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BRANDON RUMAKER

A Solitary Zebra is Helpless Prey

The clock read 1:46 AM.

I've been sitting here for six hours, Roger thought as he glanced at the clock sitting on the corner of his desk.

There was not much else on his small desk, just a few notebooks. The room was eight feet by twelve feet with white walls that had not been repainted in at least a decade. Most of the chipped paint was covered by posters of African soccer players, whom Roger still referred to as footballers even after years of living in the United States.

Roger stood up and stretched, knowing that he still had another hour or two of studying left for the night. He gazed out his window at the silhouette of the tree that leaned against his building. He could tell it was a particularly windy autumn night because the branches were massaging the brick wall of Roger's building. It was a large house that had been transformed into an apartment building through diligent renovation and students in need of shelter.

The scraping sound of the tree harmonized with the whistling of the wind to create a song that reminded Roger of the music of Pepe Kalle. Roger received his name in honor of the inspiration for some of Pepe Kalle's music, the footballer, Roger Milla. The day Roger Milla brought the Cameroonian football team to the Quarter-Finals of the World Cup, Roger Nzuji was born.

"You were destined to be special," Roger's father told him four years after that World Cup. "You were born on a day that Africa was able to stand out for talent, bright as the sun. Milla was at the center of that light. So are you."

Roger's father, André, stood tall like the maize they were harvesting. Looking up at his father required him to crane his neck so that he was facing the sky. His few memories of André were all of a smiling man gazing down at him, the closest humanity could get to a re-creation of God's protection.

"We saw your spirit within moments of Cameroon defeating Colombia. Milla showed the world that any one of us can be blessed. The second you were born, we all knew you were destined to carry the name."

The words faded from Roger's mind as he began to hum the song "Roger Milla" by Kallé. The music filled the air with a peaceful atmosphere that could not be penetrated by the gloomy November night.

As he hummed, he couldn't help but think of his brothers, Daniel and Emmanuel, both of whom were working in the fields of the Congo at that very moment.

"I win!" Daniel always shouted out after scoring the last goal in their childhood football games.

"You got lucky," Roger always said back with a smile.

Daniel was a year younger than Roger and quickly developed footballing ability that made Milla proud. Roger himself did not acquire his namesake's gift for football, but he still played to pass time and bond with his brothers.

Emmanuel was born two years after Daniel. There were two other siblings, but neither survived. The last child never even had a chance to see a sunrise. She died in their mother's womb, taking their mother with them. Their mother's death happened soon after the dictator, Mobutu, fled the country. After the Democratic Republic of Congo shed the name Zaire in a naïve attempt to evolve. After the civil wars began.

Roger had a natural curiosity and work ethic that stood out. After their father died in the war, the brothers united and began to work on their small maize farm with dreams of leaving the death surrounding them. Only Roger was destined to leave.

"We were lucky to learn English," Daniel said one day while they were working.

The sun was burning directly over the flatland, leaving them with no shelter from the daylight blaze. They often spoke and sang to distract themselves from the heat when the meditative rhythm of picking maize wasn't enough.

"It won't be of much use here," Emmanuel said as he gazed in the distance, searching for the locusts that were producing a drumming song that warned of crop destruction.

"It can help us get out. The camps sometimes have outsiders," Daniel responded.

“Where would we go?” Roger asked his brothers, afraid to think about leaving behind the only place they knew as home.

“Away from the fighting.”

“Away from the soldiers.”

“What would we do?” Roger knew that neither of the other two had an answer, but he had to say it out loud. They had discussed leaving before, but each conversation led them back into the Democratic Republic, back into waiting to be saved or be killed. They were tired of having no power. Roger regularly left the country for schooling, but he refused to leave forever without his brothers.

“We might not all be able to leave,” Emmanuel said quietly, his words almost inaudible over the locusts’ music.

“Roger, you were always the smartest. If we helped you leave, would you promise us that you would someday come back?” Daniel looked at Roger, waiting for a response.

Roger was surprised by the question, but he could tell by his brother’s tone that this was something Daniel and Emmanuel had discussed in secret for some time. Maybe they hadn’t even said a word to each other.

All three of them knew Roger would have the best chance beyond the farm. He had gone to school for years in Ghana but always came back to help with the maize. Daniel and Emmanuel never went to school. Instead, they worked as hard as they could so Roger could focus on his studies—harder than the winds currently drumming on his apartment window.

