

THE RECKONING

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1

A conspiracy swung into motion.

With stiff smiles and a handshake, two men met in the lobby of the General Assembly building. Hundreds of footsteps and voices echoed, the air heavy with urgency and purpose.

The older man had a sad, ancient face weathered by a lifetime of having seen it all. Bent and fragile, he walked with a cane. The younger man, sashaying with all the confidence of youth, clutched his arm, helping him along as one would do for a grandfather.

Like specks in a human ocean, they moved towards the rest area, where the smells of coffee and bread were strong. Above them, curving balconies floated, and close by, a plate glass window rose fifty feet high, dominating the scene.

This was the headquarters of the United Nations. Neutral ground. The building was swept several times a day by electronics and sniffer dogs.

Even so, the men were careful.

By choosing this spot to meet, they hoped the crowd would interfere with covert listening devices. That is, if anyone actually dared to use such things here.

They settled into adjacent cushioned chairs.

A waitress approached, but the younger man waved her away. Inching closer to his companion, he leaned over his armrest. 'I am afraid the ICC is not keen on pushing for prosecution. They seem to think the evidence is shaky, insufficient.'

'Insufficient evidence is not a reason.' The older man's nostrils flared. 'It is an excuse. Red tape strangling justice.'

‘We could give it more time.’

‘More time? Heavens, no. That monster is about to lobby his cause on the world stage. Seeking legitimacy. Signing trade agreements. Inviting corporations to come set up shop. God knows what will happen next!’

‘Very well. Since you feel so strongly’—the younger man prodded the armrest, his finger like a scalpel—‘I can have a team prepared for deployment within sixteen hours. We’ll move ahead with your green light.’

Furrowing his lips, the older man stared out the huge window.

Many flags flapped in the wind, their poles catching the sunlight, representing the member states of the United Nations. How insignificant Project Solidarity seemed to be in the grand scheme of things. Five tiny nations stepping up to the plate, trying to fill the moral void left behind by the superpowers. Admirable, noble even, if one could look past the distasteful gray areas.

‘I take no joy in this, you understand?’ His eyes grew pensive. ‘When you get to be as old as I am—closer to the end rather than the beginning—you start thinking about your legacy.’

‘Legacy?’

‘That’s right. Legacy. I used to be out there on the front lines—fighting the Cold War—while my children were still playing with their Lego. You have no idea how much they resent me for being an absent father.’ He chuckled. ‘My grandchildren, on the other hand, think of me as some sort of... hero... an old knight, perhaps.’ His chuckle became a snort. ‘I am proud of what I did during the Cold War. That was for my children and their generation. But Solidarity is like writing my last will and testament in blood. Is this what I really want to be giving my grandchildren?’

The younger man studied him, nodding. ‘Your grandchildren are starting their new school term very soon, I believe?’

‘Yes, quite so.’

‘Legacy or not’—the younger man jabbed the armrest, harder this time—‘the things we do will never enter the history books they study. That shouldn’t trouble you. We do what we do because it is moral... genuine justice... something the world has forgotten. Do you remember how clear our vision was when we first started?’

‘I do.’ The older man fiddled with his tie, smoothing it. His gaze returned to the younger man, his expression hardening. ‘I’m not senile yet.’

‘Good. Now do I have your green light?’

2

The moon was a silvery crescent as Abdi moved across the field, the night alive with screeching insects and a whistling breeze. The flashlight on his AK-47 swept across the tall grass, reflecting off the small animals scampering through the shrubbery.

The humidity felt oppressive.

Under the beret he wore, his face was weary, his dark skin glistening with sweat. His uniform was two sizes too big, doing a lousy job of disguising his youth. In the West, he would have been too young to drink.

Pushing on, Abdi entered a clearing with a small tree ahead, its branches skeletal and its leaves few, marking the end of his patrol route. It was time for a break. Bending under the tree, he switched off his flashlight, sinking down on a protruding root.

He struck a match, lit a cigarette, and sucked long and deep. Savoring it, he exhaled, watching the vapor curl before being carried away by the wind. Plowing his boots in the soil, he tried to relax, tried to calm his nerves.

