

THEY HAVE HIDDEN AMONG US FOR CENTURIES

**ENDOSYM**

**THE DARK FACE OF EVIL**

By J. Henry Thomson

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The events and adventures in this novel are fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously and any similarity to persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. The story and the glimpses of the lives and beliefs of the People of West Africa are based on the author’s experiences. The secret Poro society exists and the author has mixed fact and fiction into the story. The ancient statue is real, as is the leopard tooth. Their origins are fiction.

ENDOSYM: *Two entities living in one humanoid body whose goal is to become the “Apex Predator” of the Planet.*

**It had been a twelve-hour flight to Monrovia, Liberia.**

“Hank, are you OK?”

“What?” he mumbled.

“I asked you if you were OK,” she replied.

Hank rubbed his eyelids, stretched and looked toward the insistent voice.

“You were moaning in your sleep,” she continued. “I thought you were having a nightmare or something.”

A nightmare or something, he thought, one that he hadn’t had for many years.

“Yeah, I guess I was in a pretty deep sleep,” he answered softly.

“They said we’d be landing in less than two hours,” she told him. “They’re going to be serving breakfast in about thirty minutes.”

The lights were still dim in the big Boeing jet. Most of the passengers still slept. He glanced at his watch. It was almost six o’clock in the morning. The sun would be just coming up when they landed at Roberts International.

“How about a cup of coffee?” he asked her.

“Sure,” Lindsey answered.

Hank yawned, unbuckled his seatbelt, stretched, and made his way up the aisle to the serving cart.

Lindsey watched as he approached the flight attendant, a bleached blonde in her mid-forties. The two made small talk while the woman poured the coffee. Lindsey leaned back in her seat. She took a second look at the flight attendant. She imagined that the woman must have been stunning in her youth. Now, she had enough seniority to be what they called an “African queen,” one of the lucky few who traveled the prized African circuit.

Hank thanked the woman and headed back toward his seat, holding one hot cup in each hand. Lindsey saw the flight attendant follow him with her eyes. She felt a touch of pride, as well as a tinge of jealousy. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen another woman admire her husband.

No wonder. At forty-two Hank still had the physique of a man in his twenties. He stood six feet, three inches tall. He had broad shoulders and narrow hips. A few sprinkles of gray ran through his closely cropped hair. He hadn’t changed much in the sixteen years they had been married.

“Here you are,” Hank said as he carefully placed her cup on the corner of her tray table. He settled back into his seat beside her.

Lindsey leaned her head against his shoulder. She ran her fingers down his sleeve, over his wrist and clasped his hand firmly in hers.

Her coffee sat untouched while Lindsey closed her eyes. She didn’t intend to fall asleep, but simply to pass the time until breakfast was served. Her thoughts drifted to their new duty station and this new twist in Hank’s military career.

He had told her about the country’s troubled history, its valuable national resources, and its superstitious, but friendly people. She recalled asking him if they would be in any danger. She was surprised that Hank had hesitated before answering her question. She had wondered if he hadn’t told her the whole story. Sure, some of his knowledge was classified material, but it didn’t hurt to ask. Hank had paused before reassuring her that everything would be OK as the Americans had strong political and economic ties to the emerging democracy.

Hank nudged her arm to warn her that the breakfast service was about to begin. Lindsey nodded and sat up straight. She resolved to keep a supportive and positive attitude.

An hour later, Lindsey peered out the window, scanning the horizon for her first glimpse of Africa. It won’t be long now, she thought. Once on the ground, their ride would be waiting to take them to their new home.

Their adventure was about to begin.

On the ground, but not yet at the airport, Jim Parkinson wasn't so sure that the "ride" would get there on time. He took another look at his watch. Only one minute had passed since he had last checked it. Traffic barely moved. Flight 734 would be landing in about twenty minutes. He still had another ten miles to go.

"Why the hell did the Liberians build the airport so damn far from the capital?" he fumed. Just what he needed – being late to pick up the new defense attaché. Even worse luck, he thought, now the traffic had come to a dead stop.

"Drive over on the shoulder," Parkinson yelled to his driver. "Let's see if we can get by the back-up."

"Yes, sir," answered Songa.

This wasn't a bad job, working for the U.S. Embassy. Songa got along well with most of the Americans, but this Major Parkinson was his least favorite. Maybe it was because Parkinson was a black man. Songa felt that he looked down on his black African brothers.

Songa drove in typical Liberian fashion. He alternated between the brakes and the gas. He supplemented the foot movements with frequent honks and shouts. He wheeled the Chevy van to the shoulder and eased past the scene of an accident. A policeman raised his white-gloved hand in an attempt to stop the van. When he saw the diplomatic plates, he scowled and waved it on.

Parkinson looked through the shaded window at the twisted debris. Two taxicabs were now transformed into one obscene sculpture. No one had been seriously injured, yet that was an exception in this town. Thousands of taxis, wielded by aggressive drivers, tangled the traffic every day, injuring innocent passengers and pedestrians.

He remembered his first accident scene. Just days after he first arrived, he'd actually seen a pile-up in the making. A collision of four cars left five people dead. He recalled seeing the uncovered bodies spread out alongside the highway. He had never seen anything so brutal back home. Now when he or his wife, Maggie, went out during the day, they used the embassy drivers. He figured that gave them a slightly better chance of getting back home alive.

