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THE TRIUMPH

Mowambi was breathing hard, panting like a wild animal, his leathery face wincing in the hot African sun. He had been hit cleanly through the side, the wound causing a great numbness in his abdomen. His left leg lay limp like a dead thing, the life in it taken by the bullet. But the *maumivu*, the pain that it made, wasn't bad. Except when he tried to move or when he breathed too deeply. He concentrated on his breathing, short and fast, short and fast, never too deep.

Mr. Rick - on the other hand - was dead. He lay, face-up on the rocks ten feet below Mowambi, where he'd been hit. The tsetse flies had already gathered around his eyes, scavenging on the moisture there.

Together, he and Mr. Rick had made a gallant rush up the dry wash, under the weight of heavy packs, laboring like horses, dodging bullets that ricocheted and wheezed past them. They had been close to the top, very close, nearly three-quarters of the way up the stone gulch to where it steepened abruptly, almost into a cliff. Then, Bam! Bam! Two shots and they were down—dropped like two gazelles on the Serengeti.

Mowambi lay now, back propped against a stone, trying desperately to hold back the blood which oozed from his side. His head was fuzzy and light; his breathing still fast and labored. The air was hot and dry and parched his throat with each breath he took. His life light, that which gave vision to his eyes, had momentarily gone out, but was back now, and his heart was pounding fiercely. He looked over at Rick Johnson, a big man, Mr. Rick, young and tall and strong. The bullet had hit him squarely in the back and came out his chest. Mowambi had seen many bullet wounds in game animals in his long life of fifty-eight years; many bullet wounds in animals, but not as many in men. He could see now how this one had taken Mr. Rick down so quickly. Over five-hundred meters and right through the big man's heart. They shoot very well, he thought. These white men from Zambia.

"Mr. Rick," Mowambi spoke aloud. "They got you good!" He shook his head, sadly.

He squinted up at the sun, the sweat running down the sides of his face. It was mid-afternoon, hot, and there was no shade, except for one old thorn tree, scraggly as the thin gray hairs on Mowambi's chin. And Mowambi wore only a green army tunic and big Bermuda shorts, so his slender arms and lean black legs lay heavily exposed to the heat of the sun.

"Now they come to kill me!" he said, resting his head back against the stone and staring up into the blue, Zimbabwe sky.

He pulled himself higher on the stone, dragging his dead leg, and he looked down the wash. He could see them coming up: four, no five, of them. The three bushmen from the Kalahari and the two white men from Zambia. Their white safari hats were shining in the sunlight as they came out from under a group of huge, thick-trunked baobab trees at the bottom of the wash.

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All that practice, he thought. Shooting down elephants. It has made them good shots. Now they come to kill me and won't have to shoot well. So this is how it ends?

He began to laugh about it, but the laughter made the pain rise in his side.

They could use their hands now, or a rock, he scoffed.

Then a grisly thought entered his mind, that they would not kill him at all, but would leave him to die in the sun. He had seen, many times, the carcass of an animal out on the Savannah, left to die beneath a blazing sun, left alone to ward off buzzards and hyenas, left until it could fight no more and was savagely eaten alive. He understood how all things are connected; how all that rises from the earth goes back to the earth, but this did not comfort him. Death in the Savannah could be hard and brutal. Not a good way to end a long and joyous life. It was a frightful thought, and it made his heart hollow. Living long made dying okay. But slow dying, in a way that humiliates, was not good.

But they would have to kill him, he thought. After all he and Mr. Rick had done! They had no choice but to kill him! He smiled broadly.

"We done good, Mr. Rick," he said. Ah, yes, we did them good!

He began to laugh out loud, a high-pitched, happy laugh.

In his mind he saw the two jeeps explode, going up beautifully, spitting huge bellows of black smoke into the sky. And then the plane. Yes, the plane! Mr. Rick was right. Just one bottle of gasoline and one match did it. And the Coca-Cola was so good! They enjoyed drinking the Coca-Cola thinking of the gasoline with which they would fill the empty bottles afterward.

This was a huge setback for them, the white men from Zambia. Mr. Rick said it would be. No longer could they so easily shoot elephants from the sky. No longer can they take the last rhinos from the Savannah.

"Sorry you cannot laugh with me, Mr. Rick," he said. "It was a very funny thing we did."

He looked at the packs, the packs that had ruined them, one still slung partially on Mr. Rick's arm, the other beside him on the ground where he had fallen. They were filled with ammunition, hundreds and hundreds of rounds, ammunition for automatic rifles. Mr. Rick had insisted on taking them. After blowing up the jeeps and the plane, with the bushmen breathing down their necks, he insisted on taking them. It would be a tremendous setback, he said. The hunters could not replace them. Each two or three rounds represented an elephant's life. Now the two packs lay there, heavily on his mind, easy pickings for the white men from Zambia who came up the wash.

