

THE  
NAPOLEON  
OF AFRICA

PHIL SMART

First published in Australia in 2025 by Philip Smart

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All enquiries should be directed to the publisher.

ISBN 9781764041508 (paperback)

ISBN 9781764041515 (ebook)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

### ***Disclaimer***

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and events, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.*

*My wife Merenia and I had a full life before I mentioned in  
passing to her one day, 'I think I might write a book'.  
She was immediately supportive and remained steadfastly so  
until I'd completed it.  
This book is dedicated to her.*

# Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Welcome!

While I have been a storyteller and an avid reader all my life, it took me until now to share this, my first novel, with the world. It is an historically based story but does not pretend to be history.

The major events described within this narrative, however, did happen, and most of the characters existed. How these people's interactions may have influenced the outcome of history, is the tale told within these pages.

The novel is set some two hundred years ago at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. After two decades of conflict, the sudden demobilisation of the British military machine created social and economic upheaval throughout Britain, where many now-unemployed, former military professionals began pursuing alternate careers throughout the British Empire.

As an example of an event that is historically correct, and that occurs early in the story, the East India Company's ship, the *Cumberland*, did sail out of Portsmouth in January 1816 bound for Bombay (now known as Mumbai), India, and the captain was one Thomas Hutton Wilkinson. The *Cumberland* made landfall in Cape Town, South Africa, for supplies before sailing north along the east coast of Africa during April of that year, arriving in Bombay in late May 1816.

Phil Smart

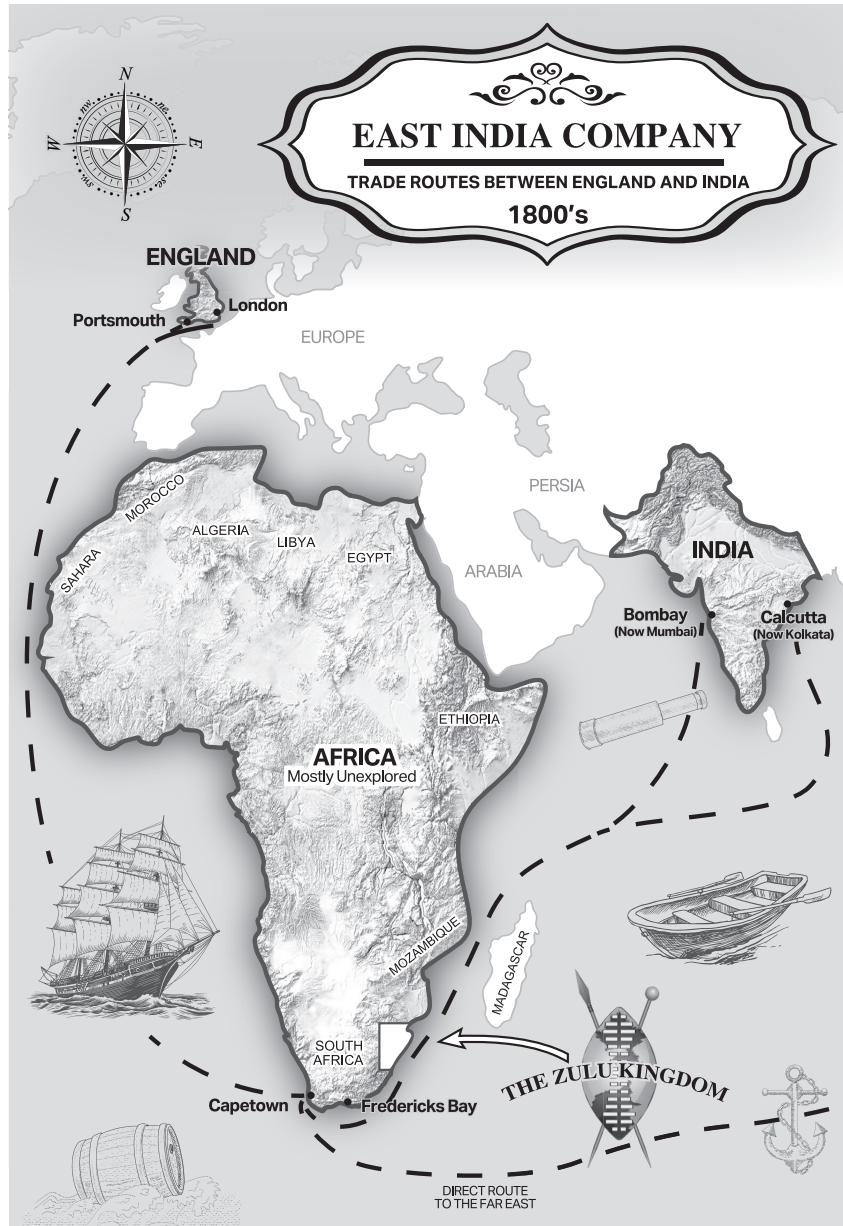
The weather conditions during the voyage are not well detailed, and the extent that fluctuations in the weather during the trip may have influenced future world events is where this chronicle begins its journey.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

If you're interested in knowing more about me and where this story originated, I invite you to join me in my new digital basecamp:

[www.philsmartauthor.com.au](http://www.philsmartauthor.com.au)

*Phil Smart*





# ONE

## A Beach in East Africa, 1816 AD

Andrew's eyes snapped open as his older brother's voice sounded in his ears. He tried to focus, staring with confusion up into Nathaniel's face. Sixteen-year-old Nathaniel stared back at him with a worried expression.

Andrew twisted his head and gaped in disbelief at the startling white tropical beach on which he was lying. The sand seemed to stretch away forever with regular surf breaks politely intruding upon the otherwise calm, emerald water.

Andrew's disorientation was complete.

*Where am I? What am I doing here? How did this happen?*

\* \* \*

Ten months earlier, on 18th June 1815, the Battle of Waterloo took place in the small European country of Belgium. On that day, the English General, the Duke of Wellington, had finally defeated Napoleon, the Emperor of France, thereby ending twenty years of almost constant war and bringing peace to Europe for the foreseeable future. While Andrew was not aware of it at the time, the battle would also have a profound influence on his own future.



From a child, Andrew had known he was destined to follow his father, a respected senior officer, into the Royal Navy. At ten years of age, he had been enrolled in the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth Dockyard, as had his brother Nathaniel three years before him.

The euphoria of Wellington's victory had swept through the whole of Britain. For Andrew, that euphoria had lasted just three months, ending one fateful evening when his whole world had fallen apart. Andrew's father, Commander Stephen Cowen, had sent an urgent message to the naval academy, asking the boys to return to the family home in Tiverton, a village nestled in the Devon countryside. Over dinner on their first night home, their father formally announced to them that he had resigned his commission from the Royal Navy. Furthermore, he had accepted a position in India as first secretary to Baronet Evan Nepean, the Governor of Bombay<sup>1</sup>.

'There is now no future in a military career for me or, sadly, for you,' Andrew's father had stated. 'We have been at war since before either of you were born, and now, with the very real prospect of a lasting peace, the government will be downsizing our military forces to a quarter of their present strength. Twelve months from now, retired military men will not be worth a ha'penny<sup>2</sup>.

'I have acted quickly and been fortunate enough to secure this position with the governor. His Excellency is a very influential gentleman whose patronage will secure our family's future. Your mother, sister, and I will be travelling to India on the first available ship.

'I would very much advise the two of you to accompany us. There will still be opportunities in the colonies to build strong careers—certainly more so than here in England. While I realise this will have come as a shock, you will have to decide quickly if you do wish to join us, as I will need to know your decision by tomorrow night. It is, unfortunately,

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1. **Bombay:** Today this city is known as Mumbai, a major city in the Republic of India

2. **ha'penny:** Half a penny, an English coin of the period. An estimated value today (2024) would be around fifty US cents

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a condition of my new employment that I book passage to Bombay immediately.'

A sober silence had gradually settled around the table as their father finished his announcement.

Their father's best friend and fellow naval officer, Francis Farewell, had also attended the dinner. Francis, notoriously uncomfortable with silence, now spoke up, offering his thoughts on the matter. 'Well, you need to know, boys, that I have resigned as well, and let me tell you, there is no need for such sombre faces; this is a huge opportunity!'

Uncle 'Fiz, as the boys called Francis, was as flamboyant as their father was dour and the boys adored him. After the ladies had taken their leave<sup>3</sup>, Uncle Fiz—over many glasses of wine—had enthralled the boys with colourful descriptions of exotic places, fantastical animals, and rollicking adventures to be experienced on the colonial frontiers. By the end of the night, Nathaniel was convinced and excited.

Andrew, on the other hand, was distraught. He saw the future he had been secretly planning for himself—but had not yet shared with his family—quietly dissolving in front of his eyes with every new tale of future exploits that Uncle Fiz enthusiastically regaled them with. Andrew knew that if Nathaniel decided to travel with the family, he would have no choice but to follow.

As the evening drew to a close, Uncle Fiz had stood, lifted his glass and proposed a toast. 'Dear friends, I sail tomorrow on the evening tide. In the next short while, the rest of you will also embark on differing life paths. Let us pledge here and now, that no matter where our journeys take us, we always seek to return to each other's company and value the family and friendships around this table tonight.'

