

WINNER OF THE 2012 YOUNG WRITERS PRIZE

JOE DUCIE



THE RIG

ESCAPE IS IMPOSSIBLE

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*For Sam,
who, a lot like Drake,
always comes out swinging.*

Home Sweet Home

The Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk flew low over the ocean, low enough that a cool mist splashed William Drake in the face through the open bay doors. He could taste salt on his lips and feel the roaring wind rush past his ears.

Handcuffed to a steel pivot-loop on the floor of the chopper, Drake glared out at the miles of endless ocean. He had lost sight of the mainland nearly an hour ago, after take-off from the holding centre on St. John's Harbour – the very edge of Newfoundland and Labrador on the North American continent. Nothing but dark, deep waters stretched over the horizon. The sky was bruised purple, heading towards nightfall.

It was cold aboard the chopper, but Drake refused to let his jailers see him shake. Also on board were two armed guards, both wearing sealed gas masks and carrying sleek semi-automatic rifles. They sat menacing and silent by the cockpit doors, their eyes unseen behind tinted plastic. Drake was bound at the ankles to a group of six other prisoners. Four girls and two boys, all about his age.

He had lost track of the days while on the run, but

he knew his fifteenth birthday had been in the last week or so. There was a good chance he was the youngest prisoner aboard, but that didn't make him the weakest.

Not by a long shot.

Strands of strawberry-blonde hair hid one girl's face. She had started crying five minutes into the flight and hadn't stopped since. None of the others had tried to comfort her. A stocky boy on Drake's left with spiked purple hair – Drake tagged him as Mohawk – sneered at the girl. Drake knew little about where they were going, as the Rig was shrouded in secrecy, but he knew enough not to cry.

'Five miles out.' A voice clouded in static transmitted into the cabin.

Drake turned back out to sea, scanning the horizon for their destination. He spotted it in the distance, rising out of the water like some dilapidated demon of steel and smoke.

The Rig.

An old oil platform that had been converted into the world's first floating rehabilitation centre. The Rig was actually five platforms, one at each point of the compass, connected by networks of metal walkways and orange pipes, and a final platform in the middle of the structure. From the air, the Rig was shaped almost like a diamond.

Another cage, Drake thought bitterly.

Drake watched the Rig grow larger from his seat on

the edge of the chopper. In the vast and murky ocean, it was the only manmade structure. For all that mattered, this far out to sea, the Rig could have been the only dry land left in the world.

The chopper landed on a wide helipad marked with yellow paint on the southern platform. Their shackles were unlocked from the chopper's floor and Drake was offloaded along with his fellow prisoners. More faceless guardsmen met them here.

With a hard shove from a guard, Drake stumbled forwards, shuffling in his ankle cuffs. The seven of them were lined up along the edge of the helipad. They stood shivering and alone as the Seahawk was quickly refuelled by a ground crew and took off back the way it had come to St. John's.

A large man dressed in a fine suit – *too fine for this place*, Drake thought – waddled up to them with his thumbs hooked into the loopholes of his pants and a smirk on his face. His tie was tucked into his belt, and his neck jiggled as he spoke.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, smiling at each of them in turn. 'My name is Jonathan Rayland Storm. You may call me Warden Storm. Let me be the first to welcome you to the Rig.' His gaze settled on Drake last of all, and he did not look away. The warden's smile turned into something nasty as they stared at each other.

‘You must be my special case,’ he said, inclining an invisible hat. ‘Well, you ain’t so special here, son. A few days of work in Tubes will see to that.’ He opened his arms and gestured to the group at large. ‘We live by rules here on my five platforms. As you can see, there is no escape. Nothing around you for a hundred miles but freezing water infested with some of the *meanest* sharks to ever grace God’s green earth.’

He dabbed at his brow with a cream handkerchief.

‘Only you won’t find any of that earth around here, no matter how hard you look. So you will follow my rules. You will call me Sir, or Warden Storm,’ he said, repeating himself. ‘You will address all of the guards as Officer.’

‘Alliance Systems, among other exciting ventures, provides the *finest* custodial services in the world, as some of you already know.’ The warden chortled. ‘Ten years ago in 2015, after the eastern platform you see just over there was decommissioned, the Alliance built the rest of this place, and since then it has become the foremost centre for violent offender rehabilitation on the planet. You are lucky to be here.’

