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Relentless Enemies

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There are predators
and there are prey.
And then, there are enemies.
From ancient times,
Africa has been the place
where huge cats ruled the flooded forests
and swamps of prehistory.
It was a violent time,
when the nightmare of massive predators
stalked the land and nothing was safe.
Well, those nightmares are back.
There is an unusual pride of lions
stalking these swamps.
Cats that live in water and hunt a single herd
of Cape buffalo.
Evolution favors predators
that can hunt a range of prey,
but these lions are defying that trend
by becoming specialists,
relentless hunters of this one prey.
The explosive sky spitting fire
from the heavens
is an unsettling prelude to the battle ahead.
When two old adversaries
come head to head,
the conflict is a war of wills.
The outcome will hang in the balance.
There is an island in Africa,
a place where the ghostly shapes
of over 1 ,000 buffalo
drift over the domain
of the resident pride of lions.
The Tsaro pride are buffalo hunters,
made up of nine lionesses of enormous bulk.
Thick necks and heavy chests define them,
features that serve them well
for this unique hunting.
Amongst them, a silver-eyed female,
possibly blinded in combat with the buffalo.
She carries her battle scars well
and leads many of the hunts.
The heaviest set is a skew-eared female.
And the twins.
Two identical lionesses that often give birth

to cubs at the same time
and always hunt together.
Then there is the large older female,
a good huntress,
but there is something different about her.
She sits off to the side,
watching the pride, always distant.
The skew-horned buffalo bull
is the herd's pathfinder,
and he has led it around
the Tsaro territory for years.
He is a survivor
and senses the trouble ahead.
There is a magical moment
in any hunt, each time,
just one first moment,
a time somewhere between the initial
stalking approach of individual lions
and the coordinated run-in of a unified pride.
At that moment, the decision is made,
"We will attack, and we will attack together."
There is no fight like the fight for survival
and for the life of your offspring.
But these lions will not accept failure.
A charging buffalo doesn't strike fear
in their hearts.
It spurs them into a deadly game
of attack and counterattack,
thrust and parry, a relentless duel.
This hunt is far from over.
Blood has been tasted,
and like some invisible thread,
it will lead them back
to the injured calf time and time again,
day after day after day.
For this is an island surrounded
by an intricate web of thick papyrus swamps
and deep water to the south and west.
The buffalo are unable
to cross the fast-flowing
and crocodile-infested rivers.
And to the north,
deep channels carved out by hippos
make it difficult for the herd

to swim to safety in that direction.
There is no escape for the buffalo.
When they do wade into the maze
of channels that ring fence Duba Island,
they get entangled, confused,
and ultimately are forced to return
to the waiting lions.
So, what to us may seem a watery paradise
is for the buffalo a deadly confinement,
shrinking during the seasonal floods
before drying out to a faded savanna,
where two great warriors rule,
the males of the Tsaro pride.
They are masters of all on this island,
in particular the buffalo,
they and their Tsaro females
seldom let out of their sight.
There is a significant
new addition to the pride.
Growing up against this backdrop of buffalo,
he needs to be nimble
and confident on his feet
to become a Tsaro lion,
a specialist buffalo hunter.
Because lions are cooperative killers,
he must also learn
how to be part of the pride
and obey the harsh rules that govern it.
He has a brief window,
while under his mother's intense protection,
to memorize the personality
of each pride member.
The lone female is his first study.
The mother's explosive defense
only increases the tension in the pride
and sets in motion a further
and ominous isolation of the old female.
As a Tsaro lion,
his world is now a world of buffalo.
Slowly, the clicking horns
and occasional bellows
will become as common to his ears
as the sound of flood waters
rippling on the sand.

