



The Sheltering Desert

A Standalone Novel

Andries J. Greyling

The Sheltering Desert

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This novel is an **original retelling of documented events**. The historical persons named in the preface lived; the hardships described are attested. Every sentence here is the author's own — nowhere borrowed from Henno Martin's in-copyright memoir *The Sheltering Desert* (1956).

Scene connective tissue, interior monologue, and dialogue are invented where the record is silent, kept true to the documented frame.

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Per Ardua ad Magnum.

A Note on the True Story

The two men in this book were real. So was the desert, and so was the dog — down to his name.

In May 1940 two German geologists named **Henno Martin** and **Hermann Korn** drove out of the settled country of South-West Africa and into the Namib rather than be interned for the duration of the Second World War. They were not Nazis; they were the opposite. They had left Germany in 1935 precisely to get away from the regime the Union of South Africa was now at war with — which was the very reason the British mandate meant to put them behind wire as enemy aliens. Rather than surrender to a camp, they loaded two cars with basic supplies and a rifle, took Korn's dog **Otto**, and disappeared into the gorges of the Kuiseb River canyon. They lived there for two and a half years.

Both were real geologists — doctoral students of Hans Cloos, closest friends from their Bonn days — who had made a living in this hard country mapping the great escarpment and, from 1937, finding water for farmers: they read rock and water for a trade, and that literacy is the engine of how they survived. The hardships in these pages are documented, not invented — the daily hunt, the water that was never enough, and the famous nutritional crisis in which lean desert game gave too little fat (“rabbit starvation”), eroding their bodies and, for a time, their minds. They came out in September 1942 only because Korn's beriberi had grown dangerous; remarkably, they were not interned on their return but taken on as surveyors. Korn died in 1946,

in a night car crash off a railway bridge near Windhoek, the circumstances never fully settled. Martin went on to a long geological career and died in 1998, having first told the story himself in *The Sheltering Desert* (1956).

This novel is an **original retelling of those documented events** — the history belongs to anyone who cares to look it up; Henno Martin's own sentences belong to him, and are nowhere borrowed here.

I did not come to this story as a stranger to hard men.

I grew up among them: generational farmers with tools for hands; men who went to the Border War and came home without saying much about it; hunters; men who could make, mend, and last in country that does not forgive softness. I thought I knew what a hard man was, and what survival meant.

Then I married into a family near **Aroab**, in the deep south where the veld gives out into the red sand of the Kalahari, and over the years I travelled the Namib and the Kalahari widely — and I met a harder kind still: people who make a living where almost nothing grows. My wife's grandfather was a **Hansen of Aroab**, a German South-West African farmer who raised sheep and bred horses for the Schutztruppe, the German colonial troops. When the First World War reached the colony he was interned as an enemy alien — a generation before Martin and Korn, the same accident of birth had already done to his family what the next war would only threaten to do to theirs. The Hansens are farming that same country still.

And then I read the true story of two geologists who walked into that desert rather than into a prison camp, and stayed alive there for two and a half years. It rewrote what I thought I knew about hard men and survival skills. This is what real bushcraft looks like — not the romance of it, the *cost* of it. The German strand, too, is not a villain's backstory in southern Africa; it is woven into the living fabric of the place — men who fled one cage only to be offered another, and families who stayed,

and lasted. That is the book I wanted to tell straight, and with respect, because the men in it and the people it comes from earned nothing less.

— A.J.G.

For Lisel.

The whole of this library — every book, every series, and the Jakobus Thread that runs through the heart of it — is hers. Each page that follows may carry another name; all of them together carry only one. She is the floor the entire house stands on.

Sawubona.

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Chapter 1 — The Notice

The news reached the farm at Otjimbingwe late, second-hand, and already a week old, which Henno Martin had long ago decided was the only civilised speed for news to travel. A man brought it up from the store with the post and the drums of diesel: Britain had declared war on Germany, and the Union of South Africa, which held this country in trust the way a strong man holds a smaller man's coat, had declared it too. And because South-West Africa was administered out of Pretoria and not Berlin, that meant the Germans here—the farmers, the traders, the surveyors, all the men who had come south to get away from exactly the thing now at war with them—were, as of that week, enemy aliens on the soil they had spent their lives learning to read.

Martin took the folded paper Hermann handed him and read it twice, standing in the thin shade of the workshop with the heat coming up off the yard in a flat invisible wall, and did not say anything for a while.

“They will intern us,” Hermann Korn said. He said it with a kind of bright savage amusement laid over something that was not amusing at all. “You and me. The whole tribe of us. Camps. Wire. Years of it, probably—they did it the last time, you'll remember, and the last time was a shorter war.” He took his hat off and wiped the band with two fingers and put it back on. “We left Germany to get away from men who put other men behind wire for an accident of birth. And now the men fighting those men are going to put us behind wire. For the same accident.”

“I had grasped the irony, yes.”

“I thought you might have missed it. You miss most things that aren’t a rock.”

Martin let that go, because it was nearly true and because Hermann said it with affection, which was the only way Hermann ever said anything that was nearly true about you. He read the notice a third time. It was not, in itself, a remarkable document: a circular, mimeographed, the ink already going grey at the edges, the flat language of administration making a thing that would tear a life in half sound like a matter of forms. *All persons of German nationality or descent. To present themselves. Pending determination of status.* He had read a hundred drilling permits written in the same flat voice. He had never read one that meant *we are going to take the next several years of your life and spend them for you, in a place of our choosing, and you will have no say in it whatever.*

He was thirty years old. He had a doctorate from Bonn that he had earned at twenty-five, under Cloos, the same as Hermann, who was three years older and twice as clever and half as steady—and the two of them together had come down to this country in 1935 with a theodolite and a hammer and an idea that the rocks here had something to tell that the rocks of Europe could not, and they had been proved right, and it had been the best five years of his life. They had mapped the great escarpment where the highland fell away to the desert. They had worked the Naukluft until they understood it. And for the last three years they had kept body and soul together by the one trick a geologist could sell to a farmer in a dry country: they could find water. They could read the dip of a stratum and the lie of a fault and tell a man, with their hands flat on his land, *dig here, not there, and you will have a well.* They had been wrong only rarely. The farmers trusted them the way you trust a man who has been right about the thing that keeps your cattle alive.

And now the same administration that had stamped their work permits was going to gather them up like stray dogs.

“There is a third thing,” Martin said.

Hermann looked at him. He had a way of going very still and very attentive when something real came into the conversation, all the brightness dropping off him at once, and it was in those moments that you saw the geologist under the wit, the man who had once held a contested correlation in his head across four hundred kilometres of broken country and never lost the thread of it.

“Not the camp,” Martin said. “Not surrender. The third thing.”

“Which is.”

Martin folded the notice along the crease it had come with and looked out past the workshop, past the windmill turning its slow indifferent turn over the reservoir, past the kraal and the last of the farm and out to where the land began to do the thing it did out here—to stop being anybody’s farm and start being the country itself, the long tawny rise of it running west and west and west toward a horizon that, he happened to know, did not have a town or a fence or a man with a clipboard on the other side of it for a very long way. He knew that country. He had walked a good deal of it with a hammer. He knew where its water hid, because hiding water was the one thing he and Hermann had made themselves expert in, and he knew its rock and its game and its terrible patient distances the way other men knew the streets of the town they were born in.

“They can only intern a man they can find,” he said.

Hermann did not laugh, which was how Martin knew he was taking it seriously. For a long moment the only sound was the windmill and the flat tick of the cooling iron in the workshop and, somewhere down by the kraal, the dog—Hermann’s dog, Otto, a rangy yellow animal of no particular breeding and total particular loyalty—barking once at something and then deciding it was nothing.

“You are not joking,” Hermann said.

“I am not joking.”

“You want to go into the desert. To live there. To wait out a war

that the cleverest men in the world cannot say will last one year or six." He said it slowly, turning each piece of it over, and Martin could see him doing the thing they both did without meaning to, the thing their whole training had built into them—*testing the proposition against the evidence*, looking for the fault that would bring it down. "Henno. Men do not live in the Namib. The old people lived in it, the XAonin down on the river, the Bushmen, and they lived in it because they had ten thousand years of knowing how, handed down, and even they did not so much live in it as endure it, and they died young doing it. We have a theodolite and two motor cars."

"We have something the clipboard men do not," Martin said. "We can find water in a dry country. It is the only thing we are genuinely better at than other men. Everything else out there will be harder than we think—I am not a fool, I know it will be harder than we think—but the one thing that kills a man fastest in that country is the one thing we have spent three years learning to beat." He turned the folded notice over in his fingers. "And a camp is certain. The desert is only probable."

Hermann was quiet. Down in the kraal Otto had got up and come a little way toward the workshop and sat in the dust looking up at the two of them with his head on one side, as though he had understood that something was being decided and wished to be counted in it.

"You have thought about this," Hermann said at last. "This is not the first time you have had this thought. You have been having it for a week, while I was making jokes about the wire."

"I have been having it for a week."

"And you waited for the notice."

"I waited to be sure the notice was real and not a rumour." Martin almost smiled. "I am, as you frequently observe, a careful man."

Hermann took his hat off again, and this time he did not put it back on. He turned it in his hands and looked west, the way Martin had been looking, out to where the farm gave up and the country began, and the

savage brightness was all gone out of his face now and what was left under it was the thing Martin loved him for, the seriousness that the wit was only ever a curtain in front of: a man weighing a real thing honestly, all the way to the bottom of it, with no pretending.

“It will not be an adventure,” Hermann said. “Whatever it is, in the books afterward, if there is an afterward—out there it will not be an adventure. It will be work, and hunger, and being afraid, and being bored half to death between the times we are afraid. And the water. You make the water sound solved. It will not be solved. It will be the thing we wake up thinking about every single day for as long as it lasts.”

“Yes,” Martin said. “All of that. Yes.”

“And we may simply die. Quietly. Out there where no one will even know to look, and the first anyone hears of it is two skeletons in a gorge a year later, if anyone hears at all.”

“We may simply die,” Martin agreed. “Out here we will certainly go behind wire. I would rather take the desert’s chances than the camp’s certainty. But it is your life as much as mine, Hermann, and I will not pretend it to you. It is a bad plan. It is only a better bad plan than the other one.”

Otto came the rest of the way across the yard and leaned against Hermann’s leg, and Hermann put a hand down on the dog’s head without seeming to notice he had done it.

“Well,” Hermann said. He looked at the dog, and then west again, and something settled in him—Martin saw it settle, the way you see a stratum come level under the dip needle. “We always did say. If there is a war, we go into the desert.” The brightness came back into his face then, but it was a different brightness, quieter, the brightness of a man who has decided a hard thing and found he is, against all sense, glad of it. “I did not think we would be fool enough to mean it.”

“Nor I.”

“When.”

Martin looked at the notice one last time—to *present themselves, pending determination of status*—and then he folded it small, smaller than the creases asked for, and put it in his shirt pocket, not because he wanted to keep it but because he did not want to leave it lying about for the wind to carry down to the store with his name on it.

“We have a great deal to load,” he said. “And we want to be gone before anyone starts to wonder why two surveyors have not presented themselves. Three days. We go in three days.”

And that was how it was decided: two men and a dog in the flat afternoon heat of a workshop yard, with a windmill turning and the country waiting beyond the last fence, tawny and enormous and entirely indifferent to whether they came into it or not.

Chapter 2 — Loading Out

Three days was not enough time and was also, Martin understood, exactly the right amount of time, because any more would have given them the chance to be sensible. A man could talk himself out of almost anything if you gave him a week and a quiet evening. So they did not give themselves a week. They gave themselves three days, and they spent them the way two scientists spend any three days against a deadline: by making lists, and then by quarrelling about the lists, and then by loading the things on the lists into two motor cars in the dark before dawn so that no one at the store would see what they were about.

The lists were the first real lesson, and Martin paid attention to it because he could already feel the desert beginning, out past the fence, to ask him questions he was not sure he could answer.

What does a man take, to disappear into a place that will give him almost nothing?

Not the things a man imagines he will take. They had both read the same boys' adventure books, somewhere back in another country and another life, and the boys' adventure books were full of clever equipment and ingenious devices, and the lists they made on the first day were full of the same—until Hermann, who for all his volatility had a way of cutting to the bone of a problem that Martin had learned to trust over a steadier man's caution, took the first list and drew a line through two-thirds of it.

“We are not going to outfit an expedition,” he said. “We are going to keep two men and a dog alive in a gorge for an unknown length of time. Those are different problems. An expedition can be resupplied. We cannot. So everything we take, we take *forever*, or until it breaks, and when it breaks there is no shop. Ask of every single thing: when this fails, do we die? If yes, take two. If no, and we can live without it, leave it, because the car will only carry so much and the things that keep us alive must come first.”