Drake tried hard to suppress a smirk at that and failed.

‘If you’ve been sent to me, to my Rig, you are all criminals, no matter your age, and have been sentenced to no less than five years of rehabilitative incarceration by your respective national governments. This old girl is

your home for the next half decade, if not more. You will hate it here. You will hate me. That's just fine. Keep your head down, do your work, and once your time is up we will send you home a productive member of society.'

As the warden finished his introduction, Drake ran his eyes across the visible structure of the oil rig. He counted three guards behind Storm, plus the two from the helicopter. There was a shadowy figure stationed up in the command tower. Call that another prison officer.

That made at least six unique guards, all faceless and armed with automatic weapons and nasty-looking black batons. *There'll be more*, Drake thought, licking the salt from his lips.

Drake had known men like Warden Storm before. Men who sat in seats of power and absolute authority. Men who controlled everything about their private worlds. The face of the man often changed but, in Drake's experience, they were always the same in one regard.

They were overconfident.

So Drake believed the warden when he spoke of shark-infested waters and the rules by which he was supposed to abide. He believed it as much as the man himself did. But his overconfidence, his arrogance, made him overlook one key factor. One small, yet important detail.

There is no escape, Warden Jonathan Rayland Storm

had said, and it was there that he and Drake would have to disagree.

Because there wasn't a prison built – on God's green earth or otherwise – that could hold Will Drake.

Processing

After the warden's speech, Drake and his chain gang were marched single file across the helipad and into the Rig. They were led down a grey corridor by four of the masked guards. Every two metres or so a window looked out over the darkening ocean and the blinking orange lights along the perimeter of the other two visible platforms, to the east and west. Mid-November and close to the Arctic Circle, the night would be cold.

The corridor took an abrupt turn to the right and opened up into a larger room in the heart of the southern platform. Drake guessed they were somewhere below the control tower he'd seen from the helipad. The floor was carpeted here and a row of empty desks sat opposite a small kitchen. Along the far wall, five bunk beds were arranged in front of porthole windows. The last of the day's light shone across the room from the portholes, and the air smelt faintly of fried onions.

'Inside. Line up next to the central desk!' a guard barked.

Drake shuffled along at the back of the group. He

thought it was just his imagination, but he was sure he could feel the floor moving beneath his feet, swaying with the ocean currents. At the front of the group, the girl who had been crying on the flight failed to stifle a particularly loud sob.

Mohawk pushed her hard in the back. '*Shut up,*' he spat. She fell to her knees and wailed.

Drake stepped forwards and smacked Mohawk upside his head with the edge of his steel cuffs. More surprised than hurt, Mohawk reeled back and raised his hands. He snarled and advanced on Drake with his fists clenched.

'Break it up!' A guard stepped between Drake and Mohawk. 'Line up against the wall like good little daffodils now!'

Daffodils?

Drake did as he was told, ignoring the look of pure hatred from Mohawk.

The guard strapped his weapon to his chest armour and undid the clasp on his face mask. The moulded plastic fell away to reveal a young man with a jovial smile. His brown hair was short at the sides and back, a military buzz cut, and his blue eyes seemed to sparkle almost sapphire in the half-light.

'There now,' he said. 'That's better.' The three remaining guards kept their faces covered, weapons at the ready, and took up positions behind the smiling man. He began to pace back and forth in front of his captives.

‘There’ll be no brawling here, my lads. Not while Marcus Brand is on watch!’

Brand . . . Drake filed the name away.

‘Screw you, pig,’ Mohawk spat.

Without breaking pace, Brand slapped Mohawk hard enough to rattle the teeth in Drake’s head. Mohawk snapped his head back with a cry and droplets of blood sprayed from his mouth in a wicked arc.

‘As I was saying,’ Brand continued. ‘Discipline, and a healthy respect for those in authority, will go a long way towards making your stay on the Rig that much more bearable. You will be here with us for some years. This is the entirety of your world from now on, and you can forget about luxuries such as trees or grass. Figure out early that it’s best to do as you are told.’ He stopped pacing and crossed his hands behind his back.

