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## Fallen Guardian

### Samburu County, Kenya

Captain Bernard Lolosoli looked down at the American journalist. “You were right.”

Tom Klay, sitting with his back against the tire of a Land Rover, looked up from his notebook. Klay wore a faded safari shirt, brown field pants, and hiking boots. A droplet of sweat rolled off his chin and struck the page at the exact spot where he’d just finished a line, destroying the word and his thought along with it. “It happens,” he replied.

“Are you ready?” Bernard asked.

Klay closed his notebook and dropped it into his shirt pocket. “All packed.”

“Good.” The ranger extended his hand. Klay took it and got to his feet. “Three men entered our east gate two days ago. We located their vehicle this morning. Their plates are stolen, and there is no exit record. Their passports were fakes.”

“Passports,” Klay said. “Not locals, then.”

“Ugandans. On holiday, they said.”

Klay caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. A small male dog emerged from behind the Green Guardians’ field station, carrying a feathered chicken wing in its mouth. The dog was scarred head to tail, with that compact build common to developing-world canines. “You get many of those?” he asked.

Bernard followed Klay’s gaze. “Dogs? Or chickens?”

“Ugandans.”

“We do. It was rail workers. Now, it’s tourists.” Bernard smiled. “Thanks to your article, everyone wants to see our famous elephant.”

Klay watched the dog. Every few steps it glanced over its shoulder towards the guardhouse, checking to see if anything was following it. The dog set the chicken wing down in the dirt. It looked back again, expectant. There wasn't much to see. The concrete field station and next to it the Guardians' makeshift field armory, a steel shipping container under a thatched roof. Between the two structures, the dirt was stained black with motor oil.

The little dog yipped and Klay heard agitated scrabbling on hard ground as a large dog emerged at speed from behind the building and rocketed towards the mutt. The bigger dog was a Belgian Malinois, a shepherd breed with relentless drive, making it a favorite among law enforcement. As the Malinois bore down, the smaller dog snatched up its chicken wing and sprinted across the clearing. It hopped onto an overturned bucket and into the crotch of a large acacia tree.

The Malinois didn't need the bucket. It leapt straight into the tree and chased the smaller dog up a thick branch into the tree's umbrella. The little dog barked as it climbed. Suddenly a third dog—a female as small and scarred as the first, but heavy from nursing—emerged from behind the field station, carrying a whole chicken, minus a wing. The female crossed the open space, dragging the dead bird between her forelegs, and disappeared into the bush. A moment later her mate leapt from the Acacia tree onto the field station roof. The Malinois tried to follow but it was too heavy and crashed to the ground instead. The big dog was about to climb the tree again when Bernard whistled. The dog froze. “Pfui!” Bernard said, and pointed. “Platz.” The Malinois slunk obediently to the outpost's front door and laid down.

Klay looked up at the rooftop. Two stories above the Malinois, the skinny male dog lay with its back legs spread on either side of the roof peak, looking down at Klay, chewing its wing.

“What do you think?” Klay asked.

Bernard sighed. “One hundred thousand dollars for that animal,” he said, looking at the shepherd. “Our donors insisted we have military dogs. I flew to Berlin to buy him. I had to learn German to speak to him. He has a better education than most of my family, and he still falls for that old dog and chicken routine.” Bernard nodded at two vehicles speeding towards them. “It doesn’t bloody matter what I think, Tom.”

Klay squinted. Two black SUVs were racing towards them from the south, kicking up clouds of dust. “I’m going to say it again. If Botha is running this operation, you do not want a political ride-along anywhere near it.”

“I know it and you know it. He knows to stay in the truck,” Bernard said.

“So, why’s he coming?”

“Someone might have told him you want his photograph for your famous magazine.”

Klay groaned. “I should have brought a camera then.”

“That would have been nice.”

