

Volt

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Onyx

The building is burrowing ever deeper down.

Some call it the spire, others the pin, but everybody knows what you mean when you talk about the building.

It's a remarkable structure. Erected between two sheer cliff faces, it looks like an elongated glass pyramid, with only its tip sticking out above the ravine and it's only there, at a dizzying height, that the glass is tempered.

Your knees start shaking when you gaze up at the razor-sharp edges; you can never take it all in, and even though the behemoth is bathed in the shadow of the ravine it radiates with an unearthly glow. Instead of constructed, it looks as if it burst ready-made through the earth's crust, splitting the rock mass in two – a crystal glazier's point hammered through hell's rooftop.

Anyway: we've taken control of it now.

As with an iceberg, the visible part is disproportionate to the underground system of passageways that's growing by the day. Tunnels are being excavated on all sides, deeper and deeper into the rockface, corridors that branch out and lead to new dark chambers, places I have never been and where I have no business either.

The building has taken root.

[...]

There's no reception, no front desk, no welcome; anyone who gets in here knows exactly what to do.

I too straighten my back and hurry to the steep escalator, my left arm pressed tight against my side. While I glide up, I look at the swarming mass down below. Blue prevails. Not because there's a dress code, it's more of a legacy from the past: the first shipment of tailored suits arrived in blue only. The colour nuances don't reflect a hierarchy either. Shades such as royal blue simply ran out faster and although some derive a certain seniority from this, it ultimately doesn't matter much: everything here is old and we have all repeatedly sent our suits to the native sewing workshops to have snags and shiny elbows camouflaged. One camp report recently spoke of a flourishing trade in blue yarn, and that some buttons have become so valuable that goats are changing hands. We must be careful not to allow a parallel currency to develop that would undermine our money, and in fact one treasurer has already floated a solution: banning blue from the workplace to create instant inflation. The emergency plan – lazily styled plan B – is kept in a drawer for now; a destabilising intervention like this could easily lead to rioting.

For the time being, it's under control and it has led to one side effect that kind of amuses me: girls who are married off in the camp are offered a blue ribbon by their intended, as an advance on their dowry. There's a certain beauty to it, our work leading to such new customs.

With my right hand on the rail, which always feels sticky, I continue to watch the teeming blue. Without small talk, people are constantly exchanging envelopes, fast and efficiently. Reports, orders, requests for meetings – everything is done via these folders. It's a tangle of paper and to guarantee confidentiality all the envelopes are blank. No name, no office number, no codes. Hundreds every day. It requires an excellent memory, a brain devoid of any baggage – my job.

All over the building you find slots in which you can dispose of surplus memos – behind the walls it snows non-stop and sometimes I press my ear against the metal plates to hear the rustling, the rustling of lost words.

My corridor rattles.

Thousands of small hammers pounding letters onto paper; the bells, the carriages returning, the rasping of the rollers; one despatch after another; the growing stack of envelopes beside the typewriters; ready to be collected and distributed by couriers, ripped open, read and responded to, before disappearing into the slots, swallowed by the belly of this building.

A long corridor with rooms full of fingers weaving a web of words, like diligent spiders.

Behind me, the office door falls shut with a soft sucking sound, as if the room takes one last deep breath before it seals and soundproofs itself. The rattling: now no more than termites' feet on parchment.

At my desk, I clench and relax my hand a few times until it has the necessary strength to tackle the stack of envelopes. I take a scalpel from the drawer and slip it between the gummed edges. I tremble as I do so – I have to be careful not to injure myself.

The messages are boring.

About the weather: hot, with an area of high pressure expected to develop and, as ever, the accompanying but never fulfilled promise of rain.

About the oil refinery on the east coast: it regrets having to report a fall in output. Although it is extracting sufficient quantities, there have been delays in the processing. There is mention of low morale among the crew. Anyone reading between the lines understands that there are fears of strike action.

A brief report from Victor's lab: no progress on the mosquito problem. There's an embargo on all other information.