‘Tomorrow morning will be your induction meeting with Warden Storm. He will assign you a daily schedule, focused primarily on your platforms – boys on the western platform, girls on the northern – and a work programme that you will adhere to at all times. Failure to do so will constitute a breach of the rules and you will be punished accordingly. Am I clear?’

No one said a word. Strawberry Blonde whimpered while Mohawk licked the blood from his lips. The rest, save Drake, simply nodded.

‘Good,’ Brand said. ‘Now, you will be unlocked from

your cuffs one at a time. When you are unlocked, you will step forwards and Officer Hall will fit you with your very own Alliance Tracker. A wristwatch, of a sort.' He held up a thick black band that flashed the time in bright luminescent green numbers, along with a stream of other data, on a five-centimetre-wide screen. 'None of you will have any excuse for being late to work now, will you?'

Drake was unlocked first. He stepped forwards and offered his left arm to the man behind the gas mask. Hall slapped it away and grabbed his right arm. The screen went over the back of his wrist, just above the steel handcuff, and snapped shut uncomfortably tight.

Drake examined the watch while the rest of his group were given one of their own. The heavy black metal band had sealed seamlessly around his wrist, and apart from the digital display and a single, rectangular hole in the side, it was unremarkable.

The display flashed the time across the centre of the screen, and in the top right-hand corner scrolled a few numbers and symbols. Drake's read: **\$-182 AC**.

'Will someone please tell me what time it is?' Brand asked, once every new inmate was wearing one of the bands.

No one spoke.

'Do not make me ask again, my little lawbreakers.' Brand was still smiling, but it never touched his eyes. Something else smiled there, something not so kind. He

rolled up the black sleeves of his sweater, below the armour, and crossed his arms over his chest. Drake thought he recognised the tattoo on Brand's left forearm – two swords crossed over a wreath and a silver crown, with the inscription C-F '13 beneath the blades – but he didn't know from where.

He's dangerous, Drake thought. He enjoys his job.

'Half past eight,' muttered the girl next to Drake.

'Thank you, my dear. Time for dinner before lights out at half nine. You'll sleep here in Processing tonight until you're assigned accommodation tomorrow. Oh, and just so you know, kids. You'll find it impossible to remove your trackers. There is good reason for this. They're also state-of-the-art global positioning systems. They can track you to within a metre, no matter where you are in the world – and seeing as how your whole world for the next five years is the Rig, there won't be a moment Control can't find you.' He grinned again, at Drake in particular. 'Now, let's get you fed before nap time.'

Still secured at the wrists, Drake and his six companions were herded over to the stainless-steel table next to the kitchen. The table was set with bowls of soup and hunks of bread. A plastic spoon had been provided for all. In the arm of each seat was a square device about the size of a smartphone. The device shone with a dull red light.

‘Everyone sit,’ Brand said. ‘And wave your trackers over the scanners.’

Drake waved his arm over the scanner embedded in the chair. It beeped as his tracker passed over it and turned a healthy shade of green. He also noticed the display on his watch had changed. The counter on the screen now read: ***-\$-184 AC.***

‘What does that mean?’ he asked.

‘I’m glad you asked, lad,’ Brand said. ‘Your tracker also keeps an account of how much it costs Alliance Systems to feed and house you during your stay.’ He chuckled. ‘This delicious meal before you costs two shiny Alliance credits. Your jumpsuits and flight to the Rig is the remaining balance. A balance you owe the Alliance for your rehabilitation. Every meal you eat, every night you sleep, must be paid for.’

‘And how do we pay?’ asked an Asian boy opposite Drake. Black, tribal tattoos crisscrossed his neck and up under his dark hairline. He had already finished half his bread and soup.

‘You work, my lad.’ Brand clapped his hands together. ‘A day’s work on the Rig will earn you, roughly, depending on the task, between fifteen and twenty-five credits. This will be used to provide your accommodation and food. Work hard and you can spend the remainder on certain luxuries, such as candy or magazines. A fair system, yes?’

Drake grunted and ate his dinner. The soup was watery

and the meat could have been anything, but he was hungry.

Afterwards, they were allowed five minutes each in a nearby washroom before being shown to one of the bunks. Brand undid Drake's cuff from his right wrist and attached it to a metal ring built into the wall. Drake had no choice but to lie down tethered to the bunk. The others were treated the same.

'One or more of us will be stationed nearby. Sleep well, kiddies,' Brand said. 'Lights out!'

