

THE GRANDMASTER OF ADVENTURE

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WITH JACK DU BRUL

A rusted, skeletal shipwreck is partially buried in a desert dune. The ship's structure is heavily corroded, with only the basic outline of the hull and deck remaining. The background features a wall with intricate, golden, geometric patterns, suggesting an ancient or mysterious setting.

SKELETON COAST

A NOVEL OF THE OREGON FILES



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Skeleton Coast
by
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I

Kalahari Desert 1896

He never should have ordered them to leave the guns behind. The decision would cost them all their lives. But had there really been a choice? When the last remaining packhorse went lame they'd had to redistribute its load, and that meant leaving equipment behind. There was no debating the necessity of bringing the water flasks the animal had carried, or the satchels bursting with uncut stones. They'd had to abandon the tents, bedrolls, thirty pounds of food, and the Martini-Henry rifles each of the five men had carried, as well as all the ammunition. But even with these weight savings the surviving horses were severely overburdened, and with the sun beginning to rise once more to pound the desert no one expected their mounts would last the day.

H. A. Ryder knew better than to agree to lead the others across the Kalahari. He was an old Africa hand, having abandoned a failing farm in Sussex in the heady days of the Kimberley rush hoping to make himself a millionaire in the diamond fields. By the time he'd arrived in 1868 the whole of Colesberg Kopje, the hillock where the first diamonds had been discovered, was staked and the fields around it, too, for several miles. So Ryder turned to providing meat for the army of workers.

With a pair of wagons and hundreds of sacks of salt to cure the game, he and a couple of native guides ranged over

thousands of square miles. It had been a solitary existence but one that Ryder grew to love, just as he came to love the land, with its haunting sunsets and dense forests, streams so clear the water looked like glass, and horizons so distant they seemed impossible to reach. He learned to speak the languages of various tribes, the Matabele, the Mashona, and the fierce, warlike Herero. He even understood some of the strange clicks and whistles that the Bushmen of the desert used to communicate.

He'd taken work as a safari guide so that rich Englishmen and Americans could adorn their mansion walls with trophies and he had spent time finding suitable routes for a telegraph company stringing lines across the southern third of the continent. He'd fought in a dozen skirmishes and killed ten times that many men. He knew and understood the African people and knew better still the savagery of the land itself. He knew he should have never accepted the job of guiding the others from Bechuanaland across the vast Kalahari wasteland in a mad dash to the sea. But there was always the lure of the big payoff, the siren song of instant wealth that had drawn him to Africa in the first place.

If they somehow made it, if the uncaring desert didn't claim them, then H. A. Ryder was going to have that fortune of which he'd always dreamed.

'Think they're still back there, H. A.?'

Ryder squinted into the rising sun so that his eyes nearly vanished into his weathered skin. He could see nothing on the distant horizon but curtains of shimmering heat that formed and dissolved like smoke. Between them and the fiery sun marched dunes of pure white sand – shifting waves that rivaled towering hurricane swells. With the sun came the wind, which lashed at the tops of the dunes so that sand blew off their crests in stinging clouds.

‘Aye, laddie,’ he said without looking at the man standing next to him.

‘How can you be sure?’

H. A. turned to his companion, Jon Varley. ‘They’ll follow us to the gates of hell for what we did to them.’

The certainty in H. A.’s raspy voice made Varley blanch under his tan. Like Ryder, the four other men in their party were all English-born and had come to Africa to seek their fortunes, though none was as seasoned as their guide.

‘We’d best get going,’ Ryder said. They’d been traveling under the relatively cool cover of darkness. ‘We can cover a few miles before the sun climbs too high.’

‘I think we should make camp here,’ said Peter Smythe, the greenest member of the group, and by far the worst off. He’d lost his swaggering attitude shortly after entering the sand sea and now moved with the shuffling gait of an old man. White crusts had formed at the corners of his eyes and mouth, while his once bright blue eyes had grown dim.

Ryder glanced at Peter and saw the signs immediately. They’d all shared the same water ration since filling their canteens and jerry cans ten days earlier at a brackish well, but Smythe’s body seemed to need more than the others. It wasn’t a question of strength or will, it was simply the lad needed to drink more to stay alive. H. A. knew to the drop how much water remained, and unless he could find another desert well, Smythe would be the first to die.

The thought of giving him an extra ration never entered Ryder’s mind. ‘We go on.’

He looked westward and saw the mirror image of the terrain they’d already covered. Sand dune piled upon sand dune in endless ranks that stretched seemingly forever. The sky was turning brassy as light reflected off the infinite desert. Ryder checked his mount. The animal was suffering,

and for that he felt guilty – worse than his feelings for young Smythe in fact, for the poor animal had no choice but to carry them across this cruel environment. He used a clasp knife to remove a stone from the horse's hoof and adjusted the saddle blanket where the pannier straps were beginning to chafe. The animal's once glossy coat was dull and hung in flaps where its flesh had begun to waste away.

He stroked the horse's cheek and muttered a few soothing words into its ear. There was no way any of them could ride their mounts. The animals were already struggling under their lightened loads. He took up the reins and started off. Ryder's boots sank to the uppers as he led the horse down the face of a dune. Sand shifted under them, hissing and sliding down the embankment, and threatening to send the pair tumbling if either took a misstep. H. A. didn't look back. The men had no choice but to follow or die where they stood.

He walked for an hour as the sun continued its inexorable climb into the cloudless sky. He'd tucked a smooth pebble between his teeth and tongue to try to fool his body that he wasn't severely dehydrated. When he paused to wipe the inside of his big slouch hat the heat scorched the red patch of skin on the crown of his head. He wanted to go for another hour but he could hear the men struggling behind them. They weren't yet at the point where he would consider abandoning them, so he led them to the lee of a particularly tall dune and began to erect a sunshade using the horse blankets. The men flopped to the ground, panting as he set up their meager camp.

H. A. checked on Peter Smythe. The young man's lips were nothing but raw blisters that leaked clear fluid and the tops of his cheeks were burned as if with an iron straight from the brazier. Ryder reminded him to only loosen his

boot laces. All of their feet were so swollen that to remove their boots meant they'd never get them back on again. They watched him expectantly as he finally took a couple of canteens from a saddlebag. He unstoppered one of them and immediately one of the horses nickered at the scent of water. The others crowded over and his own mount brushed its head against H. A.'s shoulder.

So as not to lose even a single drop, Ryder poured a measure into a bowl and held it for the animal to drink. It slurped noisily and its stomach rumbled as water reached it for the first time in three days. He poured out a little more and again watered the horse. He did this to all of them first despite his own raging thirst and the angry glares of his companions.

'They die, you die' was all he had to say, for they knew he was right.

Having drunk only a quart of water each, the horses could still be cajoled to eat from the feed bags of oats one of them had carried. He hobbled them with leg ropes and only then did he pass around the bowl for the men to drink. He was even stricter with their ration, each receiving a single mouthful before Ryder secured the water in his pannier. There were no protests. H. A. was the only one of them to have crossed this desolate wasteland before and they deferred to him to see them through.

The shade of the horse blankets was pitifully small compared to the searing oven that was the Kalahari, one of the hottest and driest places on earth, a land where the rain might fall once a year or not for many. As the sun beat the earth with hammer strokes of heat, the men lay in torpid lethargy, shifting only when the shadows moved with the revolving sun to expose a hand or leg to the brutal onslaught. They lay with their all-consuming thirst, and they lay with

their pain, but mostly they lay with their greed, for these were still motivated men, men close to becoming far wealthier than any had imagined.

When the sun reached its zenith it seemed to gain strength, making the act of breathing a battle between the need for air and the desire to keep the heat from entering their bodies. It sucked moisture from the men with each shallow breath and left their lungs aflame.

And still the heat had increased, a smothering weight that seemed to crush the men into the ground. Ryder didn't remember it being this bad when he had crossed the desert all those years ago. It was as if the sun had fallen from the heavens and now lay upon the earth, raging and angry that mere mortals were trying to defy it. It was enough to drive a man insane, and yet they endured the long afternoon, praying for the day to finally end.

