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WILBUR SMITH



THE HUNTERS BECOME THE HUNTED

Elephant Song

'Sex, money, ambition, fear and blood... an emotional stampede'

DAILY MAIL

WILBUR SMITH

ELEPHANT SONG

PAN BOOKS

ELEPHANT SONG

Wilbur Smith was born in Central Africa in 1933. He was educated at Michaelhouse and Rhodes University. He became a full-time writer in 1964 after the successful publication of *When the Lion Feeds*, and has written over thirty novels, all meticulously researched on his numerous expeditions worldwide. His books are now translated into twenty-six languages.

Find out more about Wilbur Smith by
looking at his own author website,
www.wilbursmithbooks.com

The author wishes to make grateful acknowledgement to Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*, published by Jonathan Cape, which he found invaluable in his research for this novel.

This book is for my wife

MOKHINISO

*who is the best thing
that has ever happened to me*

It was a windowless thatched building of dressed sandstone blocks, that Daniel Armstrong had built with his own hands almost ten years ago. At the time he had been a junior game ranger in the National Parks' administration. Since then the building had been converted into a veritable treasure house.

Johnny Nzou slipped his key into the heavy padlock, and swung open the double doors of hewn native teak. Johnny was chief warden of Chiwewe National Park. Back in the old days, he had been Daniel's tracker and gunbearer, a bright young Matabele whom Daniel had taught to read, write and speak fluent English by the light of a thousand campfires.

Daniel had lent Johnny the money to pay for his first correspondence course from the University of South Africa which had led much later to his degree of Bachelor of Science. The two youngsters, one black and one white, had patrolled the vast reaches of the National Park together, often on foot or bicycle. In the wilderness they had forged a friendship which the subsequent years of separation had left undimmed.

Now Daniel peered into the gloomy interior of the godown, and whistled softly.

'Hell, Johnny boy, you have been busy since I've been away.'

The treasure was stacked to the roof beams, hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of it.

Johnny Nzou glanced at Daniel's face, his eyes narrowed as he looked for criticism in his friend's expression. The reaction was reflex, for he knew Daniel was an ally who understood the problem even better than he did. Nevertheless, the subject was so emotionally charged that it had become second nature to expect revulsion and antagonism.

However, Daniel had turned back to his cameraman. 'Can we get a light in here? I want some good shots of the interior.'

The cameraman trudged forward, weighed down by the heavy battery packs slung around his waist and switched on the hand-held arc lamp. The high stacks of treasure were lit with a fierce blue-white light.

'Jock, I want you to follow me and the warden down the length of the warehouse,' Daniel instructed, and the cameraman nodded and moved in closer, the sleek Sony video recorder balanced on his shoulder. Jock was in his middle thirties. He wore only a pair of short khaki pants, and open sandals. In the Zambezi valley heat his tanned bare chest was shiny with sweat and his long hair was tied with a leather thong at the nape of his neck. He looked like a pop star, but was an artist with the big Sony camera.

'Got you, guv,' he agreed, and panned the camera over the untidy stacks of elephant tusks, ending on Daniel's hand as it stroked one elegant curve of glowing ivory. Then he pulled back into a full shot of Daniel.

It was not merely Daniel's doctorate in biology, nor his books and lectures, that had made him an international authority and spokesman on African ecology. He had the healthy outdoors looks and

charismatic manner that came over so well on the television screen, and his voice was deep and compelling. His accent had sufficient Sandhurst undertones remaining to soften the flat unmelodious vowel sounds of colonial speech. His father had been a staff officer in a Guards regiment during World War II and had served in North Africa under Wavell and Montgomery. After the war he came out to Rhodesia to grow tobacco. Daniel had been born in Africa but had been sent home to finish his education at Sandhurst, before coming back to Rhodesia to join the National Parks Service.

‘Ivory,’ he said now, as he looked into the camera. ‘Since the time of the pharaohs, one of the most beautiful and treasured natural substances. The glory of the African elephant – and its terrible cross.’

Daniel began to move down between the tiers of stacked tusks, and Johnny Nzou fell in beside him. ‘For two thousand years man has hunted the elephant to obtain this living white gold, and yet only a decade ago there still remained over two million elephant on the African continent. The elephant population seemed to be a renewable resource, an asset that was protected and harvested and controlled – and then something went terribly, tragically wrong. In these last ten years, almost a million elephant have been slaughtered. It is barely conceivable that this could have been allowed to happen. We are here to find out what went wrong, and how the perilous existence of the African elephant can be retrieved from the brink of extinction.’

He looked at Johnny. ‘With me today is Mr John Nzou, chief warden of Chiwewe National Park, one of the new breed of African conservationists. By coincidence, the name Nzou in the Shona language means elephant. John Nzou is Mr Elephant in more than name alone. As warden of Chiwewe he is responsible for one of the largest and healthiest elephant herds that still flourish in the African wilderness. Tell us, Warden, how many tusks do you have in this store room here at Chiwewe National Park?’

‘There are almost five hundred tusks in store at present – four hundred and eighty-six to be exact – with an average weight of seven kilos.’

‘On the international market ivory is worth three hundred dollars a kilo,’ Daniel cut in, ‘so that is well over a million dollars. Where does it all come from?’

‘Well, some of the tusks are pick-ups – ivory from elephant found dead in the Park, and some is illegal ivory that my rangers have confiscated from poachers. But the great majority of tusks are from the culling operations that my department is forced to undertake.’

The two of them paused at the far end of the godown and turned back to face the camera. ‘We will discuss the culling programme later, Warden. But first can you tell us a little more about poaching activity in Chiwewe. How bad is it?’

‘It is getting worse every day.’ Johnny shook his head sadly. ‘As the elephant in Kenya and Tanzania and Zambia are wiped out, so the professionals are turning their attention to our healthy elephant herds further south. Zambia is just across the Zambezi river, and the poachers that come across this side are organised and better armed than we are. They shoot to kill – men as well as elephant and rhino. We have been forced to do the same. If we run into a band of poachers, we shoot first.’

‘All for these . . .’ Daniel laid his hand on the nearest pile of tusks. No two of the ivory shafts were the same; each curve was unique. Some were almost straight, long and thin as knitting-needles; others were bent like a drawn longbow. Some were sharp-tipped as javelins; others were squat and blunt. There were pearly shafts, and others were of buttery alabaster tone; still others were stained dark with vegetable juices, and scarred and worn with age.

Most of the ivory was female or immature; a few tusks were no longer than a man’s forearm, taken from small calves. A very few were great curved imperial shafts, the heavy mature ivory of old bulls.

Daniel stroked one of these, and his expression was not simply for the camera. Once again, he felt the full weight of the melancholy that had first caused him to write about the passing and destruction

of the old Africa and its enchanted animal kingdom.

‘A sage and magnificent beast has been reduced to this,’ his voice sank to a whisper. ‘Even if it is unavoidable, we cannot escape the inherently tragic nature of the changes that are sweeping through this continent. Is the African elephant symbolic of the land? The elephant is dying. Is Africa dying?’

His sincerity was absolute. The camera recorded it faithfully. It was the most compelling reason for the enormous appeal of his television programmes around the world.

Now Daniel roused himself with an obvious effort, and turned back to Johnny Nzou. ‘Tell us, Warden, is the elephant doomed? How many of these marvellous animals do you have in Zimbabwe and how many of those are in Chiwewe National Park?’

‘There are an estimated fifty-two thousand elephant in Zimbabwe, and our figures for Chiwewe are even more accurate. Only three months ago, we were able to conduct an aerial survey of the Park sponsored by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The entire area of the Park was photographed, and the animals counted from the high-resolution prints.’

‘How many?’ Daniel asked.

‘In Chiwewe alone, eighteen thousand elephant.’