Drake folded his pillow over and faced the wall. The only light was the faint glow of his tracker and the dull, blinking orange lights strung along the outside of the platform, shining in through the porthole. The only sound was the soft, muffled sobs from Strawberry Blonde in the bunk below.

He fell asleep at 21:45 on the dot, according to his leash.

At 02:17, Drake awoke with a cramp in his leg. He groaned and tried to shake it out. The rest of the kids in the room were asleep, and someone – Mohawk, Drake guessed – was snoring. Drake rolled over as the pain in his leg eased and gazed out of his porthole at the constant blinking lights along the outer shell of the Rig.

He saw a strange thing down below.

Hundreds – no, *thousands* – of tiny electric-blue lights

danced back and forth just below the surface of the ocean, over near the eastern platform. Like a swarm of fireflies, the lights darted to and fro in the water, casting the otherwise deep, dark sea in a soft, ethereal glow.

Drake watched, entranced, for close to an hour before – all at once – the lights vanished.

It was some time before he drifted back to sleep.

Storm in a Teacup

The next morning Drake had all but forgotten about the strange light show. He ate breakfast in silence around the steel table in Processing as, one by one, Officer Brand delivered the prisoners to Warden Storm's office.

Mohawk went first, then Strawberry Blonde, and all the others. Wherever they were going, they didn't come back the same way. Soon Drake sat alone at the table with only one faceless guard and the dregs of his cereal for company. His tracker read **\$-195 AC**.

For room and board, he thought grimly.

After about an hour, Brand returned for Drake. He was led up a narrow staircase in the heart of the control tower he'd seen from the helipad last night. He walked past several doors locked with ID scanners, and emerged in a room lined with computers and workstations, manned by more guards, and made mental notes of all of it.

Brand, a hand on Drake's shoulder, led him across the floor and up a single flight of stairs to a frosted-glass door. A plaque on the door read *Warden Storm*. Brand knocked once.

‘Send him in.’

Brand held the door for Drake and motioned him inside. He nodded at the warden and then stepped out.

‘Good morning, Mr Drake,’ Warden Storm said from behind a large, opulent desk. He was sipping tea from a fine china cup and saucer. ‘How was your first night on the Rig?’

Drake thought about the odd dancing lights and shrugged. ‘I suppose it was *oil-right*.’

Storm wore another immaculate suit over his bulky frame. ‘Ah, not only an escape artist, but a comedian. I have to say, I’ve been looking forward to your arrival for some days. Please, sit.’

Drake sat and placed his cuffed hands in his lap. He glanced around the room, at the filing cabinets on the far wall underneath an open window overlooking the helipad far below, and the ocean beyond that. The warden’s office was decorated simply, wood panelling and a skylight overhead. On the wall behind the man was a collection of commendations and photographs from the United States Air Force. One picture showed Storm in the cockpit of a helicopter, flying through low, scrubby mountains.

‘You like that one?’ Storm asked. ‘My first tour, twenty years ago in Afghanistan. You weren’t even born yet, son.’ He cleared his throat and turned to his computer. ‘Now, I am not foolish enough to assume that you will treat this facility any differently from your previous three

incarcerations.’ Storm read from a display Drake couldn’t see. ‘Trennimax, in France, well, that took no real brains, just courage. I must say, though, your escape from Cedarwood in the Alps was inspiring, crafting railway wheels in the metal shop and fitting them to a laundry cart. How did you know that the old track down the mountain was still operational?’

Drake shrugged. ‘I didn’t.’

‘The devil’s luck, hmm? Remarkable.’

‘Easy.’

‘Well, as it may.’ Storm turned from his screen and met Drake’s eyes. ‘Are you a strong swimmer, Mr Drake?’

‘Used to churn through the water at East London Leisure when I was five. Don’t imagine a hundred miles of ocean will be much more of a challenge.’

Storm laughed. ‘If you wanted to try, son, I wouldn’t stop you. There is no way down to the water from the Rig, just so you know. The jump alone – fifty metres – would kill you.’

‘I’ll build a diving board.’

‘How did you escape from Harronway?’

‘I walked out the front door.’

‘Come now. Warden Gomez was a friend of mine, before you embarrassed him and he had to be replaced. To this day, Alliance Systems hasn’t been able to figure out how you did it. The morning of August thirty-first, you were simply gone.’

