

**Fata Morgana**



# Togo

*African novel*

 Publio

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## HIS EXCELLENCY

The reception had been going on for a while already.

Albert was standing in the garden, turned around and looked at the building. He loved when the embassy was resplendent in complete night lighting. Receptions were rare, but at those occasions he made the staff put lamps at every possible place. The small bulbs were hanging in bunches on the walls, but there were some around the doors and above the windows as well. The garden, that was only one scene of the reception, was lit by Japanese lanterns. The buffet was set in two corners, and tables and chairs were set randomly at several places. Warm food was mainly served inside, in the building's big room. The cold drinks and alcoholic drinks gave spirit a boost outside.

The spirit! Albert always paid attention to that to a great extent. He had been living in this country for three years now. The embassy was his home and his workplace as well, and he had got used to it very much. It was comfortable, safe, and nice. Nice was the best word for it. He had not used words like this before. But here . . .

Sometimes he came out to the garden during daytime, though hot weather made him go back quickly. The snow white building with its blue windows recalled Mediterranean shores, though the sea was quite far away from here. But the building was impressive during daytime, and seemingly at night as well when it was lit. The garden was tended, watered daily, cut weekly, the palms and the other plants, together with the flowers were colourful. The whiteness of the house looked good behind the green grass, the violet, red, yellow, and blue flowers strengthened the effect even more. They were hardly visible at night, but their smell was nicely felt in the air. Albert was caught up in nature sometimes, was happy about its beauty – then he did not notice it, forgot about it for weeks. He did not find anything peculiar about this. He believed, he loved nature just as any decent men loved it.

Borg appeared beside him, though noone had seen him approaching. Not even Albert. He was the first secretary of the embassy, in other words his deputy. He always walked quietly. Albert didn't like the words *sneaking* or *creeping*, but in connection with Borg he couldn't use any other words. In the house, in the corridor among the offices, and now on the grass in the garden, he was almost flitting, and suddenly he was beside him:

"Sir, the French colleague is on his way."

Albert knew it would be his task to greet Grésillon, the French ambassador. There were quite few of them here – the French knew this, and they knew as well that an ambassador had a lot to do. So they give a call when the colleague has left. Albert was grateful for this gesture, in this way he could put all other tasks aside, and he could greet the French ambassador at the stairs at the other side of the building. He left, and Borg followed him silently.

Mandal was silent. This town was a lot quieter at night, than the European ones, Albert had known before. Mandal was his second post, and the first one in Africa. This was a step upwards, he thought many times, as if he was convincing himself of it. The truth was that he got Mandal after serving four years in an insignificant Balkan, still European country. The capital of the Tamalin Republic was spreading around, Albert didn't really see it, but rather felt the town around himself. As if a huge beast was lying in soft darkness, only sluggishly, not threateningly. There wasn't much light in Mandal, only the main streets had lamps, complete districts were covered in dimness.

The security guards, hired for only this occasion, were standing aside at the gate. Borg was coming one step behind the ambassador, always one stair behind, and it would be like this when they would go back, up on the same stairs.

Borg was thirty years old, small and blonde, sharp-witted and with bright look. Albert knew within a few years, somewhere, first in a small country, Borg could be an ambassador too. According to the signs Borg had no doubts either. It was obvious he paid attention to everything. This was his second secretary post. He would be a secretary once more, then he would get an embassy. Borg seemed to be sure about that too. He was serving his years of study, but it would end once! – he could see it on his face, in his eyes sometimes.

"I am over thirty six, and I have more luck as this is my second term." Albert thought. The security guards stepped side when they saw the blue-white-red flags on the front of the rolling car. They were proudly waving, and were well seen in the light of the lamps. The French felt they were at home in South Africa, still, and despite what had happened. – it crossed Albert's mind. Well yes, their soldiers, the Foreign Legion was in Chad and elsewhere as well, and when they had to put things in order, like in Mali, they did. Supposedly there were some around as well in the neighbourhood, watching and waiting with guns in their hands.

