

## BREEDING GROUNDS

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**Y**ou must understand that in a hot climate having a desk near the fans was key. Only the valued clerks at the Ministry stayed cool. Growing up, I'd never even seen a fan. There was no electricity in my home village. Status was established by a slight bend in the knees or nod of the head, except on holidays, when elders wore bracelets up and down their arms and polyester robes smuggled in from Thailand.

The big mahouts at the Ministry of Public Works in Yangon displayed their trinkets all year long. The higher-ups rewarded them with special paperweights so the fans wouldn't blow their papers across the room. Kyaba and I had started at the same time, but his desk was already covered with "Greetings from Hong Kong Disney" and trilobite fossils encased in plastic, while mine was a blank expanse of cheap plywood.

Back in our home village, the edge was mine. Kyaba had a way with books and girls, but I had a way with fighting cocks. Most people put their money on the biggest bird, but I knew that the measure of a winner was the size of his fear. The big birds were preeners, overconfident and proud. They played to the crowd, clawing the ground and strutting to the clink of the coins piling up next to their owners. A sucker's bet, all flash and dazzle. I always put my money on the small, wiry birds twitching with terror.

Round and round. The contenders kept their eyes on each other as they circled the ring, each waiting for the other to look away for an instant. Some ancient memory buried in their tiny bird brains urged them to fly, but no matter how many times they flapped their wings, they couldn't get off the ground. Just peck. And squawk. Round and round until the first strike. The big ones went for the breast, drawing lots of blood, but inflicting minor damage. The small ones went for the eyes. Sightless, the losers went crazy, stupidly exposing their necks as they tried to get their bearings.

I made enough money on the cockfights to buy a place at the government school while Kyaba had to resort to a merit scholarship. But he soon advanced beyond me.

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One evening, I snuck over to Kyaba's desk and ran my fingers over a purple and white striped paperweight that I'd been eyeing for weeks. The whir of the fan was so loud I didn't hear him coming until he was right beside me.

"Smooth as a virgin's bottom," Kyaba whispered. "Don't worry, old boy, you'll have some stones of your own in a few years."

Despite his occasional assurances, no one was more surprised than Kyaba when the Assistant Sub-Secretary sent for me.

"What would the higher-ups want with you?" was his only comment that sweltering afternoon.

I shrugged my way past him to the waiting car. The Assistant Sub-Secretary's Cadillac was long, sleek and black, a giant water beetle on four wheels. The driver was leaning against the hood, picking at his fingernails. His cap was lowered over his eyes to block the noon sun. When he saw me, he jumped up and opened the back door. I hesitated. When I considered what the higher-ups might want with me, nothing good came to mind. My thoughts flapped around like a fish on dry land. Sudden disappearances weren't unusual, but they were usually reserved for show-offs and troublemakers. In my dishwater gray, second-hand shirt and longyi, I was indistinguishable from any number of other low-level clerks. True, I dabbled in the black market, but who didn't? If they took care of everyone who made an occasional illegal trade, the city would have been a ghost town.

The driver shifted his weight from foot to foot, but I was too frightened to move. I bit my lower lip to keep it from quivering. After a few minutes, he cocked his head in the direction of Scott's market. Following the driver's lead, I turned around. When my back faced his front, he reached over and gave me a firm push. I lost my balance and landed on my side, stretched across the back seat.

Everything inside the Cadillac was dark and cool. It had a full bar stocked with foreign names—Dewar's, Drambuie, Jim Beam. I released the breath I'd been holding. They would never have sent

such a nice car for a routine arrest.

The streets of Yangon were empty except for a few mutts scrounging for garbage. By noon, the vendors who whacked their curious snouts were inside lunching, and the boys who chased them for sport were inside napping. Except for the dogs and the dust, everything was still. Beyond the city limits, we drove past the villages that lined the shores of the Irrawaddy River. The memory of endless afternoons bent over steaming, snake infested rice fields dampened my armpits and darkened my collar. Despite years of living in the city, I still had nightmares of waddling through the paddies, vipers coiled around my ankles. In my dreams, I would try to nip their heads off, but they always managed to bite me first. I'd scream and punch the air until one of the other lodgers in my dormitory nudged me awake.

"Is the AC too strong, sir?" the driver asked when he saw me rubbing my arms.

"No," I answered, gripping the edge of the seat to control my shivering.

