

Lillies on the Niger

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a story in the forgotten Land of the Rising Sun

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Thanks

Thanks to Minas Pergantis for editing this one (or maybe botching the job)

Dedicated to all those who have met their fate and did not shy away from it, no matter the cost.

“There is a house in New Orleans, they call it the Rising Sun”

- The Animals, *The House of The Rising Sun*

In her Majesty's service

Sweat ran freely down the red-haired Englishman's temples, smearing the jungle camo on his clean-shaven face. A knife blade covered in dry mud sat in his left hand, while his other hand made a rough circle in the air. It was a hand signal for the command to encircle the target.

Five men melted away into the green humid jungle in a heartbeat, as if they had been an optical illusion. They moved fast; faster than what Ethan had believed them capable of. He decided to stand back for a little while more, and see how they could handle their approach on their own.

All of them stopped dead in their tracks and hunched low when they heard noise, probably from the direction of the clearing up ahead. The two men that formed the edge of the squad aimed their rifles outwards from the squad, as if a switch had been thrown. The point man laid himself flat with the silken grace of a cat, knife drawn in his right hand while his left hand reached out for his Colt zero-point-forty-five. The rearguard moved like a pair of dancers, covering each other's back, both aiming their rifles from shoulder-high, safeties clicked off to single-shot selection.

In that cautious small diamond formation they moved as a whole, each step forward made with practiced ease and well-earned confidence, the mark of a well-trained soldier. For all intents and purposes, and as far as Ethan was concerned, he had done a good job training them. What did bother him though was that they had yet to fire a shot in anger. He knew that nothing tests a man like real combat.

Though they moved precisely as they had been taught, and seemed quick and stealthy enough, Ethan couldn't really tell if they just went through the motions or if they were really up for the challenge. After all, no matter how much one practices before a show, it's the opening night that makes or breaks it.

Ethan's free hand was wrapped tightly around a metal L-shaped trigger attached to a small box no larger than a pack of cigarettes, from which a run of cables protruded and got lost somewhere under the rich jungle tapestry of green and brown. With a tight grin, Ethan whispered to himself with the expectation of a job well done:

"Showtime, lads."

When he double-clicked the trigger the first thing that attracted everyone's attention were the flashes. And then came the shockwaves, their force pummeling at everyone, making every ribcage vibrate intensely as if tremors had seized them. And that was just the opening note.

Small gun fire erupted from various well-placed locations, the muzzle flashes dotting the lavish scenery as if hundreds of photographers clicked in rapid succession.

The scouts instantly dived for cover, falling prone while keeping their arcs of fire firmly fixed to their own particular zone of responsibility. A wry smile formed on Ethan's face: he seemed to be enjoying the performance.

The five trainees were on their bellies, rolling and crawling over the jungle bed in an effort to find as much cover as possible in mere moments. They exchanged quick glances and made repet-

itive hand motions to each other, communicating silently trying to establish a point where they could fall back away from the guns blazing at them.

Every tree trunk and low bush or gully counted for gold at times like these, and the five Marine scouts from the 3rd Marine division made excellent use of their surroundings. Very much so that Ethan felt a twang of pride at seeing his handiwork in action. They were his men, and they seemed every bit as professional as he intended them to be.

They quickly abandoned their exposed position for a slightly shallow depression with good cover, fat tree trunks strewn around them with thick bush for cover and a clear view on all sides. A defensible position from which they could easily spot a move against them and fall back while they harassed their enemy firing and moving in turns. Ethan's mind flashed with the sudden realization they were good enough to be Royal Marine scouts, not just Nigerian troops.

He almost felt a hint of regret he couldn't be there with them when it really mattered, when the guns pointing towards them were not loaded with blanks; when the explosive charges half a mile away were real shells and mortars falling right on them.

Almost, as Ethan reminded himself inside his head, was the eminent keyword: This was not his war, not by a far chance, and setting up mock engagements such as this one was as close as he wanted to get to another warzone. Except for the times when he itched, except for the times he woke up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat, knowing it wasn't the tropical heat that left him sleepless thereafter, but faces all too well remembered and defined.

The team of five men had dug themselves in taking solid cover. The gunfire died down soon afterwards, and Ethan believed there was no point in continuing tracking and crossing the jungle. He had seen what he wanted to see, and that was a team of scouts, not a bunch of gung-ho Nigerians hollering with rifles

raised firing on auto, vying for Igbo blood.

Ethan raised himself above the bushes and bellowed as if he wanted the cadets back at Sandhurst to hear him clear as rain:

"End of session! Fine job lads!"

The team of five gave no sign of sight or sound that they had heard their instructor. Ethan repeated himself with less enthusiasm:

"Come on, games' over! Let's head back for some rest, off we go."

Still, nothing could be now heard other than the usual sounds of the jungle, the distant cries of birds and monkeys, and the constant buzzing of mosquitoes and other assorted exotic insects.

Ethan furrowed his brow and briefly considered that the team might have actually extracted themselves without him noticing, and decided to check the small depression himself. With a hurried pace, he made his way through the brush and in a few moments reached the position he had last seen them take cover in.

He saw no one, but suddenly felt a piece of metal poking him through his left side, right between his ribs, poised to pierce his heart at a single thrust. He had been caught unawares, and once he looked sideways to his assailant, he saw Onko, the team scout leader smiling wildly, his bright white teeth a stark contrast to his camouflaged dark face. A little stunned and a little bit surprised, Ethan barely had time to let off a curse:

"Bugger me, you've grown into a real scout Idowu."

No longer wearing the same disarming smile, the Nigerian marine responded with a heavy accent, the Nigerian pronunciation thick and strong:

"You grow soft, Captain Whittmore."

Onko then sheathed his knife, and the four other men suddenly appeared from quite unlikely and widespread places, from any one of which they could have put a bullet through Ethan at their leisure.

Ethan nodded and made a small sigh, as if acknowledging he

had indeed let his guard down and been overcome, exactly what he thought his recruits should never happen, not even while not in the battlefield. Cultivating a little paranoia went a long way in keeping a man alive, especially in a civil war where telling a friend from an enemy was not as clean a business as shooting at one.

Ethan did manage to save some face though when he pointed at his feet to a small bump in the ground, leaves cluttered all over it and said:

“See now Ibrahim, that’s a mark for a landmine. You might have killed at least one man when you chose to fall back here.”

Onko seemed far from smiling at that comment, and with a mixed expression midpoint between anger and disappointment he said to Ethan, making it sound almost like an accusation:

“There was no place else to fall back and cover, Captain. It was a death trap then, for sure. What could we have done different? Not fair, sir.”

The word ‘sir’ had a strange ring to it, and that probably was because it was meant to sound off-putting. Ethan only cared to answer briefly right before he turned about and started walking to the gathering area of the training field:

“All’s fair in love and war, sergeant. Says so somewhere, I’m pretty sure of that.”

* * *

In the warm light of neon orange, Ethan searched his pockets for the some small change, but to no avail. He rarely needed dimes and pennies when he made his cosmopolitan visits to the center of Lagos, but using the jukebox in Loui’s bar was such an occasion, and even more so a favourite habit.