So they did it Hermann’s way, which was the right way, and the second list was shorter and grimmer and truer than the first.

The rifle, first of everything—a good Mauser, and as much ammunition as they could lay hands on without anyone asking why two surveyors suddenly wanted a great deal of it, because the rifle was not for defence, the rifle was *food*, and the day it failed or the ammunition ran out was the day the desert won. They took the pistol too, which was for nothing, really, except the thing a man cannot quite make himself leave behind. Tools—the real tools, the ones that fixed a motor and shaped a shelter and skinned a kill: a good axe, a saw, files, pliers, wire, the heavy stuff a man cannot improvise out of stone. Cooking iron. A few drums of petrol, because the cars were the only way to move water and meat across distances no man could carry them, and a car without petrol was a heap of dead metal you had hauled all this way for nothing.

And then the things that were not for survival at all, which Martin noticed they both put on the list without discussion, and which neither of them mentioned, because to mention them would have been to admit something about what they were and were afraid of becoming out there. The instruments—a barometer, a thermometer, notebooks, pencils, the careful tools of two men who measured the world for a living and could not imagine ceasing to measure it even while the world tried to kill them. And books. Not many; there was no room for many. But each of them chose a few, and packed them where the dust would not get at them, the way you pack a thing you mean to keep being a person by.

“You are taking *that*,” Hermann said, looking at one of Martin’s.

“I am taking that.”

“We are fleeing into the wilderness to escape internment, and you are bringing—”

“A man should bring something to read,” Martin said, “or in three months he will be talking to the dog and losing the arguments. Otto is not a generous debater. He repeats himself.”

That got a real laugh out of Hermann, the first easy one in three days, and the dog, hearing his name, thumped his tail twice against the running board where he had appointed himself foreman of the loading and lay watching the two men carry their lives out into the dark in armloads.

The water was the thing they argued about longest, and the thing there was finally no solving by loading. They could take water—drums of it, as much as the cars would bear under everything else—but the arithmetic was merciless and Martin did the arithmetic three times because he did not want to believe it. Two men and a dog, in heat that would routinely stand above forty degrees, would drink through everything two motor cars could carry in a matter of weeks. Not months. Weeks. The drums were a stake to get them in and get them started; they were not a supply. After the drums ran dry—and they would run dry—there would be only what the country gave, which was the Kuiseb’s pools where the river ran underground and surfaced in the rock, and the waiting waterholes a man had to know to find, and the fog that came in off the cold sea some mornings and laid a thin grudging dew on everything and was gone by nine.

“So the water does not come with us after all,” Hermann said, watching Martin set down the pencil. “It is out there. Waiting. To be earned, every day, for as long as this lasts.”

“It is out there,” Martin said. “And we are the two men in this whole country best able to find it. That is the entire wager, Hermann. That is the only reason this is a plan and not a suicide. Everything else we can

learn or endure or do without. The water we have to *read*—and reading the water is the one thing we can already do.”

“And the day we cannot find it.”

“Is the day we have miscalculated, and there is no second guess.” Martin capped the drum and wiped his hands. “I do not intend to miscalculate the water.”

He said it flatly, and Hermann looked at him for a moment with the brightness all gone, and then nodded, once. He was accepting it, Martin understood—not as a reassurance, because it was not one, but as a thing Martin was taking onto himself: that of the two of them, he would be the one who never let a day pass without knowing where the next drink was coming from. The careful one’s carefulness was now the difference between two men living and two men not.

They worked the last of it in the grey before dawn on the third day. The two cars stood loaded to the springs in the dark of the lean-to, the bakkie and the old Chevrolet coupé, neither of them a thing you would have chosen for the desert and both of them what they had, packed with the strange double cargo of their flight—the rifle and the cooking iron and the petrol that would keep them alive, and the barometer and the notebooks and the few books that would keep them *themselves*, and somewhere among it all the dog’s blanket, because Hermann had put the dog’s blanket in without saying anything and Martin had not said anything either.

The farm slept. The windmill turned. Away to the east the sky was beginning the thing it did, the first grey leaching up out of the dark, and Martin stood for a moment beside the loaded cars and looked at it and thought, with the clear unsentimental part of his mind that he relied on, that he might be looking at the last comfortable dawn he would see for a long time, and possibly the last he would see at all.

And then he thought the other thing, the thing he had not let himself think out loud to Hermann in three days of lists and arguments, because it was not a scientist’s thought and he distrusted it slightly

even as he had it: that there was, under the fear and the grim arithmetic and the genuine probability of dying badly in a gorge, something in him that was not afraid at all. Something that had read that flat grey notice—to *present themselves, pending determination of status*—and felt, instead of dread, a kind of cold clean lifting, the way the air lifts before a storm. They were not going to present themselves. They were going to do the other thing, the harder thing, the thing that was theirs to choose instead of having it chosen for them. Out past the fence the country lay waiting in the grey, tawny and patient and indifferent, and it did not care whether they lived or died—but it was *honest*, in a way the camp and the wire and the grey mimeographed circular were not. It would take exactly what they could not give it, and no more, and it would not lie to them about the terms. There was a strange relief in that. A man could deal with an honest enemy. It was the dishonest ones, the ones with forms, that broke you.

“Are you ready,” Hermann said, behind him, swinging up into the cab of the bakkie with Otto scrambling up after him to take his place between the seats as though he had always ridden there and always would.

Martin took one more look at the dawn, and at the farm, and at the windmill turning over the water they were leaving for water they would have to earn.

“No,” he said honestly, and got into the coupé. “Let us go anyway.”

Chapter 3 — Into the Kuiseb

They drove west for two days, off the roads after the first morning, picking their way down through country that fell by stages from the highland into the desert the way a staircase falls—each step a different rock, a different age of the world, Martin reading them off without meaning to as the cars ground down through them, the highland granites giving way to the older schists, the schists to the long gravel plains that were not properly desert yet but were the desert clearing its throat. The grass thinned and went grey and then went away. The trees gave up one kind at a time until there were no trees, only the flat enormous gravel running west under a sky that got bigger as the land got emptier, until by the second afternoon the two cars were the only upright things in a world that had been planed flat to the curve of the earth, and a man could turn slowly all the way round and see nothing his own height in any direction at all.

Hermann drove the bakkie ahead, Otto's head out the window into the hot wind, and Martin followed in the coupé through the dust of him, and they did not talk, because there was nothing to say to country like that and the engines were loud and the heat sat on everything like a hand. Martin watched the land and did the thing he always did, which was to read it, and the reading told him two things at once that did not agree.

The first was that he knew this. He had surveyed not far north of here. He could have named the formations, dated them, drawn the section. The country was, to the trained part of him, a familiar text.

The second was that he did not know it at all. Because knowing the age of a rock was not the same as knowing how to drink in the place where that rock was, and he could feel the distance between the two kinds of knowing opening under him the further west they went, like a fault he had mapped from the surface and was now, for the first time, being lowered down the face of. He had read the desert. He had never *lived* in it. And the gravel plains running flat to the horizon did not care in the slightest how many of their strata he could name. They wanted to know whether he could find water, and shade, and meat, and they were going to ask the question every day, and the survey notes in his head were no answer to it at all.

It humbled him, the recognition, and he let it. A man who would not be humbled by the Namib would not last in it. The desert killed the confident ones first, the ones who came in certain—the ones who thought a rifle and a motor car and a doctorate added up to mastery. They did not add up to mastery. They added up to a slightly slower death than the man with nothing. The only thing that added up to survival out here was a particular humility, a willingness to be taught by the country itself, on its terms, in its own slow brutal pedagogy—and Martin, grinding west through the dust in the loaded coupé, made himself a quiet promise that he would be a good student. It was the only kind of confidence the place permitted, and he meant to earn even that.

On the evening of the second day they came to the edge.

It came without warning, the way it does—the flat gravel running on and on and then simply *ending*, the world dropping away in front of the cars into a canyon that had not been there a moment before because the land was so flat you could not see the cut in it until you were on the lip of it. The Kuiseb. The river that ran, when it ran at all, off the highland and down through the desert toward the sea and mostly did not reach the sea, that ran above ground for a few weeks in a good year and the rest of the time ran *underground*, through the sand of its own bed, surfacing here and there in the rock where the geology forced it up—which was the entire reason Martin had pointed the cars

at it, because a river that ran underground was a river a man who could read rock might find the water of, and the canyon was deep enough to give shade and broken enough to give shelter and hidden enough, sunk below the flat plain, that a man standing a kilometre off on the gravel would never know two motor cars had gone down into it.

They got out at the lip and stood looking down into it in the last of the light, and Otto came and stood between them with his nose working at the new smells coming up out of the gorge, and none of them said anything for a while.

It was beautiful, in the way the desert is beautiful, which is to say it was beautiful the way a thing is beautiful that does not care if you live. The canyon walls fell away in bands of dark schist, contorted and folded, the rock twisted by pressures older than anything with a name, and the evening light came down them in long slants of ochre and rust and a deep arterial red where it caught the iron in the stone. Far below, the dry bed of the river ran pale between the dark walls, a ribbon of sand with, here and there, a darker patch that might be a pool or might be only shadow. Birds Martin did not expect—a few, small, going to roost in the cliffs. The heat coming up off the rock even now, with the sun going. And over all of it, as the light failed, a silence so total that when Otto shifted his feet on the gravel the sound of it was startling, an intrusion, the loudest thing in a world that had been made before there was anything to make a sound.

“Well,” Hermann said at last, very quietly, as though loud talk would be a discourtesy to the place. “Here it is. The desert. We meant it, and here it is.”

“Here it is,” Martin said.

“And tomorrow we go down into it, and we begin.” Hermann was quiet a moment. “I keep waiting to feel that we have made a terrible mistake. I have been waiting for it since the farm. And it does not come. Is that the madness setting in early, do you think, or is it that this is somehow, against all reason, the right thing?”

Martin considered it honestly, because Hermann asked few real questions and deserved real answers to the ones he asked.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that we have made a mistake that is also the right thing. I think both are true. I think out there—” he nodded back east, toward the camps and the wire and the world that would have caged them “—was a smaller death and a surer one, and in *here*—” he looked down into the gorge, into the dark coming up out of it “—is a larger death and a less certain one, and that we have chosen the larger uncertain one over the small sure one, and that this is either the bravest thing we have ever done or the most foolish, and that we will not know which until it is over, and possibly not even then.” He looked at his friend. “And I think you do not feel you have made a mistake because you are, underneath all the cleverness, a brave man, Hermann, and a brave man knows the difference between a danger he has chosen and a cage he has not, even when the danger is worse than the cage. We have chosen this. That is the whole of the comfort there is. But it is, I find, a surprising amount of comfort.”

Hermann was quiet for a long moment, looking down into the gorge with the light going off it.

“You should write that down,” he said finally, the brightness coming back into his voice, gentle. “Before the rabbit-meat madness takes us and you forget you were ever capable of a coherent sentence.”

“I have no intention of forgetting how to make a sentence.”

“No one ever does,” said Hermann. “That is what makes it so interesting to watch.”

They made a cold camp on the lip that night, not wanting to go down into the unknown gorge in the dark, and they ate from the supplies that would not last and would not be replaced, and they lay out under a sky that Martin, who had thought he knew what stars were, found he had never properly seen—the whole vast wheel of them, undimmed by any light of man for hundreds of kilometres in any direction, so thick and so near that the dark between them seemed the smaller thing. Otto lay

against Hermann and sighed and slept. And Martin lay on his back on the gravel at the edge of the desert with the stars enormous overhead and the silence enormous all around and the canyon waiting black and patient below, and he did not sleep for a long time. He was afraid; the sensible animal part of him was very afraid. And underneath the fear there was the other thing again, the cold clean lifting, the relief of a man who has stepped off the path that was being walked for him and onto a harder one of his own choosing—his friend beside him, a dog between them, and the whole indifferent honest country waiting in the dark below.

Chapter 4 — Carp Cliff

They found the place on the third day in the gorge, and they found it the way they found everything that mattered out there, which was by reading the rock.

The first two days had been a slow careful descent and a slower careful searching, the cars left up a side ravine where Martin had judged the going just possible and the hiding good, the two men and the dog working down into the main canyon on foot with packs, looking—though neither of them said the word, because the word implied a permanence neither was ready to claim—for a *home*. They knew what they needed. Hermann had listed it on the second night the way he listed everything, ticking it off on his fingers in the firelight: shade, because the heat off the schist in the afternoon was a thing that could kill a man who had nowhere to get out of it; water within a day's reach, ideally within an hour's; a defensible aspect, because the gorge had hyenas and the hyenas were bold and a sleeping man was a meal; height enough above the bed that a flash flood, when one came down the dry river in a far-off rain, would not take them in the night; and concealment, always concealment, because the entire wager rested on no one ever knowing they were there.