‘That’s a huge population, something approaching a third of all the remaining animals in the country – all in this area.’ Daniel raised an eyebrow. ‘In the climate of gloom and pessimism that prevails, this must give you a great deal of encouragement?’

Johnny Nzou frowned. ‘On the contrary, Doctor Armstrong, we are extremely concerned by these numbers.’

‘Can you explain that please, Warden?’

‘It’s simple, Doctor. We cannot support that many elephant. We estimate that thirty thousand elephant would be an ideal population for Zimbabwe. A single beast requires up to a ton of vegetable matter each day, and he will push over trees that have taken many hundreds of years to grow, even trees with trunks four feet in diameter, to obtain that food.’

‘What will happen if you allow that huge herd to flourish and to breed?’

‘Quite simply, in a very short period they will reduce this park to a dust bowl, and when that happens the elephant population will collapse. We will be left with nothing – no trees, no park, no elephant.’

Daniel nodded encouragement. When the film was edited he would cut in at this point a series of shots he had taken some years previously in Kenya’s Amboseli Park. These were haunting vistas of devastation, of bare red earth and dead black trees stripped of bark and leaves holding up their naked branches in agonised supplication to a hard blue African sky, while the desiccated carcasses of the great animals lay like discarded leather bags where famine and poachers had destroyed them.

‘Do you have a solution, Warden?’ Daniel asked softly.

‘A drastic one, I’m afraid.’

‘Will you show us what it is?’

Johnny Nzou shrugged. ‘It is not very pretty to watch, but, yes, you may witness what has to be done.’

Daniel woke twenty minutes before sunrise. Even the intervening years spent in cities out of Africa, and the passage of so many other dawns in northern climes, or in the fluid time zones of jet aircraft travel, had not dulled the habit that he had first acquired in this valley. Of course, the habit had been reinforced during the years of that terrible Rhodesian bush war, when he had been called up to serve in the security forces.

For Daniel the dawn was the most magical time of each day, and especially so in this valley. He rolled out of his sleeping-bag and reached for his boots. He and his men had slept fully clothed on the sun-baked earth, with the embers of the campfire in the centre of the huddle of their prostrate forms. They had not built a *boma* of thorn branches to protect themselves, although at intervals during the night lions had grunted and roared along the escarpment.

Daniel laced up his boots and slipped quietly out of the circle of sleeping men. The dew that hung like seed pearls upon the grass stems soaked his trouser legs to the knees as he moved out to the promontory of rock at the head of the cliff. He found a seat on the rough grey granite knoll and huddled into his anorak.

The dawn came on with stealthy and deceptive speed and painted the clouds above the great river in subtle talcum shades of pink and grey. Over the Zambezi's dark green waters the river mist undulated and pulsed like ghostly ectoplasm and the dawn flights of duck were very dark and crisp against the pale background, their formations precise and their wing-beats flickering quick as knife-blades in the uncertain light.

A lion roared, near at hand, abrupt gales of sound that died away in a descending series of moaning grunts. Daniel shivered with the thrill of that sound. Though he had heard it countless times, it always had the same effect upon him. There was no other like it in all the world. For him it was the veritable voice of Africa.

Then he picked out the great cat shape below him at the edge of the swamp. Full-bellied, dark-maned, it carried its massive head low and swung it from side to side to the rhythm of its stately arrogant walk. Its mouth was half open and its fangs glinted behind thin black lips. He watched it vanish into the dense riverine bush and sighed with the pleasure it had given him.

There was a small sound close behind him. As he started up, Johnny Nzou touched his shoulder to restrain him and settled down on the granite slab beside him.

Johnny lit a cigarette. Daniel had never been able to talk him out of the habit. They sat in companionable silence as they had so often before and watched the dawn come on more swiftly now, until that religious moment when the sun thrust its burning rim above the dark mass of the forest. The light changed and all their world was bright and glazed as a precious ceramic creation fresh from the firing oven.

'The trackers came into camp ten minutes ago. They have found a herd,' Johnny broke the silence, and the mood.

Daniel stirred and glanced at him. 'How many?' he asked.

'About fifty.' That was a good number. They would not be able to process more, for flesh and hide putrefy swiftly in the heat of the valley, and a lower number would not justify all this use of men and expensive equipment.

'Are you sure you want to film this?' Johnny asked.

Daniel nodded. 'I have considered it carefully. To attempt to conceal it would be dishonest.'

'People eat meat and wear leather, but they don't want to see inside the abattoir,' Johnny pointed out.

'This is a complex and emotional subject we are examining. People have a right to know.'

'In anyone else I would suspect journalistic sensationalism,' Johnny murmured, and Daniel frowned.

'You are probably the only person I would allow to say that – because you know better.'

'Yes, Danny, I know better,' Johnny agreed. 'You hate this as much as I do, and yet you first taught me the necessity of it.'

'Let's go to work,' Daniel suggested gruffly, and they stood up and walked back in silence to where the trucks were parked. The camp was astir, and coffee was brewing on the open fire. The rangers were

rolling their blankets and sleeping-bags and checking their rifles.

There were four of them, two black lads and two white, all of them in their twenties. They wore the plain khaki uniform of the Parks Department with green shoulder flashes, and though they handled their weapons with the casual competence of veterans they kept up a cheerful high-spirited banter. Black and white treated each other as comrades, although they were just old enough to have fought in the bush war and had probably been on opposing sides. It always amazed Daniel that so little bitterness remained.

Jock, the cameraman, was already filming. It often seemed to Daniel that the Sony camera was a natural excrescence of his body, like a hunchback.

'I'm going to ask you some dumb questions for the camera, and I might needle you a little,' Daniel warned Johnny. 'We both know the answers to the questions, but we have to fake it, okay?'

'Go ahead.'

Johnny looked good on film. Daniel had studied the rushes the previous night. One of the joys of working with modern video equipment was the instant replay of footage. Johnny resembled the younger Cassius Clay before he became Mohammed Ali. However, he was leaner in the face and his bone structure finer and more photogenic. His expression was mobile and expressive and the tones of his skin were not so dark as to make too severe a contrast and render photography difficult.

They huddled over the smoky campfire and Jock brought the camera in close to them.

'We are camped here on the banks of the Zambezi River with the sun just rising, and not far out there in the bush your trackers have come across a herd of fifty elephant, Warden,' Daniel told Johnny, and he nodded. 'You have explained to me that the Chiweve Park cannot support such numbers of these huge animals, and that this year alone at least a thousand of them must be removed from the Park, not only for the good of the ecology, but for the very survival of the remaining elephant herds. How do you intend removing them?'

'We will have to cull them,' Johnny said curtly.

'Cull them?' Daniel asked. 'That means kill, doesn't it?'

'Yes. My rangers and I will shoot them.'

'All of them, Warden? You are going to kill fifty elephant today?'

'We will cull the entire herd.'

'What about the young calves and the pregnant cows? Won't you spare a single animal?'

'They all have to go,' Johnny insisted.

'But why, Warden? Couldn't you catch them, dart and drug them, and send them elsewhere?'

'The costs of transporting an animal the size of an elephant are staggering. A big bull weighs six tons, an average cow around four. Look at this terrain down here in the valley.' Johnny gestured towards the mountainous heights of the escarpment and the broken rocky kopjes and wild forest. 'We would require special trucks and we would have to build roads to get them in and out. Even if that were possible, where would we take them? I have told you that we have a surplus of almost twenty thousand elephant in Zimbabwe. Where would we take these elephant? There simply isn't space for them.'

'So, Warden, unlike the other countries to the north such as Kenya and Zambia who have allowed their elephant herds to be almost wiped out by poaching and unwise conservation policy, you are in a Catch 22 situation. Your management of your herds of elephant has been too good. Now you have to destroy and waste these marvellous animals.'

