

## Until Thieves Do Us Part

It seemed that I was the only living thing on the face of that moon-silvered waste and my tiny fire was a foreign thing in a world of grey and black. My sleeping bag invited refuge from the biting cold, but I was loath to leave the glow and crackle of the flames. Against the frosty black of a sky that showed every star, the Land Rover was a solid, familiar shape and the only assurance that I had come here of my own volition. Without it, I was stranded in this desolate place of shadows and trackless Mopani forest.

To the last of my coffee, I added the dregs of the brandy and wondered what to do with the bottle. It seemed wrong to discard it here, but to take it back to civilisation was clearly impractical. I resolved to bury it in the morning.

Fortified by the spirit, I rubbed my hands and considered the silent trees about me. A store of wood was called for and if I hurried, I could gather enough before the fire died and total darkness descended. I stamped my feet and hunched away into the dryness beyond the firelight. Beside the fire, Barrabas stretched sleepily, wagged his tail as I left and resumed his snoring. Camping out was a matter of keeping warm as far as he was concerned.

When I came back, I was dragging a huge, fallen bough and struggling to control a bundle of dry wood under the other arm. Barrabas hardly registered my return, but the dog beside the figure across the fire pricked tattered ears and growled a warning.

The sound of the branch hitting the dusty ground was loud and abrupt and the rattle of the lesser limbs seemed to go on forever as they joined it. There was no reaction from the other man, but Barrabas opened one eye and his tail managed two lazy movements and then was still. Probably more to welcome the wood than his master, I thought bitterly. The stranger and his dog warming themselves at my fire could have stolen everything in the camp without inconveniencing Barrabas.

Feeling strangely usurped, I sat down on my canvas stool and started breaking wood while I studied my visitor. He stared into the flames without moving, the remains of at least three animal skins about his skinny shoulders. In that boneless way of the rural African, he squatted comfortably on his haunches, arms folded across a cadaverous chest so that the mantle hung down to the ground about him. Like its master, the dog was black and ribby, but unlike him, its yellow eyes held mine unflinchingly, until I was the one to turn away. I tried Chilapalapa, lingua franca of the country.

"I see you, father. It is cold tonight. It is good to have a fire."

The firelight gilded a face that might have been carved from a Mopani stump. It was impossible to guess at his age. The skin stretched tightly across the cheekbones, the sunken cheeks and the thin line of his mouth reminded me of my reason for being here. He made no response and I wondered if he might be touched. It would explain his silence and his sudden appearance in this wild and uninhabited area. The retarded and the disabled were a burden in impoverished tribal lands and if one such unfortunate soul were to wander off, searches would be half-hearted indeed. Heaven alone knew how he could exist out here. I tried again.

“What tribe are you, father? Ndebele? Mashona? Batonga? Nyanja?”

I watched his face but there was no movement. He might have been dead,

“I am looking for the bones of the old ones, father. From long ago. Before I was born. But not before your time, my father?” I coaxed gently. I hadn’t been doing too well on my own, I reflected, so time spent soft-soaping this strange old man might be time well spent.

“What will you do with these bones when you find them, white man?”

His voice was the sound of dry leaves blown across the rocks, and it emerged without any visible movement of his lips. But with the utterance, he looked up and those sunken eyes were the colour of milk. Somewhere a nightjar called and I felt the icy breath of the night on my back.

I sat and stared at the old man, my voice caught in my throat so that I could not reply. How could he survive out here, not only alone, but blind? Any hopes I might have had that he might know of the burial sites shrivelled under that direct but sightless gaze. Hesitantly, I leaned forward and raised a hand to pass it before his eyes. The black dog drew back its lip, exposing worn and blunted canines and I withdrew my hand hurriedly.

“Why do you make these signs with your hands?” Although the face was immobile, I thought there was a hint of amusement in the ancient voice. “I am blind. You need not fear me and anyway, your white man’s magic is of no use here.”

“I am asking if my father knows of the old places. Where the people were buried. I seek the bones of the people who lived and died here.”

“And I asked you... what will you do with these bones?”

I considered trying to explain anthropology and decided against it.

“I will take them back to the school that has sent me to find them. There we will study them and find out many things about the old ones.”

The unsettling stare of the colourless eyes continued and the sound he made might have been a chuckle.

“And then what would you do with the bones... throw them away?”

“No, no, no! Then they will be kept in a place of honour where many people will see them and wonder at them.” I thought it was a fair description of the museum I had in mind.

He seemed to think that over for some time, and then he dropped his eyes to the flames again, shaking his head. This time, his voice was almost inaudible.

“The people would not like that. They wish only to rest. It is not good to hear that this thing can be done to you after you are gone.”

With one eye on his dog, I stood up and went to the Land Rover.  
I returned, unwrapping my precious skull.

“Father, this is one such thing which was found many years ago by a hunter. He, himself, is long dead, but many wise men have studied it and great arguments came about because of it. I have come to find the answers.”

The old man nodded and held out a hand like the claw of a bird.

“Give it to me,” he commanded.

Without thinking, I did so and my heart froze as he clasped it to his bosom and the incredibly wrinkled hands groped feverishly over the yellowed and fragile relic. His fingers paused where I had so painstakingly drilled and wired the lower mandible back in place, and I prayed that the ancient bone held under the strain of his excited exploration. I was completely unprepared for his next move.

In a flurry of ragged skins and naked limbs, he was on his feet, the dog beside him. I saw then that he really was quite tiny. The skull was held protectively away from me under one skeletal arm while those white, staring orbs dared me to approach.

“So... white man! Thief who would take even more bones away with you! Your wise men must go hungry for their knowledge. It is good that you have returned this to its place and here it will stay!” And he turned on his heel and strode away into the night, his dog ranging ahead of him.

