

PROLOGUE

The rose-coloured African sun shimmered on the horizon, throwing light and heat over tall savanna grasses. Young Thomas Karland felt the penetrating warmth on his chest, as the sunlight reached out through heavy, humid air. He was sitting on a picnic table outside the medical clinic run by his parents. From his vantage point he looked eastward into a small valley surrounded by low hills. A few isolated acacia trees sent long shadows across the silent landscape.

His parents' house and their clinic were situated on the western side of the valley. From them a dusty road wound down the hill to a mid-sized village. Thomas enjoyed watching the village coming to life. Small trails of smoke were rising from open fires where people squatted to cook their morning meal. Every so often someone would go to the well and he could just faintly hear resistant squeaking as the pump handle was worked up and down. This was the only home he had known, except for a year in Ottawa when his parents had returned to Canada. Like the daily rising of the sun, life within this community followed a long-established pattern. The rhythm of the routine and the peace of the morning filled him with a deep contentment.

His father and mother had been living in Africa for almost fifteen years. The medical clinic they operated was a low concrete block building with a galvanized metal roof. Its exterior walls had been plastered and painted white in typical Gambalian fashion. Their house had been built in similar style. It was only a short distance away from the clinic and stood among a small grove of trees.

"Thomas," his mother called from across the dusty yard, "your father wants to leave for town right after breakfast! Make sure you're ready to go!"

With a thrill of anticipation he jumped off the picnic table. Today was his eleventh birthday and his father had promised to take him to town to buy a special present. As he was crossing the hard-packed ground to his house, he paused to gaze off to the west. Less than a mile away, the yellow grassland ended sharply at a dark line of trees. The early morning sunlight was bringing the rich green hues of the upper canopy to life. He was starting to continue when he noticed a lone figure emerging from the deep shadows of the dense forest. Thomas was surprised. The only village in that direction took four hours to reach, walking on a difficult trail. It was quite a risk to travel that route at night.

He went into his house and got some binoculars that hung on a peg by the door. Looking through them, he stared with curiosity at a dark man in a khaki shirt who strode forcefully through the waist-high grass. Light glinted off the barrel of a rifle slung over his left shoulder. Thomas lowered the binoculars. There was something familiar about that walk, but there was still too much shadow to see the face. A flicker of movement back in the forest caught his attention. He focused in and scanned the trees but saw nothing. Thomas continued

to watch. It was a dangerous time of day to be walking alone in the savanna. After several minutes the man on the trail caught sight of him. He raised his hand and shouted a loud musical greeting in the local Maliki dialect. The voice barely reached the top of the hill where Thomas was standing, but he recognized it at once.

“Mom! Dad!” he called with excitement. “It’s Enzali!” Quickly replacing the binoculars on the peg, he ran off to meet their old family friend.

Enzali was a tall, very powerfully built African in his early thirties. His dark, proud face broke into a welcoming smile as Thomas approached. He reached out to shake hands, and when the boy responded Enzali suddenly grabbed Thomas by his waist, threw him high into the air and caught him at the last second before he hit the ground. Then he held him under one arm like a sack of grain and tickled him before finally setting him down.

“Ah! Little brother, you are getting so big! Soon you will be throwing me in the air, eh?”

He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and together they walked up the dusty trail to the house. By this time Jim Karland was standing outside waiting, arms folded across his chest. Enzali’s enthusiastic voice boomed with joy, “Dr. Karland! My mother greets you! My father greets you!”

“And I greet them,” Dr. Karland responded, stepping forward to shake hands. “Enzali, it’s so good to see you again! “

As the muscular African leaned his rifle up against the wall of the house, Mrs. Karland emerged from the door. She was wearing a bright print dress, her long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Ah, mama Rose,” said Enzali, exchanging a warm hug, “still the flower of Gambala!”

Roseanne flashed him a knowing smile in response. “You didn’t come all this way only to flatter me. You must be up to something.”

