

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 Per-
gantis 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 repetitive 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 realisation 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 brushes 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 indi-

cated 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."

Loui 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 Loui.

“William Wallace 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 it up, 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 disarm-

ingly 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 botswain comes looking for them. Louis kept a wary eye on a couple of strange-looking figures, 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 meself 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 griev-

ing, 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. Tomorrow 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 landing zones, 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 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 without joy 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 Litemill 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 - Direc-

tor 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 maneuver 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 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 improptu stage the middle of the street, and made a circle around him. He was all dressed up, smiling brightly. Everyone showered him with flow-

ers 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 discomfited 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. His reply came with 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 gone to waste; it almost seemed like the passengers inside were intruding on the cargo space and not the other way around. Ethan had come up with a very comfortable-looking seating arrangement on top of a sack of rice, along with a wooden crate against his back and a couple of flour bags to put his feet up on. He and the doctor were riding along to-

gether 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. It only made his suffering a little less unbearable and a little more obvious. Ethan had been sleeping on and off, the car's continuous jerks and road bumps having developed into a sort of lullaby. Their driver was invariably focused on the task at hand, barely uttering a word. 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, as had been the case previously as well.

"Yes."

Ludwig who would otherwise consider an endless talker a nuisance at best, appeared to be edging on aggravation. Olufemi's brusqueness felt like he was doing the doctor a favor by even considering an answer.

The doctor made another effort to engage in conversation or at least learn some hopefully in-

teresting 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 barely a spit. Ethan had a contemplating look drawn upon his face, his gaze darting from bush to grove. He held his camera in hand, the inadvertent swarm of flies seemingly rather fond of him. Ludwig tried to get his attention, engage in some kind of discussion to relieve himself of the dullness:

“That camera.. It’s a Leica, right?”

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

sis. As the evening wore by, flies began to give their place to mosquitoes. The grassy hills rushed by, lush with vegetation, filled with tall, thin trees and distant mangroves. The swampy savannah drew distant with every passing minute.

Ethan turned and addressed Olufemi in Yoruba with a ghastly accent, but decent enough to be understood. The driver suddenly burst into laughter and started talking vividly with Ethan. A torrential flow of Yoruba was 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 once more before 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 sounded unusually venomous for the good doctor. Ethan countered the doctor’s irate mood with a radiating smile. He explained:

“He thinks you talk too much.”

Ludwig raised his brow and nodded, right be-

fore instinctively slapping his arm, failing to kill a mosquito. Before Ludwig could have had the chance to retort in a manner unbecoming of a doctor, Olufemi suddenly cut in:

“For a doctor. We dem almost there. See now, 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 small ridge. 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, its rosy and purple hues lighting up the gathering clouds, dressing them in the imagery of 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 inhaled deeply before answering:

“Well said.”

As Ludwig joined him, the small droplets rapidly grew into a proper tropical storm, causing even Olufemi to exclaim:

“Dis dey proper fuck.”

Ethan was about to translate when Ludwig made 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-turned-into-mud path barely wide enough to call a road. Olufemi made some colourful remarks about the driving conditions, to which Ethan remarked they should be happy they weren't being shot at.

Ludwig stabbed Ethan with a gaze unusually hard and firm for such a seemingly light-

mannered man and asked him:

“Would it make good press?”

Ethan shrugged and before he had time to answer, a blinding flash lit the area in front of them and in the blink of an eye they felt the surging 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! Stop, stop! Get out, now!”

Olufemi panicked and 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 upturned and torn. Pandemonium ensued.

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

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

Olufemi was faster to comply, opening his door and rushing out, frantically searching for more flashes or explosions, but none came. Ludwig sloppily made his way out of the doors in the back of the Rover over the assorted bags and crates, while Ethan opened the window behind

him and drew himself out in a fluid motion.

He shouted to the bewildered people in the caravan, some of which had already stepped outside their Rovers, dazed and confused:

“Get out! Lay low 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, launch trails or smoke. Lots of shouting and confusion, but the characteristic hammering sound of AKs was absent. This was not an ambush. Ethan’s voice took on an authoritative yet calming tone:

“Calm down. Stay put. No-one’s shooting at us. It was a landmine. Tell the people next to you to calm down and stay put.”

Everyone was drenched to the bone. All around him, Ethan could see faces frozen in sheer terror, some of them shaking visibly. 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:

“No shouting, not in Yoruba. Understand,

mate? Not around these parts.”

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

Ethan felt the heavy rain on his head, tried to wash away everything else and focus on the moment. He needed to calmly tell these people what to do next, when Ludwig came up from behind him, the sound of his approach muffled by the rain and the din from the people in shock. Ethan’s eye simply caught a shadow approaching. He twisted around sharply, grabbed Ludwig from one arm and place 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, markedly scared and half-witted:

“It’s me! It’s me! Scheisse!”

Ethan breathed deeply, letting 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. He looked shaken but he was evidently quick about his wits. Ethan leaned slightly towards him, shouting to be heard and pointing at the column of stopped rovers and the frightened crowd:

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

Olufemi nodded and carefully started walking towards the first Rover, while the people were shouting out questions to noone in particular. Ethan started walking up the front of the column, carefully passing by people and telling everyone to be calm and emphasize that they were probably safe.

Once he reached the debris of the first Rover, he saw the people in the second car frozen still. They had bled out of their ears, probably deaf and scared to death. Ethan took a closer look: the driver was still clutching his wheel, all tensed up and in shock. 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 and stay on the tire tracks!”

Ludwig nodded 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 explosives 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 the people in that first Rover. His motions were calm and professional, as if he was working in an examination room. Ethan urged him to hurry up, and

took a few steps forward towards the small crater which had effortlessly turned into a pool. He took out a flashlight from one of his pants' pockets and a large leaf-shaped knife from an ankle belt.

He crouched and slowly crept towards the pool, carefully studying the ground, digging in with the knife at seemingly random intervals. Going past the pool, his eyes avidly scanned the mud. Before long, even under the unabating rain and all the mess of debris he caught a glimpse of a dull olive-green shape barely protruding from the muddy ground. A careful prod at the rim with 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, careful sweep with the flashlight uncovered two more, less than ten feet apart. He slid back to the crater and got up, jogging back to Ludwig and the injured man.

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 back inside their Rovers, trying to find a dry 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 with blood all over his hands and shirt.

“Your deductive reasoning amazes me,” said the doctor, not bothering to hide the tone of irony. 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 out of here.”

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, letting his utensils drop to the mud:

“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. The next moment, the doctor was leaning on the side of the

Rover, emptying his stomach involuntarily.

Olufemi noticed the slight commotion, and came a bit closer to see. Ethan explained to Olufemi as he approached:

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

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

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

“What kind of a mission?”

“French Catholic. Nuns,” replied Olufemi with a very peculiar and untimely grin.

Ludwig suddenly stood straight, hanging onto 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 you 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. Fear is natural.”

“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 red cross volunteer 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 felt odd suddenly. He had heard that same question probably a thousand times from a hundred different people, but somehow this time it sounded as different as it was familiar. 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.”

The doctor made his way to the Rover with a slouch, exhaustion drawn all over his face. Ethan got into the now vacant driver’s seat and put the gear into reverse. He felt like he was turning into an accomplished liar, something he had thought

he'd despise. Strangely enough, all he could think of was his bad leg.

* * *

Ludwig nodded his silent thanks to the sister who in turn smiled serenely and left the room with measured prudishness. A couple of oil lamps, one on a plain wooden shelf and another on an equally unadorned table gave off a warm light, accented at times by the flash of lightning pouring in through the small stained glass window. The glass added a reddish hue that seemed to have attracted Ethan's gaze like a moth to a fire, his face set in stone, perched inside the cups of his hands.

Ludwig took a cigarette from his pack, his hands still shaking. He was about to offer it to Ethan when he suddenly rose up from the small cot and blinked furiously as if awaking from a long, deep slumber of which he had no recollection. He asked Ludwig then:

"How is everyone?"

The doctor lit the cigarette and stared outside the window, even though there was nothing to see but dark, pouring rain and a circus of fleeting, ran-

dom shadows. His voice sounded unassumingly flat:

“The driver is running a high fever. He’s on antibiotics, and I thought I removed as much of the shrapnel as I could under the circumstances. Nothing can be done about his hearing. Tartooovi and Donaldson have probably gone deaf for life. I had to sedate them. They’re sleeping now. The rest, some small cuts, bruises and the occasional dislocation or sprain.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The doctor’s eyes suddenly seemed to pop while his face tensed with seeping anger at those words.

“Is that some sick joke, Mr. Owls? People died tonight, for God’s sake!”

“It could have been worse. There could have been more dead on that trail tonight.”

A flash of lightning cast a freakish shadow in the small guestroom. A few moments passed before the sound of thunder rolled by, when Ludwig managed to speak again:

“What kind of person says such a thing? These people..”

“They’re dead, and you have to live with that. Deal with it, Ludwig. There’s nothing that can be done now about it.”

Ludwig stood with a half-opened mouth, seemingly unable to find the right words.

“How can you be so.. Detached? I mean, they were.. Jesus, Richard.”

Ethan gave the doctor a long hard stare. His eyes seemed to waver a little, while his visage remained stern and grave-looking. His voice was pitched lower than usual:

“It happens after a while, doctor. It keeps me sane, it keeps me alive. It’s not something to be proud of, but that’s just as human as curling up in a corner and crying, blaming yourself or others.”

Another thunder reverberated inside the small chamber, the small flame in the oil lamp on the shelf trembling in tune. Ludwig put out his cigarette and took off his glasses. He reached into his pockets and produced a small piece of clean linen with which he started cleaning his glasses. Ethan started to say something when the doctor spoke to him without meeting his gaze:

“It seems you have everything worked out. You know your way around people dying, dealing with traumatic disorders and guilt. So tell me, please, is it normal if I feel like punching you in the face?”

Ethan paused for a moment, and shrugged almost apologetically. He replied:

“If you think it’ll make you feel better, then by all means. I’m not your problem though. You’re still emotional from what happened, and that’s just —”

Ludwig’s fist connected with Ethans cheekbone and stopped him mid-sentence. Before he slammed the frail door behind him as he left the room, Ludwig shouted in a fit of rage:

“Emotional?! What would you know about emotions?”

Ethan was caught off-guard, but recovered quickly enough. He rushed outside the small guestroom and onto an ill-lit corridor. Even as he started off to follow the doctor, a figure suddenly appeared to be blocking his way. He stopped and looked genuinely surprised when he saw a tall, slender woman sporting a look that could have bored a hole in his face. Subdued light poured off a small opening to her right. She was still holding the tattered curtain that served as a door when she sternly told Ethan:

“For God’s sake, be quiet!”

“I’m sorry about the noise and all, sister but it really is none of your business so —”

The slap across Ethan’s face came out almost out of nowhere. It jolted him back into the deep memory of a well-mannered childhood for only

a tiny moment, and the accented yet quite clear voice served to reattach his awareness into the current state of affairs and a very irate woman:

“It is my business, and I’m not anyone’s sister! These people need peace and quiet!” she said and pulled back the curtain to reveal a cluster of makeshift beds, cots and mattresses filled with people.

“Who the hell are you lady?”

“My name’s Nicole Heurgot, I’m a nurse and whoever you are you have a big mouth and an even bigger as-”

“Mademoiselle, ca suffit!”

The sister superior appeared through the curtain and she looked rather disappointed at such an exchange. She said to Ethan:

“Monsieur Owls, please. If you must, take this outside. There are sick and wounded in here, and not just your caravan. Et vous, mademoiselle Heurgot, calme toi. S’il vous-plait.”

And with that, she returned inside to the makeshift bed chamber posing as a nursing station.

Nicole’s stare was still hard when she said to Ethan, almost stunned in place:

“Not an english gentleman at all, are you?”

Ethan tried to sound apologetic when he said:

“Listen, I’m sorry but some people died today and we got into a heated debate. I wouldn’t expect you to be that understanding.” He actually sounded more like some kind of elitist snob who thought people were incapable of doing anything right.

Nicole retorted with an accusing, yet hushed tone: “People tend to do that thing around here. You assume too much. Perhaps you’re in the wrong place.”

Her feisty attitude only served to make Ethan’s head cock sideways before he replied with a slight hint of aggravation: “I’d be inclined to say the same about you.”

“And you’d be wrong,” Nicole said before adding: “Your sort usually are. Why don’t you take some pictures in there? Isn’t that what you came here for after all?”

It was a verbal attack; even though her voice was kept low at all times she sounded positively miffed. Ethan found that aggressiveness almost attractive. He was smiling thinly when he told her:

“You really don’t like me at all, do you?”

With a gaze slightly reminiscent of the mythic gorgon and an unmistakably french accent, she simply answered with another unveiled insult: “Vultures you mean? Nobody does.”

Ethan pondered about that word for a mo-

ment, and thought it funny that a journalist could draw more fire than a soldier. He then told Nicole, "I think you're biased. I said I'm sorry, and I really mean it. I was trying to apologise to Ludwig when I ran into you."

Pointing to the small nursing station behind her she said with demanding undertones in her voice: "Well you should apologise to these people as well."

Ethan tried to sound like a gentleman, using a grin that was in truth better suited to guile the unscrupulous sort of women that seemed already hooked by the sight of a Royal Marine uniform: "Can I start by apologising to you?"

"If this is your idea of english charm, you're more misguided than you look," replied Nicole with a shake of her head and an almost sympathising grimace on her face.

The more distant she became, the more Ethan's interest was piqued by what he felt like was a genuine example of the kind of women he rarely met: the hard ones. "You're a very unforgiving person for a nurse, do you know that?" he said, this time without a grin or a smile.

Nicole kept at him in the same vein: "And you're hardly a person yourself."

"Listen, I think we've started on the wrong

foot here. Please, give me a chance to make amends,” said Ethan, sounding genuinely sincere. It had little effect:

“I think I’ve wasted enough time with you already, Mr. Owls. Go back to your room and be thankful there are people who care, like the mother superior. People tolerant enough even to the likes of your kind.”

“Ah, vultures you mean? You make it sound like this whole bloody mess is my fault.”

She shrugged and said, looking suddenly morose instead of angry: “I just don’t see how taking pictures of death, destruction and starving children can do any good.”

Ethan replied in a very serious tone, in an almost dangerous display of frankness, “Would it do any good if I was carrying a rifle instead?”

She paused for a moment, looking at Ethan with a set of piercing blue eyes that seemed to be trying to peer beyond those last few words of his: “We wouldn’t even be talking if that was the case. Now please, haranguing me like that won’t get you anywhere. I have much more pressing matters to attend to,” said and made to leave while Ethan’s gaze floated around until it met her left arm, where a piece of gauze stuck out from under her sleeve.

“Like that arm of yours? You’re injured yourself, aren’t you?”

“You think you have a keen eye for misery? If only you were so thoughtful of everyone else as well,” she said with evident disapproval.

Ethan just threw his hands in the air and said: “For God’s sake, you haven’t even given me a chance, right from the start.”

Nicole was looking at him when she suddenly smiled ironically and said: “You think it’s unfair?”

Ethan waved a hand above his head and replied: “This whole business is unfair to everyone here. Shouldn’t you allow for some leeway, even when dealing with vultures?”

She paused for a moment, as if measuring everything about Ethan with a casual glance from head to toe:

“If you want some leeway, and if you’re willing to really apologize and make amends, then come lend a hand. You can carry things around without taking any pictures, can’t you?” she said, following her question up with a smile that might not have been as ironic as the first one.

“The lighting’s all bad anyway,” replied Ethan with a grin that came across as a bad touch.

“I find your sense of humor out of place,” said Nicole flatly.

"I try, but I always end up in the wrong place for some reason," said Ethan and nodded to himself. Nicole replied with a frank voice:

"You're a complex man, Mr. Owls."

Ethan smiled thinly before he crossed his arms and said: "I thought I was a vulture."

"You might still prove to be just that."

"I can't really change your mind, can I?" he said and shook his head.

As she pulled the curtain to the nursing station aside, she showed the way inside and said with what seemed to her genuine smile: "You can try."

* * *

Purple and red hues of dawn sheepishly tried to blossom far away, the earth still wet and napping, the chill humid breeze unusually refreshing. Nicole's gaze wandered around the monastery's rock and mud walls for a moment, before it focused on the bell towers. One was set facing the east, the other towards the Vatican; from the weary look on her face, both directions looked equally distant in any measureable way, whether it be space or time.

Ethan approached her casually without any hint of their former quarrelsome chat. He offered her a cigarette which she silently accepted. He lit

it up, and they both sat on a stone wall near the wall, letting the morning wind carry away all the weight of the night before.

Helping Nicole with her rounds had mellowed her somewhat to the point where she no longer considered him a vulture. Not only had she admitted being too quick to judge, but she had also been openly impressed by Ethan's quick-and-dirty first-aid knowledge, turning any simple item into a tourniquet or a splinter. It struck her as odd but Ethan had managed to explain that any journalist that wanted to get alive out of a warzone had to be a medic as well. She had smiled at that and said with just a hint of mischief: "My, my; and you can type as well".

But nothing on her face that morning came close to that austere, quirky nurse with the outspoken dislike of journalists and other vermin that seemed to feed on human misery: As she sat there smoking, she struck Ethan as a very familiar face, someone close but yet so distant in memory. Like a long lost friend or perhaps, a lover. He kept trying to remember, and was soon enthralled by the warmth of her face, lost in his little own box of memories.

As she took another puff from her cigarette, she casually looked around and caught Ethan with

his gaze fixated on her, his eyes out of focus. She asked him then, with just the right amount of disapproval in her soft voice:

“Anything you particularly like, Mr. Owls?” to which no answer came. She asked again, this time less pretentiously:

“Richard? Lost somewhere?” she said, and broke the spell.

“Hmm? Sorry.” he finally managed to answer before he himself asked in earnest: “I must’ve been woolgathering, what were you saying?”

Nicole shrugged and said, “Nothing. You just stood there and kept looking at me,” before she added all high-browed yet smiling slightly, “Looking for something in particular?”

Ethan smiled with a corner of his lip in a bitter fashion before exhaling, the smoke swiftly vanishing away in little curls and twists. He sounded somewhat reticent, weighed-down when he said:

“That’s a funny thing to ask; you could say I am, but it’s not you. Though you do remind me of someone. I just can’t put a name to it; it’s a slippery thing.”

The bells started to chime then; it was time for the morning prayer. A few sisters could be seen around the courtyard, hurriedly but quietly moving about for the mass. It struck Ethan as odd

then how similar it all looked to a roll call: quiet, practiced, efficient. "Unto God's own image," he said then half to himself, while he pointed to the shuffling silhouettes of the nuns.

