

JUSTIN
BRYANT

A zebra is shown in profile, walking through a field of tall green grass. In the background, there is a savanna landscape with a few trees and a small white bird perched on a branch. A red metal cage structure is visible in the foreground, partially obscuring the background. The title 'SEASON OF ASH' is overlaid on the image in a bold, metallic font.

**SEASON
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction and is not meant to accurately portray any actual historical events, places, or persons. All characters are products of the author's imagination. Dialogue in Zulu has been rendered into idiomatic English. In some cases, this includes the use of English words that have no direct Zulu translation.



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June 1976

The morning didn't feel especially cold, but David Themba pulled on an extra sweater and a tight woolen cap. He left his house early. Smoke from morning fires streamed from the listing shanties bunched together on the face of an ugly orange hill. He saw other children on their way to Sekano-Ntoane, his school. David's small body shook with excitement and a vague sense of dread. It was June 16, 1976, and he thought something important was going to happen.

"Where are we meeting them?" Nthato asked him in front of the school.

"Vilikazi Street, outside Phefeni Junior. They might be there already."

"Will Stephen be there?"

"Yeah! All the schools, all the students will be. Stephen is the student leader at Phefeni," David said, surging with pride at the thought of his older brother. "Stephen says this madness about Afrikaans has gone far enough."

In front of the school the students milled in distinct

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groups before congregating, when some began singing "Amandla, awethu, power is ours!" Nthato held up a scrawled sign that read THE BLACK NATION IS NOT A PLACE FOR IMPURITIES! AFRIKAANS STINKS! David stepped to the front of the children and cried, "Now on to Phefeni!" Teachers stood by forlornly as the students—perhaps as many as four hundred—rushed into the street.

They sang and danced as they moved through Soweto, and adults came from their shanties to smile curiously at them. When they reached Vilikazi Street, David blinked in amazement: here were several hundred more students, maybe even a thousand, many of them from the high schools. They sang, carrying sticks and makeshift clubs. They shouted, they saluted with the Black Power fist. David stood on his toes, searching for Stephen. He found him leading a cry of "Power! Power!" The high school students looked massive. While David and his young friends sang joyously, the shouts of the older students were filled with real anger.

"Tebello says the police and soldiers will come," Nthato shouted over the din.

David grimaced. "Yes, probably."

The throng marched on, a gyrating musical mass, swelling as students joined from Naledi and Molapo. David saw the first police, a small group cradling guns, outside Molapo Junior School. In front of Orlando West High School more police arrived in vans and armored trucks. They hastened into line, leading bristling German shepherds that blocked the road. David was near the front and didn't know it, but over three thousand students had massed behind him. A police lieutenant stepped in front of the dogs and in a strong Afrikaner accent said, "This is an illegal gathering!"

The students at the front laughed and jeered at him. He glared and said again, "This is an illegal gathering! Go home! Return to your schools!"

Someone grabbed David by the arm. "Time for you to go," Stephen said, looming over him. "This could be trouble." David nodded and moved back into the crowd. The students taunted the police, particularly the black officers,

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with cries of “Black power!” They sang freedom songs and chanted bawdy schoolyard rhymes, even as more and more police trucks and riot squads, unseen by the students, flocked behind the column of officers in front.

David didn’t see who threw the first stone. Suddenly the students scattered, sprinting to the side of the road to pick up rocks. Faint popping sounds rang out. Some students, who had rocks, hurled them at the police, but as more shots cracked through the dry air, and it became clear that the police were firing directly into the crowd, the students began to run. David could smell the metallic smoke. He leapt over a muddy ditch and ran behind Orlando High. The shots came faster. A police dog broke free and ran into the center of the crowd, barking and snapping at the heels of fleeing students. A large high school boy kicked the dog in the ribs and it howled in pain, then turned on the boy and tore at his leg.

The gunfire ceased. Most of the students fled to safety, but many were staggering in the street, wounded by bullets or police clubs, and some stood wailing over fallen bodies. The police returned to their vehicles and abruptly left.

