

“Are you ready?” Asked Dad.

“Please, it’s impossible to be ready for this,” I replied with a grin. I clutched the massive milk bottle as Dad rang the bell. Instantly, we were stampeded. It was like sitting in a boat in the middle of the calm ocean, and then being crushed by a tsunami for no apparent reason. Rough, gray, leathery hides surrounded me. I grinned as I felt one of their trunks draped over my head, trying to reach the warm fresh-made milk. Once the baby elephants were satisfied, it was time to go outside of the barn. Zuri, my favorite elephant, was playfully marching around me, prodding me with her trunk. I watched as the elephants strutted across the plains, occasionally pushing into each other joyfully. I began Zuri and my Sunday ritual. Zuri knew the drill. As soon as she finished her breakfast, she pushed me out of the barn. We zigzagged around the sanctuary, making our way towards the place we always went: Jua Hill.

When we got there, Zuri started dancing and doing everything she could to get me to walk faster. This was my favorite part of the week. Every Sunday, Zuri and I came here to sit and reflect. I stared out at the horizon with the baby elephant nestled up beside me. I gazed at the Acacia trees and African cypresses. I remembered the times that me and my mom would sit up on Jua hill. She was gone. But I had moved on from that. Dad and I learned to get along and figured it out. We moved to the Usalama Wildlife Sanctuary. We helped take care of the baby elephants, giraffes, ostriches, hippos, and more animals to adjust to their conditions. (some were abandoned, some injured, some orphaned) When they were old enough, they moved to a new sanctuary to learn how to live in the wild.

Zuri was one of the youngest. Zuri was barely a year old and she knew how to make an impression. She kind of just showed up one day. We looked for parents for a while and found none. We decided to keep her until we found a parent or she grew too old to stay here. Zuri started waking up the elephants every morning before the workers even arrived, getting them

ready for breakfast. That's the reason that some of the elephants kind of avoided her. But I loved her for it. It was nice getting the extra excitement in the mornings; it was impossible to get some of the baby elephants up in the mornings before Zuri.

I breathed in the glowing sunrise of the Usalama Wildlife Sanctuary. Its vivid charm and beautiful skies were all I needed to start the day right. I breathed out all the troubles of the week. I remembered when Matope (one of our youngest wildebeest) got stuck in mud and we all had to help him get out. That was really thick mud. I remembered how one of the sweetest little giraffes got sick and she had to be isolated from everyone else. I frowned, thinking about the poor baby. As if sensing my discontent, Zuri cuddled up closer. I wished that I could've had this bliss every day.

Once Zuri and I were done, we skipped down the hill and sped through our morning routine. At lunch time, Zuri took a detour on the way to the barn. She wanted to look at some flowers at the edge of the sanctuary.

"Zu, come on, it's time for lunch," I prodded gently. She looked at me casually, not really paying attention. Then I saw something in the distance. A shadowy figure. Holding a gun. I squinted at the figure and realized what it was.

"Poacher," I whispered. "Zu, we really need to go. We've got to tell Dad and the others about this. Now." I told her urgently. Zuri seemed to understand my seriousness. She began moving towards the impossibly faraway barn. Then time froze.

I stood there in horror as the poacher fired their shot.

"No!" I screamed, but it was too late. Zuri howled in pain as the bullet found its mark. "No no no," I whispered, crouching over the shivering elephant. "Get out of here!" I screamed at the cruel hunter, wishing them to fly off of the earth. *I should probably go get Dad.* I thought. *But I can't. Zuri needs me!* I scowled at myself. *But Zuri only stands a chance if I can get her to the medics right away!* I considered this. Then I ran. "Dad! Poacher! Zuri! Help!" I yelled breathlessly. Dad looked up from the eating elephants and saw my distressed face.

“Penzi! What’s wrong? Where’s Zuri?” I gave him a desperate look. The following events happened in an eerie blur for me: Dad and I rushed to where I left Zuri. The poacher was gone, but Dad promised we would find them. We hurried to get Zuri to the medics, comforting her on the way. Zuri was treated, but the wound was deep. Even her thick elephant hide couldn’t help her. I watched as Zuri held on for dear life. The bullet was made for killing elephants, we found out. Zuri didn’t make it.

The medics told me that Zuri was weak as a baby elephant. She couldn’t’ve survived the shot. I refused to believe them until I saw Zuri for myself. She was dead. Zuri was gone. That night I dreamed terrible dreams.

I dreamed that I was climbing the mountain of life. Just as I made it to the top, a landslide occurred and forced me back to the bottom. It was an inevitable boundary. A depressing obstacle. As far as I knew, there was no point in climbing if I would just fall back down. A useless climb.

But then I saw Zuri at the top. With my mom. Seeing them up there cheering me on was invigorating. I was filled with newfound energy, knowing that they were ready for me to carry on and stop sitting in my stupid anguish. I got up, began climbing, and woke up.

The next days sped by until it was Sunday again. I got up and fed the babies. I then began to walk to Jua Hill because of habit. I was surprised when I felt a small nudge on my calf. I looked down and saw a trunk poking my leg. I couldn’t help but smile when I followed the trunk up to its owner.

“Kindani, what are you doing here?” I smiled at the young elephant. She looked up at me with her gorgeous brown eyes and poked me again. Then she wrapped her trunk around my leg and started pulling me towards Jua Hill. I grinned as I ran with her, trying not to trip over her fantastic trunk. When we finally made it to the hill, nostalgia flooded me. I sat there, thinking about all the times that me and Zuri sat here. All the times that me and Mom sat here. My eyes betrayed me as tears waterfalled down my face. Kindani wrapped her trunk around me

protectively. I couldn't help but loved beyond measure. I kissed her head and gave little Kindani a hug. Then I stared at the sanctuary. I had always loved the endless environment and amazing views that the Usalama Sanctuary offered. I couldn't've been more happy to live there. As tradition, I breathed in the views and beauty. Then I breathed out the troubles. And boom, just like that, I no longer felt troubled by Zuri's death. I still yearned for her and missed her, but I no longer blamed myself. Zuri lived a good (short, yes) but good life. Kindani cuddled me closer just like Zuri when I was agitated. I knew that Zuri and Mom would want me to be happy. So I would.