Each day brings him closer to the time
when he'll be ready to propel himself
into the midst of the herd,
unflinchingly throwing himself,
just like his mother does,
against the terrifying wall of horns.
The buffalo must walk their own
knife-edged path of survival,
finding food and water
while all the time avoiding the dangers
that will leave their bones scattered
in the indignity of death.
The buffalo are crossing back
into his mother's territory.
She has anticipated the path
of the herd's return perfectly.
The technique, flush the herd
and scan for the weak.
This time she is alone.
But she knows the gifts
of this summer season,
the newborn calves.
Buffalo's senses, both of sight and smell,
are well developed.
Their hearing is excellent.
These are intense and alert animals,
but a sixth sense creeps through her now.
She knows there is a lion nearby
and she knows it is coming for her calf.
All cats have an instinctive fear of water.
But when the mother leads
her day-old calf into the swamp,
the Tsaro lioness doesn't hesitate to follow.
There is iron-fisted determination
in a female with a hunger and a cub to feed.
It is the trade-off that Africa must make
from time to time.
Under the lions' inescapable surveillance,
it is a constant effort just to survive.
So each precious life
that slips into existence
in this game of life and death
is a victory against the sentinels
that scan the bushes

for any sign of opportunity.
Every delicate first step silently bolsters
the herd against their decline
under the relentless onslaughts they endure.
Each wobble during the agonizing hour
it takes to stabilize,
is a celebratory yell against the fates.
And each successful birth is a tiny contract
that keeps the system alive.
The synchrony of births overwhelms
the Tsaro pride with a flood of calves
that outdoes their capacity
to kill all the newborn.
They are limited to what they can eat today,
one calf at a time.
Although many are killed,
the majority of the baby buffalo survive.
As the buffalo start to move,
the lions of the Tsaro pride
feel their pangs of hunger begin to stir.
Ahead will be a fast-moving game
of life and death,
for they must know that taking on
a fully grown buffalo
with nothing but claws and teeth
has to be the most dangerous game of all.
On this unique Okavango island,
with its one herd of buffalo
and three prides of lions,
one would expect the nights to be filled
with bloodcurdling bellows.
But strangely, these lions seldom hunt
under the cover of darkness.
So nighttime is the herd's chance to
slip away to the far side of the island,
or even across the river, if they can.
The lions' diligence
has kept the herd contained
within the Tsaro territory for weeks.
While there has been a feast on this side
of the channel,
there has been a famine on the other.
The lions to the north, the Skimmer pride,
has been without food for too long,

and now their hunger
drives them through the water.
They are nowhere near the size
of the Tsaro lionesses,
but they have other skills.
Now, the Skimmer pride has to risk
making an insurgent sortie.
Just four small adult females
with 10 hungry and ineffectual cubs,
they have to do this stealthily.
They are taking a huge risk.
If they panic the herd too early,
the Tsaro females are bound to
hear the chase and react.
Too vigorous an attack, and the cubs
could fall underfoot of a stampede.
When a single female sees her target,
the risk increases even more.
The only option now is a frontal attack.
This is almost suicidal.
Incredibly, she fells
an adult cow buffalo unaided,
and drowns its muffled bellows in the water.
Their desperation sees off any intruders.
A hurried meal is all they can risk for now.
To the south, the big Tsaro females
are ready and waiting.
In a sophisticated and well-honed tactic
of herding the buffalo,
they first panic them with
a strange, growling charge.
The object is not to attack,
but to stampede the herd into the water.
Only then do they pick off
the struggling young
as they flounder out of their depth.
It is Silver Eye who makes the first contact,
dragging her prey underwater
to deliver mortal wounds
before the mother can retaliate
and rescue her calf.
Then the hunt goes into phase two.
Now, like sheepdogs,
the lions herd the buffalo together,

relentlessly pushing in.
It is clinical, this constant probing
for weakness,
the following through the flood waters
for up to seven hours at a time.
The lone female hangs back for a moment,
but the cub is eager to join in
despite his instinctive fear of water.
Water is an element that all Tsaro lions
must conquer early to become what they are,
true swamp cats.
And then, the stabbing attacks begin.
Each attack weakens the spirit of the herd.
This is the hunt they were born to.
And this is when the blood races,
adrenaline coursing through their muscles,
throbbing in their heads.
The young are jostled between
anxious mothers and defensive bulls,
and this is what the lions
have been waiting for, mistakes,
that given time and constant pressure,
are bound to happen.
And this is what the masters
have been waiting for.
Each kill is eagerly observed from a distance.
Ready to add more battle scars
to his profile if need be,
he is here to claim his bounty.
The lionesses have come to accept
this unchivalrous behavior.
It is their sacrifice for the protection
that the males give to the pride.
And knowing that the buffalo
are about to escape across the river,
they continue the hunt.
The females that have run and hunted hard
will need the next kill to be theirs.
This kill must be large enough to both feed
those that stayed back protecting the cub,
and sustain the lionesses
that have been injured in this last attack.
For the females,
the next hunt had better succeed.

