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The maneater moved through the thick undergrowth, his paws padding lightly upon the parched earth, small puffs of dust billowing up to mark his passage. He raised his maned head, nose held high to scent at the rich night air, his lips curled upwards in what was known as flemen, exposing canines that were yellowed at the gums. The bittersweet scent of humans was heady upon the night air and elicited a growl from deep within his chest. His hooked claws dug into the hard ground, a slight popping sound as the crusty earth broke beneath him.

He moved forward, the night quiet but for the call of the African Night Jars that seemed to infest the game paths, red eyes searching out grubs and insects under the light of the full moon. They seemed to toy with him, screeching with mouths agape at his approach before flying clumsily up into the night and from the path of danger.

The lion moved off the narrow game trail and into the tall winter grass, his tan colouration merging with that of his surroundings, the only sign of movement the gentle sway of grass as he progressed. He could hear them now, an irritable and high pitched babble of sound that wafted over the open savannah. Again the deep grunt belched up from within his cavernous chest and a stream of sticky saliva dribbled from his mouth onto the ground. For a moment he froze, staring into the night, his large yellow eyes searing into the darkness, taking in the village that lay not more than a hundred paces before him, small fires flickering in the darkness. The hot night air seemed oppressive as it merged with the stench of human habitation. Bush latrines had stained the savannah and left a most distinctive odour.

The maneater was deliberately cautious now. Keeping to the cover of the grass, he circled the camp, stopping every few paces to scent the air once more before continuing. To the east of the village the herd boys had erected a wall of buffalo thorn around the cattle

kraal.¹ The large beasts stamped nervously as the scent of the lion floated across on the still night air.

He lowered himself onto the ground, nostrils flared to suck in the rich scent of the bovids, and yet his focus was continuously forced back towards the more acrid scent of man. Like the maneaters of Tsavo in East Africa, it had been the hyena unearthing bodies from shallow graves that had first given him the taste for human flesh, even in its decayed form. As a young male of only eighteen months of age he had been driven from his pride by the dominant male, an enormous black-maned lion who had left him bloodied and bruised. Wisely, the young lion had bade an unceremonious retreat, ensuring that his life blood would not flow further upon African soil. He had initially made for the river. His progress was slow as he limped painfully through the coarse bush, his thirst driving him forward.

No longer was there the protection of the pride females, nor would he benefit from communal hunting. Even then, only one in three hunts proved successful. On his own, the percentages had worsened alarmingly, and he found that he had to subsist on spring hares or by driving hyena from carrion. This latter practice was fraught with danger and he had often been lucky to escape with his life, as the clan ganged up and formed a formidable offensive group. Screeching and wailing, the hyena would drive him deep into the night, the matriarch chasing up to him to snap at his haunches as he fled in an emasculating display.

In better times the young lion would have joined forces with other nomads to increase their chances of survival. Life was hard, each day a battle to survive and forever having to run the gauntlet of pride territories. The sweet musky aroma of male scent marking was everywhere and he wisely refrained from spraying his own scent too liberally on the vegetation, knowing resident males would hunt him down and kill him at the first opportunity. Holding down a pride was the essence of male lion existence, pride dominance lasting a little more than a few years before being ousted in a battle that often led to death.

The uncovering of cadavers by ever vigilant hyena clans had proved a welcome supplement to his diet, and whilst he had fed with initial distaste, he had soon found the soft flesh palatable. In time, the ease with which man could be caught seemed almost too simplistic, and any sense of inbred fear had dissipated within him completely. Often it required little more than resting up in the reeds beside a game path, awaiting the arrival of women and children from the villages to draw water from the slow flowing stream. More concerned about attack from crocodile, the women seldom scanned the thick riverine undergrowth for danger. At first it had been sublimely simplistic and having killed his prey, he would drag the lifeless corpse into the depths of the rushes to feed in peace, the eerie wails of women receding as they fled in terror. With time, however, the villagers had become wise and mounted sentries armed with spears, or men would drive the bush with drums in the hopes of flushing him out.

With each attack, his boldness had grown to the point that he now chose to kill during the cool of night, approaching villages with only a hint of apprehension, his hatred for man sufficient to lead him forward.