Two of Bernard’s rangers waited nearby. The Green Guardians were a privately-funded counter-poaching force made up of Samburu warriors. Bernard’s men looked the part. In addition to their desert fatigues and tan boots, they wore their hair in long, ochre-dyed braids pulled back severely from their scalps, adorned with feathers and narrow, brightly beaded headbands. Beneath their uniforms, the men’s lean ribs were tattooed with chains of coffee bean-sized scars representing bravery. Like their Maasai relatives, the Samburu were nomadic pastoralists. When not on duty, Bernard’s men—Goodson Ltumbesi and Moses Lelesar—tended their animals, lived on milk and blood drained from the necks of their cattle, and warred over livestock with neighboring tribes. With their hair tied back, their dark eyes, and cheek bones as

sharp as cracked shale, they resembled a pair of young eagles swiveling for prey, with well-oiled and well-used HK G3 battle rifles for talons.

Bernard was a contrast. The Samburu warrior had gone to boarding school in England. He wore his hair short, sported a closely trimmed goatee, and carried a baby's arm of fat around his middle. When Klay first met him, years ago, Bernard was working as a fixer, taking journalists to difficult locations throughout East Africa. He emerged shirtless from his hut wearing an orange and black checked shuka over one shoulder, multi-colored bead necklaces that wrapped his neck from chin to chest, tire-rubber sandals, and a gold belt adorned with tiny dime-shaped metal circles dangling on gold chains. A thin chain stretched from one ear, under his lower lip, and over the other ear. He jingled when he walked, like a child's toy.

"You always dress up like this?" Klay had asked.

"Like what?" Bernard had replied.

Bernard took Klay up in a rented Cessna 172 to look for elephants. It was the first time Klay saw Kenya's largest living elephant, a local tourist attraction named Voi. The super tusker was standing among a group of five males on the west side of a low hill. All six were big elephants, but Voi was mammoth, with tusks so long they rubbed the ground. Bernard pointed him out, then banked the plane to take a second look. "Watch!" As the plane came around the five male elephants looked up, then quickly encircled Voi. Brandishing their tusks, they shook their heads violently, while Voi turned his back to the plane, and lowered his head.

Klay was astonished. "Like they know," he said. Bernard tapped the earcup of his headset to indicate he couldn't hear. Klay bent the mic closer to his lips, and shouted again. "Like they know," he repeated, "it's because of his tusks...."

“Of course, they know!” Bernard had replied. “We say, *an elephant is born carrying two gravestones: One for himself. One for his species.*” Klay had included the line in his article. ‘The Last Great Tusker,’ he’d called it.

Klay’s cover story had come at a cost. The big elephant was now world famous. Voi’s enormous tusks, revered by Kenyans, were now priceless to Asian ivory collectors. To protect him from poachers, Kenya’s president had declared the animal a national treasure, and had deputized the Green Guardians to protect him.

Only a few criminals had the connections and the wherewithal to kill the well-protected Voi and smuggle his tusks to China whole. Klay’s information was that Ras Botha, a man known all too well to Klay, was about to try.

Klay watched the politician’s vehicles approach. “Long haul from Nairobi.”

“We flew him in,” Bernard said. “Same as you. He’s trouble for us, Tom. Ras Botha may be our immediate threat, but if we’re not careful Simon Lekorere will become our long-term problem. The Chinese completed the Uganda rail line since you were last here. They have built another line from Addis to their military base in Djibouti.”

“The Ultimate Silk Road Project,” Klay said. “I know.”

“Do you know they want to connect them?”

Klay whistled. He imagined a gigantic Roman numeral *I* burned into the side of East Africa. The Kenya to Uganda rail line would be the numeral’s base; Addis, Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti would be its cap. China had built the southern line for economic reasons. The northern line was strategic: Djibouti was a gatekeeper to the Suez Canal.

Klay looked up at the small dog still crunching its chicken wing. “Oil,” he said.

Bernard nodded in the direction of the politician's incoming vehicle. "He blackmails us to keep his voters from poaching our elephants. That's nothing new. Our donors pay him off. But he will get more money than we can afford to sell our land to the Chinese. Connect those two rail lines and everything we have here will vanish."

Klay looked out over Kenya's idyllic landscape. Bernard was right. Whatever China's ultimate plan, if a third rail line were built through here, everything he was seeing would be lost. "No protests?"

Bernard laughed. "The Chinese hired Perseus Group."