The buffalo on this island have developed
an unusual tactic for defense.
It seems to baffle the lions.
Under threat, they present
an impenetrable wall of horns
by simply dropping down to sleep.
There are just a handful of hyenas
on the island.
When a new mother tries to move her cubs
out of the way of the herd,
she is well aware that she is being watched
from both sides.
She doesn't want to be caught
in the middle of this battle.
The unruly cubs had better head for cover.
Lions will hunt down and kill hyenas
even though they don't eat them.
But these lions are focused on killing
something edible,
so, for today at least, there's no danger.
When the herd finally sets off,
the lions slip into place.
Only half the females are here today,
injuries from the last hunt
have taken their toll,
and the mother has gone off
to search for her missing cub.
Expert buffalo hunters that they are,
the Tsaro females don't always
get it right the first time.
The remnants of the pride are hard-pressed
to outmaneuver the young male
they have selected.
Now the real hunt begins.
Defiant young bulls,
determined to make it to their prime,
are filled with the confidence
the testosterone gives them.
The bull refuses to give ground
to this handful of irritating lions.
He will turn and fight another day.
The buffalo are moving east again,
out of the Tsaro territory.
It is their chance to cross off the island.

In their path, other lions, the Pantry pride,
look forward to their arrival.
These are the risk-takers.
Once a formidable hunting coalition
of eight lions,
this pride could take down a buffalo
whenever they were hungry.
Fortune smiled on them.
But then, one day fate turned against them.
They would take on even the largest
in a battle of the titans,
they'd take risks, frontal attacks,
wrestling the bulls to their knees.
They'd collapse their prey forward,
unlike other prides who will avoid injury
and stay well clear of the sharp hooves.
These were the bold lions of Duba,
to whom the slashing points of a bull's horn
were nothing more than an obstacle
to be overcome with brute force.
Their raids on this buffalo pantry
were like medieval duels
in which they seemed invincible,
but the injuries took their toll.
The pride withered away from eight to four,
and finally, after this kill, just three.
The Pantry pride is doomed.
By contrast, the buffalo are steadily
building in strength.
Within this seemingly chaotic mass
is a surprising, almost military organization.
Kinship groups like small regiments
making up brigades
in their clans and herds.
As they hone their weapons
against trees and shrubs,
they signal their aggression.
Constantly reinforced bonds
protect the young
and bolster their group strength.
The buffalo are more than just prey for lions.
Tsaro in action again,
coordinated and working as
a unit to fell a young cow.

But the fallen cow belongs.
It is her saving grace.
Time and time again, when the lionesses
separate her out of the herd,
her clan rallies to find her.
And it is here that the whole pride is needed
to distract and counter,
to face down the charging family
and to outflank the injured cow.
But not today.
Three lionesses haven't
shown up for the hunt
and the buffalo are getting stronger.
The Skimmer pride,
hungry again on the northern bank
and with nothing to do.
The cubs urge their mothers
towards the channel,
ready for another insurgent adventure.
The mothers take the bait
even though they're wary of alerting
the resting Tsaro lionesses.
This time they bring
their own male with them.
Slightly younger than the old Tsaro males,
he looks ahead and swims on
into forbidden territory.
Now, in the tense world of a forbidden land
on the wrong side of the river,
the Skimmer cubs are intrigued
by anything that moves.
It's an exciting
and prohibited world for them.
Their mothers let the teenagers
experiment with the porcupine.
It could be a painful lesson.
Lions are often disabled
by those sharp quills.
The barbed point will cause infection,
and with lions that are constantly in and out
of swamp water,
these infections could kill them.
But this play gives the cubs
experience they need to have.

