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Booklist on *Dark Heart*

A Richard Mariner Adventure

BLACK PEARL

PETER
TONKIN

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BLACK PEARL

A Richard Mariner novel

Peter Tonkin



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all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely
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For

Cham, Guy and Mark
As always

And, with thanks, for
Graham Stanley,
Olga Tarasenko
and
Michaela van Halewyn

1973

Mizuki Yukawa stumbled through the rainforest in the heart of the West African country of Benin. Lac Bas, which stretched from the west coast towards the interior of Central Africa, whimpering with terror. Her ribs seemed too frail to contain the beating of her heart. Her skull seemed too small to contain the pictures of the brutal attack that had destroyed her jungle home and led to the slaughter of everyone she worked with. She was certain that only flight could save her from the horrific fate her friends had suffered. She was running for her life. She had twenty minutes left to live.

As Mizuki battled through the dank grey-green ferns that stood as high as she did and filled the ground between the enormous tree trunks that dwarfed and terrified her further, she relived the horror she had just experienced in a series of disorientating flashbacks. Pictures of a dozen Japanese biologists all formed up dutifully beside her in a cheerfully expectant line along the reed-fringed edge of Lac Dudo – *Black Lake* in the local Matadi language of the place. Dressed in tracksuits and trainers like Mizuki herself, ready for their morning tai-chi, the fitness programme undertaken by all employees of the Yakimoto Freshwater Pearl Company back home in Takashima City.

Pictures of the square, solid, grey-haired Dr Koizumi standing framed against the timberline, beside the greenhouse that contained his collection of orchids, ready to lead them in farming the black pearls in the lake. The dreary vegetation rising in a wild wall close behind him, the upper canopy brushing the sky and hiding the enormous volcanic crater of Mount Karisoke, on whose vast flank they stood.

She pictured the way the nearest bank of ferns had parted silently to reveal an astonishing number of soldiers, who seemed at first surprised to find the facility here. Strange young men armed with rifles and fearsome, iron-bladed matchets almost long enough to be swords. Their faces as black, hard and cold as Dr Koizumi's priceless black pearls. The soldiers had raised their guns and almost casually taken their aim.

Mizuki carried on running as she visualized the lakeside reeds that had formed a flimsy wall between her and the slaughter in the facility, behind which she had thrown herself at the first sight of the fearsomely armed men, and through which she had glimpsed even more shattered, kaleidoscopic flashes of horror.

Dr Koizumi standing with his back against the front of the orchidarium, hands raised placatingly. The others, so conveniently lined up for the tai-chi, going down as though before a firing squad beneath a withering hail of bullets from the automatic weapons. The sound of their shots like slaps against her delicate ears.

Then Dr Koizumi collapsing like a burst balloon in front of the shattered greenhouse, his clothes shocking red. Bullet holes in his T-shirt, black-rimmed and smoking. The bodies hacked disgusting to pieces under the rain of matchet blows.

Dr Koizumi's head rolling free of his bright red torso and bouncing down the slope towards her, still spraying blood, his eyes wide with shock and horror. The soldier who had chopped it off looking up, his face a mask of tribal scars, his wide eyes seeming to see right through the reed wall. His powerful arm raising his dripping matchet and his blood-flecked boots stepping down the bank.

towards her as she turned to run.

Now the tiny passage leading from the lakeside reed bed to an outcrop of the jungle proper seemed to jump and rock crazily in front of her as she fled along it, certain that the scarred man was close behind her. It was a passage she had never followed alone before for fear of what might lurk there.

The ferns were rising in sombre waves in front of her, spitting icy drizzle into her face, whipping and tripping her as she plunged among them. Echoes of the gunshots were taken up by the jungle creatures all around her, stirring noisily with the dawn. Birds and monkeys were calling in the upper canopy, while sloths and lemurs were further down, adding their hoots and howls. Fruit bats and flying squirrels flitted from creeper to liana above her, shrieking and shrilling. All invisible – there only a part of an unnerving cacophony or a flicker in the outermost edge of Mizuki's vision, until she burst out of the trackless jungle on to a narrow path which she did not recognize as an elephant trail. She paused, gasping hoarsely, looking right and left, trying to calm herself sufficiently to think, to reason. On her left the path seemed to rise – leading up towards Karisoke's distant fiery peak. On her right it fell – leading, she prayed, down round the end of Lac Dudo and on towards Cite La Bas, the local government centre where there were authorities. Regular army. Police. Safety.

Mizuki turned, therefore, and ran downhill towards her hope of safety. She had covered perhaps a hundred yards before the gorilla charged her. It came out of the jungle wall to her right without giving any warning at all. Like her, it had seen much of its troop slaughtered by the soldiers and was in no mood to give ritual warnings. It towered two full metres high and weighed two hundred and fifty kilograms. Its arms extended two and a half metres fingertip to fingertip, ending in hands nearly thirty centimetres wide – and they reached for the screaming woman as it charged. The Japanese doctor stood a little over one point five metres. She weighed forty-four kilos. The only thing that saved her was that the gorilla had been wounded in the leg and so he collapsed on to all fours before he could reach her. She ran full tilt down the path, spurred on by his roar of frustration and the thunder of his huge palms beating against the massive drum of his chest.

The elephant track ended abruptly at the wall of a fallen tree, whose trunk rose nearly six metres in front of her. She turned left because the gorilla had attacked from the right and followed the green-brown wall of the tree trunk along a narrow sunlit path cleared out of the canopy three hundred feet above by the destructive force of its fall. She followed it for a hundred metres before being beaten back into the undergrowth by the shattered limbs of its branches. And here, at last, her luck ran out.