Nicole turned around to look and through a small window the first cautious rays of sunlight caused her to squint even though she sat in the shadow of the walls. She shook her head and said, "Such a waste," before she put out her cigarette and folded her arms.

Ethan frowned and asked her: "You mean, the nuns?"

She half-turned around to look at him, while warm sunlight made her hair glow as if from within and said, "I mean God."

Ethan let out a small laugh before he said: "That's a funny thing to say for someone working in a monastery. It's almost a joke, actually."

Her eyes suddenly took on that earlier piercing glint that conveyed her annoyance instantly. She retorted:

"He' is the joke. It's just that people don't seem to get it, more often than not. In a sense, it's better that way. Imagine if these nuns were used as forced labor, sold and exchanged like cattle. At least the lie they live in doesn't make things any worse."

"I've always wondered. Don't you people believe in anything?"

She frowned, cocked her head sideways and asked him: "What do you mean, 'you people'?"

"Atheists," he said and put out his own cigarette, stamping it on the red soil.

She laughed heartily despite herself and said with a grin:

"For a moment there, I thought you would've said 'communists'."

"I try not to mix politics and religion."

"Aren't they the same?"

"Not quite. I mean, no one actually believes politicians, right? At least I hope not."

"I wish it was a laughing matter, but it's really not."

"So you place all your trust in man then? Look around you. We're not exactly doing a bang up job, are we?"

"I have faith in man. The sisters here have faith in God. And I do not consider myself an atheist; I just have a grudge against people who think God has anything to do with this life," she said and brushed a lock of her hair away from her cheek.

Ethan looked at her in a pensive mood. "What an interesting woman", he thought to himself. He

lowered his gaze to his feet and said:

“I’m not a church-going fellow myself, not by a long-shot. But sometimes, some things just make you wish for something to grab and hold on.”

“Like a woman?” she said, her grin almost meant to tease. He laughed and waved no with his hands.

“Heaven forbid, no. In any case, I meant something. Not someone. Like an idea, a symbol, a flag. Maybe a flag. You know, something to-”

“Idolize,” she filled in on cue and made him nod.

“Yeah, you might call it like that.”

“Look around you, it’s everywhere. What the sisters hold on to.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about nuns.”

“What happened to a journalist’s keen senses?” she said, and pointed with an index finger to the church bell tower. On top of it, stood a plain iron cross. Ethan smiled thinly and shook his head.

“Ah. Well, I guess that was blatantly obvious. Perhaps I should think about a career change.”

“Maybe. Sometimes I think like that myself.”

“Really? It gets to you, doesn’t it?”

“I try to think of the larger picture. That I’m helping save lives. But it doesn’t always work. That’s why sometimes I need this,” she said and showed Ethan a chain around her neck, a simple unadorned St. Andrews cross on it. It looked familiar. He felt the urge to take a closer look.

“A cross? May I?”

She nodded and took off the cross that she had been wearing: it was a simple, unadorned silver St. Andrews cross. Ethan took it in his hand and it immediately felt more than familiar - he turned it around and he saw the letters ‘A.N.W.’ carved on the backside. Andy Nathaniel Whittmore. This was Andy’s cross.

Thoughts and wishes mingled in one as they raced to take control of his mouth. He tried but he couldn’t remember the last time he had actually been at a loss. His face was motionless, unable to look anything other than utterly confounded.

Nicole saw that and couldn’t help asking:

“What is it? What’s bothering you?”

“That cross. That’s Andy’s cross. My brother’s.”

“Your brother? That’s ridiculous,” she said and looked scornfully away, unabashedly dismissive in her expression.

He didn’t give it a second thought. All the

constructed facade he had went to some considerable effort to create suddenly felt completely worthless and immaterial.

“It’s not,” he said and took off his own twin cross and showed it to her. It wasn’t as polished and there was a silver-grey patina all over it, but the initials ‘E.R.W.’ stood out clearly.

“That’s for Ethan Roiel Whittmore. And that cross of yours has Andy Nathaniel Whittmore carved on its back. That’s my brother’s cross.”

“But.. You said your name is Richard Owls. What’s this all about?”

“Where did you get that cross?”

“That’s my husband’s cross.”

The connotation made Ethan blink twice. He almost stuttered when he asked:

“Andy? Andy got married? You’re his wife? Where is he, what happened?”

Ethan’s face became a mask of anxiety, contorted and flushed. His breathing became shallower, as if he was about to jump into an ice cold ocean of fear and doubt. Nicole’s stare was fixed on the cross as she traced its edges. She spoke then with a low, uneven voice, as if she was telling story better left unsaid:

“Our camp was attacked. Tribal lords. Little more than feral men, they came one day and

wanted to loot everything. Including the women. Some of us tried to put up a fight. Perhaps it was a mistake. During the shooting, a few had the chance to run away. Andy with some of the guides stayed behind, buy us time. He was bleeding when.. He.. He gave me this cross. He was a believer, you see. Funny, no?”

Tears welled in her eyes but she did not cry, even though it seemed like she should. Ethan saw how easily her facade of a strict, haughty nurse had crumbled away when she mentioned her husband. Thoughts about that camp ran around Ethan’s head. A strange forlorn feeling of an idea formed up in his head. He told her then in his most steady, thoughtful voice:

“I’m looking for Andy. All this, it’s just a cover. I need you to tell me everything that happened that day.”

Her face suddenly became a bit pale. She looked disturbed, stricken with sudden anxiety.

“But Andy.. He has barely mentioned you. What is this? Some kind of sick joke?”

“I’m being dead serious. I’m risking my hide for this. I just want to find my brother, don’t you? You can’t give up on him. We just can’t.”

“But Andy’s.. He was bleeding from his leg, looking all pale when we.. No, he’s just as good

as dead. Those men wouldn't just.. Animals, not men. You don't know what it was like!"

"Have you given up on him already? He's a doctor for christ's sake, they'd need him alive, too useful to be killed outright. There's a really good chance he's alive, Nicole."

"I can't believe that right now. I just can't. I saw his eyes, Richard. I saw nothing but emptiness.."

"Please, call me Ethan. Whatever you saw, it's just the grief and the pain talking right now. If he wasn't dead when you left, he was alive and that's what I'm counting on."

"I want to believe you, I really do. But, what can we do? I mean.. Those people.. Even if.."

"You said you had faith. Have faith in me, please. Did he ever talk to you about Father Mulcahey?"

She rubbed her eyes with both hands. There was a deep frown on her face when she said:

"The name sounds familiar. Why?"

"Those crosses. We were ten. Well, I was twelve years old, Andy was ten. I'd snuck in Father Mulcahey's office. I'd made a bet, I could get my mates a bottle of sacramental wine. When Father Mulcahey got wind off the missing bottle, he roused us out of bed. He asked nicely which one

of lads did it. I was about to take the punishment and the hail marys that went along with it, when Andy steps out front, says he was the culprit. Everyone else goes back to sleep, and then the father calls us both into the office. I was thinking we were going to get a beating either way. Instead, he opens up this little box and offers us a set of crosses. Makes us wear them and take a vow. Next month during the holidays, we had our initials carved. Been on me every day since then.”

“What was the vow?”

“Never leave your brother behind. That’s what I’m doing. I’m not leaving Andy behind.”

* * *

The voice on the small speaker sounded worried and uneven.

“What’s wrong? Why couldn’t you wait for the courier?”

“There’s a problem.”

The matter-of-fact voice on the microphone was a woman’s voice. It had a bit of an accent.

“What kind? It doesn’t sound like you to talk around things.”

“I’m not sure if it’s exactly a problem. I might have stumbled on your brother.”

“My what?” said the man, his voice full of disbelief and shocked surprise.

“I met a man today who posed as a journalist by the name of Richard Owls. Long story short, he says he’s your brother, Ethan. We were talking, and showed him your cross, playing the widow part. Thought your death might look good on a paper. He showed me a cross with his initials on it, E.R.W. He also told me about Father Mulcahey’s sacramental wine. Is it really him? Strong, red-haired fellow. Has these piercing blue eyes. Medium height.”

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Nicole spoke once more into the microphone with some reservation:

“Andy?”

“That’s Ethan alright. Listen, you need to keep him busy while I think of something to throw him off course. He might mean well, but he can be a very single-minded idiot when he wants to. And Nicole?”

“Tell me.”

“Strict radio silence from now on. He mustn’t get a whiff.”

“You know me.”

“But you don’t know my brother.”

Blood-red dawn

The hills around the monastery blossomed golden under the first rays of the sun. The cold, wet night edged away, hiding under the jungle's tree-tops. The bell of the monastery started to ring, calling for the morning prayer. A few of the sisters started to gather in the small temple, rosemary in hand. Their lips moved at a shallow, serene pace, mouthing hymns and eulogies to their God, Lord and Savior.

Ethan had been awake before the break of dawn. He was watching the small procession from a small, paneless window. The night had been small but courteous; nothing but the distant sounds of wildlife had bothered him. Again, his

sleep was dreamless.

There was a knock on the door; the stars above shone their last light for the night. Ludwig stepped hesitantly inside, holding two cups of tea; it his way of apologizing. Ethan offered him a cigarette in kind. They sat together in the small room. Ethan sat upright in his bed cot, Ludwig pulled the single chair. They left their cups of tea to slowly cool on the window sill. When the break of dawn came they were still silent, trying not to think. Ludwig cleared his throat, breaking the uneasy silence:

“We might head back.”

Ethan simply nodded and sipped quietly from his cup. His nostrils flared from the aroma, but he said nothing. Ludwig went on:

“We’ll talk it over once everyone’s awake. I think we should press on, otherwise these people would have gone through all this for nothing. The rest though are probably scared out of their minds.”

“Can you blame them?” said Ethan and stood up, stretching. Ludwig continued, tapping his foot nervously, his tone somewhat apologetic: “In any case, some should stay behind and help the monastery, at the least. It might be just as good as setting up camp elsewhere.”

Ethan's response was terse: "Makes sense."

"Not a lot of it makes sense to me, Richard. I want to help, but this mess.."

"Having second thoughts?" Ethan said, staring blankly at the rose red morning sky, hands on his waist.

"Wouldn't you? I mean, after everything is said and done, is it worth it? I want to help, these people want to help but.. How can anyone weight that? One's own life against another?"

Ludwig gulped down a mouthful of tea greedily. He didn't seem to bother that it was still too hot for comfort.

"Did you get enough sleep?"

Ludwig shook his head wearily. Ethan perched himself on the window sill and told Ludwig in a very business-like fashion.

"If you want to move on, you need to get past what's happened. If you can't, you should head back while we're still not on the deep end here. Otherwise, chances are more people will get hurt for nothing."

The doctor nodded in agreement and lit his cigarette. He took a few puffs, drew the smoke in deep. He seemed to relax a bit, the care lines on his face evening out.

"What.. What about you?" Ludwig asked

with just a hint of hesitation, as if the answer might not be forthcoming, as it was dangerous to know.

“What do you want to know?” replied Ethan while tapping a cigarette out of his pack.

“I just think it might be safer if you came along. That’s all I need to know.”

“I’m going in as far deep as you are willing to go. But at some point..” Ethan’s voice trailed off as he drew on his smoke heavily. Ludwig closed his eyes and nodded before he replied:

“I think I understand.”

Silence ensued between them. The sound of chanting rose suddenly out of the temple’s open doors just as the first rays of the sun melted away the morning haze around the small patches of greenery. The heat was building up rapidly; soon they would be sweating again. Ethan suddenly turned and looked Ludwig straight in the eye. There was a frown on the doctor’s face, a mixed expression of fear and hope. Ash from his cigarette fell on the dirt floor.

“My name’s Ethan. I don’t think knowing that puts you in any more danger than you already are. I mean, you’ve trod on a minefield already,” Ethan said and smiled sheepishly.

Ludwig smiled thinly but genuinely and said

to him: "No, I don't think it does. I knew when I saw you that you're a good man."

"You don't want to know the half of it, doctor," Ethan replied and offered his hand. Ludwig smiled, the lines on his face wrinkling in a fatherly fashion. As they shook hands, they heard a dull but disturbing, faint echoing sound that Ethan recognised all too well: a gunshot.

"That can't be good," said Ethan dryly.

"Gunfire?"

Ethan just nodded and rushed to the doorway to peek outside. He could see through the wide open monastery gate. In the distance, he could make out a couple of open-top Rovers slowly coming up the hill. A barrage of rattling sounds echoed around the hills; assault rifles on full auto. They were soon lost behind the first turn on the hillside. The gunfire went on, echoing faintly.

"Some kind of firefight," Ethan said to Ludwig as he reached for his backpack.

"Government or rebels?" asked Ludwig with startled apprehension, as he took a look for himself.

"Probably neither. Rebels wouldn't be so frivolous with their ammo. Government troops would have a column of vehicles, squads of men fanned out on the roadside, carriers. That sort of

thing.”

“Then who are they? Who’s shooting at whom?” asked Ludwig, his voice anxious, unsteady.

“That’s not really important. It’s people we need to run away from, right now,” Ethan said as he pulled out a Colt forty-five from his backpack and drove home a clip.

“You have a gun?” asked Ludwig, as if he had never imagined he’d see one up close. Ethan loaded a bullet in the chamber and clicked the safety on.

“It’s American but it’ll do nicely. Gather your people and just go. Pack nothing, just follow the ravine eastwards till nightfall. If all goes well, I’ll try and meet up with you by morning. If not, wait it out another day before coming back,” said Ethan with a grave expression. The echoes of gunfire grew apart in time.

“What? That’s preposterous, we can’t leave everything behind! What are you saying?” said Ludwig, arms raised in dubious protest. Another rattling sound echoed, this time stronger; closer than before. The sound of motors revved up high could be heard, faintly but clearly.

“I’m saying these folks are trigger-happy bastards. Can’t guarantee they’ll just take your stuff

and leave.”

Ethan felt like he had to shout to make the doctor listen: “You’re wasting time, go! Now!”

Ludwig hesitated for just a single moment, but then ran to the door. He barely paused in his stride to ask:

“What about the wounded, and the sisters? What about you?”

Ethan wiped the sweat of his forehead, gun in hand: “I’ll sell them bastards a front-page story they can’t refuse. I’ll do my best, promise. If it comes to it..” he said and nodded at the gun. “Now go!” he shouted. Ludwig nodded and ran off. He could be heard rousing people, urging them to put on their boots and just follow him. Dumbfounded, groggy voices mixed with the shuffling of feet, thuds and protests. From the sound of it though, they were on the move.

The gunshots could be heard, growing weaker and further apart. The fight was dying out. Ethan packed a couple of clips in an ankle pocket. He grabbed his Leica, and tucked the gun away in his trousers, behind his back. He went looking for Nicole; he knew that his real priority would be to keep the two of them alive, if it all came down to that.

The chanting from the church had stopped.

A few of the sisters were crowded together outside the church doors. They stared through the wide open gate at the hazy hillside, as if waiting for some sign. Some were praying softly.

The sound of roaring motors had by now become clearly closer. Mingled with the sounds of churned dirt and gravel from the rovers' tires, it was an uneasy, threatening sound by its own. The absence of gunshots meant they were moving up towards the monastery again, unhindered.

Nicole rushed outside the small hall where the wounded and the sick lay. She was wearing a plain work apron, her hair tied in a bun. Ethan saw her then and rushed towards her, his camera swinging wildly from the strap around his neck. She barely seemed to take notice of him; she was staring at the shabby road and the approaching rovers with a cold, crisp fixation. Anger seethed clearly through her. Ethan told her with urgency in his voice:

"You need to keep calm. I think I can handle this. Follow my lead when you can, and don't just hand over everything. If they sense we're scared shitless, they'll stop at nothing. I'll try and sell them a news story, front page on the Times. You just stay firm. They might want to check up on the infirmary. Let them."

"Keep calm? That's your advice? Stay firm?"

What makes you think you can talk things over with them? We can't. We can't just talk."

Ethan was taken aback. It was an unwelcome surprise; he hadn't expected her to be so rigid. Feisty was one thing, but not playing ball when guns were involved was childish, even stupid and possibly lethal.

"Listen, the head doctor is already trying to make a run for it in the ravine. They've left everything behind. Maybe all that stuff from the caravan will be more than enough to keep them satisfied. There's morphine in there and lots of canned -"

"You think they're looking for a fix? And some corn beef? You just take care now, Ethan."

She gave Ethan a cold dismissive look and shook her head slightly, disapprovingly. Ethan frowned and was about to say something when a rover zipped past the gates haphazardly. A dozen men armed with AK-47s rode on the back, most of them wearing combat fatigues. Few piece of clothing matched their size, and most were certainly at least a size or two larger.

Only a couple of them wore shoddy boots; the rest rode barefoot. They had grim, lean faces. They were mostly skin and bones like on the edge of starvation, but their red-shot eyes shone with

a cruel, alarming intensity. In the back of the faded green and grey rover lay two dead bodies, the white of their feet marred by the red of their blood.

The sisters stood motionless, following the example of the sister superior, who was looking at the band of marauding bandits with contempt that bordered on hate.

Another rover passed through the gate. It braked badly and skid for a few feet on the courtyard dirt. Another ten men, slightly yet markedly better fed, better equipped. Some wore sunglasses, some berets and caps. Ethan noticed a big brute of a man sitting in the co-driver's seat. Once everyone else had jumped off the rover, he stepped out. He was wearing spotless combat fatigues as if they had just been pressed. He wore the insignia of a Major. It was a good thing he didn't seem familiar at all.

"That's their leader; if we get to him, the rest will follow," he said to Nicole who was eyeing the bandits with seeping, fervent anger. She did not answer; she gave Ethan a sharp accusing look and simply turned away. The next moment she lost herself inside the impromptu hospital room.

Ethan called after her, but she ignored him. It was at that point when he attracted the attention

of one of the armed men, who pointed his rifle at him and shouted something incomprehensible; it sounded like Igbo but not a dialect Ethan could understand clearly.

Ethan put his hands up and grinned like an idiot, trying to look the part of a mildly insignificant, completely harmless fool of a journalist. The armed bandit was still aiming the rifle at him, shouting incoherently, looking back and forth nervously. Ethan thought it could be he was asking 'should I shoot him?'; it could be he was asking 'can I shoot him?'. It would've made little difference had that been the case though.

The burly man was overlooking the sisters with one hand cradling a short-barreled version of an AK-47; the paratrooper version. In his hands, it looked little more than a large handgun. He motioned with his free hand and half a dozen men fanned out by two's, going inside the rooms and halls on the west side of the monastery.