As swiftly as the heat had built up it began to drop as the sun finally settled toward the western horizon, painting the sand with bands of red and purple and rose. The men slowly emerged from under the sunshade, brushing dust off their filthy clothes. Ryder scaled the dune that had protected them from the wind and panned the desert behind them with a collapsible brass telescope for signs of their pursuers. He could see nothing but shifting dunes. Their tracks had been scoured clean by the constant zephyrs, though it gave him little comfort. The men chasing them were some of the best trackers in the world. They would find them in the featureless sand sea as surely as if Ryder had left a trail of marker stones for them to follow.

What he didn't know was how much ground their stalkers had gained during the day – for they seemed superhuman in their abilities to withstand the sun and heat. H. A. had estimated that when they entered the desert they had a

five-day lead on their pursuers. He felt confident that they held no more than a day's advantage now. By tomorrow that would be whittled further to half a day. And then? The next day would be when they would pay for abandoning their weapons when the packhorse went lame.

Their only chance was to find enough water tonight for the horses so they could ride them once again.

Not enough of the precious fluid remained to water the horses, and the men's ration was half of what they'd had just after dawn. For Ryder it was like adding insult to injury. The warm trickle seemed to just seep into his tongue rather than slake his thirst, which was now a gnawing ache in his stomach. He forced himself to eat some dried beef.

Looking at the raw-boned faces around him, H. A. knew that tonight's march was going to be torture. Peter Smythe couldn't stop himself from swaying where he stood. Jon Varley wasn't much better off. Only the brothers, Tim and Tom Watermen, seemed okay, but they had been in Africa longer than Smythe or Varley, working as farmhands on a big Cape cattle ranch for the past decade. Their bodies were more acclimated to Africa's brutal sun.

H. A. ran his hands through his big muttonchop sideburns, combing sand from the coarse graying hair. When he bent to tighten his boot laces he felt twice his fifty years. His back and legs ached fiercely and the vertebrae popped when he stood again.

'This is it, lads. You have my word that tonight we will drink our fill,' he said to bolster their flagging morale.

'On what, sand?' Tim Watermen joked to show he still could.

'The Bushmen who call themselves the San have lived in this desert for a thousand years or more. It's said they can smell water a hundred miles off and that's not far off the

mark. When I came through the Kalahari twenty years ago I had a San guide. The little bugger found water where I would have never thought to look. They scooped it from plants when there was a fog in the morning and drank from the rumen of the animals they killed with their poison arrows.'

'What's a rumen?' Varley asked.

Ryder exchanged a glance with the Watermen brothers as if to say everyone should know the term. 'It's the first stomach in an animal like a cow or antelope where they produce their cud. The fluid in it is mostly water and plant juice.'

'I could go for some of that now,' Peter Smythe managed to mumble. A single drop of claret-red blood clung to the corner of his cracked lip. He licked it away before it could fall to the earth.

'But the San's greatest ability is to find water buried under the sand in dried-out riverbeds that haven't flowed in a generation.'

'Can you find water like them?' Jon Varley asked.

'I've been looking in every streambed we've crossed for the past five days,' H. A. said.

The men were startled. None of them had realized they'd crossed any dried-out rivers. To them the desert had been featureless and empty. That H. A. had known about the wadis increased their confidence that he would see them out of this nightmare.

Ryder continued, 'There was a promising one day before yesterday but I couldn't be certain and we can't afford the time for me to be wrong. I estimate we're two, maybe three days from the coast, which means this part of the desert gets moisture off the ocean, plus the occasional storm. I'll find us water, lads. Of that you can be sure.'

It was the most H. A. had spoken since telling the men to dump their guns and it had the desired effect. The Watermen brothers grinned, Jon Varley managed to square his shoulders, and even young Smythe stopped swaying.

A cold moon began to climb behind them as the last rays of the sun sank into the distant Atlantic, and soon the sky was carpeted with more stars than a man could count in a hundred lifetimes. The desert was as silent as a church save for the hiss of sand shifting under boots and hooves and the occasional creak of leather saddlery. Their pace was steady and measured. H. A. was well aware of their weakened condition, but never forgot the hordes that were surely on their trail.

He called the first halt at midnight. The nature of the desert had changed slightly. While they still slogged through ankle-deep sand there were patches of loose gravel in many of the valleys. H. A. had spotted old watering holes in a few of the washes, places where eland and antelope had dug into the hard pan searching for underground water. He saw no sign of humans ever using them, so he assumed they had dried out eons ago. He didn't mention his discovery to the men but it served to bolster his confidence in finding them a working well.

He allowed the men a double share of water, sure now that he could replenish the canteens and water the horses before sunup. And if he didn't, there was no use in rationing, for the desert would claim them on the morrow. Ryder gave half his ration to his horse although the others eagerly drank theirs down with little regard to the pack animals.

A rare cloud blotted the moon a half hour after they started marching again, and when it passed, the shifting illumination caused something on the desert floor to catch Ryder's eye. According to his compass and the stars, he'd

been following a due-westerly direction, and none of the men commented when he suddenly turned north. He paced ahead of the others, aware of the flaky soil crunching under his boots, and when he reached the spot he dropped to his knees.

It was merely a dimple in the otherwise flat valley, no more than three feet across. He cast his gaze around the spot, smiling tightly when he found bits of broken eggshell, and one that was almost intact except for a long crack that ran like a fault line along its smooth surface. The shell was the size of his fist and had a neat hole drilled through the top. Its stopper was a tuft of dried grass mixed with native gum. It was one of the San's most prized possessions, for without these ostrich eggs they had no way to transport water. That one broke when they were refilling could have very well doomed the party of Bushmen who last used the well.

H. A. almost felt their ghosts staring down on him from the ancient riverbed's bank, tiny little spirits wearing nothing but crowns of reeds around their heads and rawhide belts festooned with pouches for their ostrich eggs and quivers for the small poisoned arrows they used to take game.

'What have you found, H. A.?' Jon Varley asked, kneeling in the dirt next to the guide. His once shining dark hair fell lank around his shoulders, but he had somehow maintained the piratical gleam in his eyes. They were the eyes of a desperate schemer, a man driven by dreams of instant wealth and one willing to risk death to see them fulfilled.

'Water, Mr. Varley.' Though twenty years his senior, H. A. tried to speak deferentially to all his clients.

'What? How? I don't see anything.'

The Watermen brothers sat on a nearby boulder. Peter Smythe collapsed at their feet. Tim helped the lad move

upright so his back was against the water-worn rock. His head lolled against his thin chest and his breathing was unnaturally shallow.

‘It’s underground, like I told you.’

‘How do we get it out?’

‘We dig.’

Without another word the two men began scraping back the soil that a Bushman had laboriously used to refill the precious well so that it didn’t dry out. H. A.’s hands were broad and so callused that he could use them like shovels, tearing into the friable earth with little regard to the flinty shards. Varley had the hands of a gambler, smooth and, at one point, neatly manicured, but he dug just as hard as the guide – raging thirst allowing him to ignore the cuts and scrapes and the blood that dripped from his fingertips.

They excavated two feet of earth and still no sign of water. They had to expand the hole because they were much bigger than the Bushmen warriors whose job it was to dig these wells. At three feet H. A. took out a scoopful of dirt and when he dropped it away from the hole a thin layer clung to his skin. He rolled it between his fingers until he’d produced a little ball of mud. When he squeezed it a quivering drop of water shone in the starlight.

Varley whooped and even H. A. cracked an uncommon smile.

They redoubled their efforts, slinging mud from the hole with reckless abandon. Ryder had to put a restraining hand on Varley’s shoulder when he felt they’d dug deep enough.

‘Now we wait.’

The other men crowded around the well and they watched in expectant silence as the darkened bottom of the excavation suddenly turned white. It was the moon reflecting off water seeping into the hole from the surrounding aquifer.