Klay cocked his head towards the other American in their group, a lanky, blonde software engineer wearing a pale blue Perseus Group polo shirt. The engineer leaned against the Guardians' outpost, rapidly typing something into his iPhone. "I thought *you* hired Perseus Group?"

Before Bernard could respond, the two SUVs braked to a hard stop, covering Klay and Bernard in their dust. Klay ran his tongue over his teeth and spat. Two bulky Kenyans wearing sunglasses and business suits emerged from the lead vehicle. They hurried across the clearing, inspected the Guardians' Land Rover, gave a nod, and a third bodyguard opened the main car's back door. Inside, sat Simon Lekorere talking on a mobile phone. The heavysset politician wore a dark brown cowboy hat, gold-framed Gucci sunglasses, and an orange kitenge shirt.

"Jesus," Klay muttered.

"He's Samburu," Bernard said.

The politician sipped a bottle of beer.

"Deep down," Bernard added.

Bernard whistled and his rangers swung themselves into the open Land Rover. The Perseus Group engineer did not move.

“Let’s go,” Klay yelled to him.

The engineer glanced momentarily in Klay’s direction, then returned to his phone. He spent a few more moments typing before finally crossing the clearing to join them.

“I sent my report to Tysons Corner,” he said to Bernard.

“That’s your prerogative, Greg,” Bernard replied.

“Our contract is very clear with respect to all anti-poaching operations.”

“So you said. We’ll be leaving in a moment. You’ll have the second row to yourself.”

The engineer climbed into the truck.

“Welcome to Kenya, Mister *Sovereign*,” Simon Lekorere boomed, extending his hand. The politician’s hand was small in Klay’s, but surprisingly calloused. The portly man laughed, as if he knew what Klay was thinking.

“Come,” he said, climbing into the Rover’s passenger seat. “Let us see if we can save some of our elephants today.”

A bodyguard placed a small cooler between Lekorere’s feet. Bernard walked Klay to the back of the vehicle.

“What’s your play to hold him?” Klay asked quietly.

“Pride,” Bernard said.

“*Pride*?”

“Samburu understand the importance of land. We have to remind him that he is Samburu first and a greedy politician second. He’s wily. He’s been playing the Chinese for us, getting us a

new school and a clinic.” Bernard reached into the back of the vehicle and withdrew a rifle.

“Take this.”

“No, thanks,” Klay said.

“You said it yourself,” Bernard said. “If this is a Botha operation, we should be ready.”

He nodded towards the politician. “Let’s give him the idea we’ve got something worth protecting, shall we?”

Klay accepted the rifle, a battle-scarred, bolt-action Mauser, no doubt confiscated from a poacher. He sighted it. Checked the action. “Make a better club,” he said, working the ragged bolt.

“Good,” Bernard smiled. “We are out of those.” He handed Klay a five-round stripper clip. Klay pressed the cartridges into the magazine, racked it, and let the clip fall to the ground.

Bernard bent down and picked it up. “We recycle these.”

“Sorry,” Klay said.

Bernard tapped him on the shoulder with the piece of metal and nodded towards the politician. “We need him. So, try not to shoot him.”

“That only happened once,” Klay said. “And it was an accident.”

Bernard was still chuckling as he started the vehicle.

Bernard drove fast, the Land Rover shuddering over a dry and broken landscape. In the truck were the three rangers, the politician, the software engineer, a monitor from the Kenya Wildlife Service, and Klay. Their route traced the Ewaso Nyiro river. The river’s seasonal ebb and flow had lately been accelerated by the earth’s rapidly changing climate, floods in dry season, deserts in wet. It was late November, time for the short rains, but none had come. They

crisscrossed the river's desiccated bed, plunging down and then up its steep banks, dodging fallen trees, spinning in deep sand, crashing through thorn bush.

Standing behind Klay, Bernard's rangers scanned the landscape for threats, barely touching the truck's roll bar despite the vehicle's bucking. Klay did not ride as easily. At each jolt his thick knees punched the back of the politician's canvas seat.

