

# FIREWALKERS



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# CHAPTER ONE

## ROACH HOTEL

THE MASSEREY-VAN BULTS were coming in all the dry way down the Ogooué Road, and, as Hotep would say, there was much rejoicing. They came in a real motorcade, big cars with windows so tinted they were like black mirrors, the back ends corrugated with heat sink fins so that M. and Mme. and all the little Masserey-Van Bults, could slide untouched through the killing heat of mid-afternoon. People turned out for them. As their fleet of cars grumbled down the Ankara's one maintained road, everyone spilled from their factories and repair shops, an impromptu half hour holiday from whatever it was put food on the table. The kids jumbled out from their shacks and shanties, from all the hand-built homes that had gathered around the Anchor like junk washed up on a high tide, never to see the sea again. They

all cheered, waving scraps of cloth for flags—didn't matter the colour so long as it was bright, bright enough to see through that dark glass! They whooped and stamped, all of them, and Nguyễn Sun Mao waved and hollered just like all the rest of them because this was how you did it, at Ankara Achouka. You did it whenever the new guests arrived at the Roach Hotel, because this was the only time you'd see them. They check in, but they don't check out, which was some ad from long-back. Anyway, it wasn't Roach Hotel, not really, not to the face of the people who got to stay there, however briefly. Not to the face of the wabenzi who ran the Ankara town, controlled the jobs and who got fed. It had a fancy French name in twenty-foot gold letters that loomed over everything in the township, just like the Ankara cable loomed over them and everything, going up forever.

The motorcade was approaching the big gates of the Roach Hotel now. The first couple of cars just went in, past the guards and the guns, up the gravel drive; past the dusty space where there'd been lawns in Mao's dad's day, before the owners acknowledged that even they couldn't waste water on that kind of conspicuous consumption. Mao's dad had got to see the place pristine new, before time and dust and the heat cracked the façade. Mao's grandad had helped build it, one of that wave of labour that had converged on all three Ankara points long-back—they had locals, yes, but they got in strong backs and keen minds from all over, and it so happened there'd been plenty out of Vietnam who'd needed somewhere that wasn't underwater right about then.

The crowd's jubilation was ebbing. For a moment it looked like the Masserey-Van Bults were going to screw tradition and just pass through that gate from which no soul returned. Then, after three cars had cruised on, the fourth stopped and more men with guns got out, the private soldiers of the corporate compound noun that was the Masserey-Van Bults. And after them, some flunkies in suits, already pink and sweating in the seconds after leaving the vehicles' AC. Mao shook his head and rolled his eyes, but he kept waving his little flag because he had parents and siblings and they got hungry just like everyone else.

They had little baskets, like they were giving out lucky money for New Year: stacks of notes, a king's ransom. Sullenly, sourly, the flunkies began chucking the cash into the crowd, flashing the sweat-stains spreading like plague zones across the armpits of their shirts. The crowd whooped. Children ran up and down the line, gathering it all up. The wabenzi would redistribute it later and plenty would stick to their fingers in the process. It would all go to buy just a little less than the last, because even these good old American bucks, these sterling pounds and roubles and euros and rand, bought less and less of the less and less there was to buy.

Children, because it looked better to the guests of the Roach Hotel if it was happy kids rushing around to grab their bundles of old notes. Because nobody wanted real desperate adults slugging it out for handfuls of cash. That might suggest that they weren't *happy* with what they'd got.

Mao'd thought the flunkies were it, but there was a special treat in store for all the lucky people of Ankara Achouka. Mao saw some kind of argument going on within that great big space within the car, bigger than the room he shared with two sisters and a brother. The flunkies were protesting: *no, go back, really ma'am, not appropriate*. And then she appeared, a woman white-going-on-pink, with a broad-brimmed hat already wilting on her head. Her hair was like gold, like hair you only saw in adverts. Her sunglasses looked like poured mercury. She was waving back, basking not in the killing sun but in the adulation, listening to the crowd go barmy because some daughter of the Masserey-Van Bults had graced them with a personal appearance.

She threw something into the crowd—artless, awkward, but it reached the front ranks, almost brained some old boy, in fact. Not a wad of cash, this: something heavy. A plastic bottle, rich man's water, the pure stuff. The inside of the car was probably lined with them.

