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BIBI

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Her children's cries woke her from her safe nest. She stretched, easing the aches in her bones. In the quiet dawn, she ventured to the lake for water. She saw less of her enemies' spoor than ever before. Almost nothing was freshly dead, though a few circling birds warned her: soon. Not my children! _she wailed silently. They were fevered and ill and even dying. But where were they? No one crouched beside the lake. No one edged through the bush, seeking her. She had to find them soon, before she was a mother without children._

The land was dry and brown, as it had always been, but there were differences. The footpaths were missing, the birds no longer fled in fear of her, the few antelope she saw were smaller and quicker than any she could remember. She felt uneasy, walking in the open, with no trees to climb should she come across those fearsome doglike creatures that could swallow her in three bites. She gripped her club, which was really nothing more than an old femur bone. She had watched a great cat bring down an antelope and waited patiently for it to fill its belly, then fought the birds for the spoils and came away with a weapon as well as a meal.

She looked up again. The birds seemed smaller, and they were the wrong colors. They were still ominous and foreboding as they rode the thermals high above the savannah and sought the flesh of the newly dead.

_As the sun rose higher, she withdrew into the comforting shadows of the trees. Her stomach cried out, and she turned over a dry log, looking for termites. But the log crumbled into dust and

she realized, even as she sifted through its remains, finding a few laggard insects, that the main army had moved on to choicer morsels._

How easy it used to be to find food. In the kinder days of her youth, she could have traveled fast, grubbing food from the earth or from hanging branches. Now, it took her hours to fill her belly so it did not cry like a baby, and she barely heard the cries or coughs of beasts. Her feet bled, tender after her long rest, but she trudged on. She had slept too long.

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The camp lay 40 kilometers due west of Moroto, in the blistering heat of the Karamojo country. Even the flies had become lethargic. Dust devils swirled across the empty landscape, red and angry, reaching hundreds of feet into the startling blue sky.

Two boreholes supplied water for all the tents. One teased them with cool, clear water for two or three minutes at a time, then went dead for half an hour or more, while the other offered a slow, sluggish trickle of warm brown liquid.

"Wake up, wake up!"

A weight landed on Jeremy Harris's cot, and a child shrilled in his ears. Translating the child's excited Swahili automatically, Jeremy fixed his tormentor, not four feet high, with a bleary eye, then glanced outside. What the hell was the kid doing waking him up in practically the middle of the night?

"Dr. Umurungi told me to fetch you. You remember old Kabute? He died around midnight."

Jeremy remembered the man: not forty yet impossibly aged, almost mummified, in the final emaciation of the AIDS that threatened to finish the job in Uganda that Idi Amin began and

Milton Obote had carried forward. They died. Sooner or later, everyone died.

The child's eyes reflected awareness and resignation: he'd already lost both parents to the disease and was HIV-positive himself. It would be a miracle if he reached puberty. Forget AZT: the relief workers were happy if they could provide three meals a day.

"I'm sorry," said Jeremy. "Do they want me to talk to the family?"

He could think of several people better qualified by language or race to talk to the man's family--an elderly mother, two withered wives. One bore the marks of Kaposi's sarcoma, purple against black, and coughed almost constantly. There were several children; Jeremy would have bet good money that all of them were HIV-positive.

Jeremy was a volunteer, not a physician: if they needed him to drive, he drove. If they wanted him to perform medical tests, they taught him and looked the other way. If they wanted an English class, he taught it. When it came to bribing officials, he was without peer. Best of all, when (never _if_) they needed emergency funding, his old Wall Street training could usually wring it from some unsuspecting philanthropical prey -- or allow the prey to donate it anonymously and still keep his tax break.

What they mostly needed these days, however, was a gravedigger. In New York, Jeremy had worked out with a trainer who came to his private gym, when he didn't go to his university club, his company's fitness center, or any of the places that took up a large part of his very private life. But digging graves out here in the bush put more muscle on him than his trainer would

have dreamed possible.

"Dr. Umurungi said they left the compound, taking Kabute's body with them."

The boy opened the tent flap wider. Jeremy winced at the sunrise and swore with the inventive profanity of the equity traders he used to match drink for drink at Harry's. Not only would the women and children not get proper care -- _so what if they die a month before their time, the darkness in him muttered, we're all on Death Row here_ -- but carrying a corpse, they'd be lucky if they didn't run afoul of hyenas on the plain or crocs crossing the rivers on their way back to their village -- and that was on the unlikely assumption that it hadn't been looted by Somali or Sudanese bandits.

He lowered his feet decisively, and the child practically hugged himself with relief. Reaching for his boots and trousers, Jeremy shook them before he put them on. He folded his bedding, just so. A place for everything or you'd go crazy, living in a cluttered tent in an AIDS relief camp. Everything in its place. He unlocked the box where he kept his megavitamins and the other drugs, downing a handful of pills without water, before replacing the phials next to his portfolio statements, medical records, and a few letters. The most recent was from his parents in Vermont. He knew it by heart.

It wasn't very long. Surprisingly, it wasn't his mother who had written it, but his father, who had always been better with tools than words. The fact that Jeremy could continually force unnatural life into the camp's ancient truck was a gift from his father that he'd only now come to value. As a boy, he had lived in terror that those skills would chain him to grimy hands and

grease-stained clothes, to life in a gas station, a town, a way of life he had fought to escape.

"Son,"

"You didn't want your mother and me to come to the airport and see you off, so I didn't get a chance to see you. I don't suppose I'd have been able to say what I've been thinking about there anyhow. Things move too fast for me in New York, and you probably were all taken up with getting things arranged and saying good-bye to your friends." (What friends? Jeremy thought to himself. The one person -- the one other person he might have wanted to see would never be there again.)

"And with your mother there trying not to cry, I couldn't have said what I wanted to say. We've never had all that much to say to each other that wasn't cars, or 'How's your schoolwork going?' or 'That's really interesting,' and now I'm sorry. I always thought maybe I was the wrong father for you...but that's water under the bridge. I want you to know that you don't have to do this. You're my son, and I'm proud of you. If you're sick, come home and your mother and I will take care of you. You always have a place here.

"Love," (his father had scratched it out, then written the word again. Probably he feared that if he had to recopy the letter, he'd never send it.)

"Your Dad""

Very gently Jeremy replaced the letter in its sheltering plastic bag. Then he pulled out the small, tattered box with the monogrammed cufflinks and the unopened letter. Jeremy remembered the man to whom he'd given the cufflinks. As always, he was surprised that the box had reached him with the letter and the

rejected gift inside.

It would have been a mercy if some official had heard the cufflinks rattling around and stolen the box before it reached him. It was a mercy that Raymond hadn't thrown the cufflinks at him along with his anger when he learned just how disastrously careless Jeremy had been. "Gifts, always giving me things like I didn't know how to choose for myself. Well, this last gift you gave me was really a killer, wasn't it?" Ray had walked out, slamming the door on Jeremy and any chance they'd had for a life together, and all those gifts -- except for the deadly one he carried inside him.

Jeremy left the box under the pillow on his cot and stuck the letter into his pocket. Maybe today he'd find the time -- or the guts -- to open it. Or throw it away.

Or maybe he'd lose it.

He turned back to face the little boy. I do have to be here, he told the ghost of his father. Everything in its proper place. Just as he was.

Automatically, he scanned himself. No lesions. No fever. No faint weariness, no cough, no trace of night sweats. Nothing to worry about.

Yet.

Like so many of the people in his world, Jeremy Harris was HIV-positive. The verdict had surprised the hell out of him, though he supposed it shouldn't have. His life had been so precisely arranged: the 80-hour weeks where weekends blended into weekdays and when he sometimes lived on the phone so he could make his pile and pay for the place on Fire Island; the weeks and weekends down in the Keys, where the beer was cold, the seafood

spicy, and the company -- he'd better not think of that...or of how many of his old friends were still alive. You had to walk a very fine line between indifference, which could kill you, and caring too much, which would tear you apart.

The last time he'd visited his old haunts, the Keys had been like a ghost town. No one knew where Raymond was (or maybe he'd told them to keep their mouths shut.) That whole group of writers and artists and smart guys with money had turned into people like his father, no good at words about the real things. The survivors were either drinking themselves into oblivion or, like Jeremy, working to the point of exhaustion while becoming health and diet fanatics.

And for what? To watch their other friends die while waiting for a cure that 98% of them could never afford even if it was discovered? He subscribed to medical journals and followed the latest research on S.I.V. -- simian immunodeficiency virus -- and the vaccine Harvard Med School had developed, one that protected monkeys for three years. He'd even allowed himself to hope when Johns Hopkins turned up a 43-year-old woman who'd had three healthy children after being diagnosed HIV-positive -- and when, try as they might, they couldn't get infectious HIV from her blood.

Maybe I'm a mutant just like her! he thought desperately.

Which, of course, made him feel even more like an outcast from the human race.

He went to Montreal to visit Biochem Pharma, where a new drug, 3TC, in combination with ATZ, showed promising results. He monitored the Glaxo-Wellcome PLC merger with the attention the dying gave to the Last Rites because that had to affect the supply

of the AZT he expected to need one day. What good did it do him?

All the biotechs had tanked. AZT was more a poison than a cure, and with healthcare costs the way they were...

Of course, as long as he raked in the commissions, he had key man insurance from his company. He hardly thought they'd keep it up (_ha!_ Now there was a good pun!) when he got _really_ sick. And if he changed companies and came down with ARC or full-blown AIDS, there he was with a pre-existing condition. When his money finally ran out -- his portfolio was only solid, not huge -- he'd be out on the street, and that wasn't Wall Street -- and on whatever might be left of Medicaid by that time.

So Jeremy kept fit. Every day he scanned himself for deterioration. As his friends and lovers sickened and died around him, Jeremy realized that he was what researchers called a non-progressor; he might have 10, 15, 20 years yet. One man, infected 17 years ago, still had a normal CD-4 white blood cell count.

Maybe Jeremy would get lucky too.

Day after day, he worked, and worked out, and waited either for the disease or a cure. You can't call that living at all, his psychiatrist said.

At an Audrey Hepburn revival at the Thalia, for God's sake, a handout told him how she'd starved as a child, working for the Resistance. Until cancer left her too weak to continue, she'd tried to feed kids in Ethiopia.

