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Lusaka, Zambia, 1996.

The vulture squatted not fifty feet away from the open cargo door of the C130, its hideous face turned at an angle as it studied them in silence for what seemed like minutes before hopping a few feet nearer, spreading the huge black wings as it loomed over the carcass. Harry wondered how long the dead animal had been there, baking and bloating under the African sun, the incessant hum of the blowflies audible even at a distance. Not long he thought. Not with the temperature in the high thirties and humidity nearing seventy percent. Harry had it figured for an impala, probably struck by one of the planes using the bush airstrip, most of them engaged on the kind of under the radar flights they were on themselves.

Could have been a lion of course, plenty of them around, but there was too much meat left on it and he figured the predator would have dragged it to the nearest shade. He lifted his gaze to search the dense tree line a hundred yards out, the landscape shimmering and dancing in the midday heat. Resisting the impulse of a glance at his watch he wondered where the client was, the rendezvous had been set for ten but then this was Africa where the whites had watches and the locals had time.

‘Tell me again why the hell I’m wearing a suit when you can fry an egg on a car’s hood out there and the air conditioning on this piece of flying shit you call a plane has long headed to a retirement village down south?’

Harry sighed and shifted his gaze from the vulture, now hacking away at the carcass with quick darting movements powerful enough to rip the rotting flesh away in thick strips of red, to where Vusi was sitting on a crate, his usually smooth as satin features bathed in sweat.

‘Because we’re businessmen, Vusi, all the way from Spain remember?’

Hence we dress like business men from Spain, new to the country and dying to do the deal and get the hell out of here.'

'Dying to get out being a figure of speech, right?' He shifted his weight and shouted in the direction of the cockpit, 'Hey, Nicolai, are you sure the air con is running flat out?!

There was the sound of an oath as a knee struck a crate and then the lanky form of their Russian pilot loomed out of the gloom that was the large open cargo hold of the big transport plane. 'Whassamatter, you stupid or something? Nicolai tell you many time air con only work when engines on. You want for fly out this stinkhole we cut engine, save kerosene.'

Vusi sighed and turned his attention back to Harry who was scanning the distant dirt road through binoculars. 'Tell me again about how we're having fun, how this was all going to be a walk in the park. Couple of million dollars for a few days' work. I think you even said something about an exotic location, take in some game viewing...'

Harry thought of pointing out the vulture, perhaps stressing its infinite patience, instead he glanced at his watch. Twelve noon. They were cutting it fine, how long to offload the guns, do the deal and get the hell out. How long before his little insurance policy kicked in and the deal went sour? Where the hell was that fat slob of a Xhosa with the trucks. And his money?

Movement in the distance now, images dancing in his binoculars. Looked like a cloud of dust but could just be his imagination. How did Hemingway put it? In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie at noon. Was the form of the lumbering trucks now taking shape in the distance just a flight of his imagination?

Fifteen minutes later they were finalising the deal in the shade of a large Marula tree on the edge of the dirt strip. Harry sipped the lukewarm beer handed to him by one of Mtshali's men, a boy of no more than fifteen with a dazzling white smile and arms too small for the AK47 he was cradling and drifted his gaze to where the last of the crates were

being transferred to the trucks. By his side was the briefcase with the five million US dollars, tightly packed wads of hundreds and fresh from the vaults of the Nasser Road branch of Lusaka's Barclays Bank.

'It was good doing business with you, Mr Jackson. I hope we can do more deals in future. Are you planning to stay on for a while, see a bit of the country perhaps?'

'Maybe next time,' Harry shrugged apologetically, 'Pressing business back home, you know.'

Cecil Mtshali nodded sympathetically, a pudgy hand absently waving away the flies that had descended on them attracted by the open plastic container of sandwiches on the field table they were seated at. 'I know, the busy life of a lord of war.' He made a clucking noise of sympathy and motioned the boy to open another can of beer. 'May I ask how you got the guns down here?'

'Trade secrets,' Harry replied with a shrug, 'I'm sure you'll understand.' He didn't enquire about the origin of the money, Vusi being the contact man and going way back with Mtshali to the time they set up the ANC slush fund in Lusaka at the time of The Struggle. Money that had been lying forgotten in that account for going on eight years.