The van screeched to a stop in front of the main terminal. Parkinson flashed his diplomatic ID at the guard in customs and moved quickly into the area marked for the arrival of foreign passengers. He slipped the agent a five-dollar Liberian note, the typical bribe. Locals called it "a dash." This would speed up his passengers' progress through customs. He looked out the plate-glass window just in time to see the landing lights of the aircraft as it made its approach.

"I hope King is OK," Tim said to his mother.

"I'm sure he is, Tim," she answered. "The vet gave him that tranquilizer before we left. I'll bet he slept better than we did. Don't worry. You'll be seeing him in just a few minutes."

Tim never ceased to amaze her. He wasn't even fifteen years old, yet he was already more than six feet tall. He was in that awkward age – not a child, but not yet a man. It was hard to believe that in only a few short years, he'd be off to college and out on his own. She secretly hoped that their time in West Africa would bring special memories of their last time together as a family unit.

The plane touched down, jolting as its landing gear made contact with the runway. She leaned toward Hank and caught his eye.

"Ready for a new adventure?" he asked.

"You bet," she smiled. From her window, she watched the airport workers roll out the portable stairway. First off were the first class and business passengers. Finally, it was their turn. At the top of the stairway, Lindsey paused to take in her first impression of Liberia. The tropical heat and oppressive humidity hit her like the proverbial blast furnace. She clasped the hot metal railing and made her way carefully down the steps. Almost immediately, beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead. Strange odors – damp, decomposing vegetation, charcoal smoke, sweat and excrement – nearly overcame her. The combination of the heat, smells, twelve hours on the plane, and jet lag made her dizzy and nauseous.

Once inside the air-conditioned terminal, she regained her composure. She scanned the crowd, looking for Major Parkinson. They had communicated via letters and emails, but she had no idea what he looked like. His neat penmanship created an image of a bespectacled accountant.

“Lieutenant Colonel Martin?” said someone approaching Hank, “I’m Major Parkinson.”

Lindsey turned to see an impressive black man in the uniform of an American officer. She flashed a quick smile, chastising herself for her first assumption.

“Mrs. Martin, I presume? Welcome to Liberia,” he said, taking her hand.

“Call me Lindsey,” she said as she motioned Tim forward. “This is our son, Tim.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said Tim, shaking his hand.

“And all of you, please call me Jim. We don’t always have to be formal. Here, we often use first names in everyday conversation.”

They moved toward the baggage pick-up.

“Once your luggage comes through, we can go. Since you’re traveling on diplomatic passports, customs won’t inspect your bags.”

Right then the terminal echoed with the sound of a barking dog.

“Look, Mom! There’s King!” shouted Tim. Two airport workers were pushing a cart with the German shepherd’s kennel. The dog growled and barked at the two workers.

“Can we let him out?” Tim asked. “I have his leash.”

“Why not?” Jim responded. He and Tim walked over to the crate. As soon as King saw Tim, he quieted down and wagged his tail. Jim helped open the door and fasten the leash. He stooped down and spoke quietly to the dog and got a good licking as a reward.

At the van, Songa wasn’t too sure about the dog. King growled at the driver, baring his teeth. Jim reached down and held the dog’s collar.

“Come here, boy,” he said. “It’s time you got acquainted with the Liberians.”

A quick sniff at Songa’s pant leg seemed to be enough of an introduction for King. His hackles down, he looked up at the man and turned to sniff the van’s tire.

“Major Parkinson, oops, I mean Jim,” Tim asked, “how come King likes you, but growls at Songa?”

“Well, I guess it’s because I smell different,” Jim replied.

“But you’re both black,” Tim said. Lindsey cringed at his comment, but the man didn’t seem offended.

“Dogs are color blind. To them, all people look alike, but we smell different. Liberians eat different food than we do. As a result, their bodies emit a different odor. This is all new to King. It’ll take him time to get used to his new home.”

“Oh,” said Tim, “I never thought of that.”

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It took them another twenty minutes to load the van. Tim and King nestled in the back seat. Lindsey and Hank got in behind the driver. Jim sat in front to serve as the unofficial tour guide.

Tim stared out the window, taking in all he could of the passing scenery. At the outskirts of town, they came to a stop at a traffic light. Six young teenage girls stood beside the road. They wore short grass skirts and nothing else. A fine white powder covered their exposed skin. All were full breasted, their dark nipples jutting out from their smooth bodies.

“Holy smokes!” exclaimed Tim.

“Those girls are candidates for bush school,” Jim explained. “They will go through secret rites that prepare them for their duties as women. Neither boys nor girls are considered adults until they go through bush school.”

He told them that Liberia had two major language groups – the Kapel and the Kruman. The Kapel was the largest with a population of about one and a half million. The Kruman numbered about six hundred thousand. There were ten smaller ethnic groups that tended to speak either Kapel or Kruman.

The light finally turned green. Lindsey turned to glance at her son who continued to stare at the girls. He blushed and glanced down when he saw his mother looking at him.

“This will be quite an experience for a fifteen-year-old,” she said with a smile.

People walked along the edge of the road, many balancing baskets on their heads. The people looked healthy, but abject poverty seemed to surround them. Houses were no more than a series of tin-roofed shacks clustered in random shantytowns. Although they saw some permanent buildings, all were in poor repair. Garbage and other refuse littered the streets. Thin, mongrel dogs pawed through the trash, looking for food scraps. Animal carcasses, likely traffic casualties, could be seen frequently along the road.

