



“Bloody Tanzanian government.”

Massaging his damp temples, Elliot Cummings Jr. plowed through another hunting form. A dozen more covered the dining tent table, spoons and forks as paperweights against the electric fan’s breeze.

His staff of thirty scurried to ready the camp for the next *bwanas*, an Arab sheik and his son. Mount Kilimanjaro – Roof of Africa – on the distant horizon stretched six kilometers into the clouds. Even its massive glacier cap baked in this heat wave.

Glancing up, he flinched in surprise at the Maasai warrior standing in the tent’s fly, blood-red *shúkà* draped across his shoulder, metal spear in hand.

“*Íkó*,” the warrior greeted, standing proud and erect.

“*Íkó*.” Cummings judged him young for a warrior.

“*Ol-kurrukurr, ol-kurrukurr.*” The warrior’s free hand gestured excitedly in rhythm with his words. Lion – that much Cummings understood. The warrior gushed rapid-fire Maa.

Cummings raised his hand to slow the speech. South African born, English bred, his father’s safari operation in Botswana was far from Maasailand. As a young hunter new to the Ngorongoro region, he had yet to learn Maa.

The warrior opened a leather pouch strapped to his loin-cloth and handed an envelope to the white man.

Already behind in hunt preparations, Cummings feared where this was leading. Fingering the letter’s fine stock, he unfolded the carefully penned note:

*Greetings Mr. Elliot Cummings,*

*I hope you are using on well with your daily activities. We have bad lion. Kill six cattle. I inform you yesterday kill 12 year old boy. Your help is asked, vehicle and rifle. Meet tomorrow noon on branch of Ngare Nanyuki River. Kokoto help your directions.*

*Monduli, Maasai Chief, Isikirori Section*

“Good Lord.” Cummings collapsed into his chair. He’d heard about the cattle, but now a child! He couldn’t leave camp with clients due tomorrow – not with Peter, his assistant professional hunter, organizing a supply lorry in Arusha.

He studied the warrior – braided hair, brown neck and arm bands the color of his skin, leathered feet, fierce desperation in his eyes.

*This bloke must have run 50 kilometers in this heat.* He looked at the name on the note.

“Kokoto?”

“Kokoto,” the warrior proudly affirmed.

*That lion is starving in this drought. He has become a man-eater – a twelve-year-old, for Godsakes. What choice do I have?*

“One day.” Cummings rose, looking up into the boy’s eyes. He knew the warrior didn’t speak English but may sense his meaning. He sliced his hand across the air then held up his index finger. “One day is all I have.”

“*Hóyia.*” Kokoto hoisted his spear by the wooden grip. “*Hóyia. Ol-kurrukurr.*”

The two left at daybreak. Loading into the open-air Range Rover, Cummings fumbled with Maa and hand gestures, deducing this was Kokoto's first motor car ride, confirmed by the elation on his face.

The pair careened over rutty roads, leaving a dust cloud a kilometer long. Cummings' long sleeves and Aussie bush hat provided protection, while legs tanned between shorts and suede, ankle-high boots. Sandy hair slapped aviator shades as cigarette smoke whipped in the wind.

Kokoto pulled his flapping *shúkà* over his head, spear propped between his legs rising several feet above the windscreen.

Abandoning the road, they cruised through amber grasslands, bumping along the knotty, patchwork floor – dodging boulders, anthills and warthog holes – over fossils of a thousand vanished species buried in the soil of Serengeti's endless plain. Giraffes lounged in the shade of flat-topped acacia trees. Cape buffalo swarmed the horizon like ants.

Cummings weaved the Rover along the bank of the arid and cracked *Ngare Nanyuki*, crocodiles and hippos congregating in occasional pools, staring in wonderment.

Kokoto pointed when they hit a certain bone-dry rivulet leading north. Cummings drove the tributary's bed, maneuvering bedrock, grinding along in four-wheel, angling on and off the bank until Kokoto spotted the hunting party.

