

School Edition



Fathers of Nations

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Foreword

Just that morning, guards had caught a man selling confidential documents marked FOR 100 EYES ONLY. Nobody, except the fifty heads of state then attending a summit in the Gambia's capital of Banjul, was supposed to see those documents. Later, on the same day, the heads of state boycotted a ceremony that the Gambia had organised to mark the closing of their summit. According to the Gambian News, the boycott had nothing to do with the man caught selling confidential documents. Instead, the paper said, the boycott was a result of a bitter disagreement that the heads of state themselves had had earlier.

No Gambian has ever admitted that the man caught selling confidential documents disappeared, never to be seen again. This is to be expected. Think about it. If you were a Gambian, would you admit that the man disappeared while your country was hosting forty-nine foreign heads of state? On the other hand, the boycott of the closing ceremony is altogether a different matter. Here, you speak out. You reject any suggestion that the boycott of the closing ceremony meant that the summit was in any way a failure. The summit was a success, you insist, not a failure.

Wait, says a dissenting critic. Everyone else thinks the summit was a failure, the critic claims. In fact, continues the critic, the heads of state themselves agree, if only in off-the-record remarks so far, that the summit was a failure.

Care to respond to that? the critic asks.

Before you respond,you swallow your anger at the critic first. Then you respond. The visiting heads of state have done well to express the view they have expressed,my friend,you tell the critic.Look.We have freedom of expression in this country now, do we not? Is it not true that even visiting foreigners can now say,while on our soil,whatever they want to say? And do they not do this because all people,visiting kings and queens included,now have a right to say anything they please? Therefore, in speaking of failure instead of success, the visiting heads of state were within their rights.

Yet,my friend,you remind the critic, fair is fair. Having listened to them express their view, now listen to me express mine as well.Then,exercising your rights,you review the summit to the critic in your own light, which, of course, only illuminates high points and blurs out all low points.

And that, exactly,is what all Gambians did when the summit failed.They still rated it as having been the most successful summit ever held. They were lookingat it their way. This story will look at it another way. What really happened at the summit?

Chapter One

Four strangers checked in at The Seamount Hotel in Banjul one evening. None of them knew of the other three, or about being one of the four. And this would remain the case because, unknowingly, the hotel assigned them to different rooms on different floors in different wings.

First to check in, was a man, aged about sixty years. His hairline had retreated all the way back to his crown, but there it had held: no more hair loss. He had a strange habit of smacking his lips as he talked, appearing to shape each word first and to add voice to it only after.

Arrival formalities required him to complete and sign a registration card at the hotel's front desk. He signed it as Karanja Kimani, Professor in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. The hotel gave him a room on the fourth floor of its East Wing.

Next to sign in, was another man, aged about seventy. He had a bushy moustache, which, in moments of speech, wriggled over his mouth like a moth fighting to free its wings then fly away. The man registered as Ngobile Melusi, Comrade and Citizen of Zimbabwe. In the blank his card had for his occupation, he defiantly wrote Not Applicable. The hotel allocated him a room on the fifth floor of the South Wing.

A younger man, aged about fifty, also checked in. Big and flabby, he looked like a failed sumo wrestler. However, this feature was not evident now. He had buried it under loose robes, topped with one of those cone-like caps that always

flop to the left side,by design, not flaw. There was something about his eyes. They narrowed into slits when he relaxed, narrowed further when he smiled,and vanished altogether when he laughed.He registered as Chineke Chiamaka, Pastor at the Church inside Africa, 'CIA, in Lagos, Nigeria. He took a room on the sixth floor of the West Wing.

Last to check in, was yet another man, forty-plus years old. His walk seemed to be motion powered by rebellion. Was it a gesture of protest against someone or something? He checked in as Seif Tahir, Engineer, formerly employed by the Ministry of Defence in Tripoli,Libya.He got a room on the third floor of the North Wing.



Professor Kimani had been in his room for less than an hour when the phone there rang. He looked at his watch: not seven oclock yet.He looked out of a window: pitchdark already.How fast falls the African night! Like a heavy rain of ink, he thought. He picked up the phone.

“Is that Professor Kimani?” a male voice on the line asked.

Professor Kimani did not respond.

“Hey,I heard you pick up,” said the voice,already irritated. “So I know you are there.Look.I have an urgent message for you from AGDA."It pronounced AGDA as a word: agda."Hello.Are you still there, Professor Kimani?”

This time,Professor Kimani responded. AGDA,the Agency for Governance and Development in Africa,had sent him here, to Banjul. “Yes I am here,"he said.

"Good. AGDA's message for you is that you accept me as your guide while you are here. Now, before you go worrying about that arrangement, let me assure you that I'll do everything I can to make your mission here a success. You have my word."

Nigerian! Professor Kimani guessed from the man's tendency to inject anger into every stressed syllable. Educated Nigerian! He added this qualification after taking into account the man's impeccable grammar. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Later!" snapped the Nigerian. "Right now, I want to know if you have received a briefcase I left at your hotel for you."

Professor Kimani looked at a briefcase his hotel had just delivered to his room. "Yes, I have received it," he said. "Just now, in fact," he added. "I can't open it, though. Did you scramble its lock perhaps?"

"It's one, one, two, four."

"I'm sorry. What was that?"

"That was its combination lock. Set the lock on that. The briefcase should open. Now, before you do anything foolish, first make sure that it contains all the items that it ought to have. They are listed on a sheet that you'll find inside. Oh, Professor Kimani, that was an order." The voice paused, expecting protest from Professor Kimani. When none came, it gave the rest of its demand. "Obey, Professor Kimani, obey."

Still, Professor Kimani did not protest.

“Excellent!” applauded the Nigerian, clearly pleased with his quick victory. “So, Professor Kimani, how much time will you need to acquaint yourself with the material in your briefcase— one hour?” He did not wait for an answer. “One hour it is, then. Goodnight.”

"Wait," Professor Kimani said. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

“Me, forget?” retorted the Nigerian.

Cocky educated Nigerian, Professor Kimani said to himself, now adding up all of his assessments about the man. “I asked for your name. Who are you?”

“Oh, that. Let's just say I am your guide,” the man said.

“I meant your real name,” Professor Kimani insisted.

Instead of an answer, he heard the line die suddenly from the other end.

Comrade Melusi got a similar call after, Pastor Chiamaka later, Engineer Tahir the last. All three said they had failed to open their briefcases. To all three the caller gave the key: one, one, two, four.



Dr Afolabi heard someone call him from behind. He stopped walking then turned to look. There she was! She was wearing a scarlet blouse, a black skirt and red high heels. Who was she? She was not anyone he could remember. Perhaps she had called someone else. He looked around. No one else had stopped. That made sense: she had called his name.

She called again. "Dr Afolabi! May I please have a word with you?" she asked.

“With me?” he asked. “Are you sure?”

"I am sure all right, which means you will now follow me. This way, please." She led him to a corner with two chairs. "So sit here." She indicated one of the two chairs. "One minute is all I'll take. Well, maybe I'll take more, but five at the most." She sat on the other chair.

"One minute, five minutes—where is the difference?" he joked. Then he sat as well.

"My name is McKenzie," she began. "Fiona McKenzie. First, let me thank you for agreeing to sit for this interview. Wait. Can I tell you something else before I continue? You see, whenever I say my name is McKenzie, people look at me quizzically, silently demanding an explanation."

"And the explanation, Ms McKenzie, is what?" he asked.

"I was adopted by Ian and Elspeth McKenzie, Scottish missionaries. They are back in Edinburgh now, but were in Banjul then. They took me in while I was less than a year old."

Cute as a button and sharp as a needle, he thought. Her eyes were wide and white like a pair of moons.

She continued. "My natural parents were Gambian, but I will never see them. They are dead. Oh, well." She wriggled in her chair. "Goodness me, what am I doing? Dictating my autobiography?" She waved that idea away. "Let's talk business now, shall we?" She pulled out of her handbag a small device then switched it on. "Mind if I start recording?"

"You're a reporter?" He had not thought she was.

"Yes, for the Gambian News."

"I see. Now, how can I help you, Ms McKenzie?"

“I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may.”

“Yes, you may. In fact, why don't I start you off? My name is Abiola Afolabi, which you seem to know already. But you can just call me Abiola, my first name. Take it from there.”

“I will: You studied at Harvard University in the USA. Now you teach at the University of Ibadan, in Nigeria” She smiled.

“I got that from the cover of your book: Failure of States.”

He averted his eyes to enjoy this fame in the correct manner- with humility he hoped she would easily see through. This black Scotswoman surely knew her trade, he thought.

“When I heard you were here at The Seamount Hotel, Dr Afolabi, I decided to come and see you. So here I am. This is all so funny.”

“Funny?”

“Yes. I expected to see an academic scarecrow dressed in jeans. Instead, I see a well-dressed man who might well be a businessperson.”

“I'm sorry I've disappointed you, Ms McKenzie.”

“Forty?”

“What?”

“Your age: forty?”

“No, forty-five.”

“To my thirty-five, imagine that! Go have your picture taken right now, Dr Afolabi. You won't always look this good. I am not joking. Go.”

“Ms McKenzie, was there something else you wanted us to talk about?”

She slapped herself on one cheek as if to punish herself. “I was beginning to ramble on, wasn't I? Enough! Now then, Africa's heads of state will soon start a debate at the Pinnacle Hotel, two streets from here, and I'll be covering the debate for the Gambian News. I understand you will be an advisor to the heads of state during the debate. Could you give me some background? What will be the heart of their debate?”

“They will be debating a document titled Way Omega. You see, not long ago, twenty Nobel laureates discovered a way to develop Africa and then published that discovery in a document with that title. Africa's ministers for planning had a look at it. They liked it. Now Africa's heads of state are in Banjul to adopt it as a common development strategy for all of Africa. That's the background, Ms McKenzie. Or did you want actual content?”

She shook her head. “What are your expectations of the summit, Dr Afolabi?”

“What are my expectations? Please don't get me started! I expect the summit to be a historic moment. If adopted, Way Omega will change African politics dramatically. Just think: no more military coups; no more rigged elections; well, no more foul play, period.”

“Dr Afolabi, not all of the heads of state assembled here are fair players. In fact, a few are out-and-out foul players - they rose to power through military coups or rigged elections. Those won't be walking along Way Omega any time soon, will they?”

“Change is always like that, Ms McKenzie. One side of it has defenders of existing arrangements. These, sure about their loss if those arrangements end, fight tooth and nail to keep them. The other side has challengers of existing arrangements. These, not yet sure about their gain if new arrangements replace old arrangements, do not fight so hard to win them.”

“Huh? What did you just say, Dr Afolabi?”

“You are not listening to me anymore, are you, Ms McKenzie? Anyway, I was saying Way Omega will put Africa on a new course, free from the obstacles that have defeated its past efforts. Imagine this, Ms McKenzie: Africa without coups, without civil wars, without..” He stopped himself. “Look who is rambling on now, Ms McKenzie?”

Yet can you blame me? I told you not to get me started, remember?”

“Yes, I remember, and yet we have your book: Failure of States. Dr Afolabi, may I ask you something? What makes you this optimistic about Africa's future now, when in that book you were very pessimistic? Is it the content of Way Omega or the prestige of its authors?”

He began to dislike her. “Ms McKenzie, did you say my book was 'pessimistic?’”

“Yes, I did.”

“Was 'pessimistic' really the word you meant? You see, the word means..”

“Let me try again, Dr Afolabi. What makes you optimistic now, when before you were pessimistic?”

“Ms McKenzie, I heard you the first time.”

“Then,answer my question.”

“I see I had totally misjudged you, Ms McKenzie.” He had seen a lamb: vulnerable. Now he saw a lioness: dangerous. “I thought you were a proper good-mannered journalist. Instead,I just see one of those fire eaters who confuse journalism with bad manners.”

"Dr Afolabi,you haven't answered my..”

“ What joy do you get out of being rude to those you interview?You like watching them explode from anger and then bleed, is that it? Fine, but we have just met? What did I do that offended you?”

“Let me put my question another way,Dr Afolabi:Why did you come to this summit?”

“Correction:I didn't come;I was invited.That means presidents wanted me here. Repeat: presidents. They saw merit in the book you dismiss as pessimistic and wanted me to assure them that Way Omega agrees with it. So who cares what you think? What do you know about books, anyway?Let me tell you something else,Ms McKenzie...” He changed his mind-a voice inside him was saying he had become too defensive. “On further thought, let me not. I don't think I have to defend my book before anyone,least of all before a third-rate reporter for the *Zambian News*.”

“Gambian,"she said.

"Whatever!"

“All right, Dr Afolabi. Now can you think through your book and give me an example, a specific example,on which Way Omega agrees with your book?”

"Yes,I can."

Her mobile phone rang. She answered it. As she did, she was already gathering her things, preparing to leave. "Dr Afolabi, I have to go," she said. "Silly boss wants me back at the office. Something has come up. Sorry. So, Dr Afolabi, in only a word now, because I have no time left, what is the specific example you were about to give?"

"Let me see if I understand you correctly, Ms McKenzie," he said, suppressing hot anger. "A man you claim is your boss calls you. Therefore, I must compress my example into a word?"

"You know bosses: they don't like to be kept waiting." She picked up her things. "Listen, I really must go." She rose and started leaving. Then she stopped. "I could come back later. Would that be okay?"

"Absolutely not," he almost shouted.

"Then what do you suggest?" she asked.

"I suggest that you go read my book, not just its cover." He stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I, too, must be off. Have a good day."



Forty-nine foreign heads of state were in Banjul for the summit. All looked happy, and why not? Had they not escaped from troublemakers in their home countries? They saw ahead of them a stay free from trouble here, in the Gambia, a country everyone kept calling 'The Land of Kunta Kinteh. All hoped to get from their stay as much rest as possible. Of course, at some point they would each take the floor and, as fans back home expected, address the summit, but this was something that they could do with little or no effort at all.

For Gambians, though, the presence of so many visiting dignitaries was not fun. True, forty-nine heads of state could give a hosting country good publicity, but heads of state are a huge inconvenience. So this publicity comes at a high price.

Nowhere is the price higher than it is in Africa. Here, before the dignitaries arrive, bulldozers dispatched at night in slum-clearance 'exercises' demolish roadside kiosks on which whole families depend for their livelihood. This way, the dignitaries will see that a few streets once had sidewalks. Roads get rare layers of tarmac at times of maximum traffic. This way, motorists come to a standstill when it really hurts. Checkpoints sprout everywhere. This way, guards get even more bases for extorting bribes from passers-by. When the dignitaries finally arrive, water taps at which whole neighbourhoods queue to get just buckets of water dry up, because now all water has to go to new water fountains built to mesmerise the visitors.

Catastrophes can happen even at summits. At the Banjul summit, preventing them from happening was a joint responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Security and the Ministry of Defence. This meant both the police and the army played major roles. They came up with a very effective way of assuring that all heads of state would be safe. It was this: all heads of state, including the host, would stay in one place, the Pinnacle Hotel, located on the exclusive outskirts of Banjul. What this did was to reduce the fifty problems of assuring the safety of fifty guests scattered in fifty different locations to just one problem:

that of assuring the safety of fifty guests concentrated at only one point. Security now became no more than the elementary task of ensuring that the Pinnacle became and remained an impenetrable fortress.

This approach rested on two pillars-intelligence and combat. Intelligence meant secret agents melting into every hideout in Banjul. Their assignment was to investigate all rumours about plans to storm the Pinnacle and harm its new guests. That duty went to the police.

Combat meant trained soldiers would engage in battle with any unauthorised person who did as much as come near the Pinnacle. This duty fell on the army. The army was very clever about it. First, it ringed the perimeter fence encircling the Pinnacle with a thousand soldiers. Then, it deployed a hundred commandos in the compound inside the fence. Each of these soldiers and commandos, outside the fence and in the compound within, carried a real gun. So, while the sky above may have remained open, the ground below was fully covered. This was very clever.

There still remained Banjul's duty to extend to each head of state his or her due respect. This duty is commonly known as protocol'. At the summit, it fell on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of International Cooperation. What these ministries did was to divide it into two separate parts. The first was how to seat the heads of state at a feast the Gambia was treating them to at State House on the day they arrived. The second was how to accommodate them at the Pinnacle Hotel where they would stay between their arrival and their departure.

No one who has played host at a feast of more guests than just himself or herself needs to be told that the seemingly simple task of seating guests for a meal is in fact a complicated business. Should this guest sit here and eat next to that one, or sit there and eat next to that other? The permutations and combinations that the host has to consider quickly become countless.

For one guest, just one, there are already four options from which the host must choose—the guest could sit on the left or the right of the host, or in front, or even behind the host! For five guests, there are more than seven hundred such options. By the count of ten guests, this number has jumped to over thirty million. The Gambia did not have only ten guests; it had forty-nine! In addition, they were not just guests; they were presidents.

What happens when the guests are not just guests but presidents? Now the host simply plays it safe. Eritrea and Ethiopia might seem one country, the host reasons, but their presidents rarely see eye to eye, so they should not be seated next to each other. On the other hand, the host continues to reason, Kenya and Tanzania agree more often than they disagree, so their presidents should sit next to each other and chat away in Kiswahili. And so on.

This approach eliminates many options and, in that way, simplifies choice. In fact, when the host is entertaining only two or three heads of state, it works wonders.

However, if instead there are forty-nine, it is practically worthless, because it leaves millions of options from which the host must choose.

Then what do hosts do at state banquets, where guests definitely are many? They follow the United Nations (UN). Like the UN, they ignore all rumours about who is speaking or not speaking to whom and simply seat everybody in alphabetical order, come what may.

Alphabetical seating has one huge advantage: it is easy because now there is only one way of seating everybody. A happier world than that is hard to imagine. Still, it has one big problem. Seating everybody in alphabetical order means Algeria and Angola always get the best seats-up in front, near the high table. When the sound system or the lights fail, these two countries can still follow the proceedings. Unfortunately, alphabetical seating also means Zambia and Zimbabwe always get the worst seats -way over there at the back, from where they cannot even see the high table. When the sound system fails or the lights go out? Big problem!

What other option is there? Scramble the alphabet and move Zambia and Zimbabwe nearer the high table, and Algeria and Angola farther away from it. Uh-uh. People would not be able to find their seats that way! The trick they use to find seats works sequentially. Malians scan the sea of seats before them in sequence until they spot a Malawian or a Mozambican. Then they say: "Eureka, our seats must be somewhere between those two." Now scramble this approach away. What happens? Chaos! Banquet halls cease to be navigable. So Zambia and Zimbabwe can complain all they want, but their seats just have to be at the back. Algeria and Angola: Way to go!

Hotel accommodation involved two questions. First, what floor should this head of state or that get? Second, how many rooms should his or her delegation have? The first question was easy. Heads of state got floors up or down the Pinnacle in the alphabetical order of their countries' official names. Once more, Algeria and Angola got top floors, under A. Way to go! Botswana, Burkina Faso, and Burundi followed, under B. Now, attention! The Ivory Coast did not come under I. It came under C, among the likes of Cameroon, the Comoros, and Congo, because its official name is Côte d'Ivoire. Djibouti and the rest came after C. For some unknown reason, the Federal Republic of Nigeria did not come under F. It came under N, alongside Namibia and Niger. Zambia and Zimbabwe, of course, came last.

The second question was how many rooms should a head of state's delegation get. This question sounds easy, but it is not. Except for the United Nations' general assemblies, Africa's summits are the world's largest gatherings of heads of state. Moreover, each head of state is accompanied by a delegation with members of an unknowable number. So, how many rooms should a delegation get? This is not easy. Gambians can be clever, and in this case, they were. They assumed that all delegations, big or small, having arrived in Banjul safely, had to be 'equal, if only for that reason. Very clever! This assumption enabled them to divide the number of rooms available equally among all delegations. The result was four rooms per delegation, and that was that. Case closed!

Chapter Two

A mobile phone rang in The Seamount's West Wing. Pastor Chiamaka answered it. The caller had phoned him earlier and identified himself as his guide. He was calling him again now, he said, to see how things were going. The time was 9.00 p.m.

"Pastor Chiamaka, is everything going okay?" he began.

Pastor Chiamaka was sucking pleasure from toffees that The Seamount had sprinkled on his bed to sweeten the dreams that it assumed he would have. He swallowed that joy in his mouth first. Then he answered.

"Yes, everything is going okay," he said. Beside him lay an open briefcase.

"Did you look yet at the contents of your briefcase?" asked the caller.

"Yes, I did," he answered.

"Then you saw the letter from AGDA, didn't you? I will return to it shortly. First, tell me this: What other items did you see in your brief case?"

"I saw a copy of Way Omega, the development strategy that Nobel laureates have crafted to end Africa's misery, and that Africa's heads of state are now expected adopt at their summit."

"Go on."

"I also saw a copy of Path Alpha, the development strategy that AGDA believes is a superior alternative to Way Omega, and that it hopes to slip in to replace Way Omega"

“Good. AGDA wants you to be fully familiar with both of those documents.Continue.”

“I also saw some leaflets, pamphlets and brochures from AGDA.”

“Skip those.What else?”

“Welll, I then saw this mobile phone which I am using now.”

“Excellent.Keep that mobile phone on at all times, day and night, rain or shine. From now on, I will be calling you often,even unexpectedly,but only through this number. So always have the mobile phone on. Unlike your hotel phone, it is completely secure, which means I can talk to you on it freely.”

“So you will tell me your real name now?” Pastor Chiamaka asked.

“My real name, my real name-why?"shouted the caller, angry all of a sudden.

“ Well,'why' yourself,"Pastor Chiamaka shouted back, also angrily, answering fire with fire. “If I don't haveyour real name, how can I even begin to ask for you were a need to do so to arise?”

“Were a need to do so to arise,I would contact you,” the caller told him.

“Ah,you can contact me, but I can't contact you? What is the matter? Are you afraid I might surprise you?”

“Shut your mouth!" snapped the caller.

“What did you say?” Pastor Chiamaka asked.

“You heard me. Now get this: I want you to obey me, not to argue with me. You will not talk back to me like this again, ever. Do you understand?”

“R-r-right,” Pastor Chiamaka stammered, suddenly tamed. “Y-y-yes, I do.”

“Splendid. So, Pastor Chiamaka, let me say what I was going to say if you had let me.” Pleased by his quick victory the caller was inching back towards polite speech. “What] was going to say is...” He stopped.

Pastor Chiamaka waited.

“I was going to say that it's best if I keep on initiating all communication between us,” the caller added.

Pastor Chiamaka did not respond.

“Look. You and I are supposed to be working together. We are on the same mission.”

This time Pastor Chiamaka responded. “Then why won't you tell me your real name?”

“I won't because our mission is still at a delicate stage,” said the caller. “For that reason, I'd rather you didn't know who I really am yet. Until I tell you otherwise, just call me your guide. Needless to say, I won't let you see my face either but you will hear my voice. Is there anything else you would like to ask me?”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Ah, yes. Why should you trust me? Well, go back to the letter from AGDA. It has the answer. Quote, you are not to have any less faith in him just because he identifies himself to you only by his alias of 'your guide,' unquote

The reference there is to me, Pastor Chiamaka. That is why you should trust me. Okay?”

Pastor Chiamaka did not answer.

“Was that all you were going to ask?”

Again Pastor Chiamaka did not answer.

“Fine, let's go back to Way Omega and Path Alpha, then. As I said, AGDA wants you to be fully familiar with both documents. Are you, Pastor Chiamaka?”

“Yes, Sir.” The word 'Sir' had slipped out accidentally, but perhaps significantly, to show that Pastor Chiamaka had climbed down and accepted a role subordinate to that of the caller. “Yes, I am,” he added.

“Then there isn't any more left for me to add. Oh, actually, there is. I was there an hour ago...”

“You were there an hour ago?” Pastor Chiamaka demanded.

“To get right to the point, I saw you in the bar of The Seamount Hotel.”

“Yes, I was there, having a Pepsi.”

“A Pepsi, is that right?”

“Do you know what, Mr Whoever-You-Are? You are beginning to get on my nerves.” Pastor Chiamaka was now thinking the caller might be an invisible executioner, unknowable and unidentifiable. “You can see and identify me, but I could walk right past you and not know it. What were you doing here anyway? Spying on me?”

“I think it would be best if you apologised, Pastor Chiamaka.”

“You want me to apologise? For what? For you spying on me?”

“What business had you being in a bar, Pastor Chiamaka?”

Pastor Chiamaka felt a lump of anger rise in his throat. Only after he had remembered the injunction to turn the other cheek did he swallow his anger and apologise. “All right, I had no business being in the bar,” he said. “It was a mistake and I promise I won't do it again.”

“You had better not!” said the caller.

The lump threatened to rise again. “Goodness me, it was only a soft drink.”

“So you say. Goodnight now, Pastor.”

Another mobile phone rang in The Seamount's South Wing. Comrade Melusi answered it. Yet another rang in the East Wing. Professor Kimani took the call. Still another rang in the North Wing. Engineer Tahir spoke with the caller. The hour now was 11.00 p.m.

Chapter Three

Professor Kimani joined the University of Nairobi directly as a senior lecturer. Even before taking off, he was already flying. There was a reason. Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda had just dismantled their University of East Africa. Kenya's part of the university, now renamed the University of Nairobi, found itself with a vacancy it had to fill immediately in its Institute of Development Studies. Professor Kimani, who had just completed his studies at the University of Oxford, wrote from there to say he wanted to fill it. To ensure he came and filled it for sure, the University of Nairobi raised his entry point from that of lecturer to that of senior lecturer.

He came. Only a month after his arrival, he launched a noisy debate in which he demanded that the University of Nairobi henceforth strive for relevance to the society rather than simply excellence of its work. It was not clear exactly what he meant by relevance to the society. However, a short six months later, he prevailed. The university's official motto became Relevance to the society.

After winning this war, he started another war which was even noisier. Now he wanted the university to be an agent of change, not a mere spectator of it. This was when people still thought this view was too radical and ridiculed it as simple-minded. So, not surprisingly, some of his colleagues, puzzled by his refusal to see that it was too radical, looked at him and then shook their heads in disbelief. Others, baffled by his inability to see that it was simple-minded, did or said little, convinced that he would fall on his face before long and self-destruct on his own without their help.

He did not care. After all, his antics in the wars that he had started, and won, had also won him the heart of a campus beauty queen. Her name was Asiya Omondi. He married her on a rainy but approving Saturday, to claps of thunder and flashes of lightning. How marriage then accelerated academic success! A professorship soon followed. After that achievement, he felt fulfilled. His persona now was complete. Had anyone told him this happiness would one day end as it did, he would have laughed himself upside down.



