

Evaluation Sample

***THE ALAS
LEAGUE***

**EPISODE 1
PURGATORY**

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Once that has been said, enjoy!

Episode 1

Purgatory

1

Sylvia Thomac stretched her arm backward to reach the nearby pyramid of glasses and took one without having to look. She verified that it bore the Guinness label and then placed it under the pump, which she skillfully activated at once with a quick, gentle pressure. A throat-clearing noise made her turn her head. Two customers had gotten up and were waiting to pay their bill.

“I’m not sure it’s worth the bother, Gilbert,” said Sylvia.

“I know... But, just for the principle...”

“I understand. It’s true enough that it feels better when we can cling to day-to-day activities.”

Sylvia assessed the flow rate of the black Irish nectar with a glance and decided that she had time to deal with these gentlemen. She took the money and gave them change almost mechanically; the price of the drinks having been determined to simplify transactions rather than increase profit. She thanked them for coming and hoped to see them back again soon... Then assumed a gloomy and pouting countenance.

“Will you come and join us later?” asked Gilbert.

“Maybe,” she answered, calmly stopping the tap just in time.

She left the glass in place for the foam to subside slowly.

“I don’t know yet,” she continued. “Are there many going?”

“I should think so! Don’t you hear the cars?”

“Yeah, that’s right! It almost sounds like a parade, actually.”

“I don’t know if it will do us any good, but I feel better now that we have a plan instead of just waiting, powerless. Right, so long... Let’s just hope it turns out not to be too bad!”

“That’s it. See you soon.”

Sylvia hastened to finish filling the glass, managing to decorate the sparkling collar with a clover leaf using the spout and a swift wrist movement. She then grabbed a Budweiser and glanced at the clock. No, it was not yet happy hour with its two-for-one special. She resumed her journey with the two drinks.

“Two more heading for the caves!” exclaimed Gerard Piston, a civil engineer.

“Let them be,” said Vincent Lens, an astronomer.

His lugubrious air lightened slightly when he saw the owner of the only bar and restaurant in the small village of Verminus approaching with his brand new Guinness. He hastened to swallow the last half mouthful left in the one he had in front of him, and then pushed it back further away on the table, where it would eventually be collected... with its two predecessors and the two empty Budweiser bottles.

“My point is, that it’s completely absurd,” Piston had al-

ready restarted. “The only intelligent thing to do is... to do nothing. That way, it will be over quick and easy. If we lock ourselves up, we’re likely to survive.”

“You’re quite right. Thank you, my dear Sylvia. Oh! You did this clover leaf very well!”

“Yes, I’m getting better at it.”

“With everything that’s going on and at the rate we’re drinking today,” Piston intervened, “you might want to start putting numbers beside the clubs, and also make hearts, diamonds and spades.”

“Yeah! It should be a real challenge to play cards with fifty-two Guinnesses! Especially when they have to face down.”

“Don’t forget the jokers.”

“Oh! That’s easy. We just have to stick our faces in there!”

“Anyway... In the caves, do you reckon?”

“Yes. On the whole, we should have done that a few million years ago. It’s a bit late now.”

“Yes. Let’s drink to that.”

A little farther into the bar, a satellite telephone started to ring. A man in his early fifties got up and began to pace the room to expertly “enhance” the quality of the reception—while in fact he hoped to increase the number of people noticing he had such a phone—and he answered with a strong and commanding voice. At least, he hoped it sounded strong and commanding. The voice belonged to Reginald Verrywiz, a rich businessman who owned what could only be described as a castle not far from the village. Seated at his table was Alice, his secretary of nearly fifteen years. He had become rich by being what they call a “force of nature” and intimidating his business partners in spite of the fact that he was terribly

shy. To compensate for this quality, he made himself mad before he dealt with anyone. That way, he could keep the upper hand.

“Ah! Finally. Louis Marceau, I left you a message over an hour ago. I can’t access my account. I have a whole bunch of transactions to complete... Will you let me finish? I don’t care if you have problems. With everything I sold yesterday, your commission will allow you to take a whole year off. Shut up and listen! You’ll take half of my account and buy everything that’s trading. After a drop of ninety percent, everything is a deal.”

Verrywiz heaved a deep sigh and stopped talking, letting Louis reel off some excuses. Besides, the businessman needed these few moments to gather some momentum after having exhausted a good deal of the rage he had previously accumulated. Playing with his breathing, he felt a new wave coming through him and he was soon ready to take the initiative again.

