

EXILE

Also by James Swallow

Nomad

EXILE

JAMES SWALLOW

ZAFFRE



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
ZAFFRE PUBLISHING
80-81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk

Text copyright © James Swallow, 2017

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of James Swallow to be identified as Author of this
work has been asserted by them in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and
incidents are either the products of the author's imagination
or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-78576-044-0
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-78576-251-2

also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Zaffre Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



For my friends, who helped me get here.



ONE

There was a peculiar stillness in the air, and it made the night seem like a solid mass laid over the low, dusty cityscape. With the balcony windows half open, little of the oppressive, blood-warm heat from the faded day had diminished inside the mansion. Each time Welldone Amadayo moved, he felt his expensive Chinese silk shirt sticking to his back. The temperature, a steady drumbeat of fear, was making him sweat, and he absently ran a long-fingered hand over the dark worry lines of his oval face.

The screen on the wall above his desk was blank except for a blue square surrounding a coiled arrow, which turned in an endless circle as the voice-over-Internet-protocol software in his computer worked to connect him. Amadayo peered at the stubby digital camera clipped to the frame of the screen, watching the slow blink of a crimson light diode. He experienced a moment of brief panic, and his hands fluttered over the shirt, readjusting it in an attempt to portray himself in a more casual fashion. After a moment he gave up and hissed through his teeth. The arrow continued the endless chasing of its own tail.

Amadayo thought about sitting down, then discarded the idea. He glanced at the closed door behind him, then away. Every second of waiting was eroding his calm. He looked through the slatted blinds leading outside to the balcony. Beyond, a soft aura of light was cast from the windows of his home and the watery shimmer of the swimming pool, but the glow petered out as it reached the high walls and acacia trees surrounding his private compound.

Past that lay the clutter of the city of Mogadishu, the scattered specks of illumination in constellations of orange light that escaped from the windows of red-roofed apartment buildings and sodium-lit streets. If he stood there, he might be able to pick out the line of

darkness where the seashore began, but Amadayo stayed inside more often these days, and he had an arsenal of lies for anyone who wanted to know the reason why.

Finally, he decided to loosen the shirt, to make himself look as if he were completely relaxed. He sat and stared into the camera, schooling his expression, glimpsing his reflection in the dark portions of the screen. He was experienced at this sort of thing, he reminded himself. There was no reason to be concerned.

The turning arrow vanished and the blinking red light became a steady green. Suddenly there was a white man on the screen, outlined against a wide room made of yellow Italian stone. Shafts of daylight from a setting sun cut across the background. 'Mr Amadayo,' began the man. 'Greetings.'

'Doctor,' Amadayo corrected him automatically. He had paid a good amount for the framed university degree hanging on his wall, and it was second nature for him to remind anyone who addressed him as that. 'Mr Brett. A pleasure, as always.' He showed a practised grin.

Brett inclined his head, his eyes flicking away to glance at something that the camera on his end didn't show, then back once more. 'Dr Amadayo,' he began again. *'Forgive me for disrupting your evening, but as I am sure you understand, my employers are eager to communicate their concerns to you. And you have been rather difficult to reach over recent weeks.'* Brett's accent was like the BBC World Service radio broadcasts Amadayo had listened to in his youth, every word balanced, cut to length and positioned in exactly the right place. There was a strangely soulless, machine-like quality to the man, which Amadayo found slightly unsettling. His milk-pale face, his straw-like hair and watery blue eyes seemed unnatural. He reminded the Somali of albino children he had seen in Tanzania, and Amadayo half-wondered if, like them, the Englishman's body parts would be worth money if made into charms post-mortem.

He nodded and widened his smile for the camera. 'It is I who should be begging your forgiveness!' Amadayo faked a contrite tone. He shook his head. 'So much work to be done here, you know? So many people with needs to be dealt with and hands held out. It takes up all of my time.'

'That is why we agreed to have you work as our representative in Somalia, because of your connections,' said Brett. Personally, Amadayo had always thought of himself as a partner more than an employee, but he let that go for the moment. *'But we are concerned about a lack of visible progress.'*

'Oh?' Amadayo raised an eyebrow. Outwardly he maintained an air of quiet concern, but his heart was racing. The shirt stuck to his back like a second skin. 'I have done everything the Combine has asked of me –'

'We prefer you not to use that name again,' Brett snapped, with a wince.