In fact, Ethan was not a rare visitor to Loui’s establishment, and most would instantly recognise him. He was widely known

as the Englishman, both to the few locals and the numerous extraordinary foreigners that frequented the *Metropolitaine*.

Ethan maintained that he only came for the regularly up-to-date jukebox, whilst his tab indicated a thirsty sort of music lover with a certain taste for fine malts.

Malts such as the unusually fine scotch that Loui kept stashed for the well-off or even well-liked customer. He had simply decided to thank God there was good scotch to be found in a place like Nigeria and even more so in a bar like Loui's. To make the realisation even more mind-numbing for Ethan, there was good scotch to be found during what the Nigerian government chose to characterise as a 'crisis'. The *Metropolitaine's* crude and shanty decoration, or more appropriately its blatant lack thereof only helped to somehow accentuate that a war was going on.

A couple of ceiling fans still worked despite what one might expect at first sight, barely keeping the air from going stale.

It was with his usual wide grin that Louis, the proprietor, approached Ethan and offered him a penny before bowing slightly, impeccably dressed in a striped jacket, white pressed shirt, bowtie and smart pants, an air of the thirties Paris about him. Ethan accepted the coin gladly and immediately dropped it in the slot, while Louis chimed in his blatantly french but not unbearable accent:

"Compliments of the house, Capitain. The usual? Little ice, double fine scotch?"

Ethan smiled wryly and nodded while selecting a song in the jukebox, his index finger searching for the correct button to press. He pushed 'Under my thumb', and turned to reply to Louis before setting off to settle in his usual barstool, the bar solely at his disposal at that hour:

"Very fine scotch."

"Nothing but Scotland's finest, Mr. Whittmore."

Ethan sat on the barstool, his eyes staring at the glasses and various bottles of liquor neatly arrayed and featuring prominently

in the shelves behind the bar. When he next spoke, it was with a feeling of relief:

“I’d never thought I’d say this, but God bless Nigeria.”

Louis had assumed his proper place behind the bar when he picked up a bottle of one of his finest malts from a cupboard below along with a short glass, and said smiling wryly while he poured:

“I’m from Guiana though.”

“Ah, and Scotch is from Scotland but it knows no borders. Come on then, pour one yourself.”

The unusually tall, lank bartender complied and picked up a shot glass which he filled promptly and raised to a toast:

“To all the thirsty men.”

The Rolling Stones song had started playing in the background. Ethan raised his own glass of scotch and made a toast as well:

“To Mick Jagger and crew.”

They both gulped down their drinks in one go. Ethan made a slight motion with one hand, indicating the cupboard below.

Louis went through the motions of pouring another glass of scotch and asked his regular customer for the past year or so with his usual air of cool affection:

“How’s life treating you?”

Ethan’s tone was lighthearted, almost flippant when he said:

“Not sure. Better than horseshit? I’m not complaining though. Still ’ere, aren’t I?”

Louis laughed politely and nodded before replying:

“Woe be me if something should happen to you. Losing customers, I cannot afford that?”

“You’re not losing me soon enough. Keep the scotch coming, and I’ll manage.”

Louis let the glass of scotch slide across the wooden bar and looked Ethan straight in the eye, his face almost a pale shade of dark under the dim candlelight surrounding the bar:

“What news from your friends in high places?”

Ethan shook his head and made a strange, sour face for a moment. He brought the glass to his lips, sniffing the aromas:

"Nothing yet. It's not easy, you knew that. Not to mention there's money involved. But it'll take time Louis. Your visa isn't exactly top priority."

Louis shook his head in disappointment, and started polishing a basket full of washed glasses. His eyes were fixed to the task at hand when he replied to Ethan with a mixed feeling of sadness and slight aggravation, his movements lacking his usual crispness and finesse:

"You said by the end of the month, Englishman. Said you knew the 'ins and outs', didn't you? Who will keep Insami and Wadu off my back, I wonder. Make it top priority, can you?"

Ethan kept wearing the same smile that had won him arguments on innumerable occasions, while he kept tapping his fingers to the rhythm of the song playing from the jukebox. After a short uncomfortable silence, he said to Louis:

"It must feel like a kick in the nuts, Louis, but remember, I'm doing you a favor. Take a look around you. There's bigger trouble than those two thugs. There's a war going on. If they do pop up and act like a couple of tough guvs, I'll make sure they get one in the sack and lose a couple of teeth each. No use worrying about it now."

Louis looked a bit distraught, his eyes somewhat dull from wariness. Ethan tried to change the subject:

"What do you have for me this time? Auchentoshan? Glenfiddich? "

Louis became his professional self again; he seemed to relax a bit, his tense mouth loosening into a tight smile. He reached for a tall cupboard with a lock on the handles, and used a small key that hung from a chain around his neck. He opened the cupboard with small, graceful movements of his hands, as if opening an icon or a shrine. In it, a dozen bottles of Littlemill sat, dusty and squat, seemingly quite authentic seal, cork and all. At the sight

of the bottles of scotch and the prospect of savouring them at his leisure, Ethan's face lit up and his blue eyes seemed for a moment to sparkle. His voice couldn't contain his enthusiasm:

"Littlemill? Thirty-two years old, triple distillation. Bugger me, oldest malt in Scotland. Let me see that bottle."

Louis complied even though anyone could tell from his face he was quite puzzled. Ethan was usually interested in the contents, not the labels.

"Here you go, englishman."

Ethan completely disregarded the bartender's effort at a light-hearted insult and studied the bottle's labels with focused interest. At length, he nodded appreciatively before adding:

"From Ayrshire, too."

Louis asked with real curiosity while opening the bottle of Littlemill Ethan was still clutching like a scepter:

"Is that the place for the best scotch?"

Ethan let go of the bottle and while Louis put a single cube of ice in Ethan's glass, he continued, his expression emanating a scholarly aura:

"'Tis the ancestral birthplace of the greatest scot that ever lived. William Wallace."

The name of the famous scottish hero was intoned with reverence and pride. It seemed to have no effect on the Guinean bartender who casually asked:

"Who is he?"

Ethan blinked twice and was taken slightly aback when the name of the greatest Scotsman that ever lived rang no bell. He nevertheless straightened his back and breathed deeply when he tried to explain to Louis.

"William Wallace was the greatest scotsman that ever lived. Fought the English for the freedom of Scotland for over a dozen years. They killed his wife and family and in the end he was betrayed. He gave his all, William Wallace. Biggest set of stones ever."

Loui looked at Ethan in puzzlement as he uncorked the fine scotch, its smoky aroma wafting upwards, arousing the senses. His question seemed to flatten Ethan's face right at the moment his nostrils had become so excited:

"But Scotland isn't free. You serve the Queen of England."

"That's not entirely true, I serve the Queen of the United Kingdom."

"But there's no Queen of the Scots, is there?"

"She's also Queen of the Scots. And the Welsh. And the Irish. Well, at least some of the Irish."

"See, that's not unlike the situation here in Nigeria. The Igbo are like the Scots, they want to be free. Shouldn't they be free?"

"I don't have a say in that. It's not my job, and it's not my people. If they can, they will. And if you want to know, my father might have been born in Glasgow but I grew up in Kensington, so piss off with the Scots and all that. Pour, for the love of God."

