

A Poorly-Lit Tent In the Jungle

Bakka-Roki sat in his tent at a table and picked the dirt from beneath his fingernails with an old pocket knife; an old habit of his. His contact should be here soon, but by the look of his watch, it was three minutes late. Someone will pay if he had to sit here and waste time. He shouted to his guards through the open tent flap, "Is my contact here yet?"

"No," one shouted back. "Wait, someone is approaching." The tent flap was dropped shut and both guards raised their weapons towards the shuffling. Bakka-Roki heard the shuffling stop as someone emerged from the foliage. Whoever it was, he spoke soft and low, but with a subtle firmness as he stated his business here. One of the guards stuck his head in and nodded to Bakka-Roki. Bakka-Roki nodded back and folded his knife with a flick of the wrist, then setting it on the table.

"Come in," he called to his contact. In stepped a white man, finely dressed in a gray suit with shoes that looked to be a midway design between dress shoes and boots. He was clean somehow, and the only sign of discomfort was when he occasionally wiped his brow with a cloth that hung from a breast pocket

Bakka-Roki sneered. "You must have the wrong person. We are not poachers."

The gray man smiled slightly. "I can assure you that I know exactly who I am talking to, and I thank you for your time. I am here to negotiate the acquisition of some land around here, specifically by the unnamed tributary some five miles northeast of here."

Bakka-Roki's eyebrows furrowed. "And why should I negotiate any land with you? Africa has had enough of white men taking land from us."

The gray man tilted his head toward Bakka-Roki in the gesture of *you have a point there*. He cleared his throat. "Funny you should talk of such unity when I understand that you are in the middle of an insurrection to overthrow the current ruler, Ruba, as he is simply called." He leaned forward with new energy in his eyes. "I believe that I can offer something to help your cause."

"And what can you possibly offer?" said Bakka-Roki. Suddenly the sides of the tent went out and ripped in two, accompanied by the sound of engines. The gray man spread out his arms and backed up as Bakka-Roki got off his seat and looked around, bewildered by and nearly unable to comprehend what he saw.

"Victory," said the man. "So, do we have a deal?"

Eight Months Later

Ackbar Serbe sat in an outpost and whittled a stick to a fine point, something he was known for doing when tense. A light covering of wood shavings covered the ground and his shoes, and he thought hard about how his rebels were going to overthrow Bakka-Roki the menacing tyrant. He looked at the clock on the stand next to him; his contact is two minutes late. Just then, a white man in a clean gray suit strode in. He looked a little hurried, but composed himself.

"New record," said the man. Ackbar raised an eyebrow. "Right. Hello," said the gray man, "I'm on a bit of a schedule, so I'll cut straight to business. I am here to negotiate the acquisition of some land around here."

Unassuming

Avalia—

Population: Unknown

Area: Unknown

GDP: Unknown

HDI: >.75

Exports: NA

Imports: NA

It was 2032 when the world seemed to be on the brink of a self-destructive war, the event of which caught most everyone off guard (as tends to happen to the general public). Countries and states had been scrambling for the past few years to find every excuse to combine or annex or in a few cases, conquer. Tensions were high between every superpower, not to mention the discovery of the anti-matter explosive by The Great Republic of United Eastern Asia. Russia and the Slavic Union eyed each other down, the GRUEA and the North American Coalition aimed ICBMs at each other from across the ocean, and the European Union was falling apart from the inside out. The world had one last chance for peace for a few years at least, and that was at an international conference in the only neutral land left. A small, second-world country in the jungles of Africa.

Ambassador Dhonaldd Kinsley rubbed his temples, and it wasn't over his horribly-spelled name this time. He knew that this conference was essentially hopeless, and what more, he literally might not survive it. He had six bodyguards, and would have requested more if the advisors hadn't warned against it, saying that it would have been "aggressive," either that or he was a victim of bureaucracy. Dhonaldd sighed, intelligence reported that the GRUEA ambassador would be bringing up to twice as many bodyguards, and assuming everyone did the same, an actual firefight was likely to erupt if things got too heated. He looked out the window, *yes, it will be aggressive.*

"Sylvia," he said to his inexplicably attractive assistant, "tell me about this country, Avalia." They were still flying over the ocean, and would not see the African coast for about ten minutes.

