
our
hearts
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Our Hearts

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Swollen hearts – you are like cathedrals of love,
Where pleas of “have mercy” and “hallelujah” resound.
The vespers of all souls – chapel light, steps to God,
Where at sunset’s hour the organ pipes fall silent.
– *Erich Maria Remarque*

Prologue

The earth here had always whispered.

But people did not hear it – to people, it remained silent, stubbornly and deafly silent, like an old man who knows the answer but has decided that silence is the only honest way to participate in someone else's catastrophe. It whispered to itself: a thin, almost imperceptible hum rising from the depths, from the cracks, from the pores, from that primordial space between the stones where neither light, nor air, nor time could penetrate in the way it was understood by those living on the surface.

One of the workers – a man who had been working here for his third year and had long ceased to distinguish superstition from geology – said it was water. Underground, mine water, seeping through limestone and quartz. Water that murmurs as it flows through narrow veins, like blood through capillaries. He spoke with the certainty reserved for things one desperately wants to believe in, just to keep from losing one's mind before Saturday arrived.

The others fell quiet. Because the sound they heard – everyone heard it, but no one confessed to it, for to confess meant turning the sound into a fact, and a fact could no longer be undone even by Saturday, even by the fear of losing one’s sanity – that sound was too low for water and too rhythmic for dead stone. It was like breathing. An inhale-exhale, unhurried, deep – the kind of breathing that belongs to something that has been asleep for far too long and has no intention of waking up human.

The air at a depth of one hundred and twenty meters was solid, angular. You had to chew it, forcing it into your lungs along with dolomite dust, dampness, and the metallic aftertaste of centuries-old, petrified salt. Time didn’t flow here; it crumbled. The vibration of the massive, old rotary hammer tore it into small, jagged seconds. *Rrr-tack*. *Rrr-tack*. The recoil hammered into their shoulders, shaking the last remnants of warmth from their joints, turning the men into submissive, mindless appendages of blind, roaring iron. Darkness pressed in from all sides – a thick, physically tangible mass smelling of stale sweat, heated machine oil, and cooling, disturbed rock.

They had been working the face for the past two weeks. The task was simple, like anything done by hand: advance another twenty meters along the vein, verify the composition, record the coordinates. But this morning, everything went wrong. Joseph noticed it while still in the cage on their way down: the air was thickening, becoming denser, as if someone had added weight to it, and every breath left a thin film of dampness on the alveoli.

The sound changed suddenly. A syncopation. The dull, familiar resistance of the stone vanished. The drill plunged into the void sharply, without warning, squealing idly like a dog broken off its chain. The wall let out a guttural, heavy sigh. Fine crumb sprayed beneath their rubber boots, the monolith cracked, and the rock crumbled with a dry, rustling cough, exposing an uneven, jagged breach some sixty centimeters in diameter.

Silence descended. Deafening, heavy as cotton, sucking in the echo of the falling rubble.

A piercing, impossible cold wafted from the newly formed gap. It was the scent of forgotten millennia, of damp, primordial rot, and a disturbed, deep sleep – the smell of the abyss itself, vomited to the surface. The beams of their headlamps darted into the opening, slicing through the suspended dust with yellow, trembling cones. The light glided over the invisible vaults of the inner void. There, beyond the edge of clear visibility, shadows were stirring. Vague, pulsating clots of gloom slowly flowing into one another, like black water beneath a sheet of ice.

“Carlos. Light, over here,” Joseph said hoarsely.

Carlos, a stocky driller with a habit of chewing on dry grass whenever fear bubbled up inside him, stepped closer. His calloused fingers, white with tension, gripped the sharp, crumbling edge of the breach as he peered inside. He tilted his head back, trying to make out the invisible ceiling of the cave, from which emanated a strange, barely perceptible rustling, like the whisper of dry leaves in a windless garden.

A drop broke free from above.

It fell onto his dirty left cheek, slick with cold sweat, just below the cheekbone. Warm. Thick. A viscous heaviness crawled sluggishly down his skin toward the corner of his weather-beaten mouth. Carlos froze. He mechanically wiped the liquid away with the back of his hand, his fingertips sensing its unnatural, almost living temperature – the fluid was warmer than anything that could possibly exist at this depth. He lowered his gaze to his hand and aimed the trembling beam of his lamp at it.

In the harsh electric light, the moisture gleamed with a thick crimson gloss. Fresh. Scarlet. Blood. Smelling of frankincense and blooming gardenia.

“It’s blood,” Carlos said. His voice was even – so even that its flatness was more terrifying than a scream. The stone above the breach was bleeding, sluggishly and with difficulty, as if the rock had flesh, and this flesh had just been sliced open by rusty iron.

Before reason could process this fact, a sound erupted from the bowels of the cave. A piercing, vibrating shriek at the very edge of human hearing, one that instantly burst the capillaries in their eyes and sent their jaws into spasms. Its pitch was an

impossibility for a throat, a larynx, for any living vocal cords. The howl penetrated not the ears, but the bones, the skull, the spine, forcing their bodies into freezing.

A living, pulsating mass spewed out from the black maw of the breach. Enormous bats – unnaturally huge, with leathery wingspans of over a meter – flung themselves outward. A black river flowing against gravity, against logic, against creation itself. They battered the men's faces with taut, cold webbing, hooked their claws into the plastic of their helmets, and tore their clothes to shreds. A real, physical wind arose, sending the light of their headlamps thrashing across the walls in ragged flashes. The creatures' pupils – Joseph managed to see this for a split second – were not red; they were blind, glowing with the deathly white, phosphoric luster of deep-sea monsters.

The shriek became unbearable; the rock resonated, vibrating in time with this madness. The workers screamed, covering their heads with bloodied hands, but their voices drowned in the howling hurricane like stones sinking in bog sludge.

A minute later, the swarm surged up the shaft, toward the surface, leaving behind only a whistling echo and the stench of a primordial slaughterhouse.

Silence descended. But it was the silence of absent sounds, a post-catastrophic silence, when the air continues to tremble, retaining the memory of violence. Joseph lowered his hands. His fingers were smeared with a strange, hot lymph. Carlos stood nearby, unmoving, the dry grass frozen between his whitened lips.

And then the lamps on their helmets began to die.

One by one. Slowly, as if being drunk dry by the darkness. The yellow cones of light narrowed, dimmed, turning into tiny, dying sparks. The workers lunged toward the cage, but Joseph froze, unable to tear his gaze away from the breach.

In the absolute darkness that followed, there, behind the shattered wall, the sound of the earth breathing did not stop. It had changed. It grew closer. And through this rhythmic, deep inhale-exhale, Joseph clearly sensed how, in the pitch black, something enormous, heavy, and watery sluggishly rolled over onto its other side and took its first step toward them.

From the depths of the opening, straight to his feet, a fresh torrent of warm, thick liquid gushed soundlessly, splattering the workers’ boots with a viscous, crimson wetness.

Chapter One. Blindness

The ceiling fan spun.

Leo lay on his back, motionless, watching the blades – three of them, white, battered, caked with years of orange dust – slice through the stifling air above him with an even, lulling, and terrifying persistence. He saw himself from the outside,

from above, with the detached gaze of a stranger: thin sheets crumpled at his damp feet, a bare torso, arms spread wide like a crucified man or someone surrendering to the mercy of a victor – and the fan overhead, inexorable as a stopwatch on a guillotine. The blades swept across the ceiling, carving the peeling plaster into white segments, and each such segment was a separate frame, a separate state of his disintegrating consciousness. Leo lay beneath this invisible editing table, feeling his receptors melt, unable to assemble the disjointed moments into a single sequence.

Three blades. Eight revolutions per second. Twenty-four frames – exactly what the human eye needs for the motionless to become movement, for the dead to come alive, for deceit to masquerade as truth.

He knew this from the movies. In his childhood, in a distant, ghostly New York, his father often took him to small cinemas for retrospectives – Godard, Coppola, Tarkovsky. He, a nine-year-old boy, would sit in a cool, dark hall, inhaling the sweetish scent of worn plush and frayed cinematic reels, watching the screen, and the screen showed him a world where everything was either slower or faster than in real life. In that crack, in that gap between the screen and reality, true cinema existed. There, in “Apocalypse Now”, Martin Sheen lay on a bed exactly like this: a stifling ceiling, a spinning fan, blades, blades, sticky sweat – and then he got up and went to the shower, and the murky water washed Vietnam off him, but in reality, it washed away nothing, leaving the war under his skin.

But the song was different. And Leo was not in Saigon. Leo was in Kinshasa. And no water in the world could wash off what had been left on his skin this morning – there was so much of it that it had already sprouted inside, seeped into his pores, become part of his own biology.

Someone else’s sweat. His own was there too, but it was familiar, dissolved, invisible, like the air you breathe every day since birth. But over it lay another: salty, thin, with that distinct, agonizing aftertaste left on the body not simply by foreign flesh, but by a terrifying intimacy – the kind that is born between the inhale and exhale of another person, when the distance equals zero and you are already losing your mind, no longer knowing where you end and where she begins.

She.

The air in the room – dense, damp, tropical, grown stagnant overnight behind closed wooden shutters – held the spicy scent of a downpour. It had rained all night. Leo heard it through his feverish sleep – or through what seemed like sleep – large, merciless drops drumming on the tin cornice in a rhythm resembling a frantic heartbeat. Now, in the morning, this moisture hung in the room in a thick suspension, settling on the walls, on the cloudy glass, on pale skin, turning everything around into something sticky, alive, breathing in unison. And amid this stifling dampness was another scent, barely perceptible, floral, and absolutely not his: something cloyingly sweet, dark, exotic – not the smell of duty-free perfume or toilet soap – it was the

suffocating aroma of a night flower growing in some ancient, rich earth that had never known winter. This scent lingered in the air with a stubbornness that possessed physical weight and a tangible texture.

A bottle stood dark on the nightstand. Local, cheap, with a dirty label whose letters Leo couldn't make out because they doubled and danced before his eyes: *Lotoko* – corn vodka distilled in makeshift contraptions on the outskirts, smelling of burnt grain, smoke, and industrial alcohol. Nearby, on the floor, two empty bottles of *Primus* beer huddled forlornly, while a third, half-full, warm, and flat, stood by the foot of the bed.

Leo turned his head with difficulty. A dent remained on the adjacent pillow. Not his. Where someone's head had rested until recently, the fabric was wet and smelled of that same intoxicating floral aroma. He leaned in, inhaled this trace, and in that moment a hypnotic pendulum swung inside him – back and forth, back and forth – and he realized with horror that he remembered and didn't remember at the same time. His memory had turned into a sieve, a leaky colander through which everything rational had drained away, leaving only animal, sensual details: the temperature of a body, the coarseness of short hair pressed against a skull, a scorching whisper, and the music that still rang in his ears.

...*Love is blindness*...

The song had been playing in the bar. Leo remembered that clearly. The "Le Copacabana" bar – not at all the luxurious one in Rio, but its Congolese namesake, cozy in its squalor, pathetic, charming, with crooked wooden chairs and a bartender who smiled as if smiling were a form of professional courtesy, not a living emotion. The bar was tucked away on Avenue de la Justice, in that district where the Belgian colonial architecture – pompous, with high balconies and peeling stucco – had long ceased to be colonial and had simply become a backdrop for a useless decay, the way a uniform becomes a mere rag once the epaulets are torn off.

Leo had flown into Kinshasa that morning – an exhausting flight from Nairobi via Addis Ababa, fourteen hours in the air and on layovers. By evening, he was already in that peculiar state of half-asleep disorientation when the body has crossed into another time zone, but the brain is stuck somewhere over the ocean, and between them forms a gap, a mental crevice into which everything known as common sense irrevocably falls. He had made it to the "Orient-Express" hotel – cheap but relatively clean, tossed his backpack onto the bed, taken a lukewarm shower with a persistent smell of rust, changed, and went down to the lobby. There, Rémi Gaillard was already waiting for him, declaring categorically: "Let's go get a drink, Gonzalez. Tomorrow the hell in the red zone begins, but today we still have the right to be human."

Rémi Gaillard. A Frenchman. An infectious disease specialist. Forty-two years old, or forty-three – he never gave an exact number, the way those who categorically dislike that number never do. Tall, morbidly thin, with a face where eternal fatigue and

caustic irony lived side-by-side, like neighbors who hate each other but can't move apart due to a lack of money. He had been working in the Congo for two years – first in Bukavu, then in Kisangani, now in Kinshasa, coordinating WHO programs. Over those two years, Rémi had grown a shell of that impenetrable, vicious cynicism that comes from looking too long at things that shouldn't exist in the civilized world and being forced to call them by their names every day.

Divorced. His wife had left six months ago – Leo didn't know the details, and Rémi didn't elaborate, but from the way the Frenchman looked at local women – quickly, appraisingly, with a hungry greed hiding behind refined courtesy – it was clear that the wound inside him was still bleeding, and the cynicism was just a dry crust over it.

"To the mission, Gonzalez," Rémi raised a full shot glass. The tequila was local, nameless, with a sharp smell of baked agave and gasoline.

"To the mission," Leo clinked glasses with him.

They drank roughly and fast. Tequila into the glass, down the hatch, followed by a gulp of ice-cold, throat-prickling *Primus* beer. Leo had brought this ritual from Texas, from college, from the days when alcohol was not just a pleasure, but a form of accessible self-destruction. Rémi, however, drank differently: slowly, savoring every sip like a true sommelier, accompanying every shot with a snide comment: "Weak," "Better than that trash in Bukavu," "Oh, and this one has an earthy note, as if corn actually had a soul."

The bar was half full. Local men in bright shirts, women with tall hairstyles, UN expats, a couple of visiting adventurer-tourists, and a gloomy military advisor from Morocco who drank straight whiskey and stared at a single point. From the speakers, taped to the walls with dirty scotch tape, poured a motley musical stream – Lingala, soul, electronic bass – and then, suddenly, without any transition, the speakers spat out a sluggish, rattling sound.

...I don't want to see...

U2. "Love is Blindness". Leo instantly recognized the opening bars – that low drone of the keyboards, heavy and viscous like black honey. Something twitched painfully inside him, the way an exposed nerve twitches when an old, forgotten scar is brushed against. A song from the distant past. From that very "San Martin" cinema where he had sat as a teenager, not yet understanding the meaning of all these English words, but feeling with his skin that hopeless, beautiful, enveloping tone that made you want to squeeze your eyes shut and never open them again.

"Which version do you like better?" Rémi turned to him, holding his shot glass so that the dim light from the counter passed through the yellow liquid, painting his fingers the color of old gold. "U2 or Jack White?"

Leo listened to the musical asphyxiation build up. Bono stretched the words, stretched the vowels, and those vowels were viscous, like molasses, like the night air of the Congo.

“Jack White,” Leo answered. “White is more honest. You can feel the destruction in his version.”

Rémi smirked. The smirk was short, crooked, with one corner of his mouth raised – the favorite gesture of a man accustomed to arguing for the sake of the process itself.

“I prefer U2,” the Frenchman snapped. “White is just craftsmanship. Technique. He takes someone else's pain and turns it into a rock 'n' roll tantrum. But U2 is the original. And the original, Gonzalez, always cuts deeper, because it was born in the dark, not under the spotlights.”

Leo wanted to object. He could have said that White didn’t just cover the song – he took it apart like an antique pocket watch to expose the gears, to see the very mechanism of suffering, and in that surgical anatomy, there is a grim honesty that the sentimental original lacks. Leo could have argue that, but the tequila had already done its job – it had liquefied his internal boundaries, turning his thoughts into shifting penumbras. And in the next moment, in the huge, grease-covered mirror behind the bottles that reflected the front door, he saw her.

She entered as if this space belonged to her by birthright and had been waiting for her all along: without haste, without false timidity, without that coquettish slowing of pace used by those desperately seeking the attention of others. Not the way lonely women usually enter port bars. She simply appeared. She became part of the bar's geometry, the way an exact brushstroke of a master becomes part of a canvas – naturally, inevitably, as if before her arrival the emptiness here had shivered in the cold, and now the world had found its completion.

Twenty-three years old – he would learn this later. But in that second, earthly age did not matter, because she belonged to a rare breed of women who exist outside chronology, the way great rivers or mountains exist outside of time: they simply always were and always will be.

Her skin was incredibly dark – deep, velvety, with that rare subcutaneous glow found in people whose flesh is nourished by the sun, not burned by it. In the tavern's half-light, this skin cast a matte bronze and amber sheen, as if a lit match were held close to it. Short, coarse hair, buzzed almost to the scalp, ruthlessly exposed the perfect line of her forehead, her tall neck, and the fragile nape. And in this absolute openness, in this nakedness of the skull, there was no defenselessness – on the contrary, one could sense a terrifying precision, the precision of an exposed nerve or a fresh wound.

She wore a bright dress made of heavy wax-print fabric, covered in complex geometric patterns, spirals, and broken lines. Leo couldn't decipher them, but it seemed to him that these patterns lived a life of their own, setting into motion with her every step. Every line was not a decoration, but a secret sign belonging to an ancient, forgotten language to which the human alphabet did not apply.

She slid onto a tall stool at the bar, just two steps away from them. She placed a bottle of “Aqua” mineral water with a faded blue label in front of her. The bartender, who a second ago had been lazily inspecting his nails, immediately materialized before her with ice, as if obeying the silent command of a queen.

Rémi, of course, noticed her first. That was his curse: he saw a beautiful woman the way a hunter sees a target – instantly, and with a cold calculation hiding behind practiced Parisian charm. He smoothly swiveled in his chair, leaned forward, and unleashed a dazzling smile:

“Good evening, mademoiselle. Allow me to introduce myself – Rémi Gaillard, infectious disease specialist with the World Health Organization. And this is my colleague, Leo Gonzalez. He is also a doctor, but he's too modest for tonight and therefore prefers to keep quiet.”

She looked at the Frenchman. Calmly, directly – with that unbearable gaze that seeks nothing and avoids nothing, merely registering reality like a clean mirror.

“Imani,” she said in a low, slightly husky voice. “Imani Ngoy.”

Her name sounded like frozen music, like a voice captured in the delicate triangle of a harp, rather than a mere combination of letters. Spoken aloud, it hung in the stifling air a second longer than the laws of acoustics dictated, and from this extra second, massive goosebumps crawled up Leo's forearms – it wasn’t anything like cold or fear – it was a wild, inexplicable sense of recognition, as if his body had recalled a rhythm it had never heard before.

“Are you a local?” Rémi asked, closing the distance.

“Depends on exactly what you mean by that word,” Imani smiled slightly, and her smile was as smooth as a mirror of water right before a stone crashes into it.

“No,” she continued, holding a theatrical pause. “I have business in Kinshasa.”

“Oh, and what might that be?”

“Personal, Doctor.”

Rémi laughed in an exaggerated manner – the way men laugh when they want to show that a slight rejection hasn't bruised them at all – and turned to the counter:

“Bartender, more tequila. Three shots.”

Imani slowly raised an eyebrow, peering into the fogged glass.

“I don't drink tequila.”

“You must try it,” Rémi pushed a shot glass toward her. “It’s disgusting. But paired with beer, it becomes tolerable. Just like our whole lives in this beautiful country.”

She looked at the shot glass, then shifted her eyes to Leo. He remained silent. He couldn't think about this woman, because thought requires distance, perspective, and there was absolutely no distance left between them. Leo registered with surprise how his pulse quickened and how that very feeling was building up inside him – the feeling you get standing on the edge of a deep precipice: awe mixed with the inevitability of the fall.

“Alright,” Imani agreed and took the shot glass with thin, long fingers. “But first, I have a question for your silent friend.”

She fixed her eyes on Leo.

“You're American, aren't you?”

Leo flinched inwardly at the ruthless accuracy of her guess.

“What makes you say that?”

“Your French,” she tilted her head slightly, and this gesture seemed so ancient to Leo, as if she had been practicing it for centuries. “It sounds atrocious. It absolutely reeks of Texas.”

Rémi laughed out loud, slapping his knee:

“Gonzalez, she had you figured out from the first word!”

Leo smiled awkwardly. The smile came out forced.

“My parents are from Argentina,” he squeezed out. “But I went to med school at Harvard, and then practiced a bit in Texas. So yes, my French is terrible. I know.”

“It's not terrible,” Imani held the shot glass up to the flickering neon sign, and the murky liquid flared with gold. “It’s honest. You don't know how to hide your accent, Leo, which means you don't know how to hide yourself. In our parts, that’s a dangerous rarity.”

She drank. In one precise, seamless motion – not downing it in a single gulp like the Russians do, but not sipping it either – as if pouring the alcohol into herself. She placed the empty shot glass on the wooden counter and closed her eyes for a moment. In that single second, her face changed strangely: the tiny mimic muscles relaxed, her full lips parted, and Leo saw through his intoxication – the way one sees internal organs on an X-ray – that beneath this mask of confidence and regal calm hid something else. Something immensely profound. Dark. Something that knew far more about him than he could ever imagine.

“And you?” Imani asked, opening her eyes and staring straight into his pupils. “How do you know this music?”

Leo didn't immediately grasp what she meant. Then he listened: “Love is Blindness” was still dragging from the speakers like a skipping record, filling the bar with a suffocating fog of grief.

“From my childhood,” he answered quietly. “From some movie...”

“From a movie,” she repeated, and in her mouth, the word sounded like a final verdict.

They continued to drink. Tequila was followed by beer, beer by tequila. Rémi talked incessantly, telling wild stories about Bukavu and Kisangani, about how he had extinguished an Ebola outbreak and how one night, in a hospital tent, he heard someone inhuman singing behind the wall – singing so terribly and sweetly that he, an inveterate cynic, burst into tears that he couldn't stop until dawn. And in the morning, it turned out that not a single hopeless patient had died in the camp that night, even though the hemoglobin of three of them had dropped to a critical minimum.

“Pure superstition,” Rémi got heated, and his voice was too loud, as if he were trying to convince himself, not them. “Mass psychosis driven by stress, insomnia, and local folklore. But the coincidence, you must agree, is damn strange.”

Imani listened to him in silence. She had already given up the mineral water and was drinking the burning tequila on par with them. Her silence was dense, tangible, like a pause in an orchestral score, like a total absence of sound, like the space where that sound ripens before the strike.

“And what about you, Imani?” Rémi leaned in almost flush against her, allowing himself that brazen proximity demonstrated by drunk men. “What do you do for a living?”

“I'm a teacher,” she answered calmly. “At a Catholic parish in a small provincial town. I teach little children to read, write, and count.”

“A Catholic parish?” The Frenchman smirked cynically. “And you believe in all that nonsense about the crucifixion?”

“I believe,” her eyes flashed in the dark. “Do you, Doctor?”

“I am French,” Rémi declared proudly, and it sounded simultaneously like a diagnosis, a sentence, and a ridiculous apology to the universe.

Imani smiled her smooth, watery smile, and in that smile, Leo, through his tequila-warped vision, saw a deep, almost maternal compassion. It was the way one looks at a mortally wounded soldier who hasn't yet realized his guts have spilled onto the grass.

“Leo, and you?” She addressed him by name for the first time, and his name in her mouth took on a completely different sound – not the brief “Leo” he was used to

in Boston, but drawn out, with a heavy accent on the second syllable, turning the name into an ancient description of a predator: a lion. “Why did you come here?”

“An official WHO mission,” he managed to articulate with difficulty, trying to keep his tongue from twisting. “A mobile clinic, refugee camps in Haut-Katanga.”

“Haut-Katanga…” she repeated, and a chill cut through her voice. “Well then. Perhaps we will see each other there, beyond the hills.”

“You're going there?”

“I visit sometimes,” Imani said quietly. “You know, Leo, Katanga is the kind of place you can never leave for good. Earth that never lets anyone go alive.”

She remarked it casually, but through the haze, he caught something leaden, primal in her intonation. For a moment, he felt truly afraid, but it was the terrifying ecstasy of a suicide who is already standing on the parapet and knows he will step off – not because he wants to die so badly – simply because the gravity of the abyss is stronger than his will.

…*Won't you wrap the night around me*…

The music continued to suffocate the bar. The tequila in the bottle ran dry. Rémi was fiercely proving something to the bartender: bringing up King Leopold, the rubber plantations, the severed hands of the Congolese, the Belgian colonial disgrace. Frenchmen always start talking incessantly when alcohol strips bare their inner loneliness. But Leo no longer heard Rémi. He listened only to her: not words – but the dense silence between them, the rhythm of her deep breathing, the silky rustle of the dress fabric against her smooth skin, the barely audible creak of the tall stool when she slightly turned her torso.

“So where are you from, Imani?” he finally asked.

“Dance with me,” she said instead of answering.

Not “let's dance,” not “would you like to dance?” It was like an imperative mood. Like an ancient incantation. And Leo rose from the stool like an obedient mannequin, yielding to the impulse: his muscles fired before his mind had time to erect logical barriers.

He vaguely remembered the dance itself. More accurately, his memory preserved only blinding, alcohol-overexposed shards of that night, unconnected by any laws of reason.

One of those shards, burning his fingers: her hand on his shoulder. Her fingers – long, strong, with closely trimmed nails – lay on the rough fabric of his shirt, and from this simple touch, the fabric instantly dissolved, vanished, and her palm slowly rested on his bare collarbones, and the skin beneath her fingers flared with pure thermal fire.

Another shard of the night, smelling of dark-red leaves and an approaching thunderstorm: her face just inches from his. Now he knew exactly where that intoxicating floral scent came from – it emanated from her skin, from her breath, from the exposed nape of her neck. It wasn't perfume bought in a store; it was her own scent, built into her body, inseparable from her flesh, the way a wild plant smells after a midday downpour.

Another flash of memory: her muffled voice, whispering words in an incomprehensible language that sounded nothing like French, Lingala, or Swahili. The language was guttural, visceral, and these alien words wove into a strange song. There was no familiar melody in this song – only a wild, untamed rhythm that coincided with terrifying precision with the beating of his own heart, accelerating it in defiance of the laws of medicine.

And then – she laughed. Quietly, with a rasp, revealing even, white teeth. And this laugh was strange – more liberated than joyful – the way a prisoner laughs when the iron shackles are finally cast off after years of confinement in pitch darkness.

Tequila again. Clear liquid pouring into glasses, warm beer they drank straight from the bottle. Imani threw her head back, and Leo stared, mesmerized, at the flawless line of her neck – long, defenseless, with a deep, pulsating hollow between her collarbones. He could clearly see the living, hot dark blood beating beneath her thin skin.

A brief reflection of streetlights: Rémi. The Frenchman remained seated at the bar entirely alone, watching them through the glass of his empty shot glass. For a fraction of a second, his face looked so abandoned and old to Leo that his heart painfully clenched. But Imani made a sharp movement, turned, pressed her whole body against his, and the entire world narrowed again to the size of her pupils.

And then – a taxi. A yellow, rattling “Mercedes” falling apart at the seams, with a silent driver who didn’t even look back. The night city rushed past the cloudy window: toxic neon signs, long ugly shadows on concrete walls, street vendors selling alcohol and dope, the crackle of motorcycles, fires burning on dirty shoulders, the suffocating stench of rotting garbage and fried plantains. All this flickered before his eyes like torn frames in a broken projector when the film begins to melt from the heat of the bulb.

She sat in the backseat next to him. Her palm lay on his knee. The fingers – strong, warm – gripped his joint with that ruthless precision that articulated: I know where you are right now, I know who you really are, I know every secret thought of yours, and you don't need to explain anything to me.

“You reek of fear, white doctor,” she said quietly, whispering into his lips. Her breath burned.

“I'm not afraid,” he lied, feeling his mouth go dry.

“It's not an accusation, Leo. Fear is the only honest truth of the human body. The body is always much more honest than your proud mind.”

He wanted to object, wanted to say that he had graduated from Harvard, that he was a field medic, that he had seen death dozens of times and knew how to keep a grip on himself, but the words got hopelessly stuck in his throat. Instead of answering, he leaned in and kissed her. Her lips were hot, wet, with the bitter taste of corn vodka, salt, and something primordial, earthy. From this kiss, Leo’s head spun – physically, genuinely, the way a person’s head spins when falling from the roof of a skyscraper without a parachute.

The last manifested shard of the night: the dark hotel corridor. A steep spiral staircase. A room – his own or someone else's, he could no longer comprehend. The grinding of a key in a rusty lock. Slime-like darkness inside the room, and only a narrow strip of yellow light from a streetlamp, breaking through a crack in the shutters, falling onto the gray wall. On that wall, they saw their shadow – a single, fused, enormous, inseparable shadow of a monster with two hearts.

The bed. Coarse sheets. Their shared scent filling the room like a suffocating gas. This scent delineated a new territory, an invisible border, the crossing of which was absolutely irreversible for Leo.

And her whisper. Alien, vibrating words penetrated his ear canal. From this vibration, his eardrum fluctuated, transmitting the tremor further, into the spine, into the bones, into the blood. And then came silence. Deep, ringing, like the silence on a battlefield after the explosion of a large-caliber shell, in which two ragged breaths intertwined.

A blackout. Absolute darkness.

...*Oh my heart*...

A loud, insistent knock on the door tore the veil of oblivion. Leo's eyes snapped open. The fan overhead continued to spin with its previous monotony. The white blades ticked away the seconds of his new, shattered reality. He lay on the sheets entirely alone. His whole skin was sticky, covered in a dried layer of foreign and his own sweat. The empty bottle of *Lotoko* rolled on the floor, and through the cracks of the wooden shutters pierced the toxic, dusty morning light of Kinshasa.

The knock repeated, louder this time.

“Mr. Gonzalez?”

The voice behind the door was female, low, and polite – the professional voice of a hotel maid accustomed to waking guests after wild nights. There was nothing personal in this voice, no mystery – pure function.

“Mr. Gonzalez, I brought your morning coffee and grapefruit juice.”

Leo sat up with a jerk. The wooden frame creaked in protest. His head was unliftable, leaden, as if after bad anesthesia. Every movement echoed with a dull ache in the back of his head; his temples throbbed wildly.

“Leave the tray by the door,” he shouted, and his own voice sounded hoarse, strained, alien to him. “I'll get up in a second.”

The light, quick footsteps of the maid could be heard retreating down the long corridor.

“Did I order this?” he shouted after her, but the only answer was the hollow silence of the hotel.

Leo sat on the edge of the mattress for several minutes, burying his head in his hands and trying to hold on to the slipping scraps of his night visions. Then he stood up – sharply, clenching his teeth. The professional reflexes and cold analytical mind, beaten into him by years of training, instantly kicked in, drowning out the hangover delirium. A classic scenario for a foolish white tourist: a beautiful local girl in a port tavern, tequila, a memory blackout, scopolamine in the glass, empty pockets. What kind of moron do you have to be to set yourself up like this on your very first night in Africa!

He rushed to the chair where his clothes lay in a shapeless heap. Jeans. Shirt. He frantically snatched his leather wallet and opened it. A wad of cash dollars – in place, down to the last bill. The corporate Visa credit card – in place. WHO staff ID, international driver's permit – everything lay in its strictly designated pockets, untouched, unmoved.

He shifted his gaze to the backpack standing by the wall. The zipper of the main compartment was closed, the tamper-evident seal on the lock intact. He tore it off, opened the backpack: the work laptop with complex double encryption was in its place. Passport, mission travel documents in a sealed envelope – everything was in perfect order. The medical case with ampoules was locked with its combination lock.

Not a single item in the room had moved a millimeter.

Everything was in its place.

She had taken nothing.

This thought hit him first, like an automatic blow to the gut. Right behind it came a second one, just as sticky as his sweat, and shameful: why had he even checked? He checked because protocols dictated it, because in all those frontline and troubled cities where his duty had already taken him – Nairobi, Amman, Dhaka – the same gruesome stories always circulated about expats waking up in cheap rooms with no money, no documents, or with a crude suture on their side instead of a kidney. Leo didn't check his things because he didn't trust Imani – he didn't know her – simply because he had already stopped trusting this world.

Or did he actually trust her?

He picked up the phone from the table, unlocked the screen, and went into his contact list. Swiped his finger through yesterday's history. Bar. Taxi. Hotel corridor. He remembered clearly, to the point of aching joints, how right here in the room, holding her by her slender waist, he had opened the phone, and she dictated her number, and he had pressed his fingers against the digits. She had even smiled her strange smile then and whispered, “Make sure you don't lose it, white doctor.”

There was nothing in the phone. Not a single new entry. No name starting with an “I”. No missed or dialed number. The call log was as immaculately clean as if yesterday evening, the “Le Copacabana” bar, the tequila, and Imani Ngoy herself were merely a figment of his inflamed hangover imagination.

Leo slowly placed the phone back on the nightstand. He stood for a second, listening to the vile grating of the ceiling fan, then threw on a robe, opened the room door a crack, and retrieved the tray from the floor. On it sat a white ceramic cup of steaming black coffee, a tall glass of cloudy pinkish grapefruit juice, and two sugar cubes in paper wrappers. Bitterness upon bitterness. A standard breakfast for a standard guest.

He carried the tray to the table and headed into the bathroom to take an ice-cold shower and wash off this obsessive, maddening residue of the past night. He turned on the light. The archaic fluorescent lamp beneath the ceiling buzzed strainingly, blinked a few times, and finally flooded the yellowed tile walls with a deathly white glare.

Leo walked up to the sink and raised his eyes to the mirror.

On the large glass, slightly fogged from the morning dampness, burned a sweeping message. The letters were drawn large, with a furious, confident pressure. Thick, bright burgundy lipstick. The hand that had written this in the semi-darkness clearly did not tremble from fear and knew exactly that these words would be read.

I will find you.

Chapter Two. Stained Glass

Her shelter smelled of overheated palm oil, burnt onions, and the sweetish smoke of charcoal. Behind the torn canvas awning of the street brazier, where a heavy-set woman turned golden *accra* balls in boiling deep fat, Imani was completely hidden from prying eyes. A thick curtain of fumes and steam reliably separated her from the noisy street.

She stood absolutely motionless. She wore a long, austere white dress made of thick cotton with a high, closed collar. Her head was covered by a white headscarf, tied in the tradition of the Catholic parishes of Haut-Katanga – tightly, completely hiding her hair and neck. In this attire, her slender silhouette seemed carved from

ivory, and her face, in contrast with the snow-white fabric, looked even darker, deeper, and more expressive, like the dark water of a forest lake before a thunderstorm.

She was waiting for him.

This state of waiting existed outside of logic and decisions. It lived in her very breath, in the beating of the pulse at her wrists, in that incomprehensible feeling that had driven her here early in the morning through the wet, lazily waking city. And this waiting was corporeal: the way a lung cannot help but breathe, the way a heart cannot help but beat.

She stood on the corner of Avenue Kasa-Vubu, observing the facade of St. Peter's Church, and watched as the hot sun leisurely ignited its neo-Gothic towers. First, an orange reflection touched the upper cornices, then a golden wave descended to the foot of the steps, and finally, the stained-glass rose window above the entrance flared from within with a thick, blinding light.

At eight-fifteen, Gonzalez appeared. Leo.

Imani recognized his step even before she made out his face. The fast, focused, precise stride of a man accustomed to crossing the thresholds of hospital wards. He walked in a light-colored shirt, with a backpack slung over his shoulder. From behind the canvas awning, Imani peered at his features and marveled at what she saw: in his appearance, there was no trace left of the mad, sleepless night and the consumed alcohol. He looked absolutely fresh, put-together, washed, with his dark hair still damp from the shower. This flawless fearlessness of his body, this ability to look clean amidst the tropical chaos, made her heart clench.

When Leo stopped at the foot of the stairs and raised his head toward the rose window, the morning sun struck him right in the face. His skin immediately flared with an improbable bronze and gold, as if in an ancient fresco.

Inside Imani’s chest, a thin, taut thread snapped. In its place came a wave of previously unseen tenderness – deep, deafening, almost sacrilegious. It was an entirely new feeling, unlike anything she had known before. She had never felt anything like this toward her own husband: there, everything was built on duty, shadows, and silenced pain. But here, facing this unfamiliar white doctor, a wild, desperate impulse awoke within her. She felt an unbearable urge to run out of her dark shelter, cross the street, hug him with all her might, press his head to her chest, and hold him like that, not letting go for a single centimeter.

It was the exact same embrace with which her grandfather had once held her. In those distant, terrifying days, when her grandmother silently gathered her things, belonging to her alone, and left the house into the pitch darkness, toward the jungle, leaving behind only the smell of dug-up earth and dried herbs. On such days, her grandfather would sit on the wooden threshold, place little Imani on his lap, and press her to himself with such force, as if trying to shield her from the whole world with his

body. In that old grandfatherly warmth, there were no words or promises – only a blind, saving protection.

Now Imani wanted to become that same protection for Leo. She felt an invisible ring of danger closing around him, the center of which was herself. And this desperate thirst to keep him safe burned her from the inside.

She waited until the bulky oak door of the church swallowed the American's figure. Waiting for three minutes, Imani stepped out from behind the canvas and silently headed toward the church.

Inside, a blessed, echoing coolness reigned. The thick stone walls held the night's freshness, protecting the space from the approaching midday heat. But the main thing in the church was the light. The morning sun had already risen high enough, and the narrow lancet stained-glass windows ignited in full force. Tall pillars of color – sapphire blue, deep ruby red, amber gold – pierced the gloom, slicing the air with sharp, pulsating blades. Motes of dust danced in these rays, turning the interior space into a radiant, prayerful well.

Leo sat in the second row from the altar. His head was bowed, his fingers clasped in a tight lock. He was praying, immersed in the Catholic canon familiar since childhood, finding in it his sole anchor amidst this strange Congolese world. Next to him on the polished pew lay a scuffed black backpack with a hand-sewn, slightly crooked WHO emblem – in this uneven stitching, a touching human exhaustion showed through.

Imani approached without making a sound and quietly sank onto the pew beside him.

Leo flinched. His prayer broke off. He turned his head, and in his brown eyes, illuminated from below by the colored reflection of the stained glass, flared pure, stunned amazement.

"Imani?.." he exhaled.

"Hush," she whispered barely audibly, gesturing with her eyes toward the altar. "We are in the house of God."

"How did you... where did you come from?"

"You asked me yourself last night," her voice sounded quiet, but it filled all the space between them, like water poured into a crystal vessel. "You asked where one could pray here at dawn. I answered: St. Peter's Church, at eight in the morning."

Leo frowned, vainly trying to fish this memory out of the murky gaps of his mind:

"I asked? When? I don't remember that..."

"I know."

The stained-glass windows continued to pour their piercing light. Blue and red rays crossed right on her white dress, dyeing the fabric purple. Leo's gaze slid to her neck. There, over the austere collar, in the place where the collarbones meet in a V, where the skin is thin and a pulsation is visible beneath it, hung an amulet on a dark cord that hadn't been there the night before.

It didn't look like a cross. It didn't look like an icon. It was different, ancient, alien – and at the same time, Imani wore it over her white dress, over her white scarf – and this *layering* was not a challenge, not a contradiction, but a natural coexistence: two worlds, two views, two understandings, living in one body, on one neck, side by side, together, without interfering with one another. It was a small wooden cylinder, polished by time, wrapped in dry sinews and inscribed with fine carving, a pattern – a circle with a dot inside, and a spiral around the dot.

Leo peered at the pattern, and his voice dropped to a professional whisper:

“Is that a Nkisi?”

A lively, astonished spark flashed in Imani's eyes:

“You know that word?”

“I read about the Congo before the trip,” Leo answered, maintaining his distance. “Nkisi is... A spirit? An object of power? A guardian? I read different interpretations.”

“A guardian,” she repeated softly, and in her intonation sounded a deep, ancient respect for a man who had tried to understand her world. “Yes. You could call it that.”

“A guardian,” Leo repeated. He looked at the amulet. Then back at her. Into her eyes. “And what does it guard?”

Imani did not answer. She reached into her small palm-fiber handbag and extracted a massive object from it. It was a thick copper bracelet, covered in engravings darkened by time – the same spirals and dots as on the wooden amulet. The metal felt surprisingly warm, as if it harbored a living human breath within it.

Imani took Leo by his right hand – on his left, the steel case of his watch gleamed dully. Her movements were fluid, but absolutely unyielding. His skin was slightly reddened by the morning sun, dry, with fine dark hairs on his arms, with a visible blue vein pulsating evenly, calmly, and Imani thought (not with her head, but with her fingers, her fingertips, the pads of her fingers – her fingers thought on their own, the way separate beings think) that this pulse was beating in a rhythm, a rhythm familiar only to her, which she had heard before, since childhood, there – at home... And pressing her fingers against his wrist, she slipped the copper bracelet onto his skin.

The metal wrapped tightly around the joint. Leo felt a strange, deep impulse travel first from his wrist to his shoulder, and then further – down his spine.

“Where you are going, it can be dangerous,” Imani said, holding his hand in her palms. “It can be truly dangerous.”

“I know,” Leo replied, not taking his eyes off her face, which was bisected by a violet beam from the stained glass.

“You don’t know,” she tilted her head slightly, and this gesture, that very same one from the bar, forced Leo into silence. “You think you know. You read your papers, looked at maps, studied protocols. But paper has no smell. Maps don’t breathe. Protocols don’t cry at night.”

She fell silent, looking somewhere forward, past the altar.

“Is there Ebola in Katanga?” she asked, looking at him.

“We don’t know. There is no exact data yet. That is why Gaillard and I are heading there.”

Leo paused, peering into her dark pupils, around which amber rims emerged in the sunlight:

“Why did you delete your number from my phone?”

“I didn't delete it.”

“It's not in my phone…”

“Enough, Leo,” she interrupted him, and a sad, wise smile appeared on her lips. “Where you are going, mobile networks don't work. There are no towers. No satellites. No nothing. A phone is an object. And objects – ” she paused, “ – objects lose their meaning when they step outside the bounds of what they were made for. A phone is made for connection. And there, connection is established differently.”

She slowly rose from the pew. The white cotton fabric glided over the polished wood.

“I will come there,” she uttered quietly, looking toward the glowing crucifix. “I am originally from Haut-Katanga. I'm sorry I didn't say so right away… That is my land, Leo. Sometimes you have to return home.”

Before he had time to answer, Imani leaned in, grabbed his right arm – the one on which the dark copper shone – and squeezed it with such passionate, desperate strength that it caught Leo's breath. In that grip of hers was all the unspent tenderness, all the anxiety, and all the wild, inexplicable bond that had formed between them. And from this squeeze, he felt the blood in his wrist slow down, his pulse calm, his body relax – and this could not be explained in physical, chemical, or medical terms.

“Take care of yourself, white doctor,” she whispered.

She turned and walked toward the exit. Her light dress moved through the colored pillars of stained-glass light, dissolving in the golden dust until the oak door closed behind her without a single sound. Only her scent remained in the air – dark, nocturnal, smelling of night flowers and damp earth.

Leo slipped his arms through the backpack straps, crossed himself, and stepped outside.

The morning heat of Kinshasa hit his face in a dense, humid wave. At the foot of the steps, leaning against a battered yellow taxi, stood Rémi Gaillard.

The Frenchman was eagerly devouring a local shawarma – that specific Kinshasa kind, wrapped in oiled newspaper, with minced meat, fried onions, green peppers, and a yellow, spicy sauce that ran down his fingers and dripped onto his trousers, and Rémi paid no attention to this whatsoever, because for him, eating was a process of self-assertion in the world, a kind of action, a form of presence – to eat meant to be here and now.

