



TUSKER

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AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Sam Jardine Crime Thrillers, Book 4

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Chapter 1

Sirius Research Laboratory, University of Technology, London

Professor Dean Holgate, chief scientist of the Sirius Research Laboratory, picked up the vintage green glass jar and examined the silver-coloured metal lumps suspended in protective mineral oil. The metal was unlike any he had encountered before and no-one within the laboratory had been able to identify it. He knew it was a form of rare earth metal. It was soft enough to cut with a knife, oxidised when exposed to air and displayed a swathe of unique chemical properties.

He had received the jar from a friend in the Foreign Office, who had been tasked with clearing out the department's storage boxes at the National Archives in Kew. It was the label that had intrigued Holgate's friend: yellowing, it had almost peeled off the jar. The label's faded lettering was written in a graceful, feminine style. The only clue to the identity of the author lay in the vague description of the contents, which read: *Unknown metallic substance extracted from monazite crystals. Cheteletu, Sioma District, N. Rhodesia, September 1943. Possible Bomber Command application. Hélène S.*

The jar had never made it to Bomber Command. It had lain abandoned and forgotten in a dusty archive box earmarked for destruction seventy-five years later.

The cryptic references to its origin and chemical properties were intriguing, and Holgate assumed the brevity of the description was due to wartime secrecy. If the unknown, rare earth metal proved to have the properties that Holgate suspected, then it would become the most valuable metal on earth. The contest to locate the metal at Cheteletu in modern-day Zambia would become a race for industrial supremacy.

Holgate was a forty-three-year-old, bespectacled chemical engineer. He cut an authoritative figure tempered with such affability that his students idolised him. He had spent ten years working on Jaguar Land Rover's iPace electric vehicle programme, and was on a mission to pass on his knowledge of automotive, clean-energy technology to the university's brightest minds.

He had gained his international reputation by improving the performance of high-powered lithium-ion batteries, but he had been hamstrung by the dwindling pools of research funding. Just

as he was considering an offer to head up the Chinese government's battery research directorate, he'd received a phone call from Sam Jardine, Commercial Director of the Sirius Motor Corporation. Jardine had asked Holgate to focus his efforts on developing a lithium-ion battery that could make recharging as convenient as filling a tank of petrol. In return, Jardine had offered the professor and his team of gifted students a ten-million-pound annual sponsorship.

Holgate had put his heart and soul into the project, but the attainment of his sponsor's dream had proven elusive. Two years of intensive research had yielded only frustration and a blowout in costs that was testing the limits of Jardine's patience.

Holgate called out to his assistant Christopher Wu, who was preparing for their final test of the day. The multiple rows of custom-built lithium-ion batteries were almost primed and ready in their testing jigs.

'Hey, Chris. What did you make of the new polymer-based electrolyte we used last week?'

'A big improvement on the last batch,' the assistant replied. 'But I had to increase the ratio of gel to polymer, to increase conductivity. It added twelve per cent more weight to the battery, but it was within our tolerance limit.'

'What about the charging times?'

'Twenty-two minutes,' Wu said with a triumphant smile. 'You bet me ten pounds it would take over half an hour.'

Holgate experienced a tingle of excitement. It was the best result they had ever achieved, but it wasn't the breakthrough Jardine had been demanding.

'Mr Jardine said the Sirius Motor Corporation is going to scale back our funding,' Holgate said. 'Their chairman, Sir Claude Kingsbury, is determined to cut costs. Unless we can secure a top-up from the Department of Industry, I'll have to let Pete and Jennifer go next week.'

Wu punched the keyboard controlling the robotic arm and then stood back as it inserted the experimental cathode into the last of the batteries. The cathode contained traces of their mystery rare earth metal. Seconds later, the robot sealed the battery and Wu connected its terminals to the power supply. 'Maybe we should have accepted Guangdong Motor's offer, Professor. It was pretty generous.'

'That's against our charter, Chris. We can only accept funding from British companies.'

'Then we had better hope our mystery metal succeeds where all others have failed,' replied his assistant. 'Where did you say it came from?'

‘Africa. Zambia to be exact. But other than that, we don’t have much to go on. Mr Jardine is calling it siomium, after the reference to the district of Sioma on the label.’

‘I like it,’ said Wu. He walked across to the video camera and pressed the record button, then held up his thumb to prompt Professor Holgate to begin the experiment.

