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The Pipeline Opens

With its two fighting claws held forward like a wrestler's arms the big *Pandinus* scorpion emerged with a dry rustle from the finger-sized hole under the rock.

There was a small patch of hard flat earth outside the hole and the scorpion stood in the centre of this on the tips of its four pairs of legs, its nerves and muscles braced for a quick retreat and its senses questing for the minute vibrations which would decide its next move.

The moonlight, glittering down through the great thorn bush, threw sapphire highlights off the hard, black polish of the six-inch body and glinted palely on the moist white sting which protruded from the last segment of the tail, now curved over parallel with the scorpion's flat back.

Slowly the sting slid home into its sheath and the nerves in the poison sac at its base relaxed. The scorpion had decided. Greed had won over fear.

Twelve inches away, at the bottom of a sharp slope of sand, the small beetle was concerned only with trudging on towards better pastures than he had found

under the thorn bush, and the swift rush of the scorpion down the slope gave him no time to open his wings.

The beetle's legs waved in protest as the sharp claw snapped round his body, and then the sting lanced into him from over the scorpion's head and immediately he was dead.

After it had killed the beetle the scorpion stood motionless for nearly five minutes. During this time it identified the nature of its prey and again tested the ground and the air for hostile vibrations. Reassured, its fighting claw withdrew from the half-severed beetle and its two small feeding pincers reached out and into the beetle's flesh. Then for an hour, and with extreme fastidiousness, the scorpion ate its victim.

The great thorn bush under which the scorpion killed the beetle was quite a landmark in the wide expanse of rolling veld some forty miles south of Kissidougou in the south-western corner of French Guinea. On all horizons there were hills and jungle, but here, over twenty square miles, there was flat rocky ground which was almost desert and amongst the tropical scrub only this one thorn bush, perhaps because there was water deep beneath its roots, had grown to the height of a house and could be picked out from many miles away.

The bush grew more or less at the junction of three African states. It was in French Guinea but only about ten miles north of the northernmost tip of Liberia and five miles east of the frontier of Sierra Leone. Across this frontier are the great diamond mines around Sefadu. These are the property of Sierra International, which is

part of the powerful mining empire of Afric International, which in turn is a rich capital asset of the British Commonwealth.

An hour earlier in its hole among the roots of the great thorn bush the scorpion had been alerted by two sets of vibrations. First there had been the tiny scraping of the beetle's movements, and these belonged to the vibrations which the scorpion immediately recognised and diagnosed. Then there had been a series of incomprehensible thuds round the bush followed by a final heavy quake which had caved in part of the scorpion's hole. These were followed by a soft rhythmic trembling of the ground which was so regular that it soon became a background vibration of no urgency. After a pause the tiny scraping of the beetle had continued, and it was greed for the beetle that, after a day of sheltering from its deadliest enemy, the sun, finally got the upper hand against the scorpion's memory of the other noises and impelled it out of its lair into the filtering moonlight.

And now, as it slowly sucked the morsels of beetle-flesh off its feeding pincers, the signal for the scorpion's own death sounded from far away on the eastern horizon, audible to a human, but made up of vibrations which were far outside the range of the scorpion's sensory system.

And, a few feet away, a heavy, blunt hand, with bitten fingernails, softly raised a jagged piece of rock.

There was no noise, but the scorpion felt a tiny movement in the air above it. At once its fighting claws were up and groping and its sting was erect in the rigid

tail, its near-sighted eyes staring up for a sight of the enemy.

The heavy stone came down.

'Black bastard.'

The man watched as the broken insect whipped in its death agony.

The man yawned. He got to his knees in the sandy depression against the trunk of the bush where he had been sitting for nearly two hours and, his arms bent protectingly over his head, scrambled out into the open.

The noise of the engine which the man had been waiting for, and which had signed the scorpion's death warrant, was louder. As the man stood and stared up the path of the moon, he could just see a clumsy black shape coming fast towards him out of the east and for a moment the moonlight glinted on whirling rotor blades.

