

Excerpt

Prologue

Spring 1900 Bechuanaland, Africa

Doctor Paulos de Klerk packed the last of the medical supplies into the wooden trunk and locked the three brass clasps, mumbling under his breath with each snap. “Amat . . . victoria . . . curam.”

Victory favors the prepared.

Or so he prayed.

“So, my good doctor, how goes the effort?” General Manie Roosa’s voice boomed from the fort’s watchtower above.

De Klerk shielded his eyes from the blazing sun and stared up at the bearded figure leaning over the railing, grinning down. Though not physically imposing, Roosa had a commanding presence that made him look seven feet tall; it was in the man’s eyes. The general always looked eager for a fight.

And he was about to get one if word from up north held true. “Are we ready?” Roosa pressed.

De Klerk returned his attention to the other trunks, cases, and burlap sacks. Though the general’s words had indeed ended with a question mark, he knew Roosa was not making an inquiry. At various times throughout the day their leader had posed the same “question” to almost every Boer soldier under his command, all of whom bustled around the plateau on which the fort sat, cleaning weapons, counting ammunition, and generally preparing for the upcoming march.

With an exaggerated sigh, De Klerk replied, “As always, I will be ready to leave five minutes before you are, my general.”

Roosa let out a booming laugh and slapped the log railing. “You amuse me, Doctor. If you were not so good at your profession, I might be tempted to leave you behind, out of harm’s way.”

De Klerk stared around the bustling fort. He hated to leave its security, but he knew where he was best needed. As primitive as the fort was, with its palisade walls and crude buildings, this place had withstood countless British attacks, making it a bastion for Boer troops. Leaving the confines of its protective walls likely meant he and his medical aides would be seeing a brisk business in the coming days.

Not that he wasn’t accustomed to the horrors of battle.

Though only thirty-two years old, this was De Klerk's fifth year of war in the past decade. The first Vryheidsoorloë, or freedom war, was fought back in 1880 and had mercifully lasted but a year, ending well for the Boers—the Dutch/Afrikaans word for farmers—as they won their sovereignty from British rule in the Transvaal. Eight years later, the second Vryheidsoorloë started, involving not only the Transvaal but also the neighboring Orange Free State.

Same issues, more soldiers, he thought sourly.

The British wanted the Boers under their colonial thumb, and the Boers were not keen on the idea. De Klerk's ancestors had come to the savannahs and mountains of Africa to be free, and now the Engelse wanted to take that away. Unlike the first Vryheidsoorloë, this war was protracted, with the British implementing a scorched-earth policy. Though neither De Klerk nor any of his comrades verbalized it, they knew their own defeat was inevitable. The one person who seemed oblivious to this was General Roosa; the man was an irrepressible optimist when it came to matters of war.

Roosa pushed himself away from the railing and climbed down the rough-hewn ladder to the ground and walked over to where De Klerk was working. The general straightened his khaki uniform with a few well-experienced tugs. He was the same height as the doctor, but burlier of physique and bushier of beard. For the sake of hygiene, De Klerk kept himself clean-shaven and insisted his aides did the same.

"So I see many bandages are being packed," Roosa said. "Do you think so little of my leadership, Doctor? Or is it you think too highly of the Engelse soldiers?"

"Certainly not the latter, my general. I simply know that before long I will be treating throngs of enemy prisoners wounded by our bullets."

Roosa frowned and rubbed his beard. "Yes, about that, Doctor . . . about supplying succor to the enemy . . ."

It was a sore point between them, but De Klerk refused to relent. "We are Christian, are we not? It is our duty to provide such help. But I also understand that our men must come first. I will only provide enough aid so that a British soldier might survive long enough to be reached by his own doctors. If we do not do that, we are no better than them."

Roosa clapped him on the shoulder—not necessarily agreeing, but acknowledging the sentiment.

For reasons he had never fully understood, Roosa had come to think of him as a sounding board. The commander frequently shared information with De Klerk that had nothing to do with his medical duties—as if the general also saw him as his own conscience.