Perhaps this is the day
for teaching the cubs about life,
even though it is a strange place to do it.
The buffalo are an ideal canvass
for that education,
and this is what they came for.
Sound carries forever here,
especially to ears attuned
to the one prey species they know well
and the one signal of distress
they know intimately.
The cow is an easy target,
but the herd has been emboldened
by a wave of successes
in seeing off such attackers.
With each success
they develop more confidence.
Their triumph further enrages them
and, as it does, the scales are tipped
against the splintered Skimmer pride.
There is a subtle power shift
that sends the hunters fleeing for cover.
It is a turning point in this relationship.
With the pride scattered and running scared,
now the buffalo have a real chance
of skewering a lion at last.
It turns into a chaotic scramble for safety
for the surprised young lions.
Far across the open grassland
from the fleeing pride,
one of the insecure
teenage males is isolated.
The herd has cut off his escape.
The Tsaro pride has heard the commotion.
They are here.
Skew Ear is always quick on the offensive,
and slowly they appear from everywhere.
Now they are united.
The Skimmer lions are too shaken
by the buffalo's aggression
to notice that the lions coming at them
from all directions are not from their pride.
It takes a moment to notice
the fire in their eyes.

The Skimmer pride has no heart for a fight.
The strength of being on their own territory
weighs heavily on the side
of the resident males.
The Tsaro males focus on any foreign male,
leaving the females to their own battles.
This is male business now, one on one,
or if possible two on one.
When these huge males fight,
it is at enormous risk to both.
Even the victors have to
guard against a stray bite
or defensive swipe that could sever a jugular
or slice open a fatal wound.
Slowed down by the water,
the cubs are taking a risk
of their own in crossing.
The incensed Tsaro females
could easily cross right in behind them
and take the fight to the far shore.
So even though the odds
are stacked in their favor,
this attack is not driven to the point of death.
This time their point has been made,
"This is our land and we will defend it."
"The boundary has been secured."
The Tsaro pride's
aggressive defense is extreme
because at last they have
a new set of cubs to defend.
Hunters by nature, they seem to know
what they are born to.
Their play is a dress rehearsal
for what will one day not be a game.
And already they smell of lion.
It is a scent that drives the lead bulls wild.
The buffalo are incensed by the wafting,
invisible smell of lions,
and they push deeper into the Tsaro palms,
stomping at any movement.
The twin mothers have arrived,
drawn back to their cubs
by the weight of the milk they carry.
And when they see the chaos around them,

the low growls of displeasure begin.
These are angry lions now,
not calculating hunters.
Flinging themselves at the buffalo
takes them beyond
the simple contest for food.
Now they are enemies.
But when their thrusts are countered,
the scales are tipped
in the delicate confidence game
that drives everything in nature.
But any retreat would mean
sacrificing their cubs.
Not these two mothers. Not the twins.
But when the mothers check for their cubs
among the palms,
nothing but a disturbing silence greets them.
Only half of the cubs seem to have
survived the buffalo onslaught,
but then, from the safety of the palms,
three more and finally
all of them come tumbling out.
With only one casualty.
Most lions recover well from the deep cuts
they endure in their violent life
because of their thin skins
and the dry climate.
But in the swamp,
injuries are kept moist and raw,
open to infection.
The twins decide as one
to move the litter away
from the aggressive herd of buffalo.
For the injured cub,
this may be the worst time
to have to go on a long march,
especially when the only way
ahead is through water.
And as their whiskers touch
the still unfamiliar water,
they feel their future as swamp cats
for the first time on their skins.
It is a future that is extremely precarious
for the whole pride,