The French car was escorted by guards, they were sitting beside the driver, moreover, they were following their boss in another car as well. They parked a bit further away in this foreign embassy yard. Ambassador Grésillon was a tall, elegant but a bit paunchy man. It was obvious he did not resist desktop delights either. He hardly had any hair, now that he was over fifty. Albert knew the accredited colleagues in Mandal, there weren't many of them, and he knew things about them, especially from those working for the embassies, and staff gossips. Grésillon sometimes had African lovers, they were gossiping but no one knew anything for sure. They even said he was crazy about black women, but only very young ones. He thought of the twenty year olds as too old. He only had sex with those who had a negative AIDS test.

"Bon jour Your Excellency!" – Albert greeted him smiling. Grésillon held out his hand:

"Bon jour, dear colleague, also Your Excellency!" – the soft smile of the French showed, he himself found it unnecessary, moreover even funny, that they were calling each other Excellency, even if it was only formality. Grésillon shook hands with Borg as well, who even bowed his head, maybe giving a sign of appreciating the Ambassador of a great power coming down to him, to the level of a secretary of a small European embassy. Though he could have known that for Grésillon a handshake meant nothing. The ambassadors of big countries gave a lot of these, and they end their "generosity" at this point. A handshake cost nothing.

It was warm out here, even at that late. They ran in to a cool place, where the air conditioning worked without any noise.

Two minutes later Grésillon was greeted by the other colleagues as well. It struck Albert, that there were only a few of them. Borg, as if he was reading his thoughts, immediately told him quietly:

"Since we sent out the invitation cards, many things have changed. Many escaped when they learnt about the riot. The Czech, the Germans, even the Russians went away saying they were called back for negotiation. The Chinese stayed, but do not come here. The Spanish Ambassador represents Madrid in four countries, so now he is sittin gin the furthest one witing for the developments. The English are still here, but who knows for how long."

Grésillon went around, then went back to Albert. There were some local waiters in white coats in the brightly lit room, moving around the guests smartly and silently, holding their trays up high. Grésillon and Albert one glass of champagne off the tray. Now noone heard what they were talking about – Borg stepped away from them as well. He had an idea, that his boss would have a private talk with the French ambassador. They could not talk about things like that on the phone, it was obvious. They did not know who was tapping the phones. And who they sold the information to. If they had to talk about really important things, the ambassadors met personally at receptions. If they went to each other's embassy without registering in advance, that could mean emergency. Since Albert had represented his country, nothing like that happened.

"What do you know about the rebels, Louis?" – Albert asked. He was respectful, and confident only to an extent that was allowed between colleagues. The use of first name indicated that a confidential topic was about to come. "Now we are only half diplomats, and half people who were brought together by the common situation, the common faith."

"You don't need to worry about them." – Grésillon responded quickly, and the speed revealed he had been prepared for the question. Maybe others were asking the same question. – "Their closeness, their strength is only apparent, and their aim is blurred."

"I'm. . . we are rather worried about blurred aims!" – he quickly corrected it. So noone would think he was worried about his own safety, as this was a political matter. Grésillon understood it, so he continued:

"Of course, there are some, actually close to the power, especially here and in the Northwest, Berluga Taro and in the Geddin Republic, who are toying with the Islamists. But the suspicion is strong that these are simple rebels without any specific ideology. They want to bring down the government of Geddin, and we fall in their path. They would love to win in two neighbouring countries at the same time, then they will be stronger, or at least they think they will be."

"But it is said, they have followers here as well, mainly in the Northern part of the country."

"There is no such ideology, topic, event or person that would have no followers or supporters."- Grésillon waved. He was seemingly trivialized the situation, but this didn't calm down Albert, on the contrary. – "Anyway, they can hardly reach us. When did you last see the president?"

"Maybe three weeks ago, at his birthday reception."

"Well, I met him yesterday, and I can tell, he looks pretty bad." – Grésillon looked around. As if he was worried about someone hearing his words. But he still continued, though a bit more quietly: "The rebels threaten his power in the first place, not the neighbours'. The Tamalin Republic is nota s strong as it seems. The army gives reasons to worry. . ." – But the French didn't go into further details. Borg lurked there and reported the arrival of the American Ambassador, in a low voice, so Albert left the French colleague and went to greet the American one. The American woman was not a career diplomat, but she had become one after sponsoring the current president's election campaign with huge sums. "Impudent they are" – Albert kept saying it to himself, and not for the first time. – "They make ambassador from anyone in return of money. Don't they understand in Washington that this is a profession, and they should be competent in it. It was great luck they were hid in tiny insignificant countries, like Tamalin, Ghana, Dahomey, Kirapaga, the Blue-Islands, and the rest. . ." Whatever his opinion was, he couldn't stop smiling while he was talking to the ambassador.