Amadayo bristled at the Englishman's tone and pressed on, masking his worry with a rising anger. 'How long have I been helping you in my nation? Your past transactions in Puntland and elsewhere – who ensured that those would proceed without issue?'

'And you have been paid handsomely for your brokerage,' came the reply, *'That guarded compound where you sit? My employer's money made it possible for you to live in such luxury. And safety.'*

There was a threat buried in the words, but Amadayo didn't waste time on it. This man was half a world away, and the things that Amadayo *did* fear were far closer than he was.

But then Brett looked out of the screen at him, and it was as if the pale man reached into his thoughts and pulled that fear out across the distance. *'You enjoy your comfortable life, doctor. You like to say you are the man who knows all the names, the one with a friend in every town and village. But how much of that is true?'* He came closer until his face nearly filled the screen. *'You promised stability.'*

You told my employers your influence could make that happen. But it has not.'

Amadayo blinked, briefly lost for words.

When Brett spoke again, the cultured accent had become acidic and accusatory. *'You were employed because you pledged to bring us some measure of constancy in that cesspool of a country. But somehow, despite all your promises, despite all the people you claim to hold sway over, terrorism and piracy are on the increase once again. How is that possible, if you are working so hard for us?'*

'I –' Amadayo sucked in a breath and marshalled a tirade to throw back at the pale foreigner. But before he could shape it, a crackling ripple of noise reached his ears. Gunfire, close at hand.

He bolted from the chair and took two quick steps toward the balcony door, in time to catch the sound of an echoing crash from the front gate. Amadayo gingerly leaned out and saw bobbing at the far end of the sandy driveway. A handful of his security men were sprinting in the direction of the commotion.

Looking down, he found a lanky guard with an AK-47 assault rifle circling warily around the edge of the poolside two storeys below. Amadayo shouted out an urgent cry in the local Benadir dialect. 'You! Tell me what is going on out here!'

The guard halted and showed him a shrug. 'Not sure, doctor-sir. Someone at the gate, but I don't know –' The younger man's words mingled with a low subsonic *crack* that cut him off mid-thought, as half of his face was abruptly ripped away in a fluid jet of crimson. The guard tottered and tumbled into the pool, a gush of blood staining the grubby tiles and clouding the water.

More shots rose in a chorus and Amadayo tore his gaze from the dead man in time to see the gate crumple as a cattle truck rammed it open. Yellow sparks of muzzle flare erupted all along the line of the acacias and Amadayo flinched, ducking back into the room.

'*What was that noise?*' Brett asked lazily.

Amadayo tore a drawer from a nearby cabinet and pulled an old World War II-vintage Tokarev pistol from among the papers inside. He kneaded the weapon and spun in place to glare at the little camera. 'You have done this?' He stalked toward the screen, wishing it was a window through which he could send a bullet. 'You sent them?'

'*Sent who?*' The Englishman didn't show the slightest flicker of alarm. He sat and watched as if he were in the audience at a theatre, indifferently observing some uninvolved drama.

A random spray of automatic fire hosed across the stone balustrade outside and splintered the wooden balcony doors, causing Amadayo to cry out. Spurred into motion by the shots, he ran across the room and levered open a trapdoor in the floor. Beneath it was a safe, and inside that a bag containing a few gold bars, wads of American dollars and forged identity papers. Amadayo stared at the bag, knowing what it represented. If he removed it, it would be tantamount to admitting defeat, like a pilot taking a parachute before abandoning his aircraft to smash into a hillside.

The shooting outside tailed off to nothing, and Amadayo heard the low, indistinct rumble of a man's voice. He held his breath, straining to listen.

