

34

A stinking maelstrom. Lights and alleys, boards over ditches, mud and shit lanes, shacks and lean-tos. An overlay of *ragga*, *kidandali* and hip-hop dopplering, one music dominating, then a blur of noise, then another melody or guitar line emerges, then back to chaos. On the other side of the road, a gang walks in formation, a V, with the older gangsters in the center. They look across the street with dead eyes.

There's a man in front of him and two behind. They have a route to walk, ley lines in the gutters: through neutral territory, friendly territory, and quickly, across enemy areas. Young men scope them, they exchange a few words, a name passes back-and-forth. They ask about the *mzungu*, the old white man with the straight back, dressed in a tropical suit, looking a little lost. Thrice a young woman skips up, one tries to hug him, one of his minders shoves her aside, but with a smile, "Baby, of course he'd want to, but it's business tonight. Maybe we come back later to celebrate."

Gunshots a few blocks over, no one flinches but the old man, their hands are already close enough to their

waistbands. Fights spill out of lean-to bars, there's a man bottled in the gutter, cheek ripped open, you can see a few teeth amidst the flesh.

They come to a small lane, and there's the entrance to the house. A discussion at the door; they keep their weapons. Eight men in a small room.

35

“It is late, thank you for seeing me.”

“That is quite alright, Mr. Ainsley.” Holds up a hand before Saul can interject. “No, I have the right name for your papers, but you are Mr. Ainsley tonight.

“I apologize for the inconvenience of the trip to my house. As you see, I cannot travel far.” He taps his wheelchair, his limbs post-polio. “Would you like something to drink, Mr. Ainsley? We have Scotch.”

“I would love some, Mr. Mazimhaka, but we must walk back the same route, and regrettably, at my age, Scotch is my before-bed drink.” The men with him are disappointed, but they follow his lead. “Were you properly paid, Mr. Mazimhaka? I would not want you inconvenienced in any way.”

“Everything is satisfactory. Let me show you the work.”

He shines a light on his drafting table, with engraving tools and bottles of ink lined at the top, and he takes out three passports, adoption papers and paperwork from the refugee camp. “Thank you for having the American forms sent to me. They were easy. Just computer gen-

erated, and the seals are simple to fabricate. Consider them original. There is nothing about them that would make them forgeries except what is written upon them.”

Saul looks at the papers, and then opens the passports, ending with the boy's. “The photograph was perfect, Mr. Ainsley. The boy is from the north, yes? I don't mean to be inquisitive. To us, it's obvious and with his name . . . He is a very hurt boy, isn't he? It's a good photograph, but if you ever run into a border guard who actually has a heart, he'll see it right away.” He chuckles at the absurdity of the thought. “Just so you know. The passports are real. From a blank. The Americans are, as you know, starting to use computerized passports, but these are the passports, that you get at the American embassy when yours have stolen, without any computerized script. As I understand, you just need to get across certain borders, where the security is not so tight, yes? And you can tell whomever asks that the originals were stolen in Mombassa, and you'll get a new one once you get home. Please notice the visa stamps in Kenya from two and one-half months ago, when the theft supposedly occurred, as well as the entry and exit stamps from Uganda with the proper dates and locations.”

He looks up at Saul. The men on both sides of the room shift on their feet. “I wondered about this. I am a business man, and I shouldn't wonder, beyond if something will come back to me. But you are not what I expected, some American with a soft heart who wants to ‘make a difference.’” He is silent, the room is dim, but for the light on the table. His eyes are pools of black, and the light glints off the silver hairs of his sparse beard. He purses his lips, and narrows his eyes. “And

you aren't trying to expiate any sins, either. Well, you've given me interesting things to think about, questions I'll never know answers to, either. I think you are trying to do a good thing. Just remember, sometimes wounds never close. Pain feeds on pain."

He asks to check something on the passport one last time, and points and says, "Look here." As Saul bends over, he hears, softly, "Those men with you are not your friends."

"Goodbye Mr. Mazimhaka."

"Goodbye Mr. Ainsley."