Eleven tribesmen hid from the scorching rays in the shade of an acacia grove, awaiting the son of the legendary British hunter. Freshly sharpened steel spears nearly as tall as the warriors were planted upright in the soil like sentinels.

Like Kokoto, all had hardened bodies standing around six feet – tall for natives of the African bush – shoulder-length hair braided, tied and dyed with red clay ocher, skin glistening with animal fat.

*Great, thought Cummings, twelve barefooted warriors with spears. I make thirteen. How lucky can I be?*

KaKenya, son of Chief Monduli and head warrior, clasped Kokoto's shoulder and delivered a pouch of goat's milk and cow's blood. Kokoto took a long, nourishing drink.

KaKenya shook Cummings' hand. A white ostrich feather strapped to the back of KaKenya's neck hovered over his head like a bouncing halo.

In broken English, KaKenya explained that Kokoto was his son and today was his first *ol-kurrukurr* hunt. In this rite of passage, Kokoto would cross from boy to man, proving his bravery by soaking his spear in the blood of the lion.

Cummings had failed to recognize Kokoto's status, like himself, the son of a great hunter warrior. He embraced the lad with a hand on each shoulder. Given the excitement of his first motor car ride, the day already exceeded Kokoto's imagination. With the rigors of yesterday's 50K marathon, his eyes glazed over. Now, his first lion hunt.

The warriors studied a boulder-strewn hill skirted by grassy meadow in which they believed *Simba* was taking his afternoon rest. Dressed nimble for battle, thin, beaded straps criss-crossed their upper bodies cinching pouches of milk and blood, potions, and protective talismans. Small orange *shúkàs* matching the color of their braids hung loosely across their backs.

The warriors encircled KaKenya as he coated his son in ocher and fat. Swaying side-to-side, dipping their heads in time, they chanted as one—low, guttural, rhythmic.

*“Oooooh-yah, ol-kurrukurr. Oooooh-yah, ol-kurrukurr.” Simba will make him a man today.*

The chanting washed over Cummings, a power he couldn't understand, a Maasai hunting ritual unchanged since biblical days.

Normally giddy before *ol-kurrukurr*, their chance for celebrity status at hand, the hushed group acted forlorn.

Cummings cobbled together a question in Maa. "Why the long faces?"

"*Ol-konôî.*" KaKenya explained. "Last night. Laugh outside camp. Mock us. Hyaena steal our sleep. Evil curse. Danger today."

*Oh, bloody hell,* Cummings lamented as he handkerchiefed sweat from his face and lit a cigarette. *A man-eating lion and a bunch of nervous Nellies. How can warriors be spooked by the laugh of a hyaena?*

Heat quivering on the horizon, the hunting party set out, arid soil puffing with every step. Cummings tailed in the Rover. Tsetse flies built like airborne armored tanks chewed through clothes to pierce skin.

On a sacred mission, the warriors jogged at times, following *Simba's* eight-inch tracks with ease. When grass thickened, earth hardened, or tracks crossed, they slowed and conferred – squatting, pointing, KaKenya's feather bobbing up and down, side-to-side – then off again.

Fresh tracks. Cummings killed the truck and joined on foot, brandishing his father's double-barrel .450 rifle, The Drainpipe, bullets strapped diagonally across his chest. Two back-up shells parted the fingers of his fist.

Suddenly a warrior pointed. An immense lion with full black mane trotted from behind a boulder, flashing hostile glances at his foe and slipping into waist-high brush – perfect camouflage,

Hunter now hunted. Predator now prey.

KaKenya clucked his tongue signaling the party. Acting as one, crouching warriors spread left and right, casting a human net around *Simba*. Their cadence was pure Maasai – dynamic, fluid, graceful.

Tightening the net, each warrior crept forward, poised with spear ready to gore or throw like a javelin – three hundred meters ... two ... one ...