Just as she had blundered unawares into a gorilla troop, Mizuki ran into a chimpanzee community that was still disorientated, angered and coming to terms with the random slaughter visited on them by the soldiers. Dr Koizumi had never included chimpanzees in his warning lectures and Mizuki at first found the pink, clown faces, wide mouths, ridiculous ears and round brown eyes reassuring. But then the largest of the males ran forward aggressively and reared up, screaming, less than thirty centimetres ahead of her. He stood one point seven metres tall, seeming to tower over her. He weighed over seventy kilos, almost twice as much as she did. No sooner had he arrived in front of her than half a dozen others, almost as big, joined in. And when he screamed again, shaking his head from side to side, filling her nostrils with the stench of his breath and her face with a rain of hot drool, she saw just how long and sharp his black-edged teeth were. Felt how unbelievably strong his grip was as he grabbed her by the throat and the upper arm. Her choking screams of terror and agony were lost in their blood-curdling snarls of threat and attack.

Had Mizuki been one of the other smaller primates the chimpanzees normally hunted – a colobine monkey, a lemur, a bush baby, a youngster from another group – they would have torn her corpse apart and eaten it. As it was, they left her there with her throat ripped out and half her face chewed off.

missing fingers, toes, and one or two other soft body parts.

As the cool of the morning began to fade, a black panther, returning from a night's hunting, stopped to sniff at her. He was a massive beast, more than two metres in length to his tail tip and weighing over a hundred kilos. When he snarled, he revealed teeth that were the better part of twenty centimetres long. But all he did was lick her drying blood and pass on.

As noon approached, a cloud of iridescent blue-winged butterflies descended on her and made the horror she had become seem unutterably beautiful. For a long, lingering moment, she was transformed into the most delicate work of art, covered in trembling shards of bright blue lapis lazuli as they, too, feasted on her, as thoughtlessly and randomly as the soldiers had massacred her friends.

Within a day there was nothing left of her but bones.

2003

Mizuki's skeleton was never recovered. Nor was Dr Koizumi's head. Both lay undisturbed through the succeeding decades as the Yakimoto Freshwater Pearl Company pulled out of Africa and went into liquidation. What little could be found of the other bodies was respectfully returned to Japan but the facility was left to moulder. Unknown to anyone, the orchids in the ruined orchidarium and the pearl-rich oysters on the bed of the black lake flourished. The creatures Mizuki had blundered into did not. Through more than thirty years of sporadic war, with well-armed armies marauding hungrily to and fro, they all became bush meat – or vanished eastward over the mountains as the creatures they relied on in their food chain became bush meat in turn.

The gorillas went first. The huge hands of their leader were sold in the great Ahia market of Cite La Bas as ashtrays. His hide became a rug, his head a massive paperweight. His flesh was smoked and eaten along with that of the rest of his troop. The murderous chimpanzees were worth nothing but ornaments in The Ahia so they too were smoked and sold for food. The black panther's snarling head ended up on the wall of the minister of the interior in his offices in faraway Cite Matadi before even that great folly fell to ruin. His midnight-coloured pelt graced the floor of a Lebanese diamond trader in Granville Harbour. His bones were sold as tiger bones and followed Mizuki's colleagues back to Japan.

As the turn of the millennium came, the last of the creatures in the high canopy were blasted out of existence, either by random gunfire from below or by strafing runs from above as warplanes and attack helicopters sought to terminate the uncontrolled comings and goings of the armies, to bring an end to the anarchy that followed so destructively in their wake as their names went into nightmare folklore: Simbas, Interahamwe, Boko Haram, M23, Lord's Resistance Army, Army of Christ the Infant.

The rainforest became empty and silent, as did the whole country, from the volcanic chain at its heart right the way down to the delta. Even the mosquitoes and butterflies died out, for there was no blood for them to feed on. Moreover, the natural breeding ground of the mosquitoes in the warm, still waters of Lac Dudo were forbidden them by another form of invasive plants. Water hyacinth spread relentlessly upstream from the delta and managed to cover the obsidian surface of the lake in green mats thick enough to keep even mosquitoes at bay.

Eventually there was nothing living on the western slope of Karisoke above Cite La Bas and the black lake except the water hyacinth, the gigantic plant life of the virgin rainforest and such creatures as could find food in the plants but could not furnish sustenance for the endless succession of starving armies. Who then began, in the time-honoured tradition of the place, to eat each other.

The scarred man who cut off Dr Koizumi's head was called Ajani, which is Matadi for '*he fights for what is his*'. In some ways the three decades after the massacre by Lac Dudo had been kind to Ajani; he was alive and relatively wealthy; he had a job and a shanty to live in. In other ways they had not; he was crippled and in constant pain, doomed to eke out the last of his days working as a cleaner in the main hospital in Cite La Bas. Unable to apply for what little social help there was – not with a passport like his – nor able to afford the drugs he saw dispensed around him, he eked out his meagre wages by a little pilfering. Which saved doctor's fees as he healed himself, and allowed a little extra income from street trading what was left over in The Ahia, where anything could be bought and sold. That was where he had bartered his battered AK-47 and rusty machet when he had finally escaped from the Army of Christ the Infant after twenty-five years of brutal service.

Although he was only in his early sixties, Ajani moved like an eighty-year-old, pushing his broom along the corridors with a stooped back and an unsteady gait. Increasingly regularly now he reeled and staggered as though the floor was heaving. Sometimes this was because of his pain but more often it was because of an overdose of self-administered painkillers.

Ajani was staggering badly as he began the last hour of his life. His legs were hurting unbearably. He had swallowed several handfuls of high-dose Keral tablets stolen from the already ill-supplied pharmacy. He was light-headed and thought his sense of balance must be failing him. But, in fact, the ground was quaking, an effect emphasized by the fact that Ajani was working on the topmost floor of the hospital, twelve stories above street level. The corridor he was sweeping so unsteadily ended with a panoramic window looking north across the city towards the volcanic caldera of Mount Karisoke. Ajani noted dreamily that the unsteadiness beneath his feet seemed to be matched by a disturbing amount of activity up there. He saw much more smoke than usual issuing from the massive crater, but there was no eruption. Karisoke often fumed and smoked – she had done so right throughout Ajani's entire life. However, she had never yet erupted. He was not unduly disturbed.