David wandered into the street in front of the school. Right away he could see it was bad. At his feet was a boy, probably ten years old, like him. He didn’t recognize him. Blood had flowed from a bullet wound in his chest, but already the flow had thickened and stopped, and he was dead. David bypassed him and looked for Stephen. People gathered around the wounded and the dead. David rushed from group to group, asking for his brother, fearing the worst. But there was Stephen, organizing the panicky students, instructing them to carry the wounded to the clinic at Phefeni.

“Stephen, what happened?” David wailed.

Stephen’s hands and shirt were smeared with blood. He hurried to another fallen body. David followed.

“Stephen! It was just a protest!”

“That’s enough,” Stephen said. “People are hurt. Help me or get out of the way.”

David helped his brother carry the wounded to the clinic. They walked home afterwards, sneaking through alleys and

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backyards as enraged students looted and torched government cars and buildings. Riot trucks swept through the area, arresting anyone they got their hands on. Stephen and David hid every time a truck passed. David continued to sputter in anger and frustration.

"Let me tell you something, David," Stephen finally said. "This is just the beginning. First the police come to arrest people at night in their homes. Now they shoot at us in the streets. Soweto is going up in flames. Next is Alexandra, then the rest of it. Watch your ass from now on."

David nodded.

"They hate us and they're terrified of us. They're terrified of our faces, our numbers, the way we look, and our ideas. They arrested Mandela. They arrested Sisulu. They banned Steve Biko. Now they shoot us in broad daylight, and they don't care what we say or what the foreign newspapers say."

David shook his head. They left the fires and fighting behind and walked down dark streets, past shanties lit by paraffin lamps. David hurried to keep pace with his brother's long stride. "My school is burning, my friends are bleeding. Yours, too. People died today. We'll probably never know how many." He paused in front of the remains of a shanty hut, burnt earlier that day. "I know you're only ten years old, David, but your days as a child are over."

Stephen wiped a finger across the sooty tin. It was still warm.

"Over. Just like that . . ."

1

The drought had lasted as long as Bornwell could remember, and even the Olifants River had been reduced to little more than a silty trough spilling across the red rocks of the low veld. Bornwell spent one or two days each week attending to the boreholes, artificial ponds that sustained the wildlife of the Umhlaba Lodge region. It was difficult work. The valves of the pump houses were old and hard to turn, and many of them were labeled incorrectly, so, after investing great effort, he often found that he was draining rather than filling. There was no shelter from the sun at the boreholes, and in the middle of the day the temperature rose above 120 degrees. It was work the veteran rangers avoided, so it was left for Bornwell, a trainee.

Bornwell enjoyed working at the boreholes. As an apprentice, he was always being instructed and evaluated, and he accepted this. All the same, it was nice to be alone sometimes. He usually headed to the boreholes in the early afternoon and returned after sunset. The drive back to the

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lodge was the time he liked best, when the evening breezes dissipated the heat and the stars quivered to life above the Lebombo Mountains. On these drives, his spotlight sometimes picked out the twisted horns of a giant kudu or one of the elusive leopards that lived in the riverine bush near the lodge. If no further duties awaited him, he would linger outside the gate, his hands dry and raw from the wind that turned frigid as soon as night came, until hunger or drowsiness hastened his return.

Even out here in the bush, Bornwell knew change was coming. People had been talking about it even before Mandela had been released. He hoped the changes would mean a better life for his people in the cities and towns, as long as nothing changed in the bush. He wasn't naïve; he knew Africa had her problems, knew he was fortunate to live far away from them, in a wilderness paradise. He was lucky — and he knew that meant he had a lot to lose.



Alex Stanzis got lost all the time, even at home in Miami. His sense of direction was abysmal, he never paid attention to landmarks, and he refused to ask for directions. So he got lost.