Giving her a sly look, Enzali spoke in a hushed, secretive voice. “Well, last night, as I sat by the fire in my village, I smelled cake... chocolate cake! And I thought to myself, ‘Hmm, that must be mama Rose baking a birthday cake for Thomas. If I do not hurry it will all be gone!’ So I left the village and travelled all night just to be first in line.”

“You must have a very special nose,” Roseanne laughed, “because I haven’t even started baking yet. But for all your effort I suppose I could spare you a piece when I do. Now please stay out of my kitchen for ten minutes and I’ll try to rustle something up for breakfast. You must be hungry as a lion after all that walking!”

When his mother had entered the house, Thomas smiled up at Enzali. “Did you really come here for my birthday?”

Enzali gave the boy’s shoulder a firm squeeze. “Ah, how could I forget my little brother, eh? Now you go help your mother for a few minutes. I need to talk to your father before breakfast.”

Jim Karland was an astute observer of humanity. In spite of the joy of their reunion, he could see a shadow of concern in Enzali's eyes. He had also noticed that Enzali was still partially in uniform. Along with his short-sleeved khaki shirt, he was wearing dark green military pants and black leather boots. The fact that he had ammunition pouches clipped on his belt meant that he was anticipating trouble. Jim started to stroll across the dusty ground toward the clinic. After a few moments of shared silence he began to speak. "You haven't been home to your village for some time; and nobody walks through the jungle alone at night. So what's happening?"

Enzali hesitated, unsure of how much to share. "No, Dr. Karland, I was not alone last night. Mattana was with me." There was an awkward pause. "He... decided he would rather wait for me at the jungle trail. I left my pack with him."

"I see," Jim responded quietly. There was no need for further explanation. Mattana was about ten years younger than his brother Enzali, the son of a second marriage. There was tension between him and the Karlands, and Jim suspected that he was already involved with the rebels. Yet, out of courtesy, he still asked, "And how is Mattana?"

"Hah!" Enzali responded, with a grunt of disgust. "That man has the personality of a hyena! He is always antagonizing, always causing trouble in our village. My father probably sent him along simply to be rid of him for a few days."

Jim gave a sympathetic sigh. "I suppose even the thorn bush has its uses." He stopped and stood for a moment, squinting as he looked eastward into the valley. "So... you still haven't told me why you are here... though, I can guess that it isn't good news."

Enzali's voice was hushed and full of concern. "Yes, Dr. Karland, the situation is getting very bad. Last week we had confirmed reports that more rebels have been coming in from the north. It is almost certain that there will be an attack soon."

"Civil war... just what this country doesn't need after finally gaining independence."

"My father sits as chief in the Council," Enzali continued. "He hears many things. Some would say that you... people like you... foreigners, should be driven out. My father knows the debt he owes you. He will never forget that those were your hands that saved his life. He understands the good you are trying to do. But others..." Enzali glanced back at the house and lowered his voice, "...others would be happy to see you dead."

Dr. Karland nodded silently. Yes, he had known that for some time. He had seen the shift in attitude over the past few years. Even in Enzali's own family, or at least with Mattana, Enzali's half-brother, there was obvious hostility.

"So you have come to warn us?"

"Yes. I came from the capital to my village only three days ago. My commander will allow you to stay if you wish. But it was my father who sent me to you, and therefore he must know something. You are too isolated. He says that you must head for the coast immediately for the sake of your family."

Jim Karland could well appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Enzali had risked his life last night, not only from wild animals, but also from rebel supporters.

Leaning out from the door of the house, Roseanne called across the yard, "Jim, coffee's ready!"

"Okay! We're coming!" He waved a hand in acknowledgement and then turned to Enzali. "Let's go eat and talk this over with Roseanne."

The kitchen was filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. While the men prepared their mugs, Roseanne placed a large bowl of fruit salad on the polished wooden table. Then she took a spoon and began to stir a pot of porridge that was simmering on the propane burner. Thomas had already cut thick slices of brown bread. He now set them out with a slab of butter and a jar of honey.

