

## Burn Like Wood

The rocking lent a hominess to the minimalist opulence of the train car.

Drinking his third cup of tight-bubble espresso, James considered the rich colors of the heavy hangings now drawn across the boudoir. Blakely loved to rub them on naked flesh – hers, his, he didn't want to know whom else's. *Did she ever have them cleaned?* he wondered, a pulse in his pants telling him he didn't care if she did.

A Miro – Woman Dreaming of Escape – hung at the opposite end of the car, looking down on a sitting area furnished in mid-20th-century Danish. *What a pretty, pretty bonfire all these would make.* Something that hadn't been there before – a huge white shield box – was wedged unlovely in the corner.

He sat mid-car at the bar, the mirrored wall behind him reflecting the mirrored wall in front of him, his reflection stretching smaller and blurrier away over the dance floor.

“Always watch yourself eat and dance if you want to stay skinny,” Blakely had said when he raised his eyebrows at the mirrored space, her dark nails chewing into the back of his neck like horseflies.

He wished he had paid attention when she had showed him how to open the doors, but he had been high and horny, which is why he was now sitting here, drinking espresso and examining his reflection for signs of emotion.

Blakely. She was her ancestors' daughter; a pitiless, precisely-tuned detector and exploiter of weakness for her dynasty's gain. Wars, indentured laborers, natural disasters – the Billingslys had turned sorrow to silver since Arizona was a territory.

Blakely played out her own tactical engagement with James whenever she got the chance, her laughter as cold as pebbles in a river when she detected the stirring of his conscience.

*At least you're going longer between times, he told himself. De-escalating.*

*Ha! Don't kid yourself. You lack in scruple. Your penis is your core value.*

"Good morning." Needa appeared through the hangings, her skin more silken than they, her voice more silken still. James – like many Americans – was not immune to the superior tones of public school British. James – like many men – was not immune to the perfection of her skin, ebony appearing deeper against her light pink nightie.

He and Needa had met for the first time last night, as she and Blakely were grinding against each other on the levitating dance floor at Sparrow's Sorrow. Needa was as black as Blakely was white and James – between them – was toast. They danced and kissed under the strafing lights while strivers stared up at them through the clear dance floor, no doubt mesmerized as Blakely guided his fingers first under hers and then under Needa's tight sequined skirt.

In the VIP they sat on ostrich-leather couches and clashed in cocaine-fed conversation.

"The world is evolving. Trillionaires must be examples of the new asceticism. We have to spend as much time helping others as we do making and enjoying our fortunes. HeraSys will make that easy."

"One thing I have learned about rich Americans who claim to do good," parried Needa, "is that they are mostly liars and hypocrites. Line," she added archly, offering James a straw carved of elephant tusk.

"I'm not perfect," he replied, plucking the straw from her slim fingers, "But, I *am* evolving."

"Oh Needa, don't be so hard on Topper. Think of *our* lives. Is it easy being Daddy's girl?"

The look James saw pass between them hurled a brick through his euphoria. He lowered his eyes to the mirror.

Needa's father had been an orphan of one of Africa's migratory wars who, at the age of fifteen, had murdered his warlord general and assembled his own child army. A merciless tactical genius, he had ranged over two thirds of the African continent, controlling thousands of warriors at the height of his

terror until he had consolidated power in a kingship called Moloi, made up of pieces of Kenya, Tanzania and Congo surrendered by their atrocity-weary governments in exchange for his promise of the containment of his actions within his borders.

Despite King Gloire's dread renown, Moloi had filled with refugees from Africa's endless armed conflicts and natural disasters, drawn by promises of land and a new life.

"I am old and tired, I wish to enjoy my wives and create a paradise for my children. Paradise cannot be built without strong and fearless people. Join me, and I promise you will never lack."

What choice did they have? Death now, or a chance at a new life in Moloi, with the monster in the corner waiting for his sacrifice? They went, praying that in Moloi their lots would never be drawn.

Moloi *had* enjoyed a flowering. King Gloire's deep coffers, brilliance and iron fist created a country that was well run and without corruption. Arts which cast King Gloire and Moloi in a pleasant light were well funded. University was free, if lacking in certain subjects.