After the gate was breached and the initial exchange of automatic fire ended, a dangerous, loaded silence descended on the compound. The bulk of Amadayo's guards were Yemeni, ex-military who had fled the civil war in their own country and crossed the Gulf of Aden in search of better odds. The doctor thought that made them a smarter choice for his protection detail than the locals: they were trained soldiers but also lacked connections to the web of clan obligations and rivalries that were a matter of course for his fellow Somalis. They could keep him safe from the criminals who took issue with his actions, or the Al Shabaab militants who considered him an ungodly apostate. But what

he had failed to take into account was that these men were also *survivors*, who knew full well when the deck was stacked against them.

The guards drew back into cover behind lines of ornamental planters and low stone walls, weighing their chances. Half their number had already been killed in the opening exchange.

The cattle truck that had rammed the gate retreated and dozens of armed men flowed in through the gap it left. They toted beaten, battle-worn versions of the same Kalashnikov rifles that the guards carried, one or two sporting grimy rocket-propelled grenade launchers or PKM machine guns with heavy box magazines. At first glance they resembled the gangs who prowled the lawless provinces, or the *burcad badeed* pirates from outside the city – but unlike those rabble they moved with something approaching self-control. The Yemeni guards had expected shouting and wildfire shooting, but not discipline.

The invaders' ranks parted to allow their commander to advance into view. Heavyside, he was a densely-muscled street fighter with a broken nose and a face that shone like polished teak. A curved scar began at the right corner of his mouth and described a semicircle up his cheek to end above the brow, with the effect of permanently pulling his expression into a narrow glare. The iris of his right eye was damaged, permanently wide and black like a shark's. He marched slowly up the driveway, the heavy iron ingot of a Desert Eagle semi-automatic dangling at the end of his arm, and found a place to stand out in the open.

He took a breath and gestured with the big pistol. 'Look at me,' he called. A few wary heads bobbed up from behind cover, vanishing as fast as they had risen. 'Who does not know my name?' He cast around, waiting for someone to reply. 'Ask those with you, if you do not.' The gun went back into a leather holster strapped across his chest. 'Do you want to oppose me? Do you understand what that will mean?'

Thirty metres away, the brother of the youth whose body now floated in the pink water of Amadayo's swimming pool sighted down his AK-47. He knew the name of the big man.

Abur Ramaas.

He knew who he was and what was said about him but, in that moment, his grief was in control. The dead guard's brother rested the weapon atop a concrete urn and framed the man's chest in the ring of his rifle's iron sights. Teeth gritted, he broke the silence with a shot that the poorly maintained gun sent well wide of the mark. Ramaas heard the wasp-drone of the round passing by and glanced after it, making a disgusted face.

The next shot came from one of his men atop the compound's outer wall, the spindly length of a Dragunov sniper rifle in his hands. The weapon chugged and the guard joined his brother.

Ramaas sighed. 'Anyone else?'

Slowly, hands rose and guns clattered to the ground.

'We execute them?' said Guhaad. He was trying not to seem eager about the prospect, but to Ramaas the other man was like a hungry dog always pulling on its chain, desperate to taste blood.

He shook his head. 'Take their weapons and let them leave. It's a good lesson for the others.' Ramaas didn't add that dozens of dead bodies piled on the mansion's piebald lawns would draw the wrong kind of attention. A handful of killings could be ignored under the cover of night in Mogadishu, but the open massacre of a dozen disarmed soldiers . . . that might force the men who pretended to govern the fragmented city into action. They would feel the need to be seen to do something, and Ramaas did not wish that. He wanted them to remain comfortable and complacent, until the moment he knifed them in their beds.

Guhaad grimaced, showing teeth that were stained orange from too much khat leaf. Ramaas had outgrown partaking of the narcotic, but his second-in-command liked it as much as the younger

bandits did, chewing it to keep him alert and awake all hours of the night. Ramaas indulged him, though. Guhaad *was* his war dog, after all. Brutal and violent at the snap of his fingers, Guhaad was the club in Ramaas's hands for battering down his foes. He just lacked the insight to think more than a day ahead.

'No sign of the army,' said another voice, as Ramaas's other weapon approached. The rifleman's name was Zayd, and he was the careful knife to Guhaad's blunt instrument. The two of them looked similar enough to be brothers, both of rangy build with long arms and legs, both from clans in the south, but the way they carried themselves made the divergent nature of their characters obvious. Zayd was sly and cold-eyed where Guhaad forever teetered on the edge of fury.