I started after them, my angry shouts echoing through the trees, but the black dog suddenly dashed back and stopped, six feet away, its yellow eyes smouldering and an ugly running snarl freezing me where I stood. I stopped shouting and appealed hopelessly instead to the silent darkness. After an eternity, the dog backed off, one pace at a time. I was only too aware that the old man was getting further and further away with his precious booty. Even in my rage, I wondered how he made his way in the dark and then realised that it was all the same to him.

Suddenly, the dog wheeled about and sped off. I shook myself and felt the anger starting again. I stamped back to the fire, turning from time to time to listen. There was nothing. The kick I launched at Barrabas was only vaguely satisfying and he did not stay to afford me another. With a surprised yelp and a resentful backward look, he retired under the Land Rover as I stoked up the fire and tried to gather my wits. Barrabas mistook this for an invitation and crawled out to reclaim his place. The branch I hurled at him sent him scrambling back in indecent haste.

“Bugger off, you useless parasite!” I screamed at him. “Where the hell were you when that thieving old sod and his mangy mutt were terrorising me?”

That set me off on a real tantrum and I let my frustration and rage take complete control. What local fauna there was listened silently to the full extent of my vocabulary and it was midnight before I was able to close my eyes although I had crawled, exhausted, into my

sleeping bag two hours earlier. As I drifted off, I thought I heard Barrabas stealthily sinking down on the far side of the glowing coals.

Next morning, I woke with that befuddled sense of loss that follows any catastrophe. But, in the thin light of the new day, the situation didn't seem irretrievable. I crawled out and stirred some life into my fire, Barrabas watching me warily.

"Morning, you fat sponger. No hard feelings? Good... because I couldn't care less. You and I are going to track that old goat and when we find him, you can sort out his dog while I watch from safety. Then I'll nip in and get back my skull. How's that for a plan?"

Barrabas relaxed, and by a faint stirring of his tail, showed his willingness to forgive, particularly as I was doing interesting things with a tin and the opener.

By ten that morning, it was clear that I was no tracker, or that the old man had flown, for the soft ground showed no sign of his passing. Barrabas was worse than useless, sitting in the shade scratching himself or investigating and marking trees. I thought for a time it might be a sign that the old man's dog had passed the way, but after watching my companion for a while I had to conclude, that, arrant coward that he was, he was issuing challenges he could be certain would never be taken up in this forsaken place.

By noon, I was soaked with sweat, disconsolate and parched with thirst. The skull was gone and so was the old man. In these trackless wastes, it wasn't even possible to guess at a line of flight.

Looking in any direction, there was no point to which a fugitive might head. The world was flat, dusty, featureless and mostly covered by trees. There was no water, no human inhabitants and little wild-life. The primitives who had roamed this inhospitable wilderness had grubbed a mean and nomadic existence that stunted their bodies and ended in early death.

The old man must have had exceptional powers of endurance and uncanny bush craft even before losing his sight. Perhaps the dog was able to feed them both, hunting for rodents and scenting water in secret places.

Back at the vehicle, I packed away my gear and whistled for Barrabas. It was good to feel the normality of mechanical power under me again and I headed for the horizon. The skull was gone, but I still had my maps and theories. The ground was fairly level and we made good time, weaving in and out of the trees and avoiding the softer patches where springhare warrens honeycombed the grey earth.

That night we slept under a dense Mopani canopy against which the firelight played until I fell asleep watching it. The forest was thicker here and my pile of firewood was the height of the Land Rover. We were thirty miles from the last camp, but after the night before I felt better for the size of the fire.

Morning seemed to come, as they always do, minutes after I fell asleep and with the shreds of a dream still haunting me, I sat bolt upright in my sleeping bag, as dew ran off the nylon to darken the sand around me.

I stared about me at the familiar things of the camp. The dream had faded away but I packed without eating and only a splash of water on my face from the precious store on the Land Rover. By the time the sun cleared the trees, we were five miles away and approaching the line on my map which indicated a river.

If I hadn't taken such careful bearings, I would have missed it. The ground hardly dipped where I crossed the river bed and any water that might have flowed there had long gone. Not to the distant sea, but into the eternally thirsty earth, for these waterways were rivers and streams in name only, being merely the line of least resistance for the rains that fell here perhaps once in a half decade or so.

Over the millennia, even this tiny, token flow had worn a path that I could follow to its source. I drove back into the depression and trundled further inland, stopping to make notes and take bearings as I went.

My instruments told me the ground was rising imperceptibly, but it was mid-afternoon before I reached a low kopje of jumbled boulders, and there I stopped.

In a land as flat as this, the kopje was an imposing feature and there, instinctively, I knew I would find them. Despite a feverish scouring of the area I failed to beat the sunset and that night I slept in the Land Rover, a thin sliver of new moon hanging low in a brilliantly star bright sky, and not a breath of wind to stir the brooding silence about me

Next day, I quartered the ground until I had only the river bed to search. And there, protruding from a low and crumbling bank, I found the head of a femur. When I dashed back from the truck clutching my digging tools, I was as careful as my excitement would allow as I marked out the excavation. I knew this was going to be the find of the century.

By dusk, I was exhausted, but partially exposed and laid out before me in their shallow grave were the entwined and complete skeletons of a tiny man and a woman. At their feet were the ancient bones of an animal that must have been a dog, judging from the blunted canine teeth. In the fading light, I could see what may have been shreds of desiccated leather, but when I crouched on hands and knees to peer closer at a glint on the female skull, I noticed how neatly someone had drilled and wired the lower jaw to hold it in place.

By the lights of the Land Rover, the river course was a hellish drive back in the dark but I chose it without hesitation. As I bounced and careened along, I composed over and over the opening lines of my resignation. Somehow, it helped to stop me screaming.

**Mike Job**