Next to him on the hood lay a second shawarma, wrapped in the same kind of newspaper.

“Ah, here’s our righteous man!” Rémi mumbled with a full mouth, handing Leo the second wrap. “Here, Gonzalez. Hot meat, a bunch of pepper – the best cure for a hangover. It's time to head to the airport, the UN charter flight is already warming up its engines.”

Leo took the wrap, feeling its scalding heat with his fingers. He abruptly turned and cast a glance over the square, the brazier, the colorful crowd of passersby. The white dress was nowhere to be seen.

“Did you see her?” Leo asked quickly.

Rémi stopped chewing and wiped his chin with the back of his hand:

“Who?”

“The girl. Imani. She came out of the church a couple of minutes ago, right in front of me.”

The Frenchman frowned in bewilderment, glancing at the empty steps:

“Leo, I've been hanging around here for ten minutes. Only one crippled old man crawled out of those doors. Are you sure you slept it off?”

Leo said nothing. A cold, unearthly draft ran down his spine. He silently stepped toward the open door of the taxi and tossed his backpack onto the seat.

“Wait a minute,” Rémi suddenly narrowed his eyes and sharply grabbed Leo by the shoulder, spinning him around. “Damn it... Looks like your night really was wild. Where did you get blood on your back?”

“What?” Leo tried to twist away.

“Turn your back! Lift your shirt!”

Leo complied. Rémi carefully lifted the thick cotton fabric of the light gray shirt, which half an hour ago in the hotel had been flawlessly clean. Fresh scarlet spots were blooming on the fabric.

“Four scratches,” Rémi stated, examining the wounds with the meticulousness of an experienced doctor. “Parallel, from the shoulder blade all the way to the ribs. The skin is swollen, oozing blood. As if a wildcat slashed you.”

Leo carefully reached his hand behind his back and touched his shoulder blade. His fingers felt hot, stinging furrows and a wet, sticky warmth. In the morning, when he stood under the shower in the hotel and dried himself with a towel in front of the mirror, his back had been completely clean. Not a single abrasion. Or was it that local booze after all?

Rémi grunted, shaking his head, and climbed into the front seat of the taxi:

“Alright, don't worry about it, Romeo. No one will see anything under the protective suit anyway. Just make sure you treat it with antiseptic on the plane.”

Leo finally took a bite of the shawarma. The meat was roasted, spicy, hot; the sauce sharp, sweet, viscous; the bread thin, crispy, oily – and all this together exploded in his mouth, filling it, flooding it – and he thought that already twice in the last twelve hours his body had been filled with heat – her yesterday, the shawarma today – and the difference between these two fillings was immeasurable, disproportionate, insane.

“Get in, it's time to go,” the Frenchman interrupted his thoughts.

Leo got into the back seat. The taxi roared, enveloped itself in blue-gray smoke, and pulled away.

“Rémi,” he said.

“Mhm?”

“Do you believe in what you can't explain?”

Rémi looked at him. Long. Heavy. Then he turned away, looking out the window.

“Leo, Leo. I don't believe in anything,” he answered. “But I see what I see. And what I see, Gonzalez – ” he paused, “ – is sometimes far too much.”

Leo looked out the window at the receding towers of St. Peter's Church, at the colored stained-glass windows blinking in the already distant openings. On his right wrist, the copper pressed down like a massive, icy ring, his own inexplicable blood dried on his fingers, and in the air of the scorching car, overpowering the smell of roasted meat and gasoline, there still hung the distinct, persistent aroma of church incense and her body.

Chapter Three. Cartography of a Wound

The Cessna 208 Caravan flew low.

Single-engine, with a blunt nose and a propeller that bit into the saturated tropical air with a monotonous, dogged persistence, it had been carrying them over the green desert for the fourth hour now. In the cramped cabin hung a thick, acrid blend of aviation kerosene, sun-baked plastic, antiseptic, and human sweat. The space between the seats up to the very ceiling was packed with cardboard boxes of reagents, sealed biohazard containers, portable centrifuges, and rolls of thick insulating film.

Leo sat by the left window, pressing his forehead against the warm, vibrating plastic, and looked down.

The jungle beneath them seemed endless. The canopy of the continuous green mass, thick, dark, impenetrable, stretched to the very horizon, merging with the pale tropical sky into a barely distinguishable line. And this canopy breathed – not metaphorically, but physically: the ascending currents of scorching air heaved it in slow waves, like the measured rise and fall of the colossal chest of a slumbering giant. The forest slept. Or pretended to sleep.

And then the scars began.

The first appeared on the right, almost under the wing – an elongated, rusty-red incision in the green thicket, several hundred meters wide and stretching beyond the limits of sight. A quarry. The exposed clay, turned inside out from beneath the turf like subcutaneous fat from beneath a slashed skin, glistened in the sun with a wet, reddish-brown surface. Along the edges of the cut stuck out uprooted trees – their roots, white, exposed, looking like the bones of an old skeleton, pointing at the sky. Next to the quarry snaked dirt roads cut by the tracks of heavy machinery – bulldozers, excavators, dump trucks – and these roads, narrow, winding, merged into an ugly web entangling the open wound.

The second scar was further south. Bigger. Deeper. It no longer looked like an incision; it was a massive crater, gouged into the earth with such brutal efficiency that even from an altitude of eight hundred meters Leo could see the stepped terraces spiraling downward – like a snail shell turned inside out. At the very bottom of the crater stood murky, greenish-yellow water, resembling pus. Around it, like ants around a crushed fruit, swarmed the yellow dots of excavators.

A third. A fourth. A fifth.

The wounds multiplied, alternating with untouched patches of forest – and in this alternation there was some sinister regularity, the rhythm of senseless, repetitive violence. The forest tried to heal the damage: along the edges of the quarries crept the first, timid shoots – light green, pitiful, misplaced – but it was a child's band-aid on an amputation.

“The bowels of the Congo,” Remy sat opposite, sickeningly pale, his seatbelt pulled tight, which he hadn't unfastened since takeoff. The Frenchman wasn't looking out the window: he had closed his eyes and was pressing a wad of cotton soaked in ammonia to his nose – against motion sickness. “Cobalt, copper, uranium, coltan. The earth here is pregnant with metals, and it gets ripped open, like a stomach gets ripped open in a C-section. Only they don’t pull a child out of it.”

“Remy, shut up,” Sarah Huybrechts sat behind them, by the right window, and spoke this calmly, without irritation, the way one issues a command to someone whose habits have long become predictable.

Sarah. Fifty-two years old – she had said it herself at their first meeting at N'djili Airport, without any embarrassment, offering Leo her large, calloused palm: “Fifty-two, survived Ebola twice, malaria with a coma once, a divorce once. Consider that no infection in the world can take me down.” Originally from Bruges. Flemish. Short, broad-shouldered, with short gray hair and a face that the tropical sun of twenty years of work in Africa had turned into an old leather map: wrinkles, age spots, abrasions – but beneath this map hid a cartilaginous, unbending structure. She looked at the world through the eyes of someone who had long ceased to be surprised and had simply begun to count: the number of corpses, the fatality rate, the dosage, the coordinates.

Sarah had flown into Kinshasa a week before Leo and Remy – from Goma, where she was wrapping up a previous WHO project – and had spent those days at the Ministry of Health, securing permits, transport, and lab reagents. She already knew Haut-Katanga: in two thousand nineteen, she had worked at an outbreak in Manono, where Ebola took two hundred and twelve lives in three months. She remembered everyone by name.

“Seventeen quarries,” Sarah leaned forward, peering into her window. Her voice was steady, surgical. “I've counted seventeen since we flew over the Lualaba. Of those, at least five are unregistered. Artisanal mining. No licenses, no ecological protocols. Contraband.”

The pilot – a local, silent guy in a crumpled uniform shirt with a UN patch – banked sharply to the right, and the jungle swayed beyond the window like a green funnel. Leo felt the copper bracelet on his right wrist slowly slide, striking his wristbone. He mechanically covered it with his palm – the metal was cold, unnaturally icy, as if all morning it had been absorbing not only the heat but also a deafening chill.

The jungle ended.

It happened suddenly, almost cynically: in a matter of seconds, the solid green wall parted, exposing a flat, scorched patch of earth – and in the middle of this patch, like a pale scar on dark skin, lay an airstrip. Narrow, short, with cracked asphalt and rusty, heat-blackened barrels marking the edges of the runway. Around the airfield –

no village, no house, only sparse, termite-gnawed stumps and a scattering of shell casings gleaming in the dust.

The landing was rough. The landing gear slammed into the broken asphalt, the Cessna bounced, skidded, roared its brakes, and came to a halt thirty meters from a hangar structure – a concrete cube from which a rusty antenna protruded.

Leo unfastened his belt and looked out the window.

At the edge of the runway stood three men in military uniform – camouflage, combat boots, Kalashnikov rifles slung across their backs. One held a walkie-talkie, the other two simply stood, motionless, rooted to the spot, in the shade of the only tree – a pathetic, crooked baobab, the only living creature that had agreed to grow on this scorched patch. They drilled the arrivals with gloomy, unfriendly glares.

“Military?” Leo turned to Sarah.

She was already standing in the aisle, pulling her worn backpack from the overhead bin.

“FARDC,” she tossed back without turning around. “Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Inasmuch as you can call it an army. Here, Leo, the government doesn't trust the locals, the locals don't trust the government, and neither of them trusts us. During the last outbreak, a crowd with machetes burned a field hospital to the ground because a rumor was started that the WHO was deliberately infecting the wells to clear land for the mines. So without a military escort, a white doctor in Haut-Katanga is a target, not a humanitarian. These guys are here so we don't get torn to pieces before we manage to take our first blood swab.”

Remy, pale, with a sweat-drenched forehead, squeezed past her outside and greedily inhaled the hot air smelling of grass and exhaust fumes.

“Welcome to paradise, Gonzalez,” he swayed, grabbing the door frame. “Official, certified paradise. With armed guards.”

The military man with the walkie-talkie – a captain, judging by his stripes – approached them unsmilingly and began speaking in French. Fast, guttural, with dropped endings. Leo didn't catch everything, but enough: escort, security, follow them, do not stray from the convoy, no photos.

Meanwhile, the two soldiers and four civilians who had appeared from somewhere behind the hangar were already unloading containers of equipment from the Cessna's cargo hold. Lab suitcases, sealed plastic crates of reagents, a folding table, a portable sequencer, a freezer unit – all of this migrated into the back of a green military Mercedes-Benz truck of an old, Belgian-era modification, with a torn awning and rusty sides. The soldiers worked in silence, with a practiced seriousness, as if every container might explode.

“Gonzalez!” the captain called out, pointing to a dirty beige 70-series Toyota Land Cruiser standing in the shadow of the hangar. The diesel engine purred at idle, the car reeked of diesel and stale leather. “Your transport.”

Leo climbed into the back seat next to Sarah. Remy got in front, next to the driver – a local guy of about twenty, with a flat, inscrutable face and muscular forearms covered in thin white scars – these weren't from injuries, more likely ritual cuts. The guy didn't turn around, didn't introduce himself. He just put it in gear, and the Cruiser set off along the dusty rut, passing through the airfield gates.

The drive took about an hour of agonizing jolting along a potholed track slicing through a continuous green tunnel of jungle. Trees hung over the hood, weaving their canopies into a solid, breathing corridor. Light broke through in rare, prickly shards, dropping golden coins onto the dirty hood. The dust kicked up by the tires got stuck in this green funnel, refusing to dissipate, settling on the leaves in a gray veil.

Then the trees parted – again, like walls parting – and before them opened up Bata Kolé.

It wasn't a village and it wasn't a city. It was something in between – an unwanted, unplanned settlement that life had thrown to the surface, the way a body rejects a foreign object – out of some monstrous, mechanical necessity, rather than good will. A mining camp. Two rows of concrete buildings roofed with corrugated slate – barracks built back in Mobutu's time – were interspersed with makeshift huts of unfired brick, corrugated iron, and burlap. Between them, in the dirty, trampled alleyways, roamed chickens and naked children. A thin, acrid smell of burnt rubber and sour water hung in the air like a film blocking clean oxygen.

And beyond the settlement, on a hill cleared of thickets, lay the camp.

They hadn't set up a full-fledged hospital here yet. Four white tents stretched over aluminum frames, with scarlet crosses on the canvas walls – the red zone, surrounded by a double cordon of bright yellow plastic netting. Nearby were two smaller tents, unmarked, with weighted entrances, which emanated the smell of phenol and bleach – the morgue, above which a diesel generator powering the refrigerator hummed heavily and incessantly. And off to the side, under a canopy of camouflage netting, stood several tin construction trailers lined up like containers on a forgotten pier. The green zone. Living quarters.

Leo stepped out of the Cruiser, and his feet bogged down in dark orange, oily mud. The earth here was different – not earth, more of a clayey sludge, a mix of spilled diesel fuel, rainwater, and something else, deep and ancient, that oozed from the bowels like ichor from a poorly bandaged wound.

Two people emerged from the furthest trailer.

Dzuzu Koma – short, wiry, with quick, birdlike movements, wearing a greasy medical gown over jeans and rubber boots. She was around thirty-five, maybe a bit

older – but years of working in provincial Congo hospitals add as much to your age as wars do. The dark skin of her face was pointedly smooth, without a single wrinkle, and on this smooth, immobile face, her pupils – large, amber, with a slightly yellowish sclera – seemed overly alive, overly attentive, like the pupils of a bird of prey spotting prey in tall grass. She didn't smile.

Lukala Mbuyi stood nearby, slightly behind her – tall, stooped, in a crumpled white shirt, trousers rolled up to his knees, and sandals. Forty years old. His face – elongated, with deep nasolabial folds and sunken cheeks – belonged to a man who had long forgotten what a proper meal looked like. His eyes, dark, clouded, beneath swollen eyelids, looked at the arrivals with that expression Leo had already encountered in such places: neither hostility nor joy – the tired, quiet despair of a professional who had worked alone for too long.

“Glad you made it. Dr. Koma,” she gave Leo's hand a brief shake. Her palm was hot, dry, rough. “Dr. Mbuyi. The situation is bad. We have two corpses in the reefer and one critical patient in the isolation ward.”

Lukala nodded. Didn't offer his hand. His gaze slid over Leo, caught on the copper bracelet on his right wrist, and lingered a fraction of a second longer than was customary. Then he looked away.

Dzuzu Koma led them into a trailer that served as both office and warehouse. Inside: a table, two chairs, a map of the region pinned to the wall with thumbtacks, and a stack of folders tied with string. Dzuzu flipped open the sash of the tin window: murky light flooded in, illuminating the dust motes floating in the air.

Remy immediately took out his notebook, losing all his metropolitan swagger: “Let's go in order. Patient zero?”

“Two corpses,” Dzuzu began without preamble, the way surgeons begin, used to the fact that every second of delay costs a life. “The first is an unidentified male. White, about thirty to thirty-five years old. Found four days ago by a local hunter in the forest, roughly three kilometers south of the village. No ID, clothes in tatters. The hunter dragged him into the village on his own back. A day later, the unknown man died from massive internal bleeding and organ failure.”

She opened the folder and placed printed photographs on the table. Leo leaned in. The body lay on a gray-green tarp, in the shade of a tree. The man – lean, with a broad chest and short, muscular legs like a running enthusiast, with burst water blisters on his palms – had already been dead for several hours at the time of the photo. His face had turned black. Mouth open. Arms stretched along his body, fingers curled. On his chest and stomach were dark, almost black spots, streaks, ecchymoses.

“The second,” Dzuzu continued, “is the hunter himself, Kasongo Mpala, thirty-eight years old. From the village. Found the body, informed the elder, went home.

Twenty-three hours later – fever, vomiting, diarrhea. Twelve hours after that – bleeding from the gums and nose. Died this morning, forty-eight hours after contact."

"Classic hemorrhagic fever," Sarah nodded.

"Yes and no," Dzuzu interjected quietly, as if weighing every word. "The symptoms match, but the speed of tissue breakdown is anomalous. And the blood... It's not uncoagulated and scarlet. It's atypically dark. Almost black and thick as tar. In my fifteen years of work, I haven't seen anything like it. This certainly could be hemorrhagic fever, but we can't confirm Ebola without a lab analysis. We have no PCR equipment. We were waiting for you."

"And the third?" Remy asked.

Dzuzu and Lukala exchanged glances.

"A miner," Lukala answered, speaking for the first time. His voice was low, muffled, with a quiet, guttural vibration that seemed to originate not in his throat, but somewhere deep in his chest cavity. "A guy of about twenty, from a local artisanal mining cooperative. Helped carry the hunter's body. Three days ago – fever, chills, muscle pain. Yesterday – bleeding gums, rash. We isolated him, but we haven't done a full analysis. He's in the red zone, stable, conscious. But his colleagues started to panic. Several miners refused to show up for their shift. The mine security reinforced the perimeter."

"Security?" Leo sat on a spare stool, stretching his legs out in front of him and feeling the bracelet press against his joint. "You mentioned a mine. A white man deep in the forest with no ID... Where do white people even come from around here?"

"The company is called IC Waze," Dzuzu said, returning to the table. "Private. Israeli. Mining copper and cobalt. Twenty-year license. The site is six kilometers north of Bata Kolé. Own infrastructure: housing, electric generators, diesel depots, a helipad. They have their own security – also private. Southbridge Security, registered in Pretoria, but the owners are supposedly from Romania. South Africans. Ex-military. They don't let anyone in, and their people don't come down to Bata Kolé. They don't answer our radio requests."

"And how could an unidentified corpse end up in the forest at their mine?" Remy asked.

"Smugglers," Lukala pronounced the word like a medical diagnosis. "Small-time diggers, 'partisans' as they call them here. They infiltrate the mine territory through the jungle, steal ore, resell it on the black market. Southbridge catches them, but not always. Sometimes bodies with gunshot wounds are found. But this deceased man had no signs of violence. No bullets, no knife wounds. He just died."

"Just died," Remy repeated. "In the forest. Without clothes. Without ID. Three kilometers from the mine where the Israelis work. And no one has any questions."

Dzuzu Koma gave him a long, steady look.

“Questions, Dr. Gaillard,” she said quietly, “are only asked of the dead around here. And only when there are too many dead.”

Evening descended on Bata Kolé suddenly, like a falling curtain. The sun – huge, crimson, merciless – set behind the jungle line, and in a matter of minutes the world switched from scorching white to stifling, dark blue. Mosquitoes and gnats attacked instantly, plastering exposed skin in a dense, buzzing shawl.

Remy went to his trailer first, tossing over his shoulder: “Tomorrow at eight we start. The Congo waits for no one.”

Sarah lingered in the lab tent, unpacking containers and checking reagents. Leo could hear through the thin canvas walls as she muttered something under her breath – lists, numbers, test tube codes – there was a comforting, monotonous, almost maternal rhythm to this muttering that made the anxiety recede.

Leo's trailer was the last in the row. Inside: a narrow cot, a tin nightstand, a stool, a rusty sink with a tap that leaked murky water smelling of iron. A small window with no glass, covered by a mosquito net. Leo tossed his backpack on the cot, pulled off his boots. He went to the sink, turned on the water, splashed his face. The water was warm, tasting of rust and clay.

He looked at his reflection in the murky, smudge-covered piece of mirror hanging above the sink. His back under the shirt burned unbearably – the four parallel scratches that had appeared that morning under the stained-glass windows of the Kinshasa cathedral burned like a fresh scorch.

The copper bracelet on his wrist gleamed in the gloom. Leo tapped it with his knuckles – the metal answered with a hollow, low ring that lasted a second longer than it should have.

He thought of her. Of Imani. Of how she had vanished from the church – or, more accurately, how Remy hadn't seen her leave. Of her wooden amulet, of her words: “I will follow you there... This is my land, Leo.” Of the inscription on the hotel mirror – in burgundy lipstick, in sweeping, confident handwriting: “I will find you.” The inscription could have been a threat. Or a promise. Or – more terrifying than both – a simple statement of inescapable fact. But the memory of the scent of her body superseded everything.

Throwing a light jacket over his shoulders and grabbing his laptop to set up the portable Starlink satellite terminal, Leo stepped out of the trailer and headed for the lab tent.

The night was dark as a shroud. No moon, no stars – clouds, low, heavy, swollen with rain, covered the sky in a solid velvet canopy. The air was thick, like fabric – hot, humid, permeated with the smell of rotting leaves, diesel fuel, and something

else – barely perceptible, sour, organic – that specific smell that exists only in places where death lies next to life.

Leo walked past the two FARDC soldiers standing at the entrance to the green zone. They let him pass in silence, not even turning their heads – figures poured into the darkness, faceless as stones.

The lab tent stood in the center of the camp. The white canvas glowed dimly from within – Sarah had left a headlamp on the table, switched to a dim diffused light setting, and had already gone to sleep. Inside smelled of bleach and ozone. The portable generator connected to the tent hummed quietly, evenly, maintaining the lighting and a small air conditioner blowing a weak stream of dry air.

Leo assembled and aimed the Starlink dish at the sky. The indicator on the router blinked green – there was a connection.

He sat at the folding aluminum table, turned on the laptop. The screen flared with a cold bluish light, illuminating his face from below with a cold, lifeless glare, the way faces are lit during an interrogation. Logging into the WHO network, he opened the medical database, began scrolling through the latest reports from the regions: Mbandaka – negative; Goma – suspected, unconfirmed; Kisangani – clear; Lubumbashi – three cases of hemorrhagic fever, most likely Marburg. In the sterile tables of the World Organization, the letters A, T, G, C lined up in endless macabre dances, in dry ranks of nucleotides that danced like white moths over Benga's body, and in this strict genetic geometry there was no room for pity – only for replication.

Stop. Now the company. IC Waze. Different server, different network, different protocol.

He typed notes, scrolled through files, cross-referenced coordinates. Time dragged like thick, sticky molasses. Leo felt his eyes getting tired, his eyelids growing heavy, his body – exhausted by the flight, the heat, and two sleepless nights – beginning to treacherously shut down, sector by sector. First went his concentration. Then – his train of thought. Then – his sense of time.

He rested his forehead on his crossed arms in front of the keyboard and fell asleep.

Not gradually, not smoothly – as quickly as a person who has lost blood passes out.

And instantly the reality in the tent distorted.

He was pierced by an inhuman, penetrating frost. It became so cold in the tent that his exhaled breath turned into thick white steam. The hum of the generator outside the wall changed: the mechanics vanished, leaving only a low, visceral, pulsating rhythm – as if a giant creature was groaning heavily deep underground. The smell of bleach evaporated. Instead, the space was filled with a thick, intoxicating

aroma of blooming night jasmine, damp earth, and rusty iron. The smell of tropical blood.

A flash of wild pain scorched his back – it felt as though the four scratches had burst into flame. The copper bracelet on his wrist heated up to an icy burn, biting into his skin. Leo tried to stand, to scream, but his body was paralyzed by an absolute, crushing paralysis.

In his dream – or in this ghostly waking state – he stood in an ancient, impenetrable forest. The trees grew so close together that their trunks merged into a living wall. The canopies completely blocked out the sky. Only darkness and a deathly air smelling of rot and that very blossom.

Leo was walking. His feet carried him on their own – bare, over wet earth. He heard someone's footsteps nearby. On a parallel course, behind a wall of vines, someone else was walking too: breathing – light, even; the rustle of bare feet; and an oppressive, guttural sound – as if someone were drawing out a single note, vibrating in his chest cavity.

He stepped into a clearing. A body lay on the ground – that same white man from Dzuzu Koma's photograph. The black, caked face, the curled fingers. The body was surrounded by a ring of large white flowers with thick petals, growing right out of the mud beneath the corpse.

The body stirred. Slowly, with agonizing reluctance, it began to rise – not like a human, more like a marionette being pulled by invisible strings: jerkily, brokenly, with a crunching of joints. Getting on all fours, it turned to him.

But there was no face. In its place was a flat, smooth, dark surface – like a screen onto which an image had not yet been projected. No eyes, no mouth. Just skin stretched over the skull, and beneath it – a faint, barely perceptible pulsation.

And then Leo heard a voice. Not with his ears – from within, from his own spine, from his ribs:

“You have come…”

The voice was her voice. Not Imani. Not female. Not male. The voice was a scent. A floral aroma transmuted into saturated sound, in which his entire being drowned.

“You have come… And you bear him. Sleep. Tomorrow. Everything is tomorrow…”

The darkness slammed shut like the jaws of a trap.

“Doctor!” rang out sharply right in his ear.

A harsh, blinding beam of a headlamp struck Leo in the eyes.

Leo convulsively jerked, knocking his chair over with a crash, and breathed heavily, raggedly, gasping for air. His heart pounded in his throat.

Standing before him was an FARDC soldier – the very one who had been on guard at the entrance. Tall, in camouflage, with a rifle on his chest. He watched him in silence.

“Doctor?” the soldier repeated. His voice was level, devoid of expression. “You fell asleep. It's already 1 AM. Go get some rest. You have a hard day tomorrow.”

Leo wiped his face, wet with cold sweat. The tent was once again filled with the suffocating tropical heat, smelled of bleach, and the generator hummed steadily. No frost. No jasmine. His spine ached, his legs felt like cotton.

He nodded, reached for the laptop to close it. The screen was in sleep mode, but on the black surface – right above the reflection of his terrified face – a single line in a small white font blinked, one he hadn't typed and which couldn't be in the system:

SHE KNOWS YOU'RE HERE

Leo blinked hard and touched the touchpad – the line instantly vanished. Standard screensaver. Standard dark screen.

He closed the laptop, stood up, and walked out of the tent into the pitch-black night.

The camp slept. The only noise was the monotonous purr of the diesel and the distant chirping of cicadas beyond the perimeter. Leo took a few steps along the muddy path, pulling the collar of his jacket tight. He was shaking with a fine, nervous tremor – the residue of that dream, of that blank face, and the voice that was a smell.

And then he froze.

From the direction of Bata Kolé village, breaking through the nocturnal silence, a rhythm drifted.

A low, hollow, staccato beat. Tum... Pause. Tum-tum.

Drums.

The sound came from beyond the camp, from beyond the trees – distant but crisp, like the beating of someone else's heart. The rhythm was strange – not the familiar African polyrhythm, not that erratic pattern Leo had heard in the Kinshasa bar. This was different. Two beats – pause. Two beats – pause. Even, heavy, identical in strength. Like the footsteps of an enormous creature walking the earth, unhurriedly, knowing it had nowhere to rush.

Mingled with the rhythm of the drums was singing – a low, choral, guttural chanting in an unfamiliar language. The melody permeated Leo through his skin, through his bones – and inside his chest cavity something responded, vibrating in unison with this nocturnal choir.

And then one tone separated itself from this singing. A female voice – high, clear, piercing, holding a single, solitary note. Long, endless, ancient. In it sounded a primal yearning, a fatal inevitability, and a tender promise.

Leo clenched his fists. The copper bracelet dug into the skin of his wrist, pressing against the bone. The song poured into him, as if this voice were singing for him alone.

Then the drums fell silent. The voices melted away. The night once again became quiet, lonely-silent – but this silence was alive. It felt as if it were listening to him.

Leo reached his trailer, unlocked the padlock, went inside, and bolted the door from the inside.

He turned to the cot to collapse onto it without taking off his clothes, and suddenly froze.

On the tin nightstand at the headboard – next to his phone and flashlight – stood a glass of water. Full, clear, with a crown of tiny bubbles on the sides.

Leo had not poured this glass. When he had left for the lab, the nightstand was empty, and the door secured with a padlock.

The water in the glass was warm.

And on its surface, gently swaying in the very center, floated a single milky-white petal.

Large. Thick. Unfamiliar. Smelling of the night and blooming jasmine.

Chapter Four. Symbiosis

Morning in Bata Kolé came like an enemy attack that had long ceased to be expected.

First, silence. Absolute, ringing, pre-dawn silence, when even the cicadas fall quiet, waiting. Then the first ray – sharp, horizontal, plunging into the red clay like a scalpel into flesh. And immediately behind it – heat. Mounting, advancing in mere moments, and total. Within a few dozen minutes, the air erupted in temperature, and the trailer turned into a scorching tin box from which there was no escape.

Leo woke up at eight-ten. He remembered falling onto the cot yesterday fully clothed and in his boots. But now the light blanket was neatly folded back, and his boots stood at the foot of the cot – straight, soles against the wall.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Touched his back. There was no blood.

On the nightstand stood a glass. Empty, washed to a shine, and placed upside down on a clean napkin. The white petal inside was gone as well – it seemed the nocturnal guest had returned to reclaim their offering.

Looking at his phone screen, Leo cursed. Sixteen minutes past eight. He had overslept.

Grabbing his backpack, Leo bolted out of the trailer and ran toward the laboratory complex. At the entrance to the green block, he was met by Dr. Lukala Mbuyi – a tall Congolese man in blue surgical scrubs, methodically filling out the biomaterials logbook.

“Good morning, Leo,” Lukala pursed his lips without looking up from the clipboard. “If you’re looking for defenders, there are none. Sarah is already in the lab. And believe me, she logged your absence back at eight-zero-zero.”

Leo slipped through the canvas flap. Inside smelled of talcum, alcohol, ozone, and heated rubber. The mission's senior epidemiologist, Dr. Huybrechts, was standing at a microscope. Her gray hair was pulled back tightly under a disposable cap, and her back remained as straight as a drill officer's.

“You're late, Gonzalez,” she said, without raising her head from the eyepieces. Sarah's voice carried no anger, but rather that icy statement of fact used to announce a diagnosis. “Remy has been working in the isolation unit with Dzuzu for half an hour. We've lost precious morning time while the temperature in the isolator still allows one to breathe.”

“I apologize, Sarah. Sleeping effect…” Leo tried to start.

“Apologies do not sterilize instruments, nor do they stop filovirus replication,” Huybrechts cut in, finally turning to him. Her grayish-blue eyes behind her spectacle lenses fixed on him the way a stage holds a slide. “I saw people who were late for shifts in Kikwit in ninety-five. Half of them ended up in mass graves because haste creates breaches in protection. Get dressed. Lukala will inspect the seal.”

The airlock transition into the red zone was located under a double canvas canopy. Here, on a metal table, lay maximum biological protection suits – sealed in transparent vacuum packs, with instructions in four languages.

Leo began to undress. Sweat – instant, slick – immediately coated his chest and back. Stripping off his jeans and shirt, he stood in his underwear on the trampled concrete floor. He took off his massive steel Casio and set it on the edge of the table. Then he unclasped and removed the hoop from his wrist.

The copper slid off his skin, and Leo shuddered involuntarily. He felt cold. No, rather, a sense of sudden physical loss, as though a living suction cup had been removed from his arm. On his wrist remained a distinct, pale band – the mark left by the metal overnight.

Dzuzu Koma, standing by the equipment check station, took a step forward. Her amber pupils fixed on the copper bracelet for a second – literally just a couple of moments. That look was devoid of ordinary curiosity: Dzuzu looked at the amulet with

deep, almost professional recognition. But a moment later, her face became inscrutable once more.

“Your suit is over there, Doctor,” she said dryly, extending her hand, on the palm of which lay two brass keys on a wire ring. “Here. Forgive me. Yesterday in the commotion I forgot to give you the spare keys to your trailer. I had them.”

Leo took the keys. The brass was damp from her skin.

“So it was you who left the glass of water?”

“Yes,” Dzuzu nodded, maintaining her birdlike posture. “Last night, when you left for the lab, I noticed that the window was left ajar and insects had gathered inside. I went in to check if everything was all right, and saw that you weren't drinking any water at all. In our conditions, dehydration sets in imperceptibly.”

“And the flower? The white petal in the water?”

Dzuzu narrowed her eyes slightly, weighing whether to explain.

“Costus. *Costus lucanusianus*, white costus. It grows only in the most remote ravines of these forests, where the soil never dries out. Local women brew its petals for severe anxiety and fever. It contains alkaloids that act as a mild sedative. Folk medicine, Doctor Gonzalez. Sometimes it works no worse than benzodiazepines.”

“Yes, I noticed… Thank you, Dzuzu.”

“Don't mention it. Now put on your protective gear. Lukala, help him.”

Donning a Tyvek personal protective suit is a strict, almost religious ritual, where the slightest negligence means a death sentence. First came thick medical socks and shoe covers. Then – a snow-white jumpsuit zippered from groin to throat. The fabric rustled unpleasantly, instantly cutting off air access to the body.

Mbuyi approached from behind, deftly pulling the first pair of latex gloves onto Leo, tucking the sleeves of the jumpsuit underneath them, and meticulously sealing the joints with duct tape.

“Hold your arm steady, Leo,” Lukala murmured, deftly wrapping the adhesive tape. “In nine cases out of ten, infection occurs not because of a tear in the fabric, but because some distracted virologist improperly secured a cuff.”

Next came massive rubber boots, and a second pair of thick nitrile gloves over the first. And finally, a 3M respirator mask with a pair of gray boxy P3 filters and a transparent face shield.

As soon as Leo tightened the head straps and checked the seal – inhaling sharply, forcing the mask to suction tight against his cheeks – the outside world receded completely. Sounds turned into a dull, muffled echo. The sole dominant rhythm became his own raspy breathing, resonating inside the plastic helmet.

“Welcome to the white world, Doctor Gonzalez,” Lukala said from beneath his mask and lowered the canvas airlock flap with a slapping motion.

In the red zone isolation unit, the air was dense, hot, heavy, saturated with the pungent smell of sodium hypochlorite, which orderlies used to drench the wooden decking.

Remy was already standing by the first cot. In his white protective suit, bathed in halogen light, he looked like a huge statue carved from fog.

“Finally, Leo,” Remy muttered dully through his mask speaker. “I was starting to think you decided to take the day off. Take a close look at our guy.”

“Mbul Benga,” Mbuyi said without looking at the patient. His voice from beneath the mask sounded muffled, as if from behind a wall. “Twenty-one years old. Artisanal miner. Worked at an informal plot a kilometer and a half from the IC Waze mine. Helped carry the body of the first deceased.”

Thin, wiry, with a sunken chest and dry dark skin. On his neck, shoulders, and ribcage, spots stood out clearly – not classic hemorrhagic rash, but a fine, dark petechial network resembling wild berry juice spilled beneath the skin. He was conscious. His large, inflamed eyes with dilated pupils tracked every movement of the white figures. In that gaze there was no panic whatsoever – only a deep, detached attention.

Leo pulled out an electronic stethoscope and pressed the sensor to the miner's chest, routing the audio stream to his helmet's internal earpiece.

What he heard made him freeze.

“Remy... Dzuzu... Do you hear this?”

His heart was beating at sixty-two beats per minute. For a person with a fever near forty degrees Celsius, with a febrile syndrome and signs of vascular damage, this was a physiological absurdity. Tachycardia should have been tearing his chest apart, forcing the myocardium to pound at a rate of one hundred and forty. Yet his pulse remained calm and steady.

But that wasn't the main thing.

Instead of the familiar pure tone, Leo heard a low, visceral, heavily pulsating hum. The aorta was functioning with incredible, hypertrophied force. On the miner's neck, right above the collarbone, a visible pulsation was apparent – the skin stretched and dipped in a rhythm that felt too massive for a human body.

“I've been listening to him since morning,” Remy uttered, leaning closer. “This isn't ordinary regurgitation. Listen to the base. Don't you get the feeling that there are... two sources of rhythm?”

“Precisely,” confirmed Dzuzu, standing with a tablet at the head of the bed. “Yesterday on portable ultrasound I didn't find any anatomical valve rupture. The

aortic wall is thickened, but retains integrity. Yet the heart pumps blood as if an additional hydraulic pump were installed inside it. It isn't succumbing to destruction – it has... adapted?"

Leo moved the sensor lower, to the epigastrium. The low-frequency noise echoed in his own ear canal, and for a second Leo felt a strange, sickening longing: his own heart inside his suit tried to falter, adjusting to this other, alien rhythm.

"All right," Leo sighed heavily. "Let's go to the reefer. We need to compare this to the dead."

The second block of the red zone – the autopsy morgue – was located in a separate tent equipped with two refrigerated containers. The cold burst outward in thick white steam, clouding his face shield.

On steel tables lay two bodies: the white man found in the forest, and the local hunter Kasongo Mpala.

The difference between the living miner and these two was catastrophic in nature.

"Here the virus acted as a classic detonator," Remy said, helping Leo secure the margin of the autopsy incision. "Total necrosis. Look at the liver."

Leo made a deep incision. The scalpel entered the tissues with a soft, wet crunch. The white man's liver was twice its normal size, had lost all structure, and resembled a boiled, decaying mass with a nutmeg pattern on cross-section. The abdominal cavity was filled with a liter and a half of black, uncoagulated blood, resembling used motor oil. The vessels had collapsed, the endothelium completely destroyed.

But when Leo reached the chest cavity and opened the pericardium, he stopped.

"Sarah needs to see this," Remy whispered, his voice trembling.

The aorta of the deceased white man was dilated along its entire length – from root to arch – by roughly twenty percent. The vessel walls looked impossibly dense, edematous, and on their inner surface, small nodules protruded, resembling pearlescent grains of rice. There were no traces of ordinary calcification or atherosclerosis in them. The tissue of the wall had a strange, pearly-purple hue reminiscent of a seashell.

Leo carefully excised three fragments: for formalin, for freezing, and for PCR analysis.

"Same thing with the hunter?" he asked.

"Carbon copy," Remy replied, nodding toward the second body. "Fulminant death in forty-eight hours, destroyed viscera, black blood... and a remodeled, hypertrophied aorta with nodules."

By three in the afternoon, the entire medical team had gathered in the lab's green block. The air hummed with the sound of the portable DNA-MinION sequencer, reeking of bleach and creosote. Having shed their protective suits, the doctors sat around the work table in sweat-drenched surgical scrubs.

Huybrechts studied the fresh printout of the genomic analysis. Her finger with its short-trimmed nail traced the nucleotide sequence graph.

“It is a filovirus, without a shadow of a doubt,” she said. Sarah's voice was dry, but underlying it was a tension Leo had never noticed in her before. “Look at the protein scaffold structure. RNA, glycoprotein envelope – everything points to the *Filoviridae* family. Ebola.”

“But look at the variability!” Remy nervously ruffled his sweaty hair. “You ran the samples from the first corpse through all known databases. Mayinga, Kikwit, Sudan, Taï Forest, Bombali... A genomic mismatch of thirteen percent!”

“Thirteen percent is a chasm,” Lukala Mbuyi piped up, leaning against the edge of the table. “The difference between a human and a chimpanzee is just over one percent. Thirteen percent for a filovirus means we are not dealing with a new mutation or a seasonal strain. This is an entirely separate lineage. Or... a very ancient progenitor that evolved in isolation from all the rest.”

“All right,” Leo brought up the biochemistry and PCR data of the living patient, the miner, on the monitor screen. “Now explain this to me. These are Mbul Benga's lab results. Viral load is present in his blood, but the titer is twenty times lower than in the corpses. The virus isn't destroying his liver. Kidney panels are normal. Coagulation profile is slightly shifted, but not fatal. At the same time, the aorta is dilated, and the echocardiogram shows an anomalous second rhythm.”

Sarah slowly raised her eyes to Leo.

“What do you think, Gonzalez?”

“Ebola is a blind and blunt killer,” Leo replied, speaking unhurriedly. “It bursts into the body, burns up the vascular endothelium in three days, kills the host, and dies with it if it fails to transmit further.” He exhaled. “Whereas this strain in a living patient behaves differently. It doesn't destroy cells. It utilizes them. The virus remodels his cardiovascular system. It forces the aorta to thicken and the heart to pump blood with redoubled force, all while restraining its own tissue lysis.”

“Symbiosis?” Lukala asked quietly.

“Symbiosis,” Leo repeated. “Perhaps. Or adaptive restructuring. The virus doesn't kill the host; it turns his body into a permanent, durable reservoir.”

“Viruses don't go around ‘repairing’ organs out of altruism, Leo,” Sarah interrupted sharply. “If a virus fortifies vessel walls and alters cardiac function, it

means it requires elevated hemodynamics to fulfill another task. And that task is as yet unknown to us."

The discussion was cut short by a shout coming from the outer boundary of the camp. The voice belonged to one of the security soldiers.

Sarah, Leo, and Remy stood up instantly.

A crowd had gathered by the yellow plastic tape demarcating the perimeter. Three soldiers with rifles at the ready were holding back a group of local residents.

Out front stood two girls, clearly sisters – fourteen and eleven years old. The older wore a faded blue dress, the younger a pink one, oversized for her frame. Both stood pressed together, staring motionlessly at the ground. Behind them, their parents shifted nervously – a tearful mother and a sullen father with the calloused hands of a peasant.

A bit further away, leaning on a carved cane, stood a local shaman. A tall, withered old man in a threadbare European shirt over a skirt of dry plant fibers. Around his neck hung bones, shells, and dried bird feet. The old man looked at the white doctors with a faded, milky gaze, his lips moving continuously, chanting a silent, rhythmic spell.

Dzuzu Koma was already at the tape, conversing rapidly with the father in Lingala.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked quickly, approaching the perimeter.

"This morning the girls started bleeding," Dzuzu turned to her colleagues. "From their nose and gums. Simultaneously. The parents are panicked. The bleeding has stopped now, but look at their eyes."

Leo stepped closer. The older girl slowly raised her head. Her sclerae were heavily bloodshot, dark red – not from tears or lack of sleep. The capillary network was inflamed and had merged into a solid purple membrane framing dark, surprisingly serene pupils. For the younger girl, the picture was identical.

"Temperature?" Sarah asked sharply.

"Thirty-seven point two for the older, thirty-seven flat for the younger," Dzuzu replied.

"We need blood samples," Leo said. "Lukala, bring rapid sampling kits."

While Lukala Mbuyi and Dzuzu swiftly and skillfully drew blood from the girls' veins – they didn't even cry out, only squeezing their mother's fingers tighter – the sisters' father spoke hurriedly in French, addressing Leo:

"Doctor... Take them. Put them in the tents. Save them!"

Leo looked at Sarah. She shook her head firmly.

“No,” Leo cut in, turning to the father. “Listen to me carefully. In those white tents are people with a severe, deadly form of infection. Your daughters currently show no severe symptoms. If we place them in isolation, they will guaranteed catch the virus from the sick and die within three days. Is that what you want?”

The father backed away a step, looking at his wife in confusion.

“We will examine them. But then, home, quarantine,” Lukala joined in, handing the father four white medical masks. “Lock the girls in a separate room. No contact with neighbors. No one goes in to see them except you. You enter strictly wearing these masks. Tomorrow morning Dr. Koma will come to your village for an inspection.”

The shaman behind the parents suddenly raised his voice. His muffled muttering gave way to a harsh, guttural chant. The old man raised his cane and pointed it not at the camp, but off toward the hill rising behind the village, where the mines were located.

“What is he saying, Dzuzu?” Remy asked softly.

“He says... that this sickness came not from the trees nor from beasts,” Dzuzu translated deliberately, her eyes fixed on the old man. “He says that the white people dug up a stone that was meant to lie in the earth until the end of time. That this is no sickness. It is... a curse. And the earth will take those it deems its own.”

The shaman turned and, without saying goodbye, tramped away through the brick-colored dust.

The results of the sisters' blood tests were ready by nine in the evening. Outside, a tropical thunderstorm was commencing: large, sparse drops struck the lab's canvas roof with a loud clatter.

