

In modern Kenya and most of East Africa, elephants were dying out, Mbuno knew this and lamented. His chest ached for them. Gone were the innumerable small herds of his youth, mostly replaced by farms, settlements, human sprawl, and tourist attractions. What elephants remained had their age-old pathways and migration routes blocked, stopped, fenced, and constantly monitored. White men came and collared them, watched them on scopes, darted them, sampled them, and even shot them when they became a nuisance to farmers with cash. What elephants modern man did not manage in parks were easy prey for poachers. The days of the Liangulu hunter were over. Mbuno knew this, accepted this, and did not mind even half as much as he mourned the passing of the realm of the elephant.

All of Africa had once been the realm of the elephant. As the largest beast, immune to the normal prey and hunter battles going on all around, the elephant set the pace of the land, fertilized the forests, cropped the prairies, and paved the migration routes that all the migratory species followed. In times of drought, their superior intelligence showed where water could be found and even taught man to dig in dry riverbeds for a boundary layer of precious liquid. They created mud holes for mud baths to keep the insects at bay, used also by Cape buffalo and rhino. Over the millennia, they brushed aside acacia thorns and baobab saplings with equal ease creating the open plains. And, in time, Africa's rhythm resounded to the beat of their feet and their migratory timekeeping. Without the elephant ruling the land, the land fell into the discordant rhythm of the upright apes and began to fracture. Mbuno had known the last best years of the elephant's realm and, sadly, was now witnessing the fall of Africa's harnessing stability. Without the elephant to freely roam, the balance of nature would be broken, herds would grow to enormous size in protected parks and, outside that protection, devoid of traditional hunters, herds could be led by weak leaders who would fail to protect them from ivory hunters. Mbuno had heard this had happened before. At the end of the slave and ivory trade, in 1911 there were fewer elephants than now and the herds were only brought back from extinction by White Hunters—led by Teddy Roosevelt—using farm and ranch husbandry methods – culling every senile cow and bull. Young, vibrant, herds repopulated the migration routes. But now the elephant and Mbuno's tribal way of life were both threatened once again.

Mbuno looked back to make sure Pero and Nancy were crouched, waiting a few hundred yards away as he instructed. He then inched closer to the worrying herd, prone again, a sharp stone rolling under his hip painfully. He dared not move quickly, the bush above him would vibrate. He stopped any forward movement as he spotted feet, the small grey feet of a baby elephant, a mtoto.

One foot had an encircling, red, puss-oozing sore. Behind the mtoto's feet stood the mother. Mbuno could see the way the weight was shifting on both mother and child that the mother was soothing the young one who would be in pain. *Silent pain, the sign of a strong herd leader. Or a very frightened herd, one that is being hunted.* The mtoto's sore had been caused by a wire snare that had probably dropped off. Mbuno had seen this far too often. Now Mbuno felt compelled to do something, not just observe. It was now a matter of honor, duty, and common ancestry, not to mention his responsibility for the safety of his safari charges.

Mbuno's mind made decisions quickly. In the bush, life and death were often just moments apart. Soundlessly, moving no bush or twig, he retreated the way he had come, donned his pants only, and set himself into a running crouch. It was his usual hunter's pace, swift, determined, and ready for a change in direction. Circling the place where he knew the herd to be, he stayed four hundred yards away at least. Starting downwind and determinedly coming full half circle until he announced his presence to their sensitive noses, he tested their resolve. When he was sure they had smelled him, he knew there was real danger here because there was no charge, no bellowing threat, no foot stomp. The elephants could smell that he was only one man and also that he was a man of the bush. As Mbuno had feared, they clearly had a more dangerous enemy threat nearby, for they did not give themselves away. He continued his crouching circling run, sweating from adrenaline and the jini of the hunt. For he was hunting, but not elephant.

When he was three-quarters the way around his circle, he sensed, and then diving behind a fallen log on his stomach, he saw the men just outside the forest's edge. One was sitting on a pickup truck's hood and two stood in the flatbed. They wore no uniform. The man sitting was dressed as an Arab with a face scarf and camouflage trousers and bush shirt. He had binoculars but no gun. And two standing tribesmen looked like Pokot, Mbuno thought--northern, violent

Maasai cousins. Hunters, not cattlemen. The two tribesmen had black rifles with yellow wood stocks and foregrips. Mbuno knew AK-47s when he saw them. Mbuno had seen these types of poachers before. They snared a baby and, in its squeals, it attracted the herd; close and closer until the slaughter would be efficient, deadly, machine gun rapid.

Standing behind a tree trunk on tiptoe, peeking out, Mbuno saw the panga (machete) on the flatbed tailgate, unsheathed, its 12-inch blade glistening, freshly sharpened. The back of the truck held two freshly drawn tusks; the brown blood still not yet black. The herd had been running and not just because of the mtoto.

Mbuno did not hesitate, did not reason, did not moralize. In the bush, the law of the land was kill or be killed. These men had killed, wasted the life of elephant, wanted to slaughter the rest, and were dishonorable. He saw them as little more than wanyama—vermin—to be stopped. Without altering his run, he circled behind the pickup and approached them from behind, soundlessly, before the men could even know he was coming.