Louis smiled wryly before he retorted:

"You brought the subject to my attention, Captain."

Ethan was starting to get properly wound up when the door bell rang and attracted his attention. He looked up from his drink and saw Louis pointing with his long bony index finger to a sturdy, tall and fit black man dressed in fatigues, the beret of the Nigerian Marine Corps smartly adorning his head. The man's eyes peered vehemently through the haze and fog of the smoke and dust that seemed to always swirl lazily in the *Metropolitaine*.

The soldier's gaze quickly settled on Ethan, who was spinning around on his barstool to look at the newcomer directly. He cracked a smile and gave a mocking half-salute to the burly man who - judging by his epaulets - appeared to be a brevet Major. The man did not seem to share the same good humor and did not salute, neither did he seem to enjoy smiles and levity a lot. As he approached the bar, Ethan's mood had swung again towards his sweet side and he cheerfully made a gesture at the still open cupboard full of Littlemill, greeting the man with a proposition:

“James, this is a once in a lifetime chance for a once in a lifetime experience. It’s Littlemill. It’s the nectar of the Gods. It’ll be monumental James; getting plastered with the finest scotch in the whole country, with little doubt. So, what is the unhappy occasion of your visit here in uniform? Tell me all about it so I can forget it with the help of Louis and Littlemill. Is it remotely serious? Are the Biafrans hurtling shells at Lagos? Can I go home now?”

The heavily set man had a quite intimidating appearance. The capability of severely wounding a man armed with nothing but his hands was the usual first impression. At odds with his brutal image he had a strangely calm and serene demeanor, a grim look on his face that implied his mind was occupied with grave matters. He approached Ethan and taking off his beret he calmly said:

“It’s your brother, Ethan. We have reports their caravan was probably attacked today. Somewhere in the jungle near the border. They never reached Owerri.”

Ethan’s smile evaporated. He suddenly looked somber and withdrawn. The news were a mood killer to say the least. He looked at James with wary, stern eyes:

“Red Cross is supposed to have Army support. Where was their support, James?”

James’ bulky shoulders shook with a disarmingly vulnerable shrug. He embraced Ethan with a single arm and told him in a friendly, casual manner:

“Let’s have a drink, Ethan. Let’s talk.”

* * *

Business in the Metropolitaine was in full swing. A small gang of sailors were celebrating one of their mates birthday, following the custom of drinking till the boatswain comes looking for them. Louis kept a wary eye on a couple of strange-looking fig-

ures, but other than that the orders kept coming in and that made him a happy man.

Ethan was sitting opposite James at a small round metal table in a corner near the bar, looking far from jovial. What James had told him had suddenly turned this war into a personal matter, something that every professional soldier tried to avoid. A well-known but sadly overlooked factor in dying was doing stupid things for all the wrong reasons, and making a war something personal was both stupid and wrong.

James had fallen silent for a couple minutes silently sipping at his wine, a local plonk variety that barely passed the mark. Ethan was down to his last couple of cigarettes, chain-smoking ever since they had sat down to talk. At length, Ethan broke the uncomfortable silence:

"I should have pulled some strings when he told me he was going in with the Red Cross. Red tape, paperwork, passport trouble. Surely someone you know in the Interior could have been of some help. Maybe forced him to stay in Britain, somehow. Don't know, really."

James motioned a definite 'no' with his head, eyes closed shut. He then had another sip before answering:

"You know there are many ways to come into Nigeria. If your brother wanted to come, he would have found his own. There's nothing you could have really done to prevent him from coming here in the first place."

Ethan drew heavily on his cigarette and exhaled briskly. He spoke with some irritation:

"True enough, that. Maybe you could have detained him when their caravan set off for Biafra? I could have spoken some more sense into him. It doesn't matter now, does it?"

James was as calm as before, answering with a flat and emotionless voice, trying to calm down Ethan as well:

"Not a Red Cross caravan. How would it look in the papers if Nigeria blocked the Red Cross? It would look like we want to

let children die of dysentery and famine. No, we could not have told your brother to just stay put. It was not my job, and not yours either. It was his choice, his life.”

Ethan put out his cigarette, drank the rest of his drink in one go and made a gesture with his empty glass to Louis who seemed to notice almost immediately. Ethan then looked straight into James’ eyes; a set of dark eyes accented by the small bit of white that surrounded them. He tried to calm himself and find the appropriate words:

“You are right about that.. Maybe I should have just whipped him good like when we were still ten years old. But he’s a grown man, a doctor no less. He has his duties, his obligations. Like I have my own. Though I still think it was a stupid thing to do, at least he acted like the man he’s supposed to be. He wanted to help, he signed up with the Red Cross. Never really saw meself how lying down on the grass all day long, smoking grass and fucking like rabbits could stop people from dying. Still, a stupid move coming here.”

There was a pause. Louis was returning to their table with Ethan’s refill of Littlemill and a clean ashtray. Ethan nodded his thanks to Louis who in turn bowed slightly and fled off to serve some other table. James had rested his arms on their table, his frame too large to comfortably seat himself in the *Metropolitaine’s* plain chairs. Ethan took a mouthful of Littlemill and flinched when he felt the malt burn down his throat and into his stomach. He then went on:

”I know, war’s no place for idealists and romantics. That’s probably why I’m still alive. That, and an awful amount of luck, I’d wager. Maybe Andy’s doing a better job than I ever could. I mean, in the grander scheme of things, him being a doctor and all that. Can’t really tell why I didn’t stop him. I just couldn’t, you know?”

James blinked languidly and sipped the last bit of his wine. He set his glass down with a clang before replying:

"Someone has to try and save the world. People like your brother think they can. Like every hero should."

James grunted with a hint of disapproval and Ethan grimaced with slight annoyance at that contemptive gesture. He lit up one of the last cigarettes in his pack and inhaled thoroughly:

"Well, I wouldn't know. I'm not exactly in the business of saving people, am I? You could say we're sort of antagonists, me and Andy. Kind of reminds me, we used to be in opposite teams when we balled."

"I didn't know you play cricket."

"Haven't ever since I got a leg injury in Kenya. Nasty business that was. Almost got myself killed. Young, stupid and rash. Also, quite a lucky bastard."

James expression seemed to change somewhat. He removed his hands from the table and for a moment sat still, looking at Ethan intensely. He then ordered another drink from Loui, who seemed to keep a watchful eye at their table more so than the others and nodded promptly, disappearing at the back for a couple of minutes. When James spoke next, he was lighting up Ethan's last cigarette, Ethan affording nothing but a stunned surprise and a deep furrow:

"Were you any good at it?"

"What, cricket? I thought you didn't smoke."

"I'm a man of many talents. And some vices as well."

"Well, I hope you're not a Rolling Stones fan as well. It'd be a real crime to find out you've been hiding that too."

James drew on his cigarette and threw his head back, letting off a small cloud of smoke. He was smiling when he pointed to Ethan and said:

"Not much to hide, Ethan. Sometimes I smoke. Usually alone."