“Monrovia’s population is around three hundred twenty-three thousand, but in the last few years a lot of people have left the interior and moved here. We figure that maybe one hundred thousand people live in the streets or in the shantytowns.

“The government is supposedly throwing up some low cost housing, but there’s no way it can keep up with the growth. But this isn’t what it all looks like. After the civil war, the US provided funds to rebuild the capital. The downtown area does have a nice business section with some decent shops. Embassy Row is well maintained. And, of course, there’s Mamba Bluff, where you’ll be living,” Jim told them.

“Mamba Bluff?” Tim asked. “Does that mean there’ll be snakes?”

Jim suppressed a laugh. “Oh, once in a while we see a snake, but they are usually busy getting away from the humans.”

“Wow, this is really neat!” Tim said.

“Yeah, just great,” Lindsey replied. But she was not so certain. Snakes weren’t her idea of good company.

Jim’s commentary continued as their car made its way through the city. For Tim, the drive had been filled with exciting sights and sounds. His first impression of Liberia would be indelibly etched in his memory.

“Mamba Bluff ahead,” Jim said, as the van pulled in a wide, palm-lined drive. Now the housing was much different. They could see large, spacious homes. Some even had swimming pools.

“There are more than six hundred homes on Mamba Bluff, some worth millions. The embassy rents out several for its staff. Because there are only about forty residences on the embassy grounds, many of us live here. Most of the wealthy Liberians and other nationals live here, too. All six members of the attaché’s staff are within a mile of each other. Your home is on Charles Street. The area is well patrolled by the national police. Rougings are pretty uncommon,” he continued.

“What’s a rouging?” asked Tim.

“A rouge is an old British term for a thief. Rouging is the same as a burglary,” he replied.

About a mile later, they pulled up in front of a large yellow stucco house. A six-foot high concrete block wall surrounded the grounds. Broken glass bottles had been embedded along the top of the wall. They passed through a double entry iron gate and pulled up to the house.

“You’ve got five bedrooms,” Jim said. “All together there are more than five thousand square feet of living space.”

Eight black men stood at attention as the van came to a stop in front of the house.

“Your staff,” Jim said, turning to Lindsey with a broad grin. “You have five guards, a houseboy, a yard boy and a cook. Let me introduce you. First, this is Everyday Walker, chief of the guards.”

Everyday Walker moved one step forward and bowed at the waist. Barefoot and shirtless, he wore only khaki shorts. His bald spot was fringed with snow-white hair. His weapon was a rusty, single-shot twelve-gauge shotgun.

“Everyday Walker has been with this house for more than forty years,” Jim explained. “He started when the Walkers built the house. They were an American family who worked at Firestone Rubber. These guards protect the house from rouges. They’ll also serve as your staff when you entertain.”

He introduced John Tarkoi, Zac Wleh, John Youbatie and Nelson Webe. Each was armed with a machete.

Hank shook his head. He wondered how secure they would be if their “armed” guards faced intruders with real weapons.

With a command from Everyday Walker, the men marched to a small guardhouse near the driveway.

The three other men came forward. Adam Sayeh, the houseboy; Charles Konabe, the yard boy; and finally, the only one with shoes, Abraham Karim, the white-uniformed cook.

At five feet ten inches, Lindsey towered over the Liberians. They must have been amazed to see such a tall white woman.

As they entered the house, they saw plush wall-to-wall carpeting. Expensive new furniture filled every room. Fine art hung on the walls. Someone had gone to great effort and expense to furnish the home.

“I hope the house is OK,” Jim said with a smile. “The embassy got in a new shipment of furniture, and your place was re-done. My wife, Maggie, supervised the job.”

“It’s beautiful, really beautiful,” Lindsey said.

“Look, Mom!” Tim called from a side door. “Look, what a great back yard!”

An expansive lawn sloped away from the house to the sturdy wall. Tim opened the patio doors. King dashed outside and bounded in his rediscovered freedom. A variety of flowers, shrubs and trees lined the edges of the property. One wooden gate, latched from the inside, opened to a steep hillside overlooking the Atlantic, just three hundred feet below the house.

“Folks, I know you’ve had a long flight and need some time to relax. Get settled in first, then we’d like you to come over to our house for dinner. Maggie’s planned a little reception. You’ll get a chance to meet everyone else. Until then, the refrigerator is full of food. Adam and Charles will bring in your luggage. Your household goods are due to come in tomorrow,” Jim said. “I guess there’s nothing else to say, except welcome to Liberia!”

After Jim left, the three stood silently in the living room in disbelief. They hadn’t imagined such luxurious quarters. This whole adventure already seemed like it would be an amazing experience.

“Missy, would you and the master like some tea and cookies? Perhaps the young master would like a soft drink?” asked Abraham.

Lindsey had forgotten all about Abraham.

“Yes. That would be fine,” she responded.

After the cook had left, she turned to Hank. “Honey, I don’t need a cook.”

“I guess you don’t have a choice,” he said. “They all come with the house.”

“This is really going to be different,” she said.

“You said you were ready for a new adventure,” he smiled. “Well, this one comes with servants!”



**In Monrovia, the nation's capital, a dark blue Mercedes-Benz E500 rolled to a stop in front of the mansion gate.**

Armed with an Uzi submachine gun, the guard approached the driver's window. He scanned the car's occupants and then nodded in the direction of the gate.