Klay didn't fit well into the truck's second row. He didn't fit well into most places. He was a large, broad-shouldered man. With his amber eyes and graying brown hair, he was still handsome enough, but etched now, salt overtaking pepper. The same applied to his personality. More than one grade school teacher had described young Tom Klay as troubled. Now, in middle age, he was a hardened brooder. He ground his molars. He spoke sparingly, in a voice so low it often sounded as if he was talking to himself. He carried himself in a way that suggested any number of past careers, not one of them journalist. If you were a boxer, you might recognize the forward roll in his shoulders and the slight tuck of his chin. If you had law enforcement experience you might notice his tendency to stand with one hip forward, the other canted away. He was best appreciated in geologic terms, a cairn of irregular boulders stacked above a very active fault line.

"Tuskah!" the politician shouted over his shoulder, too fat to turn. He held a bottle of beer above his head. "You like it, right?" he called to Klay. "Tuskah?"

Klay ignored Lekorere and looked out over the savannah, two fingers balancing the Mauser's barrel against his thigh. A male lion dozed beneath a tree in the late afternoon sun.

He wasn't here for the animals, or for the conversation.

"Doesn't it get to you?" readers asked him from time to time, "the killing...all those poor animals?"

The question surprised him the first time. “It’s not easy,” he replied, “but I grew up in a funeral home so I guess I was born for this job.”

Years later he was still giving the same awkward response, only the truth behind his answer had changed. The truth was the killing had used to bother him a great deal, and he wished it still did. The transformation had happened surprisingly quickly, he realized looking back. One trip he had returned home and discovered that he hadn’t noticed any baboons, though they had surely surrounded his camp. On another, he found himself irritated by a tower of giraffe blocking the road. Eventually, even the elephants became invisible.

Nature had become his murder book. From A to Z—from the spiral-horned Addax to Grevy’s Zebra—he exposed crimes against endangered species in the pages of *The Sovereign*, and then, like a television detective with a season to fill, moved dutifully on to the next victim. One didn’t linger over the dead, in fiction or in life. One moved on.

Klay was a criminal investigator. He was selective in the stories he took on. Winnable cases only. He was no Don Quixote. He didn’t investigate crashing insect populations or stranded polar bears. He didn’t report on the global warming crisis for the same reason he didn’t investigate Russian money laundering, Mexican drug trafficking, or Wall Street’s financial crimes. Those stories weren’t winnable. He identified traffickers, designed investigations, reported his stories, and hoped the system did the rest. Enough of the time it did. But not always.

For years Ras Botha had run a continent-wide syndicate that defied categorization: Diamonds from Sierra Leone. Arms to Charles Taylor. Counterfeit pesticides for Kenyan farmers. Fake HIV meds to Nigeria’s poor. Botha controlled crystal meth labs. He trafficked Thai, Czech, and Russian prostitutes through his nightclubs in Cape Town, Johannesburg,

Pretoria, and Musina. Elephant ivory and rhino horn were sidelines for the South African, holdovers from a trophy hunting business he ran with his brother.

Klay had tangled with Botha once before. Prosecutors cited facts from Klay's story in their indictment, but corruption runs thick in South Africa's courts, and days later his case was dismissed.

That was South Africa. This was Kenya. Kenyans would love to lock up a foreigner trying to kill their most beloved elephant, especially if that foreigner was the notorious Ras Botha.

And so, by broad agreement, if the Green Guardians captured Botha's poachers tonight, Klay would be in the room for their interrogation. He would ask a few questions of his own, and then he would follow the trail back to take another bite of Ras Botha.

"Tuskah!" Lekorere managed to turn in his seat. The politician was looking at Klay, offering him a beer.

Klay forced a smile and accepted the bottle. When the politician turned forward again, Klay poured the beer out of the door and shoved the empty into the seat seam.

Bernard pulled to a stop at the edge of a deep ravine and his rangers jumped out. "We'll go in here," he said. "Tom, drive the truck up to Mitchener's Point and we'll meet you there." He checked his watch. "Give us three hours."

Four hours later, standing on Mitchener's Point, Klay studied the terrain below through binoculars.

"You're wasting your time." The Perseus Group engineer held up his iPhone. "I can see exactly where the elephant is."

Klay continued to glass the valley, moving his binoculars in a grid, trying to pick out the Green Guardians among the thick cover.