A global economic recession came. Africa was not spared. Jobs and incomes vanished. To get out of the crisis, Africa had to make changes. Changes, changes—they were everywhere!

"Donors were the forces behind them, Tuni," Professor Kimani told his daughter.

Tuni owed that name to Tunisia, believed to be her country of conception. Her father had gone there for a conference, her mother for the ride.

"What the donors did, Tuni, was to gang up on Africa," Professor Kimani said before he took a lick of his ice cream. He and his daughter were cooling off at some low-end restaurant in central Nairobi. "Look here, you Africa," the donors said, with one voice. "You will get no more aid from us unless you change this, that and the other, understand?"

"What did Africa do?" Tuni asked. She was deep into her second ice cream.

"Of course Africa did as told," he said. "Mind you, the donors did well to hang tough. Were it not for them, we'd still be reciting foolish clichés about home-growing

our own development strategies instead of importing foreign models.” He took another lick of his ice cream and grimaced. Why, he wondered, had no whiz kid invented warm ice cream yet?

“You're not enjoying your ice cream, Dad, are you?” Tuni asked.

“It's too cold,” he told her. Then he put it aside and continued. “Sadly, late changes only catalyse excess. When at last they come, people go on a rampage to make up for time they feel they have lost. Nowhere was this rampage more evident than in parliaments, the very institutions that epitomized change. Nowhere was excess more revolting than in a coup that a parliament staged.”

“The parliament staged a coup?”

“Yes, and they staged it successfully. Look. The year I started teaching, members of parliament (MPs) still earned less—I repeat, less—than professors did. Now each MP rakes in up to a hundred times—repeat, a hundred times—the income a professor makes. It gets worse. Earnings by professors still consist of salaries, which are taxable; whereas earnings by MPs are no longer deemed salaries and have long ceased to be taxable. Both the rise in income by MPs and the exemption of that income from taxation came with the coup.”

“I thought the days of coups were over.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Think again, Tuni. Not only do we still have coups by soldiers; now we also have coups by lawmakers. These latter coups are even more lethal, because they are legal. Is it legal for lawmakers to raise their wages as they

please? Yes, it is. Why is that? Because legal only means 'permitted by those who make the laws, and MPs make the laws that raise their income. Legal does not mean moral or even normal.'

"It does not?"

"No! To seal their power against reversal, all that MPs need to do now is to amend the existing constitution by inserting in it one tiny clause: Since God, Himself, cannot lower the wages MPs give to themselves, then neither can mere MPs."

"Is that possible?"

"Absolutely! After that has happened, the coup that brought these new wages about becomes irreversible. So, you see, parliaments can be even worse than armies."

Tuni blinked uncomprehendingly. "Worse than armies?" she asked. She had her mother's eyes: wings of an imported butterfly, pure black in the middle, pure white at the margins, ringed with inch-long eyelashes. Whenever she blinked, her eyelashes fluttered as if they were about to fly her away. "Dad, what do you mean?" The eyelashes were fluttering.

"You see, Tuni, soldiers could stage coups, true. However, since they were not lawmakers, they couldn't legalise their action. In other words, they only broke the law, nothing more. Now MPs do more: they break the law and legislate that breach as the new law. That's what I mean."

"But when elections come, the electorate votes them out, right?"

“Yes, just as when rains come, water washes off the spots of a leopard!”

“Dad, I am serious!” The wings of the butterfly were fluttering madly.

“Then listen to me. New parliaments are just like the old. No, they are more like the old: they raise their salaries more than did the old. The long and short of it, Tuni, is that nothing has really changed. Change in Africa has only replaced tyranny by presidents with tyranny by MPs.” He paused to think. Then he resumed. “Come to think of it, the French have always had it right. They say, The more things change, the more they stay the same. Actually, we have had it right all along as well. We say: Msitu mpya, nyani wale wale.”

“New forest, same old monkeys?” asked Tuni.

“Correct.”

“Dad, have you considered going into politics?”

“Me go into politics? No! Politics isn't for me. Teaching is.”



Guarding had come of age in Kenya. No longer was it the marginal activity it once had been. It had matured into a fully-fledged industry. Now it did not stop at just home protection. It covered other areas as well. In the transport area, it meant vehicles full of touch-me-not anti-theft gadgetry. In the tourism sector, it meant tour operators warning foreigners against showing valuables in public. In the workplace, it meant seminars on personal safety, and so on.

Professor Kimani viewed this growth in guarding with disapproval, to which he added contempt. He considered it

a symptom of failure by the state to ensure the safety of its citizens. His daughter held a more practical view.

“Mom and Dad, do you want to hear something clever that I did today?” she asked her parents breezily at supper one evening. “I attended a seminar on personal safety, that's what I did.”

Professor Kimani snorted. “You call that clever?” He helped himself to more food. “Tuni, safety isn't a clever thing we do by attending seminars. It's a necessity the state should provide to us.”

“And if it can't?”

He did not answer.

She waited. Still, no reply came.

Finally, Asiya answered. “Then safety becomes a private arrangement that we have to make for ourselves.”

“Siya!” Professor Kimani preferred this form of his wife's name to its full version of Asiya. “Siya, all that any private arrangement would do is to exempt the state from even trying to render the services that our taxes oblige it to give us.”

Mother and daughter looked at each other knowingly. How often had they heard him express that view? Yet did it not ignore reality at the expense of prosperity? People who don't like poverty and want prosperity temper their views with reality. He did not.

“Look at each other all you want,” he told his wife and his daughter. “Next you'll be saying you want to hire your own police and army. What would remain for the state to do?”

“Whatever you say, Dad,” Tuni said with a sigh. “But, before you change the world and get it to render the

services our taxes oblige it to give us, some of us intend to keep on taking steps that assure our personal safety.”

"Such as...?"

“Well,such as precautions against male violence.Over two-thirds of women in this country witness it on other women or on themselves. I'm not joking,Dad.That's what the seminar instructor said."Tuni turned to her mother. “Mom, as a woman you should be showing me just a little more interest here.”

“ And I am,Tuni ” Asiya sat up to show more of it. “ Go on,Tuni,please."

"She said there are three reasons why we women are easy prey."

Asiya knitted her brow into a question. “She?”

“Yes,Mom,the seminar instructor was a woman.The first reason, she said, is a lack of awareness of where we are. As women,we shouldl always be keenly aware of where we are and of what is going on around us. The second reason is a look of weakness and helplessness. Instead of looking weak and helpless, we should appear strong and in control. The third reason is a temptation to stray. We should never walk into bad neighbourhoods, walk alone in alleys or take stairs when there are elevators.”

Professor Kimani leaned back in his chair. “Another slow day at the office,huh,Tuni? ” he sneered. “ Surely you knew all of that already.”

She glowered at him. “Dad, this isn't about knowing." “No?”

“It's about doing. It is about women protecting themselves against criminals, male criminals,Dad.” She

made this remark sound as if her father, another male, might be a criminal.

Asiya touched her gently in a calming gesture. “Don't mind your father,Tuni.Now,what else did the instructor teach you?”

“You're not going to like it,Mom.”

“Oh? Why won't I?”

“Because it's what you do, and yet you should not do it.After completing an errand-shopping or whatever-women like to get in their cars and, said the instructor,just sit there for a while. Don't deny it, Mom.You do it,too.”

“No,I don't.”

"Yes,you do."

"I do not.”

“Never do it,Mom! A predator could be watching you.

So,the moment you get in your car, lock all the doors and drive off at once. What if a predator has a gun and has cornered you before you get in?”

Asiya's arms flew up in panicky surrender. “Tuni, stop it! The predator has a gun?” The arms rose higher. “Then you comply,Tuni. You do as he says.”

“Wrong.”

“Listen to me,Tuni; I'm your mother. You comply!”

“Mother...”

“Comply,I said.”

“Mom,our instructor explained why it makes sense to run away instead.”

“I don't care what your stupid instructor said.”

“All right,Mom. Now, suppose you're driving with a predator seated beside you...”

Asiya cringed. “Tuni,I'm not sure I want to hear this.”

"Crash the car!"

“What? Tuni, are you out of your mind?”

"Crash it hard. This will immobilise the predator with surprise and allow you to escape.”

“But our family only has that dying old Toyota.”

“Yes.Crash it!” Tuni turned back to her father. “By the way,Dad,is there any chance of me using the car tomorrow?”

He winced.The question might well have been dirt that an enemy had shot into his face to mock him.He fumbled for an excuse but told the truth instead. “Our car is down again,Tuni,” he said lamely. “I'll have it fixed as soon as I get my next salary.”

Asiya was looking at him. Once, she had seen him as a young man going places. Now she only saw an old man going nowhere. His very car had become a metaphor about him: it was going nowhere as well.

Later that evening, she offered him an idea. “Karanja, leave the university and go to greener pastures somewhere!” In the wounds this idea opened on him, she rubbed salt with a comparison: “Newborn left the university and went to greener pastures somewhere. Now look:he is an MP with four cars!”

This hurt.

Before going to parliament,Newborn Walomu,a rowdy fellow from a minor tribe without roads or schools, had been a junior colleague of Professor Kimani's at the university. Yes,this hurt.

So why did Professor Kimani not leave as well? Because he was a born teacher, he always told Asiya,and so a teacher

he would die. Losers such as Walomu swam in money, he would explain, only because even failed states have a few mansions. Since losers like to reward fellow losers, losers invariably end up occupying some of those mansions. Still, losers they all were and always would be.



First, there was a loud crash. Some moving object had hit another moving object. A trailer hooked to a truck negotiating a turn at a roundabout had broken free, spun outward, and ended up on top of a minibus in an adjacent lane. The drivers of both vehicles had then run away. They had done so to avoid mob justice.

Now the passengers in the unlucky minibus were scrambling to get out, except for one—a woman trapped in her seat. A man had seen her on his way out. He tried to go back in and get her out, but all doors had jammed. He pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket and called the mystical number-999—to report distress and request help. The hour was ten in the morning.

Onlookers started arriving. First, they only gawked, fascinated by the spectacle of a trailer sitting on top of a minibus. Goodness, how did it get there! Later, their attention moved down to the woman trapped inside the minibus.

"Look," said one onlooker.

A beautiful girl was trapped in her seat. She was still conscious.

“She is fine, then,” said another onlooker.

“Come on,” said the first onlooker. “A heavy trailer is sitting on her minibus, so how can she be fine?”

When the onlookers became a crowd, they tried to push the trailer off the minibus. They failed. Then a big van appeared.

“Ah! This could work,” they said.

What if the van hitched with the trailer through a chain then drove off? It was a good idea, but the chain kept breaking. Each time the van pulled, the trailer rose up a little at its hitched end. Seconds later, the chain snapped, and the trailer fell back down on the minibus. Every time the trailer fell back down like that, people closed their eyes in fear, because it punched the roof of the minibus down further. The situation could not have been any worse if an angry god in some dark cloud was using the trailer as a hammer to beat down on the minibus. Four attempts later, the roof started yielding and crushing the woman down.

Just then, a male giant came out of nowhere. He was carrying an axe. The crowd hushed. It was puzzled and perhaps scared. After realising that he meant no harm, it relaxed and parted to make way for him. He walked towards the minibus. The moment he reached it, he spat on his palms, rubbed one against the other and started working. Hack! Hack! He was still hacking when the minibus, now further weakened by his axe, gave in and collapsed. As it crumbled, amid groans of yielding metal, it compressed to the ground the poor woman trapped inside it. Her ordeal ended only after the minibus had squeezed out her final breath.

So Tuni Kimani did not die in an act of male violence after all. Male violence she would have fought and, given her empowering seminars on personal safety, might have conquered. She died in a freak road accident, in a minibus under a truck trailer.



Mother and father were inconsolable. Then, at their daughter's burial, final in a way that ended all doubt and all hope about her, closure came. Grief sharing then turned into progress towards recovery. Six months later, they were well enough again.

One day, Asiya woke up dejected again, not about Tuni this time but about her husband. She seemed to loathe him all of a sudden. If he did as much as appear about to touch her, she jumped back and shrank away. He pretended he understood why she did so. In the weeks that followed, he kept out of her path. If he nonetheless ran into her accidentally, he retreated at once, acting as if he had meant to go somewhere else. She saw through his lies. Only with the tiniest of wordless nods did she show she saw through them. For months, this was where matters stood. Then, one morning wordless nods turned into wordless smiles. Good, he said to himself, things were looking up. But she never really snapped out of her gloom. She still moped and moaned. And he still watched and waited. One evening just after they had climbed into bed for the night, she dropped the bomb.

“I'm leaving” she said. The bed creaked.

“What do you mean you are leaving?” Professor Kimani asked. He knew the answer: She did not want to stay with him anymore. He pressed her. “What's going on, Asiya?”

“Newborn has asked me to marry him,” she said.

This part he did not know. “Newborn Walomu?” he asked. Then he sat up in his half of the bed.

“Yes, Newborn Walomu. I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“But why, Siya?” He did not wait for her answer. “Ah! It is his money, isn't it?”

“How dare you, Karanja!” she shouted. Then she also sat up in her half of the bed and turned a bedside lamp on and glowered at him. “For you, I've done without money for over thirty years. Repeat: thirty years! And now you have the gall to say money is the reason I want to leave?”

“ Well, isn't it? ” he retorted. “ Look, Siya, money doesn't guarantee happiness.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. Then she slid back into bed, turned to her other side, and wiggled away from him. The bed roared. “You talk of happiness. You! Have you no shame? You couldn't tell what happiness was if it fell on your lap and cried out its name.” She wiggled farther away. “Then you say money doesn't guarantee happiness. Never having had it, how would you know that it doesn't?”

“All I'm saying, Siya, is..” He slid back into bed as well. The bed protested. “...that even the rich have their share of trouble. Plus more trouble from their wealth.”

“Ha! If their wealth were a problem, why don't they simply give it away?”

He tried a different approach-Tuni. “In any case, is this a good time for us to part, so soon after the death of our daughter?”

“Leave Tuni out of this!” she shouted. “She would still be alive if you had a real car.”

That really hurt. “Tuni didn't die in our car, Siya,” he said limply in self-defence. Then he tried another angle-age. “What happened to couples aging together gracefully anyway? Sixty is no age to part, surely, is it?”

“You mean I should have left earlier, before I turned sixty? Well, 'I did not' does not mean 'I should not', nor does 'I did' mean 'I will'. That is why if I did not leave before, now I should. And it is why if I did stay then, now I will not.”

She left the following morning.



A secretary, young and pretty, met Professor Kimani at the main door then smiled him in. Her smile, he now realised, had nothing to do with him. It was a remainder from some joke still floating in the air when he arrived. As proof of that fact, inside the room was another secretary, also young and pretty, who was smiling as well. In her case, she was smiling only with her eyes, her hands having clamped her mouth, pending his departure, after which she would pull all stops and burst out laughing.

He introduced himself. Both women killed their smiles and scrambled to block access to a closed door in front of them. He knew who was behind that door: Newborn Walomu, MP. So, brushing the two girls aside, he went and opened the door anyway. And who sat before him now if it was not his archenemy! He was fat. And that was how Professor Kimani greeted him: “You, fat baboon!”

The man had been reclining in a black leather chair, behind a shiny mahogany desk. Now he brought himself

back into an upright position. Except for a mounted nameplate announcing him as NEWBORN WALOMU,MP, the desk had absolutely nothing on it. “This is my office, Karanja,"he said. “You will use nothing but civil language while you are in it. Do you understand?”

Professor Kimani did not answer.

What a triumph that already was, his enemy thought. Absence of an answer meant submission. To celebrate this easy victory, the man rocked in his chair back and forth first. Then he spoke again.

“Karanja, was there something specific that you came to see me about?”

Again,Professor Kimani did not answer.

Another victory! This time the man tried to celebrate it with a smile, but he killed it. Since his leaving the university, his belly had grown into a ball, big and firm. It should have become a handicap. Yet it had not.Was he not husband to three beautiful young women who had already born him a child each? It paid for itself through reproductive success, which it owed to its cause: a soft seat in parliament.He had won the seat in a by-election. Gunmen,scaring off pursuers, had killed his predecessor, a swaggering rogue whimsically nicknamed 'Kazi-kubwa Pesa-dogo,' or 'Big-work Small-money, while he was wobbling drunkenly out of a bar.

Now there Mr Kazi-kubwa Pesa-dogo's successor was, sluggish and groggy like a satiated python with a hangover, in a big office furnished at public expense with black leather chairs and two pretty secretaries.

“Karanja, take a seat," he said, gesturing at a chair.

Professor Kimani rejected it. “Keep it!”

“Fine, stand there forever if you like. See if I care. Let me guess: You came to ask why I want to marry Asiya. Am I right?”

“You have a nerve, you heap of...”

“Watch your tongue, Karanja. I'm not going to warn you about your language again.”

“Why do you want to steal my wife?”

“The word I used was 'marry'. You prefer 'steal'?”

“What good is she to you?” Professor Kimani cursed himself for that wording. He had degraded not only his wife but also himself and, in the same breath, upgraded his foe.

“What good is she to me? Is that what you asked? Because she is much older than I am? Is that what you mean? Here is my answer: Old is gold.”

Mr Walomu's opponents had a different answer: “When a cat gets into a pigeon coop” they said, “it kills all the pigeons it finds there, not just those it will eat.” Mr Walomu had already eaten three pigeons and now had in his paws a fourth: Asiya. Strewn along his path, lay many others he had killed but not eaten. So who could say for sure that, months hence, Asiya would not become one of these?

Mr Walomu continued. “As for what you call 'stealing', a professor in Texas says that lots of people do it.” He threw in a Swahili cliché to support his claim. “Na hivyo ndivyo ilivyo.” To help it along, he gave an approximate English equivalent. “And that's how the cookie crumbles.”

That was mockery Professor Kimani felt had to reject. “You have three beautiful wives,” he began. This was a silly start, as even he realised. Had he not sounded an envious loser? Nonetheless, he went on. “All of them are young”

“And young they'll still be the day I die,"Mr Walomu added. “Karanja,you know the saying:'A real bull dies with green grass in its mouth.’”

“Then why do you want to steal my wife? She is old.Not the green grass you want in your mouth.”

"I just told you why: Old is gold. Anyway, 'stealing' - to use your word - is not all that uncommon,you know.My Texas guy says thirty percent of the British 'steal' married spouses from their partners.Repeat: thirty percent! That is a lot of spouse stealers there, wouldn't you say?”

Professor Kimani refused to bite the man's bait.

Still, the man continued. “Now take the Americans. Contrary to what everyone thinks, Karanja,Americans are not great spouse stealers at all. They check in at a mere seventeen percent, way behind the British. In fact, to cut a long story short, only the Greeks are greater spouse stealers than the British. Boy, do the Greeks know this spouse stealing business! They come in at a whole forty percent.”

The man was now toying with Professor Kimani.

Unable to tolerate it anymore, Professor Kimani moved to end it. “You,you,you greedy fat baboon!” he shouted, closing in.

The man stood up. “Stop where you are, Karanja!"he said.

Professor Kimani kept coming.When he was near enough,he swung a fist. He missed. “First you steal my wife," he said. He swung another. He missed again."Now you mock me as well.” He swung yet another. This time, he lost his balance and fell.

Mr Walomu pounced at once. “Now you die,Karanja!”
he said.

A clumsy scuffle, as between bull elephants, followed. It ended only when the police came and arrested the two angry men.

Professor Kimani was charged with assaulting a Member of Parliament. His university followed suit by demoting him from his current rank as full professor back to his starting rank as senior lecturer. This, it said, was his 'due punishment for disgracing the university in the eye of the public. Six months of jail followed. Then he was set free.As he walked back to his house,dejectedly putting foot ahead of foot,his career was all he could see. And it was doomed beyond revival.



Professor Kimani heard a knock. Weary from lack of sleep,a recurring problem now, he grumbled all the way to the door. Why didn't people just stay in their own homes? A white man, fifty-plus years old, was standing outside, looking from side to side as if an enemy might have been following him.

"Is this you,Professor Kimani?" he asked. His voice was a lion's roar: deep, reverberating and eerie. His eyes were green.

“Y-y-yes?” answered Professor Kimani hesitantly.

“We've never met before, Professor Kimani,"the visitor said, “but I've heard and read a lot about you.Here,my card.”

“Thanks.” Professor Kimani took it.

“I'm Tad,” said the visitor. “Tad Longway,Director of Special Projects at AGDA. Make that the Agency for

Governance and Development in Africa. We are based in Cape Town, South Africa.”

Professor Kimani compared this oral information with that which was written on the card. They matched. “So how can I help you, Mr Longway?”

“Sir Mark, also known as Mr Mark Thatcher, is the son of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,” remarked the visitor. “Does his name perhaps ring a bell?”

“Perhaps it does; perhaps it does not.” This self-negating answer was Professor Kimani's response not to the man's question but to the question's irrelevance.

“Sir Mark lives in South Africa these days, as you perhaps already know. Now, a few years ago, he hired soldiers.”

“No, mercenaries!”

“Missionaries might even be a better word, actually. You see, they believed they were on a mission. But call them whatever you want. My point is Sir Mark hired them to go stage a coup in Equatorial Guinea. Now, last year, the government of South Africa hauled him in and fined him a million dollars. Add to that a four-year jail sentence that it immediately suspended.”

“Mr Longway, you were saying the relevance of Mr Thatcher's attempted coup in Equatorial Guinea to your visit here this morning is what again?” Professor Kimani asked.

“Actually, I wasn't saying there was any such relevance, Professor Kimani. Still, you are right to suspect I was. Do you see what I mean?”

Professor Kimani shook his head. “Actually, I don't.”

“No? You don't? Then perhaps I should come in for a minute and explain. May I?”

"All right, but for only a minute, okay? Please come in."
”

He led the visitor to his living room.

The man followed him. “I'll be brief, Professor Kimani”
"Yes, please." He sat down.

The man sat down too. “Professor Kimani, all that our presidents ever do to us is to ride on our backs.”

"Is that right?"

“We must stop them from doing that to us. I mean us, Africans.”

“Did you say, 'us, Africans'?”

Up to this point, the visitor had been speaking with a bi-tonal accent, seemingly mid-Atlantic for sounding both American and British. Now he switched to a South African accent, mono-tonal. “Yes, I sed us, Afrikens.” Each word, throaty, had the sound of a big boot grinding gravel on an unpaved road. “P'fessor Key-money, I em ey Seth Afriken, or es we sey beck home, ey Seffriken. So I em jest es much eyn Afriken es you are. Don't you go joodging me ba tha colour of me cover.”

Amused, against himself, Professor Kimani chuckled. “I wasn't judging you by the colour of any cover, Mr Longway. I apologise if it seemed I was. Please continue.”

“Thank you,” said the visitor. His accent was bi-tonal again: American and British. “As I was saying, Professor Kimani, we must not let our leaders keep riding on our backs and wrecking our lives, when our lives are all we've got. At independence, they told us our problems were three: poverty, ignorance and disease. They promised to eradicate all three. Decades later, have they eradicated even one?”

Ha! Instead, they have added a fourth: corruption. And, this time, you don't hear them promising to eradicate it because, as its primary beneficiaries, they mean to keep it. Result? Everyone has taken the cue from them and embraced corruption as well. Listen. I get sick each time I hear our presidents telling the police to stop taking bribes. Why should they stop, when those who tell them to stop take even bigger bribes? I'll tell you something else, Professor Kimani. Our presidents are busy adding a fifth problem right under our noses: impunity. You can see how far they have gone with it by just looking at their reluctance to punish offence. They just don't want to do it. Now will they change? No. To change, there has to be an agency with a will to change."

"I'm not sure I understand you, Mr Longway. Are you saying you know of an agency somewhere that has a will to change Africa?"

"Yes. AGDA: Make that Agency for Governance and Development in Africa."

Professor Kimani remembered the information on the visitor's card. "Yes, that's your outfit."

"No, that is our think tank. You see, Professor Kimani, when presidents keep messing things up, public discontent accumulates until it becomes anger; later, rage; and eventually, fury. Yet, even as fury, it never really produces change. Why doesn't it? Well, because fury spills out in random acts of violence. Those acts cancel one another out. To bring change, they have to add up instead. Do you follow me?"

Professor Kimani put a hand over his mouth to kill a yawn before he spoke. "I'm listening," he said. "Please continue."

"So, Professor Kimani, now enter AGDA. Our mission at AGDA is to question Africa's status quo. We ask what it will take to develop this continent. Therefore, we also ask if human effort is up to the task, or if, instead, we need supernatural help, or, indeed, if Africa will ever develop. Along the way, we bump into an unnerving question: Are present leaders helping or impeding Africa's development agenda?"

"Mr Longway, I'm now sure that there has been a mistake: you've confused me with someone else. You see, I am a teacher."

"So?"

"So I am not the activist you're looking for."

"A teacher is an activist, Professor Kimani. May I tell you why?"

"No!"

"Here is why. A teacher's job is to coach people towards a better future. An activist's job is to coax them towards that future. You have to admit the two sound as if they might overlap, and they do overlap. While there may be some differences between our methods and yours, there are bigger similarities between your ultimate objectives and ours. Now, if your worry is about the differences, know we will always accept your recommendations about them throughout the path that we would like you to follow."

“There is a path you would like me to follow?”

"Yes:Path Alpha."

"Path what?"

“Alpha.You see, Path Alpha is strategy built on the idea that I mentioned earlier: That, at present, public discontent expresses itself in acts that cancel out instead of adding up.Path Alpha will correct that anomaly. 'Mobilizing civic discontent into will to change' is our motto. Unless there is will to change,there will be no change. So says the Law of Will. It's all in here.” The man held up a document titled Path Alpha then handed it to Professor Kimani. “Yours,” he said.

Professor Kimani accepted the document but laid it aside. Then he asked. “Why did you pick me as a possible recruit?”

“Because you fit the profile of a Path Alpha traveller to a tee, is why. By the way, the correct term is 'traveller', not recruit'. There is a world of difference between the two, Professor Kimani.”

“I'm sure there is. So what is the profile of a Path traveller?”

“A 'Path Alpha traveller.You left out the 'alpha.Well,the profile only has two elements really. One, the traveller must believe in Path Alpha."

“Then you've determined either that I already believe in Path Alpha or that I soon will. But by what means,when you do not even know me? Goodness,you've just met me! So how have you worked it all out like that?”

“From your history, Professor Kimani, from your history, that's how. We looked at your past as an idealist.”

"You have?"

"You think we haven't?"

"Sorry. Please continue."