The very next day, _The Wall Street Journal_ had carried a story on the AIDS epidemic in Zambia and Uganda. If that wasn't some sort of omen, he didn't know a thing about market timing. So he'd liquidated his stock positions and parked the money in secure Triple-A bond funds, said good-bye to his trainer, sold his co-op

for a good price despite rotten interest rates, and unloaded his beach house. His friends thought he'd gone crazy, his psychiatrist thought he'd gone sane and helped him negotiate the wilderness of regulations, and his family simply cried and wanted him to come back home where everyone would whisper about "Jeff Harris's boy, what a shame, so young to go." Money and some damn good networking had enabled him to hook up with a small relief organization; and so here he was.

He finished his daily checklist. Nothing left out for kids or monkeys to steal. Everything in its proper place, except for the finishing touch. He'd given up the Hermes ties, the custom-tailored suits, the meticulous Manhattan grooming for the cheapest, toughest, coolest clothes he could find, but one grace note remained. From his footlocker, he pulled out a spool of red ribbon, cut off a couple inches, and pinned it to his shirt. The boy's eyes widened and he held out an eager hand. So Jeremy grinned and cut him an AIDS ribbon too, and out they went.

He began walking through the camp, which seemed like two separate worlds to him -- or, actually, three. There was the world inhabited by the camp's employees: immaculate tents in a cluster, a spotless mess area, the infirmary -- it was too small and too easily victimized by the elements to call it a hospital; even infirmary seemed to give it an unearned dignity.

Then there was the world of the Africans: they had come by the dozens, and finally the hundreds, once word got out that another crazy European was passing out free food and medicine, and a small city of mud and thatched huts now completely encircled the world of the camp attendants.

Finally there was that tiny world inhabited only by himself

and Elizabeth, a pair of people who didn't fit in either of the other worlds. Jeremy, whose medical training was limited to a lifesaving badge he earned in swimming class when he was twelve, and Elizabeth, who had been born in Uganda and raised in Europe and didn't quite belong to either society.

As he passed a huge pile of folded, unused tents, he saw a troop of vervet monkeys edging closer to an extended family of Africans that were warming their banana mash breakfasts over a fire. Hunger had made the monkeys brave, bravery had made them foolish, and Jeremy knew that at least one family was going to be having meat for lunch.

At last he reached the mess tent and came to a stop before Elizabeth, who was writing meticulous notes in a journal while her tea sat, untouched and cooling, right next to the Coleman lamp on the breakfast table.

"Is that you, Jeremy?" she asked without looking up.

Dr. Elizabeth Umurungi's enunciation always sounded like an upper-class Englishwoman -- one who spoke perfect French -- rather than a convent-educated Achole who had fled to Britain with her parents when Idi Amin started decimating the countryside.

"No, it's Father Damian," he told her, wrapping his sweater about his narrow shoulders. It was strange: every evening he went to sleep sweating and wondering if he'd ever be cool again, and every morning he woke up shivering and wondering if he'd ever be warm again. That was Africa for you.

"All things considered, you'd hardly qualify as a saint," she retorted. "Pity. We could use a miracle or two."

She'd been finishing up her residency about the time he'd done his MBA: they had friends, or at least contacts, in common,

and in what felt like another life, they'd skied the same hills in Switzerland. One of the few people he had confided in, she monitored his T-cell status along with those of the Ugandans whose long defeats she fought.

She poured him a battered mug of tea that he eyed suspiciously. "So it's not that designer herbal muck you used to buy. It won't kill you. Dehydration and hunger will. Sit."

He would have liked to eat by the fire, preferring the chilly air and the smoke to the cramped, dark interior and endless medical conversation of the mess hall -- but as much as he was bored by such talk, he was even more bored with his own company, so he decided to eat at Elizabeth's table. His meal consisted not of the meticulously chosen, weighed, and cooked health foods that he had considered a matter of the merest survival, but rather of posho and banana mash which, even here, wasn't much.

"Think I ought to make a supply run?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"I got a dividend check," he volunteered. "Be nice to buy chickens. We could use the carcasses for soup." ("Money!" Raymond had spat. "It's all you ever think about! Well, let's see you try to take it with you!")

She finally looked up at him. "Homesick for Manhattan? Chicken soup isn't that magic. As long as we can feed everyone in camp, fine. But I do need you to drive me somewhere."

He bowed elaborately. With him, she wouldn't have to worry about assault -- or about getting back to the compound safely.

"You want to track down the villagers that left this morning?"

Jabito told me about them when he woke me up."

"Jabito gossips too much. Old head; young shoulders."

"What do you expect?"

"I expect people not to slip away from doctors who are trying to help them," said Elizabeth with the hauteur acquired in a childhood spent commuting between Paris, London and Kampala. Elizabeth might have learned patience and compassion in her self-appointed mission to help rebuild the country that had exiled her family, but the airs of the *_grande dame_* still clung to her.

Though Jeremy had to admit that on her, even a tattered lab coat and old crew T-shirt looked chic. She'd been a model in Paris. Not the type he'd pretended to drool over as a nervous teenager reading *_Sports Illustrated's_* swimsuit issue every year, but the sort of model who turned up in *_Vogue_* and had designers fighting each other over who would have the privilege this season of draping thousands of dollars of silk over her arrogant, elegant bones. Once and future stars were always chucking careers and going back to school, so the story on her in *_People_* --

"Supermodel Abandons Runways for Med School" -- produced a raised eyebrow or two before everyone in Jeremy's study group went back to being cool. And working their asses off.

While that might impress the locals, it also intimidated them, and they kept her at a distance that saddened her. For all the darkness of her skin, she was as much a foreigner here as Jeremy. Maybe even more of one. "I've got their medical records, such as they are," she added.

"You got a Land Rover?"

She smiled at him. "Better than that. I've got a flatbed truck with an almost-new spare tire."

"Where'd you get it?" he asked excitedly. "I thought you told me you were just about out of money."

"I am. We got it from a donor." She paused, then amended her statement. "I got it from a donor. You're not the only financial wizard around here."

"If you're a financial wizard, how did you manage to run through all those millions you made modeling?" he asked with a smile that was almost smug.

She sighed. "I bribed a lot of the wrong people when I decided to set up the camp. Then I had to go back and bribe the right ones. Our equipment cost a fortune to import. We're on our fifth Land Rover; do you know how much they cost, and how quickly they die out here?" She paused, then added ruefully: "And then there were my little blunders, like one hundred tents nobody wants to sleep in. They were more than eight hundred dollars apiece, and I can't get a single patient to spend a night in one."

He wanted to teasingly say, "Well, they're your people," -- but he bit the words off just in time. They were no longer her people, and in fact distrusted this Westernized woman, this "black European", even more than they distrusted Jeremy, who in their eyes was just another well-intentioned, bumbling American, a typical Two-Year Wonder who was working out his guilt at his parents' expense.

"Of course they won't sleep in them," said Jeremy. "Tents have corners, and demons live in corners. Much better to live in nice round huts."

"Did they tell you that?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't they tell me?"

"You're a Ugandan," he said. "They probably assumed you knew."

"I left when I was a child," she said irritably. "I can't remember every little superstition they..._we_...have." She paused. "I wish I knew why they confide in you and not in me."

"Us subordinates know not to trust the big chief," he said with a smile.

For a moment he thought she would explode with anger, but finally she laughed. "Anyway," she added, "I've actually got two jerrycans of petrol and a radio. We'll travel in style."

And with enough room to bring back the villagers, whether they want to come or not. Assuming we don't find them dead by the side of the road -- or such parts of them as the hyenas leave.

"What if they don't want to come?"

"What happens to the children?" countered Elizabeth. "The old lady can't do it all. It's sad: Two daughters-in-law, both with children. Under normal circumstances, she'd have all the makings of an easy, honored old age. The daughters-in-law would do all the work for her." She sighed deeply. "But now she'll be tending them and bringing up the children until they get sick too."

"Does she test positive?"

"She's negative. But that's not surprising. She lives a traditional lifestyle, and in her culture, women don't have sex once they reach menopause. Besides, her husband died years ago. The son must have picked it up from his circumcision group, or maybe from some whore in Kampala or Entebbe." She gestured to a beat-up flatbed truck at the far side of the compound. "Get your gear and let's get this show on the road. I'll wait for you at the truck."

He joined her a few minutes later, climbed into the driver's

seat, put the vehicle in gear, and they were on their way.

The road wound in and out of the bush, passing through dozens of villages, many of them totally deserted, though it was impossible at first glance to determine whether they were empty due to war or AIDS.

"God, I hate these potholes!" muttered Jeremy, as the ride began doing painful things to his spine and kidneys.

"The locals play games, trying to figure out whose they are," said Elizabeth with a bitter smile.

"Whose _what_ are?" repeated Jeremy uncomprehendingly.

"The potholes," she explained. "They try to guess whether they were made by Amin's troops, or Nyerere's, or Obote's, or Okello's, or Musaveti's."

"What a delightful way to spend your childhood," said Jeremy wryly. "Trying to guess which homicidal monster destroyed the road through your village."

"Musaveti's a good man," said Elizabeth adamantly. "And Nyerere is a saint."

"Three out of five still isn't good odds," replied Jeremy.

"Especially when you have to live through it all."

Elizabeth quickly grabbed her hat as another bump sent it flying toward her window. "We should reach the end of the tarmac pretty soon," she said.

"It gets better then?"

"It's much better right after the long rains. You can't repair tarmac out here, but if it's just holes in a dirt road, the rains will have leveled it out."

"_Nothing_ can level this road out," said Jeremy devoutly. He looked out the side window just as the tarmac ended. The

thornbush, which had been rapidly encroaching on both the savannah and the roadside _shambas_, had triumphed totally. The grass, which was green and endless a few miles back, now existed only in isolated pockets, and was dotted by the bones of dead wildebeest and kob. The red dust from the road obscured his vision, but he could see troops of vervet monkeys, plus an occasional red colobus, scampering through the trees and observing the strange-sounding foul-smelling vehicle from the safety of the branches. As the truck slowed down to cross a _lugga_ -- a dry riverbed -- Jeremy saw a figure disappearing into the thornscrub some fifty yards off to his right.

"What is it?" asked Elizabeth as Jeremy brought the truck to a halt.

"There's something back there."

"What?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." He paused and frowned. "I think it was a woman or a child; it was too small to be a man."

She shrugged. "Nothing unusual about that. Uganda's got a lot of people and a lot of bush. You tend to find the one in the other."

"Stop patronizing me," he said irritably.

"Then stop belaboring the obvious," she replied. "You saw a woman in the bush."

"There was something funny, though."

"Funny ha-ha, or funny strange?" she asked.

"Funny strange."

"What?"

He paused uncomfortably. "I only caught a quick glimpse of her -- or him -- but..."

"But what?" she persisted.

"She walked like her feet hurt, and nobody in Africa walks like that."

"Maybe she cut her foot."