“See?” said the engineer.

“Maybe,” Klay said, without looking. “Maybe you’re giving away his exact location.”

“The signal’s encrypted. It’s Perseus Group encryption, used by the Israeli military.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“He should have let our Askari drones handle this. It’s in our contract.”

“Why don’t you go sit in the truck with the politician,” Klay said.

“I have a right to be here,” the engineer protested.

Klay lowered his binoculars and faced him. “You don’t have a right. None of us does.”

The engineer shook his head as he walked away. He waved his phone over his head.

“This technology might actually save your elephant, you know.”

On the far edge of the clearing, leaning against a tree, the Kenya Wildlife Service ranger smiled. He was a lean, older man, his dark face lined from years in the bush. Klay felt bad for him, this was a babysitting assignment. The Green Guardians were permitted to carry automatic weapons as long as KWS had a ranger present. If he stayed out of the way, the seasoned ranger would receive a little cash at the end of the night to salve his pride. The ranger reached two fingers into his shirt pocket, withdrew a loose cigarette, and offered it to Klay.

“I quit,” Klay said, putting the Sportsman cigarette in his mouth. He leaned forward and the ranger lit it with a match.

Klay inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out slowly. “*Jesus*, that’s bad.”

The ranger nodded in agreement. He drew another cigarette from his pocket and Klay lit it for him with the tip of his. The two men smoked together in silence.

Klay heard a clicking sound to his right. He turned as Bernard and his rangers materialized from the bush. There was no other way to describe it. One moment there had been trees and bushes, the next they were there. Bernard first, followed by Goodson and Moses. Bernard looked straight at Klay as he approached, the heads of his subordinates swiveling.

“I thought you quit,” Bernard said. He took the cigarette from Klay’s fingers and put it to his own lips. “No elephant,” he added, returning Klay’s smoke.

“No Botha,” Klay replied. His eyes strayed to the darkening ravine. He hadn’t expected the man himself, of course, but his intelligence had been solid: a Botha poaching team was in the area.

Bernard smiled. “You’d have heard a bit of gunfire.” He patted Klay’s shoulder. “Looks like you were wrong after all.”

“It happens,” Klay said.

“Not often. Someday you’ll have to tell me how you come by all that brilliant intelligence sitting at a desk in Washington, DC.”

Klay drew on his cigarette, then dropped it, and stepped on it with his boot. Bernard began walking towards their vehicle. Klay followed. “I hear you’re part of their drone program,” Klay said.

Bernard checked to see that the engineer was out of earshot, and nodded. “They made us an offer we couldn’t refuse.”

Klay grunted. “I thought it was just collars.”

“It was. In the beginning.”

“Right. Well, makes sense for you.”

“Are you saying you wouldn’t?”

“I’m just talking,” Klay said.

Bernard halted. He turned and faced Klay. “But you are saying something.”

Klay looked into his friend’s eyes. He forgot sometimes how dedicated Bernard was.

“Yeah, alright. Would I take Perseus Group money? Terry Krieger money? If I had your problem? Sure.”

“No, if you had *your* problem.”

“What’s *my* problem?”

Bernard smiled. “Imagine you had something you actually cared about.”

Klay allowed himself a rare laugh. He knew somebody in just about every country on earth, but he needed only half the fingers on one hand to count his true friends, people he respected and trusted no matter what. Bernard was a true friend. If Bernard said he would do something, it was guaranteed. Klay had bet his life on it more than once. He didn’t just trust Bernard, he admired him. Bernard Lolosoli knew as much as Klay did about the world’s complexities, but he maintained a generations-deep connection to his family and to the earth. He possessed a joy for life that managed to flourish in spite of all that was happening around him—the poverty, the corruption, the killing. Despite it all, Bernard kept his center. After a few days in Bernard’s company, Klay always felt a little less angry, and a little more human. For a while, he felt peace.

“Okay,” Klay said. “Yeah, I’d take his money. I’d take his elephant collars. But Askari drones? Those are people trackers.”