The company had risen as one and soberly joined Fiz's toast. As they had looked into each other's eyes over their raised glasses, foremost

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3. '*Ladies had taken their leave*': It was customary at the time for ladies to retire from the dining table after dinner; usually they would play cards or discuss matters of interest to them, leaving the menfolk to enjoy cigars, more drinks and to partake in business conversation.

in their minds loomed the enormity of knowing that decisions already made, or soon to be made, would change their lives forever.

Sleep had evaded Andrew that night; he had lain in bed crying with the frustration and bitter disappointment of having had his secret dreams smashed against the rocks of fate before they'd even had the chance to set sail.

\* \* \*

The sting of a slap from his brother brought Andrew back to the present. 'Drew! Focus. I need you to stay awake and watch the longboat<sup>4</sup>. Beatrice is asleep there and you will have to stay alert in case she wakes while I'm gone. I'm going to climb to the top of that hill over there and survey the area.'

Andrew turned his head to gawk at the longboat that he now saw was beached at the high-tide mark before twisting back to view the small hill situated a short distance back from the beach. 'Drew, can you do that?' Nathaniel asked as he searched Andrew's eyes intently.

'Ye-yes,' stuttered Andrew, sitting up and rubbing his cheek where Nathaniel had slapped him.

Nathaniel did not hesitate any longer. He rose and, without looking back, strode off towards the hill. Andrew, still struggling to orient himself, watched him leave. Nathaniel was the perfect athlete, his movements balanced and smooth. His beloved Baker rifle, hanging in his right hand, looked as comfortable there as the ammunition pouches slung over his broad shoulders did. On his left hip, Nathaniel's navy-issue sword, known within the Navy as a cutlass, swung jauntily in its scabbard as he strode across the sand.

Following one step behind were Thor and Thyra, their father's massive hounds. The wolfhound–mastiff crossbreeds moved as one with

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4. **Longboat:** A type of rowboat carried on sailing ships, normally around twelve feet long. It could be lowered over the side quickly when needed and was used as a general utility boat for tasks such as taking crew to shore while the ship was anchored up. It also served as a lifeboat if the need ever arose. When not in use, it was usually roped securely, upside down, in the middle of the main deck.

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Nathaniel, like mythical warriors of old, dutifully following their liege<sup>5</sup>. Andrew remembered, as his head continued to clear, that, of course, the dogs had been kennelled in the longboat on board the ship on which the family had secured passage to India. The same longboat that was now ignominiously stranded in front of him like a forlorn whale.

Nathaniel was two years older than Andrew and already six foot tall. He was often mistaken for a grown man. Andrew remembered how proud he was when his brother had won the annual Naval Academy marksmanship award the previous year. It was also well known that he had beaten all who challenged him (including some older students) in the cutlass duels which, while banned because they were so dangerous, remained a regular part of the academy students' underground activities.

A startled cry from the longboat brought Andrew to his feet, and he stumbled groggily down the beach to the boat. Peering inside, he was greeted by a look of bewilderment and relief from his little sister; at twelve years of age, she was still no more than a child. 'Drew!' Beatrice cried out, 'Where's Mother?'

'It's fine, Bea. Nate has just gone to have a look around; he will be back in a moment,' replied Andrew in what he hoped was a soothing tone. He smiled at Beatrice as she sat up and stared at him, her startling blue eyes piercing through the unruly mess that her white-blond hair had become during the night's ordeal.

'Where's Thor?' she asked.

At least Andrew could give a more definitive answer to that. 'He and Thyra went with Nate.'

Beatrice seemed to notice the beach for the first time and, looking about, exclaimed, 'Where are we?'

'That's what Nate has gone to find out,' was the best response Andrew could muster. At the same time, he spied the supply barrel strapped in the middle of the longboat and, by way of distraction, said, 'Bea, are there any apples left? Let's have one each.'

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5. *Liege*: A feudal lord entitled to allegiance and service.

And that's how Nathaniel found them when he returned: sitting on the beach eating their respective second apples, Beatrice chatting away, and Andrew gingerly touching the huge bump he had discovered on the side of his head. As Thor bounded delightedly up to Beatrice, Andrew glanced up at his brother and noted the grim look on his face. 'There is a creek on the other side of that hill with fresh water, but other than that, there is no sign of life—well, human life, anyway. The animals, on the other hand, are extraordinary; there are thousands of them of all different types. I have no idea what most of them are, but I did think I saw a rhinoceros!' Nathaniel reported.

'Where's Mother?' Beatrice asked again, this time a little more stridently.

Nathaniel answered her. 'Mother's still on the ship with Father. You remember the big storm? Well, the longboat you were hiding in with the dogs fell overboard, and we have ended up on this beach. They will be coming to get us as soon as they can. In between times, we must carry all the supplies in this boat further away from the water before the high tide comes back. Can you help with that, Bea?'

Nathaniel's explanation to Beatrice jogged Andrew's intermittently returning memory. It brought with it hazy recollections of the heaving ship and the previous night's terrifying storm.

## TWO

### Aboard the *Cumberland*, One Day Prior

It was early afternoon on a calm April day. The *Cumberland*, a three-decker East India sailing ship<sup>6</sup> under Captain Thomas Hutton Wilkinson, was sliding lazily through the balmy waters off the East coast of Africa, heading north on her way to India. The ship's desultory progress was all that could be expected given the incipient strength of the southerly breeze; it hardly left a breath on Andrew's cheek as he walked across the deck. The captain had ordered every patch of available sail hoisted above the ship, trying desperately to extract as much forward motion as possible from what little wind there was.

Stripped down to his shirtsleeves and enjoying the warmth, Andrew didn't mind. It was a beautiful day, and whenever the ship's progress was this slow, the captain had permitted him to indulge in the second of his two great passions: fishing! One of the lines he had brought with him trailed out from the stern of the ship. He was experimenting with a lure

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6. *The East India Company*: A huge English commercial organisation that had a monopoly on the trade between India and Britain. They owned hundreds of big ponderous cargo ships that they used to carry their trade goods between the two countries. How many decks or levels within each ship gave an indication of its size. Most were two decks, some just one deck; a 'three-decker' was a big one.

he'd made from some tinsel and lace, items he had recently liberated from his mother's sewing supplies—unbeknownst to her, of course. He would tell his mother in good time, but not until after she had enjoyed a fresh fish dinner.

Andrew leaned over the ship's side, concentrating on keeping his fishing line taut. As the late afternoon sun warmly caressed his now suntanned face, his thoughts turned again to the recent changes in his life. Andrew was certain, given the ferocity with which these exotic fish struck his line and the size of the mackerel he managed to pull in, that he was fishing in a tropical wonderland that had never seen a fishing line before.

The comparison to his life of just a few months ago was stark; he had gone from the dank mouldy confines of the Naval Academy in Portsmouth, England, where the weather outside was the only thing gloomier than the lessons he suffered through, to this paradise. As for fishing at home, it consisted of dropping a line into a muddy river, only half expecting a bored nibble from a despondent eel. *The changes in my life aren't all bad*, Andrew thought to himself.

Suddenly, Andrew's arm was nearly wrenched from its socket as the line exploded savagely through the wet rag that he was using to gain better purchase on it. What followed could only be described as a desperate tug-of-war between Andrew and this new sea monster. As he frantically pulled in the line, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark shape materialising under the silver flash that he knew was his fish. It was the tiger shark again. Twice already this afternoon, Andrew had fought the line, only to pull aboard not more than a fish's head, terrifying teeth marks behind its head outlining where the fish's body had been torn away by this demon.

A passing sailor, responding to Andrew's cry, jumped in to help him pull the fish quickly onto the deck. As it lay in its death gasps, the fish's silvery brilliance was set off by deep purple markings; Andrew leant quickly back over the side just in time to see the dark shadow of the gargantuan shark merging back into the depths. He had seen the shark many times since leaving Cape Town and knew it was following the

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ship, feeding on the waste the ship's cook threw over the side. Andrew shivered and reminded himself again not to fall overboard.

On hearing the commotion, Asger, the ship's Danish cook, appeared and gathered up not just the whole fish that lay there but the severed heads as well, winking at Andrew as he held up one of the heads and saying, by way of explanation, 'Fish stew!'

That was good enough for Andrew, and he decided to call it a day. He rolled up his lines, threw a wooden bucket attached to a rope over the ship's side and, pulling hand over hand on the rope, retrieved it half full of sea water, and washed himself down. He noticed his sister sitting on the shady side of the longboat playing with Thor and he began ambling over towards them. Beatrice had adorned the dog with several ribbons and a sunbonnet. Andrew could tell by Thor's pained expression that it wasn't a game he was enjoying, and he smiled at the dog's discomfort.

