

One Last Dream

Obuya was always disappointed to see a stranger through his scope. It meant he had met another person who would sully his opinion of the world.

After he would step over their bodies, searching through their things, he always found notes of money and jangling change. Shotguns or rifles they could sell, clothes on their back they could swap for food in their stomach. But here they were, hunting after Nasima, the only northern white rhino still walking the earth.

It seemed as though every day Obuya had to defend Nasima from a new poacher eager for her horn. Aren't we all siblings? He thought. Doesn't hurting her hurt you?

Riches talk, though, riches whisper false promises into the poor man's ear. Imagine a world in which you'd never be hungry, the riches whisper. Imagine a world in which you could have whatever you want.

Obuya had been Nasima's guardian for the last six years, following her day and night from before she became the last living of her kind. She had a friend, Nesari. They were the last two on this earth. Obuya would lie with Nasima, resting his palm on her broad side, stroking her rough, grey skin, and she would lay there beside him and sleep, her mind filled with bright dreams and overwhelming love. Obuya had long decided that rhinos could dream. He'd spent far too long by her side as she was floating through the unconscious world to think otherwise. Sometimes she would kick in her sleep, or let out a breath of air so covered in joy that it was impossible for Obuya not to smile. She must've been dreaming of the past, days in the company of her brethren and her sisters. He would look up at the clear night's sky and wonder if she ever looked up at the stars in reverence like he did, if she considered the world as beautiful or just accepted it how it was. He wondered if she ever got sad, if she could tell through some intuition that it all ends with her. That after she passes the world is deprived of something unique, and everything moves one step closer to being the same.

The team on Nasima was much larger than just Obuya, but each rhino had a personal guardian assigned to them. Someone trustworthy and clean-hearted, with a record unsoiled by corruption, and, most importantly, someone more stubborn than a rhino's hide.

Nasima had fifteen men on her at all times. Obuya in her immediate vicinity, with at least two team members with eyes on her, then two more patrolling the immediate perimeter of around two hundred metres. All the rest patrolled the general vicinity of the reservation.

On occasion, Obuya would run his hand over Nasima's precious horn. Hard as granite, but so perfectly smooth. The only reason she couldn't live a true life. Something as silly as a horn. One hundred thousand dollars per kilo. That was the price of the precious

weapon he held in his hand. That was what the price used to be, anyway. Now that this was the final one, he imagined the price would be much greater. The rarer the gem the more a collector will pay.

Obuya's team found Nesari dead three years ago. The team protecting her were all found slaughtered in the vicinity of her corpse. She was lying down with her head resting in the dirt, her body all rough grey apart from the stumps where the horns used to be. Those two holes were bright red, violently cut so that every inch of horn was taken. Her body lay mutilated and lifeless. A rough charcoal carpet of a pelt and rancid meat too disgusting for any man to eat. The hornless creature would never dream again.

The hope for population growth had extinguished by then, of course. Two rhinos left, but both female. The last male had perished years before that. Critically endangered now being only a mark of pity. The northern white rhino was extinct, it just hadn't happened yet. Obuya had heard talk and declaration of prophecy his entire life, but this was the only one he watched with his own eyes, it was the only one he ever believed in.

There was a prophecy bestowed on him once when he was a child. His aunt was the one who made the claim.

'You will witness the beginning of the Rapture,' she declared.

Being only a boy, Obuya was quick to brush off her words, especially given her previous predictions. Once, an old woman who she had determined was to die in a fortnight went on living until she passed a century of life.

But still, he remembered the words, and thought about them from time to time, wondering if a rapture would ever come.

Nasima and he would sleep next to one another. Nasima lying on her stomach facing north whilst Obuya would be propped up on her side, resting his back against her. He would fall asleep watching the stars dancing in the sky above.

One day, there was a commotion far off in the distance on the plains. Not poachers letting off shots, but two giraffes locked in battle, cracking bone on bone with every whip of their necks. Obuya was used to this sight. It always reminded him of fights he'd seen people have over women. The giraffes, with their long necks and blue tongues, standing tree-high. The men with their fists clenched and their eyes full of rage. Entertainment, Obuya thought. There's entertainment everywhere in the wild.

He turned to Nasima, wondering if she was entertained, then frowned his eyebrow at her. She was watching the battle in the distance. But was tilted slightly, watching from a diagonal. There was no grass for her to graze on, and no distraction to partake in. He approached his friend from the side she had turned away from the action. He rubbed her hide, and she jumped a little, turning the whole of her body to face him. Incessant flies buzzing around her one good eye.

Obuya was sure that the dreams of the blind were more vivid than those blessed with sight. That was the saving grace of bearing such an affliction. If all a person could see existed in their dreams, then surely they must brighten and take flight amongst the ever-present darkness they saw. Nasima must be having brighter dreams than every other soul sitting underneath the starry sky overlooking Laikipia.

From that day on, Obuya made sure to stay at Nasima's right side, so she could always see him inside the tightened cone of her world. If she had anything she had him, at least. She was also, Obuya thought one night, the closest thing this world has to unique. One

of one and never to be seen again. A single star in a universe of darkness. A single bird gliding over the ocean. The final witness.

