

# RARE EARTH

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This book is dedicated to

*Michelle and LeRoy Yates.*

Dedicated in service,  
wise in counsel, strong in love.



# RARE EARTH





## Chapter One

Marc Royce arrived at the latest African crisis by way of a United Nations chopper. He was a last-minute hire, taking the place of a man who had trained hard for the role. Marc had little chance of success. Even his survival was in question. He had spent a week in Nairobi hearing this a dozen times and more each day. He was not welcome, he was not wanted. The four UN staffers sharing the chopper shunned him. They knew Marc was employed by Lodestone, a U.S. company contracted to bring in emergency supplies and do so for a profit. The UN staffers might need his company, but they still treated Marc like a pariah. They chatted among themselves and studied the rising tide of mayhem below them. They did not even acknowledge his presence. Marc was having too good a time to care what they thought. He was headed back into action. It was enough.

Up ahead, a new calamity had struck a region already devastated by drought, famine, and civil war. A volcano near the border between Kenya and Uganda, dormant for centuries, had erupted. Marc had been awakened in Nairobi two hours before sunrise with frantic orders to go out there and make things happen.

He ignored the glares as he shouldered his way in tight to the window. He was not going to miss this first airborne glimpse of his job. The base of Mount Elgon was just visible to his west, but the peak was lost to the ash cloud. Directly ahead of him was a ribbon of fire running from the volcano's new fissure. The hillside was now split with veins of smoke and fire, a wound of violent hues.

As they swooped in for the final approach, Marc studied the advancing lava flow. Ahead of the molten rock was a flood of people and vehicles fleeing the ruined city of Kitale. From his perch, Marc could see the remnants of a shantytown that crawled its way up the once-verdant slope. The city had been flattened by the earthquake that had preceded the eruption. Where the lava had not touched was only dust and rubble. Kitale was no more.

They landed in a dry riverbed west of the city. The UN relief workers jumped down and departed without a word. Marc had no idea where to go. All he had was a set of vague orders, printed that morning at Lodestone's airport office. He showed the sheet to the chopper pilot, who grinned at his confusion. "How long have you been at this job?"

"Eight days."

The copilot slipped off her headphones so she could enjoy the show. The pilot asked, "What kind of training did they give you?"

"I've had a week in Nairobi."

The pilots exchanged a glance. "And before that?"

"I was an accountant. In Baltimore."

The pilots were laughing out loud now. "Why don't you just hang tight, let us fly you back to the Nairobi airport. You can catch the big silver bird back to sanity-land."



“Thanks, but I’ve got a job to do.”

“Man, you’ve got *no* idea what you’re about to get yourself into.” The pilot pointed out the sun-splashed windscreen. “This place will *kill* you.”

Marc shouldered his backpack. “Any idea where I check in?”

The two pilots pointed him toward a tent at the border of the landing zone, then dismissed him with a pair of mock salutes.

Were it not for the ash floating like brittle snow, the September air would have been pleasant. The temperature was in the upper eighties, the morning sky a chalky blue. But every now and then a black cloud streaked above Marc’s head, vague shadows that promised danger to come. And off in the distance was a constant low rumble that thrummed through Marc’s boots.

Inside the tent, Marc found controlled chaos. A woman worn down by fatigue and stress inspected his orders. “You’re another mercenary?”

“I’m the new supply officer for Lodestone.”

“What I said.” She shot out a hand. “Passport.”

Marc had it ready for her. She checked his face against the photo. Then she keyed his name into a computer, squinted at the screen, and pointed at the dusty chaos. “See those supply trucks?”

The field beyond was a mini-city of supply mountains and rumbling trucks. “Yes.”

“Four are headed for the French camp named here in your orders. Go check in with the dispatcher.” She inspected him again, her gaze glinting with dark humor. “Don’t expect looks and a smile to get you very far out here.”

“What smile?” Marc replied, but the woman had already turned away.

The four trucks were piled high with cornmeal sacks and water purification systems and medical supplies. Marc knew because he had been given the manifest by a sweating dispatcher who scarcely even glanced at Marc’s credentials. The man was simply glad to find someone willing to take responsibility for the load.