Sarah, Leo, and Remy leaned over the printout.

Samples from both girls tested positive for filovirus RNA. But the titer levels were so minuscule that the automated analyzer output a rare system flag in the margin: “Below threshold – uncertain significance.”

“It isn't merely holding back,” whispered Sarah Huybrechts, and for the first time something resembling a suppressed, superstitious fear sounded in her voice. “In the bodies of these children, the virus induces no immune response whatsoever. Neither IgM nor IgG was detected. Their organisms' immune system simply... doesn't see it. Or considers it their own tissue.”

“And look at the pulse,” Leo pointed to the bottom line of the printout. “Both girls have a heart rate twelve beats below normal for their age. Just like Benga.”

“The virus has assimilated,” Remy stated, leaning back in his chair. “In adult men with weakened health, it causes a catastrophe or cardiac overload. But in children, it seems to recede into the shadows and alter metabolism.”

“Damn. If you're right... This is no ordinary outbreak, colleagues,” Sarah concluded quietly, closing her protocol notebook. “We have encountered something that has been brewing here for decades. Everyone go to sleep. Tomorrow will be a difficult day.”

Around eleven in the evening, Leo returned to the anteroom-changing area of the green zone to retrieve his personal belongings. The camp was already plunged into darkness, pierced only by flashes of distant lightning and the dim glow of halogen lanterns.

Leo washed up at the basin, wiped his neck with a stiff paper towel, and opened his metal locker.

His Casio watch lay on the wooden shelf. Next to it rested the copper amulet.

Leo reached out and picked up the bracelet.

The metal scorched his fingers.

This wasn't room temperature. The bracelet was freezing cold. As if a piece of copper had lain in deep freeze at minus twenty for several hours. The cold was piercing, unreal, emanating from the very structure of the metal.

Leo froze, ready to drop the amulet from his hands, but his fingers would not unclasp. As if obeying an unconscious, agonizing impulse, he overcame the resistance, pried open the band by force, and slipped the bracelet onto his right wrist.

It felt as if an icy wave immediately pierced his skin, surging up his forearm to his elbow, shoulder, and down his back. Leo's pulse spiked sharply, and then beneath the hoop a cool, dull ache flared and instantly subsided. The pale band of skin on his wrist disappeared in an instant – the bracelet fit perfectly, precisely in its former place, as though growing into the body it already considered its own.

He hurried out of the changing room and walked along the rain-soaked path toward his trailer.

The night over the camp was alive, smelling of ozone, damp clay, and rotting leaves. The morgue's diesel generator hummed behind the tents with a steady, white noise.

And then Leo heard them.

Drums.

But this time the sound was completely different. It had lost yesterday's terrifying proximity and pressure. The beats sounded far away, muffled and distorted, as if travelling through a mass of water or traversing a multi-kilometer concrete tunnel.

Tum... Tum-tum.

Two beats. Pause. Two beats.

The singing – a solitary, slender female voice holding an endless note – filtered through the veil of rain like a barely audible echo, flickering on the very edge of human hearing. This was not the ritual itself. It was its ghost, its reflection, trapped in the night air of the jungle.

Leo stopped at the door of his trailer.

The copper bracelet on his wrist was gradually losing its coldness, warming up from his skin. But for a fraction of a second, it felt to Leo as though the metal was vibrating in time with the distant beats.

He entered the trailer, locked the door with two turns of the key, and sank onto the cot without turning on the light.

The ceiling of sagging iron hovered over him in the darkness. On the nightstand, the empty glass glinted dimly.

Leo pressed his palm to his chest. And there, in the silence of the enclosed space, he distinctly felt how his own heart – a healthy, well-conditioned heart – suddenly stumbled. Faltered. Missed a beat.

And in the resulting pause, something alien answered within his ribcage.

A quiet, muffled, second beating.

Like the distant echo of a drum.

Chapter Five. Spirals and Lines

Mbanza-Ngungu breathed in the thick mist of the foothills.

Here, in the west, hundreds of kilometers away from the scorched red quarries of Upper Katanga, the air was supersaturated with moisture, carrying the heavy aroma of eucalyptus groves and the rotting bark of giant ficus trees. A white dampness crawled along the cobblestones of the Belgian streets, clung to the rusted cast-iron fences, and sluggishly seeped into the open windows of old colonial villas that had long ago surrendered to the onslaught of eternal jungle green.

Imani walked up a steep, stone-paved path. Her steps were noiseless, almost weightless. The hem of her white cotton dress absorbed the morning dew, growing wet and heavier with every hundred meters of the ascent.

Time in her grandfather’s house moved according to entirely different, otherworldly laws. It settled on the carved mahogany panels as dense wood dust, accumulated in the corners alongside the pearlescent wings of dead night moths, and seeped into the yellowed photographs on the walls. The house was a true archive of shadows. Here, into this damp coolness, the surviving members of the Ngoy family had brought from the southern provinces only old trunks secured with padlocks, and a long, unbroken memory.

But the most somber ghosts of this house belonged to distant Katanga.

Imani knew them all. She remembered the spicy scent of heated copper, forever sewn into the folds of her late grandmother's dress – a woman who was born on that toxic, ore-rich earth, who breathed its dust all her life, and who came to rest there beneath a heavy layer of loam. She remembered the night, smelling of burnt gasoline and fear, when the scrape of a machete against corrugated iron cut short her parents' voices. Barely any memory of their faces remained; only fragments survived: the dry, calloused palms of her father, accustomed to digging the earth, and the final cry of her mother, severed by the nocturnal silence. Katanga had taken them, digested them, and turned them into gray ash, from which new trees now grew.

Imani pushed open the wooden gate. The iron responded with a high, thin creak that remembered her great-grandfather, who had installed this fence in the early nineteen-thirties.

Paluku Ngoy sat in a deep wicker chair on the covered veranda. He was approaching eighty. No one knew the exact date: the parish registry had been eaten by termites back in the days of the Belgians, or so the late Padre Nicanor used to tell, and therefore he measured his age not in years, but in great wars, plagues, and the succession of rulers in the capital. Her grandfather resembled a statue of bog oak, sculpted by millennia of rain and wind. His eyes, clouded by the thick, milky film of cataracts, gazed out over the garden, piercing the mist. Clear, physical sight had abandoned him long ago, giving way to a different, frighteningly precise perception of the world.

"The children in the parish school have been reading prayers off an empty chalkboard for three days," Paluku said, without turning his head. His voice rustled like dry grass in the wind. "The chalk remained untouched on the desk. The headmaster sent a boy. I told him you were ill, but he didn't believe it. A man accustomed to lies takes the truth for deceit."

Imani sank onto a low wooden bench at his feet, smoothing the folds of her damp dress. The bench was warm with the ancient wood, having preserved the sweat and moisture of several generations.

She touched his calloused, gnarled hand.

"I should have warned you I would be gone so long," she apologized. "How do you manage here alone? Without my eyes."

Paluku offered a barely perceptible smile, and for a second his face lost its granite sternness, becoming the face of an old, tired man.

"An old man in Mbanza-Ngungu is never truly alone. The neighbor, the widow Kabemba, brings me hot fufu and fish in the evenings. She thinks I don't notice she puts too much palm oil in it," he let out a short, cracked chuckle. "And her eldest son sometimes drops by to fix the radio or play a game of macao with me."

"And you let him win?" Imani smiled faintly.

“Never,” her grandfather shook his head. “The boy cheats. He assumes that since I can hardly see the cards, I cannot hear his sleeves rustling. But he is a good lad. Brings me tobacco from the market. It is peaceful here, Imani. Too peaceful for you to worry about me.”

He sighed, and the everyday softness suddenly left his voice again, replaced by the measured cadence of an elder.

“The headmaster didn’t believe me,” the old man continued. “I wasn’t offended. People who believe everything ultimately believe nothing… But you didn’t answer.”

“I went to Kinshasa, Grandfather.”

“Kinshasa,” he repeated the word the way one pronounces the name of a disease… “Why?”

“At my husband’s request.”

Paluku shook his head slightly. His thick white eyebrows twitched a little, catching the vibration of her voice.

“A man whose bed you shared at my command rarely sends a woman to the capital for no reason,” the old man folded his long fingers, resembling dry roots, in his lap. “There is always a reason for his actions, and most often it is woven from fear. What is he afraid of now?”

“He says the earth has awakened,” Imani answered quietly. “He is truly afraid. He asked me to find an outsider. Someone from the World Health Organization. A doctor. The local people at the Bata Kolé mines are grumbling, Grandfather. They whisper in their huts, collecting old amulets. They believe the white machines have unearthed something in the hills that was meant to sleep, and now the foreigners want to cleanse the land of our people by letting death ride the water. The locals think the curse has awakened, and they will lose everything. He needed eyes in the capital before the doctors flew to the mine.”

Paluku nodded slowly, as if listening to some internal music audible only to him.

“Doctors give ancient things new names. Ebola?”

“Yes. They will gather their test tubes and slides to call it that,” Imani looked at her thin, dark palms. “They search for the cause in blood and saliva… But they know nothing yet.”

The silence on the veranda deepened. From the wet leaves of the bougainvillea, sparse drops fell onto the stone steps with a quiet ring. Imani went into the house.

When she returned to him with a freshly brewed, fragrant tea made from local herbs, the old man leaned forward, turning his half-blind face toward his granddaughter.

“Your right arm sounds different,” he said. “The wind is blowing over skin that has been hidden by metal since you lost your first baby tooth. I no longer hear the weight. Where is your bracelet?”

Imani lowered her eyes. Her right wrist was bare. Only an even band of slightly lighter skin served as a reminder of the massive copper hoop.

“I gave it away.”

“Gave it away,” Paluku repeated. There was no surprise in his voice – only a profound measuredness. “To the American?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think he is the one?”

Imani closed her eyes. For a moment, the twilight of Saint Peter’s church reappeared before her, the colored rays passing through the stained glass, and the stranger’s fingers touching her hand.

“I don’t know, Grandfather. He is different… But when I placed the copper on his arm, I felt something. As if a thread had been drawn tight between us. The metal accepted his warmth. Not the kind of warmth the sun gives, but the kind that lives deep within… True warmth. Human warmth.”

Paluku leaned back in his chair. His palm ran over his dry chin.

“The woman whose blood you carry spoke of this the night before she went into the earth,” the old man said quietly. “Your grandmother sat on a veranda just like this in that house of ours, weaving a pattern out of beads. She said: ‘A stranger will come from afar. His heart will sound with a hollow, unfamiliar rhythm, but he is the one who will close the door.’ She always forbade me from giving you to a local household. Forbade tying you to the people whose ancestors mine this copper.”

“She had visions,” Imani uttered softly, and in those words there was no doubt – it was a form of long-standing, customary agreement, the way one agrees that the sky is blue and water is wet.

“Your grandmother saw what she saw,” Paluku cut in. “And she spoke plainly: do not marry her off in Katanga. Not because Katanga is bad. No. Because Katanga is a lock without doors. Whoever goes there, stays. And whoever stays, never leaves. The earth does not let go.”

Imani lowered her head, looking at the stone floor and the teapot resting upon it.

“The Mboko family gave us shelter, Grandfather. They protected us when the house in Katanga burned down. It was a good union. You did what an elder of the lineage had to do, left with another’s child in his arms.”

“Doubt is a heavy burden for an old man,” Paluku’s voice echoed with slight bitterness. “The House of Mboko was rich, their men were armed, their word meant much in Lubumbashi. I thought I was building a fortress for you. But a fortress that protects you from the world simultaneously shuts you off from your destiny. Perhaps I was wrong to insist on your betrothal. We tried to deceive the pattern, but the pattern was biding its time all along.”

“You were right, Grandfather.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps,” he paused, “I was wrong. Because a shield that closes you off from the world also closes the world off from you. And you, Imani… you are not one who can be kept closed away.”

“You wanted what was best for me,” Imani replied.

A breeze swept through the courtyard, kicking up a pillar of orange dust. It swirled at the threshold – slowly, beautifully, precisely – the way something swirls when it knows exactly where it must settle.

“Then you must return there,” Paluku turned to her and pointed in the other direction, to the southeast, where beyond the hills and rivers lay the jungles of Bata Kolé. “Not because your husband gives orders. And not because the American is waiting. You must follow your copper.”

“I know.”

Yes, Imani knew. She knew it the way one knows things that are remembered, not learned – the way one remembers the road home when walking it at night, without a lantern, by touch, by the smell of the earth and the direction of the wind.

Paluku sighed. Something gave a dry creak in his chest, like a beam in an old building before the rain.

“Tell me about that day again, Grandfather,” Imani asked quietly. “About the dried-up well.”

The old man fell silent for a long time. Drops continued to fall from the leaves, counting the moments. But when he had unhurriedly finished his tea, he spoke:

“On that day, villages were burning in Katanga. Men from Shaba came with torches and iron. You were four years old. Your father managed to bring you there, to me, but he went back for your mother. I never saw them again. Their names are written in the priest’s book, which the dampness later ate away. But you I lowered on a rope to the bottom of the well behind the shed, the one your great-grandfather dug. It had been dry for five years by that day; the water had retreated deep down.”

“I remember the darkness,” Imani said quietly.

“You sat there for two days and nights. Without a single cry. I lowered maize and water to you in a basket. You were very small, but when I pulled you out into the light, your fingers were clenched into a fist.”

“I was holding a stone,” Imani reminded him.

“Yes, a stone,” Paluku nodded. “A dark, smooth, round pebble that you found by touch in the clay at the very bottom. It was warm. Always warm. No one knows where it came from in the wooden cribbing made of tali wood. But you didn’t let it go for another three days.”

“But the water came back, didn’t it, Grandfather?”

He smiled faintly with the wrinkles around his eyes.

“It came back... Later. Much later. On the very day your grandmother closed her eyes and stopped breathing. The water rose by three meters. Clear, cool. Since then, I drink only water from the well.”

“What was it about that water, Grandfather?”

“I don’t know,” Paluku answered. “But your grandmother knew. Your grandmother knew many things. She was born in that house, on that land, and when she died, the earth took her back, but left the water. As a gift. Or as a reminder.”

“Come,” he told Imani, rising.

They walked to the backyard, behind the shed, where the old well housing of the well stood in the shade of a sprawling tree. The stonework, laid down back in the thirties, had darkened and grown covered in thick moss.

“Your great-grandfather dug this one, too. And I lowered that stone into it.”

“What kind of stone was it?”

Paluku pulled back slightly. Looked at her. A long, heavy gaze with dim pupils that reflected the reddening sky.

“It was what was there before you,” he said. “And what will be there after. Your grandmother called it the ‘bone of the earth.’ I don’t know what it is. I only know that it came to rest at the bottom of the well long before your great-grandfather dug it. It was there before us. And it will be there after us.”

Imani leaned over and peered into the dark maw.

A few meters down, the water stood still. Absolutely motionless, as smooth as polished black glass. It did not reflect the overhanging branches; rather, it seemed to draw the light into itself. A faint, incomparable aroma wafted up from the well – the scent of a night flower, the beautiful costus, which grows only in the deepest and darkest ravine bogs.

“Take it with you,” Paluku whispered, standing behind her.

“Why?”

“Perhaps the doctor will need this water,” the old man replied. “Not his medicines, not his papers. Water from the well that guards your stone.”

Imani went into the house, found an empty glass bottle, washed it thoroughly, and returned to the well. She lowered the bucket on a braided rope.

The metal touched the surface without a single splash – dully and softly, as if sinking into a thick, oily medium.

She drew the water and poured it into the bottle, pressing the stopper in tightly. The vessel felt surprisingly heavy in her hands, as though inside were not merely a transparent liquid, but something akin to molten dark silver.

Paluku had also gone into the house, and when he returned, he held out a small cloth bundle to his granddaughter.

Imani unfolded the fabric. On her palm lay a second copper bracelet. It was more elegant and thinner than the one she had given Leo. There were no spirals on its surface – only thin, strict parallel lines with tiny dots stamped between them.

“Your grandmother’s bracelet,” Paluku murmured. “Put it on. The left wrist should not remain mute.”

Imani clasped the hoop around her left arm. The metal responded with a clear, cool pulse, traveling from her wrist all the way to her shoulder.

And in that very second, she distinctly felt her right wrist – bare, harboring a phantom trace. Between her left and right arm, traversing hundreds of kilometers of jungle and mist, stretched an invisible, humming string, reaching straight into the laboratory block of Bata Kolé, to the man wearing her first amulet.

“It is time,” Imani said.

Paluku Ngoy stood on the threshold, drawn up to his full, towering height. His dim eyes were fixed on the distance, where the brick-red disc of the sun was rising above the forest.

“Go,” the old man said with detachment. “Let the earth recognize those who are returning home.”

Chapter Six. The Peacemaker

The lab sequencer finished its run at eight-thirty. It spat out a long strip of thermal paper with a quiet hum, and the faint ozone scent of heated plastic and chemical reagents cut through the stale air of the laboratory tent.

Leo stood over the printout, pressing the curling edge of the sheet against the scratched aluminum top of the folding table. The table’s steel edge was cool, while the paper strip was still warm. He read line by line – lines that should not have existed. Mbul Benga, twenty-one years old, a miner and insurgent, a patient from the red zone – was recovering. His temperature had dropped to thirty-seven point eight. Liver enzymes were leveling out. White blood cell counts were falling. His blood – still thick,

dark maroon, but no longer that coagulated, tarry mass with an intrusive, sickeningly metallic smell – had begun to form normal, healthy clots.

The virus was not killing him. It was lying low. It had settled inside his body quietly, discreetly, almost politely – like a tenant in someone else's rented apartment trying not to move the furniture or leave scuffs on the hardwood floor.

But the very bottom line made Leo purse his lips. *Genotypic profile: deviation detected. Genome variability: 0.4% from original sample. Correlation with mutational drift: low. Direction of changes: undetermined.*

Zero point four percent in forty-eight hours.

"Rémi, take a look," Leo said without turning around.

Rémi approached from the sterile enclosure. He smelled of formaldehyde steeped into his coat and bitter canvas dust; he was chewing instant coffee right out of a plastic cup, tossing handfuls into his mouth like roasted peanuts because the water in the electric kettle had sparked and died early that morning. The dry granules crunched between his teeth.

"What's there?" Rémi asked, swallowing dryly.

"The virus in Benga. It's rewriting itself."

Rémi pulled the printout from under Leo's fingers, scanned the code, and handed it back. He took a pinch of coffee and dropped it onto his tongue.

"Zero point four in two days," he muttered, squinting at the fluorescent light. "That's damned high. Or ridiculously small. It all depends on the vector."

"Precisely. If this is a directed mutation rather than a random copying error, the virus is adapting. It's learning to mimic."

"To Benga specifically?"

"Or to humans in general."

Rémi set the cup down on the corner of the table with a dry clack.

"We need to retake samples from the girls in the village immediately," he stated firmly. "If they have the same profile – quiet clinical presentation and slow drift – we're dealing not with an infectious attack, but with a true colonization. The virus doesn't destroy tissue. It moves in, settles, occupies vacant niches, builds its infrastructure. And when there's a critical mass of it..."

He trailed off mid-sentence. There was no need to finish – the thought hung in the air like a tense residue.

Sarah entered the tent with a rustle of heavy canvas. She reeked of pungent insect repellent and wet wool. She tossed a leather-bound notebook onto the table.

“Have you seen the final sequence yet? Dzuzu has already left for the village. She took the cooler bag. She’ll draw blood by lunchtime.”

“Good,” Leo said, carefully folding the thermal paper in half.

Rémi was the first to hear the crack.

He froze with his palm raised to his lips. He tilted his head, listening instinctively, like a wild animal catching a subterranean rumble.

“Did you hear that?”

Leo froze. At first, the tent held only familiar noises: the low, vibrating thrum of the diesel generator beyond the fence, the damp rustle of heated canvas, and somewhere far off, a raspy rooster’s crow. But then a second sound cut through the dense green mass of the jungle. A dull, dry crack echoed over the canopy, as if someone had slammed a damp, heavy plank onto water.

“A gunshot,” Leo affirmed.

A third. A fourth. A short, ragged burst – a rolling *rat-tat-tat-tat*. A pause long enough for only half a breath. Then another burst – long, tight, angry.

Leo knew that distinctive metallic clatter. Not from movies or news reports – from experience.

“Kalashnikov,” he said.

“AKM,” Rémi specified. “7.62 caliber. Judging by the long bursts, some nervous idiot has his finger glued to the trigger.”

Sarah stood up immediately.

“Where is the shooting coming from?”

“Looks like from the woods,” Leo remarked, stepping outside. “Northwest. About two kilometers. Maybe a bit farther.”

By the yellow plastic perimeter fencing, a captain of the FARDC government forces had already halted. A worn rifle strap dug into his shoulder, and a radio was pressed to his ear, spewing a crackling stream of speech distorted by static. The captain spoke in Lingala – fast, low – and his dark, high-cheekboned face remained impassive, gray, and indifferent, like setting concrete.

“Captain!” Leo called out, stepping over a small drainage ditch. “What’s happening?”

“Shooting on the trail,” the officer grunted without looking at him. “Patrol reports: northern sector, closer to the old quarry.”

“Who’s firing?”

“Anyone. Rebels. Southbridge private security. Or fighting over ore.”

“There might be wounded,” Leo said, stepping right up to the mesh. “We need to check.”

The captain slowly turned his head. A vein throbbed on his sweaty, stubborn neck. There was neither fear nor heroism in his gaze – only the cold, leaden pragmatism of a man who knew the precise boundaries of his orders.

“Out of the question, Doctor. You stay in the camp. Right now, men loaded with live ammo are running around in the thicket, and they won’t stop to examine your medical emblems. Step outside the perimeter, and you’ll get cut down by the very first burst. Then there’ll be no one left to patch these guys up,” he motioned with his chin toward the medical tents.

“We took an oath,” Leo argued.

“You are the only thing standing between this area and the damned fever,” the captain snapped harshly. “Your hide is worth more than a single wounded smuggler.”

The gunfire in the forest ceased. The silence that plunged over Bata Kolé in its wake was anxiously sticky and suffocating. The air between the trees seemed to thicken, reeking of ozone, gunpowder smoke, and rotting foliage.

Leo remained silent for exactly two seconds. Then he turned on his heel, ran into the lab trailer, and ripped a red nylon medical bag with a white cross off the wall. His fingers moved automatically, pulling from the drawers packs of hemostatic sponges, sterile bandages, lidocaine ampoules, surgical forceps, long pickup forceps, and a pack of disposable syringes.

“You’ve lost your mind, Gonzalez,” Rémi said with a smirk, leaning against the doorframe.

“Perhaps.”

“If you get shot out there, I’ll perform the autopsy myself. Lucky for you, my incisions are flawless.”

“I’ll be back.”

“Gonzalez, wait.”

Leo looked up.

“At least take Lukala,” Rémi exhaled heavily, releasing a breath that smelled of bitter coffee. “He’s local. Knows the forest and the trails. And he isn’t white – in this jungle, that’s your primary body armor.”

Mbuyi was waiting for him at the exit of the “green zone.” He had already changed into high rubber boots and thrown an old hunting vest with numerous pockets over his faded T-shirt. A lightweight backpack hung from his shoulder. His face bore that particular, somber composure with which villagers set out to do hard, dirty, yet unavoidable work.

“I heard the shots too,” Lukala agreed. “Let’s go.”

The captain assigned them an escort after all – a single soldier, a very young, wiry guy with a round, childish face. The Belgian FN FAL automatic rifle in his slender hands looked like an alien, overly massive piece of iron.

They crossed the perimeter line and stepped under the green canopy. The jungle swallowed them instantly, as if a light had been switched off. Humid heat hit their faces in a dense, stifling wave. The post-rain air smelled of humus, damp bark, rotting fruit, and the delicate, barely perceptible scent of night blossoms that appeared with every step, only to vanish and give way to the stench of stagnant water.

The soldier led them along a faint track barely carved through the underbrush. Wet roots slicked under their boots. Dense midge swarms stuck to their sweaty faces, crawling into nostrils and eyes. Lukala moved behind Leo – silently, with the striking grace of someone raised in these woods. He walked on full soles, without crunching dry twigs or catching on hanging vines.

Fifteen minutes of walking. Twenty. Leo’s shirt was soaked through with sweat, clinging to his shoulder blades.

The soldier ahead suddenly raised a clenched fist. Leo froze. Lukala stopped dead beside him, flaring his nostrils slightly as he caught the sounds of the woods.

All around lay a ringing silence, stretched taut as a wire. But this silence was alive – it breathed with unseen bodies.

The soldier rasped out a few short, guttural phrases in Lingala. His voice sounded quiet, yet carried distinctly beneath the tree canopy.

The response arrived ten long seconds later. The voice from deep within the thicket was hoarse and deep.

The soldier exchanged a look with Lukala. Lukala gave a brief nod.

“Militia,” Lukala whispered in Leo’s ear. “Three of them. One took a bullet in the leg.”

They stepped into a small clearing trampled into the ferns. Three men sat near the fallen trunk of a wild ficus.

Two were on their feet. Tall, lean men in tattered camouflage pants, rifles casually slung over their shoulders. Their sweat-glistening black faces reflected less hostility than a wild, animal vigilance. The taller one had an old, pale scar running across his cheek, from eyebrow to jawline.

The third was semi-reclined, his back resting against the mossy bark. A guy of about twenty-five, with short, coarse hair and a broad, flat face. He clutched his right thigh frantically with both hands. Blood seeped through his fingers and the torn fabric of his pants – thick, crimson, almost black in the jungle gloom, smelling of salty iron.

Leo knelt right in the wet mud beside the wounded man.

“Gunshot?” he asked, looking up at the scarred man.

The man nodded.

“Thigh. No exit wound. Spent round, probably. Or passed through a tree trunk before hitting him, otherwise it would’ve blown out a fist-sized chunk of flesh.”

Leo took blunt-tipped shears from the kit and cut through the blood-soaked fabric with a crunch. The wound looked deceptively innocent – a small, neat entry hole with jagged edges. But Leo’s fingers, carefully palpating the deep tissues through a sterile gauze pad, immediately located a dense mass lodged between the muscles. The bullet sat deep, but the bone was intact, and the absence of a pulsing, spurting stream meant the femoral artery had miraculously been spared.

“I can get it out,” Leo said, retrieving a lidocaine ampoule and a metal clamp from his kit. “But not on the ground. We need to carry him to our camp.”

The militia members looked at each other. The scarred man frowned. “Where exactly?”

“To the WHO field hospital,” Lukala interjected, switching to Lingala. His voice was soft, persuasive. “We are doctors. There’s power, antiseptics, and instruments. We’ll have him back to you on his own two feet in a couple of hours.”

Scar looked down at the wounded man. The youth raised his head. His eyes, dilated with pain and shock, locked onto Leo’s face. He evaluated the doctor with the quick, instinctive precision of a wounded animal gauging a human.

“Let’s go,” the wounded man murmured hoarsely. “Carry me.”

The FARDC soldier and one of the fighters fashioned a stretcher out of two sturdy poles and buttoned jackets. They placed the casualty on it and hauled him back. Leo walked alongside, holding the leg steady so the lead core wouldn't mangle soft tissue during transport.

On the trail, Leo couldn’t help asking the scarred fighter softly: “Who did you clash with?”

“Mine patrol,” he grunted, pushing through vines. “Southbridge security.”

“They opened fire?”

“Just walked out of the thicket. They roam four deep now, body armor and night optics. Even in broad daylight. On our land.”

“Any wounded on their side?”

The scarred man smirked crookedly, dropping: “Don’t know. We struck first.”

Lukala, walking behind, leaned toward Leo's ear: "Just business as usual. The militia steals ore from the pit, Southbridge shoots them down. Sometimes they fire into the air to report back to management. Sometimes like this. Local trade."

They brought the wounded man back to camp in thirty minutes. He was carried into the dressing trailer. Within seconds, Lukala set up the workstation: sterile oilcloth, the bright beam of a headlamp LED, a tray with clamps.

Leo worked without pause. An ampoule snapped. The syringe penetrated the tissue around the wound – dry skin resistance, then a soft sink. An incision – sharp, short, exactly three centimeters. The surgical forceps dipped into the depth of the wound softly, by feel, like a key entering a tight lock. Metal clinked against lead. Leo clamped onto the bullet and extracted it in one smooth, single motion.

A small, deformed piece of jacketed lead, 5.56 millimeter caliber. Leo dropped it into a kidney tray with a soft ping.

The wounded man didn't utter a sound. He lay there, jaw clenched to the crunch, large glistening beads of sweat rolling down his temples.

Lukala flushed the wound tract with peroxide – white foam sizzled against tissue – inserted a drainage tube, and quickly tied a neat suture.

"What's your name?" Leo asked, pulling off his blood-stained latex gloves.

The wounded man closed his eyes, then exhaled: "Mwepu."

Lukala let out a short grunt, wrapping a sterile bandage around the thigh: "'The Peacemaker.' In Lingala, Mwepu. Irony, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Not irony," Mwepu replied in a weak but steady voice from the shadows of the cot. "A reminder. My father named me that so I'd remember: the shooting begins when people run out of normal words."

By the time the last suture was tied, the sun had already touched the tree canopy. Dense tropical dusk shrouded Bata Kolé so quickly it felt as if a thick velvet blanket had been thrown over it from above. Mwepu fell asleep in the trailer – the painkiller had taken effect. His companions melted into the woods, promising to return at dawn. The captain gave Leo a monotonous five-minute lecture on military discipline and responsibility for disobeying orders before returning to his radio.

Leo stood outside the trailer, inhaling the cool evening air, smelling of campfire smoke and wet grass.

Rémi stepped out of the lab, carrying fresh thermal printouts.

"Results for the village girls," he said, handing over the sheets. "Carbon copy. Filovirus markers. Minimal titer. Immune response silent. And a 0.3 percent genomic shift. Same vector."

"Where is it heading?"

“Toward complete adaptation,” Rémi sighed heavily, wiping his bald head with his palm. “The virus is wiping its tracks. In a couple of weeks, we won’t be able to distinguish its RNA from standard cellular material.”

Leo folded the paper into his pocket.

“Porthole,” he murmured quietly.

“What?”

“We look into the microscope, but we’re looking through glass. There’s nothing there. The virus has turned transparent.”

Rémi opened his mouth to add something, then checked himself.

The low growl of a diesel engine echoed from the direction of the forest road. The camp tensed instantly: sentries at the gate raised their rifles.

An old Mitsubishi Pajero rolled out onto the cleared clearing – caked in dried, brick-red mud, with a crack across the windshield. The diesel engine sneezed, blew a bluish puff of foul smoke from its exhaust, and settled into a steady hum.

A stocky man in a camouflage jacket sat behind the wheel with a rifle across his knees. From the passenger seat hopped another – around thirty, lean, with sharp cheekbones and dark, piercing eyes. He wore a plain gray T-shirt, dirty army trousers, and high boots. A handgun hung in a leather holster at his waist.

He raised his hands palms forward, showing clean fingers, and walked briskly toward the medical tents.

“It’s fine,” Leo stepped forward. “They’re here for the wounded man.”

The newcomer stopped in front of Leo. He looked at him – intently, unblinking, without a trace of a smile.

“I’m in charge of them,” he said. His voice was low, raspy. “Thanks for patching up Mwepu.”

“Just doing our job,” Leo replied.

“I know. Dr. Gonzalez from WHO. And this is Dr. Mbuyi. Rumors spread through these woods faster than malaria mosquitoes.”

He unzipped a leather shoulder bag, reached in, and pulled out a bottle. “Johnnie Walker Red Label.” Real, thick glass, with an intact tax stamp. Leo hadn’t seen liquor like that since flying out of Kinshasa.

“I suggest we seal our acquaintance. You saved my guy. That deserves a drink.”

Leo glanced at the bottle, then at Rémi. The Frenchman merely shook his head and retreated deep into the trailer. Sarah didn’t even come out. Only Lukala remained standing at the edge of the platform, arms crossed over his chest in neutral expectation.

“All right, let’s have a drink,” Leo agreed.

They sat down on rough concrete blocks beneath a camouflage canopy. The surrounding air was steeped in the scent of burnt wood, smoke, and fallen leaves. The sky over the jungle had darkened completely into deep purple, and the first large stars flickered above the canopy.

The man popped the bottle open with a short, practiced motion – twisting off the cap with a metallic crack. He poured the amber liquid into two plastic cups. At the bottom, the whiskey glinted with the reflection of a distant campfire.

“To health,” Leo said, raising his cup.

“To Mwepu,” the other corrected. “And to that idiot taking fewer metal deliveries.”

The whiskey scorched his esophagus with clean, oaken heat. Leo closed his eyes for a second, and for a fleeting moment, a dim bar in Kinshasa flared in his memory – tequila, the muffled strain of “Love is Blindness,” and the delicate, tart floral scent rising from Imani’s skin.

“Good stuff,” Leo sighed, nodding toward the bottle. “Where’s it from?”

“Spoils of war,” he smirked and extended his hand. “Ilunga.”

“Leo.”

“I know.” Ilunga smiled again. “Whispers about you are already circulating around here. The white doctor who trekked into the bush for smugglers. Almost gave the captain a heart attack.”

“He’ll survive.”

“He will,” Ilunga poured another round. “He’s been stuck in Haut-Katanga for three years. Bones harden fast around here.”

Leo took a sip of whiskey. He remained silent for a moment, studying his companion, then asked evenly: “What are you washing out in the woods?”

Ilunga looked him dead in the eye.

“Rare earth metals,” he answered calmly. “Lanthanum, neodymium, cerium. Everything without which your smartphones and turbines turn into chunks of plastic. A kilo fetches good money on the global market. Deposits run deep here. But IC Waze snatched up a twenty-year license ahead of everyone. On the best land.”

“And you work for them?”

Ilunga let out a raspy chuckle: “I don’t work for them. I’m local. My grandfather dug copper here back when the Belgians were still wearing knee pants. But the Israelis came along and claimed: we have a paper with a stamp. And we said: the land has the right of first claim. So disagreements arose.”

“So you’re rebels?”

“I don’t care for those big words,” Ilunga took a sip. “Rebels fought for an idea. We just want to live on our land and dig our ore… Sure, we sell on the black market. But it’s not a war. It’s survival.”

Leo nodded.

“And that dead white man found in the thicket? The one the hunter caught it from?”

Ilunga set his cup down on the concrete.

“I think he was from Southbridge.”

“A mercenary?”

“Possibly. They’ve got no fewer than thirty guns posted at their restricted facility. South Africans, Romanians, a couple of white guys from Kinshasa. Sitting behind electrified razor wire. They never come down to the village. Own well, own diesel generator, helipad. A state within a state. But occasionally they skulk through the woods. Patrol.”

“And one of them just walked off into the woods and died?”

“Or they wrote him off themselves,” Ilunga raised a finger. “Strict rules in there. If someone starts drinking, losing his mind, or getting hallucinations, they toss him out the gate. No weapon, no papers. No money. Local method of firing someone.”

“Have you seen that happen before?”

“I’ve seen bodies,” Ilunga replied quietly. “Twice. Ragged, beaten. One had a bullet in his back. But this guy of yours… no bruises on him?”

“No.”

“Then either he got thrown over the perimeter and croaked from the fever, or…”

“Or?”

“Or he didn’t flee. Or he left on his own because he found something at the mine that broke his mind.”

“What could be found there?”

“You asked about the ore?” Ilunga leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “The company declares rare earths. But my guys who hired on to do road grading said they’re digging the mine shaft far too deep. You don’t need those depths for neodymium. They’re looking for something else down there. And security isn’t posted to keep us out. They’re guarding whatever lies at the bottom.”

“Uranium?”

Ilunga shrugged noncommittally: “Maybe uranium.”

Leo finished his whiskey. The rich oak aroma blended with the scent of night dampness.

“And is it here?”

“Uranium?.. It is. Or was... But there’s something worse...”

“You believe tales like that?”

“I believe my eyes,” Ilunga replied. “And my eyes see: as soon as IC Waze broke through the deep layer, people around here started dropping. First one. Then two. The hunter. Then the miner. You came here and call it an ‘epidemic.’ But I say: it’s not a disease. It’s a response.”

“A response?”

“The elders say that’s how the earth responds,” Ilunga looked at Leo intently. “To those who’ve forgotten how to treat her.”

A silence fell, filled with the chirp of night cicadas and the distant ticking of the cooling diesel engine. Ilunga shifted his gaze to Leo’s right wrist.

“Where did you get that thing?” he asked.

Leo glanced at the metal: “Bought it in Kinshasa. From a street vendor. He swore it was a protective amulet.”

Ilunga smiled crookedly.

“Market peddlers don’t sell stuff like this,” he remarked softly. “This is forged metal. Real. From a lineage holding the secrets of the copper smiths. There are only two or three of them left in all of Katanga. Every hoop like this is forged specifically for a person. They aren’t sold for pennies. They’re passed from hand to hand.”

Leo looked down at the spiral patterns and notches stamped into the dark copper.

“And what’s engraved here?”

Ilunga leaned closer. His calloused finger with a battered nail hovered over the metal without touching the skin.

“I’m no sorcerer,” he said. “But reading the sign... to me, the spirals are open-pit mines. Ever seen what an open-pit mine looks like from above? Circles descending into the depths. Earth turned inside out. And the tiny dots around them are people. Small, trapped from all sides.”

“Trapped by what?”

“By the circles,” Ilunga straightened his back. “But that’s just my reading. I’m only a smuggler.”

Leo laughed softly. Ilunga let out a brief chuckle too.

“Are you married, Leo?” Ilunga asked suddenly.

Leo shook his head: “No. Not with this kind of life. Three months in Kenya, then Bangladesh, then Congo. What woman would wait for someone who constantly disappears into foreign quarantines?”

“There are those who would,” Ilunga remarked.

“Maybe. But I haven’t met one. What about you?”

Ilunga twirled the cup in his fingers, staring into the dark jungle.

“Married. Or listed as married. Our parents betrothed us when I was eleven and she was six. The elders decided it. Union of lands, security guarantees. Just like old times. She lives far from here. And I’m here. Between us is a piece of paper, a couple of ritual phrases, and a copper ring I took off and hung on a nail back home.”

“Does she love you?”

“I don’t know. Never asked. In marriages arranged in heaven but lived out on cold earth, people don’t ask those questions.”

Leo said nothing. The image of Imani rose in his mind once more. The curve of her neck, the feel of her fingers on his shoulder, the scent of an unfamiliar flower that still hadn’t faded from his lungs – as though that aroma had become part of his very breath.

Ilunga got up from the concrete block. He stretched his shoulders.

“Time to go. My guys will drive Mwepu to the village and set him up on a bale.”

They shook hands. Ilunga’s palm was dry and hot, with hard calluses at the base of his fingers.

Leo walked him to the Pajero. The fighters had already laid Mwepu on the back seat – he reclined, cradling his bandaged leg against his chest.

Ilunga opened the door, but before getting in, he turned around: “Leo.”

“Yeah?”

“If that white guy from the forest was from Southbridge… The patrol was moving south with purpose. You get it? They were heading straight for your camp. They were after him.”

“What does that mean for us?”

“It means they’ll come. If not today, then tomorrow. Or the day after. They have thirty pros with assault rifles, night vision, and a direct line to Pretoria. And you’ve got four canvas tents, a handful of soldiers, and a Frenchman chewing instant coffee granules.”

“Thanks for the truth.”

“Take care of yourself, Doctor.” Ilunga hopped into the cab. The diesel engine roared, kicking up clumps of red mud beneath the wheels.

The old SUV turned around and rattled down the forest road. Its two headlight beams sliced through the nocturnal darkness of the jungle like a sharp blade slicing through heavy cloth – smoothly and inevitably.

Leo stood at the perimeter of the camp, watching it go. The clattering rumble of the engine gradually melted into the endless, deafening drone of the cicadas.

Chapter Seven. The Raid

“*Wait for me*.”

The whisper burned against his ear – hot, corporeal, vibrating at the lowest, almost ultrasonic frequency. This voice was not born in the larynx, but at the very center of the chest, beneath the bone of ribs slick with sweat, where a restive, agitated heart beat rapidly. Leo lay in pitch-black, enveloping darkness that felt almost tangible to the touch. The air was steeped in the thick, intoxicating scents of night jasmine, damp post-storm earth, and the sharp, bitter aroma of costus – an ancient perfumery root whose fragrance recalled both dry tree resins and musk.

Imani was close. Her skin – feverishly hot, flawlessly smooth, moist with a fine sheen of sweat – slid across his chest, crowding out the world from his consciousness. Leo felt every line of her body: the graceful, confident pivot of her hips, the sharp, graphic collarbones beneath his palms, the chiseled curve of her neck. Her short, coarse coils of hair tickled his chin, leaving a faint scent of palm oil and smoke on his skin.

The copper hoop on his right wrist burned with a dry, almost deathly cold, contrasting sharply and painfully with the searing heat of her breath. Leo arched to meet this slow, hypnotic movement, his fingers digging into the dark, taut surface of her back. There was no refinement or hesitation in this surge – only pure, primal physiology, merging with something undeniable, ancient as the earth itself.

Imani leaned even closer. Her lips, hot and soft, brushed his neck below the jawline; her teeth, with a slight, palpable pressure, nipped his pulsing carotid artery, and she slipped directly into his bloodstream, leaving a burning wet trail on his skin:

“*Wait for me*...”

A sharp metallic clatter shattered the dream.

Leo’s eyes flew open, his mouth frantically gasping the stale, suffocating air of the wooden trailer. Blinding beams of headlights, slicing through the pre-dawn gloom, swept across the plywood and tin walls, piercing the torn mosquito net on the window. Outside, with a menacing, low growl, powerful, tuned diesel engines sputtered and choked at idle. Cutting through the rumble were sharp, guttural commands, shouted simultaneously in two languages – French and English.

Leo rolled off the narrow cot, instantly feeling the sticky sweat cool rapidly on his chest. He pulled on wrinkled jeans, shoved his bare feet into high boots without even lacing them, and bolted out into the stifling, motionless Africa.

In the cleared glade of the WHO camp stood two large Toyota Land Cruiser SUVs. Fine orange dust and exhaust fumes hung in the air like a dense suspension, illuminated from within by powerful halogen headlights. The car doors swung open almost simultaneously. Men in full tactical gear spilled onto the trampled mud: dark-sand plate carriers, heavy load-bearing vests, Kevlar helmets devoid of a single identifying mark or flag.

In the hands of the gunmen, Leo immediately recognized a weapon hard to mistake for anything else – Israeli Emtan MZ-4P carbines with shortened fourteen-inch barrels, gas-piston operating systems, red dot sights, and tactical flashlights mounted on side Picatinny rails.

Six men. Three heavily built local Congolese with frozen, wooden expressions, and three white men – weather-beaten, with bruised knuckles, tight lips, and the impassive, area-scanning gazes of professional private military contractors.

The FARDC soldiers, officially assigned by the government to guard the WHO field hospital, did not even attempt to raise their worn rifles. They silently lowered their muzzles to the ground, pressing themselves into the shadows of the bamboo awnings. Their captain stood by the furthest tent, staring at the mud beneath his boots with the emphatic, deathly indifference of a man whose mobile account had already received the required transfer. The camp guard simply folded up in the face of overwhelming force.

Sarah and Rémi, who were on duty, were already running out of the laboratory block, buttoning their medical coats on the go.

