

DROWNED

A Machine of Death story
by Steve Libbey

Let me explain.

The hate I felt for Senon Matoo lay across my vision like a veil as black as his African skin. It only took six months in his miserable highlands palace to come to this point. The hatred roiled my stomach like food gone bad.

In my line of work, you deal with a lot of bastards. In fact, virtually anyone who can afford to pay me is some kind of son of a bitch, either ruthless or cynical or openly amoral. The last are the easiest to deal with, because they realize that diamond mining will never be an ethical business. There's too much money at stake.

Senon Matoo came to power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo thanks to the devastation caused by the ongoing Ituri conflict between the Lendu and Hema tribes. For an Englishman like myself, it's hard to keep the players straight without the uniforms. No racism intended, seriously: unless you talk to them directly or see them aiming guns at each other, you won't be able to distinguish the warring factions. Senon's band of mercenaries fashions itself as a "peacekeeping force" in the mountainous region, and given that they tote around more firepower than the Lendus and Hemas, I suppose he can make that argument.

Mostly, though, Senon came for the diamonds.

But it was his pretense as a stabilizing influence that gave him enough of a veneer of respectability to appease the board of Yeager-Fullerton Importers. My employers, the ones who threw me into this snake pit to dig out diamonds for the fingers of starry-eyed American and European brides.

The first clue I had that this would be the longest year of my life came as our jeep emerged from a sea of huts to a scene I should have anticipated.

Five men knelt before a wall, guarded by soldiers with white sashes—Senon's symbol—and armed with wicked AK-47s. The African sunlight gleamed off the metal barrels, the cleanest things I'd seen in the village. As I contemplated the irony of this observation, one of the soldiers casually lowered his rifle to a man's head and splattered his brains against the mud bricks.

I gasped. The enormity of the execution was lost on everyone else, who didn't duck, point, scream, or stare, but went on with their lives as if a car horn had been honked. I gaped at the body and then at my driver, whose expression had not changed an iota.

We whizzed by, kicking up dust on the fresh corpse and disturbing the pioneering flies.

Squads of white-sashed, cocky men standing together sharing cigarettes and flaunting their automatic rifles led me to the conclusion that they were the local law, and thus must be in the employ of my new client. My fingers ached from tension; every muscle in my body had clenched tight when I witnessed the killing. With an effort, I tried to distance myself from it all and calm down and not think about the word on the white piece of paper that Yeager-Fullerton's machine of death had spit out: SHOT.

After I saw the third metal capped structure with a pulley system and bucket, I had to ask the driver in my passable French: "What is that thing? A well?"

"Yes," he said. "Covered well."

"To keep animals out?"

The driver burst into laughter, an earthy sound uttered by someone confident that he wouldn't be around to suffer the consequences of the private joke. "Oh, ho ho, *monsieur!* Don't ask that question at the palace."

And then we arrived at the gate.

They searched my bags, they searched my person, they searched my driver, they searched his trunk. They let us through without changing their steely eyed expressions. You are in the Congo and we lord over our tortured portion of it, said those eyes.

My driver, a Hutu, kept his eyes on the ground before him as he helped me carry my bags and instruments directly to my quarters under the watchful gaze of Senon's men. I had found him bland and remote at the start of our car trip; now, I was so unnerved that I wanted him to stay. The earnestness of my parting handshake and gift of money took him by surprise. He hesitated then said in a low voice: "Be careful of your host. He is no one's friend." He looked more worried about my fate than at that of the victim of the death squad, as though I were a child entering a biker bar. He inclined his head and departed.

The palace smelled as dry and stale as the village, a combination of dust with the raw tang of manure, feces, and smoke. Netting hung over my open window. Freshly painted blue shutters were the only measure of privacy afforded me. I stood at the window for a time before closing them. The denizens of Angaku milled about, dispirited by what I already regarded as the parasitical presence of Senon's palace. The majestic mountain vistas beyond, where diamond, cobalt, and copper awaited picks and chisels, struck me as a cruel joke on tourists.

I unpacked meticulously, a ritual for me when in strange countries with uncomfortable lodging. What little comfort I could create for myself would help keep me sane. A year in the DROC, overseeing a new diamond operation, would mean three years of leisure. I popped open my laptop to hunt for a wi-fi signal. It chirped sadly at the emptiness of the air around us. With a sigh, I disabled the

internal wireless card, knowing I wouldn't need it for the next twelve months. I brushed cobwebs from a phone jack in the corner and made a mental note to request a number for internet connections.

The bathroom had a broken toilet and a hole in the floor where a bathtub had been. In its place, a grate covered the drain pipe to collect shower water. The disrepair stood in stark contrast to the rest of the palace.

A knock rattled the wicker door.

I opened the door to find a large, bald, and well-fed African in a comfortable linen suit. I said, "Yes, how can I help you?" before I noticed the gold watch and the rings.

Senon Matoo laughed with his belly first, then his shoulders, and finally his mouth. The effect was somehow both dominating and cheerful.

"You can help me sell diamonds, Mr. Dervin." An African accent lilted over his English. He strode into my room as I stepped aside. Senon Matoo towered six inches over me. In the center of my room, he surveyed my unpacking job before smiling broadly and offering an equally broad hand. "Senon Matoo, at your service."

"Harold Dervin," I said. "My friends call me Harry."