The heavy iron gate clicked and swung open. The Mercedes moved up the curved brick-lined drive and came to a halt by the wide stairs. Another five luxury sedans were parked several yards ahead. Arms folded in front of them; the uniformed drivers leaned against the sleek fenders. It wasn't uncommon to see such vehicles here for formal events. But this was different. It was almost midnight on a Wednesday.

A tall German driver got out. He walked around the Mercedes and opened the rear passenger door. The driver wore a white polo shirt and sharply creased black slacks. His shoulder holster held a large-caliber automatic pistol.

A thin dark-skinned man with white hair emerged from the back seat. He walked up the steps to the carved wood door. It swung open. Inside, he moved into the brightly lit entrance, turned right and walked down the hallway. His five-hundred-dollar Italian shoes tapped on the hardwood floor. He came up to a heavy wooden double door at the end of the hall. He twisted the brass knob, stepped in and closed the door behind him.

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the library walls. Thousands of leather-bound volumes were neatly tucked into the dark wood shelves. Thickly woven oriental carpets were artfully placed on the polished wood floors. A half dozen upholstered leather chairs were scattered around the room's perimeter. Thin, metallic floor lamps provided soft lighting. A massive inlaid mahogany table stood dead center in the room. Four high-backed chairs were on each long side. Larger chairs sat at each end.

Five men were already seated at the table. This new arrival moved to an empty seat. He did not speak, nor did he acknowledge the others' presence. The library door opened once again. A heavy black man – well more than three hundred pounds – walked in. Despite the bulk on the five feet-seven inch frame, he slid gracefully into the chair at the far end of the table.

This last man to arrive was Dr. George Nah Sarday, chancellor at the University of Liberia. The others all knew his story. He was once a lowly assistant professor of ancient African religions. Then twenty-five years ago he found the hidden valley and its mysterious secrets. Even though ten years junior to the others at the table, there was no question as to who was in charge. He looked first to his left, then to his right. He scanned his companions, nodding to each as their eyes met his.

On his left sat Steven Dowling, Liberia's President. Beside him was Thomas Karua, minister of finance. Next, was Steven Moya, Speaker of the House. Then, the next man was Julius Carpai, Minister of Defense. The last two were John Munah, president of Munah Industries, and Abdullah Ajami, owner and general manager of Liberia Rubber.

Of the seven, six were Kapel and had survived more than seventeen years of bloody civil war. Most had English first names; some had even assumed American surnames. After the 2003 peace accord, they assumed leadership roles in the new government. Only one was not a descendant of two black parents. The seventh man was the product of a marriage between a Kapel chief's daughter and an Arab merchant who had come to Liberia to make his fortune.

Originally, ten men had occupied the chairs around the table. Three seats were left empty as silent reminders of the lost brothers. Albert Carpai, Julius's brother, had died in the battle for Monrovia in 2003; George Gabtu had succumbed to lung cancer; and a jealous husband had shot Albert Poste in 1998.

Here sat the seven most powerful men in Liberia. Their combined wealth surpassed that of the entire population of the rest of the nation.

The men bowed their heads and began to chant in unison in an ancient language. Few people alive today had ever heard these words, murmured in a tongue once whispered in the sacred land of Egypt before Moses had led his people to the Promised Land.

“My power and wealth come from you O Great One. Alone, I am weak. Together, we are all powerful. I will defend the brotherhood to death and reveal your secrets to no man,” they chanted.

The ancient litany ended. Sarday broke the silence.

“Julius, do you want to tell us what happened in Singa yesterday?”

Carpai cleared his throat while choosing his words with care. “We sent a reinforced infantry company to Singa to collect the hut taxes. They were armed with the new M-16 rifles that came from the United States. Captain Mussafa Konah commanded the unit. Once they got to the town, a small boy handed the captain a note from Charles Morray. It ordered Konah to leave town before his men were killed.

“Konah, of course, refused. He deployed his platoons. Without warning, shots rang out. The People’s Party militia had begun firing. It took only minutes. Konah was forced to surrender. Forty soldiers were killed. Another ten wounded.

“Morray confiscated all weapons, uniforms and gear and marched the survivors to the edge of town.”

Carpai reached into his pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper.

“Morray sent this letter to you, Steven,” Carpai said.

“If your soldiers had captured Morray last year when we closed down People’s Party headquarters, we wouldn’t have this problem today,” snarled Dowling.

But Carpai refused to be intimidated.

“Don’t lecture me, you old fool,” he said. “It was your idea to allow this opposition party. You said they would be no threat. It would look like democracy really was working in Liberia.”

“Shut up, both of you,” growled Sarday. “Give me that letter, Julius.”

Carpai slid the crumpled paper down the table.

It read as follows:

President Dowling, It is with deep regret that I write you this letter. You had the opportunity to give the people of Liberia the freedom of choice. You destroyed this chance when your soldiers tried to kill me. Mark my words; the time is coming when I will sit in your chair as the new head of state. The people will win!

Charles B. Morray

Sarday’s face darkened as he crushed the paper in his fist. His features taut, he whispered deliberately, “That goddamn bastard. He will never rule this country. I will drink his blood at the altar of sacrifice.”

Sarday flung the wadded paper against the wall. Then he turned to Thomas Karua.

“Thomas, tell me of the negotiations with the Arab oil cartel.”

