

THE QUARRY

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Babylon Bwoy

Frozen by terror's icy grip, the boy watched from the floor as the six strangers went about their business – breaking glass, tipping over bookcases, not leaving an inch of his family's apartment unturned.

Across the living room, the boy's father dangled by his ankles from a rope running down from the ceiling fan; his hands were bound in cable behind his back. Stripped of all its clothing, the father's body was now a bruised and battered mess. His wide blue eyes, gazing directly at the boy, were glazed over in a vacant, semi-conscious stare. His lips moved, but no words came out.

It was late afternoon and the streets of the inner city Chicago neighbourhood were relatively quiet as the beige sedan pulled into the curb across the street from the old fourteen-storey apartment building.

Shutting off the ignition, Dende glanced up at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. He was not impressed at all by what he saw. Though now twenty-five and solidly built, Dende still had the youthful face of a mid-to-late teen – one that had not been sleeping for nights on end. If he was so sure that he was ready for this, then why did he still feel so frail and weak inside? He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Courage, he prayed. Don't leave me.

Opening the door, he stepped out onto the street, shoving his Berretta into the back of his belt, concealing his sawn-off shotgun beneath his trench coat. He crossed the street to the apartment building, jogging through the arch of the iron-rod fence outside, entering through the front door.

The boy looked around the room at his captors through tear-filled eyes. The demons' faces were all black like tar, their eyes bloodshot, distant and cruel. All six had long dreadlocks dangling down from their scalps like the snakes of Medusa.

The man with the dyed blonde dreadlocks, the leader of their pack, had disappeared into a bedroom with the boy's mother over an hour ago. Her screams had long since faded. The boy closed his eyes and prayed silently that she was still alive.

Dende walked through the building's lobby. The man at the reception desk was old and balding, his head buried in a newspaper. He barely even glanced up as Dende moved straight past him and began making his way up the staircase. The building's only elevator was out of order and had been for some time; the stairs were the only way up.

The staircase, running floor by floor in a zigzag structure up through the building, was bathed in shadows. The old wood creaked under Dende's feet as he ascended higher and higher. According to Ricky Nesta's supplier back in New York – a man whom Dende had left half beaten to death – Nesta and his Jamaican thugs operated out of an apartment up on the fourteenth floor.

Dende had just reached the eighth floor landing when he noticed something was wrong. There was an unnatural silence in the air – one that five years in the New York City police force had taught him to recognise as the calm before a storm. And it was because of the silence that Dende heard the doorway to his right beginning to creak open. He stopped, slowly withdrawing his sawn-off shotgun from under his coat.

The boy could feel his heart pounding in his chest as the bedroom door flew open. The man with the blonde dreadlocks appeared in the doorway, the whites of his teeth accentuated by his dark skin like headlights in the night. He walked straight past the boy as though he wasn't even there, up to the boy's dangling father.

'Your woman be resting now, *babylon bwoy*,' the blonde dreadlock smiled, patting the father on the cheek. '*Dutty gyal* be broken.'

The boy saw his father's eyes flicker in response, moaning. He thrashed about weakly on the end of the rope – too far gone to do anything else.

The door to Dende's right swung open. He dropped to the floor just in time as the buckshot ripped out the wooden pillar behind him. Splinters clawed at the back of his neck, his ears rang from the echo of the gunshot, but Dende kept his composure. He took aim at the dreadlocked gunman, a Jamaican, who emerged from the doorway with a smoking 12-gauge shotgun in hand.

The Jamaican saw Dende lying flat on the staircase and shifted his sights, but Dende's sawn-off boomed first; the man took the brunt of the blast right between the legs, collapsing in a screaming heap, his shotgun blasting a hole up in the ceiling as he fell.

'Go! Waste the fucking *rassclaat!*' A voice with a thickly Caribbean accent shouted down from the floor above.

Fuck! Dende cursed to himself. The element of surprise was gone; Nesta's men knew he was here.

Up above two more dreadlocked gunmen charged out on the staircase and unloaded on Dende with a pair of AK-47s. Dende rolled across onto the eighth floor landing as bullets tore up the stairs around him, escaping their line of fire.

'Osiris, bring the play things!'

The boy watched on as the blonde dreadlock called over one of his men – one with a rope burn-like scar around his neck. The scarred demon named Osiris opened up a briefcase and held it out for his boss to rummage through.

Footsteps! Dende listened. One of the shooters was coming down the stairs after him. He ditched his sawn-off and picked up the 12-gauge shotgun from beside the fallen gunman, rising to his feet.

The Jamaican charged down, his Uzi blazing wildly; Dende's buckshot ripped through him at knee height, blasting off both his legs, bringing him tumbling down the stairs.