There was a fight, after that. The half-brained old boy had the bottle, his neighbours wanted it, the people next to them... Then the gendarmes had just turned up out of nowhere in their riot suits and were whaling into the crowd and cracking heads, because this sort of unruly disorder before the eyes of the guests just would not *do*. And Mao was bitterly sure that the chief of police was going to nurse a long cool drink of rich man's water this evening on his nice veranda, and that old boy was going to nurse nothing but a headache.

Then he looked at the Masserey-Van Bult girl, and she



looked so stricken. She'd done a nice thing, hadn't she? She'd shown the proper noblesse oblige. Except it had all gone wrong and now her day was ruined. He thought she'd actually stamp her little foot. But then she was back inside the car with her flunkies so the cool air could get flowing again, and the rest of the motorcade was passing the gates, and everyone went back to work or back to not having work, and then Balewa turned up and punched Mao in the shoulder. Balewa and Mao had grown up together, meaning they'd hated each other from ages five to fifteen. Then Mao had gone Firewalker and Balewa's dad had pulled strings somehow to get his boy the coveted position of errand runner for Contrôleur Attah. In which role, inexplicably, Balewa had turned out to be a good friend, and to fondly remember all those times he and Mao had tried to beat the living shit out of each other. Which meant when Attah wanted a Firewalker crew, Balewa tried to get the word to Nguyễn Sun Mao.

“Attah wants you.”

“Wants me, or wants someone?” Mao asked, abruptly reviewing what he might or might not have done.

“Wants you, he says.” Balewa shrugged. “Between you and me, guy, Attah is on the plate with the Sonko up in the Hotel. Got bizna for you. Name your price.”

Mao clapped him on the shoulder, feeling the soft there, where once there'd just been the skinny. Attah's business was feeding Balewa and his family well. Attah's business was keeping Mao's people full, too. Always happy to do business for M. le Contrôleur.

\* \* \*

ATTAH JEAN JACQUES was one of the old wabenzi; his family been running Achouka a hundred generations, to hear him tell it—and he would. He was a short man, bald, fat: not *fat-fat*, but prosperous-fat. He'd gone away to Cape Town for his education, come back to find his Assistant Contrôleur's shoes ready for him. And there were worse bosses, Mao knew. Like Attah's own superiors, he reckoned. Attah answered to the men inside the Hotel, who answered to men on the other end of the Anchor cable, who answered to nobody at all, not even God. When things went wrong, it was Attah and his fellow Contrôleurs who felt the lash, and most of his peers made sure their underlings caught it twice as hard. Attah had an eye for talent, though. Screw up and he wouldn't even shout at you: you'd be out on your backside and never get a decent job in the township again. Do well, and he'd give you the slack to get the work done. No tantrums, from him; no belittling his people, screaming at them, taking out all the many and varied frustrations of a busy man. Mao reckoned he got better results that way, being the buffer between the shit and the ground.

Which didn't make him a nice guy, and it didn't mean he was immune to that wabenzi way they had of showing off just how damn well they were doing. Attah's office had air conditioning sometimes, though right now all the windows were thrown open and there were a dozen flies drowned in the man's cup of water. Attah had trophies, too. He had a desk of black wood big enough that Mao could have used

it as a coffin. The top was old felt, sun-bleached and torn, but most of all *valuable*, antique. There were yellowing photographs on the wall behind him. One showed a view from the Roach Hotel from long-back, when it had been where the rich people came to see the animals that weren't there anymore. There were things like cows, and there was grass that went up to the cows' bellies, and out there was water, too, the sun like diamonds on the Ogooué back when it had been a river and not just a concrete road from the coast. The other photo was a man with a gun sitting proudly before the lion he'd just presumably killed. Mao had spent too long staring at that photo, marvelling at the sheer alien nature of it: not the lion, which looked like something by a computer artist with no sense of the real, but the man: so white, so huge, vaster than the lion, clipping the edges of the photo, like an ogre. The past was another country, maybe another planet altogether.

Speaking of...

"You're still running with Lupé?" Attah asked, fanning himself idly. The open windows stared out at the world as though watching for the first stirrings of a breeze.

"Yes, Contrôleur." Mao was careful to mix the cocktail of his language to the genteel standard suitable for someone of Attah's position: more French, more English, less Afrikaans and Bantu, absolutely no Viet slang. "You need, I can get her."