\* \* \*

As a war hero, now appointed first secretary to Governor Nepean, Andrew's father Stephen was somewhat of a celebrity on board the ship, and the family had been offered the very best first-class cabins, situated within the roundhouse<sup>7</sup>, at the ship's stern. Their cabin doors opened onto the quarterdeck<sup>8</sup> near where the rear longboat was secured. While their cabins were the best on board, they were still not spacious. As the ship boasted two longboats, the captain had ordered that this rear longboat be lashed right ways up and a canvas tent erected over the top. He then graciously invited Andrew's father to kennel his dogs there, close to their cabin. The family had taken advantage of this boat to store some personal effects there as well, items deemed too special by the family to

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7. **Roundhouse:** A raised accommodation area that took up the whole of the stern or rear of the ship. Its forward-facing doors and windows opened onto the quarterdeck.

8. **Quarterdeck:** The nautical term for the main, open deck that extends from the cabin doors of the roundhouse at the rear to the ship, to the very front of the vessel. It normally takes up about seventy-five per cent of the length of the ship.



have them thrown into the general cargo area down in the bowels of the ship.

The captain had also extended a standing invitation for the family to join his dinner table every night. Father had accepted the hospitality but insisted that Beatrice be left with a nanny. 'It is no place for a child, Elspeth,' he had said to Andrew's mother.

'Only a few weeks now, Bea, and we will be in Bombay,' said Andrew as he arrived at his sister's play area. Beatrice had celebrated her twelfth birthday just before they had left England, and she was the apple of their parents' eye. She looked up at Andrew with a countenance that conveyed her annoyance at being interrupted in what was clearly an important dress-up game and said, 'Andrew! Since you're here, you can be part of the game. Put your jacket back on and sit down over there. You can be Governor Nepean, and I will present to you, Lord Thor of Tiverton.'

Andrew laughed as he squatted down next to his sister and joined the game. He loved his little sister and enjoyed her company. Looking down his nose, Andrew reached for the hapless Thor's paw, saying as he did so, 'Oh-werh,' in his best imitation of the affected voice the pompous admirals had used when addressing the cadets during their visits to the Academy. 'So-werh, pleeeseduh to meet yew, Loorred Thorwuh.'

His sister giggled in delight, and so the game progressed.

At the same time, Andrew kept one eye out for his brother, who he knew would think it silly of him to play such baby games with Beatrice. 'Not becoming of a future British Officer, Andrew,' his brother would observe haughtily. Andrew didn't care now, anyway; he wasn't going to be a British Officer anymore, was he? Not that he would dare say that to his brother.

Beatrice always said of her eldest brother Nathaniel, 'It is like having two daddies.' In Nathaniel's defence, he had not chosen to be the eldest son of a British Naval Officer during the Napoleonic Wars. Their father was absent for months, sometimes years at a time, taking part in the desperate struggle for the future of Europe, fighting in places that the

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family had never heard of and in battles, the results of which were not known until many months after they had been fought.

When Nathaniel was home in Tiverton, he made sure he arrived at the parish church an hour before the scheduled early Sunday service time so that he could scour the casualty list posted there every week, in case his father's name was on it. If that awful Sunday ever came to pass when Nathaniel read the name, *Commander Stephen Cowen*, among the war dead, he wanted to be the one to break the news to his mother.

At the Academy, the list was posted daily and Nathaniel checked it first thing every morning, ready at a moment's notice to rush home if his father's name was ever posted there, again to personally break the news to his mother and support her. That daunting responsibility alone would mature any boy beyond his years.

What Andrew did not understand or appreciate was that having his brother take on that mantle of responsibility meant he could remain a young boy, still carefree enough to play make-believe with his sister.

The longboat that Andrew and Beatrice were playing behind was lashed down just in front of the wheelhouse. This was a small hut at the rear of the quarterdeck where the steering wheel and other instruments necessary for sailing the ship were situated; its walls were mostly glass as the crew had to be able to view the whole ship when they were inside it. The wheelhouse on the *Cumberland* was just in front of the roundhouse, which in an East India Company ship, took up the whole of the stern (rear) of the vessel. The roof of the roundhouse became an even higher rear deck, known in nautical terms as the 'poop deck'.

First Mate Owen Mathieson, the officer of the watch, peered up at the sails through the wheelhouse windows and then glanced at the compass. He thought all was as it should be as he finished his practised routine with a quick look at the ship's clock and barometer, lunch being the most important thing on his mind. He had turned and was about to speak to the helmsman, who had both hands firmly on the huge five-foot diameter steering wheel, when, with a start, his eyes darted back to the barometer. The thick column of mercury was dropping so fast that he could almost see it moving. Mathieson grabbed the ship's

whistle hanging on a lanyard around his neck and blew it hard. It was a message that signalled: *Captain to the wheelhouse, please*. Dropping mercury on the face of the barometer meant only one thing: a lowering of atmospheric pressure, which in turn indicated that a weather change was on the way.

Captain Wilkinson climbed up the stairs from below deck and strode across the quarterdeck to the wheelhouse, buttoning his tunic as he came. As he entered the wheelhouse, his eyes searched out the barometer, and then, with raised eyelids, he looked back at Mathieson. 'That's not possible,' he muttered.

The captain immediately left the wheelhouse and climbed the stairs behind the wheelhouse to the poop deck, with Mathieson scurrying close behind him. Captain Wilkinson lifted his telescope to his right eye. On the port side of the ship, he could see a wispy smudge, the coast of Africa away in the west, exactly where he had expected to find it. He then swivelled the telescope slowly around until he faced south-east and steadied; he had picked up a slight smudge on the horizon, a blemish in the sky so small it could not be seen with the naked eye. Even with a telescope, you would have to be an expert to discern it. The captain dropped the telescope and muttered to himself again, 'Blazes! That's just not possible, not at this time of year.'

Andrew, being a cadet in the Royal Navy, knew what the whistle signal had meant and followed the exchange between the captain and the first officer; they were unaware of the two young Cowens sitting close by on the other side of the longboat.

'Keep an eye on that, Mathieson,' ordered Captain Wilkinson, pointing with an outstretched arm to the smudge in the south-east. 'Call me again if anything changes,' he added, climbing back down to the quarterdeck and striding towards the stairs leading below, still muttering to himself.

\* \* \*

Andrew wasn't unduly concerned by the captain's words. He recalled the first night out of Cape Town when the captain had held a formal

dinner to celebrate rounding the Cape of Good Hope<sup>9</sup>. This point in the journey was regarded as the halfway mark between England and India.

At that celebratory dinner, Andrew's father and the captain had sat at opposite ends of the table. Candlelight reflecting off the gold buttons on his father's naval uniform complimented the row of war medals—polished to brilliance—that adorned his left breast. One medal, the Naval Gold Medal, had been awarded for his actions at the Battle of Lissa in 1811, and it testified to all that he was a battle-hardened veteran. Mother had sat on his right side, beautifully dressed in a silk dress of exquisite style that highlighted the diamond pendant adorning her neck.

On their last night in London, Andrew's maternal grandmother had gifted his mother the precious family heirloom. After placing it around Mother's neck, Granny, with moist eyes, had hugged Mother so tight and for so long that Andrew began to fidget, moving his weight from one foot to the other. Eventually, he looked away, flushed with embarrassment.

On this night, Andrew thought he had never seen his mother look more radiant, and he was reminded that in their twenty-year marriage, this was the first time his parents had ever been to sea together. It was probably also the longest stretch of time they had ever spent in each other's company. Andrew had sat next to the ship's surgeon, whom he had made a point of getting to know and had spent many hours with, pursuing knowledge in his other great passion, the one that relegated fishing to second place—surgery.

After much cajoling, Andrew had convinced the surgeon to let him accompany him when he attended to the various ailments and injuries of the passengers and crew each day. Andrew's knowledge increased with each consultation.

Nathaniel had conspired to sit next to a splendidly attired military officer of the East India Company, an out-and-out dandy who was

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9. *Rounding the Cape of Good Hope*: This is the most southern tip of Africa.

After sailing past this point, a ship sailing from England gradually turns back north-east on the final run to India. When travelling the other way, from India, the ship turns north-west on the home run to Britain.

returning to India after spending his leave in England. He and Nathaniel had become constant companions over the past six weeks, even though Andrew suspected half the fanciful stories the snappy officer told were probably embellishments designed to boost his own self-importance. Nathaniel didn't care; he lapped up every swashbuckling tale.

The first and second mates made up the remainder of the table's company of nine souls.

The meal had been sumptuous. Slow-baked quail, stuffed with dates and cheese and wrapped in pastry, had kicked off proceedings. The cheese had been collected from the Huguenot Dairies situated on the outskirts of Cape Town just two days prior. Roast Cape Spring lamb, complemented with new baby potatoes, fresh green peas, miniature pumpkins, and mint jelly, had followed. To complete the meal, delicate cakes, jellies and tarts—all specialties of the ship's Danish cook—were served with lashings of fresh cream.

The *Cumberland* had been anchored in Table Bay, Cape Town for three days while the ship took on supplies. Andrew's parents had taken the opportunity to visit the Stellenbosch Valley, a region famous for its wines. Andrew and Beatrice had accompanied them on the trip. Their horse and buggy had trotted down avenues of majestic hundred-year-old oak trees that framed peaceful villages from which grape vines, by the thousands, stretched across rolling hills to meet the base of the Simonsberg Mountains. Dutch Cape farmhouses in brilliant white with neatly thatched roofs were dotted among the vines, setting off this picturesque valley. The wines the Cowens had collected on that trip were now being served at dinner, and the table's company had agreed wholeheartedly that the wines were as enchanting as they were world class.

