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The Afrika Reich

Written by Guy Saville

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The Afrika Reich

GUY SAVILLE



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AFRICA, 1952


Casablanca
ALGERIA
(VICHY FRANCE)
Martha I
SPANISH MOROCCO
LIBYA
(ITALY)
Cairo
EGYPT
DEUTSCH
WESTAFRIKA
('MUSPEL')
AQUATORIANA
Dakar
Konarky
Khartoum
SUDAN
NIGERIA
SIERRA
LEONE
GOLD
COAST
KAMERUN
Fritz Paula I
ABYSSINIA
(ITALY)
BRITISH
SOMALILAND
SOMALIA
(ITALY)
Schädelplatz
Stanleystadt
KENYA
Neu
Berlin
DEUTSCH
KONGO
DEUTSCH
OSTAFRIKA
(DOA)
Roscherhafen
Loanda
Terras de Chisengue
ANGOLA
(PORTUGUESE)
Diego Suarez
N RHODESIA
Lusaka
NAZI-OCCUPIED
ANGOLA
Salisbury
S. RHODESIA
MOZAMBIQUE
(PORTUGUESE)
Tana
Walfisch Bucht
DEUTSCH
SUDWESTAFRIKA
(DSWA)
Windhuk
BECHUANALAND
SOUTH
AFRICA
(NEUTRAL)
'JEWISH'
MADAGASKAR
(SS ADMINISTERED)
Cape Town
Nazi Africa
British Empire
Pan African Autobahn
Under construction
German naval base

For my own Cole
okunene okuhepa

Throughout the book Berlin is referred to as 'Germania'. If Hitler had won the war this is what he planned to call the capital of his new empire, as he stated in 1942: 'The name "Germania" will give every member of the community, however far from the centre, a feeling of unity and close membership with the Fatherland.'

On the day when we've solidly organised Europe,
we shall look towards Africa

ADOLF HITLER
Speech to the SS, 22 February 1942

There will be no great conflagration with the blacks.
The true battle for Africa will be White against White

WALTER HOCHBURG
Memorandum to Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler,
15 October 1944

Saltmeade Farm, Suffolk, England
28 August 1952, 05:50

SIS father had a special name for it: *Hiobsbotschaft*. From the Old Testament, Job's news. The type of news you didn't want to hear. News brought on the wind of shipwrecks. Or by breathless messengers arriving with the dawn.

In an instant Burton was awake. He had never slept well, not since he was a child. Outside he heard the sound again.

Whump.

He moved to the curtains, drew them open a sliver, and peered out – like an archer at the window of a besieged castle. The sun was pink and fresh on the horizon. It had rained again in the night.

Another w*hump*: the sound of wheels as they hit potholes in the driveway. Burton had been meaning to fill them in for months, to make everything perfect for Madeleine. Except now maybe she wasn't coming. Why else would someone be driving to his door at this hour unless to bring bad news?

The car was a Daimler, the latest model, its paintwork brighter than vinyl. As it approached Burton made out two figures inside: a chauffeur and passenger in the back. The passenger's face was obscured by a newspaper. Or maybe a large, unfolded map.

Burton let the curtains close gently, so as not to draw attention to the movement, and picked up his clothes from the floor.

Corduroy trousers (no time for smalls), yesterday's shirt. He strode to the door – then hesitated.

These people could be anyone. Maybe they'd come to repay some act of violence. Maybe they were just a diversion: shiny car at the front while men with balaclavas and pistols sneaked round the back. That's how Burton would have done it.

He reached underneath the bed to a jewellery box: there were no gems inside, just his gun. It was a Browning HP, one he'd acquired in French West Africa years before. Not that there was a French Africa any more. Nowadays it was marked red, white and black on the map; a forbidden territory of sand dunes and hearsay.

The Browning felt solid in his hand. Reassuring. Its grip was made from engraved ivory.

