

Chapter 27 from *Gods Among Gazelles*

It was three in the afternoon, a little late for lunch, and they were sitting on the tiled verandah of the great farmhouse on the edge of the jungle, looking north and west across the down-sloping grassy sunny stretch and the prickly greenness of acacia trees, the bluish-green woody clumps of a few tea bushes, a few wild coffee plants scattered about, some palm trees glowing darkly against the sun, the colors of the long grasses mixing together, a swirling of dark greens and light greens, and the polished steely sunny flash of the river in the distance, the one thinking we have never had a morning like that before, God help us, never seen anything move that fast before neither, and the size of those jaws and the way they covered my whole leg and then everything vanished, he might have snapped me in two, good God that's a damn fact, it's a miracle I still have that leg, but wasn't it a goddamn thrill to start off the day like that, you don't get too many like that, by God, you just don't, and the other not thinking anything at all, just waiting for lunch to be served, sitting there with the patience of the sheltering sky and the hot fragrant wind blowing up from the river.

"She better have something better than soup and bread today," said the burly man.

He was sitting in a cane back chair painted white with a dark green cushion, and he had pulled out another cane back chair, this one with two cushions, for his right leg, which was wrapped in bandages down to his kneecap, but you could see the blood was still seeping through, dripping small drops on the cushions. They were giving him morphine for the pain. He was a burly sort, who had worn a thick red beard ever since he came to Africa, which his new wife did not like because it was coarse and rubbed her cheeks raw, but she had died a few years before and now the beard was overgrown, bushy, streaked with white. His Christian name was Jim Daenen. He had been born in America, but he considered Africa his ancestral home.

"She better bring me a steak and boiled potatoes, and a whiskey sour," he said.

He was sitting across from a long-boned, clean-shaven black man, very black, a Watusi warrior who stood seven feet tall in the sunshine and had finely chiseled features which seemed too small for his size and narrow eyes the color of almonds. The Watusi could walk twenty miles through the bush with the carcass of a dead wildebeest strapped to his back, it was said, as much as four hundred pounds of dead weight. He had carried the burly man all the way back from the river after the accident, and he had stopped only once to check on the mangled leg, because he had shredded his own shirt for a tourniquet and a makeshift bandage and the bandage had begun to unravel and the bloody purple skin was blistering in the sun.

The Watusi had been with the burly man for a long time. He called the burly man "Bwana." The burly man called him Dr. Livingstone, because he liked the sound of it, because it reminded him of the 19th century and explorers in pith helmets traveling the rivers of the dark continent.

"Nkechi, woman, god damn excruciating heat, where is my god damn lunch?"

He waited a moment, listening, but there was no reply, no movement inside, not even the clattering of plates. He slumped back in his chair, looked out from the verandah, staring into the blazing white heat of the afternoon sun, past a few potted cockatoo plants the hired women had put alongside a small white retaining wall and also out on the stone patio beneath the sweltering, white stone whiteness of the farmhouse. He was looking vaguely in the direction of the river, for there was nothing much else he could do on this hot, swamy afternoon with the hot wind blowing, and then his body tensed and he leaned forward.

“Do you hear that, Dr. Livingstone?”

The Watusi said nothing.

“That whiny, warbling, moaning sound?”

“Does Bwana mean the wind?”

“It is coming from the long grass down towards the river.”

“Yes, Bwana. It is the wind.”

He leaned as far forward as he could go with his leg the way it was, listening, straining, the blood drops dripping just a little bit faster.

“It doesn’t sound like the wind.”

“No, Bwana, but it is the wind all the same.”

The burly man sat back.

“I know what you’re thinking, Dr. Livingstone, but I’d like to be prepared in any case. I’m thinking maybe it’s one of them Bongo antelope lost his way. Hell and high water, Dr. Livingstone, it could be a whole damn herd! So if you would be so kind and oblige me, my good man. Bring me the Weatherby.”

The Watusi warrior pushed himself up from his chair, his bare feet settling onto the cool terracotta tile, and disappeared into the dark interior of the farmhouse. His feet were moist from the heavy, hot afternoon, and you could see where he left footprints on the tile from the dampness. There was no sound but the rhythmic droning of the wind, and beneath that the feathery phphpht, phphpht of blood dripping from the bandaged leg every once in a while. Then the Watusi warrior returned with the Weatherby rifle, a dozen or more black notches carved in the maple stock, and you could tell it was loaded by the careful, precise way he handed it to the burly man.

“I always wanted me a Bongo antelope,” the burly man said.