Still, he knew there was another reason Roosa took such an interest in his preparations. The men under the general's command had become his family, a surrogate to his own wife, three daughters, and two sons, all who'd been taken by smallpox two years earlier. The loss had nearly destroyed Roosa and left lasting scars. When it came to bullet and bayonet wounds, the general was phlegmatic and optimistic; when it came to disease, he was frighteningly anxious. Changing the touchy subject, Roosa pointed to the leather-bound diary that was never beyond De Klerk's reach. "Cataloging more flowers, I see."

He touched the worn cover both affectionately and protectively. "Providence willing, yes. If we are going where I think we are going, there will be many species I have never encountered."

"We are indeed heading north, into the mountains of the Groot. My scouts tell me a brigade of Engelse soldiers are headed west from Kimberley, led by a new commander—a colonel fresh from London."

"And in a hurry to prove himself no doubt."

"Aren't they all? If we leave in the morning, their lead elements will spot us by early evening."

And then the chase will be on. Though not a military strategist by any means, De Klerk had been with Roosa long enough to recognize the general's favorite tactic: let the British scouts spot them, then draw the enemy north into the mountainous Groot, where the harsh terrain could be used to set up an ambush.

The British preferred to fight on the savannah, where their tidy formations and overwhelming firepower always won the day. The enemy commanders hated hills and mountains and ravines, hated that Roosa and his band of backward farmers refused to fight on their terms. And it was exactly such a strategy that Roosa had used many times to lure the British into murderous engagements. And still the enemy did not learn.

But how long would such arrogance last?

A chill iced through De Klerk as he gathered his research journal and pocketed it away.

The troops were up and on the move well before dawn, traveling northward without incident as the sun climbed higher. Then at noon, one of the Boer scouts overtook the formation from the south, pounding up to them on a sweating, heaving horse. He joined Roosa at the head of their formation.

De Klerk didn't need to hear the conversation to know its content. The enemy had found them.

As the scout wheeled away on his horse, the general rode back to

the medical wagon. "The British will soon be giving chase, Doctor. Your comfortable cart may see some jostling."

"I am less concerned with the wagon than I am my delicate internal organs. However, as always, I will survive."

"Fine mettle, Doctor."

Minutes slid into hours as the general led their unit north, steadily closing the gap between them and the Groot, whose foothills smudged the horizon, the details blurred by waves of heat rising from the savannah.

Two hours before dusk, another scout appeared. The expression on his face and the posture of his body as he rode past the medical wagon told De Klerk something had gone wrong. After a brief consultation, the scout rode off.

Roosa turned on his horse and shouted back to his leaders, "Prepare the wagons for fast travel! Five minutes!" He then rode back to De Klerk. "This new Engelse colonel is trying to be clever. He has disguised the size of his brigade and split them into two forces—one the hammer, the other the anvil."

"With us the pig iron in the middle."

"Or so they hope," Roosa replied with a broad smile. "But hope fades with the light, Doctor. Especially once we lure them into the Groot."

With a jaunty wave, Roosa wheeled his horse and rode off.

A few minutes later the general's booming voice echoed throughout the Boer formation. "Fast travel . . . go!"

De Klerk's wagon handler snapped the reins and barked a "Hah . . . hah!"

The horses bucked slightly, then broke into a gallop. De Klerk grasped the sideboard and held on, his eyes fixed on the distant Groot Karas Mountains.

Too far, he thought grimly. Too far and not enough time. And an hour later, his fear proved true. A trail of dust marked the return of a pair of riders sent north by Roosa to scout the way ahead, but as the dust settled, it became clear only one rider had come back. He leaned askew in his saddle and fell from his horse as he reached the unit, wounded twice in the back by rifle fire.

Roosa ordered a halt, then signaled for De Klerk to come forward. Armed with his medical bag, he rushed to the fallen man and knelt down. Both bullets had torn through vital organs before punching through the front of the young man's torso.

"Collapsed lung," he told Roosa, who cradled the man's head.

The scout, a boy of eighteen, was named Meer. He clutched at Roosa's sleeve, tried to speak, but coughed up frothy blood before he could find any words.

"My general," the boy croaked out, "an Engelse battalion . . . north of us. Heavy cavalry . . . with cannons on fast caissons."

“How far away, son?”

“Eight miles.”

Meer coughed harshly. A fresh gout of blood sprayed from his mouth. His body arched, fighting the inevitable, then went limp. De Klerk checked him and shook his head.

