

## The Clockwork Atom Bomb

Dominic Green

“Over here, mister. This is the place.”

The girl tugged Mativi’s sleeve and led him down a street that was mostly poorly-patched shell holes. Delayed Action Munitions – the size of thumbnails and able to turn a man into fragments of the same dimensions – littered the ground hereabouts, designed to lie dormant for generations. Construction companies used robot tractors to fill in bomb damage, and the robots did a poor job. Granted, they were getting better – Robocongo was one of equatorial Africa’s biggest exporters. But usually the whites and the blacks-with-cash sat in control rooms a kilometre away directing robots to build the houses of the poor, and the poor then had to live in those houses not knowing whether, if they put their foot down hard on a tough domestic issue, they might also be putting it down on a DAM bomblet a metre beneath their foundations.

This street, though, hadn’t even been repaired. It was all sloped concrete, blast rubble and wrecked signs telling outsiders to KEEP OUT THIS GOVERNMENT BUILDING! FIELD CLERICAL STORES! IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT WORK HERE YOU GO BACK!

“Come on, mister”, said the *phaseuse*. “You will see, and then you will have no problem paying.”

“You stand still,” commanded Mativi suddenly. “Stand right there.”

Nervously, he reached into a pocket and brought out the *Noli Timere*. It only worked fifty per cent of the time, based on information gathered from scientist-collaborators from all factions in the war, but fifty per cent was better than zip.

He turned the device on, on low power in case any of the more recent devices that smelled mine detector power-up were present,

and swept it left and right. Nothing. He flicked it up to full power and swept again. A small stray air-dropped anti-personnel device at the north-west end of the street, but otherwise nothing.

“You see that house over there, Emily?” he said, pointing across the road. The girl nodded. “Well, you’re not to go in there. There is an explosive device in there. A big one. It’ll kill you.”

Emily shook her head firmly. “It isn’t *nearly* as big as the one that took Claude.”

Mativi nodded. “But you say the device is *still there*.”

“Has been since I was very little. Everyone knows it’s there. The grown-ups know it’s there. They used it when the *slim* hit, to get rid of the bodies, so we wouldn’t get sick. Sometimes,” she said, “before the bodies were entirely dead.”

“You can’t get *slim* from a dead body,” said Mativi.

“That’s what you say,” said Emily. And he knew she was right. So many generously altered genomes had been flying around Africa in warheads fifteen years ago that someone *could* have altered HIV and turned it into an airborne, rather than blood-borne, virus – like the rickettsial haemorrhagic fever that had wiped out all of Johannesburg’s blood banks in a single day and made social pariahs of blacks all over Europe and America overnight.

The sun dropped below the horizon like a guillotine blade, and it was suddenly night, as if someone had flicked a switch in Heaven. Mativi had gotten too used to life off the equator, had been working on the basis that night would steal up slowly as it had in Quebec and Patagonia. But the busy equatorial night had no time for twilight. He hadn’t brought night vision goggles. Had he brought a torch?

As they walked up the street, a wind gathered, as if the landscape sensed his unease.

“You have to be careful,” said the girl, “tread only where I tread. And you have to bend down.” She nodded at Mativi’s Kinshasa Rolex. “You have to leave your watch outside.”

*Why? So one of your bacheque boyfriends can steal it while I’m in there?* To satisfy the girl’s insistence, he slid the watch off his wrist and set it on a brick, but picked it up again when she wasn’t looking and dropped it into his pocket.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“In there.” She pointed. Half-buried in the rubble was a concrete lintel, one end of a substantial buried structure, through which the wind was whistling.

No. Correction. *Out of which* the wind was whistling.

She slipped under the lintel, on which was fixed a sign saying WARNING! EXTREME PERSONAL DANGER! The room beyond had once had skylights. Now, it had ruined holes in the roof, into which the geostationary UNPEFORCONG security moon poured prisms of reflected sunlight. 35,900 kilometres above Mativi’s head, he and five million other Kinshasans were being watched with five thousand cameras. This had at first seemed an outrageous intrusion on his privacy, until he’d realized that he’d have to commit a thousand murders before any of the cameras was likely to catch him in the act.

“Don’t step any closer,” said the girl. “It will take you.”

The entrance had promised an interior like any other minor military strongpoint – only just large enough to contain a couple of hammocks and a machine gun, maybe. But inside, after only a few steps down, the room was huge, the size of a factory floor. They had entered via an engineer’s inspection catwalk close to the roof. He was not sure how far down the floor was.

The wind in here was deafening. The girl had to shout. “THERE IS MORE THAN ONE IN HERE. THEY LIVE IN THE MACHINES. THE GOVERNMENT MADE THE MACHINES, BUT NOT WITH TECHNICIANS AND ELECTRICIANS. WITH *SORCERY*.”