But he couldn't relax.

Going without sleep for three days now, the insomnia ate at him, like termites burrowing through his skull. It was like being trapped in a permanent state of fatigue, a permanent state of depression.

Butchered bodies stretching out as far as the eye could see. The coppery stench of blood and burning flesh. The wailing of children being pulled from the arms of their parents and finished off with machetes and axes.

It wasn't always like this.

He remembered better times.

What little education he had had been given to him by missionaries in a school in his village. It only had one classroom, where the smell of chalk peppered the air, and colorful alphabets and numbers lined the dirt-specked walls. He could still hear his classmates giggling, their hands leaping up each time their pale-skinned teachers asked a question.

His teachers had taught him not only to read and write and count, but also to respect what they called the sanctity of life. They insisted—*oh, how they had insisted*—that tribal warfare was wrong. In other lands, people resolved their disputes through dialogue and understanding.

He had found it difficult to wrap his mind around such a concept.

What about defending the pride of one's clan?

What about punishing the enemies who spat on one's honor?

His teachers had chosen an unusual way of demonstrating their point. Along with the other children, they had given him a rabbit to look after, a white one with black spots and a sniffling nose. It was to be his pet, something he found odd. He had never known animals to be anything other than a source of food or a source of labor.

In time, his views changed.

He noticed how the rabbit would amble towards him with a twinkle in its eye whenever he fed it. It even played a mischievous game—chewing on his finger before darting away, long ears swaying, daring him to give chase.

Oh, how it made him laugh.

Looking after it no longer felt like a chore. It became a delight. His teachers used this as a lesson—if a boy and an animal could grow to love each other, why couldn't all tribes do so?

He was in awe of their wisdom.

Soon, they promised to introduce him to something called the Internet. They told him it would widen his horizons; allow him to communicate with other children across the sea. He had never been so excited in his life. He had no idea how this Internet worked, but he had absolute trust in his teachers.

But it never happened.

One day, an artillery shell came shrieking into the school's courtyard, slamming into the enclosure where the children kept their rabbits. The blast ripped them apart, disassembling them into chunks of flesh and bone.

Petrified, his teachers had packed their bags and piled into an old jeep. Before pulling away, they passed out candy and tearfully promised to come back as soon as the fighting died down.

For some reason, he knew better.

He knew they would never come back.

Soon, explosions pockmarked the landscape and machinegun fire streaked back and forth. Government and rebel forces clashed. Bewildered, he had huddled under his desk, cupping his ears, hoping against hope that his rabbit had survived.

Hours later, when the sounds of battle finally tapered away, he summoned up the courage to venture out into the courtyard. Under the dying sunlight, he had found nothing but lumpy remains. Melting into tears, almost screaming, he had scooped them up and slid them into his schoolbag.

He felt deathly sick.

Why? Why did this have to happen? Why?

Vomiting, staggering, he had peered past what remained of a collapsed wall. He watched as rebels streamed into his village, their faces leathery, their weapons

caked with mud, as they chanted slogans about socialism, liberation, and land reform.

But the man leading them was cut from a different cloth. He stood tall and regal with a compassionate gaze that could pierce the soul.

Abdi had often heard the women of the village speak breathlessly of him. They called him The General. A myth made flesh. An ordinary village boy who—through pure force of will—had become something more.

The General strode towards him.

‘Young boy,’ he had said, his voice rising barely above a whisper. ‘Are you hurt?’

Abdi struggled to say something, anything, but words simply did not come.

Instead he fell sobbing into The General’s arms.

‘You poor, poor boy. The artillery of the government tyrants hit your school. Where are your teachers? It is okay. Speak to me.’

‘They... ran... away,’ Abdi croaked.

‘Unforgivable. These neo-colonialists are selfish. They tried to instruct you in their ways and trample on our good traditions, didn’t they?’ The General dabbed away Abdi’s tears. ‘I will take care of you now.’

Abdi had served The General ever since.

Thinking of it now, his eyes grew misty.

The emotions of the past remained fresh.

He felt indebted to The General, just as so many other youngsters did. He had given them so much and expected so little in return. Or did he expect so little in return?

