



# **Tanked – Part 1**

**By Gary Devereaux**

"And you said they wouldn't notice if we just took one..." Aled swivelled his head to gaze bemused at the expanding dust cloud they were now leaving behind. "What part of this exactly dont you think they'll notice? The missing tank, the flattened gates, the dead guards or maybe, possibly the building that is not actually standing anymore?" He shouted. "Anyway..." he continued. "Do you honestly think for one minute that I believed you when you said that 'You found the wrong gear' when you reversed into those two supporting columns, that were like twenty meters apart?" Dropping into the compartment he looked around the machine, spying Gought near the loading mechanism talking to Mother T and Joseph in one of the pits. He was fidgeting with something, but Aled couldn't see what exactly.

Aled approached the drivers compartment. "Did you hear what I said?" He yelled as he stooped to stand beside the Woman driving the tank. "Oi Neon..." he shouted again. "**Whaaat? What did you say? I can't hear you... this thing is bloody loud!**" Screamed Neon in response. He sighed. "I know... so what's the plan?" he yelled back.

"Shut it down for a minute Sugar..." Purred Mother T as she half stood up to shuffle across the cramped interior. To his amazement the tank slowed to a halt, cogs and gears grinding down into a rhythmic hum, though the compartment still shook as the engine idled and that was enough the rattle teeth in his mouth. As Neon spun the drivers chair around, Aled started to vent his frustrations. "Oh right. So you can hear her but you can't hear me, I know it's OK, you were just ignoring me as usual right? Well I've had enough of this..." before he could continue he felt a reassuring hand on his back. Glancing over the shoulder he saw Mother T, she gently tapped her ear and then pulled out a communication bead. He slumped... "Sorry... I was just, well you know..." was all he got out before Mother T said "Save it... now, how about you stop being a little diva and mellow. You know I got this... Mother T always has a plan, don't I?" When nobody responded to that she said it louder. "DON'T I!"  
"Yes T!" They chorused...  
T grinned. "Now, this is what we gonna do... hustle up..."

The huddle of sorts, broke up and people went back to milling around, Aled was moving towards the hatch to pass on the information for Faith who was sat stubbornly on the track guards outside.

Faith had refused to go inside the tank initially, simply stating: "It's a tool of war, I'll have no part of it!" She was stubbornness personified which was quite handy in a tight spot but not so useful in moments like this. When Mother T had just shrugged and suggested that she walk back instead, Faith glowered and had clambered reluctantly onto the top of the machine, grumbling and hissing like an angry cat in the process.

Like everything else in this filthy behemoth, the hatch wheel was stiff, stuck firmly in place. He tried a few times, using one hand at first and then using both, throwing his meagre weight into the latter attempts. Looking around to see if anyone was watching his feeble performance and realising there were none, Aled planted his feet against side wall, avoiding where possible the rusty, oil soaked patches and yanked on the wheel again. It suddenly came loose in a blur of mottled steel, his wrists bent back as his knuckles spun into the adjacent hatch wall. He ended up in heap directly beneath the hatch. Pain flaring from his knuckles and shoulders. Groaning he lifted his head just in time to see Gought and Neon turning back to their tasks giggling at his expense.

Picking himself up he inspected his knuckles, the skin was ragged and blood has started to pool in places. Fresh pain crept into his thoughts as others subsided. He checked the source of this new pain and realised he had ripped his trousers at the knee and taken a decent few layers of skin off with it. Cursing he inspected the new hole, considering how best to patch it up, as he pulled at the torn edges he glimpsed his fingers and noticed that he'd also split a nail.

It was going to be one of those days, first the fact that he was even selected for this miserable hike and now this. *"Really? What's next..."* he trailed off, things like this usually appeared in three's and he decided he didn't fancy finding out what that third might be, instead Aled pushed the hatch up and clambered gingerly through the access point.

Out of the corner of his eye he spied Faith, she was leaning against the turret muttering something under her breath. She did that a lot. In fact, she did it all the damned time spooking everybody nearby in the process. Mostly it was the reciting of litanies, extracts or texts endlessly, imploring the Gods to shield her from this faithless world. It must have worked, rumour has it that Faith is one of the very few that hasn't been 'cycled'. Well that was what he had heard anyway and he wasn't about to front up and ask her, that was for sure.

Aled thought about that for a moment, stopping on the top rung... never been 'cycled'. The idea amazed him, to have not died in an age where Angel's walk the Earth was pretty impressive, especially when you consider the shit storm they had brought with them.

'Cycled' was a slang name shortened from recycled. Some clown had obviously coined it at some point and it had stuck. Though it was wholly relevant. When you died these days, you didn't stay dead. That was a head fuck in itself if truth be told.