“They are very interested in our proposal. They offer us \$25 million U.S. if we can guarantee that no oil is pumped from the reserves beneath the Saint Paul River for the next five years.”

“Will people wait that long now that they know we have so much?” Munah asked.

“Hell, they’ve already waited two hundred years to be rich. They can hold off another five,” Moya responded.

“What about the U.S.? They’re already pressuring us to start production this year.”

Sarday seemed unconcerned. “That will be our job to handle the United States. Thomas, I want you to go back to the cartel. Take Abdullah with you. He can speak their tongue. Tell them that they have a deal, but it will cost them one hundred million dollars U.S. We want fifty million dollars now, and the rest in five years.”

“They’ll never agree to that much,” said Karua.

“Of course they will. They have a stranglehold on the West. If we permit the U.S. to open our reserves, the price per barrel will plummet. They will lose billions. Mark my words, the cartel will agree to the deal.”

Sarday pushed back his chair, stood, and left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the remaining six leaned back in their seats. The tension had eased. Dowling turned to Moya.

“Are you coming over Saturday? My daughter Theresa and your son will be bringing the twins over to celebrate their third birthday. Jim Parkinson, Maggie and their boys are coming, too.”

“I wouldn’t miss their birthday for the world,” responded Moya.

The six men filed out and headed for their waiting cars. Left alone at the mahogany table, Dowling twisted the cap on his fountain pen. His lips tightened. So far, he had managed to move hundreds of thousands of dollars into his European accounts. It would only be a matter of time until his hidden assets topped twenty million dollars. The future – far from this godforsaken country – would be all that he imagined. He caressed the smooth sides of the pen, tucked it into his vest pocket and tapped his chest with the tips of his fingers.

Sarday watched through the window in another room as the men climbed into their waiting limos. Except for Julius Carpai, the others were weak beings, but he needed them as he gained power. Soon the time will come when only the strongest would serve him.

**The Grand Pavilion in Monrovia, remodeled some six years earlier, was the site of many festive occasions enjoyed by the Liberian elite.** The magnificent building could accommodate one thousand guests.

Lindsey, seated beside Hank in the limousine, caressed the engraved invitation.

**The President and Mrs. Steven Dowling  
Request the pleasure of your company  
At the One Hundred and Sixty-Fifth  
INDEPENDENCE BALL  
Thursday, July 26<sup>th</sup>  
At the GRAND PAVILION, MONROVIA  
Ashmun Street Entrance  
Nine o'clock post meridian  
Present at door  
Dress: Formal**

The doorman approached the vehicle. Lindsey looked at the officer seated beside her.

"I love your mess white uniform. You look so handsome," she said.

"That red evening dress isn't such a bad uniform either," Hank said. Lindsey's dark maroon silk dress was deeply cut, revealing more than a hint of cleavage. Two thin straps ran over her bare shoulders. Her lightly tanned skin, blue eyes and blond hair would cause many to stop and admire.

Arm in arm, the couple walked up the marble steps to the formal entrance. A Liberian captain snapped to attention, reached for the invitation and opened the door. Inside the grand foyer, they joined the reception line. The event had been touted as the highlight of the Monrovia social year. The guest list included high-ranking staff from embassy row, wealthy businessmen, and key government officials.

Fabric streamers in Liberian red, white and blue had been hung from the high ceiling. A soft breeze from the fans and air conditioning caused the bright material to sway gently, as if waving in celebration of the national holiday. The Monrovia symphony orchestra played a classical theme. Its musicians wore dark tuxedos and gold brocade vests.

The long linen-covered tables were laden with hors d'oeuvres – tiny shrimp, caviar, and crock truffles atop toasted bread. Fresh fruit, carved vegetables and petit fours were skillfully arranged around intricate ice sculptures. Tall crystal vases brimmed with hibiscus and black orchid. More tropical flowers and delicate ferns spilled from stone urns. Waiters, their trays heavy with crystal glasses glistening with French wines, wove in and out of the clustered guests.

The President himself – Steven Dowling – personally greeted the couples as they entered the main ballroom. As they waited their turn, Lindsey recognized some familiar faces. Jim Parkinson and Maggie stood at the front of the line.

Maggie, always one with good taste, had chosen a shimmering blue and silver gown that clung to her athletic form. Dowling kissed her warmly on each cheek, and then reached out to Jim, firmly gripping his hand. Lindsey marveled at the couple's presence. They were a study in deep, rich color. Jim's smooth dark skin, impressive height and toned physique paired well with Maggie's firm curves and lighter color. Maggie's friendship with Dowling's daughter had given Jim an open door to the executive mansion. Few attaches could match his connections.

The line inched forward. Soon it was their turn.

"Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Martin, I am so pleased you could attend our Independence Day Ball. I trust you feel welcome in our beautiful country?" Dowling asked.

"Oh, yes," answered Hank, "and we are especially enjoying your warm hospitality."

After obligatory small talk, Dowling's eyes moved to the next guest in line. Hank and Lindsey turned toward the ballroom.

"I'm amazed that he knows everyone's name," Lindsey said.

"The qualities of a true politician," Hank replied. "How about some wine?"

"Sure. White wine would be fine."

While Hank moved to the bar, Lindsey recognized Nancy Matthews. Her husband was Major Don Matthews, one of the two Air Force pilots assigned to the defense attaché's office. They flew the C-12 aircraft based at the airport. The Liberian office also served the ambassadors of four other small West African countries. The attaches made regular rounds, and the aircraft allowed them to travel without relying on commercial transportation. The twelve-passenger plane frequently had a few empty seats, which allowed family members to fly on a space-available basis.