He returned to the unfenced entrance to the small village, his breath coming in eager pants as he held himself low to the ground. Slowly he pulled himself forward, his body seeming to flow across the baked earth, head level and steady, his attention focused on the nearest hut. As he moved forward his gums receded to expose fearsome canines, recurved teeth that he would use to hold his prey and deliver a killing bite. Saliva now ran from his mouth in a constant stream, small puffs of vapour blowing from his slightly agape mouth as

¹ Cattle enclosure

he progressed. He was now within the outskirts of the village and his attention was distracted as a young boy moved to within thirty paces of his position. Oblivious to his presence, the young *piccanin*² relieved himself, whistling into the night as he sprayed his urine in elaborate arcs and patterns onto the dry sand, giggling at his artistry. Content, the young boy turned and ran back towards his hut, stopping briefly to look back over his shoulder as the ammoniac stench of the lion carried to him. Nervously the boy stared into the darkness, his eyes scanning the shadowy bush at the outskirts of the village. If he had only known that the maneater lay within the village, tan hide merging with the sandy ground, his head held low as he melted into the ground. The huge yellow eyes focused unblinkingly on the young boy, the lion's muscles tensing beneath him as a ripple of unspent energy coursed through his proud frame.

The young *piccanin* continued to walk backwards slowly. His eyes stared in terror into the darkened night. Only when close to the hut did he turn and sprint the last few paces to the sanctity of his parents' small wattle and mud home, calling in fear as he ran.

The villagers were used to predators patrolling the perimeter of the village. More often than not it was the hyena who would feed on the limited waste of the villagers. The men were quick to react. Not for one minute did they contemplate that it was a lion, and even were it so, they would assume the predator was after the prized village cattle rather than human prey. As quickly as possible the warning was passed from hut to hut and the menfolk gathered at the fires, stoking the flames with wood and illuminating the immediate village area.

The women and children had taken refuge in the scattering of huts as a precaution, a babble of noise erupting through the village as rabid looking dogs were sent out to scent the intruder, hunting as a pack and yapping hysterically in a mix of terror and excitement at their sudden release.

It did not take the dogs long to pinpoint the interloper, the frantic barking and rushing forward demarcating the maneater's position. He swiped at an over eager antagonist, the dog yelping in terror as the long claws tore into its flesh and was dragged towards the gaping mouth of the maneater. With a single cracking sound the dog's neck was broken, and the limp animal was left on the ground as the lion rose and moved back to the cover of the grass verge, snarling as he retreated.

The villagers remained wary, men patrolling the perimeter in small groups in the hopes that the lion had fled. Each man held a flaming torch aloft, their eyes wide with fear as they stared into the darkness of the surrounding bush. No other creature instilled such trepidation amongst the villagers. Even the leopard could not compete with the power of the lion in the African night. The villagers kept the fires stoked as they listened to the sounds of the bush, men talking in whispers as they drew warmth and a sense of security from the flames licking up at the night. Gourds of beer passed from man to man. The thick yellow liquid was gulped down with relish, washing fear from their bodies as the night drew on.

Using all the cunning and stealth of his genus, the maneater now focused on the cattle enclosure, charging up to the thorn perimeter and snarling viciously as the cattle panicked and shuffled to and fro. He lowered himself onto the ground and moved around the makeshift *kraal*, leaving a rich scent trail that terrified the bovids. They crashed amongst each other in the confines of the enclosure. The beasts on the outer circle were unceremoniously forced against the thorns, branches breaking as the walling was slowly breached. With the thorn barricade open, the cattle fled the enclosure, running blindly from the perceived danger and into the heart of the village. Uncharacteristically, the maneater allowed the lumbering cattle

² African child

to run right past him, choosing rather to skirt back to the village and move to within fifty paces of his chosen hut.

In the confusion men now ran frantically around the village, dogs barking uncontrollably as the cattle crashed through the small cooking fires, scattering pots that lay in their path. Even the young teenage boys emerged from their parental huts to help round up the cattle before they would be lost to the night. The wealth of every man in Africa was measured against his ownership of cattle and it was enough to have lost one animal to the lion, but for the herd to disperse into the harshness of an African night was disastrous. The assumption that the lion had made his kill was the villagers' first mistake, the second was to assume that the village was now safe from attack.

Frantic in their efforts to round up the cattle that continued to run amok within the village, the menfolk no longer sought him out. The man-eater moved unseen to the mud hut, his eyes focused on the thin layer of grass roofing. With dexterous ease he leapt up onto the roof, his claws tugging at the loose straw as he fought for footing. The thatch grassing was supported by thin wooden stays which gave under the lion's weight. The scream of terror from within the hut sounded the alarm.