Ramaas nodded. 'They won't come.' He nodded toward the house, its doors yawning open and unguarded. 'In there, he is calling for them right now.' He shook his head. 'They won't come,' he repeated.

Amadayo snapped his cell phone shut and gripped it in his hands. The men in the Federal Government who owed him favours were suddenly *unavailable*, as if a peculiar malaise had struck them down all at once. From out of nowhere, his name had become a filthy thing, a word that no-one wanted to utter.

How had this happened? He tossed away the phone and went for the pistol again. 'Ramaas. The pirate is in my home.' Amadayo said it aloud, cementing the horrible truth of it in reality. 'He's come to end me.'

'*I think we can consider this the conclusion of our working relationship*,' said Brett, reaching for a control off-screen.

'No!' Amadayo shouted at him, eyes wide with panic. 'You think I am a man who cannot produce results? I will show you!' He brandished the pistol. 'You will learn!'

Outside the room, floorboards creaked under the weight of heavy boots, and Amadayo surrendered to action over reason. Swearing a curse, he unloaded the Tokarev into the closed door, mashing the

trigger as fast as he could, bullets crunching through the wood in a desperate attempt to kill whomever was on the other side.

Without warning, the gun's slide locked open with a hollow click and Amadayo started, staring down at the weapon in his hand. The magazine was empty, brass shells scattered at his feet, cordite smoke curling around the barrel.

The bullet-punctured door burst open, sagging on its hinges, and Ramaas filled the room. Amadayo staggered back, but in a single quick stride the bigger man was upon him and he was disarmed with a backhand slap that knocked the Tokarev to the floor.

'You have never shown me respect,' Ramaas growled, the words low like a leopard's snarl.

Amadayo gathered spittle in his mouth as a retort, but then thought better of the act and swallowed it as he locked gazes with the other man's dead eye.

'You brought this on yourself,' Ramaas told him. 'You should have left the country when your wife and daughter did.'

'My . . . ?' Amadayo's legs turned to water and he had to grasp the back of a chair to remain standing. 'What did you do to them?'

Ramaas ignored the question. 'Everyone hates you,' he explained. 'Because you are a jackal that cannot be killed cleanly. Because you have made yourself necessary.' He shook his head. 'Not for much longer.' He glanced at the screen and the camera, as if noticing it for the first time, then returned his attention to his prey. 'I have heard what you said to the other weak men about *stability* and *community*. Those are just the words you use for the chains you put about people's necks.'

Amadayo blinked fear-sweat from his eyes. For months now, he had been actively suppressing information about Ramaas's activities in Somalia, paying bribes to stop them from being talked about too widely, while all along trying fruitlessly to find a way to subdue him. He had feared what would happen if his fading grip on things became apparent.

Somalia's disordered state of the nation was both opportunity and burden to Amadayo. He had used it to ingratiate himself with politicians in the government and rich outside interests, who even now were drawing future plans about how they might exploit the country's untapped reserves of oil and natural gas. Ramaas threatened all of that.

At first he had been nothing more than a blip on Amadayo's radar, one more bandit warlord among a population of smugglers and pirates. That underestimation had been his biggest miscalculation. Day after day, Amadayo got word of new alliances between Ramaas's band of brigands and the antagonistic clans in Puntland, Galmudug and elsewhere. Even worse, it was said that the ruthless Al Shabaab Islamists had found a kind of accord with the man. He was undercutting the work that Amadayo had spent painstaking years constructing. Every thug he had sent to kill Ramaas never returned. Most, he feared, had switched sides and given their fealty to the warlord instead – Somalians always respected strength. As Amadayo searched Ramaas's scarred face for some ounce of humanity, he knew that here and now, the warlord had all the power over him.

'The clan elders are sick of you,' Ramaas was saying. 'They mock you in Haradheere. Like a woman who lies with any man, they say, the biggest *dhillo* in Mogadishu.' He prodded him in the chest with a thick finger, and nodded toward the camera. 'In the pocket of the *gaal*.'