Madeleine had kept asking him to get rid of the gun before Alice came to visit again. She didn't want a weapon in the house with a child, even if it was hidden. Burton agreed but never quite got round to doing it. For once he was glad of having too many chores. There was no clip, but he hoped to rely on its effect rather than actually pulling the trigger.

The car was close now.

Burton tucked the gun into the waistband at the back of his trousers, hiding it beneath his shirt, and hurried downstairs.

By the back door he paused to yank on his boots, then slipped out into the morning. The air smelt of dewy grass and cattle; there were no masked men waiting. With only a shirt on Burton felt his skin prickle and shrink; he ignored the sensation. He half crouched and using a low wall for cover darted to the front of the house, thinking how ridiculous he'd look if his visitors were making a social call.

The Daimler had come to a halt outside the farmhouse, the chauffeur already opening the door for his passenger. The man in the back got out. He was dressed as sombre as a banker, had silver, brilliantined hair with a razor parting. Only his skin suggested a life beyond a desk. The man strode to the house and rapped on the door.

'Major Cole!'

Burton recognised the accent at once: Rhodesian, possibly South African, somewhere from the Transvaal. As far as he knew Madeleine had no connection with the colonies. Perhaps it wasn't anything to do with her. He adjusted the Browning in his waistband.

'Maybe he's not up yet, sir,' suggested the driver. 'It's still early.'

'These type of people never sleep. Too much on their conscience. And never enough under the mattress.' The Rhodesian chuckled at his own wit. He knocked again, harder this time. 'Major Cole!'

'Actually, I sleep very well,' said Burton, appearing from behind the wall.

If the Rhodesian was startled, he made no show of it. Instead he turned deliberately from the door and appraised the man opposite.

Burton imagined what he saw: old, army-issue shirt, trousers spattered with mud and creosote, wheat-blond hair far too long to be respectable. Five days of beard; Burton loathed shaving. Only his eyes might suggest something of his background. They were blue-grey, the colour of an autumn afternoon. Calm but alert. Hard as a rifle butt.

'Burton Cole?'

'Yes.' Burton's own voice was soft but growly with the nowhere accent of his upbringing: English, German, African.

The Rhodesian moved to greet him, sending out a waft of citrus cologne. 'My name is Donald Ackerman. I wish I didn't have to call so early but I've important business.'

Burton felt a sudden tightness in his chest.

There was something about the way he'd said 'important business'. Burton had a flash of Madeleine lying cold and colourless, Alice tugging at her hair not understanding why Mummy was so still. *Hiobsbotschaft* after all. He took Ackerman's hand and shook it. It was warm and chalky.

'Is there somewhere we can talk?' Ackerman motioned towards the house. 'Somewhere private.'

Burton didn't move.

He'd bought the farm wholesale, complete with its cracked-brick floor and old man's furniture. Had no choice but to keep everything (except the crucifix above the bed). Maddie never seemed to care, but if there was a connection between her and the Rhodesian, Burton didn't want him to see the interior and make any assumptions. Assumptions that he couldn't provide for Madeleine, especially after the luxury she was accustomed to.

'Come with me,' said Burton, leading him away from the door.

Ackerman lingered for a moment, then followed.

Physical discomfort was something Burton had long grown used to. The one thing he couldn't bear, however, was boots without socks. In his rush to get outside he hadn't put any on. Now, with each step, he felt his soles rub against grainy leather, felt his nails catch on the toecap. The boots themselves, like the Browning, were another acquisition – this time from the carnage of Dunkirk. He'd pulled them off a dead German paratrooper and they fitted as if measured for his own feet.

'You don't seem like your average farmer,' said Ackerman as they trudged towards the orchards. Ahead were rows of vranja quinces and apples; ravens watched them from the branches.

'It's a new life,' replied Burton.

'And you own this place?'

Something about his tone made Burton suspect the Rhodesian already knew the answer. He came to a halt by a quince tree. 'Like you said, Mr Ackerman, it's early. And I've got a lot to do. What is it you want to talk about?'

'A business proposition.'