The rising heat added to the tension; Ethan was sweating. He was hoping Ludwig had gotten everybody out in time; more people would mean more problems to solve. He was also hoping Nicole wasn't thinking of doing anything stupid. Stupid tended to pile on stupid, and that tended to make people end up dead or worse.

He was searching for a sight of her, but to no avail; for the first time the thought entered his mind that perhaps she was already running away. It wouldn't help him much, but it wouldn't make things harder either.

Ethan's self-appointed guard had stopped shouting; now he was grinning, showing a cave of a mouth. He was still aiming his gun though, and Ethan thought it was time to make his move. He shouted, "Look, press!" and pointing at his Leica he reached with the other hand at his vest's chest pocket, fumbling for the press pass.

The guard instantly drew back the AKs loading arm carefully, waiting for Ethan to make the mistake of flinching. For a bunch of ragtag bandits, they exhibited quite the streak of a rather unexpected professionalism; stupid nervous people with guns would've shot him dead. Ethan glanced at the leader who was quietly coming his way, while the rest of his men loitered near the sisters pointing guns and casting leery glances. That man, Ethan thought, was probably the sole reason why these wretches behaved themselves almost like soldiers.

The leader approached Ethan peacefully, making sure his insignia was prominently visible. He silently reached at Ethan's vest pocket and pulled

out his press pass, signed and stamped by the IPA and the UN in one of the British embassy's cultural attache's offices. The leader took a look at it and read aloud with a thick, grossly cacophonous accent:

“Richard Owls. London Times. Lost?” he asked with a grin that showed perfect white teeth and more than a couple of gold casings.

“Just doing a story,” replied Ethan and added “Major, sir,” with an afterthought, hoping to feed the man's ego. Indeed he smiled when he heard the rank, and offered Ethan his press pass back. He took a quick look around him, the sun glinting off his black raybans. Whoever the man was, he was turning in a profit, Ethan thought. When he spoke again, he wasn't smiling anymore:

“I'm a moody person. Lost two men on the way. Why are you here? What's so important about nuns?”

Ethan didn't have a very hard time faking intimidation. The man was imposing enough. Reminded him a bit of his friend James, only without the redeeming qualities. He replied with some difficulty, trying to find the words:

“The missionary work.. Taking care of people in the middle of a war. Their stoic manner; really good press back home. Good press anywhere,

really. Takes the focus away from the british involvement, too. Wins points with my editor.”

The brute looked at him as if examining a weird kind of exotic fly; it was a distant, focused stare. “Politics, journalists. Same shit, eh?” he said suddenly and laughed out loud all alone, his laughter echoing faintly in the relative silence of the monastery’s courtyard.

“Just doing my job, major, sir,” replied Ethan with a faint smile, his eyes still trying to steal a glimpse of Nicole; she must’ve really gone, he thought to himself.

The sisters were huddled close together, as if waiting for a verdict on them. The sister superior was eyeing him and the leader of the bandits intensely. Maybe she was thinking of doing something stupid herself. That would complicate things right when he was trying to achieve a sense of rapprochement, if anything like that could be achieved with the likes of these people.

“I’m no major, Dick. I’ll call you Dick. No Major Yuembe anymore. I’m King, King Yuembe!” shouted the so-called Major, triumphantly raising both arms in the air. He fired off a couple of shots, eliciting a response of wild shots in the air from his men who cheered and eyed the sisters with venomous stares. They

looked barely able to hold themselves; another example in forced discipline. He laughed heartily once more, before settling down his gaze towards Ethan once more. Ethan pitched the idea of the story he had been working on in his mind:

“I think you’d make the perfect story, really. I could show the world your living conditions, the way you’re defending your freedom. Add a bit about your backstory, where you came from, what made you quit the army. It’d be a fantastic piece, a world first,” Ethan said and aimed the camera at Yembe. He took on a haughty pose like a model, indeed the kind of self-gratifying stance photographers tend to think is fit for nobility portraits. The camera clicked, and Ethan rolled the film a couple more times, taking a few more shots. Then Yembe yanked the camera off its straps suddenly, and Ethan felt his plan wasn’t working the way it should.

“I’ll keep that film. I like pictures; but I don’t like the publicity. Understand?”

Ethan nodded, frowning warily. He replied carefully:

“No problem. I can see it could hamper your activities; I can do a text piece only, full page with stock photos or something,” he said, insisting on trying to stroke the man’s ego. He knew it

wouldn't work when the man took the film out of the camera and tucked it inside a pocket. He then just threw the camera away, breaking the lens. He then asked Ethan, edging his face closer to his the way a boxer might before a fight:

"You think we are freedom fighters?" he said through teeth almost clenched shut. Ethan's frown became a deep, long furrow. Looking distraught and casting glances around him, he looked completely at a loss. To complete the show, he said weakly:

"Well, of course."

Yuembe broke down in laughter and said something in that dialect Ethan couldn't quite get. All the men laughed along in earnest, pointing at Ethan like a freak exhibit. Maybe writing up a story wouldn't hold, but the stupid journalist ploy still had something in it, just maybe, Ethan thought to himself.

Some of the men that had been searching around the monastery called out, grabbing Yuembe's attention. They had found the caravan's Rovers and supplies. Yuembe and his men exchanged a few words from a distance, more like shouts. Then he picked a few of them by eyeing them alone, motioned with a hand and another half a dozen men left their guns behind. Soon

they started loading the crates with the red cross first onto their own trucks.

The sister superior was talking with some sisters in a low-keyed voice; they seemed somewhat relieved. It was beginning to look like the bandits would simply loot what they could and leave. Organised and disciplined as they seemed to be, they were nothing more than dangerous, cruel thieves.

Yuembe then took out a camo pattern handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. He took off his glasses and wiped the lenses as well; his round black eyes were big and calm, the eyelashes almost delicate. They belonged to a man who should've become an artist or a doctor, maybe even a priest. In any case, they didn't look like the kind of eyes that belonged to a professional lethal parasite.

That grin of his gave him away; Ethan had seen that grin once too many. He knew even himself had sported such a grin at times past. The thought disturbed him and for a minute he was out of character, looking grim and serious all of a sudden. Yuembe saw the change on his face; he was instantly intrigued. He looked at Ethan from head to toe, scanning him slowly, measuring him. He asked him then, hands around his waist, the raybans protruding from his chest pocket:

“You do not approve? Wouldn’t look good on your story?” he said and then made a motion in the air with his free hand, stopping at the mention of each word like showing off a neon headline sign: “Former Nigerian Army Major Pillages Monastery.”

Ethan simply shook his head. Yuembe went on with what he had in mind:

“I am not a man of the press, like you. But I know what spices up a story,” he said, winked and nodded towards the sisters who were still clutching their rosemaries. Some of them praying on their knees, some of them simply staring the men who guarded them straight in the eye, as if they thought shame alone could turn them away.

“Major, there’s nothing more to gain here other than those sacks of rice, those crates of medications and the canned food. That’s all there is,” Ethan said, thinking he should at least try and reason with the man, even though he seemed to be toying with ideas that went beyond looting.

“Been here long enough, Mr. Owls? Are you sure that’s all? Maybe you and I have different tastes in things,” Yuembe said with a devilish grin and then barked an order.

Another half a dozen men complied and went inside the eastern blocks of the monastery. Pretty

soon, one of them shouted back from the impromptu hospital. Another was holding a vest with a red cross painted on it. Some groggy voices and malformed protests were put down after a few slaps and kicks laid the patients back on their beds for good.

Yuembe shouted back more orders, looking pissed; veins shot from his temples and neck. He didn't seem to care about the red cross or the infirmary and the people inside. That was good; it mean Ludwig and his people were probably safe and not a moment too soon. Probably Nicole as well. He had thought she might help him sound more convincing, but she was still nowhere to be seen. Maybe she'd proved a problem in any case, Ethan thought.

His thoughts where cut short when he suddenly heard a shout from one of Yuembe's men, and then saw bloodied pieces of skull bounce off a door, the rest of the bandit's body slumping against it a flick of an eye later, when the gunshot was heard. A high velocity rifle. Though a familiar sound to Ethan, he had been more than just surprised to see its effects so vividly at that point.

Everyone froze still; it was the sisters panicked shrieks and loud prayers that roused everyone back into a frenzied random activity. Ethan

hesitated; if someone had stayed behind trying to be a hero, should he go all out and take a shot at Yuembe right now? What about the sisters? They were completely exposed. No, he decided he couldn't risk their lives.

Yuembe aimed his AK nervously at Ethan, and shouted at his men infuriated. They quickly aimed their guns at windows and doorways, covering the rest; a couple of them grabbed the sisters by force one by one, and started to tie their hands together.

A couple of sisters tried to resist, spitting and kicking their way away. Yuembe's men used the AKs shoulderguards like clubs; the nuns suffered. A few cracks were heard; bones were broken. The sister superior's proud facade had collapsed; she was now begging the men in whatever dialect ran through her tongue, with what few words she knew. Their captors seemed to enjoy their work, smiling as they heard the wailings and sobs of the hapless sisters. Yuembe shouted on the top of his lungs:

"Come out now and I won't hurt the sisters. I'll let you and them live, just as soon as I get what I came for. You and I both know I want the-". His voice became little more than a gurgle as his head exploded violently, shrapnel of his skull

flying away in all directions. His body fell backwards from the overwhelming force of the bullet, the AK falling off his limp hand on the ground with a thud.

Ethan's eyes were scanning for the shooter while his hands instinctively went for his gun. He was already moving towards the cover of the nearby arches. There was no hope in hell that he'd talk the rest of them out of this: for one thing, he didn't even speak that damnable dialect, and for another, they were already letting off a blind hail of bullets at the mud-and-hay brick walls of the monastery, trying for the shooter. All they accomplished though was leave behind large pockmarks on the walls, splintered doors and spent bullet casings.

The bandits shouted at each other, confused and dismayed. Some looked like they were itching to just shoot the sisters dead. One of them cried something like a war shout and let off a single round that went through one of the nuns like a hammer through ice. The bullet took apart almost her whole left side; blood, bone and guts spilled freely through tattered robes. She crumbled like a rag doll on the dirt before the church gate, twitches and spasms running through her body. Her dying throes were little more than a

wet cough, deafeningly loud among the silence of the sisters.

A man with a beret knocked some teeth out of the shooter with his rifle's shoulderguard, rendering him unconscious. The rest fired off wild shots at windows, more or less blindly.

The sisters started to weep. The sister superior held her cross in hand, tears running down her cheek; still she whispered the dead sister's rites softly in her ear.

Another gunshot was heard; it missed a bandit on the back of one of the Rovers by an inch. The ricochet bullet grazed him behind one ear and caused him to fall on his back down on the ground.

Ethan was now working on instinct and training alone; he would pick his targets, going in for the kill. He pulled out his gun and rushed towards the rover parked in front of the sisters and the church. He silently thanked God and his good fortune that Yuembe and his men had fallen for the journalist trick, sloppy enough not to bother actually checking him for weapons.

One of Yuembe's men saw him appearing behind one of the arches, peacefully coming towards them. He pointed with one hand and shouted a warning, instead of shooting. Two rounds went

through the bandit, and threw him off his feet a couple of feet away. The shots left his chest in ruins; his lungs and heart a ruptured mess.

Ethan switched targets and went for one of the men wearing a beret. He let another couple of rounds fly, the Colt forty-five pulsating in his double-action grip with body-shaking force. Years of experience and shooting training brought Ethan's aim lower to compensate for the recoil; aim slightly below center of mass, double-tap the trigger, swing the body and aim another. Repeat. It was as easy as riding a bike if one didn't stop to think about the killing involved.

As he swung to take down another one, there was a sharp whizzing sound. He felt a hot rush of air near the back of his head. He turned around to look and saw to his right a man down on the ground, trying to grasp his neck with both hands. He bleeding profusely, his legs flailing wildly as spurts of blood turned into a red fuzzy mist through his fingers.

The shooter was good; a professional from the likes of it. He had probably just saved his life, but there wasn't time for allowing the thought to cloud his senses. Another bandit appeared from behind a half-wrecked window and let off a ripple of bullets from his AK. He kept shouting

like a crazed madman while shooting, aiming at nowhere in particular; the kick of the AK sent the bullets plainly at the old, pitted and stained tiled roof, breaking away and chipping whole sections.

Still firing away and before emptying his clip, he was blown back by the force of two bullets, one hitting him square in the stomach and another in his chest. If his heart didn't stop outright, he'd have time enough to meet God when his gut wound ate his insides.

The sisters were busy untying themselves amidst the confusion. They rushed to the inside of the temple, trying to carry their dead sister with a modicum of decency. They lifted her up, hugging her spilled entrails in their lap.

As they did so, their former captors and guards let off another hail of fire from their AKs trying to take Ethan down; they were controlled, but badly aimed bursts. Yuembe would have probably made good soldiers out of them if it wasn't for their horrid aim and their complete lack of cover discipline.

Out in the open with every part of their body exposed and firing from the hip, their chances of hitting Ethan laying dirt-low behind a series of arches, were slim if not none. Their chances became zero when a bullet went through one of

them in the shoulder; the exit wound was the size of a basketball, turning his spine into a shredded ruin.

The other one of the pair kneeled and raised his rifle to take aim at the direction of the shooter. Ethan rolled out of cover and popped three shots at him; one caught him in the leg, tearing up his calf. Another one hit the dirt and the last one went through his armpit and neck, cutting an artery open. It left him a dying man, unable to even flinch at the scorching sun casting its glare at his fading eyes.

Ethan leapt to his feet again and rushed towards the sisters and the church, attracting a very unhealthy amount of fire from the west wing of the monastery. The bandits that had been on search detail there were now laying down covered, taking pot shots whenever they thought it was prudent. The shooter had put real fear in their hearts.

A couple of those who had left their guns behind to carry sacks and crates tried to make a run towards the Rovers for their AKs. One of them fell stone dead, leg-first, as if he'd hit his head while running, another excellent shot from the unknown shooter. His mortal wound was remarkably clean; the bullet had went straight through

the heart, imploding it and settling down the exit velocity to a lot less damaging value. The other one just dashed towards a low-walled flower fence and jumped over, creeping away back into a semblance of adequate cover.

Ethan went past the church's entrance and saw the sisters hugging around the body of their dead one. He grabbed the sister superior by one arm, while she was clearly paying no attention to her surroundings, her face deathly pale, her eyes without focus. Instinctively she tried to shake him off. He caught her stare and tried to convey a sense of calm. Panic wouldn't get them anywhere; it could only lead to senseless death. He told her then while stray shots seemed to edge dangerously close judging by the plaster and chipped wood flying around them:

"Lie down, and spread around. Throw the benches for cover. And pray, sister!"

She nodded then as if magically awoken from a deep slumber. He couldn't help noticing her wrinkled, bloodied face looked strangely attractive for someone her age and posture. Ethan bowed his head to her hand and whispered "er grace," and then carried along. He stood for a few moments by the temple's door. When he heard the distinctive bolt-action gunshot of the mysterious shooter

he decided to sprint away to a better location; one of the rovers.

He placed three shots at the windows up on high on the western edge while running. He wasn't hoping on actually hitting anything, but he was sure these guys would instinctively duck when they heard the shots, sparing him a precious couple of seconds to make a more or less safe passage. He'd heard the gun go empty; he'd need a chance to reload soon.

When he reached the Rover, he saw the flash of a scope barely visible near the church bell tower. He couldn't make out who it was; the sun was still rising directly behind him, blinding those who dared to take a shot. Clever, natural cover. Still, down on the courtyard from near the makeshift hospital, two more of the late Major Yembe's men appeared, firing on full auto towards the bell tower as they went.

Those on the western dormitories felt like contributing, so they popped out of their covers and placed single shots against the bell tower, rather blindly. The shooter let one shot fly; the cracking echo of the bolt-action came right after the thud of the dead body on the ground. But no other shots followed.

Ethan peeked from behind the Rover; the

other man was still on the courtyard, nervously trying to find cover while surveying the rooftop for the shooter. Those on the west side had no clear target, and decided to take their chances at Ethan and the Rover.

He switched the empty clip with a new full one; if this kept for much time longer he'd need to pick one of the AKs lying all around for himself. A cacophony of bullets ricocheting off thick metal engulfed him; the Rover's thick metal chassis was as good a cover as any. It wasn't impervious, but it was good enough for such a tight spot. Maybe half a dozen men took shots at him from the western dormitories; perhaps more lurked somewhere in the eastern wing. Worse still, the unknown shooter had been forced to reposition. Less cover for him than for another couple of minutes.

Ethan slithered slowly towards the front of the Rover. The engine block would provide better cover. As he did so, he kept his gun trained towards the eastern rooms. If a head or a gun popped from somewhere out there, he'd simply squeeze.

He then suddenly saw the one that had come running towards the bell tower underneath the first Rover, trying to aim his AK at him while flat on the dirt. Ethan thought he saw him grinning

but he wasn't sure; he simply brought his Colt in front of him and fired three shots in rapid succession; the man let off his own shot but the sight of Ethan's gun alone opposite him was enough to let his aim stray.

Still, the bullet grazed Ethan slightly over his left shoulder; his third shot went wild and punctured a tire. The second and first though went through the man's neck and spine. He lay there under the Rover, paralyzed and bleeding, choking on his own blood.

A small pin-prick of a flash made Ethan turn around, gun in hand ready to shoot. As the blinding light turned away from his face for a moment, he saw more clearly now the unknown shooter. The gun was an M1903 bolt-action, sniper variant with scope. And the shooter was, much to Ethan's surprise, no one else but Nicole.

He didn't have time to think about that revelation for long; another hail of wild gunfire forced her aside, behind a thick wide arch. He heard indistinct shouts in that unknown dialect, and then more gunshots were heard. None of them landed anywhere near him or Nicole. He sacrificed some cover for a better view, quickly scanning for targets. He couldn't see any. He decided to make a move then. He shouted:

“Nicole! Cover me!”

He sprang up then and ran without aiming his gun. He just run towards the west wing; a single shot was heard. One of the bandits wanted to take the opportunity against Ethan, but Nicole’s aim had proven a lethal discouragement for anyone else as well.

When Ethan reached the low-walled fence, he jumped over it and rolled sideways. He scanned aft and fore and saw noone. The Rovers were still sitting there, half-loaded with the caravan’s supplies. Behind him, a flimsy wooden staircase led to the upper floor. There were pools of blood dripping down the staircase, and traces of wounded bodies being drawn inside rooms.

He looked in Nicole’s direction. She was giving him a thumbs up. He went inside each room methodically, pushing the door open and then peeking inside before rushing inside in a crouch. He saw bodies of Yuembe’s men. Most were shot in the back. Two of them had shot each other, their bodies laying against opposite walls. It seemed to Ethan like the paper-thin veneer of what little comradeship and professionalism these bandits seemed to exhibit crumbled when Yuembe’s head got blown off. Their panic and their petty squabbles had undone them com-

pletely. Some might've fled on foot, but they've left no reason behind to return.