"My friends call me Senon," he said. "This year will be a fruitful one for both of us, no?"

"No . . . I mean, yes! Yes, quite." I tried to think of what those dour board members would want me to say. "Yeager-Fullerton anticipates a long and mutually beneficial relationship."

"Ah, but you will only be my guest for a year. This is true?"

"True, yes. I'm usually YF's scout in these matters. Next year you'll be up to your eyeballs in mining consultants and accountants."

Senon Matoo nodded. "Good, good. Scouts I understand. I am too big to be a scout, but my life has been saved by them so many times I lost count." He peeked at my hand. "You are not a married man?"

"I was once. Didn't fancy it."

"Then you will appreciate the comforts of my palace. My men and I fought hard to stabilize Angaku, so we're not shy about enjoying the rewards. As long as we get our work done, no?"

"Right," I said, thinking about the dead man. These first few minutes of acquaintance would set the tone for the rest of our interaction. I tried to ignore the uneasy feeling Senon Matoo gave me, chalking it up to subtle cultural differences.

"Tomorrow you may survey the mine. Your French, is it good?"

"*Oui, passable,*" I said.

"*Tres bien.* My men all speak it, and some of the miners do as well. But I do not suppose you speak Swahili or Lingala. I can provide an assistant for you."

"Thank you."

"Not at all. Angaku has no labor shortage, let me assure you. My miners are happy, loyal workers who will jump at your every command." He raised an eyebrow. "Something troubles you?"

I made a note to control my emotions better around Senon Matoo. “I saw . . . an execution in the village.”

He frowned. “Yes, an unfortunate necessity. Years of war and poverty have made my people reckless. The only message they understand comes out of the barrel of a gun. You disapprove?”

“It’s not my place. I’m the outsider here.”

“But not the only one! In Africa, we say, ‘Where there are diamonds there are white men.’ And white women. You will meet them tonight at dinner.”

#

Before the sun set, I performed my first act of defiance against Senon Matoo. I wanted to see the mine without his “assistant,” who would no doubt report every twitch on my face to his warlord. Using my bossy white man’s voice, I ordered the man in charge of the small fleet of jeeps to hand one over. Just as I expected, he didn’t question me. Senon Matoo was an imposing man, but it didn’t mean he was an organized one.

The mine shaft penetrated a hillside a mile from the village. Two massive ventilation fans chugged away, run by petrol generators at their feet. Miners labored near the mouth; the night shift had commenced. The men barked at each other while pushing carts of detritus along tracks. I watched the miners’ body language for telltale signs of maltreatment. Even under their best behavior, their bodies would broadcast the cruelty that had been visited upon them.

African foremen with rifles and walkie-talkies stalked amongst the miners like lions, but I saw no indication that they ruled by fear alone. After observing a miner and foreman speak without enmity, I concluded that conditions were not as bad as I feared.

A burly, blond white man in khakis emerged from the mineshaft with purpose. He barked an order at a nearby miner. My stomach sank when the man pointed directly at me. No white man is invisible in the Congo.

“You!” The man called to me. I stood my ground and waited. After a long, aggravated pause, the man strode up to me. Nothing friendly intruded on his scowl.

So I had learned over the years: establish rank at once or you will never command respect.

“What’s your name?” I snapped as he came into conversation range.

“Taylor,” he said, coming to a halt. Taylor would never like me.

“Harry Dervin, from Yeager-Fullerton.” I let five beats go by before offering a hand. When he shook it, he squeezed tight to retain some authority. I pretended not to notice. Taylor’s hands had been roughened by gun grips over the years, the hands of a career soldier.

“Mr. Dervin. Senon advised me that you were to come for an inspection at 0900 tomorrow.”

“That’s a bit early for me, I’m afraid. I had time to kill before dinner.” I gestured at the mine. “Mind if I take a peek?”

He hesitated, and I knew from it that he had instructions to the contrary. I had to decide at this moment whether to make Taylor an adversary or lukewarm ally. "Or is it inconvenient?"

"It is," he said, relieved. "Not that we have anything to hide. But, you know, straighten up the place before guests, and all that."

"Fine." I took a lengthy, significant look around the yard. "I know how it is. We'll reconvene tomorrow morning."

I made my farewells to Taylor and climbed back into the jeep. While I had not seen the mine in its unspoiled state, I had impressed upon my new underlings a sense of accountability. Under my care, this mine would not become a pit of horror. In the collision of guns, money, politics, greed, and tribal hatred, it took a subtle dance to forestall such nightmares.

#

Senon Matoo set a lavish table, no doubt at the expense of the people of Angaku: breads, rice, game meats, grilled pork, fruit, European wines, chocolates, and cheeses. He wanted to impress me with the bounty he could wring from the uncultivated lands around us, as though food acquisition equaled diamond production. Insects chirped a chorus outside, but inside, elegant candlework and shiny silverware recalled the salons of Europe.

The men at the table must have been his lieutenants: stiff in a formal setting, as though waiting for the ordeal to end and things to return to normal. The only white face among them was Taylor, who in contrast had relaxed and gotten into the wine already.

The warlord pretended not to notice Taylor's gaffe. He stood at the head of the table with a bottle of wine and a corkscrew and a wide smile at the corny solemnity of the dinner.