When South Africa began emerging as a viable market in the early 1990s, Alex arranged an extended sales trip to exploit the burgeoning demand for the latest business software. Economic sanctions had made many of the most popular programs and operating systems hard to come by, but with the sanctions recently lifted, Alex wanted to be among the first software salesmen to visit this promising new territory.

After three years of intermittent planning, he finally went, but the trip was a disaster. As it happened, almost all of the companies he visited had already acquired the major software through the black market. He didn't even come close to covering the cost of his trip. It was the first time he had failed so completely, and the first time is always the

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worst, when the veil of invincibility is shattered beyond repair. He was only thirty-three, but he saw a vision of his future, replete with more catastrophes, and abruptly he felt old. He was angry, he was confused, and he wanted to go home. He would have canceled the short safari he'd booked had he not paid for it in advance. He had reservations for a four-night stay at Umhlaba Lodge, an exclusive safari preserve in the wilds of the Eastern Transvaal, bordering the Kruger National Park. He expected it to be well worth the \$400 a night it cost him.

As he drove across the eastern landscape, twisting through rolling banana plantations framed by distant mineral mines, he dwelt on his recent disastrous sales presentations, remembering the surprise on the faces of the executives who, one after another, told him, "We're already using that application. Have been for months." He did all he could from that point on, and only his diligence and resourcefulness kept the trip from being even worse. He made a few sales, but it was still bad.

Umhlaba Lodge had faxed an excellent map to his Johannesburg hotel. Had they not, Alex certainly would have become lost, preoccupied as he was during the five-hour drive. He found the final dirt-road turnoff to the lodge and bumped along the rocky path for an hour. Boulders, rocks, and great clumps of weeds lined the road, obscuring his view of the bush veld beyond. He passed through the fenced gate of the preserve, but once inside, the only animal he saw was a single slim impala standing in the shade of a sausage tree. He arrived at the lodge at four o'clock. It was mid-March; summer was waning in most of South Africa, but the Umhlaba afternoon was grievously hot and dry. Johannesburg, with its 6,000-foot elevation and mild climate, offered no preparation for the heat that lashed into him as soon as he stepped from his car. A tall, thin young man with the darkest skin Alex had ever seen greeted him.

"Good afternoon, sir, and welcome to Umhlaba Lodge. My name is Bornwell Malaba. You must be Mr. Stanzis?"

"Call me Alex. Holy freakin' cats, it's hot! Is it always this hot?"

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"Yes, I suppose so. It's still summer. Don't worry, it cools down at night. Please leave your bags, I'll have them picked up."

Bornwell walked Alex to his rondavel, a round, thatch-roofed hut, and left him there. Alex found the vents of the rondavel's air conditioner pointed straight up at the ceiling. He fiddled unsuccessfully with the vents before napping for an hour, after which he walked outside to have a look at the camp.

By five o'clock the heat had subsided ever so slightly. The camp, a cluster of a dozen rondavels and the large A-frame main hall, hunkered under a canopy of acacia and camelthorn trees. The ground under Alex's boots, hard, sandy basalt, had recently been raked. Footpaths lined with smooth river rocks curved through the flat, shady grounds. He saw only two other people, an older couple lounging alongside a small swimming pool. Bornwell walked past, and Alex called to him.

"There's something wrong with my air conditioner. It blows the air straight up. I need it to blow down, where I am."

"Yes sir, I'll have it fixed."

"Where is everyone? This place is deserted."

"Most of the guests are on a game drive."

"Any women here?" Alex said.

"Yes, some women."

"That's something, at least." Alex pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. "So what are you, the bellboy here?"

Bornwell laughed. "No sir, I'm an apprentice ranger. In one more year I'll be a fully qualified ranger."

Alex looked him up and down. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Wow, you look like a kid – no offense. How long have you been here?"

Before Bornwell could answer, Alex saw what looked like a large, ungainly pig with a horse's head moving through the dense scrub at the edge of camp. "What the hell is that, a warthog?"

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"Yes sir, you'll see a lot of them. They come into camp every day. Hyenas, too, sometimes, at night. Once or twice a month, there's an elephant that comes right up to the rondavels."