The lead truck was a Volvo with three hundred thousand miles on the clock. The others were in even worse states of repair. Marc’s seat was patched with duct tape. The springs dug into his back with every jouncing dip. The driver was a good-natured Angolan whose name Marc had not caught. They shared the truck’s cab with two other young men, one of whom was stuffed into the rear crawl space. Two more rode perched on top of the load.

The driver spoke a few words in Marc’s direction, laughed at Marc’s lack of understanding, and turned on the radio. The volcano formed a hissing overlay that drowned out the music, so the driver slipped in a tape. The men drummed their hands in time to the tune and chattered constantly. The air was compressed, the men’s fragrance an earthy spice. When they turned west onto the main highway, Marc finally released his smile. He was headed in the one direction he truly relished. Toward action.

The manifest he held was stamped with the emblem of Marc’s company. Lodestone had recently become one of the largest suppliers of humanitarian equipment in Africa. Theirs was a specialty service. Their clients included every major aid

agency, along with the United Nations. Whenever and wherever a crisis erupted, the agencies turned to firms like Marc's to deliver emergency supplies, and do so fast.

But there was a problem. One so large it had rung alarm bells eight thousand miles away. Which was why Marc had been brought in. An outsider who some thought had no chance of success and even less of survival. Before departing for Nairobi, Marc had been repeatedly warned of unseen foes who would make it their business to assure he never made it back alive. Marc had responded that he would have had it no other way.

Now that he was isolated by smoke and fire and turmoil and Africa, Marc wondered at his habit of landing in impossible situations.

Traffic along the main road to Eldoret moved at a crawl. Directly ahead of them were crude donkey carts piled with farm implements and children, with goats tied to the rear gates. The animals fought the ropes and bleated as they were pulled forward. Marc's convoy remained on the road for over three hours and covered less than ten miles.

They then turned north on what was little more than a rutted dirt track. A pair of waist-high signs with Red Cross camp names were the only indication of life ahead. A squad of bored soldiers kept the traffic from making the turn, motioning it farther west with languid African gestures. After exchanging a few words with the lead driver, the soldiers stepped aside.

The vista consisted of scrub and the occasional thorn tree. To their left, the world was lost behind a curtain of doom. Occasionally they came upon crumbled patches of asphalt, but most of the road had long been washed away.

They traveled through much of the day, crawling along at a brisk walking pace. Marc figured they might have covered twenty miles.

They were far enough from the volcano not to see many cinders, which was good because the region looked bone-dry to Marc. Now and then the wind shifted just enough to fling ash their way, blanketing the low brush with a false snow. The driver started coughing and motioned for Marc to roll up his window. The cabin quickly became a fetid sauna.

They passed through a forest of skeletal trees, bleached a yellowish white by the drought. When they emerged on the forest's other side, Marc watched as a dozen specters appeared on the road ahead of them. The women were dressed in tribal robes coated with ash. They had wrapped the edges of their headkerchiefs around their faces, leaving only the eyes exposed. When the truck blew its horn, the women stepped aside slowly. They carried bundles of firewood and viewed the passing truck through eyes red as live coals.

Just as they arrived at the camp's border fence, the wind started pushing in from the east. As the air cleared they rolled down their windows and breathed deeply. The driver beeped his horn once. The camp guards pulled back the main gates, and they trundled inside. Tendrils of ash blew from the ground, bitter flurries that stung the eyes and left Marc's mouth tasting of old smoke and sulfur. The camp was impossibly quiet, the earth blanketed by several inches of volcanic powder.

The camp was a massive shantytown, an endless sprawl. Dwellings were built from corrugated siding, plastic sheets, canvas tarps, thorn brush, anything. Some had miniature fences

surrounding bits of land, Marc assumed, for chickens or other animals. Children stood and watched them pass, their feet and legs turned the color of old bones.

They rounded a slight bend and came upon a wall of packed humanity. The people blocking the road pressed out of the way, their motions slow and grudging. They entered the camp's central compound. The horde encircled them, twenty or thirty people deep. Marc heard a soft rumble, like another volcano threatening to erupt beneath his feet. Only this one came from the people who now surrounded the trucks.

The driver and his mates muttered nervously.

"Stay cool," Marc said softly.