Roosa closed the boy's eyes and gave his hair a few strokes before standing up. A pair of soldiers carried Meer's body away. De Klerk joined the commander. Roosa murmured, “All my talk of Engelse arrogance . . . it is I who was the arrogant one. This new British colonel is trying to stop us from reaching the Groot. If they can catch us out here in the open . . . well, then, my good doctor, you are going to have more work than you can handle in a lifetime.”

He didn't respond, but Roosa must have noted his paling face.

The general gripped De Klerk's shoulder hard. “This Engelse colonel is clever, but the tongs of his pincer are still wide enough for us to escape through. And soon the night will swallow us.”

An hour later, from the back of the bucking wagon, De Klerk watched the sun's upper edge dip below the horizon. Night was nearly upon them, but to the east, a plume of dust—red and gold in the setting sun—covered a quarter of the sky. He estimated the number of cavalry horses it would take to create such a cloud.

Two hundred riders at least.

And behind them, wagons upon wagons of troops and cannon-bearing caissons.

God help us . . .

But at least they had safely reached the foothills of the Groot, escaping through the enemy's pincers. With a final buck, the wagon rattled into a shadowy ravine, and the view of the British forces vanished.

He swung around and studied the broken landscape ahead, a veritable maze of hills, dry washes, and caves. Roosa had extolled many times about the “pocket fortresses” hidden in the mountains, Boer strongholds from which they could wait out any British siege.

Or so they all hoped.

Time ground slowly under the wheels of the wagon and the hooves of their horses. Finally, one of the scouting parties Roosa had dispatched to the south returned. After a brief consultation, the rider took off again, and Roosa ordered the formation to slow.

The general rode back to De Klerk's wagon.

“We have bought some time, Doctor. But this Engelse colonel is not only wily, but also stubborn. His troops still remain on our trail.”

“What does that mean for us?”

Roosa sighed. He took a rag from his tunic pocket and wiped the dust from his face. “To quote Shakespeare’s Falstaff, discretion is in fact the better part of valor. It is time we hole up. One of our pocket fortresses is nearby. Hidden, but easy to defend. We will tuck ourselves away, wait for the Engelse to tire of the Groot, then attack them from the rear when they leave. You are not, uh . . . what is the word? Afraid of tight places?”

“Claustrophobic? No, I am not.”

“Good to hear, Doctor. I hope the others share the same fortitude.” For another half hour, Roosa led them deeper into the mountains, eventually turning into a narrow ravine before stopping at a large cave entrance. The men began transferring supplies into the cave.

He joined Roosa at the mouth of the tunnel and asked, “What of the horses and wagons?”

“All will go inside, Doctor. We shall have to partially disassemble the wagons, but there is room enough inside for a small paddock.”

“And supplies?”

Again Roosa offered a confident smile. “I have been stocking this cave for some time, Doctor, and I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well. Unless this Engelse colonel is willing to loiter in these mountains for months, we have nothing to fear. Now, Doctor, if you will, take two men and begin transporting your supplies inside. I want to be safely settled within the hour.”

As usual, Roosa got his way. As the last of the supplies were carried inside under the flickering glow of lanterns, the general oversaw the placement of black powder charges at the mouth of the cave. Having already set up a surgery of sorts in a side cave, De Klerk wandered back to the entrance to watch.

“Good, good!” Roosa called to one of the sappers. “Move that charge on the left a few feet higher. Yes, there!” The general turned as he approached. “Ah, Doctor, are you settled in?”

“Yes, General. But may I ask . . . is that wise? Sealing us in here?”

“It would be distinctly unwise, Doctor, if this were the only entrance. But this cave system is vast, with many smaller, well- concealed exits. I have given this tactic much thought.”

“I can see.”

From outside the entrance came the pounding of hooves. One by one, the marksmen who had been dispatched earlier to harass the British forces entered the cavern, each man leading a lathered, pant- ing steed. The last rider to enter stopped beside Roosa.

“We slowed them considerably, my general, but their scouts are less than an hour behind us. I estimate three hundred cavalry, two hundred foot soldiers, and forty 12-pound cannons.”

Roosa took this in, then rubbed his chin. "An impressive force. It seems the British have put a large bounty on our heads. Well, even if they manage to find us, the fight will be on our terms. And then, comrades, we will see how good the Engelse are at digging graves."