'No, Doctor Armstrong, we won't waste them. We will recover a great deal of value from their carcasses, ivory and hides and meat which will be sold. The proceeds will be ploughed back into conservation, to prevent poaching and to protect our National Parks. The death of these animals will not be a complete abomination.'

‘But why do you have to kill the mothers and the babies?’ Daniel insisted.

‘You are cheating, Doctor,’ Johnny warned him. ‘You are using the emotive, slanted language of the animal rights groups, “mothers and babies”. Let’s rather call them cows and calves, and admit that a cow eats as much and takes up as much space as a bull, and that calves grow very swiftly into adults.’

‘So you feel—’ Daniel started, but despite his earlier warning, Johnny was becoming angry.

‘Hold on,’ he snapped. ‘There’s more to it than that. We have to take out the entire herd. It is absolutely essential that we leave no survivors. The elephant herd is a complex family group. Nearly all its members are blood relatives, and there is a highly developed social structure within the herd. The elephant is an intelligent animal, probably the most intelligent after the primates, certainly more intelligent than a cat or dog, or even a dolphin. They know – I mean, they really understand . . .’ he broke off, and cleared his throat. His feelings had overcome him, and Daniel had never liked nor admired him more than he did at that moment.

‘The terrible truth is,’ Johnny’s voice was husky as he went on, ‘that if we allowed any of them to escape the cull, they would communicate their terror and panic to the other herds in the Park. There would be a swift breakdown in the elephants’ social behaviour.’

‘Isn’t that a little far-fetched, Warden?’ Daniel asked softly.

‘No. It has happened before. After the war there were ten thousand surplus elephant in the Wankie National Park. At that time, we knew very little about the techniques or effects of massive culling operations. We soon learned. Those first clumsy efforts of ours almost destroyed the entire social structure of the herds. By shooting the older animals, we wiped out their reservoir of experience and transferable wisdom. We disrupted their migratory patterns, the hierarchy and discipline within the herds, even their breeding habits. Almost as though they understood that the holocaust was upon them, the bulls began to cover the barely mature young cows before they were ready. Like the human female, the elephant cow is ripe for breeding at fifteen or sixteen years of age at the very earliest. Under the terrible stress of the culling the bulls in Wankie went to the cows when they were only ten or eleven years of age, still in puberty, and the calves born of these unions were stunted little runts.’ Johnny shook his head. ‘No, we have to take out the whole herd at one stroke.’

Almost with relief, he looked up at the sky. They both picked up the distant insect drone of an aircraft engine beyond the towering cumulus clouds.

‘Here comes the spotter plane,’ he said quietly, and reached for the microphone of the radio.

‘Good morning, Sierra Mike. We have you visual due south of our position approximately four miles. I will give you yellow smoke.’

Johnny nodded at one of his rangers, who pulled the tab on a smoke marker. Sulphur-yellow smoke drifted in a heavy cloud across the treetops.

‘Roger, Parks. I have your smoke. Give me an indication on the target, please.’

Johnny frowned at the word ‘target’ and laid emphasis on the alternative word as he replied. ‘At sunset yesterday evening the *herd* was moving north towards the river five miles southeast of this position. There are fifty-plus animals.’

‘Thank you, Parks. I will call again when we locate them.’

They watched the aircraft bank away eastwards. It was an ancient single-engined Cessna that had probably served on fire-force duties as a K-Car, or killer car, during the bush war.

Fifteen minutes later the radio crackled to life again.

‘Hello, Parks. I have your herd. Fifty-plus and eight miles from your present position.’

The herd was spread out down both banks of a dry river-course that was gouged through a low line of

flinty hills. The forest was greener and more luxuriant here in the drainage where the deep roots had found subterranean water. The acacia trees were in heavy pod. The pods looked like long brown biscuits, clustered at the tips of the branches sixty feet above ground level.

Two cows moved in on one of the heavily laden trees. They were the herd matriarchs, both of them over seventy years of age, gaunt old dowagers with tattered ears and rheumy eyes. The bond between them was over half a century strong. They were half-sisters, successive calves of the same mother. The elder had been weaned at the birth of her sibling and had helped to nursemaid her as tenderly as would a human elder sister. They had shared a long life, and had drawn from it a wealth of experience and wisdom to add to the deep ancestral instinct with which they had both been endowed at birth.

They had seen each other through drought and famine and sickness. They had shared the joy of good rains and abundant food. They knew all the secret hideaways in the mountains and the water-holes in the desert places. They knew where the hunters lurked, and the boundaries of the sanctuaries within which they and the herd were secure. They had played midwife to each other, leaving the herd together when the time was come upon one of them, and by their presence had fortified each other in the tearing agony of birth. They had stripped the foetal sac from each other's newborn calves, and helped discipline them, instruct them and rear them to maturity.

Their own breeding days were long past, but the herd and its safety were still their duty and their main concern. Their pleasure and their responsibility were the younger cows and the new calves that carried their own blood-lines.

Perhaps it was fanciful to endow brute animals with such human emotions as love and respect, or to believe that they understand blood relationships or the continuity of their line, but no one who had seen the old cows quieten the boisterous youngsters with raised ears and a sharp angry squeal, or watched the herd follow their lead with unquestioning obedience, could doubt their authority. No one who had seen them caress the younger calves with a gentle trunk or lift them over the steep and difficult places on the elephant roads could question their concern. When danger threatened they would push the young ones behind them and rush forward to the defence with ears spread wide and trunks rolled ready to fling out and strike down an enemy.

The great bulls with towering frames and massive girth might overshadow them in size, but not in cunning and ferocity. The bulls' tusks were longer and thicker, sometimes weighing well over one hundred pounds. The two old cows had spindly misshapen ivory, worn and cracked and discoloured with age, and the bones showed through the scarred grey skin, but they were constant in their duty to the herd.

The bulls kept only a loose association with the breeding herd. As they grew older they often preferred to break away and form smaller bachelor groups of two or three males, visiting the cows only when the heady scent of oestrus drew them in. However, the old cows stayed with the herd. They formed the solid foundation on which the social structure of the herd was based. The tight-knit community of breeding cows and their calves relied heavily upon their wisdom and experience for its everyday needs and survival.

Now the two sisters moved in perfect accord to the giant acacia laden with seed pods, and each took up her position on either side of the trunk. They laid their foreheads against the rough bark. The trunk was over four feet in diameter, unyielding as a column of marble. A hundred feet above the ground the high branches formed an intricate tracery and the pods and green leaves a cathedral dome against the sky.

The two old cows began to rock back and forth in unison with the tree-trunk between their foreheads. At first the acacia was rigid, resisting even their great strength. The cows worked on doggedly, pushing and heaving, first one then the other throwing her weight in opposite directions, and a tiny shudder ran up the tree and, high above them, the top branches trembled as though a breeze had

passed.

Still they worked rhythmically and the trunk began to move. A single ripe pod came loose from its twig and fell a hundred feet to crack against the skull of one of the cows. She closed her watery old eyes tightly but never broke the rhythm of her heaves. Between them the tree-trunk swayed and shuddered, ponderously at first and then more briskly. Another pod and then another plopped down as heavily as the first drops of a thunderstorm.

The younger animals of the herd realised what they were up to, flapped their ears with excitement and hurried forward. The acacia pods, rich in protein, were a favourite delicacy. They crowded gleefully around the two cows, snatching up the scattering of pods as they fell and stuffing them far down their throats with their trunks. By now the great tree was whipping back and forth, its branches waving wildly and its foliage thrashing. The pods and loose twigs showered down thick as hail, rattling and bouncing from the backs of the elephants crowded beneath.