Yet what caught my attention, of course, was the women, who darted in and out of the dining room with trays of food to add to the feast. Most of the women were Congolese villagers chosen for their beauty: high cheekbones, firm breasts, wide-set eyes, hair teased down with American hair-care products. One in particular caught my eye. She moved with a lithe, feline grace as she placed a tray of grapes at my elbow. Her face retained a sweetness that invited my gaze in and led me to speculate on the way emotions might play across it. When she saw me staring, though, she shocked me out of contemplation with a smile that was nothing less than an invitation which stirred a sudden and fierce longing.

These women were Senon's harem.

One white woman entered the room, swinging a bottle of wine carelessly at her side. She could not have been older than nineteen, though the lascivious sway of her hips belied any youthful innocence. All eyes in the room fell upon her body and the linen gown blocking the view. The blonde girl grinned at the attention. I was reminded of groupies vying for the midnight attention of the singer of a successful rock band. Her gaze moved from man to man, but always back to Senon, whose side she settled into. He patted her bottom and scooted her away.

Senon uncorked the wine without ceremony and poured a glass to be passed to me. He poured one for himself and handed off the bottle to his neighbor, who sloshed some into a glass and handed it down the line. Senon held up a toast before the wine had circumnavigated the diners.

“To new partners in crime,” he said. The men laughed. I raised my glass with a weak smile as Senon Matoo downed his in a gulp. The mercenaries at the table worked on their feet all day under the cruel African sun; without further ado they dug into the feast before them.

I leaned towards Senon with an air of confidentiality. “I visited the mine today. I hope you don’t mind. A man likes to test the water before he dives in.”

As I expected, Senon and Taylor exchanged a glance. “Taylor talked me out of a tour, though,” I continued. “If he handles the miners as well as the mining engineers, you have nothing to fear from strikes or unrest.”

“Do I look like a man who fears anything?” Laughing, the warlord drew an automatic pistol. It lolled in his hand like a toy. Tension froze me. The others at the table paid no attention to the gun.

“I have been shooting a gun like this since I was old enough to bed girls. The gun and I, we are as close as brothers. And I’ll tell you a secret, Harry.” The gun pointed at me suddenly. “There is not a man here for whom the machine of death hasn’t predicted death by gunfire. Including you, of course.” His smile crinkled his eyes as they watched me recoil in shock. “Oh yes, I made it part of the contract. Your masters love diamonds more than they love you, I think.”

I tried to keep my hand from shaking as I swallowed the rest of my wine. “It’s the nature of their business. Besides, a gun can kill anyone.”

“Before the machine, yes, you are right. We all respected the gun. Now that we know our fates, why, the gun has lost power over some.”

“Assuming the machine is right.”

He relaxed his gun hand, shrugged with it. “And where is the harm? Do you not find it liberating?”

“In a room full of armed men? Not precisely.”

Senon Matoo winked at me. “And that is why you are welcome here. Mandy! Fill his wine glass.”

The white girl sauntered over my way. I put a hand over the glass. “No more wine for me or I’ll drown in it.”

A shocked silence fell over the room.

I looked from face to face, each bearing a hardened expression. Senon Matoo cleared his throat twice. He pressed his lips together in a dour line.

My driver’s words came back to me, a warning too vague to be helpful.

Mandy giggled.

“Ah,” I said. “Forgive me. On an occasion like this, teetotalers are party poopers. Of course I’ll take another glass.”

“Just so,” Senon Matoo said, and at once conversation resumed as if nothing had happened. I drank my wine with observable gusto like it was a life-preserver.

The rest of the dinner took on all of the allure of a minefield as I chewed my food and drank the wine and hoped I wouldn’t commit another gaffe. Alcohol has

always had its way with me; two glasses of wine and I'm ready to sing "Auld Lang Syne" and weep on my best mate's shoulder until he sends for a cab. Fear of my heavily armed hosts kept my singing to a minimum, but I accepted another glass and another until each one seemed like a nail in my coffin.

Mandy hunkered down next to me. "Man," she said conversationally, "you are wasted."

"I'm comfortable," I suggested, getting the consonants out as best I could.

"You either need some coke or a cup of joe," she said. "Name your poison."

I did the math. Coffee would commit me to another hour or two at the gathering. Cocaine, as much as I disliked it, would probably wipe me out and thus provide a perfect excuse to retreat to my room. "I could do a line or two."

Mandy took my hand in her tiny hand. "Awesome." With surprising strength, she hauled me to my feet. "Senon, I'm taking your new boy for a little blow. 'Kay?"

Senon looked up from the woman on his lap whose blouse he had undone. "*Au revoir*, my dove."

Thankfully, Mandy deposited me in my room before fetching the drugs. I took the opportunity to drink a few glasses of water and urinate powerfully before she returned. Her innocent, sweet grin was at odds with the vile powder she carried in a vial.

"No mirror?"

"Does this look like Studio 54?" She settled down on the bed. "Well, maybe it is. Come here."

I flopped down next to her, unsure of what to expect. Mandy peeled off her shirt and tossed it aside. With studious care, she lay down on the sheets and drew a line of cocaine across her taut stomach with the edge of a matchbook. The red wine and my crotch took immediate notice.

"Here, do it off me. You deserve it after tonight."

Why not? I decided with the less circumspect part of my personality. This job was bound to be at turns tedious and trying. A little fun will make the nadirs a bit less nasty.

