Yale University

From the SelectedWorks of Spencer Wolff

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Resettlement

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RESETTLEMENT

Les hommes sont doux dans la mesure où ils attendent quelque chose de ceux qui sont plus forts, et brutaux quand les individus plus faibles attendent quelque chose d'eux. Ceci a été jusqu'à présent la clé de la nature de l'individu en tant qu'être social.

Though this novel is fiction, its most brutal episodes are regrettably based on real events.

First Recommendation Interview *February, 2008*

Do you need a translator?

No.

What is your native tongue?

Lingala.

But you speak French?

Yes.

Good. Before we begin I would like to explain how this interview will proceed. You are here because we have some questions about your dossier. Everything that you say here is confidential. Nothing you say here will be told to anyone, especially not the government. We are not a government agency.

These updates are necessary from time to time in order for us to verify facts and to successfully serve the needs of our refugee population. We appreciate your coming today.

Would you like to say anything before we begin this interview?

Yes.

SILENCE.

What?

I was a child once.

THE PROTECTION OFFICER NOTED NOTHING OF IMPORTANCE IN THIS STATEMENT.

What is your name?

Arès Sbigzenou.

What is your date of birth?

June 9, 1980.

You are 27 years old?

Yes.

Where were you born?

In the world's largest francophone city.

Where is that?

Kinshasa.

What is your ethnicity?

Banyamulenge.

What is your father's ethnicity?

My father was Congolese.

Yes, but what is his ethnicity?

I remember one time gathering water with my father, when I was still young. A man approached us and said, "You stink like a Rwandan. I can smell you from the other hill." So I think maybe he was not Congolese. But my mother was not Congolese. She was Banyamulenge.

The Banyamulenge are Congolese.

Yes, she came from the Eastern Congo. Near Kisangani.

What is your father's profession?

He was a locksmith until he died. Now I do not know what he is.

Why did you leave your country?

I have told this story before.

Please tell it again.

It is in my file. It is not a good story. Let me tell you something else.

We have some questions on your file. This is why we need you to tell it again. Why did you leave your country?

The war. The war made me leave.

Why?

They attacked my house.

Who attacked your house?

Our neighbors. Our friends.

What happened exactly?

I have told this story. It is not an easy story. You have it in my file. Why do you not read my file?

Your file is incomplete. Please tell me what happened. When was the attack?

THE PROTECTION OFFICER NOTED THAT THE PRA SEEMED DISTRESSED.

At the end of 1998. After the radio programs. Kill the Rwandans. The Rwandans are not Congolese. Kill the traitors.

Why did they say this on the radio?

Kabila said it. He said the Rwandans were attacking, and that the Tutsis living in the Congo were rebelling. He gave weapons to the Babembe and the Barega.

Who are the Babeme and the Barega?

You do not know?

Tell me.

PRA SEEMS RELUCTANT TO ANSWER QUESTIONS.

They were government forces. The government organized them to kill Tutsis in the Congo.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE. PRA IS NOT AWARE THAT BABEME AND BAREGA ARE INDIGENOUS MAYI-MAYI MILITIAS ARMED BY PRESIDENT KABILA.

Were the Rwandans attacking?

I do not know. My family did nothing. We lived in the neighborhood peacefully. My father made locks.

What are the colors of the Congolese Flag?

Blue and Gold.

What happened?

It was evening. My mother was cooking.

What was she cooking?

Meat, I think. I do not remember. My father had come back from Kinshasa that afternoon. He had closed his shop early. He said that there were rumors that they were killing Banyamulenge in Kinshasa. We knew nothing.

I thought your family lived in Kinshasa. You said in your file that you grew up in Kinshasa.

Our village is part of Kinshasa, but it is maybe two hours from *centreville*. It is called Nonloso. My father's shop was in *centreville*. Every day he worked there. There was no work in our village for a locksmith. No one had locks. Our doors were open to Kinshasa. To everyone.

But that night when my father came home he locked the door. He said he was going to nail it shut, but he didn't. My mother started cooking. For a long time a goat had lived in our back yard. Then that morning my brother hung it from a tree. No one knows why.

Please tell me what happened that night.

Why you would hang a goat I cannot imagine. I hit my brother hard across the face. He was on the floor crying. I was about to hit my brother again when six men came to the door. Other Banyamulenge. They were very frightened and out of breath. They knocked for a long time before my father opened the door. When they came inside they said we would never survive. They said they had seen men burned alive, like tinder. So I did not hit my brother and my father locked the door.

Last time you said four men came to your house. Why do you say six now?

One of them was carrying a baby, so that makes five.

But you say six now? Why six now, when you said four before?

Five, Six. What is the difference? I see you know this story. Why must I tell it again when you know every detail?

Why did they come to your house?

My father's house was the only house with locks. Perhaps that is why they came to us. My father was also well respected in the community. We were not rich, but every year my father hosted a fair. They say Mobutu even came once, before I was born.

So they came for protection?

My father was famous for a game he had created for the fair. Every year it was this game that attracted the most spectators.

Did your father belong to a political party?

I do not think so. He just ran the fair. The morning of the third day of every fair, he arrived at sunrise with three boxes on a cart. He placed the boxes in a circle at the center of the fair. One box was silver, another was gold, and another was wood.

Let us try to concentrate on the attack.

Inside one box was a small airplane and a visa for the United States. This meant that you would move abroad and find success.

Inside another box was a beautiful woman and a cow. This meant that you would not only fall in love with a beautiful woman, but also that you could pay the bride price to marry her.

How big were these boxes? He put a woman inside?

THE PROTECTION OFFICER WROTE SOMETHING DOWN.

In the third box was a lock, which meant that my father would install locks on your house for free.

Everyone wanted the woman or the plane, and no one the lock.

THE PRA CHUCKLED AT THE THOUGHT

What happened during the attack?

But the game was the most interesting part.

I think we should concentrate on why you left the country.

Next to the boxes was an immense clay jug full of keys. It took four men to carry it. There were all sorts of keys inside; small ones, big ones, keys in the shapes of animals, keys that did not even look like keys, but like tools or ornaments.

You could purchase a key for 5 million Zaires. Only the sons of rich men bought them. That way my father paid for the keys he gave away. Or else you won the right to choose a key if you came first in one of the contests. Wrestling, running, long jump, the best

players in the football tournament…the winners of each contest had the right to take one key out of the jug and try it in the three locks.

The winners always tried to guess which keys would fit into the keyholes on the boxes by looking at their teeth and shanks. But my father was clever. He disguised the locks with masks.

Masks?

Over one lock, he put the head of a crocodile. You had to insert the key into its snout and turn.

Over another lock he put the head of a lion, and you had put the key into its jaws.

Over the third lock was the head of a serpent. You had to push the key through its fangs.

Were these religious symbols? Were you attacked for religious reasons?

No. Those fairs were great times for the community. Even the years when no one won. Every year, at least one box would not be opened, and some years they never even found the right key for a single box, there were so many keys in the jug. My father would reach into it and find the right keys and open the boxes just to show that the right keys had really been there, and that the prizes were really in the boxes.

