

## Chapter I

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Samuel Hamilton

Sasha Beuna is here. Here, now. Of all the days, and after all of these years, she's sitting in my office, waiting. Waiting with her ever faithful servant, Joseph.

I can't believe it. What has it been? Nearly thirty years. Hah! And that time was also about a job.

In the early sixties, when we last spoke, she asked me to work for her friend, Dr. Capowski, in Philadelphia at the Wynn-Stark Institute. But after the polio vaccination fiasco in the Belgian Congo I distanced myself from all government-sponsored programs.

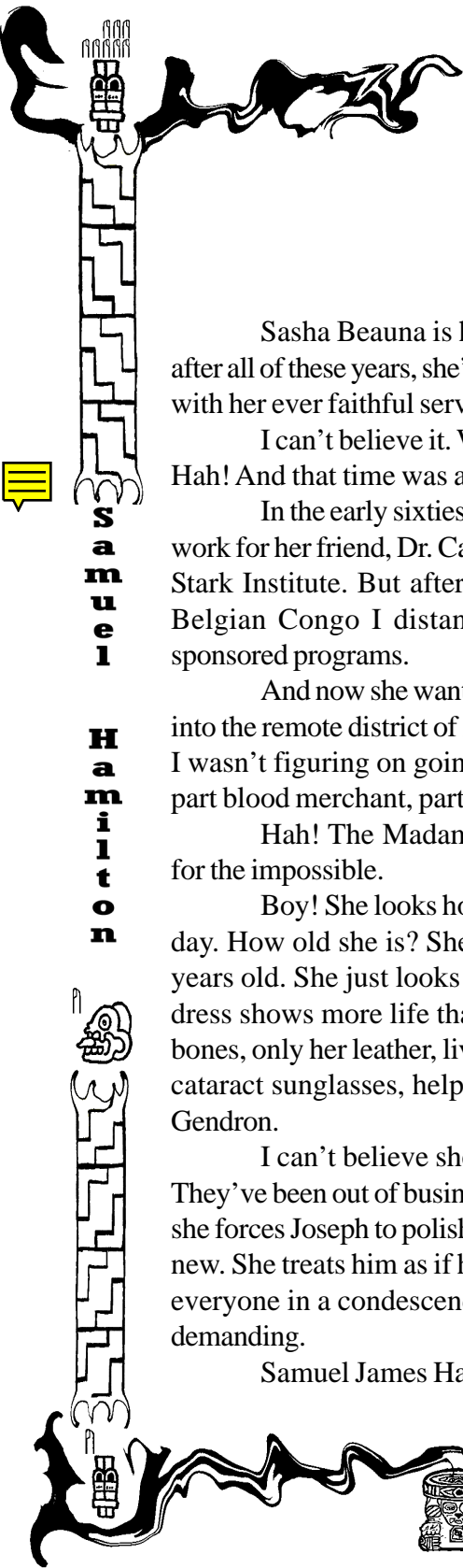
And now she wants me to take a large shipment of blood into the remote district of Kivu in Zaire. I am heading there, but I wasn't figuring on going in so deep. It's like she thinks I'm part blood merchant, part safari hunter.

Hah! The Madame never did have a problem asking for the impossible.

Boy! She looks horrible, though, like she could die any day. How old she is? She has to be at least seventy to eighty years old. She just looks so fragile. Her red and white spring dress shows more life than she does. She has no meat on her bones, only her leather, liver-spotted skin. Twig-thin forearms, cataract sunglasses, helplessly bound to her shiny fixed-arm Gendron.

I can't believe she has a chair made by that company. They've been out of business for several years, now. I wonder if she forces Joseph to polish that antique wheelchair; it still looks new. She treats him as if he is her house slave. Hah! She treats everyone in a condescending manner. She can be so damned demanding.

Samuel James Hamilton, that was not nice.



I shouldn't have come into work. I should be spending this time with Sean. Instead, I am trying to work out some last-minute details for my trip to Zaire.

I can't even think straight. I barely slept a wink last night. Sean's Aunt Lila kept talking; and every time I tried to end the conversation, she started crying. Crying like the victim she always thinks she is. Boy, how many times did she say that she was shortchanged somehow, some way?

For Heaven's sake, she has outlived my Helen by nearly twenty years and now their baby brother, Mitch. Boy, Mitch. I still can't believe you're gone.

And Sean. He's just so devastated. My son confided more in you than me. What should I expect, though? Mitch, you raised Sean. I was never around. Hell just like now. But Sean doesn't have anyone to turn to this time.

Sean's only real friend, Tony, moved to Manhattan a while back. Hah, Brian, Tony's father wasn't too thrilled about him accepting the Columbia basketball scholarship. Boy. Thompson acted offended that Tony had the slightest desire to be a basketball star. Like Brian and his doctorate of Law had brought the Thompson's family far beyond the shameful backwardness of his father's farm. Hah, it's funny that Tony admires his grandfather more than Brian.

Boy, that's a whole other story.

But what about my boy, Sean? What can I do? I have never really been there for him. And I am not going to start pretending that I am there now. He deserves more than that.

I need to do something, though. Maybe I could call Tony's mom and have her have Tony call Sean.

Oh Helen, I need help.

After this trip to Africa, I need to reevaluate everything between me, this job, my good son and this crazy world. I bet I have enough things going on in the market and mutual funds that I can seriously think about retiring maybe by the end of the year. A new beginning.

