BROTHERS IN ARMS

Standing in the shadows of a mopane tree, Rory peeled off his shirt. He hung it on a branch, next to his leather saddle and webbing. Grabbing his bottle of water, he dropped down onto the sand, knocking the rifle he’d leant against the tree trunk. He caught it as it fell, pulling it onto his lap. He looked up. The magazines were still within reach. Leaning back against the trunk, he raised the bottle to his lips. It was already half-empty. He’d have to fill it again before they rode on. He heard the others walking behind him, snapping twigs, searching for shade underneath the trees’ butterfly leaves. A splash. Shouting. Dropping the water bottle, he turned his head towards the shona, gripping the rifle. He saw Gino standing at the water’s edge, his horse rolling around in the shallows, whinnying and snorting. Rory’s grip slackened. Shit, man. He thought to himself. Just relax.

Hands shaking, he leaned across and grabbed the corner of his saddlebag. He roughly pulled it across the sand, leaving a snaking trail. Gino’s horse better not have crapped in the shona, he thought as he struggled to undo the buckles. Otherwise the water was going to taste a helluva lot worse than it already did. The buckle snapped loose, he opened the bag, pulling out a tin and another water bottle.

“I can’t decide what’s dirtier, that water you’re about to drink or you.” Recognising the voice, he shook his head, a smile turning up the corner of his mouth.

“It’s too close to call, Joost. It’s just too close to call.”
Laughing, Joost sat down next to him, his body wet and radiating heat. He ran his hand back and forth across his hair, flicking water.

"But the water here is seriously kak, even more than usual."

Rory shifted his weight, drawing his knee to his chest, the other leg stretched out. Wincing in pain, he rocked forward and stretched the muscle out more. Sometimes riding was just a bitch.

"The rain is coming soon."

"Ag man. Never mind the water, I'd kill for a coke."

Rory stopped mid-motion, and remained still, his gaze fixed ahead. The sand burned through his khakis trousers. Joost looked at Rory, then looked down at his boots, the lines on his forehead deepened. One of his shoelaces was untied. A horse nickered. Slowly, Rory changed legs; he leaned forward, stretching. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. Joost spoke first.

"It's bloody hot today, hey?"

Turning his head, Rory looked back at his friend and tried to smile.

"Ja. Our numnahs should've dried by now."

Straightening up, he leaned back, his hands behind his head. Joost began to tie his shoelace.

"Your new horse still giving you gears?"

Rory ran his fingers across his palm. It was a mess of calluses, blisters and raw skin.

"Ja. Charlie keeps getting the hell in and jerking his head."

Finished tying his shoelace, Joost moved closer to get a better look.

"Kak, those look eina. Did your last horse give you such kak?"
Rory shrugged. No, Dolphin had been a bloody fine horse. Joost hadn’t known him. After all, this was only his second patrol. Joost was still raw, a rookie.

“But one more day, man. One more day and we’re at base camp. And you get to go home, you lucky bastard.”

Rory smiled, drawing both knees into his chest. His sister was flying out from New Zealand. The whole family would be in Durban. There’d be hot showers. Clean sheets. Good food. He opened his mouth to speak, his throat tight and constricted.

“Ja, I am one lucky bastard.”

Joost dropped his voice. “Don’t rub it in, hey? I’ll be cosying up to that die poes, the lieutenant, this weekend.”

“Rather you than me, Joost. He’s a poephol. I still can’t believe he confiscated your tape.”

“The domkop probably only listens to tikkiedraai. Bloody subversive. my arse. I’ll show him subversive.”

“Ag Man! Don’t you know? Dis Lekker in die army”

Joost’s shoulders began to shake, and Rory felt his throat clear.

Laughing, he opened his tin. It was cocktail sausages again. He offered the tin to Joost, but he waved it away, pulling a face.

Using his fingers, Rory tossed the sausages into his mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Joost raise his arm, motioning for someone to come over. He followed Joost’s gaze, but the sun caught him in the eyes. He looked away, closing his eyes
tightly, waiting for the red circles to fade away. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Joost shouted, "Sinele".

Wiping his hands down the length of his trouser leg, Rory then brought them up to cover his face, shielding his eyes. Sinele. He was the new tracker. He could see him now walking towards them. He walked slowly, each step forward deliberate, his movements catlike. He blinked again. His vision was still tinged with red. He’d seen Sinele around the camp, but the guy mostly kept to himself. Quiet, even now, there were no snapping twigs. He must be a damn good tracker, Rory thought. Better than Frederick.