“What are you babbling about? The stock market is closed? Come on! You can still prepare all the automatic transactions. You must still be able to type on a keyboard. What?” he began again after a short pause. “What are you doing at home? I’m not paying you to spend time with your wife—”

Reginald Verrywiz automatically placed a hand on the back of the chair in front of him when a small shock wave passed through the bar. It had begun as a low-key rumbling and then that had been drowned out by the noise of the bar bottles clinking against each other.

“—Hello? Hello? Louis? Damn! He hung up on me, the bastard. Here Alice,” he said, handing her the device, “get him back on the phone.”

His patient secretary hastened to comply. But the real cause of the communication break down quickly became clear.

“Hey! Sylvia! The TV just stopped working,” exclaimed Mario Sax, the village garbage man from his corner.

Mario—with a build that any self-respecting cannibal or teenager in hormonal eruption would drool over—was pointing at the screen, which now displayed nothing but snow. Sylvia came closer and shrugged.

“It must be the satellite.”

“Come on, Sylvia! It’s miles and miles in the air. It should work no matter what’s going on.”

“It might be the government,” Andrew Bank, who was very active in union circles, cut in.

“What? What did you say, Andrew?”

“I said that it might be the government that has decided they needed them.”

“Or the ground stations just stopped transmitting,” proposed Lens.

“Yes, that makes some kind of sense,” said Sylvia.

“Maybe the government has grabbed all the transmitters.”

“Yes, Andrew. That’s most likely what’s happened,” muttered Lens who was starting to be too numb from the alcohol and his conversation with the engineer to want to strike up a debate about class struggles with their local socialist.

“The message I’m trying to convey,” Bank continued stubbornly, his rate of speech accurately reflecting his state to the point where Sylvia, using a stop watch, could have calculated his bill within a reasonable margin of error. “What we all have to realize, is that the government can declare a state of emergency and have disiscre... tira...—”

“Discretionary,” Piston corrected automatically, his own mind a bit on the wobbly side.

“—ry. Descretonary... That’s it. Hum! What was I saying?”

“You were talking nonsense,” replied Mario. “The TV shut down immediately after the shock wave. It’s more likely tied in with that.”

“Oh, no! Don’t tell me the television’s not working here either!” exclaimed Monica Boisse, the mayor of Verminus, as she entered the bar like a tornado. “The cable has been out of order for more than an hour now. Then I remembered,” she continued while addressing Sylvia, “that you have satellite TV.”

“It just went out.”

“Ah, yes! The government!” Bank finally recalled before stopping, having noticed the presence of the newcomer. “Monica! Hello! Speaking of the government. Aren’t you on your way to the mountain in your Car Force One?”

“Oh, knock it off!. The councilors are already over there. I’m going soon myself. I just need to pick up Peter and some stuff, and I’ll be off.”

“You’re not leaving right now?” asked Sylvia. “I’ve just poured you two Tequilas.”

“I don’t have time... On the other hand...” After just a few seconds of hesitation, Monica exclaimed: “Ah! To hell with it. For the road!”

And she quickly downed the two little glasses one after the other. The spectators made a face at this sight. Monica took the Mexican drink with neither salt nor lemon.

Lens was assaulted by images from his own brain trying to imagine what it would be like to be in the mayor’s shoes right

now. There were burning sensations dancing all over his tongue and running down through his digestive system; one of his feet wanted to tap the floor and his fist involuntarily hit an imaginary counter top. He told his brain that it wasn't necessary to continue, that he had gotten the point and that he wouldn't ever touch the stuff. As an act of good faith, Lens even pushed away his Guinness slightly. He looked at Monica in an almost resentful manner. Were Tequila drinkers aware of what they made witnesses go through?

"Well! See you later, all. Don't linger to long behind," the mayor tossed at them as she left.

"Sylvia?" called Lens. "Another round, please."

"Coming right up. I think I'll have a whisky myself."

2

Peter Boisse turned on the radio to hear the latest news. He would have preferred to follow the conflict's evolution on television, but the cable was out of order and the reception of the broadcast channels had always been weak in their small village. At sixteen, Peter had grown fond of following international events and had started to study the various political currents agitating the planet. He had quickly fallen on a fundamental enigma when he had tried to combine his new knowledge with his geography classes. Certain areas of the globe, when he added the areas of each country seemed to be several times larger than the size of the land they actually encompassed. Then he had discovered the concepts of recognized and unrecognized countries, of occupied territories and cen-

ture-long disputed lands. Certain countries ended up being counted two or three times in the statistics! Then, he had had to face a new problem. A few times he had been alarmed because some street conflicts in certain cities—whose history intersected with those of the first great empires—propagated quickly to others... Before he realized that the various news agencies didn't always use the same name for each city. It depended on which century they were choosing as their point of reference, and their political inclinations.

