
ROAN IN THE COVE

There was no escaping the chirps. Behind the rain and beneath it, surrounding his brain on every side, the air rang with chirps—a million self-important claims, echoing in tiny throats. The satellite phone wasn't bleeping, but the chirps made it hard to tell.

Roan opened his eyes and raised himself, standing on his knees in the dark tent. It was hot and humid, and the unceasing drops tapped on the canvas. He pulled on his rubber boots and his rain suit, drew back the flap and crawled outside.

Past midnight, and heaven for frogs. From every pool and rill, every hill and hollow, and from the drenched forest surrounding the Cove, the chirping cacophony rose. Roan was exhausted and nettled. He needed more sleep. There was only so much you could lose.

The crescent of rocky beach lay two hundred feet below. The sand dunes came and went with the tides. Seven head-

lamps were shifting over the rocks, and a dozen nightlights glowed. Beyond the surf, two boats bobbed at anchor. Waves slapped the hull of a racing launch, and a beacon on the cruiser pulsed. The sea glittered with phosphorescent foam, as if alive to their presence.

He donned his headlamp and switched it on, stepping toward the huddle of tents on a hillock fifty feet away. Provisions and tools were heaped behind, under a shuffle of tarps. Clucks sounded from a pen of chickens. As he approached, Roan could hear a man snoring. The perfume of a night-blooming flower reached him. He turned on the trail he'd cut days before and started down to the beach.

He had entered the country secretly, on a prop plane from Cape Town. In Jangaville, there were soldiers in the streets, but no one had stopped or questioned him. The people were mostly black, but there were Asian and Indian faces, and white ones too. He'd hired a foreman to rustle up a team while he combed the street markets, buying food and equipment. In the harbor he met a fisherman who spoke English. Quickly, quietly he'd rented the boats. They'd loaded the launch and cruiser before dawn, and by first light, they were out of the port, headed north.

Reaching the Cove, with all it would take to mine the vein, was easier than he'd expected. The problems began once they arrived. The Cove was physically unremarkable—a dark crescent between two points. Landing should have been easy, but a sequence of accidents befell them. As they were ferrying things

ashore, using the launch and a small inflatable, a sneaker wave overturned the launch. They lost a good portion of their food. The inflatable was punctured and they had to repair it. It was above the surf now, secured to a rock. The campsite they chose slid from beneath them the first night, and they spent the next day digging their equipment out of the mud.

Wiley was proving to be a difficult client. He wanted to talk, constantly. Roan had bargained him down to one call a day, but the only way to charge the sat phone's batteries was to motor to the cruiser and fire up its engine. "I'll call when I have something to report," Roan told him.

Problems with Imran, the foreman, surfaced soon after their arrival. In Jangaville, the man had seemed a good pick. He spoke French; he claimed he could round up a team quickly, and he'd lived up to his claim. But in the Cove, giving orders, Imran was arrogant and officious. The men bristled at his insults.

Roan had fanned the team out, following the shoreline, digging sounding pits in the gritty soil. They worked when the tide was low, at midday and in the middle of the night. They'd been at it for nearly a week, shoveling sand and earth from the pits, abandoning them when the tides swept in; and there was still no sign of the orbs.

As he reached the beach, Roan saw one of the men waving a night-light. The man set the light down and came forward, crossing the rocks, balancing on bare feet. He had something under his arm.

It was Tsinjo, with the lopsided face, a broken jaw that had healed badly. He did the work of two, but he craved attention and talked too much. Now he was shouting. Men rose from the pits, and their headlamps converged.

Roan strode toward them.

Imran reached Tsinjo. The talkative man held up a thin rock, the size of a dinner plate. Roan couldn't tell what Imran was saying, but he seemed to be asking questions. Tsinjo ignored him. He spoke to the others in the native tongue, as if what he had to share would raise their regard. Then he put the rock in another's hands, and they passed it around, pointing and flaring their eyes.

Imran saw Roan approaching. He grabbed the rock, made a show of examining it, then turned and presented it.

"*Pour toi*," Imran said with a toothy smile.

In the light of his headlamp, the plate-shaped rock looked badly weathered. Between lumps and pitting, Roan saw orbs. They had lost their luster, and the concentered shells were broken—but the gems were unmistakable.

"*Montre-moi*," he told Imran. "Where did he find this?"

Imran faced Tsinjo and loosed his pretensions on him, waving his arms, speaking harshly. In his blue beret, camouflage pants and running shoes, the foreman looked comical.