The search on the upper rooms yielded the bodies of those who had felt lucky or proficient enough to take down Ethan or Nicole. When he felt it was safe, Ethan shouted from an open wound to Nicole, "All clear!". She gave a thumbs up and disappeared back into the infirmary.

What a firefight, Ethan thought while overlooking the courtyard from that higher vantage point. He began counting bodies without even being conscious of it, and then he saw one of the bodies was actually moving towards the church, gun in hand. His raised his gun to aim clearly and fired away without his usual control; the bandit though still had time enough to let off a ripple of fire before the bullets struck home.

He slumped down on his knees, and fell face down on the dirt, blood oozing around him. Ethan ran down the staircase shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Nicole! Check the church!"

As he did so, Nicole had already reappeared, this time with a Beretta in hand; she moved along hugging the walls with all the care in the world.

Ethan could see the sunlight etching shadows inside the church, but not a shadow that moved.

As he came closer he yelled:

“Sisters! Sister Superior! Is everyone alright?”

As he reached the church door, he saw a the trembling figures of a few of the sisters. Some of them sat still, frozen in shock. Two of them lay down, around a pool of blood. One of them was the sister superior; her sisters had closed her eyes, and covered her with cloth from the Holy Table. The other sister was a young thing, perhaps the younger of them all. She was lying in front of the sister, her body mangled horribly; she had thrown herself in the way of the bullets but that had not been enough. It never really is, Ethan thought almost cynically.

Nicole was breathing laboriously when she came next to Ethan. He spared a glance at her, but said nothing. As her breathing returned to normal, she lowered her Beretta and slumped herself against a large wooden chair, drenched in sweat and dirt. She had the smell of gunpowder about her.

One of the nuns, still bent over the sister superior's body turned and asked Ethan with a croaky voice:

“Is it over?”

He nodded almost absent-mindedly. Then he turned to look at Nicole and asked her with a deep

frown and an almost unforgiving stare:

“I thought you would do something stupid.”

She shook her head, and looked him squarely in the eye. He saw the truth behind that glazed look and those weary words, when she said:

“Have some decency. Let’s talk outside if you must.”

Ethan nodded, made the sign of the cross and walked outside towards the Rover. The sun was starting to fill most of the courtyard. As the adrenaline rush wore off, the smell of blood and gunpowder assaulted his nostrils. He tried not to inhale too deeply and focused his stare on the church tower, ridden with bullet marks. He heard something drop behind him; he turned and saw Nicole on her knees, heaving her guts. He fought the compulsion to do so as well.

He approached her and helped on her feet. She got up and tucked the Beretta in one of her pockets, and walked to a water basin on a wall recess near the church. Ethan followed close behind her. He noticed she had a slightly limp gait; she was hurt. He asked her:

“Bullet grazed your leg?”

She shook her head and said without turning:

“No, sprained ankle probably.”

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?”

She shrugged and cupped her hands full of water from the basin. She washed her mouth and spat in the dirt before she replied:

“Algiers.”

“You mean, the Battle of Algiers?” Ethan said as if finding it difficult to grasp.

She nodded slowly and leaned her back on the wall, and untied her hair. The grit and sweat had turned them into a mess. She looked at him with a weary smile and replied:

“That’s where I lost my faith, Ethan.”

He looked at her with puzzlement. He asked her then:

“I mean, how?”

“It so happened the aid station I was volunteering got in the way. For two nights, we had to fight for our lives. Every able bodied man and woman,” she said, folding her hands together.

Ethan shook his head and bit his lip. He took a look around him and then gazed at the church as if it were miles away. He said to Nicole then, his voice carrying a thoughtful tone:

“So you’ve got your own share, then.”

“My share of what, Ethan? My share of blood and guts?” she retorted with a flush of anger.

He looked at her through a flutter of his eyes and said with a shallow, gritty voice:

“Your share of guilt.”

Her face softened and the edges of her lips fell flat. She stood away from the wall for a moment, and then started walking past Ethan towards the infirmary. He watched her as she put a hand in her eye, wiping away a tear. He then looked at the church and the bell tower before closing his eyes and letting the warm sun touch his face, inch by inch.

Heed no prayer

Ludwig was sweating profoundly, slowly packing small boxes of essential medicine onto one of the Rovers. The sun had begun its descent beyond the surrounding hills, but the heat and moisture was intolerably unabated. Ethan was helping Nicole load the wounded Red Cross people in two of the Rovers.

The patients from the infirmary would ride in the open-top Rovers the bandits had left behind. Two of them needed a stretcher, bad cases of malaria. The rest were mostly kids, left to fend on their own.

Though bullet-ridden and shoddy-looking the Rovers worked fine; they would have to do. Ethan

needed to keep just one of the Red Cross Rovers. Ludwig had indulged him without pausing to think about it; for all it mattered, he had saved their lives.

The sisters, fourteen souls left in all, would ride along with the caravan carrying their meagre belongings. They were leaving little of real value behind them. As they climbed inside the back of the Rovers, Ethan took a moment to watch them intently. Nicole had just stopped for a smoke. He turned and told her then with a flat, calculating expression:

“Look at them. Three of them dead. Vacant stares, hollow gazes. Still, they keep their rosemaries in hand, muttering prayers. Will that make them feel better about it?”

She let a small cloud of smoke hazily drift away from her as she sat with her back against the Rover’s door, legs crossed at her ankles, one hand in her apron’s pocket. She smiled thinly before she replied:

“Maybe they’re thankful for being alive. Maybe they’re mourning. Leave the poor women be. Does everything have to make sense to you?”

He crossed his arms in front of his chest and cast a thoughtful gaze towards the small graveyard where only a couple of hours ago they had buried

the three sisters, alongside the bandits. The surviving nuns had insisted on it. He shook his head absent-mindedly then and said:

“It never really does. I’m only saying, how can they go on after what’s happened?”

She laughed with a bitter crease around her lips and replied:

“It’s people just like them that do go on. Faith, remember? I’ve talked to their new superior. She’s decided to dissolve the order. I’m not sure she can really do that on her own, but she seemed quite resolved. Each will have to go her own way. She probably thinks it’ll help them heal over time.”

Ethan was looking at the nuns’ faces; they were too pale for the likes of the Nigerian sun anyway, he thought to himself.

“Maybe they will, maybe they won’t. But just going on pretending they’re stronger than they really are..”

He let his voice trail off, shaking his head in disbelief. Nicole was about to say something when they both saw Ludwig approaching them, wiping his forehead and arms from the sweat in vain; in a minute he’d be sweating once more. He nodded to Nicole and smiled, but turned to talk to Ethan, slightly out of breath:

“We’re ready. We should be at Lagos by morning. Once we do get back on the tarmac, we’ll notify the Lagos office about what happened, head straight for the hospital.”

“How’s everyone?”

“The wounded are stable. Everyone’s shaken, closed to themselves mostly. Some are still scared. Even needed sedation,” said the doctor and shrugged somehow apologetically. Ethan simply nodded. The doctor continued:

“I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done really. We could actually hear the gunfight, but we kept running, just like you said. The sisters said you had some help.”

He looked at Nicole sideways then but he was smiling gently, his eyes gleaming softly. Nicole shuffled as if feeling uncomfortable and said to the doctor without looking back:

“Not that much there, really.”

Ethan placed a kind hand on the doctor’s shoulder but before he could speak, Ludwig let out a snort of a laugh and said:

“I get it Ethan. When we get back, I’ll need to file a report; an enquiry will ensue. Perhaps I’ll be charged. Then I expect there’ll be some uproar from the embassies, the press. People will hear about this, certainly.”

Ethan's gaze for a moment turned sour while Nicole shot a worried glance at Ludwig but he went on, this time with a somber look on his face:

"I know what you're thinking. The minefield, the bandits. The sisters getting killed. People's memories do become jarred from experiences like these. Frankly, some genuinely don't recall there even was a journalist along. And the sisters, well.. Poor souls have a lot on their minds now. Not to mention there's a war going on."

Ethan nodded, grinning shamelessly. Though the cloak and dagger routine had largely lost its meaning now that the caravan was turning back, the doctor had turned out to be a welcome though strange and unlikely ally. He extended a hand, which the doctor promptly gripped. Ethan then said:

"I take it you'll cover for me," he said before turning to look at Nicole and adding "For us, anyway. Thanks, Ludwig."

Nicole nodded half-heartedly, while the doctor replied:

"The way things turned out I should be thanking you, Ethan. I'm convinced that without you, we'd be dead or maybe worse."

The doctor shook Ethan's hand and looked him in the eye with a sobering, stone-hard gaze.

The lifeless mangled bodies of the three dead nuns came unbidden to his mind then and he was unable to meet Ludwig's stare. He nodded limply and the doctor caught him by the arm, telling him reassuringly:

"Look, you saved lives. That's what matters in my line of business. Save as many as you can."

"I know Ludwig. It's just that.."

Ethan hesitated; he felt unable to find the right words. Nicole jumped in, a dull expression on her face, her voice a gritty affair:

"You feel sorry for them?"

He turned to look at her with bewildered puzzlement. He asked her with evident confusion:

"You mean the sisters? Of course, I mean -"

"Saving the world now?" she said with a vicious stare that marred her features. She almost spat out the words.

Ethan blinked furiously while Ludwig simply stood there. They felt something they had said had ticked off Nicole.

"Listen, Nicole, I understand you -" he managed to blurt before she cut him mid-sentence and said "I don't need your understanding!" before leaving them flabbergasted to watch her briskly pace towards her guestroom. Ethan made a motion to follow her but Ludwig reached an arm and

blocked his path:

“It won’t help. She’s grieving. Try not to make it harder,” said Ludwig, rearranging his glasses slowly. Ethan turned to say something as if in protest, but he simply stood there, facing her way. He said to the doctor then:

“That’s not at all like her. I mean, I barely know her, but I wouldn’t think she’d take all this that hard.”

Ludwig shook his head and looked Ethan straight in the eye; despite their height difference he managed to sound like a teacher scolding a schoolboy:

“People died here today! Did you expect everyone to move along as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened? Business as usual?”

The doctor was almost glaring at Ethan, who coolly replied in a low, calm voice:

“There is a war going on. I wouldn’t expect that from everyone, but she’s seen war. She knows what it’s like and I believe that. It’s just.. odd. I mean, she’s acting odd. She killed maybe half or more of the bandits.”

Ludwig frowned and his forehead wrinkled, beads of sweat trailing his temples. He opened his mouth to speak, and almost stuttered the words:

“She killed?”

Ethan simply nodded and fixed his gaze at Nicole's guestroom, his face a pensive, blank wall. The doctor spoke again:

"How?"

"Does it matter to you?"

"No, not really."

"I thought so as well. Though I think I need to know wherever we're going."

"You're planning to take her with you?"

Ethan nodded, hands on his waist. Ludwig asked with some reluctance:

"Then you two are.." he said, letting his voice trail rather uncomfortably. Ethan blinked and smiled somewhat lamely with a frown upon his face before shaking his head furiously. He told the doctor then:

"Good God, no. That kind of woman would be the death of me. Besides.."

"Not the time?"

Ethan shrugged and said:

"She's taken."

"Ah. I wouldn't think you'd draw such a line."

Ethan grinned despite himself and asked with a mocking tone:

"I'd say! A gentleman like meself, getting frisky with a lady in wedlock! Absurd!"

Ludwig shook his head with no hint of good

humor other than a slight curl of his lip. He then wiped the sweat on his forehead with one sleeve, while he said to Ethan rather flatly:

“How can you joke about anything after all this?”

Ethan thought about it for a moment and then said rather mirthlessly:

“Won’t kill us now, will it?”

Ludwig looked at him with a pondering expression. Before he could reply, one of his staff shouted out for his attention. He gave a thumbs up; the engines of the Rovers roared into life one after the other. They were heading back. He then simply said to Ethan with a shrug:

“Well, thanks again. And good luck. Maybe we’ll meet again in a better place and time.”

“There’s always Heaven, doctor,” said Ethan with a shallow grin. The doctor shook his head, backtracked a few steps and then started jogging towards the open door of a waiting Rover. When he climbed aboard, he had one last glimpse of Ethan lighting a cigarette, and waving them good-bye.

* * *

The moon was waxing low on the night sky. Its white sheen sometimes came through mud-

died through the wispy clouds that toiled lazily past it. And when the cool wind blew the murky clouds away, the shapeless shadows that covered everything below vanished within a swath of summer moonlight that could easily lure a man into thinking all was well in the world.

Such trappings of the mind were not new to Ethan; he'd seen first hand what such a serene, beguiling night could do to a man. Guards stabbed from behind inside their trenches, patrolmen lying dead on the ground, their throats slit open - their still warm blood misting in the chilly night air. The sudden feeling of a hand on his shoulder electrified him at first, and then sent a numbing sensation that grew all along his right side down to his hip.

He looked around as if in a dream, half-waiting for the thrust of a bayonet through his jugular. It was Nicole; the thought of how the hell she'd slipped behind him unnoticed sprang inside his mind. It was unnerving, more so for a soldier and doubly so for a Scout of the Royal Marines. 'Damn her!', he thought while he saw her grinning as if she'd had intended to catch him off-guard. Her voice sounded rather casual, but there was the barest glint of mischievous success about it:

“Did I startle you?”

There was a small moment of uncomfortable silence, before Ethan managed to answer:

“Well, yes. Yes, you did. Have you packed? We should set out now, if we want to reach LALA in the morning. Are you sure about these people you mentioned?”

She looked at him with a frown. The light of the oil lamp inside the room flickered around her face as if it danced to a rhythm of its own. She replied with a hurt tone, as if taken aback:

“Are you suggesting that they can’t be trusted?”

He got up from his chair and moved away from the way, his back resting against the dimly lit wall. He crossed his arms as if feeling threatened and said flatly:

“I’m suggesting something’s off. I’m suggesting this is all too much.”

Her face grew distant suddenly. She tilted her head and bit her lip before saying with a clear, hearty voice:

“You were the one who insisted on going back there for Andy. And I should thank you for that. It’s just that.. I’m doing all I can!”

Her face became contorted and it looked as if she was about to break down into sobs and cries

for barely a moment. But she held on and said sharply:

“I risked my life back there. I could’ve left, I could’ve run away. I did for the sisters, I tried. But I did it for Andy, and you as well.”

“Now that’s what’s bugging me,” replied Andy, stabbing a pointing finger her way. He went on with an even, accusing tone of voice:

“You’re not just good with a rifle: you’re an excellent shot. You didn’t hesitate, you actually went inside and picked up that M1903. And by the way, that’s not exactly a Derringer. Neither is that Beretta. I mean, I’m not ungrateful or anything, but just how the fuck did you get hold of those? And since when does one become such a pro with a couple of weeks of fighting? Who the hell are you, really now?”

Nicole looked at him sternly at first for an itchy moment that faintly smelled of danger, but then her face dissolved in a small, tight smile abruptly. As if she could relax now, she sat down on the cot across the small table and the oil lamp and said to Ethan with a weird, all too american accent:

“I guess you’re not the only one playing in the shadows here, Ethan. My real name is Nicole Heurgot; but I’m Agency.”

Ethan eyes fluttered violently of their own volition. His hand went instinctively to the Colt laying reassuringly behind his back, but Nicole urged him:

“No, no. I mean I’m CIA. Please, that’s not necessary. Really, we’re in this together. I really am Andy’s wife. It’s just too darn complicated. He doesn’t really know who I work for. Never did. In a way, I am to blame for what’s happened to him.”

She looked downcast, glancing at Andy, waiting for some kind of explosion on his side, some kind of reproach or exclamation that never came. Instead, he sat back down on the chair and looked at Nicole as if she was barely there.

“CIA?”

She nodded slowly. Ethan took a small liquor bottle out of a chest pocket, opened it and had a swig. He barely grimaced while the Littlemill ran down his throat, and asked tersely:

“Some kind of mission, then?”

She nodded with some reluctance this time. Her face was withdrawn, almost expressionless but for the small, wordless movements of her mouth. Ethan gulped down a mouthful of Littlemill and almost yelled incredulously:

“A yank? A bloody yank? You’re telling me

my brother's married to a bloody yank spy?"

Nicole was staring at him without really knowing what to say. She half-smiled as if out of politeness and pressed the question somehow lamely:

"Maybe it's a lot, but why not?"

Then Ethan broke into a fit of laughter that completely surprised Nicole, adding:

"He's going to ask for a divorce when he finds out, you know. I'm not one for breaking up a marriage, but when I do tell him - and I will, mind you - the poor fellow will be demolished. Does he at least know you're a yank?"

"He does. We were married in Louisiana, actually."

"That's where you're from then?"

She nodded briskly and added: "Close by. Trois Rivières."

"Kind of makes sense. What about Algiers? Horseshit?" he asked avidly. She replied with a nod and added:

"Mostly. I was simply posted there when it went down."

"So where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"You know, it does feel kind of liberating to talk about all this like we're having a dinner party around Langley, but I'd have to say I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

“So now what, you’re trying to be professional for a change? You could’ve killed me back there and I’d be still thinking the night’s just the thing. Your mission involved Andy?”

She raised an eyebrow at that and said nothing. Instead, she got up from the cot and said to Ethan, her hands in her pockets:

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that either.”

Ethan’s grin was replaced by a taut line over his pursed lips. He sat straight on his chair and said with a hint of vehemence:

“Horseshit. This isn’t about the job; any job. It’s about Andy. You said it might’ve been your fault he’s missing now. Was he part of the mission?”

She gripped her elbows as if a sudden chill had emptied her body of any warmth. She couldn’t hide the fact she felt uncomfortable. He told him then with some reticence:

“He.. He was my cover. The caravan, was my cover. I know, the irony?” she said raising a hand dismissively and went on: “But half the world knows the Red Cross is just another part of the deal. Andy thought he’d convinced me we were doing the right thing. In a way, I didn’t need much convincing.”

Ethan let out a long breath, and stared at

Nicole for an uncomfortable, long moment. She didn't seem eager to challenge his mood. At length, he asked her:

"What happened? I mean, what really happened?"

"It really was bandits. More like, the FPLB."

"The what?"

"The *Frontiere Populaire pour la Liberation de Biafra*."

"Secessionists?"

"Formerly. They'd been convinced to turn their interests in more lucrative affairs."

"Running guns. Information. A little mercenary work."

