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Things Could Be Worse

by John Rockwell

Razor Hotten stared up at the duct tape patches in the mosquito netting above his bed. The only mosquitoes that hadn't made it through the net had been the unfortunate few who'd gotten stuck to the tape. The rest had managed to have a fine night of dining at all the open tables on his skin.

'Time to get up,' he told himself, thinking the words might propel him out of bed. When it was clear they wouldn't he rolled off of it and hoped instinct would get his arms moving before he hit the floor. It did. He landed face-first a few inches above the cracked tile floor, giving him a perfect view of the many dead bug bits missed by the maids over the last fifty years. The day was off to a good start.

Five minutes and not many thoughts later he was standing at the bathroom door debating whether or not to go in. Standard procedure said take care of the three S's - shit, shower, and shave - first thing in the morning. Since everything in the hotel was dirty, including the water, there wasn't much point in taking a shower though, or risking an infection by cutting himself shaving. That only left the call of nature and it wasn't very loud right now. He turned around and went back to get dressed for his tour of the city.

Toliary Madagascar didn't get many visitors. Its main attraction, the color brown, just didn't draw in the big crowds. Everything was brown - the buildings, the streets, the water, even the sky. The only variety was provided by its close cousins, the shades tan and sand. Looking out through the thick layer of dust coating his window, Razor slowly shook his head and prayed to the god of luck that the natives would turn out to be more colorful. It'd be soup kitchen's for supper and stars for a ceiling if they weren't.

He went down to the front desk and asked the clerk for the name of anyone who might be able to help guide him to that color.

"There are a lot of people who would be happy to show you around for a reasonable price," the clerk said. "I could make a few calls if you'd like."

"Good," Razor said, handing him a twenty. "But I don't want just anyone. I need someone who's lived here forever. Someone who knows everything that's good and bad about the place."

"You want Mam Sec then. I'll see if she's willing."

Razor caught the word 'she' and smiled slightly to himself as the clerk disappeared into a back room. Maybe the god of luck had been listening.

After a couple of minutes the clerk came back with his own smile. "Mam Sec said she'd show you everything there is to see in Toliary. It'll take her about fifteen minutes to get here."

"Great. I'll wait out front." He started to leave but stopped. Something didn't sound quite right. "Hey, is Mam Sec her real name?"

"No, it's her title." The clerk disappeared into the back room again without adding any more to his explanation.

"Her title?" Razor repeated, trying to find some role it would fit. When he couldn't think of any he shrugged and went outside to wait. At least she wasn't called Queen Brown.

Half an hour later he was still sitting on an old wooden bench waiting for her to show up when someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

"Yeah?" he said, twisting around in his seat to see who it was. He found himself eyeball to kneecap with the tallest, oldest woman he'd ever seen. She looked like a skinny tree with eyes.

"Are you the young man who's looking for a guide?" she asked.

"Yeah. You must be Mam Sec."

"I must be a lot of things. Mam Sec is one of them." She came around the bench and sat down beside him. "Being stupid isn't. People try to escape from Toliary, not take tours of it. What is it you really want?"

"A story." It was a simple answer, and not an entirely complete one. He really wanted to keep his job. The last note his editor had sent addressed to 'Thin Ice' Hotten had made the stakes pretty clear. That's why he'd left Europe, where all he'd been able to find was a good time, and come here, where hunger had a hundred faces and all of them were thinner than his. Instinct told him he'd find something new here, something better than just another run-of-the-mill, millions-starve-in-a-far-off-country kind of story. It also told him he wasn't going to like the ending. Any ending would be better than the one where he got fired though, so he turned a deaf ear to instincts' whisperings on that score.

"What kind of story do you expect to find here?" she asked.

"A sad one. Something that will make people cry."

She gave him a puzzled look. "You came all the way here to find sadness? Is there none back in your America?" The way she said it, it sounded stupid even to him.

"Of course there is but it's too close to home. No one wants to read about all the people who aren't getting the help they need because the person doing the reading is too lazy to get up off of their ass and give it. They want to read about problems so far away that the only kind of help they can give is sympathy, and maybe a few bucks in the mail. Saves a lot of energy and guilt."