H. A. used a piece torn from his shirt as a filter and dipped his canteen into the muddy water. It took several minutes for it to fill halfway. Peter moaned when he heard it sloshing as H. A. lifted it from the hole.

‘Here you go, lad,’ Ryder said, handing over the canteen. Peter reached for it eagerly but Ryder didn’t let go. ‘Slowly, my boy. Drink it slowly.’

Smythe was too far gone to listen to H. A.’s advice; his first massive gulp sent him into a paroxysm of coughing and the mouthful of water was wasted on the desert floor. When he’d recovered he took tentative sips, looking sheepish. It took four hours to recover enough water for the men to drink their fill and finally manage to eat their first meal in days.

H. A. was still watering the horses when the sun began to brush against the eastern horizon. He was careful with them so they wouldn’t bloat or cramp, and fed them sparingly, but still their great bellies rumbled with contentment as they ate and managed to stale for the first time in days.

‘H. A.!’ Tim Watermen had gone over the riverbank to relieve himself in private. He stood silhouetted against the dawn frantically waving his hat and pointing toward the rising sun.

Ryder plucked his telescope from his saddlebag and raced from the horses, climbing the hill like a man possessed. He smashed into Watermen so both fell to the dust. Before Tim could protest, Ryder clamped a hand over his companion’s mouth and hissed, ‘Keep your voice down. Sound travels well over the desert.’

Lying flat, H. A. extended the telescope and set it against his eye.

Look at them come, he thought. God, they are magnificent.

*

What had brought these five men together was Peter Smythe's utter hatred of his father, a fearsome man who claimed to have had a vision of the archangel Gabriel. The angel had told Lucas Smythe to sell everything he owned and travel to Africa to spread the word of God among the savages. While not particularly religious before his vision, Smythe devoted himself to the Bible with such urgency that when he applied to the London Missionary Society they considered denying his application because he had become a zealot. But in the end the Society accepted him if for no other reason than to get him away from their offices. They sent him and his begrudging wife and son to Bechuanaland, where he was to replace a minister who'd died of malaria.

Away from the constraints of society at a tiny mission in the heart of the Herero people, Smythe became a religious tyrant, for his was a vengeful God who demanded total self-sacrifice and severe penitence for even the most minor transgressions. It was nothing for Peter to be cane-whipped by his father because he mumbled the last words of a prayer or be denied dinner for not being able to recite a particular psalm on command.

At the time of the family's arrival, the Herero king, Samuel Maharero, who had been baptized some decades earlier, was in a bitter dispute with the colonial authorities, and thus shunned the German minister sent to his lands by the Rhenish Mission Society. Lucas Smythe and his family enjoyed the patronage of the king even if Maharero was hesitant of Smythe's rantings of hellfire and brimstone.

While young Peter enjoyed his friendships with the king's many grandchildren, life as a teen near the royal kraal was tedium punctuated with moments of terror when the Spirit seized his father, and he wanted nothing more than to run away.

And so he plotted his escape, confiding in Assa Maharero,

one of the king's grandsons and his best friend, what he intended to do. It was during one of their many strategy sessions that Peter Smythe made the discovery that would change his life.

He was in a storage *rondoval*, a circular hut the Herero used to store fodder when the fields were too barren for their thousands of cattle. It was the place he and Assa had chosen as their hideout, and though Peter had been there dozens of times, this was the first he noticed that the hard-packed earth along one mud-and-grass wall had been dug up. The black soil had been carefully tamped down but his sharp eye spotted the irregularity.

He used his hands to dig into the spot, and discovered that there was only a thin layer of soil laid over a dozen large earthen beer pots. The jugs were the size of his head, and a membrane of cowhide had been stretched over their tops. He lifted one from its resting place. It was heavy and he could feel something rattling around inside.

Peter carefully worked the stitches around the rim, loosening them just enough so that when he tipped the pot a few unremarkable stones dropped into his palm. He began to shake. While they looked nothing like the stylized drawings of faceted stones he'd seen, he knew by how they scattered the meager light in the hut that he was holding six uncut diamonds. The smallest was the size of his thumbnail. The largest more than twice as big.

Just then Assa ducked through the arched doorway and saw what his friend had uncovered. His eyes went wide with terror and he quickly looked over his shoulder to see if any adults were about. Across the fenced stockade a couple of boys were watching some cattle and a woman was walking a few hundred yards away with a bundle of grass perched

atop her head. He leapt across the *rondoval* and took the beer pot from Peter's startled fingers.

'What have you done?' Assa hissed in his odd German-accented English.

'Nothing, Assa, I swear,' Peter cried guiltily. 'I saw that something had been buried and I just wanted to see what it was, is all.'

Assa held out a hand and Peter dumped the loose stones into his palm. The young African prince spoke as he tucked the stones back under the leather cover. 'On pain of death you must never speak of this to anyone.'

'Those are diamonds, aren't they?'

Assa regarded his friend. 'Yes.'

'But how? There are no diamonds here. They're all down in the Cape Colony around Kimberley.'

Assa sat cross-legged in front of Peter, torn between his oath to his grandfather and pride at what his tribe had accomplished. He was three years younger than Peter, just thirteen, so youthful boasting won out over his solemn promise. 'I will tell you but you must never repeat it.'

'I swear, Assa.'

'Since diamonds were first discovered, men of the Herero tribe have traveled to Kimberley to work in the pits. They worked a one-year contract and came home with the pay the white miners gave them, but they also took something else. They stole stones.'

'I heard that the men are searched before they are allowed to leave the miners' camps, even their bums.'

'What our men did was cut their skin and place the stones inside the wound. When it scarred over there was no evidence. Upon their return they reopened the wounds with assegais and retrieved the stones to present to my

great-grandfather, Chief Kamaharero, who had first ordered them south to Kimberley.’

‘Assa, some of these stones are pretty big – surely they would have been discovered,’ Peter protested.

Assa laughed. ‘And some Herero warriors are pretty big, too.’ He then turned serious as he continued the tale. ‘This went on for many years, as many as twenty, but then the white miners discovered what the Herero were doing. A hundred were arrested and even those who hadn’t yet hid a stone under their skin were found guilty of stealing. They were all put to death.

‘When the time is right we will use these stones to throw off the yoke of the German colonial office’ – his dark eyes shone – ‘and we will again live as free men. Now, swear to me again, Peter, that you will tell no one that you have discovered the treasure.’

Peter’s gaze met that of his young friend and he said, ‘I swear.’

His oath lasted him less than a year. When he turned eighteen he left the little mission in the center of the royal compound. He told no one that he was leaving, not even his mother, and for that he felt guilty. She alone would have to bear the weight of Lucas Smythe’s righteous tirades.

Peter had always felt he was a survivor. He and Assa had camped dozens of times on the veldt, but by the time he reached a trading station fifty miles from the mission, he was nearly dead from exhaustion and thirst. There he spent a couple of the precious coins he’d hoarded from birthday presents from his mother. His father never gave him anything, believing that the only birth the family should celebrate was that of Jesus Christ.

There was barely enough to pay the wagon master to take him to Kimberley on the buckboard of a twenty-oxen span

returning south with a load of ivory and salted meat. The wagon master was an older man wearing a huge white hat, and had the thickest sideburns Peter had ever seen. Tagging along with H. A. Ryder were a pair of brothers who'd been promised grazing land by the Cape colonial office only to find it already occupied by Matabele. With no desire to fight an army, they had prudently chosen to return south. Also with the party was a lean, hawk-faced man named Jon Varley.

In the weeks they trudged south, Peter never did get a sense of what Varley did or what had brought him so far from the Cape Colony; all he knew was that he didn't trust the man as far as he could spit.

At camp one night following the dangerous crossing of a river where Peter saved the life of one of Ryder's oxen by actually jumping on the animal's back and riding it across like a horse, Varley revealed a cache of liquor. It was fiery Cape brandy, as raw as pure spirits, but the five of them sat around a campfire digesting a meal of guinea fowl that Tim Watermen had taken with his shotgun and drank the two bottles empty.