"The average African spends his whole life walking barefoot on rocks and in thornbush country. I don't think you could cut his foot open with a knife."

"Nonsense," she said. "I cut my own foot just two days ago."

"You're not the average African," he retorted. "You spent most your life in Europe and America."

She ignored his comment, picked up the binoculars, and held them to her eyes. "There's nothing out there. Probably it was a heat mirage. Or maybe the glare on the windshield made you think you saw a woman instead of a tree."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

Or maybe his eyes could be starting to go -- except that it was way too early in the disease cycle for him to hallucinate. And besides, he didn't have the disease yet.

Jeremy continued looking out the window as he started driving again. He spotted a pair of silver-backed jackals, and a few minutes later he had to swerve to avoid a family of hyenas that were fighting over the remains of a small duiker, but there was no sign of the small figure he had seen. Or thought he had seen.

He noticed that sweat was starting to pour down his body, and he transferred the letter to another pocket to keep it dry.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," he replied. "Just a letter from an old friend."

"You haven't opened it yet."

"I'll get around to it."

"Would you like me to read it to you while you're driving?"

she offered.

"Not necessary," he said.

"It's no trouble."

"No."

They came to another village. There were sixteen hatched huts falling to ruin. Nearby was a large thorn boma for the cattle; next to it were four deserted shambas, the mango and banana trees fighting a losing battle for survival against the encroaching bush. The village had a well so that the people would not have to drink contaminated water. (Fat chance, thought Jeremy.

The water in the nearby bilharzia-infested stream was crystal clear. The people would take one look at the safe brown water coming up from the borehole and opt for the stream every time.)

There was only one problem: no people. Like so many other villages, it was completely deserted.

"I get so sick of seeing this," remarked Elizabeth, gesturing toward the empty huts.

"Where to now?" asked Jeremy, staring ahead to where the road forked and went off in two directions.

"I'm not quite sure, but I seem to think we go to the northwest."

* * *

She saw a strange beast, growling constantly and belching a foul-smelling smoke. It was like nothing she had ever experienced, strange and terrifying even for this strange and terrifying land.

She quickly hid behind a thornbush and waited for it to gallop off.

The beast had a most unusual means of enticing its victims. Instead of stealthily creeping up and then pouncing, like the great cats and canines, it showed her an image of a human very similar to herself. Doubtless she was expected to approach it out of curiosity, and it would open its slavering jaws and swallow her whole.

She would have to be prepared for this beast in the future, for she had much to do, and would doubtless encounter it again.

* * *

They managed to get lost, of course. After three days of punctured tires (five), false paths (eleven), bug bites (three million), and fraying tempers (beyond computation), the truck crashed out of the underbrush a scant twenty-six miles from where it had entered, and turned onto the narrow, almost overgrown track that was the best road Jeremy could find with sweat, map, frequently profane radio exchanges, and the occasional shout to any people they passed on the road.

"Look up ahead," said Elizabeth, pointing.

As they approached a village, a thread of smoke curled upward, and a flock of birds flew overhead. Jeremy was used to children spotting his Land Rover and running ahead or alongside with wild shouts -- but for some reason the inhabitants of this village, even the children, silently watched the truck and then went about their business.

"What do you make of that?" asked Jeremy, frowning, as the truck crunches over the rough road.

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "They know we're bringing food and medicine. They should be swarming out to greet us."

"Have you ever seen a reaction like this?"

"No," she said, frowning. "Not even when I was a little girl."

"They don't act afraid," he noted. "Just...I don't know..._wary_."

Next to one of the huts was a mound of heaped dirt. Even though it had been encircled by a crude fence that must have caused someone a lot of trouble to construct and erect, the ground was trampled, the clods scattered in places, as if something had tried to dig it up. Jeremy felt a muscle along his jaw jerk.

They wouldn't have had a whole lot of strength to spare to dig the man's grave deep enough -- and there was always the problem of how to get out of the pit once it had been dug.

Two children squatted by the roadside, waving at him. When he waved back, they rose slowly. He thought he recognized them. They'd been fed in the camp for almost a week, but the long walk home had sweated the newly-gained weight off of them. Already their ribs were showing above their bellies, which, thank God, had at least not started to swell out in severe malnutrition's dreadful parody of fat. Squatting outside the nearest hut, the healthier -- or rather, the least sick -- of the dead man's young wives tended a few scrawny chickens. Beyond the huts, an emaciated ox raised its head at the newcomers, then went back to the all-important business of grazing the near-grassless land.

The oldest child pushed at the ox, driving it toward two cows in equally poor condition.

Still, concluded Jeremy, these villagers were better off than a lot he had seen. They had posho from the relief center. They would have milk. They might even have eggs and meat. It was a wonder they had anything left at all. For years, this entire

country had been little more than the scene of a crime that called itself a government -- and now, hardly a step up, it had become a plague site.

God help them all.

Tall and thin, her head high, the mother of the dead man appeared in a doorway. She had an infant in her arms, two others clinging to her legs. She walked over to the squatting woman and handed her the child. The younger woman opened her dress, and the child began to nurse -- or to try to.

"That'll infect the baby!" Jeremy muttered.

"You want them to talk to us? Then be quiet!" Elizabeth got out of the truck, raised a hand in greeting and spoke in a formal Swahili, totally different from the "kitchen Swahili" Jeremy had learned.

Jeremy killed the motor, opened the door, stepped down, and joined Elizabeth just as the woman raised a hand. Greetings should have gone on ceremoniously, with an invitation to a meal to follow, but there was little food and less time to spare, as her apologetic gestures seemed to indicate. Abruptly, she clapped her hands. The children scattered, disappearing into various huts to emerge wearing the ragged Michael Jordan T-shirts they had received -- each decorated with a loop of red ribbon. Jeremy grinned. He remembered giving out those ribbons and slipping a dime to one of the kids, who had lost a front tooth the day before. _The Tooth Fairy comes to Uganda. Right. I'd grant you three wishes, kid, if I could._

"We know you mean well, _Memsaab_," the old woman was saying, "but we have no faith in your magic. We prefer our own. That is why we came home."

"But who will help you?" asked Elizabeth, trying to ignore the word 'Memsaab', which was only offered to whites and outsiders, never from one black Ugandan to another. "Your grandchildren are too young. Your son is dead, and his wives are sick. She paused. "It is not right that you live alone, without family to share your burdens."

"I wish you would let us bring you back!" Jeremy blurted in English.

"Damn it, Jeremy!" hissed Elizabeth. "I know you mean well, but that's an insult."

The old woman turned to Jeremy. "My father is dead," she said. "My husband is dead. My sons are dead. My grandsons are too young to give me orders. Uganda has been independent for 30 long rains. I will not take orders from you or any other European. I need no longer call you Bwana."

When Jeremy had finally stammered an apology, Elizabeth took pity on him.

"Why don't you unload the truck?" she suggested. That won her a look of awe from the old woman. For all her dedication, her Swahili, her attempt to make herself seem like a good daughter of the tribe, Elizabeth was still a European to them. She was all the more alien for being a black European and a woman who could give orders to men, especially white men, in this society where brides were still bought and sold.

"If you will have us--"

Instant protest, invitation, and apology followed in order:

how could she doubt her welcome?

"--we shall stay for a few days and observe the children. We can make ourselves useful to you."

The woman smiled. Surprisingly, given her age and health, she still possessed most of her teeth, and they glinted in the sunlight.

"But I have help, Memsaab." Elizabeth flinched. That word again. So much for Sisterhood and fitting in. "My bibi has come to help me."

"Her baby?" asked Jeremy, trying to translate.

"Bibi is 'mother'," answered Elizabeth. "You've seen those signs in the burnt-out stores and dukas along the road to Kampala, the ones that say Babito? That's a contraction, or actually an acronym, for Baba, Bibi, and Toto -- father, mother, and baby. In other words, stores for the whole family." She paused. "Now please go unload the truck before you offend her again."

Jeremy unloaded sack after sack of posho, the cornmeal that the Africans made into a porridge (and which Jeremy thought had the consistency and taste of library paste), and finally a precious box of powdered milk that they could use for the babies when (never if, only when) their mothers' milk ran dry. If he had anything to say about it, they'd be drinking it now: if a mother was HIV positive, a baby could pick it up from breast milk if it hadn't already contracted it in the womb.

Elizabeth Umurungi disappeared into the dark interior of the hut with her medical bag, leaving Jeremy standing outside. The children approached to watch him as he finished unloading the truck. Aware of their presence, he pocketed the keys, reached into the glove compartment, and slipped the revolver into his pocket.

No sense putting temptation in their way.

When he walked to the door of the hut, Elizabeth and the old

woman were kneeling beside a pallet that held the second wife.

Jeremy remembered her from the relief center. He was surprised she had made it back alive.

"Get me some water," Elizabeth ordered, not even bothering to turn around. "Rubbing alcohol too. We have to bring this fever down."

One of the children immediately ran off to obey this not-quite-stranger with her shiny instruments and her way of commanding a man taller and stronger than their father had been.

When the child sloshed back with a tin pan filled with dubiously clean water, Jeremy carried it and the rubbing alcohol inside.

Elizabeth sponged the woman on the pallet, while the other woman hovered and tried to sooth the patient. The sick woman's face glowed, the life flickering in it like embers in an ebony lantern, building, flaring up... At any moment, he thought it would surely burn out into darkness.

"Help hold her still!" Elizabeth ordered when the patient began thrashing, and Jeremy, who had always worn sweatbands and gloves when working out in his West Side gym, leapt to obey.

When they finished, the old woman held her daughter-in-law against her shoulder while Elizabeth brought out a syringe and administered it.

Of the old woman's "_bibi_", there was no sign at all.

Probably she was too shy or too frightened to even look at the strangers; Jeremy didn't envy Elizabeth the task of coaxing her out where she could be examined.

* * *

Jeremy paused, sleeping bag in hand, and looked around the hut that had been allotted them. He was used to sweat blotching

his shirts the instant he put them on. He was used to insects, used to animals, used to taking care of people in ways that would have made the men on the trading desk pass out. But the dark, claustrophobic hut with its long-unswept floor, its hovering, whining flies -- his imagination conjured up sleeping sickness, yellow fever, and typhoid for starters, and then began dwelling on more exotic diseases.

Elizabeth simply shrugged and spread her sleeping bag out on the floor. Maybe it was only dried mud, but it certainly smelled like cow dung.