Lindsey smiled when she saw Nancy. A short, plump brunette, Nancy never failed to make people feel comfortable around her. Not only was she a capable wife, she was also the mother of two children: Douglas, eleven, and little Chrissie, just six months old. The Matthews had nearly been rejected from the assignment because Nancy had been pregnant. But the paperwork had gone through. Nancy had flown to Germany to give birth to Chrissie. The child seemed to be thriving in Liberia.

"Hi, Lindsey," Nancy exclaimed, reaching out for Lindsey's hand, "will you be going to the soccer game at the international school tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" answered Lindsey. "Tim's the goalie. He'd be broken hearted if we weren't there."

"Speaking of soccer, there's Joe Weah. God, is that guy good looking!" said Nancy.

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Weah, commander of the Liberian Reconnaissance Battalion, stood a short distance from them. A blond secretary from the Swiss Embassy hung on his arm. Athletic and confident, the native Liberian sipped at his cocktail and visited with the French ambassador.

Weah was Liberia's only national sports hero. Sixteen years earlier, Weah had kicked the winning goal against the British in the Summer Olympics, claiming a bronze medal for his nation. He had later fought in the civil war and had been promoted to his present position in the new government. He was also the only Liberian officer to have been trained at the Special Forces Officers' Qualification course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Unlike most Liberians, Weah stood nearly six feet tall. His grandfather, a Mandingo, had found a job as a metal worker and had settled in the village. Mandingos were a tall, mostly nomadic people, who could be found throughout West Africa, easily mixing with local tribes. Weah's grandmother was Kapel. Their son, Joe's father, had become a paramount chief. Considered by many to be Liberia's most eligible bachelor, Joe hadn't married. Few people, if any, would dislike Joe Weah. Even Tim had fallen under Joe's spell, as the affable Liberian had volunteered to coach the soccer team at Tim's school.

"Nancy, Lindsey!" Joe said, approaching them. "Are you ready for the big game?"

"Sure are," grinned Nancy. Joe's date, Ursula, was a tall blonde, about Lindsey's height. Her most significant attribute was an exceptionally well-formed bust. She reminded Lindsey of an overly made up call girl in a movie made in the forties.

"Your wine, my lady," said Hank, handing Lindsey her glass.

Social functions like this were no problem for Hank. Lindsey admired his ability to put others at ease. After sixteen years as an officer's wife, Lindsey had seen her share of receptions. Hank could play the chameleon with the best of them. He could please a boss or motivate a subordinate.

It was obvious that Hank truly liked Joe. It wasn't the same with some others. She had sensed his distaste for Julius Carpai, the minister of defense. When she questioned him about it, Hank was tight lipped. He said that it went back to his past assignment in Liberia before they were married. Maybe someday he'd tell her more. For now, that was enough. She didn't press the issue.

Shortly after midnight, people began to slip off to private parties or simply go home. The two moved to the foyer, pausing only briefly to say goodbye to those they passed.

Back home, King greeted them at the door, his tail thumping against the wall. Lindsey peeked in Tim's room. He slept soundly. The dog jumped up on the bed and curled up at the boy's feet.

"Good night, guys," she said, pulling the door closed.

Hank sat on the edge of their bed, still in uniform.

"I'm going to get ready for bed," said Lindsey, leaning over to kiss him softly on his neck. Minutes later she returned, totally naked. Hank looked up and grinned.

"You look even better without the red dress," he smiled.

"Let me help you out of that uniform, soldier," she said, running her fingers under the lapels of his jacket. Exercising restraint wasn't one of Hank's best qualities, but he forced himself to resist the impulse to shed his clothes quickly.

Instead, he waited as Lindsey methodically unbuttoned his shirt and reached inside to caress his chest. She pulled at his waistband and loosened his trousers. He fell back on the bed as she lifted herself over his hips.

Later, she reached over to turn off the lamp. "I'll always remember Liberian Independence Day," she yawned. "Good night, Hank. Sleep well."

"Don't worry. I always do," he answered.

Yet Hank didn't sleep well. Deep-seated dreams disrupted what should have been a perfect slumber.

In the valley again, the incessant drumbeat commanded his attention. Ceremonial fires illuminated the lush foliage. The compound took on an eerie, primordial glow. The statue stood on the altar. Its horns cast a shadow on the grass below. The eyes, like bottomless pits, drew him in. Once again, he felt the vertigo of free falling. His throat tightened and his limbs weighed heavy. He willed himself to hold onto his composure, yet the disorientation intensified. Now fear was his sole companion.

"It's just the goddamn dream!" he tried to shriek. "Come on! Come on! I've got to wake up!"

He struggled to find his control. This wasn't reality. Lindsey, his home, his bed – were reality. The scene began to fade. Now he was in charge. It couldn't overtake his will.

But his efforts were in vain. In a flash, he was back in the valley.

"Shit!" he thought. "All right, I know this is just a dream. Go ahead. You won't frighten me. Dreams are only dreams."

Yet tonight was different from past dreams. He sensed the cold grass on his bare feet. The heat from the fires warmed his exposed skin. How could it be? Here in the humid jungle, his breath condensed in the night air.