In the break before the desserts were served, Captain Wilkinson had stood and, calling for attention, had outlined the plan for the remainder of the voyage. 'This is the most benign time of the year in Southern Africa,' he had said. 'We will be sailing north-north-east up the coast of Africa to take advantage of what's left of the southerly winds. Once we are through the Mozambique Strait, we will turn and run directly east across the top of Madagascar Island into the Indian Ocean.'

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‘At some point, as we cross that ocean, we will encounter the trade winds. These will allow us to change tack and sail north-west. We can then expect fair sailing up the west coast of India to Bombay. I estimate it is only another six weeks’ sailing before we anchor in Bombay Harbour, unless the southerlies are more lackadaisical than normal and conspire to slow us down. Certainly,’ the captain had said confidently, holding his glass towards Andrew’s mother, the only lady at his table, ‘we can be assured of no bad weather for the remainder of the trip.’

The captain had then raised his glass high and toasted, ‘To fair seas,’ to which they had all risen and returned the toast. ‘To fair seas.’

## THREE

### It's Just Not Possible

Andrew continued watching the captain as he disappeared down the stairs. He then turned to his sister and smiled as they returned to their game, at the same time roping in Thyra, the other of Father's dogs, to add to the fun. Thyra's lack of enthusiasm was even more obvious than Thor's. Engrossed as the children now were in the goings on of their imaginary Nawab of Bombay's royal court, they did not notice, until sometime later, that the wind had died completely.

The first mate's second whistle of the day brought Andrew's awareness back to the reality of the ship. He looked aloft to see the sails hanging lifelessly on the yardarms, like wrinkled layers of extra skin, and he realised the ship was wallowing aimlessly.

Andrew stood and looked to the south-east where he could immediately see that the 'smudge' had grown ominously to a dark cloud bank, angrily unfolding and building across the ocean. The sea, he also noticed, had changed colour from its languid light emerald green to a more sinister, darker colour. A foreboding swell had developed and, although at this stage it was nothing more than a building and ebbing under the ship, it was suggestive, at least, that there may be more to come.

The captain, responding to the second whistle, had arrived back on deck again. He didn't even reach the wheelhouse. Taking one look at the

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now rapidly-approaching giant dark clouds, he turned and started shouting orders. Immediately, crew swarmed aloft, and sails were urgently being folded before the impending wind hit and tore them to shreds. It was an alacrity that Andrew had not seen from the crew before. This continued till the yardarms<sup>10</sup> were nearly bare.

He looked back at his sister and said, 'That's probably enough for today, Bea. Might be best if you tie the dogs back into the longboat.'

The tone of her brother's voice made Beatrice look up, and she was about to ask him a question when Nathaniel arrived. He had been up high in the rigging working with the sailors, helping to get the sails stored away. 'Get those dogs tied up securely, and while you are at it, make sure everything in the longboat is tied down tight as a drum, do you hear, Drew? Tight! Then go to your cabin. Quickly!' Nathaniel added, 'This could get rough.' With that, Nathaniel turned and raced to the ship's port side to assist some sailors struggling to double-tie down some rigging knots.

The wind that had suddenly risen from the south-east was stronger than any they had experienced for days. The few remaining sails filled with an almighty crack as they bellied out to the end of their guide ropes, and the ship groaned as it leant over in response and commenced making way again. The helmsman spun the wheel vigorously as the captain turned and yelled, 'Make north-north-west, as close as she will sail.' The captain was all business, striding up the length of the quarter-deck, issuing orders as he went.

Andrew saw his father come out of their cabin and address him. 'Anything I can do, Captain Wilkinson?'

The captain turned and walked towards Andrew's father with a countenance that told Andrew how serious this was. 'Yes,' the captain said, 'if you and Mrs Cowen could go below deck and organise the

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10. **Yardarms:** All sailing ships have masts, which are the central columns that rise vertically out of the hull of the ship and continue up to the full giddy height at the tops of the sails. In some ships, for those that have 'square' sails, there are also several horizontal spars attached to the vertical mast, and the sails are hung from these horizontal spars. These horizontal spars are known as yardarms.



below-deck passengers, it would be very much appreciated.' As the captain reached the commander, he leant in close to whisper, 'We hadn't drilled the passengers for this; there is a danger they may panic.' He looked out at the approaching cloud bank, now black and threatening. 'This is just not possible this time of year,' he murmured to his fellow naval officer, by way of explanation; it seemed almost an excuse.

Now that Andrew's father had something to do, he ignored the captain's comment; this was no time for chastisement. He replied, 'Leave below decks to me, Captain; you keep all your crew up here to handle the ship. I feel you will need all hands on deck before this is over.' The captain looked at Stephen gratefully.

'I don't have to tell you this, Commander. As a sailor, you already know I have a fight on my hands. It will be all I can do to stop this storm from driving us onto the very coast of Africa.'

As the commander turned to go back to his cabin, he glanced at his two younger children and said, 'You finish that and go straight to your cabin, and don't come out under any circumstances until I say so. Is that clear, Andrew?'

'Yes, Father,' Andrew replied, wondering to himself with annoyance, *Why does everybody feel the need to double underline things when they talk to me?*

The commander entered his cabin, but within moments came back out again with Mother following, just as Andrew, with Beatrice's help, had finished tying everything in the longboat down extra tight. Andrew's father repeated his instructions as they strode towards the stairs leading to the lower decks. 'In the cabin now, Andrew, and look after Beatrice. Don't come out no matter what until I come and get you, understood?'

'Yes, Father,' Andrew replied, thinking, *Now it's triple underlined! What do they think is wrong with me?*

He realised his parents now had a critical responsibility. Andrew had traversed the lower decks when accompanying the surgeon on his rounds and had seen how passengers of lesser means were crammed down into the bowels of the ship. All manner of men, sailors, tradesmen, fortune seekers, and soldiers, were thrown in together with the

women and children and allowed on the quarterdeck for only one hour a day to walk around, breathe some fresh air, and enjoy the sunlight, before they were shepherded straight back down below deck.

Andrew knew that a panic below decks could shift the passenger weight at a critical moment that might endanger the ship, or result in a stampede to the upper deck. He knew that the impediment of a panicked crowd could seriously hamper the crew's ability to fight the storm. Andrew had been taught at the Academy that it was important, early on in a journey such as this, to instruct the below-deck passengers as to what is expected of them in an emergency. The passengers then practised the various actions assigned to them until they knew exactly what to do, if such a dire situation ever did arise.

Except, in this case, they hadn't been, as Andrew had just heard from the captain's own lips.

Andrew knew his parents would have their hands full and that he wouldn't see them again until after the storm had passed. Feeling something touch his sleeve, Andrew looked down and saw it was his sister's hand. He grasped it and looked into Beatrice's face; her eyes were as big as saucers. Smiling to reassure her, he said, 'Come on, Bea, let's go into our cabin and continue our game.'

The long swell, now growing in force, was pushing the *Cumberland* from the south-east, causing her to sail ever closer to the African coast. The helmsman and his assistant fought the wheel to keep her bow pointing as far as possible to starboard<sup>11</sup>, away from the coast, balancing between broaching her sideways on the downside of a wave while sailing as close to the wind as they could get without spilling the wind from the sails. The ship groaned in protest at the conflicting forces to which she was being subjected.

The first mate stood alongside the wheel, ready to lend a hand if needed. Nathaniel, like all the crew, had found a moment sometime in the last hour to don oilskins and seaboots. The swell had increased,

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11. **Starboard:** Right-hand side of a ship when facing the front; the left-hand side is called the port side.

and Nathaniel found he had to grab a handhold as he moved around the ship.

Soon the light was fading as the oppressive clouds raced towards them, filling the sky and, suddenly, without warning, they enveloped the whole ship.

The rigging commenced to sing with the building wind and then, in what seemed to be a mutual agreement between wind and water, the tempo of the storm increased to an unimagined level. The wail of protest from the rigging as it bent to the wind's force transcended to a high-pitched shriek, as angry as it was loud.

At the same time, huge seas towered above the deck of the *Cumberland*, pitching her forward on her bow. Sheets of sea spray raced across the ship's deck, and Nathaniel, still helping where needed, could now see little further than the end of his outstretched arm.

The *Cumberland* responded to a monstrous wave, standing almost upright on her stern, then she twisted like a living creature and surfed down the face of the following wave. The enormity of sound made words useless, so the captain just pointed to where, through gaps in the now sideways rain sheets, he had seen broken rigging flailing uselessly. Nathaniel nodded at the captain and, grabbing a seaman by the scruff of the neck, staggered along the deck to where the rigging had given way. He made sure he had an iron-like grip on the ship's rail the whole way. There, he braced his legs to get as much stability as possible before he and the seaman began frantically sorting and securing the offending rigging.