Sylvia picked up a tablet and brought it over. "A small, second-world country, though the UN is currently evaluating that designation. Their official language is Esperanto."

"Esperanto?"

"Artificial language developed in the late nineteenth century," Sylvia answered. Dhonaldd took the tablet and scrolled through pictures of developed urban areas contrasted with huts in the jungle. Sylvia continued, "Avalia started in the late nineteen-eighties or early nineteen-nineties in the Congo by an unknown organization and rapidly spread from there."

"Why don't many people know about or have a problem with this rapid expansion?" Dhonaldd asked.

"Avalia is the only African country other than South Africa to reach a Human Development Index over .75, and it's over four times as large." She pointed to the tablet. "Those huts are the exception, not the norm."

Dhonaldd nodded. "So Avalia is a good thing for the people there."

"As far as we know," Sylvia said, "though they have highly strict immigration laws and a rigid culture." Sylvia leaned in and dropped her voice to a near-whisper. "Dhonaldd, what I have just told you is the surface report; the 'safe' report. Intelligence suggests that Avalia," she paused, "is hiding something— *things*."

"Sounds like every other country."

"This is the part where I say *not like this*." She looked out the window of the airplane and could see a faint outline of the coast. "Our satellites have seen structures and technology that no country like this should have. And these are only our highest-orbit satellites; anything lower is destroyed."

"And of course, we can't say anything about it."

"Exactly. And do you know what happens to our spies that we send there? They are found a week later laying on the California shore with no memory of what they learned at all. Same thing happens to any crews of boats or planes we send, with no trace of the vehicle, likely confiscated."

"And the whispering—"

"They could be listening right now."

Dhonaldd considered this for a moment. "So why are we meeting at this country?"

"Because," said Sylvia, "they asked us to."

The Prestige

Dhonaldd and his company of bodyguards flew in an old Chinook helicopter that had been sold to Avalia by the US. The conference would naturally be held in Avalia's capital, Helion. Dhonaldd had tried to converse with his bodyguards, but they were all business and talked only of purple hearts and combat, so he was left to reading articles on his tablet about *this* country threatening that country and more erratic weather.

Suddenly, the helicopter lurched to the side, the third time it had done so on the trip. Dhonaldd climbed to the front by the pilot, a middle-aged African man. "Excuse me," Dhonaldd said, "are we hitting crosswinds or something like that?"

The pilot turned to Dhonaldd and flashed a smile. "Oh, I'm sorry mister, but I'm not used to flying something so— *manual*."

"Manual?" said Dhonaldd.

The pilot nodded and turned his head towards the windshield. "Yes. Normally we don't have to use all these levers and controls. We can just..." The pilot stopped speaking.

Dhonaldd raised an eyebrow. "What was that?"

The pilot turned to him and smiled again. "You'll see soon my *amiko*."

Dhonaldd hoped that this was all an exaggeration.

After a couple of hours, the helicopter landed on a rusty platform in a large clearing in the jungle, causing leaves to fly about and aggravate one's allergies. Dhonaldd stepped out and had to squint his eyes in the streams of light filtering through the trees and haze. He used his arm to wipe his already-sweaty forehead and looked ahead. Also here were the ambassadors of every other country with their own bodyguards, the combination of which made for a large crowd. Dhonaldd walked to the crowd and eyed the UEA ambassador, who did in fact have twice as many bodyguards.

Someone must have signaled someone to move, for the crowd started to move away from the landing pad, which was simply a large patch of packed dirt.

The procession was slow and strangely quiet, and one could feel the suffocating tension in the air as enemies walked within feet of each other. Or it was just the humidity.

The first thing wrong everyone noticed about this "second-world country" was the forty-foot metal wall that suddenly came into view in front of them. It stretched left and right as far as they could see, which was admittedly not very far, and one could see guard balconies sticking out every so often. As they approached what appeared to be a large reinforced gate, they could see two guards with M-16s watching the crowd.