Everyone was happy anyway. It meant more luck for next year. My father left the prizes in the boxes and added one new prize for the next time. So if you opened a box the next year you could win two women or two planes, and this meant that your chances of these things coming true were even better. If there were three prizes in a box, then it was your destiny that this thing would happen.

I remember once, there were three years when no one had found the key to one of the boxes. Then the friend of my older brother, Yan, won the wrestling contest. On the third day he reached into the jug and pulled out a key shaped like a fish, and when he put the key into the mouth of the crocodile it opened.

What was inside?

Inside were three beautiful women and three cows. Yan was not a good-looking man and he was not rich, but afterwards he married the most beautiful girl in our village. No one could figure out how he did it. The cow he gave was not impressive and the parents of the girl had never shown him a particular fondness.

After that, everyone knew that the boxes' predictions worked. So even though my father was a modest locksmith, once a year he was a *grand homme*.

Until the war began. Then the fair lost its spirit. The two years before his death, my father refused to host it anymore.

Which war?

Which war? The war. The war that lasted for 10 years. The war that will last my entire life.

There are two Congolese wars. The first from 1996-1998, the second from 1998-2002.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE. PRA BELIEVES THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAR IN CONGO. INSUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONGO?

Two wars; one war. They are the same war. Mobutu, Kabila. It is the same president. The Banyamulenge are never citizens.

The Banyamulenge were part of the forces that overthrew President Mobutu in 1996.

Maybe. I do not know. All I know is that when I was a child, every one was at the fair. My father would always give a big speech at the end. He said he was glad a humble locksmith could bring so much pleasure to his community. And his closest friend Guli, would yell out every year, "Stop pretending you're so small. You're not that big."

People would laugh. Then we would all go into the village and drink Skol and Malafu. We would drink so much and dance. But then the one war two war began. Everyone was quiet and stopped laughing. The fair died. No one talked with my family, because of my mother; where my mother came from.

What happened during the attack?

I have told this story before. Why cannot I not tell another story?

It is very important for your file.

But I do not want to talk about this.

THE PROTECTION OFFICER NOTED THAT THE PRA SEEMED AGITATED AND LOOKED AROUND NERVOUSLY.

If you do not tell the story, we cannot help you anymore.

What do you want to know? Why men light other men on fire? To listen to them crackle I think. To see what is underneath. Is this what you want to know?

I want to know what happened.

They came. All at once.

Who? Soldiers?

No. The people from my neighborhood.

How long after the strangers arrived?

I do not know. Very little time. A minute. Less. My father locked the door and someone knocked. There was a bad smell of meat burning but my mother did not go to the kitchen because there were shadows in the back yard.

Shadows?

They came over the back fence. Have you ever disturbed a nest of spiders? There are spiders everywhere. They were like this in the backyard. They crawled through the fissures in our walls.

Perhaps that is enough. I stop now?

THE PROTECTION OFFICER BEGAN TO ROCK LIGHTLY BACK AND FORTH ON HER HAUNCHES.

I know this is hard for you, but we need this information for your file. Please continue.

My file. I think my file has replaced me. My face is made of paper.

Please continue.

You have seen spiders in your life? They kill very slowly. I wonder if things that die by spiders arrive at a place where they do not know if they are dead or alive. Maybe they reach a place that is both of these things, life and death, and they see death is not so bad. Maybe better than this world of spiders.

Please focus on what happened. I know this is hard.

I am telling you what happened. Am I not telling you? They killed them. All the men there. All my family. They began with words. "Traitors. Go back to where you come from. We're going to kill you. You are all Rwandans. Traitors." Then there were no more words.

They took my sisters. One. Two. Three.

THE PROTECTION OFFICER SHIFTS UNCOMFORTABLY IN HER CHAIR. THE PRA BEGINS TO SOB AND HAS DIFFICULTY BREATHING.

They beat me. Look at these scars. See here. And here. Look at my back.

THE PRA LIFTS UP HIS SHIRT. THICK RAISED WEALS, LIKE RED SLUGS, NEST ON A FIBROUS MESH OF PALE SCARRING.

They took one of the men. The one with the child. And the smell was the same. I could not believe it. There was a man hitting me with a stick. He was shouting "Traitor!" every time he hit me. But I am thinking, "I cannot believe it. It is the same smell."

The same smell as what? Of what?

The goat. They smell like the goat that's burning. The last thing I remember was seeing the inside of the man's arm. He was still holding the baby, but it was glowing red bones holding fire that smelled like goat.

PRA SOBS AGAIN. FALLS SILENT. PROTECTION OFFICER TURNS ON A FAN WHILE SHE TYPES.

What happened next?

One year, I was 15, almost 16, I won the race. It was the last time my father hosted the fair. All the fastest men in the village ran. The race always took place on the third day of the festival. It was very difficult. You ran across an open field, then through some woods and then back across the same field. There were more than a hundred people that ran that day, and it was very dangerous running through the woods with everyone pushing.

What happened when you woke up?

There was a girl that I was in love with. So I knew I had to win. I never ran so fast and I was lucky, because the two men that were ahead of me tripped over a branch and one of them broke his foot and never ran again. So I won.

Everyone thought I cheated with the key; that I knew which key would go in which lock, because it was my father's contest. But I did not know. I knew only I was in love and for two years before only the box with locks had been opened.

I remember looking into the jug. There were so many keys, like a sea of metal. But I knew right away to take the one with wings. I went to the gold box and put it in the mouth of the lion and turned. But it did not turn. So I went to the crocodile, which was on the wooden box and tried to turn. Nothing. So I walked to the snake, which was on the silver box. I was the last one to go on the third day. No one wanted to let the son of the locksmith go before them.

And we thought maybe that was it. Another fair without a winner. But I put the key between the fangs of the serpent and turned. And it opened.

What was inside?

My destiny was inside. Everything that came afterwards was in that box.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE. PRA SEEMS UNABLE TO MAINTAIN NARRATIVE COHERENCY. DIGRESSES EXTENSIVELY.

What happened next?

Next is in my dossier. Next is when destiny began.

Please what happened?

THE PROTECTION OFFICER SWIVELS ELLIPTICALLY. THE PRA GIVES HER A CONCERNED LOOK.

I woke up. I was not in my home. It was dark. There was a man there, eating. He gave me water. He told me that he had found me in front of my house unconscious and he had brought me to his village. He said I had been asleep for four days.

And your family?

He told me that I had been alone. There was no one in the house. I wanted to go back and look for them, but he said it was too dangerous. They were still hunting Rwandans. He went to Kinshasa for me. He asked my neighbours what happened, but he found nothing.

How far were you from Kinshasa?

60 or 70 kilometers I think.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE. CLAIM THAT A STRANGER FOUND PRA IN FRONT OF HIS HOUSE AND TRANSPORTED HIM 70 KILOMETERS TO TAKE CARE OF HIM IS IMPLAUSIBLE.

Why in your previous declaration did you say it was 100 kilometers when now you say 60 or 70?

Why do you care about these things? One war, two wars, 60 kilometers, 100 kilometers. What are these things to you?

You promised to tell the truth.

I am telling the truth. The truth is not the distance between my house and my neighbor's house. The truth is not whether you call a war one war or two wars. That is not the truth.

Please continue.

I stayed there for two weeks, or maybe three. Whatever it says in my dossier. Then the man told me that there were soldiers looking for Banyamulenge and that it was too dangerous for me to stay.

