

BOOK III

The Ancestor Series of Adventure-Thrillers

THE VOLCANO AND THE SHAFT

Draft: 01-15-08: By Marshall Chamberlain
Scheduled for Release in 2010



The Graduate Students: Two Days Ago

THE SHALLOW CAVE THEY'D converted for use as their campsite was down some fifty meters from the highly eroded edge of the extinct volcano, keeping them out of the wind-blown dust, secure and protected from the elements. The Indonesian Park Service was sending a helicopter for them in the morning, subject to the weather. Sitting at a field table under the cave overhand serving as a front porch, the two were dirty, smelly, and drawn past their tolerance levels for each other.

"I just didn't send it," Linda said.

In Alex's view she never did anything you asked her to do. She might do it in her own sweet time, or she might not. She was just sitting there smiling, a dirty-faced mole, eyes wide open like she was about to eat a big piece of birthday cake. She was a perfect clone of her prune-mouthed mother.

"So why, when I specifically was counting on you to do it like you said you would? This is the third time we've missed reporting. Don't you think Shalard might be getting pissed off?"

"It's your job to do the e-mail, not mine," she said, looking away, lips folded and tightened, showing her teeth.

"You know it would have been bloody well if we'd never been thrown together here," he pressed. "You're going to cost me a grade in this course."

"Bugger off," she said, chewing on a pencil eraser, pretending contemplation.

Their summer vacation, compliments of the Cambridge University Graduate School Program, was six weeks of climbing around the craggy slopes of Mt. Agung, a crusty volcanic rim of eroded gray lava and basalts over ten thousand feet in elevation, thirty-five miles from Bali's capital of Denpasar. Summer field sessions collecting rock samples at volcanos along the *Rim of Fire*, had been taking place for twenty-five years, as part of Professor Ivan Shalard's pet research project.

The required mountaintop field experience was a tragic ordeal for them both. They saw their world through narrow slits of selfish, parochial pride, the product of English upper-crust isolation. Volcanology had appeared so adventurous and romantic.

Alex ignored her and stood up from the field table, kicking his wooden folding chair in a heap against the side of the rocky overhang. "It doesn't look good again," he lamented, observing the clouds below forming and billowing up the mountainside. "We're never going to get off this piece-of-shit rock. The helicopter won't come if there's any weather."

Linda put her pencil down on the table and turned in his direction. “When was the last time you tried to make contact?” Her dingy brown hair hung in disarray down her face. A tall skinny girl, she had a permanent expression of amiability carved across her face, but underneath, a manipulative personality lurked, tenacious and grasping like a moray eel. Bright, self consumed and assured, she could turn warm and reflective in an instant, appearing filled with genuine caring and affection.

“Half an hour ago when the clouds started to thicken. Nothing worked. I still can’t believe you dropped the radio.”

“It’s not the radio, Mr. electronic whiz. You keep missing the satellite.”

“Well, *I* think it is. All it does is spit static — and the weather’s not my fault. Maybe the helicopter will come in anyway,” he said, changing the subject. “Stout and bangers. I can taste them already.” He smirked, picked up the collapsed chair, and sat back down at the table, thinking about which girl friend he’d call first.

“Yeah, but I hope this fiasco doesn’t hold up our dissertations,” she snapped, reaching for the stick she always carried around, propped against a boulder next to the field-table, and started tapping on the table top. “My parents are going to have a cat if I don’t get my degree with the rest of the class. I can just hear them now, worried about what the Duke and Lady Kathleen will think, arguing about what kind of sickness they could say I caught on the trip to Bali — excuses for embarrassment.”

Linda glared at him, slouched in the chair, wearing that stupid baseball hat, fidgeting in his pants pocket for a cigarette. It was his fault they couldn’t communicate. The satellite was his problem, weather or not. What a prig, just like his bloody prince father. She took her eyes away in disgust.

Alex hadn’t seen her examining him as he lit up and leaned the chair against the rock of their shelter. “Linda, I’m in the same predicament. You know that,” he lied. “My family will have a fit if it takes

any more time. They're already planning the announcements and making it into a reunion ... Even the Queen may be coming.”

For a moment, Alex’s mind drifted among images of the lofty world of royalty, and then he abruptly leveled the chair and stood up. “I’m gonna take a leak. Keep trying the radio, and watch the satellite monitor. It should be coming into range.”

The only son of Alexander T. Townsend, the Prince of Wales, Alex was short, ferret looking, quick to mock, and forever carrying an aura of self-proclaimed competence, underlain by contempt for anything unassociated with power or wealth. He was prone to blowing off steam in short bursts and recovering quickly, believing he possessed prowess in self-control.

