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Epiphany

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CHAPTER 1 – MIDNIGHT, TIERRO, WEST AFRICAN COAST, DAY 1, EARLY 21ST CENTURY

Tierro was the name given to a small island by its people. It sat, like a gemstone, in the South Atlantic Ocean, due west of Equatorial Guinea. Until independence in the late 1970s, Tierro had been called *The Midas Island* by its pale-skinned overlords, but as soon as a new constitution was drafted the old name returned. Ironically, when part of a greater empire, Tierro had been largely peaceful, but the last five years had been dominated by a bludgeoning and bloody civil war.

With resources focussed on the war, Tierro's citizens were starving while their homes were battered by gunfire, mortars and grenades. Absurdly, by enlisting on whichever side ruled your locale, you were guaranteed food, clothing, boots, and a rifle for which you were barely trained to use. Another pro was that you were given bullets, chiefly for use against the enemy but they could also be employed on yourself, should the need arise.

About ten thousand people lived on the hot and humid island, although no-one really knew the exact total. Jalnaville, the capital, was the only town as the rest of the populous lived in scattered villages. English was spoken widely although Tierro's native tongue was still uttered by the elders. But beneath it all, the island was dying.

Shaped like an hourglass, Tierro was fifty kilometres long and twenty-five kilometres wide at its broadest point. The rebels ruled the northern territories while the south was held by government forces. And between the two factions was the Melivaal Plain...

It was midnight and the sky was clear, its panorama painted with glimmering stars.

'Focus on your target,' said Azawy, the man in command of a group of six government soldiers monitoring a rebel bolthole, northwest of the Plain.

While his men watched the tents, where inside their enemy slept, Azawy couldn't help but gaze at those stars. Of course, his

men knew he was doing it but didn't dare point it out for Azawy had a reputation of being a butcher.

'It's so quiet, you'd almost think they weren't there,' said Azawy, peering through a set of cracked binoculars. 'It's too quiet,' he whispered but then came a noise.

Initially, the sound was indistinguishable from the island's natural tunes but unlike a squawk, roar or hiss, it wasn't waning. Pressing their bellies flat to the soil, the men waited fretfully while the sound continued to grow.

'We're surrounded,' said Azawy to the man closest to him. 'I didn't see *them* move, did you?' he hissed, sick of being outwitted. 'They're using sound...to hide...their movements,' he said, fearful the rumour of rebels having infrared sights was true.

Azawy begged his men to stay calm but the noise had become brutish.

Leaping to his feet, one man began firing.

'Stay down,' said Azawy after grappling the soldier to the soil. 'Azawy, calling HQ,' he panted into a decrepit radiotelephone that'd probably served time in WWII. 'We're surrounded and under attack. They have new weapons. We can't see them but they can see us and there's this sound...I...I just can't describe it,' he gasped then watched two of his men writhe as though electrocuted by an overwhelming current. Soon, the rest began thrashing around in the same dreadful way. 'They're picking my men off... They have new weapons!' he cried before a thousand fiery bullets ruptured his body.

CHAPTER 2 – PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, JALNAVILLE, CAPITAL OF TIERRO, 03:16 DAY 1

‘Well?’ harried President Manna Akeredolu standing by a window, a fist held prisoner by his other hand. ‘Well!’ he snarled, turning to the grim faces of his two jaded Generals. ‘What went wrong? It was *supposed* to be a surprise attack!’ he growled, kicking his mahogany desk. ‘What went wrong? I’m waiting!’

Annoyed by their silence, Manna checked that six fresh bullets were in their chambers, slotted the pistol’s magazine into place, and took aim. He always seemed to be on edge and at war with himself. He was forty now but remained unmarried and without children. And that fattish and somewhat happy black face could not disguise those small, cold, eyes which would constantly disclose his sorrow.

‘Only we knew about this. It wasn’t me, so which of you was it?’

Pointing alternately at each General, Manna suddenly halted, squeezed the trigger then shifted his aim to the other man and shot him in the face.

‘In peacetime, duplicity is dangerous enough, but in war, it is deadly. Do you agree?’ he asked General Younu who showed rows of lustrous teeth between quivering lips.

‘How’d you know it was him?’ said Younu, gawking at his fallen colleague.

‘I can’t be certain,’ said Manna, ‘but if I’m wrong, then it must be *you!*’

‘It wasn’t me!’ begged Younu, a skinny man ten years Manna’s junior.