The two cows, still braced like a pair of book ends, kept doggedly at it until the shower of falling pods began to dry up. Only when the last one was shaken from the branches did they step back from the tree-trunk. Their backs were sprinkled with dead leaves and twigs, bits of dry bark and velvety pods, and they stood ankle-deep in the fallen débris. They reached down and delicately picked out the golden pods with the dextrous fleshy tips of their trunks and curled them up into their gaping mouths their triangular bottom lips drooping open. The ooze from their facial glands wetting their cheeks like tears of pleasure, they began to feed.

The herd was pressed closely around them at the feast that they had laid. As their long serpentine trunks swung and curled, and the pods were shovelled into their throats, there was a soft sound that seemed to reverberate through each of their great grey frames. It was a gentle rumbling in many different keys, and the sound was interspersed with tiny creaking gurgling squeaks barely audible to the human ear. It was a strangely contented chorus, in which even the youngest beasts joined. It was a sound that seemed to express joy of life and to confirm the deep bond that linked all the members of the herd.

It was the song of the elephant.

One of the old cows was the first to detect a threat to the herd. She transmitted her concern to them with a sound high above the register of the human ear and the entire herd froze into utter stillness. Even the very young calves responded instantly. The silence after the happy uproar of the feast was eerie, and the buzz of the distant spotter plane was loud in contrast.

The old cows recognised the sound of the Cessna engine. They had heard it many times over the last few years and had come to associate it with the periods of increased human activity, of tension and of unexplained terror that they felt transmitted telepathically through the wilderness from the other groups of elephant in the Park.

They knew that the sound in the air was the prelude to a popping chorus of distant gunfire and to the stench of elephant blood on the currents of heated air along the rim of the escarpment. Often after the sounds of aircraft and gunfire had faded, they had come across wide areas of the forest floor caked with dried blood, and they had smelt the odour of fear and pain and death exuded by members of their own race which still mingled with the reek of blood and of rotting entrails.

One of the old cows backed away and shook her head angrily at the sound in the sky. Her tattered ears flapped loudly against her shoulders, a sound like the mainsail of a tall ship filling with wind. Then she wheeled and led the herd away at a run.

There were two mature bulls with the herd, but at the first threat they peeled away and disappeared into the forest. Instinctively recognising that the herd was vulnerable, they sought safety in solitary flight. The younger cows and the calves bunched up behind the matriarchs and fled, the little ones racing to keep up with the longer stride of their dams; in different circumstances their haste might

have been comical.

~~‘Hello, Parks. The herd is breaking southwards towards the Imbelezi pass.’~~

‘Roger, Sierra Mike. Please head them towards the Mana Pools turn-off.’

The old cow was leading the herd towards the hills. She wanted to get off the valley bottom into the bad ground where pursuit would be impeded by the rock and severe gradients, but the sound of the aircraft hummed across her front, cutting her off from the mouth of the pass.

She pulled up uncertainly and lifted her head to the sky, where tall silvery mountains of cumulus cloud were piled up as high as the heavens. She spread wide her ears, riven and weathered by time and thorn, and turned her ancient head to follow that dreadful sound.

Then she saw the aircraft. The early sunlight flashed from its windshield as it banked steeply across her front, and it dived back towards her, low over the tops of the forest trees, the sound of its engine rising to a roar.

The two old cows spun together and started back towards the river. Behind them the herd wheeled like an untidy mass of cavalry, and as they ran the dust rose in a fine pale cloud even higher than the treetops.

‘Parks, the herd is heading your way now. Five miles from the turn-off.’

‘Thank you, Sierra Mike; keep them coming nice and easy. Don’t push them too hard.’

‘Wilco, Parks.’

‘All K-Units.’ Johnny Nzou changed his call-sign. ‘All K-Units, converge on the Mana Pools turn-off.’

The K-Units, or kill teams, were the four Landrovers that were deployed along the main track that ran down from Chiwewe headquarters on the escarpment to the river. Johnny had put them in as a stop line, to head off the herd if it broke awkwardly. It did not look as though that would be necessary now. The spotter plane was working the herd into position with professional expertise.

‘Looks as though we’ll make it on the first try,’ Johnny muttered as he reversed the Landrover and swung it in a full 180-degree turn, then sent it flying down the track. A ridge of grass grew between the sandy wheel-tracks, and the Landrover rocked and rattled over the bumps. The wind whipped around their heads and Daniel pulled his hat from his head and stuffed it into his pocket.

Jock was filming over his shoulder as a herd of buffalo, disturbed by the sound of the Landrover, came pouring out of the forest and crossed the track just ahead of them.

‘Damn it!’ Johnny hit the brakes and glanced at his wrist-watch. ‘Stupid *nyati* are going to screw us up.’

Hundreds of the dark bovine shapes came in a solid phalanx, galloping heavily, raising white dust, grunting and lowing and splattering liquid green dung on the grass as they flattened it.

Within minutes they had passed and Johnny accelerated into the standing dust-cloud and rattled over the loose earth that the herd had ploughed up with their great cloven hoofs. Around a bend in the track they saw the other vehicles parked at the crossroads. The four rangers were standing in a group beside them, rifles in their hands and faces turned back expectantly.

Johnny skidded the Landrover to a halt and snatched up the microphone of his radio. ‘Sierra Mike, give me a position report, please.’

‘Parks, the herd is two miles from you, just approaching Long Vlei.’

A vlei is a depression of open grassland, and Long Vlei ran for miles parallel to the river. In the rainy season it was a marsh, but now it made an ideal killing ground. They had used it before.

Johnny jumped down from the driver’s seat and lifted his rifle from the rack. He and all his rangers were armed with cheap mass-produced .375 magnums loaded with solid ammunition for maximum penetration of bone and tissue. His men were chosen for this work on account of their superior marksmanship. The kill must be as swift and humane as possible. They would shoot for the brain and

not take the easier but lingering body shot.

'Let's go!' Johnny snapped. ~~There was no need to give instructions. These were tough young professionals, yet even though they had done this work many times before their expressions were sombre. There was no excitement, no anticipation in their eyes. This was not sport. They clearly did not enjoy the prospect of the bloody work ahead.~~

They were stripped down to shorts and velskoen without socks, light running gear. The only heavy items they carried were their cheap weapons and the bandoliers of ammunition strapped around their waists. All of them were lean and muscled, and Johnny Nzou was as hard as any of them. They ran to meet the herd.

Daniel fell into position behind Johnny Nzou. He believed that he had kept himself fit with regular running and training, but he had forgotten what it was like to be hunting and fighting fit as were Johnny and his rangers.

They ran like hounds, streaming through the forest effortlessly, their feet seeming to find their own way between scrub and rock and fallen branches and antbear holes. They barely touched the earth in passing. Daniel had run like that once, but now his boots were slamming down heavily and he stumbled once or twice in the rough footing. He and the camera man began to fall behind.

Johnny Nzou gave a hand signal and his rangers fanned out into a long skirmish line, fifty yards separating each of them. Ahead, the forest gave way abruptly to the open glade of Long Vlei. It was three hundred yards wide; the dry beige-coloured grass was waist-high.

The line of killers stopped at the edge of the forest and looked to Johnny at the centre, but his head was thrown back, watching the spotter plane out there above the forest. It was banking steeply, standing vertically on one wing.

Daniel caught up with him, and found that both he and Jock were panting heavily although they had run less than a mile. He envied Johnny.

'There they are,' Johnny called softly. 'You can see the dust.' It lay in a haze on the treetops between them and the circling aircraft. 'Coming on fast.'

Johnny windmilled his right arm and obediently his skirmish line extended and shifted into a concave shape like the horns of a bull buffalo with Johnny at the centre. At the next signal they trotted forward into the glade.

The light breeze was in their faces; the herd would not scent them. Although originally the herd had instinctively fled into the wind so as not to run into danger, the aircraft had turned them back downwind.