"Don't you have fences to keep them out?"

"No sir, no fences. We're all-natural here."

"What about lions? Don't they come into camp and, you know, eat people?"

"No sir, I've seen lions near camp, and there's a leopard who lives close, by the river. But we have a few Rhodesian ridgebacks—big dogs—that the lions and leopards fear. The dogs take care of the camp."

Four open-topped Land Rovers emerged from the bush as Bornwell spoke. They churned into the center of camp, bringing with them an immense cloak of dust. Their camera-toting occupants spilled out and trailed away in twos and threes toward the rondavels. Alex scanned the group before it dispersed. He counted twenty-five guests beside himself and the old couple at the pool. Most were older couples, severely overdressed in khaki, but he quickly noticed two young women who appeared to be traveling together.

The two girls walked from the Rover to a bench, where they sat in animated discussion. "Excuse me there, uh, Bornwell. Gotta run. You'll have the AC fixed, right?"

"Yes sir."

"Thanks," he said, without looking back. He walked to where the girls sat. "You just came from a game drive? How was it?"

"It was excellent," one said with an English accent.

"We saw the Big Five, all in the first hour," said her friend.

"Ah, let me guess—Scousers!" Alex said.

"That's right! How did you recognize the accent?"

"I lived in England for six months after college. I was in London for a few weeks, but then I was in Liverpool the rest of the time."

"Why Liverpool? Most people do anything they can to avoid it."

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“Ah, I met a woman in London, she was from Liverpool, so we went back there.”

The young women introduced themselves: Anna and Teri. They worked together at a hospital in Liverpool, Anna as a senior administrator (“I write memos all day”) and Teri as a head nurse. After the three made plans to meet for dinner, the girls returned to their rondavel to wash off the icing of dust they’d acquired during the drive. Alex sat alone on the bench, forcibly attempting to acclimate to the heat. The empty Land Rovers ticked and cooled in the shade. The setting sun streamed through the trees and scattered its dappled light across the beaten vehicles. At the tree line, above the manicured grass and raked earth, the dry bush stirred with the measured breezes of evening, and, well past the trees, the heaving brown land hummed with the beating hooves and ragged claws of the wild things that lived beyond.

3

The guests took dinner in the boma, a round, reed-walled enclosure the size of a tennis court, open to the sky. The tables were arranged in a ring along the inside of the wall. An intimidating bonfire popped and groaned from the middle, providing light and much-needed warmth. The dramatic temperature drop following sunset took Alex unawares, and he shivered through his appetizer before caving in and fetching his jacket. The elderly couple from the pool sat to his right, Anna and Teri to his left, describing their game drive.

“We saw dozens of giraffes, too. Giraffe – giraffes – is the plural ‘giraffe’ or ‘giraffes’?” Anna said.

“It’s ‘giraffes,’ with an ‘s,’ isn’t it?” Teri said.

“Anyway – did you know, Alex, that lions sleep up to twenty hours a day?”

“She’s an expert now,” Teri said.

“And that giraffessssssss sleep for just a few minutes a day?”

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"I didn't know that. I can't wait to get out there myself," he said, forcing enthusiasm he didn't really feel.

Alex thought Anna and Teri were both attractive, but not so pretty as to be disarming or intimidating. They were both short—Anna particularly so—and wore their hair in the current English women's fashion, that is, indistinguishable from the current English men's fashion. Neither seemed as remotely body-conscious as the women Alex knew in Miami, and he found it refreshing. No cosmetic surgery, no eating disorders, no colored contact lenses. He thought they would be fun to hang out with.

After they finished eating, the head ranger, a man with the physique of a rugby player with a third-grader strapped to his chest, dragged a chair next to the fire and took a seat. He introduced himself as Franz van der Veen and welcomed the newcomers—eight other people besides Alex had arrived that day.