Dende walked forward, standing over his writhing victim. For a second he stared deep into the man's wide, tear-filled eyes and he hesitated as memories of his helpless father came streaming back to him. But then the sadness gave way to rage, and without even realising it he was stamping down repeatedly with his boot, crushing the man's larynx.

The blonde dreadlock reached into the briefcase and took out a small plastic package filled with white powder. He held it up for the boy's father to see.

'See this, *buttu bumbaclaat?*' he hissed through his white teeth. 'This be power! You try to steal from the devil, then he gonna burn you! *A wah di bloodclaat do yah?!*' He tore open the package and smeared the powder all over the father's face.

Bang! Dende felt the thud of bullet in the back of his shoulder and he spun around. The first Jamaican shooter he had left for dead was now holding a smoking handgun in his weak, shaking hands.

The wounded gunman fired off his second bullet at the same time Dende's shotgun sounded; his bullet clipped Dende's earlobe just as his own head exploded, his crimson-splattered carcass sliding back through the open doorway behind him.

Dende dropped down to one knee, gasping, checking the wound in his shoulder, feeling the wetness dripping down his back, the burning of entry point. The bullet had gone straight through – the exit wound through his pectoral was a testament to that. He was OK for now. The worst of the pain would come later, after the adrenaline left him.

He tossed his shotgun to the floor, no longer able to hold it in both arms, picking up the Uzi lying on the landing.

'You want to fuck with us, *bumbaclaat?!*' Another voice screamed down from above. 'Then let's fucking play!'

A surge of bullets suddenly came down through the ceiling right over Dende's head, punching head-sized holes through the flimsy wood. A rain of wood and hot-lead poured down relentlessly around him. He ran back out onto the staircase, vision impaired from the cloud of splinters and dust. They'd forced his hand now; there was no turning back.

He moved quickly, his Uzi out in front of him. Two shooters with AK-47s were waiting for him up on the ninth floor landing - Dende could just make out their muzzle-flashes at the top of the stairs. He adjusted his aim and sprayed; one went down as a bullet slammed into his chin, his entire face collapsing on itself as though sucked into a black hole.

A bullet struck Dende's forearm but he barely even noticed in his adrenaline-fuelled frenzy. He surged forward like a bull seeing red, sending a raking burst from his Uzi right across the second shooter's face – two bullets hit, one to each eyeball. They exploded like a pair of squashed tomatoes.

Dende didn't even slow down to check on his wounds as he reached the ninth floor landing. With his legs burning, bile filling his throat, he looked out across the ninth floor and saw a final gunman standing out there all alone; he charged towards him. *Osiris!* Even though the man was noticeably older, the jagged scar around his neck was unmistakable.

'*But a wha dir rass?!*' Osiris seemed to panic, fumbling with his assault rifle as it jammed up in his hands.

Dende clubbed the Jamaican once across the bridge of the nose with the butt of his Uzi, splintering bone, knocking him into a daze. Then, legs shaking with strain, he scooped up his wounded prey over his shoulder and carried him kicking and howling over to the ninth floor balustrade, tossing him over the edge.

Osiris plummeted, striking a staircase handrail and ricocheting violently across the shaft. His body exploded like a melon as it hit the tile floor at the bottom.

Panting with exhaustion, Dende collapsed to his knees. His shoulders heaved as fought to replenish his lungs. The pain was starting to kick in now; the loss of blood was beginning to make him feel woozy.

The tar-faced demons had finally found what they were looking for. The two small plastic pouches of white powder had been hidden away in the stuffing of a sofa mattress, which now lay in tatters on the apartment's living room floor.

The blonde dreadlock walked back over to his briefcase. When his hand emerged this time there was a gleaming 12-inch knife in his grip.

'Now, *buttu bumbacla*, we're gonna have ourselves a time,' he smiled, walking slowly back towards the boy's dangling father. '*Gunkona, babylon bwoy!*'

Dende kicked down the door of Ricky Nesta's apartment on the fourteenth floor and charged in, drawing his Beretta from his belt.

He moved slowly, cautiously through the main living room - palace-like in comparison to rest of the building. There was a gold-plated HD television, leather sofas, and black marble tables. A pair of half-naked hookers lay entwined on one of the sofas – one Asian, one Latina. They slept peacefully, a bag of white powder open on the tabletop beside them.

Dende walked straight past them, over to the door at the end of apartment. He was so close now. For sixteen years he had waited for this moment. He'd left his badge and the ring of a failed marriage at the bottom of New York Harbor. For six months he'd stalked just about every low-life and drug dealer in New York City in search of a ghost named Ricky Nesta. It was something he never could have done while his mother was still alive. It would have broken her heart to see him like this.

The boy caught hold of his father's dazed eyes, holding them. His father blinked, feebly trying to clear away the white powder from his face.

'My boy,' his father whispered. 'It'll all be fine. Just... look after your mother for me, OK?'