The machines did not look made by sorcery. They were entirely silent, looking like rows of gigantic, rusted steel chess pawns twice the height of a man, with no pipes or wires entering or leaving them, apparently sitting here unused for any purpose. Mativi felt an urgent, entirely rational need to be in another line of employment.

“HAVE YOU ANY IDEA WHAT THE MACHINES WERE BUILT FOR?” said Mativi, who had.

The girl nodded. “THE DEMONS ARE IN THE MACHINES,” she said. “THE MACHINES WERE BUILT AS CAGES. THE MILITARY MEN WHO MADE THIS PLACE WARNED ALL THE MOST IMPORTANT MEN IN OUR DISTRICT OF THIS. THEY WARNED

MY FATHER. THEY TOLD HIM NEVER TO BREAK ANY OF THE MACHINES OPEN. BUT OVER TIME, THEY LEAK, AND THE DEMONS CAN GET OUT. THE FIRST TWO MACHINES ARE SAFE, FOR NOW. BUT YOU MUST BE CAREFUL, BECAUSE WE THOUGHT THE THIRD ONE WAS SAFE TOO, AND IT TOOK CLAUDE.”

“WHAT DID IT DO TO CLAUDE, WHEN IT TOOK HIM?” said Mativi. He could not see any damage to the walls around the third machine beyond, perhaps, a certain swept-clean quality of the dust on the floor around it.

“IT TOOK HIM,” said the girl. “IT MADE HIM SMALL. IT SUCKED HIM UP.”

“THE MACHINES,” said Mativi in broken Lingala. “THEY ARE COVERED WITH... WITH *THINGS*.”

The heads of the chess-pawns, under the light of Mativi’s torch, were surrealistically coiffured with assorted objects – spanners, wire, door furniture, and, worryingly, a single fragmentation grenade. Many, perhaps more than half of the things were ferrous metal. But some looked like aluminium. Some were even bits of wood or plaster.

*Not just magnetism, then.*

He fished the fake Rolex out of his pocket, waved it in the direction of the machines, and felt a strong tug on it as he held it in his hand. But he also felt a strong tug on the sleeve of his shirt, and on his arm itself.

He realized with growing unease that the wind was not blowing out of the chamber, but *into* it, pushing him from behind. It also appeared to be blowing in through the skylights in the roof above. It did not seem to be blowing out anywhere.

The girl gasped. “YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE DONE THAT! NOW YOUR WATCH WILL NOT KEEP GOOD TIME.”

“IS THAT HOW THE MACHINE SUCKED CLAUDE UP?”

“NO. ALL THE MACHINES DRAW THINGS IN, BUT YOU CAN PULL YOURSELF LOOSE FROM MOST OF THEM. BUT THE ONES THE DEMONS LIVE IN WILL SUCK YOU RIGHT INSIDE WHERE THE DEMON LIVES, AND NOT LEAVE A HAIR BEHIND.”

“WHOLE PEOPLE?”

“PEOPLE, METAL, ANYTHING.”

“STONES?” Mativi picked up a fragment of loose plaster from the floor.

“YES. BUT YOU SHOULD NOT THROW THINGS.”

He threw it. The girl winced. He saw the plaster travel halfway across the floor until it passed the second machine. Then it jerked sideways in mid-air, as if attached to invisible strings, puffed into a long cone of powder, and vanished.

The girl was angry. “YOU MUST DO WHAT I SAY! THE MILITARY MEN SAID WE SHOULD NOT THROW THINGS INTO THE BAD MACHINES. THEY SAID IT MADE THE DEMONS STRONGER.”

“YES,” said Mativi. “AND THEY WERE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT. NOT MUCH STRONGER, BUT IF ENOUGH PEOPLE THREW IN ENOUGH UNCHARGED MATERIAL OVER ENOUGH TIME...”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN BY UNCHARGED MATERIAL.”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEAN BY ‘EVERYONE WOULD DIE?’”

The girl nodded. “WE SHOULD NOT STAY TOO LONG IN HERE. PEOPLE WHO STAY TOO LONG IN HERE GET SICK. THE DEMONS MAKE THEM SICK.”

Mativi nodded. “AND I SUPPOSE THIS SICKNESS TAKES THE FORM OF HAIR LOSS, SHORTNESS OF BREATH, EXTREME PALENESS OF THE SKIN?”

“YES,” said the girl. “THE VICTIMS DISPLAY THE CLASSIC SYMPTOMS OF RADIATION ALOPECIA AND STEM CELL DEATH.”

*Well, I’ll be damned. But after all, she has lived through a nuclear war. She’s been living among radiation victims her entire life. Probably taught herself to read using Red Cross posters.*

“WELL, THE SAME DEMONS THAT WERE USED IN THE RADIATION BOMBS ARE IN HERE. SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT, BECAUSE THESE ARE A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT WEAPON. BUT THE SAME DEMONS.”