‘I’ll wait until daybreak,’ said Manna, dropping his arm and falling heavily into his seat.

‘Won’t the rebels have burned their bodies by then?’ posed Younu who seemed eager to forego more lives by going in immediately.

‘Don’t you see patterns?’

Younu shook his head.

'This is the *third* time in a month that a group's been killed,' said Manna. 'We'll find their bodies but they'll be in the same state as the others.'

'Azawy spoke of new weapons.'

'I know, I've heard the recordings,' said Manna, sucking air loudly through his nostrils.

'Where do you think these weapons came from?'

'I wonder,' Manna muttered spitefully. 'Do you remember Romulus Gadillo?'

'I'm sorry, but I don't.'

'He's alive but I don't know exactly where,' said Manna. 'He's been disloyal before. I should have executed him while I had the chance. I shouldn't have let him go free.'

'Do you wish me to find him?'

'Smart thinking,' said Manna mockingly.

'But what if Gadillo isn't responsible?'

'Whether he is or not, the fact that he'd be in custody would please me,' said Manna.

CHAPTER 3 – MELIVAAL PLAIN, 07:07 DAY 1

If telephone communications were available then Gadillo, a reclusive demon, would be easy to find. However, Manna had long barred civilians using such tools. He was a xenophobe and knew that this and other policies *would* ultimately cleanse Tierro of foreign influence. Yet whilst his palace was tended, its floors cleaned, ornaments dusted, lawns trimmed and its larders laden with food, his citizens lived in squalor and had barely enough to eat.

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After handpicking eight troops, Younu advanced by jeep to the site of the attack.

‘Sir, will the rebels still be here?’ whispered Private Imo as they disembarked and began to march through the tall grasses.

‘Cowards play a dirty game,’ said Younu, ‘but they’re long gone.’

‘I used to know Azawy,’ said the gangly Imo.

‘So did—’

Younu couldn’t finish his sentence for Imo had disappeared into a deep pit.

‘Help me!’ screamed Imo, now impaled on numerous wooden spikes.

‘I shouldn’t have taken this path,’ wept Younu.

‘Sir, help...me.’

Younu froze over.

‘You’re...not...going to help me, are...you?’ said Imo.

Swallowing hard, Younu found it impossible to recount a simple truth.

‘Imo, we’re getting help but you must stay quiet,’ he said.

‘Sir, I’m...too young...to...die,’ gasped Imo.

‘We won’t let you die.’

Imo smiled bravely yet when the others re-covered the pit, he

knew it was burial.

'Think of God,' said Younu.

'I will...sir,' Imo moaned. 'But I'm still frightened.'

'We *must* move on,' Younu whispered to his men, briefly sniffing mutiny.

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Younu recognised Azawy but no-one else. In fact, Azawy's face was so vilely disfigured that Younu had had to check his uniform and papers to make totally sure.

'I count seven. How many do you count?' he said.

'Seven, sir,' said Private Chidi, pacing round the bodies. 'What happened to them?'

'I don't know,' said Younu but it wasn't the first time he'd seen bodies scorched by acid. And again, there was no tarnishing of nearby grasses and whilst there was blood, there was no sign of wounding. 'Chidi, fill the body bags.'

Chidi wasn't there for he was hurtling to the rebel bolthole like a dog freed of its leash.

'Come out!' he yelled, sweat spilling from every pore, but the tents didn't twitch.

After calling the rebels again, he sprayed his entire magazine into their dwellings. So enraged that he could barely breathe, Chidi then tore the tent's sheeting with his bayonet.

'Where are you!' he shrieked, finding nothing but their filthy odour.

'Disobey me again and I'll shoot you,' stated Younu while Chidi tasted campfire smoke in the still morning air. 'I said they'd be long gone.'

While Younu mused about where the rebels were, Chidi returned to the others.

He'd only reached halfway when there was a huge explosion.

'Chidi!' cried Younu seeing smoke, flame and bits of Chidi's leg whirl in the air.

'I...should have...known about...the...landmines,' said Chidi, cursing himself.

'Chidi,' said Younu softly, casting a great shadow over his man.

'How...bad...am...I...hurt?'

Younu made a lean smile then pointed his revolver between Chidi's eyes.

'No, please,' begged Chidi. '*I'll* do it.'