He was no longer on the hillside, but standing naked by the altar. Before, he was only a detached observer. Now, he was a participant. A stratified mist filled the night air. The statue was clearly visible, yet other dark figures remained partially hidden in the haze.

He tried to move, but his head would only turn part way. His legs seemed wooden and apart from his consciousness. When the mist began to fall away, he could clearly see the four men. Julius Carpai stood immediately before him. But it wasn't the earlier Carpai. Now it was the same man he'd seen at the reception – an older Carpai. Then there was Steve Moya, speaker of the House. He didn't recognize the third man. But Hank gasped when he recognized the fourth man. It was Steven Dowling, Liberia's President.

Carpai turned his eyes toward Hank before leaning toward Moya. Carpai pointed at Hank's groin and snickered. Hank instinctively tried to move his hands to cover himself, but his arms failed him. He blurted an explanation: It's cold. It shrinks when it's cold. Although the words formed in his head, they failed to come to his lips.

Now the drumbeat increased to one hundred beats per minute. A new figure emerged from the shadows. Naked and obese, it came to the foreground. Hank strained to make out its features. Soon it became clear – this was George Sarday, chancellor at the University of Liberia.

It all began to replay in his head. The thin form of the young Amahd once again lay across the stone altar. Unable to make his body move, Hank stared blankly into the statue's eyes. He felt himself falling under its spell. He remembered what had happened eighteen years ago.

A chant rose to accompany the drumbeat. Two men hooked their arms around Amahd's elbows and guided him toward the altar. The lanky boy was no match for the two grown men. They pushed and pulled until Amahd had been placed upon the stone altar. The boy looked up into the eyes of the idol. One man grasped the boy's head as the other held firmly to his waist. They stretched his thin form forward until his head hung over the altar's edge. The chanting continued in eerie harmony with the drums.

Now Sarday came forward and positioned himself to the right of the statue. In his right hand he was holding a long sword. The polished metal gleamed in the firelight. Sarday raised the blade high over his head. The drums reached a crescendo, and then came to an abrupt stop. The sword swiftly fell on Amah's slender neck.

It sliced cleanly through the spinal column. It cut through muscle and flesh, severing the head from the body. Falling forward, it seemed to drift toward the wooden bowl. Hank imagined the "thump" as it landed in the receptacle. Red mist sprayed from the headless corpse. The lungs released their last breath. The body contracted in massive shock. The arteries continued to spurt blood from the heart, which was still unaware of its useless effort.

At first, the bursts of blood shot more than three feet, spraying the statue. Then the pressure decreased, and the fluid slowed to dark ooze that dripped from the corpse and dribbled down the front of the altar.

"That's it," Hank ordered himself. "Time to wake up. I refuse to watch a repeat of ritual murder."

However, as much as he tried to will himself away from the scene, nothing changed. The brutal episode would be playing itself out once again.

Amahd's long, thin legs stretched out on the platform. The toes curled down and touched the stone edge. Hank could see a jagged scar encircling the boy's bony ankle. It looked strangely familiar. Where had he seen a scar like this before?

Then he remembered. It was just like the scar on Tim's ankle. Four years earlier, Tim had fallen from his bicycle. Now his fear took on a new intensity. This new victim was not Amahd. It was Tim.

A silent shriek again formed, but refused to come. Immobile, he felt the tears flow freely down his cheeks.

The chanting came to a stop. Each figure turned toward the altar. Only Sarday stood in place, his dark eyes focused directly on Hank. Then Sarday seemed to change before Hank's eyes. He appeared to be both a man and demon.

It was as though Sarday had become two beings in one body.

The thing that was called George Sarday gripped the sheath of the polished metal blade. Smiling, he raised the sword high over his head. The drums reached a crescendo. In slow motion, the sharp edge fell toward Tim's slender neck. Hank tried to scream once again. This time it was the cry of a desperate father about to watch the execution of his only son.

"Hank! Hank! Stop it! Stop it! What on earth's wrong?" Lindsey stood beside the bed, her face white with fear.

Hank sat upright. "Oh, my God ... Tim," he blurted. He rushed down the hallway and opened Tim's door.

King, alert, looked up, but Tim remained in a deep sleep.

Hank moved quietly to the boy's bed. Tim's left leg lay exposed. The thin, white scar circled his ankle. Hank reached out, touching the leg, sensing its warmth and vitality. He backed out of the room, softly released the doorknob, and moved silently into the bathroom.

He leaned unsteadily over the toilet. Beads of sweat had formed on his brow. Finally, he retched. Release of the vomit eased the spasms.

Lindsey cradled his spent body. "Hank, what's wrong?" she asked. "You've got to tell me what's going on." She helped him back to the side of the bed. He held his head in his hands.

"All right, I suppose it's about time I told you what happened," he said. It was right after he was wounded in Desert Storm, he explained. When his leg wound healed, he had been assigned to work with the Liberian army at Camp Jackson near the village of Naama.

They were a sorry lot. The officers held their positions because of political or social pull, not because of their qualifications. No one wanted to train. Colonel Julius Carpai was the biggest hurdle. An evil, ruthless commander, he stole from the payroll and bullied the villagers.

Hank's story went on for more than an hour. Lindsey sat amazed at his account of Amahd's ritual murder.

"My God, Hank!" she said. "Can't we do something? That Julius Carpai should be in jail for his actions. Certainly, he shouldn't be serving as minister of defense. "Isn't there anyone we could tell?"

