Congo[1]
Michael Crichton, pgs. 9-14

1. ERTS Houston

TEN THOUSAND MILES AWAY, IN THE COLD, WINdowless main data room of Earth Resources Technology Services, Inc., of Houston, Karen Ross sat hunched over a mug of coffee in front of a computer terminal, reviewing the latest Landsat images from Africa. Ross was the ERTS Congo Project Supervisor, and as she manipulated the satellite images in artificial contrast colors, blue and purple and green, she glanced at her watch impatiently. She was waiting for the next field transmission from Africa.

It was now 10:15 P.M. Houston time, but there was no indication of time or place in the room. Day or night, the main data

facility of ERTS remained the same. Beneath banks of special kalon fluorescent lights, programming crews in sweaters worked at long rows of quietly clicking computer terminals, providing real-time inputs to the field parties that ERTS maintained around the world. This timeless quality was understood to be necessary for the computers, which required a constant temperature of 60 degrees, dedicated electrical lines, special color-corrected lights that did not interfere with circuitry. It was an environment made for machines; the needs of people were secondary.

But there was another rationale for the main facility design. ERTS wanted programmers in Houston to identify with the field parties, and if possible to live on their schedules. Inputting baseball games and other local events was discouraged; there was no clock which showed Houston time, although on the far wall eight large digital clocks recorded local time for the various field parties.

The clock marked CONGO FIELD PARTY read 06:15 A.M. when the overhead intercom said, "Dr. Ross, CCR bounce."

She left the console after punching in the digital password blocking codes. Every ERTS terminal had a password control, like a combination lock. It was part of an elaborate system to prevent outside sources tapping into their enormous data bank. ERTS dealt in information, and as R.B. Travis, the head of ERTS, was fond of saying, the easiest way to obtain information was to steal it.

She crossed the room with long strides. Karen Ross was nearly six feet tall, an attractive though ungainly girl. Only twenty-four years old, she was younger than most of the programmers, but despite her youth, she had a self-possession that most people found striking—even a little unsettling. Karen Ross was a genuine mathematical prodigy.

At the age of two, while accompanying her mother to the supermarket, she had worked out in her head whether a ten-ounce can at 19¢ was cheaper than a one-pound-twelve-ounce can at 79¢. At three, she startled her father by observing that, unlike other numbers, zero meant different things in different positions. By eight, she had mastered algebra and geometry; by ten, she had taught herself calculus; she entered M.I.T. at thirteen and proceeded to make a series of brilliant discoveries in abstract mathematics, culminating in a treatise, "Topological Prediction in n-Space," which was useful for decision matrices, critical path analyses, and multidimensional mapping. This interest had brought her to the attention of ERTS, where she was made the youngest field supervisor in the company.

Not everyone liked her. The years of isolation, of being the youngest person in any room, had left her aloof and rather distant. One co-worker described her as "logical to a fault." Her chilly demeanor had earned her the title "Ross Glacier," after the Antarctic formation.

And her youth still held her back—at least, age was Travis's excuse when he refused to let her lead the Congo expedition into the field, even though she had derived all the Congo database, and by rights should have been the onsite team leader. "I'm sorry," Travis had said, "but this con-

tract's too big, and I just can't let you have it." She had pressed, reminding him of her successes leading teams the year before to Pahang and Zambia. Finally he had said, "Look, Karen, that site's ten thousand miles away, in four-plus terrain. We need more than a console hotdogger out there."

She bridled under the implication that that was all she was—a console hotdogger, fast at the keyboard, good at playing with Travis's toys. She wanted to prove herself in a four-plus field situation. And the next time she was determined to make Travis let her go.

Ross pressed the button for the third-floor elevator, marked "CX Access Only." She caught an envious glance from one of the programmers while she waited for the elevator to arrive. Within ERTS, status was not measured by salary, title, the size of one's office, or the other usual corporate indicators of power. Status at ERTS was purely a matter of access to information—and Karen Ross was one of eight people in the company who had access to the third floor at any time.

She stepped onto the third-floor elevator, glancing up at the scanner lens mounted over the door. At ERTS the elevators traveled only one floor, and all were equipped with passive scanners; it was one way that ERTS kept track of the movements of personnel while they were in the building. She said "Karen Ross" for the voice monitors, and turned in a full circle for the scanners. There was a soft electronic bleep, and the door slid open at the third floor.

She emerged into a small square room with a ceiling video monitor, and faced the unmarked outer door of the Communication Control Room. She repeated "Karen Ross," and inserted her electronic identicard in the slot, resting her fingers on the metallic edge of the card so the computer could record galvanic skin potentials. (This was a refinement instituted three months earlier, after Travis learned that Army experiments with vocal cord surgery had altered voice characteristics precisely enough to false-positive Voiceident programs.) After a cycling pause, the door buzzed open. She went inside.