Those who had been invited were there. Albert looked at the "mass" with satisfaction. There were about ten ambassadors, and numerous secretaries, and of course the locals. One of these was Kerio, the tycoon of Tamalin, who was approaching with a wide smile, holding his huge hand from far to Albert:

"Good evening, Ambassador! How are you?"

"Hello, Mr Kerio." – Albert liked the man though many of the locals did not share his opinion. They said a lot of good things and more bad ones. But still Kerio was someone in this country, there was a reason for him to be on the guestlist. "I need to ask this from you, as who would know Mandal and Tamalin more than you?"

It was well seen on Kerio's black face, that he was happy with the not at all hidden compliment. At the same time Albert noticed something in the man's look, that he had not seen before. A slight reserve, or rather worry?

"Ambassador, tell us about the world, and I'll tell you about the situation here." – Kerio's smile was only a mask, could be broken any minute. They went to a corner instinctively. The lord of the Tamalin woods, the owner of some timber industries loaded a huge European tanker up with good quality African trees almost every day. The lumbers worked deep in the big forests, floated the tree trunks down the river to the ports. It was rumoured that he had concerns in other neighbouring countries, moreover he had chain shops though still rudimentary, but more and more expanding, and chain stores in other countries as well.

They were standing face to face, close to each other holding their champagne glasses. No one else could hear them. Albert started:

"Some of the diplomats have already left. Others are hesitating."

"And the Europeans?" – Kerio was interested mainly in that. As the ships were coming from there for the trees. The boards, the laths, the beams produced in his sawmills were taken there. Above all, he had many things, that were sold in his shops, brought from there as well. Only the clothes came from China. But his main purchase place was Europe, and if anything had gone wrong with that relation. . . Albert understood Kerio's worries, but he did not find it fair to give comfort to him or do not tell the truth:

"The European civilians are preparing to leave too, but there is no central order yet. They are still hesitating in Brussels. If it is time to leave, then all European embassies will be closed except one. Of course only temporarily."

Kerio didn't understand it:

"Why is there an exception?"

"In cases like this only one European embassy stays open for administrative tasks in an exposed territory. From that moment it represents the whole Union and holds the things in one hand."

Kerio sighed. There was no smile on his face:

"A riot here would be devastating for me. Or as they say: "revolution" – there was somethings in his voice that shocked Albert. He had never heard this word pronounced with such an intonation. "Revolution" for him was rather an expression from history books, he last heard it in school. He hadn't called the rising of the Arabs "revolution" in the past few years. Kerio pronounced it with such disgust as if it meant something really bad and disgusting. And maybe for him it meant.

"The president and the army are at their places." He announced it firmly. The black eyes of Kerios stared at the white man's face:

"And you believe it is enough? Everyone has his pice. For many promises are more than enough. This is why everything is so shaky now."

"And what is the case with the Northeast neighbour?" – Albert asked. He referred to the Geddin Republic that was East from Tamalin. Tougran was in the North, and Berluga Taro was in the West.

Kerio was smiling bitterly:

"We seem to be alike here in Western Africa for those far away. After spending three years here probably you know as well that there are quite big differences. Here there is relative peace, and democracy. So nothing is perfect but we are on the right track. The conditions were always worse, there were more poor, the unlucky fellows capable of anything as they had nothing to lose."

"You're still afraid the riot would cross the border."

Kerio nodded:

"Yes, I am worried. Because the riot has already crossed the border. My forests are close to the river, where it rains more often, if it rains at all. . . The trees grow well there. And the river comes from the East. The rebels can cross the border any time, because for them it does not exist. Only in the map, but they haven't seen a map in their lives. But those who order them, they know everything well around here. The country, the people, the circumstances. . . If they are restricted at home, or the French intervene like in Mali a few years ago, many rebels would come to us. Many of my workers at the timber industry and lumbermen will run away, then who will work and lumber the trees? What will happen to my stores and shops?"