Holgate stared into the lens of the camera and spoke in his deep, authoritative voice. ‘Commencing test number two-two-seven,’ he said. ‘The battery uses our new lithium-siomium-ion cathode and an atom-thick graphene anode. The electrolyte has a ratio of fifteen per cent gel to eighty-five per cent polymer compound. We are ready to begin charging to twenty per cent capacity in five, four, three, two, one.’

Wu pushed the master switch and the charge indicator lights on the bank of one hundred experimental battery jigs turned from red to amber. He turned the camera around so it focused on the large screen displaying a graphical representation of the charge levels of each battery.

‘Let me know when the batteries reach twenty per cent,’ Holgate said, ‘and then we can commence the official timing sequence. In the meantime, I’m going for a cup of tea.’

‘Sure thing, boss.’ Wu picked up a copy of the *Evening Standard* and flicked through the headlines. He had just finished scanning the lead story when he heard a series of electronic beeps. He looked up in amazement at the display screen. It had been less than a minute and the batteries had already charged to twenty per cent. The override system cut in and the charging sequence was suspended, ready to begin the critical second stage of the experiment.

‘Professor!’ Wu yelled towards the little kitchenette. ‘You’d better come and see this.’

Holgate burst back into the laboratory. His mouth dropped open as he stared at the display. ‘Is this a mistake? Perhaps we hadn’t fully discharged the batteries after the last experiment?’

‘These are new batteries. They were only assembled this morning. You saw it with your own eyes,’ Wu replied. ‘Are you ready for the main event?’

‘You bet.’ Professor Holgate’s heart was racing with excitement. ‘Let’s go.’

Wu swung the camera back so it focused once more on the professor. ‘Twenty per cent charge has been achieved in fifty-five seconds,’ Holgate said as calmly as his exhilarated state allowed. ‘We will now charge the lithium-siomium-ion batteries to eighty per cent capacity, which will simulate real-world charging conditions. Ready to proceed in five, four, three, two, one.’

Once more, Wu pushed the master switch and a large digital clock appeared on the top of the screen so that progress could be monitored. This time Holgate remained in the laboratory, his gaze

rooted to the display.

‘One minute gone,’ Wu said.

‘The batteries are at forty-three per cent. My God!’ Holgate’s voice cracked with excitement.

‘What’s the temperature of the anodes?’

‘Normal.’

‘Internal resistance?’

‘Low. The readings are perfect.’

‘The batteries are half-charged and it’s only been a minute and twenty seconds.’

The two men stared at the bank of batteries and a short time later, the first green light flashed, indicating it had charged to eighty per cent capacity. Seconds later, half-a-dozen green lights lit up.

‘That’s it,’ said Wu as the digital clock stopped at three minutes fifty-five seconds. ‘All batteries are at eighty per cent.’

‘Astonishing! We may have just witnessed the end of the internal combustion engine,’ said Holgate with a broad smile. He pumped Wu’s hand. ‘By God! I’m going to get Mr Jardine on the phone. He’s going to love this. Would you finish up here please, Chris, and then join me in the office for a celebratory glass of champagne? See if you can reach Pete and Jennifer. They won’t want to miss this.’

Chapter 2

Sirius Motor Corporation Head Office, London

Sir Claude Kingsbury looked up from his board papers and was unable to hide the sneer as he glanced in Sam's direction. It was the triumphant expression of a man who knew the balance of power had unexpectedly tilted in his favour.

Sam could only speculate what act of corporate shenanigans his chairman had cooked up for the board meeting. The old industrialist sitting opposite Sam was pompous and indecisive in business, but a master of corporate politics. He spoke with an irritating, nasal tone that accentuated his long beak of a nose. Sir Claude had presided over the destruction of vast swathes of the British motor industry but was popular with the city financiers. They had foisted him upon the reluctant Sirius board as a replacement for the younger, more impetuous co-founder of the company, Cantara Sharif. In his two years as chairman, his sole achievement had been to supplant half of Sam's trusted board members with his own cronies.

Sam felt the familiar pang of loss as he remembered Cantara, his vivacious ex-fiancée. His former friend, lover and trusted co-founder of the Sirius Motor Corporation had abandoned their relationship and her automotive career to pursue the higher calling of Egyptian politics. It had been two years since she had left him and despondency still draped around his broad shoulders like a heavy cloak.