Tsinjo ignored him, motioned to Roan and turned. Roan, with the others, followed Tsinjo to a pit where the rock had come from.

Roan knelt to examine it. When he rose, he faced Imran.

"*Ce n'est rien.* It's nothing," Roan shook his head. Tsinjo's rock had broken loose of the vein years or centuries before. "*Retourne au travail*."

Roan could see the men reading his reaction. Their faces fell.

"*Je suis heureux*," he said to Imran. "I'm pleased with our progress. Tell them that."

Imran threw the plate-shaped fragment to the ground, shouted at the men as if they were children and waved them back to the sounding pits.

The rain beat harder. Roan pulled the hood over his head. As the men returned to the diggings, he could see the fatigue in their movements. He checked his watch. They had eighty minutes. Then the tide would come in, drown their pits and drive them back up the beach.

The double shift drained the men, and the rains kept them drenched, but they settled into a rhythm. Every night, Roan's sleep debt grew. He had snored through quakes in Peru. In Java, kingdoms of night grubs crawled across his chest. What was it about the Cove? Was he losing his grip? The frogs waited for him to drop off, and as soon as his mind fogged, the rain began to drum and the chirping resumed.

At twilight, on the tenth day of digging, a man named

Kalepa struck a ledge of rock four feet beneath the surface. Kalepa—*homme chat* as Imran called him—was tall and slender, and his movements had a feline grace. He spoke little, but the others seemed to respect him.

Through Imran, Roan ordered Kalepa to clear the soil around the ledge and assigned Tsinjo to help him. Two hours later, Roan was down in the hole with a hammer and a bucket of water. His first swing revealed the glassy matrix. The second freed a fragment, and when he turned it beneath the light on his forehead, he saw a cluster of orbs.

"*Lumières*," he barked. "More light. A *pointe* and a sledge."

Imran translated the order and men leaped across the rocks, collecting the night-lights and ringing the hole with them. Imran lowered the spike and a long-handled sledge.

Kalepa watched Roan with a hunter's eyes. Like the rest, he'd refused rain gear. His threadbare shirt and pants covered his wet body like a second skin.

Roan showed Kalepa where to set the spike and ordered Tsinjo out of the hole. Then he raised the sledge with both arms and brought it down. The rock split, and a chunk came loose. Roan nodded to Kalepa and climbed out of the pit.

Kalepa raised the chunk to him.

As the beam of his headlamp touched its surface, Roan's breath caught in his throat. Pearly orbs were swarming between his thumbs. The men gathered close, fingers pointing, speaking with hushed and wondering voices.

A distant chattering sounded behind Roan.

He turned.

A dark cloak was rising from the forest. It rucked and unfolded, filling the sky as the chattering mounted.

Imran shouted. Kalepa clambered out of the pit.

The noisy cloak was drawing over the beach. Grunts, gurgling—

Creatures were flying over them, large as foxes, with tapered heads and leathery wings. Bats, larger than any Roan had seen or knew existed. Imran screamed and cowered. Tsinjo was jabbering. Kalepa looked from the bats to Roan. An older man dropped to his knees, face turned up, his ball cap clasped in his hand. He looked stunned, overcome with emotion.

"What is this?" Roan said.

"*Les ancêtres*," Imran cried.

"The bats?"

Imran watched the dark cloud spreading over them with terror in his eyes. The others seemed confused, fearful, uncertain. Kalepa stood shaking his head. Tsinjo was edging away from the beach, his eyes on Imran.

"You're spooking them—"

"*Les ancêtres!*" Imran turned to flee.

Roan grabbed him. "Calm down. Listen to me—"

"*Ne me touchez pas*," Imran hissed.

"*Fou.* You fool."

Imran flung his hands over his head. "*Fou?*" He sneered, jabbing his chest with his fingers, screaming epithets in his native tongue, eyes wide. He raised his face, following the bats.

Then Imran tore himself loose and took off running.

At dawn the next morning, Roan stood in the forest with the satellite terminal at his feet and the video screen in his hand. The air was warm and the trees were dripping. The frogs had asserted their rights all night, and they were still asserting, hopping on the ground, through puddles, over the trunks and branches of the trees.

He drew a deep breath, trying to settle himself.