"I need," said Attah, heartfelt. "Her, you. Got me a situation here needs fixing."

"Nothing she can't fix, Contrôleur."

"That's what I want to hear. This is top dollar bizna,

boy.” Attah grinned: good, white teeth, so even you could use a spirit level on them. The show of money should have been something to put Mao in his place, but there was something of the cheeky child in that smile, something irrepressible that decades in Achouka hadn’t ground out of the man. “Who else is there knows their tech? Need more than two of you? Akiloye?”

“Got hurt, Contrôleur. Cut foot, went bad.”

Attah’s expression soured. “Who else?”

“Hotep, Contrôleur.”

“Hah?”

“The spacegirl. Took her with me to Ayem when the condensation plant was down, last time. Got it running, double-quick.”

The Contrôleur’s expression soured further, meaning he had remembered just who Hotep was. Mostly trouble, but the girl had all the knowledge an expensive technical education could buy: an education never intended for slumming it groundside at the Ankara.

“Take her, then. Take her, take Lupé.” Attah shunted over a tablet holding the meagre briefing. “Take a ’Bug. Get this fucking sorted and it’s bonuses all round. Double-double danger pay.”

Mao nearly swore in front of the man; that meant a lot of money indeed. “Which way is this trouble, Contrôleur?” And he knew the answer, because any other point of the compass and he’d be offered standard or straight danger money, and if he didn’t like it there’d be plenty others willing. “South, then?” South: the Estate.

Attah nodded sombrelly. “Mao, you’re a good boy, you’ve got a good crew. Double-triple.” And no haggling, no attempt to disguise the fact that the Man was riding Attah just the way Attah wasn’t riding his subordinates. *He’s on the plate, sure enough.* Time to go find Lupé and Hotep and put civilization behind them.

A FIREWALKER CREW could be two people for small jobs, could be six, eight, for big. Mao’d had a bad experience, out on a six-man crew except the wages were short and so someone had tried to have only a two-man crew come back. He’d been fifteen. He’d been left for dead. Now he was nineteen, a whole world of experience on, and he didn’t go out with big crews, or with people he didn’t know if he could absolutely avoid it. What he did was get results from the people he trusted.

A crew needed tough and muscle, and Mao brought that. A crew needed skills, too. Just one head crammed full of computer and mech repair meant if something happened to its owner, the rest of them were screwed. More bitter experience meant Mao took a fix-it for the mech stuff, a hacker for the computer tech. Most crews then threw in three more mouths who were there mostly to eat food and be someone’s useless cousin; Mao kept things lean. He was pathfinder, strongarm, marksman all in one. Lupé was mech, and he’d have to hope he could talk Hotep into doing tech, because it was that or some stranger who thought they could code.

Most Firewalker mechs would be in the township off-shift, and if they needed work they'd be in the fix-it shops where everyone brought all the crap that stopped working, or sold all the crap that had never worked. Lupé had started off there, same as everyone, working for her fix-it uncle at his tin-roofed little place out in Willaumez Neighbourhood. Everyone worked in Achouka—no room for luxuries like staying home. Boys grew up running errands, salvaging, joining gangs and fighting each other over street corners. While they were out doing that, there were schools that taught girls mech work, because everything was a resource in Achouka and nothing was wasted. It wasn't that Lupé had a magic touch for getting broken-down machines working again, because there were a score of genius fixers working invisibly in the township on any given day. What got her noticed was how her home block suddenly had access to the Roach Hotel wi-fi, running water and makeshift solar collectors on the roof. These days, if you wanted Lupé, you'd find her in or on the Hotel itself, fixing for the rich because she had family to feed too.

Most kids on her pay grade would have been trying to get others in to do their work for them, for a fraction of the pay. Mutunbo Lupé just liked the feel of the metal under her fingers, though. She liked making it all fit together. She was the best there was, or at least the best Mao could afford. They'd worked together almost two years now, half his Firewalking life.

He caught her as she came off shift, down from the AC units up top of the Hotel. That was her favourite work, when she

could get it: the view of the Anchor field was second to none, she said. A clear sight of the cable base, all those warehouses and offices dedicated to sending everything that mattered skywards, up out of the atmosphere to where the spaceship was. In Mao's dad's time it had still mostly been the physical material itself: the rare elements, the bulk metals, all the slack from when the asteroid mines weren't performing as intended. These days the ship up there, the *Grand Celeste*, was fully built and fitted out, a luxury liner to eternity, ready to coast out its days in orbit or go colonise Mars, or head to an exoplanet on a trail beaten by robot probes.