He remembered the first time he 'died'... he corrected himself... 'cycled'... he'd been mooching around an old shopping precinct which had been half obliterated by someone or something, sifting through the wreckage, looking for a nice blue jacket. He'd found one too, along with a cute little striped tie that matched his favourite pumps. It had been a good little day for looting and he remembered being a little bit smug with himself... that was until his stomach had exploded outwards, showering the pavement with fragments of his intestines. The indescribable pain hit about a millisecond after his innards had decorated his immediate surroundings and he slumped forward onto his front. As he lay face down in a pile of his own piss and blood, he recalled that he'd landed with his left arm beside him. He was still gripping the blue jacket before everything went black.

The next thing he knew he was struggling to focus, bright light was streaming into his eyes and it took a few moments to adjust. The natural expectation was to see the high powered lamp of an operating table or hospital room. Neither of these materialised. As his senses returned one by one and his eyes eventually adjusted to the brightness he quickly realised he had absolutely no bloody idea where he was. Looking around, sun was streaming through the clouds, which accounted for the bright light. Around him was a courtyard, it was old with pillars and red bricks.

Sound came rushing back and he heard people shouting and explosions echoing around him, he immediately panicked and turned to run away from the source of the yelling and the noise. As he turned he saw a yawning great abyss directly behind, which shifted and swum unlike anything he had ever seen before. He screamed and fell backwards and it was only then that he reached down to feel his stomach, it was intact and he wasn't bleeding. Before he could try and piece together what in seven hells was going on he was grabbed and dragged away roughly. He struggled, one of his assailants said something, he still couldn't recall what but he ended up struggling even harder as he was gripped by panic. His knowledge of events immediately after that point are blank, largely thanks to the gun stock ploughing into his jaw.

The next time he woke, it was in a bed and there were bright lights and he thought it had all been a dream, until he again realised he didn't recognise the room and worse still he was completely tied down to the bed. Fear took a hold of him again and he started to thrash around, attempting to break free. Someone obviously heard him and a butch black woman wearing a Nuns habit came over and rested a hand on his arm. *"Easy now sugar, you've had a busy day..."* her words were like honey to his ear and he ceased his struggle immediately. After a moment a tirade of questions cascaded from

his lips: Who she was? Where he was? What had happened? Who had he healed him? The woman began to laugh....

*"Funny?!?! Funny?!? Har-de-bloody Har... what the sweet shit is going on!?!?"*

*"Now now sugar."* She purred.

*"That kinda attitude won't get you anywhere round here let me be tellin you..."* Before he could speak again she continued... *"So I be thinking that this be your first death, would I be right?"* Aled tried and failed spectacularly to process this, struggling utterly to comprehend what this woman was actually saying. He went to say something but his mouth just flapped and nothing came out... eventually she put him out of his misery.

*"You died sweetie pie. You died and you came back..."*

He frowned before saying: *"So what? You are part of a convent and you cured me? Did my heart stop beating? How many times...?"*

She cut him off. *"No no no, nothing like that. You died, not here, well not that I know of, but somewhere and the portal has brought you back..."* This was nuts. This woman was basically saying that he'd been resurrected somehow and he wasn't buying it.

*"I'm not buying it"* he began, she cut him off again. She had a habit of that.

*"Well that's good cos I'm not sellin it."* She smiled. *"Look let's start again shall we and I'll explain. I'm Tereesah, though people call me 'T', and you might be...?"*

*"Aled. The names Aled, though I expect you're gonna tell me my names bloody Jesus or something daft like that now aren't you..."*

T ignored the barb and continued... *"Nice to meet you Aled, rest a moment and lemme enlighten you..."*

For the next few hours T went on to tell him about the portals and that you pretty much couldn't die anymore, at least that's what people now thought. He remembered hearing about these portals before he had 'died' but nobody had dared go near them for fear that an Angel would reach out and snatch you away or something silly like that. She explained that the portals were somehow able to bring people back to life and that when they did, they deposited you back on Earth in a random place. When people returned they did so whole and for all intents and purposes quite healthy and certainly not the mess they ended up as beforehand, which albeit somewhat hard to believe, would explain why he had a stomach again.

The portals weren't only bringing back the recently deceased however as it turns out, soldiers in full battle garb from different periods in time had evidently appeared along with long dead celebrities and other normal people alike, all bedecked as they were when they had originally passed.

Aled processed all of this AND immediately pointed out an obvious problem with that.

*"The place will be overrun if the dead all come back for a party.... "*

T had nodded at this. *"That's the annoying bit..."* She began. *"You don't always come back straight away. In fact, we don't know exactly how it works. I've watched someone die in front of that very portal and walk back out again not more than five minutes later. But equally I've lost friends and never seen them again to this day. There doesn't appear to be a pattern either, worse still..."* She let the next bit hang. She'd told this story to many now and this bit always set them off again and this Aled was no different, turning his head to look at her, raising his eyebrows at the same time.