Suddenly, the storm took on an even shriller note and increased in its savagery. Vertical green walls of ocean water exploded across the deck; one particularly massive wave appeared with what seemed to be a whole tree trunk in its grasp. Nathaniel gaped. He had returned to the wheelhouse just before the massive hunk of driftwood, propelled by an endless supply of violent water, came hurtling sideways down the length of the deck towards the wheelhouse, as though it was intent on wiping the hut completely from the ship's deck.

## THE NAPOLEON OF AFRICA

Just as Nathaniel thought his life was over, one end of the tree trunk slammed into the mainmast and a shudder permeated through the whole ship. Fortunately, the mast held, and the trunk swung around the mast like a giant scythe. Now, instead of destroying the wheelhouse, the trunk swept broadside into the longboat in front of it. The ropes lashing the longboat down strained momentarily and softened the trunk's blow before they snapped; both the boat and the log were thrown against the port rail.

At this point, the *Cumberland* was leaning so far into the storm that the port rail was almost underwater, and the longboat—now entangled with the log—looked like it might swing down the side of the ship like a huge pendulum, smashing all rigging in its path.

The captain knew he was looking at his ship's death knell. 'Go,' he screamed at the crew, who heard nothing above the now-banshee-like wailing of the storm. The crew knew, though, just as well as the captain, the danger they were in and rushed out of the wheelhouse with axes raised, Nathaniel with them. They raced across the deck between waves, knowing that the ship was done for unless the jumbled mess could somehow be cut free and manhandled over the ship's side.

As Nathaniel and the crew hacked desperately through the tangle of ropes, he heard the howling of the dogs tied inside the longboat. He could only imagine their terror, but the very life of the ship and its one hundred and fifteen souls were at stake, so he hardened his heart. He knew that nothing could be done, and the dogs would be lost.

Then Nathaniel heard another sound, a piercing shriek that could only be human. He ducked his head under the canvas tent, still intact over the longboat, and there was Beatrice, soaked through with her arms wrapped tightly around the dogs. Nathaniel knew he only had seconds, as the crew had nearly freed the boat and tree trunk. He screamed his sister's name and threw himself inside the boat. Nathaniel scrambled to reach her, already planning to use his momentum to continue his scramble and throw himself out the other end of the longboat, grabbing Beatrice on the way past.

However, as he was about to execute his plan, he noticed colour on the floor and looked down; there was Andrew, unmoving. He was at an unnatural angle and jammed hard up under the rowing benches.

Nathaniel couldn't leave.

Outside on the deck, the next huge wall of water was rushing headlong across the deck. The crew, having nearly freed the massive obstruction, held onto whatever they could find and, ducking their heads, braced to accept the coming water.

Inside the longboat, Nathaniel felt the wave hit and lift both the longboat and the offending trunk over the side of the dangerously leaning ship and into the ocean.

No-one had seen Nathaniel dive into the longboat, so the crew, not realising he was missing, let out a hurrah of triumph before staggering carefully back to the wheelhouse to await the next emergency.

## FOUR

### Mandlakhe, a Son of Africa

Fourteen-year-old Mandlakhe looked down at his breakfast *phutu* [porridge] and prodded at the shape he could see hidden there: a piece of beef! As the golden African sun had risen, providing early morning colour to the thatching of the hut where he slept, Mandlakhe had meandered over to his mother's hut seeking an early breakfast. Thembeke, was the third wife of his father, Zakhele, who was the *umnumzana*<sup>12</sup> [head man] of this *umuzi*<sup>13</sup> [homestead] on the edge of the Zulu tribal lands.

Mandlakhe's father was a respected member of the Zulu tribe, and his *umuzi* was laid out in the typical fashion of all married Zulu men's homesteads. The central feature was a circular cattle corral, around

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12. *Ummnumzana*: The homestead head man. His hut was situated at the other end of the *umuzi* [homestead] from the gate. Next to his hut would be the hut of the principal wife; then the huts of the lesser wives were arranged in descending order. Finally, at the farthest distance away, nearest to the gate, were the huts of unmarried dependants.

13. *Umuze*: The base family dwelling complex or homestead. It would house the headman, his wives (three would not be unusual), and their offspring. The layout was around a central cattle pen surrounded by several huts and an outer fence called a boma.

which half a dozen huts were placed. Surrounding the huts was a *boma*<sup>14</sup> [perimeter fence] about six feet high. The *boma* had one entrance, facing east, with the headman's hut placed at the opposite end to the entrance.

Today, his mother had snuck a special treat into her only son's breakfast. Tasting the beef settled for Mandlakhe what he would do for the day; he would go hunting. He had only been home a few days from his first military assignment, a month-long campaign with one of the *ezibuto* [youth regiments], which the great *Induna* [General] Shaka had instituted to act as support porters for his Zulu warrior regiment.

As Zakhele's third wife, Thembeke's hut was closer to the entrance and the unmarried quarters than it was to his father's hut. This had allowed Mandlakhe to keep a low profile since his return, and so far, he had managed to avoid being called back to take up his typical domestic responsibility—herding his father's cattle.

For the time being, Mandlakhe was free to do whatever he liked and what he liked to do, more than anything else, was hunt. As he munched delightedly on the tender beef morsel, Mandlakhe resolved that today he would go to the lagoon by the sea, where the guinea fowl could be found in abundance.

There had been a big storm the night before last, unusual for this time of year, and Mandlakhe knew the fowl would have been too unsettled to feed yesterday. Today, their growing hunger would keep the birds focused on finding food, making them easy prey. If he could get a good bag, Mandlakhe's mother would roast some up and send them to his father, who, unlike most Zulu men, enjoyed eating poultry and, in particular, was fond of these wonderfully tasty birds.

The military campaign Mandlakhe had just returned from had opened his eyes to savage and dark things, things that were now the source of nightmares whose insidious recurrences woke Mandlakhe most nights. They left him in a cold sweat, longing for the morning light.

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14. **Boma:** Outer perimeter fence of any Zulu dwelling complex, usually made of acacia thornbush branches, built to about five or six feet high.

## THE NAPOLEON OF AFRICA

Hunting at least required great focus, so Mandlakhe knew there would be no room for other thoughts. His worst fear was a creeping self-doubt as to his own courage. As a budding Zulu warrior, Mandlakhe knew he was supposed to relish the blood and slaughter that he had witnessed being wrought by the army on what were sometimes nothing more than helpless villagers. When his time came, would he be able to plunge his *iklwa* [fighting spear] into an unarmed, helpless villager? Mandlakhe knew he couldn't. Did this mean he was a coward?

Mandlakhe's real terror was that an *isangoma* [witch doctor] would see through his mask and view his compassion as cowardice. This would result in a 'smelling out'; this was the Zulu custom by which an *isangoma* would highlight a tribal member whom he suspected of being weak and cull them out before they weaken the whole tribe. There was no right of appeal for being 'smelled out', and it usually ended with an almost instant sentence of death and not just for the individual whom the doctor had thought to be a suspect. Summary execution often followed for the unfortunate victim's immediate family as well.

Finishing his breakfast, Mandlakhe walked toward the homestead's entrance, stopping momentarily as he passed his hut to collect some weapons. He selected his favourite *iWisa* [throwing or fighting club] and the *assegai* [throwing spear], which he had been awarded when he first went on campaign some weeks—and a lifetime of experience—ago.

The herd boys, now busy in the central cattle corral, were his half-brothers from his father's first and second wives. Every day, soon after dawn, the boys led the hungry cattle from the inner corral and took them out to pasture. They returned at mid-morning, when the cows were milked and the calves let loose to find their mothers. The boys, after a quick breakfast, then took the herd back out to the pastures again for the remainder of the day.

With the cattle back out to pasture and contentedly grazing, the boys' only responsibility was to keep an eye on them. This left time for them to practice their hunting and fighting skills. This they did incessantly for many hours every day, using sticks instead of the *iklwa* [fighting spear] and handfuls of grass to represent the *isiHlangu* [war



shield]. By the time a Zulu youth reached his mid-teens, the many hours of practice while keeping one eye on the cattle meant that they were all deadly experts at the skills and moves required to be victorious warriors.

They were Shaka's instant army.

Mandlakhe was mindful that as the son of Zakhele's third wife, he did not have the advantage his brothers did in the family hierarchy, and so he tried extra hard at developing the fighting skills that were valued by his nation. He particularly liked the *iWisa* [throwing or fighting club]; essentially, it was a stick with a knob on the end, and through many hours of practise, he had become adept at throwing a shorter, lightened *iWisa* with great accuracy.

His extra zeal did not go unnoticed by his father, Zakhele, who, as tradition dictated, awarded him his formal name on his seventh birthday. The complaints and bruises on his brothers' bodies from Mandlakhe's *iWisa* gave Zakhele the evidence he needed to award his third wife's only son a prestigious name—Mandlakhe—meaning 'He of great efforts'.

His brothers, out of jealousy, still called him by the derogatory nickname they had given him when he was only five—*Isitho* [calf]. It was a constant reminder of the evening he had returned home from herd duty with a calf missing. It was customary, once the calves were all secure inside the corral for the night, for the herd boy to conduct one last count. Only when conducting this last count did Mandlakhe realise he was a calf short.

