



MIKE SHERER

MAZES
OF THE
MIND

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

A MOONLESS NIGHT showcasing a multitude of stars. The air is still, the earth is still. Dark mountains loom in all directions. The shadowless void is quiet. No roads, no paths, only a dry gulley leading up. The sandy irregular ground is forbidding treacherous terrain. This could be any century, any millennium. The desert landscape is eternal on human scale. Nothing alive stirs here.

Except one thing. A dark form rises up from the ground like a resurrection. Yet it is not a clumsy movie zombie; it moves slowly, cautiously, so as not to disturb the cat's whiskers of the night. The dark being creeps forward, hunched, its tread as noiseless as that of a hologram. This could be the shadow of a cloud skittering across the sand. It pauses, listens, looks about, senses all around, then advances again, repeating this at a patternless pace as it moves up a dry gulley.

This misshapen creature resembles a giant bug. It is hunchbacked. There is a strange carapace on its head. It carries a

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long object like a segmented insect leg. Despite all these irregularities, its movements are so smooth it could be fashioned of silicone.

Noiseless movement shuffles forward behind it. There are a dozen more like this erratically advancing creature scuttling across the ground, just as muffled, just as misshapen. This odd pack makes its patient way up the gully.

The dark shape leading this eerie entourage comes to a large rock. It crouches and raises a hand. The others flatten, disappearing into the ground. The one in front extends its shell-topped head around the rock to peer ahead into a void. He removes the hump from his back — a backpack — and extracts a small device. A cyclopean metallic eye glows greenly with night vision capability. It is focused on a void within the void, a blacker shade of black, an ebony ovoid. The entrance to a cave.

A brilliant flash of blinding light. A man's face fills the cave entrance.



The light dims, leaving only the face. It is battered, scarred, irregular gashes crusted with blood, bruises fading to all colors of the rainbow. Both eyes are blackened. Both lips split and swollen. Nose broken, straightened, broken again. Gaps where teeth once were. Hair Waring-blended. A week's growth of whiskers probably conceals many more injuries.

The image of the cave entrance resolves into a mirror. The beaten face is inches from the glass. The man is leaning into the mirror, eyes scrutinizing each injury, darting from wound to wound. He shifts his weight, leans back. He had been leaning on a wooden dresser upon balled fists, balanced on his knuckles. He straightens. Now more of him can be seen in the mirror. His reflected bare chest and shoulders and arms are as bruised and scarred as his face.

He steps further back, still staring into the mirror. He is clad only in gray undershorts, which means many more injuries are

to be seen. Studying them in the mirror, he turns this way and that. He concentrates on his reflected image, as if afraid to see the unfiltered actual damage that has been done to his body.

At last, he turns away from the mirror. The small dresser holding the mirror is ornately-carved dark wood, perhaps mahogany. A matching wardrobe stands in a corner of this small room. A shelf on the wall holds books and bottles of liquor. There is a small double bed. A rickety nightstand with a rickety dim lamp. The low ceiling would oppress a tall man. Light seeps into the tight dim room around the edges of closed floor-to-ceiling wooden shutters.

As the man crosses to them, he glances down to find he is treading on a worn wooden floor. He unlatches the shutters and slides them open. Brilliant light impales his wide-open pupils.

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Brilliant light issues from a spotlight just above his face. He squeezes his eyes closed and turns his head away. Yet the light is so strong it pierces the thin membrane of his eyelids, illuminating the mad pattern of red blood vessels within them. And the light seems to penetrate no matter how he averts his face.

• • •

The man turns away from the unshuttered floor to ceiling glass patio door. The incendiary daylight outside this dark cave of a room is too much, it burns all the exposed trauma on his bare skin. Looking away, he can open his eyes enough to blink them, again and again, letting his pupils adjust in brief flashes. Finally, the haziness thins, the room comes back into focus. The dark shadows have been dispelled; the cramped confines grow more solid. The bed is in disarray. Clothes are piled on a wooden straight-back chair. On the nightstand a pack of cigarettes and book of matches beside a dirty ashtray.

The man walks to the wardrobe and opens it. Inside he finds men's clothes hanging — some sporting, some casual day wear,

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some formal evening wear. Several pairs of men's shoes are below — tennis shoes, loafers, dress shoes.

He crosses back to the dresser. Avoiding the mirror, he opens a drawer and finds men's underwear and socks. Opening another drawer, he finds something more interesting. A passport. He snatches it up. It was issued by Great Britain. Inside, a photo of his face, what he looks like without all the damage. Also, a name. Saxon Hedges. An address in London. He flips through the many stamps. European Union, Nigeria, Japan, Russia, United States, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Canada, Philippines, Pakistan.

The man has a name now. Saxon Hedges. Saxon replaces the passport and picks up a wallet. It is stuffed with Euros and pounds and dollars. Also, a British ID card with his photo and a London address. And a snapshot of a football team.