Abdi shivered.

Butchered bodies stretching out as far as the eye could see. The coppery stench of blood and burning flesh. The wailing of children being pulled from the arms of their parents and finished off with machetes and axes.

That excruciating experience one month ago had left him with nightmares that were growing more frequent. They suffocated his psyche, forcing him to wake up several times a night, gasping and shaking, turning him haggard, giving him bloodshot eyes. Now the only duty he was fit for was sentry duty.

He slipped off his beret, wiping his clammy forehead.

With trembling fingers, he touched his hair. It felt wispy, like spider strands, having dropped so much this past week.

How he longed for sleep.

Yet he shunned sleep.

He could no longer serve The General. These nightmares were affecting his health. As hard as it was, he would go back to his village. He would eke out a new life as a farmer. He would exchange his rifle for a scythe.

Yes, tonight's crescent moon looked very much like a scythe, didn't it?

He heard a rustle.

Startled, he looked over his shoulder, just as a blurry figure came bursting out from the undergrowth. A switchblade hissed. Black steel glinted under the moonshine. In that split-second, he could have sworn that his attacker wasn't human—the face rushing towards him had two robotic eyes.

He fumbled for his AK-47.

Too little, too late.

His hair was grabbed, his head yanked.

The knife entered the back of his neck.

It felt icy cold.

Then blazing hot.

Then something cracked.

The sound of his brain stem disintegrating.

He jerked, going rigid.

His eyes went wide.

His breath wheezed.

His cigarette fell from his lips, hitting the ground, spreading embers. He tumbled and slumped, trailing blood on the tree, his mouth frozen in a silent scream.

3

Haider stamped out the cigarette with his boot.

Steadied his heavy breaths.

Allowed his racing heart to slow.

The sentry was only a kid, no older than his own son. The most difficult part about killing at close range was not the physical effort but the emotional detachment. He had passed that threshold a long time ago.

Wiping his blade against the sentry's hair, he retracted his knife and dropped to one knee, bracing his SIG 551 carbine against his shoulder. He was cloaked in woodland camouflage, his face blackened by carbon. With night vision goggles clasped over his eyes, he saw everything in ghostly green, the moonlight amplified many times over.

His skin prickled.

His uniform felt scratchy.

He tugged at the curve of his collar, even though he did not sweat. Special pills had suppressed his perspiration. Only practical, since he did not want his body odor to give him away. But still, damn, the sticky heat made him uncomfortable.

Behind him, five commandos emerged in a duck-walk, sighting down their weapons, sweeping for targets. They were alert. Special pills had adjusted their circadian rhythms.

He knew his men wouldn't falter.

With a hand signal, he split them into two teams—Alpha and Bravo.

Then, leading Alpha, he rose, sprinting with his head tucked low and his body bent over. The wind started to howl, the grass around him hissing.

After thirty meters, he slowed and crouched, covering for threats, allowing Bravo to leapfrog forward. Then, after another thirty meters, it was Bravo's turn to stop and cover, allowing Alpha to leapfrog forward.

They kept going like this—Alpha, Bravo, Alpha, Bravo—their symbiosis precise, their movements smooth as liquid.

Until Haider detected a glow ahead.

A flashlight.

Clenching his teeth, feeling the adrenaline heighten his senses, he signaled for his men to go prone. The laser on his weapon sparkled to life, visible only on his night vision goggles. Around him, other lasers sparkled.

The rules of engagement were simple—anyone glimpsing the target first had permission to take him down.

Haider waited.

The glow grew brighter.

The salty smell of sweat approached.

The grass heaved and parted.

Slowly, surely, the sentry came into view.

Watching him through narrowed eyes, Haider remembered something his commanding officer had told him years ago—*you have never really hunted until you have hunted man.*

From his left, silenced gunshots whispered.

Bullets riddled the sentry's chest, mushrooming on entry.

He buckled.

More bullets tore his skull open.

His rifle fell, its flashlight shattering.

There was no twitching, no cry of pain.

It was a clean kill.