The giant bats had circled the beach and returned to the forest. When they were gone, Imran and the others huddled at the south end of the Cove. They returned to their tents at the end of the day. Roan didn't approach them. For men who lived with military rule and the plague, their distress was hard to understand.

When he woke that morning and crawled out of his tent, the men were gathered at the shoreline. They were watching the inflatable motoring away. Imran had taken it.

The terminal bleeped, locking on the sat signal. Then the dialer began ticking.

Important progress, Roan thought. He needed to focus on that and let the obstacles ride.

The screen flashed, and Nadja's face appeared.

"I'll wake him," she said.

A moment later, Wiley swung into view. "News?"

"We found it."

Wiley stared at him.

Roan raised the hunk of rock he'd split off and held it before the camera's eye.

"Good god," Wiley sighed.

Roan saw the weary eyes close. Wiley's relief was profound.

"This came from the water's edge. The vein is headed inland. All we have to do is follow it. We'll give it everything we can at low tide. Once we're higher on the beach, we may be able to run a full shift in daylight."

"How much have you mined?" Wiley asked.

"This is it, right now. There will be more the next time I call. I can't speak for the quality of the material. I'll know better once we've removed a few hundred pounds."

"How large do you think the vein is?"

"No idea. We just struck it."

"Can you show me? I'd like to see it."

"Most of the vein's still buried," Roan explained. "We have to trench around it."

Wiley's unyielding desire for the gems hidden in the Cove was a mystery to Roan. The man had only a few months to live.

"I wish I was there."

"No you don't," Roan said half to himself.

Nadja spoke softly. "You look tired."

"I could use some sleep. The rain won't let up. And the frogs— It's like being sick and delirious."

"You're not on the beach," Wiley said.

"I'm on the hill above, in the forest."

"How's your team?"

Roan was stone-faced. Wiley sensed trouble.

"Everything's fine."

"Tell me the truth," Wiley pressed him.

Roan peered at the camera eye. "Imran's gone."

"Where did he go?"

"Back to Jangaville, I suppose. He took the inflatable."

"Why?" Wiley asked.

Why was the question, Roan thought. Why giant bats? Why did the natives call them ancestors? Why was this happening with the vein in reach?

"Nonsense. Crazy fears," he said. "I'll sort it out."

"I thought Imran was the only one who spoke French. How will you talk to them?"

"I said, I'll sort it out."

Wiley was silent.

"I'll call you when I know more," Roan said.

As he disconnected, a breeze grazed his neck, raising the hair on his nape. A sudden suspicion—something was near, listening, watching. He turned.

A troop of lemurs, black and rust-colored, were descending from the trees. Their blue eyes were on him, curious, unafraid. They gathered beside a trickle, cupping their hands, carrying water to their lips. He put his back to them and started down the slope.

When the Cove came into view, the men were standing together on the beach.

They saw him coming and retreated to the far side of the

pit, with the vein at its bottom. As Roan drew closer, he could see the fear and distrust in their faces.

Eyes hard, straight-lipped, he stepped around the pit, into their midst.

"Who here speaks English?"

Silence. Tsinjo cocked his lopsided head.

"Or French. *Qui parle français?* Anyone?"

More silence. Kalepa, the tall *homme chat*, glowered at him.

Roan scanned the faces. He needed someone to pull the group together. "Chief," he said. He put his hands to his chest and made a show of swelling it.

Kalepa took a step forward. He grasped Roan's arm and led him toward the oldest of the group, the man who had fallen to his knees when the bats flew over. He was small, with nappy gray hair, a ball cap and a scraggly goatee. His nose was too big for his face.

"Henri," the old man introduced himself, extending his hand.

Roan shook it. "Talk to me."

Henri made a helpless expression.

A reliable worker, Roan thought. The old man's movements were measured, as if every exertion had its cost; but he kept a steady pace. What did he know of the bats and their appearance?

"*Les ancêtres*," Henri said in a reverent voice, as if he could read Roan's mind. He looked up at the sky, following the path the giant winged creatures had taken.

Roan nodded. "*Les ancêtres*." Then he cocked his head and wrinkled his brow, expressing his puzzlement.

Henri looked into the pit and pointed at the glassy surface where Roan's hammer blow had uncovered the orbs.

Roan gazed up at the sky and then down at the glassy fracture. Henri nodded.

"Maso ny trondro," Henri said. He pointed at his eye and then back at the glassy fracture. "Maso ny trondro." He made a searching face and turned his head from side to side with his eyes bugged, as if trying to peer through some medium denser than air.