It was Peter's first taste of alcohol and, unlike the others, the brandy went to his head after only the first tentative sips.

It was inevitable that talk would turn to prospecting since it was second nature for anyone in the bush to keep a sharp eye for minerals. It seemed every day a new diamond field or gold reef or coal mine was staked and someone became an instant millionaire.

Peter knew he shouldn't have opened his mouth. He'd made a pledge to Assa. But he wanted to fit in with these rough-and-ready men who spoke so knowledgeably about things he himself was unaware. They were worldly, especially Varley and H. A., and Peter wanted them to respect him

more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. So with lips made slack by brandy he told them of the dozen clay pots filled with uncut diamonds in the royal kraal of King Maharero.

'How do you know this, boy?' Varley had hissed like an adder.

'Because the lad's father is the preacher in Hereroland,' H. A. had answered and looked at Peter. 'I recognize you now. I met your old man a couple of seasons back when I went to see the king about hunting concessions on his land.' His steady eyes swept the group. 'He's been living with the Herero, what, five years now?'

'Almost six,' Peter answered proudly. 'They know me and trust me.'

Before another fifteen minutes had passed they were discussing openly the possibility of stealing the beer pots. Peter went along with the scheme only after the others promised that the five of them would only take one container each and leave seven for the Herero people; otherwise he wouldn't tell them where the stones were located.

At a trading post a further hundred miles south, H. A. Ryder sold his wagon and its precious load for half of what he could have fetched for the ivory in Kimberley and outfitted the men with proper horses and gear. He'd already decided the course they would take out of the Herero empire, the one that afforded their only chance of escape once the theft was discovered. The trading post was at the end of a newly laid telegraph line. The men waited three days while Ryder made arrangements with a trader he knew in Cape Town. H. A. shrugged off the staggering cost of what he ordered, figuring he'd either be a millionaire able to pay the debt or a corpse lying in the searing Kalahari sun.

It was impossible to sneak into the royal kraal. Runners reported their presence to the king as soon as they crossed into his domain. But H. A. was known to the king, and Peter's father was surely eager to have his son returned to him, though Peter suspected he'd be given a treatment worthy of Job rather than that of the prodigal son.

It took a week to reach the kraal from the border and Samuel Maharero himself greeted the riders when they finally reached his camp. He and H. A. spoke for an hour in the king's native tongue, the guide giving him news of the outside world since the king was in exile by order of the German colonial office. The king in turn told Peter, to his great relief, that his parents had just left for the bush, where his father was baptizing a group of women and children, and wouldn't return till the following day.

The king granted them permission to spend the night but denied H. A.'s request to hunt on Herero land, as he had four years previously.

'Can't blame a man for trying, Your Highness.'

'Persistence is a white man's vice.'

That night they'd stolen into the *rondoval*. The hut was packed to the roof poles with hay and they had to burrow into the pile like mice to reach the spot where the diamonds were hidden. It was when John Varley plucked a second pot from the ground and dumped its contents into a saddlebag that Peter Smythe realized he'd been duped from the beginning. The Watermen brothers, too, emptied several pots into their bags. Only H. A. kept his word and took the contents of only one of the beer pots.

'If you don't take them, I will,' Varley whispered in the dark.

'Your choice,' Ryder drawled. 'But I'm a man of my word.' As it was they didn't have enough bags for all the stones,

and after stuffing pants pockets and anything else they could, four of the big pots remained unmolested. H. A. carefully reburied the cache and did everything he could to hide the theft. They left camp at dawn, thanking the king for his hospitality. Maharero asked Peter if he had any message for his mother. Peter could only mumble to tell her he was sorry.

Lying on the crest of the dune above the water hole, H. A. allowed himself just a moment to watch the king's men.

When they'd started out after the thieves there had been an entire *impi*, an army of a thousand warriors, tracking them from the tribal lands. But that had been five hundred miles ago, and the hardship had whittled their numbers. H. A. estimated there were still more than a hundred of them, the very strongest, and they ran at a ground-eating pace despite their own hunger and thirst. The sun was just high enough to glint off the honed blades of their assegais, the stabbing spears their people used to vanquish any who stood in their way.

H. A. tapped Tim Watermen on the leg and together they slid to the bottom of the dry wash where the others clustered nervously. The horses had picked up on the sudden shift in mood. They shuffled their hooves in the dust and their ears twitched as if they could hear the approaching danger.

'Mount up, lads,' Ryder said, accepting the reins from Peter Smythe.

'We're going to ride?' he asked. 'Through the day?'

'Aye, boy. It's that or one of Maharero's warriors is going to garland his hut with your insides. Let's go. We have only a mile on them and I don't know how long the horses are going to take the heat.'

Ryder was aware that had they not found water last night, the Herero would have been on them like a pack of wild dogs by now. As it was, only one of his canteens was full when he threw a rangy leg over his horse's broad back. They climbed out of the wadi abreast, and all five men turned when they left the shadow of the depression and felt the raw sun burning at the backs of their necks.

For the first miles, H. A. kept them at a steady trot that gained them a mile for every three on the advancing Herero *impi*. The sun baked the earth and dried their sweat the instant it burst from their pores. Under the protection of his big slouch hat, H. A. had to ride with his eyes closed to slits to protect them from the blinding reflection off the dunes.

Resting under a sunshade as the Kalahari turned into an oven was bad enough, but trying to cross the empty waste under the sun's brutal onslaught was the hardest thing H. A. had ever done in his life. The heat and the light were maddening, as if the fluid in his skull was being boiled. The occasional sip of water did little more than scald his throat and remind him of his raging thirst.

Time lost meaning and it took all of Ryder's concentration to remember to check his compass to steer them ever westward. With so few distinctive landmarks to guide him, his navigation was more guesswork than science, but they pressed on because there was no alternative.

The wind, like the sun, was their constant companion. H. A. estimated they weren't more than twenty miles from the South Atlantic and had expected a breeze off the ocean to hit them head-on, but the wind kept at them from the rear, always pressing them onward. Ryder prayed that his compass hadn't malfunctioned and the needle that was to guide them to the west was somehow leading them deeper

into the raging interior of the molten desert. He checked it constantly, relieved that the men had strung out somewhat so no one could see the consternation on his face.

The wind grew and when he looked back to check on his men he could see the tops of the dunes were being eaten away. Long plumes of sand were cast from crest to crest. Grit stung his skin and made his eyes tear. He didn't like this at all. They were heading in the right direction but the wind wasn't. If they were caught out in a sandstorm without adequate cover there was little chance they'd survive it.

He debated calling a halt to erect a shelter, juggling the odds of a major storm hitting them, their proximity to the coast, and the enraged army that wouldn't stop until every last man in their party was dead. Sunset was in an hour. He turned his back on the wind and nosed his horse onward. Despite its flagging pace, the animal was still faster than a man on foot.

With a suddenness that left H. A. reeling he reached the top of one more featureless dune and saw that there were no more. Below him spread the slag gray waters of the South Atlantic and for the first time he could smell its iodine tang. Rolling waves turned to white froth as they roared onto the broad beach.

He lowered himself from his horse, his legs and back aching from the long ride. He didn't have the strength to whoop for joy so he stood silently, a ghost of a smile on the corners of his lips as the sun retreated into the cold dark waters.

'What is it, H. A.? Why'd you stop?' Tim Watermen called when he was still twenty yards back and just coming up the final dune.

Ryder looked down on the struggling figure, saw that Tim's brother wasn't far behind. A bit further back, young

Smythe clung to his horse's back as the animal followed in its brethren's footsteps. Jon Varley wasn't yet in sight. 'We made it.'

It was all he had to say. Tim spurred his horse for the final ascent and when he saw the ocean he let out a triumphant yell. He reached down from the saddle and squeezed H. A.'s shoulder. 'Never doubted you for a second, Mr. Ryder. Not for one damned second.'