'Right, let's get to business then. No time to waste,' said the chairman. 'First item on the agenda: what to do with Mr Jardine's new-fangled battery. I must say, his reckless spending on this wasteful obsession is the main reason for our current financial predicament.'

'It's called a lithium-siomium-ion battery,' Sam said.

'Of course; I knew that,' Sir Claude snapped. 'Our chief financial officer, Rupert Hayes, has tabled a motion that we sell the battery patent for fifty million pounds. It will be an excellent opportunity to strengthen our balance sheet. Would you like to explain, Rupert?'

'What?' replied Sam, clenching his jaw in controlled fury. 'We have just developed the most important piece of automotive technology since the internal combustion engine, and you're

suggesting we sell it for fifty million pounds. That's outrageous.'

'When you have been in the automotive industry as long as I have, you develop a gut instinct for knowing when to cut your losses on such ill-fated schemes.'

Sam was shocked to see several board members nod their heads.

'Precisely,' said Hayes. 'The global motor industry is in something of a recession right now and the public is turning its backs on electric- and solar-powered vehicles like ours. It's all down to range anxiety. If we sell the patent, we have a golden opportunity to improve our liquidity ratio.'

'Let me see if I've got this straight,' said Sam. 'We're considering handing over the Hypercharger battery for fifty million pounds? It could be worth ten times that. I can't believe I'm hearing this.' He looked around at his fellow board members, imploring their support.

'I would like to remind you, Mr Jardine, the British motor industry was founded on the internal combustion engine. We should sell to the first bidder before the market realises we're sitting on a white elephant,' said Hayes.

Sam could no longer control his frustration and rose from his chair. 'Ladies and gentlemen of the board. Despite the opinions of Sir Claude and Rupert Hayes, our company has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to revolutionise the motor industry. Our Hypercharger battery will make electric vehicles as convenient as petrol-driven cars. We owe it to our workforce, shareholders and our country to exploit this technology here in Britain. Can you imagine how proud it would make our people to change the face of the motor vehicle industry?'

Rupert Hayes folded his arms across his ample belly and shook his head. 'You're dreaming, Sam. The Hypercharger depends upon a rare earth metal that may not exist in commercial quantities. And even if it does, it will be years before your new battery can be mass produced. Looking at our balance sheet, we won't be around to take advantage of it when it does. It's too much of a risk for a company of our size to sustain.'

'Quite,' said Sir Claude. 'Look Sam, we are grateful to you and Miss Sharif for getting this company to where it is today. But it's time to leave the decision-making to the experts.'

A polite cough silenced the room. Simon Kincofu, the chief legal officer, stood up. He was a popular and well-respected member of the Sirius board. His athletic, six-foot frame and good looks gave him an aura of natural authority few others in the room possessed.

'Yes, Mr Kincofu?' said Sir Claude.

'At Mr Jardine's request, I have been making discreet enquiries about the siomium samples

found in the National Archives at Kew. As you know, the label on the jar states they came from Northern Rhodesia, which was the colonial name of my homeland of Zambia.’

Kincofu picked up the remote control and lowered a video screen. Moments later, an image of the vintage green jar filled the screen.

‘Let me read out the contents of the label: “Unknown metallic substance extracted from monazite crystals. Cheteletu, Sioma District, N. Rhodesia, September 1943. Possible Bomber Command application. Hélène S.”.’

‘It’s just mumbo jumbo,’ said Agnes Sharp, who was seated at Sam’s left. She was a non-executive director known for her prickly character and a pedant’s eye for detail.

‘Yes, Ms Sharp, the label is deliberately obscure. We must remember this was 1943 – when the outcome of the Second World War still hung in the balance. However, we have traced Cheteletu. It refers to a small, privately-owned hunting concession now known as the Cheteletu Game Management Area and it lies in the extreme south-west of Zambia, on the banks of the Kwando River.’

‘It’s in the middle of nowhere,’ said Sir Claude.

‘It is indeed very remote, and considered by UNESCO to be one of the world’s most outstanding places of natural beauty.’

‘What’s a Game Management Area?’ asked Hayes.

‘The purpose of a Game Management Area – or GMA – is to balance nature conservation with the economic needs of the local people who live there,’ Kincofu explained. ‘Usually they become hunting concessions, but there’s no reason why a small mine should not be built there as long as it adheres to strict environmental controls. It also happens to be for sale, following the expiry of its current ninety-nine-year lease.’

‘And you believe the monazite crystals from which siomium is extracted may well be located at Cheteletu?’ Sam said, his enthusiasm rising for the first time that day.