The boy had time to give him one tearful nod in response. Then the blonde dreadlock drove his knife into his father's torso; his eyes transformed slowly into two lifeless abysses.

Dende barged through the door.

Ricky Nesta was sitting calmly there behind his desk, the eerie red afternoon sun at his back through the glass balcony doors. His hands were raised half-heartedly in a gesture of surrender. A Smith and Wesson revolver lay untouched on the desk in front of him, atop an unsorted heap of hundred dollar bills.

He looked so much different to the man that Dende remembered from all those years ago; that he had not seen since. His hair was razored short now, naturally black with white specks. His face had become tainted by lines of age. He was dressed in an

expensive brown Armani suit. The small-time Rastafarian drug dealer had turned himself into a success.

‘Ricky Nesta.’ Dende stepped forward, his sights levelled at the source of all his hatred. ‘I ran into your old supplier back in New York. That pig told me where I could find you.’

Nesta studied the bloody, dust-covered man standing there before him. A smirk crossed his face. ‘You should have killed that coward too. He told me you’d be coming – whoever the fuck you are.’

‘He wasn’t there that day. You were.’

‘Sorry, white boy, do I look like I know you?’

‘Sixteen years ago. An apartment, Lower East Side New York.’ Dende took another step forward, taking one hand of his gun and opening up his palm for Nesta to see. ‘You left me your mark...’

The boy could barely breathe as his eyes remained glued on his lifeless father – dangling there like a carcass of beef in an abattoir.

The blonde dreadlock knelt down beside the boy on the floor, grabbing him roughly by the hair, forcing him to look straight into his bloodshot red eyes.

‘You think your daddy be a saint, kid? Him a dirty cop, a fucking *babylon bwoy!*’ the blonde hissed, shaking the boy’s head, his eyes bulging wide. ‘The dog don’t even be knowing what side of the law he’s on. But him and I... our business be done, so I don’t be killing you, kid. No, I be needing you and your daddy’s *sketel* alive to deliver a message for me. Take it to the rest of those *babylon rassclaats* who be thinking they can steal that which be mine.’

He grabbed the boy’s hand, opening up his fingers by force. ‘Tell them all that nobody with a future on this earth be fucking with Ricky Nesta!’ And then he took his knife and slashed open the boy’s palm from wrist to finger.

Ricky Nesta looked at the scar on Dende’s palm – a trench-like line running from his wrist to the base of his middle finger. Straight away his eyes flickered with recognition.

‘So,’ he grinned, ‘the son of the *babylon bwoy...*’

Dende felt the tears building up in his eyes. His hands shook with anger; his breathing quickened. ‘Dirty or clean... he was my dad.’

‘Like father, like son, yeah?’ Nesta straightened his tie and stood up slowly from his chair, his pearly white teeth glowing. ‘So how’s that fine *sketel* mamma of yours doing these days, *bumbaclaat*?’ His eyes narrowed on Dende’s face, savoring the emotion he saw there. ‘Does she still think of me?’

‘Ask her yourself!’ Dende fired and kept on firing, screaming out over the roar of his weapon, tears streaming down his face. *Die! Die! DIE!*

Nesta’s body jerked backwards with each thunderous impact; the fourth shot took him smashing through the glass doors and out over the balcony rail. He fell fourteen storeys, twisting and screaming, until at last his journey came to a bloody end atop the iron-rod fence far below.

The boy watched on in silence as the paramedics zipped up his father in a black bag on the floor of the living room. His mother had been stretchered out.

The policemen came and went that day. A few asked him some questions, or gave him small comforts.

Living with his mother and his uncle, time passed by. Nobody even spoke another word to him about it. His mother barely spoke another word at all.

Years later, during his time in the New York Police Department, he checked into the case every few days. No arrest was ever made, no witnesses ever came forward. Nothing. The case was cold. It was as though nobody even remembered, or wanted to remember a dirty New York cop murdered for stealing two keys of *yeyo* from a few small-time Jamaican drug dealers.

The boy remembered.

On his mother’s deathbed Dende made a promise to himself. He would put things right again.

The sun had already disappeared behind the horizon of building tops as Dende walked slowly back across the street to his car. The pain in his shoulder was fading. His steps had become heavy. He wasn’t so much walking as he was trudging. Any

thoughts or feelings of emptiness left inside him were draining rapidly, along with his blood.

Dende reached the car and slumped down into the driver's seat. He no longer had the strength to walk. The feeling was gone in his legs and the cold numbness was spreading up through his body. He felt as though he was drifting off to sleep; he didn't try to fight it...

Somewhere far away, in the darkness, Dende could see the light of a doorway. He could feel himself drifting towards it without even moving. Closer. Closer. He saw their faces peer out as he approached. His mother. His father. He drifted inside, then the door closed gently behind him.