“Two, the Path Alpha traveller must have the drive to pursue goals and the tenacity to stick with them,” the visitor added. “For Path Alpha, these two qualities are indispensable.”

“And, of course, you have established that I have the drive and tenacity,” remarked Professor Kimani drily. “I won't ask how you did it.”

“From your history again, Professor Kimani, from your history again,” said the stranger. Then he smiled and, apparently, also winked. He had reached the end of his presentation now. “Path Alpha is a noble cause, Professor Kimani,” he added. “Please join us. We will cover all of your expenses and remuneration, of course. All of them.”

“Suppose I join you. Be careful here now: I'm not saying I will; I said suppose. What exactly will you want me to do?”

“There will be many opportunities for me to answer that question fully later. Now let me just tell you two things. First, if you join Path Alpha, we'll want you to come down for orientation at our headquarters in Cape Town. Second, we'll want you to attend the next summit of Africa's heads of states, scheduled to take place soon in Banjul, the Gambia”

“Me attend a summit? When I wouldn't even be allowed to come near the gates?”

"Don't worry, Professor Kimani. AGDA will get observer status for you. Leave that to us. So what do you say?”

“I'll think about it.”

“Yes, let it stew in your mind on its own for the rest of the day while you do other things. Then, tonight, retrieve it and mull over it between the sheets. Kick it back and forth, back and forth.”

“I said, I'll think about it!” he almost shouted.

He enlisted the following day.

Loss of a daughter, desertion by a wife, and mistreatment by his university and by the state—these had tested him hard and long. Finally, he had reached breaking point. He used to think he was born to teach and to die a teacher. Such was not the case anymore. Now all he wanted was a way to walk out of teaching without saying goodbye, a way to run away never to come back. He wanted, in short, a new project demanding that he leave home at dusk one day and, without informing anyone, head for a brighter future somewhere beyond the darkening horizon. Suddenly, there it was: Path Alpha!

Chapter Four

Ms McKenzie hopped into a taxi, left The Seamount Hotel and headed back to her office. She had told her boss she would be there in about an hour. This estimate had overlooked a recent phenomenon: roadblocks. They were everywhere now. Motorists and pedestrians had to stop at them for inspection. Only after clearing them, did the guards on duty swing the barriers out of the way and wave them on. Two hours would have been a better estimate, she now thought.

Her first stop came at Arch Number 22. A guard there ordered her to get out of her taxi and join a queue of pedestrians. This was a blessing in disguise: requirements for clearance of pedestrians were minimal. She sailed through them without difficulty. Not so lucky was her taxi driver, a youth made to seem older by his loosely fitting robes. He disappeared with his taxi behind a wall, where guards turned him upside down and shook loose change out of his loose robes first before they let him go. He emerged with a story to tell.

Arch Number 22, lit bright by a blaze from a late-morning sun, was shining with dazzling splendour. Designed to serve as a gateway to Banjul, the Gambia's capital, it was an arch: a colossal arch, high and wide. The phrase 'Number 22' in its name referred to a date. On July 22, 1994, the legitimate and undisputed president of the Gambia fell from power in a military coup. To celebrate this change in fortune, his successor, the architect of his fall, erected Arch Number 22.

Ms McKenzie's taxi driver finally resurfaced. Wary and watchful, he was part of a growing African phenomenon: taxi drivers with university degrees whom the local job market had failed to absorb in the professions that they had trained for. He located Ms McKenzie without difficulty.

“Ms McKenzie, let's go!” he said, motioning her back into his taxi.

She got back in. “You were gone for two eternities,” she complained. “Did you have any particular reason?”

“Yes, those bullies,” he said.

“I take it you're referring to the guards. What did they do?”

“You mean what did they not do?” He drove off on screaming tyres. “Essentially, they wanted something small.”

“Don't you mean a bribe? Why did they want a bribe?” “Ms McKenzie, be serious!”

“I am serious.”

“Then leave me alone.” He gave the car more petrol. It threatened to fly. He gave it less. It slowed down. “Because my taxi has faulty brakes, they said.”

“Well, maybe it does.”

He braked to a screeching halt which nearly threw her out of her seat.

“So does it?” he asked her. “Have faulty brakes, I mean?” “I guess not,” she conceded. “So what did you do? Give them something small anyway?”

“Leave me alone, I said.” Then he drove off again.

“Anyway, in case you bribed them, know that giving

bribes is as much a crime as taking them.”

“Do you know what I'm going to do on my way back, Ms McKenzie? I'm going to ask the guards I bribed to arrest me for bribing them.”

There is anger in that sarcastic remark, she thought. She decided to leave him alone.

By the time she reached her workplace, late-morning clouds, sagging under the weight of imminent rain, were hanging low. So when she went to see her boss, he took her directly to the point. He said he was pulling her out of her assignment to the summit at the Pinnacle. He explained why. The leave-on-loan arrangement that she had applied for and that was due to begin the following week had begun on that day instead, he said. She was on a two-year loan from the Gambian News to the Voice of America with immediate effect. It started to rain.



There was a time when US policy forbade the Voice of America (the VOA) to broadcast in America. Since other international media, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), could broadcast in their home countries, this prohibition struck overseas audiences as odd. That image was bad for the VOA. It had to go. This was why the VOA was now doing things it could not have done before. Employing non-Americans in senior VOA positions was one of them. Ms McKenzie, a Gambian, was joining the VOA bureau in Banjul in the wake of this change.

Mr Robert Manley, Chief of the Bureau, met her at the main entrance then led her up two flights of stairs. Trim and tanned, he looked even younger than his youthful forty years. All the way up, he walked at a zestful pace, as if he were daring her to race him, for a prize he would specify later, and only if she won it.

“I'm afraid we are going to put you to work right away, Ms McKenzie,” he told her the moment they entered his office. “We have a breaking story that can't wait.” His every word had a humid flavour of mint, his preferred scent of breath-freshener apparently. “Take a seat.” He motioned her to a chair on the near side of a rectangular conference table.

“Thank you, Sir.” She sat down.

“Now then..” He sat beside her. “The VOA thanks the Gambian News for agreeing to loan you to us, and thanks you for accepting the terms of that arrangement. You see, a new VOA policy now requires field offices like us to use local professionals whenever conditions favour their use over that of Americans. Your presence enables us to say we have met that requirement. But we are not selfish, Ms McKenzie, so we hope you, too, will like your stay with us.”

“I will, Sir.”

“Sure?”

“Positive” She meant it. As part of her leave-on-loan arrangement, the VOA would be paying her a salary totally dwarfing the two beans the Gambian News had been paying her. “Mr Manley, I know I will,” she added.

“Then meet our new arrival from America. His name is Nick. Nicolas Sentinel.” He gestured at a youth in

army fatigues, rounded off with wire-rimmed Gandh glasses. The youth was sitting on the far side of the table “This young man has just hit our shores. He'll be our communications-technician-in-residence.”

The youth, twenty-five years old at the most, had been brooding quietly before this introduction. He continued to brood quietly even after.

“I am Fiona McKenzie,” she said, stretching a hand towards him, “but you may call me Fiona.”

Now the youth sprang into action. Goodness, did he spring into action! He scrambled to his feet and grabbed her hand from across the table. “Pleased to meet you, Ms McKenzie,” he said. He was shaking her hand. “Mr Manley says you are the best reporter in town.” He was still shaking it.

She heard the youth's compliment. To relish it, inwardly and therefore completely, she pretended she did not. This was why she asked a totally unrelated question. “So, Mr Sentinel, when did you arrive in the Gambia?”

“Yesterday,” the youth said.

“My word, you are a new arrival. Welcome to our country!”

“Thank you.” The youth let go of her hand finally then sat down again.

Mr Manley resumed. “Ms McKenzie, a summit of Africa's heads of state will begin shortly at the Pinnacle Hotel,” he told her. “That is the breaking story I mentioned a while ago. I know you were going to cover it for the Gambian News. Now we want you to cover it for us, the VOA, instead.” He looked at her. “Why did we choose you? Well, we chose you

basically for two reasons. First, your professional expertise; it will be needed. Second, your African background; it will come in handy”

“I'll do my best, Sir,” she said. “If I may ask, what kind of VOA backup should I expect?”

“Ah.” This stub of a word rode on a whiff of mentholated breath. “Perhaps now is the time to bring in Mr Sentinel.” He turned to the youth. “Yes, jump in, Cowboy!”

First, the youth craned his neck up, sticking it out like a rooster readying to crow. Next, he adjusted his Gandhi glasses around his ears. Then he clasped his hands together and, with them still clasped, turned their palms out, in the process cracking his knuckles loudly, yet, apparently, without hurting himself. Now, at last, he could speak. “Ms McKenzie, I hope you don't mind my asking this. Did you study in Britain or something? I mean, gee, your accent!”

“Yes. Scotland.”

“Edinburgh?”

She nodded.

“I'm good, huh? All right, let's move on now. You asked what kind of VOA backup you should expect. For sure, expect all the help you will need in my area: wireless communications. You know what the term 'wireless communications' means, don't you?”

"No, tell me"

“It means all methods of non-wired message transmission. You know: stuff like cell phones, or, to you folks up here with a British heritage, mobile phones” He pronounced 'mobile' in the American way: mo-bo.

"There are problems of course: problems of semi-random lognormal shadowing..."

The youth was a jargon-spewing buffoon, she decided. "And of what else?" she asked, baiting him.

"Well, and the whole nine yards really. Ms McKenzie, are you with me?"

She nodded, untruthfully. Then she lobbed back at her tormentor a one-size-fits-all kind of question. "Where is your niche in all of this wireless business, Mr Sentinel?" she asked.

"It's up there," the youth answered, pointed at the ceiling. He meant the sky. "I monitor electronic transmissions" "How do you do that?"

"I use a real-time multi-phase mega-channel analyser" The youth managed to say all that without choking. "I call the analyser the Silent Listener. Think of it as an infinite array of radios tuned to all wavelengths, from zero all the way to infinity. This is so it can catch all aired transmissions. So, by working with this sweetheart, I can monitor zillions of aired messages daily."

Mr Manley cleared his throat, letting out another whiff of his scented breath. "Don't feel you have to hold back anything, Cowboy. Ms McKenzie is one of us now. Tell her the transmissions you monitor includes private dialogue."

"Well, uh... yeah, but only as an unintended bonus." Embarrassment had reddened the youth into a ripe tomato.

She rubbed it in. "Goodness me, you mean you eavesdrop on private conversations! What happened to privacy?" She pronounced 'privacy' in a British way: pre-vacy.

“Hey,” protested the youth. “I don't break into bedrooms, okay? All I do is harvest the sky. And I don't even actually do that. The Silent Listener does it for me.”

“What has it done for you lately?” she asked.

“Aha! Now you want to hear my stuff, after all. What happened to,um,pre-vacy?”

“Answer,please,” she told him. “Has it harvested the sky for you?”

“Look.I knew from the word go that the summit at the Pinnacle would have breaches of security.Gatherings like the summit always do.Therefore, as soon as I arrived yesterday, I set up the Silent Listener then charged it with the task of watching out for those breaches, catching them as theycame and analysing them for me after it had caught them. I asked it to start by taking note each time it heard the word 'summit. You can already see the difficultythere, can'tyou?' Summit' is an English word, so equivalent words in other languages were going to blow by unheard. And this was not the only problem either.In addition,there were speech-recognition problemsI had to get past just to make the Silent Listener hear the word "summit' to begin with."

“Well?”

“I got past them! Another thing I had to do was to ask the Silent Listener to keep a special ear open for all broadcasts with hints of actual breaches of security. Do not tell me this is tricky, because I already know. When can we say broadcasts smack of actual breaches of security, and when can we not? Not easy, is it? In the end, what did I do? I made an assumption. All broadcasts that are in code,

I said, are in code to hide actual breaches of security. But this assumption was not of much help, really. All it did was to replace one complicated riddle with another no less complicated. Because, let me tell you, codes can be tough nuts to crack, and in this approach I had to crack them, you see. Frankly, I did not want to go down that road, but I had to. To cut a long story short, what I ended up doing was to limit myself to simple codes, known as disguisers."

"What? Disguisers?"

"Yes. They mask identity but do little else. Take a listen." The youth's voice rose to simulate an imaginary speaker. "Gamma, this is Kappa. Do you copy? Over" The voice fell to simulate another speaker. "Roger. Kappa, come in. Over" The voice rose again to mimic the first speaker. "Beta has just landed. So cut Delta loose. Over and out" The youth shrugged.

"You know: simple stuff like that. Oh, and the final thing I did? I told the Silent Listener to record all suspect broadcasts."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning communications with threat content. Even here, the Silent Listener was not up to the task of catching all of such communications. However, you will be amazed how much it caught. Here" The youth reached for a device that, until then, had been squatting mutely near him on the conference table. He switched it on then keyed in it a number. "Ms McKenzie, listen to this verbal trinket" He pressed PLAY. A female voice spoke:

"Dr Afolabi, I have to go. Silly boss wants me back at the office. Something has come up. Sorry."

Ms McKenzie was tongue-tied. When she could talk again, she did. "That was me," she confessed. Her eyes were filled with a child's amazement.

Mr Manley was watching her. "May I ask who Dr Afolabi is?" he ventured.

"A summit delegate I was interviewing for the Gambian News, Sir." She turned to the youth. "Nick, did you also record the interview itself?"

"No. The Silent Listener caught the bit I have just replayed only because you said it with your cell phone still in transmission mode. 'Silly boss' will have heard that epithet as well."

She slapped herself on her brow for that indiscretion. "I shouldn't have called him silly, huh?"

"No, you shouldn't have. All right, now hear another trinket." He keyed in some number then pressed PLAY again. This time, a male voice spoke:

"Excellent. Keep that phone on at all times, day and night, rain or shine. From now on, I will be calling you often, even unexpectedly, but only through this number. So always have the mobile phone on. Unlike your hotel phone, it is completely secure, which means I can talk to you on it freely."

"Isn't that ironic?" asked the youth, smiling. "The Silent Listener caught that bit of conversation because the speakers were using wireless cell phones, believing them to be more secure than their hotel's landline. In this case, the landline was in fact more secure than their cell phone after all. That is ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Ms McKenzie had new respect for the youth she had just branded a buffoon.

He keyed in a different number. “Now hear this trinket, excerpted from the same conversation.”

Another male voice spoke: “Then why won't you tell me your real name?”

“Ms McKenzie, keep that question in mind as you listen to the answer.” The youth keyed in a previous number. The first male voice spoke again:

“I won't because our mission is still at a delicate stage. For that reason, I'd rather you didn't know who I really am yet. Until I tell you otherwise, just call me your guide. Needless to say, I won't let you see my face either, but you will hear my voice. Is there anything else you would like to ask me?”

The youth waved that question away and played three other excerpts from different but similar conversations. He then concluded:

“In short, we have a man talking to a total of four other men. He knows their names but will not tell them his. They should just call him their guide, he insists. You see, 'guide' is his disguiser, a fake name. Like Gamma and Kappa, in the examples I gave earlier. He says he is talking in this nameless way because some mission is still at a delicate stage. Now, what 'mission' is that?”

Mr Manley cut the youth off. “Let's stop there for the time being, Cowboy.” Then he looked at his watch. “Goodness, I must run. I have a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” He rose. “Cowboy, let's walk our new colleague to her office, shall we?” They did. A few paces down the corridor later, Mr Manley opened a door. “Ms McKenzie, meet your office,” he said. “I hope you like it.”

“Wow!” She did like it. “Mr Manley, it's lovely. Thank you”

"You are welcome,"he said. "Now listen,both of you.I'm giving you free reign. From here on, you are on your own. So get down to work now, will you?" Then he turned to the youth."See you later,Cowboy."

"Go give them hell,Hotshot," answered the youth.

He turned to Ms McKenzie next. "Promise me you won't let Cowboy bully you,okay?"

"Have a nice meeting at the ministry, Mr Manley,"she said.



Dr Afolabi had tossed in his bed sleeplessly for nearly an hour before he finally dozed off. Now,only minutes after, the phone on his bedside table was ringing. He answered it.

"Is that you, Dr Afolabi?" asked a female voice on the line.

He had heard the voice before, but as he could not remember whose it was, he asked. "Who is this?"

"Fiona," she said.

"Fiona.Fiona McKenzie?"He had remembered her now. "Do you know what time it is, Ms McKenzie?" he asked her. Anger was creeping into his tone.

"I'm in the reception hall," she said. "Come"

Score a point here, Abiola told himself. Make her wait. When he was satisfied he had kept her waiting long enough, he went down. She was not there. Had she left? Well,at least now he could truthfully say he had answered her call and come down.His conscience clear, he turned around, readying to go back to his room. Suddenly, a piercing scream reached him from behind. A woman was crying.

“Help me,” pleaded the woman. She was about thirty years old. “Please, help me!”

Dr Afolabi saw why she needed help: a man was holding her carelessly by the waist.

“Hey, Joy, hush!” the man told her, giving her a rough squeeze. “People are going to think I’m abducting you.”

At the front desk, the clerk on duty, completely unconcerned, had his eyes glued to a novel. For him, the man and the woman did not exist.

Dr Afolabi went and confronted him. “Your guests are having a fight over there.” He pointed. “That’s bad for The Seamount’s image, is it not?”

The clerk closed his novel on a finger then looked at him. “Sir, what do you want me to do? Go and pry them apart?” He shook his head. “No, Sir. I’d lose my job in a second for ruffling their feathers if I did that.” Though a Gambian, he spoke with a British accent. “Sir, I have five children and a wife to feed. So I ask you, Sir: Why would I want to risk losing my job over these two strangers?” He brought a cupped hand to his lips in a drinking gesture. “Drunks, Sir. They will be gone before you can ask where. Our pub has just closed, Sir.”

“ Help! ” screamed the woman again. “ Someone, please!” “ Joy, I said be quiet,” the man told her. “ Didn’t you hear me?” He pulled one of her ears. “ Now you heard me, right?” He hoisted her up in the air, and, like a predator carrying away prey, headed for the elevators.

“ I don’t know this man,” the woman said to one and all. “ He is abducting me!” Her legs started kicking wildly,

scissoring the air in frantic strokes. Then she tried to claw him in the face with her fingernails, but he ducked. “Someone, please help me,” she begged.

“Joy, why do you want to go trudging out into the cold at an ungodly hour like this,” he asked her, “when you can come to my room and roll in warmth all night? You like warmth. Yes?”

“Please! He will assault me!”

Assault her? Dr Afolabi doubted that. Yet Africa is Africa, he said to himself. It comes at you from both directions: from back and from front; from right and from wrong. As if to confuse you, it always confronts you with both opposites on every issue: good and evil, wealth and poverty, peace and war.

“Help, please, help!” She was crying with even greater desperation now. “Abiola, please help me! Abiola, please.”

The mention of his name took Dr Afolabi by surprise. “Ms McKenzie, is that you?” he asked. This close, he could see the woman was Ms McKenzie. His anger at her now gone, he braved her abductor. “You, that’s enough,” he told him. “Put her down right now.”

The man turned around to face him. “What did you just say?” he asked. His face was a picture of disbelief. “I didn’t hear you. Are you man enough to repeat what you said?”

“Yes. I told you to put her down.”

“Oh, did you? All right, now get this. My real name is Leo, but people prefer to call me the Liberian Mauler. So, if you know what is good for you, you will scurry back to the hole you came from. Who are you anyway?”

“Never mind who I am. Just put her down. Whatever you are selling, you can see she is not buying. Let her go, Leo. I promise I won't harm you, but only if you do as I say” The man put her down. “Joy, please step aside for a second,” he said. “A brash brat here is asking for it” His English, though fluent, had a singsong wail to it. “Just a second, Joy, okay?” He looked at Dr Afolabi. “Little boy, didn't your mama tell you never to be rude to your superiors? She forgot? No problem: I'll do it for her.”

He balled his hands into fists then punched the air in front of him experimentally. The result was satisfactory. Encouraged, he moved. “Now close your eyes, little boy, because I'm coming to hit you, and it's going to hurt!” he said then charged. When he was close enough, he threw a punch. It grazed Abiola's brow, scraping his face. The man stepped back to gather momentum for another blow.

By then, Dr Afolabi had decided to defend himself. He planted himself in a boxer's stance and clenched his hands into rocks of human tissue. Then he waited. The man moved forward and unleashed an upward punch. Dr Afolabi tossed his chin back to avoid it but left a leg in the way. The man missed. His momentum did not. Undiminished by the target he had not hit, it continued to propel him onward. As he careened forward, he ran into Dr Afolabi's leg, now bent at the knee, which rose and hit him in the groin. He keeled over and fell. He did not rise again. The fight was over.

The clerk at the front desk still had not moved.

“Here,” Dr Afolabi said, offering an arm to the woman

he had just rescued. “Come”

She did not resist. The Liberian Mauler had left her in a state of disarray. Hair stuck out from her head in tufts, as straw from a sloppybird's nest. In this state, she simply could not have resisted. She followed him.

“Welcome,” he said as he ushered her into his suite. “Beyond that, I don't know what to tell you.” He switched a light on. “Bringing you here was the easy part.” He switched more and more lights on. “Now that you are here, what do I do?”

“My, look at your face!” she said. “Did you know you have a scrape on it? I'll put something on it.”

“Come on. It's nothing.”

“Sit! And relax. Okay?” She opened her handbag and dug out a few contents. “I have all the tools I need, you see.” She took out cotton wool and balled it with her fingers. “First, we'll use cotton wool to scrub it clean, with this.” She showed him a tiny bottle containing a clear purplish liquid. “It's my nail-polish remover.” She uncapped the bottle, tipped it and wet a part of her cotton ball with the liquid. “Nail-polish is mostly alcohol” Fully absorbed in her work now, she had forgotten all about the missing button on her dress. “Alcohol dissolves dirt off other stuff. In this case, it will dissolve it off your scrape.”

“Don't let it dissolve my face off as well, okay?”

“I'll try to remember that.”

“Will it sting?”

“Yes, but only a little. Okay, now let's go!” She went to work.

“Ouch! You said it wouldn't sting”

“I said it would sting a little.” She wiped the scrape dry with a fresh cotton ball then put a small Band-Aid on it. “Anyway, you are all patched up now. Good as new!” She gathered her tools and put them back in her handbag. “So, if you'll excuse me now, I'd like to go fix my dress.” She took her handbag into the bathroom then closed the door. “I won't be long,” she said.

That might well have been his cue. He immediately killed all the lights in the suite except the one in the bedroom; stripped down to briefs; threw a spare blanket and a spare bedcover over a couch; then slid between the blanket and bedcover.

The door to the bathroom opened. Fiona emerged and started walking but stopped. Her eyes had not adjusted to the darkness in the living room. “Where are you?” she asked.

“Over here,” he said. “I have taken a couch in the living room. Go take the bed in the bedroom.”

“You're acting as if you might have a wife,” she said. “Do you?”

“No, she divorced me last year.” “Did she?”

“Yes.”

“Let's see now. You studied in America at a marriageable age.”

“So?”

“So let me guess” “Go ahead.

“She is American.”

“Who?Pamela?”

“That's her name? Pamela?”

“Yes,it is. And, yes, she is American. Enough about me now. Let's turn to you. Shouldn't your name still be Fiona McKenzie?”

“Who told you it might have changed?” She started walking to the bedroom. Her eyes had adjusted to the only light.

“Why was the Liberian Mauler calling you Joy instead?”

“It's local slang for a streetwalker.”

“He was calling you a streetwalker?”

“Yes.Do you want me to draw a picture for you? Where are you from anyway? Mars?”

“No:Nigeria.Married?” “Me?”

The phone rang.

He rose and answered the landline by the couch. When he ended the call, his mood had darkened.

"What's the matter?" she asked him. “You seem upset all of a sudden. Who was on the phone?”

“ One Chineke Chiamaka,” he said. “The man was claiming that I chided him for being drunk, when all he had had was a Pepsi." He wriggled in his improvised bed to protest his innocence against that claim. “It beats me how he got my suite phone number in the first place,” he added. “ Anyway,I did not chide him. Why do people like to tell lies?”

“I'm not sure. Perhaps it's fun,” she said.

“Lying is fun?”

"I said I'm not sure. Now you did a good turn for me downstairs. They say one good turn deserves another. So, in return, can I tell you something I'm not yet sure I should tell you?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

“They have this youth at the VOA. His name is Nick Sentinel. What does he do? He snoops on wireless transmissions, with a machine he calls—wait for it—the 'Silent Listener'. While I was there this morning...”

“While you were where? At the VOA? Yesterday you said you work for the Gambian News. Were you lying? After all, you've just said lying might be fun.”

“Will you let me finish?”

“No!”

“Look. I really do work for the Gambian News.”

“Skip the lies! You're a CIA agent, aren't you?”

"I won't answer that."

“Because you are or because you can't?” “Neither.”

“Isn't that exactly what you would say if you were?”

“All right, I will answer it.”

“Try.”

“Believe me. I am a reporter for the Gambian News. Normally, that is. But, since right after our interview yesterday, I am on loan to the VOA. If you must know, the

VOA pays much better than the Gambian News. Will the VOA take me for keeps? No. When the loan ends, it will be thank you very much, Ms McKenzie, but please go back to the Gambian News tomorrow and start eating boiled dirt for breakfast, lunch and supper again. Are you happy now, Dr Afolabi?"

He did not answer.

"Anyhow, to go back to what I was saying, you wouldn't believe the amount of information this Nick Sentinel has gathered with his machine in just a day or two. He has caught, on a compact disc he played back to me this morning, a man talking to four other men. Now, here is what makes this catch interesting. The man knows the other men's names but, for some strange reason, they don't know his, and he doesn't want them to know it.

Dr Afolabi started paying her greater attention. He feared the youth she was describing might have uncovered him. To hide his alarm, he yawned.

"You're not interested in my story, are you?" she asked him.

"Of course I am," he said. "I just think I will be more attentive tomorrow. Goodnight, Ms McKenzie"

"Goodnight, Dr Afolabi."

Chapter Five

Before Dr Afolabi was invited to Banjul to serve as advisor to a summit of heads of state, he had previously been invited by The Foundation for Democratic Rule in Washington to give a keynote address at an annual conference.

For his wife Pamela, the invitation by the Foundation had been a godsend. It had brought her an opportunity to redeem herself. In over six years, she had not been to see her father, a widower who lived alone in Boston. Now she would get to see him at last. So, cancelling all of her other engagements, she rode on the back of the Foundation's offer to pay for her husband's travel and paid for her own so she and he would visit her old man together.