But Karisoke was playing a trick on Ajani and his fellow citizens in Cite La Bas. She was not erupting – she had not done so this century. Instead she had been quietly filling the huge caldera of her crater with a lake of molten lava, some seven hundred and fifty million cubic metres in volume, fed by a magma chamber nearly twice as large below. The lava was largely composed of melilite and nephelinite – light rare earth elements which made the molten rock almost as liquid as water.

The tremors that Ajani felt as he staggered towards the panoramic window and looked north up the vertiginous ten-mile slope towards the volcano's rim were the effects on the lower slopes of a massive collapse in the southern wall of the caldera. The effect of the collapse was that of a dam bursting. Molten lava sprang out in a red-hot river more than two kilometres wide. The boiling rock was at a temperature in excess of one thousand degrees Celsius. Because it was so liquid, it ran like a tidal wave, guided by the heaves and folds of the mountain side round the eastern end of the lake and down through the blazing jungle towards the city below. It came down the mountainside at one hundred kilometres per hour. And that was the speed it was still going when it came flooding into the eastern suburbs of Cite La Bas.

On the twelfth storey of the hospital, Ajani was too high above the streets to see individuals. The window was double-glazed and the air-conditioning fitfully alive, so he heard nothing of the panicked flight southward. All he really saw was a wall of flame-footed smoke that swept incredibly rapidly into the city on his right. He reeled unsteadily, fighting to take in what his eyes were revealing to him in a kind of drug-enhanced slow motion. Fire ran relentlessly through city blocks. Vehicles of all sizes were swept aside, burning, exploding. Buildings reeled, collapsed, ignited. Petrol stations detonated as though hit by bunker-buster bombs. Power went out. The air-con choked – then the back

up generators kicked in and gave it the kiss of life. Ajani bashed his forehead against the glass as he strained to see more. He watched, unbelieving, as the red flood swept through the airport, covering the runway and sweeping at last into the massive avgas storage tanks. The explosion as they blew apart shook the hospital more forcefully than the collapse of the volcano wall had done.

Ajani fell backwards and hit his head on the floor. He pulled himself erect and reeled to the little cubicle in which he kept his equipment. Here he vomited so forcefully that the whole world seemed to shake and swirl. He passed out into a coma deep enough to block out the shrilling of the hospital's fire alarms and the bustle of rushing feet. During the time he was unconscious, the building was evacuated. All the patients assembled, in beds and wheelchairs as necessary, in the car park outside, well away from every danger of the molten lava except for the sulphurous stench of it. Here they waited expectantly for help. But the flawlessly executed procedure proved useless. For Karisoke was joined by Lac Dudo in another grim little joke.

The floor of the lake, like the floor of the caldera high above it, was hollow. Beneath a thin crust of its southern side was a chamber, sealed for centuries. This did not contain magma but a range of gases, mostly consisting of carbon dioxide but also hydrogen sulphide and sulphur dioxide. As the caldera emptied, pouring lava past the lake's eastern shore, so the bubble burst. The southern section of the lake – far away from Dr Kuozomi's oyster beds – boiled fiercely for several minutes as millions of cubic metres of gas burst up into the air. It rolled in an invisible cloud down the hillside beside the lava, also guided by the various folds of the mountain's topography – and, indeed, that of the valley at its foot where the city lay trapped in a deep depression. It flooded into the western suburbs of the city that the molten rock had left untouched. Heavier than air, it swept into the streets and buildings in an invisible wall five stories high. It filled rooms, apartments, corridors, ventilation systems and lift shafts. It flooded into basements and tunnels. It filled the city's once-vaunted underground transport system. It washed through the south-western suburbs and out on to the farmland that clothed the foothills of the next mountain range, then, dammed there, it washed back and settled. It filled the streets and parks, the gardens and the open spaces. It filled the car park where the patients, doctors and nurses were waiting and smothered them all in moments. Everywhere it went it snuffed out life as efficiently as if the entire area had become one huge shower stall in Auschwitz.

So that, although he never knew it, Ajani was the last man left alive in Cite La Bas when he came staggering out of his tiny cubicle and started to look around. The fire alarms were still ringing. The air-conditioning was still wheezing. The lights and signs were all still illuminated. Ajani knew the procedure well enough. If the alarms were on, the lifts were out of bounds. But the thought of going down the twenty-four flights of stairs that would take him down twelve stories was more than the staggering man could contemplate. He hit the button on the nearest lift, therefore, and leaned against the wall, listening as the car wheezed asthmatically up towards him. Apart from that mechanical gasping and the shrilling of the alarm, the whole place – the whole city – seemed silent. Ajani decided that as soon as he reached the ground floor he would check out the pharmacy. With any luck he would be able to get his hands on more drugs. From the look of things there would be a ready market for anything he could steal. Though The Ahia was, like the airport, somewhere under whatever had come blazing down the mountainside.

The door hissed open. Ajani stepped in and hit the ground-floor button. The door slithered closed. Ajani looked at his reflection in the mirror on the back wall. His eyes were watering, he noted with some surprise. Then he noticed that his adenoids were burning. His nostrils twitched strongly enough to make the scars of his tribal Poro initiation writhe like snakes beneath the skin of his cheeks. Abruptly it seemed as though the whole area behind his nose was prickling uncomfortably. He

sneezed; dragged his hand down over his face. Sneezed again and gasped. Abruptly, he realized his throat was hurting also. He frowned, shaking his head. Perhaps he had picked something up, he thought. The other cleaners were always getting infections from the wards and the patients. Aja never had – perhaps because the medications he took were strong enough to keep everything else at bay, along with the pain. He looked over his shoulder. The lift was at the fifth floor. Not long now, he thought dreamily. But the pain in his throat had spread with unexpected swiftness into his chest and he was suddenly finding it hard to catch his breath.

Then, between floors five and four, the lift stopped, so abruptly that Ajani fell to his knees. *Damn*, he thought. *Now I'll have to call for help. That means I won't be able to get to the pharmacy so easily.* He reached up for the alarm button but he couldn't quite reach it. He took firm hold of the handrail which ran at waist height round the car and started to pull himself up. Only to find, with some surprise, that he no longer had the strength to do so.