He could no longer focus on his biology textbook so he sat on his bed knowing any attempt to study would only cause frustration. He looked around at his room and thought about how different it was from home. He had a radiator and an overhead light, both of which seemed incredible to him at first. He didn’t understand why people would continue working after dark, or live in a place that required fake heat to be comfortable.

“I doubt you would even recognize me,” Roger said to himself, thinking of Daniel and Emmanuel, who were still surrounded by grasps for insignificant power.

“Power,” Roger said. He had personal experience with the difference in power between the rebels in Africa and the government of the United States. It was clear each time he met someone new.

“I’m from the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s in Africa.”

“You’re from Africa? Wow!”

It was the same reaction from everyone he met. At first, it made him feel special or important. But after countless introductions to people, he felt embarrassed and learned to not even mention the name of his homeland. Africa was all one place to most people he met. He felt like he was a continental display.

“Good for you, making it all the way here.”

“It’s fucking crazy over there.”

“You must be so strong.”

“Do you miss it?”

“You must like it better here, right? All that war, it’s horrible.”

Roger wanted to be home. And each time he met someone new, he was reminded of the exact reason. He wasn’t from the United States and never would be. He would always be some fortunate soul who escaped the tragedy of Africa.

“You were born on a day that Africa was able to stand out for talent, bright as the sun.” His father’s words constantly guided him. The people he met far from home had good intentions, but they didn’t see the harshness of their own words.

“Africa is not a horrible place, there are just some bad men. It could happen anywhere,” he would say.

They would look at him with a smile that said, “Definitely not here.”

“I’m going to go back someday,” he would add.

He would get two responses.

“Really?” and “You’re crazy.” They would always try to joke about the idea, not realizing that Roger’s home was more than just a house to return to at the end of each semester.

“I want to help my family and my community. I don’t think that makes me special.” Roger was always surprised at how there was no sense of community at his school. Everyone was so focused on their own ambitions and goals.

They don’t need to worry about protecting their family here, he would think. He hated how he was considered unique for having a desire to help others, to improve his home.

The other person always became friendlier while talking with him, as if living in Africa was the most interesting thing on the planet. But he knew being an African in America made him stand out, even among actual African-Americans.

“This is not your world, you are only visiting,” Roger would remind himself. “Six more years and you’ll be where you belong.”

Roger was studying to become a doctor. He knew that trying to stop power-hungry fighters was dangerous, even before they acquired deadly weapons. He still bore scars from directly confronting rebels. So he decided that the

best option to help people was not to cause more violence, but instead keep everyone alive and healthy.

Many of the refugee camps were a biological nightmare, filled with a cycle of disease and death, a pendulum's endless swings created from a tiny push. The camps needed clean water, more medicine, and more food. But most of all, they needed toilets.

Diarrhea in the United States was something people made jokes about, but in the camps it was deadlier than sadistic soldiers. There was no treatment available, so one case would quickly spread through the camp, causing severe dehydration and, eventually, death. There was no clean system to remove waste, so the disease sat in the open. The smell of feces and corpses rotting in the heat was unbearable, at least for the first few weeks. After some time the smell became like the buzzing of locusts, ignored but ever-present.

"We can't stay here," Daniel had said shortly after arriving at one of the refugee camps. It was filled with hundreds of colorful plastic tents all clumped together with no organization. The tents looked more alive than the people inhabiting them.

"There is nowhere else," Emmanuel responded as he looked straight down, trying not to see the disorder and disease around him.

"We can survive," Roger said in an attempt to motivate his brothers. "It will get better! We will change things. We won't let the fighting happen again."

"Really?" Emmanuel looked up at his brother, his face a valley of hope and fear.

"Yes, I promise," Roger said with a smile that revealed two missing front teeth.

The three brothers were forced to leave their farm when rebels from Rwanda began terrorizing the country in retaliation of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the leader who overthrew Mobutu. Their father left to protect his country, to protect his children. Like Kabila, André Nzuji would not survive the war. Roger was seven.

Roger wiped his eyes as if they were webs filled with spiders. Yet he couldn't stop those spiders from crawling down from his eyes, past his chin, and to the floor below him.

"I miss you," he said to his father. He said it to his brothers, too. Anyone he met from home. He was an outcast in the United States, and each day only got harder than the day before. More work, more responsibility, more thoughts of his family. Most of all, there was more doubt.

The spiders were released from his eyes and began to fill the room and take on lives of their own. Roger imagined them slowly climbing the posters of some of his idols and the posts of the bed. They climbed his legs and covered his body, a river of squirming brown and frozen white thread, covering him to his neck. He was paralyzed and began to hear his heart beat louder than any drum as a brown mass rose from the sea of spiders.