After an hour or so, the bumpy, unpaved road became smooth and even. I could smell the tar beneath me. The fumes made me dizzy. It was like smoking an expensive foreign cigarette, the kind my boss passed out when the new regime took power. Cheroots were like puffing on air, but foreign cigarettes went straight to your head. And they didn't leave bits of dried leaf all over your tongue and lips.

We parked in front of a high wall covered in creeping vines. Patches of stone were just visible behind purple bougainvillea and orange hibiscus. I followed the driver to a courtyard covered with a yellow awning that kept in the cooled air that was blown from corner to corner by ground fans. Pebbles and dust and paper circled my ankles. The courtyard led to an old colonial building that had been initiated into use during the British occupation. As soon as I walked through the entrance, a small middle-aged man with a face like a dried lemon began questioning me.

"Name?"

"Sumac."

"Sumac, Sumac, Sumac," the receptionist repeated as he ran his hand down the columns of his ledger. The end of his index finger was covered in a rubber tip that reminded me of the condoms Kyaba pulled out of his desk every time he had an appointment with his

girlfriend.

“Can’t be too careful, old boy,” he’d say, slapping my back so hard I’d lose my balance. Smug bastard. Women were a two-three paperweight worry and my desktop was as bare as a monkey’s ass. The only thing I had to be careful about was keeping my noise down so my fellow lodgers wouldn’t notice my self-abuse on the nights I was especially lonely.

The A.S.S.’ office was dark; wood paneling lined the walls from floor to ceiling. “Teak,” he said, spreading his arms wide like a kingfisher about to take flight. “The real thing. The good stuff. It’s important to keep one or two nice things back from export.”

He was shorter than I expected. And younger. His hair was close-cropped, like a monk’s. Round, thin-rimmed sunglasses framed his face. They say the eyes are reflections of the soul. When I tried to look into the A.S.S.’ soul, all I saw were tiny versions of myself swimming in a black sea.

“Have a seat, Sumac.”

I looked around: our new leader staring down from the wall, his smile spread across his face like a blanket; a mantel clock held up by a gold woman whose breasts were perfect shiny round paperweights; our flag standing in the corner, its fringed edges dancing to the whistle of the fan. No chairs.

I sat on the floor. The freezing marble ate its way through my thin longyi and made me shiver. I shifted my bottom from side to side to avoid the cold.

“You’ve probably guessed why you’re here.”

“No, sir.”

“The plague, Sumac. The fly epidemic.”

I’m ashamed to admit that until that moment I hadn’t realized there was a crisis. Flies were a fact of life in our warm climate. They circled the carcasses that dangled in the meat stalls and the rosewater nuggets laid out in the sweet shops. They hovered over the dusty streets and the pilgrims at the Shwe Dagon shrine. When the sun sent us to bed in the middle of the day, they landed on our sweaty limbs and faces and rubbed their sticky legs clean.

“We need men like you to help us. Your supervisor tells me that your desk is always surrounded by dead flies.”

It was true. Blown by the fan or attracted by the heat, there were always flies circling my corner of the office. I’d learned how

to flick them out of the air with a rolled up newspaper.

“It won’t be easy, Sumac. The little bastards reproduce like, well, like flies. And it’s getting worse. We’ve done studies; their numbers have risen significantly in the last two months.”

Being summer, the temperature had also risen significantly in the last two months, but I knew enough about protocol to keep my mouth shut until it was my turn to speak.

“It’s an embarrassment, Sumac, an embarrassment. Flies are for backward places. They may have been appropriate for the old order, but they fly in the face of the progress we’ve made under the new government. They smack of foreign influence. Our people are innately clean. Look at the paintings from the great temples at Bagan. Not a single fly. Gods, goddesses, jack fruit, banyans, but not a single fly. How can we expect tourists to flock here while these pests have free use of our beaches? How can we take our place among the great nations with flies buzzing in our gutters and toilets and food?”

I shifted my weight to wake up my numbed bottom. A fresh blast of cold marble made me shiver.

“I’m glad to see you appreciate the seriousness of the situation, Sumac.”

He unrolled a map of Yangon on the floor and stamped his foot on an area that included my lodgings, the Ministry of Public Works and the Sule Pagoda. “We’ve assigned you the third sector. Your equipment will arrive by the end of the week. Three hundred pounds of pesticide, four hundred fly swatters, and twenty banners carrying the official slogan of the campaign: *‘Mobilize the People to Build a Flyless Country.’* Our immediate goal is three flies for every fifteen rooms. Take no prisoners, Sumac. Any family or business caught with extra flies must be fined. There will also be incentives, of course. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, so to speak.” He paused to laugh at his own joke; I was quick to join in.