A sudden realization stabbed through him. He might be in really serious trouble here. He sucked in a good lungful of air to call for help, but all he could do was cough and choke. He gathered his knees up to his chin and hugged them as hard as he could. The whole of his torso seemed to be on fire. Like the volcano Karisoke, burning wildly on the inside. He never really understood that he was being smothered by poison gases. Hardly even registered, in his dreamy, drugged-up state, that he was dying. The lights went out and a huge, dark silence seemed to close over him like the waters of the strange black lake so close to where he had slaughtered the Japanese workers so long ago.

2013

Then, a decade later, the rains came. Torrential, unrelenting, month after month. In a vicious meteorological irony, all the areas of East Africa where huge populations tried to scratch a living were almost totally destroyed by drought. But on the empty and forsaken forests surrounding the Central African mountain chain that is the headwater of the great River Gir – which fed the black lake – five years' rainfall tore down in less than a month. There were mudslides on Karisoke's upper slopes powerful enough to tear down even the deserted virgin jungle. More huge trees joined the monstrous beside which Mizuki's bones lay. The wide black path of the lava flow – as slick as a highway two kilometres wide even after a decade – was transformed into a wild torrent. Great rocks tore the lower sections into a black moonscape. The deserted, half-buried ruin of Cite La Bas was briefly flooded. And Lac Dudo burst its banks.

As well as his precious orchidarium, Dr Koizumi had overseen the construction of a series of dams and sluices to protect his priceless oysters and the black pearls he hoped they would bear to enrich the ill-fated Yakimoto Freshwater Pearl Company, which had employed him and sent him and his little team out here to seed the black lake with Japanese Biwa oysters. But they were no match for floods such as these. As the lake burst free of its natural boundaries, so it burst out of the doctor's system as well. The raging torrent tore away the reed bed through which Mizuki had fled, and uncovered the grinning skull which was all that was left of Dr Koizumi. The flood rolled the skull like a boulder in the ruined orchidarium where the precious plants had continued to blossom untended through all those years. It swept them on to a black-foaming crest and washed them on to a bed of water hyacinth.

But the power of the deluge was so massive that it ripped away the floor of the lake as easily as it tore free some of the plant-choked surface, so that Dr Koizumi's skull was joined on the floating bed of hyacinth not only by his beloved orchids but also by a dozen or more of his huge black pearl-ripping oysters. And that bed of hyacinth, a thickly woven mat of stems and roots almost as big as a bargo

stayed coherent as it was swept down into the river system that the waters from the black lake fed. Miraculously, the orchids, the oysters and the skull remained wedged in place as the hyacinth barge slid over waterfalls and cataracts, through races and rapids until it sailed safely out on to the broad stream of the main river. The river that was the life's blood of Benin La Bas, the great River Gir.

The hyacinth-laden barge swept swiftly downriver, through what had once been prosperous farms and plantations. Past the ruins of fishing villages and mining towns which, like Dr Koizumi's facilities had flourished in the seventies only to die during the relentless onslaughts of the eighties and nineties. Every now and then there would be something newer – projects that had died at birth under the dead hand of the bribe-crippled kleptocracies that had run the place through into the noughties and early twenty-tens, before the IMF, World Bank and interested economies from Chile to China discovered that money invested in Central Africa was even more at risk than that invested in Iceland or Ireland.

Until, at last, the great river entered the inner delta. A stream that had been as broad as the Amazon at Manaus suddenly fractured, shattered, running away into the swampy jungle in a maze of lesser streams. The barge would have been lost, too, but for the force of the flood which held its floating island in midstream so that it followed that tap-root of the River Gir straight into the heart of the inner delta. Here the flood had all but swamped even the hardiest mangroves. But they still reached out, like deadly reefs, until one at last snagged the matted roots of water hyacinth. The mares' nest of vegetation swung inwards towards the shore and became more firmly anchored.

It had reached its final resting place, seemingly almost as high as the simple wooden cross on top of the missionary church, which was the first sign of current human habitation half a kilometre inland on a knoll miraculously above the floodwater. Then the flood beneath the chapel crested and began to recede. The force of the falling water sucked at the hyacinth raft with sufficient force to start breaking it up. The mangroves tore at it as the current began to release them, ripping at it as they sprang back like the claws of the great panthers that had once hunted here, with branches as powerful as the arms of the huge gorillas that had once ruled the jungle on far Mount Karisoke. The raft came apart. Dr Koizumi's skull rolled away into the receding waters. The rest fell into the mud of the river's shore.

The rains eased. The water fell. The river at last resumed its accustomed river course, running gently enough to allow the first couple of orphans from the church school near the chapel to come down to the bank and begin to explore the aftermath of the flood, like creatures recently released from the Ark. And it was they who found the oysters lying like a bunch of misshapen black grapes in the mud of the riverside. They took the oysters to the women who ran the place, Celine Chaka, estranged daughter of the current president of Benin La Bas, and Anastasia Asov, disowned daughter of one of the richest and most powerful businessmen in Russia. It was Anastasia who opened them and discovered the huge black pearls within.

Anastasia gave the largest of the pearls to her father, Maximilian Asov, who was in the country planning to do a deal with President Chaka. She would have given them all to Richard Mariner – in the country on the same mission – for she trusted him more than she trusted any member of her family. But Max Asov had a famously successful jewellery business and promised to get her top dollar. It was a promise she and Celine were happy to rely on as they fought to rebuild the finances and infrastructure of their ruined orphanage.

Intrigued by the colour of the pearl, Max had it tested. And so he found that the mud which gave the oil-dark pearl its unique colour – the mud that formed the bed of Lac Dudo, was the purest form of coltan yet discovered. Suddenly the apparently primary interest in the mysterious black pearls became secondary to what had made them black in the first place.