Anywhere but here.

Mutunbo Lupé was local girl through and through: dark, stocky, her wiry hair pulled into Bantu knots. She always wore overalls two sizes too large, which spare space seemed able to magically furnish her with tools, food and, on one fraught occasion, a gun.

"Here's trouble," she observed, spotting Mao loitering. "M'bolo, chief. How did I know I'd see you today?"

"Am'bolo, you free?" Because these days Lupé got paid well without risking her ass for it, and each time he asked her, Mao wondered if today she'd say no.

But: "For you, always," and that easy smile, remembering the time, maybe, he'd hauled her back to Ankara Achouka after she broke her leg; or else the time she'd just about built a new car out of scrap when the two of them had been stuck long-ways east, drinking poison water from a rusty tank and going out of their minds until somehow they'd made it back to real people.

And yet... Even as they were off to find Hotep, Mao looked sideways at her. “Wait, you know what, now?”

“Oh, chommie, all kinds of shit going down at the Roach Hotel,” she told him with her bright smile, with one blackened silver tooth. “Those sonko, you never heard anyone complain like it when their AC isn’t working full blast. Chommie, some of them have worked up a *sweat* today. You never heard such language.”

“But you fixed it.” Because in his experience she really could fix anything.

“Ha, no way. Those AC units, they’re all good. Power’s coming up short.”

“Figures.” That put the mission into perspective. He and Lupé and Hotep were going south, into the dry, into the dust and the killing heat, to the places monsters lived, because out there were the solar farms. Out there were the grand fields of collectors that had powered the Ankara’s planning and building. Now they harvested sunlight and turned it into cool air for the Roach Hotel, fancy lights for the sonko parties, filtration for their swimming pools, so that their brief stay at Ankara Achouka could be flawlessly comfortable before they were hauled away forever to go live in the *Grand Celeste*. If the power was short, it meant someone was stealing or something was broken, whereupon word came down to Contrôleur Attah to hire some Firewalkers to find out and fix. And Attah, in his wisdom, picked Mao.

\* \* \*



LUPÉ BROUGHT HOME solid cash for her fixing work, but Firewalking paid better. Hotep, though: Hotep didn't need cash. Hotep had a goddamn *allowance*.

She wasn't wabenzi, that class of administrators who ran everything outside the Hotel, men like Attah who hired, fired and made sure things got fixed, hauled, shipped and built. No responsible wabenzi would let their kid end up like Hotep: too embarrassing. Hotep's folks weren't from round these parts, though. Hotep's folks were up living the High Life, overseeing those far more compliant labourers: the robots aboard the *Grand Celeste*. That made Hotep one of the sonko, the rich-rich. Except here she was, pissing her days away in the township, bitter as hell about all the indignities life had doled out to her. Once every two weeks, give or take, she got so fighting drunk she tried to break in to the Hotel, punch out the guards, scream, shout. They all knew her there, and that her dad was the CEO of Lord God Almighty Incorporated. They knocked her down, but didn't break anything. And Mao knew all she'd do, if she somehow got past all of that, would be go stand on the Anchor Field and look up to the vanishing point of the cable, where it got too small, too far to see any more. And probably scream at it, because when Hotep got drunk she got *vai* drunk.

She was drinking on her balcony when Mao found her, but that was just the usual drinking, that she did like most people breathed. No danger of her going out to buy a black eye and a loose tooth from security for a few days yet.

Hotep's real ID called her Cory Dello. The nickname

came from some old film everyone saw once, some remake of a remake that was remade back when the idea of a desert land full of ruins was somehow romantic. There had been pyramids and adventurers, and there had been a mummy all got up in bandages to chase them around. Hotep looked like that. Not an inch of her was on show. Face wrapped, save for the hole she applied the bottle neck to, dark goggles over her eyes, hair bound up in a turban and a forage cap set aslant over that like she was the world's jauntiest burn victim. She wore gloves that were expensive tech in and of themselves, and she bandaged her hands over the gloves. When they had gone out to the fix-it job at Ayem, Mao had wondered how she didn't just die of the heat, but Lupé said she had some flash liquid cooling gear in there somewhere, that recycled her piss and her body's movements to offset the battering of the sun. It wasn't overheating Hotep was worried about, but sunburn and skin cancer. Lupé said she was pale as an albino all over, under all that cloth. The thought was weird, like she was some kind of magic alien from a cartoon.