“I know. They wanted facial recognition cameras at our gate. They’re building a database by tribe, tying it into a cross-agency police cloud. I drew the line at their face harvesting. They

weren't happy. I won't be able to hold them off forever. We are a Perseus Group laboratory now." He nodded in the engineer's direction. "That one is our minder."

"Do your donors know?"

"Our donors care about our animals, Tom. He came out here, you know. Terry Krieger. Very knowledgeable in the bush. Said he's always loved elephants. Wants to give something back. They all do it. Come to Africa. Wanting to cleanse themselves of something...."

Klay's jaw muscles knotted.

"Perseus' drones have knocked the hell out of our poachers. Herd stress has declined. Birth rates are rising. Mothers are producing again." Bernard kicked a rock with his boot.

Klay waited.

"After our latest annual report came out, Nairobi said to us: 'Right. Done and dusted. Wildlife sorted. Let's approve the north-south rail line.'"

"That's the play?"

"Krieger supports us. Anything we need, he says. But I hear otherwise from Nairobi. His interest is the Chinese and they want the railroad." Bernard turned to him. "A north-south rail line would run straight through our land, Tom. Destroy our way of life. My family would have to leave here. My mother...." Bernard paused. "Why don't you write about that?"

Klay looked away. A troupe of baboons had emerged from the trees and was crossing a field of dry grass, led by a very large male. A baby sat on the big male's head, its tiny hind foot causing him to squint and swat it away.

"A story on Perseus Group?" Klay shook his head. "That's outside of scope. I'm here for Botha."

"You do remember Congo, right?"

Klay ground his back teeth, still looking in the direction of the baboons. “I remember,” he said.

“All that great intelligence you’re able to pick up in Washington. I thought maybe—”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe you could get someone important to listen.”

Klay turned and studied Bernard, wondering what his friend knew. “Look,” he said, finally. “I’m just a hack. I’d have to spend, what? Three years to get into Perseus Group? Two at a minimum. Even then. Even if they gave me the pages, even if I didn’t mind spending the rest of my life buried in lawsuits—because they’d definitely sue me—even then, there’s no one to act. Who would prosecute Perseus Group—world’s biggest private military company? No one. Not here. Not in Congo. Not in the U.S. Nowhere. And that’s just the corporation. There’s no way I could get close to Krieger. Even if I wanted to.”

“Even if you wanted to?”

“I take on fights I can win. I’m not—” Klay struggled to find a word to convey his meaning. He looked down. “I am not a fucking safari ant.”

Bernard smiled.

“What?” Klay demanded.

Bernard nodded towards Klay’s boot. “The ant never works alone, Tom. Didn’t you know that?”

Klay looked down again. Ants were attacking his boot. Several had their jaws locked into the leather. Klay knocked them loose with the toe of his other boot. “Scale matters,” he said.

“Look, take his money. Set some boundaries for him, *like you have*,” he added, quickly.

“If you say so.” Bernard increased his pace, opening the distance between the two men.

Klay had to jog to catch up. “Botha is our meat,” he said. “If we get him, maybe I can do a little good for you here.”

“Sure, Tom.”

After a moment, Bernard paused and turned to him. ““Hack.””

Klay shrugged.

“No. You said ‘hack.’ What if Botha hacked Voi’s collar?”

“It’s encrypted.” Klay saw intensity in Bernard’s eyes. “You don’t mean the transmission. You mean the access?”

Bernard nodded.

Klay considered the possibility. Voi’s collar was part of the TIPP program. TIPP was the Total Information Project for Pachyderms software designed by Perseus Group. It recorded the movements of all collared elephants across the conservancy. Someone with access to the TIPP App might be able to manipulate Voi’s location.

Klay thought of an even simpler explanation. Technically, they weren’t tracking an elephant, they were tracking an elephant’s collar. “Move the collar, move the elephant,” Klay said.

“Move a dot on his App and you move them both,” Bernard agreed.

Klay puffed his cheeks, squinting in thought as he blew out the air. “Who has access?”

“To the software? Just Greg and whoever he works with at Perseus. Maybe some of the biologists. To the physical collar? Anyone, really.”

Either option was a hack of the Green Guardians’ system.