Columbite tantalite – coltan for short – is a black metallic ore only found in major quantities in the

eastern areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, not far to the south of Beni La Bas. Max had contacts who could refine the ore if he could get at it. They were experts in extracting the niobium which was used in a range of modern equipment from MRI scanners to nuclear power stations. And also the far more precious metallic tantalum, a heat-resistant powder capable of holding a high electrical charge, a vital element in capacitors, the electronic elements that control current flow inside miniature circuit boards. Tantalum capacitors lie at the heart of cell phones, laptops, pagers, flat screen TVs and almost every other electronic device, from the radar that keeps the international airlines safe to the control panels that keep the Internet alive. The technology boom of the noughties caused the price of coltan to skyrocket. Max's experts estimated it would fetch in excess of two hundred and fifty US dollars a kilo, though it had reached more than four hundred dollars a kilo in the past. Even at two-fifty, that meant it was worth a quarter of a million dollars per metric tonne.

According to the latest maps they could get hold of – those prepared by the Yakimoto Freshwater Pearl Company for Dr Koizumi in 1972, Lac Dudo's bed was a million square kilometres in area. The depth of sediment on the lake bed, according to the careful Japanese map makers, averaged ten metres which meant that the lake could contain ten trillion cubic metres of coltan sediment. A cubic metre of sediment weighs roughly a metric tonne. It took Max Asov almost no time at all to calculate that he could be two trillion, five hundred billion dollars' worth of coltan, therefore, all just waiting for anyone who could get to it and manage to set up an extraction facility on the ruins of Dr Koizumi's doomed black pearl oyster farm.

‘Look, Max,’ repeated Richard Mariner, raising his voice over the thunder of the Kamov’s rotor. ‘Just getting up here in a chopper has taken months of planning. You must see how much tougher it will be to get a permanent team this far by water or on foot. It’ll be a long, hard, dangerous undertaking. You’d be mad to even think of leading it yourself.’ He leaned forward forcefully, frowning with concern, his ice-blue gaze probing his associate’s square Russian face.

‘For two trillion dollars I’d *crawl* up here myself,’ answered Max. ‘Especially, as you say, after everything I have invested in the project already.’

‘Besides,’ added Max’s business partner Felix Makarov, suavely leaning forward to confront Richard, his eyes, like Max’s, alight with the promise of two trillion US dollars, ‘there may be alternatives to coming up the river by boat. Look how far we have managed to come by chopper, for instance. Maybe we could just drop a team in place ...’

‘Admitted,’ Richard agreed, leaning back into his comfortable seat, one long finger thoughtfully stroking the razor-straight scar on his cheekbone as he thought through Felix’s statement. ‘But hopping up for a look-see in the company Kamov is one thing. Setting up a facility to extract the coltan is quite another. Besides, an aircraft of any kind is only useful if you can land it. And at the moment I’ll be damned if I can see anywhere suitable down there.’

The three men grouped round the table at the front of Max’s executive Kamov which belonged to his mining company Bashnev/Sevmash, looking out of the window at the relentless green of the jungle’s upper canopy. From this angle the virgin rainforest looked like head after head of broccoli with Richard – countless thousands of them; maybe millions reaching to the horizon on their right, where the borders with the countries of Central Africa lay hidden, and to the horizon on their left. Behind them it seemed to reach in an unbroken carpet to the coast, but Richard knew this was an illusion. Ahead of them, the jungle mounted to the ragged, flood-damaged tree line high on the slopes of the huge and restless volcano called Mount Karisoke and the border with the neighbouring country Congo Libre. But it was hard to get a grip of the fact that each one of the apparently numberless green humps of foliage was standing about a hundred metres above the actual ground, encompassing a cubic area larger than a cathedral.

It had taken the Kamov eight hours’ solid flying time to get here from Granville Harbour at the distant mouth of the River Gir, powering through the low, humid sky above the great waterway at its maximum speed. Eight hours that did not count the layover every two hours in increasingly remote wilderness areas where Max had set up fuel dumps. The whole project had taken six months to get even this far – the first sortie up to the fabulous lake itself. A trip that *biznizmen* Max and Felix insisted on leading themselves – and which the Mariners would not have missed for the world. Here, as in their dealings all over the globe, from the oilfields of the Arctic to those off the shores of Benin and La Bas, whatever Bashnev/Sevmash discovered, drilled or mined, Heritage Miner shipped for them and usually by water.

The last executive seat was occupied by Richard’s wife and business partner, Robin. ‘Even so,’ she said now, shaking her golden curls and frowning as she picked up on Richard’s point, ‘you’re looking at two thousand kilometres in from the coast. Two thousand kilometres from civilization to this Lake Dudo. And that’s as the crow flies. It must be another five hundred or so if you follow the river

Always assuming you can follow the river. What with the waterfalls, cataracts and white-water rapids we've flown over during the flight so far. And then there's still *this* at the end of it.' She gave a shudder, looking down.

'But there is civil infrastructure down there already,' insisted Max, straining round and unsuccessfully trying to catch the eye of whichever local government historian present on the Kamoro had described the transport system in its seventies heyday to him. 'There are roads, a railway, the whole communications network built in the late sixties and early seventies when this place was booming. There's a twelve-lane highway joining Cite La Bas with Cite Matadi, then going straight on down to Granville Harbour and the coast.'

'I've seen it – been on some of it,' countered Robin. 'It's useless. Cite La Bas is dead and Cite Matadi is not much better. Cite La Bas was never all it was cracked up to be in the first place. They talked it up as the New York of West Africa – a buzzing twentieth-century hub. But it was little more than a frontier town with big ambitions.'

'More like Tombstone in the Wild West rather than Tokyo, perhaps,' offered Richard grimly. 'Aptly enough, all things considered ...'

'Very witty, darling. Moreover, Max, the infrastructure between them hasn't been touched for forty years. It's all just jungle now. As far as I know the only way along your twelve-lane highway is by motorbike and on foot. God knows what's happened to the railroad. Don't fool yourselves, either of you. You'd need to start from scratch.'

'It's as though we haven't just come up the river,' added Richard thoughtfully, 'it's as though we've gone back in time! It's like Jurassic Park down there.'

'Robin!' laughed Max. 'Get a grip! And you, Richard – Tombstone ... *Jurassic Park!* I ask you! But for once the booming Russian's confident tone sounded a little hollow. For the last two hours there had been nothing to see other than the jungle, and that had been depressing enough. But now they were coming over the deserted suburbs of Cite La Bas.