Dinner had come and gone -- a scrawny chicken. They had protested that they had their own supplies, they could perfectly well feed themselves and everyone else; but the chicken had been killed and stewed, and they had had to eat it with every evidence of appreciation for the sacrifice it represented. Despite reprimands from mother and grandmother to let their guests eat in peace, Jeremy managed to feed at least half his dinner to the kids. He felt like a guilty child himself, feeding the family dog beneath the table, and then felt even guiltier for equating these starving children to household pets. It was a feast to them, and when their faces shone with the meager fat from the chicken skin, they started to yawn and soon wandered off.

Elizabeth and Jeremy left the hut and sat outside it, poking at a fire Jeremy had insisted on building. He promised himself that tomorrow he'd show the children how to toast things on it, wondering what he could substitute for marshmallows. He pulled out Ray's letter, studied it thoughtfully, and then placed it back in his pocket, unopened.

Beyond the circle of the village and its tiny fields, darker

than the night sky, lay uncleared land. The forest was coming back after the devastation of the past decades, and slowly, the wild creatures were returning. A hyena giggled maniacally, a lion coughed, and far off in the distance hippos grunted and bellowed. Elizabeth picked up a green branch and maneuvered a few smoldering logs. They suddenly burst into flame, and a shower of sparks rose into the dark African sky.

"Where did you learn to tend a fire?" asked Jeremy, whose camp duty it was to build fires.

For an instant, her eyes lit with humor. "In Girl Guides," she answered with a smile. "Certainly not in the bush." Jeremy forced himself not to grimace. He still held his rolled-up sleeping bag. "Are you going to hang onto that security blanket all night?" she asked.

"Why don't I sleep out in the truck?" he suggested. "More proper for the hired hand, wouldn't you say?"

"Whatever makes you happy," said Elizabeth. "Those kids look like they'd love to spend the night talking with you." It was obvious that she would much rather have been able to say "us" than "you". Suddenly she swatted a tsetse fly with surgical efficiency.

It lay still for a minute, then got to its feet and groggily walked off.

"Nobody ever told me they were armor-plated until I got here," said Jeremy, staring ruefully at the fly.

"If they get any worse, I may join you. We can take turns standing guard." She sighed deeply. "I wish we had some light," she continued. "Better than the firelight, I mean. I'd like to run some tests on that woman. She ought to be dead from that fever -- she had a body temp of at least 105."

"She was burning up," Jeremy agreed. "I thought I'd be digging a grave." He had been so careful to restrain the sick woman's flailing hands. Face it: he had been afraid, just as he'd been every day since he came here. With every patient he touched, he faced the question: are you the one who'll kick my T-cells out of balance? Will your AIDS be the death of me, too? It was no different for him than for the other relief workers. He knew that. He was no one special. But he was ashamed to ask if the others were afraid, too.

"Did you see?" asked Elizabeth. At least, she could escape into the discipline of her profession. She could do something.

"Her lesions actually seem to be shrinking."

There was a drug on the market that reduced lesions -- chicken pox or Kaposi's sarcoma, it made no difference -- but it was so expensive they'd need the treasure of King Solomon's mines to pay for it.

"Any chance of remission?" Jeremy kept his face out of the firelight so she wouldn't see the wild hope that heated it. At least, he hoped it was hope and not the first episode of night sweats.

Elizabeth put a hand out and gently touched his arm. "God only knows," she said softly. "There's always a chance, Jeremy. Always. And you're a non-progressor. Every day, every month that you hold out increases the chances of a cure, and gives us more time to study you. When we get back to the compound, I'll test your blood again." She paused. "I wish we could bring her back. And I wish the old lady's bibi would show up. You know, they tell me she cured one of the other villagers. They say he was dying of AIDS. That can't be true, of course, but I'd still love

to learn her methods."

"Don't tell me you believe in witch doctors?" asked Jeremy with a smile.

"I don't believe in all the superstition that goes along with it, but some of these folk healers have stumbled on medicines that are new to science. There are plants that no one has classified yet, and it's a fair bet that some of them will be effective against certain diseases. There's a Nobel Prize waiting for the scientist who brings back the right plants." She stared at the fire. "Yes, I wish I could convince the old woman to introduce me to this bibi of hers. Who knows what we might learn from her?"

"Maybe after a few days, when they see we don't mean any harm..." began Jeremy.

"They already know that, Jeremy," said Elizabeth. "Half of them have been to the camp at one time or another." She poked at the fire with the stick, silent for awhile. A sudden chorus of warning screams and barks from a troop of baboons told them that a leopard was in the neighborhood. The noise continued for a couple of minutes, growing gradually softer as the troop retreated higher up their trees and the leopard decided to seek other prey.

Jeremy fumbled again for the letter in his pocket, brought it out, stared at the once-familiar handwriting for perhaps the tenth time that day, and began to tuck it back into the pocket.

"You're driving me crazy with that letter!" snapped Elizabeth. "Either read the bloody thing or throw it into the fire!"

"I don't feel like reading it," said Jeremy.

"Then I'll read it!" she said, snatching it from him. She bent over and began reading aloud by firelight:

"Dear (that's a joke) Jeremy:"

"After I stopped shaking and walked out on you and got back to the Keys, Bud wanted to head North after you with his AK. But Steve said what the fuck, Bud tested clean -- no point throwing away his life along with yours and mine. And Steve's. He's real sick. ARC pneumonia. He calls it ARC-light bombing when he's got enough breath to talk. I've moved in with the two of them to try to help out. Money goes farther that way, and I like to think I'm useful. It's hard to watch him come apart and know this is how I'm going to end up."

"Then I think it's how you're going to end up too, and it's not so bad. For once, you're not going to be able to weasel your way out of something. Only you call it negotiating, don't you? It's part of that important stuff, like attention to detail and execution, that makes you such a big success on the Street. Wall, that is, not 42nd, where they sell themselves another way. Not much difference, is there, when you come right down to it? Talk about 'execution' -- you've sure executed the two of us like a pro."

"We can fight this,' you said. Maybe you _can turn what's left of your life into a holy crusade against this thing you gave me. Me, I just want to live what years I've got left. In a way, I envy Steve. He's out of it_ now, _and he's got Bud with him. I don't know what Bud'll do after he goes. Write, maybe. I'm using his computer. Don't mind the spelling mistakes. Bud's trying to get some rest, and if he knew I was writing to you, he'd probably pitch a fit._"

"Why in hell are you bothering?' he'd ask. For one thing, I want you to know _what you've done._"

"And I wanted to return these cufflinks to you. Bud was all for pawning them, sending you the ticket, and throwing one hell of a party, but that was always your job, wasn't it? With your Platinum Card, easy come, easy go, right? I don't want to drink your booze, and I don't want my friends to, either. And I don't want to keep these things around. I saw the catalog you ordered them from. 18 karat gold. I know what you paid. You must have been out of your mind.

"You want to look right, you said. You belong here. You belong with me. Dammit, if I belonged with you, why didn't you ever bring me home? I saw that picture of your folks you hide in your desk. They look nice. Your father -- he's a big guy, maybe big enough to take in another son. Maybe he even valued the one he had -- you, never mind the clone you stitched up out of bits of grad school, F. Scott FitzGerald, and The New Yorker, _or whatever the hell. Instead, Tiffany cufflinks. And the bloody Hamptons and why don't I move up to the City from the Keys, full-time, and take the goddamned Series 7 and you'd help me find a job. Then I could dress up and go to banquets for Greg Louganis or something with you and get my name on program committees. And if you died first, then I'd be the right kind of person to be written up as 'companion of' in_ The New York Times _obituary section with all the other guys who are dying too damn young._

"No, thanks.

"You said I was the best thing that ever happened to you. But that wasn't good enough. You had to play around and go test positive for HIV and give that to me, too.

_"Careless, that's what you are. Stupidly, killingly careless. Like the rules don't apply to you. I saw how your

friends act when you're not looking or maybe you don't care. They stiff waiters. They cut lines. They shout at people on the phones, people who can't shout back because they need their jobs. You probably even barged into the doctor's for your blood test ahead of six other people who had to wait even longer because_ you _were there and_ you _were important._

_ "Well, it's going to get you too, Jeremy Harris, just like it's getting the guy with TB on the street corner, wishing to hell he was dying down here where it's warm._

_ "Besides, I want to return the cufflinks because I don't want to get to the point where I have to pawn them and use the money. I wasn't smart, like you, at making money. Never had all that much. With luck, when I go, I'll go quick. If not, I plan to be somewhere warm, somewhere maybe people will take care of me. That's why I left New York. When Steve's gone, I'll probably head even farther south._

_ "If I had folks I was alive to, I'd go home to them, maybe, not hide their picture._

_ "It doesn't matter a whole hell of a lot. State of mind is important, though; that's what Steve's doctors said when they sent him home. We're not hoping for a miracle cure. He hasn't got a whole lot of time left, and no one knows that better than he does. But he's happier with his partner around and his garden and his boat in sight -- we hauled it out in front of his window. He can hear the ocean, and sometimes, when he's able to eat, one of us goes and catches him a fish._

_ "So here's the cufflinks. Keep 'em, throw 'em away, or pay Tiffany's to change the monogram for the next sucker. No use wasting good stuff._

"Steve just woke up. Got to go in a minute. Bud yelled in from his room, 'If you're writing to Jeremy, tell the sonofabitch to get a life.'"

"You had one. You threw it away. It couldn't happen to you: you were important. You were privileged. Well, it did, and now you've thrown away my _life too. Get a life, for as long as you can. That's what I plan to do. So I'm going to live as much as I can. First, I'm taking care of Steve. Did you ever help anyone up close? I'm not talking about writing checks and handing out cufflinks. It's kind of a mess, only helping someone who's that sick makes you feel...it's like you respect yourself. You know, I didn't for awhile there. You were paying the bills. I had to go along, I thought. But I hated it._"

"Don't try to get in touch. This isn't something you can negotiate until you talk me around. I know you're better at it than I am. Thing is, as long as I don't see you, I can remember the good things. But if I see you, I know I'll get mad all over again. And scared, just like when I first heard, and I prayed for a heart attack right then and there so I wouldn't have to go through what I know lies up ahead."

"Don't look for me. Don't even think about me. You know the old line, 'I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you'? Right now, I think that if I saw you, I'd kill you or die trying. And there'd go the few years I've got left. I'm not willing to throw them away too."

"Get a life, Jeremy. If you know how."

"Raymond"

Elizabeth stopped, her eyes glittering in the firelight. She was silent for a long time. Then she looked up. "I don't know what

to say..."

"Maybe now you understand why I didn't want to know what was in it," he said bitterly.

"It's a terrible burden to carry," she acknowledged. "But you're not the only one this has happened to."

"That's a damned arrogant thing to say. At least you were able to come back here..."