"Bonvenon," said a sharply-dressed man standing by the gate. He had on a white suit and blue tie with white slacks, and smiled a lot. "Welcome to our fair country of Avalia. My name is Terron, and I am Avalia's domestic negotiator and will be presiding over this conference. Now, if you all will follow me, the conference hall is but a short walk past these gates." He gestured and walked through the now opening gates. The dumbfounded crowd followed among murmurs and failed attempts to lighten the mood with bad jokes.

The second thing wrong everyone noticed was the city. There were streetlights and sidewalks and most importantly, self-cleaning public restroom facilities. There were also buildings of grand architecture, spires and obelisks that disturbed the clouds as the wind blew and all connected by mid-air bridges. There were cars that seemed to glide noiselessly along, and a high-speed railway system that flew above in elevated rails. There were a few locals around and they eyed the crowd with mild curiosity, but otherwise continued whatever occupied them.

"Behold, the dream of our great master made reality," Terron said to the crowd with outstretched arms and that perpetual smile. "The *Scivolas Urbo*, the Wonder City, where poverty and crime is virtually nonexistent, and every immorality is taboo." His eyebrows bounced once. The crowd started to pass over a bridge that spanned the width of a river. "Here is a tributary of the Congo river that passes through the heart of the city, it is our water supply and is ecologically sustained through organic and thorough filtering techniques involving..."

Terron continued on, but the GRUEA ambassador wasn't paying attention. No, he was communicating with the spies that had broken off from the main group. "Find everything you can about this city," he said into the communicator, "we will find out what this city had been hiding and deliver this place into the hands of the Great Republic of—"

"—Inspiring, I'm sure," responded an unfamiliar voice through the radio. A cold sweat ran down the ambassador's back. "Don't worry," the voice continued coldly, "your spies are being well taken care of."

“—And now, we have arrived at the conference hall,” announced Terron.

The conference hall was noticeably shorter than the surrounding buildings, let alone the fact that there were no buildings very close to the hall. Instead, the hall was very long and sloped, with continuous windows going along the upper floors, not unlike the top part of a cruise ship. The building was also built like a fortress, as it was made primarily of metal and had an almost exclusively dark-gray exterior.

Problem Solvers

The air inside the conference hall had the smell of a new building, sort of like must, but more pleasant. Pipes ran along the inner edges of the ceiling and hissed every so often, “*chhhhhhhhhht. chhhht. chhhhhhhhhhhhhhhht.*”

“Please excuse our dear conference hall.” Terron said. He chuckled to himself at the obscure joke. “We are still finishing up this multipurpose structure, and it should be all set tomorrow for the second day of this summit. We will take you all on a tour of this facility, after which you will be escorted to your sleeping quarters for the night.” Terron turned his back to the crowd as if to lead them, but stopped. “However,” he said without turning back around, “I would ask that all of your bodyguards stay outside the building,” he paused and turned around, “as some of them have already decided to do so,” he said with just a hint of bitterness. “We wouldn’t want any altercations to get— *out of hand* now, would we?” The ambassadors turned to each other for a second, then silently agreed and dismissed their bodyguards to the outside of the building.

“Excellent!” said Terron, his old demeanor returning. “On this way,” he said, leading the group through the hallways.

The Dawning Days

[Note that I have nothing against Koreans.]

The Graveyard of North Korea: 2028

2016: North Korea cuts off all outside communication, with Kim Jong V declaring that North Korea will become a “paradise” with sweeping changes to improve the lives of its citizens.

Late 2016: North Korea deports all foreigners and ambassadors after flaunting its open market and employment programs.

2017: North Korea publishes pictures and reports of a reduced military and improved lifestyle for its citizens, with intermittent reports every few months.

2018: "Border Wall" goes up, which goes along the coast and DMZ. North Korea goes completely silent. Increasing unrest in the rest of the world prevents an investigation.

2023: Russia reports small amounts of radiation drifting from North Korea. For the first time in years, North Korea speaks to report that it has built a nuclear power plant.

2024: Small boat of [redacted] deceased North Koreans crashes into North California shore. Passengers show evident signs of [redacted] behavior. Writing is found on inside walls. Writing is made of human [redacted] and states, "[don't believe their lies]" (translated from Korean).

2025: Russia reports a larger amount of radiation coming from North Korea. South Korea makes a similar report. No word from North Korea. Radiation leaks stop later in the year.