*Simba* exploded out of a thicket bolting straight for Kokoto.

From the far side of the circle, Cummings shouldered his rifle. The boy and *Simba* were on an identical bullet trajectory. In a split-second decision he lowered the barrel, afraid of shooting Kokoto.

Sprinting at thirty-klicks per hour, five-hundred pounds of unbridled fury leapt at Kokoto. Kneeling, the warrior planted the butt of his spear into the earth. Steady hands guided the blade through *Simba's* chest.

In a flash, *Simba* torqued and swatted his foreclaw across Kokoto's head as a last act of vengeance. The severed head spun lopsided through the air, spewing blood from the neck like a loose hose.

Cummings rushed to shoot the dying lion but other spears finished the deed. Crimson life spurted from the jagged neck of Kokoto's twitching, headless torso, legs intertwined with *Simba's*.

KaKenya fell to his knees, holding his face, rocking and moaning over the corpse of his son. Warriors closed ranks and laid hands on his back.

In a daze, Cummings stumbled to the severed head. Cloudy, bulging eyes peered back in a wild expression. Shuddering, he leaned down and quickly closed the lids.

In shock, he scanned the vast Serengeti ... trying to wipe blood from his mind and guilt from his heart. A hyaena stared him down as a dust devil jiggled across the earth's floor.

### Twenty-Five Years Later

Cocktail hour couldn't arrive soon enough. Tensions seething, the two white hunters sat mesmerized by the campfire's dancing flames.

Like diamonds, stars pulsed brilliantly in the vast African sky. In the distance glowed the white glacier cap of Kilimanjaro. Night chirps and a jackal's screaming yelp split the darkness.

Dunston, the Zulu waiter dressed in khakis, bow tie, and lime-green tennis shoes, quickly refilled drinks.

"*Asante*," Elliot Cummings Jr. thanked in Swahili as he welcomed a top-up.

Bush life, cigarettes, scotch, and sun had taken a toll on Cummings, but women still considered him handsome at fifty. Warm emerald eyes and a quick smile paid dividends during the off-season in the world's richest locales, regaling clients by day and ladies by evening with tales of adventure.

"Listen." The nub of Bud's cigar blazed. "If I'd known they'd spook like that, I wouldn't 'a shot the damn hyaena."

"I told you not to shoot it, Sport. Now my whole bloody camp is in disarray and half are gone. I'm down to a skeleton staff."

The folding canvas chair moaned as Bud stretched his cowboy boots toward the fire. Flames glimmered off his plump red cheeks, balding head and pickled eyes.

Cummings nodded at Dunston to bring more roasted guinea fowl.

The trouble started while stalking impala that morning. They came upon a decrepit, dying hyaena trying to escape in its ungainly gait, hind quarters shorter than front, as if designed by committee.

*Ka-wong!* Bud blasted it as Cummings yelled, "NO!"

Laritet, assistant gunbearer and loop-eared Maasai, cried out, "*Sakút, a-tól!*" No, please no. A great curse has been made—hyaena are messengers from God.

Laritet ran back to camp. "*Ol-konô! Ol-konô! Sakút! Sakút!*" Chaos erupted as fear of a curse spread like a virus. Cummings restored order best he could.

"The natives take voodoo seriously, especially the Maasai. It's bad juju."

"Mumbo-jumbo, houchie-coochie, whatever—"

"Lower your voice—"

"I didn't come all the way from Texas—"

"Shhhhh!"

"—to hear witch doctors whine."

"The night has many ears."

"Wimps."

"Let me tell you something, Sport. I have seen Maasai kill a lion with nothing but a spear and die in the process. They are not cowards."

"Everybody has their price. I'll tip 'em whatever it takes to calm 'em down. Would a couple 'a hundred do the trick?"

"I doubt it. Believe it or not, there are some things money cannot buy. Maasai spirits may be one."

"I'll wager three-hundred will."