“Contests, prizes, citations for the families with the most dead flies. You’ll think of something.” He dismissed me with a wave. On my way out, the security guard handed me a sky-blue glass paperweight. My first.

When I returned to the office after my meeting with the A.S.S., my desk was two places closer to the fans. Within weeks, I was wearing long sleeves to work. Paperweights covered my desk. Some were polished stones. Some were souvenirs of places I'd never been. The New York skyline held my statistics in place. The Egyptian Pyramids rested on top of my in-box. My favorite was a fly trapped in amber, a gift from my friend Kyaba.

"Sumac, old boy, put in a good word for me."

"Naturally, old chap," I answered, slapping his back so hard I lost my balance. I made a note to speak to the A.S.S. about Kyaba. Provided it was my turn to speak.

I began slowly. Pesticides were distributed on Sundays with instructions for daily use at sunrise. The spray spread a fog over our mornings that lasted until noon. Kyaba and a few others complained that the chemicals clouded their vision, but I could see past them now.

I organized bands of schoolchildren into swatting brigades and offered citations for the class that had the most dead pests. I let Kyaba do the first count. By the end of the first month, he had a winner:

"Class 3B, level 2, fourth quadrant, Rangoon."

I decided that Kyaba's mistake was unintentional. After all, the new government's new names for our cities were recent changes and Kyaba had a very bad memory. I gently reminded him that we no longer used the old colonial geography.

"Yangon, not Rangoon."

"Yangon," he repeated after me.

His results put me in an awkward position. A victory for schoolchildren in such a poor section of the city wouldn't please anyone who counted. Only low-class sorts lived there, mostly descendants of Indian immigrants. The place bred laziness and was overrun with cow and dog shit.

"The fourth quadrant is filthy," I said. "Did you take that into account?"

"No."

"All that garbage gives them an unfair advantage. We'll have to subtract a percentage from their total to balance things."

After making allowances for the fourth quadrant's unfair advantages, I determined that Class A2 of level 1, second quadrant

had the highest dead fly count. The Assistant Sub-Secretary's son proudly accepted the citation on behalf of his classmates.

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By summer's end, fly density had dropped twenty percent, but I didn't have time to enjoy the good news. The cock fights had taught me that the best players never let down their guard. As quickly as he'd promoted me, the A.S.S. could demote me. Or worse, now that I'd come to his attention. When a fighting cock lost his edge, he landed in the soup.

Paperweights had made me a heavyweight. I had my own place. My new apartment had running water. And privacy. Women were now a possibility. Kyaba's girlfriend was the first.

"In all the time we've been at the Ministry, you've never mentioned a girl," he said one afternoon when we were working on designing some new banners.

"It wasn't for lack of offers," I lied. "The dormitory had very strict rules."

"Must have been rough for a virile fellow like yourself. If you want, I can introduce you to someone. Daw Myo is a nice girl, very willing. And she knows what's what."

"But she's your girlfriend."

"With anyone else I might mind, but we grew up together, we're practically brothers."

"If you're sure."

"Wouldn't have suggested it otherwise. Maybe the next time you see the Assistant Sub-Secretary . . ."

"I'll put in a good word," I said, slapping Kyaba's back so hard he doubled over.

Daw Myo wasn't especially young or pretty, but she was experienced. She refused to take it when I offered, so I drank enough cashew liquor for both of us.

Hiking her skirt over her hips, she stretched out on my bed and stared at the ceiling. My cock, which had always been so dependable when I was alone, refused to rise. I straddled Daw Myo and prayed for enlightenment, but nothing came. My hesitation gave me away.

"A virgin," she said. "Just my luck." She sat up, unknotted the longyi wrapped around my waist and put her lips around my prick.

Her mouth was warm and soft. She gently caressed me until I could hardly breathe. When I let out a moan, she made a face.

“Ugh,” she said. “You stink of cashew liquor. No wonder you couldn’t get it up.”

I pushed her back on the bed and thrust my hips toward hers. Like a blinded rooster, my bewildered cock kept moving around without any sense of direction.

“All right my little archer,” she said, after three or four tries, “I’ll direct your arrow, but when I say so, pull it out.”