A broad-shouldered mercenary – a blond man with a thick, short beard, a deep scar cutting through his left eyebrow, and a snug-fitting helmet – strode purposefully straight toward the doctors.

“Where is the body?” he barked in flawless French, without the slightest hint of a Provençal or Parisian accent.

“You have no right to barge into an international UN quarantine zone!” Huybrechts stepped forward, physically blocking the entrance to the mobile refrigerator container. “This is a WHO facility! We are under strict epidemiological protocol!”

“We’re here to retrieve our employee,” the mercenary didn’t even raise his voice, but it carried the monolithic certainty of a man accustomed to giving orders.

“You’re out of your minds!” Rémi stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Sarah, his face pale with anger and impotence. “He had hemorrhagic fever! An unknown, extremely aggressive strain! The corpse is shedding contagious biological material

every second, his cells are breaking down right now. You'll infect your entire fucking mine and die there in forty-eight hours!"

"That is not your concern, Doctor." The blond man gave a curt nod to his men: "Toss him in the trunk."

Two of the fighters, pulling half-mask respirators over their faces and slipping into thick rubber gloves up to their elbows, headed toward the morgue doors.

Leo stepped into their path. Adrenaline, boiling over from his shattered dream, drowned out the last remnants of reason and fear.

"You will not touch him!" Leo blocked the blond man's way, standing chest-to-chest with his body armor. "We need to finish sequencing the genome! There's a mutation happening in his tissues unlike anything we've ever seen. Take him away, and in three days your camp will turn into a rotting graveyard! You won't even make it to a helicopter!"

The blond slowly looked Leo up and down – lingering on his bare feet in unlaced boots and hands trembling with tension.

"Step aside, kid," he hissed through his teeth.

Leo didn't budge. Pure, adolescent fury seemed to ignite within him. He lunged forward and grabbed the nylon strap of the fighter's tactical vest with all his might: "I said, you're not – "

The strike followed instantly. Without winding up, via a short and terrifying pivot of his entire torso, the lightweight polymer stock of the Emtan slammed precisely under Leo's ribs, right into his solar plexus.

Air burst from his throat in a hoarse, wet wheeze. The world before his eyes collapsed instantly into a single sparking white dot. Leo dropped to his knees right in the runny red mud, his mouth gaping helplessly as he tried to take even one frantic gulp of air, but his paralyzed diaphragm refused to work. Such sharp pain flared in his ribs it felt as though the bones had cracked and pierced the soft tissue.

"Leo!" Sarah screamed desperately.

The blond lowered the rifle barrel and ran his bored eyes over the biologist writhing on the ground.

"If you're so smart and care so much about the virus, then you're coming with us. You can work as a safety consultant. Get him up."

Two local fighters grabbed Leo under the armpits and jerked him roughly to his feet. His legs buckled; a persistent, sour taste of gastric acid, bile, and iron filled his mouth. He was dragged to the first SUV and shoved brutally into the back seat.

Meanwhile, a thick black plastic body bag was carried out of the mobile morgue. The zipper was sealed with a metal clamp, but even from several meters

away, the bag reeked of the stagnant, sickeningly chemical scent of formaldehyde and suffocating bio-decay. With a dull, heavy thud, it was tossed into the trunk of the second vehicle.

“Wait! Stop!” Sarah dropped her things and ran out of her trailer. In her hands, she dragged an orange nylon backpack adorned with bright biohazard symbols.

Approaching the open car door where the fighters were shoving the semi-conscious Leo, she threw the bag onto his lap with all her strength.

“There’s a suit, respirator, disinfectants, syringes, and antibiotics in there! Put everything on as soon as you arrive! Don’t breathe their air, Gonzalez! Do you hear me?!”

Rémi tried to break through to the jeep, but a cold, blued rifle barrel immediately materialized in front of his chest.

At that moment, the team leader stepped back a few meters, pressed a finger to his tactical headset, and began speaking rapidly and abruptly into the microphone. Leo, fighting through the ringing in his ears and the savage pain in his chest, leaned his temple against the dusty glass and tried to listen.

The language sounded entirely alien. It bore no trace of the soft, burring vowels of French, the crisp rhythm of English, the guttural Semitic vocabulary of Yiddish or Hebrew, or the melodic, vowel-rich fluidity of the local Bantu dialects. It was a harsh, incredibly dense, choppy speech, bursting with strange hissing sounds, clicking stops, hard consonants, and closed vowels – as if someone were loudly snapping dry pine branches or striking sparks from flint. One could discern Romance roots, but they were mangled by Slavic coarseness.

“So you’re Gonzalez?” the leader asked, sliding into the front seat. Without waiting for an answer, he waved his hand: “Alright, let’s go.”

The door slammed shut with a crash. The diesel roared. The SUV tore off, showering the doctors standing by the tents with a cloud of brick-red mud and burnt diesel soot.

The ride through the nocturnal jungle felt most like a sluggish crawl inside the esophagus of a giant, invisible beast.

Thick, fleshy fern and wild banana leaves whipped against the Toyota’s armored windows with a deafening, machine-gun clatter. Huge vines, draped from the canopies of ancient trees invisible in the absolute dark, looked like rigid, blind snakes in the beam of the powerful halogen headlights. The forest didn’t just grow – it lived its own aggressive life: it festered, evaporated moisture, slowly devoured itself, and immediately regenerated in an endless cycle of decay. Time inside the vehicle lost all sequence. It felt to Leo as though they had been driving for days, though barely forty minutes had passed.

A stagnant, heavy stench filled the cabin: a blend of alkaline gun oil, diesel, stale male sweat, cheap tobacco, and sourness.

With every deep pothole, with every harsh jolt of the suspension bringing them closer to the foothills, a strange, unprecedented sensation began to boil somewhere inside Leo.

Deep within his chest cavity – right behind his rifle-bruised sternum – an invisible, phantom mechanism came to life. An internal Geiger counter.

At first, there were sparse, barely perceptible clicks. A slow, erratic rhythm. *Crack*... pause... deep breath... *crack* again.

But the deeper they pushed into the forest, the closer they drew to the mining company's restricted territory, the more frequent and aggressive these discharges became. The earth around them was steeped in some ancient, sullen pathology. The copper bracelet on Leo's right wrist turned so icy that the skin beneath it began to numb. The metal's cold resonated with a mounting vibration in his own bones. The internal clicking accelerated, turning into a rapid staccato, merging into a single, irritating, persistent hum that made his teeth ache.

The jungle parted abruptly, as if someone had sharply swept back a woven curtain of vines before the speeding car.

The morning sun illuminated a tall, monumental fence. A solid concrete plinth three meters high, topped with steel chain-link and three rows of electrified "Egoza" razor wire. Industrial floodlights on corner towers still burned, washing the cleared strip in a deathly, pale-phosphorous glow.

The massive, hydraulically driven steel gates slid aside heavily and silently. The SUVs rolled into the guarded territory of the "Kato-Tombe" mine.

The camp inside the perimeter was shockingly, drastically different from the pitiful, mud-spattered tents of the WHO mission. Here stood strict, flawless rows of snow-white residential container modules, raised on half-meter metal pilings to protect against snakes and damp. The external units of powerful Mitsubishi Electric air conditioners hummed a continuous bass note on the roof of every trailer. The hulking bodies of heavy mining equipment – yellow excavators, dump trucks, and drilling rigs – loomed darkly on cleared pads.

But the main thing that seized Leo's attention lay directly in the side of a red hill towering in the center of the camp.

A rectangular concrete portal was roughly and deeply cut into the rock face. The tunnel entrance was sealed by a massive steel blast door with a dual-position handwheel lock – exactly the kind installed on nuclear submarines or in government bunkers.

Beside the entrance, a dedicated diesel generator the size of a large shipping container thundered continuously. It operated with a low, vibrating hum, feeding high-voltage power through thick black cables straight into the cave. Two gunmen with rifles at the ready guarded the entrance.

The counter in Leo's chest went into a frantic, unbroken, unbearable staccato. He felt nauseous.

The SUV stopped at the largest, two-story modular building with tinted panoramic windows. The door opened, and Leo was unceremoniously shoved outside. He barely stayed on his feet, his fingers gripping the orange backpack of protective gear so tightly his knuckles popped.

The module's plastic door opened with a quiet pneumatic hiss, releasing a gust of freezing, sterile, conditioned air into the street.

A woman stepped onto the metal porch.

She was around forty-five. Tall, lean, with an impeccably straight, almost military posture. She wore pressed dark-gray trousers and an ivory blouse of thick silk, looking wild and surreal amidst the Congolese mud. Dark hair, with elegant streaks of gray at the temples, was pulled into a tight, severe knot at the nape. Her face – with its chiseled, high cheekbones, thin lips, and deep-set dark eyes – projected absolute, icy control over herself and her surroundings.

Behind her, looming like a massive cast shadow, emerged a man of about the same age. He was thickly built, with a bull neck, a completely shaved skull, a broken nose, and a thick mustache. A jagged burn scar ran down his bare forearm. His stance, and the way his eyes instantly evaluated fields of fire, betrayed the training of a career special forces officer.

The woman slowly descended the metal stairs. Her expensive leather boots crunched dryly on the gravel. She approached Leo, stopping one step away.

"Hello, Doctor," her voice was low, velvety, and utterly indifferent. She spoke French with a faint, hard Eastern European accent. "You must be Dr. Leo Gonzalez. My name is Diana Pătrașcu. And this," she made a barely perceptible gesture with a slender hand toward the bald giant, "is Dragoș. Dragoș Horia. He is in charge of security for our facility."

Leo straightened his shoulders, forcing himself past the dull, nauseating pain in his solar plexus: "You have abducted an employee of an international UN mission. That is a grave criminal offense..."

Diana stopped him with a raised palm bearing an expensive silver signet ring – softly, but with absolute finality: "We haven't abducted you, Doctor. We have brought you in for an urgent consultation. Our employee is dead, and we have no virologists among our security staff. Your expertise is vital to us."

At that moment, the blond commander, whose rifle butt was still echoing in Leo's ribs, walked up: "What should we do with the body, Ms. Pătrașcu?"

Diana cast a quick, thoroughly disgusted glance at the black plastic bag the fighters were already pulling from the trunk of the second jeep.

"Take it to the freezer for now... Yes, and get our guest some breakfast."

Chapter Eight. The Return

Red clay dust, kicked up by the worn tires of the old bus that rattled agonizingly over every rut, seeped through the dried-out window cracks, settling on skin, hair, and fabric in a viscous, suffocating layer that left the taste of burnt iron on the lips.

Imani stepped off onto the scorching shoulder of the road while the sun, having passed its zenith, still mercilessly scorched the stiff stalks of elephant grass along the way. Fine sand, dry as gunpowder, immediately packed into her sandals, burning the soles of her feet. She adjusted the hem of her light dress, using sharp slaps to knock the terracotta powder from the folds of the fabric, and for a second pressed a damp palm to her neck – where sticky perspiration pulsed beneath her thin skin.

The news had preceded her. Rumors in Katanga travel faster than radio waves – they flow like invisible subterranean rivers between villages, alongside the drivers of passing trucks, alongside the tart smell of dried cassava from street vendors, and the bare feet of girls running after sparse transport. Even at the hilly pass, passengers in the bus had begun whispering, passing the words down the line: in the night, mercenaries from the Israeli mine had raided the WHO mobile camp. They took a black plastic bag from the morgue. With a dead body. And they took the white doctor. Alive. Meanwhile, the government army soldiers had stood quietly aside, limply lowering the barrels of their assault rifles.

Imani crossed the territory of the humanitarian mission, leaving the dry, hoarse calls of the guards at the gate unanswered. The air in the camp felt thick, poisoned by the corrosive smell of soot, sour old sweat, and the sharp, nostril-burning stench of formalin wafting from the gaping maws of the medical tents.

The FARDC captain was sitting on an overturned wooden ammo crate in the thin, shifting shade of a canvas awning. He was lazily fanning himself with a crumpled topographic map whose paper edges had long since frayed into dust, but upon seeing the young woman walking straight toward him, he frowned and rose to his feet heavily, with a dull grunt.

"You let them take him. Leo Gonzalez, the American," Imani said immediately, as if cutting off any avenue of retreat.

Her voice sounded quiet, even, with a frightening calmness, but it harbored that dense, dry threat that makes men's shoulders involuntarily turn to stone.

“I know. Armed men entered a UN facility, took a man, and your soldiers left their weapons on safety. Why are you doing nothing?”

The captain pushed his sweat-soaked, faded beret to the back of his head, exposing a forehead covered in oily sheen. He cast a long, irritated, sticky glance over Imani, struggling to guess her status.

“Go on your way, woman,” he muttered, hiding his eyes behind a thick veil of indifference. “These are matters for the army command and diplomats. I am spared the necessity of explaining my subordinates’ actions to every local.”

Imani took a short step forward, gathered the hem of her dress to bypass the rusty barbs of torn wire underfoot, and looked him straight in the face – unflinchingly, piercing right through him:

“You will be explaining your orders to the people who pay your salary when this American disappears without a trace. How do you plan to get him back?”

Her sharp voice forced the dead silence of the camp to part. The flap of the laboratory tent fluttered, and Lukala Mbuyi and Rémi Gaillard stepped out into the scorching air.

The Frenchman, rubbing his inflamed eyes, red from chronic sleep deprivation, stopped halfway. His disheveled appearance and crumpled lab coat, covered in ingrained stains of chlorhexidine and blood after several days in the field hospital, betrayed extreme exhaustion – that threshold beyond which the body moves purely by inertia.

“Imani?” Rémi blinked, doubting his own eyesight for a second. He shifted his gaze from her terracotta-dust-covered dress to her face, instantly recognizing the features of the girl from the stuffy, tobacco-soaked bar “Le Copacabana” in Kinshasa. “What are you… What are you doing here? How did you even get here?”

Imani ignored his presence. Her brown eyes with their yellow rims continued to drill into the FARDC captain.

“Why did you stand aside when they took him away?” she repeated, hammering out each word like stones dropping into an empty well.

Lukala took a step forward, raising open palms and placing himself between her and the heavy-set military man.

“Calm down, Imani, I beg you,” the Congolese doctor tried to speak softly, though his own face looked grayish, parched by anxiety. “I am Lukala. We have already contacted the general staff in Kinshasa and the WHO representative office. We reported it to the consulate. They promised to resolve the issue through official channels. The IC Waze company is a major legal player; they won’t provoke an international scandal over one biologist.”

He tried to offer a weak smile, but the corners of his lips only twitched in a nervous tic.

“Leo will be fine. They simply need his opinion on the strain.”

Imani gave Lukala a long, scrutinizing look. Then she shifted her eyes to Rémi. In her silence lay a bottomless depth of astonishment – astonishment at how sincerely these people believed in phone calls, headquarters, and stamped official papers. The capital remained endlessly far away. Here, among the scorching, heat-bleeding hills of Haut-Katanga, all legality ended exactly where the towers with halogen floodlights and rows of barbed wire began.

She turned around, smoothly adjusting the strap of the light bag on her shoulder, and walked away from the camp, leaving the doctors in a sticky, suffocating silence.

She passed the sanitary cordon – a yellow ribbon sagging in the shimmering heat haze – and headed toward the village of Bata Kolé itself.

The settlement lived its usual, monotonous, sluggish life. Women rhythmically pounded dry cassava in massive wooden mortars, and these dull thuds resembled the measured heartbeat of the earth itself; dove-gray, bitter smoke wafted above clay hearths, settling on the tongue with the taste of burnt leaves. Imani walked confidently, navigating the labyrinth of narrow, trodden alleys until she reached the most massive structure on the outskirts. A high fence of porous gray cinder blocks, massive metal gates, and a roof of corrugated iron searing in the sun.

By the wicket gate, sitting on a low plastic chair, was a young guy in faded camouflage pants, holding a worn Kalashnikov assault rifle on his lap. Seeing Imani, he tensed up. His fingers reflexively gripped the warm wooden handguard, but upon recognizing her face, he relaxed his shoulders. The guy stood up silently, and the gate flap, shedding flakes of peeling paint, opened with a drawn-out creak, letting her into the courtyard.

The fence hid a spacious lot sheltered by thick shade. Beneath the broad canopy of an old, spreading mango tree, three men were cleaning weapons, having laid out the matte-gleaming bolt carrier parts and oilers on an oil-stained tarp. The air smelled thickly of gun lubricant and heated metal.

Imani stopped in the middle of the yard, smoothing the fabric of her dress over her hips with sweaty palms.

“Call Ilunga,” she said, addressing the nearest of the men.

He raised his head, nodded, and disappeared into the cool twilight of the house. A minute later, Ilunga stepped out onto the porch. He wore loose army trousers and a gray t-shirt; damp, matted hair at his temples and water droplets on his collarbones indicated he had just been washing up. He descended the creaky wooden steps and,

with a short, commanding motion of his chin, signaled his men to withdraw to the far gate.

“Hello, Imani,” his voice sounded even, carrying that drawn-out, fatalistic intonation with which one speaks of meeting the inevitable.

“You know they took Leo,” she declared bluntly, bypassing the greeting once again.

“Yes. My men saw their vehicles out on the night highway.”

Imani took a step toward him. Between them remained a meter of dry air vibrating from the heat.

“He must be brought back. I need him.”

Ilunga fell silent. His gaze slowly slid over her left arm. On the dark, velvety skin of her wrist dimly gleamed a copper hoop – thin, heavily etched with parallel grooved cuts. The “emblematic” hoop of the Ngoy clan elders. Ilunga knew all too well the weight and significance of this metal to the locals.

Imani caught his gaze. She raised her hand unhurriedly and ostentatiously, with a light, defiant pressure, rotated the bracelet with her fingers, letting the copper flash in the sun, before looking her husband straight in the eyes:

“You asked me to find someone from the WHO. I went to Kinshasa. I found someone. Now you must return him to me.”

Ilunga calmly slipped his hands into his pockets. But a muscle rolled like a mound along his jawline.

“I talked to the soldiers from the camp guard,” he began hollowly, drawing out his words. “For a couple packs of cigarettes, they blurt out everything. They said your doctor lunged at their commander himself. He provoked the mercenaries. Picked a fight with a man holding an assault rifle.”

Imani frowned slightly. This contradicted the image of Leo she had built in her mind. He was a doctor, accustomed to calculating risks. A cautious man.

“Maybe he wanted to be taken?” Ilunga continued.

“Why? What is the point of that?”

“I don’t know. Did he ask you about the mine when you met in the capital?”

“We talked about other things. What makes you think that?”

Ilunga remained silent. He turned, climbed heavily onto the porch, and disappeared behind the door. He returned a few minutes later, clutching two plastic water bottles in his broad palms. Their sides were covered in a thick, prickly web of icy condensation, and transparent drops ran swiftly down his dark fingers.

He held one bottle out to Imani.

“You need to cool down,” he remarked, watching as she drank greedily, almost choking as she latched onto the narrow neck. “The road was long. You can stay here. Your room is free, it’s clean.”

The icy water burned her parched, dust-coated throat. Imani lowered the bottle. A cold drop, refracting the sun’s rays, broke away from the ribbed plastic and fell onto her wrist, exactly onto the scorching copper bracelet.

“And then what?” she asked. “Are we just going to sit and wait until they kill him?”

Ilunga looked somewhere past her head, at the dense, dark-green crowns of the trees beyond the fence.

“At the mine, right at the edge of their territory, stands an outbuilding,” he began quieter, almost dropping to a whisper. “It sits flush against the precipice, right over the old exhausted quarry. We don’t know what they’ve set up inside. But the white mercenaries go there every day. And exclusively whites. Locals aren’t allowed anywhere near it.”

He glanced at Imani, tilting his head slightly:

“An older woman – by all appearances, she leads them. And two others. If they are accompanied by guards, the guards stay back. That barrack is located in a blind spot. There are no stationary towers there, only the ‘Egoza’ razor wire fencing and a ‘Danger! Keep Out!’ sign.”

Imani listened to him, looking at him point-blank. Every detail instantly, with geometric precision, aligned in her head into a clear, practical plan.

“Go on.”

“If Gonzalez is taken there,” Ilunga traced the outline of the structure in the air with a rough finger, “we will have a chance. My guys know a hidden path along the very sheer face of the quarry. We can approach the outbuilding from below, from the side of the stone cliff. From there, a person can be pulled out unnoticed by the guards at the gates.”

“Alright,” Imani nodded. Her fingers, white from tension, squeezed the bottle. “I’m staying.”

Ilunga took a sip. A faint, bitter smirk surfaced on his thin lips.

“Did you speak with the elders upon arrival?”

Imani cut him off harshly:

“I came for something else.”

Ilunga accepted her answer silently, without unnecessary questions. In a union forged by the will of others, borders had long been established that both preferred not to cross.

“Alright,” he nodded. “That is your business. Go inside the house. It’s not so hot there – the fan is on… Everything is just as it was.”

He had already turned toward the doorway, intending to return to his men, but stopped and threw over his shoulder:

“If you need food, clothes, or communication – tell me. I’ll arrange everything.”

Imani watched him go. This harsh, choppy promise lacked warmth, but she could feel the cold-blooded, fundamental reliability of a man accustomed to keeping his word.

She turned and walked toward the house, feeling on her skin how the icy drop of water on her left wrist was gradually warming up, absorbing the heat of her own body.

The room on the second floor of the house where she had once lived met her with stale, stagnant air – small, scrubbed clean, with a window overlooking the courtyard. Everything remained as before: the narrow, spartan bed with its crisp white sheet; a simple wooden chair, a small table, a clay water jug. Even a bowl of cassava, carefully covered with a linen napkin, sat in its usual place. The walls were freshly whitewashed, and on the wall, above the headboard of the bed, hung an old crucifix, darkened by time and covered with a thin layer of dust. Next to it was an ebony carving familiar to Imani from her earliest childhood: small, rounded, with huge eyes, an all-seeing gaze, and thin arms reverently pressed to its chest. Ilunga’s mother had called it the “keeper of the wells.”

Imani set her bag on the plank floor. She placed the plastic bottle of well water on the table. She sank onto the edge of the bed, feeling the springs creak softly under her weight.

The bracelet on her arm caught a ray of light from the window opening, blazing with a blinding copper fire. Parallel lines. Punched dots between them. Mother. Grandmother. Moist, fertile earth.

Imani closed her eyes.

Behind her closed eyelids, Leo appeared before her. This vision came from that twilight, dangerous border zone between sleep and reality, where the body’s memory proves sharper and more honest than the mind. His face, painted by the colored glints of stained glass. His hand – with its copper bracelet – reaching out to her in the semi-darkness of the church. His voice, with a slight rasp: “*Why did you delete your number?*” His heart – she heard its rhythm, perceiving the vibration not so much with her ears as with the very bone, the temporal bone pressed tightly against the pillow in Kinshasa – his heart beat evenly, confidently, with American reliability – and suddenly it stumbled.

Stumbled.

She knew the essence of this word. Not as a formal medical term denoting arrhythmia, but as a piercing physical sensation: that exact moment when you are walking along a dark, unfamiliar road and your foot suddenly falls into a hidden pit. One step – even, familiar, entirely your own. The next – frightening emptiness. The body inexorably lists forward. And the world loses its balance. And you lose everything: the solid earth, the support, the ground beneath your feet – and you fall, you fly downwards. You fall into an alien, broken rhythm, into a different, unfamiliar space, into the very core of a stranger's heart.

And Leo was falling. She knew it.

Chapter Nine. The Camp

A juicy slice of buffalo meat, pinkish at the cut, responded to the pressure of the knife with an elastic, almost living resistance, as if the muscle fibers still remembered running across the savanna. A fragrant, tangibly thick steam rose from the white earthenware plate, which was covered in a network of microscopic scratches. It was steeped in the primal essence of sizzling animal fat, the sharp, nose-hitting bitterness of scorched garlic, and the coniferous melancholy of rosemary. Scattered alongside were small, golden potatoes with crispy, charred skins that burst between the teeth, and dripping slices of grilled zucchini. The coffee – real coffee, not the dusty, cardboard-tasting instant surrogate from humanitarian rations, but a rich, oil-dark Ethiopian brew with a velvety bitterness that lingered at the root of the tongue – steamed in a thick ceramic mug, scalding his palms.

Leo sat at a metal table under a wide beige canvas curtain, which snapped taut with a dull thud under the gusts of hot wind. He ate slowly, meticulously, almost mechanically chewing every fibrous piece. In this camp, food was neither a display of hospitality nor a ritual of comfort. Food here served as a precise engineering calculation: a calibrated balance of calories, protein, and electrolytes required to keep the human body functioning flawlessly, like a well-oiled gun bolt, amidst the forty-degree, suffocating Congolese humidity. The mercenaries of the "Southbridge Security" PMC were supplied to the highest standard.

As his jaws worked, Leo's eyes mapped the geometry of the space. It read like a strict text, devoid of metaphors.

The Kato-Tombe camp had been designed by someone who flawlessly mastered the dry language of fortification. Nothing superfluous, nothing accidental – pure, paranoid semiotics of security. The outer perimeter was formed by a taut chain-link fence, ringing with tension, topped with three rows of "Egoza" razor wire, its blades gleaming predatorily in the sun. Its lower edge was embedded in a monolithic concrete plinth – an absolute defense against tunneling and heavy vehicle breaches. At the corners, piercing the heat-bleached sky, stood four steel watchtowers. On two of them, heavy-caliber M2 Browning machine guns rested motionlessly on ball mounts, covered with faded canvas tarps. On each tower stood a sentry in

camouflage and dark glasses. They resembled gargoyles: not a single unnecessary movement, not an attempt to wipe away the sweat, despite the blinding, mind-melting morning heat.

The inner zone consisted of two parallel lines of standard shipping containers, converted into living modules. Between them, over the slick red clay that looked like coagulated blood, wooden boardwalks were laid out neatly, as if drawn by a ruler. At the end of the left row loomed a two-story block with the dark, impenetrably mirrored windows of the command post, reflecting a distorted landscape. Opposite it gaped the maw of a covered hangar, from which echoed a hollow metallic clank and the smell of diesel: there, cooling in the shadows, sat four armor-reinforced Land Cruisers and a yellow Caterpillar excavator that looked like a sleeping praying mantis.

Leo counted automatically. Nine armed men in sight. Four whites, including that same stocky blond with the short beard who had struck him with a rifle butt in the village. The rest were Congolese in impeccably fitted uniforms that did not restrict their movements, carrying Israeli carbines on single-point slings. Their movements were sparse, economical, devoid of any street-level sloppiness.

Twenty meters from the dining area, cut directly into the face of a gray-orange clay hill, the entrance to a tunnel loomed black. It was blocked by a massive steel pressure door with a circular locking wheel, slick with condensation. Two guards stood motionless at the entrance. Nearby, beating evenly and dully like a massive iron heart, thrummed a powerful diesel generator; from it, a thick, writhing braid of black armored cables ran into the bunker. A separate power line. External security. A closed loop of secrecy.

Leo took a sip of the Arabica. The sharp, astringent bitterness on his tongue, washing over his palate, suddenly tore a breach in time, echoing with a deep, long-buried memory.

His father used to brew the exact same coffee in a small, dented aluminum turka with a long wooden handle. Every morning in their Boston apartment, while wet, gray snow fell silently outside the window, erasing the contours of the alien city, his father would stand at the stove, watching the dark foam rise to a boil, and stay silent. There was no sadness in that dense silence – only the ingrained habit of a man who had learned to leave no tracks, neither in the snow nor in documents.

Northern Argentina, Formosa Province, the early eighties. The humid Chaco. His father sometimes mentioned this place – sparsely, in casually dropped phrases that reeked of swamp fever. A closed military camp amidst impenetrable, rotting swamps and palm savannas. There, under a scorching, merciless sun, the young Lieutenant Gonzalez served under the command of his own father – Leo's grandfather, Colonel Hector Gonzalez Herrera.

"There was absolute purity there, Leo," his father would recount quietly, hypnotically stirring his coffee while the spoon clinked against the edges of the cup.

“No politics. No noise. Only discipline and geometric order. We knew who the enemy was, and we knew what had to be done to make that enemy disappear, to dissolve into thin air.”

Leo learned the whole truth much later, during his third year at Harvard, when he accidentally stumbled upon the multi-volume report of the CONADEP commission – “Nunca Más,” “Never Again” – in a rare books department that smelled of old paper and dust. The pages chilled his fingers. In the lists of officers who ran the secret detention centers in the Chaco zone during the “Dirty War,” his grandfather’s name, printed in the soulless font of a typewriter, appeared on page fourteen. Seventeen secret prisons. Hundreds of people, brought in for interrogation with bags over their heads in canvas-covered trucks with no license plates. And zero survivors. The family fled to the US in eighty-seven – exactly a couple of months before a federal court in Buenos Aires issued an arrest warrant for Hector Gonzalez.

Looking at the mathematically calibrated lines of the Kato-Tombe camp, at the machine-gun towers trembling in the heat haze, and at the sweat-slicked steel door of the bunker, Leo thought that his father would have felt at peace here, right at home. His grandfather – even more so. The architecture of violence is the same everywhere; only the colors of the flags on the flagpoles and the names of the transnational corporations change. From the viscous swamps of the Argentine Chaco to the parched, brick-colored earth of the Congolese Katanga – the logic of the closed perimeter remains immutable.

Movement began at the steel door of the bunker. A releasing pneumatic valve hissed drawn-out and long, the massive locking wheel turned with a clank, and the heavy panel swung inward slowly, almost reluctantly, exhaling the chill of the underground.

Two figures emerged from the dark opening.

Diana Petrașcu walked out first – in a blindingly white, starch-crisp shirt and dark trousers, carrying a small, worn leather briefcase in her hand. Behind her, squinting against the relentless sun, strode a man Leo had never seen before. Tall, bony, dried out by the years, around sixty-five, wearing a grayish, unseasonably thick jacket over a woolen shirt. He had a thick, meticulously trimmed white beard and round, thin gold-rimmed glasses that turned his eyes into two unblinking pools, giving him the appearance of a retired literature professor or the keeper of a secret monastic archive. Diana was speaking to him quickly, in clipped tones, as they walked. The elderly man nodded rhythmically, but his detached gaze behind the thick lenses remained fixed somewhere past the camp buildings, into the void, as if he were continuing to hold a fragile, multidimensional mathematical formula in his mind.

They walked along the boardwalk just five steps away from Leo, washing over him with the scent of expensive tobacco and air-conditioned air, without turning their heads, and disappeared behind the mirrored doors of the command module.

Dragoș appeared an hour later.

He approached from the direction of the hangar – massive, blocking out the sun, his skull shaved to a greasy shine, wearing a sweat-soaked camouflage tank top. On his left forearm, an old burn scar, looking like melted wax, bulged white. In his massive hands, the commando held a neat, tight bundle and a pair of imposing high-laced combat boots.

“Clothes,” Dragoș said, short as a gunshot, dropping the bundle on the edge of the metal table. “You were taken in a hurry. Change. Your jeans have rotted from sweat and dirt anyway.”

Leo unfolded the coarse fabric. A dark-olive uniform with no chevrons or insignia, stiff cotton smelling sharply of machine oil, gun lubricant, and that specific factory treatment that lingers in long-term storage warehouses.

“How do you know my size?” Leo asked, looking up.

“I can tell by eye,” Dragoș shifted his lips slightly beneath his thick mustache; it was supposed to signify a smirk. “Occupational hazard. Metrics are the foundation of survival. Come on, I’ll show you where your module is.”

The dwelling was a standard twenty-foot shipping container: a narrow metal-frame cot with unnaturally clean, stiff linens, a table bolted to the iron floor, a tiny sink, and a small air conditioner humming with a strained wheeze near the ceiling, spitting out streams of bone-dry air. Over the slit-like window was a solid steel grate, as thick as a finger. The bag, hastily packed by Sarah, already sat forlornly by the bed.

“Are there any other sick people at the mine?” Leo asked, looking around the cramped space that pressed heavily on his shoulders.

“No.”

“Not at all? No sudden fever, no skin rashes, no stomach issues?”

“I personally checked the medic’s log,” Dragoș cut him off in a tone of steel. “Thirty-two personnel. Temperature checks scheduled every six hours. Everyone is clean.”

“What about the guy found in the forest? Your employee, the one you took from the WHO morgue. Who is he?”

Horia held a pause. The air in the container seemed to grow even denser. The mercenary’s small, deep-set eyes bored into Leo’s face with a watchful, predatory tension, as if he were calculating the trajectory of a strike.

“Not my area of competence, Doctor. But if it’s so important for you to indulge your paranoia – you can take your stethoscope and examine any soldier in this camp. We have nothing to hide. We are healthy.”

“So, I am free to go?”

“Within the fence line. Don’t go beyond the wire – the boys in the towers have orders to shoot at anything that moves without the password.”

“I’d like to draw their blood for analysis, not just give them a generic listen.”

“You will…” Dragoș placed his palm on the door handle. “If it becomes necessary.”

When the metal door slammed shut behind him with the clank of a prison bolt, Leo stripped off his sticky clothes and changed. The uniform fit almost perfectly; the dense cotton fabric pleasantly cooled his overheated skin, helping him to focus. He put on the high boots, pulled the laces tight, and walked over to the small mirror, coated in a cloudy film, above the sink. From the depths of the distorting glass, a stranger in olive-drab camouflage looked back at him – with a haggard, sharpened face, overgrown with stubble, and eyes that were feverishly sunken from today's lack of sleep. On his right wrist, Imani’s copper bracelet stood out like a dark, foreign blemish. “Spirals. Dots. Quarries and people.” The metal felt surprisingly cool, as if drawing its chill from some subterranean river. Inside his chest, just as quietly, running in the background at the very periphery of his hearing, an invisible Geiger counter clicked its ragged, inescapable rhythm.

Until noon, Leo walked aimlessly around the camp, feigning the unhurried stroll of a convalescent. The soles of his boots sank into the brown clay. The mercenaries paid him absolutely no attention. To them, he was not a living human being – he was a temporary element of the tactical landscape, like an imported generator or a sealed crate of medical supplies.

Around one o’clock in the afternoon, when the sun reached its zenith, the steel door of the bunker groaned drawn-out once more.

Diana Petrașcu emerged from the viscous darkness of the tunnel. This time, alone – without the elderly companion in glasses and without the briefcase. She walked quickly, straight as a taut guitar string, but through this bearing, a strange, barely perceptible physical tightness showed through, an almost trembling overstrain. A patch of fabric on the back of her dazzling blouse had darkened with moisture, clinging to her shoulder blades. Without looking at any of the guards, she clicked her heels up the metal staircase and vanished into the cool interior of the two-story module.

Just after two o'clock, when the merciless sun had baked the corrugated roofs of the containers into a humming brazier, Leo sat in the dining area again – under the open canopy with the metal tables – in absolute solitude. The air shimmered and melted. Lunch was just as flawless as breakfast: spiced stewed lamb with fluffy rice, juice-dripping fresh vegetables, hot bread, and moist fruit.

The PMC operatives arrived in twos and threes, silently took their portions, and retreated into the shade. No one spoke to him. No one met his eyes. He remained a piece of furniture – functional, necessary, but deprived of a voice.

Quiet, measured steps on the wooden boardwalk made him turn around.

Diana sat down on the wooden bench opposite him, bringing with her a faint scent of menthol and ozone. She had already managed to change into a fresh blouse; her thick hair was combed back tightly and smoothly, revealing a high forehead, but the aristocratic pallor on her chiseled cheekbones had become even more pronounced, taking on a waxy hue.

“Have you had a look around, Doctor?” she asked quietly, lacing her long, slender fingers together.

“I have.”

“Did you find any infected?”

“No,” Leo carefully sipped his scalding coffee. “Your people are healthy. At any rate, I didn’t see any outward clinical signs of infection.”

“Of course,” Diana gave a barely perceptible, satisfied nod.

Leo set his mug on the table. The earthenware base touched the surface with a dull, stony thud that echoed through the tabletop.

“Uranium. In there?” he asked directly, without pausing to prepare, striking a glance toward the concrete bunker.

Diana didn't even flinch. Not a single muscle on her face twitched. Only a brief, dry, almost condescending smile appeared on her lips – the kind of smile an experienced lecturer gives when hearing a correct but incredibly predictable question from an inquisitive student.

“Gonzalez, you are strikingly blunt. Is that the American style?... Back in the forties, your geologists did indeed dig up these hills. They were looking for raw materials for the Manhattan Project. They made a dozen deep exploratory shafts, gnawing into the rock, but then the work was abruptly shut down, and all the geological reports went under the highest ‘top secret’ classification. All infrastructure and logistics were relocated further south – to Shinkolobwe. Have you heard of the place?”

“I’ve read about it,” Leo replied in an even voice. “Shinkolobwe, right here, in Upper Katanga. The richest uranium deposit in history. Eighty percent of the raw material for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was mined right here, in Congolese soil.”

“Correct,” Diana nodded slowly. “At Shinkolobwe, the ore lay practically on the surface; the pitchblende had an incredible, devilishly pure concentration. The Americans and the Belgians likely just calculated that investing in deep shaft mining

here, in Kato-Tombe, was economically unviable. The project was abandoned and wiped off the maps."

She fell silent. Her dark, cold eyes watched him attentively, without a single blink. Diana was tracking his reaction – professionally, coldly, with that specific, microsurgical attention found in people accustomed to reading facial expressions the way one reads oscilloscope readouts.

"But there is uranium in these seams, Gonzalez," she said after a prolonged pause that rang with tension, and a harsh, commanding note suddenly cut through her soft voice. "And its concentration here is such that we can confidently throw all our academic geology textbooks into the landfill."

Leo remained silent, not breaking eye contact, feeling the suffocating heat of the tropics pressing against his eardrums.

Diana waited a few more seconds, as if reading his heart rate by the faint beating of the vein in his neck, then smoothly stood up from the bench without using her hands for support.

"Come with me, Doctor," she said, adjusting her snow-white cuff. "Enough theories. I'm going to show you something."

Chapter Ten. The Alchemy of Blood

The locking wheel of the massive pressure door yielded to Diana's push with an unhurried, oily mechanical click of the bolt, the echo of which seemed to sink into the very foundation of the bunker. Slender fingers in impeccably white cuffs applied precisely the effort required to unlock heavy steel latches designed to withstand colossal overpressure. The bolt slid back with a dull thud, releasing an elastic, dense wave of cool, deeply filtered air. This current struck Leo in the face – a sharp, almost painful contrast to the resinous, suffocating inferno of the Congolese noon – dry, bloodless, carrying the chill of ionized oxygen, a faintly discernible trace of ozone, and the bitterish metallic taste of freon settling on the palate.

Hardly had he crossed the high, lead-lined threshold when his body's internal clock faltered, as if caught in a powerful magnetic field.

In the very depths of his chest, right behind the sternum, a physical shift occurred. His heart rhythm reconfigured: the beat frequency remained the same, but the impulse itself acquired a different, frightening hydraulic force. The heart muscle contracted with double the amplitude; it felt as if a second, more powerful, ancient, and deep resonance had tapped into his own pulse. A beat – and following it, an instantaneous, dense echo rolling through the aorta, the way mercury rolls heavily and inexorably down a glass tube. Imani's copper bracelet on his right wrist suddenly felt monstrously heavy; it responded with a pinpoint, icy, piercing impulse that sobered his mind for a second. Leo froze for a fraction of a moment, absorbing this

double heartbeat, until dark circles momentarily swam before his eyes, pulsating in time with the new blood.

The space beyond the airlock had nothing in common with the damp drifts or mine workings that smelled of raw clay, sweat, and rust. The monolithic concrete walls were tightly sealed with light gray antistatic panels, leaving not even a shadow for bacteria. The acoustic ceiling greedily and entirely absorbed echoes, creating a muffled, padded laboratory silence, broken only by the even, hypnotic rustle of laminar flow hoods and the guttural hum of ultra-low temperature freezers. This was an autonomous BSL-3 biological protection module – a temple of modern science in the middle of a primeval forest. Along the left wall stretched a continuous row of smooth synthetic stone countertops: microscopes with trinocular heads, matte-gleaming microcentrifuges, a DNA sequencer, spectrophotometers. On the opposite side stood shelving units with reagents in dark, light-proof glass vials and refrigerated incubators secured with biometric combination locks.

At the central table, in front of the matte screens of two widescreen monitors, stood an elderly man.

Leo immediately recognized him as Diana's companion from that morning. Tall, morbidly stooped, wearing the same gray jacket of thick, prickly wool over a blue broadcloth shirt. Three ballpoint pens peeked out of his breast pocket in a neat, pedantic row. A thick, meticulously trimmed white beard framed a narrow, parchment-tinted face crisscrossed with fine wrinkles, and round glasses in thin gold frames refracted the cold light of the diodes, concealing the expression of his gray, deep-set eyes. A laboratory coat lay nearby in a careless white heap on a plastic chair.

"Dr. Gonzalez," Diana stopped slightly behind Leo, folding her slender hands behind her back in a familiar gesture. "Allow me to introduce Dr. Thierry Girard. Virologist, microbiologist. For a long time, he headed research at the Lyon branch of the Pasteur Institute. For the last few years, he has been working with us."

Girard slowly, as if reluctantly, looked up from the keyboard. His palm – dry, cool, with fingertips noticeably yellowed from prolonged contact with harsh reagents – shook Leo's hand briefly, without unnecessary pressure, like a man accustomed to saving his hands for delicate work.

"Doctor," Girard's voice had a soft, slightly muffled guttural accent characteristic of natives of the south of France, tinged with a slight shortness of breath. "I must confess, I looked at your publications on hemorrhagic fevers in The Lancet. Very precise, I would even say meticulous observations."

"Thank you. I am merely a co-author," Leo swept his attentive eyes over the sterile room, noting every detail of the equipment. "I didn't expect to see a full-fledged research center of this security level at a private mining facility."

“An unavoidable necessity,” Diana chimed in. “The man the locals found in the forest thicket – his name was Maurice Brunet, and he worked right here. We brought him in from Geneva about a year and a half ago. He possessed a rare, almost supernatural intuition for anomalies of a microbiological nature. A talented guy.”

“Your Maurice died from an acute, devastating form of hemorrhagic fever,” Leo said very carefully, weighing every word, meeting Diana’s unblinking gaze. “Consequently, does your company's profile include working with high-consequence pathogens?”

“Our profile is much broader than traditional virology,” Diana replied, tilting her head slightly, causing the light to glide across her dark hair. “We mine rare-earth metals… But we do indeed touch upon these matters as well.”

“So he got infected here? Within the walls of this bunker?”

Diana looked at him with the faintly perceptible, restrained smile of someone accustomed to treating the conjecture of others with condescension.

“Leo, are you inclined to trust the folklore and rumors spread through the villages? About IC Waze deliberately infecting the local population to clear territories for the mine's expansion? We require hundreds of living, healthy working hands every day. Decimating the workforce is a direct threat to our financial balance and logistics. For business, it is senseless and unprofitable.”

She turned smoothly to Girard: “Doctor, show Gonzalez what we have here.”

Girard nodded silently. He walked over to the massive double-door freezer module, entered a six-digit code on the touch panel, and pulled the chrome handle. With a quiet hiss, a white, dense cloud of dry ice vapor poured into the opening, washing over them with the icy breath of absolute zero. From the frost-sparkling depths of the chamber, Girard extracted a meticulously polished steel container, set it on the table, and flipped open the hermetic lid. Inside, on a bed of porous black material, lay microscope slides with fixed smears, marked with dark red indices that looked like coagulated blood.