Salvatori, chief gunbearer, appeared with news of a lion hitting their bait. *Good*, thought Cummings, *maybe I can end on a high note with this cowboy.*

“Good news, Old Chap. A big lion hit our hippo bait. Judging from the paw prints, they say it’s a bloody monster. The crew built a blind this afternoon.”

Bud’s head and glass bobbed in unison. “Well, zits about time. Here, pooty tat. Kitty, kitty. Come to Papa.”

Cummings lifted his glass. “Cheers to the king of beasts.”

Hunting was all Cummings knew. But after thirty years, repetition of antelope hunts and government paper chases numbed his senses. Hooked on the high of action, hunting the Big Five – lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino – had become the only drug which cut through his cobweb of boredom.

He retrieved his hat. “Good night, Sport. We depart at 4:30 to be in the blind by 5:30. Sleep well.”

In morning’s wee hours after coffee and tea cakes, the hunting party loaded into the Land Cruiser – Cummings, Bud, and two natives, Salvatori and Shebanny.

Salvatori, chief gunbearer from Dar es Salaam, wore his green jumpsuit and ever-present smile as he stood behind Cummings in the open-air truck. Salvatori’s dark cheeks folded like dough under wide-set eyes. His drooping, meaty eyebrows hooded slits through which he spotted game at distances twice that of most scouts.

“The best eyes in Tanzania,” Cummings claimed.

Bored and bleary-eyed, Shebanny, potbellied government game scout, bounced on the spare tire, grass stalk dangling from his lips.

At the edge of camp, Laritet, a formidable Maasai warrior in his day, appeared at road’s edge with red *shúkà* draping over each shoulder. Thin straps secured rubber retread sandals on legs grown gnarly and spindled with age.

Huge white hoops encircled his neck like Saturn’s rings. Wooden bracelets piled at his wrists. Leopard canine teeth pierced the flesh of his earlobes. A sheathed bush knife hung at his waist, his hand grasping a metal spear.

As the truck approached, Laritet stood fierce, stoic, statuesque. Penetrating eyes flashed ominously at the white man – the hyaena killer – in his Stetson with zebra-skin headband.

“*Jambo*,” Salvatori greeted.

Laritet’s silent gaze followed the truck out of sight.

Salvatori, converted to Christianity by missionaries, shook his head, snickered, and mumbled. “Maasai.”

“Did you see that crazy fool?” Bud chuckled. “I know I ain’t in Kansas now.”

“That crazy fool, as you call him, was Laritet, my rattled assistant gunbearer.”

“*That* was Laritet? Wel-l-l don’t he clean up nice.”

They veered off the camp road, rolling and listing, headlights illuminating the tall grass as it slapped the front bumper. They presently discovered the road the crew cut two days before.

Cummings fretted his own mortality like never before. The great professional hunter had survived many a charge from the Big Five. He wondered if odds were turning against him, if there was anything to this curse of the hyaena. His first grandchild was due soon and he intended to watch it grow.

He eased the truck to within a few steps of the blind. The circular tower stood eight-feet, stalks lashed tightly together with two portholes for shooting. Weapons in hand, he and Bud slid

out of the truck and slinked into the blind. Cummings latched the door with the grass toggle. Salvatori eased the truck away while Shebanny dozed.

Bud's problems blew in as the breeze filled his nose with the stench of rotting hippo flesh. He dry-heaved and moaned, "I'm gonna puke."

"Shhhhh." Cummings dug out his handkerchief, handed it to Bud and motioned for him to cover his nose and mouth.

Spotted hyaena whimpered as they ambled single file past the blind before sunrise. The two hunters heard the racket but couldn't see the source. Bud's body shook like a vibrator through the aluminum legs of his folding chair.

*I'll wager he thinks they are lions,* Cummings thought, *and it just dawned on him that all separating him from man-eaters is a one-inch wall of grass.*

Cummings thought of Bud's closing toast last night: "Here's to *Simba's* last day, 'cause here comes the meanest sumbitch in all 'a Texas."