“If Voi is not here, but his signal says he is, maybe it’s because Botha wants us—”

“—*where the elephant isn’t.*”

They strode quickly through the trees to the Land Rover. Standing beside the vehicle, the Perseus Group engineer was typing on his phone again. Lekorere, the politician, wearing headphones, was also reading his phone. Lekorere smiled, and raised a bottle of Tusker to salute their return. Bernard shook his head.

“Did you find Voi?” the engineer asked.

“No,” Bernard said.

“I told you we should have used the Askari drones.”

“He’s not here,” Klay said.

The engineer tapped his phone and opened Voi’s tracking App. “Look at his TIPP.” He handed Klay his phone. A small green dot in the shape of an elephant blinked on the program’s map. “Red means stopped. Yellow is streaking. Green moving normally. He’s right there.” The engineer pointed at Bernard. “*You* missed him.”

Klay backhanded the engineer with a withering look. He had seen Bernard glance—*glance*—at a clean stretch of granite and then describe in detail the poacher who had crossed the rock hours earlier, including his age, weight, how fast he was moving, and what he was carrying. Then, calculating how much of the poacher’s load was likely water, and where the area’s water sources lay, Bernard had driven ahead of his quarry, set up camp, and was having tea when the poacher arrived. “I’ll be having those,” Bernard had said, taking a sack of bloody tusks from the surprised man. *Good tracking follows a trail*, Klay wrote of the incident. *Great tracking leads it*.

“Voi’s not here, *Greg*,” Klay repeated.

Looking at Bernard, the software engineer scoffed, “I’m not talking dowsing sticks.”

The blinking green elephant on the engineer’s phone suddenly jumped. Klay pushed the phone hard into the engineer’s chest. “What’s that?”

The engineer looked down. “Oh,” he said.

“Oh, *what?*”

“Must be the satellite.” Greg tapped at his phone. “There may be a lag. It happens sometimes.” He tuned and pointed west to a single mountain that rose above the plain. “It says he’s up there.”

The KWS ranger shook his head and dropped his cigarette.

“I don’t like it,” Bernard said after they had parked and surveyed a portion of the mountain’s base. “No spoor.”

Klay, too, had seen no tracks—neither human nor elephant, and it was getting late. “Okay,” he said. “But if my intel’s right, and Greg is right, and we don’t follow?”

“Then we’ve said goodbye to a national treasure.”

Bernard spoke to the KWS ranger and returned to Klay. “There’s a plateau just before the top. Our cattle end up there sometimes. That’s where he’ll be. Follow the trail. We’ll clear the area and meet you at the plateau.”

“What about those two?” Klay asked.

“The MP stays in the car.”

When Bernard didn’t continue Klay shook his head. “No.”

“Babysit him, would you?”

Klay looked at Greg again, and sighed. “Beer’s on you.”

“Fair enough.”

Bernard gave a few hand signals, and then he and his rangers vanished up the steep slope, dancing over rocks and among trees, like ghosts.