Using fine tweezers, the virologist took the outermost slide, placed it on the microscope stage with a jeweler's precision, and adjusted the bright LED backlight.

“Take a look at this,” he indicated.

Leo leaned in and pressed against the cold rubber eyecups of the oculars. An illuminated cellular field opened up before him like an alien universe. The structure of the erythrocytes immediately drew his attention with its monstrous, anomalous morphology. Instead of the usual smooth, biconcave discs, the cells had compacted, rigidly defined borders with incredibly high indices of light refraction – they glowed in the solution like broken glass. Inside the cytoplasm, ordered crystalloid inclusions could be seen, arranged in strict, mathematically perfect parallel chains. The cell

membranes remained completely intact and elastic, despite the obvious, aggressive presence of viral agents.

“This isn’t human blood,” Leo whispered, without tearing himself away from the optics, feeling a chill run down his spine.

“Absolutely correct,” Girard confirmed dryly. “These samples were taken from bats. Large specimens of the Pteropodidae family, the so-called hammer-headed fruit bats. But here, they don't live in trees. A colony of these creatures inhabits deep karst washouts and abandoned, water-filled geological shafts a few kilometers from here. The wingspan of certain individuals reaches a meter and a half... But these aren’t from there.”

“This looks very much like what we found in the blood of our patients,” Leo said slowly, straightening up and looking at the biologist. “In the surviving miner. In the stifling hospital tent. In the two girls in the village. The exact same geometrically regular structures. The same architecture of organization. But in the fruit bats, it’s denser. As if...”

“As if the process has gone much further,” Girard finished for him.

“The same crystalloid structures in the cytoplasm. But here, in the fruit bats, the protein organization looks not like a mutation, but like evolution – complete, well-formed.”

“Because in the bats, this process has undergone a full cycle of centuries-long adaptation,” Girard picked up, and for the first time, notes of professional excitement sounded in his voice.

He pulled out the lower section of the refrigerated incubator and extracted a transparent cylindrical container holding a fragment of dark, almost black muscle tissue, fixed in a yellowish formalin solution. Placing the plastic cylinder in front of Leo, Girard took a lightweight portable radiometer with a long immersion probe from a wall cabinet.

The device sprang to life. The quiet, sporadic crackle of clicks from the speaker instantly accelerated, merging into a continuous, menacing hum the moment Girard brought the probe close to the container with the flesh. The needle of the analog indicator jerked and confidently swung to the right, locking dead onto a mark catastrophically exceeding the standard natural background level.

“Five hundred and eighty microroentgens per hour,” Girard noted, turning off the device. The crackling cut off, leaving a ringing silence in its wake. “For brief contact, the value is not dangerous, but for living biological tissue – it is colossal, lethal. The tissues of these creatures contain stable, resilient isotopes of uranium-238 and thorium-232, permanently embedded directly into the mineral matrix of their bones and the cellular structures of their internal organs.”

He straightened his back and sighed heavily, tiredly.

“Imagine that this isotope is built into the DNA itself, into the very foundation of the cellular matrix. The cells are mercilessly bombarded by alpha particles from within every second of their existence. Any other living creature would burn alive from agonizing radiation sickness and multiple sarcomatous cancers in less than a month.”

“Full-fledged, deep bioaccumulation,” Leo murmured quietly, feeling the puzzle in his head beginning to assemble into an impossible picture.

“Yes,” Girard took off his glasses and began methodically wiping the lenses with a flawlessly clean handkerchief. “Generation after generation, the fruit bats inhabit the cavern vaults that intersect the local uranium veins. They drink groundwater heavily saturated with isotopes. They eat wild fruits growing on soils with off-the-charts radioactivity. Their bodies are miniature, living bioreactors. But they do not die. They do not get sick. They have completely adapted to death.”

Leo stared silently at the yellowish solution in which the piece of deadly flesh floated. Inside his head – quickly, feverishly, with terrifying clarity, the way a glass mosaic comes together – a chain was forming: fruit bats – subterranean radiation – anomalously light-refracting cells – protein mutations – virus – pulsating aorta – Mbul Benga – village girls – thick, dark blood – the second, alien rhythm in his own chest.

“Do you think the virus mutations are directly linked to the uranium?” he asked, breaking the silence of the laboratory.

Girard looked at Diana. Diana looked at Leo. In this closed triangle of gazes – one second, two, three – a mute, tense exchange of information took place, the true meaning of which Leo could not fully decipher, but his body deciphered the threat for him: a spasm of tension in his shoulders, a sudden dryness in his mouth, an accelerated, arrhythmic pulse.

Girard maintained an impenetrable silence. Diana took a slow step forward, her dark, bottomless eyes looking at Leo with cold, surgical, investigative attentiveness. She spoke first.

“Gonzalez,” her voice sounded even, calm, with that special, velvety yet unyielding hardness that belongs to people accustomed to making fateful decisions single-handedly. “Will you work with us? You possess invaluable clinical observations of the primary phase in humans under field conditions. We possess a powerful fundamental technological base on the primary source.”

Leo hesitated. In his chest, the second pulse continued to hammer out its otherworldly, stubborn, primordial rhythm, resonating with the scaldingly cold metal of the bracelet on his damp wrist.

“I agree,” he gave a curt nod.

Diana smoothly extended her hand to him. The handshake was brief, dry, and extremely precise, like the sealing of a business contract.

“Girard will grant you full, unrestricted access to our archival analysis records. We have no reason to hide the details from you.”

By nine in the evening, the equatorial night had covered Kato-Tombe like a dense, hermetic blanket woven from the suffocating vapors of the jungle and the smell of rotting earth. The halogen floodlights on the four corner towers snatched from the velvety darkness the taut steel rows of the chain-link fence and the meat-red clay between the residential containers, glistening with fallen dew.

Leo sat on the edge of the narrow, hard cot in his ascetic living module. The air conditioner beneath the ceiling panel emitted a steady, lulling, monotonous hum. Fanned out on the white plastic table before him lay printouts of the most complex genomic sequences provided by Girard, but his thoughts persistently circled back to that strange, physical sensation of a hydraulic shift that had arisen upon entering the concrete bunker.

A quiet, surprisingly neat knock on the metal door made him stand up. Diana stood on the threshold. In place of her austere silk blouse, she wore a simple, form-fitting purple t-shirt that accentuated even more the unnatural, almost porcelain pallor of her skin for these latitudes. In her right hand, she held a cardboard carrier with four stout glass bottles of strong Belgian lager, completely covered in large, dripping beads of icy condensation.

“May I?” she asked.

Leo silently stepped aside. Diana walked into the cramped module, gracefully leaned against the edge of the table, and used a small metal keychain bottle opener to uncap both bottles. She handed one of the frosted, bitingly cold glass cylinders to him.

“Hard liquor within the perimeter is under absolute, strict prohibition,” she said, taking a first small sip. “But an ice-cold beer in these equatorial latitudes is the only saving grace to maintain one's sanity and clarity of thought.”

Leo also took a sip. The tart, rich barley taste with a pronounced, astringent hoppy undertone pleasantly burned his parched throat, washing away the aftertaste of laboratory freon. Diana looked at the bracelet, and then unhurriedly raised her gaze to the unbuttoned collar of his faded camouflage shirt, where a silver cross gleamed dully on a sturdy chain.

“Are you Catholic, Leo?” she asked, giving a slight, almost imperceptible nod toward his chest.

Leo automatically touched his neck. Beneath the damp fabric of his shirt, on a thin chain, hung the cross – a small, time-darkened silver cross with a slightly worn crucifix. His father had given it to him at the age of eight, on the bright day of his First Communion, in the cool Boston parish of the Holy Cross. “Yes,” he answered curtly.

“I am not,” Diana took another sip, looking over the top of the bottle. “But I grew up in a country where sincere faith and deep-seated superstition are essentially the same thing. Romania, Doctor. There, in the Carpathians, they will tell you about ghosts and the restless dead with the same impenetrably serious face with which Londoners discuss the weather.”

Leo gave a slight, faint smile with only his lips. “You know, Leo, what we are currently seeing on those microscope slides is not new at all. It is simply deeply and securely forgotten,” she said, thoughtfully studying the droplets running down the bottle.

“Have you ever heard of Erzsébet Báthory?” Diana asked without altering her casual tone in the slightest – exactly the way one asks about a distant mutual acquaintance, rather than a bloody character from a medieval legend. “Countess Báthory. The ‘Blood Countess.’ Or perhaps, of Prince Vlad Țepeș? Dracula?”

“I’ve read about them. Who hasn’t.”

“Good. Then you know from popular literature that Báthory supposedly bathed in the hot blood of virgins to preserve her youth, and Țepeș impaled his enemies on stakes by the thousands. Commonplaces. Clichés from history textbooks. Cheap Hollywood.” She smiled slightly, and in that fleeting smile, there was a glimpse of a strange, warm memory of a completely different, long-vanished life.

“During my time as a young chemistry student at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, by a funny coincidence, I attended an evening elective on history. It was taught by a very remarkable man – Professor of Theology Stefan Radu. It sounds ridiculous – the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology – but with a fanatical gleam in his eyes, he lectured a course on the history of ancient Transylvanian cults.” Diana paused, shrugged her shoulders, and slowly rolled her head, as if stretching her neck.

“A crazy old man. Short, thin as a rail, with knotty fingers perpetually stained with blue ink. He wore the exact same worn suede jacket year-round, smelled of old paper, and constantly drank strong tea from a dented tin flask. Like whiskey.” She smiled, looking somewhere through the wall of the living module, over Leo's shoulder.

“This old man spent many years like a mole in the dusty archives of the diocesan administration in Sibiu and in the closed monastic libraries of Bistrița, studying original historical documents.”

Diana slowly turned the bottle in her hands, wiping away the beaded icy moisture with her finger, as if drawing something.

She took a sip and continued: “Radu paid close attention to those bureaucratic details that modern historians usually arrogantly ignore as insignificant. In the meticulous investigative materials on Báthory’s case, compiled by Palatine György Thurzó, as well as in the dry judicial records of Brașov regarding Țepeș's raids, the geography of the victims' origins was always clearly recorded. Báthory never, under

any circumstances, took girls from her own vast estates in Csejte. Maids were specially brought to her under the cover of night from specific, remote villages in the Mecsek mountains, located near the city of Pécs. And Vlad Ţepeș, orchestrating his demonstrative punitive campaigns, took captives exclusively from certain counties – predominantly from the mountainous Bihor region, from the western rocky foothills of the Apuseni."

"Other counties," Leo murmured, trying to grasp the cold logic of her story.

"Yes. Exactly. Other counties. A completely different soil, a fundamentally different hydrology. The professor argued, frothing at the mouth, that these historical figures did not act under the influence of blind sadistic madness. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were relying on a specific, lost layer of early medieval knowledge that was of a strictly alchemical nature."

She took another swallow of lager, savoring the bitterness of the hops.

"So he spoke of those alchemists," and, holding a theatrical pause, continued: "The soil of the Mecsek mountains and the rocky foothills of Bihor has long been known for anomalously high concentrations of rare mineral salts and heavy elements. In both places, uranium was mined for years..."

She fell silent again. Leo waited. Patiently, not daring to shatter the tension hanging in the room, thick as the Congolese night.

"The professor believed: both Báthory and Ţepeș purposefully sought the blood of people whose bodies had been shaped from early childhood under the conditions of this specific, harsh geochemical background. They firmly believed that the composition of such isotope-saturated blood was capable of physically altering the properties of human tissues – halting cellular decay, granting absolute immunity to disease and aging."

Diana finished her beer and set the empty glass bottle on the plastic table with a light clack.

"Radu was predictably deemed a lunatic heretic and forced into retirement. But here, in Africa, Brunet – our late, brilliant biologist – conducted the most precise spectral analysis of samples taken from bats discovered by chance during deep geological exploration, and..."

She paused briefly, looking Leo directly in the eyes with her unblinking dark gaze.

"According to microscopic bone slices and the isotopic spectrum of their tooth enamel, the biological age of individual bats from this colony, unknown to us is no less than eighty years. Against a normal physiological lifespan for these species of a maximum of fifteen to twenty years. Thirty at best... Their bodies have found a scientifically impossible way to use the destructive radiation wear of the strata for continuous, cyclical cellular regeneration."

Leo suddenly felt the coolness of the air-conditioned air turn icy, piercing him to the very bones.

“Even if Maurice conclusively established this fact… Where and how did he get infected? If he knew the draconian rules of working in a BSL-3 protocols by heart, he simply physically could not have made an accidental, fatal mistake.”

Diana calmly, with a kind of otherworldly grace, walked to the exit. Her narrow hand rested on the shiny door handle. “He observed the safety protocols flawlessly,” Diana cracked open the front door. The saturated night air – hot, damp, intoxicatingly smelling of rotting jungle foliage and raw earth – quickly flooded into the chilled room.

“But protocols, Leo,” she adjusted a strand of hair that had fallen on her face with a light motion, “protect exclusively against accidental infection. And Maurice – I am absolutely certain of this – did not get infected by accident. He was looking for something.” “What?” “I don't know. Perhaps, that very legendary source of eternal life,” she smiled into the darkness with the corners of her lips. “Or, at the very least, its biological prototype. The mechanism of absolute regeneration.”

The metal door quietly clicked shut behind her, leaving Leo alone with his unfinished beer – in a hollow silence broken only by the monotonous, indifferent noise of the air conditioner.

Chapter Eleven. The Shaft

The timid, pastel halftones of dawn in Kato-Tombe were interrupted every day by the crude, inevitable intrusion of the generator. The guttural, deep rumble of the diesel rose from behind the hill at exactly five-thirty, the way the chest of a sleeping giant rises with a whistle and a wheeze after a long, anxious pause. The air was immediately saturated with the bluish, oily smell of burnt diesel fuel and dust that had not yet dried after the night.

The camp woke up very quickly, without drawn-out transitions from sleep to wakefulness: with a dry electrical crackle, the deathly-white fluorescent light flashed in the residential modules, bolts clanked at the posts – a sharp, metallic sound that instinctively made one's jaw clench – and large, sharp gravel crunched beneath the heavy boots of the patrols. There was an almost religious discipline in this merciless mechanical rhythm – the way Benedictine monks rise for the first prayer, submitting not to the will of the merciful sun, but to a blind, inexorable rule.

Leo was not sleeping. He lay on the narrow cot, which smelled of someone else's sweat and disinfectant, with his hands behind his head, listening to how his own anatomy was inevitably turning into an alien, unmapped archipelago.

His internal clock had irrevocably shattered. His first heart – his own, familiar, trained by long years of study and stress – beat out an even, almost doomed rhythm: sixty-four beats per minute. But nearby, behind his sternum, in the stifling darkness of his body, a second one had awakened. It beat deeper, stronger, with a frightening,

cavernous insatiability, responding to approximately every third beat of the first. This was nothing like simple extrasystoles or neurotic arrhythmia. Leo, as a doctor, felt with chilling clarity how the alien, primal muscular pump was physically displacing the tissues of the mediastinum, how it roughly compressed his left lung, forcing the lower lobe to painfully collapse with every breath, and dully pressed against his diaphragm. Something was pulsating in his chest – it seemed that two autonomous, thinking organs were crowded there, desperately contesting each other for the meager free space among his aching ribs.

"*Am I infected? Where?"* the thought ricocheted erratically, in time with the alien pulse. "*In the stifling tent? In the sterile laboratory when my hand flinched? Or…"*

A knock at the door – short, firm, double.

Diana Pătrașcu stood on the threshold, her body blocking the timid morning draft. She wore a dark blue cotton shirt with a stiff collar, tucked into gray cargo pants, and sturdy hiking boots covered with a thin layer of rusty-red dust. In her left hand, she held a lightweight leather case, its handle gleaming from the frequent touch of fingers, and in her right – two scratched construction helmets, one yellow and one white, with frayed chin straps.

Behind her back, exactly two steps away, stood two guards. One was a lanky Congolese in faded camouflage with an Israeli Emtan on a shoulder sling; he smelled of cheap tobacco and gun oil. The second was white, stocky, with a poorly shaved skull and round, watery eyes that reflected the gray morning sky. His gaze held neither hostility, nor interest, nor even a shadow of humanity – only a biomechanical fixation on its target, frighteningly reminiscent of a blind optical sensor at work.

"Good morning, Gonzalez. Put on your boots. I will show you where Brunet worked."

Dialogues with her always resembled the exchange of encrypted messages – minimum intonation, maximum functionality.

They walked toward the far edge of the camp. The walk took about twenty minutes of viscous, silent pacing. At first, the wooden decking laid between the headquarters and the equipment hangars resonated dully, with a springy give beneath their feet, but as they approached the northern side of the camp, the wood gave way to packed red clay, slippery from the morning dew, then to jagged gravel that scratched at their soles, and finally to scorched earth covered in deep, wrinkled cracks. Here, the PMC camp reached the very edge of an old, exhausted quarry, yawning like a wound on the body of the savanna.

The perimeter in this sector looked different. Instead of a high steel fence with a concrete base, there was only a double row of barbed wire, carelessly stretched over darkened wooden posts that were slimy with dampness. The old razor wire sagged in rusty, toothless loops. On the lopsided gate hung a peeling iron sign with a

faded yellow-and-black radiation hazard trefoil. The paint had blistered over the inscription:

DANGER

NE PAS ENTRER

NSAMBU TE

Beyond the wire, literally five meters from the edge of a dizzying, crumbling precipice, a shack clung right up against a gentle hill that disappeared into thick undergrowth. Single-story, built of earthy, porous, colonial-era brick and roofed with sheets of corrugated iron hopelessly rusted brown from corrosion. One small window was boarded up tight with swollen plywood. From the outside, no thick power cables or water pipes stretched to the shack. More than anything, it resembled a shed forgotten by God and men, used for storing pickaxes and deteriorated explosives – an echo of the cruel times of the Belgian Congo.

“You will stay here,” Diana commanded the guards.

The soldiers silently took up positions on either side of the gate. The bald one didn’t even twitch a muscle on his face – he continued to scan the wasteland behind them with a glassy stare, as if expecting a threat from the red earth itself, rather than from people.

Diana unlocked a massive padlock with a key from a small ring; the metal clanked dryly, and she pushed the metal door inward.

Inside the shack, there were no windows or air conditioners, and the space immediately pressed down on their shoulders with its full mass. The air here was suffocating, unbearably damp and stale, settling in the mouth with a rancid taste. It smelled of the heated roof and a characteristic bouquet that ate into the pores, which Leo recognized instantly, with a nose-stinging sharpness: formalin, caustic preservative solutions, phenol, and a barely perceptible, acidic, throat-scratching hint of lysing agents. It was the concentrated smell of a field biological laboratory, multiplied by the spirit of an old crypt.

The room was dimly lit by a few fluorescent lamps powered by a humming battery pack in the corner. On steel tables that chilled the skin, microscopes, a portable centrifuge, containers with alarming biohazard markings, and a laptop connected to an uninterruptible power supply stood in neat, pedantic rows. On the shelves along the walls, like a hideous cabinet of curiosities, glass jars lined up, containing samples of whitish tissues floating in a cloudy, yellowish solution.

“Maurice preferred to work here,” Diana said, setting her case on the edge of the table. Her voice sounded muffled. “Far from Girard’s bunker with its sterile bureaucracy. It’s quiet here. And it was here that he discovered the primary vector. The bats weren't found in the main cave system, but right here.”

She took out a portable, palm-sized Geiger counter in a rubberized casing, slipped it into her pocket, and walked over to the far wall of the shack. There, between two lopsided shelving units, hung a thick canvas tarp – dirty green, dusty, securely fastened to rusty iron hooks. Diana grabbed the rough edge and pulled it aside with a sharp, eardrum-scratching rustle.

Behind the canopy, a maw opened up.

It was neither a door nor a neatly prepared technological passage. A rough, semicircular adit went straight into the primordial darkness of the hill. The walls were carelessly reinforced with sparse, rotten wooden supports, blackened by time and covered with a whitish, fuzzy layer of toxic mold. A completely different air exhaled from the depths – icy, damp, cellar-like. Mixed within it was the sharp, ammoniacal taste of guano and an undertone of something that had fermented long ago, something sweet and putrid. And for some reason – Leo swallowed viscous saliva – cutting through this stench clearly and illogically was the faintly perceptible aroma of church incense and intoxicating, blooming gardenia.

“Take this,” Diana handed him a helmet and a headlamp. The plastic was unpleasantly cold. “And watch your step.”

Leo put on the helmet – the stiff strap dug into his chin – and adjusted the lamp. The narrow, deathly-white LED beam sliced through the thick gloom, illuminating the uneven, moisture-seeping vault of the tunnel.

“Did the Americans dig this? In the forties?” he asked. His own voice seemed alien to him amidst this rough stonework and the jagged marks on the stone.

“No,” Diana clicked her headlamp on. “The Americans used drilling rigs and reinforced their shafts with concrete. This is a manual excavation. The marks of chisels, pickaxes, and manual drilling tools. Copper ores were mined here long before the Belgians arrived. This excavation was made decades earlier. Or perhaps, centuries.”

She stepped over the slippery threshold of the adit and slowly turned around: “And one more thing, Gonzalez... Be careful. If they are in there right now, don’t frighten them.”

Leo looked at her questioningly, feeling a sticky chill crawl down his spine.

“The bats,” Diana explained dispassionately. “Sometimes they appear in this part of the shaft. The colony is unstable. Let's go.”

Leo stepped over the rotted wooden timber of the threshold – and in that very second, his body responded to the step with a monstrous, destructive physiological rebellion.

It didn’t start in his chest. His right hand, where the old copper bracelet lay tightly, suddenly flared with an icy burn. The metal on his wrist didn’t just turn cold –

it began to vibrate, emitting a physically barely perceptible tremor, biting into his skin; it seemed as if it had entered a damaging resonance with an invisible, ancient frequency coming from the very bowels of the earth.

Then, a tight wave struck his chest.

Leo staggered and, to keep from falling, pressed his bare palm against the slimy wall seeping with icy mucus. His own heart stumbled, pitifully froze for a long, terrifying pause, while that second one, formed inside, pushed with such bestial force that it took his breath away. It wasn't a normal pulse – it was an oppressive, inescapable hydraulic blow. Leo clearly, with a nauseating tangibility, felt how under his skin, along his ribs and on his neck, small, hard nodules, like lead shot, were rapidly emerging. The subdermal rash swelled instantly, pulling the skin tight, turning the subcutaneous tissue into a hot, lumpy surface. A roar filled his ears, as if a massive dam had collapsed nearby, and a persistent, astringent, nauseating taste of oxidized copper and rusty iron spread in his mouth.

His internal organs crumpled, submissively making room for the growing impulse. It was pure horror, paralyzing in its primitivism – the horror of flesh colliding with the triumph of an alien neoplasm that heartlessly used his own circulatory system as a perfect nutrient broth.

"Stop, Gonzalez. Look..."

Diana's voice sounded hollow, but it tore through the growing hum in his ears. The beam of her headlamp lowered to the floor.

Leo forced himself to straighten up, tearing his palm away from the stone. He breathed heavily, raggedly, drawing the icy air in through his mouth. On the uneven stone floor of the shaft, in a small natural depression between two outcroppings of rock, pooled a liquid.

Thick. Oily. Crimson. Opaque. It lazily seeped from a barely noticeable hairline crack deep in the wall, flowing down in small, sticky drops. In the cold light of the LED lamps, this substance shone brightly, with a deep, almost hypnotic hue that was impossible to confuse with anything else.

"Is that blood?" Leo said, barely above a whisper. His voice sounded hoarse, as if he were speaking from under several meters of water.

"No," Diana crouched down, her face in the light of the headlamp looking as if carved from marble. She stopped her hand an inch from the puddle, without touching it. "When we first saw it, we thought the same. But it is not a biological fluid. It is an aqueous solution with an extremely high concentration of mercury sulfide and iron oxides. In essence – a suspension of liquid cinnabar. But with an anomalous, impossible chemical structure."

She pulled the dosimeter from her side pocket and extended a thin metal probe. As soon as the tip approached within a couple of centimeters of the shining,

amalgam surface, the device erupted in a rapid, hysterical crackle that merged into a single piercing whistle.

On the digital display, red numbers raced with lightning speed, madly.

“Radioactive,” Diana said evenly, as if reading a routine laboratory report, her voice cutting through the crackle of the device. “A consistent spectrum. Uranium-238, thorium, traces of radium isotopes. Almost the exact same profile we invariably find in the tissues of the affected specimens.”

Leo stared silently at the crimson puddle, feeling cold drops of sweat rolling down his face. The mineral blood of the earth. Radioactive cinnabar, flowing out of the Precambrian monolith like from a severed artery. In his chest, the second heart gave another unhurried, elastic thud, as if entering into an intelligent dialogue with the panicked crackle of the Geiger counter.

And then, from the endless depths of the shaft, came a sound.

It wasn't the scraping of crumbling stone or the rustle of sliding earth. It was a breath in.

Low, drawn-out, unbearably deep, with a quiet, guttural suction of frigid air, as if somewhere in there, far beyond the bend, in the absolute, untouched darkness, the giant, multi-meter lungs of a living continent were leisurely expanding.

Inhale... a long, tense, frozen pause, during which time seemed to stand still in all of Katanga... and an exhale. The exhale sounded shorter, with a slight whistling wheeze, frighteningly reminiscent of the movement of stale air through a narrow organic valve.

“What is that?” Leo whispered, physically feeling the hairs on his forearms stand on end.

Diana didn’t flinch and didn’t turn her headlamp toward the depths of the tunnel. She kept the beam on the shining floor.

“We don’t know,” she replied in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone. “Barometric fluctuations in vast karst voids. Deep ground shifts. The movement of subterranean gases. The displacement of groundwater. The sound appears periodically. Sometimes it repeats with the precision of a metronome every five minutes; sometimes the shaft lies muted for weeks. Girard ran a spectral analysis – they are low-frequency acoustic waves, but their source is definitely located far beyond the cave-in.”

And right then, following the fading exhale, movement came from the darkness.

At first – a light rustle, barely perceptible to the ear, of a dry leather fan being stretched. Then the merciless beam of the headlamp snatched dark, swift shadows from beneath the high, moisture-seeping vault.

They didn’t fly the way ordinary small bats fly, darting around in a panic with chaotic, ragged fluttering. They glided. They were large hammer-headed fruit bats. The wingspan of their dark, velvety-leathery wings exceeded a meter. Hideous, absurdly elongated muzzles with corpse-gray, flared nostrils flashed for a fraction of a second in the beam of light. Their eyes reflected the diode lamps as two pairs of bright, ruby, almost sentient points. Without a single squeak, without the slightest sound except the dry rustle of the musty air being sliced, the three enormous specimens described a perfectly smooth arc right under the ceiling of the shaft and silently vanished back into the thick, incense-smelling darkness.

It seemed to Leo that for one unbearable second, the rhythm of their massive wings perfectly matched the rhythm of his awakened second heart: *beat – flap – beat – flap*.

“It’s time to go,” Diana touched his elbow. Her strong fingers squeezed his sleeve coldly and adamantly. “We shouldn’t disturb them. They come and they go.”

They returned to the shack. Diana lowered the rough, dust-smelling canvas tarp and carefully secured it on the iron hooks, cutting off the gloom. The outside world with its suffocating, sterile smell of formalin and the businesslike noise of the diesel behind the thin wall seemed almost illusory to Leo, a cardboard set piece. He sank powerlessly onto a hard wooden stool by the table and stared at his lowered hands. His fingers were trembling finely, treacherously.

Diana walked over to the portable refrigerator humming in the corner, clicked the latches, and took out a rack holding several glass test tubes. Inside splashed a cloudy solution, slightly opalescent in the light.

“We keep these samples here,” she said, slowly turning the test tube so the light refracted in the liquid. “Maurice secretly transferred them from the main bunker. In the central lab, Girard works under sterile conditions with a stable, preserved strain. But the virus that is isolated here... it behaves differently. It is constantly, feverishly mutating. It is incredibly aggressive and frighteningly unstable.”

“Is it... is it reacting to what’s happening in the shaft?” Leo asked, wiping sticky, salty sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The second heartbeat in his chest was gradually slowing down, reluctantly quieting, but leaving behind a sensation of deep, draining muscular fatigue.

“To the environment,” Diana corrected dryly. “To the background radiation, to the invisible mercury vapors, to the very composition of that dark-red liquid. The shaft is completely caved in about thirty meters from here. There's a solid, compacted collapse of rock. Two years ago, when we first arrived at this site, we decided to clear a passage. We brought in four local workers from the mine. Experienced, tough guys, used to working with this kind of soil in the dark.”

Diana leaned against the cold edge of the metal table, crossing her arms over her chest. The dim light of the lamp reflected in her eyes.

“They dug for several days, without straightening their backs, until they punched a small, narrow breach in the cave-in. And from there, this liquid gushed out. The very same crimson one. It flowed right under their feet, flooding their boots, dripping onto their helmets. And right behind it, like spilling from a torn sack, a swarm of those fruit bats flew out of the breach.”

“And the workers?”

“You should have seen their faces, Gonzalez. There was nothing human left in them. They dropped their tools into that radioactive mud. The eldest of them, Nkembo, I think his name was, broke into a scream, as if he had seen hell yawning wide open before him. They ran from the shack, stumbling, crushing each other in the narrow doorway in blind panic. In their dialect, they wailed the exact same phrase, over and over. Our translator later turned pale and told us it meant: ‘It is a curse! The earth is bleeding! He must not be disturbed!’”

“Did you try to bring them back?”

“They quit that same evening,” her voice did not waver. “They didn’t take their final pay, didn’t drop by the cramped dorms for their personal belongings. They simply picked up and walked away on foot through the night jungle toward Nzinga. We never saw them again.”

“And the cave-in was left untouched?”

“Yes. We didn’t proceed. The liquid appears and disappears according to its own schedule, incomprehensible to us. We found no reservoir, we found no logical source. The geologists talk smartly about hydrothermal discharge from deep horizons, but it seems this chemical composition has no parallel on the planet. And the main thing is – the sequence is always, rigorously maintained: first the bloody water appears, and only after that, as if on command, the bats arrive.”

“Do they drink it?” Leo asked quietly. Diana looked at him with a long gaze, tinged with noticeable respect.

“Maurice concluded that this is exactly what happens. He sometimes spent the night here, on this folding cot. He maniacally watched them through an infrared camera for hours. But they don’t just drink this liquid, Gonzalez. He believed it is integrated into their very biology. Their light bones, their blood, their tissue enzymes have been reconfigured for uranium and heavy mercury. They are a living, flying reservoir for this virus. And Maurice firmly believed that beyond the cave-in, there is a massive natural grotto. The primary nidus. The place where all this originates.”

“And did he find a way through to it?”

“All we know is that he got infected and died an agonizing death, Leo. But if he did manage to find a way past the collapse or penetrate deeper – he took that secret with him.”

Leo slowly, overcoming a nervous cramp in his legs, rose from the stool. He walked over to the canvas tarp and touched the dry, dusty fabric that scratched at his fingers. Behind it, hiding its secrets, the ancient mountain stood silent, while deep within it, something breathed – faintly, but stubbornly and heavily. Here, in this isolated, forgotten shack on the very edge of the crumbling precipice, there were no all-seeing cameras belonging to Girard. There was no reassuring sterile control. There was only the dry, cruel, tangible reality of a mutating pathogen and radiating traces of uranium... in an absolute blind spot.

“Can I work here?” Leo turned back to Diana, his voice gaining strength. “I need full access to these unstable samples and to your biologist’s personal materials.”

Diana was silent for several long seconds, carefully examining his face – unnaturally pale, covered in beads of cold sweat, with deep shadows settled beneath his eye sockets.

“Alright,” she finally said with a barely noticeable exhale. “The tools, the microscope optics, and all the samples are at your full disposal. I will leave orders for duplicates of Brunet’s handwritten work logs to be brought here for you.”

“And it would be preferable to have a fan brought in, or, if you have one, a portable air conditioner.”

“We’ll do that. There’s enough electricity here.”

She walked to the exit and grabbed the cold iron handle.

“Don't hold it against me, Leo,” Diana gave a slight smile – restrained, subtle, with a barely perceptible, bitter shadow of irony. “Outside the fence, by the creaky gate, our security will always be stationed. And this is not a distrust of your professional intentions. It is the only guarantee that you won’t go past the cave-in alone, yielding to the call of the search. Maurice also believed that he was fully, completely in control of the situation.”

The door of the shack opened with a drawn-out creak. The scorching, blinding morning light of Katanga struck Leo's face with full force, bringing with it the stifling heat of the savanna. And at that very moment, he felt with crystal clarity how the two hearts in his chest – his own, vulnerable, human one, and the second, uninvited, commanding one, formed in the depths of aching tissues – finally fell into a single, confident, perfect synchronous beat.

Beat. Pause. Beat. Like inescapable footsteps. Like the dull strikes of a subterranean hammer on an anvil. Like a resonant pulse deep within the collapsed shaft. Like Imani’s hot, moist, vibrating whisper, burning his ear in the living, pulsating darkness.

Chapter Twelve. The Exodus

If the scorching air of Kato-Tombe possessed a larynx and a stomach, this morning it would have fed on scents that in any other, normal place would have seemed utterly incompatible, inducing nausea: the foul, acrid-sweat-dripping rubber of generator belts, the sharp, palate-scratching soot of diesel, the warm, yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread from the camp kitchen, and a subtle, barely perceptible note of burnt machine oil settling on the tongue as a viscous, slimy film.

Three days had passed since Leo first descended into the inconspicuous shack on the very edge of the crumbling precipice. Three days that had merged into a single continuous, grueling procedure: the monotonous, eye-straining work at the microscope, the short, ragged sleep drenched in sticky sweat, and the slow, frighteningly palpable physical ingrowth into the alien anatomy of his own rapidly changing body.

Leo sat under the stretched canvas awning of the mess hall, which offered salvation from the blinding sun. Before him, in a chipped mug, strong Ethiopian coffee was cooling – incredibly dark, tart, smelling of burnt wood and leaving cloudy, muddy-brown streaks on the white walls of the ceramic. On the polished wooden table, worn smooth by the elbows of mercenaries, lay a small stack of papers: the dense handwritten diaries of Maurice Brunet, DNA sequencing graphs, and rustling printouts of chemical tables detailing isotopic compositions.

But today Leo was in no hurry. He sat, leaning back languidly against the hard backrest of the wooden bench, observing and absorbing reality.

His slightly inflamed eyes glided over the inscribed sheets, tenaciously registering the small details of camp life that went unnoticed at a first, superficial glance. Outwardly, Kato-Tombe functioned like a perfect Swiss watch. The PMC mercenaries lazily exchanged short, guttural phrases in Lingala and Romanian, smoked strong unfiltered cigarettes, spitting into the ochre dust, and methodically, with a metallic clatter, cleaned their disassembled carbines. But behind this familiar military routine, Leo could already unerringly divine another, hidden, colossal mechanism.

The morning before, during a similarly drawn-out, slow breakfast, Leo had noticed something important. A small, heavily battered canvas-topped truck – a Japanese Isuzu Elf with a dented, dirty roof and a bed thickly spattered with red clay – had rolled onto the base territory through the south gate, swaying heavily on its springs. The driver – a young Congolese man in dusty goggles that hid his eyes – steered the puffing vehicle not toward the food depot, but toward a remote, windowless hangar with an inconspicuous “IC Waze” sign.

Before raising the rattling aluminum roller shutters, two guards dropped the truck's tailgate for a routine inspection. In that brief window of time, Leo, standing a

couple of dozen meters away with a hot cup of Robusta in his hands, managed to examine the contents through the morning haze.

Inside the truck bed, in tight, neat rows, stood blue plastic barrels – standard two-hundred-liter drums with removable lids tightly secured by massive steel locking rings.

His professional experience told Leo: such specific containers are not used to transport diesel, or drinking water, or sterile PCR reagents. These barrels are universally used at large hydrometallurgical plants to transport granular ion-exchange resins – powerful sorbents applied in the industrial extraction of heavy metals from aggressive solutions.

And as the truck, growling with the strain, slowly pulled into the dense penumbra of the hangar, Leo managed to make out, deep within the massive space, sheets of thick, high-density black polyethylene rolled into long cylinders – standard waterproofing liners for heap leaching – as well as steel pumping stations, reeking of factory grease, lined up along the concrete base of the wall.

This was no secret biological research base, nor a banal site for illegal copper mining. It was the foundation for a fully-fledged, jungle-concealed technological hub for a liquid extraction process.

Diana Pătrașcu came out personally to receive this cargo. She stood at the foot of the concrete ramp in a flawless, crisp white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, confidently holding a tablet in her hands, speaking to the driver about something in a harsh, utterly emotionless manner. At that moment, her face, illuminated by the slanting rays, seemed carved from cold gray granite.

But today, everything around looked as if yesterday's truck with the blue barrels simply had not existed. The diesel hummed on the same monotonous note. The tropical sun inexorably ate into the wooden decking, drawing the smell of old resin from it.

The muffled creak of wood tore Leo from his memories. Dragoș Horia settled heavily onto the bench opposite him. The former commando arrived without food, without his constant coffee, without his usual retinue. He just sat down, calmly placing his massive hands with battered, whitened knuckles, covered in thick reddish hair, on the faded table surface scarred by knives. He smelled of good, tart tobacco, alkaline soap, and for some reason – sharply and alarmingly – of cold weapon metal.

"How is your research progressing, Doctor?" Dragoș's voice sounded hollow and colorless, as if passing through a thick layer of pressed felt. His barely visible eyes from beneath the tinted glasses slid with absolute indifference over the complex printouts on the table.

Leo slowly raised his heavy eyelids and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingertips. His face – swollen, with bluish, sickly hollows beneath his eye sockets and

a cracked, crusted scab on his lips – required no special acting. He truly looked like a man gradually descending into the abyss of total physical exhaustion.

“Poorly,” Leo admitted, staring straight ahead. He paused for a long time, cleared his parched throat with difficulty, and allowed his voice to sound as sincere and dry as possible. “I... I am at an absolute dead end, Dragoș.”

“In what sense?” Horia didn’t even stir; not a single muscle on his face twitched.

“There has to be at least some logic... in the mutations,” Leo tapped the tip of his fingernail against a winding sequencing graph in irritation. “Any pathogen, even the most aggressive and wild, like the Ebola or Marburg virus, obeys the ironclad laws of evolutionary pressure. There is always a vector of adaptation, a reaction to the host's immune response. But here... here the mutational drift looks absolutely chaotic. Somehow insane. Or...” Leo hesitated, pretending to agonizingly search for the right word, “or it’s not adapting to the host organism at all. But to some external, incredibly powerful physical factor that we do not see... or do not notice under laboratory conditions. One gets the persistent impression that the virus is behaving entirely arbitrarily, reacting to the ebbs and flows of an invisible ocean.”

Dragoș took off his glasses and stared at the papers for a long time without blinking. His gaze wasn’t reading the Latin letters and numbers – rather, he was weighing the very density of the text on the page, assessing the threat level.

“I hope you find it. The sequence,” he finally said, very calmly. But the conversation, swaying, slowly slid toward an oppressive silence. “We all very much hope for it, Gonzalez. Time is not playing on our side. It’s not playing on anyone's side here at all.”

Leo leaned forward, resting his elbows heavily on the table, and looked the mercenary right in his faded eyes, trying to pierce this armor: “IC Waze... it's just a paper license for cover, isn't it? You're not just digging for rare-earth metals here, are you?”

Horia didn’t look away. But the expected threat didn't flare up in his narrowed pupils – instead, at the very bottom, an entirely different emotion surfaced: the old, frozen, existential fatigue of a man who has too long and too blindly followed others' orders in a place where those orders have long since lost all meaning.

“You know, Gonzalez...” Dragoș paused. He looked closely at his thick, calloused fingers, then unhurriedly shifted his gaze to the scorching edges of the camp perimeter. “Sometimes it seems to me... we dug too deep into this cursed earth. Much deeper than necessary. And we woke up what was sleeping.”

He straightened up abruptly, in a military fashion, cutting off the nascent frankness in a single motion, and gave a brief nod toward the two armed guards patiently shifting from one foot to the other at the mess hall gate.

“Your boys have been waiting for you. Go to the shack, Doctor. Get to work.”

The shack on the edge of the precipice met Leo with a stifling, stagnant, gelatinous heat. The heavy lock clanked, the metal door shut with a dull thud behind his back, instantly cutting off the saving noise of the diesels and the guttural shouts of the mercenaries. He was left alone in this crypt.

Inside, there was a thick smell of formalin, phenol, and raw, ancient loam. Leo flicked the toggle switch, turning on the fluorescent lamps. Their faded, sickly flickering light flooded the cold steel tables, the chrome-plated centrifuge, and the racks holding dozens of test tubes. The fan quickly picked up speed.

Leo sat down heavily on the creaking wooden stool. His right hand unexpectedly responded with a sharp bout of icy cramp – the old copper bracelet on his wrist tightened painfully, seeming to shrink in size, forcing the blue vein under his skin to twitch convulsively. In his chest, strictly behind the aching sternum, the second heart gave a dull, moist, alien thud. Leo instinctively pressed his palm to his ribs: through the fabric of his shirt, under his fingers, he could clearly feel hard, rolling nodules that felt like large lead shot – swollen subdermal lymph nodes, predatorily sprouting along his blood vessels.

He pulled a portable dosimeter from his canvas bag, slid out the thin steel needle of the sensor with a dry click, and turned on the device.

The cramped space of the shack immediately filled with a sparse but strong, frightening crackle.

Leo began methodically moving around the tables, checking every sample: Sample No. 1 (bat blood plasma): 420 μR/h. Elevated. Sample No. 4 (the crimson liquid seeping from the shaft): 610 μR/h. Dozens of times above normal. A deadly, radiating cocktail.

He walked over to the far metal shelving unit, where Maurice’s personal archive lay in an airtight, impact-resistant plastic case – several glass microscope slides with dried, darkened tissue smears made before his death.

Leo brought the Geiger counter’s probe to glass slide No. 3. The device didn't just crackle – it immediately erupted into a continuous, hysterical, ear-piercing whistle. The red numbers on the digital display flickered and flashed out a monstrous value: 740 μR/h.

Leo froze, feeling a trickle of icy sweat run down his spine. Maurice’s dry blood smear was more radioactive than the mineral, poisoned exudate from the underground shaft itself. It seemed the French biologist hadn't simply been infected by a viral strain – his organic matrix in life had tried to greedily absorb and accumulate the isotopes of uranium and thorium, restructuring its very cellular structure for the deadly radiation. Like the bats. Maurice had turned into a living, pulsating reactor.

Suddenly, behind Leo's back, there was a sound.

It wasn't a demanding knock at the door. The inner lock didn’t even clack. The massive door of the shack opened inward unusually softly, without a single creak, as if by itself, letting in a streak of scorching light.

Leo whirled around abruptly, reflexively clenching a long steel forceps for gripping biological tissues in his fist until his knuckles turned white – a pitiful but solitary weapon.

On the threshold stood Ilunga.

His once-white undershirt was soaked through with rusty mud and caked lumps of sweat; an AK-47, darkened by time and blood, with a deeply scratched wooden stock, hung on his shoulder. Behind him, in the wavering penumbra of the opening, hovered two more figures – wiry Congolese men, taut as strings, with colored bandanas on their heads and assault rifles at the ready.

