

IN THE COOL OF THE AFRICAN DAWN

In the cool of the African dawn, six armored Suburbans bulled through the sodden Delta jungle toward Bonny Island. In their wake, whirlwinds of red dirt billowed upward toward the crown canopy. Inside the vehicles, frigid air filtered the jungle stench of rot and decay. Felix Sanhedrin, a twenty-five-year veteran of covert operations in Africa and the Middle East, sat on the rear bench of the convoy's second Suburban like Allan Quatermain returned to the Dark Continent. White linen slacks, a blue Oxford shirt, a silk ascot, and a freshly pressed, khaki bush jacket adorned his thin frame. A device more computer than chronometer rested on his left wrist. His felt slouch hat boasted a faux leopard-skin band, and his canvas jungle boots gleamed. A Glock 19 nested in a leather holster on his right hip.

Sanhedrin's new boots rested atop two green, canvas duffel bags stuffed with Benjamin Franklins, and he carried with him, like a talisman, the blessings of the Mandarins who guided the operations of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia. Despite their stated policy to never negotiate with the enemies of the United States, Sanhedrin had convinced the éminences grises to ransom his assistant, Nathan Monsarrat, from the rebel group called Fighters Against Terror in Africa, or FATA.

He issued orders like a young boy presenting Santa Claus with his Christmas list. "First rule: I'm in charge, and my word is law. Second rule: we take only Monsarrat with us. Final rule: my money's bought your silence. Neither you nor your shooters nor your medics will speak of this mission to anyone. Never repeat, never. *Capish*, my new friend?"

Next to Sanhedrin, Mark Palmer wore funereal black, a shooter's vest, tee shirt, tactical pants, jungle boots, baseball cap, Nomex gloves, and sunglasses. Years beneath the African sun had braised his face and arms. He was clean shaven, and his hair was cut in a brown bristle. Military tattoos covered both his forearms, and blue veins latticed his knotted muscles. He carried an M4 rifle, a brace of Heckler and Koch P30 pistols in nylon holsters strapped to his thighs, a combat knife, commo gear, and four P30 magazines looped onto his belt. The shooter's vest held extra M4 mags.

He spoke with a soft, Southern drawl. "Five by five, Mr. Scarnagh. No worries. We were never here."

Sanhedrin had declared himself to Palmer by his work name, Fineghan Scarnagh. He operated under the letters F and S, keeping with the monograms on his shirt cuffs. Felix and Fineghan. Sanhedrin and Scarnagh. "You should call me Fineghan. After all, we're in the same line of work."

"What line of work would that be, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm an independent oil consultant. I work with firms in Africa. Occasionally in Russia. Often in the Middle East."

“Funny we haven’t met before, me being the chief of security for the biggest oil services company in Africa,” Palmer offered.

Sanhedrin prided himself on his light touch. “I’m a traveling oil gun for hire.”

Palmer smiled politely. “Have you worked with my company previously, Fineghan?”

Sanhedrin admitted that he had not experienced the pleasure. “What about you, Mark? How’d you get into the oil business?”

Palmer gestured toward the two men in the front of the Suburban. “We’re specialists—Frank, Joe, and me. We have skill sets that oil companies find attractive.”

“Former army?” Sanhedrin asked, although he had memorized the personal history of every man and woman in the convoy.

Shafts of golden sunlight as thin as reeds cast shadowed patterns on the hardscrabble road. Joe Marinelli drove the Suburban, while Frank Rollins navigated in the shotgun seat. They might have been clones of Palmer. They wore the same clothes and carried the same equipment, save each sported a mustache, closely trimmed beard, and hair plaited into a single braid, blonde for Rollins and brown for Marinelli.

“Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan,” Palmer replied. “You name it, if it’s in the shit, we fought there.”

“Rangers for Joe and me,” Rollins answered.

“Scrolls, not tabs,” Marinelli added. “Mark was a Special Forces light bird. Compared to him, Frank and me are cub scouts.”

Compliments bored Palmer. “Monsarrat also claimed to be an independent oil consultant. Like you, he worked in Africa, Russia, and the Middle East.”

“You know him?” Sanhedrin inquired.

“We met a few times in Abuja and Lagos. Port Harcourt, more often.”

“It’s a small world, isn’t it?”

Palmer recited his sums for Sanhedrin. “In my small world, people who claim to be independent oil consultants are usually CIA spooks. Not that I have anything against spooks, other than they can’t be trusted.”