Ethan nodded with a sly grin on his face. He sipped another mouthful from his glass of scotch which was disappearing fast. James was toying with the ice in his glass when a slight grin

formed on his face, droplets of sweat running down his forehead, glistening dimly in the hazy, poor lighting of the Metropolitaine:

“A better chance than cricket, true enough. A bad leg won’t leave you behind.”

“It isn’t just the bad leg. I’m not a cricket fan really. Andy loves it though. At least as a kid he did. Used to drag me along. The bad leg is just a reminder.”

James seemed to stiffen suddenly. He straightened his back before reaching for his glass, his voice a bit shallow and distant:

“Which is worse, Ethan? The memories, or the leg?”

“It’s the memories alright. Hadn’t seen him in four years. Rarely called. Never wrote. He must’ve thought I couldn’t care less. But it’s the job, you know? The distance.”

James interjected mildly:

“The scotch too?”

Ethan drained his glass, as if a real thirst was driving him and answered:

“That too.”

James was looking at him through bloodshot eyes, his glass of wine empty once more. He sat upright in his chair, drew audibly through his large nostrils on the thick air of the Metropolitaine and made a hand signal for another round of drinks, making sure that Louis brought two glasses of Littlemill. Ethan’s gaze was fixed on the ceiling fan above them. He looked distantly thoughtful, grim and withdrawn, far from his usual self. He turned his eyes to his empty glass and spoke with a touch of anger behind each sentence:

“I need to find my brother. I’ve never left a man behind in my life. Brought everyone back. I can’t leave me own brother behind. It’s Andy for God’s sake, hasn’t hurt a fly in his life.”

James seemed at once somber and surprised, his eyes narrowing dangerously:

“Ethan, there’s a war going on. What is on your mind?”

Ethan picked up their drinks from Louis’ passing tray in mid-

air, and replied:

"Go look after him. Find him. Bring him back."

James shook his head disapprovingly:

"A fool's errand. Even if he's alive, it could get you killed. The both of you."

"It's not an errand and I'm no fool either, I'm a scot. From my mother's side."

James stare had begun to pierce through Ethan's eyes, casting a gaze hard as stone upon him: "You must be out of your mind," he said in a hushed voice.

Ethan shrugged indifferently and retorted:

"I've done more than my fair share of mistakes. I know this isn't one."

James voice had a slow quality about it that showed his determination:

"You'll need all the help you can get then. If it's going to have any meaning or chance of success."

Ethan cracked a smile and drank a tiny sip of Littlemill, noticing he was almost out of scotch. Louis then appeared out of nowhere with the grace of a dancer. He offered them the bottle of Littlemill he had opened earlier. There was barely enough scotch in it for just another drink.

"Gentlemen, compliments of the house. And you can keep the bottle too, if you like."

Ethan nodded his thanks and laughed despite himself, while James still sat there looking at Ethan seemingly unable to discern whether or not the man was simply drunk and already grieving, making up ideas. He asked Ethan, the stress in his voice showing he wanted to be convinced:

"You are sure you are going to do this? I want to help. But I want to know I'm not risking my neck for some jungle antiques, Ethan Whittmore. And it could mean my neck, literally. I need you to be deadly serious. All the way."

Ethan's reply was as sharp as his pervasive eyes:

“I got nothing left apart from Andy. Nothing that matters anyway. Job’s shit nowadays. No wife or kids. He’s all I got, James.”

James shrugged, his large set of shoulders tensing up his fatigues almost to the point of tearing. He then told Ethan:

“He could be already dead, you know that. He might be a white English doctor, but no matter how useful he may prove to any captor, bullets are not very picky.”

Ethan went on, his fists clenching instinctively, his eyes shining with a crystal clarity that he rarely exhibited:

“Then I’ll bring back the body to Glasgow and lay him down in the ground. I’ll do what I can, James. I’ll do anything.”

James fixed his stare on Ethan, as if he was measuring him up:

“What are you going to do? Quit first thing tomorrow?”

Ethan smiled bitterly and said:

“Maybe I should. They wouldn’t let me though. Operational needs, lack of personnel, that sort of thing. The service wants to fuck you three ways to Australia if they can. Can’t even put in for leave, not at such a short notice. Listen, do you think you could arrange some sort of training exercise? Any reason that will demand me being attached to somewhere outside Lagos. Gone for a week or two. If all goes well, then I’ll see what I’ll do. If not, it won’t really matter from then on.”

James took a mouthful of Littlemill without preparing himself. Unaccustomed to strong liquor as he was, he looked as if he was about to vomit on the spot but he managed to contain himself. He shook his head in affirmation and said:

“I can do that. I can do more than that. I can keep you informed; give you locations, rumors, troop movements, any intelligence that passes through me. Anything that would help you find your brother and keep you alive at the same time. I even think I can cook up a ‘real’ operation. We can then use regular radio traffic to keep in contact without suspicion.”

“Can you do that? I’ll need to leave as soon as possible. To-

morrow night, the day after tomorrow at the latest. I have to pack my gear, and maybe borrow a couple of things as well, with your help. Then I need to do some itinerary checking."

"Are you planning to follow the same path as your brother's caravan?"

"Yes, all the way. I'll start from Lagos, to Benin City, then Asaba, through Onitsha and into Biafran territory. From then on, it's Owerri."

James nodded appreciatively. He asked with a hint of worry in his voice:

"What happens when you're in Biafra? What happens if you find your brother?"

"You mean when I find Andy. Bring him back, what else?"

"I mean, how do you plan to do that? What if he's injured? A prisoner, or a hostage? What if he's weak, wounded or sick? Don't tell me you'll hitch a ride back or carry him yourself if you have to."

"I will if I have to."

"Are all scots on their mother's side as foolish as you? I'll bring a helicopter. We can arrange a landing zone through the radio. If we lose contact, we'll have two pre-determined LZs, at two different times. I hope it doesn't get to that."

"You'll do that?"

"Helicopters fly without flight plans all the time. I don't have pilot wings for show, Ethan."

Ethan grinned at the hint of mischief. James landed him abruptly once more though:

"What are you going to do when you're inside Biafra though? How are you going to run around, an Englishman like you, with no papers whatsoever? Or are you just going to let everyone know you're a military advisor for the Nigerians, so they can perhaps torture you before shooting you on the spot?"

Ethan seemed a little skeptical, but at length he managed a reply:

“I have something in mind for that. I may have a contact, through the embassy. An old friend. He might be able to forge some papers, make me look legitimate. A photographer, or a journalist. Someone who can get in and out with relative impunity.”

“There’s no such thing as impunity. Tolerance maybe. A journalist would be a good cover; they’re always looking for sympathy from the press.”

Ethan nodded in agreement and paused thoughtfully for a few moments. He then looked at James as if he knew he was already asking too much of his Nigerian friend, but nevertheless went on and told him:

“James, you’ve been a good friend while I’m here, helping me ease into the situation. We’re like-minded, you are a damned good professional if I’ve ever seen one, your cooking’s great but why are you doing this for me? It can’t be that you’re risking so much at such a time just to help a white man from Scotland. I consider you a comrade-in-arms, a friend I wish I can drool with over a bottle of scotch when I’m hopefully old enough to pee on my pants. But tell me, why exactly are you risking your life and career? If it’s about money, I assure you I ..”

