

The Waterhole

The steps were torturous. The backpack weighed on his shoulders and his mind fatigued as his feet carried him forward through the snow. The path was covered, leaving no response except for the footprints that followed behind him.

With each minute that passed his hope grew dimmer, the idea of survival fading as the snow fell before his eyes. The sun had gone down; he could feel the numbness in his toes spreading to the rest of his body. He thought about laying down, embracing the cold, giving in to nature. There would be no more pain, no more suffering. He could fall and not have to get up. No more commanders yelling to push on. Allowing his body to lie still and slowly be covered, erasing the rifle he carried and the symbols on his uniform.

He collapsed to one knee, head tucked into his body, when he looked up and saw a figure. It approached slowly, bundled in blankets, holding a lantern. Without saying a word, the figure guided him to a cabin two hundred feet ahead, a small beacon in the wilderness surrounded by darkness.

The stranger sat him down next to the fire. He could feel the warmth surround him, slowly suffocating the chills from the blizzard. As he looked into the flames, he couldn't help but feel that this was only a hallucination, a figment of his imagination. The flames danced and transformed before his eyes, forming shapes of a mother hugging her son, eyes full of terror as the gun trained down on them. Explosions surrounding towns, crumbled and destroyed to their foundations. He believed his life was flashing before his eyes and that darkness would close in, then he felt a hand touch his shoulder.

Steam slowly collected on his face, bringing him assuredly back to reality. He smelled spices—pepper and thyme—and gently raised the spoon to his mouth. The stew overwhelmed him with warmth and the tastes brought liveliness back into his soul. It had been months since he had enjoyed a meal, and anything

would suffice. Despite looking like a lackluster bowl of stew, it delivered newfound energy. His cheeks grew rosy, his stomach no longer rumbled, and he embraced the sense of comfort.

A sudden sense of fear enveloped him. It was habitual, nearly instinctual. *An antelope drinking from the waterhole.* “Complacency leads to death,” he could hear the bullhorn ringing in his ears. This was not a time to relax. This was a time to be alert. He put the bowl down, ensuring he wouldn’t gorge himself. He had run out of rations three days prior. Adjustments would be necessary, that was for certain.

He surveyed the room. A rifle was mounted on the wall above the fire. It looked service issued, but very worn. Most likely not in working condition. The stranger sat close to him. There seemed to be no one else in the home, he would have heard others by now.

The crocodile lurked beneath the surface of the water, waiting. The antelope was cautious, it knew drinking the water for too long would bring immediate death. As much as he needed to recoup and recover, he could not trust this stranger. It was only one act of goodwill, saving him from the storm. There could be no trust.

The stranger leaned over to the table and pulled out a cigar. He glanced back at the soldier, raising his eyebrows in offering. He accepted—*the antelope lapped at the water periodically. Never embracing too long of a drink*—and shared a light. They both leaned back, exhaling a puff of smoke, the soldier’s eyes never leaving the figure of the stranger.

The fire burned as the coals piled on top of each other. It provided the only light in the home, covering everyone and everything in its path with a malevolent, red tinge. A log collapsed and sparks flew. The silence was broken.

The stranger opened his jaw slowly, uttering an introduction. It offered no valuable information to the soldier, but it would have to do. Intel was scarce, and he knew that any bit of information could be beneficial in the future. Feeling compelled to make peace, he introduced himself and thanked the stranger for saving his life.

The stranger acknowledged him and sat with his thoughts. The soldier watched, silently, awaiting the next line of questioning. Interrogation was normal, he had been on both sides of it. *Waves rippled across the water, vibrations gently grazing the tongue. Two black orbs rose slowly from the depths.* He felt a sudden coldness from the stranger, as if he were not welcome. As if the stranger was biding his time, stalking from a distance and anticipating the moment to strike. The soldier sat steady, remaining calm. Tracking his thoughts, locating his exits. The stranger continued to observe, reaching down to rest his cigar.

Silence. The stranger grimaced with dissatisfaction and moved towards the hearth. He grabbed a log and centered it on the dying flames. The coals erupted in heat as he fanned the fire, and the log spontaneously caught. The flames danced higher than before, illuminating the room in a warm light. The soldier, entranced by the phenomenon, could not resist observing. Each flicker moved independently, but together formed an intricate set of motions, embracing a sequence of disorder.

He felt paralyzed, he could not compel his eyes to face the stranger. The glow was too embracing, too inviting. *The antelope closed its eyes, the desire to quench its thirst proved too hard to contain. Each lap of water brought upon the greatest relief and the greater possibility of death.* Fear filled his mind, yet it would not provoke any kind of reaction. Training had failed him. As much as he was taught to prey, he was left to be preyed upon.