"I see." She let her eyes roam across the dusty landscape, remembering things he couldn't even begin to guess. "You've come to the right place. What will your

story buy my people?"

"That depends on how good it is. If it's good enough it might get them some food. The people back home like to send food to those who need it."

"Americans can feed everyone?"

"No, just the people who need it the most."

"Every starving child needs it the most."

She motioned toward a young man who'd been leaning against the hotel watching them the whole time. "I have born six children," she said as he came over. "This is Jacaro, the one who still lives." Jacaro gave Razor a slight nod. "Tell me, Mr. Hotten, have you seen death before?"

"Yeah. I've covered a couple of small wars. A lot of people died."

"Good, then you won't be afraid to see more. Jacaro and I will help you find your story if you don't mind taking a chance."

"What kind of chance?"

"The same one we'll be taking. It is the chance that we will die."

Razor thought about it for a minute, then decided to take her up on the challenge. If worse came to worse he could always outrun her. "I'm in. Do I need to go buy a gun or something?"

"Only if you can find one that's small enough to shoot a germ. We will need a jeep though. Give Jacaro one hundred US and he'll go rent one for us."

Razor opened his wallet and handed over five twenties. "That seems like a lot of money to get a jeep for a day. Especially around here."

"No one said we'd find your story in a day. Go pack a week's worth of supplies while we're waiting for the jeep."

He did as he was told, surprised at how quickly she'd taken charge. There was more to her than a sharp tongue and withered skin. He was going to have to find out about that too.

Jacaro and Mam Sec were waiting in the jeep for him when he came back out with a backpack straining at the seams. Not knowing where they were going, he'd packed

for the desert, jungle, and mountains just to be safe. The only place he hadn't packed for was the first place they stopped at - an old monument at the foot of the harbor less than a hundred yards away.

"Do you know what that is?" Mam Sec asked, pointing towards it. It looked a lot like the top floor of a pagoda built by a very unimaginative architect. The painter had had a little imagination though. Unlike the rest of Toliary, the monument was so white it was almost painful to look at with the morning sun glaring off of its sides. Someone was taking great care to keep it that way too. There wasn't a speck of dirt on it.

Razor feigned interest in it for a couple of seconds and then said, "Haven't got a clue."

"I didn't think so. It's not the kind of thing you would have heard about while you were doing your research in the bars last night. It was built to honor the memory of those who were taken from our land in chains many years ago."

Uh-oh, he thought, not another 'feel sorry for us because our ancestors had it tough' story. "Umm, there's already been a lot of stories done on slavery. I was looking for something a little newer."

"Don't worry," she said, "I won't bore you with the past. That monument's usually the only thing in Toliary that interests visitors. It would have been a shame if you'd come all this way and missed it."

As they started to drive away he noticed some graffiti on the north side of the building that had been out of his line of sight before. It struck him as odd that something like that would be left there when everything else was being given a daily cleaning. "What's that say?" he asked, pointing back at it.

Mam Sec didn't even turn around to see what he was pointing at. "It says 'Things could be worse.' We're going to find the man who wrote it. He's your story."

The road took them north, roughly following the coastline. Most of the time they had a clear view of the heavy, white-fringed waves that constantly slammed

into the beaches, clawing fistfuls of sand away with each strike. They never saw anyone swimming out there though, which wasn't too surprising considering how strong the rip currents would be, but the lack of surfers was curious. Razor had traveled all over the world and had never seen a spot too remote for the surfers to find when the waves were this good.

"How come there's no one out on the water," he asked, guessing Mam Sec would be worldly enough to know about surfing.

"Sharks."

"What about them? They don't scare most surfers."

"How does the word spread about good beaches among your surfers?"

"Person to person, like everything else."

"At least one person must live to tell the tale then. Out there they don't."

"They're that bad?"

"Everything here is."