James slapped Ethan hard across the face, the shock from the hit leaving him dazzled for a while. His voice was like gravel on a tin, his face trembling with aggravation:

“You insult me. I come to you as a friend, and you insult me thinking me a gold-digger. You have a knack, all the Englishmen seem to. You’re so blind to what really is right in front of you. I consider you a friend too, so I’ll consider this a slip of the tongue. You’re under emotional pressure, you’ve had some drinks. I’ll forget you ever said it.”

James exhaled deeply and seemed to calm down. The timbre of his voice turned to something affable, a voice unusually soft and mellow, full of memory and sentiment:

“You want to know why I want to help you with whatever means at my disposal? Because I myself had a brother once. A

brother who bled his hands so I could grow into the man I am today. A brother who buried our parents with his own hands. I lost that brother. I lost Enkele. I lost him and while I could have done something about it, I simply watched him go away, never to return. I've been in your place Ethan. I know you're doing what I should have done years ago. And I want you to find your brother. That, I swear unto God."

Ethan looked sullen and embarrassed. He cleared his throat before saying:

"I'm sorry James. I'm sorry I offended you. You've never told me much about him."

James laughed mirthlessly before replying:

"What is there to say, Ethan? Perhaps it was his fate. Like we have ours."

"You believe in fate, then? Think all this is part of it?"

"It doesn't matter if I believe. No-one can escape the webs of fate, believer or not. We should do well to remember that."

Ethan emptied the rest of his glass in one go, and pour what little was left in the bottle of Littlemill to the both of them. He then raised his glass in a toast:

"To Andy."

And James replied:

"To Enkele."

* * *

The British embassy in Lagos stood out as the typical colonial building of the Africas, resplendent and austere, an indubitable legacy from the golden years of the Empire. Its tall, thin windows shone with the brightness of the noon sun when Ethan walked through the front gate saluting the guard on duty only perfunctorily. He ran straight up the stairs to the 2nd floor, simply ignoring any and all who tried to be of assistance. The door of the Director

of Cultural Affairs office was half-open. Ethan knocked briskly and entered without waiting for an answer.

Once inside, he saw a man in his late fifties, short and miniscule. The man wore a thick mustache, had an almost completely bald scalp and a pair of old-fashioned ebony-rimmed glasses. The label on his desk read 'Isidor Bloom - Director of Cultural Affairs'. He looked up from his seemingly casual reading material and immediately popped a smile. Even though they had only occasionally met at a couple of Embassy dinners, he offered his hand in a lively, warm way and said:

"How do you do? Jolly good I hope, old friend. Please, do have a seat. Now, what was it that you wanted to speak to me about? I believe on the phone you said it was an urgent personal matter that somehow involved my desk. Would you care to elaborate? I can only be of real help if I know what we're dealing with here, dear fellow. In the strictest of confidence, of course."

Ethan shook the hand but still felt somehow a little out of depth, his inherent distrust of spies kicking in despite the man's cordial manner. Unaccustomed to protocol and etiquette, Ethan dived straight into the matter and said bluntly:

"Mr. Bloom, I need a cover."

Isidor Bloom blinked once or twice with an unwavering, somewhat unnatural smile, and seemingly quite baffled, replied:

"I beg your pardon, what kind of cover are you talking about Mr. Whittmore?"

Before Ethan had time to elaborate, Mr. Bloom had furrowed his brow, waving a 'no-no' finger at Ethan. He got up from his chair and leisurely closed the door of his office. Ethan could only frown with genuine puzzlement while Mr. Bloom sat down again comfortably, lit his smoking pipe and had a puff. He then asked Ethan while looking him directly in the eye, his gaze strangely unnerving:

"Do you ask for a cunt when walking into a brothel, Mr. Whittmore? In such delicate matters, a little more room for ma-

neuver is usually required. You'd ask for a girl or a woman, perhaps even some company. Not for a cunt, which what brothels have on offer. Are you following me, son?"

Ethan looked ever more perplexed, especially by the sudden change of mood in the middle-aged man. He understood he had been too blunt, but while trying to think what to say next and especially how to apologise, the public servant leaned closer to Ethan before continuing:

"Listen, old chap; everybody knows what we're doing here and everyone, including us, knows we're just doing pottery and traditional art exhibitions. On Thursdays there's a bagpipe night, though. Savvy?"

Ethan nodded numbly despite not actually understanding all too well what the man was trying to get at. Mr. Bloom saw the confusion written on Ethan's face and after sighing slightly, continued:

"Right. Well then, let's make things easier for you, and expediate the process. Is there someone I can call on your behalf? Someone who can help me, help you?"

At that, Ethan replied automatically, as if he had been waiting for that question for some time:

"Yes, sir. That would be Ian Ruthers, a personal friend."

As suddenly as before, Mr. Bloom's attitude switched back to his jovial, well-mannered and quite expedient self. Wearing an almost disconcertingly wide grin on his face, he picked up the phone on his desk, dialed a single number, and said:

"Hello? Jenny? Put me through to Bristol. Yes, yes, definitely."

A small wait ensued, which was reason enough for Ethan to start sweating even though the temperature inside the room was quite pleasant. Mr. Bloom kept smiling and nodding in a reassuring fashion, which only accentuated the weird stressful feeling anxiety that had overcome Ethan. Mr. Bloom was then heard talking over the phone:

“Hello? Leonard? Yes, it’s me Isidor. Long time no see, but it’s business again I’m afraid. Is Ruthers one of yours? I see. Is he hot right now? No? Ah, splendid. Could you tell him to give me a call please? Yes, my office. Well, right about now would be indeed a perfect time. I’d like to get on with this before lunch. Yes, well she’s fine, working on her garden and all that. How’s Marie? Loved her cherry pie last Christmas, marvellous stuff really. Would love to, old chap. Have your man call me, alright then? Goodbye Leonard, don’t forget to give my regards. Goodbye.”

Once he hang up the phone, Mr. Bloom surprised Ethan once again with his choice of words:

“Fucking cunt can sod off. Now, let’s clear up a few things: This friend of yours, Ruthers, can sod off as well. If he’s going to push something for me down my pipe, that’s fine and all. I don’t give fuckall about the why or how. Do you understand that? I’m going home to Cheltenham before Christmas, and this desk can rot on my piss. And just so that you know, the cock around here tastes awful so brush often and have a care with that mouth of yours.”

Mr. Bloom put out his pipe, placed it in his shirt pocket, picked up his hat and strolled out of his office, careful to smoothly close the door behind him.

Ethan stood frozen in his chair, unable to fathom what exactly had transpired. The only certainty was that Mr. Bloom had probably been for too long in the service. Ethan’s thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing. Hesitating at first but then thinking it should be Ruthers on the other end of the phone line, Ethan picked up the receiver:

“Hello? Ian? It’s Ethan Whittmore. Well, what can I say? Didn’t expect to hear me on this end, did you? What am I doing here? Well, first of all – yes, I know I’m terrible. No, it wasn’t – I know I shouldn’t be even talking to you like this but I need some help, Ian. No! I’m not married. Can you be serious for a minute?