So not news about Madeleine. 'Unless it's about my crop,' he said, 'I'm not interested.'

'I haven't come all this way to buy fruit, Major. Besides, your quinces aren't ready yet.'

'Another month, I know.' It never ceased to amaze Burton how the details of the seasons had come to capture his enthusiasm.

That was Maddie's doing, she made him see the world like a child once more.

Ackerman spoke again. 'I represent certain . . . "interests" in Northern Rhodesia.' He said it as if struggling to find the right word, though Burton guessed this was a long-prepared patter. 'LMC, to be precise. Lusaka Mineral Concessions. We need you to do a job for us. Head up a team of commandos—'

'I've already told you, I'm not interested.'

'An assassination.'

'Assassination? What are you talking about?'

'Come, Major. You have a certain reputation – Dunkirk, Tana, Stanleyville to name but a few. Why do you think I'm here?'

Definitely not about Madeleine. If she were here she'd already be yelling at Ackerman, her fists in balls, black hair flying.

'Mr Ackerman, I suggest you leave. Now.'

'You will of course be paid . . .' again he searched for a well-prepared word, '"handsomely" for your services.'

Burton laughed. 'There's nothing you could pay me.'

Ackerman didn't reply. Instead he reached inside his jacket and withdrew a small leather box. He handed it over. 'My business,' he said.

Burton opened the case and fought the urge to gasp.

'That's just a down payment. To secure your interest. You'll get the same again on acceptance of the job. Double if you complete it . . . "satisfactorily".' He made it sound like homework.

'How do I know they're not fakes?'

'You don't.'

Burton looked at the diamonds. There were five of them, each the size of peas.

Five plus five plus ten. A fortune.

He could pay off the loan on the farm. There'd even be enough for new furniture. No more making love on that mildewy mattress for him and Maddie. And he could buy her a dressing table, something antique, French, none of that imported German

kitsch. And chesterfields for the drawing room. And a pony for Alice so maybe she wouldn't hate coming here so much . . .

Burton closed the box and handed it back. 'It's a very generous offer, Mr Ackerman. A few years ago I'd have taken you up on it quick-flash. Not any more.'

'It's not enough?'

'My life is here now, no more killing. At any price.'

The Rhodesian chuckled to himself. 'You're going to give mercenaries a bad name.'

'I'm sorry to disappoint.'

'Nevertheless, I still expect you to head up our team.'

'I'm not heading up anything. I want to stay here, work the land.' Burton suddenly thought of his former comrades and the ribbing he'd have got for declaring that. 'Maybe even settle down.'

'That's all very endearing, Major Cole. But I think marriage is perhaps a fantasy too far.'

'What do you mean?'

'Madeleine. I'm sure her husband won't give his blessing. I hear he's a very jealous man.'

Burton clenched his hand together until the knuckles stung. In his mind he saw himself grab the Browning. Force the gun hard against the Rhodesian's gullet. Cock the trigger. Demand to be told how he knew. Instead, he remained impassive except for a slight tic in his jaw.

'So that's why you're here.'

'No,' replied Ackerman. 'The Kassai diamond fields, German Kongo.'

'Kongo? I don't want anything to do with Africa. Not any more.'

'How very British of you.'

'The Nazis fucked it up . . . and we let them.'

'Exactly why your talents are required now.'

'You want me to kill someone,' said Burton. 'Why? There are a thousand men out there who could do it.'

'But none so good.'

'There are plenty better. Pulling the trigger was always my last resort, not profession.'

Ackerman snorted. 'Now you're just being modest.'

'No cold blood. Ever.'

'Hot blood, cold blood. It's still blood. Besides, we feel you'd be more "committed" to the task than anyone else, especially when you learn the target.'

'I told you: I'm done with all that.'

'You'll change your mind.'

'Mr Ackerman,' said Burton, struggling to find some gritted patience, 'I don't want your diamonds. And Madeleine and me is my business. I want you to leave. Now. I'm not going to tell you again.'