Kerio's voice was rising, he used the foreign words smartly. It was well seen that he spent years in higher education, maybe not just at home but abroad as well. But this was not important now. Albert made a decision:

"Let's agree that when you get to know something, Mr Kerio, you call me, and if I get to know something, I'll call you. And if we are leaving" - he showed around the whole embassy - "you'll know about that."

Kerio nodded and stepped away from him. Albert could see he was talking to someone, then left soon. It was no surprise he was not in the mood for the reception and diplomats, the foreign crowd. "We are the strangers here, we can never understand the locals really." Albert thought and he became a bit bitter. In spite of the reception being quite successful.

He was called from the capital the following morning.

Home calls always made him anxious. If anyone had an idea, if only a suggestion in Brussels or in his Foreign Ministry, it arrived at Mandal as an order. Because it turned into an order on its way. Sometimes he had to call back the competent one - if he managed to find the person from here, from Mandal - and had to explain why they could not deliver the task. He was shocked over and over again that those in the Foreign Ministry - that should be one huge eye to the world - had no clue political, economic, climatic or other questions. Neither about Africa.

Whenever he was told about a call from Europe, he shivered. He restrained himself every time. The Foreign Minister himself had not called him yet. "I'm a too little spot on the map of the Diplomats' country.", he used to say to Borg. Now neither the minister, nor the head of department of African affairs. After all he was the real boss.

"Hello, Mr Telldro."

"Hello, Sir."

"Tell me, how is it going in Mandal?"

The head of department of African affairs had been to every capital, though he was not a career diplomat. He spent only days everywhere and it had been years ago. But at least he knew the places, and what was going on. Albert thought. Or at least he wanted to believe.

"Uncertainty, fear." - he reported quietly. They were talking on satellite phone, an apparently safe one. Of course, no one knew what was really safe, and what was only called that. The Americans tapped everything and everyone.

"The decision has been made in Brussels. Regarding the uncertain situation all embassies of the Union will be closed temporarily, except for one. At least for a month."

"I understand, Sir. And which embassy will be the one on duty?"

"Yours, Albert."

This "Albert" was like a sign of empathy. He was not called by his first name, especially not in foreign affairs, this is why it was so uncommon now. As if it was a part of a sign-sequence: "we feel for you, you got the worst of it, so you have no other option then holding on.", and that "Albert" at the end, as he was caressed, holding his hand encouragingly. . . "Albert".

He took a deep breath. The news hit him, and he had no choice. Not any more. As a diplomat he was like a soldier. The order came, he had to obey to it, he couldn't do anything else. But it was a rough hit. Deep down in his soul he hoped he could go home as well, he could have done with a holiday. And finally he could sort out things with Erica as well. Three-four weeks would be just enough for that. For that too

But it already got out of his head. He was standing there with the phone on his ear, and felt the other was waiting for an answer. He swallowed:

"Of course, we are remaining at our place. . . sir"

The other listed the tasks with relief, and that if he felt the need for it he could hire extra security guards for the Foreign Ministry's cost. "The embassy must be protected, Telldro! As this will be the bulwark and the emblem of the European Union, not to mention the practical advantage of it. Keep your eyes open, and report often. Of course through a safe way." He didn't really pay attention to that last warning.

He walked across the house. The offices were on the ground floor, the flats upstairs. His, Borg's, and the staff's at the end: the local chef's, the maid's, and the driver's, who sometimes helped as a butler as well. The two guards - Europeans - lived here as well,

who were sent here by the Foreign Ministry, and who had been rotated every three month among the region's embassies. Albert had the suspicion not to get too close with the locals, but this was one of those remarks, questions, statements, he had never said out loud.

The following day he had many things to do.

Borg helped as much as he could. They declined the planned visit to the hospital. They were sent an important and expensive appliance by Albert's compatriots as a result of a huge collection, and the machine was started up today at one of the hospitals in Mandal. "They will be fine without us" he noted in the morning. Borg dealt with the phone calls. Albert called Grésillon too, who had already known about it. All the other embassies of the Union got the order. The lines were hot between the embassies and the airport. Albert imagined how the colleagues were fighting for the tickets. Especially for the direct ones, but in the afternoon the one that goes via CHad or Morocco or even the Blue-Islands will be just as good enough. Just get home!