At the juncture of first light, the chirp of crickets tailed off and the birds took over. Shortly, the birds stopped singing. Cummings knew the lion was near. Bud's wide-eyed face grimaced in terror when Cummings detected and pointed toward the sneaky approach of an animal behind the blind.

The first roar nearly shattered their ear drums, rattling the earth and startling Salvatori and Shebanny five kilometers away. Even Cummings' very soul was jolted by its might.

Bud's shaking hands covered his ears as his urine streamed down the leg of his chair and puddled in the dust. Wild panic contorted his face. Cummings had witnessed fear in the faces of a hundred men, but never as dreadful as this. Squeezing his arms around his quivering chest, Bud bowed his head and silently mouthed, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ..."

When a peppery stream of lion spray spurted through the grass and splattered on Bud's cowboy boots, he slapped a hand over his mouth and gagged.

As the beast prowled around the blind, snarling and hissing, Cummings caught a glimpse through his porthole – mane scraggly, ribs caged, black tassel swishing at tail's tip. *As trophy, he's rubbish. As man-eater, he's still king.*

*Simba's* next roar sent Bud tumbling out of his chair and scooting across the blind. Cummings waved a hand to calm and quiet him.

The lion pressed his muzzle to the blind then rammed it through.

Cummings aimed The Drainpipe, trigger finger pulsing. He played chicken with the devil behind the relative safety of the blind and considered pricking his nose with a knife – something an old-timer said would send a lion scurrying.

Experience had taught Cummings that the beast wouldn't come crashing wholesale into the blind. A giant foreclaw would first tear at the grass. Then, he would shoot.

Glancing at Bud, he pressed his index finger to his lips. Bud somehow managed to comply.

Heart pounding, Cummings shouldered the Drainpipe, trained at the massive golden muzzle a foot away. Belt knife unbuckled, two back-up bullets parted the fingers of his clinched left fist like pointed brass knuckles.

Once again, his and his client's life relied on nerves of steel and The Drainpipe. Without a scope, the rifle's accuracy was suspect at fifty meters but dead-on at point-blank range. It alone now stood between life and gruesome death.

Given the blinding speed of a lion in close quarters – when all calculations give way to chaos – Cummings knew he'd have but one shot.

Miss the mark and ... Kokoto, the decapitated warrior of twenty-five years ago, flashed through his mind – the unleashed power of the lion, the slow-motion image burned into his psyche of head flying, blood squirting, lifeless eyes staring ... the haunting guilt of not shooting.

Through curled lips and bared teeth, the powerful muzzle protruding into the blind sniffed on the inhale, growled on the exhale. The warmth of *Simba's* breath sent shivers down Cummings' spine.

Bud lay on the ground, wet from his and the lion's urine, staring wide-eyed at the king's tremendous canine teeth. Dripping in sweat, he suddenly clutched his chest, gasped and bellowed a cry of pain, breaking man's silence. Fleshy cheeks rapidly pumped, balled fists loosened, arms fell limp, eyes rolled back.

Cummings' focus darted between client and muzzle. *My God, I need to shoot and get it over with, so I can help this poor bastard.*

Camouflaged in a woodlands thicket, the lion's keen night vision locked on flesh hanging from a scrawny tree. In the moon's half-light, the meat dazzled.

The bouquet taunted *Simba's* nose and saliva drooled down his muzzle. But a dangerous scent mingled, the one lions detest above all – *man!*

Lions, Kings of the African plains, enthroned atop the food chain ... but for gun-toting *man*, the most vicious of all earth's creatures.

Sandwiched between *Simba* and his meal stood a grass tower – something not there when he feasted on the meat before.

Squinting, he studied the suspicious silhouette and sniffed *mans'* stench. High danger lurked. Didn't matter—it was eat or die.

