

Athens Adventure – Day 5

‘We’ll see you there...oh...who do you think will win?’

‘No doubt about it’, said Michael, ‘2-1 to Liverpool!’

‘OK, let’s go, but stick together!’

It was Wednesday afternoon. They made their way out of the hotel lobby and started the short walk to the ground. Freddy puffed his chest out proudly as the little group walked from the side street where the hotel was located towards the main road. Up ahead they could see a tidal mass of humanity moving. One direction only. Stadium-bound.

Well, this is it, thought Freddy, we’ve made it. The Champions League final. Today. Now.

Although he and Wil had been to other games, nothing could compare with this. The Champions League. A final. An evening game, and a late night. In a foreign country. And Liverpool.

As they reached the end of the street to join the surge of fans, the sights and the sounds and the smells became overwhelming. Freddy stood still briefly to take it all in.

In the sky, wisps of smoke from barbecues and food stands, down the length of the street.

In the top floors of most of the buildings, the residents were hanging out of their windows, trying to get a better look at the crowd. Some were cheering, waving at the people below. Some had put up enormous flags across their windows. Liverpool banners. Milan flags. Lots of Greek blue and white.

Towards ground level, the street lights were decorated with city flags and ribbons in the all red of Liverpool and the red and black of Milan. Every other lamp-post had the words Kalos Orisate written on them, meaning Welcome.

And then the people.

As they turned left into the street the full scale of the crowd became clear.

The players, sticking as close together as they could, joined the throng, almost like a moving carpet of people.

With Mr Andrews trying to keep them together, they were carried along on this wave of humanity towards the stadium.

Freddy, his feet barely touching the ground, started to take in the smells of the street.

At every street corner someone was cooking something. Hot dogs, burgers, kebabs, meat being roasted over open coals on skewers. The combination of aromas as they passed from one stall to another was overwhelming, vivid, exotic.

Occasionally one of the fans would let off a flare or a firecracker, adding to the mix, and filling the air

with acrid red or blue smoke.

And of course, the people. With that many people crammed together in a small space, in the heat of the late afternoon. People smells. Sweat and perfume.

The tide carried them perhaps a kilometre or more, round a corner, and then...the stadium came into view. The magnificent Athens Olympic stadium. Right there, in front of them.

And the sounds, getting louder by the minute. The hustle and bustle of a busy street. Filled with fans. Full of football fanatics. Hawkers and hustlers. Police trying to keep calm. And singing. Whistling. Chanting. Wailing and screaming. For the team.

The Liverpool fans seemed to be the loudest.

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your hearts, And you'll never, walk, alone You'll never walk, alone...

Let it be, let it be, let it be, Stevie G, For we all know the answer, and his name is Stevie G

He's big, he's red, His feet don't fit in the bed Peter Crouch, Peter Crouch!

The street widened out as they reached the stadium entrance, and the crush was less. Freddy looked round to check everyone had made it.

'Where's Hardy?' he said, looking around.

'Oh, it's OK, he's over there, look...'

Hardy was in the middle distance, apparently talking to someone at the side of the street. Freddy and Wil walked over to where he was.

'Hi, what're you doing?' Freddy said.

'Oh it's OK mate, he's fine', said the man next to Hardy, 'he'll be with you in a minute'.

Freddy looked at the man nervously. He was about thirty years old, unshaven, with filthy yellow teeth. His hair looked like it hadn't been washed for weeks. He had on a long battered overcoat, even though it was still twenty-five degrees that evening.

Hardy could see the worry on Freddy's face. He left the man and came over. Barely audible above the din around him, he said,

'Look, leave me alone right, this guy is offering me two hundred euros for my ticket. Two hundred! Just think what I could get for that...'

Freddy felt a mixture of fear and pity for his friend. A mixture of feelings. Don't mix with these kinds of people was one. How can you even think about missing this game? was another, and where do you think you're going to go? was a third. In the end, all he could say was,

'No WAY!' He dragged his friend back towards the group, 'this is the experience of a lifetime. You can't miss it! We worked so hard for this. And we are still a team, remember? Come right here.' Wil

and Freddy physically dragged Hardy back. The man was almost crying,

‘Oh come on, mate, I’ll give you four hundred!’

His voice faded away miserably as they moved away from him.

Gate 10, where they had to enter the stadium, was right in front of them and they had to go through a narrow entrance before reaching the turnstiles. The throng of people heading for the same entrance squeezed together once more, then opened out again on the other side and formed into neat queues.

As they were queuing for the left-most of the several turnstiles, more pushing, then,

Sirens...wailing.

Ten, maybe twenty, police motorbikes, lights flashing against the dimming night sky.

An enormous double-decker coach, completely black, windows darkened. A small sign in the front window.

Liverpool FC, Champions League Finalists, 2007

The players’ coach had arrived!

Without leaving their place in the queue, the Lancaster Road players strained to see through the crowd as the sleek mirrored door slid open. Four men in suits stood either side of the door, making a short corridor from the coach to a doorway marked Players Entrance. Everyone strained again.

First player off. The first one. Looking fit, looking ready.

Michael screamed his name!

‘GO Stevie, GO. You can do it again!’

No reaction. Michael yelled again.

‘Go STEVIE G!’

Gerrard seemed to hear. He turned and gazed into the crowd, and seemed to look at Michael.

He smiled, and gave a thumbs up sign. And then he was gone.

‘He smiled at us. He’s gonna do it! Stevie G’s gonna win it for Liverpool!’