The old man was not in when they arrived. Pamela knew where he hid the key whenever he stepped out. So she got it and let herself in. Abiola followed her with the luggage but did not stay. Stiff of body after the long flight from Nigeria, he went out to loosen up instead, only to stumble upon a scene he would swear to himself never to disclose to his wife.

Early summer had roofed Boston with a cloudless infinity of horizon-to-horizon blue. Bostonians, revelling in that good weather, were out in thousands. Dr Afolabi took them on: he plunged into their midst as if he was one of them. Inhaling greedy breaths of the day's clean air as he walked, he absorbed everything he saw. America, he noticed, had more old people now than in his Harvard years as a student. Its citizens were living longer. In days gone, the old would have been staying with the young,

as they still did in his Africa, in the care of kith and kin until they died. Now they lived alone in their own homes, empty of relatives, or joined contemporaries in old people's homes.

A department store emerged. Dr Afolabi headed for it. As soon as he stepped in, supply created demand. A shaving razor he did not need convinced him with just the power of its presence there that he needed it. He took it, joined a queue to pay and there ran into a snag. The woman ahead of him, not at all familiar, was not a problem in any way. But the scruffy old man ahead of her, vaguely familiar, definitely was: he had killed the queue.

“I got Baby here from Josh for Christmas,” he was telling the girl at the cash register, pointing not at any baby but at watch-like gadget strapped to his wrist. “Lives in Phoenix, Arizona, Josh does. Now watch. When I press Baby here, the band you see around my wrist inflates and deflates to take blood pressure. Baby monitors blood pressure, you see.”

“Hey, that's cool!” the girl said. She had already stopped working. “Wow!” Her excitement, though fake, appeared real: this girl was that good. “So your device measures blood pressure, you're telling me?” she asked the old man.

“Ho, ho, ho! Baby does a lot more than that. She also displays the result on her screen here” The old man pointed at the face, flat, of his gadget. “But, silly old me, as I was having breakfast this morning, I accidentally dropped her in a pot of coffee. You would have thought that was the end of Baby. But, no, look!” He pressed Baby somewhere.

There was hissing, swelling and tightening around his wrist.

“She still works, you see. Can you believe that?”

“Hit me on the head right now if I can!”

“Baby has memory too: she remembers up to thirty-one previous measurements.”

The girl decided she had humoured the old man long enough now. “You aren't buying anything from us today, are you?” she asked, peering at his empty shopping cart.

“I'll buy stuff tomorrow.” He went back to his Christmas gift from Josh. “So, every month, Baby remembers where I've been and compares that with where I am.”

“You didn't come to shop, then. You came just to show me your blood pressure monitor. Well, I'm impressed.” She sat up again. “Listen. Go have a nice day for me out there in that gorgeous weather now, okay?”

“Sure” He sounded disappointed. “I was already on my way out, anyway.” Then he shuffled off.

The girl turned to her next customer: the woman in front of Dr Afolabi. “You didn't mind that, did you, Maam?”

The woman shook her head. “No, I did not.”

“Bless your heart, Maam,” the girl said to the woman. Then she started totalling the woman's groceries, to a rapid succession of bleeps from her checkout scanner. “You saw that poor fellow?” She tipped her head in the old man's direction. Bleep! “We get people like him in here all the time.” Bleep! She was quick. “They want to touch and be touched.” Bleep! “See and be seen.” Bleep! “Listen and be listened to.” Bleep! “Not to watch television at home alone

all day.” Bleep! “It doesn't hurt to oblige every now and then, does it?”

"No, Miss, it doesn't."

Bleep! “That's what I think too, Maam.” Bleep! The girl had finished. “Total comes to three hundred ninety-six dollars and fifty-four cents, Maam. Will it be debit or credit, Maam?”

“It will be credit.” The woman gave the girl a credit card. The girl swiped it through a machine then gave it back with an invoice to be signed. “Isn't it lovely outside, Maam?” She was looking out of a window.

“It sure is, Miss” The woman returned the invoice to her, signed.

“I wish I were out there. Oh well. Have a nice day, Maam.”

“You too, Miss,” said the woman and then left. Dr Afolabi's turn had come.

“Good morning, Sir,” said the girl to him. “Will that be all, Sir?” She was looking at his razor.

“Yes,” he said. “You see I only use one at a time” It was a foolish joke and it fell flat. He apologised. “Sorry”

“No problem.” Bleep! “That will be five dollars and twenty-three cents, Sir.”

He marshalled that whole sum in coins, paid her, and then left.

She had handled the old man with great tact, he thought. But what would the old fellow do next? Would he go to show Baby to another chatty girl at a checkout counter,

or brag about Baby to a friend over booze in a bar? Or would he simply go back home and watch TV? It was hard to say which it would be.

Dr Afolabi then saw a toddler wobble away from the mother to go feed street pigeons. The child was biracial: half black, half white. The mother was classic black: pure, unblended. The toddler got Dr Afolabi thinking. His children with Pamela would have had the toddler's fractions too: half black and half white. Perhaps they would also have had its sweetened complexion: amber, the colour of honey. This all seemed far-fetched now. He wanted to have two children of his own. Pamela wanted two as well, but adopted. She thought Africa already had too many children. So why not take theirs from the pool that was already there? Why add yet more? Dr Afolabi did not move. She did not either. The result: an impasse. They did not have children, of their own or adopted.

An hour later, he rejoined his wife at her father's house. By then, the old man was back. He had just accepted as a gift from her the African face mask that was still snarling at him from his lap. Now he was showing her a blood-pressure monitor that a friend of his had sent him as a Christmas present from Arizona. Never, here or away, swore Dr Afolabi, would he ever disclose to his wife the scene he had walked into at the department store: the lonely old man he had seen there was her father.



The flight out of Washington back to Nigeria had on board a cranky passenger in first class who was demanding to sit

next to a friend of his in economy class. Only by persuading another person in economy class to trade seats with him did the crew finally silence him. As Pamela was exchanging seats with him, she assumed the crew would ask her husband to come along and sit with her. When that change in seating did not happen, she asked why not. Fake smiles were the only answer she got. She and her husband ended up travelling in different cabins.

“Tad,” said the cranky passenger as he was settling down in economy class, in a seat next to Dr Afolabi's. “Tad Longway,” he added. His voice, deep, lingered on like the boom of a big drum. He held out a card.

Dr Afolabi took it. It said the man was a Director of Special Projects at the Agency for Governance and Development in Africa. “Pleased to meet you, Mr Longway,” Dr Afolabi said. “My name is Abiola Afolabi. I teach at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.”

“You gave an excellent keynote address the other day, Dr Afolabi,” said the cranky passenger. Sparks of earnestness were crossing his eyes, both crystal-green like toy marbles, confirming the compliment was sincere. “Your keynote address at the Foundation for Democratic Rule, I mean. It was brilliant.”

“I'm glad you liked it, Mr Longway” Dr Afolabi said. His voice had become warm. “You were there, then, Mr Longway?”

“Yes, but back in the last row. As a mere spectator, I did not want to be obtrusive. Anyway, you were superb, Dr Afolabi. If you don't mind my adding this, I was more

impressed by the points that the audience raised afterwards,

during the question-and-answer period."

Dr Afolabi felt the praise he had just heard turn into reproach. "So what were those points, Mr Longway?" he asked. His voice was less warm.

"Remember the guy from Grassroots International: short fellow, round of body and outspoken of manner? What was his name? It's on the tip of my tongue."

"You must mean the fire-eater who kept accusing me of looking for answers where I shouldn't even look," Dr Afolabi said.

"Exactly, that's our man. Yes, I thought he was right on point, Dr Afolabi. He too was unhappy with the present state."

"Wait, the present state of what?" "Africa."

"I don't understand."

"No problem: I'll spell it out for you. You see, Dr Afolabi, Africa, in its present state, has two new arrivals: corruption and impunity. The first is a crime the second protects from punishment, the second is another crime the first rewards with kickbacks. That is Africa in its present state. Now can it change?"

"Tell me. Can it?"

"Well, let's ask the Law of Will" "What?"

"Unless there is will to change, there will be no change. That is the Law of Will. Dr Afolabi, I was wondering whether you might be interested in an adventure that is

being sponsored by AGDA. Oh, I am sorry: make that the Agency for Governance and Development in Africa. Its underlying idea is to mobilise our discontent with Africa, in its present state, into will to change it.”

“This little meeting between us is not an accident, then, is it, Mr Longway?”

“What's an accident, Dr Afolabi? All events are but consequences of events that precede them. Now, what is this I hear about you serving as advisor at the next summit of Africa's heads of states in Banjul, the Gambia?”

“You are well informed, Mr Longway,” Dr Afolabi said. He had begun to see the green-eyed man in a different light. “Yes, heads of state have invited me there to give them my views on Way Omega,” he added. “You know of Way Omega. No?”

“Yes, I do. So what are they, your views?”

“They are that the summit should go with Way Omega. It will change our style of doing business. Just think: no more military coups or rigged elections, no more civil wars or ethnic clashes. If adopted, what a breath of fresh air Way Omega would be!”

“Dr Afolabi, don't confuse what you want to happen with what will. You know Way Omega won't fly, don't you?”

“I see. Do you have an alternative that will fly?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Does it have a name?”

“Yes: Path Alpha. It differs from Way Omega like day from night. You see, whereas Way Omega is top-driven and

lacks the will for its implementation, Path Alpha is bottom-
led and has that will. Now, to come to the point, we would like
you to guide four Path Alpha travellers whom AGDA is
sending as observers to the very summit you'll be going to
serve as advisor."

"Mr Longway, I will be going to the summit to advise fifty
heads of state there to participate in it, not to mentor four
travellers from AGDA there only to observe it."

"But where is the problem, Dr Afolabi? You could look
both at what Way Omega is recommending for adoption and
at what Path Alpha is proposing as an alternative. If you are
open-minded, that is."

"Of course I am open-minded."

"Then you'll accept our request. But let me be clear
here. We are not asking you to defect from Way Omega to
Path Alpha. You would be of no value to us if you did."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. We need an entry point at the summit, and we'd lose
it if you left Way Omega"

"I see."

"So here is what I want you to do, Dr Afolabi. Go chew your
cud for a day or two over this document." The stranger showed
Dr Afolabi a document titled Path Alpha. "It has all the
information you'll need to decide. If you decide to accept our
request, call me, and we'll take it from there. You know where to
reach me; I gave you my card. Oh, one more thing: we will cover
all attendant costs. All right, I'll let you rest. Have a pleasant flight,
Dr Afolabi."



The boy grabbed Pamela's left hand with both of his hands. He had never done that before. There had to be something wrong.

“Madam, I think you best no go in room that be yours” the boy said. “No go inside,Madam,please.I beg”

Pamela resorted to broken English herself. “But,Issa, inside be bedroom of my,” she said.

“Yes,but please no go in, Madam. There be person you no going like.”

“Person I no going like?” She was intrigued. “Who? A burglar?”

The youth let go of her arm so he could scratch his head. Did he have lice?No,he was onlybuying time."No,Madam," he said finally. “Not burglar.”

“Then who is it? Aha! No tell me now.I know!You forgot I go be coming home today, and brought friend be yours to room be mine. So inside room be mine now be Hausa friend be yours you show room be mine this now. You are a Hausa boy,no?”

Issa shook his head vigorously to deny the charge he had just heard mentioned."Is so wrong what Madam here saying now that me cannot even think it. Madam, in room not be friend of my.There be somebody else you no going like, but not friend of my, Hausa or no Hausa.”

“Let's now drop all this gibberish for a while, okay?” She left broken English and returned to normal English. “Didn't I tell you never to let anyone into the house,least of all into my bedroom,while Master and I were in America?”

Issa gave no answer.

"Did I not?"

Again, he gave no answer. "Issa, I'm talking to you."

Once more, the boy gave no response.

Dr Afolabi stepped in. "Issa, when Madam asks you a question, she expects you to answer it. You have chosen not to. So you have me to deal with. Whom did you let into our bedroom, Issa? Answer me, or I'll break this thing" He seized the boy roughly by an arm. "Which is it going to be: an answer or a broken arm?" His grip on the arm tightened.

Issa hollered. "Ho! Master, you hurting me." His eyes were shining with tears. "I not let stranger to bedroom."

Abiola loosened his grip. "Then who did?"

A deep voice roared from somewhere. "I did."

Pamela and Abiola spun together to look at its source. It was a man who was stepping out of a bathroom. In a display of skill and calm, he was zipping his fly with one hand and buttoning his shirt with the other. But this display did not cancel out the unease it could not erase: the scar on his face. That scar was scary.

"And who are you?" Pamela demanded. She was already angry with him.

He turned his back on her, deliberately in disdain and, to show the contempt she would not fail to notice, spoke to her husband instead, pointedly in Yoruba.

Outraged, she walked up to him and reasserted herself. "It's I who asked you a question, Mister. Not my husband." "You ask who I am?" he asked. "I am me." The man then turned around to face her, showing her his scar.

Horried, she recoiled from him. “Please go away, whoever you are,” she told him.

The man pressed his advantage. “Abiola, better tell scared white woman you call wife what brave fighter I be,” he said archly, again in English, for her benefit.

Re-enraged, she re-summoned her courage. “Mister, you are in my house. You will show me respect and answer me directly when I ask you a question. So, once more, who are you?”

Before the man could answer, Dr Afolabi spoke to him, in Yoruba.

Pamela was shocked. “Abiola, so you know him?” Her question was both a query and an accusation.

“Honey, let me explain.”

“Is that a 'yes' or a 'no?’” Pamela's shock was slowly turning into anger at her husband.

“It is a 'yes. You see, Pamela, Femi is a cousin. He and I grew up together in Kaduna, so he is a friend, too.” Dr Afolabi spoke to the man again, in English. “What a surprise your visit is, Femi! Now, back to the business at hand. Who is in our bedroom?”

First, the man refused to answer the question. A moment later, he answered it, but in Yoruba. He ended with a question of his own, still in Yoruba.

To carry Pamela along, Dr Afolabi replied in English. “I see. Now let's skip the skin and go directly to the beef. Who have you installed in our bedroom, Femi?”

The man gestured at Pamela, meaning she had to leave the room before he answered.

“No!” said Dr Afolabi firmly. “She stays!”

Strange noises came out from the man from Kaduna. They were expressions of displeasure. Loud words in Yoruba followed. They spoke of scandal.

Dr Afolabi just had to respond to them. “Femi, are you serious?” he asked.

The man nodded. He was.

“Who told you I want a second wife?” Dr Afolabi asked. “Pamela is the only wife I want.” To show it, he went and wrapped her in his arms.

She wriggled away. “Leave me alone,” she told him. The man spoke again, in Yoruba.

Again, Dr Afolabi felt he had to respond. “And how do you know that Pamela can't have children of her own?” he asked him.

A sharp answer shot out from the man from Kaduna like an arrow in hurried Yoruba.

This time, Dr Afolabi shouted his response. “Femi, shut up! You can't talk to me like that. You are in my house.”

Two unsolicited observations, now in wailing leisurely Yoruba, followed.

Dr Afolabi's response was calmer. “Pamela and I have no children, yes, but that's because we don't yet want them, not because she can't ever have them,” he said. “And who told you she hates children?”

Pamela had heard enough. She stormed away at a run and disappeared, only to reappear with a broomstick in her hands, chasing a young girl she had found in her bed.

The man from Kaduna saw the young girl. “Nimbo,ho,
” he hollered.Nimbo was the girl's name.

Oh hearing her name called, she changed course and started running towards the man who had called it. “Femi, ho,” she hollered back.

Pamela followed the girl in hot pursuit until the man from Kaduna glowered at her. At that point, she stopped in her tracks and retreated. Then she turned to Dr Afolabi. “Tell them to leave this house right now. Start with your cousin.”

The Yoruba man threw at her a defiant look. “I’m not leaving!” he told her.

“Yes, you are,” Dr Afolabi said. “Pamela is right, Femi. You were wrong to bring this girl here without clearing her with me first.” After that answer, he expected the cousin to hit the roof.

Instead, the wife hit it. “Listen to yourself, Abiola,” she said. “Do you mean none of this would have been wrong if he had cleared her with you first? I am your wife, for goodness sake! Look. It’s very easy. Start with Cousin, you must leave this house right away. Now go on from there.”

“Pamela, you don’t understand,” Abiola said.

“I don’t understand?” she asked. “Now that is interesting. What part don’t I understand?” She stood with arms akimbo. “Go ahead, tell me.”

“Femi says folks back home came up with this whole idea, not him,” Dr Afolabi said. “So, if you want people to shoot, go shoot them. Not him, he is only their messenger.” He remembered the girl. “And not the girl either, she is only what they wanted their messenger to deliver.”

"They must leave now," Pamela insisted, stamping a foot on the floor. "Is that clear?"

"But, honey, it's almost midnight," Dr Afolabi told her. "So what if it's almost midnight?" she said. "Now wait a minute." She had hit on an idea. "You knew about the girl all along, didn't you?"

"Honey, that's not funny."

"No? Then listen to this: Husband wants children of his own but wife wants to adopt them instead. To break this standoff, send him a girl from his home village. She will bear him the children he wants."

"Pamela!"

"That was your idea, wasn't it? How could your folks have come up with a scheme that fits our case so closely if you hadn't put them up to it? You had a hand in it, didn't you?"

"Get hold of yourself, Pamela. You are imagining things." "That's right, Abiola. I am!"

"Yes. You are"

"So the girl I see in our home is just a figment of my imagination, right? And the man standing there beside you is another figment of my imagination, right?"

"Pamela, what do you want me to do?" "Tell them they can't stay."

"Pamela, Femi is my relative-my blood!"

"I see. He matters and I don't. Is that what you are saying?"

“That's not what I am saying, and you know it is not.” He went and put a reassuring hand on one of her shoulders.

She shrugged it off in an unambiguous rebuff.

“What are you saying, then?” she asked him.

"They could leave tomorrow,"he suggested.

“In that case,I will leave now."

Refusing to wait until daybreak, she trudged out and disappeared into the night, wheeling behind her a suitcase that she had not even had time to unpack. A week later,she phoned Dr Afolabi from her father's home in Boston.She had filed for divorce, she told him. That little separation on their flight out of Washington to Nigeria had been a precursor to this much bigger separation.

Chapter Six

Sunrise threw the heavens wide open over Banjul on the day the summit began. The sky above was a cloudless vastness, arching triumphantly in all directions. What really set the tone were two other vast elements: the sun, very hot; and the Atlantic Ocean, not far away. These two determined the tempo of everything on that day. First, they produced heat and humidity so high as to cast a spell on all events to come. Then they added sweat which put a damper on each event when it came.

The most important event on that day, of course, was the opening of the summit. Its principal participants were heads of state, fifty of them. So security was at its tightest. Yet, as Comrade Melusi waited in line to be cleared, he was a picture of calmness. He was not worried at all. To kill time, he was reflecting idly on the logic behind security clearance. What was the big idea here: to detect or to deter? The two could not be more different. Detection spots actual danger at specific points and punishes it there. Deterrence, on the other hand, sees potential crime everywhere and punishes it anywhere. So, again, what was the idea behind security clearance? Comrade Mlelusi decided it was to cover both detection and deterrence. His turn came.

"Not good, Sir," said a young security officer after x-raying his briefcase. "You have a teeny-weeny boy here who I'd like to see. You know, with these." He meant with his eyes. "Please show me this little fellow here." He tapped on a dark area on the screen of his x-ray machine.

Caught by surprise, Comrade Melusi could not give the youth the calm response he might have given. Then he remembered: security clearance aims to detect and to deter. By harassing everyone, bad and good, it does not only detect actual danger; it also deters potential crime.

“What little fellow do you mean, officer?” asked Comrade Melusi, now calmly.

“Sir, there seems to be a needle in your briefcase,” said the youth.

“Oh, you mean that little fellow.” Relieved, Comrade Melusi added cheer to his voice to announce willingness to cooperate. “I’ll get him out for you.” He took out of his briefcase a cellophane pouch containing a needle and some medicine. “It’s for my diabetes,” he told the youth, pointing at the needle.

Comrade Melusi had discovered he had diabetes during a medical check-up that AGDA had asked him to take while he was joining Path Alpha. Since then, his attitude towards diabetes had become proprietary. He owned the affliction, hence ‘my diabetes’. The attention with which he read pamphlets about it was similar to the interest with which first-time car owners read user manuals. This attitude had paid off, because he was now an authority on diabetes.

“Believe me, officer,” he told the youth, “without this medicine, I couldn’t live a day.”

“Is that right?” The youth yawned, making even more obvious his indifference to what he had just heard. “I wouldn’t know, Sir,” he added, meaning he could not be

any less interested, his interest being zero already. Then, suddenly, he snapped to alert. He had remembered something. "Hey! You could hurt other people with that."

"With this needle?" "Yes, with that needle."

"And what would I use for my next shot?" "Just as I thought. What next shot?"

"Officer, let me ask you something. How old do you think I am? Seventy?"

"Yes, plus or minus five."

"That's correct. Now, out of every one hundred people in that age range, thirty of us are diabetic. We are unable to regulate the sugar level in our blood and that kills most of us. This medicine is what keeps those of us who survive alive." He brandished his cellophane pouch again. "We shoot it into our veins with needles like that one."

"That may be so, Sir. But you cannot take that stuff in. Leave it here with me."

"I'll do no such thing if I have to wait here until the cows come home."

"What cows? Sir, you are holding up the line." "This needle is my life, officer."

"Sir, there are at least a hundred people lined up behind you."

"And they are all diabetic like me, I suppose."

“But where is the problem, Sir? Just leave your stuff here. When it's time for your next shot, come get it, and go out somewhere and do your thing. What's wrong with that?”

Comrade Melusi decided to get firm. “Young man, look here,” he said. “It seems I have not made myself clear.”

The youth cut him off. “No Sir, it seems it is I who has not made myself clear. Your needle is not coming in now, later, or ever. Is that clear now? Put it here” He held out a white plastic tray.

Comrade Melusi pushed it away. “What's it with you, young officers?” His words were louder, their tone of calm gone. “Are you hard of hearing, perhaps? Well, if you are, then listen harder.”

The youth nearly fell off his seat. “Now, do exactly as I tell you and we both get on with our lives. Continue refusing to cooperate and I ask them to come.” He tipped his head in the direction of armed guards. “And when they come, they will take care of you, as only they know how. Okay?”

“Okay. It's your call. Still, you are forcing me to climb up a steep mountain of risk here. It ends in blindness, kidney failure, foot ulcers, leg amputations, and many other bad things like that.”

What was it about this litany of bad things that gave the youth reason to change his mind? Anyway, he did.

“All right, Sir. The more I look at you, the more I see somebody I can trust. So, Sir, I will let you in with your medicine after all. Please proceed.”

The two men were having lunch at Chaminuka Restaurant in downtown Harare. Path Alpha still lay in the future. Nevertheless, as became clearer and clearer during the

conversation they were having, Banjul would soon lie firmly on their trajectory.

“After defeating Smith,"Comrade Melusi told his visitor, “ Zimbabwe had one urgent order of business still left: that of a peaceful passage to an elected government. To oversee this process,we hurriedly put together a transition government."

Comrade Melusi looked around the restaurant. It was empty.He consulted a wall clock. It told him 1.30 p.m.There should have been many diners; instead, he and his visitor were the only customers. People in Zimbabwe did not eat out anymore,unless,as now, someone foreign was footing the bill.Their economy had crashed.

Comrade Melusi continued. “The commander of our group was head of that government,” he said.

The visitor raised his eyebrows,surprised by what he had just heard. “The commander of your group was?” he asked.

Lunch was his idea. There was a subject he wanted to discuss, he had told Comrade Melusi when they met,so how about lunch? Yes, on him.By the way,he had said, his name was Tad Longway,Director of Special Projects at AGDA:Agency for Governance and Development in Africa.

“You see,” he continued, “I had always assumed that the other guy, the commander of the other group, was head of the transition government.”

Comrade Melusi shook his head. “ No,no,no.The leader of our group was.”

“Well,well, live and learn,” said the visitor.His voice was deep, as if he always spoke from bottomless holes in the ground.

“Correct,live and learn,” Comrade Melusi agreed. Hungry, he looked blacker than usual. Hunger does have a dark side. “Our leader and I had fought Smith side by side for years. This was why he used to call me 'Comrade.’”

“Then independence came,” said the visitor, urging his host on.

“And a new national anthem was sung,” Comrade Melusi added. “In English:Blessed be the land of Zimbabwe. In Shona, the language of Zimbabwe's largest ethnic group: Simudzai mureza weZimbabwe. In Ndebele, my mother tongue: Kalibusiswe ilizwe leZimbabwe.” He croaked out two lines in Ndebele between bites then gave up. “Our national motto was 'Unity, Freedom, and Work, but what unity, what freedom, and what work? Above all, what for, when we had a new ruler now?’”

“Let me guess: you did not hit it off with the new ruler, did you?” asked the visitor.

He was toying with his food.Having tired of stabbing his pepper steak with a knife in search of flaws then flipping it over on its other side to search for more, now,with a fork for pen, he was drawing line figures in his mashed potatoes, smoothing the figures out and then drawing them again. “The new ruler did not appoint you minister. Correct?” he asked.

“Correct,” Comrade Melusi answered then took a gulp of his Coke. He loved it.Aaah!The part of it that remained

he set aside for another gulp later. "The man had other ideas,"he said.

"Like what?"

"Like strengthening supporters and weakening opponents.

"You have to agree that was shrewd,"remarked the visitor. "To retain power, once said a wise man,a regime must make its supporters stronger; its opponents weaker" "Your wise man was right," Comrade Melusi agreed.His roast chicken was nearlygone."Anyway,he was Shona,our new ruler.When he discovered I was Ndebele,he deemed me an opponent, presumed I was guilty and threw me out of his government."

"You're joking.Merely on ethnic grounds?"

"Yes,but the leader of our group did stay on, although even he did not last long.A cache of firearms materialised at his home, proof enough that he was plotting a coup. Therefore,out!"

The visitor pushed his lunch away. "Too salty," he said. "Let me ask you something, Mr Melusi."

"Mr Melusi, did you say? No, no, no. It is Comrade Melusi."

"All right,Comrade Melusi! Are you saying the leader of your group was sacked?"

"Correct."Melusi had polished off his roast chicken. Now he was picking up the last of his French fries. "The new ruler fired him."
" A black hand went across the table for the pepper steak and mashed potatoes that the white

man had rejected. “Hatred-it's not too strong a word to use here-finally had brought the two men to a parting of ways”

The visitor saw Comrade Melusi's scavenging hand steal his lunch. Taking that as a hint,he broadened his earlier generosity with a new offer. “Would you perhaps also like to have dessert, Comrade Melusi?”