Rather than face his father's wrath, Mandlakhe had immediately turned around, and, without hesitation, went back out alone into the coming night to find the calf. He had not returned until well after the moon was up with the miscreant animal. His mother, distraught, had soundly beaten him, thinking she had lost him to the wilds. He didn't care, and he didn't even mind his brothers' teasing; at least his father had not found out. What he did not know was that one of his brothers, trying to curry favour, had informed Zakhele that the son from his third wife, at five, with nothing but an *iWisa* [fighting club] for protection, had gone back out into the night to find the lost calf.

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When Mandlakhe did return, Zakhele was as surprised as his mother was, feeling certain that a search next morning would turn up two sets of bones, one being his son's and the other set the remains of the calf, both evidence of leopard or lion snacks.

Much to the dismay of Mandlakhe's brothers, Zakhele chose to ignore the incident; after all, the calf was back. In his mind, though, he quietly acknowledged and marked the courage and determination of a son who had acted so swiftly.

It was also not lost on Zakhele that none of Mandlakhe's brothers had offered to go out with him that night.

## FIVE

# Marooned

‘So, can you help us move the supplies out of the boat, Bea?’ Nathaniel had asked.

‘I suppose so,’ murmured Beatrice.

‘Right! Let’s each grab something light, and we will explore the tree line. Hopefully, we can find somewhere safe to store all the equipment.’

Andrew and Beatrice stood up, and all three peered inside the longboat. Andrew’s eyes alighted on his surgeon’s case, and an involuntary exclamation of joy left his lips. He had forgotten that he had tied his most cherished possession down in the longboat. As he reached for it, Nathaniel broke the silence. ‘Leave that, Drew,’ he said. ‘There will be time enough.’ He put his hand on his brother’s shoulder and pointed, saying softly, ‘First thing, bring that oilskin wrapping there.’

Andrew knew that inside the oilskin were the Brown Besses, the muzzle-loading guns that were the current standard issue of the British Military Forces. He conceded that Nathaniel, as usual, was right. They had no idea where they were or what manner of dangers lurked here; arming themselves was their first priority.

As they proceeded up the beach, Beatrice, carrying a canvas bag Nathaniel had assigned her, looked at Andrew staggering beside her

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cradling the oilskin and observed, 'I thought Nate said bring something light?'

Not wanting to alarm her, Andrew replied through clenched teeth, 'This is light.'

She shook her head at the idiocy of boys and turned to concentrate on catching her bigger brother, whose longer steps meant he was getting ahead of them.

Over the crest of the second sand hill, there were a group of acacia trees. Nathaniel calculated they could create shelter by securing the longboat's canvas sails to the trees. 'Here will do for now,' he decided. 'We will set the canvas and store everything underneath it.'

He looked to the rocky outcrop further down the beach and added, 'Once we have everything up here, we will explore further around that small hill over there. We might find a cave of some sort that we can use for shelter. Also, we should build a pile of driftwood on the side of the hill facing the ocean for a signal fire. We can have it ready to light when we see a ship to let them know we are here.' He quickly glanced at his sister. 'Probably Daddy's ship when he comes back.'

The Cowen siblings, now marooned on a coast as far from their benign English countryside as it was possible to get, could not possibly be expected to understand that in this savage environment, life and death were a precarious balance. Nathaniel couldn't know that in this African landscape, poking around rocky outcrops, caves, and the like, was courting ferocious and sudden death.

Andrew laid the oilskin on the ground under the acacia trees and unravelled it. Inside were three gleaming, well-oiled guns.

*No wonder it was so heavy,* he thought.

Nathaniel began to instruct Andrew on how to load the weapons. He'd had enough. Did his father and brother think he knew nothing? 'I know how to do it, Nate!' he snapped back at him, grabbing a gun. Nathaniel, surprised, stepped back to watch.

Andrew threw the gun up horizontally, catching it in his right hand. At the same time, his left hand had reached into his ammo pouch and grabbed a bullet and one of the small paper gunpowder bags

situated there. Biting the top of the bag, he tipped a bit of the powder into the flash pan<sup>15</sup> and closed it. Then, after lowering the butt of the gun back onto the ground, he poured the remaining powder carefully down the barrel before pushing the now-empty paper bag and then the bullet down there as well. In one smooth motion, Andrew next slid the ramrod out from its housing under the barrel, eased it down the barrel, and tapped the powder, paper, and bullet down tight to complete the loading process. When satisfied, he whipped the ramrod out and slid it back home under the barrel.

Andrew glanced back at his brother, who looked suitably impressed. 'Well,' said Nathaniel, 'the Naval Academy has taught you something.'

The brothers loaded the remaining guns and leant them within easy reach up against one of the trees; a newfound understanding had instantly grown between them.

It took the rest of the day to transport everything out of the longboat. The dogs lay in the shade, watching the activities with interest, happy that Beatrice stopped now and again to pat them. As the high tide came back in, Nathaniel had insisted, over his siblings' protests, that they take advantage of the returning water and the ropes available to lever the now empty boat as high up the beach as they could manage.

Exhausted, they rested under the shade of the canvas strung between the trees, watching the shadows lengthen as the orange sun descended into the land behind them and dusk settled onto the landscape. Nathaniel had started a small cooking fire using a flint from one of the muskets and placed some smooth stones around the fire's edge. Using nearly the last of their water, Nate kneaded up some dough from the flour and salt he had found in the longboat's emergency rations, and when the stones were piping hot, he placed flattened, hand-sized

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15. **Flash pan:** Part of a musket mechanism, the flash pan is a small plate situated on the outside of the gun and just above the trigger. When the gun is loaded, it stores a small quantity of gunpowder. When you pull the trigger to fire the gun, a small hammer that holds a flint drops onto a steel strike plate creating a spark that falls into the pan, igniting the powder. The fire then travels through a small hole into the barrel and ignites the main charge, discharging the gun.

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portions of dough on the stones, turning them with his hunting knife when they started to crisp. The three of them had not realised how hungry they were and devoured the damper cakes as the sun went down.

Nathaniel was not worried about using the last of their water, as he had discovered abundant fresh water in the lagoon on the other side of the small hill. *Water*, he thought to himself, *is the least of our problems*.

After devouring two more apples to finish her meal, Beatrice fell into a deep sleep on a bed that Andrew had arranged for her. Andrew was ready to turn in too, but Nathaniel signalled that they needed to talk now that Beatrice was asleep. 'First question, Drew,' Nathaniel said. 'What in God's name were the pair of you doing in the longboat?'

Andrew's thoughts turned back to the storm. 'Nate, I had never been seasick, but with the storm, I was in the cabin leaning over a bucket retching my heart up. Bea and I had already argued, and I told her that under no circumstances was she to go and check on the dogs. Bea said she could hear them crying but, over that storm, I knew she was only imagining it. When I looked up from the bucket, she was gone. It was only an instant! I ran out after her, knowing where she would be. Sure enough, there she was in the longboat. I climbed in after her and argued with her about coming back inside, which was the last thing I remember.' Andrew tentatively touched the top of his head, where he could feel the massive bump was still throbbing. 'I think someone hit me,' he said.

'A tree hit you, Drew,' said Nate. 'A massive great big tree trunk hit you. It sideswiped the longboat; I was watching from the wheelhouse. The boat and the trunk then landed up against the port rail of the ship. You must have hit your head on the side of the boat when the tree smashed into it. Some of the crew and I raced out to cut the ropes and clear up the mess. The whole lot had to go overboard, Drew, before it smashed the ship to pieces. As I was cutting, I heard something, so I looked inside, and that's when I saw Bea. I climbed in to get her and saw you lying on the floor. I thought you were dead.'

'Next thing I knew,' Nathaniel continued, shaking his head slowly, 'we were lifted into the air like a feather and thrown into the ocean!'

Nathaniel paused for a moment, recalling the events. 'We were still dragging the log behind us; it must have been floating as driftwood in the ocean for ages and was waterlogged, it was acting as an anchor. It probably saved us by keeping us in line with the storm. There was nothing I could do but hang on to Bea and pray. I couldn't even reach you to see if you were still alive. Bea was asleep, and I was almost the same when I heard the surf. I knew we were close to land, and I looked out over the canvas. There was enough morning light to see it was a beach—with no rocks in sight. The dragging log kept us true, and we beached safely on a sandy bottom.

'As far as I can guess, I think we are on the coast of Africa; I estimate we have landed about a thousand miles north of Fort Frederick, which is the last point of civilisation as we know it.'

Nathaniel went quiet, and Andrew knew he had something more to say. 'Andrew,' he said softly, 'I don't think the ship survived. I fear for Mother and Father.'

Andrew had never seen his brother cry before; it started as a welling in the eyes but quickly became deep, heart-wrenching sobs. The tension of all this responsibility was just plain more than sixteen-year-old Nathaniel could take.

Andrew wanted to reach out and hug him, to explain to Nathaniel that he was here and that he wasn't a baby anymore, but the social barriers were too ingrained. He just looked away in embarrassment.