Ethan's eyes trailed Nicole's face. There was a strange glitter about them, an icy glow that rendered his gaze keen like a knife. He seemed to scrutinise her features one by one, when he finally said:

"You were their handler. The middleman."

She stared blankly at the wall for a moment before bowing her head and sighing. She clasped her hands together and said softly, almost indelibly:

"Yes."

"And Andy knew shit."

She nodded with closed eyes. Ethan went for

his pack of cigarettes, shaking his head furtively. She then cleared her throat and added very business-like:

“There’s more to it. The guns.”

“You mean the rifle and the Beretta?”

She nodded shallowly. Her face suddenly grew darker than the ill lamplight could account for:

“There’s more where that came from.”

“Sure. You’ve got connections, right? You must have had some form of backup.”

“There’s a small net. But that’s not where I got the guns.”

Ethan’s eyes became narrow at first. When the fear of realisation began to hit home, his eyes bulged even as he lit his cigarette. The tip of the cigarette grew glowing red-hot and he asked through a small fog of smoke:

“Not here.”

She nodded hesitantly before adding:

“That’s what Yuembe came for.”

Ethan’s face became flush suddenly, barely contained anger in his voice with just the slightest hint of worry:

“They’re still here then? The guns are still here. Fuckall!”

With a rather glum attempt at sounding sheep-

ish, Nicole added flatly:

“We should get going. There might be more groups interested in the cace.”

Ethan grabbed his knapsack and cocked his Colt, before darting outside the door towards the Rover and saying rather furiously mostly to himself:

“What a fucking catch, Andy! What a brilliant fucking catch!”

* * *

Ethan had driven for the better part of the night mostly in silence. What little words they had exchanged were about directions, miles, maps and compasses. He had tried to make their journey shorter, sometimes picking a dirt road or trail, and some times ploughing through the savannah head on.

They'd seen pin-pricks of light in the distance blinking on and off in their path; the creatures of the night cleared a path in their wake. It was mostly hyenas they saw, as well as owls. Each time the hyenas saw the Rover's headlights they paused in the feast of the carcass and gazed with eyes like gems; then they carried on, the instinct of fear quite outdone by hunger.

Ethan thought that had it been any other time their improvised journey through the plains and the hills of Nigeria might've been quite fascinating; a proper night safari, a peek at the pure, wild Africa, untouched by man. But that was just a passing idea; so much had happened in so little time, that Ethan found it at times difficult to focus on simply driving, his mind racing in all sorts of different directions.

At some point he had felt the need to sleep but carried on for an hour or so as if his life dependent on it. Nicole had kept silent all along. She sometimes dozed off even as the Rover rocked and rumbled over crests and gutters, hilly sides and gravel trails. She didn't seem to share the same fatigue as Ethan, who kept straightening himself up, breathing sharply in an effort to stay awake no matter what. At length, while on a small dirt road beset with tall savvanah grass, she asked him:

"Let me drive."

Ethan rolled his eyes before settling them on her face while his mouth widened slowly into a grin:

"I think not," he said, and yawned.

"You'll fall asleep on the wheel if you go on like this. You need to get some rest," she said, looking worried. Ethan glanced at her sideways

and kept driving, seemingly about to pass out in any moment. He shook his head drowsily without replying. Nicole insisted:

“Look, if you won’t let me drive at least pull over and get some sleep. For God’s sake.”

Ethan drew a deep breath and shook himself trying to stay alert. He told her then without taking his eyes off the road, his voice shallow, almost resigned:

“Fine. Remember, check your compass and clock; stick to the zig-zag on the map and we should be fine. Give me one hour, then wake me up. Understood?”

Nicole’s eyes rolled ever so slightly; that had sounded like an order. She replied with a raised eyebrow with evident irritation:

“I understand you don’t trust me yet, and that’s clearly wrong because we’re doing this together whether you planned it, like it or not. It’s about Andy, remember?”

Ethan braked gently then and brought the rover to a stop. He closed his eyes and sat with fists clenched on the wheel, breathing shallowly. “I remember,” he said and went on looking at Nicole through bloodshot eyes:

“Just don’t bloody fuck this up. We need to reach the outskirts of Onitsha very much alive and

completely unseen if at all possible. If you see or hear something just -”

“Look, I’m not a hapless bitch you can just work around, alright? Jesus, you think you’re so hot stuff don’t you? Please shut up, and sleep,” she said loudly but without screeching or yelling. Her somewhat pale face was flush with a red tint of anger, locks of her hair stuck on her temples. Ethan strangely thought about how menacingly beautiful she looked then.

He smiled thinly, nodded to himself and got out of the Rover as sharp as he could, straining himself to get to the co-driver’s seat as fast as possible. When they crossed each other in front of the Rover, they exchanged a strange look, and almost halted their stride for the barest second. A few moments later, Nicole was behind the wheel while Ethan lay in the seat next to her, arms crossed and legs drawn together, snoring like a hog.

They’d been carving a criss-cross path towards Onitsha, the gateway to the Biafran territory east of the Niger. The small city had been swapping hands for the past few months between the federal government and the Biafrans. For the past couple of months, it lay in government hands, considered marginally safer. Still,

the frontline was in an almost constant flux; units from both sides would occasionally try and force their passage over the Niger. It would come as no big surprise to Ethan if they suddenly encountered Biafran patrols instead of government troops.

As the hours went by, the savannah gave way to the lush riverside, full of mangroves and thick, green bush. The last of the starry sky shone its deep blue light. For a moment, it felt as if the rover was wading through a dreamscape, the primal Africa of the spirit fathers and the blessed mother Earth. The illusion quickly melted away as the primrose red dawn cowardly crept over the horizon. Ethan sat upright startled, his arms still tightly hugging his chest. He glanced around sharply and asked Nicole:

“What time is it?”

She glanced at her wristwatch without taking her hands off the wheel and told him:

“It’s almost six in the morning. We should be there in about an hour.”

“What?” he said slightly miffed and took another look around him. He closed his eyes for a moment and looked at her viciously:

“You’re on the road. I told you, to stay off the road. What if-”

“What if we’re on the road? Wouldn’t it look even more strange if someone saw us just wading through the savvanah like on a safari? For Pete’s sake, act like it.”

“Like what? A bloody fool?”

She stared blankly at the road and replied calmly with a vehement gaze:

“Like Andy’s brother. You’re all too tied up in playing the professional, while in fact you’re just winging this, aren’t you?”

Ethan let out a laugh of surprise despite himself. He was at a loss for words for a few moments, and Nicole went on:

“Maybe you’re too scared. You’d be an idiot if you weren’t, but at this rate..”

“So you’re the expert? Some kind of superhero? Does the CIA brainwash their own agents as well?”

Nicole shook her head and scoffed. She said with a flat, nearly emotionless voice:

“Maybe.”

Ethan did not answer. He was simply staring at her intently, as if searching for something on her face. She took notice and asked him:

“What now?”

Ethan rested his head on his hand and let out a sigh. He shrugged and told her:

“I’m just trying to see what Andy saw in you, that’s all.”

A smirk appeared on her face suddenly and she replied as if flustered:

“None of your business.”

“No, thank God not.”

* * *

“London Times?” asked the young lieutenant at the checkpoint. He was squinting under the bright morning sun, a pair of sunglasses tucked away neatly in his shirt pocket. Ethan replied nonchalantly:

“It’s a newspaper. Press?” he said, and showed off a battered, smudged, laminated press pass with his photo on it. The young lieutenant stared back for barely a moment before nodding to Nicole. He asked them:

“Red Cross nurse? All alone out here?”

“I’m doing a story arc. Ms. Heurgot here is the centerpiece, you see,” Ethan said and looked at her with a thin smile. She barely glanced back at the lieutenant with an uncertain smile, pretending to feel awkward. He shook his head and without a word, waved at the guard to raise a shoddy, rust-ridden metal bar. Ethan gave a mock salute and thanked him, while Nicole started the engine and drove off slowly towards the bridge.

After a few yards Ethan looked back through the mirror, and saw the lieutenant still shaking his head; he noticed a smile and then a few laughs from the guards. He was joking; that was good. That meant they thought they were probably crazy; which wasn't that far off from reality. Nicole asked him then:

"They're lax. It's like they think it's just another job."

Ethan laid back in his seat and lit a smoke. He told her then as they crossed the bridge, the rover bucking slightly at each segment, his head lolling freely:

"Well, isn't it?"

She spared a frowned a look lazily before replying and shifting gear:

"I like to think it's a lot more. I'm a bit surprised you seem so.." She paused mid-sentence, her mouth half-open.

As the Rover reached the other side, a guard motioned them to stop. A soldier sitting inside a small shack that offered some relatively comfortable shadow was noting down their plates, cross-checking it against some sort of list. Nicole found the word she'd been searching for and said:

"Jaded."

Ethan replied after a heavy draught:

"I thought you'd say cynical."

"I would, if you were."

"But I am."

"No, you're not. You care."

"How do you know?"

"So you do?"

He smiled thinly and tapped away the ash from his cigarette over the open window. He shook his head and said with half a smile:

"Well played, I'll give you that."

"You think this is a game then?"

"Oh, do drive on."

She smiled wearily and once the guard waved them on their way, she sped towards the center of the city through the main road. They both peered through open windows at the strange mix of people, land and buildings that seemed so impossibly jarring to the eye. Red brick walls looked inherently unable to hold even the smallest tin roof, while the people around them went about their morning business dressed in all sorts of colours from the drab gray shirt to the colourful rainbow woolen tunics.

Goats were being herded in pairs by the equivalent of a milkman, and quite a small crowd of mostly women and children seemed to be waiting in line expectantly. Small groups of soldiers

seemed to be dispersed along the road, idly but warily overlooking the passers-by.

They were driving alongside the river, the east bank on their left. Little by little the rural outskirts gave way to more and more concrete, more and more colour. The town seemed relatively intact from the fighting, but the unmistakable signs were there: bullet-ridden blue and red walls, makeshift barricades and gun posts mingled with food stalls and workshops. The people seemed to take things in their stride. Whatever else, they still lived there.

They drove past the harbor and the piers where the military presence was more than evident: stores of supplies seemed to be piling up, while barges slowly waded through the Niger, loaded to the brim. Nearby, fishermen were preparing their nets as they did every day. Nicole broke the silence first:

“Isn’t it amazing?”

“What, exactly?”

“This town has been exchanging hands ever since the war started, and there are still people living here. Not only that, they’re going about their business like nothing’s changed.”

Ethan snorted almost derisively, and with his gaze fixed on the golden reflections of the sun on the river, he replied:

“Well, what would you know. A spy with a conscience.”

She looked at him with a knowing smile, while they drove past a small square that had been reduced to patches of brush and wild grass. She retorted:

“Does it surprise you?”

“It surprises me you can afford one.”

“I’d have no meaning if I wasn’t doing this for a reason.”

“It doesn’t really have much of a meaning. And there’s millions of reasons, but try as you might, there’s no meaning.”

“So, everything is meaningless, so we should just do nothing about everything? Maybe jump off a cliff as well.”

“No, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t do nothing. I’m only saying it doesn’t really mean anything. It only means what anyone wants it to mean.”

“There’s only as much value in the war as we want it to have?”

“Not just this one here. Every war.”

“What about the people who were driven out of their homes, those who were shot because they were thought to be sympathizers? What about the orphans and the starving children? What value do

these people have?”

“To me?”

“Why does it have to be about you all the time?”

“Well, you’re asking me.”

“I can’t understand how a man like yourself is after Andy.”

“I can’t understand how someone as daft as you works for the CIA.”

“So I’m a fool, just because I believe people have the right to live decent lives? The fishermen down the river are fools for trying as well? For not giving up?”

“No, they’re fishermen. Smart trade; they cast a net and fill it with fish. No need to herd anything, and milk and shear it. No need to sow, till and water. No, they just reap what the river has on offer. Smart folk, fishermen.”

“These are the last few people who are brave enough to keep living in a warzone.”

“And go where exactly? Wait for the Red Cross to feed them? The UN to free them? From who? You don’t understand, I guess you yanks never did. The river is all that matters to these people. Without it, there’s no life. Like they care who’s running this charade. You should get out more, take a walk. Get down from that high horse

of yours.”

“You’re making things sound so fucking simple while in fact you don’t have the slightest clue about what’s at stake here. What’s at stake in Vietnam, the six day war, Angola. It’s fucking everywhere and you’re acting like it’s pointless.”

“It all depends on your point of view, that’s all. To them, it is. To you, maybe it isn’t.”

“And what about you? Do you care about all this, or do you just pull a trigger when you’re told to?”

“Don’t you?”

“When I have to. Not when I’m told to.”

“What if you’re told you have to?”

“Faith. I trust in faith.”

“You know, I really can’t tell when you’re trying to bullshit me, or just yourself. You people have some real issues. At least I know what’s wrong with me, you just live in a hazy world between reality and fantasy where everything’s possible, including saving the world by bombing it to hell. I didn’t think I’d be grateful for all the nightmares.”

“So you do have a conscience in the end?”

“Only I’m not proud about it. It doesn’t really help, you know. I consider it a luxury.”

“You should. Because you’re one cynical bas-

tard if I ever saw one.”

“I can’t wait to have this kind of conversation over Christmas dinner.”

“I bet you’re adopted.”

“I’d wish.”

She braked abruptly and pulled over in front of a small three-storey building with faux gypsum columns outside, cast in some vaguely greco-roman rhythm. Bullets had found their way through the gypsum and into the concrete, while flecks of chipped paint riddled the wide doors.

“We’re here,” said Nicole and stopped the engine.

Ethan replied with a yawn:

“I hope there’s a real bed.”

“I hope they have two rooms.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the vacancies.”

A man that appeared to be the hotel manager stepped through the doorway, dressed in a white linen shirt, smart black trousers and matching shoes, around his forties, tall, thin, almost gaunt. He smiled rather widely, a few nickel-cases showing. He bowed slightly before adding:

“Welcome to Olowo Hotel. Luggage?”

Ethan smiled and nodded towards Nicole, saying:

“Certainly, her.”

The hotel manager looked puzzled for a moment, then let out a polite little laugh, and ushered them inside.

“Coffee, or tea?” he said, and extended a hand to a couple of tables and a small bar.

“No, thank you,” said Nicole, and Ethan shook his head. He told him then:

“We need two rooms.”

The manager was already shuffling through the guestbook when he asked somewhat confused:

“You mean a double?”

Nicole sniggered behind Ethan, while he spoke slowly and surely, as if to a child, stressing each word:

“Two separate rooms with a single bed.”

The manager looked apprehensively at both of them for a moment, and then smiled assuredly.

“Certainly, sir, madam. Cash up front, please. Hotel policy. Five hundred,” he said, nodding to both of them. Ethan raised a brow but nevertheless pulled five hundred’s bills and paid. “Thank you. We’re happy to have you staying. Please, follow me,” the manager said and led them to the first floor, to their rooms. Each one a miniscule affair with a water basin and remarkably a proper bed. There was a common toilet at the end of

the hallway. The manager then said with almost unbridled pride:

“There are separate facilities for the ladies!”

“Fantastic. I wouldn’t want to bump into her,” Ethan said smiling ironically while Nicole seemed to ignore him.

The manager looked at them both once more fleetingly, opened his mouth to ask something but thought better of it and said nothing. He then straightened himself and said in business-like tones:

“Well, there is more press staying here. I hope you’ll enjoy your stay, even under the circumstances.”

“You mean the war?”

“The war will end some day, sir. But the mosquitoes, they never go out of fashion! The river, you see.”

Ethan grinned and nodded, shook his head and looked at Nicole who simply shrugged.

“Thank you very much,” Ethan said, while Nicole stared outside the hallway window onto the street below. The manager bowed again before adding:

“Ring the bell if you need me. I’ll be downstairs!”

Nicole asked Ethan without turning her gaze

away from the street:

“You think everyone else down there thinks the same?”

“Does it matter?”

“I forgot, nothing really does.”

“I need to sleep.”

She nodded, and shut the door behind her. Soon, she could hear Ethan snoring from across the hallway.

* * *

He woke up with a mild headache. There was still light pouring in from the small window. He felt his body ache from all the exertion the night before. He checked his wristwatch; it was almost four in the afternoon.

He vaguely remembered seeing a strange dream. The one thing he was certain about was that the dream hadn't been a nightmare. Curiously enough he remembered it had something to do with James. He itched in various places; he scratched reflexively and noticed the bites: mosquitoes. He washed his face and scrubbed some of the muck and dirt away, feeling a bit freshened and somewhat cleaner. He put on his clothes and tied his shoes with the usual haste of a professional soldier.

He picked up his key and his camera along

with the press card, and closed the door behind him. He went over to Nicole's room and knocked, but she didn't reply. He knocked again but didn't shout; she might be still sleeping he thought, and went down the stairs.

The hotel manager was serving coffee to some clients that looked quite foreign, blond-haired and red-faced. Evidently he was the sole proprietor, manager, and waiter. Probably noone else worked here anymore. He had simply, like others in the city, decided to stay, despite the war. Curiously enough, there was still money to be made even at a time and place such as this one. The manager took notice of him and waved from the table he was serving. He told him with a smile:

"Letter for you Mr. Owls, from Ms. Heurgot. A moment."

Ethan nodded and smiled thinly, thinking it strange Nicole had already left without waking him up. He noticed the foreigners, a man and a woman, looked at him vaguely but quickly resumed sipping their coffee silently. The hotel manager went behind his flimsy-looking counter and unlocking a small cabinet, gave Ethan a small envelope. Ethan was about to ask for an opener, when the manager promptly offered a simple kitchen knife which did the job just as well.

There was a small note inside the envelope; Nicole had to get in touch with a certain valuable contact of hers. She had written down a list of people and places where he should start asking questions. He immediately felt shut out, as if running errands on her behalf. Maybe it was less time consuming that way, or maybe she had other, work-related priorities. The Agency. What kind of operation where the Yanks really running down here? He had little idea about how these things worked. He decided he'd ask her some real hard questions about all this business when they met later that night at a shady place called 'Queen Madimba'. Until then, he had to make a call.

"Is there some place I can make a call in private?"

The manager rolled his eyes for a moment, then said with slight apprehension:

"For you, it is probably possible. You'd need to get over to Victoria Square, talk to whoever's in charge there. All landlines go through the military, you see."

Ethan nodded and smiled, before adding:

"I would know my way around. Is there a map I could use? I wouldn't want to end up in a mine-field or something now, would I?" he said and smiled, while the manager found the joke lacking

and simply gave Ethan a shoddy, trodden piece of paper that was a rough drawing of the relative locations of the hotel, the river, the city center and the harbor.

“Victoria Square is in the city center. Ask around if you need anything else. And I would like that back when you’re done,” said the hotel manager before adding:

“I lost my wife to a mine, only last year. It is no laughing matter.”