Fred. Sinele was his replacement. Three patrols ago he’d been shot. Killed. They’d been following spoor, chasing gooks the whole day. The tracks had led past a kraal. The lieutenant spoke to the woman inside. No, sir. No men have passed my house. She’d cried out as he grabbed her, pulling her towards the tracks. She looked at the ground. He twisted her arm. Two hours. Two hours ago. He let go of her, and she fell. As he strode to his horse, she looked up, her eyes wide. Rory thought he’d seen something then, but the lieutenant had signalled to move out. He remembered looking back, looking back until the dust swallowed her. She’d stood there, rubbing her arm, watching them leave. Then it happened. The ambush. It’d all started with a single shot. His horse shot. The scream. Falling. Trapped. His leg trapped underneath Dolphin. Crossfire. Blue sky. RPG7’s exploding. Frederick, fallen next to him, clutching his neck, kicking out convulsively. Blood,
blood all over. Tell my mom I love her. Support came. They'd got out alive. Twelve men out of eighteen. They went back and burned the woman's kraal.

"Sit down, Sinele. You're making me nervous. Besides, you drop that dog biscuit and Rory will know all about it. I'm telling you those things can break a toe."

Grinning, Sinele lowered himself opposite the two men, folding his legs beneath him. He was stripped to the waist, his shirt wound around his head.

"Howzit, you two? Rory, I hear you're on leave. Same as me."

"Is it? Jasslaik, you lucky bastards. I'm stuck here with..."

"Smit!"

They turned in the direction of the voice and saw their lieutenant striding across the sand, shouting, flinging his arms towards the horses. All three of them scrambled to their feet and formed a line.

"Your horse is kicking the crap out of Gino's. Sort it. Now."

Joost turned, and jogged in the direction of the horses. The lieutenant watched him go, a faint smile playing across his lips. He turned to Sinele and Rory. His smile disappeared. He strode towards Rory, the shorter of the two, sticking his face right up next to his.

"Walker and you-whatever-your-name-is." He shot a glance at Sinele.

"We ride out in ten. You both look like shit. Put your shirts on. Now."

Turning on his heel, he walked towards the horses. Sinele shook his head.
"We better get going, Ingwe."

Rory looked up at him. Sinele just smiled, gesturing towards his own face.

"You have the marks of a leopard". He snapped his fingers. "Sproete."

Rory smiled back. Sinele turned to walk away.

"Well, if I’m the leopard, you must be the lion, boet."

Dusting the sand off his hands, Rory put his shirt on and then the webbing. The magazines weighed heavy against his chest. Collecting the rest of his kit, he walked to where Charlie was tied. Holding out one of his dog biscuits, he rubbed the horse’s nose. He walked around to cinch the saddle, then led Charlie to the shona’s edge for one last drink. He was filling his water bottles, when the lieutenant rode past.

"Walker. Get a move on."

"Yessir."

He placed the bottles in the satchel, buckled it quickly and pulled himself up into the saddle. When the lieutenant gave the call to ride out, all eighteen horses broke into a slow canter. They passed lonely dirt roads, choosing to ride alongside them. The roads were pitted with exploded landmines. The men’s eyes scanned the bush ahead, searched the ground for chevron spoor. The bastards they were chasing had got wise. They used their knives to alter their boots, making their footprints harder to see in the sand. It didn’t help that the locals drove their fucking goats over the spoor as well.
God if you’re listening, please don’t let us find any spoor. Get me home alive.

As Rory prayed, he dug his finger into Charlie’s hair, feeling the muscles in his neck tense. The lather stung the open blisters. Sinele came up alongside him, and nodded towards Charlie, tapping the side of his head.

“Is he still mal?”

His mouth dry, Rory shook his head. Charlie hadn’t jerked the reins once. They rode alongside one another, their long shadows racing each other across the bush. In the distance, Rory could make out a fence, thornbush branches raggedly lashed together. He hoped Charlie would clear it. Sinele moved ahead of him, breaking away from the rest of the group. His horse just made the jump. This tak kraal stood higher than normal. The thorns, even from a distance, looked wicked. Rory dug his knees into Charlie’s side, making him gallop faster. As he felt Charlie’s front legs lift, he leaned forward feeling the saddle push into his chest, knocking the wind out of him. The thorns bit into his leg, and scratched Charlie but they’d cleared it. He turned the horse around, looking at the billowing dust cloud the platoon had left behind. It looked as if fire was falling from the clouds.