Roan shook his head, stumped.

"Nahoana?" Henri squinted at Roan, acting out his puzzlement. He looked into the pit, and then he tracked the beach, gazing at the others. "Nahoana, nahoana?"

"Why?" Roan guessed. "Is that the question? Why are we doing this?"

"Why," Henri repeated the word.

"For a dying man," Roan said. "*Homme malade*. Dying."

Henri regarded him. "Dyeen."

Roan nodded. He let his jaw drop, put his hand to his heart and slumped.

When he looked up, Roan saw a sudden depth and clarity in the old man's eyes, and the recess of some still deeper question.

Roan picked up a shovel. He handed it to Tsinjo and eyed the pit. Then he turned to the others and motioned, hoping they would grab their spades and join in. "The vein," he said.

Henri stepped up to Tsinjo and took the shovel from him. He turned to Roan, shook his head and set the shovel down. Then he motioned to the men, and they followed him up the slope, back to their encampment.

Roan watched them go, weighing his options. Finally he drew a deep breath, picked up the shovel and descended into the pit. While the tide was out, he worked alone, clearing what soil he could from around the vein.

Six hours later, Roan followed the trail back to his tent. The rains had returned shortly after he began to shovel, but he took the beating. He was drenched now, and covered with mud. He halted before his tent and stripped off his shirt and pants.

When he pulled back the flap, he saw Henri seated inside.

"Good," the old man smiled.

"Make yourself at home," Roan said, crawling in.

Henri scooted to the side and passed a dry cloth to Roan so he could dry himself. He seemed at pains to show his respect, but his manner was poised and confident.

"Ready to go back to work?" Roan wondered aloud.

Henri put his hand in his coat pocket. He drew his fist out, and when he opened it, Roan saw a half-dozen fish eyes. Roan lived on the chickens they'd brought. The men trolled from the shore and ate what they caught.

"Maso ny trondro," Henri said.

"Fish eyes," Roan pointed.

"Fish eyes," Henri repeated.

The eyes were like the orbs, with their concentered shells. Again, Roan saw depth in the old man's gaze. What was he trying to tell him?

Henri put the fish eyes back in his pocket, then he touched Roan's chest.

"Dyeen man," Henri said. He bugged his eyes and turned his head from side to side, as if searching, like he had by the pit that morning. "Fish eyes," Henri nodded. "*Les ancêtres*." His eyes brimmed with awe and veneration.

The orbs were allied with the ancestors. *Les ancêtres* could see like fish. Or the orbs were like eyes. They brought sight. Magic sight. Roan's mind was a tangle of speculations.

"Fish eyes," Roan said. "Good."

"Good," Henri intoned. "Dyeen man."

"For the dying man," Roan said.

"Dyeen man," Henri nodded gravely, and he swept his hand between them, following the gesture with a look of compassion, as if applying his idea to a mass of humanity.

Could fish eyes help the dying? What did the ancestors have to do with it?

"They're okay with us taking them," Roan said to himself, half hoping. He crawled to the tent opening, grabbed a shovel and drew it inside. "Work," he said, holding the shovel before Henri.

Henri nodded. “Work. Joro.”

“We’re going to help all those dying men,” Roan said.

Henri gave him a beatific smile. “Dyeen man.”

Roan peered into Henri’s eyes and, as he did, the eyes seemed to lose their bed. Deeper they went, deeper and deeper, as deep as the man himself. And deeper than that. It was as if Roan could see through Henri’s faith into some hidden realm. The abyss of death, the ancestors’ cave, the unbounded darkness of superstition—

Henri slapped his knee and crawled out of the tent.

When Roan descended to the beach the following morning, the men were seated around the pit. They rose as he approached.

Henri stepped forward. His smile was reverent, humble. He removed his ball cap, looked at the group and made a show of putting it on Roan’s head. He opened his arms and embraced Roan. “Work,” he said. “Joro.”

Roan patted Henri on the back and scanned the group. Tsinjo smiled. Another man eyed the vein down in the hole. Henri motioned to Kalepa, and the tall man began to clap. One by one, the others joined in. Roan didn’t understand, and then he did. They were applauding themselves. Henri faced him. Roan raised his hands and clapped along.

Was it as simple as that? he wondered. The earth around the vein had to be trenched. He retrieved a pair of shovels.

Henri was frowning, shaking his head.

Roan halted. What was wrong?