Drake said nothing.

‘Well, no matter. Your latest escape is why you’ve been sent here. Usually the punishment has to fit the crime – and the Rig takes only the worst of the worst. Murderers, violent offenders, and the like. You, as far as your record shows, are none of those things. Although you came close in Trafalgar Square, hmm? Which is why you may find your time here initially uncomfortable.’

‘That’s fine, sir. I won’t be staying long.’

‘I think it best we keep you busy.’ Storm tapped away on his computer again and another square scanner flared to life in the arm of Drake’s chair. ‘I think an intensive schedule will keep your mind off any foolish escape attempts. We wouldn’t want you hurting yourself or others now, would we.’

Drake kept quiet and let a long moment pass in silence. The warden finally cleared his throat and gestured to the scanner.

‘Swipe your tracker, Mr Drake. The device will download your schedule for the next month. After that time, we will reassess how you’re fitting in here, and modify your workload accordingly.’

Drake swiped his wrist over the scanner and his tracker beeped. A circular loading symbol covered the screen for a moment and then the time returned along with his debt. A new instruction ran along the bottom of the screen. It read:

Exercise: 0900–1000

The tracker made a harsh sound, and the screen flashed red.

Warning: You are outside the exercise area

‘Ah, you’ll be fined five credits for any breaches of your schedule, I’m afraid,’ Storm said. ‘And being here constitutes a breach. I’d hurry along, Mr Drake. Officer Brand will show you onto the boys’ platform.’

Enemies

'You've got a job in Tubes, clearing pipes – that should keep you busy,' Brand said, as he unlocked Drake's wrist cuffs and led him down a corridor linking the southern platform to the central. The floor was made of reinforced clear plastic. Large, silver-grey vents were fitted to the underside of the corridor, hanging over the water. The ocean chopped and churned at least fifty metres below.

'Tubes?'

'You've been assigned a hefty workload. Tubes always needs hands clearing sand and grit. Good credits. You'll be one of the high earners, I'd wager.' Brand snorted. 'You'll have no other choice.'

The Rig had not been used to drill into the ocean floor for over ten years, yet the smell of grease and crude oil still clung to the structure. Drake imagined it was a smell he'd get used to, in time. Despite his bravado in Storm's office, he hadn't the first idea how he was going to escape this latest cage. But there would be a way. *There always is.*

From the central platform Brand led Drake west, in

another corridor built out over the ocean. The western platform loomed before them, dark and dreary. They reached a set of barred steel doors at the end of the corridor and Brand swiped his access card across the panel. The doors hissed open on slow hydraulic runners and revealed a whole new world.

For the first time, Drake got a look at the Rig's younger inhabitants. The male population, at least. He stood at the apex of a wide cellblock, looking down at several holding levels built into the walls of the structure, and into the heart of the western platform. At least sixty metres across by the same wide, dozens of young men in green jumpsuits milled around an exercise yard ten levels below.

Drake was reminded of every prison movie he'd ever seen growing up, before his misdeeds had landed him in one.

A cadre of guards patrolled the levels above the exercise area. Drake counted seven – eight, including Brand, who led him down a series of interconnected walkways. He reached the guard level, just above the prisoners below, and gazed over the railing.

Brand scanned the crowd and pointed at a small boy sitting on his own near a row of treadmills. 'Tristan!'

The scrawny kid jumped and looked up, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. 'Sir?'

'This here's Drake. Fill him in on the details, would you?'

Brand stared at Drake and gestured at the final set of stairs down into the enclosed exercise area. 'Well? I'm not going to hold your hand. Consider your induction over.'

Drake headed down the stairway and met up with Tristan. Tristan's faded green uniform looked about two sizes too big, just like the wire-framed glasses on his face.

'I'm Michael,' he said and offered his hand tentatively, as if he were afraid Drake might bite. 'Michael Tristan.'

'Will Drake.' Drake shook his hand. The tracker on his wrist beeped and flashed green.

Entered exercise area

'So, you just get in last night? Already saw a few new faces this morning.' Tristan shuffled nervously. 'Where you from? You sound British.'

'Yes. Last night. Yes. London.' Drake shivered and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He was being watched, and not just by the guards on the tier above.