not just the one lagging cub.
With such extreme hunting,
it's inevitable that at least
one of the Tsaro lionesses
will be injured or killed at some time.
When that happens, the pride will be
in desperate need of some of their cubs.
It is essential that they keep
the hunting numbers
at the ideal eight or nine lionesses.
This then is a precious cargo.
This wet, swampy world they live in
makes up an intricate part of
the lions' hunting strategy,
where the buffalo are slowed down.
But it also wears out the lions.
Both they and their prey
are more vulnerable in the swamp.
Beyond the ebb and flow
of this unpredictable relationship,
a strange set of patterns emerge.
The lions start to show signs
of understanding much more,
and going much further
in their strategies for hunting buffalo.
The season change brings
new wanderers through their territory,
big herds of elephants from the dry interior.
To the north, no more than
a few dozen pride territories away,
other lions have specialized
in killing elephants,
but not these lions.
Even though their bulk would be valuable
in an elephant hunt,
they show no interest at all.
Lions learn quickly,
but they most often stick to what they know.
And here, that is buffalo hunting.
When the buffalo are woken and scattered
into the 110-degree heat,
Skew Horn looks north
and picks out a landmark.
The Tsaro lionesses follow.

They've seen this before.
They know exactly where the herd is going,
almost before the last members
of the herd know themselves.
From their memory of past successes
and an intimate knowledge of the terrain,
the lions now do something
that shows the precise calculation
of their hunting strategies.
They position themselves,
ready to play out the same game plan
they have used many times before.
When the lionesses ignore the herd
and circle ahead of it,
it is because they are drawing on
memory from past battles.
They know where the buffalo
will be the most vulnerable.
Up ahead is where the herd will wedge itself
against the deep water's edge.
All the lions have to do
is to position themselves,
ready for the herd to turn back.
The cubs are along as well.
The Tsaro lionesses
may be this enormous size
because of some genetic trait
that the cubs will inherit.
The constant wading may also be a key
to developing these huge chests
and upper legs,
an exercise the cubs will get used to,
even though now the soft mud
and the small creatures
that scurry away underfoot unsettle them.
The sheer volume of buffalo meat
these specialist cubs will eat
may be a further factor in making them
into these enormous Okavango swamp cats.
Somewhere along the way,
the injured cub fell behind and disappeared,
a bitter reminder to any cub that lags.
The old loner is also along today,
hanging back and weary of the unruly cubs

splashing noisily among them.
This hunt has all the signs
of being chaotic and dangerous.
Their plan is working.
The buffalo are exactly
where the lions want them.
The setup is perfect.
Now the hunt turns to the straggling bulls,
old, fiercely independent fighters,
aggressive and tough.
This will be a battle of giants.
This is the object of every hunt,
continually add pressure
and cause something to unravel.
Mistakes are then inevitable.
A single cow stands out among the bulls,
an easier target.
But as she turns back,
it is into the path of a waiting lioness.
The lion conquers her hesitation.
She has unlocked the puzzle
and found the weak spot
in the buffalo's defense.
The activity is like a magnet.
Even the lone lioness hazards the depths
to get to the flaying cow.
But these may be waters
too much even for a Tsaro female.
The crystal clear waters allow
frightening glimpses of what lurks below.
And when the buffalo starts to sink,
the lioness makes the decision to swim for it.
Making for the river bank
before the crocodiles
she knows are down there can surface,
she leaves the buffalo cow
to her own devices,
a more vulnerable bait.
The herd has outmaneuvered
the lions again today,
perhaps because it was the cubs' first hunt.
Females were scattered, and the chaos
didn't quite work in their favor.
Instantly, the buffalo settle,

quick to let go of the stress of the attack.
Their way of dealing with the lions'
relentless predation
is to put it all behind them.
It takes the lions some time to notice
that none of the cubs is with them.
Hours later, they find one dead in the grass.
The distance from water
absolves the crocodiles.
This may be something more insidious.
For Silver Eye, the distress is too much,
and she slowly and deliberately
eats the remains of the cub.
Whether lions can mourn or not,
there is an air of desperation
around the pride now.
At least one of these females knows
exactly what has happened to the cubs.
One female was always behind.
Others are more determined
to defend their young.
In the case of the Blacksmith plovers,
it is at risk of death,
against overwhelming odds.
It is the time of the angry bulls.
Monsters filled with aggression
and exploding with testosterone
find any reason to knock down an opponent.
And while these beasts engage in combat,
the plovers stand their ground
in amongst the thrashing hooves.
There is nothing delicate about this.
These are battles of brute force
that male buffalo are built for.
Their heavy necks are able to withstand
tons of head-to-head impact.
Without these gnarled and impossibly heavy
horny bosses for protection,
the repeated shocks would most likely
shatter their skulls.
With the upturned hooks on their horns,
the Cape buffalo
slash savagely at each other.
These blood-soaked rapiers