After blowing and collapsing the cavern entrance, the night passed without event—as did the next day and the six days after that. Most of the Boer troops settled into their new stronghold and went about the business of making the cave system not only comfortable, but as defensible as possible, too.

Meanwhile, Roosa's scouts used secret exits to slip from the caverns under the cover of darkness and returned with the same report: the British battalions remained in the mountains and appeared to be searching intently, but so far, they had failed to find the hidden fortress. After a week, a lone scout returned at dawn and found the general sitting in the officers' mess hall, a small cavern in which one of the disassembled wagons had been turned into a trestle table with benches. Roosa and De Klerk sat at one end, going over the day's sick report under the glow of a hanging lantern.

Exhausted and disheveled, the scout stopped beside Roosa. The general stood up, called for a water skin, then forced the scout to sit down and waited as the man quenched his thirst.

"Dogs," the scout said simply. "Bloodhounds. Coming this way." "Are you sure?" Roosa asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes, my general. I could hear them baying, not two miles away.

I believe they are coming toward this position."

"Could they be jackals instead?" De Klerk offered. "Or wild African dogs?"

"No, Doctor. My father had bloodhounds when I was a child. I know well their sound. I do not know how they would—"

"They captured three of our men," Roosa explained, as if expecting this news. "Their scent is our scent. And concentrated as we are in this damned cave . . ." The general's words trailed off. He looked down the length of the table at the faces of his concerned unit commanders.

"Gentlemen, let us man the ramparts, such as they are. It appears the Engelse will be here for tea."

The first hidden entrance the British found was on the cave system's southern side, a hole disguised by a jumble of boulders.

And so it started.

De Klerk found Roosa kneeling before a sandbag barrier with one of his unit commanders, a man named Vos. Beyond the sandbags the cavern's ceiling descended to shoulder height; at

the far end, some fifty feet away, was the horizontal shaft that led to the secret exit. A dozen soldiers were stationed across the cavern floor, each one kneeling with his rifle behind a stalagmite.

As they waited, De Klerk glanced up. Finger-width fissures split the cavern's ceiling, casting slivers of bright sunlight across the stone floor.

Roosa turned, placed an index finger to his lips, then pointed to his ear.

De Klerk nodded and said nothing. In the silence of the cavern, he strained his ears. In the distance, he could make out the faint baying of the British bloodhounds. After several minutes, the bawling fell silent.

Everyone held his breath. A soldier behind one of the forward-most stalagmites signaled back to the barrier.

Roosa nodded. "He hears voices. Multiple men coming through the shaft. Vos, you know what to do."

"Yes, my general."

Vos scratched his bayonet along the rock floor, and the men stationed behind the stalagmites turned toward him. Using only hand signals, Vos gave them their orders. Though De Klerk knew what was coming, he dreaded it.

Led by the faint glow of a lantern, the first British soldier appeared in the shaft. He crawled out of the entrance, then turned left and stopped, making room for the man behind him. One by one, the British scouts crawled out of the tunnel until there were six crouched at the far end of the cavern. Silently, the enemy played their lanterns across walls and ceiling and the stalagmites across the floor.

De Klerk watched, continuing to hold his breath.

Seeming to find only an empty cavern, the trespassers clipped the lanterns to their belts, then started moving forward, their rifles at the ready.

Vos let them get within twenty feet—then, with a double tap of his bayonet on the rock floor, his men sprang the ambush and opened fire. The fusillade lasted but seconds, killing all but one of the British scouts instantly. Moaning, the surviving soldier began crawling back toward the shaft, trailing a slick of blood behind him.

De Klerk grabbed his medical bag and stood up. Roosa grasped his forearm and shook his head.

"But, General, he is—"

"I said no, Doctor. The more terrifying we make this for the Engelse, the sooner they will leave. Vos, see to it."

At Roosa's nod, Vos hopped over the sandbag wall, drew a knife, then walked across the cavern to the crawling soldier. He knelt down and slit the man's throat.

Roosa turned to him. "I am sorry, Doctor. I do not enjoy ordering such a thing, but if we are to survive this, we must be brutal."

Such butchery settled like a cold stone in De Klerk's chest. He turned away, despairing, knowing one certainty.

