STEPHEN PALMER

A THEFT OF FLOWERS

In that mirror-bright morning on the edge of steel and chrome, Djeneba faced disaster. During the night her entire stock of flowers had been burned in the brazier that stood outside her stall.

She stood motionless as people milled around her, dark eyes invisible behind dark shades. The breeze ruffled her replacement aluminium hair as the silver fronds falling from the backs of her arms and legs sparkled in the sun.

A nearby stallholder, noticing her shock, called for Asséta.

Such a thing had not happened at Ouagadougou Market for three decades. The intricate web of relationships—of give and take, and of responsibility to the market—prohibited all forms of struggle, especially vendettas. The Old Council had been set up to provide justice and leadership, to symbolise the ethics of the market.

Of course, the Green Wall was a sector apart—real people—but there was no sign of their work at Djeneba's flower stall.

Djeneba saw little of events around her. All she could see were tiny puffs of smoke emerging from holes in the brazier lid. Eventually Asséta arrived, then led her away, whereupon Djeneba recovered enough composure to speak.

Asséta said, "Do you know who did this?"

"No."

"Do you have enemies?"

"None!"

Asséta hesitated, glancing down at the silver grass. "In truth," she said, "there is little I can do. The Old Council holds no stock of money. Those of us who run stalls are independents, solitary or paired, who succeed or fail according to the whim of the market."

Djeneba nodded, still too shocked to cry. She sat down, taking off her shades.

"It is possible that friends will rally round to provide you with food and drink," Asséta

continued. “And you do still have your tent.”

Djeneba nodded again.

“Or you may have to leave Ouagadougou Market. You cannot hope to collect enough stock from the machines around us before we leave for Timbuktu. Buying stock from people in Ouagadougou or from your friends would cost too much.”

Djeneba sat motionless.

Bending down to place a hand on Djeneba’s arm, Asséta said, “As leader of the Old Council I must be impartial. I am sorry. It would pain me to lose so vibrant a member of the market. But life in Ouagadougou is not at all like life in a real town, or even a village. Because we are so close to the Green Wall of Africa we live and die by our luck.”

Djeneba glanced up, then replied, “And by our software.”

Silence.

Asséta stood upright and said, “Ouagadougou Market contains proprietary software—I will not deny it. But that software works only for itself. None of these machine dumps, these random collections… none of those are ours. Ouagadougou Market is its own entity, owing little or nothing to forces outside, governed by the detritus of failed nation states.

"Djeneba, you have been with us for some years. Whatever you decide to do, I wish you luck.”

Asséta walked away. Djeneba glanced at her, then dropped her gaze to study the ground.

People looked aside as they passed her, as if ashamed.

Asséta presented a calm face as she moved on.

Although she suspected that a full attack on Ouagadougou Market could not succeed, she was far from certain. Strife between stallholders, when it happened, took the form of mercantile competition or shouting matches; there were few previous incidents that she could use to gauge what danger the market might now be in.

However, everyone who worked in Ouagadougou Market was aware of the existence of those darker folk who came from inside the Green Wall. The attention of that criminal fraternity was usually turned away from the market, which existed as a cyber-shield

against verdancy, but sometimes Green Wall eyes looked in their direction. Asséta knew that if Djeneba's life was in danger the threat would like as not come from that ancient place.

That was, if Djeneba spoke the truth. Life in the market was harsh. Soon they would be on their way to Timbuktu, and that meant passing through the Green Wall. Real people, real green, real animals and insects. She shuddered. There was no way over or under.

That evening Djeneba began to see what she would have to do.

Leaving Ouagadougou Market was not an option, whatever Asséta declared—a woman could die within days, in baking diurnal heat. That meant she had to acquire flower stock without delay, but the problem was: no money. Worse, because she had now lost her status as an information gatherer for local acquaintances, she would have to create a second income, and within a season; if she did not she would be in trouble. She knew from previous experience that traders who failed were rarely helped by their colleagues. Dog eat dog.

That night she crossed the market and walked down Hen Lane, dodging into the Green Wall when nobody was looking. The smell of crisped leaves haunted her. Tree boles were thick, brown, tough barriers for water, which they stored internally. And these were real trees, no jury-rigged constructs.