What was his name?

What name?

The name of the man who helped you.

I do not know.

Please continue.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE.

At night I took a pirogue down the Zaire River. I stayed in it for three days. I was too afraid to travel during the day. Finally I came to a fishing village, very close to Brazzaville. On the weekend the people there went to Brazzaville to shop. I told them nothing about my past. They thought I was Congolais. I lived there for six years.

What was the name of the village?

Dongo.

How did you survive?

I fished.

For six years?

I lived like the people of the village. I was very sick. The conditions of life were hard. The people were uneducated. Their mouths opened but nothing came out. Like fish. I forgot how to talk living there.

Why didn't you leave?

I could not leave. I was not right. It was very hard. I was alone. All the time I was sick.

But after six years you left?

There was a Cameroonian merchant who came to the village once a year to sell things. He helped me very much and we became friends. Finally he offered to take me with him. I went to Cameroon. I tried to work there. But there was nothing for me. I left. I crossed Mali, then Nigeria, then Niger, then Algeria. Then I arrived in Morocco.

When did you enter Morocco?

2004. I think. In the Spring.

Why did you come to Morocco?

I was looking for peace. For a place where I could begin to live again. It was no good in Cameroon. There was no work.

How is your life in Morocco?

It is hard. Very hard. We have no rights here. It is two years now I wait for my foot to be treated. I cannot work. I go everywhere on crutches. I wait every day for the HCR to call me to tell me I will be resettled and my foot will be treated. I wait every day for this phone call that tells me I can be alive again.

The process does not work like that. These things take time.

Yes, I know that the bird does not make his nest in a single day, but two years is too much; it is enough time to build a castle. My bird does not need a castle to live. Just a nest.

We do not offer resettlement. I would urge you to concentrate on local integration.

I have no foot. I cannot work. There is no treatment here. For two years they give me the same medicine. It makes me tired, but the foot does not get better. It is not even a foot anymore. It looks like dough, like someone made a foot out of dough.

Your case is being followed by PALS. You should try to build a future here in Morocco.

They are bad people at PALS. They do not want to help the refugees.

Local integration is the only durable solution offered to you.

I cannot integrate. The Moroccans will never accept me. I am chased out of every apartment because I am African. The children call me names in the street. *Azee*, *Azee*.

Two times my landlord threw me out for no reason. The second time, he would not let me recover my possessions. I lost everything. Then last month I was chased out by my neighbors. The people from the HCR were there. It must be in my dossier.

Did the OMDH follow up when this happened?

What?

We offer juridical protection to refugees. Did you depose a complaint against your landlord?

No. I have no *Carte de Séjour*. What is a court going to do for me? I have no rights.

The law applies equally whether or not you have a Carte de Séjour. If this happens again you should talk to someone at the OMDH.

Ok.

THE PRA BEGINS TO STARE AT THE FLOOR. HE DOES NOT LOOK UP AGAIN WHEN SPEAKING.

Where do you live?

In Salé.

Do you have security issues there? Have you had problems with the people in the neighborhood?

No. It is safe during the day. You cannot walk around at night alone, but I have no problems there, except sometimes.

Were you ever attacked? Have you had trouble with the police?

No. Yes. No.

Is it yes or no? Everything you say here is confidential. It is good to say everything.

No.

Can you please look at me when you speak.

THE PRA DOES NOT LIFT HIS HEAD. THE PROTECTION OFFICER BEGINS TO ROCK BACK AND FORTH MORE NOTICEABLY. HER HANDS SHAKE A LITTLE AS SHE WRITES.

CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT: NEGATIVE. PRA IS SUPPRESSING DETAILS ABOUT PRESENT LIVING CONDITIONS.

Unless you have any questions?

When will I be resettled?

I am sorry, but that is not an option we can offer you at this time.

THE PRA SAYS NOTHING.

Were you satisfied with this interview?

THE PRA GIVES NO RESPONSE. THE GUARD ARRIVES IN HIS LIGHT BLUE UNIFORM.

It is time for you to go now. Unless, do you have any questions?

No.

THE GUARD ESCORTS THE PRA OUT OF THE ROOM, AND DOWN THE NARROW WHITE CORRIDOR.

THE PROTECTION OFFICER RETURNS TO HER OFFICE AND SITS DOWN TO WRITE.

Protection officer notes: Credibility assessment: The PRA's statements are spontaneous and sufficiently detailed and credible on his reasons for leaving the country. His claims of harassment and violence directed against the Banyamulenge in the Western DRC are further substantiated by several reliable sources.
Among these sources are:

> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo: Current treatment of the Banyamulenge people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (June 2003), 11 June 2003, RDC41641.FE, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f7d4e0838.html
>
> > "Accused of having started the war that began in August 1998, the vast majority of the Congolese Tutsis, including the Banyamulenge, were either driven out of or evacuated from Kinshasa and other areas controlled by the Congolese government, and relocated in third countries."
>
> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC): The Banyamulenge (Munyamulenge) ethnic group; whether members of this group are targeted by government authorities, 1 December 2000, RDC35883.F, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f7d4dfe1c.html
>
> > "The Banyamulenge (literally, the people of Mulenge, a small community located near Uvira at the foot of the Itombwe mountains in South Kivu) were originally Tutsi animal breeders who arrived in Zaire one or two centuries ago. For a long time they have been considered to be fully Zairian; however, they tend to live self-sufficiently and have a sometimes difficult relationship with certain local ethnic groups.

Since the late 1960s, Tutsi refugees from Rwanda have tended to gather under the name Banyamulenge so that they can be registered as full Zairian citizens (Feb. 1997)."
"In its 30 March 2000 bulletin, Refugees International reveals that "hate speech and communal violence have increased alarmingly in the provinces of North and South Kivu," and that this violence is directed at an estimated 150,000 Banyamulenge, who are at risk of violent attack by Mayi-Mayi militia [pro-Kabila tribal militia from North and South Kivu, see RDC33309.F of 14 December 1999]. According to the same source of information, Congolese authorities have questioned the Banyamulenge's right to citizenship despite the fact that they have made the Congo their home for two hundred years (Refugees International 30 Mar. 2000). This was a key issue in the 1996 war that brought President Kabila to power [in May 1997] (ibid.)."

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation/United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (ACCORD/UNHCR). 28 November 2002. "Democratic Republic of Congo Country Report."
Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2003. Rapport mondial 2003. "Congo."
http://www.hrw.org/french/reports/wr2k3/congo.htm
Minorities at Risk Project. 10 November 2002. Gil Peleg. "Tutsis in the Democratic Republic of Congo."
http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/data/drctuts.htm

There were nonetheless credibility problems with respect to the following material elements of the claim:

The PRA lacked knowledge about the number of Congolese Wars and the composition of the rebel groups involved in them.
It is highly improbable that a stranger discovered the PRA unconscious before his doorstep and transported him over 70 kilometers to his village.
The PRA cannot remember the name of the man who allegedly saved his life.
PRA manifests a strong penchant for fabrication and digressed extensively during the interview.

The above mentioned credibility problems are sufficient to cast doubt on the applicant's claim. It is likely that any country to which we submit an RRF will reject the request

for reasons of credibility. Therefore I cannot recommend the PRA for Resettlement.