Nothing goes unpunished under the eyes of the Lord.

Days passed, and still the British came. Soon the enemy had found all but one of Roosa's secret entrances. Small but fierce battles raged at the ramparts, as Roosa had taken to calling them. It became clear the British colonel was not only willing to send his troops into Roosa's meat grinder, but he was also willing to make terrible sacrifices— five, six, seven of his troops for one Boer wounded or killed.

De Klerk did what he could to help the injured or dying, but as the days turned into weeks, the Boer death count continued to rise—at first from British bullets, then from illness. The first ailing soldier appeared in his surgery complaining of intense stomach cramps. The medical staff treated him with herbs, but within hours the man became feverish and writhed in agony. The next day, two more men appeared with the same symptoms; then four more the day after that. His surgery became a madhouse of incoherent screams and squirming patients. Roosa walked into the surgery on the twenty-fourth day to check on the wounded, like he did every morning. De Klerk gave the general a grim status report.

Roosa frowned as he finished. "Show me."

Carrying a lantern, he led Roosa to a corner of the cavern where the sick men were quarantined. Together, they knelt beside the first patient who'd appeared with symptoms, a blond-haired boy named Linden. The boy flailed on the makeshift cot. His face was deathly pale. His arms had been secured to the sides of the cot with leather straps.

"Are those necessary?" Roosa asked.

"A new symptom," De Klerk explained and reached down to show the general.

He lifted the thin cotton tunic away from the man's torso. The patient's belly was covered in wart-like nodules, but instead of dotting the exterior skin of his stomach, the protrusions appeared to be coming from beneath the flesh.

"My God. What is that?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, General. Without these restraints, he would be clawing open his belly. Look here."

Together, they leaned over the boy's body. Using the tip of a scalpel, he pointed to one of the larger nodules, about the size of a pea. "Do you see the milky green color, just beneath the skin?"

"I see it. It's as if something is growing inside him."

"Not as if, General. Something is growing inside him. All of them. And whatever it is, it is doing its best to break out. They are all showing signs of it. Look here!"

Roosa brought a lantern closer. The pea-sized nodule seemed to be writhing, wormlike, beneath the skin. As they watched, a red blister grew at the edge of the nodule and quickly expanded to the size of ripe plum.

"What in the world . . . ?" Roosa whispered.

"Stand back."

The doctor grabbed a nearby rag and draped it over the nodule.

The scrap of cloth bulged for a few seconds—then came a hollow pop. A yellow-tinged crimson stain spread across the rag. The patient began to buck wildly, banging the cot's legs on the rock floor.

One of the medical aides ran over to help them hold Linden down. Still, the boy's back arched high under them, his head pressed against his pillow. Suddenly dozens of nodules appeared beneath the skin of Linden's throat and belly, the blisters growing before their eyes.

"Get back, get back!" De Klerk shouted, and the three of them backpedaled.

They watched, horrified, as the blisters began bursting, one after another. In the flickering lantern light, a yellowish mist hung in the air before slowly settling back over the boy's body. With a final convulsion, Linden arched off the bed until only his heels and the crown of his head were touching the bedroll. The boy's eyes fluttered open, staring sightlessly, then his body collapsed and went still.

De Klerk did not need to check, and Roosa did not need to ask. Linden was dead. The medical aide draped a blanket over his ravaged corpse.

"How many are afflicted so far?" Roosa asked, his voice cracking. "Seven."

"And the prognosis for them?"

"Unless I can discover the source and counteract it, I fear they will all die. Like this boy. But that's not the worst news."

Roosa finally tore his eyes away from the boy's draped body. "This is only the beginning. More will surely get sick."

"You suspect a contagion."

"I must. You saw the airborne discharge from the blisters. We

have to assume it is a mechanism of some sort—the disease’s way of spreading itself at the end.”

“How many do you think are already infected?” Roosa asked.

“You must understand. I have never seen or read of anything like this. And the incubation is short. The boy here was the picture of health three days ago. Now he is dead.”

“How many?” Roosa pressed. “How many will become sick?”

De Klerk kept his gaze fixed to the commander, so he could see his certainty. “Everyone. Everyone in this cave.” He reached and gripped Roosa’s wrist. “Whatever is killing these men, it is virulent. And it is in here with us.”