"For you newcomers, let me explain a few things," Franz said. "First of all, as you know, we have no fences here. Don't leave your rondavel once you've turned in for the night. Anything you think you need outside can wait until morning. And don't wander too far from the footpaths at any time. Most animals stay away from camp. Don't bother the ones that do come here, like the warthogs, impalas, and baboons. Especially the baboons—they can be dangerous. A thirty-pound baboon would give me a pretty good fight, and I'm bigger than any of you. Whatever you do, don't feed any of the animals. You'll be signing their death warrant if you do, because they'll start hanging around expecting food, pestering people and becoming aggressive. When that happens, we shoot them. We have no other choice."

Franz's soupy, guttural accent, the English of the Afrikaner, was vaguely similar to an Australian accent, but without the twang on vowel sounds. For Franz and other Afrikaners, English was a second language, learned only out of necessity and used as infrequently as possible.

"When we go on game drives, don't stick your arms out the sides. On walks, it's very important that you don't talk. It's for your own safety. If you have a question or need to

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get your ranger's attention, snap your fingers or whistle. Walk in a single file and do not fall behind. Your ranger will remind you of those and other rules when you go out. Sounds a little restrictive, I know, but this isn't a zoo, folks. You have to be careful out here. Any questions?"

Nobody had any. "Okay. Let's meet at the Landies in ten minutes. Tonight we'll go out for two or three hours. Wear a jacket and be generous with the mosquito repellent. For all the lions and snakes out here, malaria is by far the biggest threat."

Most of the group went directly to the Land Rovers. Alex went to his rondavel to get his camera and brush his teeth. On the table next to his bed was a brochure outlining some of the animals they were likely to see on game drives. He thumbed through it until a knock on his door startled him.

"Mr. Stanzis?"

"Yeah?"

"It's time to go, sir. The others are waiting."

"Franz said ten minutes. It hasn't even been five."

"It's been fifteen minutes, in any case."

"Really? Okay, hang on." He grabbed his camera and followed Bornwell to the Rovers. Two had already left. The remaining one idled roughly. There was one seat open for Alex. He cursed himself when he saw Anna and Teri had left in one of the other vehicles.

They bounced along a dirt road, leaving the bobbing lanterns of camp behind. Franz drove in the right-hand seat, with Bornwell marshaling a spotlight from the left. The young man leaned forward, flashing the beam across open patches of veld and into creases in thick bush. He smiled and leaned into the frigid air.

Bush time was never routine to Bornwell. He'd come a long way to be here, having made the improbable move from his childhood home of Izolo, an impoverished shantytown in Soweto, to a career in the bush. It was Franz's policy to employ mostly local people, the majority of whom came from the villages and farms around Kruger Park. Bornwell's city-boy advantage was that he had learned English at a young age. The local teenagers worked at the

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lodge as dishwashers or garden boys. Bornwell was isolated from them by his relatively lofty standing. Conversely, the rangers treated him politely enough, but they never included him in their card games or drinking sessions, because they thought he was too young. That he neither drank nor cared for cards mattered little; he got lonely. He enjoyed fraternizing with the guests and learning about where they were from, but they were always leaving – often without finding time to say good-bye.

Trying as it was, this lack of companionship served as a boon to his career. He had little choice but to spend much of his free time studying. Beyond the obvious, such as animal and plant identification, tracking, and being a good shot in a pinch, a professional ranger must demonstrate good off-road driving skills, fluency in native languages such as Zulu, Tswana, Xhosa, and Shangaan, rudimentary first aid, and, perhaps most important, an ability to socialize comfortably with wealthy foreign guests.

Even if he excelled in all these areas, Bornwell knew only too well that there was no guarantee Franz would employ him as a full ranger when he completed his training. At present, Franz had all the rangers he needed. If there was no job for Bornwell – well then, he would have to go back to Izolo. Back to city life.

The Rover trundled across the dark veld for ten minutes before Bornwell tapped Franz on the shoulder. The big man braked to a stop, took the spotlight from Bornwell, and probed into the thicket of mopane scrub where the young man gestured. A pair of radiant green eyes appeared briefly, then receded into the dark. Because they reflected directly back to the spotlight, only Bornwell and Franz had seen the disembodied eyes.