Nodding, Haider acknowledged the man who had taken the shot. He was a believer in positive reinforcement. It kept the men on their toes.

Haider got moving once more, cutting a swathe through the field until he reached a slope. Half-running, half-sliding, he descended, kicking up dust, reaching the embankment below. He dived into the mud beside a stream with croaking frogs, feeling the temperature cool.

Looming ahead was a white mansion with oval windows, its Mediterranean appearance strangely out of place in this African savannah. Rising three stories high, its red terracotta rooftop shimmered in the moonlight. Its entrance was guarded by heavy iron gates and its compound was surrounded by a limestone wall topped with barbwire.

The area around the wall was protected by pressure sensors buried under the soil. Not terribly high-tech, but effective nonetheless. They were programmed to ignore wandering animals, but would be set off by the weight of a human being. To make things more interesting, the barbwire on the wall was electrified. Enough to deter anyone who managed to get past the sensors.

Tricky.

But Haider had come prepared.

One of his men took aim with a grenade launcher, triggering it with a hollow thump. A projectile the size of a baseball arched skywards, dropping over the mansion's wall, disappearing into the compound.

Haider thumbed a remote control.

There was no explosion.

Instead he ignited an electromagnetic pulse—knocking out the power generator, the alarm system, and everything else that had electronic circuitry.

All the windows went black in a chorus.

Their mark wouldn't know.

He had retired to his bedroom, having instructed his staff and his guards not to wake him for any reason at all. What an arrogant fool.

Surging to his feet and splashing across the stream, Haider orbited around the mansion, closing in from the rear. Reaching the wall, his men boosted the lightest commando to the top. He sliced through the barbwire and secured a rope, uncoiling it.

Haider climbed first, his arms straining, his boots scraping the limestone as he hauled himself up and over the wall, dropping into the compound.

It was almost like dropping into another world.

The lawn felt soft and smooth beneath him. Flowering bushes were everywhere, trimmed into globes and cubes and other interesting shapes. He breathed in fragrances so sweet, he could taste them on his tongue.

Voices drifted.

Laughter.

He skulked towards the sounds, careful to keep himself concealed within the darkest shadows. His motions fluid and economical, he took up position behind a water fountain, perching his rifle on its edge.

Through the cascading water, he watched two sentries laughing and gesturing. They reeked of alcohol. Their lack of discipline disgusted him. Weren't they concerned about the lights going out? How could they even drink at a time like this?

This was almost too easy.

He steadied his breaths and flipped his selector switch to full automatic. Squeezing his trigger, he pivoted, firing controlled bursts. The men twitched in mid-laugh, collapsing like marionette puppets whose strings had been cut.

The water in the fountain swirled red.

With a hand signal, Haider ordered Alpha to sweep the compound's perimeter clockwise, while Bravo would do so counter-clockwise. His plan was to catch the remaining sentries in a pincer maneuver, scissoring them as quickly as possible.

Leading Alpha, he got moving, dashing past Greek statues that stood twice his height, their nude ceramic bodies rippling with perfection.

He heard footsteps.

Approaching footsteps.

He took up position behind a statue, cautiously peeping sideways.

Three sentries came into view.

Once again, he was disgusted.

They were strolling almost leisurely with their rifles hanging from their shoulders. How could they be so incompetent?

Having faith that his men were already in position, he tapped his throat microphone twice. The crossfire came like book pages being shuffled.

The sentries jerked and heaved and collapsed.

Beautiful, he thought with a smile. *Just beautiful.*

His men were well-oiled machines.

He ought to know. He had trained them himself.

Skipping over the bodies and linking up with Bravo, he entered a patio with potted plants, lawn chairs, and garden tables. Finding the right door, one of his men opened it with a motorized lock pick, and they slipped into the kitchen.

The smell of herbs and spices tickled Haider's nostrils.

Even in darkness, the pots, pans, stoves, and ovens gleamed from polish. He padded slowly across the tiled floor and passed through a swiveling door.

He entered the dining room. It was magnificent. Crystal chandeliers hung from a dome ceiling and the long table had a dozen high-back chairs. The polished marble floor was so glossy he could see his own reflection.