2028: Parts of Border Wall collapses with no noticeable action from North Korea. UN hires New Age Works's private military division to lead investigation of the status of North Korea. Report of findings below.

Report of Status of North Korea: Operation "Gravedigger"—

February 6th, 2028
700 hours

Ten teams of twenty each are deployed by New Age Works, designated T-1 to T-10. Each team splits into two sub-teams, a scouting team of four and a slower, more thorough investigation team of sixteen, designated ST-# and IT-# respectively. T-1 through T-5 are to investigate all major population centers, T-6 and T-7 are to investigate smaller villages, T-8 is to investigate the capital, T-9 is to find and investigate the nuclear power plant, and T-10 is to be on standby to help other teams where needed.

T-6 and T-7, designated the "Dwellers," enter through a collapsed opening in the south wall, and the rest of the teams enter through an opening in the coastal wall nearer to the populated areas. The top of the coastal walls, which were built later, are found to have human bones cemented together to bolster structural volume.

The "Dwellers" find all villages desolate and in ruin, with messages of distress spelled out on the ground, assumed to be for aircraft to see. The Dwellers encounter a few groups of survivors in varying numbers and levels of health and sanity. All are armed and attack the

Dwellers, who are forced to neutralize the threats. N.A.W. suffers no casualties. A small band of sane survivors, six in total, are extracted and brought back to the forward base to await rehabilitation and interview. Their account follows this report.

Transcript of audio/video recording of IT-7 investigating the village of Nan Jing, the first village to be thoroughly investigated. Brackets indicate translation from Korean unless otherwise indicated. Members are indicated as IT-7/# for dialogue and T-# for actions:

---Begin Transcript--

IT-7 enters village. ST-7 has already given a preliminary inspection and is on its way to an unnamed village.

IT-7/1: "We've arrived at Sun Pok, mark eight-hundred twelve hours. No signs of life so far other than local fauna."

IT-7/8: "Augh!"

IT-7/1: "T-Eight, report!"

IT-7/8: "I just turned off my helmet filters, and have been rewarded with the worst stench of rot that you all have never smelled."

Several more members of IT-7 proceed to emulate Eight's action and give similar reports and reactions.

IT-7/1: "You guys done smelling the roses? Pair off and sweep the area."

IT-7 pairs off and searches the village. Pairs are every two numbers. Ex: 1&2, 3&4, etc.

IT-7/7: "Trees show signs of being cut down with notably rough tools."

IT-7/11: "I'm entering a hut with T-twelve. Hello?" *He repeats in Korean.* ["Hello?"] "We are New Age Works, we are here to help." [*Repeated in Korean.*]

IT-7/13: "There seems to be— wait, nevermind."

IT-7/12: *Peeks in window.* "No one's in." *T-11 and 12 enter the hut and turn on their helmet lights.* "Wha—?"

IT-7/11: "Holy..." *Helmet feed shows human bones arranged in a large circle on the floor with three skulls in the middle facing the edges. Blood of indeterminate origin draws unknown symbols on the walls.* "Commander, we have definite signs of degeneracy into cult-like behavior."

IT-7/1: "Affirmed."

IT-7/2: "Found a pile of candy wrappers."

IT-7/7: "Found their well pump."

IT-7/8: "Pump runs fresh water. That's a surprise."

IT-7/5: "More cult behavior here." *T-5 uses his gun to nudge a pyramid of stacked skulls, which collapse to the ground.* "Oops."

IT-7/1: "Five?"

IT-7/5: "Unimportant." *Suddenly an elderly Korean man, previously sleeping under a nearby pile of leaves, leaps up and charges T-5 and T-6 with a knife while shouting gibberish in no known language.*

IT-7/6: ["Stand down! Stand down!"] *The elderly man continues to attack T-5 and T-6 ineffectively as his knife doesn't penetrate their armor. T-6, a South Korean, removes his helmet. The elderly man looks at him for a few seconds, then breaks down into tears. He starts repeating something in Korean, then curls up on the floor and goes silent.*

IT-7/15: "This hut has animal meat hanging from the ceiling. Fresh."