The girl nodded. “BUT THESE ARE NOT RADIATION BOMBS;”

she said. "THIS MEANS YOU HAVE TO PAY ME DOUBLE." She held out her hand.

Mativi nodded. "THIS MEANS I HAVE TO PAY YOU DOUBLE." He fished in his wallet for a fistful of United Nations scrip.

*After all, why shouldn't I pay you? None of this money is going to be worth anything if these things destroy the world tomorrow.*

"I'm telling you, there are at least forty of them. I counted them. Five rows by eight...I didn't go to the hotel because I didn't want to call you in the clear. We have to be the only people who know about this...Because if anyone wanders into that site, *anyone at all*, and does anything they shouldn't, we will all die. I'm not saying *they*, I'm saying *we*, and I'm not saying *might die*, I'm saying *will die*...Yes, this is a Heavy Weapons alert...No, I can't tell you what that means...All I can tell you is that you must comply with the alert to the letter if you're interested in handing on the planet to your children...Your children will grow out of that, that hating their father thing. All teenagers go through that phase. And credit where credit's due, you really shouldn't have slept with their mother's sister in the first place...No, I do *not* want 'an inspection team'. I want troops. Armed troops with a mandate to shoot to kill, not a detachment of graduates in Peace Studies from Liechtenstein in a white APC. And when I put the phone down on you, I want to know that you're going to be picking up your phone again and dialling the IAEA. I am *serious* about this, Louis...All right. All right. I'll see you at the site tomorrow."

When he laid the handset down, he was trembling. In a day when there were over a hundred permanent websites on the Antarctic ice shelf, it had taken him five hours to find a digital phone line in a city of five million people. Which, to be fair, fifteen years ago, had been a city of ten million people.

Of course, his search for a phone line compatible with his encryption software would probably be for nothing. If there were this few digital lines in the city, there was probably a retrotech transistor microphone planted somewhere in the booth he was sitting in, feeding data back to a mainframe at police headquarters. But at least that meant the police would be the *only* ones who knew. If he'd gone

through the baroque network of emergency analogue lines, every housewife in the *cit * would have known by morning.

He got up from the booth, walked to the desk, and paid the geek – the geek *with a submachinegun* – who was manning it. There was no secret police car waiting outside – the car would have been unmarked, but extremely obvious due to the fact that no one but the government could afford to travel around in cars. The Congolese sun came up like a jack in a box and it was a short walk through the zero tolerance district back to his hotel, which had once been a Hilton. He fell into the mattress, which bludgeoned him compliantly unconscious.

When he opened his hotel room door in the morning to go to the one functioning bathroom, a man was standing outside with a gun.

Neither the man nor the gun were particularly impressive – the gun because it appeared to be a pre-War cased ammunition model that hadn't been cleaned since the Armistice, and the man because his hand was shaking like a masturbator's just before orgasm, and because Mativi knew him to be a *paterfamilias* with three kids in kindergarten and a passion for N gauge model railways.

However, the gun still fired big, horrid bullets that made holes in stuff, and it was pointing at Mativi.

"I'm sorry, Chet, I can't let you do it." The safety catch, Mativi noted, was off.

"Do what?" said Mativi.

"You're taking away my livelihood. You know you are."

"I'm sorry, Jean, I don't understand any of this. Maybe you should explain a little more?" Jean-Baptiste Ngoyi, an unremarkable functionary in the United Nations Temporary Administration Service (Former People's Democratic Republic of Congo), appeared to have put on his very best work clothes to murder Mativi. The blue UNTASFORDEMRECONG logo was embroidered smartly (and widely) on his chest pocket.

"I can't let you take them away." There were actually tears in the little man's eyes.

"Take what away?"

"You know what. *Everybody* knows. They heard you talking to

Grosjean.”

Mativi’s eyes popped. “*No. Ohhh shit. No.*” He leaned back against crumbling postmodernist plasterwork. “Jean, don’t take this personally, but if someone as far down the food chain as you knows, everyone in the city with an email address and a heartbeat knows.” He looked up at Ngoyi. “There was a microphone in the comms booth, right?”

“No, the geek who mans the desk is President Lissouba’s police chief’s half brother. The police are full of Lissouba men who were exonerated by the General Amnesty after the Armistice.”

“Shit. Shit. What are they doing, now they know?”

“‘Emergency measures are being put in place to contain the problem.’ That’s all they’d say. Oh, and there are already orders out for your arrest For Your Own Safety. But they didn’t know which hotel you were staying in. One of them was trying to find out when he rang me.”

Mativi walked in aimless circles, holding his head to stop his thoughts from wandering. “I’ll bet he was. God, god. And you didn’t tell them where I was. Does that mean you’re, um, not particularly serious about killing me?” He stared at Ngoyi ingratiatingly. But the gun didn’t waver – at least, not any more than it had been wavering already. Never mind. It had been worth a try.