“Quiet, Doctor,” Ilunga said softly, raising an open palm with a pink underside. His voice was trembling, ragged, full of adrenaline, as if from a long, exhausting run.

“I’m here for you. Imani sent me. We are leaving. Now.”

Leo stood like a stone statue, not lowering the clenched forceps. A hot wave of adrenaline rushed swiftly through his body, instantly drowning out the internal muscle ache and nausea.

“Imani?” “Yes.” “And the guards…” Leo nodded toward the open door.

“Lying by the gate,” Ilunga cut him off, quickly and angrily. “Hogtied like chickens. We have five minutes at most before the patrol on the tower notices they aren't moving. Drop everything, let's go!”

Leo shifted his feverish gaze from Ilunga’s tense face to the steel tables. To the open laptop with its priceless, decoded sequences. To the containers with the deadly, unstable strain. To Maurice’s handwritten diaries, holding the secret.

“No,” Leo countered harshly, indisputably, and steel cut through his voice. “We have to take everything we can. Just don't open the containers!… Come on, help me!”

Ilunga swore quietly, filthily through his teeth in French, but immediately, realizing that arguing was useless, waved his hand to his fighters: “Quickly! Shove everything into boxes!”

They began to feverishly clear the tables, sweeping everything in their path. With professional, cold-blooded precision, Leo shoved racks of mutated blood sera samples, storage flash drives, microscope slides carefully wrapped in styrofoam, and the laptop, having ripped out the cords, into his spacious canvas duffel bag. A partisan with a terrible, lumpy scar on his cheek hoisted a cardboard box of reagents and a portable sequencer onto his shoulder.

And at that very moment, the ground beneath their feet gave a drawn-out, resonant shudder.

It was no ordinary seismic tremor. From behind the dirty-green canvas tarp that tightly covered the passage to the old shaft, a thin, piercing infrasonic hum erupted. It passed through the stone floor, through the thick soles of their boots, striking with an abrasive pain straight into their shin bones, making their teeth vibrate.

In Leo's chest, the second heart answered with an instantaneous, wild, joyful rebellion. It struck with monstrous hydraulic force, painfully compressing his left lung and conjuring a persistent, nauseating taste of oxidized copper in his throat. The warm bracelet grew searing hot to the point of physical pain, burning his skin.

Snap!

The dusty canvas tarp trembled, drew taut as if hit by a blast wave, and burst along its center seam with a crack, as if cleaved by the swing of an invisible giant blade.

From the black maw of the shaft, smelling thickly of old ammonia, damp matted fur, and something sickeningly sour, a solid living mass poured out.

Huge hammer-headed bats – with a span of leathery, velvet wings over a meter wide – burst into the shack with a deafening rustle. Blinded by the flickering fluorescent light, they darted beneath the corrugated iron ceiling with a dull, continuous flapping. Massive wings knocked down suspended lamps, shattered glass flasks off the shelving units, showering the floor with sparkling shards. The room quickly filled with a piercing, eardrum-shredding ultrasonic squeal.

One of the creatures, whistling as it sliced the air, plummeted straight onto the central metal table, just half a meter from Leo's face. Its hideous, elongated muzzle with a blunt, leathery, hammer-like growth twitched nervously; its huge gray nostrils flared, drawing in the air – his scent – and its small, whitish, completely blind eyes flared in the light of the fallen lamp with a murky, infernal violet fire. The bat forcefully dug its long, curved claws into the wooden tabletop, emitting a hissing, grating, hate-filled sound.

"Run! Outside!" Ilunga screamed in a voice not his own, fighting off a huge shadow flying past with the butt of his rifle.

They sprang out of the shack, slamming the metal door shut with a crash and sliding the bolt home. From inside, the clinking of shattering laboratory glass, the heavy thuds of leathery wings against the walls, and the inhuman, vibrating squeaking continued to emanate.

In front of the gate, faces fearfully buried in the gray-brown dust, lay two camp guards face down. Their hands were dead-tied behind their backs with white plastic zip ties. The black Israeli Emtan MZ-4Ps lay forlornly in the parched, scorched grass by a wooden post.

"To the cliff! Hurry!" Ilunga jabbed his hot barrel toward a narrow, crumbling goat trail that immediately wound along the wall of the exhausted quarry.

Leo, operating on pure automatism, dropped to one knee without breaking stride. Losing not a second, he snatched both heavy carbines from the dust, slung the stiff straps over his shoulder right on top of his stuffed duffel, and with a sharp motion, tore a tactical vest with four full spare magazines off the back of a groaning mercenary.

Ilunga froze for a second, staring at the doctor in astonishment. Deep, unfeigned surprise flashed in his widened eyes – a strictly civilian doctor, a scientist, was handling combat weapons with that cold, practiced, mechanical dexterity that only comes from blood and experience.

“Go,” Leo said firmly, adjusting a rifle strap digging into his shoulder.

They ran along the trail. On the right, literally half a meter from their slipping boots, the hundred-meter sheer, dizzying wall of the quarry plunged downwards; at the very bottom, the dead skeletons of old Belgian excavators were rusting away. The red clay crumbled treacherously beneath their feet, small stones flying into the terrifying void with a papery rustle.

Behind them, from the direction of the camp's central square, they could already hear Dragoș’s hoarse, torn shout, the sharp pops of diesel engines starting, and the crackle of two-way radios coming to life. The patrols had noticed the tied-up guards. The clock was ticking down to minutes.

“Run!” Ilunga was the first to begin the descent down the narrow, crumbling ledge, holding tightly to the old safety rope stretched along the rock face.

Leo followed, trying not to look down. His own heart was beating a rapid, ragged, panicked pulse, but the other, the second one that had formed inside, hammered out an even, incredibly powerful, almost mechanical beat. It tirelessly, rhythmically pumped his leg muscles with additional, synthetic adrenaline, burning away the lactic acid and providing a fierce, primal, dense endurance.

They passed the most dangerous section of the ledge, jumped down onto solid ground, and disappeared into the thick, steaming shrubbery at the foot of the hill.

After two hundred meters of an exhausting run through the damp, suffocating, rot-smelling forest, where vines and thorny branches whipped their faces to the point of bleeding, they popped out onto an abandoned dirt track overgrown with elephant grass. Beneath the gigantic crowns of two sprawling ficus trees stood two old, mud-caked Toyota Hilux pickups with dented sides and engines purring dully at idle.

Imani was sitting in the bed of the first pickup.

She was wearing a light-colored dress, now completely covered in splatters of brick-red mud. Her short black hair was ruffled by the hot wind. When her anxious gaze fell upon Leo – breathing heavily, emerging from the thicket with a duffel full of deadly samples and two assault rifles on his shoulder – her bitten lips twitched in a short, ragged gasp of relief.

Leo met her eyes.

In that very second, his second heart in his chest froze for one agonizing moment – and then gave a single incredibly powerful, deep, absolutely synchronous beat alongside the first. The rhythms perfectly aligned. The two organs, human and alien, fell into a single, crushing measure. The icy metal of the old bracelet on his wrist instantly filled with a dense, elastic, pulsating warmth.

“Get in!” Ilunga barked, jumping behind the wheel and slamming it into gear.

Leo, tossing in the clanking carbines, vaulted over the iron side of the pickup. Behind him, the partisans with the sacks and rescued boxes jumped heavily into the bed. The vehicles roared off, crushing bushes with a crunch and digging their bald tires into the deep, water-filled clay ruts.

The pickups tore through the jungle, bouncing harshly over tree roots that protruded like veins. Leo sat on the ribbed metal floor of the bed, clutching the precious duffel tightly to himself and refusing to let the rifles out of his hands. Imani sat down softly beside him, shoulder to shoulder. She did not utter a single word, but her thin, cool fingers, when they settled on his hot wrist – right over the pulsating copper bracelet – whispered more eloquently than words: “*Later. Everything later*.”

They were racing toward the village of Bata Kolé. The PMC camp was left far behind, frozen in the blinding, molten midday heat of Katanga.

But at the very entrance to the settlement, where the narrow, battered forest road opened up to the first sun-drenched maize fields, Ilunga’s lead pickup abruptly slammed on the brakes. The tires squealed as they skidded on the slippery clay, kicking up a fan of mud.

Lying across the road was the massive, gigantic trunk of a recently felled tree.

Behind the barricade, standing like a silent wall, were people.

Eleven village men – with oil-gleaming machetes, long hunting spears, and old, worn rifles. And in front of them, three figures stood motionless.

The two on the flanks – tall elders, dry as parchment, in long white canvas shirts. And standing perfectly between them was he.

That same old sorcerer whom Leo had seen with the sisters from the village. He wore a long, faded colorful shirt over wide cotton pants, and on his sunken, dark chest ominously jingled the very same eerie amulets: dried bird claws and small bones polished by time. He seemed to have no eyebrows or eyelashes – only smooth skin, pulled taut as a drumhead over pale pupils covered by a thick, milky film. This was exactly what the blind, inexorable mask of fate from an ancient tragedy would look like. In his bony, knotted hands he firmly gripped a smooth wooden cane.

Ilunga killed the engine. A sticky, ringing, exhausting silence descended, broken only by the deafening, indifferent chirp of cicadas and the tired, hoarse breathing of the people in the truck bed.

The old man slowly raised his carved staff and stared with his milky, almost dead, yet paradoxically piercing eyes straight at the bed of the stalled pickup.

“Why... did you return?” his voice did not sound loud, but it carried that unnatural, rustling vibration that made every hair on Leo's arms stand on end.

Imani rose unhurriedly, gracefully to her feet, balancing in the truck bed. Her fingers squeezed Leo’s hand to the point of pain, of bruising. She kept her silence.

“Your great-grandfather...” the sorcerer took one hollow step toward the vehicle, his cane descending onto the metal tailgate with a resonant, bone-like clack. “Your great-grandfather brought strangers to our land. White men with their clanking machines. They woke what was supposed to sleep eternally beneath these stones. And the earth began to drink blood.”

The old man thoughtfully turned his head from side to side, as if catching scents and scanning the space: “And now... you. And with you is an American once again.”

The sorcerer struck the cracked earth with his cane with unexpected force. Dry dust billowed up in a thick orange cloud, settling on their faces.

“You carry rotten blood within you. You must not return here...”

Chapter Thirteen. Imani

The dirty-orange, sun-baked clay burned the soles of their boots even through the thick rubber.

Leo climbed out of the pickup’s bed, freezing for a moment and convulsively exhaling the scorching air. The fabric of his camouflage shirt was soaked through – sweat, diesel soot, the fine dust of Katanga eaten into his pores, crunching in his teeth and packing under his nails. The forest road looped here and came to an end: a trampled clearing at the base of a gigantic terminalia tree, whose tangled roots, as thick as the legs of fossilized monsters, thrust straight out of a small precipice.

The air here hung moist and dense; it felt as though it could be touched with bare hands. It smelled of fermented wild fruits, raw earth, and the subtle, barely perceptible, yet intoxicating aroma of costus – a nocturnal flower that made the back of Leo’s head clench with a sweet, aching pain.

Both pickups hid in the shade of the thicket, concealed on both sides by dense green undergrowth. Ilunga killed the engine. The suddenly descending silence of the forest brought no peace – it pressed heavy on the ears. Behind the tree, Ilunga’s Congolese fighters lined up in silence: five men with battered Kalashnikovs, mute, their faces dark with sweat.

Leo approached the elders.

“I... I absolutely need to get to the village,” he said, trying to suppress the hoarseness in his voice and wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “To the WHO hospital. Understand, this... this is important. I have the results, there are people there...”

The elders stood motionless. Two dry, tall old men in washed-out white shirts made of homespun canvas. Their faces looked as if they had been carved from petrified wood. The old sorcerer behind their shoulders – in his colorful cape, festooned with bones and dried paws – did not even turn his head, listening intently to the invisible life of the jungle.

The eldest of them shook his head. Unhurriedly. Gravely. Categorically.

“No.”

“Listen to me!” Leo lunged forward, but Ilunga smoothly yet firmly caught him by the elbow. The partisan’s fingers clamped down like steel pincers.

“Stop, Leo,” Ilunga said quietly, persuasively, barely parting his lips. “You don't understand what you've gotten into. I don't know exactly what you stole from IC Waze... but trust my experience: they will turn the whole area upside down. Bata Kolé will be the first place their PMC shows up. Show your face there, and you'll put everyone in the crosshairs. Yourself, the village, and your doctors.”

Imani stood slightly behind, leaning her back against the side of the second pickup. The hem of her dress was stained with clay; her short, coarse hair gleamed with sweat. Leo shot her a quick, searching glance. Her black eyes stared him down point-blank. For a second, her gaze lingered on his lips, after which she shook her head barely perceptibly, almost imperceptibly:

“He is right, Leo... Don't.”

Leo gritted his teeth. It was pointless to resist – here, the rules were dictated by the jungle and these people. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled notebook and the stub of an indelible pencil. Pressing the paper against the heat-vibrating hood, he quickly scribbled a few jagged lines:

“Sarah, Remy. I'm alive. I have samples of the primary strain and some materials on the virus. I need everything: PCR reagents, hazmat suits, laptop, my MinION. Pass them through Ilunga. Not a word to anyone in the camp. This is important.”

Leo folded the note in four and handed it to Ilunga.

“Give this personally to Sarah Huybrechts or Remy Gaillard. No middlemen. Please.”

Ilunga tucked the note into the breast pocket of his fatigues and nodded.

“I'll be back in two hours. Wait here, don't go out on the road.”

The diesel of the first pickup roared. The truck, coughing bluish smoke, turned around on the narrow track and headed toward the village, kicking up a pillar of red dust.

The elders silently wandered back into the thicket along the trail.

Leo and Imani were left alone. The second pickup stood off to the side, covered by branches.

“Let's go,” Imani said softly. Her voice sounded velvety and very close. “Under the tree. You need to sit down.”

They settled onto the dark, moisture-soaked earth, between the roots of the old tree sliding into the small ravine. Here, in the deep penumbra, twilight reigned. The air was thick, warm, and dense as a heavy syrup.

Leo leaned his back against the rough bark. His carbines, propped against the trunk nearby, gleamed with blued steel.

Imani sat opposite him. Too close. Very close. Her knees almost touched his legs, and Leo physically felt the dry, alluring warmth radiating from her. In the gloom, her dark skin glowed with an inner luster, and deep within her black, amber-veined eyes, the patches of sky showing through the foliage were reflected.

“Why...” Leo cleared his throat; his voice lacked breath. He looked at her lips, then raised his gaze to her eyes. “Why me, Imani? Why did you drag me into this in the first place?”

Imani froze. Her fingers, lazily tracing the edge of her dress, went still. She remained silent for a long time, looking somewhere near his neck, where a small vein throbbed rhythmically.

“I...” she stumbled, pausing, exhaling with a slight hiss. “I really don't know, Leo. Truly.”

She swallowed, slowly searching for words – as if she were trying to translate something ancient into a foreign, forgotten language:

“That evening... in Kinshasa. I was putting on the bracelet. The very one that is on your arm now. I wore it... well, I’ve always worn it, since childhood. The copper fit me like a glove. But that evening... it just slipped off my wrist. Fell to the floor. And it rang so strangely.”

She looked at him in a way that made his breath catch. And a short, electric spark flared between them – even the air near their faces grew several degrees hotter.

“I picked it up. Put it on again. And it... fell again. Four times in a row, Leo. The bracelet of my ancestors seemed to be rejecting me. As if... as if it didn't want to be

mine anymore. And in the morning, when I tried to put it on again – it fell off once more. It's silly, but I decided to... well, experiment. I took it with me."

She leaned forward slightly. The distance between them shrank to a mere handful of inches. Leo felt her breath – it smelled of wild mint and something tart.

"And when there, in the church, I slipped it onto your arm..." her voice dropped to a whisper, then broke off. "I suddenly felt it. A flash. As if everything fell into place. As if everything became right. The bracelet was looking for you, not me. But... how could I explain that to a white doctor? 'You know, Leo, my copper band has decided that you're its new master'? You would have thought I was insane..."

She reached out and rested her fingers on his wrist – exactly where the warm bracelet gripped his skin.

At her touch, a powerful jolt of electricity surged up Leo's forearm. The skin beneath her fingertips instantly flared with heat.

The second heart in his chest – a dark, nonexistent symbiote organ – responded with a heavy, hollow thud that stole Leo's breath. Imani's gaze darted to his sunken cheeks: she had felt that spasm.

Leo began to breathe heavily. He swayed to the side – his body was suddenly seized by violent, burning chills. His teeth chattered, icy sweat rolling down his spine.

"Leo..." a kind of passionate, hungry alarm slipped into her voice, as if she had sensed something inside him.

Imani immediately moved flush against him, throwing a leg over and practically sitting on his lap to steady his trembling shoulders. Her thighs pressed tightly against his body, burning through the thin fabric of their clothing, and her palm rested on his forehead – cool and damp.

"Here, drink," she fished a dark brown glass bottle from her bag with her free hand. "Please, drink it."

"What... what is it?" Leo forced out, trying to focus his blurring vision on her lips, which were dangerously close.

"Water. From the West. From the well at my grandfather's house. He told me to bring it... Drink, don't speak."

Leo wrapped his parched, stuck-together lips around the neck of the bottle and took a few greedy gulps.

The water had a staggering, utterly surreal taste. Neither rust nor bleach – it was a dense, oily liquid with the distinct flavor of raw clay, aged iron, and a rich, sweetish-resinous undertone of wood. It scorched his throat like liquid metal.

And the effect washed over him instantly.

The chills retreated in a matter of seconds. The fiery wave subsided, the dull ache in his ribs dissolved. The second heart slowed its pace, falling into step with the even, deep rhythm of the first. Leo let out a sigh of relief, feeling his muscles relax.

Imani was in no hurry to pull away. She continued to sit intimately close, her chest rising and falling in time with his breathing. The fingers of her left hand still grasped his wrist, stroking the copper band.

“The elders…” Leo spoke quietly, almost against her lips, unable to look away from her fathomless eyes. “They were talking… about your great-grandfather. He… he worked at Shinkolobwe?”

Imani slowly shook her head, her breath tickling his neck:

“No… Joseph – my great-grandfather – came here from Mbanza-Ngungu in the early forties. On a contract. He did geological surveying for the Americans. Hunting for veins.”

“And… what happened?”

“My grandfather and grandmother…” she paused, drawing a shaky breath while looking straight into his pupils. “They never talked about it. Taboo. But I’d heard, from chatter in the village… Something happened in the mine. Down in a deep adit. They found something. And after that, my great-grandfather stopped digging. He dropped his pickaxe, threw away his tools… Stopped digging the earth. Altogether. He married a local girl… my great-grandmother, and settled here. Until her death.”

“And… your parents?” Leo carefully raised his hand and covered hers with his palm. Her skin was incredibly soft and searing hot.

“Dead,” she answered curtly, steel flashing in her voice for a moment. “I was very little. Four years old. A raid. Tribal feuds.”

“And your grandfather?”

“After my grandmother died, he couldn't stay here. He moved back to my great-grandfather's homeland, to Mbanza-Ngungu.”

“And you…” Leo gave her fingers a slight squeeze, drawing her another millimeter closer. “Did you go with him?”

Imani froze. A shadow flitted across her gaze – dark, dense, full of hidden tension.

“No,” she replied quietly. “I stayed then. With my husband.”

Leo went rigid.

The air jammed in his chest. The word “husband” struck his brain with a hollow, resonating echo. He stared at her in mute astonishment, feeling reality slipping from under his feet.

Imani did not avert her gaze. On the contrary – she squeezed his hand tightly, until her joints cracked, covering the bracelet.

“Ilunga is my husband, Leo,” she enunciated clearly. Without a trace of shame, but with some kind of concealed, wild anguish in her voice.

The pause dragged on. Leo needed time. The seconds flowed like thick pitch. He looked at her face, at those chiseled cheekbones, at her dark lips; he felt the weight of her body on his lap and tried to reconcile the grim partisan with an assault rifle and this woman who was blowing his mind.

“*Between us is paper and a copper ring on a nail… Ilunga drank whiskey and knew. He knew from the very beginning*.”

“But…” Leo cleared his throat; his voice sounded hollow. “But why did you leave after all? You said so yourself… back then, in Kinshasa.”

Imani lowered her head, her forehead resting against his shoulder for a moment. Leo felt the silky coarseness of her hair.

“Leo. All the women in our lineage were sorceresses. Keepers… But when my great-grandmother married an outsider – a geologist… and especially after what happened in that cave…” she sighed heavily. “Our family line was cast out. The elders declared us blood traitors. We became pariahs. There was no place for us, not among our own people, nor among strangers. I had to leave…”

The slap of tires on loose clay and the growl of a diesel engine shattered the intimate silence of the forest.

Imani quickly pulled away – rising smoothly to her feet like a cat and straightening her dress. Leo stood up after her, still smelling the scent of her hot breath.

Remy Gaillard leapt out of the arriving pickup. His face was pale, his hair disheveled, and in his hands, he clutched a hefty orange container.

“Gonzalez! Damn you, old man!” Remy yelled, nearly tripping over the roots. “You’re alive?! We thought the Southbridge mercenaries had already cut you into ribbons!”

And, eyeing the weapons, he scoffed:

“What, did you decide to start a little war on the way?”

Sarah stepped down from the passenger seat with dignified composure. In her hands, she carried his laptop and a massive metal case stamped with biohazard warnings.

“Shut up, Remy,” Sarah cut in, though immense relief could be read in her eyes. She walked up to Leo, critically assessed his sluggish demeanor, and nodded. “Your

note knocked us for six. We brought everything we could carry out: the portable MinION sequencer, reagents, hazmat suits, your files."

Sarah set the case on the ground and crossed her arms over her chest:

"And now explain – what are you planning to do with all this? You wrote that you have samples of the source strain?"

"Leo," Remy interrupted, breathless with excitement. "You won't believe this! We rechecked that miner – Mbula Benga. He's... he's on the mend! The fever has broken, his liver lesions are regressing!"

"And the girls? Those sisters from Bata Kolé?"

"They have no trace of the virus whatsoever! None! We ran the PCR three times! We think we made a mistake with the initial tests..."

"We didn't make a mistake," Leo said quietly. "The virus hasn't gone anywhere. It is just changing."

Sarah narrowed her eyes:

"Give the samples to us, Leo. We'll take them to the hospital lab. It's sterile there, they have the equipment, we'll send the genome to Geneva..."

"No," Leo firmly cut her off. "The hospital is target number one. If the PMC raids it, they'll take everything and eliminate you as witnesses. It will be safer for everyone this way. The samples stay with me."

"And where will you go with them?!" Remy threw his hands up. "Into the jungle? To live in a hut and sequence DNA using solar power?!"

Ilunga, who had been standing silently by the pickup's fender, took a step forward. His stern face remained unreadable.

"A couple of hours' drive from here is an abandoned Belgian military base," he stated calmly. "We use it sometimes. There are dry concrete bunkers there. Some supplies, water. And most importantly – there is a working diesel generator."

Imani imperceptibly shifted her gaze to her husband. Something akin to silent approval flickered across her face.

"Alright," she agreed. "Take us there."

"What about the mercenaries?" Leo asked.

"They've locked the gates; they're combing the road."

"One more thing, Ilunga. I'll need a satellite connection. Starlink. To dump the data array. Can you get one?"

The partisan gave a curt nod:

“I'll bring it. Tomorrow morning.” Then, turning to the doctors, he added: “My boys will take you back to your camp.”

They said their goodbyes.

“Good luck to you, old man,” Remy told him, shaking his hand.

“Take care of yourself, Leo,” Sarah added.

Ilunga’s men began quickly transferring the gear. Boxes of reagents, cases of biological material, the laptop – everything was carefully packed into the bed of the pickup.

When everything was ready, Leo walked over to the tree. Lying on the roots were the two Israeli Emtan MZ-4P assault rifles and tactical vests loaded with ammo, stripped from the mercenaries.

With practiced, routine confidence – without any fuss, accompanied by sharp metallic clacks – Leo checked the bolts, popped out the magazines to confirm they were loaded, and effortlessly tossed the weapons and ammo boxes into the back of the pickup.

Imani watched him with mute incomprehension. To her, he was a doctor, a scientist, a white intellectual from America. But right now, standing before her was a man who handled assault rifles as if he had been born with them in his hands.

Leo looked at her and said nothing.

She turned her head toward Ilunga.

The partisan met his wife's gaze. Not a shadow of surprise registered on his calm face. Ilunga merely gave her a silent, barely perceptible nod. He knew how people who know how to kill moved. And he had already realized that Leo Gonzalez was one of them.

“It’s time,” Ilunga nodded.

Leo jumped into the truck bed first, offering his hand to Imani. She placed her palm into his fingers, feeling his grip tighten for a fleeting moment just a little harder than propriety demanded.

The engine roared. The pickup tore off, its treads biting into the brown clay, and quickly disappeared into the dense, pitch-black greenery of the Katanga jungle.

The old Hilux moved heavily along the worn track, growling, its treads chewing into the plasticine, searing clay. The ribbed metal floor of the truck bed transmitted a constant, fine tremor into their joints. The diesel engine spun the shaft at its limit, and this low, visceral vibration – at just under eight hundred revolutions per minute – penetrated through the soles of their boots in a strange, almost infernal manner, climbing up their shin bones and layering in precise resonance over the rhythm of the quieted “second heart.”

Leo sat with his shoulder blades pressed against the blistering side panel. His right hand rested on his knee, and in the place where the dark copper touched his skin, a quiet, continuous chemical reaction was unfolding. Imani's bracelet was still reacting to his feverish sweat, to the water absorbed by his metabolism, and to the dry scorch of the jungle. The metal wasn't just heating up – it imparted into his flesh a steady, dense, almost electrical pulsation. Beneath the lower edge of the copper on Leo's pale, thinned wrist, an insidious, malachite-green mark had surfaced – verdigris, eating directly into his pores. This fragile, chemical “tattoo” smelled sharp and acrid: of an old copper-nickel coin, wet river pebbles, and sour, oxidized blood. The skin beneath the bracelet itched slightly, but this itch carried no pain – it felt like a suture keeping the alien tissue in his body from disintegrating.

On a steep incline, where the tangled roots of a ficus had formed a natural staircase, the pickup stalled for a second. Ilunga depressed the clutch, making the vehicle freeze on the slippery slope, and looked back through the open rear window of the cab.

Absolute silence hung in the truck bed, broken only by the chirping of cicadas.

The partisan’s gaze – attentive, cold, and piercing – glided over Imani, whose hand still rested on Leo’s thigh, and then slowly shifted to the doctor himself.

Leo did not look away. He continued to hold one of the captured Emtan MZ-4Ps on his lap: the safety was off, his finger was not on the trigger but neatly extended along the trigger guard, and the barrel was pointed strictly toward the side panel at a forty-five-degree angle.

Ilunga looked at those fingers. At the familiar, professional grip. At how the weight of the tactical vest was naturally distributed at Leo’s feet.

Neither jealousy nor malice flared in the partisan's black, fatigue-filled eyes. Deep, silent understanding surfaced within them. In this place, where the boundary between life and instant oblivion had thinned to the width of a dry rubber leaf, all conventions – paperwork in Kinshasa, a copper ring on a nail, tribal taboos – lost their weight against a simple fact: before him sat the man she had chosen, and not just some doctor whining in fear.

Ilunga unhurriedly reached into the pocket of his faded fatigues, pulled out a flat English tobacco tin, and, without saying a word, tossed it through the window straight into the truck bed. The tin landed with a rattling metallic clang on the floor next to Leo’s boot. Inside lay three hand-rolled, dried leaves of wild forest tobacco.

Leo nodded silently, a brief and barely perceptible dip of his head. In response, Ilunga merely tightened his lips slightly, shoved the shifter into first gear, and stepped on the gas. The pickup roared, spitting a fan of liquid orange clay from beneath its rear wheels, and tore off once again through the closing green wall.

Chapter Fourteen. Symphony of Decay

The morning began with a slow, viscous surfacing from that muffled, blissful depth where neither names, nor spans of time, nor diagnoses recorded in journals existed.

He woke up to a scent. Not a sound, not the rustling of branches beyond the crumbling masonry – but a scent. Thick, dark, steeped in costus, night-blooming jasmine, rotting tree bark, and something else – barely perceptible, hot, salty, blood-like – that very magical perfume of a living body that Imani's skin exuded when she slept.

Leo lay on his side on the narrow army cot, pinned between two hot planes: the rough soldier's blanket and her breath. He breathed in this air slowly, greedily, deeply, like a man who had spent a long time underwater and finally broken the surface. The concrete vault of the old Belgian bunker, mottled with saltpeter, lichen, and rust stains from half a century ago, slowly emerged through the pre-dawn blue.

On his chest, with her damp cheek pressed against his collarbone, rested Imani's hand. Her left palm lay on his ribs – slightly cupped, warm, with tightly pressed fingers. Her grandmother's copper bracelet on her wrist gleamed dimly in the gray haze.

The past night hadn't simply happened – it had filled all space, crowding past lives out of his memory. It was their second night, but the first one – the half-phantom, drunken one in Kinshasa – felt as if it had never been. Back then, only a message on the mirror and a scent on a crumpled pillow had remained. Now, the boundaries of their bodies had melted in the Congolese swelter, dissolving into an invisible, primordial expanse.

Leo remembered her in waves, in flashes: the rough fabric, the slightly salty taste of her skin at the base of her neck, how her long, strong fingers dug into his shoulders, and how her whisper in an unfamiliar language broke into a low, throaty moan. But something else was paramount. There, in the absolute darkness, when their breathing merged into a single ragged hum, Leo physically felt his cursed double heartbeat disappear. The alien, hydraulic, monstrous rhythm of the symbiote-organ quieted down, submitting to Imani's steady, frantic, pure pulse. It was as if they had become a single mechanism. One circulatory system for two, closed through the searing metal of two copper bracelets. One breath. One heart for two – just like on that night of blindness, when the whole outside world had shrunk to the point of contact between two bodies.

This was better than any medical report, higher than any genetic decoding. Leo lay in the semi-darkness, listening to her steady inhalations, and for the first time in many months he felt neither fear nor exhaustion, but peace. The physical, bone-deep peace of a man whose flesh had finally ceased to be a battlefield and become a home.

Around ten in the morning, the dry silence of the forest was torn by the straining, coughing roar of an old diesel engine.

The abandoned base of the Belgian paratroopers was tiny – just two squat concrete blocks grown into the hill, and a small parade ground that the jungle had long since cracked and chewed up with the massive, knotty roots of ficus trees. Vines wove over the roofs in a dense green tent, rendering the place completely invisible to aircraft and satellites.

Kasongo – one of Ilunga's trusted men – climbed out of the battered beige Pajero that emerged from the thicket. He was a sinewy, sun-scorched Congolese man with quick eyes, who never parted with a hand-rolled local tobacco cigarette.

“Ilunga sends his regards,” Kasongo dropped laconically, spitting out a dry blade of grass and dropping the jeep’s tailgate with a crash.

The air immediately filled with the bustle of unloading. Kasongo hauled out two fifty-liter jerrycans of diesel, sacks of yams, wild garlic, and green bananas, and then fished out a large chunk of fresh antelope meat, wrapped in fresh banana leaves and still oozing dark blood.

“The Southbridge mercenaries haven't come down to the village yet,” he said, wiping his sweating neck with a greasy rag. “They’re pulling patrols back to the mine’s main perimeter. Waiting for something. Or tracking someone in the mountains. Ilunga told you to sit tight and stay out of the clearings.”

From deep inside the cabin, he extracted the white square dish of a Starlink antenna, a router in a protective case, a coil of cable, and a bulky fabric bag.

“Clothes. Whatever could be found at the bazaar in Likasi,” Kasongo nodded at Imani, who had taken the bags of food. “And diesel for the generator. It's in the back annex, I checked the oil recently. It’ll start with a half-turn. By the way, Ilunga checks his email once a day. He passed on the network password: Kolwezi-1960.”

Five minutes later, the jeep turned around on the narrow track and disappeared, leaving behind only the bluish smoke of exhaust, which was immediately greedily sucked in by the rainy wall of the jungle.

They divided their duties without unnecessary words. Imani went into the main block, where an old cast-iron stove and a soot-stained stone sink remained, to put away the food. Leo handled the communications and setting up the laboratory.

He dragged the Starlink antenna onto the bunker's flat roof, camouflaged by hanging vines, pointed the dish southwest, and ran the cable down. The indicator blinked with an emerald light – the channel was clear and stable.

Finished with the wires, Leo stopped in the kitchen doorway and stood perfectly still, leaning against the rough jamb.

Imani stood with her back to him. She had already managed to change into the clothes Kasongo had brought – simple, slightly worn jeans and a men's khaki cotton shirt, the sleeves carelessly rolled up to the elbows. With deft, precise movements, she was cutting the meat with a wide knife on a wooden block. The rustic, cozy aroma of frying garlic, palm oil, and hot iron was already floating in the air.

Leo watched her with a sudden, aching feeling in his chest. All this time – from the gloomy bar in Kinshasa to yesterday's campfire – he had seen her as a mysterious fatalist, a femme fatale from urban legends, an unapproachable sorceress, the keeper of an ancient and dangerous lineage. He had looked for a symbol in her, a myth, a biological enigma.

And now, an ordinary woman stood before him. A living, earthly, modern twenty-three-year-old woman. She blew a stray lock of hair from her forehead with the back of her hand, frowned slightly as she checked the draft in the stove's ash pit, and quietly hummed some old American pop song under her breath, likely heard on the radio in Kinshasa.

"*...Just how your love can do what no one else can...*"

In this everyday routine of hers, in this mundane, domestic movement of her hands with the knife and the board, lay such a fragile, poignant beauty that for a second, Leo forgot where they were. He desperately wanted to walk up from behind, wrap his arms around her waist, bury his face in her neck, and never leave this concrete square lost in the Congo again.

She turned around, caught his gaze, and smiled slightly – simply, warmly, without any shamanic mystery, the way people smile when they are tired alongside you and share that same peace.

"It will be ready soon," she said. "Go busy yourself with your instruments."

For the laboratory, Leo chose a separate, furthest room in the second block – a former Belgian command post. A blind room without windows, with thick reinforced concrete walls, smelling of musty dampness and old lime.

He cleared out the dust of rotted furniture, wiped down the long oak table, and set up the portable MinION sequencer, the sample containers, the microscope, and the reagents. He plugged the laptop into the network. The work was calming. The mechanical, familiar actions of an epidemiologist returned to him a sense of control over his own life.

After two in the afternoon, the heat became unbearable. The forest beyond the walls seemed to have died out, stunned by the tropical, ringing scorch.

Leo sat at the table, staring at the monitor. And then it returned.

First, goosebumps crawled over his right wrist. The copper band began to rapidly lose its heat, turning into a hoop of hard, piercing ice. Then this cold collapsed

deep inside – into his veins, into his joints, into his bone marrow. Leo twitched; his jaws clamped shut involuntarily with a dull crack. The second heart behind his sternum woke up instantly, without any wind-up, striking with such wild, unexpected force that dark circles swam before his eyes.

The chills were gut-wrenching, all-consuming. Leo tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't hold him.

"*Where?*" the single, furious thought battered his fevered brain. "*Where did I catch this? Where did the breach happen?*"

Flashes of memories began to swirl in his head, breaking apart into a mosaic in a mad kaleidoscope.

"*In the barracks? In the lab?*" That day, when he hastily, with fingers trembling from nerves, centrifuged the undiluted blood serum of Maurice and the miner Benga, and a barely noticeable micro-drop of aerosol escaped from under the test tube cap, biting into his mucous membrane?

Or... or at that damned collapse into the adit?

And Leo saw it. No. Not himself. The others.

Evening, the rusty sun of Haut-Katanga, the ragged maw of the abandoned mine. The ancient, deserted drift, from which a dense, black fog erupted – thousands of giant hammer-headed fruit bats. They surged in a solid, rustling stream, knocking people off their feet, batting dirty, red faces with leathery wings. The smell – a mixture of guano, ozone, and a sweet, oppressive, purple vapor rising from the depths of the radioactive fault. They had all breathed in that dust. All of them.

Leo barely dragged himself to the door. The mortise lock had crumbled to dust long ago. With trembling, lead-heavy hands, he grabbed a massive metal stool and forcefully wedged its back under the door handle, deadlocking the panel shut.

He returned to the table and used his teeth to tear open the plastic packaging of a syringe. A tourniquet on the forearm. The needle easily entered the swollen, dark vein.

Blood rushed into the transparent barrel. It was monstrously thick, almost black, with a pomegranate opalescent sheen under the lamplight.

Leo loaded the cartridge into the analyzer, dropped in the reagent, and initiated the protocol.

Time turned into congealing jelly. His muscles cramped so hard it felt as though they were being squeezed by invisible pliers. The air felt as though it were made of crushed glass. Leo sat on the floor, his forehead pressed against the cold edge of the oak table, and listened as the hum of the MinION merged with the chaotic, desynchronized pounding of the two hearts in his own chest.

The screen blinked. Graphs aligned in a row.

Leo focused his blurred gaze on the monitor.

The virus wasn't just in him. The RNA sequence had made a new leap. The genome had rearranged itself again. In the girls from the village of Bata Kolé, the virus fell asleep, dissolving into their tissues without a trace. But in Leo's body – under the influence of radiation, spurred by an infernal mixture of adrenaline and his own anomalous anatomy – the strain was behaving ruthlessly. It was forcing a fusion. The virus was en masse replacing red blood cells with crystal-like, pearlescent structures. His body was burning out alive, trying to digest this biological transmutation.

He brought the dosimeter to his left arm. The device clicked in a rapid, alarming rattle. The needle froze at the mark of 140 microroentgens per hour.

His own blood was emitting radiation.

A knock at the door.

The solid wood shuddered.

“Leo?” Imani’s voice sounded muffled, but a taut string was already ringing in it. She had felt it. Through the walls, through the earth, through the vibrating metal of the bracelet on her wrist.

“Don’t... don’t come in!” Leo cried out, but only a weak, strained wheeze escaped from his scorched lungs.

“Leo, open up! What's wrong with you?!”

The handle jerked frantically. The metal stool gave a drawn-out screech against the concrete.

“Imani, no... Go away!” Leo tried to get up but collapsed to his knees, his elbow catching a rack of test tubes. Glass shattered against the floor with a clatter. “It’s dangerous. I'm... I'm infected...”

In his clouding mind, seized by feverish delirium, a single panicked thought thrashed: he had become a biological bomb. If the process of decay broke out, he would kill her just with his breath, his blood, his sticky sweat.

He crawled across the floor. In the corner of the room, leaning against the concrete, stood one of the captured carbines. Leo convulsively seized the cold plastic stock, pulling the weapon toward himself, as if this piece of steel could protect the world from him.

Crash!

The door panel bowed inwards, as if the entire weight of the surrounding jungle had struck it. The stool slid sideways with a grating sound.

Another blow!

The old hinge snapped with a crack, and the door burst wide open with a crash.

On the threshold stood Imani. In the slanting rays of the setting sun pouring from the corridor, her eyes looked like two chalices filled with molten amber. She saw him – kneeling in a pile of broken glass, covered in an icy sweat, pale, hunched over the assault rifle.

“Don’t come closer!” Leo rasped, frantically raising the carbine and pointing the barrel at the floor before her feet. His fingers trembled on the trigger. “Go away, Imani! Get away! Blood... everything inside me is collapsing!”

Imani did not stop. She didn't even glance at the weapon. To her, this Israeli assault rifle was just a dead, meaningless piece of iron.

She took three smooth, unhurried steps and knelt down in front of him.

“*Kanga motema te...”* she whispered.

Her voice dropped to the lowest register, turning into a vibrating, guttural rhythm.

“*Kanga motema te... Kobanga te, nzela eza... Le nzela nionso...”*

Lingala. The ancient, rounded language of the rain-soaked forests poured from her lips. Leo did not know the words, but their meaning imprinted straight into his bones, into his tearing second heart: “*Do not close your heart. Do not be afraid. The path is open. Go all the way.”*

Her warm, strong hands rested on his convulsively shaking arms. One soft but unyielding movement – and she easily pulled the carbine from his weakened fingers, tossing the heavy weapon aside.

Leo tried to pull away, but her hot palms framed his sweat-drenched face.

“Look at me,” she whispered, switching to French, but keeping the same hypnotic, shamanic rhythm. “Look closely at me, white doctor.”

She began to unbutton his camouflage shirt. Her fingers glided quickly over the buttons, exposing his chest, where hard, painful knots swelled distinctly beneath the skin.

The trance overtook him with lightning speed.

The gray concrete walls of the laboratory suddenly swam, rippled in unsteady waves, and began to melt into a stifling green haze. The hum of the sequencer on the table turned into the roar of a million cicadas and the rustle of massive leathery wings beneath the canopy of trees.

Leo no longer felt the solid floor under his feet. Imani pulled off his soaked shirt, her cool arms wrapping around his torso. With every touch, the bumpy knots on his ribs melted, retreated, giving off a dull pain. The second heart froze for a moment – and then fell into step with her pulse again.

She pulled him to his feet, and he obeyed, utterly devoid of his own will, dissolved in her power.

It seemed to him – or was it really happening? – that they had walked out of the bunker. Moist vines caressed his bare shoulders. The cool, wet earth sprang beneath his bare feet. A crushing, sweet scent of blooming giant trees, decaying wood, and that very crimson, radioactive moisture from the deep drifts of all the local mines hit his nose.

Imani led him by the hand. Her naked back glided ahead, shimmering in the light of an invisible moon. She was taking him deeper into the green womb of the nocturnal jungle – to a place where neither viruses, nor corporations, nor military mercenaries, nor the fear of death existed. To the place where the earth itself breathed, accepting them both into its prehistoric, vibrating, infinite embrace.

Leo closed his eyes. And before them, in the pitch blackness on the insides of his eyelids, spirals emerged. Dark, pulsating, rotating...

The spirals picked up speed. They narrowed. Contracted. And Leo slipped away.

Chapter Fifteen. Leo

The pain began with the collapse of geometry.

The bunker walls lost their right angles and began to run like heated gray wax, dripping thick cement sap onto the melting floor, and in this viscous, formless stifling heat, at the very bottom of the melting universe, only she remained. Imani.

She was above him. And inside him. Right under his skin – there, in the narrow, feverish space between the epidermis and the fascia, where nerve endings turn into bare, thrashing wires. Archaic, smooth, wet with venomous sweat, smelling of the forest, earth, wild honey, and the caramel char of Leo's own blood, heated from within to the boiling point. She didn't just press him into the coarse palm-fiber mat – she was sprouting into him, feeling for roots among his ribs.

Leo threw his head back as her lips touched his collarbone. And then her teeth parted and sank into his body. It was like the bite of a beast and the kiss of a lover at the same time. It was a surgically precise, ritualistic puncture. An opening of the human shell. And beneath that shell was him – Gonzalez.

He screamed – soundlessly, arching his back, lifting his shoulder blades off the floor – when her nails, hard and long as black obsidian scalpels, carved four deep furrows across his chest. It seemed as though the skin on his body began to open. Like an overripe fruit bursting from the heat. Like a night-blooming flower unfurling. Without a crunch, without a tear – quietly, wetly, inevitably. Blood gushed from the cuts – first bright scarlet, pulsating, and then – thick, dark, pomegranate-colored, with the characteristic suffocating smell of enzymes.