The stranger stood up rapidly, examining the soldier. *The crocodile propelled forward, staying just below the surface. Approaching closer and closer, until it was within striking distance.* From the corner of his

eye, the soldier saw the hand raise. *The antelope froze from fear. It had stayed too long. Life would be determined entirely by the depths of the dark, beady eyes. Time stood still as the creatures awaited the natural end of this link between them.* The hairs on his neck stood up as the air rushed down his back. He closed his eyes, anticipating the end.

He felt the hand land on his back.

It stayed there. Lying gently on his uniform, as if to console his soul.

The driftwood bumped the antelope's nose and continued floating on top of the water. As it moved further away, the knots on the wood transformed back into eyes, ready to terrorize the next beast seeking refuge. After taking its final drink, the antelope stood firm and bounded back into the savannah.

The stranger began to speak.

Two kingdoms emanated from the valley between the mountains. As all things that start anew, the kingdoms grew slowly. In the early phases of development, the pillars of each society were established and agreed to, and communities promptly grew. With time, communities formed cities, cities formed states, and states formed the civilizations that would rule within the mountains. These kingdoms brought about inventions that inspired the greatest minds of the valley. The people learned to read and write, think critically, and slowly coalesced into an engine humming with innovation. Each invention brought them closer and closer to a utopia. Within these kingdoms, many were educated, few were poor, and nearly all were content.

But civilizations feed upon expansion and the kingdoms grew closer and closer to each other until time gave way to the creation of borders. The kingdoms, without land left to expand upon, maintained the

ground they had gained forcefully. It was the livelihood of the kingdom; the hum of innovation was felt directly through the earth that inspired growth from the beginning. If the land were lost, innovation would die, and civilization would crumble. The rulers grew fearful of these consequences, leaving them to begin the defense of their kingdoms.

Walls were built and lands were fortified. Security, not innovation, pressed civilization forward. “The pillars of society cannot be compromised by those who choose not to understand. If the pillars fail, the foundation has failed and society will crumble, devastating all the people upon the land,” the rulers decreed.

Expansion cannot be contained, and civilizations yearn to grow. The kingdoms, growing more resentful and hateful, decided that their own pillars must be founded in truth and invalidated all others. “All civilizations must adhere to our values to thrive, and the lands civilization is built upon must also follow those values.” Armies were raised, fueled by the burning passion of hatred grown between the kingdoms, demanding the people who did not live by their pillars to adapt or be slaughtered.

The armies clashed, confined by the mountains, gaining and losing territory to no avail as time continued on. The kingdoms, fearing loss and provoked by gains, devoted all resources into the military campaign.

Lost was all innovation set on affirming the pillars of society, those values faded during the war. With no one left to care for them, the pillars decayed. Hate filled them and slowly eroded the strength in their foundation, leaving hollow, twisted symbols reconceptualized to fulfill the needs for war.

Populations diminished, total war reigned, and all that was left was violence. Nearly everyone was poor, those who could find education only found propaganda, and all were distraught. The kingdoms suffered greatly, clinging to the fragments of civilization which was all but disappearing.

In the end, only the rulers of the kingdoms remained. The two stared across the border, seeing the carnage that was brought upon the land. Towns were razed, institutions destroyed, leaving only two humans among the ruins. They were no longer rulers, there was no one left to rule. The societies that were formerly thriving collapsed. There was no foundation. The pillars had been reduced to rubble. The humans, left with no hope, passed on. The age of the kingdoms had quickly faded into the mountains that surrounded them.

The man, removing his hand from the soldier's back, faced him, gripped his shoulders, and stared into his soul. The soldier focused on his eyes, forming a bond between them that was unbreakable. He saw the reflection of the fire, which began to transform. It showed the silhouettes of families, lost to the carnage of war. The annihilated buildings and houses lying in the wake of the forces of destruction. The images fused into a single tear drop that ran down the man's cheek, culminating into oblivion as it fell to the floor. The soldier felt the pain weighing on the man's shoulders, the absence of love in his life, as a consequence of men like him. He felt the misery that filled the man's thoughts, knowing he also stole those same emotions from victims that fell before his gun sights. The soldier collected his thoughts and remained still before the man, ultimately nodding his head in silence, acknowledging the tragedy in both of their lives.

The man stood up and seized his coat. He opened the door, leaving the wind to rush in and extinguish the fire. As the light from the coals began to fade, the man turned one last time and disappeared into the night.

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The soldier awoke the next day solemnly. The man had not returned, and thus he assumed he was gone forever. He prepared a fire, tending to it as the day progressed. Feeling not a burden but a new sense of responsibility, it felt abstract, still forming in his mind. This feeling continued for many days. He could not determine a way to carry out this new mission. It eluded him, slipping through the gears of each mechanically processed thought.

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Years had passed, and the soldier was ready to give up. The search had proved devoid of purpose, barren in any motive. He stood in the doorway, ready to press on, when he saw it.

A soldier, two hundred feet in front of him. On his knees, clinging to life as the cold penetrated his body. His purpose was clear. At once he pressed on through the snow, determined to save this man's life.