And if those who displeased the king were escorted to the border and their passports revoked, why shouldn't they be? To be pointed away by the hand that feeds you after you have bitten it is only just. Rumors of tortures, disappearances and murders in Moloi had never been independently confirmed. Gold is known not to tarnish. His Majesty King Gloire had learned early in his career that it does a wonderful job of removing tarnish as well.

"Morning," James swallowed, staring. Her plump African features rode the high cut of her cheek bones like Tahitian pearls.

"Coffee," she remarked neutrally. He jumped to his feet to press the button that would expel a thick thimbleful into bone china not quite as white or fine as her teeth.

"Talk like an African," Blakely had commanded her last night. Needa had slapped her hard in the face. "Pleaaaaase," Blakely had begged, as she dipped her red palm-printed cheek between Needa's legs. Laughing and groaning Needa had allowed the sands of her British accent to descend through the

hourglass of Moloi.

“I am Africa! Cradle of humanity! We were the first. We will be the last. We give up our power to any man with a gun. We love our King Gloire and his daughter, Needa. Ha ha ha ha!” she had boomed, lifting her lovely arms over her head.

James handed her the cup and touched the stool next to him.

“You’re still here,” she said

“I don’t know how to open the doors.”

She met his eyes in the mirror.

*Was she smiling?*

“That must make you feel helpless.”

Inflamed, he turned to her and cast the space between them behind him, his hands cradling the back of her skull, his lips insisting on hers.

“Idiot,” she gasped, boxing his ears.

In the ringing, he saw her lovely, angry face crease and the brown stain of her coffee on the pink of her shift.

Where Needa had been stood Blakely. Cool hands on his shoulders. “...like Needa, hm?”

“I’ll be on my way.” *Finish the presentation. Your life is about to change. The world is about to change.* “Oh let’s all go together,” Blakely said, straightening his collar, inserting the tip of her tongue into his unresisting mouth.

James lounged in the seating area, leafing through an illuminated Bible from the 1500s, the oil from his hands hastening its demise. His stomach was rumbly, but Blakely didn’t keep anything to eat.

He wanted to shake her, make her open the door for him, but it would be weakness. He

imagined her leaning back in his grip, staring at him through slitted eyes. “Of course I’ll open it for you. If you *make* me.” He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

Instead he sat and pretended to enjoy himself, the blocks of his presentation stacking and restacking behind his eyes. The day after tomorrow he would unveil HeraSys before the assembled leaders of government, business and non-profits at the United Nations Annual Philanthropic Symposium.

HeraSys existed because he had finally enlisted the help of his father. It had taken James months to yank him from the torpor of luxury and the autopilot of “next” on his 140-foot yacht.

After Li had died, Hector – long absent emotionally – became absent physically, too. His father, changer of society, inventor of the machines of the new age before the man had even finished high school, was now attended only by a skeleton staff. He was bored, indolent, martini-glazed by noon every day.

Li had been the last person to challenge him. She had called at all hours after the divorce, declaiming shrilly about a .0001% fluctuation in her trust fund, an obscene amount she couldn't run through in a century even if she used diamond-encrusted toilet paper. She had shown up at board meetings in marabou and hooker heels and thrown bottles of San Pellegrino.

When James finally caught up with Hector in Batahtaung Harbor, he noticed that the oil portrait of Li and his father was back in the dining room, presiding in the place of honor it hadn’t held since their marriage was in force.

"Son," Hector said, stepping out of his play skin with a sad smile, "To what do I owe the honor?"

When James was a child, he had often caught Dad staring at him with a look of baffled joy, like he'd cracked a chicken egg and a butterfly had flown out. For several years, though, his father hadn't

been able to hold eye contact with anyone. Hector Gutierrez had retreated into himself, and it had cost him both his wife and leadership of the company he had built from nothing, control synapse by control synapse.

"Dad, I have an idea."

The integrative service delivery structure they built that week was the incarnation of a revelation. At first Hector had listened distractedly. He hadn't understood what James meant, but James had repeated himself until he saw his father's eyes first light with interest, then blaze with excitement.