are an indication of just how easily
a thin-skinned lioness could succumb,
let alone a plover
weighing less than a pound.
And underfoot, those plovers
have made their point,
just in time for their own additions
to Duba plains.
Despite the heavy predation by lions,
the buffalo here have broken through
the threshold where the lions
can destroy the herd.
They have started to breed
faster than the lions can kill them,
and the herd swells each year,
staying together
instead of fragmenting, as you would expect.
Now sleeping within five or six paces
of the accepting herd,
the lions have moved this
to a new level of intimacy,
perhaps an indication of where
this unusual relationship may go.
The two old males of Duba
have seen many a battle together
and stolen many a kill from their lionesses.
But at nearly 13 years old,
their time is coming to an end.
When they are overthrown,
life will be even more unstable for the pride.
And in this bizarre display of familiarity,
the Tsaro females have
so imbedded themselves with the buffalo
that they have become almost
an extension of the herd.
As the herd gets closer
to the Tsaro territory boundaries,
the lions are even more attentive,
not letting their buffalo out of their sight.
When the herd moves closer to the water
and possible escape,
the lions look ahead
and comb their memories
for strategies and plans

of action they can use,
and then decide on one.
The buffalo find their direction.
They plan to cross the river.
This calls for a different tactic altogether.
Hunting here is not only a physical effort,
it is a mind game.
Now the lionesses maneuver themselves
carefully into key positions,
poaching just a little into
the Skimmer pride territory.
The ambush is a bold tactic
to frighten the buffalo
back to where they came from.
With the buffalo back in Tsaro territory,
the lions can now hunt them
on their own terms.
At first, the front line of cats
moves in shoulder to shoulder.
They still need the buffalo
a little further away from the water
and possible escape,
so they shift them
with short, stabbing attacks.
But each individual lioness who attacks
is vulnerable to the bad-tempered old bulls.
As the forays continue,
the herd senses a lack of conviction
and slowly the power shifts again.
And then, quite suddenly,
it seems as though the lions
have lost their advantage.
Their attacks become
uncoordinated and sloppy
as they get lost in the choking dust.
But then, the break happens.
The herd skirts the palm islands
and a Tsaro lioness sees
her target through the dust.
These are running attacks.
Deep chests filled with air, heavy upper legs
give them the stamina they need to keep up
and to launch themselves into battle.
For the lions now, it is a race to survive,

one day at a time,
a struggle they are determined to win.
Six months after the rain in the highlands,
the flood waters arrive in the Okavango.
The surface area of the island
is suddenly reduced,
and the lions and buffalo are forced together
even more intensely.
Today the lions are using the water
to work the buffalo into a frenzy.
Once in the water, the cats target the calves.
The drag effect slows the weaker,
young animals down.
Lions are expert
in recognizing that weakness.
The confidence of these buffalo
has now reached a level
where any attack is challenged.
In other places, buffalo usually flee in panic
to the furthestmost parts of their range.
But here, they stay as close
to the lions as possible,
circling around the attacking lions they know
rather than running away wildly,
which they've learned
will only attract other prides.
The Tsaro pride needs all their resources
and concentration now.
Any distractions will shift the power
away from them again,
in favor of the buffalo.
In the continued attacks,
the injured calf is embraced
behind a wall of buffalo
and once again the lions,
only reluctant and uneasy
when their whiskers touch the water,
continue the hunt.
Once again, they have to
spur the herd into panic
before they can search out the injured calf.
This is where they need
all of their pride members
to keep the herd under pressure.