“Yes,I'll try their chocolate cake, you know, just to see if it is as 'creamy and yummy' as their menu brags it is."The pepper steak and mashed potatoes previously rejected were quickly disappearing. “I've found menus often overstate their claims.”

“Yes,grossly.” The visitor sounded dissatisfied.His pepper steak clearly had not measured up. “I think I'll just settle for a cup of coffee now.”

“You'll have only a cup of coffee, Mr Longway?”

“Yes.I hope they'll make it hot.” The visitor looked around the restaurant. It had the mournful look of a funeral parlour. He snapped his fingers twice.Snap. Snap. Then he barked out his whereabouts.

“Over here!” His voice tore through the restaurant's wall-to-wall silence like thunder through an empty cathedral."Wed like to order,please."More thunder. “Over here!” Even more thunder.

A Zimbabwean youth in maroon trousers and a white T-shirt came running.

“Good boy!” said the visitor. “Now,listen.Listen good, good.For friend of mine here,you go come bring chocolate cake.” The visitor had slipped into minimal English. “For me,also here, go come bring coffee. Make black, no milk.

Hot, hot. Hear and understand, young man?” Snap. Snap.

“Hop to!”

The youth fled.

Believing this was now an opportune time to get down to business, Comrade Melusi cleared his throat then spoke. “Mr Longway, did you say there was a subject you wanted us to discuss?” he asked.

“Yes, I did, but can't we do that a little later, Comrade Melusi? You were still telling me about the leader of your group.”

“Yes, indeed I was,” said Comrade Melusi, sounding a little disappointed. “Well, no sooner did news of the dismissal of our leader hit southern Zimbabwe, where the Ndebele live, than anti-government unrest erupted in that area. Smarting from their man's humiliation, people there went on a rampage and attacked every government supporter foolish enough to come in their sight.”

“Let me guess once more: retribution against them followed.”

“Yes, it did, swiftly. There swooped on the area the Fifth Brigade, better known as the Gukurahundi”

“The what?”

“The 'Gukurahundi. It is Shona for the year's first rainstorm that washes chaff off fields so soil tilling can start. It washed off the Ndebele insurgents like chaff, all right” Comrade Melusi's eyes were starting to glisten with the beginnings of tears. “It started while I was still at work: I had a business office in downtown Bulawayo,

the capital of the Ndebele. I left my office at once and drove back home” His voice was faltering. “But home was a fifty-minute drive away.” He sniffled. “So, by the time I arrived, the slaughter had already run its course. I found the front door of our house wide open. That was not a good sign. I called out to my wife: Ziliza! Ziliza! Ziliza! She did not answer. This was a bad omen. I rushed to the living room. It was in a shambles. I rushed out to the backyard. There was nobody. With my heart pounding, I pressed my face to the window of the master bedroom and peered. There was no one inside. I got back inside and tried the kitchen. And there she was! Her eyes were bulges of a dead stare. The Gukurahundi had strangled her. Then, as a taunt, they had splayed her on the kitchen floor.” Now Comrade Melusi dissolved in his tears.

The waiter returned, and delivered, correctly, a generous wedge of chocolate cake plus a cup of black coffee. Then he fled again.

Comrade Melusi composed himself. Then he reached for his cake and started eating. First, he ate in silence. Later, he brightened up and spoke as he ate. “How the new ruler changed after the Ndebele insurgency!” he said. “The man had once seen as allies not just his fellow Shona tribesmen but also all Ndebele tribesmen who had fought loyally for Zimbabwe's independence. Now only his fellow Shona tribesmen could be trusted. All Ndebele tribesmen were rivals. This change transformed even well-meaning Ndebele into foes to be eliminated.”

“Whoa! Whew!”The visitor was fanning his face with a hand.

“My, is it hot!”In fact,Chaminuka Restaurant,air-conditioned,was chilly.The visitor clarified. “The coffee,I mean.”He took another sip, cautiously. Even then, he nearly spat it out.“It's too hot.”His eyes were brimming with tears, from green eyes, conceded in a clash with fire.He left the coffee alone and returned to Comrade Melusi. “Comrade Melusi,why did the man change?”

“ Mm,the menu was right,Mr Longway,"Comrade Melusi commented. “Their cake indeed is creamy and yummy.Are you sure you don't want any?”

“Positive,” answered the visitor, “but I am glad you like it. Would you like to have another piece, perhaps?”

Comrade Melusi smiled then answered."That would be overdoing it,Mr Longway, don't you think? Now,where were we?Ah,yes!You asked why the man changed. Well, my guess is,he wanted to be a life president. So he was,um, uh..." The voice was faltering again. Another meltdown seemed imminent.

This time,the visitor came to the rescue. “ Comrade Melusi,let's stop here now and take up the rest tomorrow." He left unsaid a question he wanted answered:What had happened to the man before him that had cut so deep as to remain the raw memory it still was?



Next time, the visitor wanted to try traditional food. Comrade Melusi took him to Muponda Restaurant, at the northern edge of Harare. A sign at the entrance swore the

place was 'the mother of Zimbabwe's traditional cuisine and promised 'nothing but serious food.They went in and ordered.

Comrade Melusi picked up from where he had left off. “In the end,I just couldn't resist it,"he said. “I mean the temptation to annoy 'the bomber,which is what everyone had taken to calling the new ruler, because he was bombing the country's economy back to the Stone Age. I decided to irritate him in a small yet definite way.Goodness,was I naive!”

"Don't you mean brave?”

"No,I mean naive. This is Africa, my friend.You do not go around irritating a head of state in Africa, unless you are naive.”

“So why did you do it?”

“Mr Longway,I've just told you why I did it: I was naive.Anyway,I formed an opposition group:the New Independence Party.NIP.”

The visitor liked that. “You mean there was a nip in the air?” he joked,but the joke went completely over Comrade Melusi's head.Still, the visitor pressed on."Then what did you do?”

“I ran for president.Save your breath. There is no prize for guessing what followed."

“I'll guess anyway-the bomber won."

“ Yes,by ninety-nine percent of the votes.I and the other candidates shared one percent.Now,we knew wed lose.We were naive,not stupid, but we didn't know wed lose that badly.Yes,we did lose,comprehensively,in fact. But we did not lose that badly."

“Were you angry,after you lost?”

“Yes, but not so much at my enemy as at myallies.” “Wait, why were you angry at your allies?”

“Because we could have defeated our man, but only if we had fought him together”

“What had soured matters up against him so much for you to think so?”

“You mean what had not soured matters against him. First,there was a drought,the worst in a century. It had hit Zimbabwe so badly that the bomber himself had declared it a national disaster. Second,there was the international community. It had come and clamped on Zimbabwe a programme it aptly called SAP.”

“SAP?”

"Structural Adjustment Programme," explained Comrade Melusi.

“What did it want?”

“It wanted to revive Zimbabwe's economy by restructuring it.”

“Did it succeed?”

“Certainly not!"said Comrade Melusi emphatically.

Then he sighed. “Oh,well.”

A waiter brought the visitor's order: a plate of aromatic rice and a bowl of chicken curry,both steaming hot.Then he hurried back to where he had come from.

“It is best eaten while still hot,Mr Longway," Comrade Melusi said,gesturing at the visitor's rice and chicken. "So, please dig in.”

The visitor unfurled a red cloth napkin onto his lap.

“Comrade Melusi, are you sure I can go ahead?”

"Yes, yes. Please do."

"Thank you." The visitor started eating.

A bite or two later, Comrade Melusi asked. "How is the food here, then, Mr Longway?"

"It's absolutely superb," said the visitor.

"I'm glad you like it," Comrade Melusi said proudly, as if he had played a role in its preparation. His order came: sadza, a thick maize porridge resembling mashed potatoes, accompanied by a rich beef stew.

"Looking good, looking good," cheered the visitor, pointing at the beef stew.

"It is good," the visitor confirmed. "Here, try some."

"Next time perhaps," declined the visitor politely. "Now, tell me, how did the man win the election, when Zimbabwe had been doing badly and everything spelt his defeat?"

"He rigged the results." "Aha!"

"But let's be fair. We in the opposition did not help ourselves either. Instead, of fighting him together, we fought each other."

"You should have looked for a way to achieve unity."

"They refused."

Who? The leaders of opposition parties?"

“Yes.Do you know why they refused?”

“No. Why?”

“Because deep in their hearts they each wanted to be the next president, that's why. I begged them to lay personal ambition aside and combine our efforts and then fight the bomber together. You guessed it. They booed me. After that, I let go.”

“And each party went it alone by fielding its own presidential candidate, right?” the visitor's asked. His coffee arrived.

“Actually, there was one other exception. Besides NIP, that is. “Comrade Melusi was working on his sadza, licking his fingers and smacking his lips from time to time. “RUFF, the Reformed Union of Freedom Fighters, also urged unity, but not for long.” He chuckled. “Its leader soon had to quit. Poor fellow! Young guns under him had discovered he did not have a university degree, a finding that encouraged them to presume he was useless. He did not have 'a proper education' was how they put it. Out he went. Then RUFF fielded its own candidate, too. So, you're right. In the end, each party went it alone.”

“Then the elections came,” said the visitor.

“Yes, then they came. We lost, big time. But you know what?” Comrade Melusi smiled wryly. “This was when we achieved unity finally, for the half hour we needed to declare together that the elections were a sham.”

“But by fielding separate candidates like that, surely you would have lost anyway,” said the visitor.

“Not so, we shouted together with one voice, during that half hour.”

“What followed?”

"Disaffection is what followed." Comrade Melusi had finished his sadza. He was washing his hands in a basin, with water the waiter was pouring down from a pitcher. "I went back into business." Now he was washing his lips, over the basin, which the waiter had raised to his chin.

The visitor reached for his coffee and took a sip. "More like it!" he said. "Nice and hot," he added. Then he turned to Comrade Melusi. "Your new business, how did it do?"

"I can't say it did well. Inflation was eroding incomes faster than they could grow. But I survived. I didn't live and work in as clean a suburb as I did before. I just could not afford the rent there anymore. No, I had relocated to a slum in a poor part of Harare. But, hey, I was alive" He laughed, falsely. Sorrow was in his eyes. "Then there came Murambatsvina."

"Then there came what?" asked the visitor.

"Murambatsvina'. It is Shona, meaning expelling the trash."

"Please go on."

"Bulldozers went from slum to slum evicting residents by tearing their homes to the ground. Murambatsvina expelled us, the trash, all right. We got no advance warning before or alternative accommodation after. Nobody cared whether we lived or died. We had to go. It did not matter where. Just go!"

"Did anyone explain why you had to leave?"

“The bomber tried to. Murambatsvina's real aim, he said, was to prevent disease and curb crime.”

“Was that its aim?”

Comrade Melusi belched. “Disease and crime increased instead. No, Murambatsvina had nothing to do with curbing of disease or crime. Its true aim was to punish us, the urban poor, for supporting opposition parties.”

“Waiter, come!” The visitor was ready to pay.

A female waiter came. “We hope you've enjoyed our hospitality, Sir,” she said to the visitor, ignoring Comrade Melusi. She had presumed, correctly, that the visitor was her real debtor. “But if there was anything not to your liking, please note it down on the questionnaire our receptionist will ask you to fill out as you leave.” Her English was perfect, a fact of which she seemed immensely proud. “And now, Sir, here is your bill.”

A thick stack of cash dwarfing the debt came out to settle the bill. “Keep change,” offered the visitor in degraded English, as if to take this proud woman down a peg.

His effort did not work. Her pride still intact, she made off with her prize unbowed.

Comrade Melusi resumed. “Murambatsvina chewed me up then spat me out,” he said.

“I imagine it did,” said the visitor. “Listen. You've been through hell, Comrade Melusi. So, here.” He reached into a side pocket for another stack, of American dollars this time, and handed it to him.

“Thank you,Mr Longway,” Comrade Melusi said, accepting his gift gratefully. “Thank you very much.”

A document, titled Path Alpha,followed. “This document,” explained the visitor, “covers the subject I said I had come to discuss with you,that is mobilising our discontent with Africa, in its present state, into will to change it. Comrade Melusi,would you be interested in joining that project? Money would not be a problem.”

Would he be interested? Well, of course,he would be interested!

Chapter Seven

Before the summit opened, its host thought he might break the ice by going from guest to guest and engaging each in friendly banter first. He began with the president of Nigeria. He got this right. There is a political hierarchy. Nobody talks about it publicly. Those low in the hierarchy would take offence if anybody did so, but it would not be any clearer if everybody talked about it publicly. It rests on four poles of influence.

One of these poles of influence is pure power, the ability of countries to impose their will on all who oppose them. More precisely, it is the fear by them who might oppose, that those countries would impose their direct will on them if they opposed.

Population is another pole of influence. True, it was less pivotal in the era of the summit than it had been centuries before, when strengths of armies were measured in numbers of soldiers and therefore depended on size of population. But, to this day, it still counts. Nobody takes on China, for example.

Similarly, in Africa, no one takes on Nigeria. Again, population is the reason. Every fifth African is a Nigerian, so no African snubs Nigeria, or its president. This was why, before the summit opened, its host skipped other presidents and went to exchange pleasantries with the president of Nigeria first. He had to show that the premiere status of Nigeria was neither in question nor in doubt. Thrilled by this recognition, the Nigerian president, a ripe seventy

years old-and a full general, if now retired-stood up from his seat and gave his host a broad smile, followed by a warm hug.Host and guest then chatted, like brothers. Indeed,twice each called the other his 'brother president, thereby revealing a personal secret they shared: they were born presidents.

Seated in a back row, among the observers,was Pastor Chiamaka.The summit's instructions to him as an observer were not only firm and clear, but also rude and insulting: “Watch the summit,but don't intervene,ever! ” Therefore,he was just watching,not intervening.The Nigerian president, he conceded reluctantly,looked more majestic in those sky-blue robes that he was wearing than did his Gambian counterpart in his rolls of white cotton. If only the man could rule Nigeria well, Pastor Chiamaka thought to himself.

Another pole of influence is technology. Nobody picks on America. The reason is not the size of its army but the capacity of its technology.Likewise, in Africa,nobody picks on South Africa. Its technology is nowhere near that of America,but,in Africa, its technology is second to none. For this reason, as soon as the summit's host had finished humouring Nigeria's head of state, he went to humour South Africa's president.

Still another pole of influence is a simple alliance with one or more of the other poles. Nobody bullies Kenya, for example. This is not because it is a pole itself,but because some of its friends are poles.Right from the day it won independence, it very wisely became, and,to this

day remains, America's best ally in black Africa. For that reason, no country bullies this 'chosen one. To try to do so is to risk reprisals by its powerful friend.

The summit offered ample proof of that. After greeting South Africa's head of state, its host went to greet the president of Kenya next. The Kenyan leader stood up to acknowledge this recognition. During the small talk that ensued, his country's famed wildlife came up somehow. Before long, the Kenyan president was inviting his host to his country for a state visit. Why not? Contrary claims by smooth-talking bureaucrats in ministries of foreign affairs notwithstanding.

Watching the president of Kenya from a seat at the back of the hall was Professor Kimani. His daughter, Tuni, had died on a public road under a truck trailer some law of physics had thrown at her. Then his wife, Asiya, had run off with a randy member of parliament already husband to three. These losses had since hardened into a grudge. Given the avoidable nature of their causes, were they not losses the Kenyan government could have prevented but had not?

Yet another pole of influence is sheer obstinacy. This is a pole so thorny that few heads of state dare to praise it openly. Put simply, it is the habit of engaging in needless fights, with enemies and friends alike. Zimbabwe's ruler had bags of it. Once, at a well-attended general assembly of the United Nations, the man had walked up to the microphone and rebuked America and Britain, loudly, in spite of the devastation they could have rained on

him before he got back to his seat. Something else also happened on that day. In the eyes of the world, the prestige of this son of Zimbabwe rose. Through sheer obstinacy, he had dared to say publicly what not many would have dared to say publicly.

It was not surprising, then, that when the host finished greeting Kenya's president, he hurried to this son of Zimbabwe next. The man had endured so many rude questions about his reign over Zimbabwe that now he answered them even before they were asked. Such was the case here too. Zimbabwe's economy was on the mend, answered he before his host asked. Detractors who said otherwise, he added, were but liars in the pay of evil masters, or traitors who deserved to hang and one day would.

Comrade Melusi, now scowling at the man from a seat in a back row, hated him intensely. Zimbabwe's Fifth Brigade had murdered hundreds of people, including his wife. Had the man not set the brigade loose on them? Bulldozers had driven thousands of Zimbabweans out of their homes into wild lands. Had this self-same man not given the order? After years of misrule, Zimbabwe now was back in the Stone Age. Had the man not taken it there?

Where everybody else exercises power within agreed rules, the simple refusal to abide by those rules is another pole of influence. No one understood this truth better than did the leader of Libya. Later, he would disown it, but before he did, it was his tool of choice. He used it when a bomb planted by his followers blew up a Pan American

World Airlines plane over Scotland,killingthree hundred. Agreed-on rules required him to surrender the bomb planters for trial and to pay compensation to the families of their victims.The man refused to.

Perhaps it was to buy off such lawlessness that the summit's host went to greet him next.The man,mellowed now than in his earlier days,exuded little of the menace that once had radiated from his every pore.His eyes still flashed flares of the iron will that yet flamed in his soul. When annoyed,he turned wild.This was understandable, if not desirable.When he was amused,he also turned wild. This was not understandable.

Studying him from the back of the hall was Engineer Tahir.Once,he had been one of the man's greatest admirers. Not anymore.The man,he was now convinced,had sold out to the West and become its servant.The man used to snap at the West's heels like a terrier,but now he was poodle -happiest when seated on the West's lap.Worst of all,the man had abolished Libya's nuclear weapons programme. How could he have failed to see, marvelled Engineer Tahir, that by so doing he was throwing away the country's only insurance against future Western attacks,and signing his own death warrant in the bargain?

Chapter Eight

He always drove dangerously, with an elbow sticking out of a window and a radio blaring out the latest hit songs. Other drivers got no pity whatsoever from him. Say he changed his mind in mid-traffic and decided to drive to this destination instead of that. What did he do? He swerved out of his initial lane then kept cutting into other lanes until he reached the lane to his new destination. How were the drivers in the other lanes supposed to free themselves from the chaos he was causing? That was their problem. They would have to figure out a way somehow. If his new route landed him at a scene of an accident that had blocked all ways forward, now what did he do? He crossed over to lanes for vehicles travelling in the opposite direction and kept on going in his previous direction. Would he not be driving against all motorists on that side? Yes, but they could see him coming, could they not? Let them get out of his way, then. Chineke Chiamaka! He always drove dangerously.

He adored Lagos. He drove up and down its streets daily without fail. How did he feel about the traffic jams and the detonations of human temper that were Lagos? He liked them. By complicating the physics of driving, they heightened the thrill of doing it. How he beeped his horn as his car came tearing down crowded streets, and how he laughed as terrified pedestrians fled out of his path! Everyone hated him, with one exception: his younger

brother,Obinna.Danger lurked on every mile the elder drove, and the boy liked the thrill of danger.

“Mm-mm,"purred the elder brother. “Goodness,the car!” He was looking out of his silver-grey Mercedes. It needed a new coat of paint,he decided.Not the Mercedes. He was referring to its garage."Mm-mm,"he purred again. “What a wonder,the car!”

“Give it arest,Chineke,” Obinna finally told him. “Let's go! I'll be late."The younger brother was an evening student at the University of Lagos,and he had asked his elder brother to give him a ride.

"Did I hear someone say late?” asked the elder brother. “What does that word even mean?Watch this!” The two brothers shot off.



After dropping offhis younger brother,Chineke Chiamaka was to drive to his office at Earth Movers Ltd next. By taking the route he chose,he drove into trouble instead: Holy Camp. Every Friday evening, born-again Lagosians choked full all routes to this destination-the most popular place of worship.Still,they choked no route fuller than they choked the route he chose now.Its real name was Highway 69,but its nickname-'God's Highway'-having long come to seem more appropriate,had stuck.When he chose that route,he had forgotten that the day was Friday.But it was Friday.God's Highway was throbbing with 'Born-Again Lagosians driving out of Lagos on their way to Holy Camp.

On the other hand,lanes heading in the opposite direction, of course,had sparse traffic.Well then,where was the problem?He swung into action.

Leaving the lanes for traffic going out of Lagos,he crossed over to lanes going to Lagos, in the opposite direction,but kept on going in his initial direction.Of course,after Holy Camp,beyond the crawling mass of worshippers headed there,he would return to the correct lanes.Until then,he would keep going, against the flow.

He had played this trick many times before, and it had always worked.Each time,the other fellow driving in the opposite direction had blinked first, by either braking to a stop or swerving aside to let him pass.Now,too,all other motorists were yielding. His trick was working beautifully. Approaching cars were either stopping or swerving out of his way like water pausing or parting to let a Moses on wheels cross the Red Sea.

Nevertheless,each wave of oncoming cars driving in the opposite direction always carried inside it the possibility of a mean machine. That thing would not have tolerated such blatant outrage as Chineke was asking it to tolerate. No part of it had a label saying it was a mean machine. Still, even on past occasions when he had driven into oncoming traffic and got home in one piece, such a machine existed somewhere.The only difference was, on those occasions, he did not run into it.Now he did.

It was a fire engine, massive and unstoppable. It hit him. His Mercedes flew off the road and spun in the air several times before landing on the road again. Although mangled out of shape by the time it settled down, it still could move. Surprising! Even more surprising was the fact that he escaped without serious injuries. This, he thought, had to be a miracle.

He got out then looked around. The fire engine was nowhere in sight. Had it hit him and run, or had it just ignored him and kept going? Either way, it had vanished. He was convinced that his offence had vanished with the fire engine. Another miracle, he thought.

Not a single motorist stopped to check on him. This was not surprising. Motorists never stopped at accident scenes on Nigerian highways. This was for a very good reason: an accident could easily turn out to be something else. If what had looked like an accident was in fact a trap and it sprang an armed robber on them, who would come to help them? So, now, too, they were cruising past him as though nothing had happened to him. But in so doing, were they not disqualifying themselves from testifying against him in the event the Fire Department took him to court? Precisely. He saw this as yet another miracle.

In time, he came to believe these 'miracles' were not isolated pieces of the same narrow escape. He saw them as connected segments of a single revelation. To discover its meaning, he turned to religion—he became a preacher.



Preaching was once a special skill taught only in seminaries. Then it became a common skill available anywhere. Chineke Chiamaka acquired the skill in this new format. First, he started by nodding to express agreement to points made in church and later by shaking hands with the preachers who had made them. Then he advanced to actual techniques: flourishes of speech and rhythms of gesture. When he was sure he possessed the courage to face down a congregation, the authority to lecture it, and the audacity to reprimand it, he plunged into the real thing: preaching.

He preached everywhere: indoors in the strict privacy of a house or in the limited publicity of a church, and outdoors in the glare of light at shopping malls or the whistle of wind at open-air markets. His maker had given him all the gifts he needed—a strong physical presence, a knack for the dramatic gesture, a reverberating rumble of voice and a very rich sense of humour.

No sooner was he a pastor with a church of his own than he proved he was the real thing. Disappointing few, he surprised many. Turned hanger and flogger all of a sudden, he lashed his congregation into feverish frenzies, using only sermons but leaving no doubt that he would have preferred real lashes. His approach to moral correctness was usually coercive, but it could be persuasive.



Persuasive it was on this one Sunday. His sermon on that day, as announced in a bulletin at his church's entrance, was 'God Is Watching You!' The exclamation mark at the end was there for a purpose. It turned what the congregation might have mistaken for a mere statement into a sharp warning. When he was ready, he walked up to the pulpit, turned to face the congregation and clapped his hands three times to evoke the Holy Trinity.

His standard opener followed: "Let us listen to our Maker."

The congregation responded in the prescribed manner: "Let us hear His word."

This was not loud enough, he decided. He tried again. "I said 'Let us listen to our Maker'"

"Let us hear His word!" This was louder. Better.

He could begin his sermon now. "God Is Watching You! That is our sermon for this Sunday, dear brothers and sisters," he said.

"So, imagine being the last person to leave your place of work one evening." This situation matched his audience. There were tradespeople, sporting robes indicative of wealth; there were market women, wearing perfumes smelling of money, and there were government bureaucrats flaunting power that knew no bounds. All of these could identify with the situation he was asking them to visualise. He continued. "While heading for your car, parked safely in a secluded area, you see a black plastic bag lying on the ground in the parking lot. You pick it up."

To illustrate those words, his right hand stretched down to pick up an imaginary black plastic bag. The thing was heavy. Lo! “The black plastic bag contains a cool ten million dollars!” he said.

Heads were raised, ears cocked. The whole congregation started to pay close attention.

“American dollars!” he added. “My dear brothers and sisters, the black plastic bag has ten million American dollars.” He leaned back to let this hefty sum sink into the minds of the congregation first. Then he leaned forward again. “Remember, your car is parked safely in a secluded area. So, because you are the last one out, no one is there now except you.”

Suspense in the congregation hit a high. What next? “Three options next, brothers and sisters,” he said.

“One, you could keep the money and call it the good luck God owes you. Two, you could carry it home for the time being and figure out the smartest thing to do with it later. Three, you could hand it over to the police right away.” He raised his hands as if to replenish his energy. Then he wove the three options together into a single question. “Which of these options do you think people would be inclined to take?”

The congregation let the question pass. It did not know the correct answer.

“Let me tell you, brothers and sisters,” he said. “It turns out AISHI, the Australian Institute for Studies on Human

Inclination,has for long been researching this very question.Praise the Lord!”

"Amen."The congregation also thought the Lord deserved praise on this one.

"Last year,AISHI found the answer,"he said."Praise the Lord!”

Again the congregation agreed."Amen.”

"Dear Brethren, last year AISHI found that twenty per cent of all people will pocket the money and let matters end there."To demonstrate this choice,the hand that had picked up the imaginary black plastic bag now slipped imaginary money into an imaginary shirt pocket. “ Call that twenty percent Group One."The hand came out of the shirt pocket."Group Two has fifty per cent. This bunch will carry the money home and there think of what to do with it." To that effect,the hand dropped imaginary money on the floor,pending availability of a better place for its storage. “And Group Three,what does it have? It has thirty per cent. People in this group, believe it or not, will actually hand the money over to the police right away." With that aim,the busy hand plunked imaginary money in an imaginary safe-deposit box on top of the pulpit."Now, brothers and sisters,I ask you."The hand pointed at the congregation. “Yes,you!Where do you fall among those groups?Group One,Two or Three?”