"Joro," Henri said. He made fists and held them against his chest, exhaling with a stricken expression.

"Joro," Kalepa nodded.

Henri shifted his gaze around the group. "Joro."

The others agreed. "Joro, Joro."

"What is Joro?" Roan frowned.

Henri knelt and picked up a broken shell from the beach. As he rose, he tested the shell's edge with his thumb. Then he straightened, held his hand out, and slit the top of it. "Joro," he said, looking at Roan.

"Blood?"

Henri dabbed his finger in the droplets. "Blood," he repeated. He faced the pit and pointed his bloody finger at the vein. "Blood."

"Joro," Kalepa urged the men. And they concurred, "Joro, Joro."

Henri swept the air with his hand, including them all, and ended by settling on Roan's shoulder. The old man's eyes glittered.

"No," Roan said. "Not on your life."

Henri considered him carefully. His expression was thoughtful, not surprised, not angry. He raised his brows, reached up and took the ball cap off Roan's head. Then he

sighed and turned, and the men followed him back to their shelter.

Joro was performed at sundown. Roan insisted the natives go first. There was mistrust in Tsinjo's eyes. Kalepa was scornful. They seemed offended by his ignorance. Henri persuaded the men to make allowances.

Kalepa started things. He removed his shirt, and then he and Henri climbed into the pit. Kalepa stood facing the vein. The others, Roan included, knelt at the pit's rim. Henri looked into the sky, as if it was still black with bats, and uttered what sounded like pleadings. Was he asking the ancestors for pardon, seeking forgiveness for something Kalepa was going to do? Or assuring them the man had good intentions?

Henri drew something from his pant pocket. As he raised his hand, Roan saw a pair of rusted scissors. Henri grasped Kalepa's biceps. He pinched a vessel on the arm's soft inside and snipped it. Blood spurted out.

Roan glanced at Tsinjo, kneeling beside him. His conviction seemed unshaken. Kalepa had closed his eyes. Henri was speaking in phrases now, and Kalepa repeated them. An expression of faith, a call to departed intimates, a promise to think certain thoughts or take certain actions— Roan couldn't tell what the substance was, but Kalepa's jaw spasmed and there were tears in his eyes. All the while, the

red rill snaked down, puddling below the exposed ledge of rock.

When Kalepa's offering had been made, he pinched his wound and clambered out of the pit, and the next man descended. Two weeks before, all they cared about was getting paid. Now, through Henri, a strange connection was being forged. Roan could feel the emotion in the old man's voice and see how deeply it affected the men. Whatever the belief was, they were going back to work.

When Tsinjo was done, he climbed out of the hole. Henri rolled up the sleeve of his shirt, exposing his wiry biceps, and snipped himself. He watched his blood dribble down, repeating the rhythmic phrases. Then he motioned to Roan.

Roan removed his shirt and descended.

Henri moved beside him, standing close. He began speaking, fast and low.

Roan raised his left arm.

Henri paused, muttered something and put his hand on Roan's chest.

"What are you—"

"Chief," Henri whispered. And he turned his eyes on him, those bottomless wells.

A morning beam lit their depths, and Roan felt again the strength of the old man's faith. Henri pinched a vein in his left pectoral. Then the scissors snipped and the blood was set free.

Dark faces lined the pit's rim, and as Henri's voice rose, Roan felt a breath of relief from them all. As his blood joined

theirs below the fish-eyed rock, he repeated Henri's phrases as best he could. The letting calmed him. The blood warmed his front, and he could smell it now.

"Good," Henri purred, "good, good." And when Roan faced him, Henri's eyes spoke: *You were chosen for this.*

The ancestors were pleased.

And so were the men. He'd gained their trust.

By noon, they had made surprising progress. Roan guessed at the ledge's trajectory, and they excavated above the surf line and found it. They continued digging as the tide retreated, following the ledge and trenching around it. The natives' focus was sharp and their efforts unstinting. The ancestors' favor, it seemed, gave them strength and purpose. By late afternoon, twenty feet of the ledge was exposed.

It took four days and nights to uncover the vein. With every incoming tide, the sea did its best to undo their work, pouring sand back in. When the ledge was visible from the surf to its tapering end, the trench was a dozen feet wide and three men deep. They began to take rock, and the work got harder. They attacked the ledge with hammers and spikes, one man holding the point, the other swinging a sledge with both arms.