Twenty minutes later, it was drizzling as he returned and scampered into the overhang, agitated and excited, and began going through one of the gear lockers.

“What are you doing now?” Linda asked, entering their protected space behind him and pulling down the tarp rigged to cover the entrance. “It’s going to rain cats and dogs as usual. How about helping me get more dry wood in here and re-start the fire? It’ll be cold again tonight.”

“I found something — ah, here’s what I want.” Alex strapped on a geologist’s tool belt and changed from sneakers to climbing boots. “Come take a look,” he said, grabbing a rain suit and a coil of nylon rope.

“I’m not interested. All I want to do is go home. Help me with the wood. The rain will be here in a minute.”

“Do it yourself,” he exploded, throwing back the tarp and taking the trail up the mountain.

Alex threw on the rain parka, slipping up the rocky grade, plying over his righteous frustrations, adding up the tally, stating justifications in his head: She was a cluts. She’d broken most of the equipment. He’d busted the stove, but she’d already trashed the control knob. The bitch let their tea blow away on the second day. The

T H E V O L C A N O A N D T H E S H A F T

sleeping bags were full of fungus because she hadn't aired them out. It was her job. She wouldn't even go downwind to take a crap. Every day it rained like hell. The dust and sulfur were tearing up his lungs, and his eyes wouldn't stop burning. Mornings he had to go five hundred feet down and five hundred feet up, just to fill six, little quart water carriers — his job. The pathetic packaged food was probably old WWII rations. He had the constant shits. At least there weren't any bugs, and it was the last week. Back to civilization, good food, booze, and pussy. No more Linda Jan Berkshire.

The rain came in wind-blown torrents, and the dark clouds cut off most of the sunlight. Gusts tore at her rain suit, and she held on tightly to her hood-strings as she made her way up the trail, trying not to take a fall on the wet rocks. "Alex, where are you?" she yelled for the fourth time. She was almost at the volcano's rim. It felt like shouting in a closet, the pouring rain absorbing her words. The pelting had beaten the dust into flotsam mud, bubbling along the sides of the trail. She thought he must have been purposely ignoring her. Why was she bothering, trudging around in the rain and muck? He was probably trying to get out of fixing dinner.

"Over here."

She could barely hear him off the trail to the right. What was he doing over there? There were just big craggy exposures of country rock where time had eroded away the lava, nothing of interest.

She picked her way through the rocks and boulders, using her stick for balance. Alex was kneeling, scraping, and digging with his pickaxe around the base of a large smooth outcrop that seemed to protrude from the host granite. It was an interesting formation, a sort of big mushroom without a stalk, sticking up about eight feet above ground level, probably produced by wind and rain erosion.

As she approached, the rain was abating, and the clouds were quickly breaking up and dissipating, leaving rays of sunlight glistening off the wet rock facets along the saturated mountainside. "What are

you doing? I'm hungry. It's your turn. I still couldn't reach anybody. The rain, or maybe the satellite's still out of range."

"Just button up for a minute and come here." Alex stood up. "Watch and listen." He started tapping the pick at the base of the outcrop and then moved up an inch or so at a time.

The rain had stopped, and the dark storm clouds were receding down the mountain, leaving the mountainside steaming and fresh smelling. Linda was getting out of her rain suit and wasn't paying attention to him. "What's the big deal? Let's go eat."

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what? Let's go."

"Just shut up and come over here."

Linda shrugged and shuffled next to him, peeved, not wanting to have to start another fire herself, open the cans, and make something edible out of the field rations. It was his turn. "What?" she squealed.

"Watch." Alex repeated the tapping from the base. When he got near the top of the outcrop, the tapping sound stopped, and the tip of the pick seemed to sink into the rock. "Well?" he said, staring her in the face.

"Well, what?"

"You're not even curious. You're such a prig. Watch this." He put the pickaxe down and reached up and slid his hand up along the rock face until his fingers disappeared. Feeling the edge, he jumped up and grabbed on with both hands and hung there.

"How'd you do that?" Linda's eyes were wide open. She couldn't see his fingers.

"There's a lip up here," he said, dropping back down. "Listen, I came off the trail to take a piss, and it started to rain. I was looking around, and the weird shape of this rock got my attention. I noticed the rain was flowing off its top in geometric rivulets instead of random. From where I was, up there," Alex pointed, "it looked circular, so I took a look."

"And?"

T H E V O L C A N O A N D T H E S H A F T

“When I got down here, it didn’t look so unusual, but I couldn’t see the top. I don’t know why, but I threw a rock up to see what would happen. It didn’t roll back down. I walked around it and kept throwing rocks. Nothing came down. That’s when I came back to camp to get some gear. I was about to climb it when you got here.”