The elephant's eyesight is not sharp; they would make nothing of the line of human figures until it was too late. The trap was set and the elephants were coming straight into it, chivvied and sheep-dogged by the low-flying Cessna.

The two old cows burst out of the tree-line at full run, their bony legs flying, ears cocked back, loose grey folds of skin shuddering and wobbling with each jarring footfall. The rest of the herd were strung out behind them. The youngest calves were tiring, and their mothers pushed them along with their trunks.

The line of executioners froze, standing in a half circle like the mouth of a gill net extended to take in a shoal of fish. The elephants would pick up movement more readily than they would recognise the blurred man-shapes that their weak, panic-stricken eyes disclosed to them.

'Get the two old grannies first,' Johnny called softly. He had recognised the matriarchs and he knew that with them gone the herd would be disorganised and indecisive. His order was passed down the line.

The leading cows pounded down directly towards where Johnny stood. He let them come on. He held the rifle at high port across his chest. At a hundred yards' distance the two dowager elephants

started to turn away from him, angling off to the left, and Johnny moved for the first time.

He lifted his rifle and waved it over his head and shouted in Sindebele, '*Nanzi Inkosikaze* = here I am, respected old lady.'

For the first time the two elephants recognised that he was not a tree-stump but a deadly enemy. Instantly they swung back towards him, and focusing all their ancestral hatred and terror and concern for the herd upon him, they burst together into full charge.

They squealed their fury at him, extending their stride so that the dust spurted from under their colossal footpads. Their ears were rolled back along the top edge, sure sign of their anger. They towered over the group of tiny human figures. Daniel wished vehemently that he had taken the precaution of arming himself. He had forgotten how terrifying this moment was, with the nearest cow only fifty yards away and coming straight in at forty miles an hour.

Jock was still filming, although the angry shrieks of the two cows had been taken up by the entire herd. They came down upon them like an avalanche of grey granite, as though a cliff had been brought rumbling down with high explosive.

At thirty yards Johnny Nzou mounted the rifle to his shoulder and leaned forward to absorb the recoil. There was no telescopic sight mounted above the blue steel barrel. For close work like this he was using open express sights.

Since its introduction in 1912, thousands of sports and professional hunters had proved the .375 Holland & Holland to be the most versatile and effective rifle ever to have been brought to Africa. It had all the virtues of inherent accuracy and moderate recoil, while the 300-grain solid bullet was a ballistic marvel, with flat trajectory and extraordinary penetration.

Johnny aimed at the head of the leading cow, at the crease of the trunk between her myopic old eyes. The report was sharp as the lash of a bull-whip, and an ostrich feather of dust flew from the surface of her weathered grey skin at the precise point upon her skull at which he had aimed.

The bullet sliced through her head as easily as a steel nail driven through a ripe apple. It obliterated the top of her brain, and the cow's front legs folded under her, and Daniel felt the earth jump under his feet as she crashed down in a cloud of dust.

Johnny swung his aim on to the second cow, just as she came level with the carcass of her sister. He reloaded without taking the butt of the rifle from his shoulder, merely flicking the bolt back and forward. The spent brass case was flung high in a glinting parabola and he fired again. The sound of the two rifle shots blended into each other; they were fired so swiftly as to cheat the ear into hearing a single prolonged detonation.

Once again the bullet struck exactly where it had been aimed and the cow died as the other had done, instantaneously. Her legs collapsed and she dropped and lay on her belly with her shoulder touching that of her sister. In the centre of each of their foreheads a misty pink plume of blood erupted from the tiny bullet-holes.

Behind them the herd was thrown into confusion. The bewildered beasts milled and circled, treading the grass flat and raising a curtain of dust that swirled about them, blanketing the scene so their forms looked ethereal and indistinct in the dust-cloud. The calves huddled for shelter beneath their mothers' bellies, their ears flattened against their skulls with terror, and they were battered and kicked and thrown about by the frantic movements of their dams.

The rangers closed in, firing steadily. The sound of gunfire was a long continuous rattle, like hail on a tin roof. They were shooting for the brain. At each shot one of the animals flinched or flung up its head, as the solid bullets cracked on the bone of the skull with the sound of a well-struck golf ball. At each shot one of the animals went down dead or stunned. Those killed cleanly, and they were the majority, collapsed at the back legs first and dropped with the dead weight of a maize sack. When the bullet missed the brain but passed close to it, the elephant reeled and staggered and went down kicking

to roll on its side with a terrible despairing moan and grope helplessly at the sky with lifted trunk.

One of the young calves was trapped and pinned beneath its mother's collapsing carcass, and lay broken-backed and squealing in a mixture of pain and panic. Some of the elephant found themselves hemmed in by a palisade of fallen animals and they reared up and tried to scramble over them. The marksmen shot them down so that they fell upon the bodies of those already dead, while others tried to climb over these and were in their turn shot down.

It was swift. Within minutes all the adult animals were down, lying close together or piled upon each other in bleeding mounds and hillocks. Only the calves were still racing in bewildered circles, stumbling over the bodies of the dead and dying, squealing and tugging at the carcasses of their mothers.

The riflemen walked forward slowly, a tightening ring of gunmetal around the decimated herd. They fired and reloaded and fired again as they closed in. They picked off the calves, and when there remained not a single standing animal, they moved quickly into the herd, scrambling over the gigantic sprawling bodies, pausing only to fire a finishing bullet into each huge bleeding head. Most often there was no response to the second bullet in the brain, but occasionally an elephant not yet dead shuddered and straightened its limbs and blinked its eyes at the shot, then slumped lifelessly.

Within six minutes of Johnny's first shot, a silence fell over the killing ground on Long Vlei. Only their ears still sang to the brutal memory of gunfire. There was no movement; the elephant lay in windrows like wheat behind the blades of the mower, and the dry earth soaked up the blood. The rangers were still standing apart from each other, subdued and awed by the havoc they had wrought, staring with remorse at the mountain of the dead. Fifty elephant, two hundred tons of carnage.

Johnny Nzou broke the tragic spell that held them. He walked slowly to where the two old cows lay at the head of the herd. They lay side by side, shoulders touching, with their legs folded neatly under them, kneeling as though still alive with only the pulsing fountain of life-blood from their foreheads to spoil the illusion.

Johnny set the butt of his rifle on the ground and leaned upon it, studying the two old matriarchs for a long regretful moment. He was unaware that Jock was filming him. His actions and his words were completely unstudied and unrehearsed.

'*Hamba gahle, Amakhulu,*' he whispered. 'Go in peace, old grandmothers. You are together in death as you were in life. Go in peace, and forgive us for what we have done to your tribe.'

He walked away to the edge of the tree-line. Daniel did not follow him. He understood that Johnny wanted to be alone for a while now. The other rangers also avoided each other. There was no banter, nor self-congratulation; two of them wandered amongst the mountainous dead with a strangely disconsolate air; a third squatted where he had fired his last shot, smoking a cigarette and studying the dusty ground between his feet, while the last one had laid aside his rifle and, with hands thrust in his pockets and shoulders hunched, stared at the sky and watched the vultures gather.

At first the carrion birds were tiny specks against the glaring alps of cumulus cloud, like grains of pepper sprinkled on a tablecloth. Then they soared closer overhead, forming circling squadrons, turning on their wide wings in orderly formations, a dark wheel of death high above the killing-ground, and their shadows flitted over the piled carcasses in the centre of Long Vlei.

Forty minutes later Daniel heard the rumble of the approaching trucks, and saw them coming slowly through the forest. A squad of half-naked axemen ran ahead of the convoy, cutting out the brush and making a rough track for them to follow. Johnny stood up with obvious relief from where he had been sitting alone at the edge of the trees, and came to take charge of the butchering.