I fumbled to get into a good position. Up close, I could see a fine layer of down on her tanned skin. I wanted to touch it, and so I did. Her muscles played under my hand and I resolved to keep Mandy in my room tonight.

My nose ran along her stomach as I snorted up the drug. It hit me like a locomotive and I blinked away tears, immediately regretting my college-boy antics.

"Christ Jesus," I said. "I'm too old for this."

"Oh, come on," she said. "What else is there to do? Take off your shirt. It's my turn, Mr. Bond."

I did as I was told. "Mr. Bond? James Bond?"

"Don't tell me this isn't just like a Bond movie. A pretty girl in an exotic setting . . . your hot accent . . . some coke . . ." She arranged a rail on my chest, which was less hairy than my stomach.

"I don't recall Bond doing drugs. Rather, he was shooting the drug dealers."

“All cops do blow.” Mandy took the powder up in a mighty and unladylike snort. “Wow! Damn! Fuck!” Her eyes went wide and wild. “Right on.” In slow motion, Mandy draped her arms around me and pressed her small breasts against my chest. “Now interrogate me, Mr. Bond.”

I found myself kissing her before I had decided to do so. Her small mouth danced around mine.

Caressing her back, I mock-whispered in her ear: “Why did your boss get so offended when I refused a second glass of wine?”

“It wasn’t the wine, dummy,” she said, very much unlike an enigmatic Bond girl, though the enthusiasm with which she tugged at my belt made it quite forgivable. “You said a naughty word.”

“I did?” My head swam with desire, drugs, and alcohol. All I could remember was Senon’s sour look, which was almost enough to kill my mood. “Which one?”

“Drowned,” she said with relish, kissing me again as though I were a condemned man.

Drowned.

I pictured the word on a small, merciless slip of paper, and I understood why the wells had been capped, why the bathtubs had been ripped out, and why Senon Matoo feared no guns.

Mandy squealed under me as we found another way to drown for a time.

#

I awoke to sun and an empty bed. My body ached and my head split in two. No one had warned me about the dangers awaiting a mining engineer outside a mine. James Bond, indeed. If there was to be a mine inspection today, it would have to take place after lunch, because I could not imagine putting breakfast food in my queasy stomach.

The shower ran cold, which did wonders for my alertness. I dressed warmly in anticipation of going underground and wandered out of my room. A passing servant let me nick a glass of water from his tray. I sipped it and stepped out onto the patio.

To my delight, Mandy sat with her back to me in a lounge chair, holding a mixed drink of a citrus nature, her blonde hair tied back with a ribbon. I tiptoed up behind her and tussled her ponytail.

“I hope I didn’t divulge too many state secrets last night,” I said with jocularly.

She yelped and jumped out of the chaise lounge. My stomach sank: it wasn’t Mandy at all.

“Bloody hell.” The woman I had accosted swore at me from behind dark sunglasses as I held up my hands in protest. “What d’you think you’re doing?”

“Making an ass of myself, miss. Please, please forgive me. I mistook you for someone else.”

Her mouth opened but she said nothing. I thought I had set another person off against me; people were touchy in Senon Matoo’s palace. Worse, this woman

had a distinct British accent which made me a bit homesick. But then she cocked her head.

“Don’t I know you?”

“You might have seen me arrive,” I said. “Not too many white faces in Angaku.”

“No, no.” She took a step closer. “I swear to God.” Raising her shades, she appraised me and I her. Without the concealing glasses, her full face came into view and looked familiar to me.

“I’m sorry, but—”

“Chesterfield Grammar,” she said.

I started. “Why, yes. When I was a lad . . .” Recognition dawned. “Good Christ.”

“Harry . . . Harry something.”

“Dervin!” I nearly shouted. “And you’re Marion. Witt?”

“Watt. Marion Watt.” The drawn features split in a warm smile. “Whatever is a Chesterfield boy doing in this hellhole?”

“Making the best of things. My goodness. I believe it has been at least twenty years since we sat in French class together.”

“And Mademoiselle Smith would be proud to see us putting her lessons to use.” Marion Watt put a hand out and I took it. “A pleasure to see you again, Harry.”

“And you. You look smashing.”

“Pshaw. The African sun has dried me out.” She wasn’t lying. Her stoic, gentle features had darkened and freckled and pulled, though whether it was from sun or age, it was hard to say. I remembered the serious girl repeating the words of our teacher. Her friend—Susan? Sarah?—I had fancied for a time, until a bold kiss won me a shove and a scolding. After that I had lost interest in Marion and her friend.

I took a seat next to her chaise, but she sat up straight to talk to me.

“Tell me your story and I’ll tell mine,” she said.

“It’s not so remarkable. Masters in Geology, married at twenty five, divorced at thirty, no kids. Decided to travel the world now that I was unburdened. Yeager-Fullerton offered me more money than anyone else, so I let them send me hither and thither.” I shrugged.

Marion nodded and put a hand on my arm. “Isn’t it strange? I did nearly the same thing. Social work. I was going to save the world one continent at a time. Africa beat me though.” Her smile faded. “Nearly killed me, in fact.”

“Oh dear.”

Her face became grave: it was her most lovely expression, I realized, even as a girl. “The NGO I joined chose the wrong village to set up camp. We were overrun by rebels, hid in the bush. Senon’s men protected us, and now here I am.” Her eyes dropped.

