

*From Chapter 1:*

**Nigeria: Ikorodu village. May 4.**

**T**wo years later Wolf Oil sent me to Nigeria to prospect for new fields in the East.

Africa grew on me. In-Q-Tel, the CIA's Silicon Valley venture company, kept paying me. Now and then they'd ask for some little errand or other; nothing too heavy.

One day in late August I was on my way back to Lagos. The Land Cruiser's air conditioner made little impact on the heat as I cruised down the Expressway at 70. The late August sun beat down on the road and bounced up at me, and I felt sweat trickling down my back as I left Ibadan behind. I wished for the cool days of spring and fall in San Antonio, but it would be months before I finished surveying.

An hour later I hit heavy traffic and turned onto the old road. I kept my gaze upon my surroundings, ever wary of trouble. There had been riots between the Christians and the Moslems and I didn't want to be caught in the crossfire.

The road took me past the Man Must Wack cafe-bar, one of my watering holes. I was lucky; they had cassava foo-foo, my favorite, as plate of the day.

The market-mammy who ran the place took my order. Juju music tinkled inanely somewhere; if she was picking the records, she must've had a fetish for Sonny Okosun oldies.

The foo-foo was good; a great mound of white cassava smothered in red chilly sauce, with a small but tasty bush-rat steak on the side. I had a couple of Star beers with it, leaned back and watched the

sky slowly change from bright blue to turquoise. Crickets began singing outside. Soon I'd be home — my rented house in Lagos. With Liz, my girl for the last three months. That little detail wasn't something I put in my monthly reports to In-Q-Tel, but I guessed they knew anyway.

I liked being in-territory. Back home I'd end up as one more of the hopeless, huddled by the freeways. Another bum with an illegal smile. Or should I move somewhere else? What country? There lay a question. I didn't want the answer to it, not yet anyhow. A sense of undefined gloom stole over me as the afternoon sky faded to cerise. Depression without any apparent reason. Perhaps a tropical storm was coming. In the distance, big old bullfrogs began their deep-bellied burping.

I sat with my back to the wall, an unbreakable habit. Nigeria can be a violent place.

Metal grated against metal close by. The jarring sound of it got my attention. Someone was bolting an iron grille across the front window. There was only one door. Another window, high opposite, admitted a narrow shaft of sunlight. My watch read just after five. With night coming on, I guessed the grille was extra security.

I picked up an old copy of Lagos Weekend from the next table. My chair groaned as I tilted it back.

The door creaked open. Two men came in. Was that pale gray cement in the folds of their brightly patterned shirts? Maybe they worked at the nearby cement block factory. They wore ragged blue jeans, sun-bleached pale. Their facial scar patterns marked them as Yorubas, impressively big men from Western Nigeria.

One of them stared at me. His skin was so black it shone indigo, with raised tribal marks on his cheeks. Something odd struck me, then I realized: he had a glass eye.

He took a lazy step towards me. A barely audible click came from the door. Someone locking it? Hair rose on the back of my neck. The air in the room turned into cold glycerin, dust hanging like frozen golden sparks.

I started easing my chair to the floor.

The two men exchanged a couple of short sentences in Yoruba, then laughed. I caught only one word, 'oyinbo', white man.

Out back, someone dragged the stylus across an old-fashioned vinyl record. The juju music stopped tinkling.

"Mistah."

It was the man with the eye. He smiled at me, but only with one side of his mouth.

He took another step. A beam of sunlight illuminated him. A thin line of scar tissue ran from the man's jaw line, through the corner of his mouth, towards his nose, then upwards again, bisecting the glass eye and disappearing into the hairline.

"Man Must Wack, eh, Mistah." Stale beer breath wafted from him. A machete hung from his belt. The edge of the blade sparkled in cross hatches as it caught the light. At least it was still on his belt and not in his hand.

I felt cold. Freezing cold.

The other man moved now, casually, but in a moment he'd be in reach.

I eased all four legs of the chair to the floor. Lowered the paper to the table. Cradled the edge of the table in the palm of my left hand.

I thought, let's see, I've got three thousand Naira, give or take a hundred. In Nigeria that's a lot of bread, but on the black market, I could replace it for the price of a meal in a decent Washington restaurant...

"Yeah, mistah, man must wack." The glass-eyed man looked down at me, and fingered his machete.

He smiled lopsidedly again, and shifted effortlessly into pure English. "But it would be better to dine in more salubrious surroundings."

Someone placed a stylus on vinyl. An ancient Fela record, 'Zombie', began to play in wonderfully raw crackly sound.

"What do you want?"

"A couple of hours of your time. My employer wants to meet you." His smile faded. "Don't be paranoid, mister. If we'd been what you thought, you'd have been body parts by now. Plenty armed robber roun' these parts."

I guess my face showed surprise.

The man laughed. "Oh yes. "

"You speak English like a Brit," I said.