“Certainly. I was just.. Right, thank you,” Ethan said and walked out onto the street, which was mostly empty. Apart from the heat and the nearly debilitating moisture in the air, there was little to do other than peddle foodstuffs and alcohol to passing troops and patrols, either on or off duty. Kids would invariably pop in and out of sight, some playing catch or football, others trying to sell something they’d fished in the river.

The town seemed subdued; poor, but still living. Hurt, but not destroyed. His walk took him through a few streets he could barely recognise. Some of those were in his list, others were in fact nothing more than alleys or dirt paths. He decided to grab a bite at a stall selling fried fish.

While he ate, he noticed the peculiar silence. This was a city at war, in the front lines, but noth-

ing other than the presence of the military reminded him of that. There was no shelling, no gunfire, no sound of engines revving up and armor clamoring by. A city under siege, without walls or trenches, nothing but the river as a moat. It seemed like nothing would ever force the people to abandon it, except perhaps the river drying up.

He felt full after the first fish and drank a couple mouthfuls of beer. It felt like home for the barest moment: lukewarm and tasteless, just like the water in this town.

He then made his way straight to Victoria square where he could see a lot more soldiers, jeeps and trucks. It looked like every other building around the square had been taken over as barracks, storage or command center. The congregation of so many soldiers in one place looked like a staging area. Perhaps some kind of operation was about to begin.

As he approached a small tent near a guardpost, a soldier shouted at him something in Yoruba, without bothering to aim his rifle at him. Ethan held both hands high, one of them holding the press pass. The soldier squinted at it, and called one of his superiors, a sergeant by the looks of his stripes. The sergeant looked at Ethan with

puzzled disbelief:

“Reporter man?”

Ethan nodded and said:

“Richard Owls, London Times. I could gladly use a phone.”

“A telephone?”

The sergeant said something to the soldier and they broke down in laughter. Despite the complete lack of courtesy, the sergeant pointed at the small tent and said:

“Try the Captain,” and resumed what must have been a keen joke between himself and the guard on duty.

Ethan approached the tent where a rather small man with the insignia of a Captain was studying maps and a few sheets of reports, sitting down in a fold-up garden chair. On the small table, his service revolver lay in pieces, ready to be cleaned. Ethan cleared his throat and announced himself:

“Captain? Richard Owls, London Times. I’m sorry to bother you, but I do need to phone my office.”

The Captain looked up from his work briefly and barely registering Richard he pointed to a hand-crank magnetic phone. He told him then:

“Ask for Operations. Tell them to connect you to an outside operator and give him the num-

ber.”

“Right, thank you. Terribly sorry, really. I hadn’t expected this kind of lockdown.”

“Makes you wish you hadn’t left the office, doesn’t it?”

The captain smiled broadly, and Ethan replied with a nod. He asked for the operator and after giving the number, there was a small pause, and then some more silence before the silky voice of a woman came on the phone:

“Who would you like to speak to?”

Ethan hesitated for a moment before asking the captain:

“Captain, would you mind? It’s a sensitive call.”

“It’s my phone. I do mind. Get on with it or hang up, I don’t care.”

Ethan nodded, and having no other option went ahead:

“Ian Ruthers, please. Tell him it’s from the Nigerian desk.”

The voice on the other end sounded puzzled:

“Sir, do you know were it is you are calling?”

“I bloody know very well, get me Ruthers, just mention my name Richard Owls. And I’ll hold.”

There were a few moments of silence and then some hiss and the sound of lines mingling and

connecting. Finally, after almost half a minute Ian could be heard on the other side:

“Have you lost your mind? Calling from half-way around the world on an insecure line! What do you think this is, Whitehall?”

“I’m in a tent, borrowing a phone from a Nigerian captain. Listen, I need you to run a check. Nicole Heurgot, says she works for Virginia.”

“What the hell, Ethan? What’s with her? You don’t mean Langley, Virginia.”

“The one and the same. Listen, just let me know when you find out. A yes or no will do.”

“I guess I’ll have something by tomorrow night. Listen on the BBC. Tomorrow at 10. God, the paperwork you’re putting me through alone could kill me.

“Right.. How will I..?”

“Right, well. Off the top of my head, and I’m not saying we do this all the time, we’ll use the ‘Top of the Pops’ opening song. I know you hate the Beatles, so.. ‘Hey Jude’ seems fitting. Remember, opening song. And Ethan, I don’t know why exactly you’re asking this but it doesn’t sound good at all.”

“I know. I just hope I’m wrong.”

Dead men can't dance

The old man drained the last of the beer off the keg, and brought the bottle to Ethan's small table. There was some beer foam right at the mouth of the bottle, which the old man blew away with a whizzy puff, before settling it down on the table. He then looked at Ethan with wide, almost hazy, glassy eyes and said:

“He can smell you are trouble.”

Ethan shook his head and his stilted smile had the look of tasting salt about it. He drank another gulp of beer and asked the old man, “I didn't know trouble has a smell of its own,” trying to sound

non-chalant, unconvincingly enough.

“It doesn’t. It’s the smell of shit!” blared the owner with an almost accusing stare and suddenly broke down in laughter. The other two men followed suit, showing off hollowed out mouths and wrinkled, leathery faces worn through a life-time of being used to hardships of all kinds.

“And you’re full of it, Englishman. Who dem asking for trouble, days like these, but dem trouble, no?” said one of the two, while the owner chimed in himself again, “You can’t hide a pile of shit if you paint it gold, mister. It still smells, so do you. Your man, whoever he is, won’t be coming. Hope he didn’t take your money first.”

Ethan couldn’t manage a reply. Taken by surprise by their straightforward manner, he barely managed a grin while acceding to having being played like a fool:

“He did. I’m that transparent, am I?” he said, while all three men smiled and nodded. The one who hadn’t even spoken a word said then, “You dem English” smiled, shrugged and sipped his beer. The owner was sitting behind his counter, and tapping his hand with each word he said to Ethan, “What’s a white man doing in the middle of a war?” and added with a rather grim face, “It can’t be fishing now.”

Ethan took the hint, nodded almost reverentially, drank another gulp of beer, left another five pounder on the table and got up. As he stepped outside the door, he began to realise there was a lot more to what the old man had just said.

* * *

The rest of the leads proved to be dead ends as well; they all talked about a red cross caravan, and they had all heard about the attack. But nothing solid, nothing first hand. Those few shady people that made a living trading all sorts of information had either been laying too low to be found or had simply refused to deal; one of them had just left saying the whole thing was too hot. In any case, all the useful info about Andy boiled down to that he was indeed missing.

Soldiers on jeeps and foot patrols made their presence felt around the town while Ethan moved about; they asked him for his papers on more than one occasion. They had lists with names and photos, actively looking for people that the Nigerian government had one way or the other decided had been acting against their best interest: Soldiers of fortune, spies, people who made it their business to know all kinds of dangerous, possibly profitable things.

An English journalist casually roaming about Onitsha and asking people questions then could be all three things if his name or photo was on that list. It was a crude thing to do, using soldiers for field intelligence work, but then again he himself was running on pure luck and whatever ropes James was pulling. His cover was extremely thin, but he had no other option; it was only a matter of time before someone would notice he was nowhere to be found, and still he had nothing solid on Andy. At least, he thought to himself, they hadn't found a body yet.

The evening breeze brought the smell of river life to Ethan as he walked past a checkpoint under an old, anglican church. He stood there for a moment or so with real, keen interest as its small congregation poured outside, shuffling their feet with purpose: it would be curfew time soon. True enough, the church bell started to ring, forcing Ethan to look at his watch: half past seven. He would run a bit late for his meeting with Nicole.

He nodded with an uncertain smile at the soldiers motioning him to get off the street and hastily took off towards the river bank, quickly disappearing in the flimsy shade of a small shop alley. He could hear movement and shouts behind him; the military police was hurrying people

out of the streets and into their houses.

At the end of the alley he ventured a quick look behind him. Nothing. As he crossed an empty street, he noticed it was the same in every direction he gazed at: The natural denizens of city streets, dogs and cats alike, could barely be seen hiding away under alcoves, small balconies and porches. Pigeons and swallows were trudging along stained rooftops lazily, and even rats seemed attuned to the curfew, fleeing purposefully back into their shadowy nests wherever there were people left to harrow.

Then he noticed more movement near the river bank, jeeps and trucks moving along the length, while all the while tugboats putted away upstream. With a fleeting look he noticed a patrol coming his way. Across the street, he finally saw a sign that read "Madimba". He crossed the empty road with a casual walking pace, and pushed the door open. A flight of steps lead downward into a dimly lit cellar, hushed conversations and the faint but unmistakable sound of brass; jazz.

He closed the door behind him and carefully tread down the narrow steps. He then looked around, taking in the whole setting of the underground bar. It was elegantly decorated but crudely furnished; crammed but somehow every-

one seemed comfortably seated. The smell of sweat and smoke weighed heavy.

It was a small wonder that a place like that could be found hidden away amidst the forefront of a war, but there was an explanation for that as well; it was packed with foreigners. Europeans from the look and sound of them, almost down to the last one.

He then saw Nicole silently waving him over to a table near one corner of the establishment; a tall, lank black man was sitting beside her. After wading through tightly packed tables and customers, he pulled up the single empty chair and sat, addressing Nicole:

“Who is this?”

“This is Adu, Adu Nebdele. He’s going to help us get to Owerri.”

“First of all, I don’t like the fact we didn’t talk this over first. Why Owerri?”

Adu then spoke out of turn, just when Nicole was about to talk and bluntly said with a cultivated accent:

“I think your brother’s dead.”

“Who is this again?” said Ethan without even turning to acknowledge the man’s existence. Nicole replied with a calming voice, “I’ve known this man far longer than you, Ethan. You can trust

him, he's been more than useful in the past."

Ethan shook his head and sagged back on his chair. He flicked his gaze between Nicole and Adu, and said with a sickly grin:

"Can I now? What makes him such an expert on dead people?"

Nicole's face flashed red with slow-boiled anger and her piercing eyes met Ethan's with a decisive clash. Neither of them seemed willing to look away. Adu then drew himself closer to Ethan and said in a low-keyed voice, trying to sound condescending:

"I have a brother-in-law, works in the morgue. There's been lot of work lately."

Ethan spared a vehement look in Adu's direction that only seemed to stick for a moment or two. He then lowered his gaze and said after sighing:

"I need a drink."

Adu nodded and asked him casually:

"Scotch?"

"I thought there was a war going on," replied Ethan, a mocking expression on his face.

"Not if you're a white Englishman with pounds to spare. Anything particular?" asked Adu to which Ethan answered along with a wave of his hand, "I wouldn't go that far. Anything

other than rye would be good.”

Adu smiled thinly, nodded and got up. As he slowly made his way through the crowded tables towards the bar at the other end, Ethan told Nicole with ire in his voice:

“I don’t appreciate this. Who the hell is that?”

“He’s an associate. A valuable associate. Has been for the past three years. If you can’t trust him, you can’t trust me, and that would be a damn shame because I want us to find Andy. Alive. Maybe you’re having second thoughts about this,” said Nicole, nursing a barely touched glass of wine. Ethan almost erupted into a drowned out shout:

“Now hold on a minute! The last thing I need right now is some sort of lecture from the wife and all sorts of Agency bullshit!”

Nicole’s face had a serious, business-like look when she said, “Adu is a very well connected man. He keeps an uneasy balance between the two sides. I’ve been going in and out thanks to him ever since I’ve been operating here.”

“Which brings us to the question, what exactly are you working on here? And why did you drag Andy into this mess?”

“Listen, I really wish I hadn’t but that was his choice. It really was. I thought it would be rela-

tively safe. That was my mistake. Now, about the job..”

She let her voice trail off while the jazz filled the next few silent moments. Ethan shook his head and said through a tight, forced smile:

“Bloody right. A mistake. But not the last one.”

Their gazes remained locked like lovers in a quarrel; neither one seemed willing to let go, as if in a staring contest. Instead of passion though, there was brewing anger. When Adu returned with Ethan’s drink though, they looked away as if somehow slightly embarrassed.

“Thanks,” said Ethan with barely audible mutter, while Nicole silently sipped at her own glass of wine. Adu then told Ethan matter-of-factly:

“I can imagine you might be upset about this, but it’s good, solid information. Caucasian, English passport.”

“I’ll wait and see with my own two eyes,” Ethan replied and then said to Nicole accusingly, striking his finger at the table, “I’ve been running in circles all day, and you simply ask your man and it’s a done deal? Andy’s dead?”

The jazz song playing in the background reached a crescendo, sax and trumpets blaring with a virtuoso’s tenacity, easily drowning out the

mingled, hushed voices all around the 'Madimba'. Nicole looked at Ethan with watery eyes and said, "Andy's not dead. I believe he is not dead. But we have to know, don't we? To keep looking, we have to know."

Ethan drank a mouthful of the scotch. It made him flinch, his face sour. He nodded and said flatly:

"True enough. Besides, Owerri was down the road anyway. When do we leave?"

Nicole shrugged and said, "We can't leave tonight, not with the curfew in place. Tomorrow at dawn, at the earliest."

"So what does that mean, we're stuck here for the night as well?" said Ethan indignantly.

Adu's mouth widened into a knowing smile, showing an impressively bright set of teeth before he said:

"There's a small room with a cot on the top floor where you can spend the night. A guesthouse, if you like. Besides, the curfew isn't all that it's cracked up to be if you're white and willing to spend money."

"We could just bribe the MPs then? That simple?"

"If you find anyone sober. Things have been quiet for too long around here. They feel settled,

at ease. There's no fighting right now. Regrouping, they call it."

"But still.."

"Everyone needs to unwind. War is a tiresome affair, no? I'd thought you would know."

Ethan laughed despite himself and downed the rest of his scotch.

"Is this why this place is full of foreigners? Noone really bothers with the curfew? Because the scotch it serves is barely three years old. All it's good for is a pissing."

Adu nodded with a thin smile on his lips, and added:

"That's about right. Only it really is rye."

"Rye?"

"Old family recipe. There's a war going on, remember?"

Ethan didn't laugh at that last remark, despite Adu's brilliant smile. He looked at his emptied glass and asked Adu then with some puzzlement:

"Family recipe, you said? This place yours, then? This is what you do, sell drinks and work with the CIA?"

Adu knit his hands together and smiled, while Nicole sipped at her drink languidly, staring at Ethan. Adu answered with a careful, concise tone:

"Among other things. Whatever the reason,

we're here, and there are opportunities all around. It's a terrible thing, to waste an opportunity."

"I don't really like you. Or your kind."

"You mean businessmen?"

"No. Warmongers."

Nicole closed her eyes and said calmly:

"Ethan, please. No need for namecalling."

Adu smiled thinly before calmly retorting:

"This isn't about money, or profit. This is about survival. I could just as well imply that the British government is doing the same, trying to hold on to the oil contracts."

"We didn't start this war, you know."

"But there's only one outcome that suits you."

"That's politics."

"So they are politicians, but I'm a warmonger? It doesn't seem fair."

"I think as much, only from a different point of view."

"But do you really understand why I have to do all this? Stand in the middle, play all sides, balance things?"

"You're trying to tell me, you have no other option?"

"Precisely. Someone has to be the voice of reason in a very unreasonable affair," he said and grinned before adding with a shrug, "..war."

"I thought you were just selling info this way and that according to what suits the CIA."

"Or maybe what suits me. Even I can't tell sometimes," Adu said with a grin and looked at Nicole sideways for a moment. When she stared back he went on and added:

"You know where to look. My job is done."

Nicole shot him a fiery look and told him with icy deliberation:

"That's not what we agreed upon."

"It's not too late to reach another agreement. Perhaps it would be much more fair if Mr. Whittmore had a say in this."

"How much?" blurted Nicole with a flustered face, while Ethan frowned and asked rather dully:

"How much about what, exactly?"

"Triple the usual," said Adu casually, casting a fleeting gaze at Ethan who repeated his question, this time a lot more convincingly:

"The fuck what for?"

"Keeping his mouth shut," Nicole said briskly. Adu replied with a annoying grin on his mouth:

"Indeed. That would be very bad for both of you, wouldn't it? In more than one way. Isn't that right, Ms. Heurgot?"

"I thought you said you could trust this man."

"Trust is a rare commodity these days. The

price, and the client, are.. Flexible,” said Adu with a sharp, shiny grin.

Ethan locked eyes with Adu. He had a look of calm determination about him, eyes glinting in the dim light of the oil lamp. The black man's grin turned into a thin line and a deep frown appeared on his face when without warning Ethan reached for his ankle and pulled his combat knife with one superbly fluid motion.

Nicole's eyes widened with shock while Adu's hands were already upending the table. She only had time enough to cry “Wait!” but Ethan was already off his chair, trying to sidestep the table. He went for Adu's arm with a quick jab with the knife, but he missed for an inch or so. The upturned table hadn't slowed him down, and he was right behind Adu who was already thrusting people aside, edging his way towards the bar.

The sudden commotion made people turn their heads in a snap. Nicole jumped off her chair and tried to grab Ethan by the waist. Her initial surprise had made her slow to act and she missed him by a few inches, grasping nothing but air.

Within moments, Adu had cleared his way through the tables, smashing glasses and brushing aside stunned customers. Ethan was only a few steps behind, his knife in hand. A quick nod

and a moment later, the bartender was leaning behind the counter. When saw the movement he instinctively rushed towards the ground in an audacious tackle. Their feet connected; Adu tripped and suddenly fell sideways at the exact moment when a small cloud of wooden splinters, smashed tiles and pieces of cloth flew right above Ethan's head. The booming sound of a shotgun echoed like thunderclap around the small bar; mayhem ensued.

Shouts and cries mingled with the sudden rush of screeching tables and chairs as the panicked customers fled the 'Madimba'. Clicking metallic sounds alerted Ethan that the shotgun was being reloaded, even as Adu had rolled on his back and turned around to jump on Ethan.

With his sudden rush he had managed to pin Ethan's knife hand, but his grip was lax, his body badly placed, vulnerable. Ethan managed to swing a punch right in Adu's face with his free hand; it barely shook him. A couple more quick jabs had little effect other than Adu replying with a fist right in Ethan's stomach, grunting instinctively as he flexed his muscles.

Ethan tried to get a hold on Adu with his legs, catch him in a vice. He couldn't get a good grip, as Adu was piled up more pressure on his knife hand,

trying to wrestle the knife away. His other hand went for Ethan's neck and met with opposition. While they grappled on the floor, Ethan heard a loud shot without warning, then another and one more, all in quick succession.