But Leo's blood did not stain her thighs. It burst outward in brown ropes that changed their nature in mid-air. Hemoglobin turned into chlorophyll, plasma into concentrated plant sap, erythrocytes into tiny, writhing buds. Like wet, vibrating vines, his own venous system crawled across his ribs, sprouting shoots, suckers, and tendrils. Real, succulent stems grew from his open chest with bright, emerald leaves smelling of rotting wood and tropical rain. These rhizomes wrapped around Imani's wrists, reaching for the vanishing ceiling, blossoming with black, radioactive buds and white flowers smelling of gardenia.

"*Ne tanga motema*..." she whispered into his bare collarbone. The voice was deep, guttural, vibrating in her ribcage and transferring into his bones through the tangle of exposed flesh. "*Don't close your heart*..."

And those drops of blood that, rolling down and turning into nectar, suddenly stumbled upon the darkness, changed color. They became absolutely black, like the color of ancient uraninite from the underground tunnels of Katanga. And from each black drop, with a soft, fleshy pop, shadows hatched.

Leo felt his venous channels fill with the weight of radiating pitchblende – the same resinous ore that, in the 1940s, half-naked, nameless miners of Shinkolobwe carried on their backs in woven baskets, so that later it could incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His bone marrow became uranium-238, slowly, with a half-life of billions of years, slipping through radium and polonium to stable, dead lead-206. The radionuclide decay emitted alpha particles directly into his thoughts.

He fell through layers of Precambrian shales, through dolomites and copper veins, the back of his head brushing against the fossilized bones of the first hominids who had once straightened their backs on this plateau. It seemed the very vector of evolution had looped upon itself: the virus did not bring death; it returned his flesh to the primordial proto-matter, to that prehistoric suspension where a uranium atom first met the first organic molecule...

Shadows. They grew. They shivered and burst.

Bats.

Huge, blind fruit bats covered in ichor hatched right out of his torn veins, like chicks from a shell: wet, frantically flapping their underdeveloped membranes. A moment later, their leathery wings spread, and the creatures, with vile, piercing squeaks, soared up and down, plastering Leo's body in a rustling, living mantle, turning him into their own nest. They beat him on the eyelids, on the lips, burying their blunt gray muzzles into his neck and the corners of his mouth, clawing at the meat, drinking his fear. They kissed him with hundreds of blind, trembling mouths.

Flap-flap-flap.

The sound of leathery wings grew louder, became rhythmic, and faltered, until it turned into the steady crackle of an old movie projector.

The clatter of film. A dusty, smoke-filled beam of light cutting through the gloom of the “San Martin” cinema in Boston. Winter.

Leo is seventeen. He is sitting in a cool, sagging velvet seat in the penultimate row. His father is no longer next to him – his father stayed home, by the stove, silently staring at a brass cezve and watching the snow that didn't touch the ground. The seat to Leo's left is empty, like a gaping hole in his own ribcage.

On the screen, Alan Parker was murdering a human soul. “Angel Heart”. Mickey Rourke was walking through New Orleans, amid stagnant water, dead chickens, and mud. The music flowed thick, like congealed syrup. The ceiling fan on the screen spun, slicing the air into chunks. Leo stared at the screen, but the celluloid was melting, and there, in a macabre sepia haze, he didn't see Harry Angel. He saw himself. His own lost eyes, convinced they were investigating someone else's crime – and not knowing that the evil was already inside, already in the blood, already on page fourteen of the CONADEP report.

And across from him, in a puddle of sacrificial plasma, danced Epiphany Proudfoot. Dark skin, white dress, thirst, flesh. Lisa Bonet looked out from the screen and smiled – and it was the smile of Imani from the bar in Kinshasa.

But the film jerked, slipped off the reel, the frame flipped, and the roles swapped. Suddenly, like in a ruined projection. Now Imani was Harry – with a knife in her pocket, walking down dark streets. And Leo was Epiphany – tied to a bloody bed, soft, dark, open, suffocating with terror. And looking down at him from above, with the eyes of Louis Cyphre, was she, peeling a boiled egg with her long black fingers, devouring his soul piece by piece.

“I know who you are,” she whispered from the screen, and the sound rustled in his own ear canals.

The camera on the screen moved in close to the backs of the audience's heads. Leo looked back. In the last row, two seats away from him, sat his grandfather – Hector Gonzalez Herrera. A tired face, thin white lips. Eyes – two cold, glass buttons sewn into wrinkled skin. His grandfather didn't move, but his words resonated directly in Leo’s cerebellum, drowning out the clatter of the film:

“If you don’t do it, Leo, they will do it to you.”

The clatter of the “San Martin” projector merged with the crackle of the dosimeter in the barracks, which in turn bled into the dry, rhythmic clacking of the *Olivetti* typewriter on which, in Buenos Aires in the seventies, the lists of the *desaparecidos* – the missing – were compiled.

Clack-clack-clack. Ding. Zzzzip.

Every letter struck into the thick paper by his grandfather echoed with gunshots at “The Farm” and the boiling of copper-cobalt emulsion in his liver. His tongue lost the ability to distinguish taste and sound: the lead of the target smelled of Charlotte’s

fresh peach perfume, and her treacherous whisper possessed the colorimetric density of thorium dissolved in nitric acid. All the names he knew, he remembered – Harry, Epiphany, Louis, Simon – sifted through Imani's fingers like fine, prickly sand from the bottom of the dried-up Congo River...

Her nails dug into his back again, tearing the skin off him along with the Boston memories. Sharp, precise, inexorable, they carved paths from his shoulder blades all the way to his ribs.

The smell of the old cinema was replaced by the sickeningly sweet stench of spilled *Budweiser* beer, cheap marijuana, falling autumn leaves of Cambridge, and peach perfume.

Austin. Or Cambridge. Freshman year. Leo is nineteen, walking heavily, drunkenly up the wooden stairs of the frat house, holding onto the sticky railing. The bass from the speakers on the first floor pounded in his chest, dull and rhythmic – exactly like a second heart that hadn't yet grown, but was already casting a shadow. A hot premonition of disaster lodged in his throat. He was walking after his future. After Charlotte. He had carried her name on the tip of his tongue for the last three months: white skin, blonde hair, brown eyes, their first kiss between the bookshelves of molecular biology.

The room on the second floor. The door is ajar.

Leo pushed it open.

Charlotte was on the bed. Above her, Simon moved – heavy, animalistic, and rhythmic – a broad-shouldered bastard from the lacrosse team. Their bodies intertwined like the writhing vines in his own chest. Leo stood in the doorway, paralyzed by the sight of sweaty, alien labor. He heard the wet slaps of flesh, saw Charlotte's pale fingers digging into an unfamiliar freckled back.

She turned her head. Her eyes – empty, glassy – met his gaze.

“Leo...” she said quietly, but the voice didn't belong to her. It was Imani's voice: “Don't be afraid...”

And Simon calmly turned his face toward him. And beneath his mop of red hair, Leo saw the lifeless, parchment face of his grandfather. The ice-cold buttons of his eyes stared with a dead squint:

“The world is a slaughterhouse, Leo. If you don't do it...”

Bang! The whipping slaps of bodies instantly morphed into the measured roar of gunshots.

Rat-tat-tat.

The smell of beer and betrayal was burned away by the sharp, sulfurous scent of cordite and wet Virginia pine.

“The Farm.” The thick, milky fog of the Camp Peary training grounds. Leo lay in the watery mud of the shooting lane, squeezing the blued metal of the rifle in his wet fingers. He is twenty-two. The stock is jammed into his shoulder.

“Shift fire! Double tap to the body, one to the head!” The ruthless voice of his father battered his eardrums worse than the recoil. There was no malice in it, no love – only the cold geometry of liquidation. “Count to three! On ‘three’ – fire! Don't think, Leo! The target is just meat and physics!”

Leo pulled the trigger. One. Two. Three. The plywood silhouette in the distance jerked and slumped.

And to the side, in the shadow of a glaucous Virginia pine, sat grandfather Hector on a folding chair. In an immaculate raincoat, holding a cane whose knob gleamed in the fog.

“Kill first, Leo,” the old man rustled, and the sound of his voice deafened the roar of the assault rifles. “Kill before they open their mouths. Hurt them before they get to your skin.”

Another target popped out of the fog on rails. Leo raised the barrel, his finger pressing against the iron on its own, but suddenly the target gained volume. It wasn't rubber or plywood. It was Imani. Or Charlotte. Or himself – in the light-gray suit of a field medic.

Leo screamed, trying to tear his finger from the trigger, but a cramp seized his hand. The rifle thrashed in his grip, spitting bullet after bullet into the familiar body. But instead of blood, the same black fruit bats burst from the target's shattered chest. They rushed back along the bullet trajectories – straight at Leo, crashing into his face, clogging his mouth, nostrils, and ears with wet membranes.

Vines sprouted from beneath the soil of Virginia, breaking his grandfather's cane, wrapping around his father's legs, dragging them both into the rotting, radioactive earth of Upper Katanga. Leo choked, coughed, and tiny, trembling winged shadows flew out of his own throat along with the air.

Imani was lying on top of him.

Her body – supple, scalding, soaked in sweat – pinned him completely to the mat. Her lips sank into his lips, her tongue – hard, rough, strong – swept across his palate, across his ribs, licking away the flowing blood. The pain from her teeth was so blinding that it destroyed the very concept of suffering, turning into a ringing, monstrous ecstasy.

Imani was drinking his past – the cowardly Charlotte, the cold father, the dead grandfather with his glass eyes, the smell of the old cinema, and the gunpowder fumes of “The Farm.” She chewed up his fears, replacing them with her own dark, chthonic essence.

Leo felt how, at the very center of this orgasm of decay, his two hearts – the human and the viral – stopped beating out of sync. The second heart no longer needed to grow like a nodule under the skin. It hadn't stopped – it had dissolved, pouring itself into the first. They merged into one. Two pulses forged into a single, incredible piston.

A single beat.

It was so powerful that the plywood of the targets, Parker's film, the Virginia fog, and the bunker's concrete walls disintegrated into dust.

A sharp, deep breath.

Silence crashed down on him like a slab dropping onto water.

No bats. No vines. No gunshots.

Leo opened his eyes.

The light filtering through the dried, cracked boards of the window was no longer morning light – it was thick, amber, mid-afternoon. The ceiling – low, concrete, with the familiar saltpeter stains and a crack along which a small spider crawled. The smell – sterilely clean, with a faintly perceptible note of charred wood and fresh coffee.

He was lying on the floor, on the stiff palm-fiber mat.

He was entirely naked.

Leo sat up slowly. There was no dizziness. The nausea, the ache in his joints, the sensation of crushed glass in his lungs – everything had vanished. His body felt surprisingly whole, filled with a taut, ringing, yet absolutely obedient strength.

He looked down at his chest. His hands instinctively ran over his ribs, expecting to feel jagged wounds, torn meat, or flexible stems.

There was no blood. There were no vines.

But the skin was marked. On his collarbones, on his shoulders, along his ribs – where in his delirium the vines had torn out and teeth had sunken in – glowed faint, delicate pinkish crescents. Nail marks. Light, superficial bite prints. They were not bleeding; they throbbed with a dull, affectionate warmth – like physical proof that her touches had been real while his mind soared over abysses. The dense pearlescent nodules under his skin had completely dissolved.

Leo pressed his fingers to his sternum, freezing in anticipation.

Inside, steadily, deeply, and terrifyingly, like the engine of an ocean liner, beat a single, unified pulse. Sixty-two beats per minute. No extrasystoles. No hydraulic strikes. Nothing else. Just a heart. Just a pulse.

Voices drifted in from the street, through the warped door. The sound reached him with crystalline clarity – as if the concrete walls had thinned to tissue paper.

“...was it worth it?” It was Ilunga’s voice. Hollow, vibrating with barely contained tension.

“I did what I had to do,” Imani’s voice sounded steady, like the flow of a deep river on a plain.

“He is an outsider, Imani.”

“He is not an outsider anymore, Ilunga.”

Leo rose from the mat. His muscles rolled beneath his skin smoothly, like a predator's after a long hibernation. In the corner lay his olive-green mercenary uniform. He pulled on the trousers, buttoned the shirt. The fabric glided over the fresh marks on his body, causing a light, thrilling tingle. Tying the laces on his high boots, he cast a glance at his right wrist.

The copper bracelet was warm. Alive.

Leo pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped out from the bunker's twilight into the blinding, scorching glare of the Congolese day.

Imani sat in the shade, at a makeshift table fashioned from an old stump. She wore the same worn-out jeans and a men's shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Her hair was slightly damp from sweat, her face tired but remarkably bright. She looked at him the way one looks at a person who has returned from an incredibly long journey: without superfluous words, with pure recognition.

Nearby, by the concrete water cistern, stood Ilunga, his hands shoved into his pockets. His face remained inscrutable, but in his heavy gaze there was no longer the old, blatant distrust. Only the acknowledgment of a fact: he survived.

The ground beneath Leo’s boots felt to him – for the first time in all these days – not alien. The clay was not an enemy. The jungle around them was not a prison.

He walked up to Imani.

She didn't embrace him, nor did she ask questions. She simply picked up an enameled mug from a protruding stump nearby and handed it to him.

Coffee. Black, strong, with a velvety bitterness.

Leo took the mug. Took a sip. The bitterness burned his tongue, flowing down his esophagus, filling the residual emptiness in his chest.

And in that dense bitterness there was no longer any Boston, or “The Farm”, or Charlotte, or the dead eyes of his grandfather.

There was only this earth. Only this day. And only her.

Chapter Sixteen. Target Trajectory

The heat over the base hung motionless, thick and viscous as unsettled palm oil, drowning out both the cries of birds and the distant rumble of trucks from the

Kato-Tombe mine. The air was heavy with ozone, rotting banana leaves, and damp cement.

Ilunga stood by the rusty rainwater cistern, leaning his shoulder against the rough iron. On his dark fingers, accustomed to the oily chill of a Kalashnikov bolt carrier, a pinch of dry tobacco crumbs clung. He kept his eyes fixed on Imani.

She sat on an overturned wooden crate of Czechoslovak grenades. Her nakedness was already hidden by a simple cotton shirt, but on her delicate collarbones and the dark, smooth skin of her neck, one could still sense the fresh, blood-engorged crescents – invisible to his eyes – imprints of Leo’s bites and nails. And she radiated that faintly perceptible, bitter scent of the tropical forest and burnt sugar, which Ilunga remembered from their very first night together in the village by the Lualaba River – eight years ago, before another war burned down their home, before the customary law *droit coutumier* turned into the powerless whispers of old men.

Ilunga looked at her not with male resentment, nor with jealousy – in the Katanga jungle, these feelings burned out first, giving way to pure survival instinct. He looked at her as a prophetess who had made a sacrifice to gods whose names were forbidden to be spoken aloud.

“Why him?” Ilunga asked.

His voice was muffled, low, and even, like the thumps of a wooden pestle mashing dry cassava. It held the detached pragmatism of a man assessing an unexpected breach in his defenses.

Imani did not raise her head. Her fingers casually stroked the thin copper bracelet on her left wrist – an ancient weave of her mother's family, where every notch meant something.

“Perhaps he is the only one who can stop all this,” she answered.

The conversation between them was always built not from words, but from the pauses between words. From the way foliage rustled under a bare foot, how a palm tree's shadow shifted, how the heart stopped before the first shot.

“How?” Ilunga crossed his arms over his chest. The dark veins on his forearms pulled taut like dry vines.

Imani closed her eyes for a moment. Behind her closed eyelids, the frantic celluloid reels from his delirium were still spinning, the Boston snow was falling, and the black bats hatched from his veins were beating against the walls of the concrete bunker.

“I don't know,” she said calmly. “But the earth has accepted him. And he has accepted it.”

The massive wooden door of the bunker, sheathed in sheets of roofing iron, slid open with a drawn-out, creaking groan.

Ilunga quickly turned his head. Leo stepped out of the doorway onto the scorching clay of the courtyard.

The partisan's honed eye noted everything: the nervous, slouching angularity of a white man terrified of stepping on a venomous snake or breathing contaminated air was gone. Leo stepped barefoot onto the hot dust with confident, fluid, heavy steps, as if the weight of his body had changed, acquiring a new density. Under the unbuttoned collar of his camouflage shirt, a pink net of fresh scars was visible on his chest, and on his right wrist gleamed clean, polished copper.

Leo stopped, squinting against the blinding tropical sun. Imani rose from the crate, walked over to a flat stump where a soot-blackened kettle sat, and poured a fragrant black brew into an enameled mug.

"Here, drink," she handed him the coffee.

Leo took the mug. His fingers were steady, his nails no longer blue from hypoxia. He took a long, greedy gulp. The bitter, scalding liquid washed down his esophagus, and for a moment it seemed to him that he wasn't drinking ordinary Arabica, but the liquid, molten earth of this land. That he didn't just hear the noise of the jungle – he felt the vibration of the earth hundreds of meters away, as if his circulatory system had begun to operate like a low-frequency seismograph.

"How long was I out?" Leo asked. His words sounded unusually deep, devoid of their former shortness of breath.

"Almost two days," Imani replied.

Leo flinched. The mug froze at his lips. Forty-eight hours. Two days subtracted from the calendar, from life, dissolved in a delirium where Alan Parker spliced light in an old cinema, and his own venous system bloomed with radioactive gardenias.

"And what… what was that?" Leo looked Imani straight in the eye, trying to latch onto a comprehensible coordinate system – onto virology, onto enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays, onto shamanism, onto anything that had a name.

"Leo, wait," Imani softly but unyieldingly placed her palm on his chest, barely touching the fabric of his shirt. "Right now, that doesn't matter."

She shifted a strict, demanding gaze to Ilunga. *Don't drag it out. Speak.*

Ilunga sighed heavily, peeled himself away from the cistern, and stepped closer. His face once again turned into a frozen mask of baked Katanga clay.

"Mbul Benga is dead," the partisan stated evenly.

Leo slowly lowered the mug.

“The miner? But Remi said... Sarah wrote in the report that his condition had stabilized. The dynamics were positive. Wasn't he already getting up?”

“He came out of his tent yesterday afternoon,” Ilunga confirmed. “I saw it myself. Drank cassava broth. Talked to people. And tonight... He died suddenly. Just bled out. In ten minutes.”

Ilunga paused, looking somewhere over Leo’s head into the dense green of the jungle:

“The duty orderly ran out of the tent in tears. By morning, nothing was left of Benga’s internal organs but dark slime. The whole bed was soaked in a black, uncoagulating sludge. He was bleeding even from under his fingernails.”

He reached into the side pocket of his worn vest and pulled out a thick A4 file, folded in four. The documents were slightly permeated with the smell of gun oil and, for some reason, dried pepper.

“Dr. Huybrechts asked me to pass this on to you.”

Leo snatched the papers, immediately unfolding them. His professional eyes quickly scanned the first page: hematological parameters, D-dimer concentration graphs, rapid-PCR results.

“And the girls?” Leo snapped his head up. “The sisters from the village?”

“They are fine,” Ilunga replied. “No fever, no bruising. But just in case, Huybrechts moved them into strict quarantine. Into a separate, locked isolation ward.”

Leo looked closely at the second page. Sarah's data was flawless and terrifying. The erythrocyte lysis graphs did not fit any standard curve.

He slowly lowered the papers. In his eyes, recently cloudy with fever, now stood a cold, mathematical clarity. His brain, rewired by the virus, instantly switched from a biological threat to a tactical one.

“What's the word from the mine?” Leo asked, and his voice sounded detached, as if he were somewhere else entirely. “Diana's mercenaries. Are they looking for us?”

Ilunga chuckled – shortly, only with the corners of his eyes, without parting his lips.

“Dragoș came to Bata Kolé yesterday,” the partisan replied, and a cold contempt slipped into his tone – the contempt of a man whose land had digested far worse conquerors. “In two Jeeps. Machine guns uncovered, barrels pointing at our backs. They herded the elders to the well. The Romanian shouted, spat saliva, promised to burn the crops and spill blood if the village didn't hand over the American doctor and...” Ilunga shot a glance at Imani, “the witch.”

Imani did not react to the word at all, but her fingers squeezed the copper bracelet a little tighter.

“And what did they do?” Leo stepped a little closer.

“The elders? Kept silent, like stones in a dry riverbed,” Ilunga shrugged as if it were an everyday occurrence. “To them, Dragoș is just an ordinary evil spirit, a gust of rotten wind that will soon die down. While we remain. They were told nothing. The mercenaries spun their wheels in the dust, kicked some dogs, and drove back to their camp.”

“And the WHO hospital?” Leo's fingers gripped the edges of the medical reports. “Are Sarah and the others safe? If Dragoș decides to pressure them...”

“The hospital doesn't know where you are hiding,” Ilunga cut him off, raising a palm as if blocking the path to doubt. “I ordered my men to cut all direct contact. Dr. Huybrechts thinks you've gone deep into the jungle, toward the river. My guys only passed on to her what was safe to pass on, and took her papers. They'd rather swallow their own tongues than lead the mercenaries to this base. If Dragoș raids the WHO with a search, the doctors won't be able to give you up even if they wanted to. No one knows the way here. Only the forest.”

Leo nodded, accepting this information as just another resolved variable in his deadly equation. They had little time left.

“Stay here,” Leo tossed back, pivoting on the thick soles of his army boots. “I need to check something.”

“Leo, you need to eat first!” Imani called after him, taking a step forward. “You haven't eaten anything for two days!”

“Later. Afterwards,” he replied without turning around.

The bunker door slammed shut, dully cutting off the noise of the tropical day.

The improvised laboratory smelled of isopropyl alcohol, acrid phenol, and heated ozone from the portable MinION genomic sequencer quietly buzzing on the edge of the oak table. The glaucous light of a fluorescent lamp sliced through the gloom.

Leo sat down on the wooden chair. His movements were economical and hyper-precise, as if controlled by an alien, perfect mechanism.

Tourniquet on the left forearm. The cold click of a sterile needle. Venous blood quickly filled the vacutainer.

Leo held the test tube up to the light. The blood was a dark ruby, of natural density. No tarry thickness, no black cinnabar. He placed a drop on a slide, covered it with a coverslip, and slipped it into the light microscope.

A perfect cosmos opened in the eyepiece: the biconcave discs of erythrocytes floated in the transparent plasma like smooth golden coins. No pearlescent structures. No thorium microcrystals. The leukocytes were calm.

Then he ran the rapid PCR test on the MinION. Twenty minutes later, the monitor displayed the result: *Ebola Filovirus Katanga strain – undetectable*. The viral load had dropped below the detection threshold.

Leo laid out all his available data on the table, turning the oak surface into a complex semiotic map of a catastrophe, a palimpsest of medical records and espionage reports.

On the left – the diary entries of the deceased Belgian biologist Maurice and the autopsy protocols of the hunter Kasongo Mpala (from chapter 3). In the center – the medical charts of the miner Mbul Benga and the sisters from the village, sent by Sarah Huybrechts. On the right – his own test results and genomic maps of the filovirus isolated from the fruit bats from the Southbridge Security mercenary camp.

Leo began to construct the phylogenetic tree of the pathogen, reading the symptoms like the characters of an ancient, half-forgotten alphabet.

1. **Kasongo Mpala (hunter)**: Found Maurice in the forest. Infected with the wild strain. The virus acted like a classic, crude killer. Zero genomic shift. Lightning-fast collapse of the vascular bed. Death in 48 hours.
2. **Maurice Brunet (biologist)**: Infection site unknown. In him, the virus reacted with the high radiation of the Katanga pitchblende. The first mutation occurred – the virus tried to rebuild Maurice's aorta, creating pearlescent nodules to accumulate isotopes, but the human body couldn't withstand such a load. Maurice died of a systemic hydraulic shock.
3. **Fruit bats from the Southbridge camp**: Stable, centuries-old symbiosis. Immortal bioreactors. The virus lives in their tissues without killing the host, using them as an ideal reservoir.
4. **Mbul Benga (miner)**: The most terrifying variant. Infected by the hunter. In him, the virus tried to take the path of “symbiosis” – it slowed the pulse, lowered the temperature, gave the man a false remission. The virus “tested” the host, trying to integrate into his DNA (a genomic shift of 0.4%). But when Benga's immune system tried to reject the alien material, the pathogen instantly dropped its adaptive settings. A reverse explosion back to its primordial, hemorrhagic form occurred. Overexpression of lysis enzymes – and the man literally dissolved from the inside out in a matter of minutes.
5. **Sisters from Bata Kolé**: Complete, instantaneous integration. Genomic shift 0.3%. The virus didn't kill them and didn't lay dormant – it dissolved into their metabolism, turning them into asymptomatic carriers.
6. **Himself (Leo Gonzalez)**: Stable integration through alchemical and biological shock. Genomic shift 0.2%. The virus reconfigured his cardiovascular system, fusing two hearts into one, and fell asleep, turning Leo into the same ideal, immortal reservoir as the bats.

Leo leaned back in his chair and squeezed his eyes shut.

The picture came together with chilling, mathematical precision.

This Ebola strain was not a banal pathogen. It was a living evolutionary machine, possessing a strange, almost conscious flexibility. It was looking for a way out. It was testing human material. If the host was weak or resisted, the virus turned into an absolute hemorrhagic weapon with 100 percent lethality, tearing the host apart to escape into the environment as an aerosol and bloody dust.

And all these threads, all these mutated RNA chains led to a single geographic point.

To the sealed adit on the territory of the Southbridge Security camp. To that very crimson, radioactive puddle of cinnabar oozing from beneath the cave-in.

When Leo came out of the bunker, the sun had already crossed its zenith, casting long, predatory shadows from the trees.

A plate already sat on the wooden table dug into the ground. Imani silently watched him. In the bowl: hot rice, chunks of stewed wild boar meat in a thick peanut sauce, and fried green plantains.

“Eat,” Imani said shortly, pushing the bowl and an aluminum army spoon toward him.

Ilunga sat opposite him on a stool, unhurriedly wiping the bolt carrier of his assault rifle with a rag.

Leo sat down. He picked up the spoon and began to eat. He swallowed the first two bites without tasting them – his stomach, tormented by two days of hunger, contracted in a spasm. But with each new swallow, a cold, calibrated mental clarity returned to him.

He chewed another piece of meat, washed it down with water from a clay jug, laid his spoon on the edge of the plate, and raised his eyes.

“We have to destroy everything,” Leo said. His voice sounded even, devoid of emotion, like a surgeon reading out a diagnosis. “Burn it all down.”

Imani froze with the jug in her hands.

“What?” she asked quietly.

“The Southbridge Security camp,” Leo shifted his gaze from her to Ilunga. “The source of the virus is there. In that adit. In the barracks. And it doesn't behave like regular Ebola. It tests its hosts. Do you understand? If it realizes it can't create a stable symbiosis with most humans, it will drop its settings. It will turn into a super-pathogen. Into an airborne hemorrhagic fever. It will break out like Covid, only it will kill everyone it touches.”

Ilunga carefully laid aside the rag, took the bolt, and with a click, slotted it into the receiver.

“Is it dangerous?” the partisan asked.

“It's the end,” Leo replied. “First Bata Kolé and all the Kato-Tombe miners will die out. Then Lubumbashi. And a couple of weeks later, the virus will fly on a commercial jet from Kinshasa to Brussels and Paris. Millions will die.”

Ilunga looked at the American with narrowed eyes.

“And how do you propose to ‘burn it all down’, Doctor?” a dry, bitter irony slipped into the partisan's voice. “My people are fourteen men with rusty Kalashnikovs and two RPG-7 grenade launchers. Southbridge's mercenaries are thirty professionals in heavy armor, fortified pillboxes, heavy machine guns, and thermal imagers. We won't even get within grenade-throwing distance of their fence.”

Leo put another spoonful of rice in his mouth, chewed unhurriedly, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“Not us,” he replied. “The ‘Company’.”

Ilunga frowned, ignorance reflecting in his eyes. He clearly didn't understand the term.

Imani lowered the jug to the table. The copper bracelet on her wrist clinked softly against the enamel. She looked at her husband, then shifted a long, stern gaze to Leo.

“The CIA,” Imani said quietly and distinctly.

Ilunga froze. His fingers, resting on the wooden stock of the assault rifle, instantly tensed.

Imani faltered slightly, her pupils clouding over for a moment, as if she were peering back into the feverish haze from the distant past:

“I saw... I heard everything when you were delirious, Leo. The voices. The training ground in Virginia. The gunshots. About your father.”

Ilunga slowly leaned forward. His tired face, crisscrossed with fine scars, became as impenetrable as basalt.

“So, you work for the CIA... Doctor?” the partisan's voice dropped to a dangerous, growling whisper.

Leo nodded affirmatively, continuing to chew and look the partisan straight in the eye. There was no fear, no attempt to justify himself in his behavior.

“Do they have anything to do with the virus?” Ilunga asked, the barrel of the assault rifle swaying slightly in his hand. “Did they bring it here?”

Leo stopped chewing. He put down his spoon, straightened his back, and placed both palms on the table.

“No,” Leo answered firmly. “Langley has no idea what was found in the Kato-Tombe mine. The Agency is interested in something else entirely. Smuggling. IC Waze and their shell companies are suspected of illegal mining and illegal export of unrefined uranium on an industrial scale. They are selling it to third countries – to Iran or North Korea. My task was singular: to find and secure evidence.”

“And what will your ‘Company’ do if you give them the evidence?” Ilunga asked.

“They will strike,” Leo replied.

“A strike? Here?” Imani threw up her hands.

“Not far from the coast, in the international waters of the Gulf of Guinea, a U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer is stationed,” Leo spoke in the dry, protocol-heavy language of Langley briefings. “On board are Tomahawk cruise missiles with concrete- penetrating and thermobaric warheads. If I transmit the exact coordinates and confirmation of the presence of high-grade uranium ore, they will launch a precision strike.”

And in that moment he tasted the familiar flavor of Virginia cordite on his lips again. High-quality American steel, flying low over the Gulf of Guinea, was to be the only scalpel capable of cauterizing this ancient ulcer. This was the cold mathematics of the Pentagon, where no room was left for poetry.

Leo swept his gaze over them both:

“The missiles will destroy Southbridge headquarters, seal and collapse the adit with hundreds of tons of rock, and the thermal explosion will scorch everything inside at a temperature of three thousand degrees. The virus will be physically eradicated.”

“But won't people die?” Imani asked quietly, with pain. “There are workers there. There are ordinary Congolese from the lower shifts…”

“Only those who are directly on the base's territory at the moment of the strike will die,” Leo answered calmly. But for a second, the voice of his father-instructor from the Camp Peary training ground broke through in his tone. “The strikes will be high-precision. It will not affect civilians in the surrounding villages or the mine itself.”

Pausing, he held the heavy silence and added:

“Otherwise, Imani, in a month, half of Africa will die out. Millions will perish.”

Ilunga looked at Leo for a long time. The complex, agonizing work of thought was reflected in his eyes. The partisan, who had spent his whole life fighting with rusty iron in the mud and jungles, was trying to comprehend this terrifying, god-like ease with which white men could call down fire from the heavens from an ocean thousands of kilometers away. He looked at his own hands, fiddling with the bolt

carrier. Next to what the American was offering, his assault rifle seemed no more menacing than a child's slingshot.

Ilunga raised his gaze to Imani. That unspoken, years-long experience of understanding each other told: she gave a barely perceptible nod.

The partisan leaned his elbows on the table, bringing his face closer to Leo's.

"Leo," Ilunga asked. "What kind of evidence is needed? For your destroyer to fire?"

"Ore," Leo pulled the folded page from Maurice's diary out of his shirt pocket. "Ore with an anomalously high concentration of uranium-235 and specific thorium isotopes. I need a physical sample from the vein. A photograph of the spectral analysis and exact GPS coordinates of the seam outcrop. And this vein is here somewhere. Not in the mine itself, but nearby."

Ilunga and Imani exchanged glances again.

"We need to talk to Mulenga," Ilunga said, turning to his wife.

"With whom?" Leo frowned.

"Kapya Mulenga," Imani answered. "The old shaman. The same sorcerer who cursed you by the maize fields when we returned."

"The old man remembers these hills from before the Israelis came here with geological maps," Ilunga added, chambering a round with a click and putting the rifle on safety. "He knows where the old tailings are. He knows where the ground 'glows at night' and where people's teeth fall out. If there's a pitchblende outcrop somewhere on the surface – Mulenga knows about it."

"His father worked with my great-grandfather," Imani added.

Leo looked at them, at this pair bound by the place and a shared past, and rose from the table. His meal was finished. Inside his chest, steadily, deeply, and powerfully, pumping enriched blood through renewed vessels, beat the single, unbending piston of a new heart.

"Alright," Leo agreed, buttoning his khaki shirt. "Then we go to him."

Chapter Seventeen. Bone of the Earth

The forest parted before the hood of the battered Mitsubishi reluctantly and heavily, like thick green water closing with a grim rustle behind the stern of a boat.

The village of Bata Kolé met them with silence – a scorched, tense silence. Parched by the sun, choked with stifling fear, and frozen with the anticipation of disaster. Several rows of mud huts made of unbaked brick and rusty corrugated iron stretched along the broken red rut, like knocked-out teeth in a lower jaw. Between them lay trampled, cracked alleyways, overturned wooden mortars, and abandoned maize fields upon which the dust unhurriedly settled. No children, no chickens, not

even flies over the dung. Only the distant, barely audible cry of an infant drifting from somewhere behind a clay fence, and the persistent smell of overburnt palm oil, wood smoke, and stagnant water.

Ilunga hit the brakes at the very last yard on the outskirts. This house was wider and sturdier than the rest – with high gates and a solid cinder block fence.

Behind the fence, in the gray-brown shade of a sprawling mango tree, boiled a quiet, monotonous life. At the gate stood a young woman with a one-year-old child on her hip – she silently and motionlessly followed the Jeep with her eyes. In the yard, two old women in faded dresses rhythmically pounded dry cassava with wooden pestles in massive stone mortars. The hollow, dense thuds – *thwack*... *thwack*... – echoed over the blistering earth, akin to the pulse of an ancient, tired beast. A little further off, over a fire of damp logs, a huge cast-iron cauldron resting on three boulders let out bluish smoke. It wafted a spicy, hearty steam – some kind of stewed meat, roasted palm nuts, and a sharp note of wild onion.

Ilunga killed the engine.

“Wait here,” he tossed back, and stepped out of the cab.

Leo and Imani remained in the open bed of the pickup. Imani sat with her knees pulled to her chest, her palms resting motionless on her worn jeans. To the residents of Bata Kolé, she remained a pariah – the one who had betrayed her family's blood for the sake of whites. And Leo physically felt this thick alienation, taut as a string. The copper bracelet on his wrist radiated a quiet, steady warmth, pulsating in time with his new, solitary heart. Inside his ribcage, there was no longer a chaotic flutter – the renewed sinus node pumped blood evenly and thickly, and in this rhythm he caught a strange echo: the copper on his wrist pulsed with a barely perceptible, tickling spasm, as if reacting to an invisible vein buried deep beneath the shaman's hut.

Ilunga walked up to the gate and spoke quietly to the woman. She nodded and darted into the gloom of the yard.

A couple of minutes later, the hefty carved door of the mud hut creaked, and Kapya Mulenga stepped onto the threshold.

The old shaman seemed carved from ebony or dry, cracked clay. Parched, parchment-like skin stretched taut over his cheekbones, a short bristly crop of white hair, and a sunken chest adorned with a bundle of bird claws and small bones on a dark cord. His pupils – cloudy, covered by the thick milky veil of cataracts – seemed to look not at people, but somewhere through time and space. In his right hand, he gripped a carved wooden cane with a bone knob; his fingers traced the ridges on the polished wood as if they were counting the years.

He did not descend the steps. He stopped on the threshold, placing a palm on the doorjamb – the gesture of an owner, marking the boundary between his own and the foreign.

“Young Mboko,” the sorcerer rasped. His voice was restrained, with a quiet, hollow vibration that sent a chill over the skin. He called Ilunga by the ancient surname of his ancestors, instantly drawing the boundaries of the conversation. “Why have you brought them?”

Ilunga stood before the gate with a straight back, arms lowered by his sides. In his posture, for the first time, a deep, almost religious respect could be read – for the old man and for that unseen, ancient power he embodied.

“The earth is burning, Kapya,” the partisan began in Lingala. “The white mercenaries behind the fence have unleashed a contagion from the adit. The whole village is in danger. We need your help.”

Mulenga slowly raised a hand with withered fingers, halting his speech.

“Your words are heavy, Ilunga,” the old man said quietly but firmly. “But such words are not cast into the dust before a single man.”

The shaman turned his wrinkled face toward the yard and tossed out a single, guttural word. One of the women by the cauldron immediately set aside her pestle, briskly walked out of the yard, and disappeared into the labyrinth of village streets.

“We will wait for the elders,” Mulenga rasped, and retreated into the shadow of the house.

They waited under the scorching tropical sun for about twenty minutes. Finally, five old men gathered in the yard – two of those who had blocked the Jeep's path during the escape, and three new ones. All of them wore white canvas shirts yellowed by time, with sun-dried faces and hands roughened by years of labor to the state of cracked kiln clay. They sat silently on wooden benches and overturned crates beneath the broad crown of the mango tree. Mulenga sat in the center, in a chair woven from vines, motionless and stern as an idol.

The women stepped back to the edge of the yard, continuing to busy themselves soundlessly by the cast-iron cauldron, occasionally glancing at the gathered men.

Ilunga stood before the council. Leo and Imani kept silent slightly behind him. On this land, the floor belonged to those who had put down roots into it hundreds of years ago.

The partisan spoke. His voice was even, devoid of emotion – like a commander reporting before a battle. He did not resort to complex medical terminology. He translated Leo's conclusions into the language of the jungle and the ancestors: he told of the black, rotting blood that dissolved a person from the inside out in ten minutes, of the deaths of the hunter Kasongo, the white biologist Maurice, and the miner Benga. He explained that the blight was breaking out of the old adit on the territory of the Southbridge camp, and that the white doctor wanted to bring down fire from the sky upon this adit. But to summon this fire, the doctor needed proof – that

very stone that made the ground “glow at night” and caused people's bones to wither and teeth to fall out.

“Elders,” Ilunga concluded, “you know these hills better than anyone. You know where the ancestors forbade digging earthen pits. But we need this stone.”

He fell silent and crouched on his haunches.

The old men remained silent. They exchanged glances – unhurriedly, weightlessly, the way people exchange glances when they are accustomed to speaking not so much with words as with looks and pauses.

Finally, one of them, with whitish, faded eyebrows and deep nasolabial folds, nodded toward Leo:

“Let the white man speak.”

Leo stepped forward. Standing before five old men in a Congolese village was not like presenting to an Academic Council at Harvard, nor was it like giving a report to an instructor at the Langley “Farm”. Here lay a different scale of truth, where a single gesture weighed more heavily than a dozen scientific monographs.

“The contagion that the mercenaries found is not just a fever,” Leo began, calmly weighing each word, pausing while Ilunga translated into Lingala. “It is more terrible than any curse. It is smarter. The virus learns, adapts to a person to find its next victim. If it breaks out beyond the camp's perimeter, it will leave no one alive. It will destroy not just your village. Cities, capitals, the whole world will perish.”

The elders looked at him with motionless, dark eyes, but the air around them thickened.

“But there is a way to stop it,” Leo continued. “American ships from the ocean will deliver a precision missile strike. The strike will come from the sky, early in the morning, at dawn. The adit will be buried under hundreds of tons of rock, and a thermal charge will burn the virus to ash. Neither your village nor the main Kato-Tombe mine will be affected.”

He paused, letting the thoughts settle in their minds:

“To minimize casualties among ordinary Congolese workers and PMC staff, I propose organizing a diversion. When I learn the exact date and time of the strike, Ilunga's men will attack the main mine. The mercenaries are hounds, reacting to any threat to their loot. The bulk of the garrison will abandon the camp and rush to defend the mine. And when the missiles fall on the adit, only a few will remain in the camp.”

“Mboko, are you sure he will succeed?” asked one of the old men, looking intently at the partisan.

Ilunga nodded silently.

The elders leaned their heads toward one another. Their quiet, staccato whispering in Lingala rustled like dry grass in a gust of wind – guttural syllables, frequent pauses, arguments, and, finally, agreement.

Mulenga sat motionless all the while. His cane lay across his knees. He did not participate in the council – he was listening to the profound essence of what was unfolding.

After several long minutes, the old man with the whitish eyebrows raised his hand. Silence returned to the yard.

“We will help you find the stone, white man,” the elder took the floor, and his voice sounded like the crunch of pebbles beneath a thick-soled boot. “Mulenga will show you the way to the old tailings.”

He shifted a hostile gaze, filled with ancient rejection, to Imani, and then back to Leo:

“But the earth has a price. When everything is over and the fire falls from the heavens, you both will leave our lands. Forever. You will not return to this village, nor to these hills. The curse lives within you both. You carry it in your blood. Leave Katanga, or the jungle itself will devour you.”

Imani shuddered barely perceptibly. Leo noticed how her fingers touched the copper bracelet – the only thing she would have left from this land. Her fingers clenched into fists, her knuckles turning white, but she silently bowed her head.

Leo met the elders' gaze openly:

“Alright, we will leave.”

Mulenga rose from the wicker chair. His movement was unhurried, commanding, as if an ancient tree trunk were straightening out. He took his cane and, step by step, walked past the elders to the gate. At the gate, he stopped and tossed a few short words to one of the women.

“I need a pickaxe,” he said. “And a headlamp.”

A minute later, she brought out from the depths of the yard a heavy, rusted miner's pickaxe with a hewn wooden handle, and a military headlamp with a cracked lens on a powerful battery.

Mulenga gripped the pickaxe handle with his bony fingers with the familiar confidence of a man who had held the tool a thousand times. He walked unhurriedly over to the pickup, pulled the door open himself, and sank heavily into the front passenger seat next to the driver's side.

The old man laid the pickaxe behind the seat. He clamped the cane between his legs. The headlamp he left on the dashboard.

Leo and Imani climbed into the open truck bed. With a turn of the key, Ilunga started the diesel, and the pickup pulled away, kicking up clouds of red dust.

On the way out of Bata Kolé, the vehicle drove past the white canvas tents of the WHO field hospital.

Behind the yellow plastic cordon tape, at the entrance to the green zone, stood Remy Gaillard and Dzuzu Koma. Both wore white medical gowns with headlamps around their necks. The Frenchman smoked nervously, flicking ashes into the mud, and his sweat-drenched face seemed carved from gray wax. Dzuzu stood beside him, clutching a clipboard with documents to her chest.

Remy lifted his head and saw the passing pickup. A complex, bitter turmoil reflected on his exhausted face – a mixture of professional impotence, human anxiety, and the desolate realization that his colleague had crossed a line beyond which no epidemiological protocols applied anymore. Dzuzu quietly placed her hand on the Frenchman's shoulder, and her attentive, narrowed eyes followed the vehicle with an unwavering, long gaze.