After a few minutes she stood on a path that led down to a striped tent. Ball O' Fat recognised her from some way off, waving her forward as she tip-toed closer. When she was a few yards away, he grinned and said, "Welcome, lady."

She approached, already disconcerted by his insincere tone of voice. She said, "I need more money."

"Ah! I 'eard about your accident. Nasty, that. 'Oo was it?"

"That's none of your business."

He sniffed, then wiped the back of his hand across his nose. "Come into me tent, lady."

Inside, Djeneba said, "I can't survive if I don't have stock."

"What's your mark-up?" Ball O' Fat asked.

She shrugged. "Fifty percent on the seed-bearing flowers, less on the others."

He took the agreement that she had signed years before and ripped it into fragments,

tossing them over his shoulder. “You owe me two-and-ten,” he said. “I reckon you’re gonna need fifteen more ebits at least.”

“I’m not sure I’d need fifteen,” Djeneba said.

He shook his head. “At least that amount.”

“I can find small stuff to sell in the mirror steel around here.” She would have to use all her skills to make locally sourced material look attractive to her customers.

“You gotta sell stock quick, lady, make a good profit, otherwise you’re dead. Assuming you find any stock, that is.”

“What are your debt terms?” she asked, with a sigh.

He began writing on a fresh scroll, passing it over when he finished. Fifteen ebits: payback, twenty-two-and-ten over a period of two seasons, plus the two-and-ten that she already owed him, making twenty-five in all.

Djeneba’s heart sank. She sat back, considering the viability of the terms. With luck she could expect to turn over her first load of stock in a fortnight, which might leave her with five ebits. The problem would be finding more to sell on. But if she was frugal, she might just do it; and it was the right time of year to gather from silvery meadows.

“Too much, lady?” Ball O’ Fat enquired. “There’s other methods of payin’. You’re a pretty lady—”

She looked at him with distaste and he grinned. “You know what I mean.”

Infuriated, Djeneba signed the scroll and threw it in his direction. Ball O’ Fat counted out the money and passed it over. Moments later she was gone.

Back in her tent, she turned her mind to the possibility of catching the person who had burned her flowers. It would likely be a rival, she guessed; a local. A rider of machines.

Perhaps… perhaps a collector of seeds.

Djeneba planted seeds of her own as she returned to Ouagadougou Market, and when they germinated next day she watered them with knowledge from the machine dumps surrounding the market. Soon a row of bright plants lay along Hen Lane, camouflaged in the dusty silver undergrowth.

Hours later, having interrogated them, she had a name and a location.

The simmering bitterness Djeneba felt for certain people of the Green Wall now turned to fury. On screens she saw Ball O' Fat and Silver Nose speaking together, planning, surveying—and all in the days before the burning of her flowers. Luckily the issue of market privacy had not yet been resolved, else she would not be able to trawl these depths.

Djeneba grabbed images and noise, then departed her tent.

And there was Silver Nose himself, emerging from the undergrowth beneath a baobab tree… heading for the pavilion of the Old Council.

Djeneba, still angry, ran fast. Asséta and Silver Nose were speaking when she entered the pavilion. Matte black hyperducts channelled information from random machine feeds—the place was a-twitter with bird calls. Seeds lay everywhere on the sandy floor.

Asséta raised her hand and Djeneba halted, but then spoke anyway. "This is the criminal," she said. "I declare Silver Nose to be the burner of my flowers."

Silver Nose turned away, shunning Djeneba, to give Asséta an ultimatum. "That woman is leaving the market," he declared.

"Er…" Asséta temporised, raising her right hand and taking a step backward. "Er, wait a moment, please—"

"No waiting, I'm wanting a decision now."

A dozen people or more stared in their direction, and embarrassed customers were already departing Old Council stall benches. "Please, Silver Nose," Asséta insisted. "This isn't the place—"

"Now!"

Djeneba said, "Why should I leave the market?"

Silver Nose pointed to a nearby flower stall and said, "That. And you! Your stock isn't even real flowers!"