He leaned forward again in the direction of the grassy stretch and the river that was a quarter of a mile away, resting the barrel of the Weatherby on top of the white stone wall that surrounded the verandah, the hot sunlight glancing off the dark steel, checked the action of the bolt, seemed satisfied, then raised the rifle to check the ironsights, his eyes blinking back the hot, moist, windy air, and then he clicked the safety off and squeezed the trigger and the air exploded and a small cloud of black smoke floated up and was erased by the wind, the burly man rolling back slightly in his chair from the kick of the Weatherby, but he was used to the kick from years of hunting and it seemed gentle and soothing. He grinned at the Watusi, who was sitting once again, as silent and reserved as the burly man was noisy and boisterous. He pulled back the bolt and the spent cartridge popped out and another one fell into the chamber and he rammed it home. He took a second shot, and a third, and a fourth, more black smoky

clouds drifting up with the wind, the spent cartridges bouncing on the tile. The wind began to pick up.

“By God, Dr. Livingstone,” said the burly man. “Do you hear the way that whiny, warbling, moaning has kicked up a notch?”

“Yes, Bwana.”

“If that aint a Bongo antelope plugged with a bullet then I don’t know what!”

“Yes, Bwana. But even if it is a Bongo, the leopard will find it before we can get there. Before we even see its blood stain on the grass.”

“I know it. I know it,” said the burly man.

He looked through the ironsights one more time and grimaced and then sighed and then clicked the safety on.

“You’re a good man, Dr. Livingstone, to put up with the likes of me.”

The Watusi said nothing.

“But it was a hell of a shot, wasn’t it.”

The Watusi warrior nodded. He had seen the burly man make some incredible, improbable, even ludicrous shots. The walls of the library were full of the heads of animals killed by wild, acrobatic bullets that bounced off rocks and circled back against the wind and skipped along the surface of rivers and always hit their mark, buffalo, impala, a lion from the Sudan, a small herd of zebras, there was even a jungle elephant he brought down in the foothills of the Rwenzori Mountains with ivory eight feet long with a single shot from three-hundred yards. The Watusi almost believed there was a wounded Bongo down in the long grass by the river.

“One of the best I ever made,” said the burly man.

“Yes, Bwana. One of the best.”

Then the burly man took out a penknife and carved a notch in the maple stock, slipped the knife back into his shirt pocket and set the Weatherby against the wall, more than satisfied now, sitting back in his chair once again, thinking some more about the Bongo antelope and what a hell of a shot it was sitting there on the verandah with his leg mangled like it was and the blood still pooling beneath the bandages and the great excruciating heat and the wind kicking up, and that Bongo hiding in the grasses down by the river so that you couldn’t even see it, you could only hear it, and even then it was hard to distinguish the two sounds, the sound of the Bongo moaning and warbling, and the sound of the hot wet wind rushing up from the river, he had never before made a shot when he was so blind, with only the sound of the animal moving about and moaning like that to help him zero in on its whereabouts, and that was a fact, by God, you could not dispute that fact, it was indisputable.

“Nkechi, woman, where in the hell is my lunch!”

The wind was really picking up now. You could see the waxy leaves and the red and yellow blossoms of the cockatoo plants vibrating on the patio. The wind only made the heat worse. It was like breathing in the steam of a great steam engine and you felt even your eyeballs melting.

“Nkechi, god damn it!”

A woman appeared in the doorway with a tray. She stood a bare five foot three in her

brown rope sandals and was very thin. She did not look at the burly man directly as she approached the table, but spoke instead to the Watusi warrior.

“Tell Mr. Daenen I am bringing him lunch,” she said.

“Bwana, she says to tell you she is bringing you lunch.”

“I heard what she said, Dr. Livingstone. It’s about god damn time, Nkechi.” He shifted the chair with his mangled leg and the blood still dripping, only not so much as before, so he could get a better angle on the table. “What took you so damn long?”

“I heard someone shooting a very angry gun,” she said. “In this country, when you hear someone shooting a very angry gun, you stay indoors until the shooting is over.”

“God damn it, Nkechi, it was me shooting the gun. You know that very well. And it was just a gun, after all. It was not a very angry gun, as you say.”

Nkechi smiled. She had a young, broad, pleasing, beaming face with plump cheeks and warm, full lips in spite of how thin she was. Her eyes, filled with the light of playful compassion and instant, joyful forgiveness, were usually a deep brown color with flecks of olive, but when the sun was setting or when she smiled they seemed almost amber. When she looked at you with her beaming, compassionate, forgiving face, you had to smile back. She wore a simple brown dress to match her sandals, a thin gold chain with a gold cross around her neck, the cross glowing against her soft brown skin, and she was also wearing a green head tie covered with stylized African-art crocodiles done in brown ink with a fancy African-art border. Sometimes when you looked at her in the early morning light or just after sunset, she would close her eyes and smile a soft, radiant, thankful smile, and it seemed like she was floating in the air. At those times she had the look of a beaming saint.