The scratchy roughness of her cheap cotton skirt gave way to buttermilk softness.

“Relax.”

I tightened. Then a net wove around me, shutting off sound and light. I was beyond instruction.

“Now,” Daw Myo screamed, but I wasn’t ready.

“Get off me, you bastard,” she said. As she struggled to get out from under me, she dug her nails into my chest, leaving thin trails of blood. Finally, she managed to push me off her.

I landed on the floor. Daw Myo ran to the sink at the other end of the room and washed me off her crotch and thighs.

“Are you deaf, or just dumb?” she screamed. “Do you know what will happen to me if I get pregnant?”

The break in her voice made me feel sorry for her. I massaged her neck and shoulders to calm her down. As she relaxed beneath my fingers, I stiffened again below the waist. I felt a sudden tenderness for the woman who had given me so much pleasure. When I rubbed against her bottom to show my gratitude, she pulled away.

“Are you crazy?” she shrieked.

“Don’t you want to?”

“I only came here because Kyaba asked me. Do you really think I wanted to fuck you?”

Her vulgarity made me wince. After she left, I began to wonder about Kyaba’s motives. Maybe the loan wasn’t interest-free. I considered the possible damage. What if Daw Myo told Kyaba what had happened? I would lose my authority at work. A sudden image of my inferiors laughing about my long delayed loss of virginity made me queasy. I crawled into bed and held a cold towel over my forehead. The edges of the sky were already starting to gray by the time I finally fell asleep.

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I avoided Kyaba for the next few days. By the end of the week, however, desire overcame judgment. Ever since our encounter, I tried to picture Daw Myo's face and body when I exerted myself at night, but I couldn't recapture her moist, warm mouth and deft fingers. Despite her rudeness, I knew that she must have felt something for me. Her tough exterior only hid the softness inside, like the hard shell of the durian fruit.

Since Kyaba gave nothing away, I had to raise the subject myself.

"How is Daw Myo, old boy?"

"Fine," he answered without raising his head from his documents.

"Does she, um, ask about me?"

"No," he answered, still stamping papers, even though his mark had run out of ink.

I was sure that Kyaba was lying. My thoughts were confirmed the next week when I saw Daw Myo waiting outside the office. The moment I recognized her, the documents on my desk became a blur. I stared at the same words over and over without reading them.

"Sumac, what are you doing by the window?" Kyaba asked after the fifth or sixth time I walked away from my desk.

If she had given me some warning, we could have arranged a less awkward place to meet. I didn't want to hurt my old friend, especially since he'd been the one to introduce me to Daw Myo.

"Checking the weather," I lied. "I feel rain in my bones."

"The monsoons aren't due for months."

I lowered my head as I passed under the New Leader's smile beaming from the wall. Thinking about Daw Myo made me warm. The brown powder she wore on her cheeks to protect her face from the sun burnished my skin. My moist hands smudged the papers in front of me. At six o'clock precisely, I clicked my briefcase shut and ran downstairs, two steps at a time.

By the time I stepped outside, Daw Myo and Kyaba were already halfway down the street. Watching her sashay down the block, hips swaying like a palm frond in a storm, I remembered how vulgar she was. Good enough for a country bumpkin like Kyaba, but

not suitable for a man in charge of a major government program. I promised myself that when pest density decreased another two or three points, I would treat myself to something young and pretty. A ten-twelve paperweight girl.

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By mid-fall, fly density had dropped another four points, but I had no time for women. It was simple. As quickly as the Assistant Sub-Secretary had raised me up, he could shoot me down. I didn't have to look any farther than my own office. In a few short months, Kyaba had been relegated to the back of the room. Even the new recruits ignored him. He could have disappeared altogether without anyone noticing.

There weren't enough hours in the day for everything I had to do. Weekly statistics from each district had to be collected and tallied. I had to account for every rise and fall on the graphs, no matter how minute. After work, I had to attend regular meetings with the A.S.S. The sun set earlier now and it was usually dark by the time I reached his office. Driving at night was a nerve-racking business. Since there were so few lights, I couldn't see the bumps on the road that that jerked me from one end of the back seat to the other. Still, there were weeks when those drives back and forth were the only rest I had. Sometimes I even managed a short nap between potholes.