The crowd rushing outside reacted to the shots with a louder burst of bewildered, panicked shouts. They were still shouting when he heard the thud of a body falling limp against the floor, the sound of smashed glass following its way down.

They were both surprised and for an instant Adu's attention waned as he shot a reflexive look behind him, where the bartender should have been holding the shotgun. In that single moment his grip became just a tad more lax and allowed Ethan to slip his knife hand away with a sudden, violent shove.

Losing the grip on the knife hand, Adu tried to roll over on the floor, put some space between them. He tried to put his back against the bar, while he reached for someplace out of Ethan's sight. While he swung his body around, trying to catch Adu from an ankle or a leg, he saw Adu's face suddenly go slack, all the tension vanishing in an instant. His hand stayed for the merest moment still in the air, and then another shot was

heard.

This time he saw Adu's whole body flex, quiver and shudder all in the blink of an eye before it fell limp against the bottom of the bar. Blood trailed down from the hole in his shaven head, now grossly disfigured, the cracked skull penetrating the skin. Nicole's shouts reawakened Ethan who stood there transfixed for the merest second, mesmerized from the puzzled look in Adu's eyes:

"Go! We have to run, now!"

Ethan stood up, sheathed his knife and ran towards the stairs right behind Nicole. He told her then, out of breath:

"Why, did you shoot him dead? I had him."

"What an idiot! He was reaching for a gun."

"I didn't see any gun," Ethan said when he stepped outside. He could see a few of the customers shouting for any patrol to come to their help. From the corner of his eye he could see some pointing at him. Nicole dragged him along behind one of the walls of 'Madimba' and told him in a very strong manner, evidently quite upset:

"You can thank me later, you dolt! What kind of an asshole jumps on an informant like that? Without provocation as well!"

"Without.. He was bloody going to tell on us! Who knows whom to! I was protecting us! You!"

“Jesus! Just.. Fuck!”

“Listen, I think we need to make ourselves scarce. We’ve got to leave now, tonight.”

“Oh, you think?”

Shouts and the sound of boots and clattering helmets came from the street behind them. Some of the customers were talking wildly in accented English and French, while an authoritative voice wanted them to shut up.

“They’re trying to explain the shots and all. We can’t go back to the hotel right now,” said Ethan, licking his lips from his sweat.

“Any brighter ideas, then?”

“The river. Let’s try the river.”

“The river’s crawling with soldiers!”

“It’s full of water as well! We’ll get on a boat, or lay low someplace until things die down.”

“Die down? Are you- never mind, no time to argue. Go!” she said as the patrol leader shouted orders to his men, still trying to glean an understanding from the terrified white folk.

They both ran towards the river bank, trying to use alleys and shadowy paths through the irregular maze of Onitsha’s neighborhoods. Behind them, they could hear echoes of bellowing officers and the muffled sound of boots running. At each corner they would stop for a breath, then

silently nod and keep going with the same pace. Anxious glances revealed wary eyes from the city folk peeking behind smudged windows and decrepit walls. They kept running and before long the empty streets gave way to a wild, lush vegetation.

Dusk had already fallen, and with the riverside in plain view, they laid low near a thick bush. Nicole was out of breath, her muscles burning from the effort. She bent over and weighed herself on her knees with sagged shoulders. Ethan knelt beside her and surveyed the river bank for a moment. She said then with pain written on her face:

“That’s it. I’m beat,” and a short breath later added, “Can’t go on like this.”

Ethan replied with a nod, quite unaffected by the physical strain:

“Right. I wasn’t thinking about running all the way to Owerri anyway.”

Nicole laid down on her back and found in her just a breath of laughter before she replied, still grimacing from the exhaustion:

“Should’ve thought about that before.”

“Your valuable associate,” Ethan said icily, “was going to sell us out.”

“What the fuck do you know, anyway?” came

Nicole's sharp, almost vicious answer, before she added with a sigh, "Real smart. Brilliant."

"I know we need transportation," said Ethan dryly, staring at the Niger's steady, gentle flow. A moment later he added with a vehement grin, "Do you have any brilliant ideas you'd like to share?"

Nicole shot him a weird look, her eyes all lit up. She suddenly sprung back on her feet, and said "Actually," and then added as if it was her God-given right to do so, "I really do."

* * *

The small river barge was dominated by a rather large stack of barrels and crates. Some had been spray painted with numbers and letters in the same pattern, while others were completely devoid of any markings. Most seemed battered and frayed, while few seemed brand new. As the last light of the day fell around them, it cast a blurred, murky reflection of the uneven heap on the water rolling lazily past the flimsy, almost flat hull.

"You see," said the Swede scratching his reddened beard as if deeply ponderous, "you have to have a.. How do you say that?"

"Perspective?", asked Ethan and drew on his cigarette. The sound of crickets and buzzing mosquitos were drowned by the monotonous 'put-put' of the two-stroke motor that somehow

managed to barely propel the barge.

The Swede replied with a smile that took a moment or two to form on his sunburnt face. He then added as he peeked behind Ethan at the helmsman, a boy in his teens:

“Perspective. See, Muembe there lacks perspective. He just wants to feed his family. Never asks a thing.”

“I don’t think he’d been working for you if he did.”

“Well, of course not. If anyone did, I’d be out of business,” he said turning back to face Ethan with a thin, gentle smile on his face. Ethan nodded and said nothing. His gaze wondered for a moment before it fell on the cargo. He asked then the Swede:

“And you just run up and down the river like that? No questions asked by anyone?”

“Sometimes, some do. But I can be very persuasive. Plus, the Nigerian Navy is more or less, a common joke around these parts,” he said and shook his head wildly.

Ethan drew on his cigarette slowly and said, “You’re saying this is easy? Is that why you don’t even bother with a canvas or some camouflage?”

“A canvas would draw even more attention. If I do meet a boat on the river, then they’ll probably

think I'm just running a shipment for the Army. The river is so plentiful, see? Fishermen fish, and I haul," the Swede replied, waving his arms about.

"How much does this pay then?" asked Ethan with a frown on his brow.

"Are you looking to get into the business? Because I'd hate the competition," replied the burly man, laughing heartily to himself.

"Not really, no. I'm kind of into the business myself, but I'm not a middleman."

"Ah. Mercenary then?" he asked with a smile.

"Slightly different. Though I can't be sure there's a real difference," replied Ethan with a somewhat weary look.

"Royal Marine!" the Swede exclaimed, pointing wildly with a finger.

"For God's sake, is it that bloody obvious?" asked Ethan slightly irritated. The swede leaned toward him and said, nodding with his head once so often:

"The knife. You seem calm but your body is tense. You keep an eye all the time. One hand on the cigarette, one near the knife. Edgy but cool. Not regular british army. I can tell. They are-"

Nicole then appeared from the small galley below and said in a flat, tired voice, "He's full of shit. I told him who you are," and then she sat

down on the deck, crossing her legs before adding "Must be going bored out of his mind."

"I'm just trying to make your friend here feel at ease," the Swede said throwing his hands in the air, acting the insulted part. Ethan drew a last whiff and threw his cigarette in the water before asking with smoke coming out of his mouth and nose:

"We could have come straight to this guy, why did we-"

Nicole interjected with a suddenly conversational tone:

"We needed to check with Adu first. We didn't know whether the Swede would even have a delivery today. See, Adu and the Swede are partners, so to speak," she said with a gleeful smile and fluttered her eyes only for Ethan to see, before she threw her head backwards to gaze at the still faint stars in the sky.

His face sat in a frown for a moment or so, before looking sideways at Nicole and then back again at the Swede who was looking upwards and bobbing his head slightly as if counting in his head. He checked his wristwatch; it was almost ten o'clock.

"Twenty, twenty-five thousand pounds. Give or take," said the Swede suddenly. Ethan did not

have to act surprised or impressed when he said:

“Bloody hell. Where do they get that kind of money?”

“That,” the Swede said waving a hand dismissively, “is not my concern.”

“I mean, how do they get hold of that kind of exchange. The exchange rate is ridiculous, not to mention the exorbitant inflation.”

“Well, I’m not an expert, but the French economy isn’t that bad.”

“The who?” said Ethan with genuine puzzlement even though there was nothing wrong with his hearing.

“Your friend isn’t exactly up to date on this war, is he?” said the Swede to Nicole who simply shrugged.

“I thought that.. Never mind. I’m tired. I really I am. Let’s not have this kind of discussion right now. I’d rather listen to the radio,” said Ethan in a very natural way.

“There’s one down below. I am the host, I’ll go get it.”

Not a moment after the Swede went below, Nicole quickly turned her head and shot Ethan a look that overflowed with a raging intention for murder. She hissed, rather than said:

“Moron.”

Ethan replied calmly, almost non-chalantly:

“I won’t stab this one, don’t worry.”

Her nostrils flared with anger instinctively and right before she could retort, the Swede came back up, with the radio in hand. He tuned the dial first and then turned it on. Intense brass sounds and pompous drums came from the small speaker, while the Swede seemed instantly gratified judging from the grin on his face. Ethan asked him then:

“Could you tune that to the BBC?”

“You don’t like Wagner?”

“I thought the Germans had this craze about Wagner.”

“I thought he was Austrian.”

“Never mind that. ‘Top of the Pops’ is on now.”

“‘Top of the Pops’? Seriously? You want to listen to that, now? Here?” said Nicole.

“It won’t hurt or anything, will it? I’m a big fan of the Stones.”

The Swede shrugged and turned the dial, while the selector remained on the AM setting. Through a flurry of white noise and incoherent sounds, a clear voice could be heard from the speaker albeit with some static but nevertheless with surprisingly good reception:

“..so until they’re ready, let’s listen to their latest single to hit the record stores, ‘Hey Jude!’”

A loud applause was heard and the announcer’s voice was cut crisply, while the clapping faded away and soon the voice of Paul McCartney came softly through.

Ethan’s brow became a deep furrow. He flexed his hands and looked at Nicole with a calm, steady gaze. She felt his stare upon her after a moment and looked at him with a quizzical expression. He shook his head slightly and simply said:

“I just hate the Beatles,” after which suddenly and least expectedly, the young boy at the helm smiled brightly and sang along, “..naa, na na na naaa, hey Jude...”

* * *

Sometime into the night, they had travelled further down the river, mostly thanks to the stream rather than tiny motor. Nicole had been sleeping soundly for a few hours. But Ethan could not, now that he knew Nicole had been lying to him. What was worse, he couldn’t read what was the truth between her lies. She was an excellent shot, and she was well connected. Her agenda though still remained conspicuously well-hidden. Was she simply working for herself, like the Swede? But to what end? Did she really want

to find Andy as much as he did? Thoughts like these - and some even worse - tugged at his mind like ropes, bogging him down in a spiral with no real answers, no clear exit.

He felt it was dangerous to stick close to Nicole. But she had saved him more than once so far. Whatever her methods and her real purpose, maybe she had put all that aside for Andy's sake. Maybe she'd explain later, maybe she had as much trouble trusting him as he did her. Andy was all that mattered, and soon - he hoped - he'd meet the corpse of some other unlucky bastard, not Andy's. Nicole couldn't really be trusted, but he had to admit to himself that she had gotten them this far. Andy was all that mattered, and that was what would keep him focused. That, and keeping a wary eye on her.

The warmth of the night earlier had given its place to a fresh, wet breeze that helped him stay awake despite the small hours. The Swede had helped with some sort of home-made vodka and stories about making even more money when the war would finally end: in the poor light the single lamp offered them, he'd shown him sketches and graphs about cables and telecommunications, satellites and whatnot, stuff that Ethan barely acknowledged they existed. Their little discussion

was interrupted by the boy who spat out a glob of some sort of local chewing tobacco variety and said something in what must have been a local Igbo dialect.

He caught their attention and turning to look, they saw a flare lazily falling down, fading away with a trail of smoke behind it. Then another one shot up in the opposite direction further down from the east bank and they could almost see a small band of armed men waiting on a sandy patch of dirt.

“That’s them, two flares, first over the river, the second over land,” said the Swede, eagerly telling the boy in what sounded like very bad Igbo to cut the engine. As the boy complied, he went to the helm and let the stream carry them slowly towards the lowered east bank.

“And the best part is, I don’t have to off-load anything. They do all the work,” he said and pointed at the small group of men who were now holding a few lit lanterns and waving a torchlight to pin-point their location. The more they approached, the clearer it became not all of them were really men. Most were actually the same age the Swede’s helmsman was, and some looked shorter, skinnier, every bit younger than the boy.

“They sent the boys to do a boy’s work,

no?” said the Swede smiling thinly before shaking Nicole gently on the shoulder and waking her up. In a heartbeat or two she was up, and after a couple of deep breaths and a stretch could have fooled anyone that she had slept for almost half a day. Ethan then asked the Swede, while Nicole bent slightly over the rim of the boat and splashed some water on her face:

“And they’ll take us to Owerri?”

“I wouldn’t know about that, but there’s a good chance. I can’t think of a reason they won’t. For a price, of course.”

“I kind of left almost everything back at the hotel in Onitsha. We are sort of short of cash.”

“Even a fiver is worth a month’s food down here. You’ll pass off as a rich man in Biafra,” the Swede replied, and Nicole added after a cough:

“There’s always other ways to pay, food and drugs being the highest in demand. And then there are the services.”

“Services? Can’t think there’s much office space in demand right now.”

“Are you really that thick, or is this your first war behind the trenches? Prostitution. Very commonplace.”

“I thought the Biafrans are hitting that pretty hard.”

"If you mean hard-ons, that's true," the Swede said with a sly grin that almost made him look rather slimy all of the sudden.

They felt the boat settle on the wet sand with ease, and the boy jumped outside holding a flimsy, worn rope that filled the role of a mooring line of sorts. One of the boys wearing fatigues from the waist down, seemingly accustomed to the process, found a nearby mangrove and tied the rope around it. Then a man barked a couple of orders and the boys laid down their weapons and formed a sort of antline, carefully treading up to the boat where two of them had already begun unloading the cargo.

The man in charge wore a full set of fatigues and even sported a red beret. When Ethan and Nicole jumped off the boat, he immediately asked them, making sure with a wave of his hand that a couple of rifles were already aiming at them:

"Who dem they now?" to which the Swede replied casually:

"Looking to get into Owerri. Looking for a Red Cross man. I've done business with her. Him, I've just met."

"Ask the Red Cross, then," the man said with a face that signified hostility.

"The Red Cross lost a caravan. Would you

know anything about that?”

“Do I look like the Red Cross, englishman?” said the man with a sudden, wide grin, barely able to hold a laugh.

“Alright, we just want you to get us to Owerri.”

“What dem for?” asked the man, crossing his arms.

“We need to take a look at a corpse,” said Nicole rather bluntly, almost angrily.

The man shrugged and nodded, before adding in a quite plain fashion:

“Heard stranger things.”

He then shouted a few words that must have been names, because two boys settled down a crate they were carrying and came over to him. A short deliberation later, and after he had pointed at Ethan and Nicole quite fervently, they picked up their weapons and motioned with an awkward, mixed expression of confusion, fear and faked bravado to follow them. The man asked Ethan then:

“Rolex? Tag?”

“No, but it’s eighteen karat gold anyway,” Ethan replied and unfastened it from his wrist, passing it over to the man and giving him an unpleasant look that seemed to go completely unno-

ticed. The man weighed the clock in his hand first and then asked Ethan with a rather serious tone:

“And her?”

“What do you mean? If this doesn’t seem enough, then-”

“I don’t want her money,” he said and licked his lips provocatively. Nicole shook her head, while the Swede gave his flask of vodka a swig, giggled and snorted.

“Now, wait a minute!” said Ethan in what sounded like a poor attempt at passing for the guy with all the men and the guns. He was about to reach for his ankle knife when Nicole burst into laughter, and said in-between:

“I mean, where’s that vaunted, sense of humor, huh? Jesus, Ethan, you take everything too seriously.”

The man nodded and extended his hand in what seemed a genuine gesture, motioning the boys to lower their guns as well.

“Ms. Heurgot and I have met in the past. I thought it was strange to meet again under so similar circumstances?”

“I wasn’t searching for a corpse back then, Yenkele,” said Nicole, shaking her head.

“No, but you looked just as wonderful and sleepless,” Yenkele replied with the tiniest hint of

a bow.

“You can tell?” said Nicole, with a smile and a nod. Ethan asked Yenkele in all seriousness, “Can I at least have my watch back then, if your friend would be so kind?” to which he received the frank answer, “Oh, I’m keeping the watch. War contribution.”

“Ah, I see. Any more surprises?” Ethan said with an almost shrill, irate voice.

“I’m all out of vodka,” said the Swede and everyone let out a small laugh, except for Ethan, who couldn’t help looking at Nicole like she had stabbed him in the eye.

“Come, let’s walk over to the truck.”

“Opel?” asked Nicole with hands in her pockets, Ethan walking a few steps behind her.

“Unimog from Angola,” replied Yenkele and nodded enthusiastically. Nicole then said, “Going up in the world, I see.”

Soon they were sitting inside the cabin of the truck and the last of the cargo had been loaded. The Swede was waving goodbye as he and the boy turned the boat around and headed upstream, when Yenkele started the engine with a powerful rev that blanked out everything for a few seconds. When the noise died down, he asked Nicole:

“Where do I drop you off?”

"The morgue," said Ethan uninvited, and Nicole nodded. There was a strange look of bewilderment on Yenkele's eyes that quickly gave its place to a mild indifference, when he said:

"I thought you were joking about the corpse."

* * *

The morgue's pale blue-white neon lights made even the living stand out as if they had been just as cold dead as the corpses filling it. The whole cooling chamber was actually reserved for important people, like officials, dignitaries, and mostly foreigners. Somehow to the Biafrans it was really important that a dead foreigner - perhaps a journalist or a UN official or a priest with inordinate amounts of belief in mankind - received all due care when the time came: a morgue, a funeral, a tombstone. The rest of the normal people could just die wherever they liked, but not the foreigners.

"We keep them here, until their relatives and governments are notified. Most are claimed, and we arrange the transportation of the body through the Red Cross, sometimes the UN. Some though, stay here forever," said the doctor in charge. Nicole asked then, "You can keep a corpse indefinitely?"

"No, I mean they get buried here, in Biafra.

We can't keep anyone more than two weeks. Not a lot of room, anyway. But this is a remarkably equipped facility. The bodies are kept in cold storage," he said with a slightly awkward smile. Ethan said bluntly, impatiently:

"Will you just, show us the corpse?", to which the doctor nodded and led the way towards a specific slot, while Ethan added "Un-fucking-believable. It's like a bloody farmer's market, isn't it?". He wiped his mouth without a need, suddenly feeling nervous despite the fact that he really believed this corpse was simply a useful mistake from which they could move on. Still, something inside ate at him. A quick gaze at Nicole told him that odd feeling came from her. The question of why she had lied to him gnawed his mind.