The road they were on certainly was. It tossed them back and forth, up and down, left and right, over and over again to the offbeat tune of the jeep's squeaking axles. Someone must have read the plans sideways and put the damn curbs across it instead of beside it, he grumbled to himself. The only thing that made him feel any better was knowing there was only whiskey sloshing around in his stomach. It would have been embarrassing to lose his breakfast in the backseat while the others calmly weathered the road. By the time they reached their first stop four hours later he was ready to find out just how much more whiskey it would take to make him forget this miserable trip.

He slowly pulled himself out of the jeep and looked around. Several paths led from the road through a thicket of thin-trunked trees to what looked like either a rundown fish camp or what passed for a quaint native village in these parts. The motley collection of small, one-room patchquilt houses made out of sheets of plywood, tin, and just plain old sheets didn't seem very inviting.

"Is this where I'm going to find my story?" he asked, thinking it was going to

have to be one hell of a good one to make up for the bruises on his butt.

"No, this is Walneya," Mam Sec said. "The natives, or if your magazine is for polite people, the villagers, are background material. You need to meet one of them."

"Great," he said, following her down one of the paths. "I hope he likes to drink."

When they were just about to reach the first house, hut, or whatever the locals called it, she turned down a side path and led them further into the woods. The village was almost out of sight behind them when they reached a shack smaller than any they'd seen so far standing in its own little clearing. From the look of things people came here often and from the smell of things they probably didn't stay long.

"Someone really lives here?" he asked, finding it hard to believe.

"Yeah, I do." Half of a man came out of the shack, walking on his knuckles while the stumps that had once been legs swung freely beneath him. It was obvious from the smoothness of his gait that he'd been getting around this way for years.

"This is my good friend Ulan," Mam Sec said, bowing slightly towards him. "And this is Mr. Razor Hotten," she continued, without bowing, "a writer of many stories and, I imagine, a friend to few men."

"Thanks for the generous introduction," Razor said. He reached down and shook Ulan's hand, hoping the gesture didn't mean 'I want to steal your wife' in the local lingo. Not knowing whether he was speaking to the village holy man or garbage man, he decided to play it safe. "So this place is all yours, eh?"

"Yes, it's all mine. Would you like to buy it?" Ulan gave him a mischievous grin.

"Hey, just because I'm American that doesn't mean I'm rich," Razor said, mirroring the grin. "Mam Sec said you're someone I should talk to if I really want to find out what your country is like. Is there someplace we can sit down and chat a bit?"

"Sure, there's plenty of ground. Pick any spot you like."

There was something about the way he said it made it sound like a test, one Razor wasn't about to flunk. "This'll do just fine," he said, dropping down into a cross-legged position right where he was. It was a relief to see Mam Sec and Jacaro sit down in the dirt beside him. He'd done something right. The feeling of relief was somewhat tempered by the fact that they were now all sitting on pin cushions made from the thousands of tiny fishbones that littered the ground. "You speak pretty good English for someone who lives way out here."

"Mam Sec taught me the language long ago and Jacaro keeps it fresh on my mind by only speaking it when he brings me old magazines to read from the hotel. What would you like to know about my country?"

"Anything you think Americans don't already know."

"You're asking for a book then, not an article."

Razor took the good-natured insult with a nod and a smile. Sarcasm was his favorite form of conversation. "Okay, let's narrow it down to stuff with some kind of human interest angle then. Why don't we start with your legs. What happened to them?"

The immediate answer was silence. Ulan looked down and stared at the ground while Mam Sec turned and stared straight at Razor, frowning at him with her eyes.

"What can I say, I'm a rude son-of-a-bitch. It's part of the job."

"Don't worry," Ulan said, not looking up, "a man who eats the garbage of others is not easily offended. I was just wondering what kind of human would be interested in my story." He raised his head. "Paying to hear about someone else's misfortune. That's quite pathetic, don't you think?" His smile was back again.

"Of course it is. Why do you think I never let myself get a couple of hours away from being drunk as a monkey on moonshine. Now what about those legs?"

"Ah yes, my legs. I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. It's not much of a story. Just another typical childhood accident." He'd lived with the story for years and the thought of telling it bored him. He might have even refused if

not for Mam Sec. The favors he owed her were many and this would be a way to repay her for one of the smaller ones. He didn't owe Razor a thing though and didn't add any spice to make it more salable.