He surveyed the area around him. He and Mr. Rick had made it to the point where the two washes merged. He had picked this spot, this saddle near the top of the two washes, from far away. He had remembered it because the two washes were like crossroads and he had looked up at them when they first started up the wash, using them as a bearing to know when they neared the top.

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Above him was the rock-strewn ridge that they would never make. Before him was a vast view of the African countryside. From high on the stone face, he overlooked a deep valley, almost a canyon which swooped down from the mountains and opened into a large sea of rolling hills of grass. Beyond that were the flatlands, and further out, along the western horizon, a dusty yellow haze, fading into the sky, marked the end of the Savannah. The near end of the canyon was thick with bamboo forests, out of which the hunters now ascended, following a game trail steeply up the gully.

Between him and Mr. Rick's body, there was nothing but the rocks and stone slabs that made up the slope, the two packs, and the scraggly old thorn tree. Near his foot he saw a stick from the thorn tree. A nice, round stick--the length of his arm. He reached for it with his one good leg, pawing at it with his heel until he could draw it in. Then he reached down with his good right arm, stopping for the pain to subside, then reaching again, stretching and clenching it in his hand. It is a good stick, he thought. It will be useful.

A noise sounded behind him. He looked up and saw a large yellow hornbill perched on the stone just above his head. The bird watched him, turning its head, showing its big, curved, yellow beak. It had small yellow eyes that pulsed and zoomed in out. The bird peered at him, long and lustfully.

"So, you have come for dinner, my friend?" said Mowambi. "Leave now. I do not die yet."

Mowambi waved at it with the stick and the bird flew up and over the small rise in the saddle between the two washes, and down into the steep gorge beyond.

Mowambi looked down at the packs. All that weight in those packs, he thought, that weight that slowed us down, that kept us from getting away free. That's a shame, Mr. Rick. Too bad the hunters will end up getting the bullets back. It is *mbaya sana*, very, very bad. But we got their plane. They will not be killing elephants from the sky for a while. No, sir. We did good, Mr. Rick.

He looked at Rick Johnson again, thinking of the young American. A crazy man, he thought, here in Zimbabwe, so far away from his home, here to save elephants from the culling, the poaching, and the trophy hunters. It was not his fight, they were not his elephants, nor his home, nor land, but here he was, leading the charge, organizing the others, doing what he could to thwart the hunters. Here he was, dead because of 150 pounds of bullets that would go back into the hands of those who will use them to kill.

Mowambi was thirsty now, very thirsty, and he tried to think of something pleasant. He thought of the water flowing in the small stream down below in the bamboo forest. He thought of the *Kariba*, the endless *Kariba*, and the cold, clean water that flowed from it. He thought of the life it brought. He thought of what it would be like to have a cool drink of water!

"*Nipatie kinywaji baridi, tafadhali,*" he said – please bring me a cold

drink!

But his mind kept switching back to Mr. Rick, his presence here, and why he should die in Zimbabwe, in vain, high on this rocky gulch overlooking the Savannah. And for Mowambi, it was *wapi* – the worst way to die. When you do not finish what you start out to do. It was the worst way. Those bullets, Mowambi thought, they really ruined us.

Mowambi had not known all that had taken place, until Rick Johnson told him. Sure he knew the value of ivory, pound for pound more valuable than gold, but he did not know that the culling had been authorized by the government and the ivory was being used to finance rebel armies in the north. It was bigger, even bigger than Rick Johnson had known. But for Mowambi, what he had always known was enough. The killing was bad. He worked hard to help the foreigners fight against the killing. What he saw in Rick Johnson's eyes and what he felt in his own heart was enough for him. It was all that Mowambi needed.

The elephants were friends of the people and friends of the land. And they had always been friends to Mowambi. From the time he was a small child in his father's village, to now as an old man, they had been a part of his life, part of the Savannah. From birth to death they all walked together on the Savannah. The elephants widened the water holes and brought life to many. '*Tangu kuzaliwa hata kufa,*' was the saying.

He knew how elephants cried. Even more so than humans, they sensed death and felt death. They were not thoughtless beasts. He remembered the time he saw an elephant cow crying for her lost child. He had watched her from a thicket, and had returned three days later to find her there, still mourning. He had heard elephants laughing, under the sunlight, herds wallowing in mud holes, laughing and squirting showers of water on one another. He had watched young elephants rumble on the Savannah, tripping over their trunks, fumbling with the use of that strange appendage. And he had laughed hard, so hard that he thought his belly would crack.