It was Martin who saw the cliff, and he saw it because of the pool.

They had come round a bend in the gorge in the brutal middle of the afternoon, both of them moving slow and saving themselves the way the heat taught you to within the first day, and below them in the bed of the river the sand gave way to a long dark sheet of standing water—

a real pool, not a shadow, the underground river forced up here by a bar of harder rock across the bed, lying still and dark and improbable between the burning walls. And on the pool, when they got down to it and crouched at the edge of it with their hearts going at the simple animal fact of so much water, there were fish. Carp. A whole slow population of them, drifting in the dark water, ancient and unbothered, the descendants of fish that had come down the river in some long-ago flood and been stranded here when the river withdrew underground and had simply gone on being fish, in a pool in the desert, for longer than anyone could say.

“Carp,” Hermann said, staring at them. “There are *carp*. In the Namib. We have walked three days into the driest country on earth to escape a war, and there are *carp*.”

“There is water that holds *carp*,” Martin said, which was the part that mattered, “which means there is water that holds, which means it does not dry in the worst of the year, or the *carp* would not be here to be surprised by. A pool that keeps fish is a pool a man can drink from for a long time.” He was already looking up, past the pool, at the wall above it—and there it was, the thing the pool had led his eye to: a great overhang of the dark schist, where the rock had weathered back under a harder band and left a deep shaded recess thirty feet up the cliff face, dry, sheltered, open to the gorge so a man could see anything coming, high enough above the bed to laugh at a flood, and shaded—shaded all the burning afternoon by the very rock it was cut into.

They climbed up to it and stood in it, out of the sun for the first time in three days that the sun had not simply found them wherever they went, and the relief of the shade was so physical that Martin felt his whole body let down a notch he had not known it was holding.

“Here,” he said.

“Here,” Hermann agreed, turning slowly in the cool of it, looking out at the gorge falling away below and the pool dark at the foot of the cliff and the long view up and down the bed that would let them see a man,

or a hyena, or the brown wall of a flood, long before it reached them. “Yes. Here.” He looked down at the pool with its impossible fish. “We should name it. A man should know the name of the place he lives, even if he is the only one who will ever say it.”

“Name it for the carp,” Martin said.

So they named it for the carp. *Karpfenkliff*. Carp Cliff. And in the naming of it something shifted that Martin felt and did not remark on, because to remark on it would have been to risk it—the place stopped being a feature of the country they were searching and became, in the saying of its name, *theirs*; a home, the first home of the desert life, the rock they would learn every crack of, the pool they would drink from and the shade they would shelter in and the high ledge they would lie on at night with the rifle close and the dog between them and the stars wheeling enormous over the lip of the gorge.

The making of it took the rest of that week, and it was the first real work the desert asked of them, and Martin found it good—found it, in fact, the most contented he had been since the notice came, because it was work with his hands at a problem he could see and solve, and after three years of finding water for other men there was a deep plain satisfaction in building a thing that would keep him and his friend alive. They hauled the camp up from the cars piece by piece in the cool of the mornings. They built a low stone wall across the open side of the overhang, not high, just enough to break the wind that funnelled down the gorge at night and turn a hyena’s easy approach into a considered one. They made a hearth where the smoke would draw out and up and not choke them. They laid the blankets and stowed the precious things—the rifle, the ammunition, the tools, the instruments, the few books—back under the deepest shade where the dust and the rare rain would not reach them. They worked out the path down to the pool, and the path up the gorge, and the lines of sight, and where a man on watch should sit, and all the thousand small accommodations a body makes with a place it means to survive in.

And in the evenings, when the work was done and the heat went out

of the day and the gorge filled up with a blue cool shadow from the bottom while the lip of it still burned red in the last sun, they sat on the ledge of Carp Cliff with their backs against the warm rock and looked out at the country they had thrown their lives into, and were, for that little while, in those first easy days before the desert began the harder lessons, something close to happy.

“It is almost a fraud,” Hermann said one such evening, watching the shadow climb the far wall. “We fled into the wilderness to suffer nobly, and instead we have a fishing pond and a shaded balcony with a view. I feel we are not taking the situation sufficiently seriously. Where is the suffering? I was promised suffering.”

“It will come,” Martin said. He said it lightly, to match Hermann’s tone, but he meant it. He was watching the pool below, and the fish in it, and doing the arithmetic he never stopped doing—the water, the meat, the days, the long unknown length of the war. The shade and the pool and the easy evening were not the desert showing them its terms. This was the desert letting them settle in. “Be glad it has not yet, Hermann. Be glad of every day it has not yet. That is the whole of the art of this, I think—to be properly glad of the good days, and not to believe, for one moment, that they are owed to continue.”

Hermann looked at him for a while in the failing light, the brightness gone quiet.

“You are going to be unbearable out here,” he said at last, with great affection. “I can see it already. The careful one, hoarding his pessimism like the last of the sugar. Henno Martin, who would not let a man enjoy a sunset without reminding him of the actuarial tables.” He leaned back against the warm rock and closed his eyes and, after a moment, smiled. “Thank God. One of us has to be. Wake me when the suffering arrives. I should hate to sleep through it.”

And below them in the blue dark the pool lay still and the carp drifted in it, and the stars came out over the gorge one at a time and then all at once, and for this one night, in shade and water and the company of a friend, it was enough.



Chapter 5 — The First Kill

The drums of water lasted five weeks, and the tinned and dried food they had brought lasted not much longer, and so the desert asked its first real question sooner than either of them had let themselves expect: not *can you find water*—the pool answered that, for now—but *can you take meat from this country, and keep taking it, for as long as this lasts*. And the answer to that question was the rifle, and the rifle meant the hunt, and the hunt was the second great lesson of the desert life, and Martin found it harder than the building of the home and in some ways harder than the water, because the water was a problem for the head and the hunt was a problem for the whole man.

He had shot before. Every boy of his generation in Germany had handled a rifle; he had taken the odd buck on a farm in his survey years, when a farmer offered and the pot was low. But he had never *hunted*—never gone out knowing that if he came back empty there would be, in a week, nothing to eat at all, that the difference between a clean shot and a missed one was the difference between meat on the rock for ten days and the slow beginning of going hungry in a place where going hungry had no remedy but to try again, weaker, tomorrow. That changed it. The pressure of it changed everything about it, the way Martin imagined the pressure of a real war changed the soldiering a man had only ever played at.

The game was there. That was the strange mercy of the gorge—that in this country which looked, from the flat plains above, like a place where nothing could possibly live, there was in fact a whole slow pop-

ulation of things that had learned to live in it, and the canyon and the river-bed and the springs concentrated them. Gemsbok, chief among them—the great desert oryx, pale grey, the long straight rapier horns, an animal so perfectly fitted to the place that it could go without drinking for weeks, taking its water from the plants it ate and the cool of the night, an animal that did not need the country's water and so was not tied to it the way a thirstier beast would be. Mountain zebra on the higher ground, hard and wary. Springbok out on the gravel after rain. Klipspringer on the cliffs, the little rock-jumpers, neat and quick. And smaller things, and birds, and the ostrich that ran the plains above like something left over from an older world.

It was a gemsbok that Martin took first, and he remembered it for the rest of his life, every part of it, the way a man remembers the things that change what he is.

He had gone out before light, alone—Hermann had argued to come, and Martin had argued him out of it, on the grounds, which were true, that two men made twice the noise and twice the scent and that the hunt wanted one man moving slow, and on the other grounds, which he did not say, that if it went wrong he would rather it went wrong with only himself to answer for. He had crossed the river-bed in the grey and worked up a side gorge where the gemsbok came down in the early cool to a seep he had found, and he had got himself into the rocks above the seep with the wind in his face, and he had waited. The waiting was most of it. He had not understood, before, how much of hunting was simply the discipline of being still and patient for a very long time, of letting the country forget you were in it, of becoming, by sheer unmoving endurance, a part of the rock you lay against. The cold came up off the stone into his chest. The light grew. A jackal trotted through, unaware of him, ten metres off, and was gone. And then, when the sun was just touching the top of the far wall and the gorge was filling with light, the gemsbok came.

There were three of them, moving down to the seep with the unhurried watchfulness of animals that have never been safe a day in their lives, and Martin lay against the rock with the rifle already up and his

heart going hard and made himself do the thing the whole situation was screaming at him not to do, which was to wait—to wait past the first one, which was quartering toward him and would have been a poor shot, to wait while they drank, to wait for the big one, the lead cow, to turn broadside and lift her head, and in the half-second that she did to put the foresight on the place behind her shoulder where he knew, from a boyhood of other men's lessons and three years of the odd buck for the pot, the heart and the lungs lay, and to breathe out, and to press.

The shot went away enormous in the gorge, slapping off the walls. The cow dropped where she stood—dropped at once, cleanly, which he had not dared hope for and was, he understood even in the moment, as much luck as skill—and the other two were gone in a clatter of stones before the echo had finished, and Martin lay against the rock with the rifle still up and his ears ringing and his whole body shaking, not with fear, with something else, something he had no clean name for, that was part triumph and part a kind of grief and wholly, completely real.

He went down to her. She was dead, the long horns laid back against the rock, the great dark eye already going flat, and he knelt by her in the early sun with the smell of the shot still in his nose and the blood coming dark onto the pale sand, and he did not feel the simple hunter's satisfaction he had half expected. He felt the weight of it. The animal had been alive, perfectly and entirely alive, fitted to this place as he would never be, and he had ended that so that he and his friend could go on, and there was no getting around the size of the thing, no pretending it was small. A life for two lives. He had done it cleanly, which mattered—he understood already that doing it cleanly was the whole of the morality available to him out here, that a botched shot and a long death was the real sin and a quick end the best a man could offer—but cleanly or not, he had done it, and he knelt by the warm body and let himself feel the full weight of it, because he had decided, somewhere on the drive in, that he would not let himself become a man who stopped feeling it. The day he butchered an animal without that weight was the day the desert had taken something out of him he did not want to lose.

Then he stood up and got to work, because feeling the weight of it did not change the fact that there was a great deal of meat lying in the sun in a hot country and not much time before it spoiled, and the work of it—the skinning, the quartering, the heavy labour of getting two hundred kilograms of gemsbok back across the river-bed and up to Carp Cliff over two exhausting trips with the sun climbing—drove the philosophy out of him and put the practical man back, which was, he reflected, probably the desert’s intention. It did not let you stay long in any feeling. There was always the next thing the body needed, and the next, and the country kept you too busy keeping alive to spend much time examining the cost of it.

Hermann met him at the foot of the cliff on the second trip, having seen him coming, and took the load off him without a word and looked at the meat and then at Martin’s face.

“Clean?” he said. Just that.

“Clean,” Martin said. “One shot. She didn’t suffer.”

Hermann nodded, and something passed between them, some acknowledgement of the size of the thing that neither of them needed to put into words, two scientists who had spent their lives studying living things and now had to kill them to go on living themselves. “Then we eat,” Hermann said. “And we are grateful. To her, and to your steady hand, and to whatever it is that put gemsbok in this gorge for two fools to find.” He hoisted the load. “And tonight, Henno, we have *meat*, and I am going to enjoy it without one word from you about the actuarial tables, the rationing, or the day the gemsbok run out. Tonight we are men who have eaten. The careful one may resume his duties tomorrow.”

And that night they ate gemsbok grilled over the hearth at Carp Cliff, the fat running and crackling, the first fresh meat in weeks, and it was, Martin thought, possibly the best thing he had ever eaten in his life, and he did, for once, as Hermann asked, enjoy it without a word about the cost. But he lay awake after, on the ledge with the stars wheeling over, and did the arithmetic anyway, silently, where his friend could not

hear it: the meat, the days, the size of the gorge's slow population of game and how fast two men and a dog would eat through it. Someone had to. It had fallen to him, and he had taken it, and he did not let it down its guard, even gorged on gemsbok under the enormous stars.

Chapter 6 — Water

The pool at Carp Cliff did not last the year, of course. Martin had known it would not—had said so, in his careful way, the first week, and been told by Hermann that he was hoarding his pessimism like the last of the sugar—but knowing a thing and watching it happen were different, and through the long heart of that first dry season he watched the pool go down, day by day, finger by finger, the dark sheet of water shrinking back from its margins until the carp crowded into the deepest part of it and the bar of rock that had dammed it stood bare and white in the sun, and he understood that the wager he had made on the farm at Otjimbingwe—*we can read water in a dry country*—was now going to be tested not as a clever idea but as a daily, grinding, life-and-death fact, and that there was no more important work in the desert, none, than this: the finding, the keeping, the eternal anxious reckoning of the water.

