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Opening Extract from...

A Loyal Spy

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Published by Hodder Paperbacks

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JONAH

The Graveyard of Empires

'The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks,
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'
Henry Newbolt, *'Vitaï Lampada'*

I go chop your dollar

July 2001

Jonah arrived in Freetown on a Saturday, the day of the weekly soccer match on the beach between amputees and polio victims from the nearby Médecins Sans Frontières camp. He met up with his contact in the reception of the Cockle Bay guest house, opposite the squalid shacks of salvaged timber and blue all-weather sheeting that constituted the camp. Dennis was wearing a Tupac Shakur T-shirt. So were most of the RUF fighters who had been hanging around in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, since the 1999 peace accords. They loved Tupac. He'd been dead for nearly three years, shot up in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas, after watching the Tyson–Seldon fight, and that was how they all wanted it to end, in a blaze of booze, dollars and gunfire. Like Tupac, they wanted their ashes rolled up and smoked with weed.

It was a convincing disguise. Dennis wasn't really an RUF fighter. He wasn't even from Sierra Leone. He was from Shepherd's Bush. He had Jamaican parents who'd come over to Britain on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948.

We're all at it, Jonah thought: Poles build your new extension, Lithuanians sand your reclaimed wood floors, Nigerians clean your office, Indian doctors treat you when you are sick, Filipino nurses change your NHS bedlinen, Ghanaians drive your minicabs, and if you can afford it Hungarian nannies or Czech au pairs look after your kids. And some of us – usually second generation and sufficiently acclimatised – work for a cash-strapped branch of British military intelligence known only as the Department and do

your dirtiest spying for you. And, it goes without saying, it's a thankless task.

They walked over to watch the match. Jonah stood beside a limbless man who was smoking a cigarette perched between the wire twists of a coat hanger on the end of a stump.

It had been five years since President Kabbah had called on his citizens to join hands for the future of Sierra Leone. The RUF had responded by dumping sacks of amputated human hands on the steps of the presidential palace, embarking on a spree of amputations that left several thousand people without limbs.

'Aziz Nassour and two others flew into Liberia last Friday,' Dennis told him. 'They were met by Liberian police and escorted straight past immigration and customs.'

Aziz Nassour was a Lebanese diamond broker on the UN Security Council watch list, whose presence in neighbouring Liberia was in contravention of Security Council Resolution 1343, which sought to end the illicit trade in conflict diamonds.

'From the airfield they were driven straight to a known Hezbollah safe house owned by a Senegalese diamond trafficker named Ibrahim Bah.'

Ibrahim Bah was also on the UN watch list. And he had pedigree. Jonah assumed Bah was the reason that he'd been flown in. Bah had fought in Afghanistan with the mujahedin and in Lebanon with Hezbollah. He was also thought to have been involved in training Charles Taylor, Liberia's despotic president, and Foday Sankoh, the psychotic leader of the RUF, when they were in Libya in the eighties.

'The day after they arrived they met with an RUF general, known as General Mosquito, who is a middleman involved in smuggling diamonds out of Sierra Leone. They asked Mosquito to double production of diamonds from the mother lode for the next two months, and they are offering to pay over the odds for them.'

Somebody was looking to change large amounts of cash into easily transportable commodities and looking to do it quick.

'Where's this information coming from?' Jonah asked.

'Local informant.'

'Reliable?'

Dennis shrugged his skinny shoulders. It was one of the Department's mantras – the more you pay someone the more you can rely upon them to tell you what you want to hear. It was the same with torture. Neither was a reliable route to the truth.

'Who are the two men with Nassour?' Jonah asked.

'The informant didn't recognise any of the faces on the Hezbollah list.'

That summer most intelligence analysts imagined that Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed and Lebanese-based terrorist network, posed the greatest threat to western interests. 'Have the Americans been informed?' Jonah asked.

Dennis shrugged again. 'Couldn't tell you . . .'

'So where do I fit in?'

'We believe they've crossed into RUF-held territory to take a look at diamond production. We need you to go up there and try to identify them.'

'Alone?'

'We have a contact up there who will host you.'

'Who is he?'

'A diamond broker by the name of Farouz – he's a Lebanese Shiite from Barital in the Bekaa Valley. The family is up to its elbows in the counterfeiting business. The Metropolitan Police arrested his nephew in a London casino a couple of weeks back with a hundred thousand pounds of fake currency. Farouz has been offered a deal – cooperation with us will ensure that his nephew gets off on a technicality.'

'So he knows that I'm a British spy?'

Dennis shrugged. 'Believe me, he doesn't want to know.'

'What kind of back-up have I got?'

'There's an Increment team on stand-by in Ascension.'

The Increment was the executive arm of the General Support Branch – a group of specialists usually serving Special Forces, though in these days of recognised security organisations and private military companies you could never be sure – that provided

the special operations capability for MI6. In Jonah's experience they had a tendency to measure their success in terms of quantity of ammunition expended, and he was as likely to die in the crossfire as survive any future rescue attempt. It wasn't exactly reassuring.

'I've filled out a mop for you,' said Dennis, meaning a UN Movement of Personnel (MOP) form. 'You're booked on a UN chopper tomorrow.'

'Don't tell me it's got a Ukrainian crew?'

'It's got a Ukrainian crew. But don't worry, the pilot never takes a drink before lunchtime.'

'What time is the flight?'