The lion landed on the cow dung floor of the hut. The confined space was filled with the stench of man. An old woman stood before him, a long stick her only defence as three children cowered behind her. She wailed as tears began to well in her eyes, blinding her temporarily as the lion sunk low onto the ground once more. The children clung to one another. Their eyes were wide with fear and their lips trembled as they stared on at the menacing form of the lion. The room was filled with the stench of the animal, a bitter urine scent that seemed to merge with the waft of decomposed flesh. A steady and deep bodied growl emanated from the beast as he crouched, eyes fixated on the frail looking woman.

It was one of the herd boys who heard the woman's cries and he was quick to call for help. Men moved cautiously towards the entrance of the hut and shouted encouragement to one another. An elder drew a burning branch of wood from the nearest fire and lobbed it onto what was left of the thatch roof, the dry grass igniting and spitting sparks up into the night before bursting into flames. Smoke billowed up from the hut.

From within the hut the woman continued to hold her ground, the children now wailing loudly as the grip of fear overwhelmed them, small hands clutching at the old woman's skirt. Above her the burning thatch grass illuminated the hut in a macabre orange glow, the magnificence of the lion lost on her as she stared into eyes as cold and menacing as anything she could imagine.

As one of the roof trusses gave way a bale sized ball of flame fell to the hut floor, scattering sparks across the small room. Burning grass blew up into the lion's eyes and he blinked and clawed at this face, sneezing as he inhaled the smoke-filled air into his lungs.

Fire was the only thing he feared. The terrible heat and burning sensation in his eyes drove him from the hut in a mad bounding rush for freedom. Blindly he charged at the small door opening, roaring his defiance and side swiping the nearest man as he made his bid for freedom. As he plunged across the open space the menfolk thrust steel tipped spears at him, the sharp serrated blades slicing through his flesh as he bounded towards the cover of night. He could hear their shouts of anger as he fled, the light of the fire leaving him temporarily night blind as he crashed his way into the darkness, his chest heaving as he tried to put as much distance between himself and the villagers. His throat burned from the smoke he had inhaled.

As the night drew him on he began to slow, reaching the small river system where he sought deep cover, limping painfully towards the life-giving waters that lay in tepid pools before the onslaught of summer rains.

For three days the villagers hunted him, the deep spear wounds festering along his flanks, and the muscles bruised and stiff. Horse flies laid their eggs deep within the wounds, maggots eating at the rotten flesh as pus oozed in a steady stream from the deep lacerations. He chose a southerly passage crossing the Tropic of Capricorn and into an area the white men had come to know as the Lowveld with the spectacular Drakensberg escarpment lying to the west. This was a hostile environment for man, the area renowned for malaria and the potentially more dreaded nagana sickness caused by the bite of the Tsetse fly. The inhospitable nature of the region had kept villagers from settling in the area and it was only in the winter months that hunting forays penetrated deep into the interior. The absence of human habitation, coupled with strong rainfall, ensured the area was rich in pasture upon which vast herds of game had once fed.

The lion's wounds had healed slowly and had left him with a distinct limp, his gait slightly lopsided. Relatively free of pride territories, the maneater was able to move through the area with impunity, traversing to the south-east where the rivers ran steadily before the coming rains.

The sounds of unfamiliar crashes of repetitive thunder had kept him holed up in deep cover at first. Overhead the skies were a deep blue and the air felt dry and devoid of any hint of rain, and yet the explosions of sounds continued, staccato bursts that shook the ground beneath him.

On the third day his pangs of hunger drove him forward, his ears focused on the hysterical sound of hyena feeding. No longer could he ignore the ache in his stomach, and even though the lightening-like explosions continued unabated, he crept forward using the limited undergrowth for cover.

The hyena clans had come together, accepting a territorial neutrality as they scavenged the human battleground, the corpses of soldiers scattered across the wide open landscape. Whilst many of the fallen soldiers had been removed during the break in artillery salvos, there were those who had had to be left to the ravages of the African savannah. It was a macabre scene, bloodied bodies torn asunder as the hyena clans feasted without fear, cackling hysterically with heads dripping bloodied gore.

The lion moved towards the outskirts of the clans, not daring to challenge the authority of such a vast congregation of scavengers. Bodies lay everywhere, many of the dying men having crawled towards the relative safety of the riverine embankment before succumbing to their terrible wounds. In the distance the sounds of gunfire continued – men taking life in the defence of their territorial beliefs. The maneater knew that for the time being the feasts would continue.

Until the beaten *Boer*³ forces could sue for peace, thousands of soldiers and family men would lie dead and dying upon the African soils, and the King would feast on the rich blood of man.

³ Afrikaner