THE SENIOR PROTECTION OFFICER CLOSED THE PINK FOLDER, NUMBER 918-04C-04606 AND LAID IT GENTLY ON A SMALL RIDGE OF DOSSIERS THAT CIRCUMFERENCED HER DESK AND REACHED NEARLY TO HER WAIST. ALL WERE BEING CONSIDERED FOR RESETTLEMENT.

Kinshasa *1986-1995*

I was a child once, and I was born in the world's largest francophone city.

"Kinee-kin-kin-chasa, abachasa-kin-ku," he sung as a child beneath the Hagenia trees in the backyard his parents shared with two other families. He was waiting for his father, who was going to take him into *centreville* and show him the locksmithery for the first time.

But his father was busy. One of their neighbour's children had a worm. Arès' father was holding the child down, while the boy's mother slowly extracted the parasite. It was a delicate process. If part of the worm broke off in the child's intestines it would regenerate.

The boy was screaming every time his mother tugged, "*Ca fait mal! Ca fait mal!*" A woman was patting his forehead with a wet rag, but it did not seem to help.

Arès ran over to the crowd that was watching. Already he could see it; a long glucose tape, which when released began to twirl elegantly like a sparrow at dusk.

For weeks the entire neighborhood had listened to the boy's hoarse cries of pain. Finally the nub of the worm sprouted from his rear. The children had been told not to drink the stale water in the basin beside the field where they played, but not everyone had paid attention.

Now the boy's distended belly wobbled on the wooden table at every jerk of his mother's arms. With mute fascination Arès watched the boy's bottom disgorge a thing of slithers.

At last it was out; a rope gooped with offal, flaring small hooks that still gripped shreds of intestinal lining.

It was an unkillable thing. Cutting it in pieces would just mean more worms, so they cremated it in a small pyre built for this purpose. There was a light blue hiss and then Arès' father collected his hand, and navigating between piebald pigs they walked down a road lined with palm fronds and aluminum-roofed shacks.

His father was a locksmith in a community without locks. Windows were open or covered by tarp, doors listed off their frames and yards bled into neighboring plots. To be a locksmith one had to work in the city center and so his father commuted two hours every morning to his little shop in Kinshasa.

They arrived at the *marché central*. Hawkers cried out their wares and Arès hopped from foot to foot in excitement. He had been looking forward to this day for months. But the vans were unpredictable. It could be a minute or an hour before one came.

An eternity passed, and then, at last, a van to sheared down a compost-strewn road walled by market stalls. Inside was a shaking jumble of limbs. Arès' father lifted him high and wedged him into a clucking feathery crevice near the fifth window.

The boy gazed intent between dusty grills at the first blurrings of land to his memory.

Brown, green and white; cloudfalls of rushing ochre, bloomy pixels kicked up by vulcanized tires, slow-moving beige domiciles, a sharp isosceles of stone painted with an Olympic torch, mint-green bowers lassoed by vines, minute after minute till asphalt rolled over dirt, granite barriers sprouted from earth, and buildings reared grey, silver and glass in place of trees.

They dismounted in Ngaba near the *Cité des anciens combattants*. The locksmithery was at the corner of *rue lobo* and *avenue de l'université*, not far from the *cité universitaire*. Scores of well-off students lived in the area and they liked to have their locks made by someone from the country who charged reasonable prices. Of course, the *Zaires* they paid went a long way two hours from *centreville* in the forgotten periphery.

The father and son twisted through a warren of boutiques till they reached the store. Arès' father furled up the rumbling sheet metal grate and in they went. The lights went on.

Years thereafter, countless years of growing, Arès visited this shop, worked in this shop.

He loved the luminous clutter of the place. A room so small that both of them could hardly fit, with a countertop they had to duck under anytime they busied in and out. And behind them an imbricate symphony: shanks, and whirls, keybits and handles, stout brass hooks and bunker-like sanders jangling for attention.

Shortly after his twelfth birthday, Arès began his apprenticeship at the smithery. That same year the first bills worth 5 million *Zaires* found their way into circulation and the old money had long since been deemed worthless. A year later the *Zaire* was replaced with the *Nouveau Zaire*, but the new currency did not remain stable for long and Arès' father began to accept only American dollars in exchange for his services.

When he turned thirteen, Arès left school to become a full time locksmith. Twelve months of hammering out keybits, milling bolt stumps, and jousting with the lathe had convinced him that this was his calling in life. This shop, working with his father, the exciting bustle of Kinshasa during the day and in the evening a riverside hamlet livened by the golden sparks of fireflies and the singing of cicadas.

Beyond this conviction nothing else mattered. The splintering of the government, Zaire's economic woes and its red flares of civil unrest—all this was of as much concern to Arès as the erratic migrations of nomads across far-off deserts. But he was unlike anyone in his family. At times, even his father found his complacency disarming.

In addition to Arès were five other children, three girls and two boys. Every morning they filled the house with their ricocheting voices and the sounds of their living, and in the evening they flooded the dining room with chatter about their days.

Félix, the oldest of the brothers, was also the most loquacious. At seventeen he was preparing the state exam to enter the Business School at the University of Kinshasa and already his head spun with ambition. The ailing of Mobutu's regime had kindled hopes of sweeping change for Zaire, and like many of his schoolmates, Félix could rattle on endlessly about a new politics and the end of one-man rule.

Over dinner, while Arès and his father calmly chewed their meals, and the younger children scrambled under the table, Félix monologued about world affairs. He passed Paris and Belgium along with the bread, and salted plates of steaming Cassava with democratic reforms. He was going to pursue a degree in Finance and move to London or Brussels, places Arès could not locate on a map.

"Once Mobutu is gone," He said when they were nearly done eating. "Zaire will have a tremendous future. It is the largest French speaking country in the world. It is swimming in resources. It just needs responsible men in the government."

Arès' father laughed and shook his head. "The big fish do not keep to the small streams. I believe the government will always attract the biggest crooks."

"All this corruption is the result of Mobutu's leadership." Félix replied, his handsome face peering confidently over the table. "When he is gone, things will change. It is not like this in Europe. I will go there and see how they fish their criminals out. Then I will bring back their nets and do the same thing here."

Arès looked admiringly at his brother's wide smart brow, his knowing nose and his dimpled cheeks. It was hard not to be swayed by those two bright eyes aglitter with conviction.

"I am not so sure European ideas will help us." Arès' father replied. "The Congo did not fare so well last time it was under European influence."

"Last time?" Félix chortled loudly. "Father, what are you saying? Who defends Mobutu but the French? Who is helping him plunder the country?"

"Then what is there to learn from them?" Ares' father creased his brow and began to nibble thoughtfully on a fin.

Félix leaned in conspiratorially as he spoke. "Here, the Europeans back only criminals but there…" His hand seized his main course, "…There they fry them like fish!" He ripped off the backbone and bit with gusto into the white and brown folds of meat, smacking his lips comically. Even Arès' father smiled. Then his face grew serious again.

"But do you think European nets will be big enough to fish out the Zaire?" Arès' father shook his head. "This is not some puny European river. Think of its name."