*"... worse still..."* She continued. *"Is that the Angel doesn't understand it either."*

Initially Aled took this and it clearly didn't process straight away, he started to ask a question. *"So what month or year is this, how long have I.... wait what? What did you just say? Did you say Angel?"* T nodded.

*"Now you're telling me that you know an Angel, well jackpot baby, I've heard it all now... you know you had me for a minute. I was almost starting to believe you. But let me tell you something, if you had come across and Angel, you wouldn't be here and you certainly wouldn't have had a*

*conversation with it, not one that didn't end with your skin being flayed by lightning, or worse still something sharp and pointy inserted into... well you know, somewhere unpleasant. I've seen what they can do first hand and let me tell you exactly what happened. I stood in awe at first, then it decapitated four people in one blurring sweep. As the four heads fell around me, bouncing off the pavement and walls, it looked casually in my direction, where I screamed in terror, shot myself and then I ran, faster than I ever had thought possible. Soooo if you don't mind untying me, I'll be on my way, perhaps I'll high five your Angel as I skip out the door..."*

T sighed. *"I hate it when they never believe me, why can't they ever just believe me.... Pen!!"* She shouted. *"I've got another one..."* She sighed again.

For a few moments he just lay there, unmoving, waiting for this 'T' to unstrap him. When it became obvious she wasn't going to, he cleared his throat.

*"Ahem... I don't mean to pester but could you... you know just..."*

She rounded on him *"Just a moment more sugar and we will untie you and you can be on your way..."*

She was grinning. He remembered feeling truly uncomfortable as he muttered his thanks just before a shadow fell across the room. Fear gripped him again, whatever was coming was huge, he started to struggle. As he looked up he saw the impossible occur. Feathers, of the purest white imaginable appeared, growing in size as the figure they were attached to shuffled sideways through the narrow door, the second wing following shortly after. He blinked repeatedly. The Angel turned to look at T and spoke, the sound the most beautiful thing he had ever heard:

*"You need to work on your technique, you know how irritating it is to come through that door. It's like you know and choose the smallest room in the building just to irritate me."* She was grinning.

Grinning! Angel's didn't grin. They maimed and butchered!

*"It's the mohawk, lose the mohawk, it intimidates people, doesn't it?"*

The question was aimed at him. An Angel was actually talking to him. He pissed himself.

*"Don't worry, that usually happens the first time..."* He went white as a sheet and stammered...

*"How did you know...?"* Aled had asked.

*"What besides the fact that piss is now pooling around my feet? We Angel's, well some us anyway, let's just say we have the sight."* And winked at him. *"Now do you believe what the good lady beside me has said...?"*

It took him a second or two before he turned his head towards T, constantly watching the Angel, quickly stealing a glance and then switching back to the Angel as if he were a cornered animal in sights of a predator. Eventually he slowly nodded.

*"Excellent!"* Whooped the Angel. *"See, it's not so hard after all Tereesah, is it?"*

Tereesah was stood there all sullen with her arms folded. *"Easy for you to say when you've got wings, shiny eyes and all the rest of it..."* She mumbled.

The Angel ignored her and looked sideways at Aled who was watching on intently. After regarding him for a moment she turned to face him properly and spoke. *"My name is Penemue, though some affectionately call me Pen, which I don't care for. Yes, I'm an Angel. No I'm not going to rip your arms off and beat you with them. Not yet anyway."* She carried on before Aled swallowed slowly.

*"Though, there are those that I would enjoy doing that too, so do not think for one moment that it is beyond me..."* Aled shook his head really fast to acknowledge the implication.

Penemue stood at the end of his bed and glanced skywards. *"I remain loyal still, for what that is worth now. I am a guardian, a Watcher if you will, charged with stewardship over the many world's and beings within this realm. I..."* She trailed off as she noticed the slack jawed look on Aled's face...

*"Oh for crying out loud, yes there are other life forms, or 'aliens' as you call them. Such an arrogant species, despite your qualities this is not one of them. Did you honestly, truly think you were alone in this?!?"* The Angel proclaimed in exasperation. *"Idiot humans. The lot of you. Naive. Arrogant. Idiots. Next you'll be telling me that you actually think the Internet was a human idea and not the creation of my fallen brethren to monitor and manipulate you to their own ends...."* Aled look across to Tereesah for support, who was slowly shaking her head at him. Not in a mocking sense but the meaning was obvious 'just don't say anything...'

Penemue hunched forward and sighed. *"So easily led, so easily fooled."* Tereesah went to intervene. **"Don't!"** snapped Penemue, her eyes flickering cerulean blue and they bored into the very core of Aled's soul.