“What was Mr. Daenen shooting at?”

She set the tray on the edge of the table and unloaded the wooden bowls filled with peanut soup with bits of chicken and the plates of mashed yams and a basket with chunks of honey bread for dipping in the soup.

“Bwana was shooting at the wind.”

Nkechi laughed, and it sounded like cow bells from very far away, or the singing of wild birds at midnight.

“Tell Mr. Daenen I thought it was something like that,” she said.

“Bwana, she says —.”

“Good God, Dr. Livingstone, I am sitting right here.”

“Yes, Bwana.”

Nkechi’s laughter had moved into her eyes and she nodded at the Watusi warrior, whose eyes were also filled with laughter, and set a pitcher of water on the table and also two glasses. There was no ice in the pitcher. The electricity had been out for almost a month. Then she picked up the empty tray and headed towards the doorway and the dark, cool interior of the farmhouse.

“And I was not shooting at the wind, Nkechi. I just wanted you to know that. There is a dead Bongo antelope down there somewhere, or almost dead, bleeding out in the long grass by the river.”

Nkechi stopped.

“Did not the man from the Red Cross clinic say to you your leg was very bad and you should give up hunting until the bandages were removed?”

A sour expression flickered across the face of the burly man, but he said nothing. He looked at the Watusi warrior, but he was dipping his bread in his soup.

“That is what I heard him say,” said Nkechi.

The burly man made a growling sound and then coughed a bit.

“Yes, yes, that is what the man said, but it is not the same thing, hunting from a chair,” the burly man said. “It is not the same, it is . . .”

“I do not think this Bongo you speak of knows this difference,” said Nkechi.

But the burly man did not respond.

“Perhaps what Bwana means is that shooting at the wind from the verandah is not the same thing as hunting in the bush.”

Again the Watusi warrior and Nkechi traded laughter with their eyes, but it was softer laughter now, wet, filled with the erratic acoustics of sunlight, tinged with a deep yet swift-running sadness. But still the burly man did not respond. He had suddenly moved away from the conversation. He no longer heard the voices of the Watusi warrior and Nkechi, except as one hears the rustling of the wind at midnight and the clouds streaming past way up in the sky, or the steady, plunging rain outside from an early morning storm and a thunderclap in the mountains every now and then, a vague booming, very far away. He had turned slightly in his chair and was looking down towards the river once again and the hot wind blowing up and the cockatoo plants vibrating stiffly and the tinny, hollow sound of the pots vibrating against the patio stone and the phphpt, phphpt of his blood dripping feathery drops onto the cushions and from the cushions onto the tile below, and he was thinking about that blazing bright morning a week or so before, or perhaps it was longer, he wasn't sure, it was hard to tell.

They had gone down to the river early and then headed south, the same direction as the current, away from Bangui on the other side and the rapids to the north, working their way through the thick vegetation up away from the bank and along the many narrow animal trails to avoid the crocodiles, until they came to a flat, sandy portion of the river where the river widened and the scrub gave way to a muddy, grassy stretch and a line of heavy dark trees in the distance and then the scrub returned and the yellow muddy waters of the river moved very slowly. The morning had started off cool, with a thin filmy mist that stretched across the river like a shroud, and from somewhere there was the sweet scent of bougainvillea, and then the sun grew hot and the air began to shimmer. The two men stopped for a while to drink from their canteens. They would fill them later when they came closer to the river. They did not speak. Orange brown river warblers darted back and forth between the edge of the river and the dark green thorny scrub and back out across the river and back to the scrub. The air was very still. Above them, a small kestrel hovered, a shadow against the sun, and then its orange white wings pointed straight down and it dropped, a sudden, silent explosion, and then missing, skimming the surface of the river, taking to the air, a shadow once again in the shimmering blue sky, and the orange brown river warblers were back at it.

They still had several miles to go. In the muddy spots they saw the tracks of various animals heading down to the river and back up, gazelles, a leopard, wildebeests, zebra. They

saw the tracks of a water buffalo, and they could see the animal was sick, and then later on they saw the tracks of a very big lion following the buffalo, and then both sets went away from the river and disappeared into the thick, thorny scrub.

He was pushing his way through the brush along the river with the Weatherby, just in case. The Watusi warrior carried the Gibbs for when they got there. They had only come down this far once before, a few years before, but a thunderstorm had driven them back. But this morning was hot and dry and the clear, blue sky stretched all the way to the horizon.