No sane congregation would ever answer that kind of question in public. It was too personal.

Even he knew it was too personal. So he did not even wait for an answer. "Be that as it may, brothers and sisters," he said. "Now here is a twist to what happened in the parking lot." A smile came to his lips. "Now suppose a guard is patrolling the grounds and he has seen you pick up the black plastic bag. Aha! The percentages in the three groups will now change, won't they?"

The church rocked with laughter. Even it thought they would change.

He could turn to his real message now. "God Is Watching You! Dear brothers and sisters, you are always being watched at all times." An index finger pointed skyward. "God sees every step you take, every move you make. Praise the Lord!"

"Amen."

"He sees you pick up the black plastic bag" The index finger turned on the congregation. "So why do you even consider sneaking off with it?" This was not a question; it was a reprimand.

Heads in the congregation dropped. Men began smoothing out wrinkles in wrinkleless robes; women pressing out creases in creaseless dresses. The congregation looked humiliated. Its pastor had tricked it with no more than a plastic bag he had filled with imaginary money.

"You're afraid of a mere guard but are not afraid of Almighty God. Well, let me tell you something. Unlike the earthly guard, whom you can buy off with a cut of your

loot,our heavenly Father does not take bribes. Praise the Lord!”

The congregation was sore with shame,yet it had to respond. “Amen!” Still, an undertone of rebellion could be heard in that response.

He would not tolerate rebellion."I said "Praise the Lord!"
"Amen!" Better.

Yes,that Sunday,Pastor Chiamaka delivered an excellent sermon:witty and persuasive.



Such was not the case with his sermon the following Sunday. This latter sermon was combative, as if earlier that morning he had seen a clump of human hair in his breakfast.

“Our president,” he began, “has made public a memo he has written to his staff about an ongoing problem."He looked at the congregation. “But you know what? When there is a problem,Nigeria expects its president to find a solution,not to write a memo."He knew he had scored."To that,this congregation will say Amen."

It obliged. “Amen!”

“ But,brothers and sisters,perhaps we should suspend judgment until we've heard what the president's memo said. So what did it say?” He pulled out a photocopy of the president's memo leaked out to him by a news reporter then read from it. “
Quote, my government advises its officers

to treat recent events with caution,unquote.Yes,brothers and sisters,the word there was 'advises"His fist pounded the pulpit. “ But,again,brothers and sisters,a government is supposed to take action,not to advise itself.”

“ Right on,preacher!"cheered a concurring voice in the congregation.

He liked the irreverence of that anonymous approval. “Praise the Lord!"he said.

“Amen,"now cheered the rest of the congregation.

"Not long ago," he continued, “riots broke out and brought havoc to a region of our land. Guess what?” he asked. “Wholly to blame in that chaos was a neighbouring region."He had not named the two regions.Yet,even by just pairing them like that, he had left little unnamed.Remarks like that had already sparked off rebellions in three cities.

He persisted. “And what has our president done to stop the fires that have been consuming our cities?” To pose this query,his voice had risen.Now it fell to give the answer. “The president has called the fires recent events.This means he has done something about the fires.Rejoice,then.What are you all waiting for?”

The congregation gave no response. It could see he was trying to drag it into politics. Afraid of the consequences if it followed him,it kept quiet.

He scolded it. “Courage is what you people need.You say what more can the poor president do when he has written a memo already?” He snorted. “Suppose he has

written a memo?Merely writing a memo about a problem doesn't solve the problem, does it? Only our man thinks it does!”

The police picked him up at dawn the following morning.For the next two weeks,he shared a rat-infested cell with smelly inmates. Luckily for him,rescue came to him soon.In early morning of Monday at the beginning of the third week, his jailers set him free. However, that luck was not unlimited.The police banned him from preaching.

Two years later, a deep voice called him.He could swear that the voice called him from on high. “Listen to news about Africa," the voice said. “Good news, for a change. Now,good news about Africa is hard to find and difficult to hear.So listen very carefully. AGDA has just come up with a fresh approach to Africa's development: Path Alpha.At the heart of this project,is the idea of mobilising discontent with Africa, in its present state, into will to change it.”

Pastor Chiamaka did not need to hear more. He signed on.

Chapter Nine

After graduating from Abdelaziz Academy, in Tripoli, Engineer Seif Tahir had left Libya and gone to study weapons development at the University of Paris. Sceptics scoffed at him. Of what use would that be? He told them to wait. Time would come when he would use the skills he acquired there to build real weapons for Libya. Just wait.

He returned from overseas on the day the leader of Libya was celebrating his twentieth year in power. The leader's opponents wanted him to tell them whether this celebration meant he would now step down. Engineer Tahir dismissed them as 'crackpots left alone and ignored'. He believed the leader had the right vision for Libya and so was the right person to rule it.

Look at what the leader had done already, he told the opponents. Had he not closed down all foreign military bases in Libya? Then had he not nationalised all foreign businesses in the country? The man had guts of steel. Under him, Libya would soon recapture the prestige it had enjoyed in its heyday.

Look again, Engineer Tahir told the leader's opponents. A recent discovery of petroleum reserves had shown the world that Libya did not just have sand after all; it had oil as well.

Look yet again, Engineer Tahir continued. Nuclear bombs are the ultimate weapons. Not because they defeat offence but because they deter it. Once the leader of Libya had grasped this point, had he not launched a programme

to make them? And had he not,himself,named the programme the 'Fist of Allah,as a warning to all that might have thought it just another human effort?

Engineer Tahir joined the 'Fist of Allah' right after his return from overseas.The time he had always dreamed about had finally come.Now he would use the skills he had acquired to build real weapons for Libya, exactly as he had dreamed while he was still a child.

In a very happy coincidence, the leader of Libya adored the 'Fist of Allah'. He gave it all the money it asked for.Allahu akhbar. How true! Allah is great. Libya was becoming a nuclear power. It was becoming great again.

Then,boom-boom-boom,Al-Qaeda struck on American soil.The leader of Libya knew America would soon retaliate and not necessarily within the bounds of reason. He scrambled to his bases to shield Libya from America's revenge. He even dismantled the 'Fist of Allah' itself. Engineer Tahir would have learnt to live with anything, but not with the dismantling of the 'Fist of Allah'.The dismantling of the 'Fist of Allah' was shirq,or sacrilege,an offense so dreadful that it was eternally unforgivable.Angry beyond words,Engineer Tahir now hated the man he had once liked.No more was the leader of Libya his hero.He had become a villain.



The dismantling of the Fist of Allah coincided with the peaking of an unrelated crisis. Born of 'the accident,which by then had happened, the crisis had been brewing for more than a year. Each time it threatened to spew out,Engineer

Tahir had sat on its vent and, with his full weight, forced it down again. One day, it burst out. Yet, first, what was the accident?

Engineer Tahir had already gathered that some of his colleagues at the 'Fist of Allah' were male. Now he learnt something else: the rest were female. He fell in love with the female colleague first to cross his field of view the next day. Love might as well have been an unpleasant chore he felt he had to put behind him fast and then hurry back to work. She was beautiful enough: big smile, big eyes, big everything really, and very kind. Her name was Rahmah, Arabic for 'very kind. Rahmah Mahmoud.

She worked down the hall in the same weapons laboratory as he did, but she was his junior by a million miles. This difference in rank should have been, if not rightly, an advantage for him. Instead, it was not. He could have endured any indignity, but not rejection by a junior colleague. Therefore, he did not approach her. Then one Wednesday, spurred on by inexplicable confidence, he went to her office, and took the plunge.

"Sabah kher," he began. This was Arabic for hello, but he regretted saying it. What a bad start, he thought. Did it not make him seem to be grovelling before a junior colleague? He tried again. "Ms Mahmood, let's have a bowl of tomato soup one evening." This was better, he thought. It was more assertive, more take-charge. "Just you and I, okay?" he added.

She looked up. Her big eyes were shining like light bulbs, perhaps with a fire his words had ignited that she

was now trying to extinguish, or maybe with a flame lit before he came that she was still trying to kill. She did not say anything.

Believing she was lost for words, he suggested four: "How about this weekend?" It being a Wednesday, this meant he was serving her three to four days' notice.

She gave him one of her big smiles. Its details included big teeth, white; and big gums, purple. Covering her head was a veil, black. It hid her hair but left out the face, which it encircled yet did not conceal. A loose head-to-foot garment, also black, shut the rest of her from the world. Her face was her only window.

"Saturday, perhaps?" suggested Engineer Tahir.

Again, she only gave him her big smile, not his answer. In addition, he got another reward. In moments of amusement, he noticed, her left cheek was capable of a dimple. He added this new finding to his previous discoveries. These were more than enough, surely. He decided to decide. "Saturday it is, then."

This time she actually said something. "No."



In the heat of passion, when no one reasons clearly, who has not at one time or another misinterpreted a kind word from a friend? Who has not then reacted to it with disappointment, though, in the light of subsequent reflection, laughter would have been the appropriate response? Ms Mahmoud's intention had been to conceal her eagerness to accept Engineer Tahir's offer of tomato soup by refusing it, believing that to accept it too enthusiastically

would have been unseemly. By burying her response under layers of coyness, she only sought to show that no actually meant yes. As a proper Libyan woman, she felt she had to do this thing right: by letting him fill in the blanks that she left blank for him to fill in.

Engineer Tahir misinterpreted a sweet no as a sour no and reacted to it violently. Convinced it was a rebuff dealt to hurt him, he stormed back to his office in a fit of rage. Believing Ms Mahmoud had said no to put him down, he felt humiliated, by a woman who, for all her big smiles, was nevertheless his junior by many miles. Unwisely, he vowed to retaliate.

As she was removing her head veil the next morning, readying for laboratory work that it would have impeded, he went and slapped her. What made this assault seem "reasonable" was that it happened during Heritage Week, a period that the leader of Libya had set aside to give his people time to celebrate their renowned history.

Apparently, then, Engineer Tahir slapped Ms Mahmoud to administer discipline on a female subordinate for shedding her head veil in public, in violation of Libyan culture. In truth, he did it to take revenge against someone who, he thought, had rejected his advances. Discipline, revenge, or whatever it in fact was, she did not take it lying down. She struck back. Had she stopped to think of the chain of events her reaction might set off, she would have restrained herself.

Yet, in the heat of anger, when no one thinks logically, who has not reacted by reflex and hit back on being

hit first? Who has not so reacted even if, in the light of likely future consequences, turning the other cheek would have been a better response? Ms Mahmoud hit back by reflex. A letter opener, obeying her hand, sliced through a semicircle of air and found a soft target. Its tip, sharp on the day of purchase but sharper and sharper each day from use, caught Engineer Tahir right in his left eye and slit it open. That was the accident.

A month later, he came out of hospital. His left eye, cut open by a mundane office instrument, was gone. Turned bitter and vengeful now, Engineer Tahir took Ms Mahmoud to court the day he came out of hospital. Why, the court enquired of him, had he slapped her in the first place? To stop her from imitating Americans by shedding the head veil in violation of Libya's culture, he said. Then why, wondered the court, had she hit back? To defy not him but Libya, he replied.

She pleaded innocent, citing, as her defence, temporary insanity caused by extreme provocation. The court returned a Hammurabic verdict—an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

"No," she cried.

The court was not moved. It told her that she should count her blessings because the victim had not lost his teeth. However, he had lost a left eye, so her left eye had to go as well. It went early one morning, by surgery.

Did vengeance buy Engineer Tahir peace? No. In fact, he was even more restless now than he had been before. He certainly was most restless about the head veil and

its removal in public. Already, he said, he had lost an eye in the course of this cause. This was sacrifice enough; but were the need to arise again, he would not hesitate to offer his remaining eye as sacrifice as well.

Fanatics, a wise man has said, are people who redouble their effort after they have forgotten their aim. Engineer Tahir's aim for Libya once had been to regain the glory it had once enjoyed. Since then, he had forgotten that aim and given the 'Fist of Allah' his every effort. Now the leader of Libya had gone and dropped an axe on it.

Engineer Tahir's dream of a resurgent Libya, now having been punctured, exploded beyond control. Out popped the emotional boil that had been festering inside him since 'the accident. How he screamed and shouted! He calmed down eventually, of course, but only soon to sink into a deep gloom he refused to shake off.

His friends tried to talk him out of it but he waved them away. When they persisted, he left Tripoli and moved east to live alone in Benghazi.



There were two reasons for Engineer Tahir's gloom. One was an object, foreign and lifeless. He got it after losing an eye in what he took to calling the accident. The other was an effect, deep and weakening. This, he got when he decided to have an artificial replacement for the eye he had lost. Surgeons told him they would plug into the eyeless socket a ball-like implant. Not removable, they warned him. Then, at the outer surface of this implant, they would add the artificial eye itself. This would be a convex shell of

glass cupping over the implant snugly like a contact lens. Removable, they said. So what did he think, they asked him. Proceed, he told them. They proceeded.

The finished product matched with the good eye so well, in both size and colour, that people took it for the original it had replaced. He should have liked it, then. Although it was not capable of vision, it hid the hole in his face quite well. Instead, he hated it. Did it not remind him of the hole it hid, and tell him he had become a freak of nature permanently? How he loathed himself! He brightened out of this gloom from time to time, of course, but an air of sorrow always lingered on like an unwanted guest who might leave or might not. That was 'the effect' that 'the accident' had had.



One day, after brooding on 'the effect', Engineer Tahir ran into a green-eyed stranger at a street-side café. The two of them got talking, mostly about the history of Libya.

"The first foreigners to arrive in Libya," Engineer Tahir told the stranger, "came from Phoenicia." The two men were chatting over coffee. "They reached our shores in the tenth century BC, settled in the north-western region of Tripolitania, and there established brisk commerce with the indigenous people."

The stranger narrowed his brow into a question. "Who were the indigenous people?"

"They were Berbers. By the way, I am a Berber, a pure Berber."

"Of course, why wouldn't you be?"

Engineer Tahir slurped a sip of coffee from one of those little cups with which North Africa drinks its coffee. Slurp. Then he answered. "Mr Longway, we've just met. So, why would I lie to you?"

"I'm sorry," apologised the visitor. "Please continue."

"After the Phoenicians, came Greeks. One of their cities would later become this place." A hand swept through an inclusive arc to show the reference was to more than a street-side café.

"This place meaning Benghazi?" the visitor asked.

"Correct." Slurp.

Then the visitor described the mission that had brought him to Benghazi.

Engineer Tahir enlisted on the spot.

Chapter Ten

The youth phoned her immediately after lunch. He had interesting material he thought she ought to see at once, he said. So could she please come over? She went. As she was entering his office, she wondered what interesting material he had acquired since their last meeting only the day before.

"Hello, Nick," she said.

"Hi, Fiona," he grunted, beckoning her to a seat.

"What's up?"

"I'll show you what's up." The youth began to rise from his chair, lifting his lanky self in small instalments. This process went on until he reached his full height of six feet and eight inches. Then he stretched out his arms, clasped his hands together, cracked his knuckles and yawned. He was ready now. "Come," he said. He started walking. "Here." He stopped.

"Meet the Silent Listener!" It was sitting silently at the far end of his office.

She had imagined it as an ugly monster with a jungle of cables spilling out of its ears and a jumble of wires pouring out of its nostrils. Instead, before her was a sleek device, new and shiny, with hints of gold and silver. At its centre sat a core component. It was compact. To the left and right of it were two auxiliary units. They were compact as well. No cables or wires in sight.

"As you can see, it has three parts," the youth explained. "This part over here is the receiver" He pointed at the auxiliary unit on the left, seemingly adorned with strips of gold. It looked like a refrigerator, a contented refrigerator -it was purring.

She stretched out a hand and petted it."What does it do?"she asked.

The youth frowned at her hand with open disapproval. "It collects sound transmissions,"he said."That beauty can catch and analyse all sound transmissions,and I mean all sound transmissions.So be respectful,Fiona.You're petting a goddess you should only be worshipping."

She withdrew the irreverent hand at once. "Shouldn't it have an antenna?" she asked.

"It's over there,"the youth said,pointing at a window.

"Where?The window?"

"No,the dish outside the window."

"Ah."

The youth moved on. "And at the centre here we have the processor." It was a smooth silver-looking block,like a rich woman's safe-deposit box,with complicated electronic gadgetry cleverly hiding inside its simplified exterior. "What it does,Fiona, is to sift through all transmissions caught by the receiver, saving those it decides to keep and discarding the rest."

"Smart!"

"Then why aren't you singing its praises?"

She slapped it instead. "Who tells it what to save and what to discard?"

"A computer does."

"A computer?" She gave it a more respectful look. "And how does the computer decide?"

"It decides through programs."

"Whatever that means."

The youth moved on to the auxiliary unit on the right. Except for a keyboard, seamlessly joined to its base, it might well have been one of those flat-screen TVs. "And the exhibitor, up here, runs on programs as well" He pointed at the unit whose turn to be introduced had come. "Its job is to present transmissions chosen for play or display, and to present them in the preferred format. This was usually audio but occasionally video. Let's say, for instance, that I wanted to..."

"I think I've got the gist of it, Nick."

"As you like," said the youth. He seemed offended.

"Didn't you say you had something interesting you wanted to show me?"

"You mean nothing from what I have been showing you so far was interesting?" Now the youth was definitely offended. "Let's move on to this chart. If it won't interest you either, then nothing will." He headed for the chart. "It's simple enough already. Still, I'll see if I can make it even simpler for you."

She ignored that put-down and simply braced for jargon she would listen to but was sure she would not understand. Her strain must have shown.

"You should see yourself, Fiona!" he teased her. Cheer had returned to him. "I haven't even begun and already you are sweating blood?"

"No, I'm not," she said. "And if I were?" Cheer had returned to her as well. "Would it stop you?"

"No, I'd still press on," said the youth. "All right, now pay a little attention, will you?" He grabbed a pointer and faced

his chart. "After thinking over the transmissions that the Silent Listener has gathered and analysed so far," he began, "I have come to a very troubling conclusion." He held his pointer by its ends then flexed its middle back and forth. "Something fishy is going on at the summit."

"Fishy?" A frown came to her brow. "Like what?" "Like a secret agenda."

The frown deepened. "By...?"

"By people whose identities I haven't figured out yet. Beyond their names, that is. I already know they are working in a network of five nodes."

"What's a node?"

"In this case, it is a person."

"Then why don't we just call it that, a person?"

"We do not just call it a person because it is not simply a person, working alone. It is a person working alongside others, in a group, a node in other words."

"Go on."

"There is a node here, here, here and here." At each 'here', the youth's pointer tapped on one of the four outer circles on his chart twice. Tap. Tap. Then the pointer pulled out of the chart and circled in air several times without landing. "These four nodes aren't connected one to the other. So they wouldn't be parts of the network if they weren't connected to this fifth node here in the middle either." Now the pointer landed, on a circle at the centre of the chart. Tap. Tap. Lines ran outward from that circle to the four other circles like spokes from the hub of a wheel.

"Let's call this circle the Hub-node."The youth paused to take stock."Are there any questions so far?"he asked.

"Uh-uh!"she said.

"Then let's go back to the dialogues I played yesterday. If you remember,they were conversations on cell phones between a man and four other men.While he knew their real names,he was insisting they just call him their guide, a fake name. You remember him, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Well,it turns out he is the Hub-node."The youth took a felt pen from a tray under his chart then wrote "Their guide' inside the circle at the centre. "And these four outer nodes are the other four men:Professor Kimani,Comrade Melusi, Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir."He wrote those names as well, each inside its own circle.

"Sorry,Nick,"she interrupted. "These nodes,where are they,physically?"

"They are at The Seamount Hotel."

"Wait.Are you saying that five of the guests lodged at The Seamount as summit observers in fact have a hidden motive?"

"Yes,I am.Let's refer to them as "The Seamount Gang of Five.

"And you've learnt all that from your Silent Harvester?"

"No,Silent Listener.Do you want to hear how I did it?"

"Yes,if you swear you'll use no jargon."

The youth swore. "So,take GPS."

"Nick! You've sworn."

“Sorry.GPS is short for Global Positioning System,a way of determining location on earth using signals from satellites.Okay?So take GPS. It has three segments.First, there is a space segment consisting of satellites in space,in the sky.”

“Enough.Second?”

"Second,there is a control segment based here on earth that oversees the space segment. Do you know how much the US government spends each year to run it?”

"No,and I don't care.Third...?”

“It spends a billion dollars. Third, there is a user segment also based on earth,featuring stuff like cell phones. This is where The Seamount Gang of Five come in.”

That piqued her interested. “I'm listening,” she said.

“I thought you would be,” the youth remarked drily. “Now,most cell phones these days are not just telephones: devices for delivering sound across long distances.Theyare also GPS receivers...”

“That will do. So what were you going to say? Is that how your Silent Listener located The Seamount Gang of Five?”

“Yes.”

“By listening in on conversations sent out from their mobile phones?”

“ Now hear this,Fiona.The four outer nodes are not in communication with one another. That is why my chart shows no lines connecting any one of them to any of the other three.”

“How can you be so sure?”

"Trust me.All four are communicating only with someone else-their guide,the Hub-node.He is their leader. If I were you,Fiona,I would already be out there looking for him."

Her brow clouded. “I thought the Silent Listener had already found him."

"Only to within a range:Seamount Hotel,Second floor, Centre Wing.No room number."

"Any other leads-besides hotel,floor and wing?"

“Uh-uh! So you are all set. Go. Oh, don't forget to tell him about The Trick!”

“The Trick?What trick?” The youth explained.



By sunset,The Seamount's reception hall was humming. Guests in national garb ebbed and flowed,searching for diversion with which to kill off the dying day,yet seeming unsure where to look for it.All dressed up but with nowhere to go!

As Ms McKenzie navigated her way across the hall, dodging this guest then that, she could feel male eyes burning her back with the same red-hot question.Might she be the answer they were looking for? To leave no doubt that she was not,she hurried across the hall towards her destination at a pace even more determined than merely purposeful.

“ Excuse me,Miss,"she began,before she had quite reached the front desk.

This was all it took."Hey,"exploded the woman at the desk."It's first come,first served," she explained. She sounded foreign, thanks, no doubt, to an overseas education. "The man behind you was here before you." Her hair,done in shiny cornrows, resembled a tight crown woven out of little black snakes.Now it looked as if the snakes were writhing, and might actually be poisonous. "So get out of his way!"

Conquered,Fiona stepped aside. The woman turned to the man. "Well,then,Sir.Can I help you?"

"I hope so."The man's voice was deep. "You wouldn't remember,of course." A sarcastic tone made that remark a veiled reprimand. "I've filed a complaint about my room with you.The air-conditioning system there isn't working. " "I see"The woman sounded betrayed.Having rooted so firmly for this man, she had expected better. "Sir,what did you say your name was again?"

"Longway.Tad Longway."

"Wait just a second,Mr Longway."She grabbed a sheaf of messages from a tray,leafed through them,then apparently found an interesting item. "Sir?Good news!" Her voice rang with chimes of a happy discovery. "We've found another room for you."

"Might I ask where the room is?"

"Same wing and same floor as before:Second floor, Centre Wing."

Fiona became interested.Second floor,Centre Wing? That was where the VOA youth had said a guest self-named their guide was staying.

“Sir, I'll send someone over to help you move right away.” The woman hit a buzzer to call a porter. “Meanwhile, here you are, Mr Longway.” She handed the man a small envelope. “It has a key card for your new room, Sir.”

He took it. “When will he come, do you think?” The man was grumbling ahead of the delay he had not yet endured but had decided to expect. “I mean your porter.”

“He'll come right away, Sir.”

“We'll soon find out, won't we?” The man turned to go.

Only then did the woman remember Ms McKenzie. “I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Maam,” she said, “but that man really was here before you.”

“Well, now he's gone, isn't he?” Ms McKenzie was spiking her words with bile left in her mouth by the earlier exchange. “So maybe now you can see if Dr Afolabi is in. Should I spell his name for you?”

“Excuse me, Maam” The woman's eyes had moved to another person. “Is something wrong, Mr Longway?”

“Yes, you! That is what's wrong.” The grumpy man sounded even grumpier. “You gave me the wrong key card.” He tossed the small envelope back at her. “Read its label. West Wing 2059.”

“Oops, wrong wing” Penitent for that slip-up, the woman hit her forehead with a palm as penance. “One moment, please” She fished out another small envelope from behind her desk. Its label said Centre Wing 2059, which Fiona managed to read. “There you go, Mr Longway. It's the right key this time.”

"It had better be!" the man said sceptically, then took it and left.

Behind his back, the woman now took her revenge. She shook at him a deadly fist he would not have been able to withstand. Then she returned to Ms McKenzie. "Sorry again, Maam..."

Ms McKenzie could no longer hide her anger. "Sorry again, yourself!" she told the woman.

The woman detonated. "What did you just say to me?" She was seething with anger. "Do you see those phone booths at the end of the hall? Go and call your friend there."

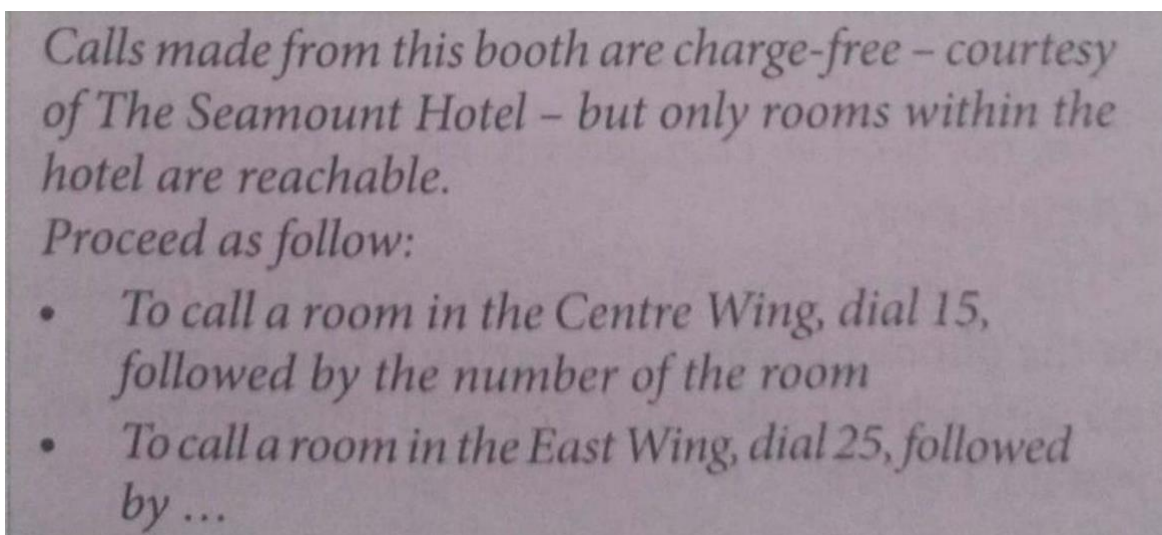
"But yesterday you called him for me."