'Depends what time lunch finishes.'

'Thanks, Dennis. You're a bundle of laughs.'

There was a cheer as the amputees scored. Dennis shook his head sadly and said, 'The wheels have fallen off this place.'

The man beside him was scratching at Jonah's leg with his coat-hanger prosthetics. Jonah gave him a dollar. He had to tuck it directly into his pocket.

There was a battalion of Zambian peacekeepers stationed in Kenema, the capital of Sierra Leone's Eastern Province, and Jonah rode up there on a resupply flight in the back of an Mi-8 helicopter with a fresh platoon of soldiers. They say the Mi-8, formerly mass produced in the Soviet Union, has a Jesus screw. A single threaded bolt that attaches the rotor to the frame. If for some reason the bolt should become unscrewed and the rotor's blades unattached, then – in the absence of lift – you fall. Like a brick. In such circumstances all you can say, all you have time to say, is: 'Jesus . . .'

Jonah was asleep before the chopper took off.

He opened his eyes on a different world. An impenetrable forest-green canopy lay below, dotted with cloud shadows. The engine shuddered and his ears pulsed.

They passed over a circle of open space, a village clearing. In it he could see naked black children staring up, each one pegged

to a shadow, and the chopper's shadow blurring on thatched roofs and then flickering over the forest again. He watched the Zambian soldiers bunched around the porthole windows, their ivory eyes staring down. The forest stretched to the horizon.

Jonah walked up Kenema's Hangha Road, shouldering through the melee of hawkers standing outside Lebanese stores selling racks of boom boxes, shortwave radios and Sony Walkmans, past the bullet-riddled police station, plastered with Red Cross posters of missing children, and a café playing Nigerian rap:

> You be the mugu, I be the master
> Oyinbo man I go chop your dollar
> I go take your money and disappear.

He stopped in front of a shop displaying a dilapidated wooden sign with a cut diamond painted on it. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The Lebanese had arrived in Sierra Leone over a hundred years earlier, and unlike the Europeans, who lacked the enthusiasm to penetrate the bush, they made straight for the interior. Before long they could be found on every street corner peddling mirrors, pots and pans, jewellery and cheap imported textiles. By the late 1950s they dominated the two most lucrative sectors of the economy: agriculture and diamond dealing; and by the late nineties they had it all sewn up, diamonds and gold, finance, construction and real estate. It was said that it was Lebanese money that Liberian president Charles Taylor had used to bankroll the RUF, when they seized control of the diamond fields.

Farouz was a large man sitting behind a small desk in a threadbare office at the back of the shop. There was a black velvet pad in the centre of the desk with a couple of magnifiers and a jeweller's loupe on it, and a folded camp bed in the corner of the room. Farouz had a black carpet of chest hair and a heavy gold chain. He sipped at a tiny cup of Lebanese coffee while he examined Jonah's letters of introduction from an Antwerp cutting house and periodically attempted, without much success, to light

a fat Havana cigar. When he was finished reading he jabbed the cigar at Jonah.

'So you want me to teach you about diamonds? We used to see a lot of delinquent kids offloaded down here to cut their teeth. It's been happening for as long as anyone can remember. They'd fuck the local whores and beat their chauffeurs and when they were done they'd run back home to Beirut to take over the family business. You think you're here to play?'

I'm here to play because of your delinquent nephew's weakness for blackjack, Jonah was tempted to say, but he wouldn't. It was an elaborate charade. A dance conducted, Jonah assumed, for the benefit of eavesdroppers. 'Do I look like a delinquent?'

Farouz leant back in his chair, which squealed in protest. 'You look like you've been in a car crash.'

'I've been in several,' Jonah acknowledged. It was true: the scars were there to see. Front- and rear-end impacts, rolls, pile-ups, the whole shebang. It was a hazard of the job. And explosions too; in 1994 in Bosnia he'd driven over an anti-tank mine in a Land Rover and had been catapulted into the sky. That one had cost him an eye.

'What do you want?'

'I want to learn the trade,' Jonah told him, going through the motions.

'I'm sure you do,' said Farouz, leaning forward again and leafing through Jonah's papers with a sceptical look on his face. 'Your references are impeccable. Best I've ever seen.'

Jonah silently cursed General Support Branch, which consistently failed to heed its own dictum – *keep it ordinary*. Farouz jabbed the cigar at him again. 'What I don't know is whether you have the stomach for this business.'

'I've been around the block.'

Farouz snorted. 'You have some scars. That's nothing to boast about. Tell me, have you ever seen a diamond mine?'

'No.'

'You see a polished rock on a pretty young woman's finger, white, no inclusions – flawless. You have a naive belief in the idea

of the purity of marriage. But this is nothing. It's just a sentimental idea. Here in the jungle, diamond mining is a kind of robbery with violence. You grab what you can get. To do it, you need only brute force, which is nothing but an accident caused by the weakness of others. It is not a pretty thing to see.'

'I'm not a pretty thing to see,' Jonah retorted.

And Farouz laughed – a belly-shaking rumble that caused further protest from the springs in his chair. 'If you want to see the mines you have to get up early.'

'I don't sleep much.' Which was also true: he'd been a raging insomniac since his wife had left him two years before.

'Nobody sleeps here,' Farouz told him. 'There's too much money to be made.'

'So when can I see the mines?' Jonah asked.

'Tomorrow. Why not . . .?'