After an hour's flight at maximum cruising speed they were nearly three hundred kilometres from the River Gir now, approaching Cite La Bas from the south-west, so they were confronted at first by the stunted overgrowth of secondary jungle that had developed exponentially in the years since the global cloud had killed those who had survived the eruption and the lava flow. City block after city block was literally running to seed. Plants burgeoned everywhere, given gigantic expansion by the rainforest climate. It was hard to see most of the houses, draped as they were with ivies, creepers and lianas. Huge trees rose, not only in gardens but through entire dwellings. It was hard not to see the secondary jungle as a living thing ruthlessly reinvading the land that humanity could no longer defend.

Awe-inspiring though this huge destruction was, it shrank to insignificance beside the utter devastation of the north-eastern suburbs. Here everything was black instead of green. Starkly, gaunt and dead instead of threateningly fecund. Even after all these years – and after all that nature had dealt out – cars stuck up out of the cinder-black ground, half buried, frozen in place. All of them battered and rusting, many of them burst open like obscene flowers where their petrol tanks had exploded. Buses, trucks, lorries, pantechnicons stuck up like toys thrown on to an ash heap. Richard's eyes swept over the devastation almost unbelievably. A black-throated pit appeared, seemingly leading halfway to the centre of the earth; big enough to make him wonder if this was an offspring of the volcano itself.

'That must be where the avgas tanks went up,' said Max, who had read the report prepared for the government in the months after the disaster, when the international community had been throwing money, aid and volunteers at the place. Before it became obvious that almost nothing was getting past ex-president Liye Banda's venal clique, who were growing fat while the dwindling survivors up

country were simply wasting away. And there was precious little that could be done in any case, especially in the face of the marauding Interahamwe, the Lord's Resistance Army and the Army of Christ the Infant. Before they all pulled out again and left Benin La Bas well alone. 'The explosion took out all the airport buildings and everything on the apron, so it says in the report.'

Richard just shook his head, beyond speech. He glanced at Robin. Her grey eyes were wide and full of tears. The state of the once-great city emphasized the point she had been making about the country's infrastructure more powerfully than any words ever could have done.

'Damn,' said Max. 'I'd hoped we could land on the runway at the airport or – at the worst – on the lava itself. The government report said the shield was flat, like the flows in Hawaii.' He swung round glaring at the experts cowering down the length of the cabin behind him. The two nearest glanced up guiltily. But in fact they were looking at the Japanese map and the GPS handset and were unlikely to have been the ones advising Max on the state of the lava flow.

'You'll never find a place to land there,' said Robin. 'What was Plan B?'

'The lake,' answered Richard. 'Didn't you see the floats on the undercarriage? The plan is to land on Lac Dudo.'

But Lac Dudo never appeared. The Kamov followed the pitted path of the lava flow until one of Max's experts – the one with the map – called out and the helicopter swung westward. They all craned to see the surface of the volcanic lake. But there was nothing to see. The broccoli heads of the virgin rainforest opened out into a huge prairie of lighter green, but there was no water.

'This is the place, Mr Asov,' called the expert with the GPS, already nervous at having got the blame for the lava flow's unexpected condition. 'We are immediately above the position that the Japanese map makers recorded.'

'But there is no lake here!' snarled Max.

'It looks like a big meadow,' said Felix. 'Put us down here and we can explore,' he called through to the pilot. The chopper began to settle.

Richard looked out, his mind racing. 'This is weird, even for Benin La Bas,' he observed to Robin. 'One minute there's a black lake, the next there's a big meadow. What on earth is going on?'

Robin knew the river best, so she understood what they were looking at first. 'Stop!' she called to the pilot. 'Take us up again! Max, for God's sake tell him before it's too late! That isn't grass – it's water hyacinth!'

The pilot responded to her call, and under the extra pressure of the rotor's downdraught, the apparently solid prairie rippled and began to heave.

'Thank you, Robin,' said Max soberly. 'I believe you have saved us all from an unexpected swim and a very long walk indeed!'

Richard and Robin exchanged meaningful glances. They both knew that if the Kamov had tried to land on the deceptive-looking meadow it would almost certainly have broken through the mat of water hyacinth vegetation and sunk. And anyone trying to find the surface once they were below the water hyacinth would have been doomed to drown as though trapped beneath a solid layer of ice.

‘Right!’ said Max. ‘Now that we have found the lake, let us explore a little further. I am not about to let some floating weeds stand between me and two trillion dollars’ worth of coltan!’

‘Good idea!’ added Felix. ‘But where shall we start? I doubt we have enough fuel left in the chopper to simply circle round and round ...’

‘Excuse me, Mr Asov,’ hazarded the expert with the map a little nervously. ‘The area in which the Yakimoto Freshwater Pearl Company constructed Doctor Koizumi’s oyster-harvesting facility is marked most precisely on this map. Apparently there was a relatively large section cleared of jungle there.’

‘Excellent!’ boomed Max. ‘Go and give the pilot the coordinates. Once I get a toehold,’ Max continued, ‘then I’m in. I’ll bomb, burn or poison that floating garbage and get at the lake bed no matter what.’

‘It might be worth taking it carefully to begin with,’ warned Robin. ‘If you leave the oysters alive then you could have a second income stream in pearls.’

‘Huh,’ grunted Max. ‘We’ll have to see whether they’re worth more mounted or strung – or crushed to get at the coltan dust within them!’

Felix reached down for the briefcase that was standing beside his right ankle. It went on to the table and opened to reveal, among other things, a slim bottle of Stolichnaya *Elit* vodka and four shot glasses, one inside the other. ‘Let us leave such thoughts to the future and drink to our continued success,’ he suggested, handing shot glasses over to Max and Robin.

Robin put her glass upside down on the table with a disapproving *snap* and glanced at her teetotal husband. But his mind was elsewhere. Richard was not used to following along in someone else’s plans. He was a natural leader. She wondered what he was thinking up now. Max held his glass out and Felix unscrewed the top of the bottle. ‘Success!’ he said. ‘A good toast!’