IT-7/5: "He's dead." *T-5's feed shows T-6 visibly shaken.* "Hey, you alright?"

IT-7/6: "Yeah, I will be. I just need to get myself together." *T-6 puts his helmet back on and sits by and stares at the man.* "He kept saying thank you, thank you. And man, he looks like my father."

IT-7/5: "I'm sorry. Let's get out of here."

IT-7/15: "Last hut searched, no other contacts."

IT-7/3: "Found a fire pit."

IT-7/1: "Good, you guys may want to converge on me and check this out." *IT-7 follows orders and meets near the center of the village.*

IT-7/8: *Gives off a sharp laugh.* "Well, will you look at this."

Helmet feeds show what looks to be a concrete fountain on a concrete foundation. The foundation looks like it would have been expanded if construction had not been stopped for some reason. Surrounding the fountain are the steel frames of benches, the wood having rotted away. Nearby is a steel canopy with two vending machines with concrete walls behind them. Both vending machines have had their glass fronts smashed out. Next to the vending machines is a charging station with standard and USB outlets.

IT-7/8: "Anybody need their phone charged?"

IT-7/3: "Commander, those fire pits. They had glowing embers in them."

A war cry is heard and several hostile Koreans of varying age and genders run out of the forest, all armed with guns. The hostiles open fire and IT-7 takes cover behind the fountain and vending machines. T-13's neck armor is hit and he falls over coughing.

IT-7/14: "Thirteen's choked!"

IT-7/1: "Hold fire! Two, how many contacts?"

IT-7/12: "Ow! Criminey!"

IT-7/2: "Eighteen, about."

IT-7/15: "Ak! I'm good!"

IT-7/16: "Permission to fire sir?"

IT-7/1: "Negative! Six, see if you can reason with them!" *Six stands up.*

IT-7/6: ["Hey! We're here to help!"] *Six is hit several times and scrambles back down.* "No good, sir."

IT-7/1: *Sighs.* "Open fire."

IT-7 fires on the group.

IT-7/8: "Eat it!"

The hostiles fall. Two survive and attempt to flee the scene.

IT-7/1: "Stop them!"

IT-7/10: "On it."

T-9 through T-12 pursue and apprehend the survivors. The rest of IT-7 inspect the bodies.

IT-7/14: "They've armed children. Thought I saw enough of this at the liberation of Jerusalem."

IT-7/4: "I remember that. Some as young as six, and this one's about eight years."

IT-7/8: "Aw sheesh," *gestures to a woman*, "this one died staring ahead, and I happened to be the one she's checking out."

IT-7/15: *Points to the woman's wounds*. "She's not exactly your type."

IT-7/1: "That's enough you two. Everyone, search the bodies for items of interest."

IT-7 proceeds to follow orders without incident.

IT-7/16: "A talisman."

IT-7/3: "Faded photo of a long-lost lover."

IT-7/2: "Our guys are returning."

IT-7/6: "Found a diary. The outer pages are soiled, but the inner pages are readable."

IT-7/7: "What do they say?"

IT-7/6: *Flips through the pages*. "Give me a couple of minutes."

IT-7/15: "Those woman's eyes. They had an emptiness to them, like she never saw the people she was attacking."

The rest of IT-7 return with the survivors, an unconscious teenage boy and a woman who is trying to get out of T-11's grip.

IT-7/11: *Trying to calm the struggling woman*. ["Hey, it's alright. Calm down. I'm here to help you."] *He takes off his helmet. The woman calms down and looks at him silently.*

IT-7/6: "Just like the elder."

IT-7/7: "Hey, you big softie. Your voice breaking?"

IT-7/6: *Laughs*. "Sorry. It's just with the world going down like it is, it's nice to personally see someone saved here." *Looks at the woman*. "She doesn't have the emptiness in her eyes anymore."

IT-7/1: "The boy is stable. I'm calling for extraction, mark nine-hundred one hours."

---End transcript---

IT-7 leaves the village and proceeds to inspect several unnamed villages. The teenage boy and woman are sent to South Korea for rehabilitation.

The Dream City

What follows is a report of the nuclear power plant and Pyongyang as found by T-8 and T-9 respectively