The three of them were almost alone now. "We can lower our voices," Asséta said. "Nobody wants to hear this."

Silver Nose glanced up and down the pavilion. "This has gone too far," he said. "I'm being displaced by an outsider."

Asséta said, “But you, as part of the Green Wall, are the out—”

“Asséta, wait,” Djenebra interrupted. “I’ll leave.”

“No!”

“Shush,” Djeneba said, stepping closer. “I’ll buy a tent and pitch it a few yards down the path, outside the market. It’s the polite thing to do.” She looked at Silver Nose and said, “It’s the Ouagadougou Market thing to do, isn’t it?”

Silver Nose said nothing. Silence fell. Abruptly he shrugged. “Do it, then.”

But Asséta’s attention was elsewhere. “Who’s that?”

From a gap between two pavilion flaps a mirror-masked man emerged. He was large, heavy-set but not fat, and he held a crossbow, which without hesitation he aimed at the trio, at Silver Nose, or so it seemed to Djeneba. He fired. From the corner of her eye Djeneba saw a dart shoot past Silver Nose’s head.

She was too surprised to move, until the man glanced at her—then she screamed and turned for the pavilion exit. The man reloaded and fired again in a single, fluid motion, but Asséta flung herself at Djeneba and rolled with her behind a bench. A third twanging shot sounded, then silence. Asséta peered around the bench leg to see that he had vanished.

All over in the space of ten heartbeats. Asséta lay, holding a shivering Djeneba. “Who…?” Djeneba muttered.

“I don’t know,” Asséta replied, “but what in all Burkina Faso is happening? Market people don’t go around assassinating their rivals.”

“That was somebody from the Green Wall,” Djeneba muttered.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know. But it is obvious.”

“Then why attack Silver Nose?”

Before Djeneba could reply Silver Nose scrambled underneath the bench to join them. “He was firing at me!” he said. “He was shooting at me!”

“What’s going on?” Asséta demanded, taking him by the shoulder. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Silver Nose glanced at Djeneba. “Everything’s been different since she arrived.”

“That’s nonsense,” Asséta interjected. “Anyway, Djeneba’s leaving the market soon. And that man fired at you first.”

Silver Nose shook his head. “Cybere be thanked that the market protected me.”

“The market does not protect green people,” Asséta said.

He reddened. “We founded your market. Leave us in peace!”

Asséta continued speaking as they stood up. “Cybere protects the market,” she said, “and it protects the members of the Old Council in certain, simple ways.”

Djeneba was perplexed by this remark. “And you’re in charge of that?”

Asséta shrugged. “Cybere will be here in a moment. The market mood will have twitched in its mind.” She turned to Silver Nose and said, “Why would an outsider want to kill you?”

Silver Nose said nothing, but Djeneba bobbed her head. “If I may ask, what do you mean, you founded Ouagadougou Market?”

The question was politely phrased, but Silver Nose looked at her with scorn. “The mere fact that you have to ask such a thing shows the darkness you live in. All this machinery! And you ignore the truth it holds, even though that truth comes from your past. You’re all liars!”

“I don’t understand.”

“The assassin—it was one of your kind.” He turned and hurried away, glancing nervously around, then back at them with anger. “You think of us as criminals, but we are not.”

Later, much later, Cybere arrived. Asséta had long since sent Djeneba to her tent. The market’s embodiment was tall, bright, heavy, appearing as though European. She put on sunshades to reduce reflection glare.

“There is a madman here,” Cybere said. “Djeneba attacked.”

“You mean the crossbow man?” Asséta asked.

Cybere looked in astonishment at her. “You were shot at with a crossbow?”

“Silver Nose was.” Asséta shrugged. “What attack were you referring to?”

“The flower burning. Is Djeneba well?”

Asséta did not immediately answer. “Doubtless the mood enfolding the Old Council was triggered in your mind,” she said. “But the assassination attempt failed. It was therefore performed by somebody who knows nothing of our market secrets. A Green Wall man, quite possibly, though Silver Nose thinks otherwise.” She sighed.

“The Green Wall of Africa is full of humans.”