He was gazing at a *J'ba Fofi*, a spider he had only heard of, but had never seen before. It was similar to a tarantula, but larger. It rose like a person doing a push up and slowly turned toward him. Its body was roughly three feet long with legs long enough to span Roger's head and toes. The *J'ba Fofi* began to slowly turn towards him until the two were staring directly at each other. Roger could not see its features in detail as his tear ducts were still creating more spiders.

But he did feel nausea as they began crushing his whole body, as if every cell in his body was being choked. He couldn't breathe or swallow and his body became incredibly sensitive. The room was brighter, the spiders were louder, and each one of the thousands of legs was distinct on his skin.

This was not the first time Roger felt the entire world become unbalanced. Soon after arriving in the United States, he had fleeting moments of strong panic, as if he was still at that refugee camp, and he would relive moments he prayed he could forget. Sometimes he would spend the entire day angry and unsure why. All it took was a car speeding by, someone using a knife, or yelling and he would immediately feel himself collapse like so many regimes in the Congo.

He could never predict when the fear would return. His father had taught him what fighting an unwinnable battle would lead to, so he surrendered to the emotions until they passed. He watched this enormous spider, fascinated, as it turned towards the window and slowly began to back away.

What could be out there that would make something like you afraid? Roger wondered.

Then he blinked.

And the *J'ba Fofi* was gone.

The other spiders began leaving through any crack they could find, either in the wall or under the door, as Roger calmed down and wiped the tears from his eyes.

The *J'ba Fofi* and its children were just reminders of the world that Roger had left behind and would never be truly a part of again. He had fully immersed himself into academia and there seemed to be no turning back.

Roger had been able to wade through the ocean of academics with the assistance of Dr. Regina Graceman, his academic advisor.

When Roger walked into Dr. Graceman's office for the first time, she was intensely reading an article on her computer, only half-facing Roger. Roger immediately noticed that her desk appeared to be a storage facility for various articles and essays, which stood out in comparison to the office itself. The office had shelves of books and journals that were alphabetically organized by author and then by title.

"You want to go to med school?" Dr. Graceman asked Roger during their first of many conversations.

"Yes," Roger said with determination as he shifted his weight, so that the uneven legs of the wooden chair he was sitting in were properly balanced. Dr. Graceman turned towards him in her green swivel chair to look at him carefully. He had only been in the United States for a few weeks and was still adjusting to the new culture.

"Do you know how the process works?" Dr. Graceman asked with some confusion. She was a tall blonde woman with hazel eyes and a large mole on the left side of her lip. When she spoke, the mole danced in time to her voice.

"Process?" Roger asked her, trying to ignore the mole.

"Yes, you have to go through an undergraduate education first. After that you can apply to medical programs."

"Under...I don't know what that is. I've only taken classes on occasion before. I was only told that I would be studying to be a doctor."

"Basically, it's a way to indicate that you're intelligent and capable. Not everyone can just become a doctor. It requires considerable work."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite understand."

"There's a system and—"

"No, I mean the word, indicate. I don't think I have heard it before."

"Oh." Dr. Graceman was silent for a moment as she gazed into the depths of a yellow and green coffee mug hidden from Roger's view. "Is English your first language?" She asked.

"No, French. *Français*."

Roger quickly realized that despite having learned enough English to get by in the Congo and his classes in Ghana, he was not ready for the language of science. He could handle the material if it was in French, but it took him a while to learn it in English. After a year, he had made considerable progress with the assistance of Dr. Graceman. She had found French copies of his textbooks online and introduced him to some of the French professors in the language department. Roger compared the language within the English textbook to the language within the French book. It was a tedious task, but he would refer to each book as one of his brothers in order to remain focused on why he had come to the United States in the first place. Emmanuel was the French book, Daniel was the English book.

But these textbooks were not really his brothers, and Roger continued to struggle.

“What happened?” Dr. Graceman asked after Roger failed a test. Roger had gone to Dr. Graceman’s office repeatedly over two and a half years, but never to discuss one of her tests. “I know how hard you work; this isn’t like you,” she said.

“I don’t know,” Roger said quietly, staring at the yellow and green coffee mug, which had become a symbol for stability. It was the only object in the office that Roger knew for certain would be there the next time he visited Dr. Graceman.