The driver glanced over. It was uncertain whether he understood Marc's words. But Marc's tone and expression were enough to calm him. His death grip on the wheel eased slightly.

Inside the throng was an empty space, perhaps two hundred yards across. This central zone held an administrative building of unpainted concrete blocks, a chapel and schoolhouse, a medical clinic, a bunkhouse and mess hall, and a trio of godowns, the local word for an open-sided warehouse. The entire area was rimmed by people.

A squad of soldiers in sweat-stained uniforms stood before the godowns. Four people in white gowns watched their truck through the clinic's mosquito-netting walls. Otherwise there was no movement. Just the wall of dark faces and scowls and red-rimmed eyes.

Then a woman came bounding out of the admin building. She appeared to be in her late twenties and was attractive in a disheveled manner. She had a coltish manner of running, her long legs weighted by heavy lace-up boots. A rubber band only

partly managed to control her dark brown hair. She gripped Marc's windowsill and addressed him in frantic French.

"Sorry," Marc said. "Do you speak English?"

The woman demanded, "Where are the soldiers?"

Marc waved at the trucks. "We're just delivering supplies."

"I spoke on the radio with the colonel. Last night and again this morning. I forget his name." Her accent was almost comically French, drawing the *r*'s from somewhere deep in her throat and making *z*'s of each *th* sound: *Ze radio wit' ze colonel*. "He promised more soldiers."

"The base camp is sheer chaos," Marc replied. "No one said anything about soldiers. I never saw an officer. I flew in; they told me to come here."

The woman released his window so as to pull her hair away from her face. Marc realized she was doing her best not to cry.

She took a pair of raspy breaths, then said quietly, "We are all going to die."



## Chapter Two

When Marc stepped down from the truck, the surrounding throng greeted him with a low growl. He pretended not to hear anything, though his belly quivered from nerves.

Fear added tremors to the French aid worker's voice. "How can they send me more supplies and no staff? I am the only person here with authority. I cannot control the situation."

Marc opened the truck's rear gate and unhooked the bungee cords holding down the medical supplies. He pulled out the nearest crate. "Take this."

She did so only because he shoved the container into her arms. "Did you hear a word I just said?"

Marc pulled out a second one and started across the ash-covered earth. He kept his voice calm. "I would advise you to be quiet."

She hurried to catch up. "How *dare* you say such a thing. You have *no* idea what I've—"

Marc smiled cheerily. "Your tone of voice is making things worse."

The medical clinic was an identical concrete block structure to the chapel and admin building and bunkhouse, only it had been expanded by hooking open-sided tents to three

of its four exterior walls. Marc slipped through the mosquito netting lowered to keep out the ash and asked, “Who speaks English in here?”

An attractive young nurse in a sweat-stained uniform said, “I do.”

“May I ask your name?”

“Kitra.”

“I am Marc.”

The aid worker behind him clearly disliked being ignored. “You Lodestone people are all the same. You think you can buy your way out of any crisis.”

Marc replied, “I know you’re scared. But we can get through this intact.” He realized the nurse was backing away from him. “What’s the matter?”

Kitra was dark-haired with eyes of emerald fire. “You are from the Lodestone group?”

“That’s right.”

Her face now held an acrid mix of fear and loathing. “Get out of this tent.”

“Look, I’m here—”

“Leave!”

A pair of medical staffers started toward him. Marc set the crate he was carrying on an empty bed and raised his hands in submission. The French aid worker watched in bitter triumph as Marc retreated.

A tall African in a dark short-sleeved shirt and pastor’s collar was waiting for him. “Perhaps I can help. I am Charles Matinde, camp chaplain.”

Marc gestured at the faces glaring through the screen. “What just happened in there?”



“The aid supervisor, her name is Valerie. She is very frightened and most certainly out of her depth.” The chaplain’s English was precise and heavily accented. He was in his forties, tall and slender in the manner of a long-distance runner. “As for the nurse, she has a personal issue with your company.”

Marc asked, “What about you? Do you have a problem with Lodestone?”

“Certainly not.” Charles indicated the crowd of people. “My concern is for them. My question is, can you help?”