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Saxon, wearing a uniform like the ones in the photo, kicks a ball around with other men dressed in the same uniform.

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Saxon stares at the photo. His teammates? None of the faces look familiar. In a surge of panic, he casts a frantic glance around the room. Nothing looks familiar. With a force of will, he concentrates on the photo once again. On his own image. This face is not beaten up. He wasn't injured like this playing football. This was taken before whatever happened to him happened. Had he been mugged? In a car wreck? Fallen from a six-story building?

Saxon slips the photo back into the wallet, replaces the wallet in the drawer next to the passport, closes the drawer. He walks into a compact bathroom. Cuts on the bright light, leans on the sink and peers into the mirror on the wall. This face has been massacred. With shaking hands he snatches up a glass on the sink and storms out to the wall shelf. Opens a bottle of whiskey and pours the glass full. Chugs.

• • •

Saxon, in his soccer uniform, is in a crowded English pub with his teammates. They are all dirty, bruised and muddy. It is loud and raucous, with everyone knocking together pints of ale and chugging, apparently celebrating a win.

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Saxon sets the empty glass down. He can breathe cleanly, and his eyes aren't watering. So he is used to drinking hard liquor. He turns back to the open shutters with a squint. His eyes have adjusted enough for him to endure the bright outdoors.

Saxon opens the door and steps outside onto a small balcony. He hugs himself as a brisk wind comes down out of the mountains. Looking down from the distant peaks, he sees he is on the second floor of an old two-story building of east European style. Below is a small courtyard café on a narrow cobblestone lane. Several people in light jackets and sweaters sit drinking coffee. At the front of the small collection of tables a violin player is performing. Saxon closes his eyes.

• • •

The same strains of violin music echo through the dark. Echoes? From a small confined space? A cave?

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Saxon opens his eyes. He has heard this music before. Dvorak's Ninth. The New World Symphony, or at least the violin part. Had he heard a recording of it? This now is one man playing one violin, outside, with no echoes. But it is the same music, he is sure of it. The violinist glances up at him over the top of his violin held to just below his chin, smiles briefly, then looks back to his scant audience.

Which includes a man seated at a table manipulating a wooden puppet. It jerks all across the tabletop.

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Saxon, in blood-soaked military fatigues, is drug by the arms through the night by two dark figures. His bruised and bloody body jerks like the puppet. He screams in agony as his wounded limp broken body is drug without care across rocky ground.

• • •

“Good morning, Saxon.”

Saxon whirls around at the French accent behind him. Just inside the room stands a short slight wisp of a man clad in shirt and slacks, pale-complexioned, with collar-length jet black hair. He stares at Saxon with a blank expression as he raises a cigarette to his lips, draws deeply on it.

• • •

Saxon lies naked, face up, tied to a bed. His body is covered with scars just like the ones on his face. His battered face is twisted in fear and agony as he stares up. The glowing end of a cigarette descends by increments of eternity from out of the dark. After the passing of an age it touches his bare chest. Saxon screams!

• • •

Startled by the intensity of the memory, Saxon lunges back against the railing. He starts to pitch over it. The newcomer dashes out onto the balcony to catch Saxon. But all Saxon can see is the glowing cigarette coming at him, toward his bare chest, like in the memory. Saxon grabs the rail with his right hand, catching himself, then slashes out with his left to grab the man’s wrist. “Keep that away from me!” Saxon twists the wrist, forcing the man to drop his cigarette.

The man winces. “All right, Saxon. You win. Like always. I’m no athlete. No footballer. Like you.”

• • •

Saxon, in his team shorts and jersey, charges down a playing field dribbling a ball. He is running flat out as he maneuvers the ball with his feet with impressive skill.

• • •

Saxon freezes, remembering. The man makes no move to escape. He studies the damaged convolutions of Saxon's face while waiting. At last, the face relaxes and Saxon releases the wrist. He stares at the man, trying to puzzle out who he is. When the man steps back, rubbing his sore wrist, Saxon's inquisitive voice probes. "Philip?"

Philip smiles. "Big improvement over yesterday." He crushes the still-lit cigarette with his shoe.

"I'm an athlete? A football player?"

• • •

A player from the opposing team charges at Saxon as he dribbles the ball down the side of the field.

• • •

"You are getting better." Philip nods toward the room. "This calls for a drink." He walks back inside.

Saxon starts to follow, but glances down at the crushed cigarette. He kicks it off the balcony with his bare foot then follows Philip into the room. He closes the door and shutters behind him, returning the room to comforting dimness. As he turns back around, Philip fires a shot glass at him from the wall shelf. Saxon catches it.

"Reflexes seem okay." Philip pours himself a shot from the whiskey bottle. "Sorry, there's no ale, or beer of any kind."

Saxon steps up beside him, fingering the shot glass. "I'll have what you're having." He hands the glass back to Philip.