“Working for him.”

“Not exactly.”

I hesitated. I hadn't made the connection earlier, but the only women I had seen in the palace worked as menials or whored for Senon and his men. Had Marion fallen so far? I failed to conceal my shock.

"He's a harsh man, but he's treated me well," Marion said. "When he wants to be, there's no one kinder."

"I see. Well, good for you."

"Good for me," she agreed without enthusiasm.

The conversation lasted until a fussing servant interrupted us to announce lunch. Marion Watt and I reminisced about Chesterfield: old friends, old teachers, our adjoining neighborhoods, and the stores we'd patronize; fields, streams, groves in which we adventured before the pleasures of teenage interaction rendered them unsuitable for anything but a romp; our former universities and spouses; our jobs and our hopes for the future. It must be painfully obvious: I fell in love with her in just a few hours.

Was it because of our shared history? Did each landmark in common serve as a mooring line between our ships until a web of robe bound us together? I can only speculate on that at length, and that is time I am sure I no longer have.

My eyes roved over her body as we spoke. She wore a loose shirt and shorts which revealed lanky limbs—and faint tell-tale bruises gathered around the delicate veins of her arms. I knew what they were at once, and at once put it out of my mind. In my haze of attraction I translated addiction into a cry for help. My help.

"Let's not tell Senon that we were school mates," Marion said in a confidential whisper as we returned to the same dining room where I'd embarrassed myself the night before. "Some things should be outside of his control."

"Agreed," I said.

#

For weeks I scoured every inch of that mine, Taylor barking orders at my side. In carefully chosen words, I told him that I would tolerate no more executions. He resisted until Senon met with him privately. Afterwards, he became as gentle as a surly lamb.

Mandy made her way to my bed a few more times, but she had lost interest in her Bond fantasy, and thus lost interest in me. It was just as well, because she seemed to me a hollow shell of a woman. In our last encounter, I allowed myself to imagine Marion panting beneath me.

Marion and I found time to chat in the evenings before the communal meal. When dinner was served, she became Senon Matoo's property once again. The rough mercenaries treated her with a deference I had attributed to her position by Senon's side, until she revealed a secret about herself.

The NGO, as a matter of policy, tested their employees with the machine of death. It made sense: someone doomed to die from malaria belonged at a desk in Spokane, not an African swamp. Marion's had come back the same as Senon

Matoo's: *drowned*. This morbid fact had been the icebreaker that he used to woo her.

Is it possible to be jealous of someone's grim fate? In my case, I'd choose drowning over a bullet wound any day. If it would bring Marion closer to me, even better. One death is as bad as another if you're alone in the world.

I sat with her on a hill overlooking the village. From here, the ramshackle huts and dark moving forms took on a charming, exotic quality only found in Hollywood movies about Africa. Life below was dreary. The shreds of African culture that hadn't been supplanted by American pop nonsense served to hold up the community as well as anything served in a war-torn, poverty-stricken country. Thanks to the British Empire and other predatory colonial powers, Africa was the world's ghetto. I felt sorry for the poor bastards stuck in it, and said as much.

"Misery loves company," Marion said in a faraway voice. "Don't pretend that merry old England is some kind of paradise."

"Of course not, but these folk would consider our worst problems to be a step up from their situation."

Marion shrugged and said nothing. She swayed a bit on the grass.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, quite," she said with a loopy smile. I realized she was high and grew tense.

She put a hand on mine. "Harry, please," she said. "Nothing lasts forever."

"The drugs or Senon?"

"Both," she blurted out, and then turned away as if she could take back the words. "It's just a hard time for me right now."

I bit back the cruel rejoinder that hovered on my tongue. A grunt sufficed.

"Go on," she said.

My gut told me to protect my heart from this broken woman, but I had seen her too happy and carefree in my presence to think clearly. "There's a Marion that I know who doesn't carry these burdens on her back. She doesn't need heroin or a petty tyrant." I took a breath. "I believe I have fallen in love with that Marion."

"I know," she said, suddenly lucid. "It's kept me going."

"Going where? To his bed?" I gripped her hand. "Cut yourself loose from him. Let me help you."

"Help me what? Kick? I'd go mad here. The heat, the bugs, the misery . . . to face it full on would rip the skin right off my body."

"I do it."

Marion pressed against me. "Because you're strong, Harry. So strong! I'm a coward. Working at the NGO drove me mad. I'm not exaggerating, darling." Despite the darkness of her words, "darling" gave me a stir. "Do you know why I left?"

"The village was overrun," I said.

"It was, but at the invitation of the villagers. They wanted us out." Her voice shrank. I put an arm around her. "I killed a girl."

“A baby girl.” Tears welled in her eyes. I wiped them free. “She was nearly dead from dysentery. The poor little thing, she was suffering so. Her mother had four children; she couldn’t be bothered to save this tentative little life. By the time she was brought to me, she had maybe a few agonizing days left to her.”

“God,” I said.

She nodded. “I prayed. I’d never prayed before, but I prayed over this girl. When I was done, the air was as hot and empty as before, and I knew I was the girl’s salvation. So I smothered her.”

Foolishly, I thought of the machine of death: *smothered by social worker*.