‘Success!’ toasted Felix cheerfully. Both Russians tossed the spirit back, then repeated the procedure and seemed to become a little more expansive and relaxed at once. They leaned back. Loosened their seat belts. ‘It will be good to see what is left of Doctor Koizumi’s facility in any case,’ rumbled Max. ‘It would make a satisfactory base for our own people.’

‘There won’t be much there, surely,’ said Robin. ‘Not after what happened. I mean, I’m a bit sketchy on the history of the place but I know they were all slaughtered. Bodies were brought back but no one ever really sorted out who was who. They were chopped to pieces by those terrible machine things the men all seem to carry here. In any case, the buildings were all destroyed. Apparently there was some woman there who was never found.’

‘Doctor Mizuki Yukawa,’ confirmed Max, who had clearly read more than just the report of Cite L’Ecluse’s destruction. Not for the first time, Robin made a mental note never to underestimate Max’s professionalism and willingness to do the basic groundwork. He might be a bullying sexist bastard who’d disowned his daughter Anastasia while bed-hopping through a series of mistresses young enough to be her sister. He might show a weakness for vodka and occasionally become dangerously unpredictable as a result. But he had built a massive company. And he hadn’t just done that by luck, bribery, strong-arm tactics and buying up massively undervalued ex-nationalized facilities in the months after the collapse of the communist system. He was nobody’s fool. He did the groundwork

And the fact that he knew about the deaths of the Japanese was a case in point.

~~‘She’s out there somewhere, whatever’s left of her,’ Max continued, his tone darkening. He gestured with his left hand, striking the knuckles against the window as he tried to encompass the entire rainforest on Karisoke’s southern slope. ‘Unless the people who killed the others took her with them.’~~

‘If they did, then she’s probably somewhere nearby,’ said Robin sadly. ‘They won’t have taken her anywhere very far, I’d have thought.’

‘And, like Shakespeare’s Richard III, they *won’t have kept her long*,’ added Richard grimly. ‘Whoever they actually were.’

‘Apparently the best guess was that it was an early manifestation of the Army of Christ the Infant,’ continued Max. ‘Pre-Moses Nlong days. Before they hit the headlines like Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army. They say the Army of Christ has been coming and going through here for decades in one guise or another, slaughtering villagers and animals, taking boys into their fighting units and making women and girls their sex slaves.’

‘If they caught her they’d have raped her, killed her and eaten her,’ said Robin matter-of-factly. ‘As Richard says, they won’t have taken her far. And they won’t have wasted time and food keeping her alive unless they thought she was worth a good solid ransom. But if they were going to ransom anyone, logic dictates that it would probably have been whoever was in charge.’

‘Doctor Koizumi,’ nodded Max. ‘They never found much of him either – certainly not his head.’

‘Nice!’ muttered Felix ironically. He threw back another shot of vodka. ‘More chopper work – with those matchets. Very nice.’

There was another short silence. Both Richard and Robin felt the weight of the knowledge they shared but nobody was willing to discuss at the moment. Max’s estranged daughter Anastasia had been one of those attacked by Moses Nlong and his Army of Christ the Infant – and had been miraculously lucky to have survived the capture and slaughter visited on her friends. It had been a narrow escape, with a hair-raising ride down the great river in a tiny motor boat. Not to mention the equally spine-tingling return with Richard, Robin and an army bent on the rescue of the living and revenge for the dead. Anastasia was at the front of it all, armed to the teeth – ready, willing and able to execute her personal vengeance on Moses Nlong, the brutal army’s cannibalistic leader, only to see Odem, his right hand man, vanish into the jungle. But Max never talked about Anastasia, whom he had disowned and disinherited in the most brutally public manner possible the better part of ten years ago. So the silence lay there between them, like a dead thing on the table. Max threw back another shot of vodka.

‘You’ll want to be up on that,’ observed Richard grimly, breaking the tension at last. His narrowed eyes swept over both Max and Felix. ‘You’ll need to know pretty precisely what madmen are marauding around here nowadays. Moses Nlong may be dead but the Army of Christ is still out there somewhere. Like the situation with Kony and the LRA. Whether he’s dead or not, they still seem to be going, and not too far south of here either, come to that.’

Robin nodded to herself. So that was what Richard was thinking about as his bright blue gaze had been quartering the jungle all around them. And wisely so. Until the area could be secured against the anarchic militias that had infested the place for the last forty years or so, there was absolutely no point in investing anything up here – no matter how great the promised prize. And there were only two ways in which absolute security could be guaranteed: either the country itself needed a settled government that was able to guarantee security throughout its dominions, or Max was going to have to come up with an army of his own capable of outgunning the Army of Christ and whoever else came cruising by.

drawn to Max's promised trillions like sharks drawn to blood.

'~~And this is the kind of place they come to, to regroup if for no other reason,~~' emphasized Robin running with Richard's idea as though she had been able to read his mind. 'Not that there's much for anyone up here, heaven knows! Unless they can get across the border into Congo Libre or one of the other neighbouring states who don't mind supplying arms and expertise in the hope of fomenting a little trouble along the border. They can regroup and rearm there, then come back and start all over again here. But even so, unless they have a very powerful agenda indeed, it's hard to see that there's anything worthwhile for anyone in this godforsaken place.'

'Except for us,' exulted Max, brightening up suddenly, unexpectedly. And, given Richard and Robin's concerns, not a little disturbingly. 'Except for us! For us there is *two trillion, five hundred billion US dollars!*'

'We're there, Mr Asov,' called the map man from the cockpit. 'Right over Doctor Koizumi's facility. At least, where it's marked on the map. But I'm afraid I can't see any buildings or anything ...'

'Right,' said Max. 'Tell the pilot to take us down. But do it carefully!'

Felix screwed the top back on the vodka bottle and replaced it in his briefcase, much to Robin's relief. Richard strained to see out of the window, hoping for a clear view of whatever lay immediately beneath them, wondering what the odds against finding a hostile army hiding in the undergrowth were.