It became the shape of his mind out there. A man imagines, before he has done it, that surviving in a desert is a thing of dramatic moments—the charging beast, the flash flood, the great shot. It is not. It is, more than anything else, *the water*: the low ceaseless drone of it under everything else, the first thought on waking and the last on sleeping, the arithmetic that never finishes because it has to be done again tomorrow with the numbers a little worse. How much in the pool. How much it is dropping each day. How many days, then, before the pool is gone. Where the next water is when the pool is gone—and that one was the real question, the one that earned its keep, because the

country did not advertise its water and a man who could not find the next source before the present one failed was a dead man walking around not yet aware of it.

Here, at last, the three years of finding wells paid for themselves, paid for the whole mad wager, and Martin took a deep professional satisfaction in it even as it frightened him. Because finding desert water was not magic and it was not luck; it was *reading*—reading the rock, the dip of the strata, the lines of the faults, the places where an impermeable layer would force the underground river up or hold a body of water against the dry season. He knew how to do it. He had done it for farmers for three years. And now he did it for himself and his friend, working out from Carp Cliff in widening surveys in the cool of the early mornings, hammer in hand, reading the gorge and its tributaries the way another man might read a city he had to find his way around in the dark—*there, where that band of harder schist crosses the side gully, there will be a seep, because the water cannot pass the band and must come to the surface; there, in the deep shaded cleft, where the sun reaches only an hour a day, a rock pool will hold long past the open ones*—and going to look, and being, often enough, right.

Not always. That was the thing that kept the fear honest. He was not always right, and the times he was wrong—the seep that had dried, the pool that the geology had promised and the season had taken—those were the times the desert reminded him, flatly, without malice, exactly what the stakes were: that his skill was real but not sufficient, that the country was larger and older and more various than any man's reading of it, and that the day his reading failed when there was no margin left would be simply, quietly, the last day. He did not let himself forget it. The forgetting was the danger. The man who found water three times running and grew confident was the man who did not check the fourth time, who assumed, who let the margin close—and the desert was patient and would wait years for exactly that one assumption.

“You have become a kind of priest of it,” Hermann observed one evening, watching Martin come back up to the cliff from another survey, dust to the knees, the hammer in his belt. “The water. You go out into

the wilderness and commune with the rock and come back and tell us whether we may drink. I find it strangely comforting and slightly absurd.”

“It is entirely absurd,” Martin agreed, lowering himself onto the ledge with the particular care of a tired body in a hot country. “Two doctors of geology, fugitives from a war, reduced to a daily search for enough water to keep two men and a dog from dying. If you had told me, in Bonn, under Cloos—”

“Cloos would have been delighted,” Hermann said. “Cloos always said the only test of a geologist worth anything was whether he could read a country he had never seen and tell you something true about it before he opened a single book. He meant it as a metaphor. He did not imagine we would take it quite so literally, or that the something-true would be *here is where you will not die of thirst this week*. But he would have approved. It is, when you think about it, the purest test of the science there is. We read the rock, and the reading is either right or we die. No journal referee was ever so strict.”

Martin almost smiled. It was true, and it was the kind of thing that, said in the failing light at the end of a hard day, took some of the weight off the fear—the reframing of the daily terror of the water as a kind of ultimate examination of the craft they had given their lives to, the one examination that could not be argued or fudged or politicked, where the country itself marked the paper and the only grade was *alive* or *not*. There was a grim dignity in it that helped. A man could carry the water-fear better if he could also, sometimes, in the cool of the evening, see it as the hardest and truest piece of geology either of them would ever do.

But he did not let the dignity soften the discipline, and that, he came to understand, was the whole art of staying alive out there: to find what comfort you honestly could in the situation, the dignity and the friendship and the enormous stars and the satisfaction of skill, and to take that comfort gladly, because a man with no comfort breaks—and at the very same time, in the same breath, never for one instant

to let the comfort persuade you that the country had agreed to keep you alive. It had not agreed to anything. It went on being exactly as indifferent and exact as it had been the first night on the lip of the gorge, and the water went on dropping in the pool, and somewhere out in the dark the next source either existed where Martin's reading said it would or it did not, and no amount of dignity or friendship or stars changed that arithmetic by a single drop.

So he went out again the next morning, and the morning after, in the widening surveys, reading the country for its hidden water and finding it more often than not, while the pool at Carp Cliff went down and the carp crowded into the last deep shadow of it and the dry season ground on toward its worst. They could still read the country well enough to live. For now, that was the whole of it.

Chapter 7 — The Rhythm

What no one tells you about surviving, Martin came to think, is how much of it is boredom.

The books made it all crisis. In the books a man fought the desert in a continuous fever of peril, lurching from the charging beast to the failing water to the storm, and collapsed each night exhausted by drama. The reality was almost the opposite. The reality was a great deal of waiting, of repetition, of long flat hours and days and weeks in which absolutely nothing happened that a writer could have used, punctuated—rarely, sharply—by the moments of real danger that the boredom existed, in a sense, to make survivable. You could not live at the pitch of crisis. No animal could. So the desert life found its level, and the level was a rhythm, and the rhythm was mostly quiet.

They rose before light, always, because the cool was precious and the work of the day had to be done in it. They tended the fire. They saw to the water—checked the pool, and on the days a survey was due, went out for it. They hunted when the meat was low, which was every week or ten days depending on the kill. They mended things, endlessly, because everything wore out and nothing could be replaced and a torn boot or a frayed rope or a loose rifle-sling was not a small thing but a crack in the wall that kept them alive. In the worst heat of the afternoon they did nothing at all, lay up in the shade of the cliff like the gemsbok lay up in the shade of the rocks, and waited for the sun to come off the gorge. And in the evenings, in the blue cool, they talked, or did not talk, and watched the country, and slept.

It was in the talking, and the not-talking, that Martin learned his friend, in a way the years in Bonn and the survey camps had not taught him. You think you know a man after ten years. You do not. You know the man as the world has let you see him—across a laboratory bench, over a map, in a town with other people in it and somewhere else to go when the evening ends. You do not know him until your two lives have been reduced to a gorge, a rifle, a pool, and each other, with no one else for a hundred kilometres and nowhere else to be for an unknown number of years. Then you learn him. Then there is nothing left to hide behind, and nothing to dilute him, and you get the whole man, undiluted, for better and for worse, all day and every day, and you find out what he is and what you are and what the two of you are together.

Hermann undiluted was a wonder and a trial in equal measure, and Martin loved him without reservation and wanted, some days, to strangle him.

The wonder was the mind. Three years older, and quicker than Martin by a clear margin, and out here with nothing to occupy that quickness but the desert and the two of them, Hermann turned it on the country itself, and his observations were the best thing about the long days. He noticed everything. He could lie on the ledge in the heat, apparently half asleep, and produce a remark about the behaviour of the ravens that overturned something Martin had taken for granted for a week. He worked out the springbok and the rain when Martin was still only collecting the data. He had a way of taking a thing they had both seen a hundred times and seeing it new, and the two of them would fall into the old rhythm of it, the rhythm of Bonn and the survey, the building of an idea between them, one offering, the other testing, both improving—and for an hour the gorge would vanish and they would be simply two scientists at the oldest and best game there is, and it was in those hours, Martin thought, that the whole strange enterprise came closest to being worth the price of it.

The trial was the moods. The same quickness that produced the wonder produced, on its dark side, a volatility that the confinement of the gorge sharpened rather than soothed. Hermann ran high and

Hermann ran low, and out here, with nowhere to take a black mood and walk it off, the low days were hard. He would go silent—not the easy companionable silence of two men who did not need to talk, but a closed, bitter silence, a withdrawal, and Martin learned to read the signs of it and to leave him to it, because there was nothing to do but leave him to it. There were no distractions to offer a man in the Namib. There was no town to send him to, no work that would absorb him, no third person to dilute the two of them. There was only the gorge, and the heat, and the two of them, and a black mood in such conditions could go on for days and there was nothing for it but to wait, and to keep the camp running, and to be steady, and to be there when it lifted.

And it always lifted. That was the thing Martin held onto, on the bad days—that the moods passed, that the brightness came back, that under the volatility was the friend he had thrown his life in with on purpose and would have thrown it in with again. He was the steady one and Hermann was the brilliant one, and out here the steadiness was, he came to see, his real contribution, more than the water-finding even, more than the hunting: that of the two of them, he was the ballast. He did not run high or low. He woke each day and did the next thing and did not let the boredom or the fear or the sheer grinding sameness move him much off true, and that steadiness held the camp together and held Hermann together and was, in its quiet way, exactly as necessary to their survival as the rifle and the water-reading, though no book of adventures would ever have thought to list it.

Otto held them both together by being entirely uncomplicated in a situation that was nothing but complication. He did not have moods, or fears about the water, or a running arithmetic of their days. He had the morning and the evening and the smell of the gorge and the two men he had decided were his, and he was, simply and completely, glad—glad of the hunt, glad of the scraps, glad of a hand on his head, glad to lie between them on the ledge under the stars. There is a particular sanity that a dog brings to a hard place, a reminder, just by existing, that the thing itself—the being alive, the morning, the company—is good, whatever the arithmetic says. On the bad days, when Hermann

was closed and silent and the heat would not break and the pool was lower than yesterday, Martin would find his hand on Otto's head and the dog leaning into it, and some of the weight would go off, and he understood that Hermann's bringing the dog's blanket, that first dark morning at the farm, packed without a word among the rifle and the instruments, had been one of the wisest things either of them did. A man can survive a great deal with a steady friend and a glad dog and enough water. It is not nothing, what they did, the two men and the dog, in keeping each other not just alive but—most days, in the rhythm, between the crises—something that a person could honestly call sane.

Chapter 8 — The Oryx and the Dog

The danger, when it came, came the way danger came in the desert—out of the boredom, without warning, in a few seconds that undid weeks of the quiet rhythm and reminded them both how thin the membrane was between the life they had built and no life at all.

It was a gemsbok that did it, which had a bitter justice in it, because the gemsbok was the animal that kept them alive.

Martin had wounded it, which was the root of the whole thing, and he carried the guilt of that afterward more than any of the rest. He had taken a shot at long range that he should not have taken—the meat was low, and the animal was moving off, and he had let the pressure of the empty larder push him into a shot a more disciplined hunter would have let go, and he had hit it badly, gut-shot, the worst thing, and the gemsbok had gone off wounded into the rocks. And a wounded gemsbok was a different creature entirely from the wary grazing animal of the morning hunts. A gemsbok was not a docile beast even at peace; the long straight horns were a weapon it knew how to use, and lions had been found dead in the Kalahari with a gemsbok's horn driven clean through them, the two animals killed by each other in a single locked moment. A *wounded* gemsbok, hurt and cornered and past all fear, was as dangerous a thing as the desert held.

They tracked it—they had to, both because a wounded animal must

not be left to die slowly, which was the one unbreakable law of the hunt, and because the meat was needed—and Otto ran ahead, as he always did, casting for the scent, doing the thing a dog does, and it was Otto who found it, and Otto who paid.

The gemsbok had gone to ground in a cleft in the rocks, and it came out of the cleft when the dog found it, came out fast and low and savage with the long horns down, and Martin, twenty metres back and scrambling over broken rock with the rifle, saw it happen and could do nothing, could not shoot for fear of hitting the dog, could only watch in the stretched horrible slowness of such moments as the gemsbok caught Otto on its horns and threw him. The dog went up and sideways and came down hard among the rocks and did not get up, and the gemsbok, mad with its wound, turned to come on, and Martin, who in the ordinary run of things took no shot he was not sure of, took a snap shot from the hip at ten metres because there was no time for anything else, and by luck more than judgement put it down—down at last, the great pale body folding into the rocks, the long horns scraping stone, the dark eye going flat the way the first one's had gone flat, a lifetime ago, in another season.

He did not go to the gemsbok. He went to the dog.

Otto was alive. That was the first thing, and for a moment it was the only thing, and Martin knelt over him in the rocks with his hands shaking and felt the relief of it go through him like cold water. Alive, but hurt, badly: a long gash torn down his side and shoulder where the horn had caught and dragged, the blood coming fast and dark, the dog's eyes wide and his breath coming in quick shallow pants of shock and pain. Martin had seen enough wounds, his own and others', to know it was bad and to know, also, that it might not be past saving—that the horn had torn the flesh and not, he prayed, gone into the chest, that a wound like this killed by blood lost and by the rot that came after, both of which a man might, with luck and care, prevent.

Hermann reached them at a dead run, having heard the second shot and read it correctly. The brightness went out of his face all at once.

He got down in the rocks beside the dog and put both hands on him and said the dog's name, the way you say a name you are afraid is already past hearing it, and Martin saw how much of whatever held Hermann together out here was bound up in the uncomplicated glad creature now bleeding in the rocks.