Hector worked tirelessly, standing clammy-faced at his vast crescent workstation, moving data and code between holo-sims with his eyes and hands – a tech dervish.

He spat rapid-fire questions at James, then fell silent for hours, leaving James to anticipate and find the answers to his next questions.

James had arrived on a Monday. On Friday Hector said, "It's done."

"What's done?" James was eager to see a piece finished.

"All of it. There's your baby,"

James touched the screen, and a fully functioning network with thousands of vacant nodules opened. "Here's the mockup version." His father toggled the screen, and the nodules were filled with all the service entities on earth.

It was at that moment that James saw his father for the first time. Separate from the graven history of childhood, he saw why his father was who he was – possessor of one of the most brilliant minds of his time – a titan.

Then James saw himself – venal, exalted only through luck of birth.

"This will change the world, Son. I'm proud of you."

His father hugged him and stroked his hair. When they pulled away, both of their eyes shone with tears, shed for different reasons.

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His Latin was still there, James was surprised to note as he read.

*Today I have paid my vows.*

*Therefore I have come out to meet you*

*To seek your presence and I have found you.*

*I have spread my couch with coverings.*

*With colored linens of Egypt.*

He set the Bible down with a thump and stalked to the controls by the door. Flipping open the steel cover, he tried to decipher the raised writing on the buttons.

"Wait, wait, wait," called Blakely. She and Needa traipsed over on high heels from the mirror where they had been primping and whispering.

The girls each took an elbow and nuzzled an ear, all three of them supporting each other on the slight rolling of train.

"Don't go, Topper," crooned Blakely

"You smell like sun-baked sand at St. Tropez," whispered Needa. His neck and chest flushed at their touch.

"We're ready, we're ready. Just one more thing. Turn around, face the door."

"Why?"

"Face the door, face the door, face the door," they pealed, hands in front of their mouths.

James turned to face the burnished steel door and watched their distorted reflections move toward the enormous white box. Outwardly prep-school good natured, impatience scratched at him. They were about to play some silly trick, a trick that would absorb precious time that he might be

spending on his presentation. The ashes of this phase of his life were fluttering behind him. The minutes had burnt like paper. Ahead lay the weight of his future.

He heard a scraping and a chuff-chuff but it was the smell that spun him around hard-necked, adrenaline static in his ears.

Needa held the tiger on a leash while Blakely stroked the animal's shining back. The girls looked at him under their thick mascaraed lashes and advanced on James.

"What?" he stammered, stunned by the creature's beauty, scanning the car for a weapon.

"No sudden moves," Needa purred.

"Oh, he's *usually* pretty friendly," Blakely said, gazing tilt-headed at James.

There was no weapon, no escape, but his body was nevertheless poised to spring. He thought of Hector – heartbroken – of HeraSys – implemented without him.

They closed the space, all teeth. James held carbide-still as the tiger delicately sniffed the cuffs of his pants.

The beast wasn't quite full grown, he noticed. An adolescent.

"Did you bring him here," he asked Needa, his mouth barely moving.

"There are no tigers in Africa." The twist of her face said *idiot* more loudly than any mouth could. "Dad acquired him in his last takeover," Blakely informed him.

The train sighed to a stop. James had never felt the muscles in his toes so deeply, clinging to the floor. Blakely flipped the steel cover on the control panel and pushed a short sequence of buttons which she troubled to shield from James. *Don't bother, I'll never step foot in here again.*

"We're not going out there!" he said.

"Why wouldn't we?"

Their beautiful eyes in their beautiful faces were all brittle innocence. "You can't."



“No one tells me I can’t,” said Needa, cupping his balls through his canvas pants.

“Come on, Topper, or you’ll be stuck here forever,” Blakely said with a laugh.

The doors swept open with a pneumatic hiss, and Needa and Blakely strutted out, the tiger padding ahead of them.

There was a collective gasp, followed by an instant of that rarest of New York commodities – silence.

