

The Deadliest Game
By Michael Danese
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“Run! RUN!” echoed in Jim’s head. And he did. For his *life*. His heart was pounding out of his chest, but he kept on running.

This was his chance, his only chance to keep on living. He’s lucky he’s in such good shape. There isn’t much else to do in prison besides exercise, even *less* to do on death row. These past six years have been a nightmare. Some guys have been on death row for much, much longer. It’s all a mental game for him now.

“*Every day he is alive, is one he ain’t dead,*” is what he always tells himself.

Jim has spent many of his 38 years in and out of prison, starting with juvenile convictions for petty crimes like jacking cars and B and E. Crime is all he ever knew, at least until he met Mary. In the age-old discussion of breeding or environment, Jim is a two-time loser. Both his parents were good for nothings. Growing up in West Philly as a minority (there aren’t too many redheads there) forced him to be quick on his feet. But, Jim will be the first to tell you that he doesn’t deserve to be on death row, that he didn’t kill anyone. Yeah, as you know, death row is full of innocent people...

Faster! FASTER! He ran as fast and as far as he could. He stopped at the edge of the woods before emerging. He stood there, panting and holding his side. He’s a big guy, six-foot three, with a face full of freckles. Tough to hide when you look like that. He listened hard...couldn’t hear anyone chasing him right now...after catching his breath he cut back into the woods and remained out of site.

Jim’s ticket to “freedom” is as a player in a gruesome, violent and deadly game; a game that he is now having second thoughts about volunteering. Apparently there is a faction of hunters that don’t feel that deer, bear, moose or elk are *challenging* enough for them. They need a more cunning prey, one that is capable of trying to out-think them, or even fight back. So, a small group of filthy rich hunters “invested” with some government officials to try to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Legal? Of course not! But, with enough money legality is easily overlooked. This *game* involves high ranking people in the state, lawyers, and just enough people to make it work, and work *quietly*.

In the Pine Barrens of New Jersey they fenced off a ten square mile “arena” where they could stage their hunt. Five hunters and five runners are deposited into the arena. The hunters each have a .22 rifle; the runners each have a machete. Although the hunters have the advantage, a skillful runner can certainly make his own kill, *if he is clever enough*. At the end of a three-day weekend, a hunter that makes a kill gets a trophy. It’s just a small statue, nothing grotesque, remember, this IS *illegal*. A runner that is still alive gets his freedom. And those that don’t survive...simply disappear. The hunters, with their large invincible egos are okay with this. The runners have nothing more to lose.

Jim is crouching by a stream and rubbing mud on his face when he hears some shots off in the distance, and the sound of some muffled cheering. He assumes that the number of runners has just been reduced. He pushes himself up and runs away from the sound.

A few hundred feet away two hunters are standing over their kill. One guy is tempted to take a photo with his phone, but he knows that it's prohibited and fights off the urge. Meet Jake, and he couldn't be more proud as he stands over the body of a thin black man. He's in his mid-sixties, and the thrill of first blood has him drunk with joy. He's been everywhere and killed just about everything. But this is a first, and he is *reveling* in it. Jake doesn't have a lot of friends, probably because he's a life-long bully. He decides what he wants and gets it, no matter what's fair or what others think. It's probably why his trash hauling business has been so successful. There's been talk of underworld ties, but that talk remains behind closed doors. The only people he's interested in are people that could bring him a profit of some kind.

His son-in-law, Pete, just snuck off and hurred in the bushes. Pete is about 30, has soft hands and even softer eyes. He's been hunting with Jake many times, and while it has been a great bonding exercise for him and his wife's overbearing father, he never really "loved" it. Surely not like Jake does, and even more surely, not like *this*. Pete wouldn't admit it, but he was basically bullied into being a hunter. And, while he had second thoughts about participating in the game, he gave in and came along. Now he knows that it's the biggest mistake of his life.

"Come on, Pete, zip it up and let's go! There isn't much daylight left!" Jake yelled in Pete's direction. "I think I mighta spotted a runner over that way. Hurry up, for Christ's sake, he's getting away!"

"Okay, okay," said Pete as he emerged from the bushes.

Jim stopped to get his breath. The vision of his wife, Mary, and their two girls, Lauren and Lily, flashing in his head were all the inspiration that he needed to keep moving, and keep *alive*. Mary and the girls, eight and ten years old, changed his life. At least for a while. Jim was completely clean for four years after he married Mary. He was working construction, and he was pretty good at it. He put his old ways in his rear-view and focused on a future with a family, a row house and a small, white picket fence.