*"Now, as nice as this has been, time does not wait and is precious and now you must choose. Will you follow me, willingly? Will you aid our plight to restore this world and rid it of those I once called family, or will you choose another path? For I offer a choice, unlike some others, but it is one you only get once so know this, you will choose a side or one will be chosen for you, be it mine or another but choose wisely."*

The words hung in the air like unwanted wasps at a summer barbecue. The Angel, now identified as Penemue stood over Aled as he lay prone, her shadow engulfing him as a tombstone would a grave. The woman Tereesah didn't move an inch, not even an imperceptible nod or shake of the head to guide him in his decision. Though he was sure he already knew what she would do in his position. Eventually he spoke and his words surprised even himself.

*"You offer choice but one that is tainted with risk and not really a choice at all and you ask that I do this willingly when you restrain me like a rabid dog. You ask me follow you, yet I do not know what following you means because I do not know what or who you are. I just know what your kind is capable of."*

He thought he caught Tereesah smiling and nodding appreciatively in the corner of his eye just as hands clamped to the sides of his head and the face of the Angel Penemue hovered mere centimetres from that of his own and spoke *"Then know me Aled..."* and his world exploded into bright white and the sound of rushing winds.

As he stood there lost in the flashback, it coincided near perfectly with the roaring explosion that engulfed him entirely. Whereas in the dream he was flying, borne aloft on pinions of beauty, the only comparison to the now was that he was airborne. Shrapnel whizzed and smacked against the metal surfaces of the tank, pinging and zipping in different directions. His scream seemed to go on forever as time screeched to a crawl. Down became up and the colours of his surroundings whirled and blurred into one as he was flung through the air. The now smoking tank was upside down and receding from his vision as he eventually collided with the Earth in a crumpled and broken heap. He lay there for a moment, agony overwhelming his senses, the roaring noise in his ears replaced by a ceaseless ringing that appeared near and far at the same time. His body became a confusion of numbness and excruciating pain, flaring and subsiding as his conscious fought with itself, trying and failing to process the multitude of signals being delivered to his brain.

Noise returned first and he heard people shouting, they sounded familiar but blended into one. 'Smacks' and 'thunks' punctuated the crescendo of different sounds as his battered conscious processed the information with increasing speed and clarity. The small arms fire was broken up by the sounds of machine gun fire and the clunk of heavy calibre rounds. He could make out muffled words here and there at around the same time as his vision swam back into focus.

*"Move"*

*"left, left, they're on the left..."*

*"check right, who's covering the...."*

His vision returned just in time to see the contrail of an incoming missile, his natural reaction was to shout a warning but his mouth had barely opened before the tank slewed sideways, its track ruptured in a shower of white hot sparks and fragmented metal.

The impact sustained by the tank had pushed it further sideways across the road they were travelling to reveal a body in a crumpled heap about fifteen meters from where he lay.

He rolled onto his front, wincing as fresh pain surged up his leg, looking down he could see a ragged and blackened mess, partially cauterised with melted fabric, flesh and blood welded together.

It was bad.

Drawing on reserves of strength he didn't think possible and using his hands to claw his way across the grass verge where he had landed. Slowly he edged his way towards the broken heap of his friend, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

All the time he would hear bursts of gunfire or the scrabbling of feet and skittering stone chips as people scrambled to avoid the hail of incoming projectiles. Most of all though he heard the reassuring words of Mother T, barking orders or coordinating arcs of return fire and establishing a firm defensive cordon.

Aled was close now and it was obvious that the person splayed across the broken tarmac road was Faith, her riot visor was still strapped to her head and her black and white habit torn but unmistakable. He remembered now as eventually he drew himself up alongside her body, that she had been sat a few paces from him on the track guard when the world had exploded into brilliance and pain.

The adrenaline that had fuelled his attempt to help support his stricken comrade was deserting him swiftly now as pain and exhaustion washed over him. He lay there next to her, panting and struggling to breathe, waiting for darkness to consume him once again. He knew this feeling now, he was a veteran of dying if such a thing could seriously exist and he knew his time in this latest 'cycle' could be measured in mere moments. Closing his eyes, he lay, ready to embrace the inevitable.

He came around as a shadow fell across him, shading him from the harsh sunlight. His skin prickled at the change in temperature and tried to open his eyes. One obeyed, the other was seemingly welded shut by a mixture of congealed blood and swelling and refused. Standing above him, tears streaming down her charred face stood Penemue, his Angel. Her radiance and beauty as terrifying as the day he had first lain eyes upon her.

He made to speak but his voice failed him, rasping air the reward for his painful attempt. The Angel bent down beside him and regarded his wounds and that of the broken corpse of Faith beside him. A soft warm glow emanated from Penemue, not coming from anywhere in particular but suffusing her entire form, gradually growing brighter as the seconds passed... the cerulean glow appeared once more in her eyes as she placed a hand firmly on the chest of Faith and then onto Aled's and smiled at him before saying:

*"We cannot live in a world without Faith now can we?"* and Aled's world exploded into brilliant white once more.