H. A. allowed himself a laugh. 'You should have. I sure as hell did.'

The others joined them within ten minutes. Varley looked the worst of the group and H. A. suspected that rather than rationing his water, Jon had drunk most of it in the morning.

'So we've reached the ocean,' Varley snarled over the crying wind. 'What now? There's still a bunch of savages after us and in case you didn't know we can't drink that.' He thrust a shaky finger at the Atlantic.

H. A. ignored his tone. He pulled his Baumgart half hunter from his pocket and tilted it toward the dying sun to read its face. 'There's a tall hill a mile or so up the beach. We need to be on top of it in an hour.'

'What happens in an hour?' Peter asked.

'We see if I'm the navigator you all hope I am.'

The dune was the tallest in sight, towering two hundred feet above the beach, and on its crest the wind was a brutal constant weight that made the horses dance in circles. The air was filled with dust, and the longer they stayed on the hillock the thicker the dust seemed to get. Ryder made the Watermen brothers and Jon Varley look up the beach to the north while he and Peter kept watch to the south.

The sun was well down as seven o'clock came and went according to H. A.'s pocket watch. *They should have signaled*

by now. A weight like lead settled in his stomach. It had been too much to ask: crossing hundreds of miles of empty desert and thinking he could come within a few miles of a specific spot on the coast. They could be a hundred or more miles from the rendezvous.

‘There!’ Peter cried and pointed.

H. A. squinted into the darkness. A tiny red ball of incandescence hung close to shore far down the coast. It stayed within sight for no more than a second before vanishing once again.

A man standing at sea level can see approximately three miles before the curvature of the earth blocks his view. By climbing the bluff, H. A. had extended their range to eighteen and a half miles in either direction. Adding the height the flare had climbed, he guessed their rendezvous was about twenty miles down the coastline. He *had* led them across the barren wastes to within sight of their target, a remarkable feat of navigation.

The men had been awake for forty-eight torturous hours, but the thought that their hardships were almost at an end, with a king’s ransom for a reward, buoyed them those last miles. The bluffs sheltered the broad beach from the intensifying sandstorm, but dust was clouding the waters along the surf line as sand settled onto the ocean. The once white crests were mud brown, and it seemed the seas were sluggish under the tons of sand blowing into it.

At midnight they could see the lights of a small ship anchored a hundred yards from shore. The vessel was steel-hulled and coal-fired, a littoral cargo ship about two hundred feet long. Her superstructure was well aft, punctured by a single tall funnel, while the forward part of her hull was given over to four separate hatch covers for her holds, serviced by a pair of spindly derricks. Sand blasted at the

ship and H. A. couldn't tell if her boilers were still fired. The moon was mostly hidden by the storm, so he couldn't be sure if there was smoke coming from her funnel.

When they were abreast of the steamer, H. A. plucked a small flare from his saddlebag, the only item besides the stones he'd refused to leave behind. He ignited the flare and waved it over his head, yelling at the top of his lungs to be heard over the gale. The men joined him, whooping and hollering, knowing in a few minutes they would be safe.

A searchlight mounted on the ship's flying bridge snapped on, its beam cutting through the whirling sand and coming to rest on the group of men. They danced in its glow as the horses shied away. A moment later, a dory was lowered from the lifeboat mount, a pair of men working the oars with swift professional strokes that cut the distance in moments. A third figure sat in the back of the craft. The men rushed into the water to greet the boat as its keel sliced into the sand just inside the surf line.

'That you, H. A.?' a voice called out.

'You damned well better hope so, Charlie.'

Charles Turnbaugh, first officer of the HMS *Rove*, leapt from the dory and stood knee deep in the surf. 'So is this the biggest cock-and-bull story I've ever heard or did you actually do it?'

H. A. held up one of his saddlebags. He shook it, but the wind was too fierce for anyone to hear the stones rattling around inside. 'Let's just say I've made your trip worth your while. How long have you been waiting for us?'

'We got here five days ago and have been firing a flare every night at seven just like you asked.'

'Check your ship's chronometer. It's running a minute slow.' Rather than make introductions H. A. said, 'Listen, Charlie, there's about a hundred Herero bucks after us, and

the sooner we're off the beach and over the horizon the happier I'll be.'

Turnbaugh began directing the exhausted men into the dory. 'We can get you off the beach but not over the horizon for a while.'

Ryder put a hand on his dirty uniform jacket. 'What's the matter?'

'We grounded ourselves when the tide went out. The shoals and sandbars along the coast are always shifting. Come next high tide we'll float free. Don't worry.'

'Oh, one thing,' Ryder said before stepping into the little boat. 'Do you have a pistol?'

'What? Why?'

H. A. twitched his head over his shoulder to where the horses huddled together, growing more terrified as the storm strengthened.

'I think the captain has an old Webley,' Turnbaugh said.

'I'd be obliged if you fetched it for me.'

'They're just horses,' Varley said, huddled in the dory.

'Who deserve something better than dying on this forsaken beach after what they did for us.'

'I'll do it,' Charlie said.

H. A. helped push the little craft until she floated free and waited with the horses, talking to them soothingly and rubbing their heads and necks. Turnbaugh returned fifteen minutes later and silently handed over the weapon. A minute after that, H. A. climbed slowly into the dory and sat unmoving as he was rowed out to the tramp freighter.

He found his men in the wardroom devouring plates of food and drinking enough water to make each of them look a little green. H. A. took measured sips, allowing his body to adjust. Captain James Kirby stepped into the small room

with Charlie and the ship's engineer just as H. A. took his first bite of stew left over from the officers' mess.

'H. A. Ryder, you've got more lives than a cat,' the captain boomed. He was a great bear of a man with thick dark hair and a beard that reached midway down his chest. 'And if it had been anyone other than you making such a damned fool request I would have told them to shove off.'

The two men shook hands warmly. 'At the price you're charging I knew you'd wait until hell froze over.'

'Speaking of price?' One of Kirby's bushy eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead.

Ryder placed his saddlebag on the floor and made a show of undoing its buckles, drawing out the moment until he could taste the crew's greed. He opened the flap, rummaged through the bag's contents until he found a stone he thought appropriate, and set it on the table. There was a collective gasp. The light in the wardroom was just a pair of lanterns hanging from hooks in the ceiling but they caught the diamond's fire and cast it around so it looked like they were standing inside a rainbow.

'This ought to pay you for your trouble,' H. A. deadpanned.

'With a little change left over,' Captain Kirby breathed, touching the stone for the first time.

A rough hand woke H. A. the following morning at six. He tried to ignore it and turned away on the tiny bunk he was using while Charlie Turnbaugh was on duty. 'H. A., damnit. Get up.'

'What is it?'

'We've got a problem.'

The grimness in Turnbaugh's voice brought Ryder instantly awake. He swung off the bunk and reached for his

clothes. Dust spilled from the cloth as he struggled into his pants and shirt. 'What is it?'

'You have to see it to believe it.'

Ryder was aware that the storm continued to blow stronger than ever. The wind screamed over the ship like an animal trying to claw its way in while even stronger gusts made the entire vessel shudder. Turnbaugh led him up to the bridge. Dun light filtered through the windscreen and it was almost impossible to see the *Rove's* bow only a hundred and fifty feet away. H. A. saw the problem immediately. The storm had dumped so much sand on the freighter's deck that the weight of it pinned her to the bottom despite the rising tide. Furthermore, where once they had a hundred yards of water between them and the beach, now less than fifty separated ship from shore.

The Kalahari and the Atlantic were locked in their eternal struggle for territory, a fight between the erosive actions of waves versus the awesome volume of sand the desert could pour onto the waters. They had fought each other since the dawn of time, constantly reshaping the coastline as sand found weaknesses in the constant scouring of current and tide and struggled to expand the desert a foot or a yard or a mile. And all this played out with little regard to the ship caught in the tumult.

'I need every available hand to start shoveling,' Kirby said darkly. 'If the storm doesn't abate, this ship is going to be landlocked by nightfall.'