He had seen an elephant reach out and touch another, fallen from a bullet; and many others carrying and fondling the bones of their fallen friends. He had heard stories told of young elephants, orphaned after their parents were shot, having horrible nightmares for months on end, as any human child would. He had heard their trumpeting cries across the desert, felt the sorrow of their low, subsonic rumbles, and saw them kick up clouds of dust against a setting African sun. Elephants had brought him amusement and sadness, compassion and joy. They had brought great laughter to his long life, and he owed them for that. They belonged here.

But the hunters could not see the elephant's soul. Their eyes were blinded by greed. For them, the prize was ivory – white gold. And the herds were diminished, as was all the world. At first, they took out the big bulls. When the bulls were no more, they took the females, often leaving the young elephants motherless. Mowambi's heart ached for the small, clumsy babies left to die on their own.

His head was hot and clammy now. His mind was fading in and out, almost into unconsciousness. And, in the heat and clutter of his fever, he had a vision. A big elephant came to him, crashing through the forest, its

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huge ears flapping, ivory tusks swinging from side to side. It stormed toward him, crushing down branches, pounding the earth with each step, shaking the ground so hard it rattled him. Then it stopped and stared in his eyes, its huge head swaying from side to side. In an instant, as quickly as the elephant had come, it turned and charged off into the forest.

Mowambi was startled awake by a noise. The bird again, the big, yellow hornbill. This time, it was perched on a rock below him. It was blazing hot and the thin shadow of the thorn tree was fully behind him now. He looked down the wash and saw the men closer, laboring up, their rifles slung confidently on their shoulders.

"You want to eat me now, don't you?" Mowambi said to the bird. "Uende! Go away again. I do not die yet."

He picked up a small stone with his good arm, and tossed it at the bird. Pain rose sharply in his side. The stone bounced off a rock near the bird, and the bird flew off again, as he did last time, over the saddle and down, laughing mockingly as it vanished over the rise.

"Where do you go, bird?" Mowambi asked.

He stretched his neck, trying to look over the small rise in the saddle. He could not see far beyond the curvature of the rock; only the sheer wall on the other side.

He grabbed a stone and tossed it over the saddle, not far enough to drop into the steep hole beyond. He threw a second stone, and the pain in his side roared so intensely that he almost blacked out.

This time, though, Mowambi heard the rock tumble, bounce, echo, bounce again, and then splash. He threw another, and again there was a bounce, an echo, a bounce again, and a splash. And Mowambi began to laugh loud--his high-pitched, joyous laugh. It would be the perfect plan, he thought. The perfect place.

At first, he went for the pack closest to him. It was scarcely an arm's length away, but it was on his bad side, the side that had been killed by the bullet, and although he could move his left arm, it was almost numb, and his left leg was lifeless.

He felt his left thigh with his slender fingers. Nothing. Through all his years, it had been a good leg. He had traveled many miles on it, across the savannah, in the desert, through the mountains.

"Wake up, leg," he said. "No time to sleep."

But it was *usingizi* – dead--the worst kind of sleep. His only choice was to twist across his body and reach for the pack with his right. He was reluctant to try it, the pain might cause him to pass out. Yet the men were coming up and he knew he had to move quickly. So he reached for it, at first stretching slowly, testing the pain, pacing himself through it. Then he made himself fall over on his side, in the direction of the pack. His slender left shoulder hit the rocky ground and he clenched the pack-strap in his good hand, gripping it tightly, and dragged it toward him. He took a second, resting his face in the good earth.

It is truly not bad, he thought. When I stop, the pain goes away.

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He pulled himself up and rolled the pack over his dead leg, the full weight of it, nearly seventy pounds, coming against it. He was glad it was asleep now. The bullet must have completely smashed the big nerve.

Over his good leg next, and down to the rocky ground. Then he began to push and roll it up the small grade of the saddle. He turned sideways and pushed with his right leg. He dragged himself along the rock to get closer, always pacing himself, sweating and gritting his teeth through the pain. He took the stick and pushed the pack as high as he could so that it reached the peak of the small rise.

The pack was long and cylinder-shaped. Mowambi knew it would roll easily once it started down. He inched himself forward. Smiling, then wincing with pain, then smiling again, tasting victory. He reached out and placed the stick against the bag, holding it there as he readied himself. Then he pushed hard, extending his arm fully. The pack tumbled, began to roll, and fell through the open air.

There was a huge splash, and Mowambi smiled widely. He thought of an old East African saying: *Kusika si kusna* – hearing is not seeing. But what he heard was *mzuri sana* – very, very good. The splash was loud and wonderful, as good as seeing. It must be deep, he thought. It has to be very deep!

“Do you see, Mr. Rick?” he said aloud.

