

The atmosphere in the operations tent had changed. Everyone was sitting attentively at their computers, communicating with their operatives in the field.

We were listening at Samson's post to a report relayed over the speakers about activity at the poachers' nearest camp, when Charles called out from his station. "Hey, Croc, you need to look at this!"

We crowded around his computer screen. "This is the poacher's main camp that Thabo is keeping under observation." The video image was poor, but we could make out eight 4X4 pickups, parked amongst a group of tents.

"What the hell. Thabo, how come we didn't know about those extra vehicles?" Croc demanded.

Thabo's voice sounded over the speaker, "They have just arrived from the border."

"Thabo, zoom in on them," Croc instructed. "Hold that camera as still as possible!"

Men were milling about the vehicles, talking. Then they began climbing in, some into the cabs while others clambered onto the backs. They started driving off and the camera tracked them as they disappeared into the bush.

"Which direction have they taken?"

"West!"

Croc cast a loaded look at Yolanda and Raúl, and then at me. "Their main camp is just this side of the Zimbabwe border, one hundred and five kilometres east from here."

“But that means...” Yolanda began.

Croc nodded. “They could be here in an hour and a half, unless they stop along the way. But seriously, they don’t know we’re here and they won’t find us.” He looked at me. “Still, I think it would be prudent for you and your guests to get back to your plane now. Things are going to get hot around here!”

“Right.” Had I not been hobbling about with the aid of a walking stick, I would have stayed. But I had to also consider Yolanda and Raúl. I couldn’t risk putting their lives in danger. We said hurried goodbyes and within a minute we were in the Land Rover with Joshua.

On the way to the airstrip we had a puncture.

“Murphy’s Law!” I exclaimed as I got off to inspect. “It’s the worst possible moment for this to happen!”

Joshua just sat, gazing into the bush, his hands still gripping the steering wheel.

“Joshua, what’s the problem?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Haai! We have no spare wheel...”

“What?!”

He looked at me with a fatalistic expression. “I had a puncture when I came to fetch you this morning, and I was still fixing it when I had to drive you right away. I had no time to finish.”

“Okay. Then radio in and ask them to send another Land Rover...”

I was interrupted by Croc’s urgent voice over the radio.

“Joshua, Martin, can you hear me? Where are you now?”

“About halfway to the airstrip. We’ve got a flat tyre.”

“Well, change it quick and get on that plane...”

“We’ve got no spare!”

“Oh...shit!” There was a moment’s silence. “Well, figure something out, we can’t spare another Land Rover right now. The poachers have also left camp two, and my men have seen two of their vehicles moving in the direction of the airstrip.”

“And the other poachers?” I asked.

“We’re not absolutely sure, but we counted at least twelve vehicles. The problem is they’re not communicating with each other, so we can’t get bearings on them.” There was a pause while Croc discussed something with Charles, but we couldn’t make out the words.

“Martin!” Croc came back again. “The poachers seem to be going for a rhino just off the south end of the runway. You get to your plane, and if there is any danger, our guys will distract the poachers somehow. We’ll keep you informed. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Croc.”

“Martin,” Raúl called. He’d been circling the Land Rover and inspecting it. “The flat’s on the left front. If the three of us sit far back on the right, maybe we can create enough counterbalance for Joshua to drive. It’s worth a try.”

We didn’t need any convincing. We perched ourselves on the back metal edge and Joshua eased away. Our progress was slow and wobbly, but still faster than walking pace. It was a relief when we came within sight of the baobab under which our plane was parked. As we approached through the thick bush, Croc’s voice came through again.

“Martin! Where are you now?”

“Almost at the plane.”

“Listen, the rhino is on the runway.”

“Hell! And the poachers?”

“Almost there as well. Is your plane in the open? Is it visible?”

“In the usual spot, under the baobab.”

“Hide it as much as possible, maybe they won’t see it. And for God’s sake be careful, don’t get involved if you can help it.”

Just then we reached the plane and parked near it.

“Why don’t we just get in and go?” Yolanda asked.

“That’s a very good idea, Yolanda, but a tad risky right now,” I said. “The poachers are tracking a rhino at the far end of the runway. Once we start the engine and advertise our position, we’ll have to take off in their direction...we’ll make ideal target practice!”

“Alright, no need to get sarcastic,” Yolanda retorted, frowning.