Turnbaugh and Ryder roused their respective crews and using coal shovels from the engine room, pans from the kitchen, and a hip bath from the captain's washroom they ran into the raging storm. With scarves covering their mouths and the wind so strong that talking was impossible, they pushed mounds of loose sand off the deck and into the

water. They raged against the tempest, cursing it because every shovelful they heaved over the side only seemed to come back into their faces.

It was like trying to hold back the tide. They managed to get one hatch scraped clean only to see the amount of sand piled onto the other three had doubled. Five adventurers and a ship's complement of twenty were no match for the storm that had traveled across thousands of square miles of seared earth. Visibility was cut to almost zero, so the men worked blind, their eyes tightly closed to the stinging grit that assaulted the *Rove* from every point on the compass.

After an hour of frantic work, H. A. went to look for Charlie. 'It's no use. We have to wait and hope the storm slows.' Even with his lips touching Turnbaugh's ear Ryder had to repeat himself three times to be heard over the shrieking wind.

'You're right,' Charlie screamed back and together they went to recall their men.

The crews staggered back into the superstructure, shedding cascades of sand with each step. H. A. and Jon Varley were the last ones through the hatch, H. A. out of duty to make sure everyone was all right, Varley because he had a rat's cunning to never give in when he was certain of a reward.

It was still difficult to hear out of the wind inside the companionway.

'Dear Jesus, please let this end.' So awed by the force of nature arrayed against them, Peter was almost in tears.

'Do we have everyone?' Charlie asked.

'I think so.' H. A. sagged against a bulkhead. 'Did you do a head count?'

Turnbaugh started counting off his people when there was a sharp rap on the hatchway.

‘Good God, someone’s still out there,’ someone called.

Varley was closest to the hatch and undogged the latches. The wind slammed the door against its stops as the gale whipped into the ship, scouring paint from the walls with the merest touch. It appeared no one was there. It had to have been a loose piece of equipment rattling outside.

Varley lurched forward to close the door and had it almost shut when a bright silver blade emerged a hand’s span from his back. Gore dripped from the spear’s tip, and when it was pulled from the raw wound blood sprayed the stunned crew. Jon pirouetted as he collapsed to the deck, his mouth working soundlessly as his shirt turned crimson. A dark wraith wearing little but feathers and a cloth around his waist stepped over Varley with an assegai in his hands. Behind him more shapes were primed for the charge, their war cries rivaling even that of the storm.

‘Herero,’ H. A. whispered with resignation as the wave of warriors burst into the ship.

The storm was a freak of nature, a once-in-a-hundred-years occurrence that raged for over a week, forever changing the coast of southwest Africa. Once mighty dunes had been rendered flat, while others had grown to newer and even greater heights. Where once there were bays, now great peninsulas of sand thrust into the cold waters of the South Atlantic. The continent had grown five miles bigger in some places, ten in others, as the Kalahari won one of its battles against its arch foe. The map would have to be redrawn for hundreds of miles up and down the coast, that is if anyone cared to map the forlorn shore. Every sailor just knew to stay well off the treacherous seaboard.

Of the *Rove* and all those aboard her, the official report listed her as lost at sea. And that wasn’t far from the truth,

though she lay not under hundreds of feet of water, but under an equal amount of pure white sand, nearly eight miles inland from where the icy waves of the Benguela Current pounded against Africa's Skeleton Coast.

*The Laboratories of Merrick/Singer
Geneva, Switzerland
Present Day*

Susan Donleavy sat hunched like a vulture over the eyepiece of her microscope and watched the action unfold on the slide as though she were a god of Greek mythology being entertained by mortals. And in a sense she was, for what lay on the slide was her own creation, an engineered organism that she had breathed life into as surely as the gods had molded man out of clay.

She remained motionless for nearly an hour, enraptured by what she was seeing, amazed that the results were so positive this early in her work. Against all scientific principles, but trusting her gut, Susan Donleavy removed the slide from the scope and set it on the workbench next to her. She crossed the room to where an industrial cooler hulked against one wall and removed one of several gallon jugs of water kept at precisely sixty-eight degrees.

The water had been in storage for less than a day, having been flown to the lab as soon as it had been collected. The need to keep fresh water samples was one of the principal expenses of her experiments – nearly as costly as the detailed gene sequencing of her subjects.

She opened the jug and smelled the salty tang of ocean water. She dipped a dropper into its surface and siphoned up a small amount, which she then transferred to a slide.

Once she had it centered under the microscope, she peered into the realm of the infinitely tiny. The sample teemed with life. In just a few milliliters of water there were hundreds of zooplankton and diatoms, single-celled creatures that formed the first link of the food chain for the entire ocean.

The microscopic animals and plants were similar to the ones she'd been studying earlier, only these had not been genetically modified.

Satisfied that the water sample hadn't degraded in transport, she poured some into a glass beaker. Holding it over her head, she could see some of the larger diatoms in the glare cast by the banks of fluorescent lights. Susan was so focused on her work she didn't hear the door to the lab open, and since it was so late she didn't expect anyone to be disturbing her.

'What have you got there?' The voice startled her and she nearly dropped the beaker.

'Oh, Dr. Merrick. I didn't know you were here.'

'I've told you, like I tell everyone in the company, to please call me Geoff.'

Susan frowned slightly. Geoffrey Merrick wasn't a bad sort, really, but she disliked his affability, as if his billions shouldn't affect the way people treated him, especially staffers at Merrick/Singer who were still working toward their doctorates. He was a year over fifty, but kept himself in shape by skiing nearly year-round, chasing the snows to South America when summer came to the Swiss Alps. He was also a bit vain about his appearance, and his skin remained too tight following a face-lift. Though a doctor in chemistry himself, Merrick had long since given up lab work and instead spent his time overseeing the research company that bore his and his ex-partner's names.

'Is this that flocculent project your supervisor ran past

me a few months ago?’ Merrick asked, taking the beaker from Susan and studying it himself.

Unable to lie to get him out of her lab Susan said, ‘Yes, Doctor, I mean, Geoff.’

‘It was an interesting idea when it was presented, though I have absolutely no idea what it could be used for,’ Merrick commented, handing back the beaker. ‘But I guess that’s what we do here. We chase down our whims and see where they take us. How’s the project coming?’

‘I think okay,’ Susan said, anxious because no matter how nice he was, Merrick intimidated her. Though, if she were truthful with herself, most people intimidated her, from her boss down to the older woman she rented her apartment from and the counterman at the café where she bought her morning coffee. ‘I was about to try an unscientific experiment.’

‘Good, we’ll watch it together. Please proceed.’

Susan’s hands were beginning to tremble so she placed the beaker on a stand. She retrieved the first slide, the one containing her engineered phytoplankton, and sucked up the sample with a fresh dropper. She then carefully injected its contents into the beaker.

‘I forget the particulars of what you’re doing,’ Merrick said, standing over her shoulder. ‘What should we be seeing here?’

Susan shifted to hide the fact his proximity made her uncomfortable. ‘As you know, diatoms like this phytoplankton have a cell wall made of silica. What I’ve done is, well, what I’m trying to do, is find a way to melt that wall and ramp up the density of the cell sap within the vacuole. My engineered specimens should attack the unaltered diatoms in the water and go into a frenzy of replication and if things work out right . . .’ Her voice trailed off as she reached for the beaker once again. She slid a hand into an insulated

glove so she could touch the glass container. She tilted it onto its side but rather than spilling quickly, the water sloshed up the side with the viscosity of cooking oil. She righted the beaker before any dripped onto the lab table.

Merrick clapped, delighted as a child for whom she'd just performed a magic trick. 'You've turned the water sort of gooey.'

'Kind of, I guess. The diatoms have actually bound themselves in such a way that they capture the water within a matrix of their sap. The water's still there, it's just held in suspension.'

'I'll be damned. Well done, Susan, well done.'