They saved him, but they could not do it alone, and that was the thing that broke the careful safety of their hidden life and cost them, for one frightening day, the concealment the whole wager depended on.

They got the bleeding stopped, there in the rocks, with cloth and pressure and Hermann's hands steady now in the way a man's hands go steady when the thing that matters most is in them. They got him back to Carp Cliff. But the wound wanted more than they had. It wanted cleaning and closing that two men with a hunting kit could not properly do, and it wanted it before the rot set in, in a hot country where rot set in fast. And they made, that night, by the fire, with the dog breathing shallow on his blanket, the hard decision: that they would risk it, that one of them would take the dog to the nearest farm, days off, where there were people who knew animals and the means to treat them, and that they would trust those people not to ask too many questions or, asking them, to keep the answers to themselves.

It was Martin who went, with the dog, because Hermann could not have borne the waiting and because Martin was the steady one and the one less likely to say a wrong word to a stranger. He drove the coupé out of the gorge and across the gravel in the dark, the dog wrapped on the seat beside him, and came at dawn to the farm of a family he knew a little from the survey years—Germans, like themselves, the Siedentopfs, settled on a hard piece of country at the desert's edge, the kind of people who had been on that land long enough to be more of the desert than of Germany—and they took him in, and took the dog, without the questions he had feared.

They knew. Of course they knew. Everyone in that country knew by now that some of the German men had not presented themselves, had

gone—*somewhere*—rather than the camps, and a surveyor turning up at dawn with a hurt dog and a haunted look and no good explanation for where he had come from was not a difficult thing to read. But they were of the desert's edge, those people, and the desert's edge bred a particular code, older than this war and indifferent to its administration: you helped the man in front of you, and you did not ask what the authorities would want to know, and you certainly did not tell them. The wife cleaned and closed the dog's wound with a competence that shamed Martin's hunting kit, and fed Martin a breakfast that he had to make himself eat slowly, and asked him nothing about the desert at all. The husband saw to the coupé, found a problem with it Martin had not known about and fixed it, and asked him nothing either. And when Martin left, a day later, with the dog stitched and dosed and already, with the resilience of dogs, lifting his head and thumping his tail—they sent him off with as much food as he would take, pressed on him over his protests, and a few words that Martin carried back into the gorge and did not forget.

“We did not see you,” the husband said, at the coupé, in the dawn. He did not make a thing of it. He said it the way a man states a fact. “Whoever asks. We did not see you, and there is no dog, and you were never here. Go safely, *Herr Doktor*. And —” a pause, the hard face softening a degree—“do not let the country win. It will try. It tries with everyone. Do not let it.” He put a hand briefly on Martin's shoulder. “We will say nothing. Go.”

Martin drove back into the desert with the dog mending on the seat and the family's food and the family's words both, grinding across the gravel toward the gorge that was now, against all sense, *home*. The cage and the wire were one Germany. The family at the desert's edge, who had not seen him, were another. He drove home holding both, and grateful, beyond what he could have said, for the second.

Chapter 9 — The Lean Months

The suffering Hermann had been promised arrived as a slow subtraction, and it came in through the meat.

It began so gradually that neither of them marked the start of it. The seasons turned; the rains that should have come did not, or came far off and little; the gorge's slow population of game, which had been their larder through the good months, began to feel the dryness too. The gemsbok grew warier and harder to find, ranging further for the failing grazing. And the animals they did take were different from the animals of the early season, leaner, the fat gone off them, the meat dark and stringy and poor. Martin noticed it first as a hunter notices a thing, practically: that a kill that would have fed them ten days now fed them seven, that there was no marrow worth the name in the bones, that the rich crackling fat of the first gemsbok—the fat he and Hermann had eaten with such animal joy that first night, a lifetime ago—was simply gone.

He did not, at first, understand what that would mean. He thought it meant only that they would have to hunt more often, work harder for the same calories, and he set himself to it grimly, and did not see—neither of them saw, two doctors of geology who knew a great deal about rocks and not enough about the chemistry of their own bodies—that the missing fat was not merely a question of calories. That a man cannot live on lean meat alone. That there is a thing the body needs

from fat, and from the things that come with fat, that no quantity of lean muscle can supply, and that a man who eats nothing but lean meat, however much of it, will sicken and weaken and, in the end, die. Die with his belly full. Die of a kind of starvation that has nothing to do with hunger.

The first signs were so small and so easily explained away.

A tiredness that the day's work did not account for. But the days were hard, and a man is tired after a hard day, so they explained it by the work. A heaviness in the limbs, a slowness in the morning. But they were not young, and they had been living rough a long time, so they explained it by that. A faint persistent wrongness that Martin could not name and did not mention, a sense of the body being somehow *off*, running poorly, like an engine on bad fuel. But the mind makes a great deal out here, in the isolation and the strain, and he distrusted his own sense of it and said nothing, and Hermann, who was feeling the same thing and saying nothing for the same reasons, said nothing too.

And a longing for fat that grew, week by week, from a preference into something closer to an obsession. They both felt it. They talked about it, at first lightly, the way men talk about a food they miss—what they would not give for butter, for bacon, for the rich marbled meat of a fat ox—and then less lightly, as the weeks went on and the lean meat went down with less and less satisfaction, as the body's craving sharpened into something that was not really about pleasure at all but about a need it could not name and they could not yet read. Martin caught himself dreaming of fat. Actual dreams, in which the fat was the whole subject, vivid and absurd, and he woke from them with the craving worse than when he had slept. He thought it strange, and a little shameful, that a serious man should be reduced to dreaming about fat. He did not see it for what it was: the body saying, in the one language it had, the thing the two clever heads were too ignorant to hear.

"We are getting old, Henno," Hermann said one evening, and there was no brightness in it, which was itself a sign Martin should have read

and did not. They were on the ledge, as always, and the kill of two days before—a poor lean klipspringer, half what it should have been—was nearly gone, and there was no fat in the pot and had not been for weeks. “Look at us. Slow. Tired. I feel like a man of seventy. I go up the gorge for water and I have to stop and rest like an invalid. Is it the work? It cannot only be the work. We did harder work in the first months and bounded up like goats.” He turned a piece of the poor dark meat over in his fingers without appetite. “Something is wrong with me. With us. I have felt it for weeks and not wanted to say it, because to say it is to make it real, and out here a sick man is —” He did not finish. He did not need to. Out here a sick man, with no doctor and no medicine and a hundred kilometres of desert between him and any help, was a thing neither of them wanted to name.

Martin looked at his friend in the failing light, and saw—now that Hermann had said it, now that the words were out—what he had not let himself see for weeks: that Hermann *did* look like a man of seventy, that they both did, that the vigour of the early months had drained out of them so slowly they had explained each stage of it away, and that whatever was wrong was real, and getting worse, and that the two of them—for all their doctorates, for all the careful reading of rock and water that had kept them alive this far—did not have the first idea what it was.

“It is the meat,” Martin said slowly. He did not know it yet, not fully, but it was beginning to come to him, the connection coming the way a correlation comes: the lean meat, the missing fat, the slow weakening, the craving that was not really about pleasure. “Hermann. It is the meat. We are eating, we are filling our bellies every day, and we are starving anyway. There is something in the fat—in the fat, and we have had no fat in weeks—that we cannot do without, and we are doing without it, and it is killing us by degrees while we eat our fill.” He heard his own voice and did not quite believe what it was saying, and believed it completely at the same time. “We are starving with full bellies. I think—Hermann, I think that is exactly what is happening to us, and I do not know what to do about it, because the only fat in this

country is on the animals, and the animals have no fat, because the country has no rain.”

They sat with that, in the dark, as the stars came out over the gorge—the same stars that had seemed so glorious that first night on the lip of the canyon, when they were strong and certain. Below them the pool lay low and dark. The fire burned down. Thirst they could read. The charging beast they could shoot. This was a slow chemical subtraction working in their own flesh, invisible, unhuntable, unreadable by any survey, taking them apart from the inside while they did everything right: ate every day, found their water, kept their discipline. The two best readers of that country alive could not, for all their skill, read the way out of it.

Chapter 10 — The Hunger That Eats With a Full Belly

It got worse before they understood it well enough to fight it, and the worst of it is the part Martin found hardest to set down afterward, and would not have set down at all except that the whole point of the thing—if there was a point, if the suffering meant anything—was to tell it true, and telling it true meant telling this.

There is a name for what was happening to them, though Martin did not learn it until long after, in a comfortable room with books on the shelf and food in the kitchen, reading the science that explained the thing he had nearly died of. The old Arctic men knew it before the doctors named it: *rabbit starvation*. A man who eats only very lean meat—rabbit in the north, lean desert game in the Namib—takes in protein and almost nothing else, no fat, none of what the fat carries, and the body cannot run on protein alone. It must process the protein, and the processing has costs the body pays in water and in other things it is not getting, and so the man weakens, and his mind goes strange, and his body begins to consume itself, and the cruel heart of it, the thing that makes it a special kind of horror, is that he is *eating the whole time*. He is not hungry in the ordinary way. His belly is full. He has meat. He is starving anyway, starving with a full belly, and unless he understands what is wrong and finds the missing thing, he will die that way: well-fed, and wasting, and at the end not entirely sane.

They reached the place where they were not entirely sane.

Martin would remember it in pieces. That was how it came back to him: fragments, the thread between them gone.

He remembered the weakness becoming something past weakness. A heaviness so total that the simple acts of the camp—fetching water, tending the fire—had to be steeled for, undertaken, recovered from. He remembered the two of them moving about the gorge like old men, stopping to rest on the way up to the pool, sitting down halfway through a task and not able, for long minutes, to make themselves rise and finish it. He remembered eating. Eating the lean dark meat with no pleasure and no relief. Eating because they knew they must, and being no better for it. The full belly and the wasting, side by side.

And he remembered, with a particular dread, the going-strange of the mind, because that was the part that frightened him worse than the weakness, worse even than the fear of dying: the sense of himself slipping, of the careful disciplined intelligence he had relied on his whole life beginning, here and there, to fail. The clarity went. The arithmetic he had carried so faithfully—the water, the meat, the days—became hard to hold; he would start a reckoning and lose the thread of it, and have to start again, and lose it again, and feel a cold animal panic at the loss. His temper, which had been his great steadiness, frayed. He snapped at Hermann over nothing, and Hermann, worse off than he was by then, snapped back or worse, withdrew into a black closed silence that was not the old volatility but something flatter and more frightening. The line between them and the animals—the line that a man’s mind draws and maintains, the line that makes him a man and not a beast scavenging in a gorge—that line, Martin felt, with horror, beginning to blur. There were moments, in the worst of it, when he caught himself thinking and feeling in ways that were not human thoughts, that were the thoughts of a cornered animal, narrow and savage and concerned with nothing but the body’s need. And the worst of it was that some clear remaining fragment of him could see it happening, could watch the man he had been thinning out toward the beast, and could do nothing to stop it, because the thing that would have stopped it was the very faculty that was failing.

He had thought, coming into the desert, that he and Hermann would suffer but remain themselves. He learned that you do not remain yourself. Take away the food and the water and the rest and the safety, one prop at a time, and the disciplined moral man comes down like anything else built and not maintained. There was no irreducible self at the bottom of him that the chemistry could not reach. What was left when it had done its work was not a hero enduring nobly. It was an animal in a gorge, eating and wasting and forgetting it had ever been anything else.

And yet, looking back, there was one redeeming filament running through the worst of it. Even there, even in the going-strange, the scientist did not entirely die. Some hard professional fragment of the two of them, some habit of observation built so deep by their training that not even rabbit starvation could quite root it out, kept *watching*. Kept noticing. In the rare clear hours, the two of them would talk about what was happening to them as though it were happening to someone else, to specimens, to a problem—*the weakness presents thus, the mental effects thus, the cause is surely dietary, surely the fat, surely something the lean meat lacks*—and the very act of observing it, of standing the small clear remaining part of themselves a little apart from the suffering and *studying* it, was, Martin came to believe, part of what saved them. Because it was that scientific fragment, that refusal to stop observing even while they came apart, that finally produced the understanding they needed—that turned the blind animal suffering into a *problem*, a problem with a cause, and a cause with, perhaps, a remedy. Two doctors of geology, dying of a thing they had not the medical knowledge to name, reasoned toward the answer anyway, from the symptoms, as they would have reasoned toward a hidden aquifer from the surface signs: *it is the fat, it is something in the fat, and we must find that something, in this country that has so little of it, or we will not last the season*.