'Are you sure?'

'I was stupid, wasn't I?' Chidi reflected.

'I didn't mean...'

'You're crying,' said Chidi as Younu passed him the gun.

'I'm just as human as you.'

'I know,' said Chidi, holding the revolver in a feeble grip. 'Tell my family I love them.'

'I will,' said Younu.

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Despite a dark and solemn air filling the jeep, duty required Younu to call his President.

'Sir, the bodies again look as if they've been burned with acid,' said Younu.

'Are you alone?' said Manna. 'You can't let *those* people listen to our conversation.'

'*Those* people risked their lives for *you*,' said Younu, cowering to muffle his words.

'You make it sound as though I don't appreciate it?'

'I didn't mean that,' said Younu.

'*But it's true, I don't love my people. I don't love anyone,*' thought Manna.

CHAPTER 4 – TIERRA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, JALNAVILLE, 08:11 DAY 1

‘When did they die?’ said Dr Jansasinya, the middle-aged bespectacled chief surgeon.

‘About midnight,’ replied Younu, hauling Azawy’s body out of its black plastic tomb.

‘They’re decaying *very* fast,’ said Popalu, Jansasinya’s detracting deputy.

‘It’s as though an organism’s still inside,’ said Jansasinya, ‘devouring the husk.’

Leaning back, he checked his grubby surgical mask was secure then scanned slowly over the seven bodies laid side-by-side. His rumination, however, was disturbed when the operating theatre’s rickety doors were nearly ripped from their hinges.

‘It’s just as before,’ growled Manna, leaning close to Azawy’s corpse.

‘Sir, please put this on,’ Jansasinya insisted, passing over an unspoiled mask.

‘I don’t want that, I want answers!’ he spat, swiping it away. ‘Why’s the floor dirty?’

‘We’re doing our best under extreme circumstances,’ said Jansasinya. ‘We lost half our block in a mortar attack last month.’ Sadly, Manna wasn’t interested. If the floor was dirty then it *must* be cleaned and the needy could wait while it was being done. After all, Jansasinya should be grateful to have electricity, albeit from a grungy oil-powered generator that never worked when it was most needed. The palace and jail were the only other buildings to be connected to this “grid” whilst the rest had to make do with sunlight, fires or oil lamps.

‘Isn’t it time you gave me some answers?’ said Manna.

‘Maybe you should ask your brother instead of me?’ muttered Jansasinya.

‘Do your job, else I’ll find someone else,’ spat Manna then studied Azawy’s corpse. ‘I think the rebels have biological weapons,’ he argued as Jansasinya tittered. ‘Well, come on *great*

doctor! What else can it be?' he posed, throwing his arms high.

'A deadly new strain of yellow fever,' said Jansasinya.

Manna laughed.

'Yellow fever doesn't do *that!*'

'These men weren't attacked by manmade chemicals,' said Jansasinya.

'Apart from working here, is your other job to always disagree with me?' said Manna as Jansasinya began cutting Azawy.

'*Maybe more of us should have disagreed with your insane policies,*' thought Jansasinya.

'My brother's got *something,*' said Manna before choking on the vilest imaginable odour. 'He's also got Romulus Gadillo working for him,' he mumbled.

'The organs are already putrefying,' said Jansasinya.

'But yellow fever only comes from mosquitoes, doesn't it?' said Manna uncertainly.

'It does,' agreed Popalu.

'Isn't it interesting that there's no bullet wounds,' said Jansasinya.

'The bodies have rotted so much...how...how can you tell?' said Younu.

'Their uniforms are intact,' said Jansasinya. 'I thought you'd have noticed that?'

'Its biological weapons,' Manna maintained.

'What about these?' said Jansasinya, noting several marks on Azawy's face and neck.

Manna made a cursory peek. Although the skin was gnarled like tree bark and the colour of an old bruise, minute puncture marks were still visible, but perhaps not for long. Similar observations could be made of all the other men.

'I'll take tissue samples for tests.'

'You always do, but nothing ever comes of it. Maybe you don't test at all?' said Manna.

'Still sticking to your biological weapons story, sir?'

'Maybe it is yellow fever?' mumbled Younu.

'Be careful Younu, as I may start scouting for other Generals,' said Manna.

CHAPTER 5 – PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, 13:50 DAY 1

'Dasna,' spat Manna into a large ivory-coloured telephone.