She moved abruptly, then stopped. It was as if she wanted to take his letter -- and his idiotic defensive statement -- and toss the whole lot into the fire. "I didn't mean to come back alone.

I wasn't alone in Paris. Ever. I could have had anyone.

Bankers, oil men, Frenchmen whose blood was so blue it was a wonder they could still breathe." She sighed. "What I chose was Paul. That was his Western name, the one he used in medical school. He was an Ibo."

Jeremy shut his eyes as he considered this revelation. Achole and Ibo. Elizabeth would have had about as much in common with Paul as if she'd been a nice Jewish girl who fell in love with Moammar Quadafi.

"Sorry," he muttered. At this rate, he'd have to make a tape or something: "Jeremy Harris -- His Greatest Apologies!" and play it as needed.

A hippo grunted, much closer than before, and Jeremy peered into the dark, trying to spot it with no success. They weren't carnivores, but they killed a lot of people who got in their way at nights.

Elizabeth spat on the ground, all the chic, all the European gone from her for a moment. "We had such plans. He was going to establish the best medical clinic in Africa, and I would be a

high-profile spokeswoman or fund-raiser, probably both. We were going to be a bridge between the nations, Paul and I -- and since he was the man, and that counts for more than you can imagine on this continent, we set up shop in his country." She sighed, and her shoulders looked bony, not elegant, not any more. "I tried. I did my best. I stuck it out long enough to be called a useless Achole bitch."

"By him?"

"By everyone. Including him."

Jeremy wanted to reach for the letter, but managed to control himself. "Then what?"

"I applied to medical school myself. My O-levels were good. I'd taken a First in university. Given Harvard's admission policies, I knew I could get in as a special student, then move on to med school. When I was done, I took my money and built the relief camp, and cajoled a few doctors into coming back to Uganda, and sold space to a few people like you, who were willing to pay to work here for whatever their personal reasons." She paused. "It was important to me when the camp became a reality. I collected all my clippings and sent them to Paul."

"Where is he now?"

"Nigeria. Or maybe hell, for all I know. There's not much difference between the two. I read last month that there's yet another revolution there; maybe they'll shoot him this time."

Again she poked at the fire.

Jeremy watched her face in the flickering firelight. All I ever saw before tonight was the model's looks and the cool, competent exterior, he mused. I guess we're all of us trapped inside our bodies. Even someone as beautiful and accomplished as

Elizabeth,

"Nigeria will do just fine without him," she concluded after a long silence. "It doesn't need a savior." She stared into the fire again. "I just wish I knew why Uganda is cursed."

"Uganda's not unique," replied Jeremy. "All the African countries have AIDS."

"We're unique," she said adamantly. "First Amin, then the other butchers, and now this. You know, Kenya has a high HIV incidence, almost as high as ours -- but their people aren't dying like ours. I've even heard former colonials in Nairobi, sitting at their lily-white bars and restaurants, complaining about it.

They thought AIDS would return Kenya to them, but hardly anyone's dying and they feel cheated! And here, right next door, in the most beautiful, fertile land on the continent, we're lost entire villages." A look of fury spread across her face. "It's just not fair!"

"Maybe we should learn from other countries instead of resenting them," said Jeremy, while deep within him a tiny voice protested in outrage.

"Their time will come," she replied. "What we need is more information. Sooner or later, we're going to find out what it is about non-progressors that makes them fight the disease better. Sooner or later, we're going to find someone with natural immunity..."

"God help the poor sucker," said Jeremy. "You'll make a lab rat out of him for sure."

A rich lab rat. A celebrity lab rat. There'd be fortunes to be made from an AIDS vaccine -- if you'd lost enough of your soul to charge what the market would bear. The market, of course,

being guys like him, not women like the ones lying two huts over, fighting off fever and the long defeat of their lives.

"Or _her_," she replied. "Who knows? Maybe this old woman's mother is the one. She's certainly lived long enough."

"So where is she?"

"Who knows?" Elizabeth frowned. "I've been away a long time.

My clothing's wrong, my accent's wrong, even my magic's wrong.

They don't trust me."

They sat in silence by the flickering firelight for a few

more moments. Finally Elizabeth yawned, stretching like one of the

children. Jeremy smiled at her. _I'm sorry that you hurt, but I

like you even better now that I know you're human._ Maybe he and

Elizabeth could adopt each other or something. He could be Uncle

Jeremy to any children she would eventually have. If he lived

long enough to see her meet a man with more sense than Paul. _Not

wisely, but too well,_ Jeremy thought. That went for both of them.

"I really _am_ going to bunk in the truck," he said, picking

up his sleeping bag. "The hut's too stuffy for me, even if does

get cold out here, and this way I can keep an eye on things."

"While you're sound asleep?" asked Elizabeth. He'd rather

hoped she'd be too sleepy to be sarcastic.

"Good night," he told her and trudged wearily toward the

battered truck. He spread out his bedding on the back of the

truck. If anything tried to get him, he'd at least hear it

coming, and he still had the pistol, just in case.

* * *

Jeremy jolted instantly awake, his heart pounding, his body

drenched. But this wasn't fever.

Something was watching him.

He forced himself back into stillness, keeping his eyes shut.

His hand, hidden beneath his head, gently released the safety on the pistol. Leopard or bandit or whatever, whatever tried to attack him was going to be very, very surprised, and then very, very dead.

Steady there. Play possum. He slowly opened his eyes. When they adjusted to the darkness, he glanced stealthily about. A tiny blot of shadow detached itself from the doorway of the sick woman's hut and paused, staring at the truck.

Dammit, those kids had no business wandering around here at night! He'd seen the fence around the old man's grave. Maybe the local scavengers would like live meat for a change. The children seemed eager to provide it.

You know perfectly well why their mothers can't watch the kids, he told himself. _They're sick or they're dying. Probably both._ Never mind what Elizabeth had said about miracles. The fact that her parents had survived the madness of Idi Amin had made her a cock-eyed optimist.

He'd give the kid five minutes, Jeremy decided. Five. If it didn't do its business in the bush or wherever, then go back into the hut, he personally would escort it back to its mother.

Wait. Don't move.

The shadow detached itself from the shelter of the hut and moved out into the clearing, toward the fenced-in grave. It squatted there, and Jeremy could see the tremors that shook it. No, shook _her_. Had one of the little ones been a girl? He couldn't remember. There'd been so many children, each to be greeted with a grin and a loop of scarlet ribbon as long as supplies held out, that sometimes he didn't look at them as the

individuals they were -- or that they would grow into if they
lucked out and lived.

This was a girl, barely four feet tall. Much too small to be
out alone. He gathered himself to leap down from the truck and
take the child in charge.

Not yet.

The child's shoulders shook. _Why, she's crying for her
father!_ Jeremy's own eyes filled. He blinked frantically, and
when his sight cleared, he found that the child had turned around.

And it was no child.

It had the face of a withered old woman -- with eyes that
seemed filled with love and compassion.

_This is crazy! Africa's finally got to me. I must be
hallucinating. How can you look at a pair of eyes, especially in
that ancient face, and read compassion or anything else into
them?_

A cough came from the darkness of the forest, a cough and a
rush of paws, followed by a squall of pure rage as the child with
the ancient face beat at the predator with a club. Finally Jeremy
could make out her attacker: a small, scrawny leopard, made bold
by its hunger.

No time for waiting now. Jeremy grabbed for the pistol,
aimed as best he could, and fired.

The explosion woke up the village. Jeremy built a huge fire
and reconnoitered, pursued by Elizabeth's ironic comments about
mighty hunters. A trail of blood and pawprints led back to the
bush and vanished there. Upon returning, he insisted on seeing all
the children and counting them, and trying fruitlessly to
determine which of them had been the one that had beaten off the

leopard.

Gradually, the infants stopped screaming. The sick woman in the hut stopped moaning for "Bibi". She even consented to drink some broth and put on a T-shirt that had been donated by Elizabeth.

Finally the village quieted down and went back to sleep.

After a long, long while, so did Jeremy. If anyone ventured outside, he didn't hear it -- or anything else.

In the morning, he found that the truck's radio and spark plugs were missing.

"Why would anyone take them?" he asked Elizabeth. "It's not as if this was telephone wire or something they could use for ornaments. The radio's no good to anyone without a power source, and the plugs are totally useless -- unless someone thought they'd look cute stuck through his ears." He paused. "If they don't turn up, we're in deep shit: no transportation and no way of calling for help."

"All we can do is ask," replied Elizabeth wearily.

She walked over to the old woman's hut and entered it.

"Good morning," she said with a smile as the old woman looked up from the daughter-in-law she had been tending.

"_Jambo, Memsaab,"_ responded the woman.

"That is a very formal greeting. I would much rather you called me Elizabeth."

"But _you_ are always formal, and don't call me by _my_ name," the old woman pointed out.

"I apologize, Maroka," said Elizabeth. "I did not mean to offend."

"I am sure you did not." Maroka reached out and touched

Elizabeth's arm gently. "You are a good person, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth finally looked down at the younger woman -- and almost did a double-take. Her eyes were alert and animated, and she was no longer covered with sweat. Elizabeth reached out a hand, feeling for signs of the fever, and finding none.

"Has she eaten?"

"Yes, Elizabeth," answered Maroka. "She has had _posho_ and milk. She asked for _pombe_, but I decided she should not have any until tomorrow."

Elizabeth examined the young woman for another few minutes, then straightened up. "It's amazing," she said at last. "My medicine has never been able to do this before."

"Your medicine did not save her," said Maroka. "It was Bibi's magic."

"Bibi came here last night?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes."

"Where is she now?"

"Hiding," answered Maroka. "She is shy of strangers. She will be back after you have left."

Elizabeth glanced out the door, wondering where Bibi might be. Then her eyes fell on the truck, and she remembered the purpose of her visit.

"There is a problem, Maroka," she said. "This morning we have found that certain things are missing from the truck. We must have them back, or the truck will not run."

"A monkey took them, Elizabeth," suggested Maroka. "Or perhaps a baboon."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you have many other villages to visit, and nobody in

this village would want to keep you from your work. We know it is important."

Elizabeth frowned. In a culture where no one ever spoke harshly or said anything unpleasant, Maroka's answer was the closest she would come to: "Because we don't want you here, and would never do anything to keep you from leaving."

"We still have food and medicine to give you," said Elizabeth.

"We have food, so it is best that your food go to a less fortunate village," replied Maroka. "And we have no need of your medicine. Bibi's magic is much stronger."

"I _really_ want to meet her," said Elizabeth, "and learn about her magic."

"I think she is afraid of you."

