

THE FORMERS

They were assembled in a large hut, next to a crumbling, schoolhouse to which no children came any more, all of them hard and ruthless men who had seen woeful days and never forgotten about them. They were all former *formers* and united by having been formerly something that they could no longer be. They were labourers and lawyers, doctors and drivers, mechanics and muggers, students and smugglers and men from all walks of a former life; people condemned to the Pit for any number of reasons including their ethnic heritage and their political thought, or simply for being on the wrong side of the fence when the call was sounded and the gates slammed shut; for reasons none of which mattered now.

Some of them had taken part in the creation of the laws that now classed them less than human. Others had built the fortifications and the barricades that now kept them out of the City. Still others had enforced the evacuation and ostracised their kin before they too were kicked out of the City. They were indignant and intractable men, outraged men with a massive axe to grind, men who would do anything to be let back in human society. And they were united in their fear and loathing of the system which had so publicly rejected and humiliated them.

The Boy, however, knew them for what they were - men so desperate to get out of hell that they would sign another pact with the Devil. Men who argued too much about what they could do, what they should do and what was necessary to do. Though they spoke the same language, their meetings were always a cacophony of ideas, ideologies, purposes and egos. Among them was a new face, a man with a bandage on his head, and a pained expression on his face.

They stopped arguing, when the Boy entered the meeting place, and turned on him like a pack that had found a new prey.

“You are late,” one of them said.

“Where have you been?” asked another.

“How can you keep us waiting?”

“You are always late,” said another. “Where did you go?”

The Boy, feeling the air of cold desperation that permeated the room, said, “I missed the house.”

“This house?” exclaimed the Lawyer. “You missed this house?”

“I was angry,” said the Boy, “I didn’t look where I was going.”

“Have you been listening to that old fool again?” the Smuggler asked him.

Irrational anger surged through the Boy's heart. He fought to control it as he stood by the doorway looking round the room at the men gathered there. They sat on the floor and on wooden crates, on upturned buckets and on the two unmade beds and on anything that could be sat on. They leaned on the sooty walls, making them sag outwards. They were not only angry but also tired of waiting. They were tired of waiting for the Boy, weary of waiting for something to happen to end to their perpetual limbo. And they were tired, as the Smuggler often said, of living in the Devil's anus. But they could not reach the Devil so they blamed it on each other and the Boy.

"The Old Man is not a fool," he said.

"Not a fool?" the man demanded. "What is he doing here?"

"The same thing you are," said the Boy.

"He was inside when it happened," the Smuggler vented. "He was right in the thick of things, and what did he do? He stepped back like a fool, opted out of it all and walked away while the rest built palaces and castles on the hilltops. He could have made himself a fortune, been a *bona fide* citizen in the City, but what did that old fool do? He became a poet, a self-appointed hero of the masses and, of all things, a Pit crier, a singer of dreadful dirges wasting his breath on any fool that will listen."

He had many hateful things to say about the Old Man, and he said them with great resentment, desperation and despair. The Boy remained calm, and heard him out, for he too knew that it was true. The Old Man had been a chief too, with money and power and status. He had been there when they changed the constitution, in an underhanded manner, to allow themselves to rule forever and ever and ever, and he had been there too when the master-plan was drawn up, when the death militia were formed in every village and commune in readiness for the massacres to come. Everyone knew that the Old Man had been summoned by the plotters to join the interim Government that would later initiate and supervise the killings of hundreds of thousands of people. It was even rumoured that he had been offered the vacant presidency as inducement but had turned it down and consequently sealed his own fate. He could have blown the whistle on the plotters and been damned for all time. But, for whatever reason, he had not done so; though he claimed to have written numerous reports to human rights watch and to other organisations and concerned peoples, warning them of the imminence of a massive bloodshed. He had no proof of any of it though, for his old life had been razed down along with his house. Now people vilified him, or praised him, as convenience and memory served them, and there was nothing he could do about it. Still, some were gracious enough to remind others that he could have kept quiet and continued to eat and grow fat, and to prosper among the chiefs and the thieves, and the foreign wolves that would eventually eat up the whole country. He had chosen, instead, to speak and become a pariah among his fellow chiefs, a man marked for banishment, and worse, long before the Pit was conceived.

“And you tell me he’s not a fool,” said the former economist to the Boy.

He was bald and had eyes that discharged hate like puss from an infected soul. His indignation, as all present knew, stemmed from his resentment at having been locked out of the system that had enriched his peers beyond human imagination. And all because he was different.

He had been a chief economist at the Ministry of Finance, the man in charge of the Government coffers and a facilitator of that corruption. He it was who had invented some of the most diabolical schemes to clean out the Government treasury. He it was who had devised, implemented and presided over the worst theft of Government funds in human history. At a time when the national economy was in tatters, the central bank on its knees and the population languishing in poverty, he and the Big Chiefs, their friends and relatives had conspired with international thieves, for the Government to pay out millions of dollars as export compensation to non-existent exporters of non-existent gold from a country that did not have any gold worth mining. Everyone had got away with it, except himself. Designated sacrificial lamb long before he got promoted to the job, he had been unceremoniously dumped by his chiefs the moment the World Bank asked why. It hurt him especially hard when, instead of being publicly honoured, as other master thieves before him had been honoured, he was publicly vilified and consigned to the Pit like a common criminal, along with the hoards he had helped impoverish. And all because he was different.

He who had never harboured any ethnic, racial or sexist sentiments, and would have stolen with anyone regardless of their origin, had been one of the first casualties of ethnic paranoia. It drove him mad to think that he had eaten, drunk and partied with people he considered his friends, but who were meanwhile plotting to kill him and all his family and friends. Secure in his false belief that a civilised, educated and democratically elected leadership did not turn against the electorate and aid and abet mass murder, the former economist had hobnobbed with some of the worst mass murderers of all time and never even had a clue. He did not, and had never, cared for anyone but himself. He did not and had never cared for anyone in the Pit. He tolerated them as long as they kept to themselves and kept their scabbed brood and their dogs out of his way. No one liked him, and he liked no one. They tolerated him because he was a man of means and commanded the gangs of smugglers that fed and clothed the Pit.

“There,” the former economist-turned-smuggler spat at the Boy’s feet. “I spit on your Old Man.”