The dank press of the crowd surged away from them. People held up their palms, the digital eyes of their comm-comms opening. A woman screamed and tried to run, stumbled into a group of young toughs who laughed and pushed her back towards the tiger.

“Ai Mami, no!” she screamed, falling to her knees at Blakely and Needa’s feet. The tiger ignored her but swiveled its head to the group of boys and hunkered into a crouch, showing its teeth.

“Aw fuck,” they yelled and shoved themselves away.

“No, no, no,” said Needa sweetly, manipulating the leash. The tiger’s crouch became a cower and a hiss, fur rising on its spine.

“Nano manipulation amp...Much more effective than the old shock collars,”

“But less humane,” said Needa, manipulating the leash again. The tiger cried like a baby. Regret stabbed James like a needle suit, but he reigned himself hard against the instinct to hide. “Trillionaire Tyke Torments Tiger,” was a probable *Post* headline at this point. Popping his collar or covering his face would only make it worse. This was bad. This was bad for HeraSys. This was bad for his father, but the thrill of the situation rose in him, filling his head with lavish spun images of himself as man, artist, scion.

The crowd rampaged towards both exits.

“Remain calm. There is no running permitted on the subway platform. Please walk to the nearest exit,” intoned the automated station attendant.

A holo-scan jumped out of the MTA pedestal and bathed the tiger in light. Lit orange and jet, it

looked like a god. James reached out to touch it.

“Only registered service animals are allowed on the New York City Transit system. Registration not found. Remain where you are. An MTA officer will arrive shortly.”

“Well come on,” he barked, propelling each woman with a palm in the small of her back.

As they ascended, James gloried in the coiled power of the tiger trotting up the iron stairs – at the surreality of emerging from a subway station with the beast into the New York City day. These beautiful minutes burned bright.

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To keep his nerves in check, he didn't arrive at the symposium until just before he was to go on, trusting his staff to smooth the way. Seven minutes to go.

“James?” He turned to find Dr. Egwu standing stern in the wings.

“Doctor.” James smiled, delighted. Dr. Egwu was an old friend of his father's – a doctor from Liberia whose work on behalf of the sick and poor was tireless.

“Son, you must cease to consort with those heartless children.”

“I tried to stop them,”

“That is not the point. Even without that incident they stain you. Your reputation, your father's reputation.”

“I know. You're right. I have already come to the same decision.” “Good boy,” Dr Egwu replied, her smile blinding. “Good luck.”

James burst onto the stage to polite applause.

“Today I'd like to show you how, together, we can reduce hunger, disease, and poverty by half within ten years, and very probably eradicate them altogether in our lifetimes.”

A few indulgent smiles. Bored looks, and some angry ones. He and Blakely and Needa hadn't made the cover, but they had made page 6. Animal rights groups had been barraging his father's

publicity office with tortured screeds about animal cruelty and the entitlement of the ultra-rich.

"Conceived by G Industries; I give you – HeraSys!" *Click*. The network. *Click*, the nodules, interconnected and moving resources to precisely the areas they were needed from across the world within hours. *Click*, an enactment of a North American neo-measles outbreak and its subsequent quashing with fewer than 1,000 casualties. *Click*, a mustering of law enforcement, medical personnel, and social workers to fourteen strategic points in a Mexifornia techno-gang battle. *Click*, 14 tons of food being diverted around blockades and through Sinwajjin territory.

By the end of the presentation, the indulgent smiles and bored looks had become urgent whispers and looks of astonishment. The angry looks were mostly still pasted on, but starting to peel like sunburn, revealing smooth admiration underneath.

"Thank you," he finished, leaving the backbone and nodules – mapped like the electrical impulses of a brain – firing on the screen.

The audience stood and applauded. And applauded. And applauded.

"Is it real?" asked a woman in a red skirt as he walked along the side row to the Dignitaries' Box. "You'll save us," said an old man, tears jiggling in his cloudy eyes. "Gutierrez, Gutierrez, Gutierrez," chanted two dozen Green Punks.

Blakely met him at the threshold of the Dignitaries' Box and pulled him gently to her table just inside the half door.

On autopilot, he high fived her pale upheld hand.