"Please help me," said Elizabeth earnestly. "She is an old woman who will probably never travel ten miles from here. Whatever magic she performs is needed all across Uganda."

Maroka paused and considered what she had heard. "That is true," she said at last. "I will tell her what you said, Elizabeth."

"Thank you."

"But I do not think she will come."

"Please ask her anyway," said Elizabeth. She inspected the younger woman one more time and then left the hut. She rejoined Jeremy, who was still rummaging under the hood of the truck, searching for further damage.

"Well?" he asked. "Does she know where our spark plugs and radio are?"

"I can't be sure, but I don't think so," said Elizabeth.

"It took you fifteen minutes to come to that conclusion?" he asked sardonically.

"It took fifteen seconds," she said. "The rest of the time we talked about medicine. Or magic."

"I don't follow you."

"That young woman -- the one I thought would be dead by today -- is one hundred percent better."

"What did you give her?" asked Jeremy.

"Nothing I haven't given hundreds of other patients," said Elizabeth, frowning. "I'm thrilled that she's recovering -- but everything I know about medicine says she shouldn't be."

"And they think it's magic?" asked Jeremy. "Even though they saw you administer the medications?"

"Evidently Bibi came by last night and laid a spell on her," said Elizabeth.

"A spell?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "A leaf. A plant. Some kind of flower. I don't know what. But Maroka's convinced that she's the one who saved the young woman." Elizabeth frowned. "Hell, for all I know, Maroka's right. That's why I want to find her, even more than I want to find our spark plugs. If this woman has stumbled on some kind of miracle cure, I want to know about it."

"Maybe they're right," said Jeremy. "Maybe it is magic."

"Nonsense!" she snapped. "There's no such thing!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jeremy. "To create penicillin out of bread mold seems like magic to me. Or to take a piece of silicon and make it think faster and more accurately than a man, that's magic too. You're too concerned with process, Elizabeth, when it's the result that counts. If the old lady's mother can cure people

by magic or any other means, I'd bring her a batch of sick people instead of trying to steal her secrets."

"I don't like what you're accusing me of, Jeremy," said Elizabeth sharply. "All I want to know is what she's doing to make them well -- if indeed she's doing anything at all -- and then I want to find out how to synthesize it, bottle it and distribute it."

"Maybe it can't be done."

"You give me the facts, and I'll do it."

"To quote Don Quixote, facts are the enemies of truth."

"That's romantic drivel," said Elizabeth. "Facts are all there is."

"Not around here," he replied.

"Oh?"

He smiled. "Ask the villagers: There's magic, too."

"Are you trying to be argumentative?" she demanded.

"Some unseen old lady may be going around curing people of AIDS," answered Jeremy. "All you're concerned with is how she does it, and all I'm concerned with is getting her to do it again. Now, if that's argumentative..."

"No," replied Elizabeth thoughtfully. "No, I suppose it isn't, really. You've got a vested interest in being cured; I've got one in finding out how to cure people. Our approaches are bound to differ."

"I grew up on Peter Pan and Mother Goose and Mowgli and Oz, and you grew up with facts and figures and slaughtered villages," replied Jeremy. "Of course our approaches are different."

"You simply will not understand!" she said irritably.

"No," he admitted. "But show me a cure and I might

believe."

She angrily turned away from him and strode off into the village, where a clap of her hands summoned all the children from their huts. Those few who were wearing clothes twisted them as they stood in a ragged, uneasy line, expecting the worst from the two strangers, one white and one black.

"All right, believer," said Elizabeth to Jeremy. "_You_ can tell them what we lost." It would be a stretch in kitchen Swahili, but walking back to the relief camp was a far less attractive alternative.

A few adults gathered around to chuckle in amusement at Jeremy's awkward descriptions of the things that were missing. The children's eyes simply widened and they looked from one to another.

Then Elizabeth walked up and down the row of children, studying each in turn. Finally she stopped before the tallest of the boys, who had long since outgrown his Michael Jordan t-shirt and was wearing a filthy, tattered Muhammed Ali t-shirt from another era.

"You know, don't you?" she said. "I can see it on your face.

You know who took those things."

The boy's bare feet scuffed in the dust. He muttered something.

"I can't hear you," said Elizabeth.

"Bibi took them."

"His mother?" interjected Jeremy, puzzled.

"Perhaps," answered Elizabeth. "In formal Swahili, bibi can also mean grandmother."

"You mean Maroka?" asked Jeremy, surprised.

There were indignant protests from the healthier of the two wives, who had come out to watch. From Maroka there was only a haughty lift of the head.

Elizabeth turned back to the child. "I want you to tell me where our things are. We can't go home without them."

More sidelong, wary glances, child to child.

Elizabeth left the boy and stopped in front of a girl who was no more than six or seven years old. She didn't say a word, just stared at her. The girl kicked the red dirt nervously with her bare feet and refused to meet Elizabeth's gaze.

"Do you know?" Elizabeth finally asked her.

"She said not to tell."

"Who said not to tell...and why?"

The little girl looked up, and then spoke in a rush. "Bibi.

She says your hearts are good, because you wish to help. But she also says if we stayed in your village, we would have all gotten sicker. If we had left earlier, my father would still be alive."

"But that's not true!" protested Elizabeth.

"Bibi says it is," said the girl, staring unblinking into Elizabeth's eyes.

Elizabeth kept trying, but after a few minutes it became obvious that the children would not disobey Bibi and reveal where the missing parts were hidden.

Elizabeth exchanged a quick, frustrated glance with Jeremy.

"Beautiful Uganda, land of my people, where no good deed goes unpunished," she murmured.

Jeremy was almost as depressed as he had been when the results of his initial bloodwork had come back. Radios, if mistreated, could be cranky, and there was a limit to the truck's

ability to sit outside without maintenance. Let it be exceeded, and even if they found their equipment, they'd still be stranded in this tiny village.

"Well," said Elizabeth, "I may as well make my morning rounds." She grimaced in Jeremy's direction. "Are you ready for an _un_ scientific opinion?"

"It's my favorite kind."

"Personally, I think this whole goddamned village needs to have its collective head examined."

The day passed uneventfully, and as the huge sun went down, Jeremy summoned the energy from somewhere to gather wood for a fire. The children were busy gathering firewood and water, and putting the chickens in their coops, which would be hung from nearby trees. Jeremy watched Elizabeth's friendly overtures met with polite coolness, as the villagers decided that black skin and a knowledge of Buganda did not make her one of them.

He considered the missing equipment for the hundredth time.

They couldn't count on anyone arriving here except by accident.

They _had_ to persuade the thief to give back the radio and the spark plugs.

Elizabeth emerged from a hut and walked over to join Jeremy.

"I must have misdiagnosed that woman," she said, puzzled. "She showed all the classic signs, and I thought her fever would finish her off in a matter of hours. But she's no more an AIDS victim than _I_ am. Hell, even that case of thrush she had is clearing up." She shook her head. "Maroka wants to make her sit up tomorrow. I suppose she's right; the sooner she's back on her feet, the better."

"Who will watch her until she can go back out in the fields?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "We still haven't seen Bibi; given her age, that'd be a good job for her." She paused. "You know, that's another reason I'd like to get out of here; the poor thing's so scared of us she's hiding out in the bush. I didn't come here to turn some poor woman out of her house and put her at the mercy of the hyenas."

She seemed about to say something more, then changed her mind and headed off to her sleeping hut.

Darkness descended, and Jeremy soon fell asleep on the back of the truck. When he woke in the morning, the crimson ribbon was missing from his shirt.

Interesting. He climbed down, swallowed his pills, cut himself a fresh ribbon, and put the much-diminished spool into a hip pocket, just in case.

And suddenly he knew that he was being watched. He found himself glancing over his shoulder, watching the long sharp shadows in case some tiny fragment broke off from one of them and headed for the truck or the fields or the deep bush.

When he paused to wipe his face after splashing it with some water, the sense of being watched grew even stronger. Once or twice, he caught a flicker of motion on the far side of a clearing, at the edge of his vision.

Maroka's bibi? He hadn't gotten a good look at her, but he couldn't imagine who else it could be. He set off across the clearing, and soon spotted some footprints in the dust. They were small enough to be the prints of a child, but they were deep, as if the person they belonged to was carrying something heavy.

They led him deeper and deeper into the bush. Soon the vegetation had closed around him. He could hear the chirping of

birds and the buzzing of insects, but the only motion he could see was the slight swaying of leaves in the hot breeze. He could almost imagine that he was some stone-age man, pushing his way through the bush in pursuit of his dinner; surely the terrain hadn't looked much different even a million years ago.

A hyena giggled in the distance; in Jeremy's mind it became a 300-pound hyenadon. A vulture circled lazily overhead; he pretended it was a pteradactyl.

He was still imagining a distant past and a more physically imposing version of himself when suddenly he came upon a clearing. A huge dead tree had fallen down -- he imagined that a mastodon had pushed it over -- and a nearby termite mound towered some twenty feet above the ground.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a cluster of children, and saw the baby -- (and how had they let the kids take it out of the hut?) -- in the arms of what looked like another child.

That is, it looked like another child until he got a glimpse of its wizened face. It was a female, no question about it, for she was nursing the infant. Her skin seemed incredibly ancient, not so much lined as engraved with seams. The sparse hair surrounding it, growing far down on her low brow, was white. But the smile on her lips as she looked down at the baby was very beautiful and oddly familiar.

I've seen you before, I know I have. But where?

Jeremy took a step toward her. A dry twig snapped beneath his foot and a dozen birds burst from cover while overhead a family of colobus monkeys began shrieking. The woman with the ancient face jumped, startled. Then she laid the baby down on a piece of red cloth and fled into the bush. The infant, deprived of his milk,

promptly began howling.

_"Come on, Bibi!" he wanted to yell after her. "Can a sick, skinny American be that frightening?" _

By the time Jeremy had helped soothe the infant, placing it in the eldest girl's arms and coaxing all of them to believe he wasn't some sort of monster just because the old woman had fled, he had gotten his thoughts -- and his memory -- in order.

One summer, just for a change, he had rented a place on Nantucket, not the Hamptons: a shabby, ramshackle, desirable home that had cost him a bundle. It had been a good summer, and he hadn't begrudged a cent of it, despite about a week of rainy days. Along with the seafood, the sailing, and the whale watching, he'd had the whole old house to prowl through. And, in its attic, he'd found treasure indeed -- thirty years worth of _National Geographics_.

He'd loved that magazine ever since he was a child. In fact, he'd dreamed of being an explorer, maybe even a paleontologist or geochronologist until his Uncle Sid -- the executive vice president -- sat him down and explained the facts of life to him: student loans; grants; bottom lines. The best way -- probably the _only_ way -- to participate in these expeditions was to fund them.