How you're working for Six I'll never understand. Well, now that I saw the guy in the Nigerian desk perhaps I do understand. Listen. Just listen. I need some cover. It's Andy, my brother. I need to go into Biafra. No joke. There will be no widow to comfort, so stop being a cunt and help me over here. Right, then. A piece of paper? I'm on it."

* * *

James rolled a cigarette. Real imported tobacco, confiscated from Customs. A smile, a joke and a tap in the back usually go a long way. Especially when you're six feet tall and slightly less stocky than a bull. That was something that Ethan had said when they had first met. A piece of wisdom from Britain's finest.

He lit his cigarette and sat down on a chair across the kitchen table. A hefty fish lay half-eaten, its maws showing a slightly serrated set of tiny teeth. The smell of roast dominated the room and through an open window the grill on the small porch could be seen; a few coals were settling down, their heat meaningless in the suffocating summer night of Lagos.

A wedding feast was being held down the next street, the gathered crowd milling about like a colourful circus troupe, dancing and singing with vigor despite everyone being thoroughly drenched in sweat. James peered mirthlessly at the small spectacle and stared blankly for a minute or two, as if his thoughts were completely disconnected with what was going on in front of him.

The crowd brought the groom to the fore, the impromptu stage the middle of the street, and made a circle around him. He was all dressed up, smiling brightly. Everyone showered him with flowers and small gifts, while they danced to a deep, rhythmic beat of drums. His face seemed to shine almost imperceptibly

with a gold sheen that somehow looked only natural under the light of the torches.

The burning tip of the cigarette fell on James' arm. He shook instinctively, ash marking the spot of the slight burn on his skin. His face didn't flinch though, nor did he seem to notice his cigarette was out. The phone in the bedroom was ringing with a mindless persistence that only a salesman would envy.

When James finally got up from his chair, the phone was ringing again. He stormed outside dressed in nothing but his shorts and ran towards the moving wedding feast barefooted. As he ran, he ran his tongue across his lips but couldn't tell his tears from his sweat.

Well met on an ill road

“Hello, Richard Owls. London Times. I presume you must be Dr. Ludwig Manteuffel. Glad you could take me in on such a short notice.”

A somewhat plumb, blond-haired man with a scruffy look and a thin, wiry receding hair line looked up from his writing pad through thick glasses and saw a red-haired, tall and almost gaunt man smiling and squinting under the uncomfortably radiant morning sun:

“There’s room for more, actually. Your editor-in-chief was very pleasant on the phone, and quite convincing.”

Ethan laughed politely and replied, tilting his head only barely so he could shade his eyes at least:

“He’s a wily bastard, I’ll say. When he can tell his arse from his elbow that is.”

The doctor extended his hand casually and smiled, a bit puzzled:

“I hope he’s not exhibiting a cognitive disfunction of such proportions. It could prove quite problematic in his line of work.”

Ethan shook the doctor’s hand with some hesitation, shaking his head in ignorance:

“I can’t say I’m quite following you, doctor.”

Dr. Manteuffel wiped the sweat on his forehead with the arm holding the writing pad and exhaled briskly with the hint of a slight laugh:

“Distasteful doctor’s humor, Mr. Owls. Can I call you Richard? Please call me Ludwig, we’ll be on the road together for some time. This isn’t exactly a dinner party we’re going to, yes?”

A number of people around them was busy loading the Land Rovers with all sorts of crates, bags, and sacks with everything from gauzes to canned food and flour. Ethan looked quite accustomed to the heat and the Nigerian sun, at odds with the stocky german doctor who seemed to be discomforted immensely, even though he tried his best not to show it. Ethan nodded with a sparkly grin and said:

“Can’t see any drinks on offer, and the timing’s off too. Ludwig, then?”

The german doctor motioned with his pad to the paltry shade offered by a nearby tent filled with crates stamped with the sign of the Red Cross, and Ethan lead eagerly. The doctor replied:

“You can also call me Baron. It’s a nickname my colleagues often use, jokingly of course.”

“No real title then?”

“Oh, the family name is old and at some point there was some land associated with it. The land was sold but the title stuck. The war, you see.”

Ethan put down his knapsack and welcomed the shade, settling on a crate. His eyes seemed suddenly old, staring outside at the crowd of volunteers when he said:

“There’s always some kind of war going on. Isn’t that why you’re here now?”

The doctor put down his pad on one of the crates, pulled a fold-up chair from a corner of the tent, spread it open and sat down, his relief obvious in the way he splayed his feed, heels

on the dirt. He took a few short breaths before answering in a peculiar, thoughtful voice:

“I’m here to help in what way I can. Famine and disease are just as lethal as bullets from what I’ve seen. But why are you here?”

Ethan frowned in puzzlement and smiled in his usually disarming way. He tried to sound casually baffled when he said:

“Tell the world what’s going on in Biafra. Take some pictures. Perhaps ask London for a raise too once I’m famous.”

The doctor put one leg on the other and seemed somewhat distraught, perhaps worried:

“So, a professional. I was hoping for a bit of a romantic you see. Every help we can get is better than none at all. And frankly, you look like you don’t need much help in these parts.”

Ethan crossed his arms against his chest, purely an instinctive defensive motion that only helped to show his nervousness. His charm didn’t seem to work as intended, and his sly grin was his way of showing he genuinely liked the plumb Prussian doctor for his openness:

“What can I say, I’ve been places. Suez. Kenya. Angola. Vietnam.”

The doctor reached into his sweat-stained shirt’s pocket and procured a pack of Camel’s. He put one into his mouth and proffered one to Ethan as well, who politely nodded his refusal, the grin unwaveringly attached on his tanned face. The doctor got up from his seat, while searching around for something to light his cigarette, while replying in a slightly muffled voice:

“I’m sure you enjoy travelling. A lot, I might add. Light?”

Ethan laughed and felt somewhat unburdened. He offered Dr. Manteufel a lighter from one of his pants’ side pockets:

“I can’t really say what’s on your mind, Ludwig.”

The doctor lit his Camel and seemed to cherish the moment before answering, his eyes squarely meeting Ethan’s gaze before asking him straight:

“Are you going to be trouble? We don’t need any more trouble where we’re going.”

Ethan took his lighter back and answered the doctor, the sudden quietness in his voice the only indication that he himself was somewhat uncertain:

“I want to stay out of trouble as much as you do.”

Ludwig drew on his cigarette once more, this time exhaling briskly and adding hastily:

“Good. That’s good. Thank you.”

Ethan nodded in silence before the doctor went on:

“I just want to help these people, and stay alive in the process. Is it too much to ask?”

“No, I suppose it’s not.”

Ludwig then put out his cigarette in the dirt and wiped his forehead once more. He seemed to mumble to himself:

“Good man. A good man.”

Ethan noticed and asked the doctor, his voice right on the edge of doubt:

“How can you tell?”

Ludwig looked at him with some reluctance before replying:

“I can’t. But I have hope.”

* * *

Space inside the Land Rover was at a premium. Not an inch of space had been wasted; in fact it almost seemed like the passengers inside were actually intruding on the cargo space and not the other way around. Ethan though had come up with a very comfortable-looking seating arrangement on top of a sack of rice, along with a wooden crate for his back and a couple of bags to put his feet up on. Him and the doctor had been riding along together at the rear of the small convoy of Land Rovers.