“What do we have?” Franz said.

“It was bushbuck.”

“Just one?”

“No, there were others behind the tortillas tree.”

Franz handed back the light. Bornwell found the bushbucks briefly, giving the guests their first look until the shy animals disappeared into the dark. Franz coaxed the Rover’s

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abused gearbox into first. He drove slowly into the night. Bornwell's light occasionally picked out fleeing impalas and warthogs, but over an hour had passed since they entered the bush, and they still hadn't seen anything dramatic. Franz knew wealthy tourists expected to see big game immediately, and usually the night drives afforded them the best opportunity. He called the other rangers on his two-way radio and spoke in Afrikaans: "Anybody have anything?"

"Ahoy, cuzzie. It's quiet tonight," Peter reported.

"How are your bunch holding up?"

"Oh, they don't seem too bothered. We saw a few hyena right off the top, so that seems to be holding them over."

"Well, we haven't seen anything, and my bunch are grousing a little," Franz said. "I've got the Yanks."

"Ya, I noticed that."

"What about you, Hennie? You out there?"

"Ya, Franz. I'm at Eltskopdam, and it's quiet here, too. This English fellow I've got says the England-Australia one-day test match is on M-Net at eleven tonight."

"Ya, we'll watch it, but don't come rushing in yet. Keep them out there until they get cold, so they'll want to come in even if we don't see much."

"I will. It's just one of those nights."

"That's all right for you, Hennie. You've got the good-looking English birds," Peter said.

"Ya, cuzzie, and now I'm going to drive them to the darkest place I can find! See you at ten or so."

Bornwell gamely continued to flash his spotlight about. They had nights like this every few weeks, when the bush seemed dormant. Perhaps the lions were hunting on the slopes of the Mbari Hills three miles to the east, and the hyenas had found a carcass on the other side of the Crocodile River. Or the darkness might simply have cloaked the animals, which even then were watching them as they drove past.

A drowsy wind sloughed through the ebony and sausage trees, masking the scuffling of vervet monkeys in the branches. Franz stopped the Rover at the crest of a modest hill. He turned off the engine and the lights.

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"If you sit in one spot, sometimes the game will come to you," he whispered.

They sat in silence for five minutes. Bornwell thought he sensed something coming close—he would not have been able to say why or how, whether he heard or smelled or saw something; only that he thought something was moving near them. But just as he was about to turn on his light, one of the guests burst into a sneezing fit. He released half a dozen violent microbursts, then blustered, "Sorry, sorry." Franz and Bornwell looked at each other and laughed. "Bang goes that," Franz said in Zulu.

Bornwell was sorry the guests wouldn't be seeing any game, but he was more than happy to lean back and watch the stars as they shifted across the dome of sky. Out here, unfettered by city lights or smog, they shone with an absurdly incandescent glow. Satellites streamed overhead in crisscrossing patterns, three or four visible at once in orbital freefall. The young boys who worked in the kitchen had a Zulu word for them that meant "the shooting stars that move very fast and never burn out." The Southern Cross, barely distinguishable from its background of mottled stars, trailed slowly but perceptibly above the haggard, grasping tree line. Meteors flashed every few minutes, trailing white sparklers as they burned through the atmosphere. Behind all of this lay a thick band of the Milky Way, arching across the sky like a tapestry of diamond dust.

Twenty minutes passed. Bornwell rubbed his arms against the cool breeze. Franz looked at him and nodded, then interrupted the group reverie when he quietly said, "Well folks, nothing doing. We get nights like this now and then, but don't worry. We'll see plenty tomorrow."

It wasn't too soon for Alex. He'd been genuinely excited about seeing lions, but as the night wore on and it became apparent none were to be seen, he wanted to get back to the little bar for a beer and, he hoped, a chat with Anna and Teri. As they drove back to camp, he began daydreaming about how he might yet salvage his trip.