I ignored her pique. “Come. Let’s hide the plane, but facing the runway, in case we need to make a quick getaway.”

We quickly set about our task. Raúl was collecting fallen branches near the edge of the runway when he called out, “Martin, come and look!”

I hobbled over and looked in the direction of his pointing finger.

“Hey, those must be the same rhino cow and calf we saw when we came in to land,” I said.

“There’s something strange about that rhino,” Raúl commented. “She’s agitated...and why is she out in the open like that? She would normally keep to the bush.”

The rhinoceros cow was lifting her head uncharacteristically, as if to sniff the air, then tossing it from side to side. It looked as if something was dangling from her head. I was

about to ask Joshua for the binoculars when we heard Croc on the radio.

“Martin! Can you hear me?” he sounded exasperated.

We hurried to the Land Rover. “Yes, go ahead.”

“There’s been a bugger-up! The rhino on the runway isn’t the one with the tracking device, we didn’t know about that one. There’s another rhino nearby, that’s the one the poachers are going for. It’s keeping to the bushes on the other side of the runway from you, and following the other one. And listen, my guys have spotted you there, so get under cover! The poachers are close now.”

As if to reinforce his warning, we heard the sound of engines revving from the far end of the runway. Two pickups were tearing towards us, twin dust clouds streaming behind like the vapour trails of a jet.

“They’re here!” I shouted.

“HIDE!” Croc yelled.

We hid behind the enormous baobab trunk, but peered around it to watch the rhinos on the runway. Startled by the noise they had broken into a trot.

“They’ve turned towards us!” Yolanda cried.

She was right. Seeking the sanctuary of the bush, the rhinoceros mother and calf veered in a diagonal trajectory across the runway in our direction...with the poachers gaining on them rapidly.

The bush around us came alive with whirring and swishing noises, followed seconds later by the crackle of machine gun fire. One of the pickups veered off towards the other side of the runway as they must have spotted the tagged rhinoceros, but the other pickup was coming straight for us! A man was standing in the back handling a machine gun mounted on

the roll bar, fire spurting from the barrel, white smoke streaking back in the wind.

The rhinoceroses stepped up their pace as bullets raised a trail of dusty explosions along the ground behind, gaining on them rapidly. With her long horn parting the way and her calf following close behind, she came crashing through the scrub, thundered right under the plane's wing and just missed the tail wing, scattering the branches we'd arranged as camouflage, and then carried on carving a path through the bush.

Raúl was aiming Joshua's hunting rifle, using the trunk of the baobab as a support. He waited an excruciatingly long time, and by then the poachers were so close I swear I could see the white of the driver's eyes...he shot! The front left tyre deformed, the wheel wobbled, and then it dug into the sand. The pickup swerved violently and then flipped, hurling the gunman skywards like a Hollywood stunt. The vehicle came cartwheeling towards us, pieces flying out in all directions. We ducked behind the vast trunk of the baobab as debris crashed into the bush around us, one large piece thudding into the trunk. A wheel bounced past and smashed on through the undergrowth. Then the tumult quietened down.

After a few stunned seconds we peered around the trunk. The almost unrecognisable wreck was right in front of us... incredibly the right way up. Through the haze of dust I saw a small yellow flame flickering next to the naked engine.

"Joshua! The fire extinguisher!" I yelled.

As Joshua ran off to the Land Rover, Raúl threw sand onto the fire and I struggled to wrench open the door of the crushed cab. The two men were stuck and I couldn't get them out, one was groaning softly.

With a sudden whoosh the wreck burst into flames. Raúl's shirt was on fire but Joshua instantly discharged the fire extinguisher on him. A loud scream from a poacher and Joshua emptied the fire extinguisher into the burning cab, but it was only a small extinguisher, it had little effect on the roaring blaze. Even as the man screamed horribly, the heat kept us back. There was nothing to be done, except perhaps to block our ears as Yolanda was doing.

"They are well and truly poached now," Raúl muttered.

We just stood there, staring at the conflagration in morbid fascination. I had to snap us out.

"Quick!" I shouted. "We must put out the fire before it spreads."

Once the fire had been extinguished, Yolanda and I went over to the injured man. "He's still alive," she said as she kneeled next to the unconscious body. "But he's badly injured, it looks like his neck could be broken."

We heard intermittent bursts of gunfire in the distance, from the other side of the runway.