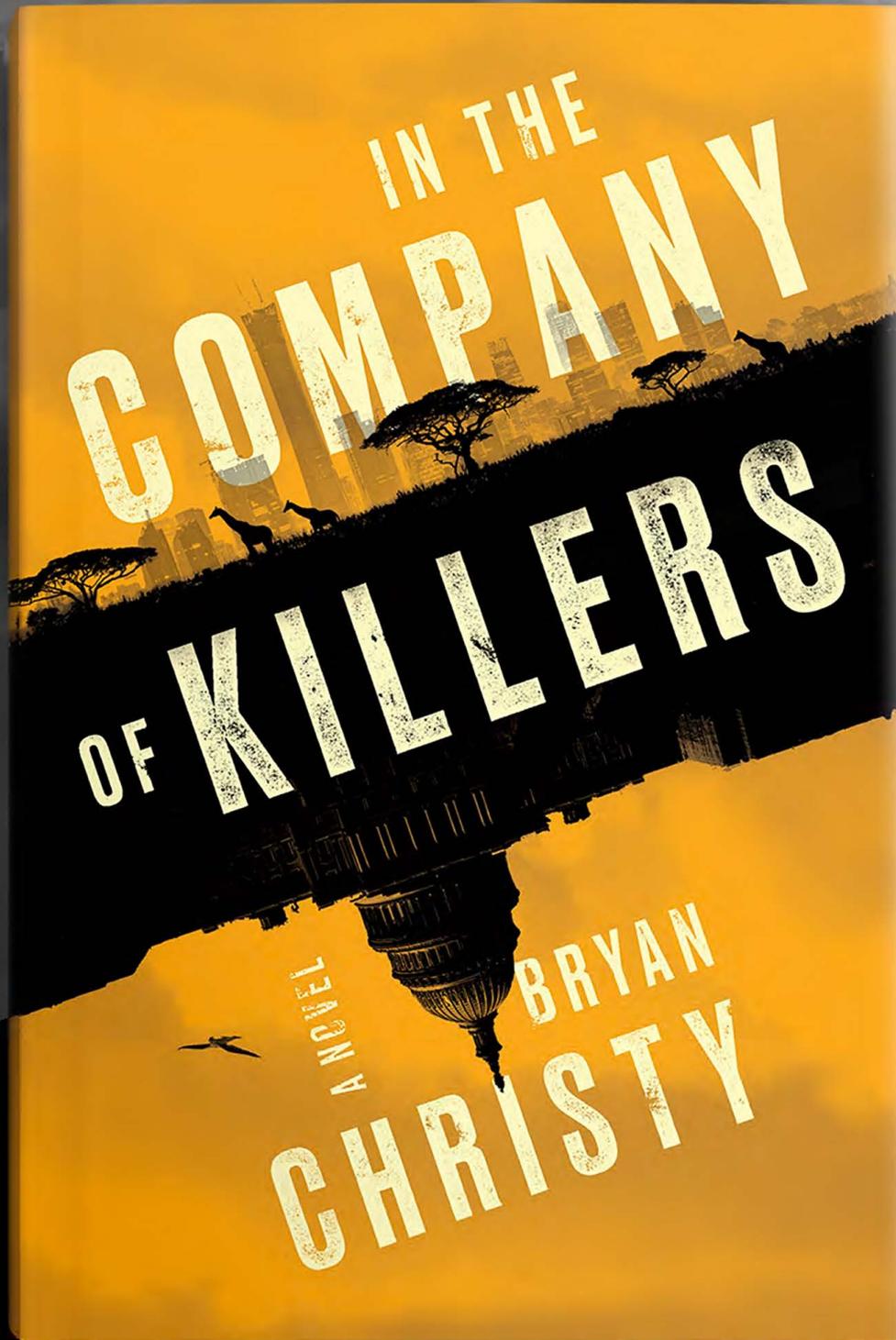
The climb was steeper than Klay expected. After an hour he was using vines and roots to pull himself upwards. After two hours, he was struggling to silence his breathing. It came out of him in deep, cave-emptying gasps. His thighs burned. At each step he ordered his foot to clear the next rock, then watched as his boot kicked the rock loose and sent it tumbling down the mountain. Behind him, Greg climbed easily.

Klay wiped a damp forearm over his muddy face. Sweat burned his eyes. It was a poacher's moon, nearly as full and bright as daylight. Tracking is easiest at dawn and late afternoon when angled sunlight casts a shadow in each footprint, enabling even an average tracker like Klay to read the ground. In this light, the earth was illegible.

Finally, he reached the edge of the plateau where the elephant was supposed to be. He wiped his eyes with a dry corner of his shirt tail and raised his binoculars. The clearing was empty. Klay grabbed the engineer's phone from him. According to the TIPP App, the biggest elephant in Africa was standing right in front of them.

Bernard appeared at Klay's side. He put a finger to his lips. "No elephant," he mouthed, gesturing to indicate a trunk. He scissored his fingers to indicate a man walking, and pointed. Klay understood: Someone was on the plateau with them.

Klay heard the crack of a rifle shot. Bernard's eyelids fluttered. The Samburu ranger seemed surprised, as if someone familiar had called out his name. Klay dove forward, tackling Bernard to the ground. Klay didn't hear the second shot. His senses inverted. Sound turned to light. Light became touch. He tasted the bullet's impact, he would later recall. And then he was falling.



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