Asséta realised how important this statement was. Cybere would want to know why the market mood had been triggered. “There’s something bad going on. The Old Council should meet. We haven’t faced this kind of threat before, and we can’t just ignore it.”

Cybere said nothing for a full minute. Its face became white, its gaze cast down to the ground. “You are correct,” it said. “I will arrange it.”

Asséta paused at Djeneba’s tent and called out, “Djeneba? I wish you to speak before the Old Council tomorrow. Can I come in?”

There was no reply except sobbing. Asséta decided this answer was as good as any; in her current mood she was not to be denied. But the sight that greeted her shocked her. Djeneba had cut off all her metal. Her eyes were red from weeping. The metal had been hacked off, leaving silvery patches, but in some places black blood dried hard where skin had been cut. She looked so different that Asséta found herself unable to speak.

“Asséta…” Djeneba whispered. She was distraught.

It took a moment for Asséta to reply. “What happened?”

“A man came… he did it.”

“Who?”

Djeneba began weeping again. For a while neither of them spoke, until she murmured, “I don’t know. A big man. He said he’d come to make me part of the Green Wall.”

Asséta said, “What is happening to Ouagadougou Market this year?”

Through her sobbing Djeneba answered, “I don’t know.”

Djeneba got up and stumbled out of the tent. Asséta sat down. She noticed the disarray that the tent was in—cushions lying at random, oddments everywhere, and a few scraps of metal that had not yet been gathered up. One of the objects she saw was Djeneba’s purse. She grabbed it. Gold and silver inside—real metal, not ebits.

She knew then that Djeneba told the truth. An assimilation was in progress.

Djeneba was half hidden within a deep hood as she spoke before the Old Council, describing the burning of her flowers, the failed assassination, the taking of her metal. She revealed her wounds only briefly, and out of sympathy and decency they looked away.

When she was done, Djeneba withdrew to a respectful distance, while Asséta sat with others in the shade of a faux baobab tree to discuss the events. “In truth, there is little we can do without evidence,” she told Cybere and the others. “The Old Council holds no stock of money. Those of us who run stalls are independents, solitary or paired, who succeed or fail according to the whim of the market.

“It is possible that Djeneba’s friends will rally round to provide her with food and drink. And she does still have her tent.”

Cybere nodded, but from a distance Djeneba frowned.

“Or she may have to leave Ouagadougou Market, which she has offered to do. She cannot hope to collect enough stock from the machines around us before we leave for Timbuktu. Buying stock from people in Ouagadougou or from her friends would cost too much.”

There was no comment from the Old Council.

Asséta continued, “As leader of the Old Council I must be independent. I am sorry. It would pain me to lose so vibrant a member of the market. But life in Ouagadougou is not at all like life in a real town, or even a village. Because we are so close to the Green Wall of Africa we live and die by our luck.”

“And by our software,” said Cybere. Djeneba’s face paled. She herself had said those same words to Asséta, had she not?

After a long while Asséta said, “Ouagadougou Market contains proprietary software—I will not deny it. But that software works only for itself. None of the machine dumps, the random collections… none of them are ours. Ouagadougou Market is its own entity, owing little or nothing to forces outside, governed by the detritus of failed

nation states. Djeneba has been with us for some years. Whatever she decides to do, I wish her luck."

"Are there any other statements to make?" asked Cybere.

Another long silence. Asséta turned to beckon Djeneba to rejoin them, but there was no sign of her.

Djeneba sat opposite Ball O' Fat in the striped tent. Her request had not gone down well.

Ball O' Fat grabbed her wrist. He said, "More money, eh lady?"

Djeneba stared at him. She said nothing.

"You're makin' me think you're a bad debt," he added. He drew his lips back to expose decaying teeth. "Right?"

"I need it to survive," Djeneba said. "My stall is secure, I always have customers—"

"The year's gettin' on, lady. It'll be the autumn soon. The autumn of the green ecosystem is the spring of the mechanical one. But we rule all!"