His past just kept creeping up. He was getting good at shrugging it off, but it was like a magnet, pulling him back. A few of his old cronies blackmailed him into helping with some drug deliveries. He resisted, and they almost broke his arm. They said next time they would punish his kids. So he did the minimum, didn't take any unnecessary risks, and all was well for a spell. He had some regular rounds, a few nights every couple of weeks. Mary had no idea. Until it all went bad.

One of his "clients" could not pay, and, while Jim was ordered to punish non-payers, he covered it up instead. It was a risk he didn't want to take, and it turned out to be the wrong choice. The dealers weren't as forgiving, and they beat him badly. He missed two days of work, and worse yet, he had to come clean with Mary. For Jim, her disappointment was worse than the beating. But the dealers went on to finish the job. They went to the place of the non-payer, and when he still couldn't pay up, they bashed his head in and trashed his place. They used one of Jim's wrenches to do the bashing, then carelessly left it there.

Detectives quickly identified Jim's fingerprints at the crime scene and on the wrench. And, well, for a guy with a record and little money, the monkey trial that took place was a slam dunk. Even the public defender that was assigned to the case didn't really believe Jim's claim of innocence. The only one still in Jim's corner was Mary. Even after he was sentenced to die, she remained loyal; visiting him often and keeping him up to date with the girls' progress. It was a

terrible strain on her, but she did her best to keep a stiff upper lip and to try to teach Lauren and Lily that their dad was a good, decent man.

Jim heard two shots off in the distance that jarred him back to reality. It was almost dark, and he knew the hunters would be settling in for the night to drink around their campfires and plan their strategy for the next day. He was near the stream, and there he found two fallen trees, almost on top of each other. He was able to shimmy between them and devise a makeshift bed with a pile of dried leaves. He cut a large branch and used it to seal off his entrance. He knew he would be safe here, at least for tonight.

Pete and Jake met up with the three other hunters and Jim was right about the campfire. Tony, Rocco and Sal were from New York City. Each were in their forties. They grew up together in the same neighborhood, and all found success in the finance world. Rocco, the youngest, is an analyst. His brother, Tony, is a stockbroker, and Sal, the oldest, is a financial advisor.

Hunting was their occasional ticket out of the rat race of the city. They had a long history of hunting together, and they relived every minute of it around the fire as they passed bottles around. Jake tried to keep up as he boasted of his own experiences, but these guys had him beat: safaris in Africa, bear hunting in the Yukon, lions, elephants, you name it.

Pete blotted out most of the chit-chat, concentrating on drinking the expensive Scotch that was making the rounds. "Isn't it illegal to hunt elephants?" he chimed.

The conversation halted for a second, then the three New Yorkers broke out in belly laughs. "Ha!" grunted Sal through the guffaws, "This guy's a regular riot! Like what we're doing here right now ain't illegal!" Even Jake found Pete's "joke" amusing. Everyone did. Except for Pete.

The trio from New York notched a kill today, and they were thirsty for more. The five hunters all feasted on the supplied food and liquor, and the more they ate and drank, the more they talked about how the three remaining runners didn't have a chance. Eventually they all crawled into their luxury tents, with their heaters and electric hook-ups.

At the crack of dawn they were all foaming at the mouth to get at it. Tony, Rocco and Sal headed deeper into the woods. Pete and Jake went in a different direction, heading downstream. Jake, who fancied himself the master tracker, explained to Pete how animals are always drawn to water.

The trio trekked along for most of the morning without sighting any prey. They made a large arc and found themselves close to the stream. Rocco decided it was time for a bio break. He wandered off by himself, took out his shovel and dug a latrine. He sat over a log reading a paperback when a silent blade separated his head from his neck. A large black figure, completely covered in mud, watched as his twitching body collapsed and bled out. Still silent, he picked up the rifle and retreated back into the woods. He watched and waited.

"Yo, Rocco! Come on, we ain't got all day! ROCCO!" yelled Sal.

"Tony, go get your lazy brother and let's get *going*!" Sal continued.

"Alright, alright, keep your pants on!" Tony said as he headed towards his brother's corpse.

As he approached, the Mud Man carefully took aim. He waited until Tony was right over his brother's body, and when he finally looked down on him, in the split second before he could scream, a bullet entered his skull. Tony landed on top of his brother in a heap.