It is a strange thing, Martin thought afterward, in the comfortable room with the science on the shelf that named what they had survived. The desert nearly killed them with their own ignorance. They would not

have starved with full bellies if they had known, at the start, what every Arctic hunter knew about lean meat. And the desert was very nearly thwarted by the one thing the two ignorant men did have, which was not knowledge but *method*—the trained, ingrained, unkillable habit of looking hard at a thing and reasoning from what you see—which, applied even by two half-starved men with their minds going strange, to the problem of their own dying bodies, found a way through. They did not survive because they were strong. They were not strong; they were as weak as men can be and live. They survived, in the end, because even at the bottom of it, even with the self thinning toward the beast, they could not entirely stop being what they were, which was two men who, faced with anything, even their own deaths, would try to *understand* it. And the understanding, when it came, was the thread they climbed back up.

Chapter 11 — The Turn

The understanding, when it came clear at last, did not feel like salvation. It felt like a small dull practical fact, arrived at by reasoning from the evidence, the way they arrived at everything. Only later could Martin see it for the turning point it was. At the time it was simply: *the organs*. *We have been eating the muscle and throwing away the organs. The organs are where the thing is.*

It came partly from the half-remembered hunting lore of other men, the kind of thing a man hears and forgets and then dredges up when his life depends on it—that the old hunters, the Bushmen, the men who lived on game and nothing else and did not die of it, ate the whole animal, and ate the *organs* first and with reverence: the liver, the kidneys, the fat around the gut, the marrow, the things a European sportsman discarded as offal. It came partly from reasoning: if the lean muscle lacked the thing they were dying for the want of, then the thing must be elsewhere in the animal, in the parts they had been wasting, because the animals themselves were not dying of it and the animals ate nothing but the desert. And it came partly from the body itself, from that same wiser-than-the-mind craving that had been screaming about fat for weeks—because when they first ate the liver, half in desperation, half in scientific hypothesis, the body's response was so immediate and so violent in its gratitude that it confirmed the theory better than any argument could.

The liver, first. They had shot a gemsbok, poor and lean like all of them now, but it had a liver, and they ate the liver, that evening,

and Martin would remember the eating of it as one of the strangest experiences of his life: the body seizing on it, the craving that had haunted him for weeks suddenly and fiercely answered, a sense of something long missing flooding back in, so strong that it was almost frightening, the flesh's blind joy at receiving, at last, a thing it had been dying without. They ate the liver, and the kidneys, and the fat that there was, little as it was, around the organs, where the muscle had none; they cracked the bones for the marrow; they ate, in short, the way the old hunters ate, the way the people of the country had always eaten, the whole animal and the organs first. And within days, within remarkably few days, the turn began.

It was not dramatic. That was the thing Martin wanted to be honest about, afterward, because the temptation in the telling was to make the turn a triumph, a rescue, a sudden glorious return of strength. It was not that. It was slow, and partial, and it left marks. But it was real. The bottomless weakness lifted, by degrees, into ordinary tiredness. The mind came back: the clarity returned, the arithmetic held again, the fragments rejoined into a man who could think; and Martin felt the relief of *that*, of having his own mind back, more keenly than he felt the return of the body, because the going-strange of the mind had frightened him worse than anything, and to feel himself becoming himself again, the careful disciplined self he had nearly lost, was like a man surfacing from deep water into air. The line between them and the animals, which had blurred so terribly, redrew itself. They were men again. Diminished, and marked, and no longer able to believe the comfortable thing about an irreducible noble self, but men, reasoning, observing, themselves, climbing back up the thread of their own understanding into something like sanity.

"We are idiots," Hermann said, when the worst was past and he could say it, the brightness coming back into him for the first time in many weeks, weak still but unmistakably himself again. "Two doctors of geology. We nearly died of a thing any Bushman child could have told us about. *Eat the liver, you fools*. That is the entire science of it. That is what nearly killed us—that we knew the age of every rock in this

gorge and did not know to eat the liver.” He laughed, a thin worn laugh, but a real one. “Cloos would be appalled. All that education, and we are saved at the last by remembering that hunters eat offal. There is a lesson in it somewhere, Henno, about the limits of the kind of knowing we were so proud of. I am too tired to work out what it is. But there is a lesson.”

“The lesson,” Martin said slowly—and he had been thinking about it, in the clear hours, as his mind came back, because it seemed to him important, the most important thing the desert had taught them yet—“is that knowing about a thing is not the same as knowing how to live with it. We knew about this country. We knew its rocks and its ages and its structure, knew it better than almost any men alive. And it nearly killed us anyway, because *knowing about* is not *knowing how*, and the desert does not care in the slightest how much you know about it. It cares whether you can live in it, which is a different skill entirely, an older one, the one the Bushmen had and we did not—the one that knows to eat the liver, that does not waste the organs, that has the thing in its hands and its habits and not just its head.” He looked out at the gorge, at the country that had so nearly finished them. “We have been trying to survive out here as scientists. And the science kept us alive, some of it—the water-reading saved us, the method saved us at the end. But the science was not enough. We had to become something else as well, something older, something the country could teach but the university could not—we had to learn to *live* here, in the body, in the doing, the way the people of the place have always lived here. And we learned it the hard way, the only way it can be learned, by nearly dying of not knowing it.”

Hermann was quiet, looking out at the same country.

“You will write that down,” he said at last, gently, the old joke, but with something under it now that had not been under it before—a respect, a recognition that the careful one had said a true thing. “Before we forget. I think it might be the truest thing either of us has learned out here. The whole point of the suffering, perhaps. That there are kinds of knowing that cannot be got from books—that have to be got

from the country, in the body, at the price the country charges—and that all our learning was, against this place, only the beginning of an education we had to finish in a gorge, eating liver, half out of our minds.” He lay back against the warm rock, spent and mending and himself. “Write it down, Henno. It is the one thing we have to bring back out of here that is worth the bringing.”

They were not done, and Martin knew it even in the relief of the turn. It was not a triumph. It was a reprieve. But a reprieve, in the desert, was a great deal—was, in fact, all there ever was—and he took it gladly, and ate his liver, and got his mind and his friend back, and did not believe for one moment that the country had agreed to let them keep it.

Chapter 12 — The Watchers

The war, which they had gone into the desert to escape, did not stay escaped. It came looking for them, in its way—not for them by name, the administration had surely long since written off two missing surveyors as a minor untidiness in a busy war, but for men like them, for the German men who had not presented themselves, and the looking was enough to put a new fear into the gorge, a fear they had been mercifully free of through the months of the building and the hunting and the diet crisis, when the only enemy had been the country itself.

It began with a sound.

Martin was up the gorge at the pool, in the early cool, when he heard it—a low droning, far off and high up, that did not belong to the desert's repertoire of sounds, which he had come to know as intimately as a man knows the sounds of his own house. He stood very still with the water bag half-filled and listened, and the sound resolved, and his blood went cold with a recognition that came up from a place older than his own experience of it: an aircraft. An aeroplane, somewhere up in the enormous sky over the desert, droning along on some patrol or survey of its own, and the sound of it carried for miles in that silence, and there was no way to know, from the bottom of the gorge, how high it was, or what it was looking for, or whether the two motor cars hidden up the side ravine, however well they had hidden them, might show as two glints of metal to a man with binoculars looking down from the air at a country where nothing made of metal had any business being.

He got under the overhang of the rock and stayed there until the

droning faded, and his heart did not slow until it was long gone, and when he came back to Carp Cliff and told Hermann, he saw his own fear answered in his friend's face, and saw something else in it too—a particular ghost that the word *aircraft* raised in any man who knew the history of that exact desert.

“You know what they did, the last time,” Hermann said quietly. “Here. In this country. The other war.”

“I know what they did.”

“Garub. A German flyer, in 'fifteen, came down out of the sun on a South African camp at Garub and bombed the horses—the cavalry horses, hundreds of them, grazing—and scattered them across the desert, and the wild horses out there now, the ones near Aus, are the children of those horses, gone feral, surviving where no horse should.” Hermann's face was grim. “Aircraft over this desert have a meaning, Henno. They have had a meaning for thirty years. And the meaning is that the war, which we keep telling ourselves cannot reach a gorge in the middle of nothing, has reached this country from the air before, and could reach us.” He looked up at the strip of sky visible from the ledge. “We have been thinking of ourselves as hidden. We are hidden from men on the ground. We are not so hidden from men in the air. We must think about that. We must think about it carefully.”

So they thought about it, and the thinking changed how they lived, added a new discipline to the old ones, a vigilance that had not been needed against the country but was needed now against their own kind. They were careful with the fire—small, smokeless where they could manage it, and never at all in the daylight hours when a column of smoke from a gorge would be a flag run up for any watcher. They kept the cars under cover, and went over the covering, and improved it. They learned the sky the way they had learned the ground, listening for the drone, ready to be under rock in a moment. And they began, that season, to use the other shelters—for they had not stayed only at Carp Cliff; over the long months they had made other camps, further up the gorge and in side canyons, partly against the failing of the water at any

one pool and partly, now, against exactly this, the need to be able to move, to not be a fixed target, to be two men who could vanish from one place and appear in another and never quite be where a searcher expected.

The strangeness of it was not lost on Martin—the strangeness of hiding from a war in the emptiest place on earth. They had come into the Namib because it was empty, because emptiness was safety, because a hundred kilometres of waterless gravel was a better wall than any the administration could build. And it had been safety, against the camp, against the wire. But it was not perfect safety, because nowhere was, because the war was a thing that reached, that put men in aircraft and sent them droning over even the emptiest country, that did not respect the desert's indifference or grant the desert's distances the immunity Martin had half believed they conferred. They were fugitives. He had not, somehow, fully felt it until the aircraft came—had thought of their life as a hard private struggle with the country, man against desert, the oldest and cleanest of contests. The aircraft reminded him that it was not clean and not private, that they were hiding, that there were men out there who would, if they found them, put them behind the wire after all, that the whole desert life was lived under a low ceiling of that possibility, and that the country's emptiness was not their ally so much as their accomplice, hiding them as it might hide anything, with the same indifference it brought to everything, neither for them nor against them, simply vast enough to lose two men in if the two men were careful and the searchers were not.

They were careful. The droning came, now and then, over the seasons, and each time they went to ground and waited it out and were not found, and the cars were not seen, and the small smokeless fire raised no flag. But the ease was gone from the gorge after that first aircraft—the sense, which they had earned through the building and the hunting and even the diet crisis, that the gorge was *theirs*, a private world with only the country in it. After the aircraft there was always the third party, the war, the low ceiling of the possibility of being found, and Martin came to think of it as one more of the desert's hard truths,

no different in kind from the water or the lean meat: that there was no perfect safety, not even here, not even in the emptiest place on earth; that a man who flees the world does not escape it, only puts more distance and more difficulty between himself and it; and that the distance and the difficulty, however great, are never quite infinite, and a man lives, even in the deepest desert, under whatever ceiling the world can still reach him beneath—which, with aircraft in the sky and a war grinding on with no end in sight, was lower than the enormous emptiness had let him, for a while, pretend.

Chapter 13 — The Long Grind

Time was the enemy they had not reckoned on, going in. They had reckoned on the water and the meat and the heat; they had reckoned, more or less, on the danger; they had not reckoned on the sheer length of it, the months piling on months with no end visible, the war out there grinding through its years while they ground through theirs in the gorge. A man can brace for a hardship of a known size. It was the not knowing—one more year, or three, or never—that wore the bracing away.

That was the thing that wore hardest, in the end—not the crises, which a man could brace for and recover from, but the grind between them, the long flat stretches in which nothing happened and nothing changed and there was no reason to believe anything ever would. A man can endure almost anything for a known length of time. It is the *unknown* length that breaks him, the not-knowing, the absence of any horizon to fix his endurance against. They did not know how long the war would last. No one knew. And so they did not know how long they would be in the desert, which meant they were enduring not a hardship of a certain size but a hardship of no fixed size at all, that might end next month or might go on until they died of it, and the mind, Martin found, does not do well with that, the mind wants a term, a date, a finish to count down to, and the desert gave them none, and the lack of it was its own slow torture.

The friendship took the weight of it, the way the friendship took the weight of everything out there, and it bent and did not break, though there were times Martin was not sure it would hold. Two men, alone, for years, in a gorge—there is no relationship a writer of adventures imagines that is harder than that, and none that the adventures so consistently get wrong, making it all noble comradeship, when the truth is that two men confined together that long, however much they love each other, will also, inevitably, come to grate on each other in ways that have nothing to do with love and everything to do with proximity, with the absence of any third thing, any escape, any relief from the unending presence of the other man's habits and moods and the sound of his eating and the shape of his silences. Martin loved Hermann. He was also, by the third year, sometimes nearly mad with the constant unrelieved fact of him, with the volatility and the moods and the brilliance that had nowhere to go, and he knew that Hermann felt the same about him, about his steadiness that on a bad day read as a maddening flat imperturbability, about the careful pessimism that Hermann had once called the hoarding of sugar and now, ground down by the years, sometimes could not bear.