Albert envied him a bit that they could go home, but at the same time he was inundated with work, so he didn't have much time to feel sad about it. He organized the security guards, made many phonecalls, reorganised the embassy building. He had to think of the chance if a "riot" broke out in Mandal, a part of the mob would not spare the foreign embassies either. Now he went around the stonewall that surrounded the house. He had the thrown out garbage taken away. Everything that was flammable, he had taken away from the garden and the yard, as well as from the downstairs windows in the house. They would have to pull the furniture away from the windows, and pile them up in the middle of the room. They would have to buy plastic buckets, and if things got out of hand, they would need to use them to put out the fire. Of course, it could happen they would not have electricity and running water. There was a generator in one of the back room. It worked with gasoline, so they had to have that as well - he remembered a training they had at home for ambassadors to be, about situations like this. It didn't do any harm if they prepared drinking water as well. He sent one of the guards to the gas station with a van - he came back only in the evening, he reported there were hundred meter long rows. But he brought as much petrol as he could. The mobiles should be charged all the time, and of course the official one, the satellite one as well - he ordered. An unexpected blackout could not hinder the work of the embassy.

The last call came the next day. It was the Portugese ambassador:

"Dear colleague "Your Excellency"! The others from the Union have left. I am the last one. I wanted to tell you only this. Good luck!"

Of course, all of them left because they had been "called back for consultation" - Albert smiled bitterly. He looked out the window. Mandal was just the same as always.

Maybe his worries were needless. There would be no problem. "There won't be any problem!" he said it half loud. He calmed himself down. But when he looked out the window half an hour later, he was watching the approaching military truck anxiously. It stopped right in front of the embassy, soldiers jumped off, soldiers in red caps, with wing badges on their chests. "Paras", it crossed his mind. Paratroopers. What do they want?

He got to know it six minutes later. A young lieutenant came to him:

"Your Excellency, the Foreign Ministry asked the Military Affairs to settle here."

"Will you protect us against anyone?" - Albert asked after shaking hands with the lieutenant. The man had very good aftershave smell, he might have shaved earlier. The local blacks had beard: short, rare haired. His clean face was smooth.

"This is our order" - he answered. - "As we know we cannot be stationed at the embassy, we stay at an empty place nearby. But we will come patrolling around the building every day."

This made Albert calm. He was called already: this time from the Foreign Ministry of Tamalin. The news he got got him anxious a bit. Some groups of the rebels in Geddin - according to satellite shots given to the government by the Americans most probably - crossed the border at some places in the north-east. The news did not shock the man really, as Gedding was far from here, it was three hundred kilometers to the border from Mandal, he knew it well. Though he had not been there, he had been to other parts of the country in the past few years.

"We'll stay in touch with you." - the foreign employee promised. While he was listening to man's voice, Albert saw the narrow faced, skinny young man with glasses before him. There were still only a few people who graduated at universities abroad, the Foreign affairs gladly pounced on them. Then he was swamped with other things, calls ran in a row from Europe. Those "runaways" from other embassies called him to ask for this or that. They forgot to take something with them, one of the colleagues left his luggage at the airport, the other did not pay a bill. Borg helped him sorting out the things. Meanwhile Albert felt he did not really need this. To be an ambassador of the Union meant, he had to deal with the things of almost thirty countries, their citizens and diplomats in case of trouble. If he was the one appointed to stay. Well, he was, and now he had to keep his ground.

But he did not know that the worst was yet to come.





## Ambassador

Two days passed. The hours became blurred in Albert's memories, everything seemed to be one, long, hardly interrupted period. He could sleep four hours without a break only once, other times he had a short one hour nap, then he was woken up. Borg was seemingly exhausted as well, and when Albert wanted to shave on the third day, he got scared from what he saw in the mirror. How easily changes one's appearance! - he was staring at his bristly, pale, almost wrinkled face. He looked ten years his senior. But he still had his optimism: these days, or maybe weeks would pass, and everything would get back to normal.

After he got shaved, he did not spare the aftershave, even its smell refreshed him. His skin was smooth again, and his mood got better. He looked in his eyes having rings around them:

"I still need some sleep, then I'll be like I was before!"