"You're the rock star of the do-gooders," she smiled.

An edge of rue surfaced above the wash of accomplishment that had covered his dismay at seeing her. "Congratulations Mr. Gutierrez," called several people from the linen covered tables.

He nodded stiffly, his elation siphoning away.

"Why are you here?" James asked, not sitting.

"Where else would I be? I run the Billingsly Foundation. Contributions of 1.79 trillion last year to entities such as those in your triumphant presentation."

He stared at her, jaw tight. He had never known her to take her responsibilities seriously, but of course she would be here to pose for the press. She looked like an angel, her white blond hair in an updo, wearing a white silk blouse with bell sleeves as wings, a white wool skirt for clouds.

"I'm very excited at the possibilities your system has for leveraging our future contributions."

She patted the chair beside her.

He wanted to walk past her but she was right. The Billingsly Foundation was a tax write-off, and rumored to be used to smooth the way for less savory BillingslyCorp endeavors, but the amount of funding they chucked out to appease the very people whose broken backs they profited on was unreal. *HeraSys could increase the effects of 1.79 trillion to ten times that.*

"Maybe we could discuss it tonight."

"I'm free Tuesday and Thursday to meet in the HeraSys offices," he replied coolly.

"Very well, Topper. Oh look, our friend Needa."

He looked to the stage. If he had been struck by her beauty before, now he was assaulted by it. She stood in Moloi dress, every inch the warrior queen.

As she spoke, a hush fell over the assembly.

"My father was a refugee child, brutalized and pressed into servitude at the age of six by the warlord Sgeze, who butchered his mother and father in front of him."

James watched as a tear scarred her cheek.

"Not knowing any other way, my father perpetuated this brutality for twenty years – though he was far from the only one.

“Then, my father met my mother.” Here she paused, overcome with emotion.

“And she showed him how to be a good man.

A whisper of incredulity rippled through the audience.

“He created Moloji, a country of great prosperity. In Moloji we live in a paradise,” At this the Moloji delegate jolted from his seat and stood at attention.

“In most humble penance for his previous misdeeds, my father wishes to do his part to assist our friends and allies in extending this paradise throughout Africa and the world. To this end, my father the king is proud to partner with HeraSys and the Billingsly Foundation to bring an end to disease and poverty in Africa and beyond.”

A silence fell on the hall, broken only by the enthusiastic clapping of the Moloji delegate and his relatives.

Everyone in the Dignitaries’ Box turned to look at James. “Surprise,” mouthed Blakely, eyes alight.

Great claws grasped at James’s chest. His heartbeat filled his head with dark drumming.

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James couldn’t remember how he had gotten home. He might as well have flown out of the Dignitaries’ Box and over the city.

He remembered seeing Dr. Ekwu shake her head and look down. Everything else between the U.N. and home was gone.

Now he paced naked in his Park Avenue penthouse, begging God to grant him a solution in wholeness, the way HeraSys had come to him one morning as he was eating a soft-boiled egg.

Those traitorous wretches had cast HeraSys into the mud and trampled it with their pretty cloven feet. One million well-crafted press releases denying any affiliation of HeraSys to the atrocity king

of Moloï and the Billingsly profiteers would not erase the stain.

There was a knock at his walnut door.

The holo panel showed Jenner standing outside with a young man, as scruffy and lean as Jenner was clean-shaven and portly. "What?"

"Package, sir."

"Just leave it outside."

"Sorry sir, but this gentleman insists on a signature."

James flung the door open. Neither man blinked at his nakedness.

He scrawled his signature on the hologram over the messenger's palm and slammed the door.

The large flattish box was wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string. He ripped it off with fingers that shook and lifted the top.

Inside was a black garment – a jacket – he thought. He pulled it out – a trench, superbly tailored in Apres-Tex. A piece of paper fell to the ground.

The outside of the cream card was blank. Inside it read, "Topper – Omelets = Eggs." He knew before he unbuttoned the coat that he would find it lined with tiger fur.

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A friend of a friend of a friend knew Al-Bavvar, or more accurately, an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance.