Arès oldest sibling, Yika, coughed loudly from the corner. She was nestled into a wingchair beneath a funnel of light, studying for an upcoming exam. "'Zaire,'" she said, "means 'the river that swallows all other rivers.'"

Félix turned and looked at his sister. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and a pair of bookish lenses budded rectangular on the oval of her face. As always she was dressed conservatively for her age, in unpleasant blacks and grays. Nevertheless, her considerable attractiveness was a constant source of discussion among the men in the village. At one time or another nearly all of them had tried to court her, but she beat them back with her thick, legal tomes and a studious absorption that was often taken for disdain.

"That is it exactly." Ares' father continued. "Politics here are dangerous, my son. Every time someone tries to divert the great river there is a flood, and many people drown."

Félix leaned back in his chair, his eyes suddenly darkening. "How can you put up with it?" He said coldly. "Do you not understand what it is like for us? If you are young there is no opportunity no matter how hard you work. You have to be related to Mobutu to get a job. Is this not just as dangerous? You have always told me, *quand un lion mange une mauvaise personne et il n'est pas tué, demain il mangera une bonne personne*.[1] Look around, our country is being eaten alive by big-cat Mobutu."

He smacked his palm down on the table. The clatter of childrens' tumbling suddenly ceased, and three small heads poked inquisitively above the rim of the table like a bundle of dolls.

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[1] When a lion eat a bad person, and he is not killed, tomorrow he will eat a good person.

"This is true, this is true." The father softened his voice with concern. "But they say as well, *qui veut chercher des puces sur la queue du léopard, qu'il fasse attention*.[2] If you go out to hunt the leopard, he may eat you as well. What do you think Arès?"

"What?" Arès replied.

That afternoon, in the van on the way back to Nonloso, there was a girl sitting behind him. When she stood to get off, her hand grazed his shoulder and his whole body was still tingling from her touch. All he knew was that her name was Christelle, and that she reminded him of those ecstatic dawns beside the river, when its waters were smeared with honeyed light. Since then he had not been able to concentrate on anything. A secret voice kept whispering, over and over again, that she was the one for him.

Félix laughed. "Arès does not have a thought in his head. He is someone to fix locks, not save a country."

Yika's wide, intelligent eyes fired with excitement. "I agree with Félix. Zaire cannot heal itself."

"Patience." Arès' father said. "Patience. I was like you at your age." He leaned back in his chair, and a shadow fell across his face. "But change comes in its own time. It demands that we wait. *L'arbre de la patience a des racines amères, mais ses fruits sont doux.*"[3]

"This country has been patient for over thirty years, and the situation has only gotten worse." Félix said, springing to his feet. A piece of silverware clattered to the floor startling Arès out of his ruminations. "When there is sickness in a tree, it must be razed to the ground. When the entire forest is sick, we set it on fire. The fire burns away everything. Only then can healthy plants begin to grow."

"These sound like European ideas." Arès' father said. He rested his strong, steady hands, curled into fists, on the table. His children could see the veins snake up and down his powerful forearms. "We have known here for a long time that the same fire that warms our hands can also destroy the entire village. This is why we use only local fires, and then only carefully."

"Local fire, foreign fire, what is the difference? Who cares?" Félix replied.

"Remember, Mobutu was educated in Europe and now he is the biggest crook of them all. But he began like you. He began with ideas of a new politics for Africa, and look where it led him. Think of the name he took."

"Mobutu Sese Seko?"

"No. His full name. *Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga*. The all-powerful warrior who goes from conquest to conquest, leaving only fire in his wake. Is this the type of fire you would bring to Zaire?"

"Then where should I go? And what should I bring back? I will not fish any new ideas out of that idiot river." Félix shot a condescending look in the direction of the rolling Zaire.

Arès' father smiled again. "I think if you look around you will find more useful things here than in Europe. Especially if you want to help the Congo. That is why they say, *la*

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[2] Whoever goes looking for fleas on the leopard's tail should watch out.

[3] The tree of patience has bitter roots, but its fruits are sweet.

connaissance, comme le feu, nous la cherchons chez les voisins.[4] The fire that will help us is in the hands of our neighbors."

Arès' attention wandered again, and the voices around him gently condensed into a well-known tune, a fugue and counter-fugue that had played in that house a thousand times before. He did not need the words. He simply loved to listen to the sturdy rumble of his father's voice, as dependable as the whetstones on which they honed their tools. He turned to his father for guidance, whenever there was some secret about the world he needed to unlock.

But Félix's melody inevitably carried the day. He spoke with vibrant inflections and everything he said sounded like a string of notes plucked from some stirring national hymn. His influence on the rest of the family was manifest. Already Yika talked about continuing her law studies in Paris. Already, Arès' younger brother and sisters knew things about China and the United States that he could hardly fathom.

It was no different in their village, or in *Centreville*, where Félix went to *lycée*. Tall, languid and handsome, people instinctively flocked to him. Every day after school, Félix convened a small band of disciple-friends, and spoke about Zaire as if they were all marinating in a stew of promise, and only had to reach out their bowls to fill them with greatness.

His friends were like him, puffed up with Zaire's future and contemptuous of the mediocrity and complacency around them. They were all going to post themselves abroad and courier back enough civilization to reforge the entire country.

Félix did his best to open his younger brother's eyes, but Arès was unimpressed. What better place could there be than their small village with Kinshasa nearby? What could he possibly find out by leaving? If he stayed he would be like his father, a man with all the keys.

So each brother staked out his share of their hereditary kingdom. Félix passed the state examination with one of the highest marks and joined the incoming class at the University of Kinshasa. Arès continued to work in the smithery, learning every day more secrets of the trade.

Another year passed, and for once business was inordinately good. Thefts had increased markedly at the university and the shop was contracted to install security systems and locks on several administrative buildings. It was a massive undertaking for the two men. Hard at work, Arès barely noticed as twelve more months of his life flowed briskly by and were swallowed up by the river.

Then in 1995 trouble flooded in from Rwanda in the East and the economy flagged in the West. Business paltered, picked up again, and finally collapsed. All along *rue lobo* shops lay dormant, shuttered, abandoned.

Ever hopeful, Arès' father refused to shut his doors. From time to time a steadfast customer ghosted down the deserted lane and peeked into the smithery, bashful, half-expecting to find no one inside. Father and son waited for these rare reprieves, biding their time before streets that grew hungrier with every passing week.

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[4] Knowledge, like fire, we look for in our neighbors' home.

Then the last customers vanished and the city slept. Its hot dusty avenues gasped as they dreamt, and the months spun out like a long incubation.

Only twice a week now they commuted from Nonloso to *centreville*. Business had been bad before. It would get better. But more time passed, and no one came. Even Félix and Yika began to steer clear of the shop, inventing every excuse not to drop by in the pauses between their classes. The day's hours deflated like an empty gourd, begging to be filled.

If there was electricity, Arès and his father spent their time watching one of two flickering channels on a grainy three-color T.V. There was almost always a football match on. Otherwise there were the swaggering state programs, and old French comedies with Louis de Funès or Pierre Richard that made Arès shake with laughter.

Only the evening news was unbearable; especially how it began. Whenever the image of Mobutu Sese Seko, descending through the clouds from heaven, flared on the screen, Arès' father unplugged the machine.