The natives seemed to believe Roan had accepted their faith, and he did nothing to shake their confidence. With

Henri, he wasn't as sure. There were times when he feared the old man knew his respect for *les ancêtres* was a show. Henri didn't press him, and Roan did his best to avoid raising suspicions.

The black men were strong and agile, unafraid of the clashing steel. With the shifting sands and the water foaming around them, they attacked the rock with resolve and endurance. Roan felled a dozen trees, and they erected a dam around the trench. That reduced the sea's intrusions and allowed him to lengthen the shifts.

Despite the obstacles, the excavation progressed quickly. The men were giving everything they had, and it was clear to Roan that the pittance they were to be paid had nothing to do with it. They were a congregation driven by belief, and Henri was their priest. Chatter about fish eyes, "maso ny trondro" and the "Dyeen man" was constant, and Roan did his best to dance around it, wondering what they would do if his true thoughts were known.

The natives worked in the rain and fought the tides, returning to camp, drenched and muddy. They stripped off their clothing and let the rain wash them. Roan did the same, alone, before crawling into his tent. He ate alone, at his end of the hillock. They fed on their fish and the crated stores. He slaughtered the chickens. Then, after a spell of exhausted sleep, they were on the beach, together again.

"Here's a good-looking one." Roan was speaking to the video screen, circling a small boulder with the camera's eye trained. "Orbs on every side." He set his hand on the rock, then stepped away, so Wiley could see the piles of excavated rock behind him.

"He's done it," Nadja said.

"We've started to cull them." Roan circled another rock pile, aiming the camera. "These are lower quality. Poorly silicified. In some, no orbs are visible."

"How much have you taken?"

"A ton and a half. Gem grade, maybe six hundred pounds."

"How much of the vein?"

"Twenty percent, I'd guess. How are you doing?"

"I'm confined to the building now," Wiley said.

He and Nadja explained that he had taken a fall. Wiley's face had thinned. His eyes looked desperate.

"What about you?" Wiley said.

"I'm ready to come back. The monsoon's a deluge. The waves are huge, and the dam can't handle them. The men—Their lives are at risk. We've got a good load."

Wiley didn't reply.

"I'm not sure how long I can hold this together," Roan told him. "I'm—"

"No," Wiley said. "I want it all."

Nadja's hand entered the frame. Her fingers blurred, then the screen image jittered and Wiley's face froze.

"What is that?" Wiley asked.

Roan looked down. Blood was seeping through his shirt. The Joro wound hadn't sealed. Its edges were purple now, infected. Roan switched off his screen and ended the call.

The punishing winds mounted. The torrents battered the men in the trench. Controlling the sledge was an impossible task, and holding the spike was worse. For the ones on the rim, lifting rock out, the wind sent the rain at a cruel angle. Roan was often there, taking the buckshot on his back and sides. Despite that, the weather did little to dampen the men's spirits. Kalepa swung his hammer with fresh determination. Tsinjo relayed rock to the piles faster than ever, shirt flapping in the wind, his torn pants suspendered with twine. And Henri gave voice to the ancestors' pride, cheering them on.

The sea rose. The racing launch twisted on its mooring. Whitecaps pounded the cruiser's hull. Around the camp, rain blasted the tarps and flogged the stores, drenching grain sacks and cracking crates. A tent was uprooted and carried away. One night, the stormy sea overtopped the dam and flooded the trench. They dug drainage ditches and bailed with buckets. "It can't continue like this," Roan said.

Then they lost Tsinjo.

He was returning from the piles, having dumped his load. He beamed at Roan as he approached the trench. Roan saw

the rogue wave rising behind him like a giant scallop shell. He motioned, but Tsinjo had no time to react. The wave struck him, swept him off his feet and into the surf.

In a moment the men were out of the trench. They saw Tsinjo surface—his head, an arm thrashing. Henri barked orders. A flurry of words and scrambling bodies, then a sprint toward the breakers. For a moment Roan thought they would all dive in, but they halted, waist-deep, and two lines were thrown. Tsinjo saw one of them, but he sank before he could reach it. And he never reappeared. The waves continued to crash, and they continued to watch, standing in the surf, seeing only curls and froth.

That night, crouched alone in his tent, the Cove seemed to Roan like an advancing madness. He felt dizzy, seasick, helpless as the deluge drowned them and the tide rolled in. The crazed frogs knew; they swarmed out of the hills, their chirping frenzied, announcing the end of the world.