The man frowned. "I like to think the three years I spent at Oxford were not entirely wasted, Mr. Conley. We have a car waiting. It's not far. My colleague," he indicated the fellow on my right, "will bring your own car along."

He dropped a handful of big yellow ten-Naira notes on the table. "Dinner and dash. Let's go."

"Zombie o Zombie," Fela sang as we left, "Open your hat. Salute. To the right. Quick march!"

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Every panel on their vintage Peugeot 504 glowed a different colour in the bright yellow-green sunlight. Overcoming my disgust, I got in. Grease and sweat caked the seats. Faux leather on the doors had crazed like a dried-up lake bed. Flaps of the stuff stuck out. Several times it spiked my hand or arm.

Some asshole had glued mirror film on the side windows. I couldn't see out of them.

They sat me in back with the scar-faced doc on my right. The doors had no handles on the inside. A cry of dismay came from the clutch and we lurched forward.

The car wandered from one side of the potholed road to the other as the driver spun the wheel back and forth. A lopsided toy-sized plastic fan hung from the sunvisor in front of him. From it dangled a wire that ended in the cigar lighter socket.

We came to a fork. The driver stopped for a moment, to let a mammy-wagon pass. We pulled in behind it. I peered through the windscreen.

The wagon looked like one of the old British Bedford three-ton trucks left behind by the Brits, when they'd pissed off and left the locals to get on with democracy as best they could. The truck glowed with color. Across the tailboard giant letters proclaimed, in red and gold, 'NO CONDITION IS PERMANENT'. Clouds of oily black smoke billowed from somewhere underneath. People hung from every available inch.

I twisted round to peer out the back window. My Wolf Oil Land Cruiser followed a good fifty yards behind, half hidden in our dust.

I asked, "How much further?"

The guy on my right showed a wall of white teeth. "Not too far, Mister."

He leaned forward and said something in Yoruba to the driver, who roared with laughter.

"Ya nervous, mistah? Lucky we no get go-slow, sometime it take one, mebbe two hours. Na whole worl' take de Expressway, no get go-slow no more, na so? The patrols too, mistah!"

He was right, which was why I'd been on the old road in the first place. Pity I hadn't sat it out on the Expressway. I'd have been back in Ikorodu right now, with Liz.

The car yawed. Perhaps we'd hit a chuckhole? I heard a crackling and crunching sound. I peered through the almost-opaque rear window. We'd driven over tree branches. What was ahead? We were approaching a bend. Another heap of vegetation lay in the road. I braced myself.

"For Christ's sake, slow down!" I knew the locals put pieces of tree on the road after a fender-bender.

Maybe we were doing thirty-five as we came round the corner. The speedo wasn't working. I saw the mammy-wagon parked on the right hand shoulder. Passengers jumped from it, holding clasped hands behind their necks.

Directly in front of us a long nail-board lay in the road; we'd no chance to drive around. The driver slammed on the brakes. Tires shrieked. He pumped the pedal and stopped just short.

Several men stood on the left. They were dressed in black flowing robes; black burnouses covered their heads. They had the pale skin of Muslims from Northern Nigeria.

Two of them aimed automatic rifles directly at us. The rifles were unmistakably Chinese SKS carbines. Cheaper and nastier than the old standard, the AK-

47, but they took the same cartridge and made just as much mess.

Parked behind the armed men stood a mirror-glass Mercedes 750.

A chill went through me.

"Mattawa," breathed scar-face. "Just keep your mouth shut, mister, and we'll be all right. Got that?"

"Sure" I said, but it came out more like a squeak. Nigeria had been in charge of the Party of the Chosen for the last eight years. This was The Chosen secret police. I'd seen these bastards before and always headed in the opposite direction real quick.

In front of the mammy-wagon stood one of the passengers with hands outstretched. His light skin showed no tribal marks. Probably the guy was an Ibo, from Eastern Nigeria. He wore stained 'gabs' -- gabardine trousers -- and an open-necked shirt. A small, battered brown suitcase lay in front of him. Its top hung open. Soiled clothes littered the ground.

Two of the Mattawa bent down, inspecting a small package. It looked like a roll of newspaper twisted at each end. One of them ripped it open. A chunk of something dark fell out. He bent down and picked it up. Put it to his nose. Sniffed. Nodded. Each action seemed to take forever.

The other Mattawa reversed his rifle. Without warning he smashed the butt into the side of the passenger's head. Blood sprayed. The man fell into the dirt, arms and legs splayed.

The first Mattawa started haranguing the remaining passengers in Hausa. I couldn't make any of it out. There were frequent references to Allah and much pointing at the man groveling in the dirt.

Finally the first cop nodded to the one next to him, who immediately brought the muzzle of his rifle

up against the back of the Ibo's head. In the preternatural silence the surrounding jungle held a menacing presence. Crystal clear in the moment, came the snick of the safety catch being released.