'Brother,' Dasna replied wearily. 'Calling a truce?' he sniggered then recoiled as a blast of static deafened him.

'Never!' said Manna.

'So why call? You've never been a poker player, so something *must* be wrong.'

'Something is *very* wrong,' said Manna. 'More of my soldiers have been massacred.'

'But brother—'

'Don't call me brother!' said Manna. 'I just need to know one thing.'

'That you're going to lose and that Tierro will be free again?'

'Do you have biological weapons?' said Manna, a question he'd posed before.

'I'm not parting with *my* secrets.'

'Do you have biological weapons!' shouted Manna, thumping his fist on the desk.

'I'm not saying a word.'

'Who are you in league with? Is it Romulus Gadillo?'

'I'm in league with no-one. I merely want sense to prevail. That's all I've ever wanted.'

'So I'm *insane* now!' cursed Manna, longing to smash his brother's face into a wall. 'I think it is you who are mad! I may be bad at poker but I can raise the stakes. The next time I find my soldiers bodies burned, I will kill your civilians.'

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Still angry, Manna called Jansasinya.

'Was I right about biological weapons?' he probed.

'Sir, the effects still point to yellow fever,' replied Jansasinya.

'You're useless!'

'Sir, to be certain I need the facilities to make proper studies, but

I don't want people to starve so that I can.'

In shutting Tierro off from the outside world, Manna believed that he could bring about a speedy end to war, but so far, the rebels weren't yielding. After meticulously destroying all means of contact with other countries, Manna's troops shackled Tierro's merchant fleet to Jalnaville's harbour then shelled the only airfield. Finally, radio, newspapers and books were outlawed and the means of their production smashed.

'I'll provide you with the facilities,' said Manna.

'Where will the equipment come from?' said Jansasinya. 'Manna, it doesn't exist.'

'I'll give you money.'

'It's not the answer,' said Jansasinya.

'But I must have—'

'Must have what, Manna?' Jansasinya queried.

'Weapons,' he coldly declared. 'I want you to create these for me.'

'Even if I could, I would not do that!'

'Are you not a chemist?' said Manna. 'And am I not the President?'

'Manna, you *must* get control of yourself,' said Jansasinya bravely.

'My brother has just said I'm insane,' whispered Manna. 'Are you agreeing with him?'

Jansasinya apologised yet knew it served no more purpose than to spare his life.

'*I just don't want my island to die,*' he thought then continued his work.

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During the reign of Manna and Dasna's father, Jalna, agriculture was Tierro's economic mainstay. Farms grew groundnuts, sugarcane, maize, coconuts, tomatoes, melons, and breadfruit. In addition, fish, coconut oil, live animals and trochus shells were also exported. In return, Tierro got machinery and equipment, beverages, tobacco and fuels. It was a deal that would have existed

in perpetuity had it not been for Jalna's passing ten years ago.

Manna and Dasna had differing views on how Tierro should develop after their father's death. Manna wanted the island to become a haven for hi-tech companies while Dasna wished that Tierro remain pastoral and untarnished.

Manna ultimately secured the Presidency and spent the next several years welcoming corporations to Tierro. Dasna, however, was steadfast in his belief that these organisations were abusing the goodwill, but Manna wouldn't listen and eventually imprisoned Dasna for treason.

On the eve of his execution, though, Dasna escaped.

Troubled by Tierro's instability, or so they said, the corporations soon departed. At that point, Manna could have declared a truce and deferred to his wiser twin on matters of state. Instead, he remained in his private, unreachable, world.

Blaming his brother for Tierro's collapse, Manna placed a throttlehold over the island. From a tropical idyll, Tierro was now a violent, lawless and poverty-stricken place. Even so, Manna would not stop his war until he had his brother.

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It was late, yet Jansasinya's mind remained razor-sharp. Still, no matter how much he preferred to think that a biological or chemical agent was to blame for the soldiers' deaths, he could not expel the notion of a rogue strain of yellow fever. Usually, symptoms would take several days to develop, but here, bodily destruction had occurred in a fraction of that time. Whilst he couldn't vouch for the prevalence of head and muscle aches, fever, and loss of appetite which typified the disease's early stage, the autopsies did show liver and kidney failure, haemorrhaging and brain dysfunction that marked its later phase.

'It *must* be plague,' he said, chilled by his observation.