“Bwana, we are almost there. It is just around the bend.”

“I know it. I know it. I can feel it coming. I can smell it.”

The river widened again and there was another muddy grassy stretch, and there was a sandbar in the middle of the river and some grasses growing there, and on the far side the river moved fast and you could see bubbles and the flash of small silver fish and the black hammerhead storks looking on and also a few white egrets, and on their side the river became a muddy, yellow pool. They smelled the hippos before they saw them, a burning mixture of decomposing flesh and steaming feces and a thick, spicy, musky, rotting-egg stench that sliced the air into pieces and scarred the backs of their throats, but they were used to such smells. They could hear the soft, nasal grunting of the hippos and then a rush of water and the pitch of the grunting became louder, sharper, and then subsided, and then they came to the bend in the river and they stopped in the grasses along the edge.

Down beyond the bend they saw an endless river of hippos half submerged in the muddy yellow pool, their purple-gray hides glistening with an oily wetness beneath the sun, some of them munching water hyacinth, a couple of females wading through the sedge grasses along the bank, their offspring trotting behind, heavy black shadows against the sun and a few black warblers riding on top, pecking at insects, and also an egret. But the two men were not watching the herd so much as they were focused on two males twenty yards or so upriver from the rest, an older, heavier bull with the scars of many years of fighting and part of an ear missing and a deep gash along his flank, and a younger male without a mark, pristine in his aggression, and the two men were watching the two hippos circling slowly in the muddy pool and then a rush of water and the hippos hurling themselves at each other, jaws stretched back, exposing the soft, pink flesh of their mouths, the flash of yellow ivory tusks, the hippos gouging at each other, flinging their heads from side to side, flinging their war cries of great bellowing monsters of the river, the spray of water and blood and oily sweat rising into the air and the battle mist dissipating, falling back to the river. The two men were watching the battle and the yellow muddy water of the pool was streaked with a bloody orange foam as the animals lunged back and forth at each other, their jaws locking and then releasing and then another rush of water.

The Watusi warrior lowered the Gibbs and got it ready, but the other one had forgotten about the gun. He was mesmerized by the battle between the two behemoths and even forgot he was standing on the edge of the river. Time stopped. The sounds of the two hippos faded, became part of the background static of the universe, and then silence. And as the two hippos fought in this silent movie of his own making, the burly man slipped into the water and waded closer, closer, the two hippos unaware he was so close, or they did not care because they were

river gods and could hardly be bothered. It was hard to say why he moved so close.

“Bwana,” the Watusi said, several times, but the burly man did not hear. He was breathing in the war song of the river god hippos and he felt it was his song, this was why he had come back to Africa, it was not just because of the hunting, at least this is what he was thinking, it was mostly because of this song of Africa and how it soothed his soul and gave him a sense that everything was right with the world, and not just this world, but every world, and so he had come back to Africa to find this song, and in so doing he had reclaimed his soul, or a piece of it, yes, he could feel something inside him beginning to stir, and as he was thinking these thoughts the battle raged and now it was all around him, the swirling water and the hippos circling in a mad drunken frenzy and bellowing out their war cries and the blood streaming down the sides of both of them and their mouths were filled with blood, and the storks and the egrets and the smaller birds in the scrub or along the river bank had flown away from the commotion and the rest of the herd was uneasy, snorting and trumpeting and grunting, but he stood there in the center of this whirling maelstrom and he was untouched by it, at least this is how it seemed, and he was standing so close now he could see directly into the strangely small eye of the big bull and the pale, wrinkled skin around it, and it reminded him of the eye of a Belgian heifer the way it looked out on the world with a heavy sadness about the life and death of things, an ancient tribal sadness, it seemed, but also a wisdom, and he wanted to say something profound, he wanted to speak some words of compassion, he wanted to tell the great ancient river god hippo that he understood, but then the flash of his life caught up to where he was standing in the river and the great hippo flung his head to one side and snapped him up in a single motion, the great yellow ivory tusks clamping down, the upper tusk piercing the right leg of the burly man, boring straight down through the femur and then a popping, cracking sound, through the center of the bone and out the other side and the flesh of the leg now torn and jagged and bits of bone, the yellow ivory tusk all the way through and the blood oozing out, anchoring the burly man to the jaws of the hippo, and then the great bull shook his head back and forth and back and forth, the limp body of the burly man mostly hanging outside the great jaws, the arms and the one free leg flapping about as if they belonged to a child’s rag doll and not a man, then the great jaws opening, releasing the body with a heavy, heaving, snapping shrug, the hippo turning once more to face his rival, the burly man sailing through the air and landing in the dark green thorny grass.