

STEALING FIRE EXTRACT II: Andy and Bob Get Bad News

Andy walked in to Stone's office without bothering to knock and sat down facing his enormous walnut desk. What a desk – surely the best thing about Stone's job, and about the only thing that made Andy ever want to get promoted. Bob ignored Andy as he sat down.

Andy's boss was wearing one of those light striped tweed jackets and had a glaring yellow silk hankie stuck out of his top pocket. A country shirt and his old RAF tie completed the get-up. 100% old forces buffer, no doubt about it. He looked up once he'd finished the letter he'd been reading and blinked, then smiled and said:

“Right mate. We're conkers deep in it this time.”

“What's up?”

“Russians think we're trying to blame them for illegal sales to Africa. You familiar with Equatorial Guinea?”

Not as such, Andy thought. But never mind.

“Not really – go ahead.”

“Piles of oil. Dictatorship. Starving people, all of that. Usual nonsense from the top man – find an enemy of some description and go after them so your people ignore the fact that you're thieving the mineral wealth.”

“And who is the enemy, and what's it got to do with us?”

Harris felt for his tobacco pouch in his suit pocket. Smoking bans relied on the smoker being reported, and no-one ever reported anything that went on inside Luxor's offices. Except of course to the Ministry of Defence – and they were all at it in their offices anyway. Smoking, that is.

“Sao Tome and Principe, that’s their enemy. Where, I hear you ask? Tiny place. Islands in the Atlantic. Does bananas and a little tourism off the West coast of Africa, you know the thing. Shell and Total Oil recently discovered geological structures that they want to test drill – in other words, oil deposits— in the straits between Equitorial Guinea and Sao Tome. Of course, when the government of Sao Tome saw that their neighbour wanted to attack them, they went looking for a little insurance.”

“What do you mean, insurance?”

“I mean, they did what any self-respecting impoverished third world government would do: they started looking for arms on the black market. By the way, what happened to your eye?”

Andy shrugged. “Took a hit when I was sparring at lunch time. It’s nothing.”

“Don’t come the hard man with me, Harris. You should get that looked at. And if you can’t get to the doctor, then at least splash some vodka on it, that’s my advice.”

Harris ignored him and leaned back in the chair across from Stone’s desk. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt, loosened his own dark blue tie and tried to recall anything he knew about Sao Tome and Principe. He’d never even heard of the bloody place.