Hurrying now for the other pack, he dragged himself across the stone, pulling with his one good arm, pushing with his one good leg, laughing hard against the pain. His bad arm had no feeling, but he folded the numb hand around the stick and dragged it, looking back frequently to see if the stick was still there.

He laughed at the thought of himself crawling across the ground like a worm. Stretching out, then inching forward—just like a worm! A worm that would defeat the hunters! He had walked great distances in his time. How he could barely make ten feet to where Mr. Rick and the other pack lay. He was glad he had watched worms and understood their movement.

No time to laugh, worm, he thought. Time to work!

Stretching out, he extended himself completely and reached for the pack with the stick. For a moment, everything went black. Then he came to. He looked down-canyon, but was too low to see the hunters.

“I must hurry,” he told himself. “They are close.”

Then he stretched for the pack again.

The strap, still on Rick Johnson’s arm, had a nice loop in it that stood out. He tried to snag it with the end of the stick.

“Come on, stick. Come on, *fimbo*. Take it.”

He jabbed and poked, finally catching it. Then he pulled on it with his good arm. He reached up with his numb arm as well, holding the stick with both hands now, and pulled back hard. The pack slid from Mr. Rick’s limp arm, and began to come away, pulling the dead man’s arm with it.

“Don’t worry, friend! I come join you soon,” Mowambi said, softly.

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He yanked on the stick again, this time with all his strength, and the pack came loose from Rich Johnson's shoulder. He drew it in close enough to where he could grab it into his chest.

It was the greatest chore, inching the pack back uphill. Every time he stopped to rest, the thought of the wonderful splash it would make gave him strength to go on.

When he reached the saddle, and pushed the pack down the other side, he held his breath until he heard the deep splash—then he let his head fall back and laughed high and fast. Finally, limp and exhausted, he lay back against the flat rock, resting his head on the earth, his one good arm outstretched above him. After a few moments, he let gravity roll him back down to his original position, pulling himself against the stone, and waited.

It was not long before he heard the hunters approaching and could see their white safari hats topping the rocks below him.

"*Habari! Karibu!*" Mowambi said, in the nicest form of welcome.

The men came in slowly, cautiously, circling around Mowambi, and around the body of Rick Johnson. Two of them pointed their rifles at Mowambi. One of the bushmen poked at the corpse with the barrel of his gun.

"*Wafu,*" he said. "Dead."

Then they looked at the wound in Mowambi's side.

"It's not bad," Mowambi lied. "*Sijambo!* I'm fine."

One white man, the *mzungu*, had curly red hair, narrow eyes and a pug nose. He turned to the bushmen and spoke in Swahili.

"*Kutafuta wao! Kuta wao!* Look for them! Find the ammunition!"

The bushmen immediately began searching the area, behind the rocks and in crevices, up higher in the wash, too, where it steepened. One bushman backtracked down the wash from where they had come.

The other white man, thinner and taller, with a big black mustache, looked at Mowambi.

"Where are they?" he asked. "The bullets, the popoo! *Ramia!*"

Mowambi smiled at him, showing him his missing teeth. He laughed at him, with his high, ridiculous laugh, until the pain from his wound made his stop.

"How do you kill now, with no bullets? How do you kill? No more elephants. No more *buri*. No more, *pembe,*" Mowambi said, using the Swahili words for tusks and ivory.

One bushman was now halfway down the wash. The pig-faced white man yelled to him in Swahili. The bushman looked up, raised both hands in the air, and shook his head.

The other white man walked to the top of the saddle, where another of the bushmen stood looking down the steep cliff at the water below. When the white man saw the water, he turned back and looked at Mowambi.

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"Too bad," Mowambi said. "Too bad no more ivory." He was laughing, laughing and choking on the blood that erupted in his mouth.

"*Kufisha*," said one of the bushmen. "Kill him."

The man with the mustache picked up a rock and tossed it into the pool of water. It splashed so loud they all could hear it. Then he walked back down beside the other white man and stood before Mowambi.

"Black bastard," the black-mustached one spoke. "Bastards." He kicked at Mowambi.

Mowambi was ready. He wanted to force them to end it now. His side was hurting badly. Also, he didn't want to be left for the hyenas.

It would be the white man with the narrow eyes of a wild pig, he thought. The *ngizi*.

The pig-faced one stepped forward now, his rifle barrel low to the ground. Then he raised the barrel to Mowambi's face. Mowambi laughed again, high and silly. His mind went into a dreamlike state, and he saw the large elephant in his vision, charging through the forest. He saw the young elephants playing in the mud holes. He saw Mr. Rick, behind a pair of dark sunglasses, laughing and smiling. He saw the packs, full of bullets at the bottom of the pool, soaked and wrecked. Then he saw a white flash, and he saw no more.