

# Meridian of Darkness

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#### LEGEND OF THE BAOBAB TREE

It is said that long, long ago the first baobab grew beside a lake. As it grew taller it noted the colourful flowers, large leaves, and grand trunks of the surrounding trees. On a calm day it finally got to see its own reflection in the lake, and was shocked to see that its flowers lacked bright colours, its leaves were small, its trunk was thick and ungainly, and its bark resembled the wrinkled hide of an old elephant.

The baobab then raised its voice and complained to the creator in the hope of securing a better deal. The creator in turn pointed out that some organisms were purposefully less perfect than others, and asked if the tree found the hippopotamus beautiful, or the hyena's cry pleasant. Yet even then the barrel-chested tree was not appeased and whined unceasingly, until in exasperation, the creator seized the ingrate by the trunk, plucked it from the ground, turned it over, and replanted it upside down. And ever since, the baobab has been unable to see its reflection or make complaint. For thousands of years it has survived strictly in silence, paying for its ancient indiscretion by doing good deeds for people. Across the African continent there are variations on this story that explain why this species is so unusual and yet so helpful.

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[Koos:—Bloodshed in the Bushveld](#)

“DOOMA DOOM DOOM DOOM!” The drumbeats fell like spears through the theatre of darkness, each oblique “doom” a quickening of dread in our deepest beings. About us, the African stage lay frozen in its knowing repose; the cricket chirp ceased, the eagle-owl grounded, the black-maned, bass-chested lion silenced in grim abeyance to the sonic purveyors of death. For it is with their

guns and their bombs that humans wreak a carnage that no other predator of the wild can even contemplate, and through the primeval throb of their drumbeat they proclaim their superior bestiality.

Earlier, with the savage staccato of death advancing upon us, we fled into the no-man's-land of chest-high savannah and cat-clawed thorn bush in an adrenalin-charged, frenzy of flight. Our first headlong dash carried us deep into the domain of the untamed, until we came to an involuntary halt before an imposing old baobab that billowed up above us. It stood majestically aloof, with wide, grotesquely twisted limbs silhouetted against a spangled portrait of the night sky. Like a sentient antediluvian entity, its languid, olden days' language counselled calmness and cautioned against the folly of blundering blindly onward into the African bush. It was there that we held our first impromptu indaba; an important conference in Zulu. In retrospect, it would prove to be the rallying point that would mould us into a team, and thus ensure that some of us survived the coming days.

We were all out of breath, desperately trying to gather ourselves, when the blonde Rachel broke the paralyzing spell of silence, a note of hysteria thickening her Kentuckian drawl into a vestibule of fear, "They ain't coming after us, are they?" Some of us looked back for a long moment, pondering on the unthinkable as we listened the hollow tattoo of drumbeat in the night. "Why don't you ask Koos? He's from this country, maybe he knows best vats happening," the portly Bruno finally gasped, his guttural Germanic voice ragged with worry, as he held his wife Uta close to him. The others drew nearer too, until they were all facing me, pale and wild-eyed with their chests heaving from exertion.

I had known all along that it would eventually come to this, and had no reassuring answer. It had been my penchant for late night walks that had saved us from an immediate, violent death. Incredibly, it was only about thirty minutes earlier that I had been approaching the entrance along the perimeter of the bush camp's thorn-wired fence when a thunder of gunshots shattered the silky equilibrium of the smouldering Lowveld evening. I swung around to see the first of the trucks gunning through the front gate, unleashing a hail of death upon the unsuspecting game rangers on duty. As I fled towards the tented area I glanced back only once; the luxury bungalows were aflame, and a howling mob of African men were pursuing screaming tourists, bayoneting them in a brutal orgy of bloodlust. I had needed no persuasion to convince the terrified group of campers to follow me out the back way, and run through the verdant veldt until we were engulfed within a vast world of thorn-bush thickets and flat-headed acacia trees.

"Who ees those peoples? Why ees they doings zose terreoble theengs?" The Frenchman Philippe's tense voice cut into my thoughts, forcing me to focus on the group of anxious people gathered before me. "I don't know, they may just be bandits, but it is also possible that they are part of a general rebellion against the government. But calm down, they cannot follow us in the dark, so we're OK for now," I replied.