“It means I couldn’t take the chance that they really did want you arrested for your own safety,” said Ngoyi. “If a UN Weapons Inspector died in Kinshasa, that would throw the hand grenade well and truly in the muck spreader for the police chiefs, after all.”

“I take it some of them are the men who originally installed the containers. If so, they know very well full amnesties are available for war crimes – ”

Ngoyi shook his head. “Not for crimes committed *after* the war.”

Mativi was alarmed. “After?”

“They’ve been using the machines as execution devices,” said Ngoyi. “No mess, no body, no incriminating evidence. And they work, too. The *bacheques* are terrified of them, will do anything to avoid being killed that way. They think they’re the homes of demons – ”

“They’re not far wrong,” muttered Mativi.

“ – and then there are the undertakers,” continued Ngoyi. “They’ve



been using the machines for mass burials. Otherwise the bodies would just have piled up in the streets in the epidemics. And the domestic waste trucks, about five of them stop there several times a week and dump stuff in through the skylights. And my own trucks – ”

“Your own trucks?”

“Yes. Three times a week, sometimes four or five.” Ngoyi returned Mativi’s accusing stare. “Oh, *sure*, the UN gives us Geiger counters and that bacterial foam that fixes fallout, and the special vehicles for sucking up the fixed material and casting it into lead glass bricks – ”

“Which you’re supposed to then arrange for disposal by the IAEA by burial underground in the Devil’s Brickyard in the Dry Valleys of Antarctica,” finished Mativi. “Only you haven’t been doing that, have you? You thought you’d cut a few corners.”

“The UN gives us a budget of only five million a year!” complained Ngoyi. “And by the time that reaches us, it has, by the magic of African mathematics, become half a million. Have you any idea what it costs to ship a single kilo of hazardous waste to Antarctica?”

“That’s what you’re supposed to do,” repeated Mativi, staring up the barrel of the gun, which somehow did not matter quite so much now.

“We were talking astrophysics in the Bar B Doll only the other night. You told me then that once something crosses the Event Horizon, it never comes out!” said the civil servant, mortified. “You *promised!*”

“That’s absolutely correct,” said Mativi. “Absolutely, totally and utterly correct.”

“Then,” said Ngoyi, his face brightening insanely, “then there is no problem. We can throw as much stuff in as we want to.”

“Each one of those containers,” said Mativi, “is designed to hold a magnetically charged object that weighs more than ten battleships. Hence the reinforced concrete floor, hence the magnetized metal casing that attracts every bit of ferrous metal in the room. Now, what do you think is going to happen if you keep piling in extra uncharged mass? *Nothing* that crosses the Event Horizon comes out, Jean. *Nothing. Ever.* Including you, including me, including Makemba and Kimbareta and little Laurent.”

Ngoyi’s face fell. Then, momentarily, it rose again. “But our stuff is

only a few hundred kilos a week,” he began. “Much less than what the domestic waste people put in.”

“I feel better already. You’re not going to be personally responsible for getting the whole planet sucked into oblivion, it’s going to be some other guy.”

“The sewage outlet, mind you,” continued Ngoyi. “That must be pumping in a good thousand litres a day – ”

Mativi’s jaw dropped. “*Sewage outlet?*”

“Sure. The sanitation guys rerouted the main waste pipe for the city as a temporary measure. They have to keep replacing the last few metres – the machine keeps eating the pipe.” Ngoyi shrugged. “How else do you think they keep five million people’s shit out of the drinking water?”

“Jean-Baptiste, you people have to stop this. You have to stop it now. You have absolutely no idea what you’re doing.”

The gun was still pointing at the centre of Mativi’s chest; now, just for a moment, it stopped wavering and hit dead centre.

“I know *exactly* what I’m doing. I am making sure I can feed my wife and children.”

The finger coiled round the trigger, slowed down as if falling down gravity slopes. Mativi winced.

The gun clunked and did nothing.

Ngoyi stared at his uncooperative weapon tearfully.

“I must warn you,” lied Mativi, “that I led my university karate team.”

“You should leave,” said Ngoyi. “I think I recognized the municipal sanitation inspector’s car following the bus I took down here. He had a rocket propelled grenade launcher on his parcel shelf.”

The road surface rose and fell under the Hyundai like a brown ocean swell, testing its suspension to the limit. Mativi heard things grounding that probably ought not to.

“Can I drop you off anywhere?” He braked gently as the traffic hit the blast craters around the freeway/railway junction, which had been a prime military target. Robot repair units were still working on it, and their operators did not pay much attention to cars that weighed

one tenth what a mine clearance tractor did. The streetlights seemed to be out on this stretch of road, and the only illumination came from car headlights bouncing up and down like disco strobes. The robot tractors did not need visible light to see.

“The stadium will do fine. I can catch a bus out to Ndjili from there.”

“You live that far out of town?”

“We don’t all live on Geneva salaries, you know.” Ngoyi’s face blanched suddenly as he stared into the evening traffic. “Stop the car! Handbrake turn! Handbrake turn!”