Ludwig was sweating profusely, and kept dabbing his forehead and face with a small hand towel, in an effort to make his suffering a little less unbearable and a little more obvious. Ethan had been either sleeping on and off as if the car's continuous jerks and the road bumps were sort of a lullaby. Their driver though, was invariably focused on the task at hand, barely even breathing, much less so talking. Ludwig could not stop himself from asking, straining his voice to be heard over the roar of the diesel engine. Even though at previous times he hadn't received an answer he could make good use of yet, his pitch had an air of optimism about it:

"Are we going to stop any time soon, Olufemi?"

The driver's answer was curt and to the point.

"Yes."

Ludwig, who would otherwise consider an endless talker a nuisance at best, looked right on the edge of aggravation, Olufemi being so brusque that he felt as if he was doing him a favor by even considering an answer.

He made another effort to engage in conversation or at least learn some hopefully interesting information about their whereabouts:

"Well, could you refine that somewhat? How soon exactly, is soon? More or less, of course."

Olufemi paused for a moment before answering in his usual, quietly dry manner:

"Before nightfall."

Ludwig nodded to himself, and tried to clear his parched throat with little success and even less spit. Ethan had a contemplating look drawn upon his face, his gaze darting from bush to grove. He held his camera in hand, the swarm of flies seemingly rather fond of him. Ludwig tried to get his attention, engage in some kind of discussion to relieve himself of dullness:

"That camera.. It's a Leica, right?"

Ethan turned to face Ludwig with a furrowed brow, and hav-

ing been caught unawares asked rather plainly:

“I’m sorry?”

Ludwig repeated himself, this time almost shouting:

“The camera. It’s a Leica M3, right? Some very good equipment you have there.”

Ethan shrugged indifferently, effortlessly shooting down Ludwig’s hopes. A prolonged silence followed once again, regularly interrupted by the creaks and croans of the Land Rover’s chassis. As the evening wore by, flies began to give their place to the mosquitoes. Ludwig was fighting a losing battle with the blood-sucking insects, and his utter annoyance was more than evident in his quiet and unintelligible swearing, in what sounded like german. Ethan on the other hand was looking outside the windows, over the grassy hills lush with vegetation, tall coconut-like trees and distant mangroves. The swampy savannah could be seen drawing distant with every passing minute, and Ethan’s eyes seemed to glitter with a sparkle born of an itching need to meld inside that scenery.

He then turned and addressed Olufemi in Yoruba, unmistakably ghastly sounding to a native speaker, but decent enough to be understood. The driver suddenly burst into laughter and started talking vividly with Ethan, in a torrential flow of phrases intermixed with laughs, giggles and extravagant hand gestures. Ethan was responding in kind, and judging by his tone, sometimes asking, sometimes filling in and sometimes simply nodding. Olufemi even made eye contact with Ludwig once, before breaking down in laughter and finally being able to settle down to his invariably dull and sullen mood. Ludwig looked at Ethan with eyes that shone rather irregularly and a voice slightly reminiscent of gritted teeth:

“Care to share, Richard?”

The last word came out with a hint of aggravation, while Ethan countered the irate mood with an almost flippant radiating smile, before adding vivaciously:

“He thinks you talk too much.”

Ludwig raised his brow and nodded, right before instinctively slapping his arm, trying to kill a mosquito. Before the doctor could have the chance to retort in a manner unbecoming of a doctor, Olufemi suddenly cut in:

“For a doctor. We dem almost dere. See, near the clearing.”

Both of them looked up ahead to where the road steered off course and into a dirt path that seemed to lead slowly upwards onto a ridge of sorts. Ludwig asked then with barely concealed exhilaration:

“Is that where we stop for the night?”

Olufemi gave a nod instead of answering properly, while Ethan was looking more and more at the sky, rosy and purple hues lighting up the gathering clouds like cotton candy. While the last light could be seen falling around them, Ethan said with some disappointment:

“It’s going to rain like the devil, that’s for sure.”

The driver nodded his silent agreement, while Ludwig said with the slightest hint of irony:

“I thought Brits liked rain.”

To which Ethan commented wryly:

“We like rain alright. It’s all that water we could live without.”

Olufemi started laughing again, and this time Ludwig managed to crack a smile. Ethan laid back on his sack once more while the first droplets of water gathered on the windshield. Ludwig retorted with a grin:

“And the rest of us could be spared your dry sense of humor as well.”

Ethan lit up a cigarette and drew a puff before answering:

“Well said.”

As Ludwig joined him sharing the cigarette, the falling droplets of rain grew into a proper tropical storm, causing even Olufemi to exclaim:

“Dis dey proper fuck.”

Ethan was about to translate when Ludwig tried to make himself heard over the din of the storm:

“I think I get the idea, Richard.”

Visibility had been reduced to the car up ahead, and only thanks to the powerful headlights. The caravan was moving with a walking speed, carefully treading on a dirt path barely wide enough to euphemistically call a road. Olufemi made some colourful remarks about the driving conditions, to which Ethan replied while putting out his cigarette:

“At least we’re not being shot at.”

Ludwig stabbed Ethan with a gaze unusually hard and firm for such a light-mannered man and asked him:

“Would it make good press?”

Ethan shrugged and before having time to answer, a blinding flash lit the area in front of them and in the blink of an eye they felt the overpressure of a shockwave on their eardrums. A wall of dirt and mud seemed to go up in the air, lifting with it the chassis of the Rover in front of the column. Ethan’s shouting was barely heard through buzzing eardrums:

“Landmine! Get out! Now!”

Olufemi let go of the wheel, their car bumping on the Rover in front. The flaming debris of the destroyed Land Rover could be seen, lying on the edge of the road. Pandemonium ensued.

“What was that?” Ludwig asked with a slight tremor in his voice. The answer from Ethan came accompanied with a powerful shove:

“Landmine or RPG! Now move! Out of the car!”

Olufemi was faster to comply, opening his door and rushing out, nervously searching for more flashes and explosions, but none came. Ludwig tried sloppily to make his way out of the doors in the back of the Rover, while Ethan expertly opened the window on his back and drew himself out.

He immediately started shouting to the bewildered people in the caravan, some of which had already stepped outside their

Rovers:

“Get out of the cars! Lay down on the dirt and don’t move!”

Ethan’s eyes were frantically looking for signs of movement in the torrential rain, the light from the headlamps the only source of illumination. There were no muzzle flashes, or launching trails. There was a lot of shouting and confusion, but the characteristic hammering sound of AKs in the distance was absent. This was not an ambush. Ethan’s voice took on an authoritative yet calming tone:

“Calm down. Stay put. Noone’s shooting at us. It was a landmine. Tell the people next to you to calm down and stay put.”

Everyone was drenched from the torrential rain. All around him, Ethan could see faces frozen in sheer terror, some of them visibly shaking. Olufemi had started shouting calls to the other drivers in Yoruba, when Ethan’s instincts kicked in; he quickly walked over him and put a hand to his mouth. Olufemi was surprised and looked at Ethan sideways, giving him a look of frustrated fear. Ethan put one finger to his mouth while shaking his head, and let go of Olufemi’s mouth:

“We don’t need no shouting, not in Yoruba. Understand? Not around these parts.”