"Go ahead and help yourself, Enzali," Roseanne encouraged. "I still want to put on some eggs." She diced a small onion, added it to a bowl of fresh eggs, and dropped in some chunks of cheese. While the mixture sizzled in the frying pan, she poured herself a cup of coffee.

Once their meal was underway, the atmosphere at the kitchen table became increasingly subdued. The military information that Enzali shared made a civil war seem inevitable. Such an event would put the Karlands in a very dangerous position, regardless of their good intentions.

"The rebels see you as an unwelcome link to the outside world," Enzali explained. "You could provide information to other countries about their activities. Even your presence in Gambala could help generate support for our current government."

Roseanne understood where the conversation was headed. "Which means," she observed, "that if foreigners could be removed, then Gambala would be relatively isolated from the rest of the world."

Enzali nodded and sipped his coffee. "It would be merely another African nation at war with itself."

"That would certainly suit the rebels," Jim commented. "It would give them a free hand to try to overthrow the government." There was a lull in the conversation, and Jim pondered his family's situation. All of this was not really news to him, but the pot must be near the boiling point if Enzali's father had sent him a warning.

While the adults talked and sipped strong dark coffee, Thomas began his daily chore of washing dishes. He had been busy rattling silverware and plates around the sink for a few minutes when Enzali suddenly jumped up.

"Thomas, wait!" he commanded.

There was a moment of surprised silence and then from the distant background came a deep rumbling sound, along with faint metallic squeaks and squeals. All four rushed from the house and looked east, in the direction of the noise. Low hills that surrounded the valley blocked their view of the main road. But off to the north-east, thin wisps of dust could be seen

rising into the humid morning air. Thomas was unsure what was happening, but both his father and Enzali knew. The noise and dust were being caused by heavy equipment... probably tanks... and whether rebel or government forces made no difference. It was time to get out.

“Dr. Karland, mama Rose, you must get your Land Rover loaded up right away,” Enzali ordered. “I will go over to the north hill for a look. I can see for miles from there.” He picked up his rifle that had been leaning against the white plastered wall and slung it over his left shoulder. Reaching back inside the house, he took the binoculars from their peg and jogged off down the dusty road toward the village.

The Karlands’ red Land Rover was parked at the side of their house. While his parents packed, Thomas began relaying packages into the back hatch of their vehicle. Personal belongings were not important beyond the basics. What they needed were supplies of food, water and survival gear. When the roads were bad it could take up to three days to get to the coast. How long would it be if a civil war was beginning?

Once he reached the edge of the village, Enzali circled around to the north side. Many people had become aware of the strange sounds in the distance. They stood outside their homes, looking anxiously to the east. Enzali’s dark face hardened as he began to climb the hill. He knew that the innocent would suffer terrible consequences if the rebels began a war.

The sun had already jumped into a clear sky and the air was heavy. Enzali began to run with sweat from his long climb. Nearing the hilltop, he crouched down in the tall grass and crept up behind some scrubby trees. The main road was slightly over a mile away. Even without binoculars he could see that a large force was moving southward. Dust rose in swirling clouds, partially obscuring the troops. Enzali felt a great sadness. So, it was beginning.

Wiping the sweat from his face, he focused in on the long column of vehicles. Tanks... probably a dozen or so! Now his grief was replaced by a slow-burning anger. If the rebels had tanks, then somebody from outside Gambala was trying to undermine the country. There was no other way they could have obtained that type of firepower in such a short time.

Crouching on one knee in the yellow grass, Enzali studied the troops again. Judging from their formation it was clear that they were not expecting any opposition. Only a few hours away there was a large town which would provide them with abundant supplies and a base of operations. That must be their objective. He watched as they passed the road that turned west into the village. Good. Maybe there would be no trouble here today.

The attack, when it came, was sudden and unexpected. Shells screamed, explosions ripped the air, machine guns and rifles barked. The ambushed rebels scattered for cover, most of them heading toward the hills around the village. Enzali swung his binoculars to the south, where the road funneled between two sweeping ridges. Flashes of flame and puffs of smoke marked the positions of government artillery. They must have moved up from the coast in the last few days. His commander had said nothing about a military offensive. He continued to watch as rebel troops returned fire and the battle was engaged. It would not be long before

the fighting reached the valley. Easing away from the trees, Enzali turned and ran through the tall grass.