A sharp, nauseatingly acrid smell of chloramine and burnt plastic drifted to Leo – they were disposing of used hazmat suits in a blue barrel near the tents. This sterile, medical scent of the old world caused a fleeting, dry lump in his throat. They seemed like figures from someone else's dream, stuck in the hopeless logic of instructions, while beneath Leo’s own shoulder blades, fresh, invisible scars, flushed with hot blood, were still burning.

He didn't wave to them. Didn't call out. He simply tried to commit their faces to memory – two people from his former, rigorous academic life, which had burned away without a trace in a radioactive delirium. The vehicle picked up speed, and the white canvas tents dissolved behind a bend.

The jungle swallowed them instantly. At first, the track wound through thorny underbrush, but soon the crowns of centuries-old ficus and khaya trees closed over the road in a solid dark-green vault, turning the path into a damp, breathing tunnel. The air thickened, suffused with the stagnant smells of humus, wet foliage, and overripe fruit.

Mulenga sat in the front seat absolutely motionless. His time-faded eyes stared straight through the windshield:

“There... Left at the fallen baobab... Across the dry creek.”

The pickup bounced over exposed roots, its undercarriage scraping against boulders. The trail grew drier and narrower, until the Jeep suddenly rolled out onto a wide, scorched clearing.

Before them, amidst patches of toxic-green moss, ruins revealed themselves. Here, time had devoured everything except stone and rust. Two orange, listing steel portals and the remnants of iron mine-cart rails jutted out of the red clay, plunging

into the dark, caved-in maw of the rock. Scattered around lay the blackened remains of wooden supports, coated in a whitish layer of mold.

It was an old, abandoned mine – a blind sinkhole opened by the Americans eighty years ago.

Ilunga killed the engine. In the silence, only the ticking of the cooling metal muffler could be heard.

The uninvited guests felt a cold, cellar-like draft pull from the depths of the mine, and faintly mingled within it was a strange aroma, unnatural for this place – the smell of frankincense and blooming gardenia.

Mulenga opened his door and stepped barefoot onto the damp moss. He took the pickaxe from his knees, picked up the headlamp, and walked over to the truck bed, handing the items to Leo.

“See there,” the old man pointed with his carved cane through the dense thicket to the right, to where a gently sloping, absolutely bare hill of gray rocky earth rose. “About half a kilometer, maybe a little further. Where the earth smells of dry iron and mortal cold, you will find what you seek.”

Leo jumped down from the truck bed and took the dosimeter from the glove compartment – the device clicked softly, reacting to the background radiation. Leo hung it around his neck and then took the pickaxe – the old metal burned his palms with the chill of rust and foreign, forgotten labor. He placed the headlamp into his canvas bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

Imani immediately climbed out after him, her lips pressed into a tight, unyielding line:

“I'm going with you.”

But Mulenga abruptly thrust out his cane, blocking her path.

“No!” the sorcerer's voice clanged like a steel bolt. “He must go there alone.”

The old man turned his impassive face, deeply etched with wrinkles, toward the dead hill:

“This place is cursed. Your great-grandfather knew. He who digs here loses his mind. Or his life. Let this curse meet him face to face. If the earth accepts him, he will return.”

Imani froze. Her hands, clenched into fists, trembled, but she did not take another step. In her dark, profound gaze reflected the sheer depth of fear, faith, and silent love that must not be spoken aloud before the ancient forest.

Leo stepped toward her. Briefly, firmly, in a single motion, he embraced her – pulled her close, breathed in the scent of her hair. Through the thin cotton fabric of

her shirt, he felt the trembling, hot expanse of her skin, heard her heart beating in rapid, bird-like thuds... And let go.

“I will return,” he assured her.

Imani nodded. Once. And that was all.

Leo shifted his grip on the wooden handle of the pickaxe and stepped alone into the dense undergrowth, making his way toward the gray hill.

Chapter Eighteen. The Shrine

The forest had different eyes – deep, subterranean, woven from tangled threads of mycelium, ancient Precambrian strata, wet lichen, and rotting foliage that absorbed every drop of stagnant water. The jungle felt the weight of the walking man's boots, the rhythmic spasm of his muscles, the chemical trail of his sweat – agitated, white, steeped in bitter coffee, antibiotics, and distant Boston snow. The jungle remembered.

Because a similar footstep had echoed here recently. Another white man – fragile, fine-boned, smelling of medicinal phenol, road dust, and convulsive fright – had passed through these very ferns, his head brushing the hanging, supple lianas. He had moved away from the gray hill, clutching a massive steel container under his arm, and had not returned. The jungle had accepted his tracks, dissolved his scent into the warm humus, and turned his name into nothing.

And now a second one was making his way through.

He walked differently. His step resonated with a different – seamless, confident – solidity, the way subterranean waters advance along deep drifts. The copper bracelet on his wrist radiated an even, profound warmth into the damp air, and within his chest beat a deep piston whose rhythm the jungle recognized as kin. He carried within him their own, hard-won blight.

The jungle was in no hurry. It remembered everyone who had set foot on this earth – and every one who had never walked out of it.

And Leo pushed on through their thicket.

The massive rusted pickaxe banged against his thigh with every tilt of his torso. The military headlamp thumped against his chest, and the Geiger counter on his neck emitted rare, quiet clicks – a dry, barely audible rustle, akin to the movement of sand in an hourglass.

The underbrush was becoming impenetrable. First came thorny shrubs with small, stiff leaves that scratched his forearms into scarlet streaks. Then – tall wild ferns smelling of musty earth and falling wild mangoes. And finally – gigantic, centuries-old khayas and ficuses, whose intertwined crowns completely extinguished the daylight, dropping only rare, sharp gold coins of piercing sun onto the damp moss.

The moss beneath his feet was soft, elastic – it yielded like living meat – step, step, another step. The air thickened with every stride: the moisture, the smells, the sounds – everything swelled, compressing into a dense, almost tangible medium through which he didn't just walk, but waded.

It felt as though this air could be drunk. Or, if he dropped the pickaxe, the bag, took off his combat boots, he could dive in and swim. Swim away somewhere far – where no one would find him – where it would be only him and Imani...

Leo felt the bracelet on his right wrist begin to gradually warm up – with an even, deep, living warmth. Like the warmth of hands that hold you, embrace you, dry you off. And you, clean, refreshed, feel their warmth – even here.

Half a kilometer. The mossy carpet ended.

The trees parted, forming a natural amphitheater at the foot of the gray, absolutely bare hill of charred rocky ore.

Here, the earth seemed scorched long before the dawn of man. Not a single stalk, not a single blade of grass – only cracked limestone veiled in gray slag. At the very center of this barren clearing rose an ancient shrine.

Seven basalt effigies, hewn from dark, blue-black stone, stood in a semicircle. Their crowns, worn smooth by rain and centuries, reminded Leo of silent sentinels frozen over an invisible boundary. The entire surface of the basalt was deeply pitted with circular signs, spirals, dots, and parallel lines – resembling that same symbolic alphabet stamped onto his copper bracelet and patterned on traditional wax-print dresses. It was a language that existed before the advent of letters, before man attempted to line up the world into the neat ranks of academic dictionaries.

Behind the semicircle of idols, at the very base of the hill, a dark opening gaped.

Not a man-made drift with wooden supports, but a jagged, natural fissure washed out by millennia of subterranean currents. The edge of the passage looked perfectly smooth, polished, as if the sleek bodies of massive creatures had slithered through it for centuries. A freezing, cellar-like draft wafted from the depths, mingling a sharp ammoniac tang, the smell of raw lime, and a subtle, intoxicating note of night-blooming costus.

Leo clicked the switch on his headlamp. A narrow, blinding beam illuminated the slippery walls coated with a mineral bloom.

He took a step inside.

The dosimeter immediately sprang to life.

The quiet background crackle gave way to an insistent, rapid clicking. The device's needle twitched to the left and steadily crept toward the red marks. Two hundred. Three hundred. Four hundred microroentgens per hour. The earth beneath his feet radiated a dense, resilient heat.

The fissure narrowed. Leo moved forward, his shoulders nearly brushing the damp stone outcroppings. The pressure mounted, saturating with the smells of iron, raw loam, and subterranean moisture.

Beneath his boots, something squelched with a heavy, visceral slop.

Leo lowered the beam of his flashlight.

A thin, viscous rivulet flowed across the polished floor of the cave – dark burgundy, with an insane, pearlescent opaline sheen. It was not blood, nor was it ordinary rust. It was that same thick mineral emulsion – cinnabar, mercury sulfides, thorium oxides, and uranium salts seeping from the Precambrian monolith. Leo stepped right into it: the sticky liquid clung to his soles, trailing thin crimson threads behind his boots.

The Geiger counter broke into a rapid drumroll. Six hundred. Seven hundred microroentgens.

Leo rounded a bend in the passage and stepped into a natural grotto. The vaults here rose to the height of two men; the walls were covered with the same carved signs – spirals, deep dots, and closed rings.

And at that moment, the space filled with sound.

Not footsteps, nor the howling of the wind. Not the clatter of crumbling rocks.

A barely audible, silky rustle. The susurration of multitudes of leathery membranes slowly folding in the dark.

Leo raised the beam of his headlamp to the ceiling.

Just beneath the vault, clinging with curved claws to the cracks in the limestone, hung fruit bats. Dozens of massive hammer-headed bats with velvet wingspans of over a meter. They were not asleep. Their wrinkled, blunt muzzles with fleshy outgrowths turned toward the light, and their blind eyes, completely filmed over with a cloudy milky membrane, fixed upon his presence.

In that sightless, focused gaze there was neither fright nor feral aggression.

A profound, non-human recognition seeped through it. They looked at him the way one looks at a creature carrying in its blood that exact same ancient, radioactive alchemy that fueled their own veins beneath the vaults of this grotto. Not a single beast twitched, nor let out an ultrasonic squeak. They hung in total silence, following the white man with the pickaxe with motionless, age-old attention.

The dosimeter escalated into an alarming squeal. Eight hundred. Nine hundred. A thousand microroentgens.

And then Leo caught a scent.

Not guano. Not ammonia. Not raw loam.

The smell of a hospital ward.

Absolute, seared into his memory down to the last molecule. Chloramine. Quartz-sterilized plastic. An impeccably clean floor. And beneath it – the barely perceptible, cloyingly sweet ghost of irradiated, decaying flesh.

Boston. Mass General Hospital. He was six years old.

His father led him by the hand down a long, echoing corridor where the linoleum yielded a barely audible squeak beneath their feet. The air in the hallway smelled exactly like this – of medical ozone and melting radiation.

Room four hundred and twelve.

His mother lay on a narrow white bed. Her once-thick hair had been completely shaved, a translucent stubble breaking through the skin, and deep bluish hollows had settled beneath her eyes. Brachytherapy. Stereotactic radiosurgery and teletherapy had failed to halt the tumor, so the doctors had implanted radioactive seeds into her brain tissue to burn the disease from within. She emanated that same frightening, stifling heat of a decaying core.

Little Leo stepped up to the bed. His father froze by the door, his arms hanging limp.

His mother turned her head. She did not utter a word – only a quiet, bright smile, exhausted by the illness, touched her cracked lips. There was no fear in it, nor any self-pity, only the infinite tenderness of someone departing. She took his childlike palm and pressed it to her hot, sunken cheek.

“Mom…” Leo exhaled.

She smiled at him one last time. And the world collapsed.

Leo stood in the middle of a cave in Upper Katanga. Hot, salty tears streamed down his cheeks, washing away the dust and mingling with drops of sweat. The Geiger counter squealed at its limit. The sightless fruit bats beneath the vault kept their silence.

He wiped his face with the sleeve of his olive shirt, took a deep breath, and stepped toward the far wall of the grotto.

In a niche between two natural stone flowstones, there it lay.

Pitchblende. Uraninite.

A heavy, blue-black rock with a greasy, resinous luster on a fresh fracture. It ran in a thick, uneven vein through the white limestone, scattering bright yellow-green crusts of secondary uranium minerals along its edges.

Leo brought the counter’s sensor closer to the black seam.

The device roared with a continuous, shrieking hum. The needle instantly went off the scale. Twelve hundred. Fifteen hundred microroentgens per hour. The rock was literally boiling with ionizing radiation.

Leo dropped to his knees right into the warm garnet liquid. He pulled a hammer and chisel from his canvas bag, set the tip against the edge of the vein, and struck with force.

A sharp metallic clink echoed beneath the vaults. A sculpted, hefty chunk of pitchblende the size of a large fist broke away from the wall with a slow crunch. Quickly, with professional precision, Leo wrapped the specimen in three layers of thick canvas cloth and placed it at the bottom of his bag. Then he chiseled off a second, smaller piece and sent it in after.

Buckling the strap of the bag, he raised his eyes to the black vein.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Not to the cave. Not to the jungle. Not to the ancient gods on their stone effigies.

To Mom.

He turned and walked toward the exit. The fruit bats followed him with that same soundless, blind, age-old gaze. Not a single wing fluttered. They continued to hang beneath the ceiling, like amulets frozen in stone.

Leo stepped out of the sinkhole.

The white, unbearable glare of the tropical day struck his eyes. The green sea of the jungle surged to meet him with the smells of overheated grass, damp leaf litter, and wild honey. The dosimeter on his neck instantly quieted down, returning to its customary dry clicking.

He walked past the basalt idols of the shrine without brushing against the stones, and descended the slope of the hill.

The pickup waited in the clearing. Imani sat on the wooden tailgate of the truck bed, her legs pulled to her chest. Ilunga stood by the hood with his rifle slung over his shoulder. The shaman was frozen in the front seat of the Jeep, clutching his cane between his knees.

Leo emerged from the thicket. His boots were caked in drying orange clay, his shirt was soaked through, and dusty trails from his tears darkened his cheeks. In his hand, he gripped the bag, densely packed with the specimens.

Imani quickly hopped down to the ground. Her eyes read everything without a single word.

“Leo…”

“Everything’s fine,” he said in a dry, hoarse voice. “I found it. Let’s go. We need to drop off Mulenga.”

She dashed over to him and embraced him – fiercely, with her whole body, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Leo pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, breathing in a scent that felt like his own. Her palm came to rest over his right wrist –

over the dark copper – and in his chest, his heart answered with a steady, powerful, synchronous thud.

They climbed into the truck bed. With a turn of the key, Ilunga made the diesel engine roar.

The vehicle pulled away, turning around on the narrow track and heading back toward Bata Kolé to drop off the old man.

They drove back to the village. The jungle parted before the hood, closing in behind the stern like water closing behind a boat heading upriver. The light broke through in rare, sharp shards, dropping golden coins onto the dirty windshield.

Leo sat in the back, holding Imani's hand. Her fingers – slender, strong, with short nails – clasped his palm over the copper bracelet. The cold of the metal and the warmth of her skin – two worlds, a single point.

He watched the road running away behind them. And thought.

He already knew what would come next.

Returning to the concrete bunker at the abandoned base, he would start the generator. He'd pull the chunks of pitchblende from the canvas bag, lay them out on the table next to the activated dosimeter, and take a series of clear photos with geotags linked to the Southbridge Security camp.

Then he would activate the Starlink and log into the Agency's secure communications terminal.

He wouldn't write a single word in his report about the virus, the mutations, or the resilient fruit bats. That would force Langley to send mobile biodefense teams, scientists, and Special Forces here – and then the jungle would be drowned in blood.

He would strike at Washington's primary, systemic phobia.

Leo would provide the exact GPS coordinates of the barracks at the edge of the quarry. He would transmit the coordinates of the hangar where the blue plastic barrels of ion-exchange resins had been unloaded, and of Girard's underground laboratory behind the steel hermetic door.

And in the operational summary field, he would type out brief lines that left no room for ambiguity:

"*Equipment for the primary extraction and enrichment of uranium concentrate has been delivered to the territory of the PMC base working for the IC Waze corporation. Module manufacturer markings: China National Uranium Co., Ltd. (CNUC / SinoU). I confirm the presence of raw material with an anomalously high concentration of Uranium-235. The site is preparing for the illicit supply of enriched materials to the black market. Requesting immediate neutralization of the infrastructure.*"

This would be more than enough.

The encrypted packet would go out via satellite. Langley would bring up the target map. Aboard a destroyer, they would run the launch calculations.

The missiles would arrive at dawn. They would destroy the barracks and the laboratory, bury the adit under hundreds of tons of incandescent rock, and incinerate the viral epicenter forever.

Leo squeezed Imani's fingers tighter. She raised her dark, fathomless eyes to him; there was no fear in them – only the boundless, profound trust of the earth that had accepted him as its own.

"Everything will be fine," she said with quiet certainty.

Leo looked at the green wall of Katanga closing in behind the tailgate of the pickup and nodded silently.

Everything will be fine.

Chapter Nineteen. The Rain

The downpour crashed down upon the old Belgian base around four in the afternoon. It struck not gradually, not with timid harbingers, but all at once, totally, with a leaden, monotonous heaviness – the way a theatrical curtain falls at the finale of a drawn-out tragedy. First, the forest grew paralyzed: the birds, the cicadas, the shrieking mona monkeys – everything fell silent, pressed into the bark and moss. The sky thickened to the state of wet velvet, a dense, dark-blue velvet, swollen with storm water. And then it poured. Large drops, the size of a finger joint, fell with such terrifying force that they churned the orange dust of the parade ground, instantly turning it into the viscous, pulsating, glistening blood of the earth. The jungle drank this water greedily, with a visceral hum, rustling with millions of glossy leaves.

Imani stood in the doorway of the kitchen block, her shoulder leaning against the rough, damp-oozing concrete jamb. The air around her thickened, steeped in the sharp scent of ozone, rotting wood, crushed greenery, and the bitterish smoke from the smoldering cast-iron stove. She wore faded jeans and a men's cotton shirt with rolled-up sleeves – her only armor left from her past life in Bata Kolé. Ilunga had brought them clothes, but for now she had no desire to change. She was watching.

Beneath an awning of torn corrugated iron, leaning against the bunker wall, stood a long plank table. Over it, heads bowed, two men were frozen.

A husband and a lover.

Two men, carved from entirely different stone, yet in a strange, almost magical way balancing each other in this damp, rotting haze. Between them, weighed down at the edges by two rusted assault-rifle casings, a walkie-talkie, and a mug of cold coffee, lay a printout. Ilunga had arrived with it this morning in his crumpled Pajero – detailed satellite images of the Kato-Tombe quarry. The paper had already begun to

ripple from the dampness, imbued with the smell of gun oil and tobacco. From above, the camp appeared as a perfect, sterile geometry: the white rectangles of containers, the mathematically precise perimeter of barbed wire, the blind squares of the watchtowers, the dark, gaping maw of the hangar. It was death, categorized and shelved, translated into the language of simple engineering semiotics.

Imani watched them through the silver mesh of the rain.

Ilunga stood on the left. His faded camouflage t-shirt clung to his broad back, a colored shirt thrown over it. The partisan's profile seemed carved from ancient basalt – calm, collected, impenetrable. His finger, with a torn nail, slid slowly over the grainy paper, tracing the lines of invisible fronts. This is what a man looks like who has prepared for battle a thousand times, knowing that one day the forest will take him forever, yet continuing to return.

Leo stood on the right. In a multi-colored mottled jacket without insignia, his short hair darkened by the moisture. The American had frighteningly changed over these days: the metropolitan gloss had vanished, his movements had shed their academic fussiness, becoming predatory, economical, like those of a wild forest cat. The virus and the jungle had reforged him, burning away all the superficialities, leaving only a hard, lethal framework. In his insomnia-sunken eyes, there was no longer any fever or confusion. Only clarity. The cold, surgical, terrifying clarity of a man who has peered over the edge. The dark copper of the bracelet on his right wrist gleamed dully in the gray gloom of the awning.

Between the men, there was neither enmity nor awkwardness. Only a wise, dense silence – the silence of two warriors who understood that any words about the past right now would destroy more than they could save.

“Confirmation from Langley came through the night,” Leo's voice sounded dry and steady, cutting through the deafening drumbeat of the downpour on the corrugated roof. “The strike complexes on the destroyer have been switched to combat mode. Missile launch is tomorrow. Estimated time on target is zero six thirty. Right after dawn.”

He touched the center of the satellite image with the point of a pencil.

“Four Tomahawks. Two thermobaric warheads will crack open the barracks by the old mine and the hangar. Two bunker-busters will strike right at the base of the hill, above the vault of the adit where Girard's lab is located. They will trigger a directed collapse. Hundreds of tons of incandescent rock will seal the adit tight. The temperature will exceed three thousand degrees. The virus, the pitchblende – everything will burn in milliseconds.”

Ilunga leaned in closer, narrowing his pupils, dark as overripe olives.

“And the mercenary camp?”

“As we discussed, to minimize casualties, you will lure them out of there before the strike. But protocol requires visual confirmation of the target's destruction. I will be here,” Leo's pencil slid to an elevation in the east. “A blind spot for their perimeter cameras. I'll record the impact, and then send the verification code.”

Imani took a step from the doorway into the gloom of the awning. Her voice sounded quiet, yet with that cast, chthonic unyieldingness with which water wears away stone:

“I am going with you.”

Both men raised their heads simultaneously. The rain behind their backs seemed to lose its rhythm for a second.

Ilunga frowned, his jaw muscles flexing.

“That is madness, Imani. A missile is not a rifle bullet. The shockwave, the thermal blast... If the wind shifts, you'll be covered in scorching dust and concrete shrapnel.”

“I won't let him go alone,” she stood next to Leo. Her hand familiarly, almost reflexively, rested on his forearm. The copper touched her skin, and Imani felt how beneath the cotton fabric his pulse beat evenly, unhurriedly. *We are bound* – her touch said.

Ilunga looked at her with a long, attentive gaze. A complex, multi-layered shadow flickered in his eyes – the bitterness of loss mixed with a deep, unconditional respect for her choice. He gave a short nod. Once. The question was closed.

“My men are ready,” the partisan told him, clipping each word as he tapped a knobby finger on the paper map near the residential barracks of the main mine. “We have been working on this all day. I’ve made arrangements with the shift supervisors. Tonight, as soon as it gets dark, the workers will begin to riot.”

“How exactly?” Leo leaned forward, eyes fixed sharply on the map.

“The way cornered people riot. They will say rumors have reached them from the village about the black blood, about the dead miner Benga. They are terrified. They are convinced this is a new Ebola, and that the white mercenaries locked the contagion behind the fence so as not to halt production. The riot will be primal, loud. They’ll roll their dump trucks onto the roads, light fires in iron barrels with diesel fuel. They’ll get drunk on local moonshine...”

He looked at Leo, then at Imani.

“It makes the blood hot, and fear disappears. They will scream, beat the fences with rebar, demand answers. True chaos will break out.”

Ilunga smiled a crooked, almost predatory smile.

“The Southbridge mercenaries will have to pull almost their entire personnel to the quarry to keep this enraged mob from breaking through to the expensive equipment,” and, tracing a finger along the map as if closing the circle of a trap, he continued. “And at five thirty in the morning, when the sky begins to gray, my boys will strike from the flank. We’ll empty a couple of magazines into the air over the watchtowers and plant a grenade in the empty tire warehouse. The roar and the flames will be such that their commander will have no choice. She will throw the last reserves from the base into the fight. They will run to defend the quarry. And the missiles will fall on a half-empty camp.”

“What if the mercenaries don't buy it?”

“They have to.”

“Alright,” Leo breathed a sigh of relief. “That means by six thirty, only the on-duty guards will be left at the adit.”

The drops steadily tapped out their rhythm: *tock*... *tock*... *tock*... – as if an invisible clockwork mechanism were counting down the final hours of a vanishing world.

“Tonight, Kasongo will come for you,” Ilunga continued, gathering up the map and rolling it into a tight tube smelling of gunpowder. “He knows the forest trails like the back of his hand. He will drive you past the posts to the foot of the eastern hill. From there, you will climb up yourselves. After the strike, go down to him; he will be waiting in the hollow. He will bring you back here.”

“Thank you, Ilunga,” Leo said, looking him straight in the eye.

The partisan did not reply. He shoved the rolled-up map into his shirt's breast pocket, leaned heavily with his palms against the edge of the table, and looked out at the red, bubbling mud beyond the awning.

“And what then?” he asked after a prolonged pause, without turning his head.

The question hung in the damp air. Leo looked at Imani. She answered him with a long, calm gaze. In that visual touch there were neither doubts nor fear – only a singular, unbearably tender, enduring space that belonged to them alone.

“We will leave,” Leo replied.

Ilunga turned around. His face remained a mask of wet stone.

“Where?”

Leo stayed silent. He had no route. Boston remained in a past, dead life. Langley had turned into a double-edged tool that would have to be discarded tomorrow. There was only this rain, this jungle, and the woman whose breath he felt on his skin.

“I can smuggle you across the border into Zambia,” Ilunga offered in a businesslike, emotionless tone. “I have people there. Smugglers' trails. No border control. No unnecessary questions.”

“There is no need, Ilunga,” Imani said softly but firmly. Both men looked at her. “I must say goodbye to my grandfather. In Mbanza-Ngungu.”

Ilunga closed his eyes.

“Alright. Let me at least drive you to Lubumbashi,” he agreed. “From there you can go west... or wherever you decide.”

Leo and Imani nodded simultaneously, like a single organism.

The partisan reached into his jacket's inner pocket, pulled out the stub of a chemical pencil, and tore a scrap of paper from a notepad. Pressing it against the rough board of the table, he quickly jotted down eleven angular digits.

“Here,” Ilunga handed the paper to Leo. “It's a phone number. A man in Kinshasa. Ngala. Tell him you're from me. He is a master. He will make you both clean documents – passports, driver's licenses, whatever you need. Genuine blanks. With them, you can fly out of the country anywhere you want. All he needs are your photographs.”

Leo took the slip, folded it in half, and carefully slipped it into his shirt's breast pocket. He understood the true, colossal price of this gesture. Ilunga was giving them not just a contact – he was giving them the right to a future.

“Thank you,” Leo's voice faltered with a barely noticeable, genuine hoarseness. “This will really come in handy.”

Ilunga pushed himself back from the table. For a few seconds, he looked at them in silence. At his wife, standing shoulder to shoulder with another man. At the white American who had come here a stranger, and now carried the rhythm of Katanga in his blood. At two people, strangely intertwined into one, indestructible, living knot.

“Take care of each other,” he said hollowly, with a barely perceptible, instantly suppressed vibration in his voice.

He turned around, pulled his faded cap down over his head, and stepped out from under the awning into the solid wall of the downpour. The water very quickly soaked through the fabric, ran down his broad back, and glistened on his wet neck. His massive boots squelched as they bogged down in the red clay.

The Pajero's diesel sneezed, roared, spewing out a cloud of bluish smoke. The headlights smeared a dim, blurred yellow light across the wall of the jungle. The SUV pulled away, its tires biting into the soggy rut with a growl, and within a second its heavy silhouette began to dissolve, melting into the green gloom, swallowed by the

endless torrent of water from the heavens. A moment later, the sound of the engine vanished too, leaving behind only the absolute, total symphony of the rain.

Ilunga was gone.

Imani stood at the very edge of the awning, looking into the emptiness of the clearing. Large, stinging drops were blown in by the wind; they settled on her cheekbones, on her chin, got tangled in her eyelashes, mingling with the invisible, transparent moisture clouding her gaze. Whether the water was salty or from the sky, she did not know. And what did it matter – both were equally wet. The thin copper bracelet clinked softly, musically, as she clenched her fingers into a fist.

Leo stood nearby. He did not try to embrace her, did not violate the boundary of her farewell. He was simply there – an undeniable, warm presence. His shoulder an inch from her shoulder. The scent of his damp skin, bitter coffee, and steel – next to her scent of costus and rain.

Tomorrow the sky would crash down upon this earth in roaring fire. Tomorrow everything would change forever. But now, in this fluid, drawn-out second, the world had narrowed to the size of a tiny island beneath a dirty corrugated roof.

Imani unhurriedly turned her head. Her eyes – fathomless, black, with amber veins, absorbing all the gloom of the oncoming evening – met Leo's eyes.

She reached out her hand. Her cool fingers slid along his wet cheek, traced his jawline, touched the pulsating vein on his neck.

“Come to me,” she whispered so quietly that the words did not sound, but rather seemed to spill into his waiting lips.

And Leo took a step. No, he didn't just follow her – he pulled her himself into the thick, breathing darkness of the bunker, pressing her to him with such force as if trying to hide her beneath his own ribs. To a place where there were no printouts, no missiles, no past. To a place where the stifling heaviness of the tropical night advanced slowly and inevitably, closing over them in a protective, absolutely hermetic dome.

Chapter Twenty. Copper

The dry tearing sound of ripping canvas shattered the jungle. Bursts of 7.62 caliber ripped through the pre-dawn fog over the Kato-Tombe mine, echoing along the slopes of the basalt hills. A moment later, a muffled, rolling thud shook the air. Then another, and another. Above the tree crowns, where the old tire warehouse stood, a dirty, orange-and-black cloud billowed up. Greasy, smoky flames greedily licked the gray equatorial sky.

Leo lay on his stomach, pressing tightly into the dew-soaked earth on the ridge of the eastern hill. The mottled camouflage fabric that Kasongo had brought in the dead of night chilled his skin, but inside, beneath Leo’s ribs, his heart pumped blood

steadily, powerfully, in perfect rhythm. He pressed his eyes to the eyepieces of the binoculars. The battered German Zeiss, with a fine, barely noticeable crack on the right lens, brought the perimeter of the Southbridge Security base so close it felt as if Leo were standing right behind the coils of barbed wire.

Beside him, shoulder to shoulder, lay Imani. The jacket fabric, wet from the morning dew, clung to her body, tracing the curve of her back and the graceful line of her hips. Leo felt the heat of her skin through the coarse material – this heat streamed, throbbed, subjecting the earth that had cooled overnight to its will. The boundary between their bodies blurred in the stifling, electrified air. The smell of crushed fern stalks mingled with the scent of her sweat – musky, dark, reminiscent of wild honey and damp clay. Every breath Imani took echoed with a deep vibration in his own chest, as if an invisible, trembling root system connected their lungs. In this carnal closeness, on the very edge of someone else's inevitable death, lurked a feral, poignant union: the pulse of one became the rhythm of life for the other, and an accidental touch of their bodies burned hotter than a scalding shell casing.

Panic was unfolding in the lenses of the binoculars. The perfect, calibrated mechanics of the PMC camp were breaking down, choking in primordial chaos. The flash of the explosion at the mine acted like a detonator for an anthill. The doors of the residential modules flew open, spewing out mercenaries. They ran out, fastening the Velcro of tactical vests on the move, chambering rounds into carbine receivers with a metallic clatter, leaping on the run into the beds of three heavy armored Land Cruisers.

Dragoș burst out of the headquarters container. His massive bald skull gleamed in the light of the floodlights; his powerful arms chopped the air, barking orders – silent to the observers – pointing the direction toward the mine. The diesel engines roared, the vehicles broke through the open gates and dissolved into the pre-dawn gloom, leaving behind only a thick trail of red dust.

The base emptied instantly. Inside the perimeter, only four sentries froze on the corner watchtowers, along with two people on the concrete parade ground.

Diana Pătrașcu stood at the entrance to the underground bunker. Her white blouse seemed a phosphorescent stain in the dusk. In one hand she clutched a walkie-talkie, barking fast, harsh orders – an architect of control trying to hold up a collapsing structure of order. Nearby slumped Dr. Girard, shifting from one foot to the other in ridiculous old-fashioned pajamas, constantly wiping his fogged glasses; he looked like a bewildered spectator accidentally caught on stage during a fire.

Leo lowered the binoculars for a second and glanced at the face of his steel Casio. Zero six twenty-eight. He covered Imani's hand with his own and felt the earth beneath him breathing. It was a real, slow pressure, as if somewhere deep in the basalt something gargantuan was unhurriedly turning over onto its other side. The

bracelet on his wrist suddenly grew hot. Not warm – hot, almost scalding. Imani let out a quiet sigh beside him, and he knew she had noticed it too.

Diana was still standing by the hermetic door. The walkie-talkie at her lips. Girard beside her, in pajamas, glasses, with shaking hands. Leo looked at them and, for the first time in all these days, thought not of the virus nor of the mission. He thought: in a few seconds, these two will cease to exist. And strangely enough – he hardly cared. Almost.

At first, there was no sound. There was only pressure.

The air above them suddenly turned as dense as water. His ears popped. Something tightened in his chest – a pure physical constriction, as if an invisible hand had grabbed his lungs and unhurriedly squeezed them into a fist. Beside him, Imani twitched and pressed her shoulder closer. Leo felt her fingers dig into his wrist over the tarnished copper.

The sound was born somewhere in the stomach, in the very bowels of the earth, and only then reached their eardrums.

A low, swelling, vibrating roar of turbines tearing through the dense air. Cruise missiles flew at extremely low altitude, skimming just over the crowns of the ficus trees, inexorable as punishing steel angels. In their predatory, rapid grace lay a terrifying, lethal beauty – the absolute triumph of Western geometry over African chaos.

Diana snapped her head up. Her mask of cold calculation cracked, letting out the raw human terror of a body before the falling heavens. The walkie-talkie slipped from her fingers. She grabbed old Girard by the collar and, with incredible, animal force, yanked him toward herself, tackling him into the mud, dragging him behind the concrete parapet, away from the steel hermetic door – away, as far as possible.

The first flash was white.

Not orange. Not red. White – so pure and sharp that for a fraction of a second, the world vanished. Leo closed his eyes a moment too late. A searing circle remained before his eyes, and when he opened them again, the barracks no longer existed. In its place stood a vertical pillar of fire that sucked in air with such force that even on the hill the branches swayed.

That blinding light completely swallowed Maurice’s laboratory at the edge of the old quarry.

A moment later, a monstrous, chest-flattening roar rolled up to the hill. The thermobaric charge blossomed like a giant, incandescent lotus. The aerosol cloud sucked in all the oxygen and detonated, turning colonial brick, rusted corrugated iron, virus samples, and the very memory of the French biologist into a column of roaring, pure fire. The triumph of absolute temperature erased matter, leaving only a smoking crater.

The shockwave arrived a few seconds later.

It came as a dense, hot wall. Leo instinctively shielded Imani, pressing her head to the ground. The pressure slammed into his back, knocked the breath out of him, drove the smell of sulfur, burning plastic, and something cloyingly sickening – burnt flesh and formalin – into his nostrils. Ringing filled his ears. For a moment, he ceased to hear even his own heart.

When his hearing returned, the first thing he heard was Imani's quiet, muffled sob.

The second and third impacts merged into a single seismic spasm. The bunker-buster Tomahawks slammed precisely into the slope of the hill above the bunker, penetrating deep into the basalt flesh. The earth surged like a living body impaled by a red-hot scalpel. It rose in a huge bubble, hung for a moment – and collapsed inward upon itself. A hollow, heavy rumble issued from below, from the very guts of the rock. Leo felt it in his knees, his belly, his teeth. It felt as though not just a hill, but a whole continental plate was collapsing beneath them. Through the binoculars, he managed to catch the hermetic door of the bunker bowing outward for a fraction of a second before being utterly crumpled along with the concrete. Hundreds of tons of rock, limestone, and red clay crashed down, forever sealing the adit with its radioactive cinnabar, centrifuges, and blind fruit bats.

The fourth missile turned the IC Waze hangar, along with all its equipment, into a churning lake of molten plastic and metal. In the smoke, a white blouse flashed – and vanished. Leo did not search for her with his eyes.

He pulled away from the binoculars. The blast reached the hill as a dry, scorching wind that struck their faces, throwing ash and decaying leaves into their hair. Below, in the valley, black craters gaped, shrouded in thick smoke. Tongues of fire greedily devoured the remnants of the containers. The bone of the earth was scorched and buried under its own weight.

His hands trembled. The hill beneath him was still vibrating slightly – shuddering slowly, convulsively, like a huge animal that had just had its skull crushed.

Imani lay beside him, face in the grass. Her shoulders shook finely. Leo reached out and placed his palm between her shoulder blades. She did not pull away.

"It's over," he said softly.

She nodded without lifting her head.

Below, in the smoke, something was still burning. But the earth no longer breathed.

Leo pulled the radio from his pocket and pressed the transmit button.

“Ilunga, this is Leo,” his voice sounded steady, rhythmic, without the slightest tremor. “Target hit. All four impacts confirmed. The camp is covered, the adit is buried. You can pull back.”

The crackle of static tore through the airwaves, and through the interference broke the partisan’s hollow voice:

“Copy that. My guys are pulling back.”

“Is everyone okay on your end?”

“Yeah. See you at the base.”

Leo turned to Imani. Orange flickers of the distant fire reflected in her widened, dark pupils. They held the deep, ancient tranquility of an earth that had survived far worse cataclysms.

“Let's go,” Leo exhaled heavily, feeling the adrenaline unhurriedly drain from his muscles. “All that was left was to confirm target destruction, and that's it.”

They slipped soundlessly down the slope, concealed by emerald ferns. In the hollow, hidden in the dense thickets, the old Jeep waited for them. Kasongo sat behind the wheel. He asked not a single question, merely chewing silently on an unlit cigarette. Leo and Imani climbed into the back seat, and the vehicle dissolved into the morning fog, carrying them away from the ashes.

Noon swallowed the remnants of the morning cool, crashing the ringing heat of the tropics down upon the old Belgian base.

Ilunga arrived around two o’clock. The partisan looked exhausted: his camouflage was covered in soot, a fresh scrape darkened his cheekbone, but in every movement there shone the grim, taut satisfaction of a man who had finished his war.

On the trampled parade ground, Leo stood near a rusted diesel barrel set on bricks. Inside, flames roared. Leo methodically, page by page, committed the past to the fire. Printouts of genomic sequences, Maurice’s diaries, sequencing charts. The paper blackened, curled, thinned, turning into weightless gray ash carried away by the wind into the jungle. Next into the flames went plastic flash drives, melting with an acrid, cloying smell, then glass slides with blood smears, bursting from the heat with a delicate crackle. The texts of death were destroyed, erased from the book of life.

Imani, in the shade of the awning, was packing their few belongings. A canvas duffel, a canteen, a laptop. The white case of the Starlink terminal, closed forever, stood by the door – the digital communication link to Langley was severed.

Ilunga walked up to the barrel, squinting against the scorching air, and stopped beside Leo.

“These are the samples,” the American said, tossing the last folder of calculations into the fire. “The tests. Research materials. No one should ever find them. Never.”

The partisan nodded in silence. He knew all too well the value of erased tracks on a trail.

Imani brought out three white enameled mugs of thick, black coffee. They sat on wooden crates and drank it in complete silence, watching the fire burn out. The bitterness of the Robusta mingled with the bitterness of ash on their lips, but it was a proper, cleansing bitterness.

All three sat in silence. Not one of them was in a hurry. Time, which for so many weeks had driven them forward, had finally stopped. And in this pause lay everything that needed to be said.

They loaded the duffel and the Starlink into the back. Ilunga’s Pajero swayed rhythmically over the bumps of the forest track. Leo and Imani sat in the back, sharing between them a dense, viscous silence in which tension no longer existed.

Suddenly, Imani leaned forward and touched the partisan’s shoulder.

“Let's stop by the old mine,” her voice sounded quiet, yet crystal clear. “The one Mulenga showed us.”

Ilunga cast a quick glance in the rearview mirror, gave a brief nod, and turned the wheel, pulling the pickup onto an overgrown clearing. Soon the vehicle rolled out onto the familiar opening.

“Stop here,” Imani requested. “And wait for us.”

She opened the door. Leo stepped out after her. The air here stood completely motionless, saturated with the thick smell of the forest. The jungle was silent. It felt as if time itself had frozen here, waiting for these two.

They stopped a few paces from the edge of the dark opening.

Rusted steel portals jutted from the red clay like broken ribs. The black gap of the entrance gaped at the base of the hill, framed by rotten, blackened shoring. From the depths pulled a visceral, cellar-like cold and a barely perceptible, ancient, and deeply familiar aroma – frankincense and gardenia.

Imani turned to Leo. A fathomless, liberated peace swam in her huge eyes. She reached out her hands and gently framed his right wrist. Her slender, trembling fingers glided over the smooth surface of the copper bracelet, found the invisible seam, and carefully pried the metal open.

“You don't need it anymore,” she exhaled.

The copper slipped from his arm. Leo's skin, accustomed to the constant, pulsating warmth of the band, suddenly felt a strange, cool, crystalline freedom. The heart inside him beat steadily – a single, strong, human heart.

Then Imani pulled off her left bracelet – the thin one with parallel lines that held her grandmother's memory.

She walked to the very edge of the abyss, held both rings in her palms, and brought them to her lips. Her lips began to move. It was Lingala – fluid as the Congo River itself, an ancient language of incantations and farewells. Leo didn't understand a word, but he felt the rhythm of those words against his skin. Imani was speaking to the mycelium, to the stone, to the invisible spirits of the forest, returning her debts.

She unclasped her fingers.

Two copper rings glinted in the dim light of the clearing and fell into the dark. They vanished into the gaping maw of the mine absolutely soundlessly. No clink against stone, no echo, no splash. The earth accepted the offering, swallowing it with silent gratitude, closing the cycle forever.

Imani lowered her hands. A warm wind brushed her hair. Leo stepped closer. She raised her eyes to him – in their amber depths swam a profound, cavernous silence. She reached toward him barely perceptibly, her fingers coming to rest on his neck, where a vein beat heavily and steadily. The touch of her bare skin, freed from the copper, struck a spark that sent a hot, viscous wave rolling down Leo's spine. The air between them thickened, became tangible, smelling of yesterday's thunderstorm and crushed grass. Leo framed her face with his palms, feeling with his fingertips the velvety sweat on her temples, feeling her ragged breath against his lips. In this slow, greedy touch, their final separateness dissolved. Two bodies merged into a single vessel overflowing with primordial tenderness, where every breath flowed into the exhale of the other, and their blood sang to one rhythm.

Two hearts. One pulse...

A few minutes later, they unhurriedly returned to the vehicle. Ilunga stood leaning against the hood, watching them with a long, understanding gaze. He saw the completion of the circle and required no explanations.

Outside the pickup, framing the orange-dusted window, the jungle stood like eternal sentinels – green, dense, infinite. And above the tree crowns – a clear, high, fathomlessly blue sky. Only somewhere far off, beyond the hills, the Kato-Tombe camp was still smoking.

Leo and Imani sat in the back seat. The doors slammed shut, cutting off the smells of the forest.

And with that barely audible, metallic click, Imani physically felt the invisible umbilical cord connecting her to the continent thinned to a ringing wire and snapped. To Africa, she had become a ghost. By surrendering the copper rings to the darkness

of the past, she had voluntarily erased her name from the memory of the *mzemu* – the ancestral spirits. The basalt of Katanga would no longer respond to her footsteps, and her ancestors would not come to her dreams, for she had ceased to exist for this land. From now on, her only soil, her only homeland, her only bond would be the beat of the pulse beneath the skin of the man sitting beside her.

They no longer had identity records, no citizenship. Before the law, from this second on, they were becoming a blank slate, nameless statistical shadows whose right to breathe on foreign soil would have to be proven anew.

Imani looked at Leo, then shifted her clear, transparent gaze to the rearview mirror, which reflected Ilunga's eyes. In her face there were no longer shadows of the past, nor fear of what was to come – only a ringing acceptance of the void she had chosen for herself.

She half-closed her eyes and, with relief through her whole body, emptying her lungs to the very bottom – as if it were her final word – said:

"Let's go."