So he'd packed the dream away, but he'd kept up his subscription to _National Geographic_, joined the Nature Conservancy, and always made donations to the American Museum of Natural History. They were good causes and tax-deductible, but the _real_ reason was that he loved them.

Now, those yellowed covers and fragile pages riffled in his imagination, and he remembered Dr. Donald Johanson's discovery of

Australopithecus afarensis, some 3.2 million years old. She was mankind's ancestor, a tiny female Johanson had called Lucy after the Beatles' record his staff had played incessantly during the dig.

And now he had seen her. Not as a mummified corpse or a pile of white bones, either.

He'd seen her as a living, breathing being. Nursing her great-to-the-Nth-power-grandchild. He even knew her name.

Bibi

* * *

While everyone else was celebrating the miraculously-recovered young woman's emergence from the hut in which she was expected to die, Jeremy wandered over to the truck and picked up his "bait": a bowl of _posho_ and some dried fruits.

There was no sense telling Elizabeth what he had seen or what he planned to do about it. She would give him so many rational explanations that he would have ended up believing her and not trying to entice the ancient woman back. So while Elizabeth lay deeply asleep within the hut, Jeremy laid out his traps on the back of the truck, then stretched out right beside them. He forced himself to close his eyes: moonlight would reflect off them, and it stood to reason that the superior senses of _australopithecus..._pitheca?... would spot it.

He waited.

And then it was morning, and the fruit was gone.

* * *

"It was _her_," said Jeremy to Elizabeth. "I know it was!"

"Then what are you going to do -- sleep out in the truck again?"

He shook his head. "That's my turf, and it makes her too cautious."

"Surely you're not going out into the bush at night!"

"You want your spark plugs back, don't you?" he retorted.

"Not at the cost of your life."

"I'll be fine."

"Sure you will," she said caustically. "If you don't get totally lost, you'll probably run into that leopard you shot."

"He's out of the area," replied Jeremy.

"How do you know?"

"The baboons are quiet at night."

She stared at him. "This is really stupid, Jeremy."

"Probably," he agreed. "But unless you have a better idea..."

* * *

She walked through the bush, eyes and ears alert to any danger. The animals were different from those she was used to -- smaller, but just as dangerous. She came to a small stream, checked carefully for predators, then squatted down, cupped a hand, and brought some of the life-giving liquid to her lips. A marabou stork landed a few feet away and she jumped.

Her first urge, now that she had satisfied her thirst, was to return to the cave she had found, where she would be safe for the night. But then the wind brought the scent of fruit to her nostrils, and she decided to investigate...

* * *

The moon had long set, and he was on the verge of drowsing off, his back against the thick bole of an acacia tree, when he finally saw that small, familiar figure steal out from a nearby bush across the clearing. It paused to stare at him, and Jeremy

forced himself to remain motionless. Tiny shadows swung from her neck. As she came closer, Jeremy saw what it was: she -- or one of the children she tended -- had strung the spark plugs on a grass string, and she was wearing them as a necklace.

Come on, Sweetheart, he thought as his heart pounded. He had spread his treasures out on the ground: the red cloth in which the infant had been wrapped, some dried apricots, a bowl of _posho_, a long loop of scarlet ribbon. _Come on!_ But the tiny creature paused, suddenly frightened. _Please_, he thought again, this time imploringly. _Please, Bibi!_

The figure turned toward him, lifting her head and straightening up, which set the spark-plug necklace to swaying once again. Then, attracted by the prizes he'd set out, she drew closer.

She recognized the cloth and snatched it to her breast, cradling it like an infant. She caught up a dried apricot and chewed it quickly, her eyes shining with pleasure. Then she reached for the strand of crimson ribbon.

Jeremy laid his hand down on the other end of the ribbon.

Bibi jumped back.

Jeremy leaned forward carefully. She had seen him with the women and children; she had to know that he wasn't a threat. Still, she watched him carefully, never taking her eyes from his, never losing her grip upon the ribbon.

That's right. Think of the necklace you can make. Think of how it'll delight the kids.

"Come on," he whispered to her as he got slowly, carefully to his feet. Would she understand any speech at all? "Of course you want it. It's pretty. I'll trade you. This for..." he waved at

the spark plug necklace in a gesture of _let's barter_ that might have been old when she was young.

The ancient woman backed away. _Smart, aren't you? Why bargain if you can get it for free?_ He tugged lightly on the length of ribbon, trying to draw it toward him, and her with it. She let herself be drawn and looked up into his face.

He was struck by her eyes. Even under the low, furrowed brow, they glowed with intelligence. This was not a "primate"; this was a _person_. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

You've seen me. I'm your friend. I shot the leopard.

"I really need those spark plugs," he said softly. He leaned over, cautiously, maintaining the tension on the red ribbon. He was six feet tall to her four. A little further, a little longer -- and his fingers closed on her arm.

He was strong, especially compared to her -- but she was wily. Even as she squalled with anger, she let him draw her closer. And then, with a smile of glee at her own cunning, she buried her sturdy, three-million-year-old teeth deep in his arm. Jeremy let out a yelp of surprise and pain. Human bites were as nasty as those of the big cats, he'd heard, and even dirtier; but this bite burned like molten iron.

Goddammit! I thought you'd come to save your children, not kill them! Are we that _disappointing to you?_ And then came a frightening thought:

God help me, I've contaminated her!

He realized that he was bleeding like the proverbial stuck pig, his arm was swelling, and the moonlight shone off some nasty red streaks had started to travel from the wound up toward his lymph nodes. He could hear his teeth chattering as he burned and

shivered and tried to use his belt as a tourniquet.

Why, Bibi? You can't _have come across the endless eons just to bite a man who's already dying. It doesn't make any sense!_

Then he blacked out.

* * *

The sky glittered as if it were filled with diamonds. More diamonds, or maybe sapphires, reflected off the brilliant surface of the lake. Or maybe it was an ocean. A white wake bisected it, and ripples shimmered, then evened out as the water calmed.

Jeremy thrashed. He wanted to tell everyone that it was a good sign that the water was troubled, it meant that spirits were abroad, or afloat, or something. Anyhow, it meant that miracles could indeed happen, even to him. His arm burned; he ached all over; and his mouth tasted as if bats had roosted in it.

He thrashed and felt weights land on him, forcing him back down. He opened his eyes and saw Bibi, the infinitely loving mother of the race, up in that glittering sky, surrounded by a rainbow haze that turned into crystals even as he watched, then dropped down in showers of gems. _Lucy in the sky, with diamonds.

And I thought it was just a song!_

He'd been young once, without this treason in his blood and body; and he'd waterskiied in the Keys with guys as carefree as he himself. He'd linked arms and chanted, "The whole world's watching!" So it was, and Bibi was watching too, her ugly, beautiful, infinitely loving face grave with concern.

"If you get sick, come home," his parents had written, "and we'll take care of you."

That's just what I've done, he wanted to say; _I've come

home, and the mother of us all is taking care of me._

Then he fell into a restless sleep in which he was walking, walking, always walking. He was walking not merely across the millennia but across goddamned millions of years toward someone who had cried out in pain. Toward a _lot_ of someones. And he thought his heart would break from the effort and the sorrow.

* * *

Jeremy awoke, shivering, as three women sponged him down. A child's voice piped up like rock music when the lead singer goes falsetto. He heard a cuff, and a cry, and the child was out of there.

In the muted grey light of a dawn he had never expected to see, he found Elizabeth Umurungi's troubled eyes, much reddened, watching him. "If he doesn't come out of this now..." he expected her to say. Instead, he could lip-read the words of the Rosary. He cried at her sorrow. He imagined that someone took his hand in a warm grip, unlike any he had ever known. It drew him back across the years, across the gulf of sickness, fear, and death, out of the place where the sky dropped diamonds and back into the familiar smells and sounds of the tiny village.

* * *

Flies buzzed overhead, butting up against the hut's thatched ceiling. Jeremy wrinkled his nose at the reek of antiseptic, so totally at odds with the homelier smells of animal dung, human sweat, and cooking fires. Not far away, water trickled into a metal basin... God, he was so thirsty! He tried to ask for water. Something between a croak and a whimper emerged from lips that cracked open with the effort.

Another voice echoed his. Someone went to the door and

called. Shouts that might have been cheers sounded from outside.

"He's coming around? Good! Stay with him."

His eyes were so thoroughly gummed shut that it seemed to take an hour to open them. He flexed his fingers. Still all there. What about his other arm, the one Bibi had bitten? Experimentally, he moved it, and flinched.

"I wouldn't try that," said Elizabeth. "You've been pretty sick. Bit of a reaction to the rabies vaccine. Or maybe the tetanus."

The _what?_

"Maybe you can help me out," continued Elizabeth. "I don't know what got you. I just know I found you, swelling up like a balloon, blood oozing from your arm, and nothing in sight."

"It was Bibi."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Elizabeth.

"It was Bibi, and she didn't do it to hurt me," whispered Jeremy weakly.

"Rubbish."

"You'll see," said Jeremy. "Ask her yourself."

"Why in the world would she come back here -- _especially_ if she bit you?"

"Because she's worried about her son."

"You're not her son," replied Elizabeth patiently, as if speaking to a child.

"We are _all_ her children," rasped Jeremy. "Somehow, she felt our pain, knew we were in trouble, and through means we'll never understand, she did what any mother would do: she came to help us."

"Jeremy, you've been delirious. You're still not thinking

rationally," said Elizabeth. "She's an old woman, that's all.

Possibly a bit retarded. And she's probably mute; the children told me she used some form of sign language when she spoke to them."

"She can speak," said Jeremy with absolute conviction. "It's just that no one can understand her language."

"Oh?" said Elizabeth sardonically. "Just what language does she speak?"

"I don't know," murmured Jeremy. "It hasn't been heard in three million years."

"You're sicker than I thought," she said as he passed out again.

* * *

When he awoke, he felt good.

More than good. He felt better than he'd felt in years. For the first time since he'd contracted the virus, he felt ready to get up and seize the day.

And then, suddenly, the revelation hit him. He tried to sit up, but found he didn't have the strength. A child looked in, saw him struggling, and called Elizabeth.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Jeremy?" she asked as she entered the hut.

"Nothing!" he said. "Absolutely nothing!"

She stared at him, puzzled.

"Don't you understand?" he said excitedly. _ "There's nothing wrong with me!" _

"What are you talking about?"

"As soon as we get back to camp, I want you to run another blood test on me."

She looked at him as if she expected him to foam at the mouth momentarily. "You don't seriously believe that you're no longer HIV positive, do you?"