But when the Rhodesian failed to move, it was Burton who turned and strode away. The Browning felt sweaty against the small of his back.

Ackerman called after him: 'I've got news of an old acquaintance of yours, Major. A friend.'

'They're all dead.'

'Not this one.'

Burton ignored him.

'The man we want you to kill is – Walter E. Hochburg.'

Burton stopped solid.

It was as if his entire body – every muscle, every sinew, every pulsing vein and nerve – had turned to stone. Although the sun was continuing its ascent everything suddenly seemed darker: the fields, the trees, the farmhouse he so desperately wanted to make a home for Madeleine. The thought of her in front of the fire, toasting crumpets, flickered through his mind; they were both looking forward to their first autumn here. He pushed the image away. As far away as he could. So help him, God.

Very slowly he twisted to face Ackerman. 'What did you say?' He spoke as if his breath had been stolen.

'I think you heard me well enough.'

From close by came the croaking of a raven.

Burton tried to laugh. 'It can't be. Hochburg died years ago. In a fire.'

'Let me assure you, Major, he's still very much alive.'

'No.'

'Alive and now the Governor General of Kongo—'

'I'll do it,' said Burton. There was the slightest catch to his words.

'Don't you want the details? What we're proposing is danger itself. And what about your quinces?' He might have been joking with him now. 'And Madeleine? She's arriving later today, isn't she? I rushed to get here first.'

But Burton was deaf to everything Ackerman had to say.

'I'll do it,' he repeated.

This time his voice was unflinching.

Part One

GERMAN KONGO

Never wage war with ghosts

AFRICAN PROVERB

Chapter One

Schädelplatz, Deutsch Kongo
14 September 1952, 01:14

NINE minutes. He had nine minutes to exorcise a lifetime.

Burton Cole sat at Hochburg's desk, sweat trickling behind his ears. He was dressed in the uniform of a Sturmbannführer, an SS major: black tunic and breeches, Sam Browne belt, jackboots, swastika armband on the left sleeve. His skin crawled beneath the material. To complete the look his hair had been cut short, beard shaved; the skin on his cheeks felt raw and exposed. Chained to his wrist was an attaché case empty except for two items: a pouch fat with diamonds and concealed inside that, a table knife.

The knife had been his mother's, from a service used only for best. He still remembered the way she would beam as she laid the table for visitors; the flash of silver. That was – what? – when he was eight or nine. Back then he used to struggle to slice meat with it, now it was as deadly as an ice pick.

He'd spent years sharpening it to a jagged point for this very moment, never once believing it would come.

But just as Burton opened the case to grasp the knife, Hochburg held up his hand. It was an immense, brutal paw that led to an arm straining in its sleeve and the broad shoulders of a swimmer. The movement itself was languid – a lazy version of Hitler greeting the ranks.

'The diamonds can wait, Sturmbannführer,' he said. 'First I must show you something.'

Ackerman warned him this might happen. Hochburg had shown all the previous couriers, showed everyone, no matter what their rank. It was his great pride. *Indulge him*, Ackerman advised. *Do nothing to arouse his 'suspicions'. There'll be plenty of time for the kill.*

Burton glanced at his watch. Everything had gone wrong that night; now he felt crushed by the lack of seconds. This was not how he had envisaged the moment. In his dreams time stood still, there was opportunity for talk and torment.

And answers to all his questions.

Hochburg rose from his desk. The office around him was austere. Naked wooden floors, simple furniture, white walls that smelt of damp and rubbing alcohol. There was a gun cabinet in the corner and shelving for hundreds, possibly thousands, of books – though not a single volume filled them. Overhead a fan remained motionless despite the humidity of the night. Although dark patches were spreading across Burton's shirt, Hochburg looked as if his body were chilled to the bone. The only decoration in the room was the obligatory portrait of the Führer, another of Bismarck, and maps.

Maps of Aquatoriana, Deutsch Ostafrika, DSWA, Kamerun, Kongo, Muspel: all the dominions of Nazi Africa. The cartography of enslavement, thought Burton. Every last hectare pored over, charted, claimed. In the first years of conquest they had been governed by the Kolonialpolitisches Amt, the KPA, a haphazard civil administration. Later the SS took control.