If the electricity was out, which was most of the time, Arès staved off boredom by picking locks, or watching his father cobble together queerish keys with totemic heads and long molded shanks to throw in the massive amphora when it came time for the fair.

The Fair

June, 1996

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

—Ecclesiastes

Her body was a parade.

Arès watched her snake between the three glistening boxes and run her hand down the prepossessing vase. Her name was Christelle Abdoulay. She was a year younger than him and the daughter of a cobbler.

Every man within half a mile was watching her. Her long slender frame was folded in two colorful Pagnes, canary yellows and sapphire blues embellished with lilting peacock eyes that undulated as she walked. She was the only creature moving through that immense meadow of wildflowers, and colorful as she was, with purple lobelias strewn in her hair, she could have paused in a floral patch and vanished.

At the edge of the clearing, beneath the broad flat crowns of silk-cotton trees, bumbles of children frolicked between palm fronds and picnickers. Wooden tables were larded with cassava and chikwanga and plates of rice and plantains topped by grilled fish. Even treasured bottles of Skol and Primus were in abundance that day (the village had organized months in advance to have enough for the fair).

But the bottles would not last and Arès looked longingly at golden labels he would never touch. Then he raked his foot into the dirt, sneaking a toe underneath the long yellow rope that marked the starting line.

Barely 16, he was wearing only white FIFA shorts and his lucky necklace: a key sheathed in golden ormolu that hung off a metal chain. He was straight of jaw with lucid eyes and a plumb nose that gabled a wide mouth often busy with laughter.

A man twice his size jostled him on the right, and Arès nearly fell over. He stepped aside and stretched his back and arms. He was lean and not particularly tall, but his body seemed carved for speed. He had been preparing for the race for over two months, and recently formed muscles glistened on his skin like soft watery stones.

Unhurriedly, he retook his position at the starting line. All around him runners stamped the ground impatiently and cast sour looks at the fairgrounds. The winner from the previous year, a goatherder by the name of Salifou, was laughing loud beside the picnic tables. The race would wait on him and he was taking his time.

Arès watched him out of the corner of his eye, weighing his chances. Salifou's limbs were extended and knobbly, and he ran with long, gulping strides that devoured the trail beneath him. He would be tough to pass. Worse, he was likely to knock Arès to the ground if he tried to edge by him in the woods.

Arès' older sister Yika was partially to blame for this. Like many men in Nonloso, Salifou had practically thrown himself at her feet, and in a moment of boredom or irritation, she had trod him under. Afterwards he badmouthed her to anyone who would listen. When Yika found out about it, she light-heartedly laughed and told an inward

leaning group of girls, "*Monsieur* Salifou can say whatever he wants, but it won't change the fact that he has the head of a goat."

The girls raced home to their families and the nickname "goat-face" spread like wildfire through the village. It stuck to Salifou, as much owing to the animals he tended as to his high cheekbones and strangely cut eyes. Two weeks later, a fistfight broke out between Salifou and Félix, and both families were called on to apologize.

Neither party had ever really forgiven the other. Still laughing Salifou shot Arès a mocking glance, and then quieted as Félix strolled a little too close, trailed by a jostling band of university friends. After they passed, he made some sort of crude joke, and discharged a shriek of laughter that caught everyone's attention.

A golden bottle, pearled with condensation, tipped disorderedly in his hands.

Times were not good, had not been good for a while. The soldiers' riots in Kinshasa, the hyperinflation, the schismed government, the loss of the Lake Kivu region first to the Tutsi rebels and now to the Hutu paramilitaries. The authorities seemed absent. It was even rumored that Mobutu had cancer. It was impossible to know. The "Leopard of Kinshasa", the Big Man himself, had been holed up in his jungle palace near Angola for almost two years.

No one knew how long Zaire would last.

The faregoers celebrated in their own fashion, trying not to think of unpleasant things. Some were brasher than normal, speaking arrant thoughts and making climactic gestures. People were a bit too drunk, talking a nudge too loud. It was the last day of the fair, and the past two days had been disrupted by several brawls.

Others, like Arès' father, seemed uncharacteristically circumspect. It was impossible not to notice that certain groups that had always intermingled now kept their distance.

In a cluster beneath the immense crown of a Mahogany tree, some of Mobutu's more fervent supporters were uniformed in leopard print toques and martial abacosts. They looked like a pride of jungle cats. Two of them even held traditional tufted spears, a symbol of the Zairianiasation folly that the president had inflicted on the country.

In former years, Arès' maternal uncle Guli could have been found capering in front of them, hooting like a chimpanzee and yelling something about digging up his ancestral roots. But this year he kept close to his friends and talked softly.

The felines were conversing heatedly with three or four Rwandan Hutus, newcomers to the region. There were hundreds of them streaming into Kinshasa every day, but these were the first to trickle out to the village.

Arès had heard rumors of war and more in the East. But the East was impossibly far off and insubstantial to a young man about to assure his future.

On the eve of the first day of the fair, Arès had been loping along the river's edge, returning from a late afternoon run. He was about to turn towards the village when he saw a half-silhouette capped by a diaphanous green foulard.

He slowed to a halt beside her. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

"It's too hot in the town. I wanted to go for a walk by the water where it's cool."

"These aren't safe times," He said. "You shouldn't be walking alone. I'll walk you back."

"Maybe it will be more trouble if I walk with you."

“No, because I am going to marry you.” He replied.

“Oh really?” She laughed like a cascade of water. Her eyes seemed curiously immense in the waning light. Like enormous goblets that he could drink from. “You see, already I have trouble. A few minutes ago I was walking alone and I was free, and now I’ve started walking with someone and I am a married woman. I think it is safer if I walk alone.”

He tried to take her hand but she skipped away.

“Is it not better to be married?” He asked.

“And where will we live when you marry me?”

“Here.” He said surprised. “Where else.”

“I don’t want to live here.”

“We can move to Kinshasa then.” He replied. “My family’s business is there.”

“But I don’t want to live in Kinshasa.”

“Where do you want to live then?” His eyes screwed together, perplexed.

“Somewhere better. Somewhere not here.” She gestured indistinctly towards the river.

“Brazzaville? Why would you want to go there? It’s a city of beggars. They clean our toilettes.”

She laughed again, like light bursting through leaves.

“There are many men here that want to marry me.” She said, tears of mirth drizzling down her cheeks.

“Yes, but I am going to win the race in three days, and I am going to pick the key that will open the box with the beautiful woman. And since you’re the most beautiful woman here I am going to marry you.”

She wound the green foulard tighter about her hair as they walked.

“So your father told you which key it is. But why do you think you are going to win the race? There are many men faster than you in the village. ”

“My father would never tell me which key it is. Also, it wouldn’t work if I knew which key it was. It’s been three years since anyone opened a box. Whoever finds the right key will marry you.”

“I did not know my fate was already decided. And I wanted to move away. How sad.” She turned her head away from him towards the river where a bluish heron skimmed low upon the water. Galaxies of mosquitoes fogged the air.

“We can move wherever you like.”

“And what if you pick another box? What if you open the box with the planes? Then you’ll have to move away without me.”