Mativi stared into the traffic. “Why?”

“Four secret police cars, dead ahead!”

It was true, and Mativi cursed himself for not having seen it. The SUV’s stood out like aluminium islands in the sea of polyurea AfriCars. Each one of them would have cost ten times an ordinary Kinshasan’s annual salary.

“It’s not a roadblock,” said Mativi.

“So I should care? They’re out looking for you!”

“Looks like an escort. They’re not even coming down this road. They’re turning onto the freeway to Djelo-Binza. They’re escorting that big, heavy launch tractor...one of the ones designed to carry clutches of heavy ballistic missiles out to the pads at Malebo.” He peered out of the driver-side window. “The one whose suspension is scraping the ground – ”

He did a handbrake turn and left the road in the direction of Djelo-Binza. The suspension hardly noticed the difference. The only reason people drove on roads any more in Kinshasa was because the road was slightly more likely to have been checked for explosives.

There was only desultory hooting when he rejoined the road. Leaving the road and rejoining it after a four-wheel-drive short-cut was common. The four-by-fours were clearly visible now, crammed with whatever men the police chiefs had been able to get their hands on at short notice – some in military uniform, some in T-shirts, some with government-issue sidearms, some with war-era AKMs, yawning, pulled out of bed in the early hours.

The crawler was taking up three lanes of traffic, drawing a horde of

honking AfriCars behind it like a bridal train. Despite the horns, the crawler was probably not moving much slower than the cars would have done – the expressway was still a mass of blast craters.

“I can’t *believe* this,” said Mativi, hugely affronted. “How can they think they can haul a million-tonne object across town without me noticing?”

Ngoyi stared. “You think that thing’s got – *things* on it?”

Mativi nodded. “One of the things is on board – one of the *containers*. They’re taking it across town because they can’t bear to lose it...I wonder why.” He winked at Ngoyi. “Maybe they’re in the pay of the office of sanitation?” The car plunged into yet another black void unilluminated by its headlights. “*Jesus*, I wish those streetlights were working.” He blinked as the car bonnet surged up again into the light.

Then he realized. Not only were there no streetlights, there were also no lights in the city around the road.

“That’s it, isn’t it.”

“What?”

“They’re going to the power company. You dumb fucks have been plugging power into it as well. *Haven’t you.*”

Ngoyi hesitated, then gave up the game and nodded. “It started out as a theoretical weapons project in the last days of the war. But,” he insisted defiantly, “it was a *peaceful* use we put it to! One of our office juniors, a very clever young man, a PhD from CalTech, suggested that if we aimed an infrared laser beam at the event horizon at a certain angle, it would come out as a gamma-ray beam, which we used to heat a tank of mercury...we tried water first, but it flash evaporated and fused the rock around the tank to glass.” He licked his lips nervously. “The hardest part was designing a turbine system that would work with evaporating mercury. We lost a lot of men to heavy metal poisoning...”

Realisation dawned on Mativi. “You were one of the researchers in Lissouba’s government.”

“You think I could have got away with living in the old People’s Democratic Republic with a physics degree *without* being a weapons researcher?” Ngoyi laughed hollowly. “Dream on, brother. But this is *peacetime* now. The technology is being used to power the houses of

five million people – ”

“Uh-uh. There’s no sidestepping the Laws of Thermodynamics. You only get out less than what you put in. You’re only getting power out because you’re sapping the angular momentum of what’s inside the container. I’ll lay a bet that what’s inside the container was created illegally using the Lubumba Collider that President Lissouba convinced the UN to build to ‘rejuvenate the Congolese economy.’”

Ngoyi squirmed. “He also said *scientify* the Congolese economy. He actually used the word ‘scientify.’”

Mativi nodded. “In any case, that angular momentum was put *into* the container by gigawatts of energy pumped into the Collider from the city power grid. Effectively all you’re doing is using up energy someone stole and stored fifteen years ago. It’s no more a power source than a clockwork doll is, Jean-Baptiste. You have to wind it up to watch it go. And all you’ll be left with, in the end, is a non-rotating very heavy lump of extremely bad shit.”

“Well, I must admit,” admitted Ngoyi ruefully, “the amount of juice we can squeeze out of it is getting smaller every year.”

The tractor in front suddenly rumbled to a halt in a cloud of dust big enough to conceal a herd of rhinos. A wall of immobile metal barred the carriageway, and three lanes of drivers performed the peculiarly Congolese manoeuvre of stepping on their brakes and leaning on their horns simultaneously. One of them shrieked suddenly in dismay when a length of caterpillar track resembling a chain of house façades clipped together with traffic bollards slammed down onto his bonnet and crushed it flat, before slapping his saloon into a cabriolet. Paint flakes flew everywhere. The car was a steel one, too – an old Proton model produced under licence in Afghanistan. Mativi hoped the driver had survived.