Listening to information programs was now one of the rare activities that succeeded in keeping him away from his computer and video games—to his very politically active mother Monica's satisfaction. That day, he chose to tune in on an international news station; his favorite for the past year. He put his portable radio near his bed and lay down, sad and anxious. Thirty hours earlier, an unexplained explosion in China—probably an ancient atomic power plant—had caused the formation of a very dense radioactive cloud. It had left the automatic defense mechanisms confused, and a silo had launched a first salvo, one missile of which had reached Israel.

The latter, believing it to be a sudden terrorist attack, deployed their arsenal and soon all communications with the Middle-East became impossible. Although the great powers quickly realized that these catastrophes were not intentional, the automatic systems continued to follow their instructions and it soon became a desperate race to disarm. The software, having been conceived to resist tinkering by enemies, was not easy to alter. Some succeeded in provoking mid-air explosions of several warheads, but that did little but worsen the

problem by increasing the ambient radioactivity and exciting the electronic sensors. Panic was so prevalent that confusion grew by the hour and all efforts quickly became useless since most of the orders were either contradictory or quite simply ignored.

At the beginning, bulletins of the progression of efforts arrived quickly and in a coherent manner. Now it was even impossible to know whether or not the largest countries could regain control of their own arsenals. If a solution was not soon found, Peter would never reach seventeen.

The radio was finally turned on and properly tuned; Paul Deathishere—Peter’s favorite journalist—was speaking:

“[...] that the city of Tokyo has been evacuated. Indeed, this important international metropolis is in the path of Elgar, the fifth, large, radioactive cloud identified earlier this morning. For those having missed earlier reports, Elgar was created by the in-flight detonation of a Chinese missile launched by their own automatic response system. It was promptly named Elgar, following Allen, Bardot, Cinderella and Descartes. With this evacuation, the western block retakes the lead nine to eight. However, several experts anticipate that the Ukrainian response could easily cost two new cities—likely to include either Vienna or Rome—but it is still too early to predict which one it will be. On the American continent, we still mourn the losses of New York and Atlanta.

“The President, speaking from Air Force One, said he was for the moment satisfied with the turning of events. The Pentagon has always regarded those cities as lost in advance in the eventuality of a nuclear conflict. Although more than fifteen million people have lost their lives, New York counts as a single city in the final score. Nevertheless... Wait a minute... Yes... Yes...

Ah, yes? Dear listeners, a news flash. Three direct hits have caused the long awaited separation of California, which has just sunk into the Pacific Ocean. With this accomplishment, the Eastern block moves ahead for the first time with a score of... please be patient while I quickly calculate... twelve to nine! This is by far their best move since yesterday morning [...]"

Peter looked at the radio, flabbergasted. They've all gone mad, he told himself. As if it was a game! The Earth is blowing up and they're making sport of it! He had already changed stations and had stopped at an advertisement. An ad for whiter teeth! But soon the show in progress returned. It was one of his favorite stations for political debates. That day, the invited politician was none other than Gomer Famineson, leader of the official opposition.

"[...] While we were off the air, I received the following dispatch: three bombs have just fallen on California. What is the government doing? What are they waiting for to pass a bill prohibiting nuclear warhead explosions? They've done absolutely nothing for our national safety. Two years after being elected, they're still not taking their responsibilities seriously. The economy recovered badly from the last recession and now bombs are falling on our heads! The stock market certainly won't take this news lightly. I hope the public is no longer duped by their grand speeches and will clearly see their incompetence. [...]"

Peter shrugged and shook his head, a little discouraged. The following station was an open line. Peter was about to continue his search when he heard the question of the day: "What are your views on the present nuclear conflict?" John Pestalens was moving on with his show:

"[...] We're ready for the next caller. Hello, Mrs. Beside, wel-

come to 'It's your turn to speak'. What are your views on the present nuclear conflict?"

"Firstly, I'd like to congratulate you for your beautiful show. I listen to it everyday and I hope you'll be on the air for a long time."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Beside. Now, with regards to the question of the day?"

"Er, well, my dear John. You know, I never really believed in atomic bombs."

"As dissuasive weapons?"

"I don't know why some are calling them 'suasive' but, I never believed in them. I mean really! As if such a thing could exist. It's always been just an excuse to raise taxes. It's incredible. With my pension check, I can barely make ends meet. Imagine if they raise the taxes again! There won't be anything left at all, that's for sure."