“Are you doing okay?” she asked, regaining his attention. Roger frequently talked to Dr. Graceman when his stress became too much for him, but he would not talk about his problems unless she directly asked. He didn’t want to seem rude by interfering with her work, so he would never initiate.

“I can’t focus. I can only think of home. I tried to study, but I couldn’t. Even during the test, it was only home,” Roger said, looking at her with squinting eyes.

Dr. Graceman sighed, mulling over the piles of papers covering her desk. “Well, there’s nothing you can do about it now. No changing what happened.” She smiled at him. “One bad grade won’t ruin your chances. Once you start going for interviews, they will know that you have talent,” she said to him.

“A zebra never loses its stripes,” he said to her with a smile.

He had only seen zebras a few times in his life, when he was around five or six years old. He remembered talking with Daniel about why they looked so strange.

“Zebras avoid getting eaten by making lions dizzy. When a lion or a scary animal attacks, they all run around. They become one,” Daniel had explained.

“When they’re scared, you can’t tell where one starts and one ends,” Roger mumbled, still sitting on his bed. “Zebras aren’t meant to be alone.”

The memory of Daniel explaining the survival skills of zebras helped though. Roger began to smile as he imagined a younger Daniel teaching a lecture on zebras to university students.

Was Daniel five at the time? The thought appeared as suddenly as the spiders had disappeared.

The only reason Roger even knew his birthday was because of the World Cup, and he hadn’t figured that out until after arriving in the United States. *How old would they be?*

Roger continued to think of his siblings, his source of strength. *Without them I couldn’t be sitting here right now*, Roger reminded himself. And with a wipe to his face, the last spider creeping was flung off.

He looked over at his biology textbook, considering the option to study once more. Medicine had been his way out of the Congo; now it was going to be his way back in.

“Who is that?” Emmanuel asked in a hushed voice.

“He’s not one of us,” Daniel said, peeking behind their blue tent at a doctor who was treating a woman with a high fever.

The doctor appeared to be a younger adult and was not as tall as Roger’s father had been. He stood out in the camp, for he had clean clothes and a walk of confidence and strength. The man glowed in comparison to those he was treating.

“No one helps the dying like this,” Daniel said in wonder of the mysterious man. They had never seen a doctor using Western medical techniques before.

“I heard that he has powers,” Emmanuel whispered.

“A gift from God,” Roger said with a breathless voice that revealed his curiosity. He approached the man.

“Who are you?” Roger asked him.

“You can call me Ekow,” the doctor said, turning toward Roger.

“Ekow? Where are you from?” Roger asked.

“Ghana.” Ekow spoke quietly and slowly, as if each word was a lullaby.

“Why are you so different? How did you get here? What are you doing to her?”

“So many questions.” Ekow smiled. “I am a doctor and I trained far from here, far from Ghana. Do you know where Ghana is?”

“Yes, I learned it in school.”

“What about Europe?”

“Europe?”

“That’s where I learned medicine. The old ways were not working, so I learned the ways that could work. I was looking to help the sick, and I looked all the way here,” Ekow, said as he sat down next to Roger.

“Can I learn too?” Roger did not know where Europe was, except that it probably wasn’t in Africa. He was willing to go anywhere if it meant leaving the diseases and violence behind.

“Only if you’re willing to,” Ekow said.

“I am.”

“Good.”

“Would you take me with you?” Roger asked.

Ekow’s eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a frown. “I can’t this time. I should be back in a few months.”

A few months could be a very long time for a child in the refugee camps. Shortly before fleeing his farm, Roger had learned that thirty sunrises was called a month. Many refugees died after a handful of sunrises, and survival became a bigger challenge with each new day. To survive over a hundred sunrises until Ekow returned seemed impossible.

“Can I go with you next time?” Roger asked.

“Only if you’re willing to,” Ekow said.

“Can my brothers come too?”

“How many?” Ekow asked quietly. Roger barely heard him but it seemed as though Ekow sounded upset.

“Two, Daniel and Emmanuel.” He gestured back towards the blue tent where the hands and faces of the two children could be seen sticking out from the edge of the tent.

Ekow looked at Daniel and Emmanuel for a few seconds then said, “I’m sorry. If you want to stay with your brothers, you can, but I cannot give space to all three of you.”

Roger glanced back at his brothers for a second and then looked back towards Ekow. Roger looked towards the sick woman who was behind Ekow. “Will you save her?” Roger asked.

“Yes, I will,” Ekow said as he looked over his shoulder at her. He turned back to Roger and said, “Plus many others. I won’t let these people die.”

