

STEALING FIRE EXTRACT III: Andy Gets Hung Out To Dry

Outside, the two men squared up to Andy as if they were about to fight on the streets instead of sip champagne at a party. One of them was around one hundred and ninety pounds, six feet tall and very fit: it was the other one who worried him. A good six inches taller and forty pounds heavier, with mean-looking tribal scars on either cheek. Corn rows braided up under his army cap and a Chinese character tattoo under his ear. These guys were paramilitary at best – more likely straight mercenaries.

“You work for Luxor Systems, yes?”

“That’s right. I’m Andy Harris. How can I help? Are you enjoying the party?”

The smaller guy ignored his question. The bigger one looked straight through him. That was a look that he’d last seen on the SAS trooper who picked him off the assault course when he’d failed Special Boat Service for the third and last time.

Harder than the word “hard”.

Too hard to care.

The smaller guy spoke in an even voice: “We could kill you now, but then you’re not worth it. Not tonight, anyway. Mr Harris, we know what your company has done. We know you have supplied Sao Tome with the best weapons in the world - illegally.”

He took Andy’s shoulder, grabbing him with an alien pincer-grip. The big guy grabbed his other shoulder and they shoved him to the balcony railings, turning him face-first towards the vista of Paris turning peach in the dusky light. Below him in the streets, Andy could see the streetlamps just switched on, the Eiffel Tower ablaze in the fading sun.

The big guy grabbed Andy’s leg and they swung him out over the edge of the balcony, tipped him upside down, nothing but their arms stopping him from falling to his death.

Andy watched his precious gold lighter fall down to the streets below, felt the men's arms tremble as they struggled to hold his weight.

“Because we know you are being watched, we will not kill you here and now.”

Andy didn't move a muscle. Struggle would be suicide right now. He looked down to the cars passing a hundred feet below. No-one had seen him hanging in mid-air. No-one would notice if they dropped him. It would look like an accident.

The big guy with scars and tats was staring at him. Andy looked up and he could see the butt of a 9mm poking out from little guy's waistband. Why hadn't security got that when they came in? Little guy snarled at him:

“Listen to me white boy. You have five days to get your missiles out of Sao Tome before three things happen. The first is we kill you. Then we tell your government what you've done, so your company gets mashed. And the third thing”— the man smiled, and they lifted Andy back on to the balcony.

His heart was pounding, and he held back the need to strangle this bastard right here and now.

The taller African finished his buddy's sentence: “The third thing we do: well, wait and see. But it's called self-defence. Self-defence against the imperialism of the British with their flag like a butcher's apron. Look what you people did to Africa one hundred years ago – you will not do it again.”

The men turned and walked back into the apartment. Andy could see them heading straight for the elevator: their departure would hardly be noticed in all the military uniforms, champagne and flirting.

He watched them leave, then dusted himself off and straightened his tie. He rolled a cigarette, much deserved after his near-death experience, but then realised he'd lost his lighter.