The man rubbed his hands down the sides of his dirty khaki shorts and moved quickly round the bush to where the rear wheel of a battered motorcycle protruded from its hiding place. Below the pillion, on either side, there were leather tool-boxes. From one of these he extracted a small heavy package which he stowed inside his open shirt against the skin. From the other he took four cheap electric torches and went off with them to where, fifty yards from the big thorn bush, there was a clear patch of flat ground about the size of a tennis court. At three corners of the landing ground he screwed the butt end of a torch into the ground and switched it on. Then, the last torch alight

in his hand, he took up his position at the fourth corner and waited.

The helicopter was moving slowly towards him, not more than a hundred feet from the ground, the big rotor blades idling. It looked like a huge, badly constructed insect. To the man on the ground it seemed, as usual, to be making too much noise.

The helicopter paused, pitching slightly, directly over his head. An arm came out of the cockpit and a torch flashed at him. It flashed dot–dash, the Morse for A.

The man on the ground flashed back a B and a C. He stuck the fourth torch into the ground and moved away, shielding his eyes against the coming whirl of dust. Above him the pitch of the rotor blades flattened imperceptibly and the helicopter settled smoothly into the space between the four torches. The clatter of the engine stopped with a final cough, the tail rotor spun briefly in neutral, and the main rotor blades completed a few awkward revolutions and then drooped to a halt.

In the echoing silence, a cricket started to zing in the thorn bush, and somewhere near at hand there was the anxious chirrup of a nightbird.

After a pause to let the dust settle, the pilot banged open the door of the cockpit, pushed out a small aluminium ladder and climbed stiffly to the ground. He waited beside his machine while the other man walked round the four corners of the landing ground picking up and dowsing the torches. The pilot was half an hour late at the rendezvous and he was bored at the prospect of listening to the other man's inevitable complaint. He

despised all Afrikaners. This one in particular. To a Reichsdeutscher and to a Luftwaffe pilot who had fought under Galland in defence of the Reich they were a bastard race, sly, stupid and ill-bred. Of course this brute had a tricky job, but it was nothing to navigating a helicopter five hundred miles over the jungle in the middle of the night, and then taking it back again.

As the other man came up, the pilot half raised his hand in greeting. 'Everything all right?'

'I hope so. But you're late again. I shall only just make it through the frontier by first light.'

'Magneto trouble. We all have our worries. Thank God there are only thirteen full moons a year. Well, if you've got the stuff let's have it and we'll tank her up and I'll be off.'

Without speaking, the man from the diamond mines reached into his shirt and handed over the neat, heavy packet.

The pilot took it. It was damp with the sweat from the smuggler's ribs. The pilot dropped it into a side pocket of his trim bush-shirt. He put his hand behind him and wiped his fingers on the seat of his shorts.

'Good,' he said. He turned towards his machine.

'Just a moment,' said the diamond smuggler. There was a sullen note in his voice.

The pilot turned back and faced him. He thought: it's the voice of a servant who has screwed himself up to complain about his food. '*Ja*. What is it?'

'Things are getting too hot. At the mines. I don't like it at all. There's been a big intelligence man down

from London. You've read about him. This man Sillitoe. They say he's been hired by the Diamond Corporation. There've been a lot of new regulations and all punishments have been doubled. It's frightened out some of my smaller men. I had to be ruthless and, well, one of them somehow fell into the crusher. That tightened things up a bit. But I've had to pay more. An extra ten per cent. And they're still not satisfied. One of these days those security people are going to get one of my middlemen. And you know these black swine. They can't stand a real beating.' He looked swiftly into the pilot's eyes and then away again. 'For the matter of that I doubt if anyone could stand the sjambok. Not even me.'

'So?' said the pilot. He paused. 'Do you want me to pass this threat back to ABC?'

'I'm not threatening anyone,' said the other man hastily. 'I just want them to know that it's getting tough. They must know it themselves. They must know about this man Sillitoe. And look what the Chairman said in our annual report. He said that our mines were losing more than two million pounds a year through smuggling and IDB and that it was up to the government to stop it. And what does that mean? It means "stop me"!'

'And me,' said the pilot mildly. 'So what do you want? More money?'

'Yes,' said the other man stubbornly. 'I want a bigger cut. Twenty per cent more or I'll have to quit.' He tried to read some sympathy in the pilot's face.