Marc liked that answer as much as he did the chaplain’s steady manner. “Who else is in charge here?”

Charles motioned toward a middle-aged African who leaned against the side of the nearest godown. He cradled an AK-47 with such ease it was almost possible to ignore the readiness to his stance. “Sergeant Kamal.”

“Is the sergeant to be trusted?”

“He does not have enough men. He complains. But yes, I think he is a good man, and his men agree.”

“Does he speak English?”

“A few words.”

“Would you come translate for me, please?”

Valerie emerged from the medical tent, clearly displeased with how Marc was circumventing her authority. She fell in beside them and continued with her complaints. “I was promised more staff. I was promised security. We do not have any way to protect the supplies we have now.”

The sergeant scowled at Valerie, adding his own displeasure to Marc’s. The woman went silent. Sergeant Kamal wore a khaki uniform with blue stripes on his lapels and sleeves, denoting a soldier in the UNHCR brigade. When the chaplain

introduced them, Marc drew himself up to full height and gave the man a parade-ground salute. "Please extend to the officer my sincere respect for keeping things under control."

The sergeant underwent a remarkable transformation. Gone was his sullen rage, which Marc knew was a noncom's customary response to threats of any kind. The sergeant smiled, revealing a mouth crammed with overly bright teeth.

Marc said, "Ask Sergeant Kamal when the last time food was distributed."

The chaplain replied without asking. "Not since the volcano erupted."

"I need the sergeant to respond and feel included."

"Ah, of course." Charles spoke with the sergeant in what Marc assumed was a local tongue. He then replied, "Three days and counting."

The aid worker snapped, "How could I *possibly* deliver supplies when I have no idea of what or who represents which refugee family? We have *thousands* of new refugees arriving every *day*. We were promised machines to make IDs. We were promised staff to make proper records. We were promised *guards*."

Marc turned to the aid worker. "Your assistance is no longer required."

Valerie gaped at him. "*Comment?*"

Marc said, "You would help us a lot by returning to the admin building."

The chaplain actually smiled.

"How *dare*—"

"Are you able to find it on your own," Marc said, "or should I ask the sergeant for an escort?"

The sergeant tracked Valerie's angry retreat with cynical approval. He turned back to Marc and nodded once.

Marc asked, "How many able soldiers are we talking about here?"

"Sixteen," Kamal replied through the chaplain. "One under-strength squad."

Marc scanned the area. The tension emanating from the anxious crowd was a palpable force. It felt to Marc like a finger slowly drawing down on the trigger. "We don't have much time."

"No," Charles quietly agreed. "We do not."

He liked the pastor's calm. It was the manner of someone who had long since given up worrying over everything he could not control. Marc sensed the sergeant held the same attitude, so long as his superiors gave him direction and at least a hope of survival.

The godowns, whose tin roofs were supported by concrete block pillars, were crammed to the gills with supplies. The third was empty. Marc knew without asking that the sergeant had massed the provisions into as small a space as possible to keep from overextending his squad. Marc asked, "Which godown holds your oldest perishables?"

The sergeant used his machine gun to point at the godown to his left. Charles translated, "The mealy sacks have begun to smell."

"Okay, here's what we do. We pull the trucks up to the empty godown. You take your men off the warehouse there and direct them to stand guard while we off-load the trucks."

The sergeant understood immediately. "You will let them steal everything?"

“First of all, the supplies were always meant for these people. Nobody is stealing anything. Secondly, we don’t have enough men to guard three godowns.”

The sergeant looked at the surrounding throng for the first time. “And they are starving.”

Marc released the faintest wisp of wrath. “That is absolutely unacceptable.”

The sergeant turned back, approval clear in his dark gaze. Charles translated, “Kamal asks how long you will be staying.”

“One day beyond as long as it takes,” Marc replied. “Let’s get started.”

Marc joined the guards standing around the trucks. He held a Nambu machine pistol that belonged to one of Kamal’s soldiers who was down with gut rot. Marc had never liked the Nambu. The gun was exceedingly ugly, with a pig’s snout of a barrel and a curved clip long as his forearm. The clip was oversized because when the weapon was switched to full automatic it threw out bullets as fast as metal rain. The gun was polished with years of handling, but there was no rust and the trigger was firm. Marc had no doubt it would fire well. But he had no intention of using it. He carried it as a show of authority.