Troops poured out of the four-by-fours, ignoring the barrage of horns. They were staring at the side of the tractor. Some good Catholics were even crossing themselves.

Mativi put the handbrake on and left his car. Someone hooted at him. He ignored them.

One whole side of the tractor had collapsed into the asphalt. The torsion bars of the vehicle’s suspension, each one a man’s waist thick

and made of substances far, far stronger than steel, had snapped like seaside rock. The load on top of the tractor had slumped sideways underneath its canvas blanket.

Now that he was outside the car, he was aware of a hissing sound. The sound was coming from a hole punched in the canvas cover.

Some of the troopers were walking up towards the load. Mativi danced out onto the grass verge, waving his arms like an *isangoma*. “No! *Non!* Get away! *Trés dangereux!*”

One of the men looked at Mativi as if he were an idiot and took another step forward. His sleeve began to rustle and flap in the direction of the hole in the canvas. Then his hand slapped down onto the canvas cover, and he began to scream, beating on his hand, trying to free it. His comrades began to laugh, looking back towards Mativi, enjoying the joke their friend was having at the crazy man’s expense.

Then he vanished.

Not *quite* vanished – Mativi and the troops both heard the bones in his hand snap, saw the hand crumple into the canvas like a handkerchief into a magician’s glove, followed by his arm, followed by his shoulder, followed by his head. They saw the flare of crimson his body turned into as skin, bone, blood vessels, all the frail materials meant to hold a body together, degenerated into carmine mulch and were sucked up by the structure. A crimson blot of blood a man wide sprayed onto the canvas – out of which, weirdly, runnels of blood began trailing *inward* toward the hole, against and at angles to gravity.

The police troops turned and looked at Mativi, then looked back at the tractor.

“*Alors, chef?*” one of them said to him, “*qu’est-ce qu’on fait maintenant?*”

“It’s loose,” said Ngoyi, his eyes glazed, seeing the ends of worlds. “It’s loose, and I am responsible.”

Mativi shook his head. “It’s not loose. Not *yet*. We can still tell *exactly* where it is, just by feeding it more policemen. But its casing’s corroded. It’s sucking in stuff from outside.”

“Not corroded.” Ngoyi shook his head. “It won’t corrode. It’s made of nickel alloy, very strong, very heavy. It’s one of the cases we bored a

hole in deliberately, in order to shine in the infrared beam. There'll be another hole in the casing on the far side. Where the gamma comes out."

Mativi nodded. *One of the machines the demons live in.*

Ngoyi still seemed to be wary of even looking at the container. "Could it topple over?"

"No. If it begins to topple, it'll right itself immediately. It's probably scrunched itself down into the top of the tractor doing that already. Remember, it's a small thing rotating, rotating fast, and it weighs over a thousand tonnes. The gyroscopic stability of an object like that doesn't bear thinking about – "

"CETAWAYO BRIAN MATIVI! I AM HEREBY BY THE ORDER OF THE UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE CONGO PLACING YOU UNDER ARREST"

Mativi turned. The voice had come from a senior police officer. The amount of shiny regalia on the uniform confused matters, but he was almost certain the man was a Lieutenant.

Mativi sighed. "Lieutenant – " he began.

"Major," corrected the Major.

" – Major, I am engaged in preventing a public disaster of proportions bigger than anything that might possibly be prevented by arresting me. Do you know what will happen if that load falls off that wagon?"

The Major shrugged. "Do you know what will happen if I see you and don't drag you down to the cells? I will lose my job, and my wife and children will go hungry."

Mativi began to back away.

"Hey!" The Major began to pointedly unbutton his revolver.

"I know what will happen to you if you don't bring me in. And you forgot to mention that there'll be no power in the city either, and that as a consequence a *great number* of wives and children will go hungry," said Mativi, circling around the danger area of bowed, permanently windblown grass near the tractor's payload. He waved his arms in the direction of the dark horizon. "You can see the evidence of this already. The device on this tractor has been uncoupled from the grid, and immediately there is no power for refrigeration, no power for

cooking, or for emergency machinery in hospitals. I know all that.” Slowly, he put his hands up to indicate he was no threat. Then, with one hand, he swung himself up onto the side of the tractor, with the payload between himself and the Major. “But you truly cannot begin to comprehend what will happen to those wives and children if I allow this load to continue on to Djelo-Binza, sir. You see, I understand at a very deep level what is in this container. You do not.”

“I must warn you not to attempt to escape custody,” said the Major, raising his pistol. “I am empowered to shoot.”

“How can I be trying to escape custody?” said Mativi, looking down the barrel of the pistol as if his life depended on it, and sinking in his stance, causing the Major to lower the pistol by a couple of centimetres, still training it on his heart. “I’m climbing on board a police vehicle.”

“Get down off that police vehicle, now,” said the Major. “Or I will shoot.”