'I am no whore!' Amadayo dredged up what little of his defiance still remained, but the outburst drained him and he folded.

Ramaas saw it, a hunter knowing his prey had given up, and nodded. 'Time for you to go.'

Was he being given a way out? Amadayo took a wary step toward the door, but an angry-looking man in a bright red soccer shirt was barring the way.

'You've been lucky,' Ramaas told him. 'Getting to here.' He surveyed the room. 'I want to see if you are still lucky.' The warlord

fished in a pocket and produced three careworn playing cards, each bent into a curve. He showed Amadayo their faces; the Jack of Spades, the Jack of Clubs and the Queen of Hearts. 'Find her.'

Amadayo knew the game, and he knew it was a trick, but Ramaas was already laying the cards out on the desk, moving them about with a deftness at odds with his heavy boxer's hands. When he was done, he drew back a step and waited.

One chance in three, Amadayo reasoned. He had no other choice but to play along. Reaching out, he tapped the middle card, and he heard the outlaw in the soccer shirt give a derisive snort.

Ramaas gave an indulgent nod and let Amadayo flip the card over. The pale face of the Jack of Clubs pictured there reminded him of Brett's studied features.

'Come, mister-doctor. I want to show you something.' A smile played around Ramaas's mouth and he pushed Amadayo in the direction of the balcony.

He reluctantly allowed himself to be directed outside. His eyes darted around, searching for anything that could be a method of escape. Below them, the warlord's men were already looting the house, walking in empty-handed and out again with anything of value they could carry. Amadayo stifled a moan of dread.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder. 'You see that?' Ramaas pointed out toward the city. 'It was never yours to begin with. You were a fool to think otherwise.' He paused. 'Do you believe in a God? Do you think he looks well upon you?' Amadayo didn't know what to say, but he suspected Ramaas knew the answer to his questions already.

'Brother, please,' Amadayo whispered, pleading. 'You are going to let me go?'

'No.' With a vicious shove, Ramaas's hand clamped around Amadayo's neck, his thumb choking him as it pressed into the soft flesh of his throat.

He stumbled back and collapsed against the bullet-pocked balustrade, but Ramaas kept up the pressure, forcing him over the

edge until his torso was hanging out over the drop. Amadayo's hands came up, flailing and scratching, fright overwhelming him as he realised that this would be his end.

Ramaas grabbed at his belt for leverage and tipped him over the edge. Amadayo spun and landed hard against the tiled patio surrounding the murky swimming pool, bones breaking against the concrete. Agony blinded him and blood spread around his body, soaking into the silk shirt.

'Boss.' Zayd glanced at the twitching body on the ground and looked up at the balcony where Ramaas was wiping sweat from his fingers. He pointed down at Amadayo. 'Still alive.'

'Oh.' Almost as an afterthought, Ramaas removed the Desert Eagle from its holster and blind-fired four rounds into the dying man. The reports of the heavy-calibre pistol echoed like claps of thunder, and then the matter of Welldone Amadayo was dealt with. 'Get up here,' said the warlord.

Zayd's head bobbed on his thin neck and he shouldered his rifle on its strap, making his way in through the house. Expressionless, his gaze ran over the expensive furniture and the garish paintings on the walls. Every square metre of the place was crammed with overblown, gaudy clutter. Zayd looked away – Amadayo's home was full of hollow things that only had value to rich fools, but like the man himself they were worthless. There was nothing here that had been earned through sweat and toil, only by guile and lies.

The other outlaws were in the process of stripping the place. What could be sold on would be used to fund their group. The remainder would be left for those gathering outside the gates – the people who had been forced to live in the shadow of Amadayo's offensive wealth – to take and do with as they saw fit. Zayd pushed past a man on the stairs laden down with armfuls of colourful women's clothes, and found his way to the dead politician's office.

Inside, he came upon Guhaad emptying a bag across the floor. Small bars of gold thudded on the thick carpet and his eyes widened.

Zayd ignored him and looked to Ramaas, as the warlord pulled on a fist-sized plastic ball mounted on a television screen.

He drew it toward him, and the device cracked, trailing out wires. 'You liked the show?' he asked it.