And then, they see it.
But surprisingly for this area,
a small raiding party of hyenas arrives,
attracted by the commotion
within the stampeding herd.
These huge lions don't have the experience
of hyenas very often
and their reactions are astonishing.
Just one of these lionesses
outweighs a hyena three times over,
and yet the small handful of attackers
manages to gain
the psychological advantage
simply with posture and intimidation.
Today the lions seem to think better
of provoking the hyenas or evoking the wrath
of their vicious teeth and darting demeanors.
The hunt is over for the lions,
another failure,
although the hyenas
can still smell opportunity.
When the herd nuzzles the wounded calf,
they taste the blood and sense his fear.
The day is not yet over for the buffalo
and their injured calf.
Now he is left to the more persistent dogging
by these new predators on the scene.
When Skew Ear and Silver Eye
regroup with the twins
and decide to move off,
it is not to hunt again,
but to retire from the field, beaten,
and to find the other females.
Something in their strategy
just isn't working.
After the cub deaths,
the pride has been distracted,
females joining loosely
and disbanding again.
But just as the hunting party breaks up,
the hyenas drive the buffalo
right in behind the departing lions.
And now, all they must do is to reach out
and take what is rightfully theirs.

It's an intoxicating moment,
that instant of a lion's explosive
and determined rush at its prey.
The water drags at any movement,
slows their responses
and magnifies the effort
each has to make to escape
or capture their prey.
It is a contest to see which animal
has developed the best weapons
to cope with the water.
The heavy buffalo bodies pitted
against the wit and strength of the lions.
The heroic defense of the clan
versus the instant damage of an attack,
each racing against time.
The time it takes to inflict a mortal wound.
And the capacity to outsmart and outlast
the enemy in this battle
is an art, a science,
poetry in the face of death.
Their new nemeses are quick to follow up.
Where this new confidence came from,
we will never know,
but the psychological tactic
is overpowering.
Both of the lions' kills are under threat now.
A wall of attacking, demonic,
blood-splattered hyenas will intimidate
even the strongest warriors of the plains.
But the day is far from over.
The buffalo have bounced back yet again
and are heading for
the water-crossing to the west.
The day's relentless demands
have sent them back on a familiar path,
and, as before,
the lions recognize the pattern.
When they make their third kill of the day,
the battered pride assembles at last.
The besieged herd makes one last stand
for their injured calf.
This has not been their day of glory.
Their five hours of hunting has fed

almost every other predator in Duba
and, but for a few mouthfuls,
the huntresses have gone unsated.
The lionesses of the Tsaro pride
are finally exhausted.
They cannot push the buffalo another step.
The astonishing beauty
in their haunting relationship
is what makes this island so special.
At dawn, as the lions and the buffalo
gather for their daily interaction,
it is difficult not to see them
as part of one whole.
The buffalo herd is kept pruned
of the sick and the weak,
a burden that weighs heavily
on their progress.
And the lions could certainly
not live without them.
They need each other.
When individual buffalo step out at the lions
and playfully leap back to safety,
it is a deadly game.
The movements seem to lock these two
in an ageless dance,
in perfect harmony
on that essential edge of life
where heroism and bravery are tempered
by the constant risk of death.
The lions amble out of the way,
but bounce back, and for just a moment
the backwards and forwards movement
takes on a fluidity that is much more
than just predators and prey,
or even enemies.
This is a deadly dance that can erupt
into violence in a heartbeat.
And slowly, the lionesses are assembling.
Just then, the old female stops.
In the distance, one of the missing females
appears with two new cubs.
Like an expectant grandmother,
the old female is enraptured.
But something bothers the mother

about her approach.
It sends the cubs back
towards their hiding place.
Something in her body language instills fear
and foreboding in their innocent,
but perceptive, minds.
And then, her actions are clear to the mother.
She is the cub killer!
When the mother attacks her,
it is as if it is for all the mothers
that lost their cubs in the past few years.
Her attentive rearguard
while the mothers were off hunting
gave her the opportunity
to finish off each and every cub
in the past two years.
Thirty-one in total.
And at last, the cause is known.
Now, these new cubs are under threat.
And with each season of failures,
the pride itself is under threat.
She must be controlled.
Now, with the cub killer
known and warned off,
these cubs may stand a chance.
The pride needs them to survive.
Each day these tiny jewels survive
is another day towards preserving
the future of the pride.
Against a permanent backdrop of buffalo,
their play is a dull pleasure.
Every blow to each other while playing
is a risk in this environment.
But it will be hard to control the killing.
It may even be more extensive
than just one female.
Ironically, the biggest threat to the lions
is not buffalo at all,
but the stalking enemy within.
It is a new day, with new challenges.
The Tsaro females collapse a prime
male buffalo in seconds, with little effort.
Their efficiency as a pride running at a peak.
Everyone is here today, all except the cubs,