Dr. Karland had moved his partially loaded vehicle over to the clinic and was carrying out medical supplies and essential files. Back at their house, Roseanne and Thomas had been driven into a panic by the distant sounds of gunfire. They were rushing to finish their packing when Enzali stepped through the door with his rifle in hand. Sweat was streaming down his face and his shirt was soaked. He could see the fear in their eyes.

“Mama Rose, you must go now! Leave everything!”

While they were preparing to exit the house, a rebel tank that had climbed one of the eastern hills fired into the village. A terrific explosion was followed by the screams of wounded and terrified villagers. Enzali took a cautious peek outside. Troops were charging through the grass on the far side of the valley. There was no time to lose! They had to get to the Land Rover!

“Go!” he shouted, waving them out the door.

As the trio dashed across the exposed area on top of the hill, two shots were fired from inside the clinic.

“Jim!” Roseanne screamed. Running through the open door, she collided with a tall black man, knocking him to one side. He stumbled back against the clinic wall and stood in silence. It was Enzali’s half-brother. Roseanne looked at him bewildered. “Oh... Mattana... what are you doing here? We heard shots... we... where’s Jim?”

Throwing a hard glance at Mattana, Enzali walked through another doorway that separated the office from the treatment area. At his shocked exclamation Roseanne also rushed into the room. Enzali had dropped his rifle and was kneeling beside her husband. Dr. Karland lay on his back on the concrete floor, his chest covered in blood.

“No! No!” Roseanne wailed, falling to her knees beside him.

Thomas ran to the room and looked in, but the horror of what he saw drove him into a shocked silence. It couldn’t be! Not his father! For a brief moment, Mattana had been overwhelmed with panic. He had been caught! He should run from the clinic and escape! His dark eyes darted to the front door as he wavered with indecision. Then his thoughts shifted, and he no longer wanted to leave. He had promised the rebels that he would kill the doctor. They would respect him now! His twisted pride filled him with self-importance. Calmly he swaggered to the doorway of the treatment room, an ugly sneer of contempt on his face. For the first time Thomas noticed the pistol in his hand.

Enzali rose slowly to his feet. His face was rigid with fury. “You murdering snake!” he seethed.

Keeping the gun trained on his brother, Mattana began to back away. It was clear that he was frightened by the immense strength of Enzali. Finally realizing what had actually happened, Thomas found himself gripped by an overpowering rage. His father had been shot!

The man who had done it was here! They thought he was a friend... He had been in their house and they had eaten together... Reason was replaced by red hatred. With a scream Thomas lunged!

Jumping back in surprise, Mattana swung down hard with his pistol at the boy's head. Thomas fell stunned to the ground, his scalp cut wide open by the force of the blow. Enzali had reacted a split-second after Thomas, but before he could reach his brother, Mattana swept the gun back and fired to ward off the attack. A bullet passed through Enzali's thigh and he fell to the floor with a grunt of pain.

Mattana had not intended to confront Enzali, but now he could not help gloating. "That will teach you to side with foreign dirt! The sooner we get rid of them the better!"

Struggling to his knees, Enzali spoke through gritted teeth. "Who do you side with... brother?" he spat.

Roseanne now emerged from the examination room. Her blood-stained hands were clasped together in despair. Tears rolled freely down her anguished face. "Mattana... why? What did we ever do? We only came here to help your people."

The tall African started to move toward the front door of the clinic. "We don't need your help," he snarled, "your useless beliefs!"

"And you," Enzali countered, as he staggered to his one good leg, "you... with your fine belief in nothing... where has that led?"