“That won’t happen.” Arès replied. He reached out for her hand again and this time he caught it. “I am going to run faster than you can believe. Faster than that bird is flying.”

“We’re here.” She said. He looked up and before he knew it she had unclasped her hand and sped between two adobe huts that marked the perimeter of the village.

He wanted to give chase, but something nameless held him back. Not far from the river’s edge, he squatted down amidst the ghostly roots of a Silk Cotton Tree and watched her melt into moving shadows as if passing through a portal into another world.

He was looking at her now, while last year's winner, cocksure of himself, took his place at the center of the front line. Arès had come in twentieth the year before, and though he found himself among the vanguard runners, he was far over to the left. There were nearly two hundred men entered in the race.

A high whistle, shrill and stuttering, stabbed through the fairground bustle. Then silence. It was the signal for the race to begin. Breaths came hot and short. Muscles bunched and slid beneath taut human hides.

Arès's father lifted the ceremonial cane, crested high with plumage, and let it fall against the stone below with an almost deferential rap.

The earth condensed, dented and bunched, beneath the instantaneous press of four hundred feet. Then the meadow shuddered and the afternoon air cleft into a thousand moving vectors.

Arès darted forward, shoving to get in front. The course narrowed quickly as it moved from the open meadow into the jungle. Getting caught behind a slow runner where it was difficult to pass would mean falling irreparably behind.

Soles pounded through the grasslands, and the air hummed with the shuttling of startled insects. Arès kept his mouth as thin as possible while he ran. Around him erupted salvos of hacks as racers inhaled the whirring things. Arès punched ahead.

200 meters gone and a group of thirty men had already separated themselves from the pack. With 100 meters to go until tree-line, a total mêlée erupted at the lead. There was something acrid in the air and shoulders ground together with more force than they ever had in the past. Arès watched two close friends tussle their legs and rejoiced as the faster one fell to the ground.

50 meters to go. The pack closed ranks.

One of Arès' neighbors moved to block him, but he goaded his elbow into the man's flank and stole ahead.

20 meters to go. His body, sore from two months of constant exertion, sent shivering complaints through thighs. He gritted his teeth and ran.

10 meters.

Someone else tumbled to his left, and Arès twisted around to catch one last glimpse of Christelle leaning fatidically against the massive amphora of keys.

The path darkened.

Arès was fourth as the runners entered the forest. They were advancing now in single file, hopping fallen branches and canting into the sudden turns. In about 100 meters the path would begin to widen again until it struck its largest span at the river crossing half a kilometer off.

Arès had tested the waters the night before and he knew they were deep if he went straight in, but that there was a rise in the riverbed if he swung a few meters upstream.

He knew every stretch of the course, every log, every ditch, every low branch, every conceivable short cut. He had run the race every day for two months, imagining the runners beside him, imaging the prize waiting for him at race's end.

The path widened and he strummed ahead of a fisherman named Moussa. Then it was just him and the two fastest runners in the village. The winner from last year, Salifou, and a friend of his brother's named Diomande. Both of them, he knew, desired Christelle, and both of them were swifter than he.

The two men were vying ahead of each other, angling for an advantage, while five meters behind he was struggling to keep up. His breath rasped hot against his lungs, and he began to swing his arms, trying to gain purchase on the steeply rising trail.

His footing went suddenly awry and bramble and pricker bushes lashed his torso like small licks of flame. He slowed a bit, but felt Moussa hot on his heels. Then four others wrapped him on either side as the trail began to plane outwards.

The jungle receded and the route swung broad and down and the river rose into view. Though only a small tributary of the Zaire, it frothed with abundance.

There were twenty runners at the front; Salifou and Diomande, the sharp cusps of a rushing phalanx. Forty feet pounded rhythmically against brown dirt, rock and snapping twigs; a symphony of heavy breaths, synchronic arms, and deep complicity.

For a moment Arès forgot the race, forgot Christelle, forgot even himself. He glided through pure immanence; step, thrum, step, bound, pivot off rock, dodge an arm, step, step, step, the pounds and grunts of a score of others contending beside him. They floated now, and each of their buoyant steps announced that deep meaninglessness which is the essence of freedom, and everything seemed tinged with a nimbus of light. He felt jubilant, invincible, like he could reach out and crush the world.

Then Salifou and Diomande splashed side-by-side into the water and flooded downstream bawling for help. Four runners swerved left, racing along the riverbank, trying to gain on the two men spilling like trout through a torrent of cataracts.

Arès cut right up the bank, seeking a way across. The river had swelled in the night, fed by summer rains. He raised his eyes, and picked out a minute Diomande grafted onto an outhanging limb, and Salifou nowhere in sight.

Some of the other runners began to wade cautiously into the flood slightly upstream, clasping each others' hands. Arès ramped into the jungle, bursting through veils of green. He had planned for this. Fifty meters upstream there was a massive Silk Cotton Tree that had been struck by lightning and its coruscated remains bridged half the river.

Arès leapt onto the blackened limb like he had practiced, picked up speed running across it and sprung with all his might for the far shore.

Water engulfed him. He felt himself in a coiling wetness that spewed forth as if into an abyss. A rock jarred against his chest and pinwheels of color burst upon his inner eye. His whole body was a scudding tumble of froth.

His foot raked the silt bottom and he pushed desperately against the sliding muck. Then the world dervished and fluxed, and all was fluid again and splashing turvy. His breath began to leave him. Water pressed hard against his mouth.

But in that liquid confusion rough skin clasped against his palm, and he felt himself hoisted towards the drought of the sky. He coughed and spattered and heaved. The frontrunners had yoked their arms and forded the river as a unit. The third man in that human mesh had caught Arès, and tossed him towards the shore.

When all fourteen were across Moussa gave a loud shout, "*Allons-y*!"

And the race was on to the slap and cry of several who clacked gripless back against the mud, and the sputtering of those who heaved forward into the slashing vegetation. A second flank of racers had massed on the far riverbank and were stringing themselves across, with the vanguard loop about mid-river, and they too let fly watery shouts.

Arès fell into a long lope third once again, but this time Moussa and a young man named Buisha were spearing the run. After the river, the trail looped downhill and rounded back to the far side of the meadow. The wet spank of their feet against slick ground, like the thrumming of drums, the brittle thwacks of bramble, the whistle of bearded insects, the impossible jungle clatter, amidst all this Arès ran.

The forest was damp, wet and close. He felt his breath coming short and insufficient, his concentration broken by minor concussions of leaves and sprigs against his face. Soon they would be at the forest's edge and already a distance yawned between the front three and the rest of the runners, the reports of their grunts and blunders receding with every lunge ahead.

A buzzing rose in Arès' head, and he leaned in and forward, concentrating on the tumble of the four legs before him, heckling his will. Everything burned and already a soreness lived in his arms.

A long stretch and then dry red dirt rolled over the wet slap of leaves. The path swerved invisible around a bend.

The two men disappeared. A shout shocked out ahead and Arès pitched violently aside. The frontrunners lay toppled over a decaying trunk beyond the tall spike of a branch.

Arès rolled onto the hard packed dirt, then yanked himself to his feet and sprinted on, hastily looking back as a voice he knew belonged to Moussa gave a tremendous cry of pain. In the narrow window of his glance he caught the last lash of a diamond-patterned snake slithering into the brush.