"Just test me," his voice reflecting his absolute conviction.

"There's never been a single recorded case of a spontaneous cure, Jeremy."

"It's not spontaneous!" Jeremy said excitedly. "And no one records cures out here in the bush. She cured me, just like she's cured so many others. That's what she's here for."

"And just how do you think this old, illiterate woman, who is totally ignorant of all medicine and technology, cured your incurable disease?"

"She bit me."

"You mean all I had to do all these months was bite you and you'd have become HIV negative?" said Elizabeth sarcastically.

"No. She had to do it."

"She undoubtedly bit you because you scared her."

A feeling of overwhelming fatigue swept over him, and he lay back on his pillow. "I feel very sorry for you," he said.

"You feel sorry for me?" she repeated. "Why?"

"Because you know too many facts and too little truth," he said as he struggled to remain awake. "You'll test my blood, and because you don't believe in Bibi, you'll take two or three more samples before you acknowledge what your tests tell you."

He could almost feel a rough, calloused hand run tenderly through his hair as he dropped off to sleep once more.

* * *

Jeremy was outside, chopping firewood, working up a sweat and feeling great about it, when Elizabeth called him over to her hut.

"What is it?" he asked when he arrived.

She held up the spark plugs, strung together on a thread of scarlet ribbon.

"What happened?"

"I left some costume jewelry outside the hut," said

Elizabeth. "She came during the night and accepted the trade." She grimaced. "They cost me a cultured pearl necklace and a silver-plated bracelet."

"I think both sides made a good trade," said Jeremy.

He looked across the village, past all the huts, toward the bush.

Thank you, Bibi. I will probably never see you again, but I owe you my life, and I will dedicate it to helping your other children.

* * *

They had been back in camp for a day. Jeremy had put in a long morning tending patients and passing out food, and was sitting on a camp chair just outside his tent, reading a 10-month-old copy of _The New Yorker_, when Elizabeth appeared.

"I tested your blood," she announced.

"And?"

"I couldn't culture HIV from your blood if I had all the resources of the Mayo Clinic here." She paused and stared at him.

"You got your miracle, Jeremy. You're clean. HIV negative."

Suddenly tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks. For just an instant he thought he could feel Bibi's hand tighten around his, a mother reassuring a child who has been desperately ill.

"I _told_ you," he said at last.

"I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now," answered Elizabeth. "But whoever and whatever she is, she's worth her weight in gold to us." She paused thoughtfully. "She's why they said that Kabute wouldn't have died if they could have gotten him back home -- because she was there waiting for him. And she's probably why we saw that fatally ill woman's lesions shrink and the thrush go away."

Jeremy grinned. "'Probably', hell! Of course it was her. And now I'm going to live. I'm going to live forever and ever!"

* * *

The next morning was cool and clear, and they decided to eat breakfast outside. The crackling of the eggs and bacon frying attracted a small troop of vervet monkeys, and a black African kite swooped down from a limb above the fire and swiped a piece of bread right out of Jeremy's hand.

"They're such rogues," said Elizabeth as the kite flew away with its prize.

"Well, it's nice to know that something on this continent isn't endangered," remarked Jeremy.

She watched the kite for another moment, then turned to Jeremy. "I've been giving Bibi a lot of thought."

"And?" asked Jeremy.

"We've got to go back and find her," answered Elizabeth. "I'd kill for the chance to have AIDS researchers examine her. I still don't know that I buy your story about her curing you with a bite, but whatever happened, she obviously gave you some biochemical agent that kills the HIV virus." She looked at Jeremy wryly.

"It'll never replace the Salk vaccine, but there's simply no other explanation. I've got to find her and bring her to the camp."

"She's not a lab animal," replied Jeremy seriously. "She's got to remain free to do her job."

"Her job?"

"She has other children to cure."

"You're not a child."

"We're all her children."

"_That_ again," said Elizabeth with a sigh.

"_You_ don't have to believe it," said Jeremy, protecting his bacon as the kite swooped down toward his plate. "It's enough that I do."

"You're not being logical, Jeremy."

"I was logical my whole life, and what did it get me, except some money I don't need and an incurable disease?" replied Jeremy.

"Why don't you really look at Uganda sometime? This is a magical place, for all its problems. Spit a mango pit out the window of your Land Rover, and when you drive by six months later a mango tree has grown up. Amin and his successors virtually wiped out your wildlife, yet all the animals are returning. Terminally ill people suddenly get cured. So how can I not believe in magic?"

"There's nothing magical about Bibi."

"I think there is," said Jeremy. "Leave her alone."

"I can't," protested Elizabeth. "Not until I've studied her, and found out how she does it. We may never find anything like her again."

"Think of her," he said. "What kind of life do you think she'd have, shuttling from clinic to clinic, facing all those vampires in white coats that not even a mother could love?" He paused. "Let her stay in the bush. These people won't tell. Besides, you have me: a certified HIV-negative volunteer at your

disposal." He stared unblinking into her deep brown eyes. "Let her go, Elizabeth."

"You know I can't. We could save _millions_ of people." She zeroed in for the kill. "Or isn't that important to you, now that _you've_ been cured?"

"You know that's not true!" he snapped heatedly.

He was going to say more, tell her how unfair that statement was, how no true friend would ever even suggest it. But a little voice in his head intervened: _Could she be right? Am I just pretending to believe in Bibi's powers? Do I really feel now that I'm cured that no one else matters?_

He searched his soul, which he had not done for a long time, because he hadn't especially liked what he had found there. This time he couldn't find what he was afraid might be lurking in its darker recesses.

Well, I know it's a lie, he thought with satisfaction; _no sense trying to convince you, too._

"All I know is that we're going to dig ten more graves tomorrow morning," responded Elizabeth, "and ten the day after that, and ten the day after _that_, and we're going to keep digging them until we've either beaten this disease or every last victim has died. Now, here's a woman who may, just _may_, have a cure for it. Do you really think I can let her go?"

He stared at her for a very long moment. "No," he said softly. "I know you can't."

"Then come with me while I search for her," continued Elizabeth. "She helped you. Maybe she won't be so frightened if she sees that you're with me."

He stared at his plate for a long moment, considering his

answer. The kite hovered overhead, and finally settled for a scrap of bacon that had fallen in the dirt by the fire.

"All right, I'll come," he said at last. "But we won't find her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you're antithetical to her. She's magic brought forth from the spirit of this land, and you're science and logic and doubt educated thousands of miles away."

"Science will save a lot more people than she can once I find out just what it is that she does," said Elizabeth.

He shook his head sadly. "You still don't see, do you?"

"See what?"

"Science needs her," said Jeremy. "She doesn't need science. Never has, never will." He sighed deeply. "You and she are oil and water, and your worlds touch only briefly in passing. That's why you'll never find her."

"We'll see," said Elizabeth grimly.

* * *

They spent the next three months following up every rumor, every imagined sighting of an old woman who performed feats of medical magic.

They scoured the Virunga Volcanos and came away empty-handed.

They thought they found her tracks in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon, but they never saw her. They stopped back at camp only long enough to take on fresh supplies, then went to the arid semi-desert in the north of the Karamojong country, and west to the aptly-named Impenetrable Forest. They spent a week at Murchison's Falls, only to discover that the old lady they were tracking was a Buganda witch woman who was missing an eye and part

of an ear.

Everywhere they went they questioned the local people. Far from showing the symptoms of the "Thinning Disease", almost all of them glowed with health and fervently denied ever having seen anyone who remotely resembled Bibi. Jeremy got the distinct impression that they were secretly laughing at the two relief workers.

Finally Elizabeth admitted defeat and returned to camp.

Jeremy tended the sick and the dying for another week, and then asked to see her privately.

"Well?" she said, when the two of them were alone in her tent.

"I've made up my mind," he announced. "I'm leaving."

"You mean you're going home?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm staying in Uganda."

"Then I don't understand..."

"All we're doing here is prolonging doomed lives," said

Jeremy. "I came here to save some."

Suddenly Elizabeth's eyes widened with comprehension. "You're going out after Bibi!"

"That's right."

"But we've just spent three months looking for her. What makes you think you can find her?"

He didn't want to answer that, for fear of hurting her, but finally he did. "I'll be alone."

"You think that makes a difference?" she said caustically.

"Yes, I do." Okay, so you can't be hurt if you don't believe.

"You're a fool!" she snapped. "Where will you go? In what

direction will you look? How will you feed yourself?"

"I'll get by," he said. "And I won't have to find her.

She'll find me."

"You'll starve to death, or run into a leopard or a hyena, or drink the wrong water or eat the wrong food," said Elizabeth.

"You can't survive alone in the bush."

"I didn't realize you thought so little of me," he said wryly.

"It's because I think so much of you that I don't want you dead."

"It's my decision -- and if AIDS can't kill me, neither will anything else this land has to offer." He withdrew a handwritten document and placed it on her table. "This turns over all my investments to the camp." Suddenly he grinned. "The Notary Public's hut wasn't open for business today, but I think it'll stand up in court."

Elizabeth walked to the door of the tent and looked out at the busy camp, then turned back to Jeremy. "You're giving everything up for a dream. Won't you reconsider?"

He shook his head. "If I reconsidered, I might agree that it was nothing but a dream and stay here. And then I'd miss the chance to help her perform her magic."

"We don't need magic," she replied impatiently. "If this crisis is solved, it will be solved by science."

"To me it's all magic, and who's to say that yours is any more potent than theirs? Science couldn't cure me, but Bibi could."

"Damn it, Jeremy, you're chasing a will-o-the-wisp. She's just an old woman, not some mythical creature with awesome powers

of healing."

"She cured me with a bite," he said. "How can I not believe in that?"

"We don't know that that's what cured you," insisted Elizabeth. "She could have administered any number of medications while you were delirious."

"She could have," he agreed. "But she didn't."

Elizabeth paused and look at him sadly. "Isn't there anything I can say?"

"Yes," he replied. "Say 'Good luck'."

She was still staring at him silently as he left her tent.

* * *

Bibi walked through the bush, senses alert to the hidden presence of predators. There were so many children, far more than she dreamed possible. She could feel their cries, their hunger, their pain, and she knew that she had much work to do before she could rest again.

Suddenly she heard a twig break, and she crouched, ready to race to safety. A man was approaching noisily, making no attempt to hide his presence, frightening birds and monkeys with every step.

Her first inclination was to run, but some secret instinct made her stay -- and then she saw a familiar face, a face that reflected the unselfish love that was written across her own.

_ "Hi, Mom," said the man, holding a dried apricot out to her.

"I've brought you a present." _

-end-