Statistics on the containers of incoming ships roaming the shrinking coastlines. Falling statistics.

The department of agriculture is confident about the maize harvest, provided its water rations are raised by at least fifty per cent so as to guarantee irrigation.

A request from housing: the number of chlorine tablets used to keep the swimming pools free from algae is dwindling rapidly. A response from Victor's lab: they have embarked on the cultivation of algae-eating fish that are safe for humans and provide a natural solution to the problem.

A camp report, addressed to me personally, from an informant: inflammatory pamphlets are said to be circulating. It's still just a rumour; no actual copies have been confiscated.

As I lean back and weigh up the truth of the report, I light a cigarette. It's not allowed in here, but I disabled the smoke detector. I'm sure I'm not the only one. Luckily tobacco is *not* scarce; we've got depots full of the stuff.

[...]

With half an eye on the smoke trailing up, I mull over the report. I don't give it much credit. First of all: most natives can't read. Unless somebody is secretly teaching them, which would definitely have come to our attention. And precisely because it's redundant, paper is scarce inside the camp. Leaflets would be conspicuous; children would be using it to fold chains and aeroplanes, adults to light fires – it wouldn't go unnoticed.

Secondly, it's simply a roundabout way of inciting a rebellion. Why spread useless pamphlets if you can use your tongue, a method that's not only much faster, but also leaves less of a trail.

Above all: where would they get a mimeograph?

No, not exactly credible. Still, it would be wrong to ignore the information altogether – we must remain on guard. Who knows how bold they are? Maybe they do have the nerve to distribute pamphlets. The natives are, alas, no machines. You can't expect them to behave reasonably. No uprising ever erupted after careful deliberation. No, somebody prises a cobble out of the pavement, lobbs it through a window and before you know it the entire neighbourhood is in flames. There's no orderly procedure behind it, because that's the crux of a revolution: you topple the established order, you reject order itself.

The word 'pamphlet' raises concerns too. It's too specific, too authentic to be made up – it has no place inside the camp. An infiltrator wanting to show off with a fancy word? Or a simple translation error? It happens, and sometimes the difference is just a letter or two. One report notes that Pablo was grassed, another that he was a grass. Little more than a smudge of ink, but it doesn't matter to Pablo: in the first scenario he's already been dealt with, in the second I'll send somebody round.

Rumours are never plucked out of thin air; they're not lies, but flawed versions of the truth. It comes down to patiently collecting all the pieces of the puzzle. They don't arrive together in one box and there's no illustration – you pick them out of the gutter, one by one, and even if a piece doesn't seem to fit anywhere right now doesn't mean it can go in the bin. Sometimes it takes years before a few slot together. It's a long, often fruitless search; it's rare for anything to be solved, you seldom get to see the full picture – the world remains fragmented, smashed to smithereens, and we walk round with a handful of shards, bleeding in the dark.

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Camp

Clouds of dust shroud the horizon: the armoured vehicles that will escort us to the camp are on their way. I screw the silencer onto the barrel, slam a magazine into the well. Benji's hand rests on the machete.

The moment we turn onto the narrow road to the camp, we're flanked by gung-ho, growling machines that tear straight through undergrowth and crops. They stop for nothing, give way to nothing – they are the way.

A dry stalk of corn sweeps across the gun turret and ahead of us panicked goats scatter in all directions. One of them is mangled beneath the man-sized tyres; in a flash I see its little body flattened into a thin red smear, which elicits a brief, wry smile from me.

We thunder relentlessly along the dirt track. In our wake: a sandstorm.

We only slow down when we see the first few rust buckets. There's a scrapyard outside the camp. Or an open-air garage, depending on your perspective. Reliable transport is invaluable to the natives – any breakdown means a long walk to the workshops, the villas, the bars, the refinery. And so they've built a scrap heap in their front garden, where they spend day and night tinkering with wrenches and jacks and blowtorches to keep their fleet of cars on the road.