“The mother knew the moment she saw my face. The next night we heard gunfire at the perimeter, and we ran for our lives. The rebels caught a group of staffers and gutted them.”

So much dying, I thought. Life as a commodity is undergoing a market shift downwards.

“I don’t know what to say, Marion.”

“Just say my name. Like we’re back home. Good, solid, pastoral English words.”

I whispered her name in her ear. Her hands moved around my body with feverish heaviness. No emotion we brought to Angaku could be pure, but we couldn’t deny it.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” she said. “Take me home.”

“I will when I’m done. It’s only six months away.”

“No. Now,” she said and covered my mouth with hers. “Give me back England.”

I broke the kiss for some air. My thoughts raced. “Senon,” I said.

“Fuck him. I want you.”

My love for Marion outstrips my fear of Senon Matoo, I told myself, as my hand found its way under her shirt as though it had already rejected the mercenary’s power over her. We made love on the hill in the dirt and grass, and I whispered to her that I would protect her, no matter what. In the narrow world of Senon Matoo, it was the grandest promise I could make my drug and sorrow addled lover.

#

Senon knew. Marion had said nothing to him, but the man knew. His attitude towards me altered in a subtle but frightening way. Senon Matoo no longer relaxed in my presence, but rather wrapped himself in a light, feline alertness; my skin tingled in his direction as he paced his office while we talked mine productivity, or stepped out to the veranda for an ostensibly friendly drink, or toured the mine. I told myself it was my imagination, but several times he caught me peeking at him and gave me so a knowing smile that accusations were not necessary.

In a way, I felt drawn to him, as though we were brothers courting the same neighborhood girl. I thought of the way Marion bit her lower lip as she climaxed,

and part of me wanted to ask Senon Matoo if she did the same in his embrace. To breach the subject would justify his itchy trigger finger, at least in his view, but to know that she reserved her true ecstasy for me alone might be worth the risk.

After all, Yeager-Fullerton was paying the man millions of dollars for his diamonds. Why shouldn't he give something truly precious in return? I hated him for his possessions.

He welcomed my hate. It made us equals.

I took no comfort in the dark of the mine with Senon Matoo and Taylor at my heels. He had demanded a snap inspection of the newest tunnels. Our lanterns illuminated the dust hanging in the air, and Senon sneezed. I smiled grimly.

"I can send for a facemask," I said.

"No need," he growled, and then sniffled like a schoolboy. He wiped his hands on his pants as though he'd touched something foul.

The three of us pushed past miners chasing the last tendrils of veins in the rock. They paused to watch Senon with hooded eyes.

"Why aren't these men working the new vein?" he said.

"I'm not satisfied that the old ones are tapped," I said, running a hand on the cool rock. "We can still dig here where the walls are known to be stable."

"And is that what your masters want?"

I bit back an acerbic reply. "I do my job."

Senon grunted as if I'd made a jest. I led them to the elevator shaft. We stood in uncomfortable silence, listening to the clanking of the pulley as the car ascended to our level out of inky blackness. Senon stepped onto the rickety lift without fear; there was no water in the mine.

"Gentlemen," I said, inviting them to board the lift. Senon scowled at me in the lamplight at jabbed a finger at it. I inclined my head and waited for them. Six months, I reminded myself.

"You like it down here, don't you?" Senon Matoo said as the lift dropped into the shaft.

"Well enough."

"Feels like a grave."

I could not think of a proper response, so I kept my tongue. Taylor chuckled.

The elevator shuddered to a halt; a familiar jolt to Taylor and I, but Senon winced. A smirk found its way to my face.

"I should warn you, Senon, the new tunnel hasn't been cleared for use yet. We're bringing in more timbers to support the roof." I tapped the wall for emphasis. "We'll just take a peek inside."

He cleared his throat. "I want to see it all."

"Suit yourself."

The three of us passed several intersections where miners drank water from pails. The ventilation ducts rumbled and hissed above us, a chattering conversation with the fans on the surface. The miners watched Senon with open distrust.

We trudged through the dirt and dust and mud and rubble until we reached the new galleries. Several miners sawed at wooden beams meant to bolster the ceiling. They gave me a status update in their lilting French.

“The tunnels are shaky,” I told Senon Madoo and Taylor, who knew this already. “Proceed with caution. Are you sure you want to see it up close? Really, it’s just a rock wall, of no special interest to the untrained eye.”

In response, Senon strode boldly down the newest tunnel. The miners goggled at him and muttered to each other. Taylor and I exchanged a look; his face was open for an instant, almost apologetic, before it closed over with the impermeability of a mercenary.

“Your masters and I have been talking about production levels,” Senon announced in a stentorian tone amplified by the stone walls and the distance between us. “I assured them of a fifty percent increase within a month.”

“Rather ambitious, wouldn’t you say?” I directed my comment to Taylor as well as Senon. “Particularly since you didn’t consult me before making promises you can’t keep.”

“I don’t consult underlings to ask politely whether they might do their job. I issue orders.” He turned at the dead end of the tunnel, ignoring the freshly hewn wall that was of so much interest to him before. His eyes glittered in the lamplight. “I would not have had to initiate direct contact if you had been doing your job properly.”

My shoulders ached; I realized I had been tensed up ever since we boarded the elevator. “Is this a job evaluation? Forgive me for saying so, but these matters are usually handled by peers.”