They had learned to manage it, mostly. They had learned the value of separation—of one man going up the gorge for water and taking longer than the water needed, of the other not asking why; of the unspoken agreement to give each other the gift of solitude, as much of it as the gorge allowed, because solitude was the one thing two men confined together most need and can least easily get. They had learned when to leave a mood alone and when a word might lift it. They had learned, in short, to be married, in the way that two people who must share a small world for an unknown length of time must learn to be married, with all the accommodation and forbearance and deliberate small kindness that real marriage takes, and the friendship survived the grind because they did that work, because they tended it, because each of them understood that the other man was, in that whole enormous emptiness, the only human thing he had, and was therefore to be preserved, protected, forgiven, at almost any cost.

And there were the other times, which were the redemption of it—the times the grind lifted and the old thing came back, the two scientists at the desert, building an idea between them, and the gorge filled up again with the pleasure of each other's minds. Because the desert, for all that it ground them down, was also, to two men trained to see, *endlessly interesting*, and the interest never entirely failed even when everything else did. The country changed, slowly, across the seasons, and they read the changes. And once—Martin would remember it always, as a kind of gift the desert gave them in the middle of the grind, unasked—once, after a real rain came down off the highland far away and laid a brief green flush across the gravel plains above the gorge, they climbed up out of the canyon to look, and saw a thing that took the years off both of them in an instant: the game, drawn to the new grass from across the whole desert, gathered on the plain in numbers neither of them had imagined the country could hold—springbok in their thousands, three thousand, four thousand, a great pale moving multitude of them, and zebra among them, and gemsbok, the whole desert's hidden life come out of hiding all at once to the brief feast of the rain, the empty gravel transformed for a few weeks into something out of the world's first morning, teeming, alive, glorious.

They lay on the lip of the gorge and watched it for a long time and did not speak, and Martin felt the scientist in him stir and want to count, to record, to understand—*how far have they come, what triggers it, how does the country signal the rain to animals a hundred kilometres off*—and felt, under the scientist, something simpler and larger, a plain human wonder at the sight, at being two of the very few men alive who would ever see the Namib do this, who had paid the desert's terrible price and received, among the payments it took, this: the gift of the country's secret abundance, the proof that the emptiness was not empty at all but only patient, holding its life in reserve against the rare mercy of the rain.

"It was almost worth it," Hermann said quietly, beside him, watching the multitude move on the plain. "To see this. Almost." A pause. "Do not tell me the actuarial tables. Not now. Just—for once—let it be

almost worth it.”

“It is almost worth it,” Martin agreed, and meant it. The desert teemed below them, and his friend was beside him, and the grind and the fear and the unknown length of it were held off for that one hour by the sheer overwhelming fact of the thing they were seeing. He lay on the warm rock and watched the springbok run and was, for that hour, against everything, glad.

Chapter 14 — Korn

It was Hermann who began to fail, in the end, and Martin, who could read rock and water and game, who had brought them through the thirst and the lean meat and the long grind by the patient application of everything he knew, could not read a way to save him, and the helplessness of that was the worst thing the desert ever did to him, worse than the rabbit starvation, worse than the fear of the aircraft, worse than anything the country had taken from his own body—because it was not his own body now, it was Hermann's, and there was nothing his carefulness could do.

It came on after the diet crisis, in the long grind of the third year, and at first it wore the diet crisis's clothes, so that they nearly missed it—the weakness, the heaviness, the slowness that they had learned to read as the lean meat, the want of the things the organs carried. They had beaten that once; they thought, when it came again in Hermann, that it was the same enemy and would yield to the same remedy, and they ate the organs and the marrow and what fat there was, and waited for the turn that had come before.

The turn did not come. That was the first wrongness, the thing that told Martin, with a slow cold dread, that this was not the old enemy in a new season but a different enemy wearing the old one's face. Hermann ate the liver and did not mend. The weakness deepened past the place where the diet crisis had bottomed out. And then the symptoms came that the diet crisis had not had, that belonged to some other deficiency, some other thing the desert's poor table failed to provide—the

swelling, first in the legs, the flesh going soft and heavy and holding the press of a finger; the heart that Hermann said raced and fluttered when he lay still; the numbness creeping in the hands and feet; the exhaustion that no rest touched. Martin watched it come on and did not have a name for it—he learned the name later, the way he learned all the names later, in the comfortable room: *beriberi*, the disease of a deficiency, of a thing called thiamine that the body must have and that their desert diet, for all the organ meat, did not supply in enough; a disease of prisoners and sailors and the besieged, of men whose food fails them in one specific invisible way—but the name would have changed nothing even if he had had it, because the cure for it was not a thing the Namib held, the cure was the missing substance, and the missing substance was not in the gorge or the game or anything the country offered, and Martin understood, slowly, with a grief that he carried for the rest of his life, that his friend was failing of a thing the desert could not cure and that he, the careful one, the finder of water, the reader of the country, was for the first time entirely powerless to help.

He tried everything he could think of. He hunted further, harder, brought back the richest organs of the best animals he could find, on the theory—wrong, as it happened, though he did not know it—that more of the same nourishment that had saved them from the rabbit starvation might save Hermann from this. It did not. Hermann ate, and swelled, and weakened, and the awful thing was how *clear* he stayed, how the mind, this time, did not go—the rabbit starvation had blurred the mind toward the animal, a horror but a mercy of a kind, because a man whose mind is going does not fully know what is happening to him; but this disease left the mind intact and only took the body, so that Hermann lay on the blanket at Carp Cliff, swelling and failing and short of breath, and watched it happen to himself with the full clear intelligence that had been the best of him, and knew exactly what it meant, and so did Martin, and neither of them could do a single thing about it.

“You must not look like that,” Hermann said to him once, near the

worst of it, in a clear hour. His voice was weak but the wit was still in it, worn thin but there, the curtain he had hidden behind his whole life still raised, gamely, even now. “You have the face of a man at a funeral, Henno. It is very depressing. A dying man wants cheerful company. Tell me something. Tell me a rock. Tell me about the schist, the way you used to bore me with it in Bonn—God, I would give a great deal to be bored by you about a rock again.”

And Martin, because his friend asked it, because it was the only thing left that he could give, told him about the rock—sat by the blanket in the gorge and talked about the schist of the canyon walls, the folding of it, the unimaginable pressures and ages that had twisted it into the shapes that surrounded them, the whole long story of the stone, told quietly, steadily, the way you tell a story to a sick child, and Hermann lay and listened with his eyes closed and the swelling in his legs and the flutter in his heart and the clear mind taking it in, and once, in the middle of it, said, without opening his eyes, “That is better. That is much better. The world makes sense when you explain the rocks. It is the one thing that has always made sense, your rocks. Go on.” And Martin went on, and did not let his voice break, though it wanted to, because the careful one’s last gift to his failing friend was steadiness, was the refusal to let the fear and the grief into the voice that was telling him about the stone, and he gave it, the whole long patient story of the schist, until Hermann slept.

He had learned to find water, and to take meat, and to endure the years. He learned now the last thing the country had to teach him, and it taught him in the body of the man he loved most: that there is a limit, and at the limit all a man’s care buys him is the right to sit by the blanket and tell the stories and keep the fear out of his voice. It was not nothing. It was not the same as saving him, either, and Martin would grieve that all his life.

Chapter 15 — The Surrender

In the end they were not beaten by the desert, exactly, and not captured, and not starved—they were beaten by the simple fact that Hermann would die if he stayed, and that there was, somewhere out beyond the gorge, in the world they had fled, the one thing that might save him and that the desert did not hold, and that to get it they would have to give themselves up, walk back out of the country and into the hands of the administration they had spent two and a half years evading, and trade their freedom, at last, for Hermann's life. It was not a hard decision. It was the easiest decision Martin ever made, and the most sorrowful, and he made it the moment it became clear that staying meant watching his friend die, and there was nothing in him, no pride, no fear of the wire, no attachment to the life they had built, that weighed for one instant against it.

“We are going out,” he told Hermann, on the morning he had decided it. “You need what the desert does not have. We are going to Windhoek, to a doctor, and they will do to us whatever they do to us, the camp, the wire, all of it, and it does not matter, because you are dying out here and there is medicine out there, and so we are going out.” He said it flatly, the way he said the things he meant most, and he did not leave it open to argument, because he knew Hermann would argue, would protest the giving-up of everything they had endured for, the surrender at the very last, the trading of two and a half years' freedom for a hospital bed and a prison camp.

And Hermann did argue, weakly, from the blanket. “Two and a half

years,” he said. “We have lasted two and a half years, Henno. The war cannot last forever. If we hold a little longer —”

“You do not have a little longer,” Martin said. “That is the whole of it. I have done the arithmetic, Hermann. I have done the arithmetic on everything out here for two and a half years, the water and the meat and the days, and I am doing it now on you, and the arithmetic says you do not have a little longer, and so we are going out, today, and I will hear no more about it.” His voice did not break. He had become very good, over the years, at not letting his voice break. “I did not bring you into this desert to watch you die in it for the sake of a freedom that is no good to a dead man. We came out here to live. You cannot live out here any longer. So we go where you can. It is the same logic that has kept us alive the whole time. It has not changed because the answer is one we did not want.”

So they went out. They loaded what would load—not much; they left most of the desert life where it lay, the camp at Carp Cliff, the things they had made and used and depended on, and Martin felt the strangeness of that, of walking away from the gorge that had so nearly killed them and was, somehow, in the leaving of it, revealed to have become *home*—and they got Hermann into the bakkie, swollen and failing but clear-eyed, and Otto into his place between the seats, and they drove up out of the gorge for the last time, up the side ravine and onto the flat gravel plain, into the enormous light, and pointed the cars east, toward the world.

Martin looked back, once, from the lip, at the canyon going away below—the dark folded walls, the pale river-bed, the pool at Carp Cliff where the carp had drifted and they had drunk and built their life—and he felt a grief that surprised him with its size, a grief he had not expected to feel for a place that had taken so much from them and so nearly taken everything. He had thought he would be glad to leave it. He was not glad. He was leaving it because he had to, because it could not save Hermann, and he was grateful to be going to where Hermann might be saved; and at the same time he was leaving the country that had taught him the deepest things he knew, that had stripped him

down past the self he had thought was his and shown him what was under it, that had nearly destroyed him and had, in the destroying, made him—and a man does not leave such a place gladly, however hard it was, because it was *his*, in a way nothing in the comfortable world would ever be his again, paid for at a price the comfortable world could not imagine and would never ask. He looked back at the gorge, and said nothing, and turned the car east, and drove away from the desert toward the war.

The drive out was the hardest driving he ever did, every kilometre a calculation of how to spare the failing man on the seat, and they came at last, after days, to the edge of the settled country, to the first farm, to the first telephone, to the machinery of the world they had stepped out of, and Martin made the call that ended their desert life—telephoned the authorities, gave their names, said where they were, said that one of them was gravely ill and needed a doctor, and surrendered, in a single sentence into a crackling line, the freedom they had paid two and a half years of suffering to keep.

He had braced for everything. He had braced, on the long drive out, for the camp, the wire, the interrogation, the punishment that two men who had evaded internment for two and a half years might expect; he had braced, most of all, for them to be too slow, too official, too tangled in their own procedures to get Hermann the doctor in time. He put down the telephone in the farmhouse, with his friend swollen and failing in the bakkie outside and two and a half years of his life behind him in the desert, and stood for a moment in the strange enclosed air of a room with walls and a roof and a floor, the first such room he had stood in for two and a half years, feeling the desert life close behind him like a door.

Chapter 16 — Put to Work

They were not interned.

They came in, the two of them, after two and a half years in the desert, having evaded the whole machinery of the war, braced for the camp and the wire and the punishment—and the war, when they finally walked back into its hands, looked at them, and got Hermann to a doctor, and then, in effect, shrugged, and put them to work. Martin would think about it for the rest of his life as a last joke the country played, or perhaps not a joke at all.

The doctor saved Hermann. That was the first and most important thing, and Martin was grateful for it past any words he had—the thing the desert could not do, the medicine the gorge did not hold, supplied at last by the world they had fled, the swelling going down, the heart steadying, the body, slowly, mending, the friend returned to him from the edge he had watched him go to and could not pull him back from. The medicine was thiamine, the missing substance, the want of which the Namib's poor table had nearly killed him for; a small ordinary thing, freely available in the settled world, that the desert in all its vastness simply did not have. Hermann lived. The careful one's helplessness at the limit had been real—Martin could not have saved him—but the world could, and did, and Martin had done the one thing that was left to him at the limit, which was to bring him to where he could be saved, and it had been enough. He had not been able to cure his friend. He had been able to carry him to the cure. It was, he came to think, the most a man can usually do, and on the rare occasions it is enough,

more than enough.