A Sami freedom fighter (the Norwego-Dano government labeled him terrorist), Al-Bavvar sat on James's terrace. He looked more Norwegian than Sami.

"I want to be there."

"That's impossible."

"I'll double your price."

Al-Bavvar's gray eyes flicked out to the blue sky. After a moment he sighed. "Two weeks."

A pause fell and was embellished by the coo of a pigeon. "Which one do you want more?"

James let his stomach consider the question. "I want them both equally."

"I'm good at what I do but your targets have...vast resources. If I only get one, I might not have the chance to get the other one. You make it more difficult by insisting on being there."

"Who you see first, that's the one I want most."

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It was windy on the roof. Al-Bavvar searched James.

"You will not speak until it is done," he said, his eyes as empty as a glass of tap water.

James said nothing. Al-Bavvar turned to place his tools and James lowered his binoco-visor.

Wind handed James the scent of his youth; the streets he'd ranged over in shining coalescences of rich kids; their breeding, education and possessions all first-rate.

Sometimes they'd allowed a hanger on if he or she was exceptionally funny or daring or creative, but those all fell by the wayside sooner or later. They never understood who the world belonged to, so they couldn't belong. James felt an old twinge of regret for one boy and another for a girl.

Al-Bavvar looked through the scope and they waited.

They waited through the cold windy morning and through the rainy afternoon. At nightfall, a Ferrari pulled up. Blakely got out of the passenger side and cat-walked towards the building. James's ears tensed back, his body flushed with warmth. She disappeared into the vestibule and the Ferrari rumbled off down Lexington Avenue.

James said nothing, but stared hard at the back of Al-Bavvar's head. "They are both due here. Perhaps they will come out together,"

Indeed, twenty minutes later, a limousine stopped at the curb. The chauffeur opened the door for two bodyguards and Needa. She went into the building, the men just behind her.

James exhaled a powdery breath he didn't know he had been holding.

The lights of the city came on in slow waves from east to west and from ground floor to top floor, automated to illuminate at the exact second each space lost the sun, mitigating the load on the city's grid.

*You could stop this now. Pay Al-Bavvar and send him home.*

He thought of the three of them in Blakely's subway car, click-clacking across the bridge, gazing out over the shining East River, joyous in tumbled bedding.

*They're in there right now, drinking champagne and eating beef, making plans to wring their next trillion from the sorrow of the world. They've turned you into a killer.*

He waited.

He was stretching his stiff body against the chill when he sensed a heightened alertness in Al-Bavvar. The front door of the building flew open and two bodyguards walked out, followed by Needa and Blakely, heads together. The binoco-visor captured the sounds of their laughter and carried their distorted words to him.

"Let us make a pact to get to bed early," Needa laughed.

"Let us not and go dancing instead," Blakely replied.

Al-Bavvar's body swelled with breath and he pulled the trigger. Blakely's arms flailed out. Before she fell he pulled it again and Needa doubled at the gut. One more shot and Needa's head flew back. They fell away from each other and crumpled on the cement.

The men turned to the girls but James put his visor up. He didn't want to see their amused looks turn into concern and then to terror. They'd be executed by Needa's father.

Al-Bavvar was breaking down his rifle with military speed and precision. "Cigarette?" James



asked, taking a lighter from his pocket.

“Not now.” Grim annoyance tightened Al-Bavvar’s face, followed by an instant unfolding. He dropped the rifle and reached for the gun in his waistband but James had already touched his lighter to Al- Bavvar’s arm and pressed the nano-simulation amp.

Al-Bavvar writhed and dropped the gun. James held fast on the button.

Before he left, James pulled his visor down one more time to see them up close. Blakely would be happy, he thought. She looked so thin lying there. And Needa, Needa was every inch the fallen queen.

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“Needa Gloire and Blakely Billingsly, Daughters of King Gloire of Moloï and Tycoon Stephen Billingsly, Assassinated by Sami Terrorist,” read the headline in the *New York Times*. James didn’t bother with the *Post*. He had no time for unserious things.

His work was to save the world.

The minutes would burn like wood.