Robin looked further away as the helicopter settled below the level of the upper canopy. The great branches reached out, laden with broad green leaves, festooned with pendant mosses, even at the upper level, bound with massive ropes of creeper and liana. Below them were cavernous, shadowed spaces. Then the lower, secondary canopy – thinner, robbed of light by the huge upper leaves – seemingly strangled from below by the creepers, the parasitic orchids and all the other plant life fighting desperately for a share of the sun and the rain, feeding off each other like vegetable vampires.

As the Kamov obediently settled further, Richard's gaze fastened on the huge grey ferns of the jungle floor which came piling out into the sunlight like breaking waves. Immediately in front of them, a wall of reeds and rushes as wide as a highway and as tall as a bungalow defined the edge of the lake. The reeds reached towards the belly of the helicopter, and Richard frowned with concentration seeking clearer ground beside them. But there was nothing.

Where Max had no doubt imagined an open area of grass the size of a football pitch conveniently placed for the Kamov to land safely, there was instead a stand of bamboo the size of Wembley Stadium. Many of the bamboo tops were covered with feathery leaves, but by far the majority of the tops were tipped with fearsome points, like spears. And the bamboo stood as tall as the lakeside reeds – at least three metres. There was no sign at all that any human had ever had the temerity to come here. In fact, Koizumi and his facility might be as much of a fairy tale as the monsters Richard had brought to mind when he likened the place to Jurassic Park.

'You'll never get down here,' said Richard grimly. 'This place is locked tight shut against any kind of aircraft. The only way in is on foot, Max.'

'You're right,' admitted Max. 'I just hate admitting defeat.' His fist crashed on to the tabletop. 'Take us up again,' he called to the pilot.

'At least, now that we're here, we can try to follow the tributary stream to the main river,' said Richard. 'Anyone coming in on foot may well want to follow it upstream – as a guide, at least. It'll be as well to get a good idea what the terrain actually looks like.'

As the helicopter rose back into the sky above the treetops and turned away towards the distant River Gir, the largest of the ferns parted and a man dressed in army camouflage cargo pants and

green vest stepped out. He wore a green beret and wraparound sunglasses with mirrored lenses. He carried a Desert Eagle in a green webbing holster on his right hip. On his left he carried a machet with a stainless steel blade more than a metre long. In his high-laced right boot he carried a black-bladed Russian military Stalker knife. Around his chest he wore a webbing bandolier carrying half-a-dozen double clips of five point forty-five ammunition for the brand-new AK-74M with GP-30 forty millimetre grenade launcher that he cradled like a baby in his muscular arms.

Silently, he watched as the helicopter filled the increasingly narrow band of sky between the treetops that stood astride the river as it followed the flow of black water away. Then he moved his head infinitesimally, and started moving noiselessly forward into the stand of bamboo. At once he was surrounded by the better part of fifty soldiers, varying in age from ten to forty, all as well armed as he was, the largest and strongest of whom fell in a step or two ahead of him, using their massive machetes with practised ease to clear a path through the vegetation, following the vanishing chopper down the black stream from the black lake towards the distant River Gir.

As the Kamov followed the river course, Robin's attention was torn. It was impossible to see much of the dam system immediately below, but it was all too easy to see the overhanging greenery of the canopy on either side. Far more interesting was observing Richard as he worked his magic on Max and Felix.

Even as Richard leaned forward, Felix reached down for his briefcase once more. This time, as well as the vodka bottle, he pulled out a slim laptop. He opened it and turned it so that the screen covered the lower half of the window. He tapped a couple of buttons and it lit up, showing video feed from the camera mounted under the Kamov's nose, but Robin still looked out of the window. If she looked up she could see the leaves of the canopy fluttering in the wind of their passage. If she looked down she could see their roots standing out like huge knotted talons as they gripped the steep banks on either side of the precipitous young river beyond the dam system. Below them, much reduced since its overpowering spate, raced the strange dark tumble of the black water rushing downwards so eagerly to join the stately flow of the distant River Gir. But, as far as she could make out, the jungle itself was deserted. Apart from the plant life, it was dead.

After a moment, Robin's attention switched back to Richard. Of course, he would be looking for an edge, she thought. The owners of Heritage Mariner might be apparent spectators here, but Richard never did anything without an ulterior motive and he was as aware as his associates that there was a fabulous fortune to be made. And Heritage Mariner could well do with a share of it.

On one level, the fact that the Russians had returned to Felix's vodka bottle might make Richard hope to get past their defences, Robin calculated wryly. But on another, they just became more suspicious and argumentative the more they drank. 'You've just seen for yourselves,' Richard was saying. 'Getting upriver is hard.' He gestured at the laptop screen, which was showing a waterfall that looked to be taller than the hundred-metre trees surrounding it, tumbling beneath the natural bridge of a fallen tree into a lake that was as thick with water hyacinth as Lac Dudo itself had been. 'Even something like that will take a good deal of time and effort to climb. And I think you'll find there are more – and bigger – waterfalls between here and the main river. Cataracts and rapids too, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Point taken,' allowed Max. 'We can go through the video record in more detail when we get back to base. Have a really good look at it. Digitally enhanced. Make proper use of some of these experts we've ferried up here at such expense. But on the other hand, if it doesn't look too difficult down below now, we can still come upriver anyway. Two-pronged attack. Once we get to the lake we can clear the jungle rubbish away, set up camp and really get to work.'

'There's a time limit,' insisted Felix. 'Word of this is bound to get out, and then ...'

'The Chinese,' said Richard. 'Yes. I'd worked that out too. Chinese suppliers to Japanese and Korean manufacturers who can't live without tantalum processors for their laptops, mobile phones and flat screens – let alone the new markets for electric cars and so forth.'

'It's Sony, Toyota, Cannon, Honda, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, NTT, KDDI and all the others from Kagoshimo to Sapporo,' Robin emphasized forcefully. She had read the same reports. 'But the Japanese manufacturers are supplied by Chinese mining companies such as Beijing Jinshan, Dongguan Benyuan and Fuyang Zhongyu to start with just a few of the legitimate ones with interests in the area'

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