"How do you explain, then, the news of the last twenty-four hours?"

"It's all arranged by the government. If you'd go to the trouble of calling someone in California, they'd probably tell you that they've received the news that Winnipeg has been bombarded. Come now! We shouldn't be taken in so easily."

"And why would they do that?"

"There must have been a sexual scandal with a hooker or something—but it's the parents who are really to blame. They raise their children without caring nowadays and then they blame society. And the first thing you know is they end up with a cigar where it shouldn't be, and then the government invents wars and economic problems so we forget about it."

"Thank you very much for your opinion, Mrs. Beside. [...]"

“Lord!” exclaimed Peter before changing the station again.

“[...] is listening, I'd like to tell her that I'm coming home as soon as possible. [...]”

“Oh no!” Peter said, having recognized the voice of Marcel Warner, one of the most popular comedians—more a clown according to him—of the day. “Don't tell me there are still some people making stupid jokes at a time like this!”

His thoughts went no further. The ground was shaking. The first shock had been very loud and was followed by a series of lesser vibrations. It certainly wasn't an earthquake, which normally started by warning waves. Meanwhile, the radio was going on:

“[...] My God! What was that? Come on Charles, let's go. No one feels like laughing. I want to see my wife and my children one last time. No, I'm not pessimistic. Listen to the news! It's the end of the world. That sure wasn't a water pipe that just blew up!”

“Marcel, I'd like to speak...”

“Yes, go ahead Frank. Anyway, I'm out of here.”

“Wait for me, I'm right behind you. Caroline, if you're listening, I'm coming home. I have no idea about what's best to do, but I'm coming. To all of you still listening... I really don't know what to say. I hope with all my heart to be here with you tomorrow. If not, well, to hell with it all! Like in the movie 'The Day After', I don't know what would be better: to die today or to survive. [...]”

The ground trembled again and the radio was reduced to emitting static. Death in his heart, Peter turned the receiver off. He set out to look for his mother. He only had her now, his father having died three years ago. She was probably still

at the Town Hall, directing the city council in this fast-growing crisis. He took the phone off the hook to call and see if she was there, but the line was dead. From outside he heard a racket of engines as if all the vehicles of Verminus had passed the word around and were now engaged in a big race. He went out to look at the phenomenon more closely and saw a long line of cars advancing at high speed, like a herd of prey fleeing the approach of a pack of predators. A short, sharp bark drew his attention. Fido, his dog, was springing after the cars as if he were trying to round up the escaping steel cows.

“Fido. Fido! Come back here now!”

The animal turned towards him for a moment and then made a complex series of head movements, as if he was telling him: “I’m coming back as soon as I’m through with this.” Judging by the direction they were going, Peter surmised that they were planning to take refuge in the mountains. Completely useless, he thought, although he was left with a lingering feeling that they perhaps knew something that he didn’t. He stayed on the door-step for a while. He was looking towards the horizon where he believed he had seen a strangely colored, large, dense mist; it was a mixture of white and gray that became yellowish at times. He had never seen such a thing before. Apprehensively, he was wondering, and rightly so, if it weren’t a radioactive cloud.

Finally, there was no one left in sight. The long procession of vehicles had disappeared about fifteen minutes ago and must certainly have already crossed the village limits. He heard a new car coming suddenly at high speed. He immediately recognized his mother’s sedan, whose color was oscillating, depending on the sun’s angle, between mauve and black, as if

the paint used had been extracted from suffocating chameleons. The Acura parked in a disorderly fashion. The mayor shot out like a turista victim after a long bus trip and hurried towards the back of the automobile. While opening the trunk, she turned to her son and shouted:

“Peter! Hurry up. Pack a minimum of clothes. We’re leaving for the caves. I’m coming in two minutes to help you with the food. Don’t just stand there, go!”

Obeying more by reflex than reflection, Peter climbed the staircase and went immediately to his room. As he was busily filling his backpack with everything close at hand, a new blast—this time much more violent than the preceding ones—made him collapse on his bed. He could hear the warning systems from outside, as all the remaining cars started to howl like so many apocalyptic trumpets.

After lying there for just a few seconds, he suddenly had the feeling he was in an elevator ascending at vertiginous speed. As he was crushed into his mattress, he heard the feet of his bed snapping under the pressure. He had the silly impression that the whole village was being separated from the ground and projected into the atmosphere. Everything went black and he died... or at least, he lost consciousness.