Someone was shouting. When Roan lifted the tent flap, Henri crawled in. His face was dripping, his feet balled with mud.

"Go back," Henri said.

To Jangaville? Was that what he meant? I'm ready, Roan thought. They had half the vein now. Wiley could do with that.

"Fish eyes," Henri said, pointing toward the beach.

What was the old man saying?

"Go back," Henri repeated.

Roan was stunned. The old man wanted to return to the trench. And what about the others? They couldn't all be so tenacious.

Henri saw his bewilderment and reached his hand out.

Roan felt the old man touch his knee, as if to reassure him. He wondered if Henri had done the same with each of the men, solemnly, in private. Roan had always been committed to his work, to coming back with the goods, no matter the hardship. For what? Pride of achievement, courage, integrity, cash in hand. Henri was committed too. But his commitment sprang from a different source.

The next morning, streams were flowing around Roan's tent, and the storm was beating harder than ever. When he crawled out, he saw the men descending the slope, stripped to the waist. He removed his shirt and hurried for the beach.

He reached the trench as they did. Without a word, they picked up their tools and returned to work. Two men manned the buckets when bailing was needed, while the others used hammer and spike. They labored as never before, backs bent, the beams of their headlamps circling the walls. When a load was ready to be hauled to the piles, Roan climbed out, and the orbs rose into his hands. He took the blasts on the rim, hauling the smaller rocks alone, getting Kalepa's help with

the larger. All the while, he kept his eye on the sea, fearful the storm might hurl him into it.

Later that day, as he returned from the rock piles, Roan heard a strange sound rising from the trench. It was rhythmic, forceful, and laden with emotion. The men were chanting.

He felt pity—they were risking their lives for so little. Their courage, their passion, their blind devotion— For what?

When they returned to camp, he asked Henri about it, using a word he'd learned.

"Manazava. What are you singing?" He repeated a phrase from the chant.

Henri responded with a long oration in his native tongue. He raised his face to the sky; he reached for the earth; then he seemed to be pulling earth and sky together. Earnest sounds sprang from his lips, and he fluttered his hands like two small birds. Roan had no idea what he was saying. Maybe the men were asking the ancestors for help; maybe they were grieving the loss of Tsinjo; maybe they sang to the fish eyes, or to Tsinjo's spirit.

Henri could see he was baffled. So the old man silenced himself and gazed at him with that bottomless look. The look of belief. Working in the raw was his idea, Roan thought. And the chanting was too. As he watched, Henri's gaze narrowed. The old man's eyes had a wish in them now.

"Eat," Henri said. He raised his hand, pretending to put food in his mouth. "Eat." He tapped Roan's chest and then touched his own. "You. Us."

The men sat in a circle in the crowded tent. Henri was beside him. At the center, Kalepa stirred barracuda heads in a boiling pot. They turned in the broth, eyes wide, nosing to the surface and diving back in, as if unaware their bodies were gone.

Roan had nothing to fear. But when he joined the circle, he did so with trepidation. He had suffered with the men to unearth the prize, but the chasm between them was wide, and they had been dealt a harrowing loss.

A wooden box with rice was passed around. Each man had a bowl in his lap. They were drinking tea out of tin cans. Roan raised his and swallowed a bitter mouthful. He felt the heat from the fire on his chest. The acrid smoke bit his nose. Henri turned to face him.

"Tsinjo," Henri said, "manana maso."

Roan shook his head. What was he saying?

Henri's brow furrowed. He gazed in the direction of the beach, considering their tribulations perhaps, the fierce rains, the angry sea, the grueling labor.

"Dyeen man," Henri said. "Tsinjo."

A ladle started around. A man scooped fish broth into his bowl.

Henri was nodding. "Tsinjo get fish eyes."

"He earned them," Roan said.

Henri put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed it.

Compassion creased the old man's face. Roan drank from his can.

Tsinjo has fish eyes, he thought. The rules of Henri's faith were a mystery, but its strength rang in Roan's heart. And he could feel it around him. That was why they chanted and labored like demons.

Few in the States would care to be the pups of giant bats. But it was easy to wish that a man's purpose might be as noble as Henri imagined, and that a belief as passionate as his might come to life inside you. Roan felt sick. Something in the tea or the fumes from the pot. Or the wound in his chest. He was sweating, feverish.