It's allowed, as long as they keep the road passable. If not, our convoy will waltz right across their precious collection and they get to piece their cars together from scratch again.

Among the jumble of metal, glass and rubber black heads pop up. The children make a run for it, the adult men stay put and meekly lay down their tools clearly visible at their feet. They know better than to flee: numerous gun barrels poke out of the armoured vehicles.

The camp itself is enclosed by a low wall topped with thick coils of barbed wire. At the front anyway. With the population proliferating, the camp is bursting at the seams and the houses have started to grow across the wall. At the back, peculiar constructions bridge the rampart, turning it into a load-bearing inner wall with doorways cut out. Some reports even speak of an underground tunnel complex, complete with residential units and a structurally sound system of corridors.

Now that our birth rate is grinding to a halt, their overpopulation is threatening to become an issue, especially for the food supply. We're still hatching a solution.

Swathed in clouds of dust, we come to a halt in front of the camp gate. It's adorned with colourful hanging baskets and spanning the entrance is intricate wrought-iron that spells out the words *Arbeit macht frei*. No idea what it means, but back in the day Sebastian insisted that we donate this relic to the workers to appease them.

The soldiers wait outside. Their presence is more than enough. Since I gave the camp leader the gift of an old Mustang, we enjoy his unconditional support and to keep it that way I've brought another gift today. Benji opens the boot, swings a wriggling burlap bag over his shoulder and then we walk side by side into the camp.

The housing problem has clearly worsened; the side streets have turned into narrow alleyways. The old workers' houses we erected a long time ago have developed cancers: bamboo huts and awnings made of corrugated iron cling to every façade, while the roof terraces are covered with parasols and tarps that have been tied together. These new tumours cast further shadow over the stalls that cram the main street. Now I understand why Benji prefers to sleep in my gatehouse; it's a palace compared to these shanties.

Wheeler-dealers are loudly advertising their wares. We pass tubs full of pickled shrimp, withered cobs of corn and half-gnawed fish bones, all covered in glistening black flies. Iguanas are hung up to dry in the sun. One stall sells only lightbulbs. Laid out on a tarp is a heap of colourful plastic, ranging from coffee mugs to a drying rack and torn carrier bags – all from their beach where lots of this junk washes ashore every day.

Somewhere in a corner, children are weaving straw hats and shoes. A man is trying to placate two bickering women who are both after the same blue button and another man simply gawks at me, his face a scaly battlefield of scabs and festering wounds, and although I have nothing to fear my hand reaches for the reassuring grip inside my waistband and for the rest it's mostly an agglomeration of stench and noise, and the ground is sticky, and pigs and chickens are getting in my way and I feel an irrepressible desire for a flamethrower bubbling up inside of me.

And it's hot.

The sun in its zenith.

As if you're being rubbed with warm paint.

Benji doesn't seem bothered. Not a bead of sweat on his forehead. Without any qualms, he kicks aside a mangy cat, and when pushy kids try to flog him a shell necklace he whacks them with the flat of his machete. Nobody intervenes, nobody tries to stop us, and at the end of the main street I see the camp leader's house loom up: three storeys, nicely painted yellow, pristine white shutters and a colonnade where the shade beckons seductively.

Nearby, the bright green lawn unfurls, bordered by palm trees and oleanders, and sitting right beside the bare flagpole is the Mustang, completely restored, an explosion of shiny chrome and brilliant red paintwork – a mighty dragon having its summer siesta. Strangely enough, it makes me think of the savannah, of lions and giraffes and the taste of vodka on my tongue.

Anyway, the new leader is called Ndugu, his predecessor was called Xhosa. Not that their name matters – they tend to embellish it with all kinds of invented titles anyway, too long to remember – , it's no more than a fresh label on an otherwise hollow administrative body. As long as he keeps the place ticking over and the natives turn up to roll call, he gets to govern the camp as he sees fit and enrich himself as much as he likes. For the rest he's no more than a puppet.

We pull the strings – we give them some slack, and we sever them in cold blood.