Hochburg moved towards the opposite end of the room where French doors led out to a veranda.

'But your diamonds, Herr Oberstgruppenführer,' said Burton, remaining in his seat. He didn't relish the idea of killing Hochburg on the balcony in full view of the camp.

'I said they can wait.'

Burton hesitated, then got to his feet and followed. His jackboots pinched with every step.

Hochburg was already on the veranda. Above him hung a silent wind-chime. He spread his arms with a messianic sweep. 'Magnificent, isn't it?' he declared in a baritone that sounded raw from cognac, even though Burton knew he was a teetotaller. 'A thing of wonder!'

The official headquarters of the Schutzstaffel, the SS, may have been in Stanleystadt – but this was the real powerbase of Deutsch Kongo. Burton had arrived through the front entrance, past the cranes that were still erecting the imperial façade. The quadrangle below him was at the rear, the hidden part of Hochburg's fiefdom, used for ceremonial occasions. No one but the SS were allowed here.

It was the size of a parade ground with several storeys of offices on all sides and, according to Ackerman, cellars that went as deep below as the floors above. Bureaucracy and torture: two pillars of Nazi Africa. There were guard towers on each of the corners; a patrol stalking the perimeter with a Doberman. Enough barbed wire for a concentration camp. But it was the ground that most caught Burton's attention. Searchlights dived and soared over it. For a second he stood dumbfounded at the sheer scale of it. The sheer barbarity. His father would have wept at its sight.

Then his stomach curdled.

'A wonder!' repeated Hochburg. 'You know, when the Reichsführer first saw it he clapped his hands in delight.'

'I heard that story,' said Burton. 'I also heard he filled two sick bags on the flight home.'

Hochburg stiffened slightly. 'The man has a poor constitution; we gave him a sumptuous dinner.'

Burton glanced at the square again, then turned his eye to the murk of the jungle beyond. Somewhere out there, concealed among the symphony of cicadas and tree frogs, were the rest of his men.

He imagined them: hearts jumpy but mouths set, faces thick

with camouflage, counting down the final minutes on their watches. Patrick would already be slowing his breath to maximise the accuracy of his shot . . . Assuming, of course, they were even there. The team had gone their separate ways twenty-four hours earlier and Burton had no way of knowing if the others had made it to their positions. It was the one flaw in the plan. He might be about to leap into the abyss – with only darkness to break his fall.

'How many would you say it took?' continued Hochburg.

'I've no idea, Oberstgruppenführer,' replied Burton. 'A thousand?'

'More. Much more.' There was a gleam in his eyes. They were the colour of coffee beans and not how Burton remembered them. When they glinted in his nightmares they were black – black as the devil's hangman. But maybe that was just the years in between. It wasn't the only difference. Hochburg had also lost his hair, every last follicle of it.

Burton offered another guess. 'Five thousand?'

'More still.'

'Ten?'

'Twenty,' said Hochburg. 'Twenty thousand nigger skulls.'

Burton looked back to the quadrangle and its gruesomely cobbled square. It gave Hochburg's headquarters their name: the Schädelplatz. The square of skulls. Inside him something screamed. He saw children torn from parents, husbands from wives. Families left watching the horizon for loved ones who would never return home to smile and bicker and gather round the fire. Every skull was one more reason to kill Hochburg.

He saw the view of his childhood, the dark jungle of Togoland. He saw his mother's empty room.

Burton struggled to keep his voice level. 'Can you walk on it?'

'You can turn panzers on it.'

'How come?' His brain could only supply nonsense. 'Have they been fired? Like tiles, to make them hard.'

'Fired? Like tiles?' Hochburg stiffened again . . . then roared

with laughter. 'You I like, Sturmbannführer!' he said, punching his shoulder. 'Much better than the usual couriers. Obsequious pricks. There's hope for the SS yet.'

