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THE HIPPO, THE IMPALA AND THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS *Sylvester 'Silvo' Motaln*

HIPPUS HAVE A FEARSOME REPUTATION. Grumpy, short-tempered and indiscriminately belligerent, they are said to be responsible for more deaths in Africa than any other large animal. But in the early summer of 2011, in the midst of a remarkable and gut-wrenching plight of an unlucky impala, we got to see another side to the hippopotamus – a scarcely believable altruism that flies in the face of their cantankerous reputation.

We were sitting in our car at Sunset Dam, just a stone's throw from Lower Sabie rest camp, admiring the hippos, crocodiles and birds when suddenly the dense bush to our right exploded into action. An impala ewe burst out of the thicket, pursued by a brute of a hyaena, and fled past us straight down towards the water's edge. It was a tragic blunder for the impala; with trees overhanging the water to its right, and a steep bank to its left, it was trapped on the shoreline. Its fate was sealed, and the hyaena moved in for the kill.

But this impala seemed malcontent with the natural order of the food chain. With no way out on the land, it realised that there was still one possible, albeit unlikely, escape route: straight into the water. Why it didn't just swim around the overhanging trees and get out the other side was beyond us all. Instead, it plunged into the water and began swimming towards the middle of the croc-infested dam.

'You've got to be joking,' exclaimed someone from one of the other cars as the impala paddled furiously, its head straining upwards, barely above the surface. We watched in horror as the crocodiles sunning themselves on the banks raised their bellies off the mud and slipped into the water in the way you only ever seem to see on television. The outcome was inevitable.

From the bank, the hyaena watched with interest.

As the impala reached the middle, so did a large crocodile. There was a splash and the impala seemed to rise up out of the water, exposing much of its upper torso, before the croc readjusted, grabbed the impala's neck and began to pull it under. It was an awfully cruel thing to witness; the impala had escaped the jaws of a hyaena only to land up in the jaws of a crocodile.

A semi-circle of hippos, submerged up to their eyes barely metres from the frothing attack, looked on dispassionately. It all seemed over for the impala, when suddenly something extraordinary happened. An enormous hippo – possibly the dominant male – broke ranks, surged through the water and viciously attacked the crocodile.

Realising that it had bigger problems on its hands than trying to drown its lunch, the crocodile let go of the impala, which immediately began swimming back towards the bank. There was a loud cheer from the growing crowd of incredulous onlookers parked up on the edge of the dam.

However, the hippo's work was not done. It had stopped the attack and sent off the crocodile, but what followed was so unexpected and so utterly extraordinary, if it were fiction it would stretch credibility to breaking point. The hippo swam quietly up behind the impala and began gently nudging it along through the water, lifting it from below whenever the impala floundered or began to sink, patiently escorting it all the way to the safety of the shallows. It was a display of altruism that was as touching as it was baffling. What possible benefit could a hippo reap from such an act of apparent kindness? And this from the most grouchy and ill-tempered animal in Africa.

With the impala safely on its legs again, waist-deep in the water, the hippo waited a moment and seemed to take a bow as it received its thanks from a grateful audience. Then it turned around and swam back to the middle of the dam.

Meanwhile, the impala staggered forward a little, to within four or five metres from dry land. With the water barely reaching its knees, it stood for a while, rebuilding its strength. Incredibly, there was not a spot of blood on its neck or torso. It appeared to have emerged from its encounter with the crocodile unscathed.

But, like something from the Book of Job, the biblical misfortune continued to rain down on the poor impala. We hadn't been the only ones watching the remarkable rescue: the hyaena that had chased the impala into the water in the first place had been keeping a keen eye on proceedings too, and had scuttled around the side of the dam to greet the impala head-on.

An uneasy standoff ensued. For what seemed like an eternity, the impala stood bolt upright, frozen in the shallows, and stared across the few metres of water at the waiting hyaena. As time passed we could only speculate how this would play out. The hyaena was clearly unwilling to enter the shallows and get its feet wet – even when the impala edged forward to within a body's length from the shore. The impala was not so foolish as to make a dash for it. Would it come down to which animal was most patient? Would we return tomorrow and find them exactly as we left them, still locked in a stalemate?

The urge to somehow place myself between the two and allow the impala to scamper out of the water and away into the bush was so strong, but this was nature at its most raw. All we could do was watch sadly and wait in hope that perhaps the impala would get one final chance – but it never came. The impala's fate was sealed by another crocodile emerging unexpectedly from the depths. It grabbed the impala violently from the rear, before dragging it into deeper water.

Earlier, the dominant hippo had given the impala a second chance at life, but there was no third chance this time – and no altruistic intervention. The hippos barely noticed, and the water birds didn't even glance up. Scrambling for my camera, I managed to capture one last photo of the impala's muzzle, gasping its final breath, before it slipped beneath the surface.

The extraordinary spectacle was over and the natural order of things resumed. The hyaena skulked off into the bush to find a less plucky meal, the hippos grunted and grumbled in the depths and the water birds huddled down as the afternoon faded. But for maybe an hour afterwards, the successful crocodile paraded around the dam with the dead impala, holding aloft its trophy, as if declaring its victory over disorder.