'It's not a total success,' Donleavy admitted. 'The reaction is exothermic. It generates heat. Around a hundred and forty degrees in the right conditions. That's why I need this thick glove. The gel breaks down after only twenty-four hours as the engineered diatoms die off. I can't figure out the process behind the reaction. I know it's chemical, obviously, but I don't know how to stop it.'

'I still think you're off to a tremendous start. Tell me, you must have some idea what we could do with such an invention. The idea of wanting to turn water into goop isn't something that struck you out of the blue. When Dan Singer and I started working on organic ways to trap sulfur we thought it might have applications in power plants to reduce emissions. There must be something behind your project.'

Susan blinked, but should have known Geoffrey Merrick didn't get where he was without a keen sense of perception. 'You're right,' she admitted. 'I thought maybe it could be used for settling ponds at mines and water-treatment plants and maybe even a way to stop oil spills from spreading.'

'That's right. I remember from your personnel file, you're from Alaska.'

‘Seward, Alaska, yes.’

‘You must have been in your early teens when the *Exxon Valdez* hit that reef and dumped all that oil in Prince William Sound. That must have had quite an impact on you and your family. It must have been rough.’

Susan shrugged. ‘Not really. My parents ran a small hotel and with all the people on the cleanup crews they did okay. But I had a lot of friends whose parents lost everything. My best friend’s parents even divorced as a result of the spill because her dad lost his job at a cannery.’

‘Then this research is personal for you.’

Susan bristled at his slightly condescending tone. ‘I think it’s personal for anyone who cares about the environment.’

He smiled. ‘You know what I mean. You’re like the cancer researcher who lost a parent to leukemia, or the guy who becomes a fireman because his house burned down when he was a kid. You’re fighting a demon out of your childhood.’ When she didn’t reply Merrick took it to mean he was right. ‘There’s nothing wrong with revenge as a motivation, Susan. Revenge against cancer, or a fire, or an ecological nightmare. It keeps you far more focused on your work than doing it just to get a paycheck. I applaud you and by the looks of what I’ve seen tonight, I think that you’re on the right path.’

‘Thank you,’ Susan said shyly. ‘There’s still a lot more work to go. Years, maybe. I don’t know. A tiny sample in a test tube is a long way off from containing an oil spill.’

‘Run your ideas to ground, is all I can say. Go wherever they take you, and for as long as you need.’ From someone other than Geoffrey Merrick that would have sounded trite but he spoke it with sincerity and conviction.

Susan met his eye for the first time since he’d entered the laboratory. ‘Thank you . . . Geoff. That means a lot.’

‘And who knows. After we patented our sulfur scrubbers, I became a pariah to the environmental movement because they claimed my invention didn’t do enough to stop pollution. Maybe you can finally salvage my reputation.’ He left with a smile.

After he’d gone Susan returned to her beakers and test tubes. Wearing protective gloves she took the one filled with her genetically modified diatoms and slowly tilted it to the side again. Ten minutes had elapsed since she’d last handled it and this time the water sample at its bottom clung to the glass as though it were glue; and only after inverting the hot beaker completely did it start to ooze downward, as slowly as chilled molasses.

Susan thought about the dying otters and seabirds she’d seen as a child and redoubled her work.

*The Congo River
South of Matadi*

The jungle would eventually swallow the abandoned plantation and the three-hundred-foot wooden pier built along the river. The main house a mile inland had already succumbed to the effects of rot and encroaching vegetation, and it was only a matter of time before the dock was swept away and the metal warehouse nearby collapsed. Its roof sagged like a swaybacked horse, and its corrugated skin was scaled with rust and flecked paint. It was a haunted, forlorn place that even the soft milky glow of a three-quarter moon couldn't liven.

A large freighter was nudging closer to the pier, dwarfing even the massive warehouse. With her bow pointed downstream and her engines in reverse, the water under her fantail frothed as she fought the current to stay on station. It was a delicate balance to maintain her position, especially considering the Congo's notorious back-currents and eddies.

With a walkie-talkie held to his lips, and his other arm flailing theatrically, the captain paced the starboard wing bridge and yelled at the helmsman and engineer to make corrections. The throttles were moved in fractional increments to keep the 560-foot vessel exactly where he wanted.

A group of men wearing dark fatigues waited on the dock and watched the operation. All but one carried an assault rifle. The man without an AK-47 had a huge holster strapped

to his hip. He tapped the side of his leg with a leather riding crop and despite the darkness sported mirrored aviator shades.

The captain was a large black man wearing a Greek fisherman's cap atop his shaved head. The muscles of his chest and arms strained against his white uniform blouse. Another man was with him on the bridge wing: slightly shorter and not as muscled, he was somehow a more commanding presence than the captain. He exuded authority from his watchful eyes and the loose, casual way he carried himself. With the wing bridge lofting three stories above the quay there was no chance of their conversation being overheard. The captain nudged his companion, who'd been studying the armed troops rather than paying attention to the tricky maneuvering.

'Seems our rebel leader stepped straight out of central casting, eh, Chairman?'

'Right down to the riding whip and shades,' the Chairman agreed. 'Of course, we're not beyond giving people what they expect to see, either, *Captain* Lincoln. That was a nice little performance with the walkie-talkie.'

Linc looked at the walkie-talkie in his big hand. The small device didn't even have batteries in it. He chuckled softly. As the most senior African-American member of the crew, Lincoln had been tapped by the ship's real captain, Juan Cabrillo, to act the part for the current operation. Cabrillo knew that the representative sent by Samuel Makambo, the leader of the Congolese Army of Revolution, would be more comfortable dealing with a man who shared the same skin color.

Linc looked over the rail once again, satisfied that the big freighter was holding steady. 'All right,' he bellowed into the night. 'Let go fore and aft lines.'

Deckhands at the stern and bow lowered thick ropes through the hawseholes. With a nod from their commander, two of the rebels slung their weapons over their shoulders and looped the lines over the rust-coated bollards. Windlasses took up the slack and the big freighter gently kissed the old truck tires slung along the length of the pier that acted as fenders. Water continued to foam at the ship's stern as reverse thrust was maintained to fight the current. Without it, the ship would have ripped the bollards from the decaying wooden dock and drifted downstream.

Cabrillo took just a moment to check the freighter's stations, keeping position, gauging current, windage, rudder, and power with one sweep of the eye. Satisfied, he nodded to Linc. 'Let's make a deal.'

The two stepped into the ship's main bridge. The room was illuminated by a pair of red night-lights, giving it a hellish appearance that made its dilapidated state all the more obvious. The floors were unwashed linoleum that was cracked and peeling in the corners. The windows were dusty on the inside while the outsides were rimmed with salt crust. The sills were the graveyards of all manner of dead insects. One needle on the tarnished brass engine telegraph had broken off long ago, and the ship's wheel was missing several spokes. The vessel carried few modern navigational aids and the radio in the shack behind the bridge could barely transmit a dozen miles.

Cabrillo nodded at the helmsman, an intense Chinese man in his early forties, who shot the Chairman a wry smile. Cabrillo and Franklin Lincoln descended a series of companionways lit only occasionally by low-watt bulbs in metal cages. They soon reached the main deck where another member of the crew waited.

'Ready to play jungle jeweler, Max?' Juan greeted.

At sixty-four Max Hanley was the second oldest member of the crew, and was only just showing the signs of age. His hair had retreated to a ginger fringe around his skull and his belt line had thickened a bit. But he could more than handle himself in a fight and had been at Cabrillo's side since the day Juan had started the Corporation, the company that owned and operated the tramp freighter. Theirs was an easy friendship of mutual respect born of countless dangers faced and bested.

Hanley hoisted an attaché case from the pitted deck. 'You know what they say – "diamonds are a mercenary's best friend."'

'I've never heard them say that,' Linc said.

'Well, they do.'