Borg knocked on the bathroom's door:

"Sir, the American Ambassador is looking for you."

For a moment he thought the woman was standing in front of the gate, but then he realised it was impossible. Even because of security reasons. And anyway, they would have called in advance. The American ambassador in dangerous regions, in dangerous times never leaves her residency. Of course, she was on the phone.

"Good morning Madam, sorry for keeping you wait but. . . I was shaving."

"Well, you see, I'm not wasting my time with that." - the woman was joking. - "We got a squeal, that the rebels captured a European."

As if an ice string had tightened in Albert's body. It turned cool around, the noises disappeared. He could only hear the colleague's breathing on the phone:

"What happened?" - he asked hoarsely.

"It was a report from the intelligence service, so I cannot tell you more. Anyway our people saw this man was caught together with his companions."

"Do we know who he is?"

He only realized a moment later that his question was needless. As the ambassador had already told he was European. Then they knew who he was.

"A Danish journalist, Ole Nielsen. He was taking photos, until the very last moment, and forwarded the shots via his satellite phone. But as far as we know he is not a journalist, neither a war correspondent but a civilian."

Albert was waiting. He did not really know what the American wanted from him. But she already said:

"I'm sending you the event's geographical coordinates. Washington is calling Brussels right now. As Nielsen is a European citizen, his capture happened in the Tamalin Republic, and you are the representative of the Union in Mandal, so I thought you should know about it."

"Thank you Madam."

Minutes later he was thinking about what this sudden turn meant: the Americans saw as the Danish man was captured? Then why didn't they intervene? Then he thought of the satellites. Maybe they were watching this restless country now as well, or the whole region. They could see a lot of things from far away, but they were helpless.

But he soon forgot about these thoughts, because Borg came, morosely:

"Brussels on the line."

Who called him, was an old acquaintance. Espinosa, the coordinator of the Union's common foreign affairs. They had dinner twice, but did not dare to enter the nightlife in Brussels. They did not drink any alcohol. Espinosa was just as much concerned about his diplomat image as Albert. He settled in the town for longterm, and he hoped he could have two five years accreditation before they would send him back to Madrid.

"*Salut, Albert.*" – he was greeted in French, leaving the end "t" from his name, "Salu, Albeer. . ."

"*Salut. Ca va, Miguel?*"

The man was hesitating, but started right in the middle:

"It's about the Danish journalist. It's not in the news yet, but it's only a matter of hours. His family probably alarm the colleagues, and not only the newspapers but the whole media, and the international organizations of journalists as well. I can tell you, it's lot worse than if a diplomat was captured. one of us. . . you have to deal with this situation somehow."

It was clear why he. Still Albert asked helplessly:

"What can I do here in Mandal? As I learnt from others about what happened."

"Yes, the Americans are watching. Moreover, they might interfere if it is necessary. Of course together with the French, they have some knowledge of the region. . . But you have to know something else as well: the rebels got in touch with us through a mediator."

"What do they want for Nielsen?"

"At first weapons, but we drove that out of their heads. Now money is enough for them."

Albert still did not know whether he was only involved informally, or. . . but Espinosa said it already:

"The decision was made, pretty quickly. We are paying ransome."

"Until now the Union said they do not negotiate with terrorists."

"It's just the use of words. The case is in Brussels: the rebels are thought of as terrorists but rather some kind of revolutionary group. Like the Chechens until now, or others. So now we're informed they are revolutionaries, who might get the power in the near future in two or three countries and will legalize themselves. And we need to think about this option as well. We cannot turn them against Europe right at the beginning."

"I see." – hardly sensible bitterness was hiding in Albert's voice - "We need to take them seriously, because we might meet their delegates in Brussels, in the UN, and everywhere soon."

"Yes, that's right." – Miguel's voice suggested naturalness. - "Anyway, we have come so far with the mediator, that they are willing to let Nielsen free, but they will not let anyone near themselves."

Albert knew what he had to know. He felt strange pressure in his throat, he couldn't swallow. so he remained silent for a while. Espinosa continued:

"They want the ambassador of the Union in Tamalin to bring them the money."

"So, it's me." – he started to come around. - "But why do they need an ambassador? Even our driver could bring it there."