**CHAPTER FOUR**

784 words

**ZAMBEZI**

A week after David approached Joseph in early September it was a full moon and the eerie almost other worldly silver light gave the landscape an almost lunar feel. The bushes and trees caste sharp shadows, while the moon and stars looked down on Earth from their lofty perches. The sounds too added to the magic as the creatures of the bush spoke to the heavens while they went about their night’s business.

The male pangolin was low to the ground and so caste no shadow as he explored the night in his search for ants and termites. In contrast the termite mound caste a gothic castle like shadow as it stood waiting for his arrival.

On the human clock it was just after midnight and he had left his shallow burrow three hours ago at the start of his nightly feeding expedition. The full moon, stars, and cloudless sky had created special bright conditions, and a human would almost have been able to read a newspaper. However, the unusually light night was of no special interest or advantage to him because Temmincks ground pangolins, and their cousins in other pangolin species have very poor eyesight and hearing. In contrast they possess an extraordinary sense of smell and it was this that guided him on his food patrol.

His ancestors had originated around 87 million years ago and moved into the African continent about 40 million years ago. His scale covered body gave him an unusual almost prehistoric look.

He had reached the termite mound and he used his powerful front claws to dig into it, and then probed the insect tunnels with his tongue. Various ant species were his normal and preferred diet, but tonight he was hungry, and in this feeding foray his initial selection

was termites for the food bulk they represented. Sticky saliva covered the surface of his tongue, and every time he withdrew it

from a tunnel it came back into his mouth coated with termites trapped on his tongue’s sticky surface. He fed at the termite mound for less than three minutes, and by the time he left the gothic castle had, in part, been reduced to sandy rubble. Pangolins don’t have teeth so he couldn’t chew his food as such, but sand trapped on his tongue helped his powerful mouth in the mastication process. Sand and small stones in his stomach further helped him grind his food. He had tightly constricted his ears and nostrils to keep out the insects that were ever present around his head while he was feeding.

 \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

He wandered the savannah surprisingly fast as he switched his search back from termites to the more usual ants. He stopped frequently, collected ants, and then his long ant coated tongue disappeared down his throat. He was just over nine years old, and now lived only a few kilometres away from where he had been born in southern Zimbabwe only a short distance north of its border with South Africa.

This wild animal would soon be subjected to life threatening dramas, stress and trauma, and his life would lie in the balance. Unaware of the struggle to come, he went about his nightly feed as his species had done for tens of millions of years.

Several hundred kilometres to the south outside Pretoria in South Africa, the traffic fought its noisy way past the Kolonnade Shopping Mall on Zambezi drive. Within two weeks the pangolin would have been named ‘Zambezi’ after the street in which he would find himself being traded by human criminals. For now, the moonlight and the wind were his friends, and as the moonlight lost its battle with the rising sun, he made his way back to the burrow where he would sleep, rest, and lay up for the day. He would rest in the expectation of a similar feeding expedition the next night. He

couldn’t know that by then he would have been captured and would lie in an old sports bag more frightened than he had ever been in his life before.

Zambezi’s life would take a dangerous, unwelcome, and dramatic turn when his human captors placed him in the trafficking pipeline which led to consumers in a far-off continent. Within a matter of months of his capture the biggest news in the world would be a virus which started infecting and killing humans in China. Within weeks of the virus emerging the word ‘pangolin’ would be on the lips of a large part of the world’s population. People all over the world who didn’t even know what a pangolin was, or what one looked like, suddenly developed an interest in Zambezi’s group of species.