Because the camp was about to blow.

The camp was run by the largest French aid agency. Africa’s crisis camps were segmented by agency and nation, to avoid language confusion and duplication of either action or personnel. But when the volcano had erupted, the nation’s minister for refugees had ordered the camp’s directors to take over three other camps whose own administrators were trapped in Kitale

and presumed lost. Valerie had been the lone aid worker left in charge, and was overwhelmed.

Valerie was obviously accustomed to having any number of staff do whatever she wanted. Only now there was no one around for her to manipulate, except for the pastor and the sergeant and a pair of overworked male nurses. Kamal scowled whenever she came within range, and his men were more than happy to follow his lead. The camp elders utterly despised her. Charles viewed her with amused condescension. Marc had no idea what opinion the medical personnel had of Valerie. He had not been permitted back inside their tent.

Since the other administrators had departed, the camp had swelled from nine thousand to somewhere around thirty thousand people. This Marc learned from the pastor. Charles revealed a sharp but gentle wisdom that matched the silver threads woven through his close-cropped dark hair. The man possessed a quiet dignity that Marc found genuinely appealing, especially as it remained untouched by the current crisis. As Marc separated the medical supplies and water purification systems from the foodstuffs, he asked, "Think maybe you could find the camp elders?"

"That is simple enough." Charles gestured toward a cluster of older men standing to the right of the main road. "All but one is there. The other is laid up in the clinic."

"Will they speak with me?"

"They will listen. As for talking . . ." Charles gave an eloquent shrug. "They stopped speaking to Valerie the day before yesterday."

Marc stopped by the nearest godown and hefted a sack of grain. The elders watched in unblinking silence as Marc and the

chaplain walked over. A deep voice roared from somewhere to Marc's left. The sound was followed by a chorus of rumblings. Marc could hear the pastor's breathing, quiet gasps like he had just run a hard mile.

Marc set the grain down at the elders' feet and said without preamble, "I offer my solemn apology for the hardships they have faced. I thank them for the order they have maintained in the camp despite the situation."

Charles translated in the same tight breaths, nervous punches of a few words each. The elders made no sign they heard him.

"My aim is to relieve the worst need for food, and then set up an equitable system to distribute the other goods."

Charles seemed to have trouble finding enough air to shape the words. When he was done, Marc said, "Tell them the left godown holds food, and everything can be taken. Now."

Even before Charles finished translating, the youngest of the elders turned and lifted his staff high overhead. He was a slender man in his late thirties, with the motions of a tiger and features to match. There was no doubting his authority. He pointed at the godown and called. The cry was taken up by a hundred voices, a thousand. All but the elders erupted in a tide of ash-colored robes.

"*Non, non, c'est ne pas—*" The French aid worker had the good sense to scream her objections from the admin building's front step. She shrieked once more at the sergeant, who paid her no more attention than Marc or the elders.

The people rushed the godown from all sides. The native truckers stood on their vehicles and chattered nervously as the UN soldiers formed a line between the left godown and

the other supplies. But the people made no attempt to break through the phalanx.

When Valerie realized no one paid her any attention, she seated herself on the top step and smoked and sulked. Marc ignored her and kept his attention on the crowd. The people cleared the warehouse with the speed of locusts. There were a few squabbles, not many. The youngest leader protected one woman whose sack was being tugged at by a pair of teenage girls. The sergeant ordered two of his men to shield a trio of children struggling with a carton. From inside the medical station, patients rose on their beds while the staff stood and watched.

Children began dancing about the central compound. Packets of Plumpy Nut flickered mirror-like in their hands. Plumpy Nut was a true success story, a combination of Western ingenuity and African need. The product required no refrigeration, was crammed with vitamins and proteins, cost less than thirty cents a portion, and suited the locals' tastes. Marc had tried it in Nairobi and thought it tasted like peanut butter laced with boiled ham. But the children loved it. And that was what mattered most.

Then it was over. The tension was released. The camp went quiet. Marc remained where he was, stationed by the elders, until woodsmoke rose and blanketed the camp with the fragrance of cooking grain.