Xhosa found himself at the sharp end of this. The trouble at the refinery marked the end of his tenure. It's uncertain whether he instigated the strike, but that's irrelevant; he had lost control, he was guilty. Ndugu was approached, wooed and goaded, provided with the right propaganda and supporters, and a few days later Xhosa's head adorned the top of the flagpole.

Amazing what you can do with an old car and a few bags of rice.

It's likely that Ndugu only lowered the skull of public enemy number one today, so as not to offend our high-ranking eyes, something I greatly appreciate, and now he even gives us the honour of a personal welcome at the entrance to his official residence.

Unlike Xhosia, who always draped his sizable body in colourful robes, Ndugu wears an astonishingly smart suit, an astonishingly blue suit, without faded lapels, without frayed hems, without missing buttons.

Surrounded by lackeys, he nods at us with a broad smile. Benji politely nods in return. I remain poker-faced and watch as Benji opens the burlap bag and pulls out a little goat. It blinks, takes a few crumpled steps and then darts away across the lawn that's as smooth as our golf courses.

Ndugu probably already knows that we just crushed a member of his herd and that this is more compensation than gift, but that does not detract from the symbolism: this goat comes from my domain and my goat is now his. That's the message of our ever-lasting union.

Seemingly delighted, he claps his hands loudly while not far from us the goat nibbles on an acacia – despite the thorns, they love the pinnate leaves – and after a bit of chuckling back and forth, he invites us into his residence with expansive gestures: time for the reception ritual. I'm already annoyed by the time-consuming courtesies, but leisureliness is a form of wealth too: those with nothing to do can stretch any trifle into an opera.

I resign myself to the inevitable and roll up my left sleeve and follow the procession to the entrance hall where the high ceilings trap the cool air. The guests are gathered four deep around an octagonal table with a round wicker basket in the middle, its lid safely weighed down with a stone from our system of tunnels – gold veins crisscrossing the rock.

Ndugu launches into a speech that Benji appears to be translating for me in whispers, but that I don't really listen too; depending on the tenor of the silences I give the leader an affable or a serious nod. Speeches always follow the same pattern – it's easy to tell when you're supposed to cheer or when to clench your fist. The actual content rarely counts; it's all about a leader making noise and a congregation loudly affirming.

After the final silence and a resounding applause, it's time for the offering. This is what they've come for, this is what they want to see.

Together with a servant, I walk to the table. Protected by thick leather gloves, the type worn by falconers, he carefully lifts the rock and the lid off the basket. A shiver circles through the crowd – the wicker quivers and you can clearly hear the hissing, as if someone has flicked a burning match into a glass of water. Without thinking twice I stick in my left hand – a woman in the front row utters a cry, a man claps his hand over his eyes –, and at first there's a cold wriggling, immediately followed by a series of stinging bites, one, two, seven needle-sharp punctures through my skin.

I ignore the searing fish hooks, concentrate on the cold scales under my fingertips and wait until I feel the bulge, the jaws, the forked tongue they use for smell, and then I pluck the coral snake out of the basket, a black-and-red sliver I present with outstretched arm – my skin perforated, the audience aghast, the mouth wide open.

It's trying to escape, writhing and hissing, its fangs glistening with venom, and then I press the head flat down onto the tabletop and with horrible precision the machete slams down right beside my fist. A few more feeble convulsions and then it's over and I drop what's left – a rope, scissors, no more.

They cannot believe it. Stare at me expectantly, convinced I'm about to collapse foaming at the mouth. I defy their stares, show them the wounds. With each second, their conversion is consolidated. Because they know how quick it is; they know a single bite – let alone seven – kills instantly.

It has happened. They have seen it. And they will spread the word.

I calmly roll down my sleeve and button up my cuffs.

Ndugu steps forward, grabs me by the wrist and raises my left arm up in the air – a boxer after the match, his opponent on the mat. In a deep voice he addresses his subjects, assures them, sways them.

I don't listen to Benji, don't understand a word, except one: 'Deathless.'