The deal had been a month in the making, through countless cutouts and several clandestine meetings. It was pretty straightforward. In exchange for a quarter pound of rough diamonds, the Corporation was giving Samuel Makambo's Congolese Army of Revolution five hundred AK-47 assault rifles, two hundred rocket-propelled grenades, fifty RPG launchers, and fifty thousand rounds of Warsaw Pact 7.62 mm ammunition. Makambo hadn't asked where the crew of a tramp freighter got their hands on so much military hardware, and Cabrillo didn't want to know how the rebel leader obtained so many diamonds. Though coming from this part of the world, he was sure they were blood diamonds, mined by slaves in order to finance the revolution.

Able to recruit boys as young as thirteen for his army, Makambo needed weapons more than soldiers, so this shipment of arms would ensure that his attempt to overthrow the shaky government now stood a pretty good chance.

A crewman lowered the gangplank down to the dock and Linc led Cabrillo and Hanley onto the quay. The lone rebel

officer detached himself from his Praetorian guards and approached Franklin Lincoln. He snapped Linc a crisp military salute, which Linc returned with a casual touch to the bill of his fisherman's cap.

'Captain Lincoln, I am Colonel Raif Abala of the Congolese Army of Revolution.' Abala spoke English with a mixture of French and native accents. His voice was flat, without any trace of inflection or humanity. He didn't remove his sunglasses and continued to tap the riding crop against the seam of his camouflage pants.

'Colonel,' Linc said, holding up his arms while a pock-faced aide-de-camp frisked him for weapons.

'Our supreme leader, General Samuel Makambo, sends his regards and regrets that he could not meet you in person.'

Makambo had been waging his year-long insurrection from a secret base somewhere deep in the jungle. He hadn't been seen since taking up arms, and had managed to foil all government attempts to infiltrate his headquarters, murdering ten handpicked soldiers who'd tried to join the CAR with orders to assassinate him. Like bin Laden or Abimael Guzman, the former leader of Peru's Shining Path, Makambo's air of invincibility only added to his appeal, even with the blood of thousands blamed on his coup attempt.

'You have brought the weapons.' It was more statement than question.

'And you will see them as soon as my associate here inspects the stones.' Lincoln made a casual wave toward Max.

'As we agreed,' Abala said. 'Come.'

A table had been set up on the dock with a light powered by a portable generator. Abala threw a leg over one of the chairs and sat, setting his whip on the tabletop. In front of him was a brown burlap bag with the name of a feed

company inked in French on its side. Max sat opposite the African rebel and busied himself with the contents of his case. He took out an electronic scale, some weights to calibrate it, and a bunch of plastic graduated cylinders with a clear liquid inside. He also had notebooks, pencils, and a small calculator. Guards stood behind Abala and more were behind Max Hanley. Another pair stood close enough to Cabrillo and Linc to cut them down at the slightest indication from the rebel colonel. The prospect of violence hung low over the group and the humid night air was charged with nervous tension.

Abala rested one hand on the bag. He looked up at Linc. ‘Captain, I think now would be the time to show some good faith. I would like to see the container carrying my weapons.’

‘That wasn’t part of the deal,’ Linc said, letting just a hint of concern into his voice. Abala’s aide snickered.

‘Like I said,’ Abala continued, his tone full of menace, ‘it is a show of faith. A goodwill gesture on your part.’ He took his hand off the bag and raised a finger. Twenty more soldiers emerged from the darkness. Abala waved them off again and just as quickly as they’d appeared they vanished back into the gloom. ‘They could kill your crew and simply take the guns. That is a show of my goodwill.’

Without a choice, Linc turned to face the ship. A crewman stood at the railing. Linc twirled his hand over his head. The deckhand waved, and a moment later a small diesel engine bellowed to life. The center of the three derricks on the big freighter’s bow section creaked to life, heavy cables sliding through rusty pulleys as a great weight was lifted from a cargo hold. It was a standard forty-foot shipping container, as innocuous as any of the hundreds of thousands used every day in maritime commerce. The crane lifted it clear of the hatch and swung it to the railing, where it was lowered

to the deck. Two more crewmen opened the doors and stepped inside the container. With a shout they called to the hoistman, and the container was lifted once again, rising up over the railing as the box was moved over the side of the ship. It was lowered to within eight feet of the dock but came no lower.

The men in the box used flashlights to illuminate the container's contents. Racks of AK-47s lined the walls, oily black in the dim light. The beams also revealed dark green crates. One was opened, and a crewman slung an empty RPG tube to his shoulder, showing off the weapon like a model at a trade show. A couple of the youngest rebel soldiers cheered. Even Raif Abala couldn't keep his mouth from twitching upward at the corners.

'That's the extent of my good faith,' Lincoln said after the two crewmen had leapt to the ground and returned to the ship.

Without a word Abala spilled the contents of the bag across the table. Cut and polished, diamonds are the greatest natural refractor in the world, able to split white light into a rainbow spectrum with such dazzle and flash that the stones have been coveted since time immemorial. But in their raw state there is little to distinguish the gems. The pile of stones showed no sparkle. They sat dully on the table, misshapen lumps of crystal, most fashioned like a pair of four-sided pyramids fused at the base, while others were just random pebbles with no discernible shape at all. They ranged in hue from pure white to the dingiest yellow; and while some appeared clear, many were cleaved and fractured. But Max and Juan noticed instantly that none was smaller than a carat. Their value in the diamond districts of New York, Tel Aviv, or Amsterdam was far beyond that of the contents of the container, but such was the nature of commerce. Abala

could always get more diamonds. It was the weapons that were hard to procure.

Max instinctively grabbed the largest stone, a crystal of at least ten carats. Cut and polished to a four- or five-carat stone, it would fetch about forty thousand dollars depending on its color grade and clarity. He studied it through a jeweler's loupe, twisting it against the light, his mouth pursed in a sour expression. He set it aside without comment and peered at another stone, and then another. He tsked a couple of times as if disappointed by what he was seeing, then pulled a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket. When he had them perched on his nose, he shot Abala a disappointed look over them and opened one of his notebooks, scratching in a couple of lines with a mechanical pencil.

'What are you writing?' Abala said, suddenly unsure of himself in Max's learned presence.

'That these stones make better gravel than gems,' Max said, making his voice shrill and adding an atrocious Dutch accent. Abala almost leapt to his feet at the insult, but Max waved him down. 'But on preliminary review I judge them satisfactory for our transaction.'

He pulled a flat piece of topaz from his pants pocket, its surfaces deeply scratched. 'As you know,' he said in a lecturing tone, 'diamond is the hardest substance on earth. Ten on the Mohs' scale, to be exact. Quartz, which is number seven, is often used to fool the uninitiated into thinking they are getting the deal of a lifetime.'

From the same pocket he plucked an octagonal shaft of crystal. Bearing down with considerable force he raked the quartz across the flat chunk of topaz. The edge slid off without making a mark. 'As you can see, topaz is harder than quartz and hence can't be scratched. It is eight on the

Mohs' scale, in fact.' He then took one of the smaller diamonds and ran it across the topaz. With a spine-shivering squeal the edge of the gem dug a deep scratch into the blue semiprecious stone. 'So what we have here is a stone harder than eight on the Mohs' scale.'

'Diamond,' Abala said smugly.

Max sighed as if a recalcitrant student had made a gaff. He was enjoying playing at gemologist. 'Or corundum, which is nine on the Mohs' scale. The only way to be certain this is a diamond is to test its specific gravity.'

Although Abala had dealt with diamonds many times before he knew little of their properties other than their value. Without realizing it, Hanley had piqued his interest and lowered his guard. 'What is specific gravity?' he asked.

'The ratio of a stone's weight versus the volume of water it displaces. For diamond it is exactly three point five two.' Max fiddled with his scale for a moment, calibrating it with a set of brass weights carried in a velvet-lined case. Once the scale had been zeroed he set the largest stone on the pan. 'Point two two five grams. Eleven and a half carats.' He opened one of the plastic graduated cylinders and dropped the stone inside, noting how much water the gem displaced in his notebook. He then tapped the numbers into the calculator. When he saw the resulting number he glared at Raif Abala.

Abala's eyes went wide with indignant anger. His troopers tightened their cordon. A gun was pressed against Juan's back.