Poachers are men possessed. The object of their desires is Orion's star, their guiding starlight. The world exists around it and nothing else matters.

Some are bold, moving with violence brewing in their palms, letting off gunfire with glee, thinking they could kill the entirety of their guard on their own. These men are rare but not extinct. Delusions are popular amongst people whose god is a growth of bone. Most of them, aren't like that, though.

Obuya had stopped counting. The number was beginning to scare him. Occasionally he wondered how many more he'd have to kill before there weren't any left. He reserved himself to accept the sad truth that they would never stop. Only Nasima's death would stop anything.

It was three weeks since he'd found out about Nasima's blindness when another poacher wandered into the reserve hoping god would aid him in achieving his dreams.

Wambua slipped past the first set of patrolling guards under the cover of night, hiding amongst the patches of bush and underneath the low-hanging leaves of the trees scattered across the plains. His friend sitting in a pickup truck at the meeting point, and two more friends in a car waiting for the right moment.

Once the guards went to do their rounds once more, the poacher slipped past them. Getting closer and closer towards his prize.

Obuya was sitting with his friend, a hand resting on her body, his eyes gazing up at the stars. It was a bright, clear night, illuminated by starfall. Nasima was sound asleep, dreaming.

Wambua approached without sound, masking the rustling of the grass he ran through with the sounds of the wind.

Gunfire in the distance. He peered out from the bushes at four Jeeps rushing to the sounds to extinguish the threat. Once they were gone and the sounds of gunfire erupted and illuminated the night in a cacophony of rapture, Wambua sprinted in the direction the Jeeps had appeared from.

Obuya held his rifle in one hand and left his other resting on Nasima. Her dream extinguished, pulled back to the world to witness the sounds of death. Obuya was drowning in adrenaline, his heart pumping lightning. Every sense available to him heightened beyond human levels of perception. The eyes of a leopard and the nose of a hyena, the ears of an antelope. And those other senses vibrating alive with the lightning. He felt, in the single moment they fell upon him, the eyes of a stranger peering at him from the darkness and he lit up the evil with bullets whose shells rattled as they fell onto the ground.

Nasima was up and whining at the racket but calmed by Obuya's returning hand and soothing whispers.

'Backup, backup,' he shot into his radio in between the whispers.

He never saw Wambua's body, but he knew it was there by the thud made when it was deposited into the bed of a pickup truck and driven away.

Nasima was back asleep, lost in her dreams. Obuya did not sleep that night, but he stayed with her. He made sure his friend was dreaming something sweet.

A year passed. More attempts, more failures. Nasima started to lose sight in her right eye, and the doctors were assuming she was going deaf as well. Forty-eight years she'd lived. Only four rhinos in captivity had ever passed fifty. None of them had gone blind.

Obuya could feel the energy of his friend sapping away as the days went on. She was sleeping more and more. Eating less. He wondered how the world looked with nothing inside it.

Then the day came when he woke from his sleep not propped on her back but flat on the floor, looking into the early morning sky so blue it was green. He sat up and looked around. The plains were clear. He couldn't see a single patrol, couldn't hear the engine of a Jeep. No animals on the horizon, no clouds in the sky. It was Obuya alone in the world.

'Nasima? Where are you?' he asked to the wind. But the wind answers to no man.

'Nasima?' he shouted as he ran around the reserve. He asked the trees and he asked the bushes and he asked the grass.

A flock of birds flew overhead, and he asked them. He asked the wandering antelope and he asked a strolling water buffalo and he asked the endless sky.

A Jeep came by and he signalled it over.

'Where's Nasima?' he asked.

'Didn't you hear?' the guard asked back.

'Hear what?'

'You stayed asleep this whole time?' The guard laughed. 'They should fire you; a guardian who doesn't know where his animal is.'

'Where is she?' Obuya asked, one last time.

'The watering hole. She's still there. Hop on.'

Obuya stood inside the Jeep, with his arms resting against the roof, gazing off into the distance. Nasima hadn't visited the watering hole in three years.

‘How did you know to take her there?’ he asked.

‘We didn’t. She took us and we followed.’

‘But she’s blind,’ Obuya said.

‘She has a good memory,’ the guard said, tapping his index to his forehead.

The watering hole came into view. Usually dense with creatures, on that morning it was empty. Obuya couldn’t see Nasima there either. He was about to ask the guard again when he spotted movement. Inside the shallow watering hole, Nasima was splashing around and decorating the land in sparkles of water, moving with a vigour and grace Obuya hadn’t seen from her in years.

The Jeep pulled up and Obuya ran out towards the water. Nasima looked up at the noise, seizing up for a moment, but somehow, she knew it was Obuya running towards her, she could feel it in her heart where she couldn’t see it in her eyes. And her whole person lit up as she recognised her greatest friend. Obuya jumped inside the water with her, cascading manmade rain down on the plains. The two of them ran around in the water, playing like children in a never-ending dream.