'All right,' said the pilot indifferently. 'I'll pass the message on to Dakar, and if they're interested I expect

they'll send it on to London. But it's nothing to do with me, and if I were you,' the pilot unbent for the first time, 'I wouldn't put too much pressure on these people. They can be much tougher than this Sillitoe, or the Company, or any government I've ever heard of. On just this end of the pipeline, three men have died in the last twelve months. One for being yellow. Two for stealing from the packet. And you know it. That was a nasty accident your predecessor had, wasn't it? Funny place to keep gelignite. Under his bed. Unlike him. He was always so careful about everything.'

For a moment they stood and looked at each other in the moonlight. The diamond smuggler shrugged his shoulders. 'All right,' he said. 'Just tell them I'm hard up and need more money to pass down the line. They'll understand that, and if they've got any sense they'll add another ten per cent on for me. If not . . .' He left the sentence unfinished and moved towards the helicopter. 'Come on. I'll give you a hand with the gas.'

Ten minutes later the pilot climbed up into the cockpit and pulled the ladder in after him. Before he shut the door he raised a hand. 'So long,' he said. 'See you in a month.'

The man on the ground suddenly felt lonely. '*Totsiens*,' he said with a wave of the hand that was almost the wave of a lover. '*Alles van die beste*.' He stood back and held a hand up to his eyes against the dust.

The pilot settled into his seat and fastened the seat belt, feeling for the rudder pedals with his feet. He made sure that the wheel brakes were on, pushed the pitch

control lever right down, turned on the fuel and pressed the starter. Satisfied with the beat of the engine, he released the rotor brake and softly twisted the throttle on the pitch control. Outside the cabin windows the long rotor blades slowly swung by and the pilot glanced astern at the whirring tail rotor. He settled himself back and watched the rotor speed indicator creep up to two hundred revolutions a minute. When the needle was just over the two hundred, he released the wheel brakes and pulled up slowly and firmly on the pitch lever. Above him the blades of the rotor tilted and bit deeper into the air. More throttle, and the machine slowly rose clattering towards the sky until, at about one hundred feet, the pilot simultaneously gave it left rudder and pushed forward the joystick between his knees.

The helicopter swung towards the east and, gathering height and speed, roared away back up the path of the moon.

The man on the ground watched it go, and with it the £100,000 worth of diamonds his men had filched from the diggings during the past month and had casually held out on their pink tongues as he stood beside the dentist's chair and brusquely inquired where it hurt.

Still talking about their teeth, he would pick the stones out of their mouths and hold them up to the dentist's spotlight, and then softly he would say fifty, seventy-five, a hundred; and they always nodded and took the notes and hid them in their clothes and went out of the surgery with a couple of aspirins in a twist of paper as an alibi. They had to accept his price. There

was no hope of a native getting diamonds out. When the miners did get out, perhaps once a year to visit their tribe or to bury a relative, there was a whole routine of X-rays and castor oil to be gone through, and a grim future if they were caught. It was so easy to go to the dental surgery and pick the day when 'Him' was on duty. And paper-money didn't show up on X-rays.

The man wheeled his motorcycle over the rough ground on to the narrow trail and started off towards the frontier hills of Sierra Leone. They were more distinct now. He would only just have time to get to Susie's hut before dawn. He grimaced at the thought of having to make love to her at the end of an exhausting night. But it would have to be done. Money was not enough to pay for the alibi she gave him. It was his white body she wanted. And then another ten miles to the club for breakfast and the coarse jokes of his friends.

'Do a nice bit of inlay, Doc?' 'I hear she has the best set of frontals in the Province.' 'Say, Doc, what is it the full moon does to you?'

But each £100,000 worth meant £1,000 for him in a London safe deposit. Nice crisp fivers. It was worth it. By God it was. But not for much longer. No sir! At £20,000 he would definitely quit. And then . . .?

His mind full of lush dreams, the man on the motorcycle bumped his way as fast as he could across the plain – away from the great thorn bush where the pipeline for the richest smuggling operation in the world started its devious route to where it would finally gush out on to soft bosoms, five thousand miles away.