tucked away in a thicket.
The bull's calls start to attract attention.
Slowly, the numbers mount up.
Eventually, dozens of stomping legs
and fierce, swinging, saber-sharp horns
slash the air around their heads.
The bull must be a valued warrior
to attract the support of the whole herd.
They are now rallying to his call.
The lions are now desperate
to keep their prey.
Their attack is relentless,
but countered over and over
by an equally determined
gathering of buffalo.
It builds to a battle
reminiscent of an ancient duel
between titanic forces of nature
where winner takes all.
A large buffalo bull, the biggest of the big,
or else injury or possible death
that might finally send
the Tsaro pride into decline.
The partially crippled male
is seen as weakened by a rival bull
and mated as a show of dominance.
And then, at the height of the battle,
one lioness turns back
in the direction of the cubs.
The others don't notice.
They are caught up in their struggle
to outsmart the buffalo.
They have no time to look back.
Quite suddenly, the lioness reappears.
It is the mother with her two cubs.
She couldn't take the chance
of leaving them alone in this confusion,
but now this hunt has turned into
an ideal lesson for the cubs.
These little hunters' eyes take it all in
and see their very first hunt.
They will learn about buffalo
and the smell of blood
when the air fills with that magic.

The moment when lions suddenly slip
into a coordinated attack,
and the hunt begins.
But it must be a terrifying time,
when monsters turn and confront you
and their giant shadows send
chills down your spine,
making you question
the invincibility of your mother.
It is a dream.
It is a nightmare.
It is all things for them,
as this experience overpowers them.
It is the ultimate lesson
of where death fits into life,
and how it is a part of life
and not just the end of it.
It is a vivid display of determination,
of clutching on to life, this life,
against overwhelming forces.
And the old bull turns
to confront his enemies.
The cubs stare into his eyes.
It is a look of foreboding warning.
And the buffalo front rank
rallies again and again,
wearing down the lions,
circling them and chasing them to ground.
And it is a riveting lesson of fortitude
and comradeship in the face of death,
and finally the dignity of being able to turn
and confront your tormentors head on.
And while they stay just out of harm's way,
they see an even more
confusing development.
From an unexpected quarter, the rival bull
steps out and attacks his own,
driving home his aggression and dominance,
upending his old adversary, and with that,
tipping the scales of victory
in favor of the lions.
It is an unanticipated advantage
that the lions quickly move in on.
And it is over.

The Tsaro pride are back.
Their first meat meal seems to hold
as much attraction as their mother's milk.
Their curiosity only tempered
by the fear of being mauled
within the confusion and aggression
that makes lions unique
in cooperating on the hunt
and yet fiercely competitive as they feed.
In the past few days, the cubs have met
the rest of the pride for the first time,
seen their first hunt, and are experiencing
their first violent introduction to lion life.
And in this magical world,
hidden by the delicate mists of time,
there are questions to be asked.
Will all this be here tomorrow
when we wake?
Or will they have disappeared like ghosts,
nothing but a dream remembered?
Huge lions specializing in one prey,
adapting and breeding in isolation
on an island in a river that goes nowhere.
Given time, could this lead
to the slow and continuous evolution
of a distinct race or even species of lion?
An island swamp cat, more precious
and rare than we can imagine.
And, of course, vulnerable to the whims
of our own carelessness.
The silent swish of grass
against their faces doesn't distract them.
The amber coats and thick cushions
on their feet are meaningless
as forms of concealment for these lions.
They no longer need that.
These are the cats of this marshy wilderness,
stalkers, followers, and confronters.
All relentless hunters of the buffalo,
masters of their craft.
As they gather on
this ancestral playing field,
they dance a dance that is unique
to this place and this time.

And yet, it is forever.