On the screen, a well-dressed foreigner cocked his head like a curious dog. *'It seems as though you have dealt with a problem that we both shared. Perhaps you would be interested in accepting the position that has just been vacated?'*

Ramaas gave a grumbling chuckle and shot a look at Guhaad, who belatedly shared a rough snigger. Zayd's expression remained blank. Little amused him, and certainly not some pale-skinned *gaal* who talked at them like he thought they were all fools.

'Messenger,' Ramaas said to the white man. 'Go and tell your masters that I am in charge here now.' Then with a jerk of his wrist he wrenched the camera the rest of the way from the wall and tossed it onto the desk. The screen flickered and went blank.

Zayd nudged the camera ball with a finger, ensuring it was dead. Next to it, he saw the warlord's cards lying in a line. He flipped over the two that were still face down and found a pair of identical Jacks. 'Amadayo should not have played this game,' he noted, handing the cards back to the warlord.

'So true,' said Ramaas. 'Greed makes a man overstate his chances. He knew chance did not favour him, and yet still he played on. You see the arrogance of that? To the end, Amadayo believed the rules of the world did not apply to him.'

'What do you want me for?' said Zayd.

Ramaas studied the computer on Amadayo's desk. They had men who were knowledgeable about such things, and the machine would go to them just as the spoils from the house would go to the rank-and-file of the outlaws. Ramaas looked Zayd up and down. 'You are no bigger than the late mister-doctor. His clothes are very fine. Go to his rooms, gather some up. Take what you like.'

'Why?'

‘You are going on a vital journey.’ He nodded in the direction of the screen. ‘There is more work to be done.’ He leaned in and spoke quietly. ‘Only you can do this for me, brother.’ The rest went unspoken. It would not be the first time that Zayd had carried the warlord’s flag for him. There were few to whom Ramaas was willing to give such an honour.

From across the room, wood crunched and splintered as Guhaad bodily shoved a rack of shelves aside, to reveal a hidden compartment behind it. He broke open the lock on the metal door with the butt of his rifle and slid it open. ‘Boss. Look here!’

Ramaas reached inside and came back with plastic-wrapped bricks of American dollars in high denominations. He gave a nod. ‘Empty it. Amadayo will be generous in his passing.’ Zayd watched him lay a hand on Guhaad’s shoulder. ‘I can rely on you to keep things in order while we are gone?’

‘We?’ Guhaad shot a look in Zayd’s direction, confused and annoyed all at once. He didn’t like the idea of being left out of something.

Ramaas was already shaking his head. ‘I need your strong hand here while I am away.’ He had a way of managing the thug’s moods that the rifleman could never comprehend. ‘Zayd has a mission, and so do I. These things are significant, brother. I could have sent you two alone to do this thing today, but I did not. I am here. You know why?’

‘It is important to do some things in person,’ Guhaad replied, remembering other lessons he had been taught. ‘A man must be seen to do the deed.’ A thought occurred to him. ‘That’s why you let the Yemenis live. To say what you did.’

Ramaas nodded. ‘All men should live by a code. A set of principles.’ He released his grip and walked away, turning the bale of money over in his hands. ‘Just a few more things need to be done. There are ropes that hold us tethered which need to be cut.’

‘And then?’ asked Zayd. It was rare for him to even think of questioning Ramaas’s orders, but the need to know pushed at him. Each day they were moving closer to some goal that only Ramaas saw clearly.

‘*Waaq* will provide,’ said the warlord, using the Cushitic name for God. Zayd cared very little for religion, but he kept that to himself rather than offend his Muslim brothers in the war band. For his part, Ramaas held to the old Oromo folk beliefs and no-one had the courage to challenge him on them. More than once, Zayd had heard him talk of *Mission* and of *Duty*. Ramaas could be compelling when he wished to be, then terrifying, turning from one to another like the rise and fall of ocean waves.

‘We are change,’ he told them, speaking with such certainty that it seemed as though his desires were already fact. ‘We are the storm that will sweep over our nation. Believe that.’ Then he smiled, squeezing the fat bundle of dollar bills in his fist. ‘But to make it happen, we will need more of *this*.’