Since the A.S.S. kept his shades on at all times, his hands were the only clues to his mood. His fingers drummed continually on his mahogany desk. If he was pleased, he tapped out a relaxed, syncopated rhythm. If the news was bad, he pounded the wood with the heel of his palm. During one particularly tense meeting, he slammed his hand down so hard, I could see a bruise starting.

"Foreign press," he shouted. "Foreign pigs. Instead of helping the world understand our Great Leader, they condemn him. They sniff around for failure like dogs hunting for a fuck. Bastards are so sure they know what's best for everyone else. But look at Malaysia; they make money there without elections. Compare that with the sub-continent. So the Indians get to scratch a mark on a piece of paper every few years. Big deal. Which economy would you rather have?"

“Malaysia’s, sir.” I realized I’d answered a rhetorical question when the drumming stopped.

“You know what you get with democracy?” he said after an eternity.

This time I knew enough to keep silent.

“I asked you a question, Sumac.”

“Loose behavior, sir.” My voice hovered between a question and an answer, unsure where to land.

“Anarchy, Sumac. And anarchy leads to filth, and filth leads to...” He paused for a moment as if he’d lost his train of thought.

“Flies, sir?”

“Exactly.”

The next day, I hired a professional painter to make poster-size versions of the latest statistics to spur the others to work harder. The numbers stared down at me like giant accusations. The only good news was that the fly population was steadily decreasing. I reminded myself that the figures showed that the A.S.S.’ goal was at least theoretically possible. Multiplying and dividing for hours at a stretch, I tried to calculate how long it would take to make his theory a reality. Not since my cockfighting days had I felt such a command of the odds. Only this was finer, because I was betting for the whole nation.

Since electricity was a luxury, I worked that night by the light of kerosene tins. The crackle of the fire played a duet with the rumble in my stomach. I remembered that I’d forgotten to eat dinner. Or was it breakfast and lunch? When I wrapped my hands around my waist, my fingers almost met. I hadn’t been so thin since my college days.

I lowered my head to make out the tiny numbers on the spreadsheets in front of me. When my nose struck the desk, my head sprang back. My eyes widened as I watched one of the ceiling shadows solidify into the Assistant Sub-Secretary. His sunglasses fractured into dozens of tiny facets. Light bounced off every one of his new eyes, flooding the room. When I closed my eyes, the sun came out. Fog rose off the steaming paddies. Pigs grunted in my ears. Mosquitoes circled my head. While I worked, the rice stalks multiplied. For each one I picked, two shot up. Somewhere a cock crowed. Then the crow turned into a high-pitched shriek. Blood gurgled in the rooster’s throat.

The next thing I knew, it was morning and Kyaba was lifting

me off the floor and brushing the dirt off my longyi.

“You’ve been working too hard, Sumac. You should take a break.”

“Now is hardly the time to rest,” I croaked. Exhausted as I was, I hadn’t lost my ability to think fast. I positioned myself to kill two birds with one stone: I could keep Kyaba occupied outside of the office and speed up the program at the same time. “I’m putting you in charge of the next phase,” I said. “Pesticides are to be distributed four times a week with instructions for use at sunrise and sunset.”

A few months later, Kyaba showed up at my desk with a worried look on his face and a bunch of rumpled papers in his hands. His usually immaculate appearance was marred by a stain on his shirt and three-day gristle on his cheeks.

“I think we should go back to the original spraying program,” he said. “I keep getting reports about strange births. Calves with shrunken limbs and heads. Piglets without ears or tails. Puppies with no eyes.”

“Nature isn’t perfect, Kyaba.”

“I’ve received complaints about the water supply as well. It’s possible that the pesticides are leaching into the ground water.” He held down his bad news while I searched for a paperweight.

I have to confess that I hadn’t anticipated the depth of Kyaba’s jealousy and I was shocked that he would put the program at risk just to hurt me. Fortunately, his strike missed its mark. There have always been freak births. As for the water, I drank it every day and it tasted fine to me. Better even.

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Five months into the program, we were still averaging five flies per fifteen rooms. Studies showed the greatest concentrations of the enemy population in the sweet and meat stalls. Close observation of their habits indicated a fondness for sticky substances. Blood, honey, sweetmeats. I shut down the candy and butcher shops. There were complaints; people were used to the traditional diet. “They have to be re-educated,” the A.S.S. told me. My workload doubled, but I was sure my new banners would brighten up the gloomy feel of the empty market:

*Sugar is the Drug of the Backward*

*Meat Feeds Counter Productivity*

I carefully chose the designs and colors. Lots of cheerful purples and greens.

