



# REQUIEM FOR A RHINO

**Somehow, *Anna Merz* has to come to terms with the end of a chapter in her life. But the tragedy that has befallen the orphan rhino she raised to a life back in the wild can only strengthen her resolve to save *Samia's* species.**

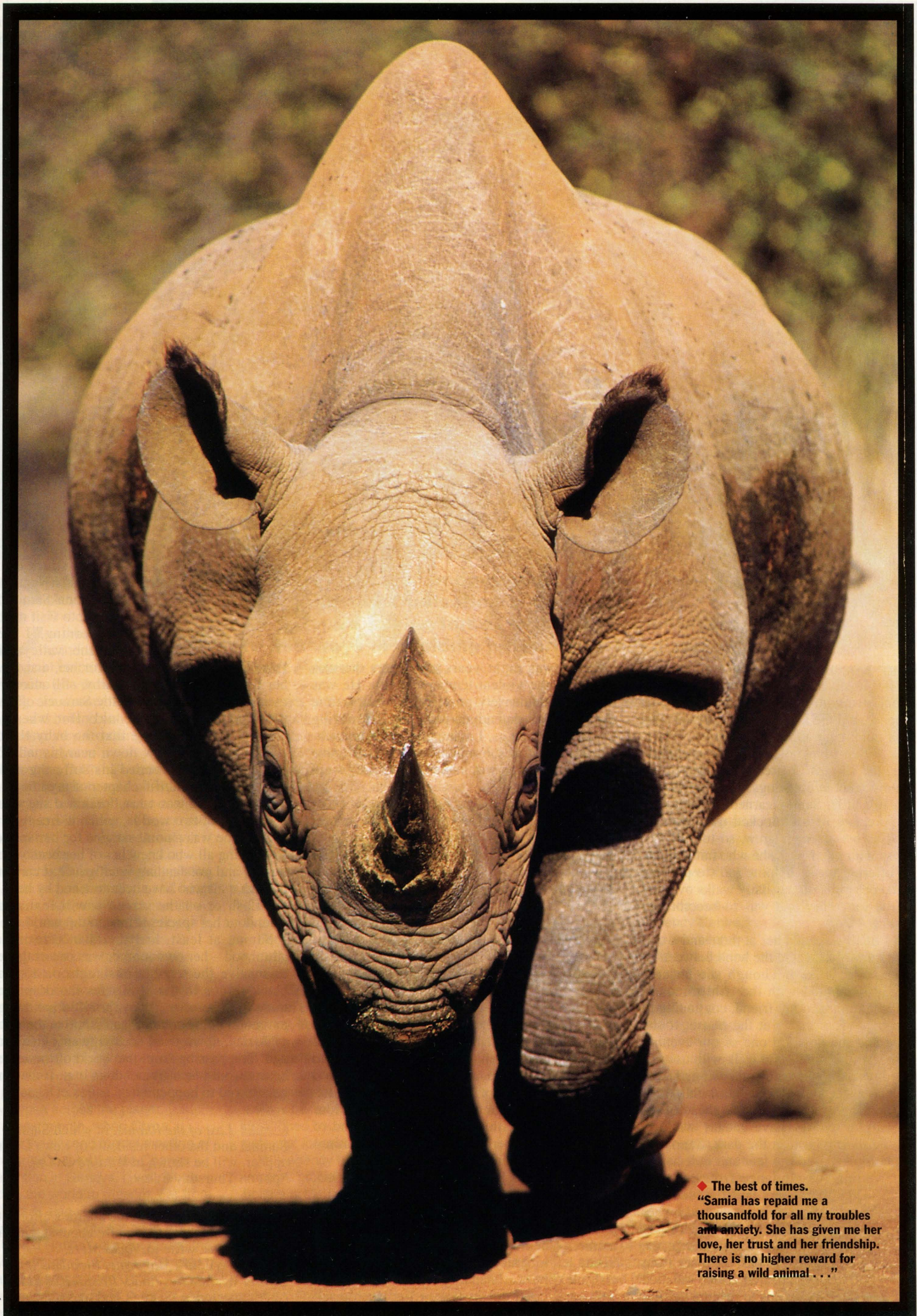
**S**amia and her baby are dead. Both dead. Ten days now, and still I can neither accept nor bear it. I think my heart is broken, as are their backs. After some sort of contretemps in the middle of the night with her mate Kenu, she went over a cliff in the valley to the north and died instantly. Her seven-month-old baby Samuel was still alive when I found them the next morning. I didn't realise the extent of his injuries and sent frantic messages to Ian to help me move him, and to Kibor to buy baby food. Then Ian and Charlie came and said his back was broken, and Ian shot him.

The next day the game warden from the Kenya Wildlife Service came to dehorn her – to prevent her carcass attracting poachers. Then Francis had them laid side by side, and I said good-bye and covered them with a sackful of bougainvillea.

Now, at home, with the wind in the north, I can smell them sometimes – she whose breath was always so sweet. I have lived my life with animals and have hand-raised many, but my relationship with Samia was unique. Between us there existed a love, a trust, a mutual reaching out for understanding. I never tried to discipline her or hold her – she lived as a wild rhino, as part of the local community. Yet, of her own free will, she kept alive the bond between us.