Once his pride's alpha male, a thrashing from an upstart cast him out. Now a lone nomad, shunned by other prides, no females hunted for him. Tired of eating hares and rats, hippo tack was manna from Heaven.

A throbbing gash in his shoulder fevered his body. Beyond the swat of his tail and reach of his paw, putzi flies fought over the open wound as puss drained into his sandy coat.

Insult adding to injured shoulder, pain from an abscessed tooth pounded with every heartbeat.

Trouble-making hyaena roamed nearby. An impala herd defiantly grazed to the right. Today's bounty hung from a limb, dangling at a perfect height – probably another cat's kill dragged into the tree and abandoned. But why? It didn't really matter now.

The weary lion patiently bided his time. He knew he must feed once more, sensing it may be some time before he ate again. Drifting in and out of twilight and listening to the hoarse bark of a far-away bushbuck, he fitfully watched for the first hint of sun. Then he would feed.

From the grass tower, soft wind rustled the dry, purple fruit tips of long, golden stalks, playing a foreboding and mournful refrain.

He heard a faint, unnatural hum in the distance. As the alien noise swelled, he realized it could only be one thing – *man!*

Louder still, two small lights approached. Adrenaline surged. Closer. Closer. Suddenly, a contraption rolled into view. Hunkering his chin, he sank his claws into the earth, bracing for trouble, ready to attack or flee.

The contraption paused beside the grass tower. A low, guttural growl rumbled in his throat at the sight of *man*. Hairs on his massive neck bristled. The contraption took the noise and light with it as it disappeared over the horizon.

Fresh musk of *man* filled the air as muffled sounds arose from the grass. Then silence prevailed, yet the stench lingered. *Simba* rested his aging chin on outstretched legs – eyes, ears and nose on high alert. The predator laid in wait.

Before dawn, he heard hyaena on the prowl and watched the pack's round ears and unkempt coats parade past the grass tower. Pacing underneath the meat, the sloped-back enemies stretched their long necks skyward, yelping, rearing onto squatty hind legs, jumping to no avail.

When they moved on, it was time for the king to feed. Vexed by the dilemma of *man*'s presence, with growling belly and pain pulsating from his shoulder and tooth, the brute's fury raged.

Painfully rising, back sagging with age, he cautiously scanned his surroundings. Head and belly low, shoulder blades high, he stalked like a ghost, an annoying limp impeding his once majestic gait. He skulked toward the grass, ready to pounce.

Pausing just short of the tower, he smelled putrid *man* but couldn't see him. Too exhausted to play games, he inhaled deeply and proclaimed his dominion.

His thunderous roar shook the earth, his mandate resonating swiftly through the bush – ricocheting off trees and rocks, scattering birds, commanding immediate and undivided attention of all creatures in his kingdom.

Enraged and ready to ambush, he readied for *man* to run ... nothing.

Growling deep and guttural, he approached the tower. Lifting his leg, he sprayed his duo of urine and glandular scent onto the grass. Circling, snarling, he dared anything to move. Nothing. His anger surged to a boil.

His second ear-shattering roar rumbled and quaked. Still nothing.

Nudging the grass to provoke action, he rammed his muzzle through the stalks and heard shuffling within. Growling on the exhale, grimacing on the inhale, he massaged the vomeronasal scent organ at the roof of his mouth.

He was in no mood to suffer cowards and the sharp, sour smell of *man* disgusted him. Suddenly he heard *man*'s cry.

The old lion heard hyaena approaching and withdrew his muzzle to have a look.

Commotion rose from the grass—*man*'s movement, rhythmic blowing and pumping.

Lusting hyaena circled frenetically under the tack, their eyes darting between it and *Simba*.

Pacing to and fro, the king growled defiantly, weighing the dual dilemmas of *man* and hyaena. Sulking, *Simba* finally strutted away ... as dawn broke in the African bush on another dying day.