“Sometimes you look at that and just forget why you’re here.”

“Not long enough”

“What?”

“Never mind.”
Rory kicked the horse into a canter, and Joost followed. The platoon picked up the pace. Night would fall within the hour.

When the mopani was thick and the shadows long, the lieutenant stopped riding. The men got down from their horses and spread out, forming a large defensive circle. Slinging his rifle around, so it hung from his shoulder, resting across his back and freeing his hands, Rory walked into the middle. Some of the men had already tied up their horses. He decided to tether Charlie to a low hanging branch two metres away, making the knots tight. He couldn’t be kicked by any of the other horses that way. He then carefully removed two mortar shells from his belt and laid them in the sand with the others. There were twenty-two altogether. If they were attacked during the night, Gino would stand here and fire these shells out one after another, screaming into the darkness. These things might save them all. They might stop the bullets streaking like fireflies across the sky. He turned away and saw Sinele was setting up a canvas shelter. He was trying to stretch it taut between two trees, but the other side kept falling down. Rory grabbed the other end of the rope, and Sinele looked up at him and grinned. When they had pulled the canvas taut, Rory dropped to his knees and began to clear away the sticks and stones with his hands. He stood up, rubbing his hands together, trying to remove the ingrained dirt. He walked back towards Charlie, patting the horse down and removing the lather with a wet cloth. Charlie tossed his head and gave a loud snort. Rory dug into his pocket, and brought out his
second-to-last dog biscuit. He quickly removed the saddle, the two bags, the sleeping roll and numnah and returned to his spot. Putting his kit down, he shook out the numnah and then laid it down. One of the corners had folded over, so he bent over and flicked it into place. He grabbed the sleeping bag next and unrolled it, laying it atop the numnah.

"Rory, do you have a spare shirt?"

He nodded, reaching into his saddlebag and tossing it in Sinele's direction.

"Thanks."

"Pleasure"

Somewhere a hyena laughed, Rory shuddered.

"Why did you join, Ingwe?"

"I was eighteen." A pause. "It was either this, or an university. I didn't want to go to university."

Looking back, he couldn't see Sinele's face. He ran his hand through his hair, and continued.

"I was told the commies were on our borders. If I didn't fight, they'd overrun the country. Change everything. Kill everyone I love."

"I was told this too. I hate the gooks."

Sinele sat down on the edge of his sleeping mat, untying the laces of his boots and pulling them off his feet. Rory moved to sit beside him. As he sat down Sinele spoke again.

"We will be home tomorrow. To our normal lives."

"Ja."
Rory began to pull off his boots, not bothering with the laces while Sinele opened a bottle of water, and took a sip. Then lifting his foot off the ground, he poured water over it, brushing away the sand. Laying the rifle next to the sleeping bag, Rory crawled underneath the cover, unzipped the bag and got in. Resting his head on the saddle, he closed his eyes and listened to the sound of water falling to the ground.

In the early hours of the morning, he woke to the sound of rain.
Opening one eye, he turned his head and watched the drops fall, hitting the ground, splitting like shrapnel. He looked up at the canvas, which shook underneath the falling rain. Closing his eyes, he drifted back to sleep, telling himself he was safe, safe underneath the cover. He bolted upright at the hand on his shoulder. It was only Sinele. It was morning. The canvas was gone. It had stopped raining.
“We're riding out just now.”
Rory leant forward, rubbing his eyes when Sinele pushed a tin mug into his hand.
“Ngianbonga.”
Sinele nodded, folding the canvas and packing it into his saddlebag. It'd already dried. Rory drank the coffee quickly, and put his boots on.
They rode out ten minutes later. They came across another shona, but they did not stop, riding straight through. Rory could see Sinele out in front, his eyes intent on the ground, searching for spoor. They were a hour away from camp. The horses began to gallop. As they passed a large mopane tree, a kaleidoscope of leaves flew into the air. Looking
back, Rory saw the African monarchs hover, then float back down onto the tree. He turned to look ahead. Etale shimmered in and out of focus. They rode into camp twenty minutes later, and settled the horses. Rory cleaned and packed away his things quickly, and then went to find Joost to say goodbye. He came out of the tent, and ran towards the samil trucks, throwing his rucksack up to Sinele. He jumped into the back, and sat on his rucksack.