"Alright!" yelled Sal. "Wait for me – you guys can't have all the fun!" he continued as he grabbed his rifle and ran towards the sound of the shot. "Where is he – did you get him!?"

As Sal lumbered through the woods towards the bodies of his fallen comrades, the Mud Man was ready for him. He was bracing against the V of a large tree, he took a deep breath as he pulled the trigger. The bullet entered Sal's head and he fell within a few feet of Rocco and Tony.

Almost immediately another shot rang out. "I got him! I got him!" yelled Jake. "Wow, look at the size of him! I wonder how he got the gun?"

"I...I dunno..." said Pete.

"Whad-I-tell-ya! If you head towards the sound of the shot sometimes it drives the prey right into your lap! I never expected it to roll out this way. A few seconds sooner we mighta saved that New Yawker's life! Oh, well, that's how the game's played; a trophy for me and a punched ticket for that poor bastard."

As Pete and Jake got closer, they realized that the Mud Man got *all* of the other hunters. Pete wretched again, and wished he was far away from Jake and this awful game. The nightmare just keeps getting worse for him.

"Amazing – he got *all* of them, so much for the *big game hunters* – they became the hunted!" Jake bellowed through his own guffaws. "Do you know what this means!? We're the only hunters and there are *two* runners left! How great for us!"

"Yeah...great..." said Pete.

Jim also heard the shots off in the distance. He figures that, after hearing five shots, he is most likely the only runner left against five experienced trackers. He knows that he needs to be elusive for another day. With nightfall being a few hours away, he's even more careful not to leave any telltale signs along his path.

All of the sudden he is surprised by the sound of a man running towards him through the woods, coming from the direction of the shots. Jim hunkered down, and as the man got closer, he realized that he was another runner. Jim tackled him and they both fell into the bushes. As soon as the guy realized that Jim was also a runner, he stopped struggling. He was completely out of breath. They stayed in the bushes and talked for a minute.

His name is Rami. He is a Pakistani, very small and thin, in his early twenties. Rami is almost dwarfed by the size of Jim. Both are glad to see each other, thinking they were each lone survivors. Rami told him that he had met up with the Mud Man and they hid out together. He said that from a distance he watched the situation play out between the Mud Man and the hunters. They now figured that there are only two hunters left, and that they are the only two remaining runners. They decided that sticking together was probably a good idea. Rami said he didn't think that they were onto him or where he was headed, as they were wrapped up in the shootings.

They decided that finding a good hiding place would be better than running. Jim had already scoped out a large bluff that was thick with vegetation. The men crept up the hill while

always scanning behind them. They were treading as lightly as possible, as not to disturb the ground and leave any evidence, and also to be able to listen for any voices or footsteps coming their way.

When they reached the top they found it to be a good choice. There were a lot of bushes that would provide them good cover, plus, from this vantage point they could see a large area. It would be tough for them to be surprised. They found a few berries to eat, and since it was nearly dark, they both crawled under bushes and made themselves comfortable. They concentrated on listening for the hunters, and refrained from talking as to not allow their voices to be heard. What would they discuss anyway? The usual prison claptrap? What are ya in for? How long? Got family? Where ya from? No, silence and rest were in order.

Jim wasn't much for prayers, but on this night he found himself begging God to give him the wisdom, strength and, yes, the luck that he needs to get through the next day. He knew that all he had to do was to survive another 24 hours and he and his family would be re-located far from Philly, where they could get a fresh start. He was betting his life on it, and he would do whatever he could to win this fight.

The first light of dawn pried its way through the tall pines. The morning began differently for the two pairs of remaining players in this game. Rami and Jim were shivering under their blankets of branches, leaves and pine needles. They hesitated to show themselves, and remained hidden as long as possible. They eventually made their way down to the creek to refresh themselves, get a drink and also grab a few berries. Then they returned quickly to their safer spot on the bluff.

Jake and Pete emerged from their warm tents recharged and ready to begin the day. Bacon sizzled on the grille and eggs were scrambled as the coffee was being poured. Jake blubbered on about the thrill of the hunt and the sweetness of the kill. Pete just wanted him to *shut up*. He couldn't wait for this horror movie to end.

They spent the better part of the day searching and tracking. Jake used every one of his never-fail hunting techniques – smelling the air, looking for feces, broken branches, any tell-tale signs of his prey. But this time he came up short. Pete insisted that they take a late lunch break. He was tired of all of this and was constantly praying that they don't find any runners.