Fine dining, indeed.

Beyond the next door, he stepped into a hallway with oil paintings of scenic landscapes. A strong woody aroma hung in the air, the type that only came from expensive furniture. Somewhere close by, a grandfather clock tick-tocked, its pendulum unaffected by the electromagnetic pulse.

Haider clucked his tongue and shook his head. Their mark lived here in opulence, enriched by cash, jewelry, and property stolen from thousands of his murdered victims. Grotesque. Disgusting.

At the end of the hallway, he located a door leading down to the basement.

He descended, the wooden steps creaking ever so slightly.

Reaching another door at the bottom, one of his men snaked a fiber optic camera under it. The camera transmitted grainy images to an LCD monitor. With a thumbs-up, he confirmed that there were no active threats on the other side.

They were good to go.

Opening the door, Haider crept in, welcoming the chill of air conditioning. His men fanned out before a row of double-level bunks containing the sleeping forms of servants who worked here in this mansion.

Haider studied their tranquil faces, their chests rising and falling.

He felt a touch of regret for what he was about to do. But the rules of engagement were quite clear—no one, absolutely no one, could be allowed to interfere with their mission.

They took aim.

Their lasers glittered.

They opened fire.

The servants convulsed from hundreds of bullet impacts, their bedsprings squeaking. Blood geysered against the walls. Stuffing from mattresses and pillows rippled and burst.

It was over in seconds.

Haider eased his finger off his trigger, the last of his spent casings clinking on the floor. His weapon continued to smoke. The air was thick with cordite, as if they had set off fireworks in here. Slowly, very slowly, two of his men prodded each bleeding body, making sure their targets were dead.

Haider heard a gasp.

He spun.

A female servant stood in the doorway to the bathroom, her hands clutching her mouth. Petite and fragile, her bulging belly told him that she was pregnant.

Pregnant?

He froze.

What the bloody hell was this?

Their intelligence had mentioned nothing about a pregnant woman.

This was wrong. There must have been some mistake—

She turned, as if breaking into a run. Before Haider could stop them, his men reacted, their guns snapping up and tracking her with gunfire. In nightmarish slow motion, he watched her crash against a sink before rolling to the floor.

His throat knotted up.

He choked.

Seconds stretched.

Good God. What have we done?

His men bowed their heads, reloading their weapons. Anger swelled up inside him, scalding like acid in his stomach. But he held it back.

They had reacted exactly like the well-oiled machines that they were.

He ought to know.

He had trained them himself, hadn't he?

Damn it.

Chewing his lip, he moved to check the woman's carotid artery. No pulse. Almost as an afterthought, he lowered his ear towards her belly. Nothing. They had terminated both mother and child.

He tightened his jaw, bottling up his feelings.

Now wasn't the time to waver. He signaled his men to perform a quick sweep of the bathroom—making sure no one else was hiding—before exiting the servants' quarters and creeping back up the stairs.

He continued navigating the mansion until he found a spiral staircase with banisters made of ivory. Touching a banister, he took in its cold smoothness, noticing how badly his hand trembled. He gripped it to stop the tremors from getting worse. He felt like... almost like... something inside him had shriveled up and gone poisonous.

Climbing to the top, he stepped onto a floor carpeted with a cushy fabric. A huge oak door lay just ahead, flanked by the masks of the gods Apollo and Mercury, their vacant eyes staring sternly at him.

His men arranged themselves around the door, their faces brimming with intensity, their hands flexing on their weapons. The fiber optic camera was used once more, and Haider squinted at the monitor, studying the image of their mark—The

General—sleeping on a king-sized bed. Because of the low angle, they could only see his feet.

At last. *At last.*

The irony was not lost on Haider.

They had come to put him to sleep for good.

One of them picked the lock and turned the knob.

He pushed the door in slowly.

Something clicked.

A tripwire, hidden at the top of the door.

In a heartbeat, a blinding flash engulfed them. Like multiple suns. Then came a roar, absolutely volcanic. From the bottom up, the mansion's windows exploded outwards, glass flowering, flames surging. The shockwave smashed through the roof, sending tiles rocketing into the night.