

ARIADNE IN SOUTH AFRICA

WRITTEN BY ALEXANDRA STANISLAV

Natalie pushed hair from her eyes with dirty fingers and turned her face to the wind. "Pedal to the metal, Jim." Her voice was nearly carried away at fifty-five miles an hour.

"As best as I can." His eyes did not leave the dirt path, lines of red-brown swallowed steadily beneath greedy tires. He, as she, appeared determined, but both tired minds had already done the math: they were too late to save this one.

South Africa slid by in jerks and stops, an unbalanced film projection in the window; the jeep rumbled further into the park. 1.2 lost every day, she thought. Natalie couldn't help feeling she had lived this story before. It didn't bode well for the heroine. She snorted in disgust; Jim's features twitched like a dog's ears. They remained silent. No one was a hero; at this point no mortal could make a difference.

The jeep ground to a halt beside what looked like a lumpy mound of cement. Stench like filthy fingers prodded the inside of her nose, pressed her brain, and left fingerprints. This was death. "Still haven't moved Martin yet?"

Jim didn't bother to answer; proof positive was heaped before them, flattened yellow-brown grass, stank to high heaven. He looked in every direction, gun casually in hand.

"Don't see anyone, Nat." He turned back to her, his skin reflecting sunlight like a dusty chalkboard. "Might have been locals down the way." He gazed north, across another expanse of grass and baked soil, into a strand of Outeniqua Yellowwood, still youthful, at the edge of a small forest.

"Maybe," she replied. Doubt it, she thought.

The echoing shot, now silent, still rang in her ears. The sound of another life ending. She could almost smell the newly-drawn blood, and she turned her face to the decimated pile of bone and skin, what remained of Martin.

Only weeks ago she had named him, en route to his new habitat. Don't get too attached, Nat, Jim had warned, pessimistic to the end. She had stared back, challenging, foolish, believing she was a savior, a goddess. Invincible. But she delivered Martin into the sights of new rifles, set him on a pathway into hell. Four days ago they had found his body. Unexpectedly. No one else heard a shot rip open the night. But Martin heard. The same shot penetrated the tender skin above his eye, lodged in his brain, stopped his hearing – his knowing – cold. She ached for whatever creature had endured the more recent bullet; she searched feebly for smoke, rising from the rifle's mouth to the sky.

This rhino, Martin, remained unmoved, fallen to rest as if he tripped, short legs splayed beneath him, one bent, another extended. His neck stretched forward, reaching. No more. Blood ran in dusty trails, baked into cracked gray skin, like tears, from a crater in his forehead. There was an empty space where a horn once stood.

The birds of Africa had picked him clean.

"This has to stop." Natalie's voice was a hammer slamming nail, stolid and binding. Repetitive.

"I know, Nat." Jim's voice came as more of a chant. A mantra. "I know."

"Since 1970, the rhino population has plummeted, and no one in power seems to be doing anything about it." The council sat staring, seemingly unmoved by her words. "I mean, 2,300 rhinos remaining? Out of 65,000? Clearly trade bans are not working." She looked to Jim for affirmation, received a nod, and continued, "That's a 96% decrease in population."

She assessed her audience, a stiff line of self-important people behind wooden tables, piles of paper before them, boredom shone from glassy eyes. Does no one care? No one at all? She felt her voice grow weaker, uncertain of her footing, and hated herself for it. "What about all the people whose lives are affected? People starving to death because they can't legally hunt? People who don't dare venture into a national park for fear of being shot on sight?"

No reaction. She wanted to scream. The leader of the committee rose from his seat to address her. He stood only fifteen feet away, behind nothing more elaborate than a row of sturdy tables, desks, chairs, but his was the seat of power.

"What do you suggest we do?" He adjusted his jacket sleeve and returned clean fingertips to polished wood; the question was obviously rhetorical.

He continued. "We have watched the decline of the rhino population for decades. From over 30 species to 5, and all endangered." A weighted glance in her direction: listen to the facts; I am not ignorant in this. "At present there is little we can do to change it." Words like a gavel, cracking the case to fragments, put her arguments to rest. The speaker leaned over, rifled papers on the table - filed her away, and moved on to the next matter of life and death.