"Yesterday was yesterday."

"And today is today."

"Exactly, so it is not yesterday."

Conquered again, Ms McKenzie meekly headed for the phone booths. Inside each booth was a command. Users had to read several lines of instructions carefully before proceeding. She smiled. The lines were a gold mine:



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The rest was easy. She dialled 152059.

A deep voice answered."Hello."

She gasped for breath. "Mr Longway?"

"Talk!" said the voice. "You got me out of a shower so soap is eating my eyes.

"Im sorry. My name is Fiona McKenzie."

"Talk,I said."

"Sir,you were down at the front desk a few minutes ago. As you were leaving, you dropped something"

"I see. Well, as I said,I have soap in my eyes. So,give whatever I dropped to the woman at the front desk.Tell her I'll come down for it later."

"That's a bad idea, Mr Longway.I'm a Gambian,Sir."

"All right, so you are a Gambian. Well, I am a South African.Now how has that helped advance world peace?"

"Sir, are you reallya South African?" "Yes,I am."

"This is the Gambia,Sir.Since the article you dropped looks valuable, you might never see it again, Sir. As a Gambian,I ought to know.Still,if you insist, I'll give it to the woman at the front desk."
"

"No,no,no. I've changed my mind. I'm coming down for it right away."

"That's a good idea,Mr Longway.You'll find me standing near the phone booths. I'm wearing white shoes and a red dress with white polka dots. You will not miss me,Sir.But if you do,I won't."

"I'll be there in fiveminutes." He was there in three.

She spotted him first. "Sir, it's me you are looking for," she said. "Mr Longway, I am Fiona McKenzie, the stranger who phoned you."

"Are you? You see, the picture I had formed of you in my mind was not black at all. Wait. That did not come out right, did it? I meant on the phone you sounded Scottish, white anyway. Goodness, what am I saying? Forget it. I am Tad. Tad Longway."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Sir. I am Fiona. Fiona McKenzie" She handed him something. "That's the article I was telling you about, Sir." "It was a key card to her office at the VOA."

He looked at it. Then he gave it back to her. "Not mine," he said. "The tag says VOA, and I have no ties with the VOA."

"Then I interrupted your shower for nothing. Yet I can swear I saw you drop this very key card, Mr Longway."

"Now, now, Ms McKenzie. Don't go burn yourself at the stake just for this, okay? In fact, since you've gone to all this trouble for my sake, why don't you let me buy you a drink? It's time for my evening Martini anyway. So what's your poison?"

She consulted her watch then shook her head. "It's late," she said.

"Late? That must be a new drink."

"All right, Mr Longway. Maybe a Coke, but I must be off soon."



Dr Afolabi meant to go over his notes on the presidents' debate one more time before he went to bed. This was not to be. As he was about to start, he heard a knock. He went and opened the door.

"Ms McKenzie!" he said. "What a pleasant surprise!" He ushered her in. "Please come in."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said.

He closed the door then steered her towards a chair. "Feel at home," he said.

"And I will." She sat. "Mother has a question for her boy. How was your day, young one?"

"It was only so-so, Mother," he said. "Or, as we say back home, only small-small."

"Mother thinks that's big-big enough. Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"As ready as I ever will be, I guess, Mother." He went and sat beside her.

"And do you still think the summit will adopt Way Omega?"

"Only twelve hours to go before we find out."

"Sorry. Is it just me or has it actually got colder over the past two days? You don't sound so upbeat today as you did two days ago."

"Only twelve hours. We can wait."

"By the way, guess who I ran into downstairs? Someone by the name of Longway. I was tracking down a man they call their guide and thought this fellow might be him. Do you know him?"

Dr Afolabi did not answer.

“Well,do you know Mr Longway or not?”

“Yes,Ms McKenzie,I do.You might as well know this now:I am their guide.”

"What?"

“Promise you will keep that to yourself,okay?”

"I promise.”

“Apart from Mr Longway,whom you now know,there are four other people I'm working with on the periphery of the summit as their guide. Instead of adopting Way Omega, this group wants the summit to adopt Path Alpha.”

"It wants the summit to adopt what instead?”

“Path Alpha-it's a rival to Way Omega.The trouble there is that Path Alpha isn't even on the summit's agenda.”

“So?”

“So,Mr Longway and company want me to help them put it there.”

“Wait a minute. Only two days ago you said you were here to help heads of state adopt Way Omega.Now you say other people want you to help them adopt Path Alpha,a rival to Way Omega.What's going on here?”

“Here is what's going on. I came to advocate for Way Omega,and I will. In doing that I'll draw on other alternatives, including Path Alpha.”

“You will? Then remind me: Why did I promise to keep your identity to myself?”

“Because I'm hiding from Way Omega my links to Path Alpha.Look.Some heads of state-not all,but some-believe I should be focusing exclusively on Way Omega.If they heard about my links to Path Alpha,they would demand my scalp.”

“Back to the other four people you said you are working with besides Mr Longway.They wouldn't be Professor Kimani,Comrade Melusi, Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir,would they?”

“Mr Longway told you all that?”

"No.Nick,the youth at the VOA did. He also told me about The Trick."

“What trick?”

She described it to him.

His reaction was one of admiration. “I'd like to meet this Nick of yours one day," he said.

Chapter Eleven

Pastor Chiamaka had gone through the Pinnacle's security-clearance formalities without difficulty, and entered its dining room with ease. This part of his scheme had gone as he had planned. Thereafter, no other part had.

According to the programme, heads of state should have attended a small dinner at the Pinnacle that day before the real banquet on the last day of their summit. That small dinner was cancelled, without explanation. In consequence, he had found neither the opportunity he had banked on to meet his president face-to-face in a small setting, nor the chance he had counted on to ask him about Way Omega.

Had matters gone as he had planned, he would have patiently wormed his way through the melee of bowers and kneelers until he got to his president. Patience was crucial

Once he was within reach of his president, Pastor Chiamaka would have extended a hand to shake his. A law of nature would then have intervened: To every action, there is a reaction. Upon seeing him extend his hand in greeting, the president would have reacted by extending his own to accept the greeting. Pastor Chiamaka would then have shaken the president's hand and kept shaking it until the man got tired. Then he would have released his hand and asked him this question: "Mr President, heaven forbid, but were Way Omega to come down to a vote during the

summit's debate tomorrow, which way would you go: aye, adopt; or nay, reject?"

Then he would have sneaked in the real stinger. "You think I know you, Mr President, don't you? Well, I don't. So tell me, what did you just tell me your name was again, Mr President?" After that, he would have fled to the nearest bush for cover.

The small dinner was cancelled, so none of that happened. Now what was he to do? His mobile phone rang.

"Good evening, Pastor" The caller was in a jovial mood.

His voice was all syrup and honey. As part of a growing informality between him and Pastor Chiamaka, he had taken to calling Pastor Chiamaka only by title like that. "This is your guide here speaking."

"Is that right? Let me call the media," Pastor Chiamaka said sarcastically. His scheme having failed, he was smouldering in a bad mood he was nursing on purpose, as in a self-indulgent act of slow suicide over a fire he had set at minimum.

"Pastor, you sound angry," said his guide

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Goodness, you are angry!"

"You would be too if you were in my position."

"Enough of your self-pity! Now let me remind you..."

"Don't."

In a sermon four years earlier, Pastor Chiamaka had made statements he believed to be well within the bounds

of permissible political expression. Still, the police had picked him up the next morning. Before he could ask them why, he had found himself in jail, sharing a cell with very bad people.

"I don't need reminding," he said.

"All right, Pastor. On to another subject now: a meeting is soon to bring together you and four other people. Plus guess who?"

"Who?" asked Pastor Chiamaka. His tone was not any less rebellious.

"Me."

"Two days ago you said you didn't want to be seen."

"We'll meet in an hour."

"Why the long notice?"

"Room 2059, Centre Wing of The Seamount Hotel. Be there. Ciao."



Comrade Melusi, in bed flat on his back, was daydreaming about his wife. Ziliza, he was telling himself, had to have been the most beautiful woman on earth. Oh, Ziliza! He reached for his wallet then pulled out her photograph. She emerged with her eyes fixed on him from across the twenty years she had been dead. She would have been older now, but death had frozen time and suspended aging. The photograph showed a woman still debating whether to enter her fifties or to wait forever at forty-nine.

Comrade Melusi's mobile phone rang. He answered it.

“You almost failed this morning, Comrade, didn't you?” said the caller. “The x-ray youth at security nearly uncovered you. You messed up, didn't you?”

"Leave me alone," Comrade Melusi said. He had taken offence.

“Listen. I want you to come to a meeting in an hour, in Room 2059, Centre Wing, without fail.” The caller then switched off.

Comrade Melusi returned to the photograph of his wife. To her now had come a mournful plea, all the more touching for having a face but not a voice. The man responsible for her death, she was begging wordlessly, now must himself die. Comrade Melusi promised her he would see to it. To underline his promise, he rose on his feet, stood at attention, executed a wobbly salute and intoned an oath. Come next day, he swore, she would have her revenge.



As Professor Kimani brushed his teeth, readying for bed, the mirror before him showed he was loose everywhere. His belly hung over his belt like a half-empty sack. Loose. He tried to suck it in. It stayed put. His face had wrinkles like a dry prune. Loose. Two folds of skin ran on the left and right sides of his nose down to the left and right corners of his mouth. Loose. He tried to smile them away. They refused to leave. The flesh under his chin hung and shook. Loose. Was getting old a process of wholesale loosening? His mobile phone interrupted this analysis.

“Professor Kimani, is that you?” asked the caller.

"I believe it is, yes." Professor Kimani staggered away from the unflattering mirror, heading for physical support at the nearest chair.

"Your guide on the line," said the caller. He could have skipped those words. His voice alone was sufficient identification. "Has your hotel delivered my note?"

"What note?"

"I guess it has not. So we meet in an hour: you, me and four other people. Room 2059, Centre Wing"



Engineer Tahir was all set to turn in. Still, a nagging thought kept crossing his mind, as might a mosquito determined to suck a bit of his blood before it let him wave it away. What was it that he should have done but had not? He could not name it. Therefore, he had not done it. Yet, believing he should have, he kept thinking he must do it. But must do what? Ah, the lens-like cap over the filler of the hole in his face: the artificial presence with which surgeons had filled an unnatural absence. He had not taken his eye out for the night. Now he would see to it. As he was removing it, a man phoned.

"Seif..." began Engineer Tahir in answer but broke off to clear his throat. Then the full answer came. "Seif Tahir speaking."

"I swear I heard fear stuck in your throat," joked the caller. "Do I really make you that nervous?" It was a feeble joke.

Engineer Tahir ignored it.

“Engineer Tahir, seriously now, I left a note for you an hour ago.”

“Yes. I got it.”

"Excellent. We will meet in an hour. Room 2059. Centre Wing. Come on time, or else..."

Engineer Tahir did not like threats. “One day, I am going to..” he said then hung up.

He went back to the filled-in hole in his face.



Dr Afolabi arrived early. Mr Longway had said he wanted to broach the meeting with him first before it began. Then its other participants came: Professor Kimani, Comrade Melusi, Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir. When all had taken their seats, Mr Longway rose. Since he knew them all and they didn't all know each other, he said, perhaps he ought to do the introductions. He began with Dr Afolabi, seated on his immediate right.

“Dr Abiola Afolabi here is a Nigerian,” he said. “We'll hear more from him later.” His eyes moved farther right. “Next to him is Professor Karanja Kimani, a Kenyan. Until recently, he was in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Nairobi. On his right is Engineer Seif Tahir, a Libyan. He was once a weapons developer in Tripoli.” Mr Longway came back to his left. “Comrade Ngobile Melusi there is a Zimbabwean. He used to be a big-time politician in his country. Finally, next to him is Pastor Chineke Chiamaka, another Nigerian. Still based, I believe, at the Lagos branch of the CIA.”

Everyone present snickered.

“Make that the Church Inside Africa,” Mr Longway added.

Now everyone laughed out loud.

Mr Longway could now turn to serious business. “ You four,ostensibly at the summit as observers,are here reallyfor four other reasons."He was referring to Professor Kimani, Comrade Melusi,Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir. "First,you are here because you see that Africa has problems whose solutions its present heads of state are simply not up to.Second,you are here because you believe Path Alpha will solve those problems, not Way Omega.Third,you are here because you have suffered ugly state abuse you do not want to ever suffer again. Finally,you are here because you want to address each of the above by making your heads of state adopt Path Alpha,not Way Omega" He turned to Dr Afolabi. “Dr Afolabi will now describe what you must do.So,over to you,Dr Afolabi."He sat down.

Dr Afolabi stood. “I'm Abiola Afolabi,previously known to you only as your guide."

"Impossible!"shouted Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir together.

"You are kidding,right?"asked Comrade Melusi,also unable to believe Dr Afolabi's self-revelation.

“Then what was that 'I'm your guide' business all about?” demanded Professor Kimani.

Dr Afolabi explained. “I came to the summit as an advisor for Way Omega,while you four came as advocates

of Path Alpha, a rival to Way Omega. Such being the case, I felt I could not openly work with you without appearing I felt I could not openly work with you without appearing to undermine my official role here. Having studied both Path Alpha and Way Omega closely, I now feel duty-bound to balance my views on each of these two documents in the advice I will give to the summit. Do you see what I am saying?"

Four heads nodded.

"So do you forgive me?"

The four heads nodded again.

"Thank you. Let me now go to my main message. It's important, so please pay close attention. Nations don't host summits just to amuse foreign visitors, and the Gambia is no exception. They do so out of self-interest. To make sure they don't miss out on any part of that self-interest, their presidents themselves usually accept the honour of serving as summit Chair. But not this time: the Gambia's president has declined the honour."

Four brows creased to frame the same question. "Why has he?"

"Well, basically because he expects the summit to turn bitter, and the Chair to end up pleasing some heads of state and displeasing others. Since he reckons he can serve his country's interest best only if he pleases all and displeases none, he has sidestepped the honour of serving as Chair."

"Why should we care that he has?"

"Because the new Chair has up his sleeve a ploy-he calls it The Trick-which is good for us. If he fails to lead the

summit to a consensus, as he almost certainly will, he will let another head of state propose that a committee convene to devise a method of eliminating the need for a consensus. He wants a win-win result, in which he wins if he wins and still wins if he loses. That is The Trick."

"Diabolic. So why is it good for us?" "It opens the door for Path Alpha."

"That is good, yes. When and where do we come in?"

"Tomorrow, that's when. At the speaker's microphone, that's where."

"We come in at the speaker's microphone?" "Correct."

"We don't understand."

"Let me put it this way. Imagine you had an opportunity to tell Africa's heads of state, face to face, the one most important thing you thought they ought to hear, and you only had a minute or less in which to say it. What would it be? This is the golden opportunity you will have tomorrow - an opportunity to mold the hurt of your past into your wishes for a better future. Do not say it to me now. Go and think about it first. Then say it to the summit tomorrow, at the speaker's microphone."

Chapter Twelve

The national anthem struck:For the Gambia,our homeland. Everyone rose.It played.All remained on their feet. It ended. Everybody sat. The Gambia's president stood up.The hall hushed.An imposing figure even while seated,on his feet the president seemed a gigantic statue that had got up to go for a stroll.He left his seat at the dais and started walking. When he reached the speaker's microphone,he stopped. Then he turned to face his audience.Seated before him were forty-nine fellow heads of state.

The big man dug out from a breast pocket a prepared speech.Then he read from it. “Excellencies,Africa's heads of state,"he began.His voice,nasal and thin, clashed wildly with his big size. “Our task at this summit,"he continued, “is to adopt a common growth strategy for our people.Luckily for us,Way Omega,now before us, is just the strategy we want.Was it not invented by the cleverest twenty of the world's best and brightest,each a Nobel Prize winner? I say we look at it, yes. Better yet, I say we just adopt it! Excellencies,after those few words,I declare this summit now formally open.” Then he went back to his seat at the dais.

Normally,the big man,as host,would have been Chair of the summit. But, for some fear he refused to spell out, His Excellency Miniko Menkiti, president of an important African country,then was Chair instead. As Chair,he was

now seated in the middle of the dais. Flanking him on his left and his right, were two other summiteers. Mr Tiku Zinto sat to his right. He was Minister of Development Planning in an island country and had served as convener of the committee that previewed Way Omega ahead of the summit. Dr Afolabi, here as an advisor to help the summit along, if asked to, was sitting to the Chair's left.

The Chair called on the first speaker. "The summit has now been formally opened," he said. "And you Minister Zinto are our first speaker, so you have the floor."

Minister Zinto rose from his seat. Then he walked to the speaker's microphone. "Excellencies," he began, bowing low to the fifty heads of state in front of him. "Let me start by saying what a great honour it is for me to be here. I'm truly humbled." He bowed again then continued.

"Excellencies, whirling across our continent now is a cyclone of change so strong that even the most stubborn among the leaders of our countries are yielding to it. They are doing so in various ways: individually or collectively; willingly or unwillingly. Credit for this change must go to the African Union," claimed the minister.

He was not being truthful. The African Union, as he well knew, was an international organisation even more incompetent than the individual nations it united to make less incompetent. Donors had been the real movers and shakers. If they had not threatened to cut off all aid unless Africa made the change the minister was talking about, there would have been no change.

Besides getting the real catalyst movers and shakers in Africa's change wrong, the minister got another thing wrong. What was it? Was it the tone of his voice or the method of his delivery? It was the tone. It was making his speech sound like a lecture.

Before long, heads of state, unaccustomed to hearing a subordinate lecture them, began to suspect they were hearing a subordinate lecture them. A few of them stopped listening and started yawning.

Still, Minister Zinto went on. Finally, he did conclude. “Excellencies, if you adopt Way Omega today, Africa will start developing tomorrow. This is why I'm begging every one of you to adopt it. Thank you, Excellencies. You have been a very attentive audience.”



Because the minister had taken more time than his allotted fifteen minutes, the Chair said he had decided that the next speaker would have to make do with the remaining seven.

“Life just isn't fair, is it, Dr Afolabi?” he said with a smile.

Dr Afolabi smiled back. “No, it isn't, Mr Chairman,” he said.

“Excellencies, unfair though I may seem,” continued the Chair, “unreasonable I am not. So I've granted our next speaker two special requests. First, he has asked to share his seven minutes with five friends who, he says, want to greet us. That sounded reasonable, so I have told him to

go ahead. Second, he has asked that I put before you for later perusal a document he would have said a word or two about if he had had the fifteen minutes he had expected. Again, this sounded reasonable, so I have told him to consider it done. This is why you now see members of our secretariat distributing among you, on my orders, a document titled Path Alpha."

Minister Zinto immediately jumped to his feet in dissent. "SIR, THAT'S TOTALLY AGAINST STANDARD PROCEDURE!" he shouted.

"Watch it, Minister Zinto!" the Chair warned him.

"Mr Chairman, Path Alpha was not on the summit's agenda"

"I wouldn't have added it to the agenda if it was already there, would I now?"

This remark was greeted with prolonged laughter.

"Order, Excellencies," said the Chair finally. "Order!"

Order was restored.

"Mr Chairman, Minister Zinto persisted, 'what you propose to do now totally breaks summit rules.'"

"I have already warned you, Minister Zinto."

"Mr Chairman, you need approval by the other heads of state to change the agenda."

"Minister Zinto! A word more out of you and I will have guards escort you out of the hall. Do I make myself clear? Now sit down at once."

Minister Zinto saw guards heading towards him. He obeyed and spoke no more.

"Good," said the Chair. Then he called on the next speaker. "Dr Afolabi, you have the floor."

Dr Afolabi rose, walked to the speaker's microphone and, from there, called to the microphone the observer he wanted to greet the heads of state first. "Mr Thaddeus Longway, come here please."

The man came. "Greetings, Excellencies," he began. "I'll be brief," he said. "You have already heard about Way Omega. It contains good ideas, but just that: ideas. You've not heard about Path Alpha yet." He waved a copy of it in the air. "You have it now. Please read it later. You will see it contains action, concrete action. So, while Way Omega offers you a bird in the bush, Path Alpha presses that bird into your hand, and, Excellencies, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Thank you, Excellencies, for listening to me." The man then went back to his seat.

Pastor Chiamaka came next. "Praise the Lord!" he began.

All heads of state pretended they had not heard him. He tried again. "I said Praise the Lord!"

Still, all heads of state refused to answer.

"Excellencies, I can't hear you."

Most heads of state continued to be quiet, convinced a summit was no place to holler about some lord. A few surrendered. "Amen," they answered.

"LOUDER! PRAISE THE LORD!" he said.

Now,most surrendered."AMEN."

“ Thank you,Excellencies,"Pastor Chiamaka said with a triumphant smile.Then he intoned a piece of prayer that he made up.

“Heavenly Father,I really have only one request to make to you on this day,and it is this:Please bless this summit and make it choose Path Alpha over Way Omega.I ask this in the name..."He broke off."I was going to say 'in the name of our Lord'"he explained."However,as some of you people here are not believers, I'll just ask for it in my name. So,Heavenly Father, I only ask this in my name. AMEN.” Pastor Chiamaka then left the speaker's microphone and went back to his seat.

Professor Kimani came after him.His greetings to the heads of state were a tearful cry of the aggrieved.Teachers, he said, deserved respect, and only Path Alpha would see that they got it, he wailed.When he finished,he headed for his seat. As he was doing so, a president intercepted him and refused to let him pass.

Engineer Tahir followed."Excellencies,please adopt Path Alpha"he said. “ Path Alpha will give Africa its own modern weapons.You see,these do not only defend,they also deter. And deterrence is better than defence. Nobody gets killed. Remember that,Excellencies!”

Comrade Melusi came last. No sooner did he reach the speaker's microphone than he turned around and walked away from it.

“Hey,that was quick,” said the Chair, joking.

But the man had not finished.Instead of returning to his seat,he veered off course then hurtled towards the ruler of Zimbabwe. His intention then was to avenge his wife Ziliza.Before he could carry it out, guards seized him by the collar and whisked him away.

That incident shook everyone up.Pandemonium reigned in every corner of the summit hall. Only after great effort did the Chair manage to restore order.When he did, he spoke to Dr Afolabi. “Now you only have one minute left,Dr Afolabi.”

“It will do,Mr Chairman.I have read both Way Omega and Path Alpha very, very carefully. My considered opinion is this:On one hand,Way Omega is big on ideas and Path Alpha small; on the other hand, Way Omega is weak on the implementation of those ideas and Path Alpha strong. Thank you,Mr Chairman.” He bowed then returned to his seat at the dais.



The debate by the heads of state themselves got off to a sluggish start.They said they wanted to stand up and stretch first before the debate got going. They did not come back from that break until an hour later.The Chair started by asking them who wanted to speak first. All heads of state raised their hands to demand the floor first.

One of the hands raised was unique. Its owner had led his country out of colonial bondage to independence and, as father of that nation, ruled it ever since. But merely to say this was to miss the point: seniority. Didier Bangoura had fathered his nation before any of the other heads of state at the summit had fathered theirs, which gave him seniority over them.

“President Bangoura, why don't you start us off?” said the Chair, recognising him before the rest for that reason: seniority.

The old man did not stand up and go to the speaker's microphone. Instead, he remained in his seat and used the microphone at his desk.

“Merci, Monsieur le President,” he began. His French was perfect. Whenever the old man spoke English rather than French, presumably for effect, he liked to pepper his sentences with French words. English-speaking listeners still understood him, because they could ignore those words without loss of meaning. Besides, he himself often translated them in his previous breath or his next. “Alors... So... Since this is the first time I am...” He broke off. “Un moment, s'il vous plait. One moment, please.” The microphone at his desk, he had just discovered, was still dead. Now he pressed a button at its base. A red light came on. The microphone was now live, ready for use. The old man started afresh.

“Alors. Since this is the first time I am taking the floor, let me start by expressing my sincerest gratitude to the people of the Gambia. Monsieur le President, Mr Chairman, Gambians must be the most hospitable people on earth. Right from the moment I arrived, I have received nothing but the warmest hospitality from them. If I'm not mistaken, this has been the experience of all my fellow heads of state here as well.”

"You're quite right," agreed the other heads of state in unison. They too had received nothing but the warmest hospitality.

President Bangoura nodded to acknowledge their support. His head was a bean: brown, hairless and smooth, except at the jowls, which were wrinkly. He continued. “Might I, therefore, ask you my brother president, leader of the Gambia, to do us all a big favour? At the earliest moment you consider most opportune, could you convey to your people our most sincere gratitude? And could you stress to them that this sentiment comes from the bottoms of our bottomless hearts?” The old man looked around the summit hall to see the effect that his words were having. Fellow heads of state were all smiling at him. Satisfied with their reaction, he beamed an elderly grin at them, but especially at the Gambian president. For reasons founded in protocol, he had called the host his brother. For reasons grounded in truth, grandson would have been

more accurate. “Sir,thank your people for us,"he said.

"Daccord?Okay?"

"Daccord,"said the Gambian president."Your Excellency, I will do as you request,"he promised.

President Bangoura heaved a sigh of relief. His host's promise had taken a load off his mind. He continued. “Mr Chairman,let me now turn to the two documents before us:Way Omega and Path Alpha.First,I have a confession I wish to make.I wish to confess that I have not read them and to declare that I will never read them.”

Bemused,the other heads of state smiled and at the same time frowned.

“At my age,"continued President Bangoura, “I just don't have that kind of energy.Nevertheless,I have pieced together two opinions from what the two previous speakers have said.First, I may be wrong here, but I think I heard Minister Zinto say Way Omega echoes resolutions we've adopted before." The old man paused there,baffled.Then he continued. “Quite frankly, I find that puzzling. If such is, indeed,the case, I do not see why Minister Zinto is asking us to adopt Way Omega.I would have thought,Mr Chairman, that resolutions, once adopted, do not have to be adopted again just because some sharp secretary somewhere has heard echoes and,for purposes of safe filing,stapled them together into a single document titled Way Omega."

The summit hall exploded with laughter.