The piles of dead elephant were pulled apart with winches and chains. Then the wrinkled grey skin was sliced through down the length of the belly and the spine. Again the electric winches were brought into play and the skin was flensed off the carcass with a crackling sound as the subcutaneous tissue

released its grip. It came off in long slabs, grey and corrugated on the outside, gleaming white on the inside. The men laid each strip on the dusty earth and heaped coarse salt upon it.

The naked carcasses looked strangely obscene in the bright sunlight, wet and marbled with white fat and exposed scarlet muscle, the swollen bellies bulging as though to invite the stroke of the flensing knives.

A skinner slipped the curved point of the knife into the belly of one of the old cows at the point where it met the sternum. Carefully controlling the depth of the cut so as not to puncture the entrails, he walked the length of the body drawing the blade like a zipper down the belly pouch so that it gaped open and the stomach sac bulged out, glistening like the silk of a parachute. Then the colossal coils of the intestines slithered after it. These seemed to have a separate life. Like the body of an awakening python, they twisted and unfolded under the impetus of their own slippery weight.

The chainsaw men set to work. The intrusive clatter of the two-stroke engines seemed almost sacrilegious in this place of death, and the exhausts blew snorting blue smoke into the bright air. They lopped the limbs off each carcass, and a fine mush of flesh and bone chips flew in a spray from the teeth of the spinning steel chains. Then they buzzed through the spine and ribs, and the carcasses fell into separate parts that were winched into the waiting refrigerator trucks.

A special gang went from carcass to carcass with long boat-hooks, poking in the soft wet mounds of spilled entrails to drag out the wombs of the females. Daniel watched as they split open one of the engorged wombs, dark purple with its covering of enlarged blood vessels. From the foetal sac, in a flood of amniotic fluid the foetus, the size of a large dog, slid out and lay in the trampled grass.

It was only a few weeks from term, a perfect little elephant covered with a coat of reddish hair that it would have lost soon after birth. It was still alive, moving its trunk feebly.

‘Kill it,’ Daniel ordered harshly in Sindebele. It was improbable that it could feel pain, but he turned away in relief as one of the men struck off the tiny head with a single blow of his panga. Daniel felt nauseated, but he knew that nothing from the cull should be wasted. The skin of the unborn elephant would be fine-grained and valuable, worth a few hundred dollars for a handbag or a briefcase.

To distract himself he walked away across the killing-ground. All that remained now were the heads of the great animals and the glistening piles of their entrails. From the guts nothing of value could be salvaged and they would be left for the vultures and hyena and jackal.

The ivory tusks, still embedded in their castles of bone, were the most precious part of the cull. The poachers and the ivory-hunters of old would not risk damaging them with a careless axe-stroke, and customarily would leave the ivory in the skull until the cartilaginous sheath that held it secure rotted and softened and released its grip. Within four or five days the tusks could usually be drawn by hand, perfect and unmarked. However, there was no time to waste on this procedure. The tusks must be cut out by hand.

The skinners who did this were the most experienced men, usually older, with grey woolly heads and bloodstained loincloths. They squatted beside the heads and tapped patiently with their native axes.

While they were engaged in this painstaking work Daniel stood with Johnny Nzou. Jock held the Sony VTR on them as Daniel commented, ‘Gory work.’

‘But necessary,’ Johnny agreed shortly. ‘On an average each adult elephant will yield about three thousand dollars in ivory, skin and meat.’

‘To many people that will sound pretty commercial, especially as they have just witnessed the harsh reality of the cull.’ Daniel shook his head. ‘You must know that there is a very strong campaign, led by the animal rights groups, to have the elephant placed on Appendix One of CITES, that is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘If that happens it would prohibit the trade in any elephant products, skin, ivory or meat. What do you think of that, Warden?’

‘It makes me very angry.’ Johnny dropped his cigarette and ground it under his heel. His expression was savage.

‘It would prevent any further culling operations, wouldn’t it?’ Daniel persisted.

‘Not at all,’ Johnny contradicted him. ‘We would still be forced to control the size of the herds. We would still be forced to cull. The only difference would be that we could not sell the elephant products. They would be wasted, a tragic criminal waste. We would lose millions of dollars of revenue which at present is being used to protect and enlarge and service the wildlife sanctuaries . . .’ Johnny broke off and watched as a tusk was lifted out of the channel in the spongy bone of the skull by two of the skinners and laid carefully on the dry brown grass. Skilfully one of them drew the nerve, a soft grey gelatinous core, from the hollow end of the tusk. Then Johnny went on, ‘That tusk makes it easy for us to justify the continued existence of the Parks and the animals they contain to the local tribespeople living in close contact with wild animals on and near the boundaries of the national wilderness areas.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Daniel encouraged him. ‘Do you mean the local tribes resent the Parks and the animal population?’

‘Not if they can derive some personal benefit from them. If we can prove to them that a cow elephant is worth three thousand dollars and that a foreign safari hunter will spend fifty or even a hundred thousand dollars to hunt a trophy bull, if we can show them that a single elephant is worth a hundred, even a thousand of their goats or scrawny cattle and that they will see some of that money coming to them and their tribe, then they will see the point of conserving the herds.’

‘You mean the local peasants do not place a value on wildlife simply for its own sake.’

Johnny laughed bitterly. ‘That’s a First World luxury and affectation. The tribes here live very close to subsistence level. We are talking about an average family income of a hundred and twenty dollars a year, ten dollars a month. They cannot afford to set aside land and grazing for a beautiful but useless animal to live on. If the wild game is to survive in Africa it has to pay for its supper. There are no free rides in this harsh land.’

‘One would think that living so close to nature they would have an instinctive feeling for it,’ Daniel persisted.

‘Yes, of course, but it is totally pragmatic. For millennia primitive man, living with nature, has treated it as a renewable resource. As the Eskimo lived on the caribou and seal and whale, or the American Indian on buffalo herds, they understood instinctively the type of management that we have never achieved. They were in balance with nature, until the white man came with explosive harpoon and Sharpe’s rifle, or, here in Africa, came with his elite game department and game laws that made a crime for the black tribesman to hunt on his own land, that reserved the wildlife of Africa for a select few to stare at and exclaim over.’

‘You are being a racist,’ Daniel chided him gently. ‘The old colonial system preserved the wild game.’

‘So how did it survive for a million years before the white man arrived in Africa? No, the colonial system of game management was protectionist, not conservationist.’

‘Aren’t they the same thing, protection and conservation?’

‘They are diametrically opposed. The protectionist denies man’s right to exploit and harvest nature’s bounty. He would deny that man has a right to kill a living animal, even if that threatens the survival of the species as a whole. If he were here today, the protectionist would prohibit us from this cull, and he would not want to look to the final consequence of that prohibition which, as we have seen, would be the eventual extinction of the entire elephant population and the destruction of this

forest.

‘However, the most damaging mistake that the old colonial protectionists made was to alienate the black tribesman from the benefits of controlled conservation. They denied him his share of the spoils and built up in him a resentment towards the wild game. They broke down his natural instinct for management of his resources. They took away his control of nature and placed him in competition with the animals. The end result is that the average black peasant is hostile towards the game. The elephants raid his gardens and destroy the trees he uses for firewood. The buffalo and antelope eat the grass on which he feeds his cattle. The crocodile ate his grandmother, and the lion killed his father . . . Of course, he has come to resent the game herds.’

‘The solution, Warden? Is there one?’