Olufemi could only nod. Rather baffled though he was, he motioned with his hands to the other drivers who had his attention to ‘lay low’. With fear and hesitation as plentiful as the rain pouring down on them, the drivers seemed to comply, some of them already on their knees and praying.

Ethan was trying to clear his head and calmly tell these people what to do next, Ludwig came up from behind him, the sound of his approach muffled by the rain and the din from the people in shock. Ethan caught his shadow from the corner of his eye and twisted around sharply, grabbing Ludwig from one arm, while placing his foot to act as a pivot. Before having time to actually see Ludwig, he was already throwing him down to the dirt, still grabbing his arm.

Ludwig splashed in the mud yelling:

“It’s me! It’s me! Scheisse!”

Ethan let some of the adrenaline wear off before picking up Ludwig and offering his apologies:

“Sorry I jumped on you. It’s a conditioned reflex.”

Ludwig could not help but shout irately:

“Conditioned reflex?”

“Just so happens, yes. Never mind that, we need to get these people off the road. Someone fucked up the itinerary. Olufemi!”

The driver turned and nodded, shaken but evidently quick about his wits. Ethan leaned slightly toward, shouting to be heard and pointing at the column of stopped rovers and the frightened crowd:

“Stay on the Rovers’ tracks. Tell the rest of the drivers to get the people inside. See if anyone’s wounded, get the doctors working on them. We’re safe as houses then.”

Olufemi nodded and carefully started walking towards the first Rover, while the people were already starting to shout out questions and demand explanations while at the same time sobs and cries could be heard. Ethan started walking up the front of the column, carefully passing by people and telling everyone to be calm and emphasize they were safe.

Once he reached the debris of the first Rover, he saw the people in the second car had bled out of their ears, and were probably dead and scared still. Ethan took a closer look: the driver was still on his wheel, tensed up and nervous. The explosion had shattered the windshield, and along the water that had pooled inside there was what remained of a shattered, blown away arm. The driver had shattered fragments of glass all over his face, and his eyes were a bloody mess.

Ethan shouted to Ludwig:

“Ludwig! Grab a first aid kit, and come up front! Face injury! Try to stay on the tire tracks!”

Ludwig seemed to nod affirmatively and disappeared in the

back of the Rover. Ethan grabbed the blind man from one arm and told him nothing. He simply squeezed him gently and felt the man's blood pumping like a flooded river.

Once Ludwig arrived he shot a quick glance at the blown up vehicle, and quickly turned to say something to Ethan who shook his head in denial:

"Not a chance, mate. I'm sorry. Enough explosive to throw five thousand pounds six feet in the air. It's a bloody miracle this one's lost just his eyes instead of his head. The others are in the back, scared shitless, a bit deaf probably but otherwise in one piece."

Ludwig nodded appreciatively and focused on the task at hand, trying not to think about what Ethan had said meant. His motions were calm and professional, as if he was working in an examination room. Ethan urged him to hurry up, while he took a few steps forward. He took out a flashlight from one of his pants' pockets and took out a large leaf-shaped knife.

He went on a crouch towards the crater the landmine had left, carefully studying the ground, digging in with the knife at seemingly random intervals. Going past the crater, his eyes avidly scanned the mud. Before long, even under the unabating rain and all the mud he caught a glimpse of a dull olive-green shape barely protruding from the slippery ground. A careful prod at the rim from the knife let him know this was another landmine. A few feet to his right, he could make out the outline of another. A slow sweep with the flashlight uncovered two more, less than ten feet apart. He left them unbothered, slid back to the crater and got up.

He went back to Ludwig, while a certain amount of quiet and calm had started to settle among the crowd. Olufemi could be seen quietly exchanging concerned looks with the other drivers, some of them already inside, trying to light up a smoke.

"It's a proper god-awful minefield," said Ethan to Ludwig.

Ludwig was still dressing the eyes of the driver, after having administered some sedatives for the excruciating pain that

would follow the end of the adrenaline rush. He was dripping wet, smeared blood all over his hands and shirt.

“Your deductive reasoning amazes me,” said the doctor with an aggravated tone. Ethan replied calmly:

“It could have been a single land mine, an old ambush site. No, this was a proper minefield, there’s probably more of them around the bushes and trees. We need to go back. I don’t know who decided on this itinerary, but it wasn’t safe. Killed those people in the Rover, and it might have killed us all. Might still as well. We need to get moving.”

Ludwig suddenly stopped tending to the wounded driver. He closed his eyes and seemed to whisper something in German. Ethan told him sternly:

“What are you blabbering about? They’re dead, Ludwig. Come on now, pull it together.”

The doctor exploded with fury at Ethan:

“I picked the roads! It was me! So fuck you, Mr. Owls!”

Ethan fell instantly silent, knowing there was nothing meaningful to say to the doctor, who in the next moment leaned on the side of the Rover, and threw up.

Olufemi noticed from the back, and came a bit closer to see, while everyone had gotten inside the Rovers by now, still shocked and bewildered but calm enough to try and deal with what had just happened on their own. Ethan explained to Olufemi as he approached:

“We need to go back, around another way. It’s probably best if we can stop someplace near. Anything in mind?”

Olufemi seemed to think about it for a while, and then nodded with a renewed vigor:

“Yes, dey is a mission,” his voice ringing clear through the never-ending rain.

“What kind of a mission?” asked Ethan with a hint of puzzlement in his voice.

“French Catholic. Nuns,” replied Olufemi with a very pecu-

liar and untimely grin.

Ludwig suddenly stood straight, still hanging on to the Rover's door though, and said with a pale face:

"We're going back. This caravan is no more."

Rivulets of rain ran freely down Ethan's taut face when he said with the slightest hint of irony:

"How are going to help then, doctor?"

"I'll have no more blood on my hands. I can never -"

"You're scared out of your mind, I know. Maybe you've shat yourself, or pissed on your pants. Can't tell with the bloody rain. It's only natural. You'd be really fucked up inside if you didn't feel fear."

"It doesn't matter what I feel, damn you! These people trusted me with their -"

"Signed the papers, didn't they? Listen, this is fuckall, alright? You can't think straight. Olufemi, take point in our Rover. I'll drive this one. Doctor, seriously, grab a couple of sedatives yourself and just hang on. Alright?"

Ludwig stared blankly at Ethan, while Olufemi hurried to spread the word to the other drivers. Ethan moved the driver in the co-driver's seat, and told a practically deaf nurse and a volunteer helper with a broken arm that they were leaving now. At length, before he urged Ludwig to get in the Rover, the doctor asked him:

"Do you know what you're doing?"

Ethan had heard that same question probably a thousand times from a hundred different people. And even though he felt naturally inclined to grin and answer 'bloody hell no', he calmly said to the doctor:

"It will be alright now. Just get in the car with Olufemi, and try not to think about anything."

The doctor feebly complied, making his way to the Rover with a slouch, while Ethan was thinking he was turning into an accomplished liar.

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