Present Bangoura continued. "Second,I then heard Dr Afolabi say Way Omega is big on ideas and Path Alpha small, while Path Alpha is strong on their implementation and Way Omega weak."The old man paused again, once more baffled. "What's wrong with our African experts?Why are they incapable of giving straight answers? Dr Afolabi,which is it? Are Way Omega and Path Alpha big or small,strong or weak? You have not helped us much there,have you?" The old man was done. "Et là,Excellences, cest tous que je voudrais vous dire pour le moment.Je vous remercie,Monsieur le President:And that, Excellencies, is all that I wish to say at this point. I thank you, Mr Chairman."

"President Bangoura, I thank you for those wise words," said the Chair. "I'm sure Minister Zinto and Dr Afolabi have taken note."He paused. A member of the summit's secretariat was handing him a document.Then he resumed. "Excellencies,our secretariat has just given me a serial list it has compiled of all speakers who have asked for the floor." He raised the document up in the air for the other heads of state to see it. "Henceforth,I will call on speakers to take the floor only in the serial order in which they appear on this list.So,President Ibarosa,you are next."

The hall tensed.President Simba Ibarosa had never taken the floor to make friends or make amends. He always took it to make war or cause trouble.This was why everyone feared him. Paradoxically, it also was why everybody

revered him. People actually sought after him, especially when they were having meetings with no known aims. To all occasions for loose talk such as those, he brought the required element of danger. Without him, no one thought those occasions complete.

“Mr Chairman,” President Ibarosa began. He paused as he arranged his ammunition. Then, he spoke again. “Thank you,” he said. Now he was ready. “Mr Chairman, I want to start with the honourable minister seated there beside you.” He had taken aim. “If I may be blunt, that man has totally misled this summit.” He had fired. The war was now on.

Minister Zinto sat up. He was breathing with difficulty.

“Contrary to the impression the minister has given this summit, Way Omega does not just echo resolutions we've passed before. He waved his copy of it in the air. “In fact, its main thrust is a proposal it deliberately neglects to mention. That proposal is that our tenures as presidents henceforth be limited to only two terms. I repeat, only two terms.” He had made that up.

Voted out of office five times since first becoming president, this liar of a warrior had each time flatly refused to step down, claiming he had won. His face summed up the result of his stubbornness. Round and shiny, it was as smooth as a baby's face—testimony to a lazy tropical life spent in cool shades, daydreaming idly about imaginary accomplishments.

He concluded. “Minister Zinto should have the courage to tell us that this two-term proposal is in fact the centre piece of Way Omega. Although not there, it is in fact there.”

"I've read Way Omega from cover to cover, President Ibarosa," said the Chair.

“And...?”

“And I, too, did not see the proposal you say Way Omega neglects to mention. So could you perhaps say again that it is not there? I believe that would go a long way towards assuring everyone here that the proposal that isn't there really isn't there.”

Minister Zinto tried to inject reason here but was rebuffed.

"You've already had more than your say, Minister Zinto," said the Chair curtly.

“But, Mister Chairman...”

“You've had your say, I said.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Minister Zinto finally in surrender.

Next, the Chair offered the floor to a king. “Your Majesty, you have the floor,” he said. As if that was a cue, the air-conditioning system miraculously sprang back to life. “There,” said the Chair, sounding as if it was he who had fixed the problem, whatever it was. “Go ahead, Your Majesty.”

King Jemba-Jemba IV had ignored everything he heard President Ibarosa say. Jemba-Jemba was no mere

president: he was royalty, king for life.No one could take that away from him.His reign was a clean birthright,not a dirty favour won with bought votes, or a prize stolen in a bloody coup. As a permanent inheritance,it was immune to the limits on tenure that President Ibarosa was shouting about.What an ill-bred windbag that man was!People of noble birth never shouted. Oh, if only he, Jemba-Jemba IV,could just get up and leave;but not even kings could walk out of a summit. So there he still was, stuck,with nothing to do except to listen to a president shouting excitedly about an imaginary proposal that was threatening to end his career.

“ Thank you,Mr Chairman,"began Jemba-Jemba.A product of the strange practice that allows even ugly kings to marry beautiful women, he was not bad-looking at all: gorgeous physique,gorgeous smile,gorgeous everything really.And he was young, a fact none of his elected peers could claim. “Mr Chairman,I've reconsidered,” he said. “If I may, I'd like to pass my turn to President Dibonso,who, I can see,wants to have the floor at this point.”

“Your Majesty, the summit will do as you ask,"said the Chair,smiling.He knew where King Jemba-Jemba was speaking from-a position requiring no action.Unlike presidents, kings do not have to slay opponents to rise to power or to maim rivals to stay in it. Jemba-Jemba did not have to lift a finger to become or remain king. Cursed be

this callow youth with a mother's milk still on his breath, silently said the Chair to himself. Aloud he was kinder. "The summit notes His Majesty's generosity and, as he has asked, now passes the floor to President Dibonso. Please go ahead, President Dibonso."

President Bibo Dibonso was a force to reckon with. Forty years of supremacy had turned power into a habit then into a toy, and Dibonso himself into a permanent bully. On that day, a new anger was troubling him. Its cause, also new, had come only that morning. He had slept like a log the night before and, like a log, woken up stiff. This was not new. He woke up stiff like a log often these days. So, that morning, he decided to loosen up, for all it was worth, by standing up then bending down and straightening up again, once. The cause of his new anger arose from that little workout. In a first sign of loss of self-control, something warm trickled down between his legs. This had never happened before; it was new. A bolt on some valve inside him had gone loose, basically owing to old age. Old age has uncanny ways of loosening bolts even on valves best left alone.

He showered, of course, but his self-image had already suffered a blow no shower could undo. Since that incident, all words he uttered had a new anger, a terror he unleashed to make up for a loss of self-worth caused by an internal valve gone haywire. That anger was in his every word now.

"You have been quite a disgrace,Mr Chairman,"he began.This language was extreme,even by his extreme standards.

"What did you say,President Dibonso?"asked the Chair, pretending he had not heard.

"You've totally lost control of the summit,Mr Chairman."

"What exactly do you mean by that,President Dibonso?"

"This debate is supposed to be about Way Omega and Path Alpha. Yet didn't you just let someone raise an imaginary issue not in either of these documents?" President Dibonso was referring to President Ibarosa, another fire-eater,and dared not mention him by name. "And I'll tell you something else,Mr Chairman." "Keep it,

President Dibonso,"said the Chair cultly.

President Wasiwasi Wesiga, an old hand who had anticipated many coups and nipped them in the bud before they got off the ground, was first to spot brewing trouble.He moved at once to end it."POINT OF ORDER," he shouted.He did not want trouble. "MR CHAIRMAN, POINT OF ORDER!"

"Nonsense!"snapped the Chair at him. "What point of order?" Confused by his own fury after his clash with President Dibonso,he thought he was snapping at that President.

"It's about The Trick,Mr Chairman,"said President Wesiga.He had taken no offence for being snapped at.

“Whose trick?” asked the Chair, confused.

"Come on, Mr Chairman. Yours."

"Mine? Oh, yeah." He had finally remembered. "Yes, The Trick." The Chair's eyes were now shining with light from something previously forgotten but finally remembered. "President Wesiga, you have the floor."

"Thank you, Mr Chairman," began President Wesiga. "Mr Chairman, our nerves are starting to fray, our tempers to flare. Before we actually come to blows, we need measures to relieve tension first. I propose two measures. One, I move that we adjourn now. It's getting late anyway."

"AYE, AYE," agreed the other heads of state together. They too did not want to come to blows.

"Motion accepted!" declared the Chair, inwardly relieved. "Go on, President Wesiga."

"Two, I move that we ask a small group among us, say consisting of President Simba Ibarosa and President Yamlaza Gamlozi, both led by President Didier Bangoura, to see how we can best proceed from this point on."

"AYE, AYE," agreed the other heads of state together once more.

"Again, motion accepted!" ruled the Chair, even more relieved.

A consensus on Way Omega or Path Alpha had receded beyond his reach, but The Trick had come to his rescue. It would eliminate the very need for a consensus to begin with.

“But let's be clear here why we are doing this,” the Chair said. “First, we are doing it because we need to choose between Way Omega and Path Alpha but lack a method with which to do so. Second, the task of our small group, therefore, will be to find such a method. Third, for that reason, we'll call the group the 'Method Committee'. Fourth, it will work this evening and report to us first thing tomorrow morning.” Gavel hit wood. Bang. “This meeting is now adjourned!”

Chapter Thirteen

She had told him to start from a supermarket she mentioned by name. From there, he was to walk five blocks north then turn left. He found the supermarket easily enough. But two blocks north of it, came a difficulty. An alley crossed a shopping mall. Was the mall one block or, because of the alley, two of the five blocks she had mentioned? Another three blocks north and her street came into view. Here he turned right. In front of him now was a building with three floors.

Up the staircase, he was pleased to see a label her directions had encouraged him to expect. 'MIDDLE FLOOR: He got out on that floor. She had called it the 'third level. The actual label for it, sure enough, read 'TOP FLOOR' instead. Her apartment lay to the left of the staircase exit. He knocked on the door.

Someone cracked the door open a hair's breadth then asked. "Who is it?"

He stepped back to a non-threatening position before responding. "It's Abiola."

"Oh, Abiola!" She let him in. "A bit on the frugal side, I'm afraid," she said, gesturing with hints of apology at her living room. Then she looked out of a window. "Mother Africa, it's only a few minutes after sunset, but look at you. You're so dark already!"

"They didn't call her the Dark Continent for nothing," he remarked, embellishing a remark she had already embellished.

She flipped more and more lights on. "This way I'll be able to see what you're up to," she told him. "Now then." She pointed at a chair. "Sit!"

He sat. "Thanks."

"A drink?" she asked. Even before he answered, she started heading for the kitchen. "Yes?"

"Smart girl. Yes." In light from a ceiling lamp, he watched her walk gracefully to her refrigerator.

She returned with two glasses. "Cheers!" She offered him one.

"Cheers!" He accepted it.

"So." She sat beside him, smiling with joy.

"To us!" She raised her glass.

"To us!" He clinked his glass with hers.

She took a bird's sip from her glass. Her lips loved it. They smiled, flashing satisfied teeth, white. She had risen to a higher level of happiness.

He took a lion's sip from his glass. "Mm, excellent!" he said.

She laughed. Her every laugh was a song now, a melody performed by a youthful diva in love.

There was a knock at the door.

She went and answered it. “Hi,Nick. Come right in.”

“Thank you,” said the lanky youth, stumbling in.He tipped his head down by a foot, in this case less out of necessity than out of a habit acquired from knocks he had suffered at doors with insufficient head clearance.

“Nick,sit down."She indicated where. “Oh,before you sit down, first say hello to a big fan of yours. His name is Abiola Afolabi.” She gestured at him. “He is dying to meet you” Then she started walking to her refrigerator. “Hey, Nick.What would you like to drink?”

The youth checked to see what the others were having and adjusted down his choice from gin and tonic,his preferred drink.

“I'll have a glass of wine, please,"he said, without much enthusiasm. “White,will do.”

She returned with another glass of white wine then sat down. “Gentlemen,we haven't got all night.So,Abiola,why don't you start?”

“Sure.Fiona,I am glad you made it possible for me to meet Nick. No,I am very glad you did. Nick, I cannot thank you enough.Without your tip about The Trick,I would not have managed to put Path Alpha on the summit's agenda in the first place.”

The youth shrugged. “You could have had all that stuff from the Chair yourself for the mere asking.”

“Uh-uh.I would have been told it was confidential.”

“Confidential?What reason can there be for branding The Trick as confidential when it is only a manner in which the Chair intends to avoid catastrophe if the summit fails to reach a consensus?”

"Nick,Nick,"Dr Afolabi said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Our presidents condemn trouble makers but some are themselves troublemakers. Early knowledge of The Trick would have enabled them to plot mischief.Yet, by doing as little as keeping such knowledge under wraps, as confidential,has the Chair not cut them out of the loop and blocked them off?”

“Abiola,I think you are overestimating the trouble makers' ability to cause mischief.”

“And,Nick,I think you are underestimating it,"said Dr Afolabi. “On to another subject now.Might you have learnt, through your Listening Listener...”

“No,no,no:Silent Listener!”

"Yes,of course:Silent Listener.Has the Silent Listener told you whether a method for choosing between Way Omega and Path Alpha has been found?”

“Yes,it has. It tells me The Method Committee has named it The Choice Matrix. Don't ask me what it entails. I don't know, yet” The youth smiled. “Sorry. Are we still friends?”

“Come on,Nick. We'll always be friends. Listen.I've arranged observer status for Fiona at the summit tomorrow.

I could do the same for you if you'd like to come. You'd learn a thing or two about African trickery."

"That would be cool. So yes, I would like to come. I could even ask Bob, my boss at the VOA, to tag along." Then the youth looked at his watch and made a face. "Goodness," he said. "I must go." He rose.

Ms McKenzie saw him out. Abiola followed suit.

Chapter Fourteen

While the summit was reconvening the next morning, its mood was expectant, yet jittery. Hope and fear hung in the air in equal measure. Yes, all heads of state hoped The Method Committee that they had formed the previous evening had done its work and found a method they could use now to choose between Way Omega and Path Alpha. Still, they feared their pick of committee leader might have killed this prospect even before it was born.

President Bangoura, after all, had told them he had not read and would never read the documents he had to have read or would have to read if he was to properly perform the task with which they had charged him. A man like that wasn't at all a choice they should have made. How was he going to perform his task if he did not know what the task was and had sworn never to know? How could he answer a question he had not heard and was determined not to hear? Yet here he was now, about to do just that.

A change of seating had occurred at the dais. Minister Zinto had moved a place so President Bangoura, as Chair of The Method Committee, could sit immediately to the right of the Chair of the summit protocol. Apart from this repositioning, however, there had been no other change. Dr Afolabi and the Chair still sat where they had sat the day before.

Among the observers, in the back row, were three new presences. Mr Manley, Chief of the local VOA bureau,

was the first. There he was now, exuding his aura of good health as usual, and probably exhaling his mentholated breath as well. Ms McKenzie, was the second. She was nestling between Mr Manley on her right and Mr Longway on her left. From time to time, she turned to speak to Pastor Chiamaka, Professor Kimani and Engineer Tahir, in adjacent seats behind her. The VOA youth, was the third new presence. He had wedged himself between Pastor Chiamaka and Professor Kimani. Not a word had crossed the youth's lips since he arrived. Neither of his immediate neighbours felt at ease with him enough to strike up a conversation. Comrade Melusi was absent. After his arrest the evening before, he had not yet resurfaced.

The Chair called the meeting to order. "The summit now resumes!" he said. His eyes were on the other heads of state.

"Before we adjourned last evening, we asked a committee, the Method Committee, to find a method we would use today to choose between Way Omega and Path Alpha." He turned to the man on his immediate right. "President Bangoura, may I ask you, as the committee's leader, if you were able to find such a method?"

"Oui. Yes, Monsieur le President, we were," answered President Bangoura from his seat at the dais.

A wave of relief swept through the summit hall, but it did not last. All heads of state knew President Bangoura. He was unpredictable and probably senile. Perhaps he was pretending and had come up with no method at all.

"President Bangoura, will the method you've found be up to the job?" asked the Chair.

“Hoy.”

“Sorry.Was that a no,President Bangoura?”

"It was a yes, Monsieur le President.”

“Sure?”

“Oui.It was a yes.”

"You are ready to present your method,then,President Bangoura?”

“Of course. Bien sur”

“In which case,could you please do so?”

“Maintenant?Now?”

“Yes,now.”

“With pleasure,Monsieur le President."This once the old man spilled himself out of his seat at the dais and started flowing towards the speaker's microphone. “Alors,"he began, after he had reached his destination and pooled himself back together.

“Excellencies,you sit ready to listen. No?” He looked at the other heads of state, expecting a response.

None came.

“And you,Monsieur le President,you sit ready?”

The Chair did respond. “Yes.Carry on,Your Excellency.”

“Senk you very much," said the old man gratefully. “First,if you permit me, I will start by...” He broke off. “In English,how you say rendre hommage?”

"To pay tribute,"offered President Gamlozi,who was fluent in both English and French. As a member of the Method Committee,he had worked with the old man and come to like the give and take of his participatory how you say?' approach to dialogue.

"Yes, to pay tribute," said the old man. "Voilà! There you go! I will start by to pay tribute to other members of my committee: President Gamlozi and President Ibarosa. They were truly terrific—truly terrific. Senks. We were able to wrap up our task in only half an hour."

The other heads of state let out gasps of surprise. "What, in only half an hour?"

"I joke you not. Can one say like that in English?"

"Actually, no!" shouted President Ibarosa cruelly. He, the other member of the Method Committee, had not got along well with the old man.

"Oh là là! Oh my!" moaned the old fellow. "No?"

The Chair was less cruel. "We got your drift, President Bangoura."

"Drift?"

"Your meaning," said the Chair. "Please continue." "Senk you," said the old man. "The result of our effort was the method I will now demonstrate you in image on wall who is before you." The old man was happily letting foolish little English words like 'a' die unborn. He looked sideways at a youth the summit's secretariat had stationed at a projector to operate it for him. "We are ready to start, young man. So switch on projector."

"Yes, Sir." The youth turned the device on. An image lit the front wall.

"Merci, thank you, young man. Not switch off him now, please; just keep him on. By way, young man, what name you call yourself?"

“Mam-Biram,"said the youth.

“Keep on projector,Mam-Biram.Not switch off."

"Sir,I won't."

“Bon.Good.Excellencies,can you all see image on wall? That is the method my committee and I found."It was a table with four cells. “We it named The Choice Matrix."Each cell contained a simple equation:

H=Omega	T=Alpha
H = Approve	T=Reject

“Mathematics at a summit!"complained the other heads of state. “What next?”

The old rogue knew they were having trouble understanding his equations. Yet did he offer them any help? No.He wanted to enjoy the moment.

When he had enjoyed it for long enough,he offered the help he had withheld.

“Here is what those equations tell to you, Excellencies. They say you I will toss this coin twice."He held high the coin that he was talking about. “If coin land..."He broke off again. “How you say pile ou face' in English?”

"Heads or tails,"obliged President Gamlozi.

“Senks,"acknowledged the old man. “So,if coin land heads for first toss,then first equation - in first row,first column,of The Choice Matrix-is telling to you:Choose Way Omega for another toss and forget all about Path Alpha.But if coin land tails, then second equation- in first

row,second column-is saying you:Choose Path Alpha and forget Way Omega instead.” The old man looked at his audience. “Questions?” he asked.

“YES!” shouted Minister Zinto,already up on his feet. “With all due respect,President Bangoura,I think what you are suggesting now is total nonsense.”

“QUOI?WHAT?”

“ Mr President,real summits don't decide by flipping coins.”

“I see. And I suppose,Cher le Ministre, Dear Minister, you going make same protestation, with as much vigour, when your Way Omega get win.”

The summit hall rocked with laughter.

“Order!” demanded the Chair. “Order,Excellencies, order! We will have order. As for you,Minister Zinto,you will speak only when I say so. Do you understand-yes? Then sit down!”

The minister sat down.

Dr Afolabi rose."Mr Chairman,I think the minister has a point," he said. “My advice here would be...”

The old man cut him off. “Your advice here would be what? That we utilise your method of 'this on one hand and that on other hand'?Ha! We would still be here next year, admiring our hands if we were to do so."Again,the summit hall rocked with laughter.

“ Order, please! Excellencies, order! ” the Chair reminded everyone. “As for you,Dr Afolabi,ifI find I need your advice, you will know.I will ask for it.Sit!”

Dr Afolabi obeyed.

The Chair gave the floor back to President Bangoura. "President Bangoura, you still have the floor," he said. "Please go on."

"Merci. Thank you. Now, equations in second row of The Choice Matrix, are telling to you something tres different ..." He broke off yet again. "How you say that in English?"

"Very different," offered President Gamlozi once more.

"Ah, is same as French! Those equations are saying you this. Whether document emerging from first toss-Way Omega or Path Alpha-is approved or rejected will depend on outcome of second toss." The old man held his coin high again. "Third equation-in second row, first column-tells, if heads you must approve document. Fourth equation-in second row, second column-says, if tails you must reject. There, now you have it, Excellencies. La Matrice du Choix.

The Choice Matrix."

No one was listening. Convinced The Choice Matrix was some kind of game, the other heads of state were all busy exchanging funny notes about it.

"Any questions?" asked the old man. Nobody heard.

"Perhaps you no hear me. I ask if you have any questions."

Again, no one heard.

"Quest ce qui se passe? What is happening? You people not even listen to me! Yes?"

This time all heard, and murmurs of anger began then grew. Danger loomed.

Quickly,the Chair moved to avert trouble before it erupted. “All right,we'll break here for a breather,"he ruled. Bang."We'll resume in fifteen minutes."Bang.



When the summit resumed,the breather seemed to have done its job.It had rejuvenated the old man with a second round of youth. His very voice had fresh verve.

“Monsieur le President,” he began, “I would now like to execute the process itself.I wish,in other words,to determine what choice summit must to make between Way Omega and Path Alpha.But first,Monsieur le President, please to join me here where I stand. I will need your help. Daccord?”

"Daccord.” The Chair joined the old man at the speaker's microphone.

“Senks,"acknowledged the old man with a smile wet with drool.

“ In turn,you,Monsieur le President, are going to need two witnesses for to help you help me.I suggest you Ministre Zinto and Docteur Afolabi!”

Dr Afolabi and Minister Zinto went and stood beside the Chair.

“ Bon."The old man held his coin high yet again. “ Monsieur le President,what I do now is,toss this coin. When it land, you and your two witnesses will look to see what is up:heads or tails.” The old man threw his coin up in the air then, feigning fear of the impending result, closed his eyes. The coin landed harmlessly on the floor, near his feet.

The Chair and his two witnesses closed in to look.

"Monsieur le President, what's up?" asked the old man, his eyes still closed.

"Tails-up!"

"Is that right?" The old man's eyes opened. "Now look at second equation-first row, second column-of The Choice Matrix, Monsieur le President. What does it say you?"

"It says Path Alpha progresses to.."

"HIP, HIP..." shouted Mr Longway from the back among the observers.

"..HURRAH!" shouted Professor Kimani in response, also from the back.

"Hush, you two back there," hissed the Chair in anger. "Remember, you are observers, not participants. So shush!"

They shushed.

"So, as I was saying, Path Alpha progresses to the second toss."

"NO!" objected Minister Zinto again. "Mr Chairman..." "Be quiet, Minister Zinto," ordered the Chair. "President Bangoura, please go on."

"Merci" The coin rose and fell again. "Now what's up?"

"Heads-up!"

"Monsieur le President, according to third equation-in second row, first column, of The Choice Matrix-that means what?"

"It means the summit must approve Path Alpha"

"PRAISE THE LORD!" hollered Pastor Chiamaka from the back.

"Amen,"murmured a few heads of state. "Amen," murmured a few more.

"Order,please," ordered the Chair. "Order!"

Murmurs persisted. "Amen! Amen! Amen!"

"Order!Order!Order!"

Order returned.

"Good.It's decided,then.Excellencies,Path Alpha is our choice."

"Alhamdulillah! " dared Engineer Tahir, in Arabic. "Praise be to God!"

For Professor Kimani,Pastor Chiamaka and Engineer Tahir,as well as Comrade Melusi in absentia,that moment of victory was therapeutic.In Path Alpha,there was a chance that action, concrete action,would be taken to right the wrongs they had each suffered.

The Chair had begun walking back to his seat.Now he stopped. "Good stuff,"he said appreciatively.Then he began walking again. "President Bangoura,come."

"Bien sûr.Of course." The old fellow started to flow behind the Chair. "Au revoir,Mam-Biram.Goodbye,"he said to the youth at the projector.

"Goodbye,Sir."

"Senks."The old man flowed on, trailed by Dr Afolabi and Minister Zinto.

When all four were back at their seats,the Chair began to wrap up. " Excellencies,we've come to the end of our summit." He smiled,and why not? Had The Trick not saved the day?Had it not eliminated the need for the consensus he could not achieve? "Go back home safely, Excellencies.

As we say in my country, travel like lions, without fear of attack or worry about supper. And, speaking about supper, the Pinnacle informs me that, to cap our summit, it has organised a closing ceremony on the mezzanine floor. Things will start sizzling in thirty minutes. So we'll meet there soon.” Gavel hit wood. Bang. "I now declare the summit itself formally closed.” Bang. Bang.

President Dibonso sprang to his feet at once. “ Mr Chairman, don't insult our intelligence with that rubbish.” His voice was grating on all ears with tones of rage.

“What rubbish are you referring to, President Dibonso?” asked the Chair. He was rising to the challenge.

"The Choice Matrix indeed! Do you really expect us to buy into that madness? Can't you see that some of us are not senile? We reject the matrix, lock, stock and barrel.”

"I said the summit stands closed,” insisted the Chair.

Bang. Bang.

“And I say it is open again,” retorted President Dibonso. “ But, President Dibonso, you do not have the power to do so.”

“Who says I do not have the power to do so? See this?” He pulled out a pistol, pocket-size.

The other heads of state scrambled to hide under their desks.

“President Dibonso, put that thing away!” demanded the Chair.

“Make me!” retorted President Dibonso.

The pistol clicked. It was ready to start spitting fire at the Chair.

“Hey! I told you to put that thing away.”

“And I told you to make me put it away!”The small gun stayed.

“All right.Watch me."The Chair pressed a panic button hidden under his desk.

Commandos armed with machine guns burst into the summit hall at a run.

The Chair smiled. “Do what you came to do,boys."They cocked their guns.

President Dibonso disabled his little gun, hid it away,and then slipped out through an emergency exit.

“You can come out now,fellows,"said the Chair to the other heads of state.

All of them rushed to the exits,swearing not to return for the summit's closing ceremony. The Chair turned to his commandos.

“Come on,boys,"he said, “let's go!”

“ Aye,aye,Sir!"They lowered their guns, closed ranks behind him, and escorted him out.

It was over.

Mr Manley rose. “Do you reckon we ought to head back to our barracks ourselves,Cowboy? ” he joked to the VOA technician.

“Aye,aye,Sir,"answered the youth in a whisper,mocking the commandos."I reckon we ought to,Sir."

Dr Afolabi and MIs McKenzie were already leaving. He reached for her hand and asked. “So,what did you think?"

She received his hand in hers and asked back. “So, what did I think about what?”

“Come on, about the summit! Quite a show, huh?”

"Are all summits crazy like that?" she asked.

“No, only those that are crazy like that are crazy like that.”

Mr Longway and his four men were last to leave. As they were leaving, they hugged and cheered. Against all odds, their Path Alpha had carried the day.