‘That’s my theory,’ Kincofu said. ‘The geological reports carried out by the old colonial government in the 1940s suggest the one-hundred-and-fifty-square-mile tract of land contains the right conditions for the presence of monazite crystals.’

‘Then why didn’t the British government mine the crystals at that time?’ Hayes persisted.

‘After the Second World War, demand for aircraft-based cathode ray tubes collapsed,’ Kincofu explained. ‘Not only that, but Cheteletu sits on some of the most ecologically sensitive land in the

world. Within its boundaries there exists the single most important trans-frontier elephant trail in Africa.'

'Can you just imagine the headlines if the environmentalists found out we were extracting rare earth metals on an elephant trail?' said Agnes Sharp. 'I vote we steer well clear and sell the patent. The risk is unacceptable.'

'I agree with you about the potential environmental impact, Ms Sharp,' Kincofu said. 'However, the Chinese are pressuring the Zambian government to rezone the area for industrial use, using their twelve-billion-dollar debt-trap position as leverage. But there are several ministers who are not happy about handing such an environmentally sensitive area to a destructive Chinese mining enterprise. Their track record has not been good.'

'And how do you know all this?' Sir Claude asked.

'One of the ministers responsible for negotiations with the Chinese trade delegation is Dr Ignatius Mazembula, Minister of Regional Development. He's brother-in-law to the current President of Zambia, as well as being a Rhodes scholar and something of an Anglophile.'

'Minister Mazembula is also Simon's godfather,' Sam explained.

Chapter 3

Lealui (Lozi royal summer capital), Upper Zambezi, Zambia

The rains had arrived early in the Western Province of Zambia. The Zambezi River had been rising for weeks and shimmered like a turquoise ribbon as it threaded its lazy way through the lush patchwork of flooded fields. The twenty-five-kilometre-wide floodplain teemed with exotic animals and striking birdlife, while industrious Lozi fishermen searched for bream and tigerfish in their traditional wooden canoes. As the storm clouds parted, the sun lit up the countryside in bright, vibrant hues unparalleled in their beauty.

In the royal summer capital of Lealui, water lapped at the outlying buildings. The Lozi king, known as the *Litunga*, consulted the spirits of his ancestors and decided the portents were favourable. He stripped off his shirt and beat the chest-high royal war drums made from the skins of twenty great bulls, to summon his people to the palace. The message was clear: ‘*Meyi a lungwangwa*’ – ‘the waters that consume everything’ had arrived – and it was time to move his court to higher ground. The giant *Maoma* war drums echoed across the land known since ancient times as the Barotse Empire. It was time for the annual *Kuomboka*: the ‘getting out of the water’.

* * *

‘What a spectacle!’ said Ignatius Mazembula, the minister for regional development. ‘It makes one proud to be Zambian.’

‘Indeed it does,’ replied his godson Simon Kincofu. ‘Although not all of us have been blessed to have been born under the Zambian sun.’ He gestured towards Sam, who was wedged in his wooden seat between the two big men.

The minister had secured front row seats in the VIP section of the world-famous *Kuomboka* ceremony, the most spectacular cultural event in Zambia.

‘Please excuse my rudeness, Mr Jardine,’ Mazembula said. ‘But feel free to consider yourself an honorary Zambian while you conduct your due diligence into the purchase of the Cheteletu

Game Management Area.’

‘That’s kind of you, Minister,’ Sam said as he adjusted the unfamiliar red beret perched on his head. Almost every male in the throng was wearing similar headwear to declare their affinity with the Barotse royal family. Sam fought for an additional inch of elbow room. Mazembula was a huge man who had once been an Oxford Boxing Blue. His fight was now a losing one against middle-age spread, but his pugnacious character and boundless energy remained.

‘Does that honorary citizenship extend to my competitors?’ Sam said. He motioned towards the large Chinese trade delegation occupying half of the roped-off VIP section.

‘It might,’ replied Mazembula. ‘But such a gift is not bestowed on our guests by a Zambian government minister. It comes from within.’ Mazembula placed a giant fist on his chest. ‘Zambia can produce many conflicting emotions on those who visit our beautiful but unpredictable country. Those who are fortunate will never wish to shake the dust of our land from their shoes.’

Kincofu chuckled. ‘Sam feels it. He could not hide it from me when we first met in Luangwa Valley three years ago.’

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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