As an added bonus, shutting down the meat stalls took care of the pariah dog problem in my sector. The stronger mutts went to other quarters to find scraps; the old and lame ones weakened and died. I organized squads of schoolchildren to collect the bodies. We improvised a special holiday for the bonfires. Housewives tied brightly colored ribbons around their fly swatters. Orange and pink and blue snaked in and out of the gray smoke. Some of the women strung beads on the ribbons. The click of plastic on plastic drowned out the hiss of the flames.

When I returned to the Ministry of Public Works that afternoon, the results of the latest poll were on my desk. Density was down to two flies for every fifteen rooms! Buoyed by my success, I decided to give Kyaba another chance. On my way home that night, I stopped off at his place to share the good news.

“Just think, the first flyless country. Even the U.S. has flies. Even Europe has flies.”

“That’s wonderful, Sumac.” His words were congratulatory, but he spoke in a flat, sluggish voice, as if he were deliberately trying to diminish my achievement.

As he poured me a beer, I noticed that Kyaba looked thinner. Paler. I could see his jugular throbbing in his neck.

“Feeling all right, old chap?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“It’s just that things have been difficult since the prohibition on sweet shops. Daw Myo’s people make most of their money raising honeybees.”

Not a word of gratitude for all I’d done for him. “We’ve all had to do our part,” I said calmly, careful to keep my disgust out of my voice.

“We could really use the extra income. We’re planning to get married.”

I looked up from my glass.

“You’re spilling your beer,” Kyaba said, pointing at the floor, but I knew from my cock fighting days not to take my eyes off him. “She’s pregnant, you see.”

I took a deep breath. The air was thick with Kyaba's sweat. "It's getting late," I said.

Kyaba stood in front of the door.

"Perhaps you'll consider reopening the food stalls. The new regulations have been very hard on the vendors, and everyone misses the traditional foods."

I tried to push him out of my way. Falling to his knees, he locked his arms around my legs as if I were the village headman and his case was before me. When I shook him off, he lowered his face to the ground and placed his twitching hands on either side of his head. I stepped over him and walked out. A frightened man is a dangerous man; it pained me to admit it, but I knew I had to do something about my former friend.

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One morning, four weeks after Kyaba's disappearance, I received a report confirming that fly density was down by another forty percent! I could hardly believe it. I gripped the sides of my new mahogany desk to steady my shaking hands. The others were bent over their work like so many cranes diving for dinner. Clearly, they hadn't heard the news. I stood up and clapped two of my paperweights together until they looked up.

"Good news, everyone," I began. "Wonderful news." Being a sporting fellow, I decided to make a game of it. "Can anyone guess what it is?"

The only response was the squeak of a fan that needed oiling.

"Go on," I said, waving the report over my head. "U Thin, what's the best possible news you can imagine?"

"We're all getting raises, sir?"

I shook my head.

"Another vacation day?"

"Wrong again."

"I've got it, sir," one of the new boys shouted. His bright eyes and enthusiasm reminded me of me. I was sure this fellow would guess right. "Go ahead," I urged.

"The Ministry has decided to re-open the sweet stalls," he answered.

Someone at the back of the room began to applaud. Then the

others started whistling and stomping their feet.

“Wrong!” I screamed. I stood on a chair close to the wall and pounded my fist across a diagram showing the projected stages of our campaign. “Fly density is down forty percent!”

In the silence that followed, the whirr of the fans sounded like a giant swarm of insects. I was more determined than ever to crush the little bastards.

Staring at the dull, pasty faces of my so-called assistants, I remembered how I’d had to prod and push them. How they procrastinated and stalled every time I sent out a new directive. Idiots, I thought, I’m surrounded by idiots. Or worse. Recalling Kyaba’s efforts to sabotage my work, I realized that I’d made a mistake telling my subordinates about our advances. They’d use it as another opportunity to undermine me by slacking off. In future, I would keep important news to myself.

“Get back to work,” I instructed, stepping off the chair. I put the poll results on my desk, lifted my favorite paperweight and slammed it on the report. The sun shone clear through the purple and white striped glass. Rubbing my fingers over the smooth surface, I resolved to discuss the inappropriate response of my underlings with the A.S.S. at our next meeting. Just as soon as it was my turn to speak. ■