‘Since independence from the colonial system we have been trying to change the attitude of our people,’ Johnny told him. ‘At first they demanded that they be allowed to enter the National Parks that the white man had proclaimed. They wanted to be allowed to go in and cut the trees and feed their cattle and build their villages. However, we have had a great deal of success in educating them to the value of tourism and safari-hunting and controlled culling. For the first time they are being allowed to participate in the profits, and there is a new understanding of conservation and sensible exploitation, especially amongst the younger generation. However, if the protectionist do-gooders of Europe and America were to force a ban on safari-hunting or the sale of ivory, it would set back all our efforts. It would probably be the death knell of the African elephant and eventually the end of all the game.’

‘So in the end it is all a matter of economics?’ Daniel asked.

‘Like everything else in this world, it is a matter of money,’ Johnny agreed. ‘If you give us enough money we will stop the poachers. If you make it worth their while, we will keep the peasants and their goats out of the Parks. However, the money must come from somewhere. The newly independent states of Africa with their exploding human populations cannot afford the First World luxury of locking away their natural assets. They must exploit them and conserve them. If you prevent us doing that, then you will be guilty of contributing to the extinction of African wildlife.’ Johnny nodded grimly. ‘Yes, it’s a matter of economics. If the game can pay, then the game can stay.’

It was perfect, Daniel signalled Jock to stop filming and clasped Johnny’s shoulder.

‘I could make a star out of you. You’re a natural.’ He was only half joking. ‘How about it, Johnny? You could do a hell of a lot more for Africa on the screen than you can here.’

‘You want me to live in hotels and jet aircraft instead of sleeping under the stars?’ Johnny feigned indignation. ‘You want me to build up a nice little roll around my belly.’ He prodded Daniel’s midriff. ‘And puff and pant when I run a hundred yards? No thank you, Danny. I’ll stay here where I can drink Zambezi water, not Coca-Cola, and eat buffalo steaks, not Big Macs.’

They loaded the last rolls of salted elephant-hide and immature calf tusks by the glare of truck headlights, and climbed back up the rough winding road to the rim of the escarpment and the headquarters of the Park at Chiwewe in the dark.

Johnny drove the green Landrover at the head of the slow convoy of refrigerator trucks and Daniel sat beside him on the front seat. They talked in the soft desultory manner of old friends in perfect accord.

‘Suicide weather,’ Daniel wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his bush shirt. Even though it was almost midnight, the heat and the humidity were enervating. ‘Rains will break soon.’

‘Good thing you’re getting out of the valley,’ Johnny grunted. ‘That road turns into a swamp in the rain and most of the rivers are impassable.’

The tourist camp at Chiwewe had been closed a week previously in anticipation of the onslaught of the rainy season.

‘I don’t look forward to leaving,’ Daniel admitted. ‘It’s been like old times again.’

‘Old times,’ Johnny nodded. ‘We had some fun. When are you coming back to Chiwewe?’

‘I don’t know, Johnny, but my offer is genuine. Come with me. We made a good team once; we would be good again. I know it.’

‘Thanks, Danny.’ Johnny shook his head. ‘But I’ve got work to do here.’

‘I won’t give up,’ Daniel warned him, and Johnny grinned.

‘I know. You never do.’

In the morning, when Daniel climbed the small kopje behind the headquarters camp to watch the sunrise, the sky was filled with dark and mountainous cloud and the heat was still oppressive.

Daniel’s mood matched that sombre dawn, for although he had captured some wonderful material during his stay, he had also rediscovered his friendship and affection for Johnny Nzou. The knowledge that it might be many years before they met again saddened him.

Johnny had invited him to breakfast on this, his last day. He was waiting for Daniel on the wide mosquito-screened verandah of the thatched bungalow that had once been Daniel’s own home.

Daniel paused below the verandah and glanced around the garden. It was still the way that Vicky had planned it and originally laid it out. Vicky had been the twenty-year-old bride that Daniel had brought to Chiwewe all those years ago, a slim cheerful lass with long blonde hair and smiling green eyes, only a few years younger than Daniel at the time.

She had died in the front bedroom overlooking the garden that she had cherished. An ordinary bout of malaria had turned without warning to the pernicious cerebral strain. It had been all over very swiftly, even before the flying doctor could reach the Park.

The eerie sequel to her death was that the elephants, who had never entered the fenced garden before, despite its laden citrus trees and rich vegetable plot, came that very night. They came at the exact hour of Vicky’s death and completely laid waste the garden. They even ripped out the ornamental shrubs and rose bushes. Elephants seem to have a psychic sensitivity to death. It was almost as if they had sensed her passing, and Daniel’s grief.

Daniel had never married again and had left Chiwewe not long after. The memories of Vicky were too painful to allow him to remain. Now Johnny Nzou lived in the bungalow and his pretty Matabele wife Mavis tended Vicky’s garden. If Daniel had been able to choose, he would have had it no other way.

This morning Mavis had prepared a traditional Matabele breakfast of maize porridge and sour milk thickened in a calabash gourd, the beloved *amasi* of the Nguni pastoral tribes. Afterwards, Johnny and Daniel walked down towards the ivory godown together. Halfway down the hill Daniel checked and shaded his eyes as he stared towards the visitors’ camp. This was the game-fenced area on the river bank where the thatched cottages with circular walls stood under the wild fig trees. These structures, peculiar to southern Africa, were known as rondavels.

‘I thought you told me that the Park was closed to visitors,’ Daniel said. ‘One of the rondavels is still occupied, and there’s a car parked outside it.’

‘That’s a special guest, a diplomat, the Ambassador of the Taiwanese Republic of China to Harare,’ Johnny explained. ‘He is extremely interested in wildlife, particularly elephants, and has contributed a great deal to conservation in this country. We allow him special privileges. He wanted to be here without other tourists, so I kept the camp open for him—’ Johnny broke off, then exclaimed, ‘There he is now!’

Three men stood in a group at the foot of the hill. It was still too far to make out their features. As they started towards them, Daniel asked, ‘What happened to the two white rangers who helped with

the cull yesterday?’

~~‘They were on loan from Wankie National Park. They left to go home early this morning.’~~

Closer to the group of three men Daniel made out the Taiwanese ambassador.

He was younger than he would have expected a man of such rank to be. Although it was often difficult for a Westerner to judge the age of an oriental, Daniel put him at a little over forty. He was tall and lean with straight black hair that was oiled and combed back from a high intelligent forehead. He was good-looking with a clear, almost waxen, complexion. There was something about his features that suggested that his ancestry was not pure Chinese, but mixed with European blood. Though his eyes were liquid jet-black in colour, their shape was rounded and his upper eyelids lacked the characteristic fold of skin at the inner corner.

‘Good morning, Your Excellency,’ Johnny greeted him with obvious respect. ‘Warm enough for you?’

‘Good morning, Warden.’ The ambassador left the two black rangers and came to meet them. ‘I prefer it to the cold.’ He was wearing an open-necked short-sleeved blue shirt and slacks, and indeed looked cool and elegant.

‘May I present Doctor Daniel Armstrong?’ Johnny asked. ‘Daniel, His Excellency the Ambassador of Taiwan, Ning Cheng Gong.’

‘No introduction is necessary, Doctor Armstrong is a famous man.’ Cheng smiled charmingly as he took Daniel’s hand. ‘I have read your books and watched your television programmes with the greatest of interest and pleasure.’ His English was excellent, as though he were born to the language, and Daniel warmed to him.

‘Johnny tells me that you are very concerned about the African ecology, and that you have made a great contribution to conservation in this country.’

Cheng made a deprecatory gesture. ‘I only wish I could do more.’ But he was staring at Daniel thoughtfully. ‘Forgive me, Doctor Armstrong, but I did not expect to find other visitors at Chiwewe at this time of year. I was assured that the Park was closed.’

Although his tone was friendly, Daniel sensed that the question was not an idle one.

‘Don’t worry, Your Excellency. My camera man and I are leaving this afternoon. You will soon have the whole of Chiwewe to yourself,’ Daniel assured him.

