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A Carrion Death

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Published by Headline

Extract

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CHAPTER 1

The hyena moved off when the men shouted. It stood about fifty metres away, watching them with its head low between powerful shoulders, wary, not fearful, waiting for its chance to retake the field. The men stood in silence, staring at what the hyena had been eating.

Yellowed bones pierced through areas of sinew and desiccated skin. The head, separated from the spine, lay about a metre away. Remnants of skin on the upper face stretched in a death mask over the skull and pulled at the scalp. The lower part of the face had been torn away, and the back of the skull was smashed by jaws hungry for the brains. The eye sockets were empty, save for dried blood; one of the vultures had already had a turn. Snapped ribs lay scattered, but the backbone and pelvis were intact. One leg remained attached; the other was gone. The lower half of one arm was missing; the other, freshly crunched by the hyena, lay a short distance away. There was a cloying smell of carrion, unpleasant but not unbearable. The scavengers had removed most of the flesh and the desert sun had desiccated the rest. The flies, less cautious than the hyena, had startled to a buzzing swarm but now resettled, fat green jewels on the dirty bones.

'It's definitely a man,' said Andries unnecessarily.

Bongani was staring at the bodiless head.

'It's not one of our people,' Andries continued. 'Would've heard that somebody was missing. It'll be one of those bloody poachers that have been causing trouble up north. Damned cheek, coming this close to the camp.' Andries gave the impression that the man had got his just deserts, given this lack of proper respect for the authorities.

Bongani looked at the area around the corpse. Thorn acacias, trees typical of Kalahari stream verges, were scattered along the edges of the dry river. Vultures brooded in the branches, waiting for another chance at the remaining scraps should the men and the hyena withdraw. The riverbanks consisted of mud baked to hardness by the sun. From there scattered tufts of grass spread away from the bank, becoming less frequent as they battled the encroaching sand. Beyond that the desert had won, and the first slope of loose sand ran up to the Kalahari dunes, which stretched endlessly into the haze.

The two men stood under one of the trees, its canopy cutting off the heat, its roots sucking moisture from the subterranean water. The body sprawled on the edge of a mess of twigs, leaves, and branches, which had fallen to the ground over the years. Behind it lay the sand bed of the long-vanished river, patterned with tracks of animals, some old with the edges of the imprints crumbling, and some as recent as the disturbed hyena.

Bongani spoke for the first time since they had spotted the vultures circling. 'Do you have problems with white poachers here?'

Andries just looked at him.

'Look at the head. There's still some hair left on the scalp.'

Andries knelt next to the skull and examined it more closely. Although the hair was fouled with blood, he could tell it was straight and perhaps five centimetres long. This was a disturbing development. These days game reserves survived on tourists rather than conservation imperatives, and bad publicity would be unwelcome.

'You wouldn't expect to find a poacher down here anyway. You just said so,' Bongani pointed out. 'And why on his own in a dangerous area? They don't operate like that.'

Andries was reluctant to give up his simple diagnosis. 'Some of them aren't in gangs, you know. Just hungry people trying to get some food.' But he knew it would never wash with that straight hair. 'But not the white ones,' he admitted. 'It'll be some damn-fool tourist. Has a few too many beers in the heat and decides to take off into the dunes to show how macho he is in his four-by-four that he's never had off-road before. Then he gets stuck.' The retributive justice of this new idea made him feel a little better.

Bongani focused farther up and down the river. The wind, animals, and the hard stream verge could explain the lack of footprints, but a vehicle track would last for years in these conditions. It was one of the many reasons why visitors had to stay on the roads.

'Where's the vehicle?' he asked.

'He'll have got stuck in the dunes and tried to walk out,' Andries replied.

Bongani turned back to the body. The lengthening afternoon sun highlighted the dunes and concentrated his attention. 'Wouldn't he follow his vehicle tracks back to the road?' he asked.

'No, man, he'd realise that this stream would join the Naledi farther down – nearer the camp – and take the short cut. You'd be four or five kilometres at least from the road up there,' said Andries waving vaguely upstream, 'and you'd be climbing up and down through the dunes all the way.'

Bongani grimaced and turned to stare at Andries. 'So let's see. Your tourist has too much to drink and sets off into the dunes, probably in an unsuitable vehicle – by himself since no one reports him missing. He gets stuck and then has enough knowledge of the local geography to realise that following the watercourse will be the easy way back to camp. However, he doesn't realise how much dangerous game he may encounter in the river. And, by the way, he's working on his suntan at the same time because he sets off naked.'

Andries looked down. 'What makes you think he was naked?' he asked, ignoring the rest.

'Well, do you see any cloth scraps? The animals wouldn't eat them, certainly not with bone and bits of sinew still left. And what about shoes? Animals won't eat those either.' Bongani continued to watch the changing light on the sand dunes while Andries silently digested this new challenge.

'Let's take a look up in those dunes,' Bongani said at last. 'Maybe he came from up there. Let's go round the side of the tree, though. I don't want to disturb the area between the body and the dunes.'

Something in the way the sand looked struck him as not quite right. For once Andries didn't argue. They clambered up until they could see beyond the crest of the dune above the stream bed. Two sets of tyre tracks stretched away from the river, the fat-shoe tracks of vehicles designed

for the desert. The tracks came towards the dune and then stopped abruptly as though the vehicles had been lifted into the sky.

'Oh shit!' said Andries. 'It drove out here and then went back. It was one vehicle, not two.'

'Yes,' Bongani agreed. 'And they had to turn around on this dune when they saw that they'd come to the river. They smoothed the area where they turned so that you couldn't see the tracks from the river bed.' They walked together towards the spot where the tracks disappeared. Once there, they had no further doubts. There were boot prints aplenty, and close up they could see the sweep marks on the sand that the wind had not fully erased. Whoever had been there had been careful to use the hard ground and debris from the trees to hide their progress into the river course.

'They knew what they were doing, these people, whoever they were.' Bongani had grudging respect in his voice. 'They wanted that body destroyed, and they knew that was more likely to happen along one of the river courses than in the relatively dead dunes. And they left it naked because that way nothing would remain to show it was human. In another day or so they would've had what they wanted. And in case by bad luck the remains were found, they took care to hide the tracks, which might be visible from the river. Your tourist, or whatever he was, was murdered, Andries. I think we have a big problem.'

Andries nodded. 'We can use the camera in the truck to take some pictures. We'd better bring the tarpaulin to cover the remains. And we'll have to wait here until we get some men to keep guard. They'll have to spend the night here. The police won't get here until tomorrow morning.'

Sitting in the sand with Bongani and a corpse for several hours was the last thing Andries felt like doing, but there was no choice. The hyena was still waiting. It had moved much closer when they climbed into the dunes.