With each word Burton felt the breath wrenched out of him. He suddenly knew he couldn't do it. He had killed before, done it so many times he'd grown indifferent to it. But this – this was something else. Something monumental. The desire to do it had been a part of his life for so long that the reality was almost like turning the knife against himself. What would be left afterwards?

Burton tried to glance at his watch but it caught on his sleeve. The minutes were counting down: he was running out of time. On the veranda the wind-chime tinkled briefly.

He must have been crazy to think he could get away with it, that Hochburg would reveal his secrets. Here was a man dedicated to making silence from living, breathing mouths.

Then the moment passed.

At 01:23 the north of the Schädelplatz would vanish in a fireball. By then he'd be on his way home, justice done, Hochburg dead. He'd never have to look backwards again. The future would be his for the taking.

'Your diamonds,' Burton said, moving decisively towards the study.

But Hochburg barred his way, his eyes drained of humour. He seemed to want reassurance, to be understood. 'We have to cleanse this place, Sturmbannführer. Let the flames wipe Africa clean. Make it as white as before time. The people, the soil. You understand that, don't you?'

Burton flinched. 'Of course, Herr Oberstgruppenführer.' He tried to pass.

'Any fool can pull a trigger,' continued Hochburg, 'or stamp on a skull. But the square, that's what makes us different.'

'Different from who?'

'The negroid. We're not savages you know.'

In his mind Burton could hear the precious seconds counting down like a tin cup rapped on a tombstone. He tried to move

forward again. This time Hochburg let him through – as if it had been nothing.

They resumed their positions at the desk, the smell of rubbing alcohol more potent than before.

Hochburg poured himself a glass of water from a bottle in front of him – Apollinaris, an SS brand – and downed it in a single, gulpless motion. Then he reached beneath his black shirt for a chain around his neck. He seemed greedy for his loot now. On the chain was a key.

Burton released the attaché case from his wrist and set it on the desk between them, feverishly aware of the blade hidden inside. He thought of the fairy tales Onkel Walter (his gut convulsed at the words) used to read him at night, of Jack lifting the ogre's harp and it calling to its master. For a moment he was convinced the knife would also speak out, warn Hochburg of the looming danger, its loyalty to Burton forgotten in the presence of the hand that once grasped it.

Hochburg took the case, placed the key from his neck into the left-hand lock and gave it a sharp turn, like breaking a mouse's neck. The mechanism pinged. He swivelled the case back. Burton inserted his own key into the second lock. Another ping. He lifted the top and slid his hand in, finding the bag of diamonds. He took it out, the knife still hidden inside the pouch, and stared at Hochburg. Hochburg looked back. A stalemate of unblinking eyes.

Ask, a voice was bellowing in Burton's head; it might have been his father's. *What are you waiting for? Ask!*

But still he said nothing. He didn't know why. The room felt as hot as a furnace, Burton aware of the sweat soaking his collar.

Opposite him, Hochburg shifted a fraction, clearly not used to such insubordination. He ran a hand over his bald head. There was not a drop of perspiration on it. In the silence Burton caught the prickle of palm against stubbly scalp. *So not bald, shaved*. Any other time he might have laughed. Only Hochburg possessed the arrogance to believe his face needed something to make it more intimidating.

Burton's fingers curled around the handle of the knife. Very slowly he withdrew it from the pouch, all the while keeping it out of sight.

Hochburg blinked, then leaned forward. Held out a grasping claw. 'My diamonds, Sturmbannführer.' He offered no threat, yet there was confusion in his eyes.

Burton spoke in English, his mother's language; it seemed the most appropriate. 'You have no idea who I am, do you?'

Hochburg's brow creased as if he were unfamiliar with the tongue.

'Do you?'

'*Was?*' said Hochburg. '*Ich habe nicht verstanden*.' What? I don't understand.