"What could I say?" Hank asked. "I'm not sure any of it is real anymore."

Hank paused.

"There's more," he said, hesitating. "Sometimes I wonder if it's just a dream that occurred as a result of a malaria fever."

"Go on, dear," she said, "you might as well get it all out."

"I was discovered hiding on the hill. When they chopped off the boy's head, I think I yelled. Suddenly they were all looking up at the place where I was hiding.

"The guy with the sword reeled, pointed at me and shouted. Then the guards crouched and fired their rifles. Bullets ricocheted on nearby rocks.

"I turned and rushed downhill toward the trail. I ignored the stiffness in my left leg, still weak from the wound. Nothing mattered but escape. I sensed the presence of men in pursuit but resisted looking back. Wasted seconds could be deadly. My instincts told me that they were closing the gap.

"I took a sharp left off the main trail onto a less-traveled path. I increased my stride, ignoring the brush and vines that scraped against my uniform. Within minutes, the path widened. I allowed myself to slow, making careful steps through the darkness. It looked like I lost them but I kept moving, occasionally looking behind me. I saw nothing. I thought I had made my get-away.

"How wrong I was. Two steps later my flight came to an abrupt stop. Would you believe it? I ran headlong into that damn idol itself. But it was no longer just a small wooden statue; it had grown in size. It loomed over the path and blocked my way. The white eyes had turned red, the color of Amahd's blood. In its eyes, I could see the reflection of my own naked body stretched on the stone altar."

Hank stopped talking and sat on the bed staring at the wall. Then he continued.

"With no way to move forward, I cut to my right, thrashing through the brambles that tore at my flesh. Again, the brush opened up. This time I found myself at the mouth of a dark tunnel that sloped downward. I had no choice. I charged furiously ahead, dreamily aware of shouts and gunfire only seconds behind me. Although it was dark, my eyes adjusted to the scant light.

"I had entered a limestone cavern. I followed a worn trail deeper into the Earth. Then I realized that I wasn't alone. Warrior statues that looked like men with horns and tails stood as silent sentinels. I thought I was losing my mind. I ran faster and found myself in a subterranean grotto. In many ways, it resembled a Roman coliseum. At its center stood a granite temple. From behind its columns, I saw a reddish glow. As I got closer, there was the infernal statue sitting on a granite block. You know, like the statue of Lincoln in Washington, D.C.



“Everywhere I went, everywhere I looked, the statue followed. Although I struggled to fight its spell, it denied my escape.

“There was no way to move forward. My only choice was to turn and retrace my steps. In the shadows ahead, I saw something move. I couldn’t see it clearly but I knew it was creature that the statue represented and it was waiting for me. Somehow, I knew that this hideous beast would drive me insane. I was sure that the statue in the temple was the lesser evil. I reeled and headed back down the path.

“Then I slipped and fell face first onto what I thought was the muddy floor. I pulled myself up on my knees and examined my slimy hands. I rubbed my fingers together and sniffed the substance.

“My God, I realized that it wasn’t mud at all, but blood kept damp by the trickle of the cavern’s own internal moisture. The floor of the tunnel was awash with the blood of thousands of sacrifices. I struggled to stand, but my legs gave way. The thing drew closer. I could smell its foul breath. It reeked of death and corruption. I struggled to my feet then slipped again falling forward as razor-sharp talons dug into my flesh.”

“How did you ever escape?” she asked. Lindsey felt light-headed. She had been so close to losing Hank.

“That’s the weird part. I don’t really remember. I do remember this sixteen-year-old kid who had been assigned as my aide. His name was Charles Morray. He was supposed to keep up my uniform, polish my boots, and maintain the quarters. I didn’t know how to deal with having a manservant at first, but that’s the way they do things here. Morray led me to the valley. He left before the sacrifice.

“The next morning, they found me in my bunk. I was delirious and had a high fever. I remember being in and out of it for at least a week. The medic said it seemed like malaria. I took the pills and eventually got better,” Hank said.

“What about this Morray? Did you ever ask him what he knew?”

“No. I never saw him after that. Someone told me that his company had been sent out to do border patrols. By the time they returned, our tour was up.”

“Did you see Carpai after that night?”

“No. He had gone to Monrovia,” Hank said.

“Do you think he knew you were a witness?”

“If he did, I’m sure I would have been killed,” Hank answered. “Honestly, I don’t really know what I saw. Maybe I temporally lost my mind. The dreams went away after a few years. They started coming back on our flight here.”

Lindsey rubbed Hank’s back, unsure of what to say next.

“What scares me is that tonight’s dream was so different,” he said.

“How was it different?” she asked.

When he told her that this time Tim had been the victim, Lindsey shivered. Somehow she had to help him get through this.

“Tonight’s dream was most likely just a reaction to those old memories and being at the Independence Ball. All those men from your dream were there. You saw that Tim’s just fine. Just try to get back to sleep. The reality is that you’re here with me, and we’ll get through this together.”

In a matter of minutes, Hank slept soundly. His breaths came in even measures.

But now it was Lindsey who couldn’t sleep. What was truth and what was fiction? Her husband wasn’t a man who would confuse the two. Although she had done what she could to soothe his anguish, her concern had heightened. She began to recite the Lord’s Prayer, an old habit from childhood. In the past, the words had helped her find stability when her world seemed out of control. Perhaps it would once again.