With its red night lights, Communication Control was

like a soft, warm womb—an impression heightened by the cramped, almost claustrophobic quality of the room, packed with electronic equipment. From floor to ceiling, dozens of video monitors and LEDs flickered and glowed as the technicians spoke in hushed tones, setting dials and twisting knobs. The CCR was the electronic nerve center of ERTS: all communications from field parties around the world were routed through here. Everything in the CCR was recorded, not only incoming data but room voice responses, so the exact conversation on the night of June 13, 1979, is known.

One of the technicians said to her, "We'll have the transponders hooked in in a minute. You want coffee?"

"No," Ross said.

"You want to be out there, right?"

"I earned it," she said. She stared at the video screens, at the bewildering display of rotating and shifting forms as the technicians began the litany of locking in the bird bounce, a transmission from satellite in orbit, 720 miles over their heads.

"Signal key."

"Signal key. Password mark."

"Password mark."

"Carrier fix."

"Carrier fix. We're rolling."

She paid hardly any attention to the familiar phrases. She watched as the screens displayed gray fields of crackling static.

"Did we open or did they open?" she asked.

"We initiated," a technician said. "We had it down on the call sheet to check them at dawn local time. So when they didn't initiate, we did."

"I wonder why they didn't initiate," Ross said. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so. We put out the initiation trigger and they picked it up and locked in within fifteen seconds, all the appropriate codes. Ah, here we go."

At 6:22 A.M. Congo time, the transmission came through: there was a final blur of gray static and then the screens cleared. They were looking at a part of the camp in the

Congo, apparently a view from a tripod-mounted video camera. They saw two tents, a low smoldering fire, the lingering wisps of a foggy dawn. There was no sign of activity, no people.

One of the technicians laughed. "We caught them still sleeping. Guess they do need you there." Ross was known for her insistence on formalities.

"Lock you remote," she said.

The technician punched in the remote override. The field camera, ten thousand miles away, came under their control in Houston.

"Pan scan," she said.

At the console, the technician used a joystick. They watched as the video images shifted to the left, and they saw more of the camp. The camp was destroyed: tents crushed and torn, supply tarp pulled away, equipment scattered in the mud. One tent burned brightly, sending up clouds of black smoke. They saw several dead bodies.

"Whoa," one technician said.

"Back scan," Ross said. "Spot resolve to six-six."

On the screens, the camera panned back across the camp. They looked at the jungle. They still saw no sign of life.

"Down pan. Reverse sweep."

Onscreen, the camera panned down to show the silver dish of the portable antenna, and the black box of the transmitter. Nearby was another body, one of the geologists, lying on his back.

"Hey, that's Roger…"

"Zoom and T-lock," Ross said. On the tape, her voice sounds cool, almost detached.

The camera zoomed in on the face. What they saw was grotesque, the head crushed and leaking blood from eyes and nose, mouth gaping toward the sky.

"What did *that*?"

At that moment, a shadow fell across the dead face onscreen. Ross jumped forward, grabbing the joystick and hitting the zoom control. The image widened swiftly; they could see the outline of the shadow now. It was a man. And he was moving.

"Somebody's there! Somebody's still alive!"

"He's limping. Looks wounded."

Ross stared at the shadow. It did not look to her like a limping man; something was wrong, she couldn't put her finger on what it was…

"He's going to walk in front of the lens," she said. It was almost too much to hope for. "What's that audio static?"

They were hearing an odd sound, like a hissing or a sighing.

"It's not static, it's in the transmission."

"Resolve it," Ross said. The technicians punched buttons, altering the audio frequencies, but the sound remained peculiar and indistinct. And then the shadow moved, and the man stepped in front of the lens.

"Diopter," Ross said, but it was too late. The face had already appeared, very near the lens. It was too close to focus without a diopter. They saw a blurred, dark shape, nothing more. Before they could click in the diopter, it was gone.

"A native?"

"This region of the Congo is uninhabited," Ross said.

"*Something* inhabits it."

"Pan scan," Ross said. "See if you can get him onscreen again."

The camera continued to pan. She could imagine it sitting on its tripod in the jungle, motor whirring as the lens head swung around. Then suddenly the image tilted and fell sideways.

"He knocked it over!"

The video image crackled, shifting lines of static. It became very difficult to see.

"Resolve it! Resolve it!"

They had a final glimpse of a large face and a dark hand as the silver dish antenna was smashed. The image from the Congo shrank to a spot, and was gone.

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[1] This excerpt has been edited slightly.