“We made it.”

The journey to Oshivelo didn’t take long. They pulled up to the station, and jumped out with their rucksacks. Sinele and Rory walked onto the platform and waited for the go-ahead to board the train. Sinele sat down while Rory paced. Neither of them saw the officer approaching.

“What the bloody hell are you doing sitting here? You can’t sit here. You board over there.”

“What’s wrong, sir?”

“I want you to explain to him”, he said, pointing back at Sinele, “that he cannot sit here. This is where the whites board the train, he must board it over there”. He pointed at the far end of the platform.

“But there are no signs.”

“I don’t give a fuck. He can’t sit here. Hurry up, the train is going to leave.”

Rory looked over the man’s shoulder; Sinele shook his head, bending down to pick up his rucksack. The officer turned to leave when Rory spoke.
“There is no difference between a lion and a leopard.”

“What you say, boykie?”

No answer.

“Get on the bloody train, soutpeil.”

“Yessir.”

The officer left, and Rory stared after him. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Leave it be, Ingle. Don’t risk your leave, or mine.”

“What bullshit.”

The bell began to ring.

“We must go now. I will see you again.”

Sinele turned and ran to the other end of the platform, his rucksack bouncing on his back. Rory stepped on to the train and found a seat. There were several other men in the compartment. White. Rory closed his eyes. He didn’t feel much like talking.

The next morning, Rory was sat on his rucksack at the side of the road, watching the traffic pass by. He’d been trying to hitch a ride the whole morning. A car pulled to the side of the road. Probably engine trouble. The window rolled down, and a white glove emerged, beckoning him over. He got up. There was a woman in the passenger seat. She looked as if she were out for a Sunday drive. The man driving leant over the console, and shouted through the window.

‘Where are you going, son?’

“Durban.”
"Well, you're in luck. We're off to visit the in-laws there. Get in the back."

"Thank you, sir."

He threw his rucksack in the back, and clambered in, closing the door firmly behind him.

"You've been up in Angola?"

"No, South West Africa. Near —"

"Keeping the reds at bay?"

"I think so."

'Good. Good. Lovie, did you pack my baggies?"

"Ja, they're in my beach bag."

"Good. I'm hoping to get some surfing in."

"I hope you're not going to go off and leave me with my mother."

"Honey, I can't just sit in that house. It's more than a man can—"

"Honey! I forgot to bring mom that honey that she likes."

"I'm sure she can get honey where she is."

"But not that honey. She'll be cross with me."

Rory looked out the window, feeling his eyes begin to close.

"You do know she's already cross with us for not staying with her"

"You told me to book the unit. You didn't want to stay with her."

"I know, but I didn't tell her that. I hope you asked for the unit we stayed in last time. I liked the kitchen in that one."

"I guess we'll just have to see."

"You forgot to ask, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."
“You don’t listen to a single thing I say.”

"Before I forget, I’ve invited my brother over for a braai tomorrow."

“You did what? You know I can’t stand that wife of his. She looks down her nose at me all the time. And their kids . . .”

“How do you think I feel around your family? I’ve had to listen to your grandmother tell me every bloody year for the last nine years how her maid keeps stealing her sugar. Sugar! Bob only ever talks about politics. I’d like one holiday where I can just forget about blacks and all the kak they cause.”

Rory closed his eyes, and pretended to sleep.

“Son, can we drop you off here? Son?”

Rory woke with a start, and looked outside. He was home.

“It’s not too far from here. Thanks, sir.”

He got out of the car, closed the door behind him and began to walk in the direction of Northway. Adjusting his rucksack as he walked, he saw a woman ahead. She was sitting on the ground next to a bench. A child was tied to her back, while another one, older, sat next to her. A police car pulled to the side of the road and the officer stepped out, walking across to the woman. His truncheon in his hand, he tapped the side of his thigh with it while holding out his other hand.

“Papers.”

She got up, and pulled them out. The young boy stood up, swaying slightly, as the officer glanced at the papers, shoving them back at her.

“You’re not supposed to be here. Move. Now.”
She turned, picking up her bundle and moved forward. As she passed, she cast her eyes down. Her cheeks glistened. The little boy looked at Rory, his eyes flickering to the pistol he wore at his waist. He quickly looked to the ground. The policeman stood there, his arms folded, watching them leave.

“She was sitting next to the white bench. She should know better.”