In those restless nights before the mission Burton's greatest anxiety was that Hochburg might recognise him. It was twenty years since they'd last seen each other but he feared that the boy he'd been would shine through his face. Throughout their whole meeting, however, even with their eyes boring into each other, there hadn't been the slightest tremble of recognition.

Now something was creeping into Hochburg's face. Realisation. Alarm. Burton couldn't decipher it. Hochburg glanced at the portrait of Hitler as if the Führer himself might offer a word of explanation.

Burton repeated his question, this time in German, revealed the knife as he spoke. The blade caught the lamplight for an instant – a blink of silver – then became dull again. 'My name is Burton Cole. *Burton Kohl*. Does it mean anything to you?'

The faintest shake of the head. Another glimpse towards the Führer.

'My father was Heinrich Kohl. My mother—' even after all this time her name stumbled in his throat '—my mother, Eleanor.'

Still that blank look. Those empty brown eyes.

If the bastard had hawked their names and spat, if he had laughed, Burton would have relished it. But Hochburg's indifference was complete. The lives of Burton's parents meant no more to him than those pitiful, nameless skulls on the square outside.

He had planned to do it silently so as not to bring the guards hammering at the door. But now he didn't care.

Burton leapt across the table in a frenzy.

He crashed into Hochburg, hitting the bottle of water. Shards of it exploded everywhere. Burton grabbed the older man's throat but Hochburg was faster. He parried him with his forearm.

They both tumbled to the ground, limbs thrashing.

Hochburg swiped ferociously again, snatched at Burton's ear as if he would rip it off. Then he was grasping for his Luger.

Burton clambered on top of him. Pushed down with all his weight. Pointed the knife at his throat. Hochburg writhed beneath him. Burton slammed his knee into his groin. He felt the satisfying crush of testes. Veins bulged in Hochburg's face.

Outside the room there was shouting, the scrape of boots. Then a tentative knock at the door. It locked from the inside and no one was allowed entry without the express command of the Oberstgruppenführer, even the Leibwache – Hochburg's personal bodyguards. Another detail Ackerman had supplied.

'You recognise this knife,' hissed Burton. All his teeth were bared. 'You used it often enough. Fattening yourself at our table.' He pushed the blade tight against Hochburg's windpipe.

'Whoever you are, listen to me,' said Hochburg, his eyeballs ready to burst. 'Only the Führer's palace has more guards. You can't possibly escape.'

Burton pushed harder, saw the first prick of blood. 'Then I've got nothing to lose.'

There was another knock at the door, more urgent this time.

Burton saw Hochburg glance at it. 'Make a sound,' he said, 'and I swear I'll cut your fucking tongue off.' Then: 'My mother. I want to know. I . . .' He opened his mouth to speak again, but the words died. It was as if all Burton's questions – like wreaths or phantoms – had woven themselves into a thick cord and pulled tight around his throat. He made a choking sound and became deathly still. The blade slackened on Hochburg's neck.

Then the one thing happened that he never considered.

Burton began to weep.

Softly. With no tears. His chest shuddering like a child's.

Hochburg looked more bewildered than ever but took his chance. 'Break down the door!' he shouted to the guards outside. 'Break down the door. An assassin!'

There was a frantic *thump-thump-thump* of boots against wood.

The sound roused Burton. He had never expected to get this opportunity; only a fool would waste it. He bent lower, tear ducts still smarting. 'What happened to her?'

'Quickly,' screeched Hochburg.

'Tell me, damn you! I want the truth.'

'Quickly!'

'Tell me.' But the rage and shame and fear – and in the back of his mind the training, that rowdy instinct to survive – suddenly came to the fore.

Burton plunged the knife deep and hard.

Hochburg made a wet belching noise, his eyelids flickering. Blood spurted out of his neck. It hit Burton in the face, a slap from chin to eyebrow, geysered on to the walls. Burning hot. Scarlet.

Burton stabbed again and again. More blood. It drenched his clothes. Spattered the maps on the walls, running down them. Turning Africa red.

Then the door burst inwards and two guards were in the room, pistols drawn. Faces wide and merciless.