His smile was wicked and bright. “Ah, Harry. We *are* peers.” He reached out and felt a beam. A cloud of dust descended from the ceiling. “Peers share a body of knowledge.”

Taylor had positioned himself behind me, blocking my exit. His lantern distorted my shadow against the walls. Sweat trickled into my eyes.

“Go on,” I said.

“You know what I’m going to say. I smell you on her skin.” The smile didn’t leave his face, for all the venom in his words. It was a smile of relief. “You think you can live in a man’s house and steal his woman without consequences? How utterly English of you.”

“I didn’t have to work hard at it. She loves me.”

“Oh, yes. You’re her English knight in shining armor, here to rescue her from the black cur who keeps her hostage. You’ll take her back to civilization, I am sure.”

“Marion will return to England with me, yes. She’s had enough of Africa.”

“Is that so?” He shook the beam again. “Had enough of sweet South African heroin? Had enough of African hospitality, given freely? Had enough African cock inside her? What a short attention span.”

“You have plenty of women, Senon. Why hold on to Marion? You don’t love her.”

Senon Matoo barked a laugh meant for the ears of enemies alone. “Get your head out of the ground, Englishman. I love her the same way you do—but it is *I* who rescued her. Marion knows she is safe with me.” His free hand patted the holster on his waist. “I am a man who can protect his woman. What are you? A temptation. A devil.”

“Says the man who keeps her strung out on junk.”

“That was *her* choice. She has to clean up now—and I will ensure it. You’re so weak and starry-eyed that you’d let her jeopardize the child.”

The idea took a moment to slip past the danger I was in and register with me. “The—*child*?”

“Our Marion appears to be more forthcoming with me than with her new lover. The baby is mine.”

“How do you know?” Emotions raged inside me. Betrayal, hope, fear; I clung to the menacing conversation like a lifeline. “It could be mine.”

“I am not discussing paternity. I am discussing ownership. Besides, you will be dead.” For emphasis, he tugged at the beam, releasing more dust and pebbles.

The truth was out. “You can’t threaten me with a cave-in. I know what the machine predicted.”

“The machine is quite literal. Taylor,” Senon Matoo said with a twitch of his head. I heard a metallic clatter at my feet.

A gun.

“Identical to mine: Browning 9mm automatic. Loaded. You can pick it up if it makes you feel better.”

I stooped and took the gun. It was heavier than I expected, as an instrument of death should be.

“Yeager-Fullerton will sever ties in a moment if you kill me.”

“*Absolument*, Harry, which is why you committed suicide after being trapped by a cave-in.” Senon Matoo shook his head in mock dismay. “So tragic a death.”

I aimed the gun at him. I didn’t know how to turn the safety off, so I left it alone. “I could shoot you.”

“And you might even hit me, but I have been shot before. It’s not my fate for a bullet to take me . . . and I hear no running water, do you? Meanwhile Taylor would have the privilege of finishing you off.”

I glanced at the mercenary. He shrugged. “Nothing personal. It’s my job,” he said. “There’s a reason I’m not a bloody accountant.”

Power. They both reveled in it, like the first cup of coffee of the day.

Panic welled up in me. I wanted to run for the exit, past Taylor, away from the killers and their guns. I wanted to steal Marion for real, take her from such a savage world where the willingness to kill was the primary qualification for authority. At least in England there was a veneer of civility over it. That was where her child should grow up.

Yet I would die in the next minute if I didn’t think. This mine was my territory, not theirs. I was the authority here. That helped clear my mind.

Senon Matoo shook the support beam again with a mocking grin.

It was a clue.

I backed away from him, gun wavering. “What if the machines are wrong, Senon? What if my bullet is what does you in?”

“Then I die and the machines are wrong. You think I took up a gun because I thought I would never get hurt? We all die, *mon ami*. But some of us are killed for a reason. You crossed the line.”

I took a few more steps back. I couldn’t glance behind me without giving my plan away. “Why Marion? Why not Mandy? She’s at least as fucked up, but much more willing to enjoy herself.”

“Mandy is a foolish girl. Marion is a woman. Troubled, yes, but deep, real, true. Isn’t it funny? The cruel warlord has a heart after all, not just a predilection for white pussy.” He casually drew his gun. “And after all, it is the principle of the matter. I’d lose face if you took Marion and the child away from me.”

“Listen, Senon, this isn’t necessary. I’ll just leave. She’s not worth dying for.”

“She’s worth killing for,” he said. “Besides, that’s my job. And I’m known for doing it properly.”

He leveled the gun at me at the same time my back touched the support beam. I tore my eyes from the muzzle of the gun and shoved the support with every ounce of strength I could muster. The beams in this tunnel were held in place by tension alone.

It gave way in a moment of blessed release. The girder above tumbled down between me and Senon Matoo. He shouted and squeezed off a shot. The bullet whined in ricochet near Taylor’s head. His combat reflexes took over and he ducked.

The second of chaos was my only window to escape. I ran past Taylor through billowing clouds of dust. Ahead of me, the miners began to shout a warning.

“Come on!” I told them. Together, we dashed to the elevator.

“Is Mr. Matoo behind us?” One miner yelled as we piled onto the lift.

“Don’t worry about them,” I said, grimly. “This isn’t their fate.”