Mattana seemed about to answer, when a cruel smile flickered across his face. His eyes burned with malice. Standing in the entrance to the clinic, he raised his pistol and pointed it at Roseanne's head. The whistle of the shell and the deafening concussion of its blast seemed simultaneous. Mattana was thrown violently back into the room as a huge fireball erupted outside. The explosion hammered the concrete building, knocking both Roseanne and Enzali to the floor. It blasted a hole through the exterior wall into the examination room, filling the humid air with dust and smoke.

The red Land Rover, parked in front of a white medical clinic, had made an inviting target for the rebels. Whoever was not for them was against them. The turret of the tank spun away from the burning wreckage. Enzali's ears were ringing and his head was aching as he fought himself to his knees. He knew that he was trying to talk, but couldn't even hear himself. Dr. Karland was dead and the rebels had already entered the village. They had to get away... now.

"Now!" he shouted at Roseanne in answer to her dazed, perplexed look.

Thomas had fallen beside a desk when Mattana struck him. Grabbing hold of it, he made a feeble effort to get to his feet, but slipped back to the floor. Enzali shook Roseanne by the shoulders and pointed at Thomas. "We must go now!" he shouted again into the ringing silence. Awareness began to return to her eyes. The heartrending efforts of her son drove out

the shock that would have overpowered her. On hands and knees, she crawled across to help him.

Enzali hobbled over to where the body of his half-brother lay crumpled in a heap. The side of Mattana's head was a bloody mess. Just above the left eye it appeared that his skull had been caved in. Bone fragments were sticking through the skin and blood was running from a deep wound in his scalp. Enzali was sickened by the sight, yet death was what his brother deserved. Reaching down, he pulled the pistol from limp fingers.

Over at the desk, Roseanne had lifted Thomas to his feet. She now had the sense to check the storage area for a first-aid kit. Finding a good sized one, she stuffed it into a backpack with some other supplies while Enzali retrieved his rifle.

During the few minutes of their own personal tragedy, the conflict had escalated around the village. Government forces had begun shelling the area as they fought to pin down the rebels. The sound of gunfire was constant, while more troops and armoured vehicles could be seen crossing the valley. Enzali knew that their only hope was to head west in order to pick up the jungle trail. This would take them north to his village. From there he would have to find a way to get Thomas and Roseanne to the coast.

Smoke from the burning vehicle was still providing reasonable cover at the front corner of the clinic. Taking advantage of this protection, Enzali moved painfully through a gaping hole in the block wall. Followed by Thomas and his mother, he slipped around to the back of the building. The three of them were now shielded from the view of anyone in the valley or eastern hills. But the battle was spreading rapidly as government troops tried to outflank the rebels.

"Mama Rose," Enzali grimaced, "take Thomas and get into the deep grass. Keep to the north of the trail in case rebel soldiers are using it. If they find you they will certainly kill you. I will follow as best I can. We will meet at the forest."

Roseanne's eyes welled up with tears and her hands shook as he handed her Mattana's pistol.

"You must take it," he insisted. "You may need it... to protect Thomas. Now go!"

Without further hesitation Roseanne grabbed Thomas by the hand. The two of them ran across the bare hilltop until they could duck behind some low bushes on the far side. Then, rushing down the slope, they dropped from view into the tall yellow grass. Enzali's wounded leg made it a struggle to cross the open ground. He had just hidden himself behind the same small clump of bushes when a rebel jeep came roaring along the top of the hill. It ground to a dusty halt behind the clinic and half a dozen soldiers hopped out. All of their attention was directed into the valley. Using the building for cover, they moved into position and began firing.

Enzali's shirt was drenched in sweat and dust stuck to his bare arms. Keeping a screen of leafy shrubs between himself and the rebels, he inched down the hill until he reached some

relative safety in the savanna grasses. Crouching and crawling, he dragged himself along for a few minutes and then collapsed on the ground. He was breathing heavily, partially from exertion and partially from pain. His leg was bleeding and the muscles were on fire. Activity around the hill kept increasing as more soldiers took up positions behind the house and the clinic. Enzali knew that his trail would be easy to follow if someone came in his direction. He needed to get to the forest. How long would it take? Holding the rifle in his right hand, Enzali began to crawl.