Ball O' Fat squeezed her wrist tighter. "You owe me money. I ain't gonna give without restraint, lady, 'cos I need a secure return. Let me tell you somethin'." He tapped his temple with a forefinger. "I'm thinkin' of a limit. I ain't gonna tell you what it is. If you go over, if you can't pay, well, Silver Nose will think of ways to make you pay." He grinned, and drool dribbled onto his chin. "Ah, yes," he said, "Silver Nose would enjoy 'avin' a nice slave like you."

Djeneba tried to free herself from Ball O' Fat's grip, but it was impossible.

"Don't move!" he grunted. He reached into his pocket and pulled out five ebits. "Same terms as last time," he said.

Djeneba looked at the money.

Ball O' Fat tapped his temple again. In a gruff voice he said, "You don't want to go too far, lady. So take it or leave it."

Djeneba grabbed the money and thrust it into her belt-pouch. "I know you're behind the assassination. It was faked, wasn't it? You just want to throw the market into chaos, so you can push your own agenda—"

“We own this place! You people have always been the outsiders. We hate you. We hate the nation states you come from. You deserved to decline into savages.”

“You lie.”

Ball O’ Fat chuckled. “We’ll ’ave you people gone to Timbuktu as soon as we can,” he said. “Then we’ll cleanse this town, and you’ll never be allowed to return.”

Djeneba ran from the tent into the night.

Djeneba moved her tent to a hollow just outside the fringes of the market, where weeds from the edge of the Green Wall grew low and dense. On a softpad she made a calculation of the debt she was in. Huge. Debt for the rest of her life, she thought.

She glanced through the interstices of her tent at the trees of the Green Wall. For a moment she wondered: Was that their idea? Perpetual debt?

She wandered back into the market, feigning customer interest, feigning casual chatter. Faking a news bulletin, she used it to ask a few stallholders how much debt they were in, claiming that it was all for the Old Council and the greater good of Cybere, Ouagadougou and Africa.

What she discovered appalled her, for her guess, inspired by the situation she found herself in, had been correct. Almost nine out of ten stallholders were in debt to criminals of the Green Wall. Real-time figures propagated by random machines in the silver halo of the market suggested an imminent crash.

“I’ve got to tell Asséta!” she told herself.

Then she hesitated. What good would that do?

Was there in fact a better course of action?

Suppose she was no longer a member of the market. How would she survive? In their scorn, Ball O’ Fat and Silver Nose had both revealed choice facts that perhaps they should not have. They considered themselves the true residents of Burkina Faso, with all the market stallholders, Cybere and the Old Council counted as intruders. What if…

But no. She was not like them.

Yet she could be real, because she could act real. What if she went over to their side?

That might be the only way to survive. Never-ending debt was insanity. But green roots plunged deep into red African soil, and had done for generations uncounted.

She stood up. In her pocket she carried a tiny gas lighter, of the sort used by technicians of the unsacred to remove inutile machines from the silver dumps. She took it out, staring at it, then collected all her personal belongings.

She burned the tent. The metaphor would not be lost on Ball O' Fat and Silver Nose.

Asséta gasped when she saw Cybere's data.

"The mood of the market has crashed," it said. "We are in trouble."

"But what can we do?"

"There is a madman here," Cybere said. "Djeneba attacked."

"You mean the crossbow man?" Asséta asked.

Cybere looked in astonishment at her. "She was shot at with a crossbow?"

"Silver Nose was. What attack were you referring to?"

"The flower burning. Is Djeneba well?"

Asséta nodded. "Doubtless the mood enfolding the Old Council was triggered in your mind. But the assassination attempt failed. It was therefore performed by somebody who knows nothing of our market secrets. A Green Wall man, quite possibly, though Silver Nose thinks otherwise."

"The Green Wall of Africa is full of humans."

Asséta said, "There's something bad going on. The Old Council should meet. We haven't faced this kind of threat before, and we can't just ignore it."

Cybere said nothing for a full minute. Its face became white as it cast its gaze down to the ground. Then it said, "You are correct. I will arrange it."

Asséta watched as it departed. Something was wrong between her and Cybere, but she could not put her finger on it. Had anything useful been said? Somehow… somehow… she thought not.