The drumming ceased abruptly, leaving in its wake a vacuum of resonant disquiet, punctuated by several ominous bursts of machine-gun fire. "What is happening out there? And what are we going to do now?" This time it was the robust Irish girl Shauna who was clutching her diminutive friend Caitlin protectively to her side, her head angled questioningly. I racked my brain for an answer. "I think they may be hunting down people who are trying to escape, so it's probably a good idea to get as far away from the camp as possible before dawn." "But surely we'll be rescued in the morning? After all, you can hardly expect us to stay out here in the wild like this. It is dangerous and we have no protection, nor any food or water!" Ian bleated plaintively in his prim Queen's English, Adam's-apple bobbing, and his narrow face puckered with anxiety. "So solly, no poleesman coming this place, but you no wolly, we all be OK," Sora, the petite Korean artist said, stroking his arm soothingly, her irrepressibly good-humoured face breaking into a warm,

reassuring smile. Sesame oil on troubled waters!

It was only then that the full gravity of our situation dawned on me. Our camp had been overrun by a band of blood-thirsty killers, and we were lost somewhere in the centre of South Africa's Kruger National Park, an area that is larger than the adjacent Kingdom of Swaziland, and almost the size of Israel. We were unarmed and on foot in a terrain that harboured a multitude of ferocious felines, enormous tuskers, monstrous horned beasts, hyenas, deadly snakes, and countless other venomous things that slithered or crawled. The rivers were infested with crocodiles, and hippos, the wild's chief human killers, roamed the pools and river banks. We were entirely on our own without provisions, and by dawn the forces of darkness could possibly be on our trail.

I listened as each of them voiced their fears and misgivings before coming to a conclusion. "The fact that the marauders arrived at our obscure bush camp in trucks and were armed with machine guns probably indicates that they are part of a much bigger group, possibly involved in a general insurrection against the government. This may explain why there has been no recent satellite connection, and other forms of communication have been down too. Also, as nobody knows about our plight it might take days or even weeks before we can even hope to be rescued. If there is a tracker in that group they could catch up with us in the morning. I say that if we want to live we should keep moving and try to conceal our tracks as best we can. I'd rather take my chances with the animals of the wild than be at the mercy of those killers back there!"

"Koos hees right, let us follow heem," said Filippe. I looked at him gratefully, and liked the sight of his muscular physique and the steely resolve in his eyes. "Yea fuck, going back is no option," agreed Rachel. "Jaa, but how should we walk, vat vill be our plan?" asked Uta, the practical one. "And what about the wild animals? We saw lions, buffalo, and many elephants in the vicinity of the camp yesterday," Shauna said pointedly. "Man more dangerous than animal. We use our minds, we think, we act, maybe we live," said Toshi, the stocky martial artist from Japan, who was the oldest member of our group. "I say we should go back and try to reason with them. It is too dangerous to go stumbling off into the wilderness," Ian persisted. He was beginning to annoy me. "Did you see what they were doing to the other tourists? You are welcome to go back and try to reason with them, but count me out!" I replied. "Look, we were in a newly developed bush camp in a remote area somewhere in the east, between Skukuza and Lower Sabie. I think that we should circle back until we reach a major road. We can conceal ourselves near the road, and maybe the nature of the passing traffic will indicate who is in control of the area," I suggested. "Who are you? You do not sound like an ordinary South African," said Caitlin. "I am just one of your co-campers, but I have been involved in military, as well as personal expeditions where I gained some great experience out in the wilds of Africa. But listen, we've wasted enough time already! If you're going to come along, fall in behind me in single file. Don't talk, and try not to step on any broken branches or make any noise. Filippe, I want you at the back, and drag this branch behind you to wipe out our tracks," I ordered, passing him a leafy branch that had recently been ripped off a tree by an elephant. "If I raise my right hand you must all freeze, and if I indicate like this, move back slowly, but never, never run, that is unless I do!"

Ian, are you with us or not?" I asked sharply. "Do I have a choice?" he answered sullenly, avoiding my eyes, as though he'd been press-ganged into joining us. Yet it was a decision that would have consequences far beyond the scope of our immediate vision, for nobody could have foreseen the horror that lay ahead. \*

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Ultimately, a new order will rise from the smouldering ashes of war, but not until

Koos; an expat, and Tihosi; a game ranger, go head-to-head with the elements of darkness that invade South Africa's Kruger National Park.

When several tourists flee into the vast wilderness they soon learn that the key to survival lies within themselves, as they become pawns in an increasingly deadly tango with ferocious beasts, rebel soldiers, an international poaching syndicate, and evil witchdoctors.

This epic tale has elements of courage, love, loyalty, and haunting heartbreak that shine brightly through the flames of bloody revolution.

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