Philip pours another shot. "If nothing else, your taste has improved." Philip offers the glass, and Saxon takes it with his other hand. "I didn't know you were ambidextrous."

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Saxon looks at the hand holding the glass. "I didn't know that, either."

"Still, you seem to be doing better than yesterday."

Saxon studies Philip's composed face. "I'm not doing as good as you seem to think I am. Start from square one."

Philip smiles. "Square two. We were at square one yesterday. Today you know my name and that you play football." He turns away to inspect the books on the shelf with the liquor bottles. "Last game of the season. Bozidar hit you so hard ..."

• • •

Saxon, in his team shorts and jersey, charges down the field dribbling a ball. A player from the other team charges toward him. Saxon passes the ball off at the last second. But neither he nor the charging player can change course. He and Saxon collide! Head to head! Crack!

• • •

"... you were out for ten minutes."

• • •

Saxon is on the ground flat on his back staring up at the gathered concerned faces of his teammates staring down at him.

• • •

"You walked off the field ..."

• • •

Saxon limps off the field, supported by a teammate on either side. Philip paces the sidelines, looking anxiously at Saxon as he nears.

• • •

“... but you were out on your feet. Your fourth concussion. Sax, it’s time for you to retire from the game.”

Saxon sits on the edge of the bed, suddenly weary, as if the effort of remembering has exhausted him. “Yeah. I remember. Some of it.”

Philip picks up one slim volume from the shelf and turns toward the bed. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Saxon frowns. “I was dreaming. I was walking. In the mountains.” He glances up at the closed shutters. “Not these mountains. It was in the desert. At night.”

“Yes?”

“That’s it. My head’s so fuzzy.” Saxon chugs his drink in a single gulp, like before. Like before, this doesn’t faze him.

“You cracked heads with Bozidar. Apparently, his is much harder than yours.” Philip sets his glass down. “Don’t worry. It will come back to you. In the meantime, relax. Take in Prague.” Philip tosses the book he holds. “Read a good book.”

Saxon catches it. “So you are babysitting me. In Prague. Why?”

Philip sighs. “I told you why yesterday and I’ll probably tell you again tomorrow. I hope I’m not telling you a week from now. This could become very tiresome.”

“Why!?”

“The match was in Prague. I volunteered to stay behind with you until you were able to travel.” He sighs more heavily than before. “We’ve been friends all our lives, Sax.”

• • •

Saxon, in his soccer uniform, is celebrating in the crowded English pub with his teammates. He raises a mug of ale to the person seated beside him. Which is Philip, in street clothes. Saxon chugs his ale, while Philip drinks a glass of whiskey.

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Recognition registers amid the scars on Saxon's face.

Philip smiles in response. "Just relax, Sax. This is going to take some time. But I'm here for the duration, however long it takes." Philip finishes his drink. "I'm going down to the café. Get dressed and join me." He walks out, closing the door behind him.

Saxon stares at the closed door for a moment then glances down at the book he holds. It is printed in the original Czech. Surprised that he can read it, he mouths the words on the cover. "'The Metamorphosis', by Franz Kafka." He opens the cover. Inside is a smashed bug. Not an illustration of one, but an actual flattened bug. A cockroach.

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A cockroach scurries across the floor. A hand snatches it up out of sight. A second later there is a loud SLAP.

• • •

Saxon, disturbed, stares at the squashed bug. Finally, he flips through several pages to the beginning. He reads aloud the first sentence. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." Disturbed even more, he slaps the book closed. Realizing it has made the same sound as the one in his memory, he opens the book and slaps it closed again and again.

Saxon slaps the book closed one last time and sets it down on the nightstand. He stands and walks up to the dresser to stare at his reflection in the mirror. The image in the mirror changes, transforms to his game face, sweaty and grimy and reddened from exertion. It changes again, with streaks of camouflage grease and topped by a military helmet. It changes again, to the bruised and battered face he had awakened to. He smiles. "It sure must have been a long hard season." He goes to the wardrobe to select some clothes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Sherer has been writing his entire life. His first published work was a record review column in his college paper. His novels include his paranormal/suspense novel, *A Cold Dish* (James Ward Kirk Fiction), horror novella, *Under A Raging Moon* (World Castle Publishing), paranormal mystery novel, *Souls of Nod* (Breaking Rules Publishing), and his middle grade novel, *Shadytown* (INtense Publications). The movie from his screenplay *Hamal_18* is currently available on Amazon Prime.

Mike Sherer lives in West Chester in the Greater Cincinnati area of southwest Ohio. You can learn more about his works and world on his website mikesherer.org.

*Saxon knows something.
People are desperate to know what he knows.
But Saxon doesn't know what he knows.
Only Kafka can help.*

In Prague, a man finds himself in possession of way too many memories. Which are true? Who are all these people claiming to know him? Why has he attracted so much attention? Will he ever learn who he really is, what he has done, and why it matters so much to so many people?

He has this book he has never read, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, that he can't seem to get rid of.



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