‘Oh, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not so selfish as to wish you gone. In fact, I am sorry to hear you are leaving so soon. I am sure we would have had a great deal to discuss.’ Despite the denial Daniel sensed that Cheng was relieved that he was leaving. His expression was still warm and his manner friendly, but Daniel was becoming aware of depths and layers below the urbane exterior.

The ambassador fell in between them, as they walked down to the ivory warehouse, and chatted in a relaxed manner, and then stood aside to watch as the rangers and a team of porters began to unload the newly culled ivory from the truck parked at the door to the warehouse. By this time Jock was there with his Sony camera filming the work from every angle.

As each tusk was brought out, still crusted with freshly congealed blood, it was weighed on the old-fashioned platform scale that stood at the entrance to the warehouse. Johnny Nzou sat at a rickety deal table and recorded the weight of each tusk in a thick leather-bound ledger. He then allocated a registration number to it and one of his rangers stamped that number into the ivory with a set of steel dies. Registered and stamped, the tusk was now legal ivory and could be auctioned and exported from the country.

Cheng watched the procedure with a lively interest. One pair of tusks, although not heavy or massive, was of particular beauty. They were delicately proportioned shafts with fine grain and elegant curves, an identical and perfectly matched pair.

Cheng stepped forward and squatted beside them as they lay on the scale. He stroked them with a

lover's sensual touch. 'Perfect,' he purred. 'A natural work of art.' He broke off as he noticed Daniel watching him.

Daniel had been vaguely repelled by this display of cupidity, and it showed on his face.

Cheng stood up and explained smoothly. 'I have always been fascinated by ivory. As you probably know, we Chinese consider it to be a highly propitious substance. Few Chinese households are without any ivory carving; it brings good luck to its owner. However, my family interest goes even deeper than common superstition. My father began his working life as an ivory-carver, and so great was his skill that by the time I was born he owned shops in Taipei and Bangkok, Tokyo and Hong Kong, all of them specialising in ivory artefacts. Some of my earliest memories are of the look and feel of ivory. As a boy, I worked as an apprentice ivory-carver in the store in Taipei, and I came to love and understand ivory as my father does. He has one of the most extensive and valuable collections . . .' he stopped himself. 'Forgive me, please. I sometimes get carried away by my passion, but that is a particularly beautiful set of tusks. It is very rare to find a pair so perfectly matched. My father would be ecstatic over them.'

He watched longingly as the tusks were carried away and packed with the hundreds of others in the warehouse.

'Interesting character,' Daniel remarked, after the last tusk had been registered and locked away, and he and Johnny were making their way up the hill to the bungalow for lunch. 'But how does the son of an ivory-carver get to be an ambassador?'

Johnny chuckled. 'Ning Cheng Gong's father may have come from a humble background, but he didn't remain there. I understand he still has his ivory shops and his collection, but those are merely his hobbies now. He is reputed to be one of the richest men, if not *the* richest man, in Taiwan – and that, as you can imagine, is very rich indeed. From what I hear he has his fingers in all the juiciest pie around the Pacific rim as well as some in Africa. He has a large family of sons and Cheng is the youngest and, they say, the brightest. I like him, don't you?'

'Yes, he seems pleasant enough, but there is just something a little odd. Did you notice his face as he fondled that tusk? It was,' Daniel searched for the word, 'unnatural?'

'You writers!' Johnny shook his head ruefully. 'If you can't find something sensational, you make it up.' And they both laughed.

Ning Cheng Gong stood with one of the black rangers at the foot of the hill and watched Daniel and Johnny disappear amongst the msasa trees.

'I do not like the white man being here,' said Gomo. Under Johnny Nzou, he was Chiwewe's senior ranger. 'Perhaps we should wait until another time.'

'The white man leaves this afternoon,' Cheng told him coldly. 'Besides which you have been well paid. Plans have been made that cannot be altered now. The others are already on their way and cannot be sent back.'

'You have only paid us half of what we agreed,' Gomo protested.

'The other half when your work is done, not before,' Cheng said softly, and Gomo's eyes were like the eyes of a snake. 'You know what you have to do,' Cheng went on.

Gomo was silent for a moment. The foreigner had indeed paid him a thousand US dollars, the equivalent of six months' salary, with the promise of another year's salary to follow after the job was done.

'You will do it?' Cheng insisted.

'Yes,' Gomo agreed. 'I will do it.'

Cheng nodded. 'It will be tonight or tomorrow night, not later. Be ready, both of you.'

'We will be ready,' Gomo promised, and climbed into his Landrover, where the second black ranger waited, and they drove away.

Cheng walked back to his rondavel in the deserted visitors' camp. The cottage was identical to the other thirty which during the dry cool season usually housed a full complement of tourists. He fetched a cool drink from the refrigerator and sat on the screen porch to wait out the hottest hours of the noonday.

He felt nervous and restless. Deep down he shared Gomo's misgivings about the project. Although they had considered every possible eventuality and planned for each of them, there was always the unforeseeable, the unpredictable, such as the presence of Armstrong.

It was the first time he had attempted a *coup* of this magnitude. It was his own initiative. Of course his father knew about and thoroughly approved of the other lesser shipments, but the risk was far greater this time, in proportion to the rewards. If he succeeded he would earn his father's respect, and that was more important to him even than the material profits. He was the youngest son, and he had to strive that much harder to win his place in his father's affections. For that reason alone he must not fail.

In the years that he had been at the embassy in Harare, he had consolidated his place in the illicit ivory and rhino-horn trade. It had begun with a deceptively casual remark at a dinner-party by a middle-ranking government official about the convenience of diplomatic privilege and access to the diplomatic courier service. With the business training that his father had given him, Cheng recognised the approach immediately for what it was, and made a noncommittal but encouraging response.

A week of delicate negotiations followed and then Cheng was invited to play golf with another higher official. His driver parked the ambassadorial Mercedes in the car park at the rear of the Harare golf club and as instructed left it unattended while Cheng was out on the course. Cheng was officially a ten-handicap golfer but could play well below that when he chose. On this occasion he allowed his opponent to win three thousand US dollars and paid him in cash in front of witnesses in the club house. When he returned to his official residence he ordered the driver to park the Mercedes in the garage and then dismissed him. In the boot he found six large rhino horns packed in layers of hessian cloth.

He sent these out in the next diplomatic pouch to Taipei and they were sold through his father's shop in Hong Kong for sixty thousand US dollars. His father was delighted with the transaction and wrote Cheng a long letter of approbation and reminded his son of his deep interest in, and love of, ivory.

Cheng let it be known discreetly that he was a connoisseur of ivory as well as of rhino horn, and he was offered at bargain prices various pieces of unregistered and unstamped ivory. It did not take long for the word to spread in the small closed world of the poachers that there was a new buyer in the field.

Within months he was approached by a Sikh businessman from Malawi who was ostensibly looking for Taiwanese investment in a fishing venture that he was promoting on Lake Malawi. Their first meeting went very well. Cheng found that Chetti Singh's figures added up attractively, and passed them on to his father in Taipei. His father approved the estimates and agreed a joint venture with Chetti Singh. When the documents were signed at the embassy, Cheng invited him to dinner, and during the meal Chetti Singh remarked, 'I understand that your illustrious father is loving very much the beautiful ivory. As a token of my utmost esteem I could be arranging for a regular supply. I am sure that you would be forwarding the goods to your father without too much scarlet tape. Most miserably the ivory will be unstamped, never mind.'

'I have a deep distaste for red tape,' Cheng assured him.

Within a short time it became obvious to Cheng that Chetti Singh was head of a network that operated in all those African countries that still had healthy populations of elephant and rhino. From Botswana and Angola, Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique, he gathered in the white gold and the horn

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