Djeneba smiled at Silver Nose and Ball O' Fat. These were green people, who did real things. She said, "I have the information you need to assimilate the market."

"You, eh?" said Ball O' Fat. "And why?"

“Because I believe you to be correct. Africa has long been green.”

Ball O’ Fat nodded. “Not always,” he said, “but you’re right, aye, you’re right. So wha’s this info?”

“The accession codes for Cybere. You can remove it. You can lop the head off the market.”

“And then?”

Djenaba glanced down at her skin. “Can you make me real? I want to live again.”

Ball O’ Fat shrugged. “Lady, you might’ve had your metal hacked off, but you’re still one of them.” He gestured at the market. “Not one of us, see?”

Silver Nose tapped Ball O’ Fat on the arm. “Listen,” he said. “This could work for us. This Euro-spawn seems genuine.”

Ball O’ Fat scowled. “Don’t talk as though she’s not here!”

Djeneba felt a touch of desperation. “I’ll do anything,” she said. “I’ll work for you. I don’t want the old ways any more, honestly.”

Silver Nose glanced at Ball O’ Fat, then grinned.

The next Old Council meeting was well attended. Djeneba sat at the back of the crowd, concealed in the public padock, a faux-silver cloak rippling around her, a silicon-software wig on her head. Just a regular marketeer, or so it appeared. But she had given Cybere’s accession codes to the men of the Green Wall; now all she had to do was wait for an appropriate moment to open the way, initiate the assimilation.

Nearby, Ball O’ Fat and Silver Nose lay hidden amidst the new-grown mirror flowers of Ouagadougou’s surroundings, like monkeys in junk.

Cybere stood beside the market bell, towering over everybody. “The mood of the market has crashed,” it said. “We are in trouble.”

Asséta stepped forward, and in spite of herself Djenaba felt a flicker of uncertainty. When she was grieving her flowers, when she was bleeding alone, Asséta had been there. And now…

“But what can we do?” Asséta asked.

“There is a madman here,” Cybere said. “Djeneba attacked.”

“You mean the crossbow man?” Asséta asked.

Cybere looked at her. “She was shot at with a crossbow?”

“Silver Nose was. What attack were you referring to?”

“The flower burning. Is Djeneba well?”

From her vantage point, any lingering doubts within her died. No, she thought, Djeneba is not well. Not here, not any more. She gripped the tiny rat-switch in her right hand.

Asséta replied, “Doubtless the mood enfolding the Old Council was triggered in your mind. But the assassination attempt failed. It was therefore performed by somebody who knows nothing of our market secrets. A Green Wall man, quite possibly, though Silver Nose thinks otherwise.”

Djeneba thought Poor Asséta, then shook her head.

“The Green Wall of Africa is full of humans.”

Asséta said, “There’s something bad going on… there’s something bad going on…” She paused, then repeated the mantra: “There’s something bad going on… we haven’t faced this kind of threat before, and we can’t just ignore it.”

Cybere’s face became white as it cast its gaze down to the ground. “You are correct. I will arrange it.”

This was the penalty of working with software, Djeneba knew, software eternally in debt to the European originals. A mixture of dog-eat-dog and callous exploitation; human greed dissolved into silicon lies.

Asséta seemed frozen, as if confused, aware that a flaw in the conversation had developed. Djeneba sat upright as the audience murmured—also aware, but uncomprehending.

Cybere said, “You are correct. I will arrange it.”

“There’s something bad going on,” said Asséta. “We haven’t faced this kind of threat before, and we can’t just ignore it.”

Whatever machinations the green men had worked, there was no question now that

both Cybere and Asséta were looping. Ending it would almost be an act of kindness.

Djeneba pressed the switch.

At once Cybere staggered backwards. The partial mirrors of the pavilion interior turned green. Black hyperducts fell to the ground, like autumn’s dead branches. Bird calls faded… then returned. But the new sounds suggested the noise of real birds: birds in trees.

Through a flap at the side of the pavilion two men emerged, one bulbous and grinning, one with a silver nose.

The first man cleared his throat. “We have assumed control,” he said.