“I’ll go with you,” Roger said.

Roger was brought back to his room as a sudden thud forced his thoughts of the past to retreat. He could hear laughing and yelling from outside his building. There was another thud and Roger realized someone was hitting the door to the building. *I wonder who it is. Maybe someone forgot their key.*

Roger leaned over his desk to reach for his blinds so he could get a better look. As he began to pull the blinds up, he was greeted by an orange object smashing against his window. He immediately leapt back at the sudden sight and the booming sound that acted as its companion.

He squinted slightly, trying to determine what the object had been. It had left a small amount of residue on his window which looked like paste. Then another object collided with his window along with another bang. He realized that whoever was outside was throwing pieces of pumpkin at his window.

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath, assuming that the cheering people outside were drunk and would eventually move along onto something else. He just had to wait. He had been doing it for decades—he could wait a few seconds more. He opened his eyes in time to see a third piece of pumpkin invite itself to the glass of his window. Then a fourth. Then a fifth. He leaned

over to lower his blinds, which had only partially opened. As he reached for the cord of the blinds, the people outside stopped throwing pieces.

Instead, someone decided to throw an entire pumpkin at his window. And they decided to throw it as hard as they could. It struck his window just as he began to pull the blind down. The sound it created was closer to a gunshot than an instrument. The noise was joined by a faint cracking sound as the pumpkin proved itself to be stronger than the window. Roger felt the fear from minutes before return.

Was this what the *J'ba Fofi* was afraid of?

Roger had almost shouted at the sight of the pumpkin flying towards him. Now his heartbeat was muting any sounds from outside and he began to feel his chest being prodded along with a sudden desire to vomit. He collapsed to the floor as his vision became unfocused and his thoughts turned once again to the past. This memory was different, for it forced its way into his mind as if it were that pumpkin breaking through the window.

He could see a man with a machine gun yelling out to a crowd surrounding him. His brothers were there too and they looked just as afraid as he felt.

Suddenly the man with the machine gun turned to Roger and began yelling in a language Roger didn't understand. Roger tried speaking in English, then in French, but the man shoved the gun into Roger's mouth and stood silently, watching him.

All around them, plastic tents of various colors were being knocked over and searched by Rwandan rebels. It was a raid to find women and food. It was also an excuse for the rebels to abuse the little power they had. They had guns and were looking for a reason to use them.

Minutes passed. The refugees all stood perfectly still in absolute silence. Their eyes were on Roger, the epicenter of tension. Everyone in the camp was waiting for Roger to die. But he didn't die. In a final attempt to telepathically communicate with God, he thought of as many prayers as he could. But the rebel did not fire his gun.

The rebel slowly pulled out the gun and said in English, "You are nothing to me. You can live or die. I don't care." The rebel then took a knife and waved it in front of Roger.

"This knife and this gun. Remember who has the power," the rebel said. Then the knife was deep in Roger's leg and there were screams. Gunshots. People running on the dirt and grass. Tents falling. His brother's face. Roger couldn't tell where bodies had started to fall and where the last one had fallen.

"I don't want to think about this. I don't want to think about this. I don't want to think about this." Roger kept shouting these words as if they would protect him from the pain he was reliving.

It was a memory that replayed itself over and over, a clear recording of that most terrifying moment. Roger hadn't seen the memory in such detail since coming to the United States, so he had thought that he had finally made progress. Now he knew that the memory had tricked him, waited for him to become completely unsuspecting before rising and striking again. He wasn't sure what to be more afraid of: the fighting within the Democratic Republic of Congo, his own memory, or the people outside the building who were ignorant to what was going on in Roger's room.

"They don't know," he said, unsure if that made him angrier or empathetic.

The sounds of the yelling began to fade, as the people outside grew bored of their evening activity. Roger remained on the floor listening to his heart-beat pulse through his entire body.

He began to hum the song "Roger Milla" once again, in an attempt to force the anxiety to fly out of his vocal cords in a buzzing swarm and disappear into the night. After humming the song for twenty minutes, Roger slowly got up and once again looked at the textbook sitting open on his desk.

"They become one." Daniel's words came out from between Roger's lips. Roger thought of his father, of Daniel and Emmanuel, of Ekow, of Dr. Grace-man. For a second he even thought of God, after years of doubt.

Roger sat down at his chair and took a deep breath. As he exhaled, he picked up a pen and prepared himself for another hour of studying.

The night became quiet except for the music of Pépé Kallé.

"Good thing I'm not alone," Roger said with a smile.