Rory looked at him. The policeman reached out, patting him on the shoulder.

“You’re also doing a good thing for our country. Keeping them in their place.”

The policeman walked away. The car door slammed, Rory remained standing there, looking at the bench. Whites only. He could feel his hands begin to shake.

“Hey. Is that you, Rory?”

He turned around, seeing a landie pulled to the side of the road, Greg in the driver’s seat. They’d been paired as centres for DHS in the last year of matric. They’d been good mates. Greg had gone to university.

Pietermaritzburg.

“It is you too! Get in. I’m meeting the guys for a game of touch, come with.”

“I have to go home first, they’re expecting me. I’ll play with you guys next time.”

“I’ll give you a lift then. C’mon.”
Rory passed his rucksack to Greg who tossed it in the backseat while he got in. Greg flicked the indicator, looking over his shoulder, waiting for someone to let him come out.

"Bloody Vaalies. Can't swim and can't drive for kak."

"Ja."

"At least the cherries aren't half bad, you should see the one I picked up last week. She's one good-looking chick, and she's here for all the whole summer."

He edged the car forward, pulling off quickly in front of an old bakkie. The driver blasted his horn, but Greg just laughed.

"You'll meet her tomorrow if you come to the beach but hands off."

Rory nodded, trying to smile as Greg spoke about his year at university and the summer ahead. He rolled down the window, and looked out. He asked Greg if he could turn up the radio. He hadn't heard it for a while he tried to explain. Greg looked at him, frowning but turned the volume up.

—*just one world but we live in different ones.*

"Good song."

"Ja, but I've heard it before. So, you were saying about this chick of yours". Rory reached forward, turning the radio off.

Greg grinned, drumming his hands on the steering wheel. Rory leaned back into the seat and listened, nodding

"Check you later."
Rory raised his hand in answer as Greg pulled out of the driveway.

Turning, he hitched his rucksack up higher on his shoulder and walked towards the door. He knocked and waited. The door opened. It was his mum. He felt her arms go around him, the damp of her costume and her wet hair.

"Oh, it's good to see you, my love."

He held her tighter. "It's good to see you too, mum." She pulled back, her hands resting on his shoulder and looked at him.

"Get your baggies on. We're all out back. The water's just lovely."

He followed her in, hugging her again before he walked to his old room. He could hear them outside. A splash. Shouting. Dropping his rucksack to the floor, he peeled off his shirt.
### Glossary of Afrikaans, Zulu and South African English

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ag man</td>
<td>‘Oh man’ (pronounced <em>akk man</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ag Man. Dis Lekker Innie Armie.</td>
<td>Afrikaans, translated loosely it means: ‘Oh man! It’s good to be in the army.’ It was one of the bush songs the soldiers were taught.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boet</td>
<td>Afrikaans for ‘brother’ or ‘comrade’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boykie</td>
<td>Afrikaans for ‘boy’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Braai</td>
<td>Barbeque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domkop</td>
<td>Afrikaans for ‘idiot’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>Durban High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chevron spoor</td>
<td>The ‘enemy’ wore boots with a sole that had a raised chevron shape. Trackers looked for the tell-tale ‘V’ sign in the sand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eina</td>
<td>Zulu for ‘ouch’ (pronounce <em>ah-nar</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jasslaik</td>
<td>An Afrikaans exclamation. (pronounced <em>Yuss-like</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kraal</td>
<td>Zulu for ‘house’</td>
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<td>Kak</td>
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<td>Inge</td>
<td>Zulu for ‘leopard’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mal</td>
<td>Afrikaans for ‘crazy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numnah</td>
<td>Horse blanket</td>
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<td>Ngiyabonga</td>
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<td>Term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoepol</td>
<td>Afrikaans for 'asshole'</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poep</td>
<td>Afrikaans for 'bastard'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roofie</td>
<td>New army recruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona</td>
<td>Shallow lake</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soutpiel</td>
<td>Afrikaans for 'Salt penis'. Army slang for South African of British origin, mostly used by Afrikaners. They were said to have one leg in Africa, the other in Britain, their penis dangling in the sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoor</td>
<td>Tracks, e.g. footprints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sproete</td>
<td>Afrikaans for 'freckles'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tak Kraal</td>
<td>Fence, made of thorn bushes. Typically found near kraals, Zulu houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikkiedrie</td>
<td>Genre of Afrikaans music.</td>
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