## SIX

### Mandlakhe, the Hunt

As Mandlakhe passed through the entrance to his father's *umuzi* [homestead], he read the ground and noted with satisfaction that the cattle tracks leaving the *umuzi* veered left. This meant that his brothers were taking the cattle towards the highlands and away from the seaside lagoon where he intended to hunt.

He hefted his weapons to balance them and broke into the easy trot that all Zulu males learnt from an early age and could be kept up for hours—a trot that allowed their armies to cover up to fifty miles in a day if need be. Not that Mandlakhe was travelling that far, but the fifteen-mile trot to the lagoon would still take him hours.

Shaka had dictated that no Zulu would wear sandals so that their feet would develop the tough underfoot pads that became their sandals. The campaign from which Mandlakhe had just returned had strengthened and hardened his feet such that he did not have to watch the ground in front of him closely for impediments; his eyes were free to survey the landscape.

He could have hunted guineafowl closer to his home, but Mandlakhe knew that the fertile waterways where he was heading provided birds with a succulence far superior to the scrawny, dry bush fowl available



closer to his home. Besides, he loved the surroundings of the lagoon; he felt at peace there.

As he trotted, Mandlakhe became one with the bush, attuned to its every nuance, acutely aware of all that was around him. While a Zulu warrior thought of himself as the apex predator of the African bush, lions, leopards and even the big old bull buffalo had been known to dispute this Zulu view of the world. Many an arrogant man had paid for complacency with his life. In a split second, the wild could transform from its usual tranquil balance to a place of terrifying violence and death. Elephants rudely awakened from slumber, hippopotamuses caught between their feeding grounds and river refuges, and even rhinoceroses had contributed to reminding men of their mortality. This was especially the case with a single hunter moving soundlessly through the bush. The only way to be secure, his father had taught him, was to be aware of what was around you before what was around you became aware of you.

Luxuriant pasture surrounded the seaside lagoon. It was dotted with acacia trees; some so big even elephants couldn't knock them down, and their massive umbrella of leaves provided shade and contrast to the plains of grass that stretched as far as the eye could see. The lagoon, situated behind the sand hills facing the beach, extended for miles in parallel with the coast, in places narrow enough to throw a spear across and, in other areas, miles wide. This paradise, having existed since time immemorial, nurtured a plenary of creatures that could be counted in their millions. Mandlakhe trotted for some time before he sighted, emerging in the faded blue distance, the small hill that signalled he was approaching this wonderland.

The hill was a small knoll with rocky outcrops. The inland side of the hill provided protection from the prevailing winds so that, over time, the bush had become thicker there, extending all the way to the lagoon. This area of thicker bush gave Mandlakhe the cover he needed to get close to his intended prey. This cover, of course, gave all predators the same advantage, and he knew there was a good chance he might be sharing the area with some of these other predators.

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In his many visits here, Mandlakhe had become aware that a resident pride of lions also enjoyed this paradise. During his last visit, over three months ago, he had especially noted a large, black-maned male. The lion and Mandlakhe had simultaneously become aware of each other at some four hundred yards. Their eyes had locked, and neither moved for several moments. The lion was perched on a rocky prominence that jutted out slightly above the base of the hill; he was sitting in the shade of a misshapen acacia tree, surveying the view. As the tree had grown, it had been forced by the unforgiving rocks at its base to bend and extend out over the rock, looking for all the world like a huge fan being held over the regal beast by some unseen giant servant.

As they looked into each other's eyes, an understanding passed between them that, for today at least, they were of no concern to each other and could go about their respective business. After that, the lion lost interest and had moved his massive head sideways as something else caught his attention. His luxuriant mane, which proclaimed his health and ascendancy, waved in the breeze as he did so. Mandlakhe had then judged it was safe to move on and, respectfully, he had receded into the bush.

Later that day, some three months ago, as Mandlakhe had left the lagoon with a full bag of fowl, he had looked back over his shoulder at the hill, seeking out the lion. He was still there, basking in the late afternoon sun. It seemed to him that the lion's eyes might never have left him but had swivelled to remain lazily focused on this piddling man-thing the whole time Mandlakhe had been hunting.

The lagoon may well have been the self-proclaimed kingdom of the black-maned lion, but it was also Mandlakhe's place of peace. Even surrounded here as he was by the cacophony that made up the communication of all things wild, He had always felt at home, intimately in touch with life. It seemed to him that every time he came here, he discovered new and wondrous mysteries of nature.

Mandlakhe knew as he left that day that he would always be drawn back here, and so, as much as he had tried to ignore it, he accepted in his

heart of hearts that sometime in the future, a reckoning between Black Mane and himself was inevitable.

But that had been three months ago, and today, as he moved forward, Mandlakhe's main concern was the lionesses. In lion hierarchy, it is the females that do the killing, and he did not want to unexpectedly come across Black Mane's lionesses out hunting. Granted, it would be a huge coincidence if the lionesses were hunting at the same time and place as he was, but in the African bush, it was the unexpected that got you killed.

As he got closer to the lagoon, Mandlakhe watched and sensed the animals around him. Nearly all of them were the mutual prey of both humans and lions. The animals were all displaying a placid calmness that Mandlakhe knew meant only one thing: the lions had already killed that day. He still needed to know where they were, though, even if the lions had already fed. He did not want to surprise them, or himself, by accidentally running into them in the middle of his hunt.

Moving into more dense bush, he slowed to a careful stalk, becoming even more focused on his surroundings. Then he heard it—a snarl. Well, he didn't hear it exactly; you don't hear a lion's snarl ... you feel it. The sound travels as a deep rumble through the ground, permeating up through your feet and into your body and soul. He knew immediately from the nature of the snarl, a lazy half-hearted effort, that it was no more than a chastisement, probably directed at a youngster moving in too close to a kill while its mother or auntie were eating. That, in turn, meant it was a big kill and that this pride would feed and sleep there for the next few days.

The snarl felt like it was several hundred yards away, in the opposite direction to where he was going and to windward. *Good*, he thought, *they won't pick up my scent.*

Mandlakhe had already heard the guineafowl calling in the distance. One thing about guineafowl: they were noisy! The continual female cry, mixed in with the raucous screams of the males as they argued over who was truly the more manly bird, was like a homing beacon for the young hunter.

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Mandlakhe had perfected his skill with the throwing *iWisa* [fighting club] to a level that even surprised him. He was easily the most accurate in the village and was able to hit a guineafowl in just the precise spot where he knew the meat would not bruise, and he could do that consistently out to thirty yards. That was not the real skill. It was easy to hit the first fowl, however, if the rest of the flock saw the kill, they would disappear in a flurry of indignant squawks. Mandlakhe hoped to take home a dozen birds just to prove his prowess.

With the lions located, he now turned his attention to the hunt. He began his stalk, wary of wind and cover. A short time later, he saw his first bird, and then another appeared. As he crept closer, he saw about thirty of them scurrying in and out of cover, as if they were attending to some incredibly important business. He noticed two birds move further away and around a bush. The years of practice kicked in, and before he had even consciously thought it through, the *iWisa* had flown from his hand, accurately covering the thirty yards' distance, and both birds went down flapping but without a sound.

The remaining fowl continued their business, oblivious to the fate of their compatriots. That was the easy bit. Now Mandlakhe had to retrieve his *iWisa*!

This patient hide-and-seek dance between man and bird went on for a considerable time before Mandlakhe had his dozen birds, with the remainder of the flock still none the wiser. The hunt had been helped halfway through by the arrival of a thirsty elephant herd that had come to drink their fill of the lagoon's sweet, cool waters. As luck would have it, they had approached the lagoon up-wind of where Mandlakhe was hunting and so, like the lions, they had not been able to detect his scent.

Elephants and water are a joyous affair, and he had watched with amusement as youngsters trumpeted with delight while plunging into the lagoon with gay abandon. They would keep moving into the water until they were well out of their depths, with only the tips of their trunks showing above the water's surface. Meanwhile, their mothers, with contented rumblings emitting from deep within their massive chests, filled their trunks with gallons of water and, after drinking their

fill, used those trunks as powerful water hoses; they would exuberantly spray themselves and those around them until everything was saturated.

The noise and activity were hugely entertaining for Mandlakhe, who completed the rest of the hunt with a smile on his face. The presence of the elephant herd meant that the birds were wholly distracted and far easier to hunt. *Thank you, spirits, for the gift of the elephants*, Mandlakhe prayed inwardly.

Mandlakhe was now exhausted. The tension of a stalk like this was only rewarded because he knew few hunters could bag more than one bird, let alone nearly a dozen. He smiled again as he thought about the looks he would attract, walking back through the entrance to his father's *umuzi* [homestead] with this many birds adorning his chest in the carry position.

Mandlakhe sat while he cleaned off some vine, using it to bind the birds' legs together for the trip home, and thinking about how fortunate the elephants arriving upwind of him had been. If they had arrived downwind of him, the outcome would have been very different. The matriarchs, catching his scent, may have come searching; they were always uncomfortable with the smell of man so close to their calves and Mandlakhe would have been forced to discreetly abandon his hunt, returning home empty-handed.