With a wave of dizziness came shame and guilt. He felt its grip closing now, the undertow pulling. He'd brought them to this dangerous place and cost a man his life. They thought they were on a mission for *les ancêtres* and the fish eyes, but he was packing the orbs back to Wiley, and from there to market.

Henri took the bowl from Roan's lap and ladled soup into it. When Roan looked down, he saw fish eyes floating in the broth. He blinked and the eyes disappeared.

Roan turned to Henri, and again he saw those bottomless wells. Eyes dark with wishes, hollow with grief, deep with knowing. Henri knew. Henri knew his accord with the men was a sham. Henri knew he was alone in the world, without faith in anything or anyone but himself.

Kalepa had a rattle he'd made from an empty can and some beach pebbles. He shook the rattle now and began to

chant. The others joined in. Henri rocked, the men closed their eyes. Their voices were gravelly. Outside, the rain was crashing.

He had heard the chants day and night in the trench, but this chant was different. He could feel the sounds and emotions inside him. They reached out, they implored, they laid hold of a greater power. Now, as he listened, the phrases began to make sense. Without understanding the words, he knew what they meant.

The pot was boiling, and along with the steam, fish eyes were rising. They floated in the air before Roan. They looked at Kalepa and Henri. And now they were turning and looking at him. Their concentered rings pulsed—

They peered into his soul. There was no hiding now. They knew who he was.

Henri leaned closer, chanting louder, encouraging him. Roan moved his lips, echoing the sounds. Then his vision blurred, and he was sinking into the old man's embrace, feverish and shamed, alone and bereft. He felt Henri's arms, and darkness closed around him.

A downpour drowned the satellite terminal, so the calls to Wiley ceased. The work continued until the vein was mined out, and then strangely, the rains stopped and the sun

appeared. It was as if the weather's only purpose had been to challenge them.

Kalepa swam out to the racing launch and brought it close enough to load. The men waded through the surf, carrying the rocks, and the launch shuttled them to the cruiser. By late afternoon, it had all been crated, and they were ready to leave. Roan thanked the men. They're sensing my distance, he thought. And then the men were forgotten. It was the city, its police and its soldiers, that crowded his mind.

The Jangaville docks were dark when the pilot arrived. After they'd lifted the crates into his van, Roan thanked Henri and the men again. Then he opened an envelope and began counting out cash, intending to pay them twice what he'd promised. But Henri raised his hands and shook his head.

"No," he said. "Work. Good."

Roan extended the bills toward the men, but they answered the gesture with grumbles and troubled expressions. They had discussed this, it seemed, and were of one mind.

"*Les ancêtres*," Henri said gently, as if Roan would understand.

The work was an act of piety. Roan saw the familiar look in Henri's eyes, intensely personal—the look of faith, deeper

than any other. Now, so close to his departure, the sight pained Roan.

He tried again, raising the cash with a gracious nod to the men, hoping their practical instincts would prevail. No one responded. Roan stuffed the money in his coat pocket and glanced at Henri. The cost in toil and life had been high.

"Blood," Henri said. "Rain. Tsinjo. Fish eyes—"

He was reading Roan's mind. He knew Roan was returning to the world he came from, but the old man hoped he would take his faith with him. Henri was trying to smile, but there was trouble in his eyes.

"Dyeen man," Henri reminded him.

"I'm in a hurry," Roan said.

"Dyeen man. *Les ancêtres*."

"Put in a word for me with them," Roan said.

He felt the gap between them growing. Henri's smile sagged. He raised his arms and clasped Roan's shoulders.

"I won't forget," Roan promised.

"Forget," Henri said softly, as if he knew what the word meant. Then he turned and walked away. Without a word, the men followed him.

The pilot drove slowly, past cranes and cargo on pallets. Coconut and lumber, bagged rice and coffee, cotton and cement. With his window down, Roan could hear the creaking of the sailing boats moored in the quay. They passed a military hut, surrounded by dented trucks. Soldiers were milling outside, machine guns strapped to their shoulders. Then the van was threading unpaved streets, by open-air markets with

empty stalls, past lines of rickshaws and squatters' shacks, through shantytown slums with mosque minarets looming over them.

They crossed a bridge and rumbled down a long dirt road.

When they reached the hangar, the plane was gassed up and ready to go.

They loaded the plane without interruption and were airborne when the sun rose. From the co-pilot's seat, Roan could see the island's rivers, bearing iron-rich soil, bleeding scarlet into the ocean's blue.