'Don't worry,' the fat man laughed, 'I know they come from a warehouse somewhere in Morocco, Vusi told me, and I was simply curious as to how you got them past the different border controls.'

Harry waved away an offered sandwich and tugged at his loosely knotted necktie, his lightweight suit now like a sponge on his body, his mind going back to the three week journey around the Cape of Good Hope on the chartered freighter. The ship now moored in the harbour of Beira, followed by the flight earlier that day across Mozambique to that godforsaken strip of no man's land. 'Customs in Africa is such a flexible concept,' he offered with a smile. 'I find most customs officials very reasonable people.' Behind the cool façade his mind was racing, how long before the second phase of his plan kicked in? Cutting it fine now, time to start moving towards the open, gather the lads around.

‘Sure I cannot interest you in another beer, Harry – you don’t mind me calling you Harry, do you?’

‘Not at all, Cecil. As you said, a mutually satisfactory deal and hopefully the start of a lucrative partnership.’ He shook his head at the held out beer and the boy placed it back in the cooler. A thought seemed to strike him, ‘Perhaps I can be of help with the onwards transport of the guns?’

Any information could be helpful later, if his plan didn’t come off.

‘No need, Harry, but thanks for the offer. These trucks will take them straight across the border to the Congo where a friend is waiting to put them to good use.’ The latter apparently merited a hearty laugh and Harry forced himself to join in.

‘More understanding customs officials!’ And that was good for another laugh, even before Harry added the bit about hoping his next payment wouldn’t be in blood diamonds.

Out in the open now and the two Russian pilots puzzled as to why Vusi insisted they get out of the plane and wait next to him on the baking gravel, the temperature now definitely in the forties Celsius, even the vulture giving up and lazily flapping away to the beckoning shadows of the nearest tree.

And then, with the last of the crates loaded and Mtshali’s men on board the two trucks there was really nothing more to do but say their farewells and head off into the wild blue yonder.

‘Need any help to push-start that antique you came in?’ Mtshali quipped, adding that until then he’d never seen that much rust on a plane that actually still flew. Harry shrugged and was about to answer when there was a sudden cry from the men in the nearest truck, outstretched arms pointing in the direction of the tree line where several fast moving vehicles were racing towards them, lurching and bouncing crazily as they covered the uneven ground. Men were crammed on the back of some and even at that distance Harry could make out the sunlight glinting off the barrels of guns. A quick three sixty confirmed that there would be no

escape to the far side of the airstrip, two vehicles coming their way from that direction.

‘Here come the cavalry,’ Vusi said unnecessarily as Harry joined him and the two Russians. Harry didn’t reply, he was too busy listening to Mtshali barking a series of orders at the men in the trucks who seemed frozen on the spot. Then there was a frantic gunning of engines and the fat man running for the nearest truck but it was all too late and within seconds they were surrounded by the vehicles, seven in total, Land Cruisers all and spilling out of them at least twenty heavily armed men.

All of them wearing body armour with ATF stamped clearly across the matt black tops in bright yellow.

The man in charge introduced himself as Agent Stenson from the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Agency of the United States Government. Acting in conjunction with Mr Johannsen who represented the UN in a joint operation to combat illegal arms dealing into nearby conflict ridden Congo. Unlike Agent Stenson whose muscular tanned arms, crew cut and aviator shades had him down as ex-marine, Johannsen looked like an apologetic scoutmaster in the kind of “African wear” khakis last seen in the colonial Africa of the thirties. Throughout the whole encounter to follow Harry never heard him utter a word.

Harry’s “I guess this is not about the alcohol or the tobacco” was ignored by all.

They watched in silence as Stenson’s men approached the trucks ordering the occupants out and herding them into a circle at gunpoint. Moving slowly so as not to attract attention Harry raised the walk-talkie he now had in his hand and spoke a few soft words into the mouthpiece. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the American coming his way as a loudly protesting Cecil Mtshali was led away and ushered into the back of a Land Cruiser.

‘It’s guns, alright. AK 47s and ex-Czechoslovakian Army by the looks of it.’