They settled by the stream. Pete spread out their prepared lunches of hoagies, chips and beer. “We only have a few hours left to land another trophy,” said Jake.

“It's getting a bit cloudy, I hope it doesn't rain,” replied Pete, trying to change the subject.

Jake then reached into his pack and pulled out a pair of high powered binoculars. He began to scan the area.

“Come on, Jake, ya know that's against the rules!” said Pete.

“Rules! These convicts already murdered three hunters! It's everyman for himself here!” squawked Jake.

“Well, one of the basic tenants of hunting is giving the prey a fighting chance!” argued Pete.

“Yeah, well most prey don't have machetes!” barked Jake.

At that, Pete got up and wandered towards the woods.

“Be careful, Pete, these murderers can jump out at any time!” Jake warned as if he was talking to a child about to cross a busy street.

“Well, the murderers now have binoculars,” Pete muttered to himself.

A few minutes later, Jake exclaimed, “Hello boys, gotcha! Pete, come here, check this out!” he said walking toward him and handing him the binoculars while pointing.

“Look, up at the top of that hill, I’m sure that I see two sets of feet under those bushes. They musta joined up together. Smart! But, now that we’ve found them we can get ’em both!” Jake continued.

“I don’t...see...oh, yeah, could be, you may be right...” said Pete.

“Now, look over to the left, see that ridge? We can climb up there and look over, and each have a clean shot! Let’s go!” Jake said giddily, like a high schooler about to reach under his girlfriend’s sweater for the first time.

They didn’t even bother to pack up after their lunch. They circled the long way around the huge hill so they wouldn’t be seen. After almost a half an hour they made it to the top of the ridge. As they carefully peered over the top they could see the two men huddled like frightened rabbits. They were only about fifty feet away, so they were assured of easy kill shots.

“Ok, this is perfect, *perfect!* Get ready!” whispered Jake. “We need to get set and shoot at the same time ‘cause the first shot will spook the other guy.”

They both got set up and took careful aim.

“I’ll take the little scrawny guy; you take the big red head. He’s a giant, you can’t miss!” said Jake laughing. “Get set, we will shoot on my count, on three, ready...one...two...”

Bang! The shot rang out and the echo made it even louder. Rami and Jim dove deeper in to the bushes and scurried around the hill away from the direction of the shot. They ran down the far side of the bluff and disappeared into the woods. They ran until they were completely out of breath. They eventually stopped on the far side of a thicket of trees.

“Are you okay?” asked Jim.

Rami nodded. “Close call!” he replied. “I don’t hear anyone following us.” he added.

“Neither do I.” said Jim. “Let’s keep moving...” he said as they disappeared into the woods.

Up on the ridge Pete was sobbing. On the count of two he swung his gun around and shot Jake in the neck. As Jake bled out, their eyes met and Jake was in shock, but his expression was “Why?”

Pete yelled at him, “I shoulda did it on Friday before you shot that first guy. *You* are the cold blooded murderer. You made me do it, and I ain’t a bit sorry.”

Soon Pete fired his gun into the air as a signal to the runners. He knew they would keep running. They wouldn’t dare circle back to where he was. He continued to shoot into the air every 30 minutes or so, just to keep the runners moving away from him.

As the sun was setting, Rami and Jim emerged from the “arena” and were met by their lawyers and the promoters of the game. There were three other lawyers there, but their clients

weren't as fortunate as Rami and Jim. There was also a bus for the hunters, but as of yet, none had emerged.

Jim locked eyes with the promoter that brokered his deal. He wanted to thank him and also kill him in the same motion. He turned to his lawyer and said, "Let's get outta here. I want to see Mary and my girls now."

His lawyer gave him a coat and told him he would see them soon. They didn't know anything about the game. Jim wanted to tell them he was released and explain the relocation deal to them himself.

He never told Mary about the game.

Pete emerged from the "arena" after he was sure the runners were gone. He didn't want them to see him for obvious reasons. He climbed in to the bus and said, "Let's go."

"I need to wait for the others," said the driver to Pete and the promoters.

"*There are no others.* Just me," said Pete. He knew this game was a "no questions asked" agreement. He went to the back of the bus and collapsed.

Pete was happy to be home with his family. He acted surprised when they were notified of his father-in-law's hunting accident. He never told his wife they were together, part of the rules of the game. As far as she knew he was at a conference in Newark.

Pete never even considered hunting again. To this day he is haunted by the memories of the game. He stuck to the rule and never spoke about it. He always considered himself the biggest loser of the game.

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