The accident happened when he was eight years old, too young to be trusted on his own with one of the fishing canoes and too old to be happy tagging along after the adults. He was old enough to know how to make a small raft though and convinced one of his friends to help him make one. Once it was done they started out on their own fishing trip and slowly made their way down to the mouth of the bay using poles to push it through the shallow water near the shore. It was a hot day, the kind that made swimming look a lot more fun than fishing, and by the time they reached their chosen fishing spot they'd decided not to let the fish have all the fun. Jumping in, they spent the next hour or so swimming around, keeping their eyes on the raft the whole time to make sure it didn't drift out of reach. They didn't pay any attention at all to exactly where it was drifting though. When they finally climbed back up onto it they found themselves surrounded by more ocean than bay.

Poor judgment being their theme for the day, they figured this meant they were just going to have to do some more swimming. They jumped back in and started pushing the raft towards the closet shore. It didn't take long for Ulan to find out that this idea had definite drawbacks. The bite from a single shark was all it took to convince him of that. It must have been a small shark because all it managed to tear off were his legs. A bigger one would have swallowed him whole and used his friend as a condiment. He didn't panic though, he was too busy screaming from the pain to let fear get its fair share of attention. The responsibility for worrying fell to his friend who fortunately chose that moment to start thinking clearly. He pushed what was left of Ulan up onto the raft and then quickly pulled himself up. It took less than two minutes for him to tear the sleeves off of his shirt, cut their fishing line into several long pieces, and tie tourniquets above each of the stumps, all the while sitting on top of Ulan to keep him from thrashing

his way back off of the raft. The tourniquets weren't perfect but with a couple of more pieces of cloth pulled down tight over the open wounds the bleeding was lowered from gushing to seeping. With that done, his moment of clear thinking ended. He jumped back in and started kicking as hard as he could to push the raft to shore. If he'd waited just a little longer he would have seen three fishing boats hurrying around a bend towards them, drawn by Ulan's screams. As it was, he only had time to let out a scream of his own as another shark, twice as large as the first, came straight up from beneath him and swallowed most of him whole as it shot out of the water. The shock that had been rapidly shutting down Ulan's nervous system didn't come quick enough to keep him from seeing that scene and having it fused in his memory.

"So there you have it," Ulan said, "the simple story of a boy who lost his legs and his best friend in the same day. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"Yeah, just for the record what was your friend's name?"

"You can call him Lucky. That's what good luck looks like for those who live here."

Mam Sec stood up. "Thank you Ulan." She motioned to Jacaro who pulled out a new batch of magazines and handed them to him. "Mr. Hotten, it's time for you to meet the rest of the people who live in this village." She started walking back down the path they had taken before. As soon as they were beyond Ulan's hearing she spoke again. "Are you a good reporter?"

"Some people think so."

"Who cares about them. What do you think?"

He should have been used to her directness by now but had to admit she could still catch him off guard, like she just did. "I'd say I'm pretty damn good. They pay me a lot of money to travel around the world and find things out."

"Good. Pay attention then when I introduce you to these people. Let me know what you've found out when we're done." She took him through the village, stopping

each person they met to tell them who he was and tell him who they were. After he'd met everyone who happened to be in or around the huts, including the infants inside them, she took him down to the beach so he could meet the women who were repairing fishing nets there and all of the fisherman who as they landed their boats with their catches. They stayed until she was satisfied he'd finally met everyone who called this village home.

It was dark by the time they got back to the tents Jacaro had set up beside the jeep for them. He'd also built a fire and boiled some soup. Sitting down by the fire, Mam Sec slowly stirred the soup in her bowl to cool it. "So Mr. Hotten, being the good reporter that you are did you notice anything special about the people of Walneya today?"

Razor ran through each of their faces in his head, trying to spot one that stuck out as peculiar in some way. None matched that description. "They all seemed pretty normal to me. Just regular people."

"Perhaps it's their diet that keeps them healthy?"

"Maybe. Who knows."

"I do." She handed Jacaro her empty bowl and headed for her tent. Before going in she looked back at Razor. "We'll see the answer tomorrow."