Mao's dad'd had skin cancer for a few years now, the kind that wasn't going to get you tomorrow or this year, but eventually. Mao would get it too, most likely. Everyone who wasn't wabenzi or sonko would, because they had to go out to work and there weren't enough hats or parasols in the world to keep that sun off. Lupé was already checking herself every day, she said, because the old story that only pale, delicate people had to worry about melanomas was a convenient lie they told you, to get you to go out. Hotep

was super-paranoid about it, though, and that was only one of the many delightful quirks that had ended with her down here looking up, rather than up there looking down.

“I know,” she told the pair of them as they scrambled up to the balcony. She had more living space than Mao’s entire family, paid for by the folks who would give her everything so long as they never had to actually share an orbit with her again. “You see the news? Whole lot of people flying in to Libreville Secure International tomorrow. Whole lot of people driving their expensive cars down the Ogooué Road. Busy-busy times a-coming.” She spoke the chimera patois of the township with a ridiculous scholarly precision, clipping out slang like she was saying the Latin names of extinct deep-sea fish. “Of course they need us.”

“Because the AC at the Hotel is bust?” Lupé asked her.

Hotep turned her goggles, her bandages, towards them, faceless and creepy. Her wrapped hands were drumming against her knees in complex patterns; she was never completely still. “I give rocks about the AC. AC at the Hotel has been on brownout for months. Only now they’re going to have guests on top of guests at that place, all clamouring for their cool air. You not catch the news from Ecuador, dangi?” She scooped up a little tablet—crazy money worth of device just lying about, propping up one of her empties. She had it projecting pictures on the wall, though Mao had to squint against the sun to make them out. He saw... devastation. He saw water. That made him sit down next to Hotep and just stare, because there was more water there than even God had a use for, surely. Water coming through

streets, water flooding around cars, water slanting down in great turbulent sheets from a heavy sky. Water scouring in two-storey-high waves across a field of overturned vehicles and broken prefabs and...

It took him too long to identify the stump of the building there, lashed by that insane rain, as though all the water that they were lacking here in Ankara Achouka had been dumped in that other place, on the other side of the world.

“Ankara Pedernales,” Hotep pronounced. “Storm and a tidal wave hit it. Cable just gone, though.” She shook her head. “Serves them right.” As though, if she’d still been on the orbital team, somehow she’d have stopped it.

“And the people who didn’t get out?” Lupé asked. “Serve them right, too, does it?” Air evac from Ankara Pedernales would only have been for the few waiting for the cable ride up, plus maybe the guards and whatever they called wabenzi over in Ecuador.

Hotep’s goggles stared at her while the fingers of her free hand continued their manic drum solo.

Eventually she shrugged. “Went too long without answering, didn’t I?” she remarked cheerily. “Sorry. Making a note now: human better next time.”

“This is happening now?” Mao asked. He couldn’t look away from the images.

“Boss, this is happening yesterday. We already got plenty rich folks flying this way because they missed their golden ticket up the pipe,” said with that extra bitterness Hotep reserved for anything to do with space. “They blocked off the news, tried to stop it getting to the local net here, but

there's no data wall high enough to keep me out. So, that's the job, boss? They need to turn on all the extra AC at the Hotel, just when there's a power outage? That mean we're going south at last?"

"Vai south," Mao agreed. Meaning further than any of them had gone "Bundu south." Meaning the wilds, too dry for anything to live, too desolate for anyone to go. Except they were going and, by variedly mad-sounding reports, things still lived there. "All the way." Meaning the Old Estate, abandoned to the sun and the automatic systems three generations ago, and only rumours about what went on there now.

"Where the wild things are," Hotep said languidly, necking the last drops of her beer and placing the bottle on its side, fussily in line with its expired compatriots.

"Dusk, vehicle compound."

"I'm driving."

"Fukyo are you. *I'm* driving."

She shrugged, one hand leaving off slapping at her shins to spider around for another bottle. "See you there."