'I'm from Perth, Western Australia. People from all over the world in here,' Tristan said, but Drake ignored him.

He swept his gaze across the exercise area. Most of the boys were paying him no attention. A few sneered, or stared at him blankly. He was trying to figure out the group dynamics, and who to watch out for. It had been the same in his other cages. There were always people to look out for – usually sooner rather than later.

Mohawk, the purple-haired kid from the chopper, was talking to a group of rough-looking boys near the weight wall and pointing at Drake.

‘Who’s the big fella the spiky-haired punk is talking to?’

Tristan followed his gaze and paled. That told Drake all he needed to know.

‘Alan Grey,’ Tristan whispered. ‘He’s –’

‘Coming this way,’ Drake said. ‘I take it he’s not the friendly type?’

Tristan was backing away as quickly as he could, no longer acknowledging Drake.

Standing his ground, Drake turned to the side as Grey approached, flanked by three large inmates on each side. Mohawk smirked at him from over Grey’s shoulder.

‘You’re the tough guy, huh?’ Grey said, crossing his arms over his chest. He had thick black hair and narrow, cruel eyes. His nose was flat, like a pig’s, and rough stubble coated his cheeks. He was just less than six feet, and if Tristan’s uniform had looked two sizes too big, Grey’s looked far too small. His muscles bulged beneath the fabric. ‘Lot of tough guys here. What’s your name?’

‘Drake.’

‘Drake.’ Grey sneered. ‘Gaz says you disrespected him last night.’ He jerked his thumb at Mohawk. ‘Old mate of mine, is Gaz, from Trennimax. Thinks you owe him an apology, he does.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Drake said. ‘I’m sorry he’s a scurrying little

worm that beats on girls, and goes crying behind the fanciest skirt in the yard when called on it.'

Grey tried to grab his shoulder.

Drake slapped his hand away. A flash of anger crossed Grey's features and he lunged forwards, faster than Drake thought he could move, and slammed his forehead into Drake's face.

Drake stumbled back, staggered by the blow and anticipating another. Blood spurted from his nose in a violent torrent. He ducked low and felt Grey's fist swing through the air above his head. No stranger to brawls, Drake launched a crippling kick into Grey's shin. If he didn't end it now he'd find himself with worse odds later.

Grey groaned and fell to one knee. Drake spun on his haunches, swiped the bully's other leg out from under him, and slammed his fist into Grey's mouth. He hit the spongy floor of the exercise area hard and cursed.

Where are the guards? Drake glanced up and saw Brand making his way slowly down the stairs. He had a smile on his face and seemed to be taking his time. The rest of the officers watched from above, pointing and jeering.

One of Grey's friends came in from behind and wrapped his arms around Drake's chest, squeezing him tight as Grey got back to his feet.

'Hold him. *I'm gonna break his damn jaw!*'

Drake hauled his legs up into the air as Grey lunged

at him. He timed it right and his feet connected with Grey's chest. Drake thrust his weight back, using Grey's momentum against him, and the bully went down a second time, gasping for air.

The boy holding Drake was thrown back too, striking his head against one of the metal support pillars. Drake broke free.

With a roar, Grey rose again, glaring at Drake. For a moment Drake thought he saw an actual flash of furious red in Grey's eyes, but then Brand stepped between them and blew a shrill whistle.

'Enough!' He glanced over his shoulder. 'You need to calm down, Mr Grey. And Mr Drake, fighting is prohibited. You'll both be fined fifty credits. Now walk away. *All of you.*' Brand wasn't carrying his gun, but a long baton that hummed softly.

Electrified, Drake thought, wiping his bloody nose with his sleeve.

'This isn't over,' Grey growled. He walked away, the rest of his gang following in his wake. Mohawk offered Drake a sly grin and flipped him off.

His tracker beeped.

Lessons: 1015–1215

'What does that mean?'

'It means we've got lessons until lunch,' Michael Tristan said. He was looking at Drake in amazement. 'Then work and dinner, followed by two hours' free time

in the common area. Standard day in paradise. Do you know where you're working?

'Tubes, apparently.'

'Wow. You've been here five minutes and already made the worst possible enemy and been assigned the worst job on the Rig.' Tristan chuckled. 'Need to keep your head down, Drake.'