And then the surveyors. The administration, having interned a great many German men at the start of the war and found, two and a half years in, that it had a country to run and not enough men who knew it to run it, looked at the two doctors of geology who had just walked out of the desert—two men who knew the South-West better than almost anyone alive, who had spent two and a half years learning its deepest country in a way no salaried surveyor ever would—and did the sensible thing, the bureaucratically obvious thing, the thing that made the whole grand tragedy of their flight dwindle in an afternoon to a matter of personnel: it took them on. As surveyors. To map and measure the country they had hidden in. The war wanted their eyes. The very competence that had kept them alive in the desert was a thing the administration needed, and so the men it would have caged it instead employed, and Martin and Hermann, who had thrown their lives into the Namib rather than be interned, came out of it and were, after a doctor and a few forms, simply given jobs.

There was no drama in it. The war that had loomed over their whole desert life, that had sent them into the gorge and kept them hiding from the aircraft, turned out, met face to face, to be a clerk and a form and a job of work. Not that the war was not terrible; it was terrible, elsewhere, for others, on a scale Martin could hardly imagine from the bottom of his gorge. But the particular terror it had held for *them*, when it finally arrived, was a tired administration's pragmatic shrug, and the disproportion between the fear and the fact was so great that Martin did not know, for a long time, whether to laugh or weep at it, and in the end did a little of both.

Hermann did not have long, as it turned out, though they did not know it then and it was no part of the desert's doing.

He lived through the war, mended, and worked, and was himself again, the brightness and the brilliance restored, the desert behind them both and a country to map ahead. And then, a year or so after the war ended, on a night near Windhoek, his car went off a railway

bridge into the dry bed of the Gammams river, and he was killed, and the manner of it was never fully settled—whether the road, the dark, the simple bad luck of a bridge and a night; or something else, something in a man who had been to the edge of dying in a gorge and perhaps brought back from it a thing that did not entirely heal; Martin did not know, and would not pretend to know, and did not let himself, in all the years after, settle it one way or the other, because to settle it would have been to claim a certainty he did not have about the inner country of even his closest friend, and the desert had taught him, if it had taught him anything, the difference between what a man can read and what he cannot. He could read rock and water. He could not read, finally, the whole of the man he had loved most and survived the desert with. The bridge, the dry river-bed, the dark—these were facts. What was in Hermann on that last night was not a fact Martin had access to, and he left it unread, out of a respect that was the last and deepest thing the desert had taught him: that there are limits, and that at the limit a man is helpless, and that the helplessness must be borne without the false comfort of a certainty one has not earned.

He grieved him all his life. He also lived—a long life, a full one, the desert and the friend carried in him through all of it: the years of the Geological Survey, the country mapped at last, the work that the two of them had thrown their lives into and that Martin alone carried on; and then the wider world, the research, the chair at Göttingen, the students, the long distinguished career of a man who had once eaten liver half out of his mind in a gorge to keep from dying with a full belly, and who never, in all the comfortable years after, in all the rooms with books on the shelf and food in the kitchen, forgot what the country had taught him, or stopped being, under the professor, the man the desert had made.

And the country was still there. That was the last thing, the thing Martin held onto, the image he kept: that the Namib, which had taken so much and given the hard gifts it gave and outlasted, in the end, the friend he had shared it with—the Namib was still there, the gorge, the dark folded walls, the pool where the carp drifted, the enormous

indifferent stars over Carp Cliff; still there, unchanged, neither for them nor against them, having lost two men in itself for two and a half years and given them up again without a mark to show it, the way it gave up everything, the way it would give up everyone, in time. It did not remember them. It did not care that they had lived in it or that one of them was dead. It was simply, enormously, indifferently *there*, as it had been before they came and would be long after the last man who knew their story was gone. The honest country. The patient country. The teacher whose lessons cost everything, and that Martin spent the rest of his life trying, and failing, and never stopping trying, to say what they had been worth.

What Is Real in This Book

A note from the author, and an invitation.

Everything in this novel is made up. And almost none of it is.

Henno Martin and Hermann Korn were **real geologists**. **Otto** was Korn's real dog. The **Kuiseb canyon**, the **two and a half years**, the **rabbit-starvation crisis**, Korn's **beriberi**, and their **return as surveyors rather than internees** are documented. This book is an **original retelling of those events** — the history is public; Henno Martin's own sentences in his memoir *The Sheltering Desert* (1956) are **not borrowed here** (that book remains in copyright).

What I invented: scene connective tissue, interior monologue, dialogue where the record is silent, and any unnamed farming family who helped them — kept true to the documented frame and to the respect these men earned.

The men (real)

Henno Martin (1910–1998) and **Hermann Korn** (1907–1946) — German geologists, doctoral students of **Hans Cloos**, anti-Nazi émigrés who left Germany in **1935**. They mapped the escarpment, worked the Naukluft, and from **1937** located water for farmers. On **25 May 1940** they drove into the Namib rather than be interned as enemy aliens.

They emerged in **September 1942** when Korn's illness could no longer be managed in the gorge.

Korn's death (9 August 1946) — post-war, not at war's end. His car left a railway bridge near Windhoek at night; the circumstances were **never fully settled**. This book holds the ambiguity. It does not claim suicide or absolve accident.

Otto — Korn's dog, their alarm; gored by an oryx in the documented account and saved with help from sympathetic farmers.

The survival (real, unromantic)

- **Place:** the **Kuiseb River canyon** — schist gorges, **Carp Cliff** (Karpfenkliff), three shelters over the period.
- **Hunting:** mountain zebra, oryx, ostrich, springbok, klipspringer, steenbok; a feral cattle bull among the largest kills.
- **Water:** the eternal problem — pools and waterholes in a river that is often dry on the surface.
- **The diet crisis:** lean game without enough fat ☒ **“rabbit starvation”** / protein poisoning; vitamin deficits; the documented mental erosion Martin described.
- **The ending:** thiamine treatment in the settled world; **not interned** on return; employed as surveyors.

What I invented: the particular texture of any single day's hunt, argument, or silence — always within these documented bounds.

Fiction vs. the memoir

	Martin's memoir (1956)	This book
Status	In copyright (EU life+70 ☒ 2068)	Original retelling of events
Sentences	His	Mine
Facts	His frame	Same documented frame, independently researched
Title	<i>The Sheltering Desert</i>	Working title — a distinct published title is recommended

The Real Places in This Book

Go. The desert is still there.

The Kuiseb canyon & Carp Cliff — the schist gorge that hid them. The **Henno Martin shelter** at Kuiseb is a known landmark; approach with respect — it is real country, not a set.

Swakopmund & Walvis Bay — where the émigré geologists landed in **1935**; the German-Namibian strand still lives in the living fabric of the country.

The Namib-Naukluft — the oldest desert on Earth; the dunes, the gravel plains, the fog belt.

Gobabeb Namib Research Institute — if you want the science of fog, fauna, and survival in this exact biome.

Windhoek — where the strange anticlimax landed: a doctor, forms, a job, not a camp.

Aroab & the Kalahari edge — the author's personal thread (the Hansen family, German South-West African farmers interned in the First World War) is real soil under this retelling, not plot invention.

Illustrations

Freely licensed photographs of the Namib, the Kuiseb, and the living desert accompany the ebook and PDF editions. Credits and sources: `design/IMAGE_COMPENDIUM.md`.

Before publication

This draft awaits a **Namibian / German-Namibian sensitivity read** and natural-history verification (Topnaar / ☒Aonin representation, Korn's death, Gobabeb-grade ecology). The prose is complete; the veto of the people who know this ground is not optional.

Great real bushcraft. Not always a fun read. Real story. Real respect.

Acknowledgements

These books exist because other people made things that lived in my head long after I'd finished them. My thanks:

To **Dennis E. Taylor**, who wrote software for thirty-five years — front-line grunt to upper management, always in IT — before he ever wrote a Bob, and then proved that a career programmer can write gripping, genuinely entertaining stories. As one software engineer to another: it would be my great honour to talk shop with you over a pint, in “real” (sic). *The Court thanks the Bobs.*

To **Ray Porter**, for giving me the voices of the Court in my head. May I be so lucky as to have you narrate the US release.

To **Scott Sigler**, for *EarthCore* and *Mount Fitz Roy*.

To **Michael Crichton**, for — honestly — everything.

To **Dan Brown**, for teaching me a new kind of storytelling.

To **Andy Weir**, for showing how to write fiction on the back of real science that isn't science fiction.

To **Neill Blomkamp**, for *District 9*, *Elysium*, and *Chappie* (Die Antwoord and all). Your films kept the characters and the scenes grounded in my head. May you be the one who puts this on the big screen.

And to **Patrick Rothfuss**, for getting me into a genre I never knew I'd fall in love with. As my small way of giving back: you have free use of Arjuna Badger Press, always.

— Andries J. Greyling

Illustrations

A gallery of the real places, peoples, and made wonders behind this book — the wider subject, not only the scenes in the prose. All images are freely licensed (public domain / CC0 / CC BY / CC BY-SA); credits follow.

Places of Awe



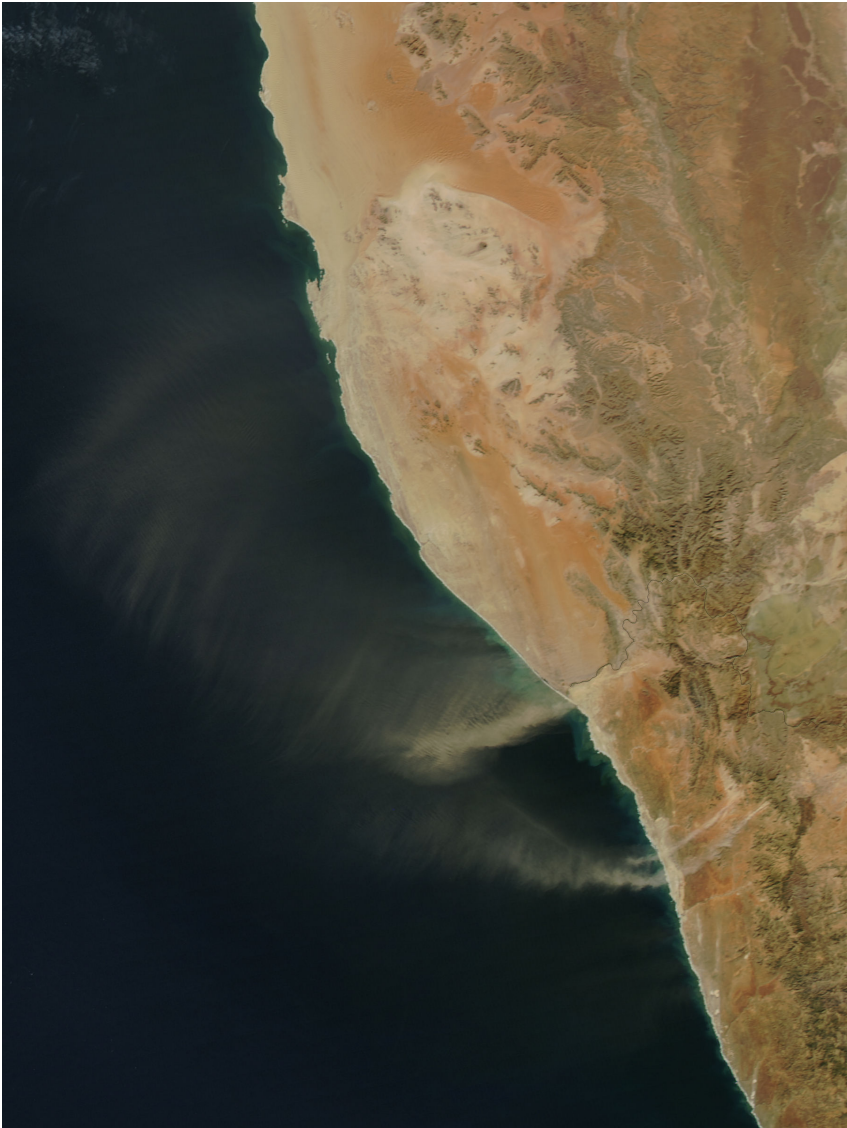
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The Namib dunes — the oldest desert on Earth, the sheltering and the killing one.

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The Namib gravel plains and fog-belt — water out of the air when there is none in the ground.

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Swakopmund and Walvis Bay — the coast they arrived on in 1935, fleeing one war into another.

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Things of Wonder



Welwitschia mirabilis — a living fossil that drinks the fog and outlives empires.

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The gemsbok — the desert game the two men hunted to stay alive, and kept observing as they starved.

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The quiver tree (kokerboom) — the arid country's own architecture.

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The Peoples



The Topnaar (ǀAonin) Nama of the lower Kuiseb — the people who belong to that river.

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Nama dress — a living people of the Namib's edges.

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