Mativi licked his lips, looking up a pistol barrel for the second time that day, but this time attempting to perform complex orbital calculations in his head as he did so. *Have I factored in relativity properly? It needs to travel dead over the hole –*

“Shan’t.”

The gun fired. It made quite a satisfactory *boom*. There was a red flash in mid-air, and Mativi was still there.

The Major stared at Mativi.

“As I said,” said Mativi, “I understand what is in this cargo. You do not. Do I have your full cooperation?”

The Major’s eyes went even wider than his perceived Remit To Use Deadly Force. He lowered the gun, visibly shaken.

“You do,” he said. “Sir,” he added.

The Hyundai became bogged down by bodies – fortunately living ones – in the immediate vicinity of the Heavy Weapons Alert site. A crowd of perhaps a thousand goggling locals, all dressed in complementary rayon T-shirts handed out by various multinationals to get free airtime on Third World famine reports, were making road and roadside indistinguishable. But the big blue bull bars parted the crowd



discreetly, and Mativi dawdled forward to a hastily-erected barrier of velcrowire into which several incautious onlookers had already been pushed by their neighbours. Velcrowire barbs would sink a centimetre deep into flesh, then open up into barbs that could only be removed by surgeons, providing the owner of the flesh desired to keep it. Barbed wire was not truly barbed. Velcrowire was.

The troops at the only gap in the fence stood aside and saluted for the UN car, and Mativi pulled up next to an ancient Boeing v-22 VTOL transport, in the crew door of which a portly black man in a bad safari suit sat juggling with mobile phones. The casings of the phones, Mativi knew, were colour coded to allow their owner to identify them. The Boeing had once been United Nations White. After too many years in the Congo, it was now Well-Used Latrine White.

Mativi examined what was being done at the far end of the containment area. The site was a mass of specialized combat engineering machinery. Mativi recognized one of the devices, a Japanese-made tractor designed for defusing unexploded nuclear munitions – or rather, for dealing with what happened when a human nuclear UXB disposal operative made a mistake. Hair trigger sensors on the tractor would detect the incipient gamma flare of a fission reaction, then fire a hundred and twenty millimetre shell into the nuke. This would kill the bomb disposal man and fill the area around the bomb with weapons-grade fallout, but probably save a few million civilians in the immediate area–

Mativi walked across the compound and yelled at the man in the Boeing. “Louis, what the *hell* are your UXB monkeys *doing*?”

Grosjean’s head whipped round. “Oh, hello, Chet. We’re following standard procedure for dealing with an unexploded weaponized gamma source.”

“Well, first off, this isn’t a weapon – ”

Grosjean’s smile was contemptuous. “It’s something that can annihilate the entire planet, and it isn’t a *weapon*?”

“It’s *thirty-nine* things that can annihilate the planet, and they’re not weapons *any more*. Think about it. Would anyone use a weapon that would blow up the whole world?”

Grosjean actually appeared to seriously consider the possibility;

then, he nodded to concede the point. “So what sort of weapon were these things part of?”

“Not weapons,” corrected Mativi. “Think of them as weapons waste. They were the principal components in a Penrose Accelerator.”

“You’re making it up.”

“You damn fool security guy, me weapons inspector. We’ve suspected the People’s Democratic Republic of Congo used Penrose weapons in their war with the Democratic People’s Republic of Congo for some time. They had guns capable of lobbing hundred tonne shells full of plague germs at Pretoria from a distance of four thousand kilometres, for instance. When we examined those guns after UNPEFORCONG overran their positions, what we found didn’t fit. They had magnetic accelerators in their barrels, but at the sort of muzzle velocities they’d have had to have been using, the magnets in the barrels would only have been any use in aiming, not in getting the payload up to speed. And the breech of each weapon had been removed. *Something* had been accelerating those projectiles, but it wasn’t magnetism, and it wasn’t gunpowder. The projectiles were big, and they were moving *fast*. You remember that outbreak of airborne rabies in New Zealand two years back? That was one of theirs. A Congolese shell fired too hot and went into orbit. The orbit decayed. The shell came down. Thirteen years after the war. Gunpowder and magnetism don’t do that.”

“So what was it?”

“A Penrose accelerator. You get yourself a heavy-duty rotating mass, big enough to have stuff orbit round it, and you whirl ordnance round those orbits, contrary to the direction of the mass’s rotation. Half of your ordnance separates from the payload, and drops into the mass. The *other* half gets kicked out to mind-boggling velocities. The trouble is, none of this works unless the mass is dense enough to have an escape velocity greater than light.”

“A black hole.”