He ran on.

Minutes later an immense light inundated the forest. He broke into the blinding glare of the meadow to lively cheers. Half a kilometre to go. He swished headlong through the powdery grassland amidst fanfares of flowers, his body crunched in a strange lope, an alchemy of exultation and pain. At last, with heaving lungs and the first twitches of a cramp he staggered over that invisible demarcation which signaled his triumph.

His father clasped him in a proud embrace and pressed a golden bottle into his hand. "I saved this for you."

Arès kissed his father and setting the drink aside, stalked purposefully through the festive crowds seeking out Christelle. Behind him the second cohort of runners beat across the finish line to winnowing ovations.

Limning the crowd, he espied her far off, half hidden by a cove of gladioli and nestled between the massive buttress roots of a grey-speckled tree.

He set himself directly in the sun's glare. "I told you I would win."

"Where are Diomandé…and Salifou?" She replied. "They were ahead of you going into the forest."

"They will come." He said. "Do you not want to congratulate the winner?"

"It does not make sense. You were alone when you crossed the finish line. How did you get so far ahead of the other runners?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I am much faster than I was last year."

She stroked his hand and smiled at him. "Sit down next to me."

He wedged himself between a spiraling root and the soft bow of her side. He could feel the suppleness of her skin through the thin layers of cloth that separated their hips. "You pulled some trick, didn't you? You cut through the forest?"

“No. How can you say that? I won by being the best.” He struggled to contain his irritation. “Diomandé and Salifou were not strong enough. They could not make it across the river.”

“Oh no.” she said, and he saw fear spark black in her eyes.

“They’re fine. They’re fine.” He gave a big-man laugh. “Last I saw they were hanging onto branches downstream crying for their mothers.”

Her body reared out and away from his. “But did they make it out?”

He stood up angrily. “Do not worry about them. Their friends went to save them.” Without looking back, he strode towards the fairgrounds.

As he reached the first picnic table, Diomandé and Salifou emerged into a fury of light bearing Moussa on a makeshift stretcher of deadwood. Before them Buisha ran, waving his arms, shouting for help.

That afternoon the ceremony of the drawing of the keys began. The three boxes glittered in the afternoon sun, one of burnished gold, one of gleaming silver, one of umber wood. Above them towered a flagpole with a large green pennant at whose centre rippled a flaming torch in a yellow circle. The rest of the fairgrounds were festooned with pageants of kanga cloths.

A long wending line of some fifty-five men snaked between hillocks crowned with taut brooms of barnyard grass.

At the head of the line, the amphora loomed like the relic of a forgotten myth. No one knew where Arès’ family had gotten a hold of it, but it had been with them, according to family lore, for countless generations. It topped the tallest man in the village by at least a meter and was elephantine in girth. Well over a thousand keys of all dimensions fit comfortably inside.

To collect their prize, the men had to climb a rickety wooden ladder lashed together with raffia fibers. From the rim it was impossible to reach beyond the top stratum of keys, and so the contestants often descended into the bowels of the jar to mine out their luck.

Arès took his place at the back of the line and watched figure after figure crab into the wide maw seeking what had not been found for years. Each time a hand shot skywards, clutching some wag of a key, its shank molded into flung wings, or a crocodile’s grin, or a hooked fish, he prayed inwardly that it would not fit a lock.

One by one, the amphora regurgitated the men. They gathered, gaunt silhouettes in the fading afternoon light. From each of their hands dangled an incantatory key.

The beer had run out and the spectators had turned to potent jugs of sugary dibondo and bitter malafu. Boisterous shouts of encouragement issued from the increasingly bawdy crowd. Twice, an excited chorusing broke out as the spectators dueled traditional songs.

But when Arès emerged from the mouth of the jar, and took his place among that stock-still host, silence settled over the fairgrounds.

An apparition emerged from the forest wearing a garguantan wooden mask, a meter in height, with deep slanting eyes and rouged lips. Arès knew it was and it was not his father. The apparition carried a traditional shield in its right hand and a tufted spear in its left. Its arms swung together and the spear shocked against the shield three times.

A voice rang out from the depths of the mask. “Now we shall see to whom

fortune promises great things!"

One by one shadows detached from that rustle of men and passed from the aureate lion to the wooden crocodile to the silver snake. Such was the quiet that Arès could hear the wingflaps of midges swishing beside his ears. Each time a key thrust into the lock-jaws the silence deepened, and fists clenched, fearing or hoping for a click. One by one disappointment extended its reign, and a laconic calm settled over the fairgrounds.

Fifty-four shadows sighed back to the picnic tables, melting into the statuesque crowd. Arès tightened his grip on his key. He had forged the bow and the shank himself and sculpted them after ocean waves. But, his father had fashioned all the keybits, so Arès could not say if his choice would turn any of the locks.

Knowing his father's superstitious logic, though, he was sure that if it did work, it would only open in the crocodile's mouth. Water for Water.

A murmur rose in the crowd as he headed straight for the umber box. He plunged the shank deep into the grinning jaws till only the last of the wavelets could be seen lapping beyond the tip of the snout. Then he snapped his hand to the right.

Stuck.

He jiggled the bow, and then reinserted the device into the keyway. Stuck again.

He backed up confused. The meadow was bathed in a crimson light, and he saw a heron swoop low over the distant river. The apparition clapped spear and shield together producing a metallic boom.

"Go on!"

Arès approached the lion and with little hope pushed in the key. He pulled it out again dejected. Only the serpent was left.

The fifty-fifth man approached the silver box, its surface spooled with coppery secretions in the dying light. He could hardly make out the edges of the snake and he glided his finger along its jutting tongue to find the lock-plug. He glanced left, scanning the crowd unsuccessfully for his brothers. Dusk had swallowed every human trait, and Arès looked upon a faceless and silent multitude. His body trembled. Then a light electric surge travelled down his arm and burst upon his fingers.

The key turned like a thunderclap.

For a moment, the only sound in that immense glade was the whistle of the birds and the drone of insects. Then the spectators exploded with bottled-up emotion. Drums pounded into rhythm, and flames spouted from dozens of torches. Three years of unluck at last undone.

Arès' brothers were whistling and dancing in large eccentric circles, and he could see his friend Yan swinging a pretty girl in a floral dress, her toes grazing the tall tips of grass.

Christelle had twined her arms around one of the torches, and he looked at her with all the light of destiny and then pulled open the serpent's mouth. Out of that silver cave tumbled a plane. Then two more, and Arès hopped in slight pain as one plummeted directly onto his left foot.

He bent down and picked up the airfoils, holding them high to the crowd's unrestrained cheers.

She gazed at him now, an enigmatic expression on her face. He wanted to call out to her, but his father, unmasked, clapped him hard on the back.

"You have a big destiny my son. Congratulations."

“It seems our country is too small for my son!” He shouted to the assembled village before him. “Let us wish him success in his travels!”

Those who still had plumb wine raised their cups, and the rest let loose a wild uproar of ululations and a clacking of spears. Arès looked around at a unanimity of smiling faces and worried where he would go.

Two months later Christelle married Diomandé. The next day the vice-governor of the South Kivu Province issued an order that all Banyamulenge leave Zaire on pain of death.