Samia's mother Solio was pregnant when she arrived here at the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary, in October 1984. The nearby Solio reserve (also in Central Kenya) had had the most fantastic success breeding both black and white rhinos, and Solio was one of three black rhino cows they sent us in that first year of the sanctuary's operation (see 'Big Little Ears', November 1994).

Solio had abandoned Samia as soon as she was born, and so the tiny calf knew no mother but me. Because she never received any colostrum from her mother's milk, her digestion did not work properly, and for months she suffered from violent bouts of diarrhoea and dehydration. She also suffered from an ►



◆ The best of times.  
"Samia has repaid me a thousandfold for all my troubles and anxiety. She has given me her love, her trust and her friendship. There is no higher reward for raising a wild animal . . ."

◆ Son and heir. Ten years on, the living testimony to the success of Anna Merz's rearing of Samia was baby Samuel. But, for their species, that line now leads nowhere.



Pauline and Jack Bellamy

inability to regulate her body temperature. Raising her involved a series of crises, but with each one surmounted, the bond between us strengthened and the love between us grew. She was both intelligent and intuitive in her behaviour to a degree I have met in no other animal, including the chimps I reared in Ghana so long ago and my innumerable dogs.

When still little, Samia learned that I did not really appreciate being knocked over, even in play, and as her strength grew, so too did her gentleness with me. It was she who initiated the ploy of offering me a 'helping tail' to pull me up the steeper trails on our daily walks over the part of the sanctuary that was to become her home range.

When I finally weaned her at three and a half years, I naturally expected the bond between us to loosen. It never did. Though she became completely integrated with the wild rhinos in the area, she remained my friend, continuing to make regular visits to me at the house. If she heard me and the dogs on one of our evening walks, she would join us and walk with us as in the old days. On one such occasion, I was caught out – as the swift tropical dusk fell, three other rhinos appeared on the track ahead of us. A long detour would have meant walking through the thorny bush in the dark. Samia, as so often before, sensed my fear and indecision. Without waiting for guidance from me, she rushed up to the three, ears laid flat, snorting and hurrumphing. Apparently astonished by her aggressive behaviour, the three wild rhinos backed off, whereupon Samia returned to me and the dogs and escorted us past the place from which they had just disappeared. Then, satisfied that we were safe, she left us to resume her life in the wild.

Samia was eight years old when she was mated by the violent-tempered Kenu. He was small but immensely powerful. The first time she seemed to defend me from him, by moving quickly between us, I assumed it must be coincidence. But on subsequent occasions, it was obvious her action was intentional. Once, I went

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to the gate to greet her, not realising Kenu was there. Samia stood between us, and I could sense his rage and hatred of me, his desire to obliterate both me and the gate that stood between us. For 40 minutes, I watched and listened as Samia controlled Kenu's behaviour through her breathing patterns, a method of communication perhaps as important to rhinos as their more obvious squeaks and snorts.

When Samia's baby was born, in April 1995, I thought then, at last, the bond between us would break, and I was prepared and happy for it to be so. Above all, I wanted her to be a good mother. When Samuel was but a few days old, Samia left him sleeping under a nearby bush to visit me. She was standing beside me when he woke and cried out in fear at finding himself alone. Samia's action was swift and wholly

instinctive: she rushed towards him, swiping me sideways with her head on the way. Seeing that no harm had befallen him, she then returned to me, still sitting on the ground where I'd fallen. She thrust her nose at me, and I assured her that I was unhurt. Then she turned and, as so often in days gone by, presented me with her tail for a pull-up.

I never attempted to touch Samuel, but slowly he got used to my scent, and his inborn fear of me lessened. Almost daily, at dawn, Samia would come to visit me with Samuel at heel. Each day would start with the joyous knowledge that both were safe and well, and that she, hand-raised herself, was proving to be a wonderful, loving and protective mother. I was so proud.

Tragedy struck on the evening of 21 November 1995. When Samia did not come to visit me the next morning, I went down the valley with

Patrick, my tracker, to look for her, and found her dead. Her baby lay nearby, still alive. For two hours I knelt beside little Samuel, offering what poor comfort I could. But when Ian arrived, he showed me that the baby rhino's back was broken, low down near his tail. The merciful shot that ended his suffering ended also the most beautiful chapter of my life.

Truly, Samia was what I dreamed she would be, a rhino of two worlds, wild and free, yet my friend. She was an ambassador for her species, convincing all who knew her of her beauty, gentleness and outstanding intelligence. I can only hope that all who have been touched by her – in the flesh or on the screen – will realise the splendour her species brings to the world.

Samia, at least, had the chance to live to adulthood – her own mother was one of the few to survive the terrible onslaught on Kenya's black rhinos in the 1980s for the despicable trade in their horn. Today, just 430 are thought to remain in the country, and 2,500 in the whole of Africa, down from 65,000 twenty-five years ago. The passing from the world of these great beasts would be a tremendous loss. It must not be allowed to happen. ■

**ON AIR** *Last of the Rhinos*, in which Samia, Samuel and the other residents of Lewa Downs appear, will be shown in *Wildlife on One* at 8pm on Thursday 6 June.

**ACTION** To contribute to the author's efforts to conserve rhinos, or to enquire about staying at Lewa Downs, write to: *Anna Merz*, c/o BBC Wildlife Magazine, Broadcasting House, Whiteladies Road, Bristol BS8 2LR (mark envelopes 'Samia', and make cheques payable to 'Lewa Wildlife Conservancy').