#

I did not return to Senon Matoo’s palace. I hid in the bushes until I saw the warlord and his man emerge from the mine, blackened by dust. Senon had lost his temper and cursed and howled in rage. He even cuffed Taylor, who bore it with stoicism. They pushed aside a miner and took the first jeep back to the palace.

Miners rushed to and fro with rescue equipment. The cave-in had been localized to the new tunnel; no one was injured. When I reappeared, I told the men to take a break and then see to digging the collapse out. Then I found the foreman’s shed and flopped down on the cot. I rubbed my eyes and forced myself to breathe slowly.

An hour passed. I bathed with water brought from the nearby river. Exhausted, I waited to see if Senon returned with a death squad. He and his men knew this land intimately. If I left in a jeep for Kinshasa at once, I might escape

his wrath. And if I could get to a phone, I could bring Yeager-Fullerton in on the matter. Senon Matoo could be reined in by his greed.

But Marion would still be in Angaku. Marion and the unborn baby – possibly my baby.

I had no illusions that Marion was fated to be my wife. Perhaps it would come with time, but more pressing was the issue of her safety. No matter what Senon boasted, a mercenary stronghold in the Congo was no place to have a child. Not with a man like Senon Matoo. Marion was not strong—heroin wasn't her only weakness. Her life would be hellish here.

So I waited.

Night came, and morning. No retribution. Senon Matoo had failed to set me up for a fall, and his desire to keep up appearances with Yeager-Fullerton outstripped his desire for revenge. Nevertheless, I stayed away from the palace. I supervised repairs to the new gallery. Taylor did not appear.

Curiosity nagged at me. What was happening at the palace?

I let two days go by before I dared to send a man for my clothes and laptop. He returned with the former, but the latter had been taken from my room. Dressed in clean clothes, I had to appreciate my small victories. If I could ignore the drama around Marion, make it through my tenure here without further incidents, and fly back to England, life could resume its bland, ordinary, and non-life threatening course. I had never been around so many guns in all my days. The machine of death's prediction could mean I died tomorrow at the hands of an African mercenary warlord or in thirty years from a trigger-happy burglar. Right now, the warlord seemed far more probable.

Four days after the murder attempt, Marion shook me awake in my cot. I blinked sleep out of my eyes as she hugged me fiercely.

For a moment, we studied each other's faces. Then she spoke: "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "He's a madman."

"He's not insane, just dangerous." She paused. "Why haven't you left?"

"It sounds quite foolish, but I can't leave you here with him."

She nodded, saying nothing. I had hoped for a more committed declaration of love from her. I could tell from her distant tone that she was high again, yet the drug couldn't hide the misery in her posture.

"Do you love him?"

"No—not love," she said with solemn finality.

"We can leave together."

Marion shook her head sadly. "He might let you leave—I begged him not to kill you. But if I'm with you, Senon will hunt us down."

"It's madness," I said. "Why can't we love each other in peace?"

A shadow crossed her face. "It's too late for that." Reaching into her jacket, she removed an envelope. "Harry—I have to go. This is for you, if you want it. If not, I understand."

The envelope contained paper and something solid and jingling. "I don't need money."

I saw her hand stray to her belly and caress it before tugging the fabric of her jacket with unconscious violence. I reached out to still her hand.

“Is it mine?”

“No,” she said with a sad smile. “He wants a son, you know.”

“You’ll be a fine mother,” I told her as I blinked back tears. A curtain had descended between us.

“I won’t,” Marion said. “Not here.” She rose, resplendent in her despair. “Goodbye, Harry.”

I stood and embraced Marion fiercely. I remembered the times we had made love, when she clung to me with such a sense of hope that I believed I had found a purpose in life. Her final grip seemed to give that hope back to me to invest in another.

Marion brushed her hair back in a gesture I remembered from our grammar school days. “I should go,” she said.

“Back to Senon.” I tried to say it without rancor.

She shook her head and left the shack.

From the door, I watched Marion walk unsteadily down the dusty road, holding her belly. Tall grasses hid her as she rounded the curve.

I sighed like a schoolboy and turned the envelope over in my hands. A plane ticket? A note? I tore the corner. A small metallic object slid out and bounced on the wooden planks of the floor. I grabbed it before it could fall between the cracks.

A key.

The piece of paper inside had writing and lines. I unfolded it, hoping for a moment that Marion’s true thoughts lay within. Instructions for a secret rendezvous, or a promise to meet me in England for the birth of the child. Even an admission that the child was mine.

Instead, the paper contained a hastily drawn map of corridors and rooms. After a moment, I recognized it for the wing of the palace where Senon Matoo kept his quarters. A large room had been labeled “master bedroom”; a smaller adjacent room bore the label “bath—locked. Look for red tapestry.”

A hidden bath—Senon Matoo could bathe in secret.

And now I had the key.

The man had handed me a loaded pistol, so sure was he that that machine of death had predicted his fate accurately. But he could not take a bath without precautions.

My heart soared. Marion wanted him dead. This key was her rejection of Senon’s love. The murder of one evil man would restore her to me.

Breathless and purposeful, I dashed out into the yard of the mine. Miners washed nearby with water brought from the river. A woman wove into view around the bend in the road that Marion had taken. River water sloshed in the buckets that dangled from a stout, cut branch draped over her shoulders.

Oh God. The river.

I ran to the river screaming Marion’s name.