But today, the spirits were with him and Mandlakhe relaxed as he snacked on the still-warm hearts and livers he had put aside while cleaning out the birds' internals. Feather plucking, however, he would leave to his mother, and he envisaged how delighted she would be when he presented the—

His train of thought was savagely disrupted and Mandlakhe was instantly on his feet, standing completely still, staring intently down the length of the lagoon. A sound had enveloped him, an intrusion, like a thunderclap, but there was no storm nor cloud in the sky. The wildlife around him had fallen eerily silent too.

It seemed as if the very balance of nature had just been torn asunder.

## SEVEN

# The Lagoon

Andrew woke the following day at the first inkling of light. He noticed that the fire was still burning healthily, and from that, he surmised that Nathaniel must have been up and down all night tending to it; no wonder he was now sleeping so soundly. Andrew had himself woken a few times during the night, aroused by the extraordinary sounds around him. Did these animals ever sleep? It had sounded busier than Portsmouth Common on market day.

Each time Andrew had woken, he had glanced over to where the dogs were sleeping; they didn't seem to be perturbed by the raucous goings on, so he felt comfortable that there was nothing in the immediate vicinity to be worried about. Eventually, he had gone back to sleep, staying that way until the first kiss of sunlight had warmed his cheek.

Andrew got up and, while adjusting the fire, noticed his surgery kit sitting on the supply barrel. Glancing around, he checked that the others were still asleep and felt he now had the privacy to inspect its contents. He carefully unlocked the lid, making sure not to make a noise that might wake the others. As was befitting a kit designed for a naval surgeon, no water had penetrated the internals. On top were the books of medicine that the surgeon at the Academy had recommended Andrew purchase. They were still as good as new. He carefully set them

aside and inspected the instruments now on display. They all exuded gleaming precision; each one carefully designed and tested to undertake a tailored, usually gruesome, task. He hefted each utensil and imagined himself as a respected professional physician.

Although Andrew had enjoyed his first year at the Naval Academy, he was never as enthusiastic as his classmates about the tales of British cannon fire sweeping life from enemy decks, leaving only maimed sailors as evidence of British superiority.

He recognised that brutal combat was integral to victory, but didn't see the need to revel in the violence as strongly as his fellow students did. It wasn't until a physician and surgeon who was also a respected naval officer visited the academy that Andrew found his calling. The distinguished Charles Bell had come to lecture on his wartime experiences. He had talked with scepticism about the concept of 'courage on the field of battle', but he spoke with enthusiasm about the immense courage of wounded British soldiers waiting cheerily in line for their turn to have a wounded arm or leg removed, with nothing more than a mouthful of grog to dull the pain of the surgeon's knife.

Charles Bell had been there, covered in blood in the middle of battle, but he was saving lives, not taking them.

Andrew realised he could become a respected British officer like his father by saving lives on the battlefield, not taking them. To be as publicly acclaimed as Charles Bell for his skill and sacrifice in ameliorating the suffering of the sick and wounded became Andrew's secret passion. While he hadn't been quite ready to share this new ambition with his father and brother yet, of his future career, he was certain.

He shut the case's lid with a definitive snap, which caused Nathaniel to stir and open his eyes. 'Morning,' he mumbled sleepily to Andrew without moving from under his blanket.

'Hi, Nate,' returned Andrew. 'Now that you're awake, I thought I might wander down to the ocean and see if I can't catch some fish for breakfast.'

'Take a gun, Drew, just to be safe,' Nathaniel added, throwing his blanket off and sitting up.

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‘Good idea,’ said Andrew, grabbing a gun and his fishing gear as he strode out toward the shoreline. The hounds followed as they did any time one of the family walked with a gun.

Andrew could see a multitude of fish in the clear water, not far out from the shoreline. Putting a piece of last night’s bread on a hook, he cast out through the light surf and took up the slack. Almost immediately, he was rewarded by a tug on the line, and he hauled in a plate-sized fish that he took to be some variety of snapper. Confident in his ability to catch more, Andrew threw the first fish to Thor. Momentarily, he had landed a second one, which he offered to Thyra. Both dogs devoured their fish enthusiastically.

A short time later, Andrew arrived back at camp with a trio of cleaned fish for the family breakfast. ‘At least we won’t go hungry,’ he said, proudly holding up the fish for inspection. Nathaniel had already stirred the fire and heated the stones again; he took the fish and arranged them on the rocks. The aroma of baking fish woke Beatrice, whose first words were, ‘Yum! That smells wonderful.’

Something had been niggling Andrew, but he had been too preoccupied to worry about it. As he relaxed with a belly full of fresh fish, it dawned on him what it was, and he queried, ‘Nate, did you say yesterday that you saw a rhinoceros?’

‘I think so. It looked similar to the rhinoceros in that menagerie<sup>16</sup> mother took us to, before we left London, only bigger,’ Nathaniel mused. ‘We have to fill the water bags anyway, so when you’re both ready, why don’t we all go, and you can see the lagoon for yourselves?’

A short time later, they walked along the beach together, each carrying a water bag. Nathaniel also carried his rifle, and Andrew one of the guns. Beatrice was grumpy because Nathaniel had insisted she wear her sunbonnet.

‘But mother’s not here to see,’ she protested.

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16. *Menagerie*: Zoos did not exist at this time, but wealthy individuals sometimes had private collections of live animals, known as a menagerie. Quite often, they invited the public to view these menageries.



‘Not the point,’ said Nathaniel. ‘Put it on.’

The dogs followed with interest. After about fifteen minutes of walking, they stopped to rest, and Nathaniel informed them, ‘The lagoon is just over these sand hills. I suggest we travel a bit slower from here on in and don’t make any noise.’

As they moved off again, the dogs, being highly trained hunters, took their lead from Nathaniel and began moving soundlessly, keeping well behind him as his hand signals had instructed.

They crawled slowly up the last sand hill on hands and knees before carefully peering over the top. The sight they beheld there was beyond anything they could have ever imagined. It was a paradise of bird and animal life beyond comprehension.

Giraffe stood off in the distance, moving elegantly between acacia trees, using their long tongues to strip the leaves from between the thorns. Zebra moved around them, holding noisy conversations with each other. All manner of antelope walked daintily among the trees and grass, stopping now and then to sniff the air before continuing their grazing. And so the endless parade went on.

Andrew didn’t think he had ever seen anything so peaceful and yet so dynamic, even if he had no idea what most of the animals were called.

Beatrice whispered suddenly, ‘I’m thirsty. Let’s go fill up the water bags.’

Just as she said it, Nathaniel pointed something out in a gully leading into the lagoon, clicking his fingers at the same time. Andrew looked but couldn’t see anything. Then he thought his eyes were playing up; it looked like the whole gully wall was moving.

‘An elephant,’ Beatrice announced excitedly. ‘It’s the same as the one in the menagerie; do you remember?’

Then there was a second of the beasts, then a third. They were huge mountains of life with long white tusks almost touching the ground as they moved ponderously towards the lagoon.

The siblings lay there, taking it all in. A group of smaller antelope no bigger than sheep passed by below them and moved tentatively to the

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water to drink, their calves following closely behind them. 'Aren't they beautiful,' whispered Beatrice rhetorically.

Without warning, the water in front of the antelope erupted in a mountain of spray, and a monster launched from the deep with mouth wide open; its terrifying jaws crashed closed on one of the antelope as the rest of the herd sprinted away with gravity-defying leaps into the air. The struggle lasted only a few seconds as the huge beast turned and began sinking back under the water. The unfortunate antelope, clamped within its jaws, struggled desperately until it too disappeared below the surface, and then there was nothing.

Peace again.

The trio lay there stunned. After a minute, Beatrice began to whimper. Nathaniel put his arm around his sister and looked at his brother, saying, 'Filling the water bags might not be as simple as I thought.'

## EIGHT

### Shaka Zulu

Some forty miles inland from the beach where the Cowen children had found themselves marooned, Shaka, a prominent Zulu warrior, was holding court. At twenty-eight, he was the youngest *induna* [commanding officer] that his lord, King Dingiswayo, had ever appointed. Around Shaka were his *izilomo* [council of trusted advisers]. His most trusted adviser was his mother, Nandi, and she sat directly to his right, a position that reminded all present of her standing within the council.

Nandi's life had not been easy; Shaka had been conceived out of wedlock, and her lover, Senzangakhona, who was Chief of the Zulu Tribe, had refused to marry her because she was not from his tribe. Her own tribe had also ostracised her, and Nandi, now with the young Shaka in tow, had been forced to seek shelter where she could find it.

Finally, she found refuge with a warrior named Gendeyana from an outside clan. It was under Gendeyana's fatherly guidance that Shaka developed into an excellent warrior and first came to King Dingiswayo's attention.

Shaka's personal *isangoma* [witch doctor] was called Bhekimuzi. He was also the head of Shaka's informal intelligence network and had come to his hut early that morning with important news. Much to the witch doctor's frustration, Shaka had sent him away while he assembled