Natalie was not so easily defeated. "There is nothing you plan to do? Animals are being murdered on your watch - a species is literally being hunted to extinction - and you're going to sit here and shuffle papers? It's bullshit." She regretted her outburst instantly, but did not rescind the comment. It was the truth, after all.

"What do you suggest?" A repetition, a sigh of resignation from the big man in the cheap suit.

"Well-" On the spot, she was defenseless. This was, indeed, the golden question. More than golden, she thought, horn is worth twice as much as gold on the black market. But how to stop the trade, when use of rhino horn is so ingrained in cultural belief? It was like telling a Catholic they must no longer use wine at mass; there would be blood in the streets, on the prairies, seeping back into earth. Dust to dust. There seemed no legitimate way out of the labyrinth, no string to follow. Only an enormous captive beast, growing weaker by the moment. "We could regain control of the stockpiles, legalize the trade, or invest in sustainable horn growth..." Natalie trickled into silence. This battle was lost centuries before she was born.

What about those things? Spelled the wrinkles of his face. "Marcie will show you out," he informed her, gently, turning tired eyes to the door.

Marcie needed not to trouble herself. Natalie turned on her heel and stormed from the room. Bastards. Sitting on their asses in comfy chairs while rhinos are being tracked, murdered, and desecrated.

Yet even before she reached the door, the hot air seeped from her like steam from a broken teapot. She was not angry at these people. They were on her side. "Thank you for your time," she intoned quietly, before turning to Jim. He silently followed her.

They slipped back into the South African heat.

"So, Nat, you gonna save your rhinos today?" Same question every morning as they climbed into the jeep, dawn cracking in jagged streams of pink light.

"Every day, Jim," she always replied. They usually fell silent beyond that, but not today.

"Why rhinos, Nat?" As if he asked what number follows four. Jim did not take his eyes from the dirt path. The rifle, safety on, bounced against his leg as he drove.

"Because they don't deserve to die." Like unicorns, unjustly hunted. They cannot be captured, but are easily killed. Poor beast, lured to sad demise by a virgin in the forest.

Jim nodded, as if he understood perfectly. And he did.

"Jim, I never asked you: Why did you come to work at the park?" What Natalie meant was what happened to your family? But she lacked the courage to ask outright.

"For the rhinos, of course." He flashed a practiced smile and waited for her to buy it. She didn't. With a sigh, corners of his lips falling, "My family was killed."

"Killed?" She prodded gently, to poke without striking a nerve. The jeep hit a bump on the path, jolted everything, cargo and human, into the air, and slammed them back down. Jim felt the butt of the rifle jam into his leg, a bruise already forming.

She knew why. The shoot-to-kill policies; 'suspected poacher' was synonymous with 'dead body' these days. Jim granted her a look that read no different from your rhinos, darling and again turned to the road. He could tell her stories about armed guards, wilderness patrols, the abuse of power.

Power was always abused here. But he remained silent. Natalie had enough uphill battles to fight, weapons to forge from elusive sand. He had said too much already, fed her burning determination and endless questions. Rhinos.

She turned to rummage in the back of the jeep and he watched, thinking she was endangered in her own right. Africa would bake the passion out of her as surely as she burned from the inside. She would harden to clay, wrinkle, and crack into pieces with age.

They stood together, and searched halfheartedly for the newest victim, another creature felled by a practiced, selfish bullet. Flesh converted to garbage in the wake of human greed. Natalie stood tall, scanned the horizon and tried not to see a carcass rising like hell's mountains before her. What was once Martin, was now nothing.

Jim remained silent, hardened. He was attuned to madness, familiar with the plight. He had long ago baked through, and waited for his turn to crumble.

"We don't stand a chance." Her voice cracked, tears marched near; earth shakes beneath the footsteps of devastation. Natalie raised her eyes to Jim, hope poised on the brink with slippery soles. "I can't find my way out of this maze, Jim." But she wasn't really talking to him, more to the dancing African air, dust in the breeze shimmering like magic, like the cloud of flies over Martin's carcass.

He laughed, not without bitterness, and for the first time he spoke as if he truly knew her. "This is the way of things here. Day by day." He patted her shoulder with a large, warm hand and walked to stare into the wilderness. Dusty brush and dry forest.

Somewhere in the distance a bird screamed.

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