“Yes. You have yourself thirty-nine charged rotating black holes, formerly used as artillery accelerators, now with nowhere to go. Plus another hole lodged precariously on the back of a tractor on the public highway halfway between here and Djelo-Binza. And the only way for

us to find enough energy to get rid of them, I imagine, would be to use *another* black hole to kick them into orbit. They also give off gamma, almost constantly, as they're constantly absorbing matter. You point one of those UXB defuser tractors at them and throw the safety on the gun, and – ”

“JESUS.” Grosjean stared at the ground floor entrance where his men had been preparing to throw heavy artillery shells at the problem, jumped up, and began frantically waving his arms for them to stop. “*OUI! OUI! ARRÊTE! ARRÊTE!* And we thought getting rid of nuclear waste was difficult.”

“Looks easy to me,” said Mativi, nodding in the direction of the highway. Two trucks with UNSMATDEMRECONG livery, their suspensions hanging low, had stopped just short of the military cordon in the eastbound lane. Their drivers had already erected signs saying LIGHT HEAT HERE FOR DOLLARS, and were handing out clear resin bricks that glowed with a soft green light to housewives who were coming out of the darkened prefabs nearby, turning the bricks over in their hands, feeling the warmth, haggling over prices.

“Is that what I think it is?” said Grosjean. “I should stop that. It’s dangerous, isn’t it?”

“Don’t concern yourself with it right now. Those bricks can only kill one family at a time. Besides,” said Mativi gleefully, “the city needs power, and Jean-Baptiste’s men are only supplying a need, right?”

Ngoyi, still in the passenger seat of the Hyundai, stared sadly as his men handed out radionuclides, and could not meet Mativi’s eyes. He reached in his inside pocket for the gun he had attempted to kill Mativi with, and began, slowly and methodically, to clear the jam that had prevented him from doing so.

“Once you’ve cordoned the area off,” said Mativi, “we’ll be handling things from that point onwards. I’ve contacted the IAEA myself. There’s a continental response team on its way.”

In the car, Ngoyi had by now worked the jammed bullet free and replaced it with another. At the Boeing, Grosjean’s jaw dropped. “You have teams set up to deal with this *already?*”

“Of course. You don’t think this is the first time this has happened, do you? It’s the same story as with the A-bomb. As soon as physicists

know it's possible, every tinpot dictator in the world wants it, and will do a great deal to get it, and certainly isn't going to tell *us* he's trying. Somewhere in the world at a location I am not aware of and wouldn't tell you even if I were, there is a stockpile of these beauties that would make your hair curl. I once spoke to a technician who'd just come back from there...I think it's somewhere warm, he had a sun-tan. He said there were aisles of the damn things, literally thousands of them. The UN are working on methods of deactivating them, but right now our best theoretical methods for shutting down a black hole always lead to catastrophic Hawking evaporation, which would be like a thousand-tonne nuclear warhead going off. And if any one of those things broke out of containment, even one, it would sink through the Earth's crust like a stone into water. It'd get to the Earth's centre and beyond before it slowed down to a stop – and then, of course, it'd begin to fall to the centre again. It wouldn't rise to quite the same height on the other side of the Earth, just like a pendulum, swinging slower and slower and slower. Gathering bits of Earth into itself all the time, of course, until it eventually sank to the centre of the world and set to devouring the entire planet. The whole Earth would get sucked down the hole, over a period which varies from weeks to centuries, depending on which astrophysicist you ask. And you know what?" – and here Mativi smiled evilly. This was always the good part.

"What?" Grosjean's Bantu face had turned whiter than a Boer's. From the direction of the car, Mativi heard a single, slightly muffled gunshot.

"We have no way of knowing whether we already missed one or two. Whether one or two of these irresponsible nations carrying out unauthorized black hole research dropped the ball. How would we know, if someone kept their project secret enough? How would we know there wasn't a black hole bouncing up and down like a big happy rubber ball inside the Earth right now? Gravitational anomalies would eventually begin to show themselves, I suppose – whether on seismometers or mass detectors. But our world might only have a few decades to live – and we wouldn't be any the wiser.

"Make sure that cordon's tight, Louis."

Grosjean swallowed with difficulty, and nodded. Mativi wandered

away from the containment site, flipping open his mobile phone. Miracle of miracles, even out here, it worked.

“Hello darling...No, I think it’ll perhaps take another couple of days...Oh, the regular sort of thing. Not too dangerous. Yes, we did catch this one...Well, I did get shot at a *little*, but the guy missed. He was aiming on a purely Euclidean basis...Euclidean. I’ll explain when I get home...Okay, well, if you have to go now then you have to go. I’ll be on the 9AM flight from Kinshasa.”

He flicked the phone shut and walked, whistling, towards the Hyundai. There was a spiderweb of blood over the passenger side where Ngoyi had shot himself. *Still*, he thought, *that’s someone else’s problem. This car goes back into the pool tomorrow. At least he kept the side window open when he did it. Made a lot less mess than that bastard Lamant did in Quebec City. And they made me clean that car.*

He looked out at the world. “Saved you again, you big round bugger, and I hope you’re grateful.”

For the first time in a week, he was smiling.

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