"Ready?" asked the doctor, to which Ethan retorted:

"You're not very good at this, you know that, don't you?"

"A doctor is supposed to tend to the living, sir," the doctor said apologetically, and continued, "I'm only saying that because the sight is particularly.."

"Just get on with it, yes, please," said Ethan and he pulled the handle on the small door, opening it carefully, almost reverently. He slid out the

stainless bed with care, revealing the badly charred body of a man laying almost comfortably on his back, with a bullet-ridden chest almost torn to pieces. Nicole gasped at the sight instantly and her face furrowed, while Ethan couldn't help wondering at how anyone could identify this man with any amount of certainty. The doctor spoke then in a professional, easy voice:

"White caucasian male, judging from the shape of the hips and the cranium. Large entry and exit wounds on the chest probably from a high-powered rifle. Body stance indicates the fire was irrelevant to the man's death. Two gold fillings melted away, both on the right frontal wisdom teeth. A broken clavícula, an older wound, possibly as a child."

The doctor paused, as if waiting for something from either Ethan or Nicole, but they both remained silent for more than just a moment. The doctor felt compelled to ask:

"Does this man seem to be the one you're looking for?"

Nicole broke down in sudden tears, sobbing like a little girl then and nodded furiously even as the doctor tried to show her the burnt off personal effects that were found on the body: Andy's switchblade, his steel-cased watch with their fa-

ther's signature on them, and a badly burnt but still somewhat readable passport. It was all there, this looked exactly like Andy's body.

Ethan stood silent, while Nicole took a step back. He took a good, hard look at the charred body lying in front of him. Nicole placed her hand on her mouth, and sobbed quietly, respectfully, before whispering, "Oh, God.. Andy.." . Ethan looked at the doctor, and then at the body once more, from head to toe, vainly trying to find a sign of life in that piece of charcoal lying in front of him.

He looked at Nicole then with a curious look, as if he had never seen that woman before in his life. His brother's wife, he reminded himself. Something very human inside pushed him to hold her in his arms gently, offer a crying shoulder, while a part of his mind raced in the completely opposite direction. And that part of his mind was the part that was usually right about basic things, like keeping out of trouble, dodging bullets and gunfire. Instinct made the hair on his back suddenly rise, a chill went down his spine when the doctor's words rang once more in his mind.

The medical report; the wisdom teeth. He could see the doctor idly fiddling with some sort of report on his writing pad. He caught a glance

of him looking back. The doctor tried his best at smiling uncomfortably before fixing his attention once more in the writing pad. Ethan's eyes looked around the morgue and flipped a few pages in recent memory; no X-ray machine.

That same bone, but no incisions. That very same bone, since they were thirteen years old. He shot Nicole another weird, expectant look. He asked himself then how she could not see it for herself. Unless, he thought, she could, and she did. Because she must have known as well, and that only meant she was taking him for a fool. A damn near-sighted, forgetful fool.

His heart must've skipped a beat when he heard the doctor ask him rather hesitantly:

"Is this your brother then?"

He cleared his throat and closed his eyes for a moment. He drew a deep breath and said with a reluctant, shy voice, even as Nicole threw herself into another fit of sobs:

"Who do we talk to about the funeral?"

Blood thin as water

“I’m deeply sorry for your loss,” said Father Likembe and nodded solemnly. He struck Ethan as a man of integrity and good will. His words sounded true enough, so Ethan obliged a sincere reply:

“Thank you, father,” he said and nodded pensively, suddenly lost in thought, his eyes fixed beyond the mass of people waiting for a meal. There was a peaceful murmur in the air, rarely broken by the sound of crying children. The people that had gathered weren’t restless at all. He had been expecting something of a riot, and this orderly manner fascinated him. Nicole must’ve thought he was still trying to come to grips when she took

him gently by the arm and said to the priest with a tiny shake of her head:

“If you need anything father, please.. Anything at all..”

Father Likembe’s mouth formed into a gracious smile before he replied, “I need this war to end, nothing more.”

Nicole nodded skeptically before the lank Igbo priest continued:

“We could always use an extra hand or two. Another couple of mouths to feed are, as you can see, just a drop in the ocean.”

He gestured at the small throng of people, mostly mothers with their children, as well as old men and quite a few disabled or injured men. Some of those had the stare of a wounded tiger, but for most the truth was that mines, shells, and bullets are quite oblivious to a man’s allegiance and unable to discriminate. They had simply been unlucky, and with a bitter smile to himself, Ethan thought that whole sordid affair reeked of bad luck.

“I can only hope you will consider it. I’d hate to force anything upon you, but do not forget, your brother died trying to keep others from such a fate,” said Father Likembe, trying to sound comforting and encouraging but with little success this

time; his words sounded more like a standard, ready-made speech.

Nicole sipped her coffee from a tin and said with a slight dose of uncertainty, careful to meet Ethan's gaze casually:

"I think I'll stay on, father. I don't know for how long, but I feel I should. I can't speak for Ethan, but I'll help."

Ethan caught that gaze and remained expressionless for a moment or two. He was still trying to discern the from truth in her eyes, her voice, her face, but he had proven quiet inept at it so far. It helped him though being constantly unsure of her; it enhanced his feelings of being distraught, disoriented, confused and wary at the same time - because Nicole probably thought he was acting weird because of Andy's death. And that should help him find out why she wanted him to think Andy was dead.

The priest smiled thinly and crossed his palms as if in prayer:

"That's always good to hear," he said with evident joy in his voice before adding in a more sombre, well-practiced, even tone:

"I can understand your grief would only be compounded in such a place."

He then looked at Nicole knowingly and

added, while Ethan furrowed his brow just barely:

“Nicole has been doing this for a long time, it’s part of who she is. It’s not an easy life, especially for someone like you, I would imagine,” Father Likembe said, clearing his throat and straightening his back at the same time. He leaned closer to Ethan who was sitting to his left and said with a clean, hearty voice as if preaching:

“Do not feel unwanted or unwelcome, my son. It would be for the best if you coped with this in your own terms, in your own manner. I know your heart is in the right place, but your soul needs to heal away from all this misery.”

Nicole looked at Ethan with a warm gaze, her lips pursed together in a show of sympathy. Ethan glanced at the mass of refugees sitting in large rough benches made out of trees. He nodded then and said:

“You mean I’m responsible for these poor bastards, right? That’s what a soldier does, is it not?”

Father Likembe shook his head with a deep frown, his voice calm and quiet:

“I never said that, Ethan. I mean well, I simply think this isn’t the right place or way for you to mourn.”

Nicole searched for Ethan’s face with her

own, a set of begging, weary eyes fluttering frantically:

“Andy would have stayed. Isn’t that right?”

The gall of that woman, Ethan thought to himself.

“Yes he would have. But that’s not the issue, is it? You think I’m trouble, the both of you.”

“I think you are troubled my son, and nothing more.”

“Well, if it’s all the same to you then, I’m staying too.”

Nicole’s eyes flashed and went wide for the tiniest moment, before a thin smile formed on her face. She glanced at the priest and said then:

“If it’s alright with Father Likembe, then. Still, you shouldn’t stay just because you think Andy would have wanted you to take his place. You are different people, there’s nothing wrong to that. You can still help in other ways, Ethan. There’s no shame in going home.”

“Were’ different people. We were different people, Nicole. Get used to it,” Ethan said hoarsely, got up from his chair and walked away into the crowd, looking hurt and irritated. Nicole shouted his name but he did not turn. When it seemed as if she’d go after him, Father Likembe took her by one hand and shook his head, his face

turned suddenly worried, fearful.

“Don’t push him,” he said unevenly, while Nicole answered with a purposeful voice, “I’m not sure he is convinced. This isn’t like him at all.” Father Likembe’s eyes narrowed, his voice instinctively lowered to a whisper:

“I thought you were married to his brother. You’ve hardly met the man. Have you..?” He raised an eyebrow and fixed his glasses with one hand in a very bad attempt at conspiracy, only to have Nicole look at him sideways with a mock look of hurt and a sly grin.

“I don’t work like that. And it wouldn’t have worked on him, either.”

“How so?” said the priest looking at Ethan from afar with a penetrating, curious gaze.

“Because he loves his brother, if nothing else,” said Nicole, her face twisted with unwanted approval. Father Likembe closed his eyes and shook his head feverishly. He licked a drop of sweat on his upper lip, and said in hushed, angst-ridden tones”

“I am a bad liar. I can’t keep lying to this man. Why is he so important?”

“He isn’t. But he’s prodding where he shouldn’t be. I’ve already lost valuable time, not to mention men, simply to get him off our backs,

father. So have some respect for the people in your care, play along, and we'll keep the food and the medicines coming."

"Alongside the guns, the bullets, and the shells?" asked the father, his hands nervously tracing the emptied tin cup of coffee in front of him, his eyes lost somewhere on the surface of the table.

"It's hard to win a war empty-handed," replied Nicole, her eyes discreetly following Ethan around the crowd, as he had taken it upon himself to hand out biscuits to all the children. He seemed relaxed, smiling out of sympathy, but he didn't look aloof.

"I fear I've already lost my war," said the priest taking off his glasses and placing them in his shirt's pocket. Nicole turned to face him with a sudden twist, as if her interest had been piqued out of nowhere in particular.

"What war was that again?"

"Against the devil. Against evil," he said and breathed deeply before he continued, "against the lesser, dark side of our souls," said the priest with eyes closed, hands lightly massaging his bald head.

"It's getting to you, isn't it? All this," said Nicole and made a small circle with one hand. She drank a sip of coffee and said, eyes level

with the priest's, "I hope you're not having second thoughts about our working relation."

"It would be too late, wouldn't it?" the father replied with consternation. She then got up before she told him earnestly, without a hint of malice or threat in her voice:

"I wouldn't like you to force my hand, but the way things are turning out, how could you let these people starve to death? You're only doing what you have to, father."

"But at what cost?" he replied with weariness.

"What's a life worth to you, father?" she asked him, her face intensely sweet and welcoming. Father Likembe looked her in the eye with a pained look and said in a trembling voice:

"How I wish it were that simple."

She smiled then mischievously and told him in a casual tone of voice:

"Don't fret about it. I'll know what to do with Ethan in the morning. And father?"

"Something more?" he asked resignedly.

"Don't do anything stupid. Think of the children," she said flatly and walked away casually.

* * *

It was the heat and the sweat that made sleep that night a particularly uncomfortable, bothersome affair. But it was knowing that Nicole had

been lying to him probably from the start and perhaps about everything, made it impossible for Ethan.

He opened his eyes and checked his watch under the dim moonlight; quarter past three. It was a wet, warm, and unusually clear night without a cloud nearby; even the weather likes to play tricks sometimes, he thought to himself.

He raised his head and blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to what little light shone through the shadows of the mangroves surrounding the catholic mission. He got up and leaned to the window, resting both his elbows on the sill. Most of the refugees had remained; a few pregnant mothers shared tents with other families, while the rest simply slept on the ground, sharing blankets, mats, rugs and pillows.

A faint lamp light shone from a hut next to the church across from the small barn-turned-warehouse where Ethan had been sleeping. It was the priest's hut, the same man who tried to convince him to leave, just like Nicole did.

Ethan scowled for a moment before he put on his trousers carefully, without so much as a sound. He kept his eyes fixed on the priest's hut, noticing the movement of a shadow now and then, the flicker of the flame. Someone was working late,

and he needed to know who and on what.

He strapped his combat knife in its sheath around his leg, and jumped outside through another window on the far right, covered in the shadows of a thick, tall mangrove. He almost landed on top of a family, all hunched together like siblings. He then carefully made his way through the tents and makeshift beddings, always careful to keep hiding in the shadows. He moved quietly, crouched low, his eyes fixed on the ground so as to keep the white in his eyes from giving him away. And that was because he was certain Nicole, and probably the priest as well, kept a wary eye out for him.

When he was close enough to the hut, he crossed a patch of dirt road quickly, careful to tread lightly and without sound. He flicked his gaze around him, his back on the wall; he couldn't see anyone up and about. But amidst all the light snoring and laboured breathing of the refugees, he thought he could hear the familiar voice of Nicole. She spoke french, in curt, small bursts of words.

He took a few steps closer to the small opening that served as a window, and tried to focus, remember what little french he'd picked up at school, but it was no use. The thought occurred

to him that perhaps it wasn't just his bad knowledge of french.

He sat and listened some more, and saw some kind of pattern; Nicole was uttering many words repeatedly, in a staccato fashion. She wasn't talking, he realised; she was reading something from a piece of paper, a series of words, possibly numbers as well.

She was reading some sort of code, in French nonetheless. When she would stop transmitting, he decided he'd go in and have a more or less civilized chat that should explain a few things. And then he heard a thin, almost wailing voice shout something in Igbo and instantly knew someone had seen him.

"Mma! Kushi! Onye oshi! Kushi!" shouted the small child and instantly half the camp practically sprang upright on their feet. He raised his arms then and stood there stock still, trying to smile for no real reason while he could hear Nicole had stopped transmitting the moment the shout was heard.

He pulled out his knife then and reached for the hut's door. The blade flashed steel-white in the moonlight, causing quite a few gasps and the instinctive shuffling of feet away from him. He could hear more shouts as he kicked the flimsy

door open expecting it to be locked, but as that was not the case he overstepped and trying to compensate he swung blindly with his knife hand.

When he looked up again he saw Father Likembe's with a strange look of mixed horror and puzzlement, blood pumping out coarsely from a vein in his neck. Nicole jumped out of her bamboo chair in front of the radio set towards a small cot. As she did so, still wearing the headphones, she unplugged them from the set, while Ethan found his footing once more and dived after her. A slightly distorted, static-ridden voice could be heard repeating with an awful accent: "Licorne! Licorne! Quarante-six! Quarante-six!"

Ethan grabbed her from the waist, while outside fearful women's shouts and children's cries could be heard. Father Likembe was vainly trying to plug his gushing wound with bare hands. His body was sagged and a small pool of blood had already formed around his buttocks. His vestments was a blood-soaked ruin.

"I need the towel, you moron!" screamed Nicole while Ethan tried to tie her hands behind her back, but without letting go off the knife he fumbled and swerved this way and that without really grappling her. They both fell awkwardly on the cot, and Nicole found the opportunity and

drove a hell of a kick with her bare-footed heel on Ethan's foot. Flinching from pain, he loosened his grip involuntarily and allowed her to spin around and punch him hard across the face.

Ethan staggered for a couple of moments and saw her indeed grab a towel from the cot and frantically ignore him. She hurried close to Father Likembe who was trying to breathe through sputters of blood. He kept opening and closing his mouth aimlessly as if trying to speak but no sound came out of him other than a shallow, hollow roar, like a deathly snore.

"Hang on father, don't try to talk, just breath. Let's stop the blood, first," said Nicole in an impossibly calm voice, even as she tied the towel around Father Likembe's neck as tight as possible without choking him. Ethan had remained stunned at how she had completely ignored him. Then the realisation sank home that he'd almost killed the priest outright by mistake, the knife in his hand still bloodied.

A few of the more brave men shouted something in Igbo, while the first drops of rain could be heard, steadily rising in tempo and volume. Nicole shouted back in what sounded surprisingly good Igbo, and didn't even spare a moment away from Father Likembe.

And then she felt Ethan's knife against her throat, the coldness of the steel a stark contrast to the warm sweat covering her from head to toe.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she said even as she calmly tried to apply more pressure to the father's wound, the white in Likembe's eyes rolling about as if he was about to have some sort of seizure.

"What does it look like?" said Ethan, his kneecap forcing Nicole to bend forward in a very uncomfortable position down on the ground.

"Whatever this is, just let me try and save this man, for God's sake!"

"You're just wanking me around again, aren't you? He's got another minute or two to live, and that's all. Main artery's ripped open, he's bleeding like a pig."

"That's your handiwork right there!"

"He got in the way, I didn't mean to cut him down like that!"

"You were going for me then? For fuck's sake, why?"

"After all this, you're still taking me for a pillock then? Why, the nerve!"

"This man's dying, could you at least have the decency-"

"Enough!"

The rain had grown stronger in only a few moments. From the corner of his eye Ethan could see the women and the children had sought refuge in the small church, but some of the men, still stood outside, getting soaking wet in the blistering rain. They seemed to be looking at Ethan and Nicole intently.

“What the bloody hell are they looking at?”

“Father Likembe.”

“What about him?”

“He’s dead, and they saw you kill him.”

“I said, that was an accident.”

“I don’t think they care.”

“Neither do I. He was working with you after all.”

“You’re going mad, aren’t you?”

“For the last time, I know about the fake body. I know you’re not CIA, because I checked. What I don’t know is why you’re so hell bent on thinking Andy’s dead. And I need answers, love. Not more bullshit, answers.”

A heavy silence ensued, while a few of the more brave, younger men made a few steps towards the hut. Nicole motioned them to stop with a bloody hand and raised her other hand in the air:

“Could we do this in a more civilized fashion?”

“I like it just the way it is, crass and sharp. Who do you really work for?”

“Who do you think?”

“The french, right?”

She nodded silently. Ethan was eyeing the men vehemently. He went on:

“Why do you want me to think Andy’s dead so badly? Is he your hostage? Is that how you got hold of his things?”

“Andy is my husband. He’s not anybody’s hostage.”

“I said no more bullshit.”

“That much was true.”

“What else was true then?”

“Not much.”

“Where is he then?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“What’s going to stop me from cutting your throat then?”

“I didn’t think you had a penchant for being so bloodthirsty. They might.”

“Will they try?”

“If you do cut my throat, I can guarantee that. They’re Likembe’s sons.”

“Oh, bugger me. I guess I’ll have to take some more chances.”

“Listen, we can work this out, if you’re willing

to let me go.”

“I thought the only reason they haven’t jumped on me now is the sharp threat around your neck.”

“I can talk to them.”

“You’re trying to swing this around, aren’t you? No joy, I’ll only let you go after you tell me where’s Andy.”

“I can’t tell you, because I don’t know.”

“More lies, at a very inopportune time. If this is how it’s going to be, I think I’ll have to take my chances anyway.”

“I can tell you were they hit the caravan though.”

“Some random point in the map?”

“You seriously find it impossible to believe me even under these circumstances?”

“Especially under the circumstances, I might add.”

“What if we walk over there together? It’s not very far from here, it’s a bit north, near Otamiri.”

“Only with hands in a knot behind your back.”

“And then, will you release me?”

“I’ll think about it then. Good enough?”

“Alright, let me talk to them.”