

PRIDE

The Kenyan Maasai Who Once Hunted Lions Are Now Their Saviors



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A decade ago, scientists worried the lion could go extinct in Kenya by 2020. But today the area's lion population is thriving thanks to an extraordinary group.

Andrew Dubbins

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Maasai warrior Kamunu Saitoti had been hunting for the better part of a day when at last he came across lion tracks in the dusty soil. It was 2007 in the Maasai-owned territory of Eselenkei in southern Kenya, the light was growing dim, and Kamunu's two younger fellow warriors said perhaps they should turn back for their village because it is dangerous to be near lions at night. But Kamunu was eager to find the lion that had eaten his father's cow.

A severe drought gripped the region. Wildebeest and zebra were dying by the thousands, so the lions—starved of their natural prey—had turned to attacking Maasai cattle in greater numbers. Cattle are the Maasai's livelihood, and warriors like Kamunu were responsible for protecting them.

Gripping tall spears and wearing the Maasai's traditional brightly colored cloth sheets, bracelets, and earrings stretching their earlobes, the three warriors stalked across the savannah in sandaled feet, until Kamunu spotted three lions under a tree. One—a female—had a bloated belly, which led Kamunu to suspect she was the culprit.

A seasoned lion killer, he led the warriors stealthily through the chaparral and waited behind a tree until the lions fell asleep. With adrenaline surging, they leaped from the cover of the bush, sprinted for the lions, and attacked them with their spears. The startled lions fought back, snarling, lunging, and roaring at the warriors. But as they roared, Kamunu's hunting party knew to stab the animals in their open mouths, puncturing their organs and causing them to bleed internally. The lions hissed, choked, and coughed up blood, until finally collapsing.



Courtesy Andrew Dubbins

Kamunu waited to be certain the beasts were dead—because a wounded lion is a terrifying thing—before unsheathing his steel knife and slicing open the belly of the lioness. He was expecting to find his father’s cow inside, but much to his surprise, he discovered her stomach was empty. His bad luck continued when he was arrested by Kenya Wildlife Service rangers for the killing. He served 10 days in jail, and his father had to sell three cows to pay his bail.

Lion hunting was an ancient tradition among the Maasai, the semi-nomadic tribe that ply their existence herding livestock in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. Throughout the tribe’s 2,000-year history, its warriors hunted lions both to defend their livestock and as part of a “coming of age” ritual. Lion hunts increased as the area’s human population grew, with villages and pastures carving deeper into wildlife habitat, bringing Maasai livestock in closer contact to lions. Between 2001 and 2011, Maasai

warriors killed more than 200 lions in southern Kenya, the equivalent of 40 percent of the population each year. These hunts, combined with habitat loss, poaching, and disease, caused the lion population across Africa to plummet from half a million in 1950 to fewer than 30,000 in 2013. A decade ago, scientists worried the lion could be extinct in Kenya by 2020.

Instead, in the Maasai-owned lands of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania known as Maasailand, the lion population has rebounded. “We’re now having conversations around what to do with so many lions,” said Egyptian American conservationist Dr. Leela Hazzah.

She’s the founder of Lion Guardians, a nonprofit that gives Maasai warriors who once killed lions the responsibility for protecting them. Building on their traditional tracking skills, the warriors learn to fit lions with tracking collars, then use radio telemetry antennas and GPS receivers to follow their movements and warn villagers and herders if a lion is in the vicinity to thwart any conflict.

Leela launched the organization in 2006, while researching Kenya’s declining lion population for her master’s thesis. She was interviewing Maasai lion killers and found an article about Kamunu who’d been arrested for killing a lioness. The article had a grainy picture of him in the caption, his deep-set eyes glaring at the camera. Leela asked around about Kamunu and almost every warrior knew about him. He was from a family of lion killers and had five kills to his name.

Determined to talk to him, Leela visited his rugged mountain village in the Maasai community of Eselenkei, known for its many massive birds of prey. After a few hours of searching, she spotted a man riding his bicycle down the hill. Leela recognized him from his picture and by his swagger. “I could tell he was a lion killer just by the way he was riding his bicycle,” Leela recalls.

Leela waved to him, and he coasted to a stop on his bicycle.

“Where are you coming from?” asked Leela, who’s youthful-looking and petite.

“I just got out of jail,” said Kamunu, a tall, unsmiling man.

“What happened?” Leela asked.

Kamunu shook his head, then told the story of his father’s missing cow, the lion he’d mistaken for its killer, and his subsequent arrest.

Kamunu was angry and confused by his prison sentence, and Leela could understand why. Once, lion killing had won him respect and prestige in the community. But the ways of the Maasai warrior were fading. The Maasai were becoming more Westernized—carrying cell phones and driving motorcycles. Education, rather than lion killing, was the new path to status. Kamunu, who couldn’t read or write, was struggling to adapt to the changing times.

Leela was mulling over the germ of an idea that would become Lion Guardians. “If you happen to get a job, will you stop killing lions?” she asked Kamunu.

Kamunu fixed her with a hardened stare. “I will only stop killing lions when they stop killing our livestock,” he said firmly.

Leela saw something in Kamunu. He had an integrity and pride and the respect of his community. He was a stubborn lion killer for sure. But if she could change his heart, she thought, others would follow.

On a trip to East Africa last year, I met with Leela at Lion Guardians’ hilltop camp near Kenya’s Amboseli National Park. I’d read an article about the conservation group years

back and was intrigued by the image of Leela—an American grad student in her twenties—recruiting a team of traditional Maasai warriors to trade their spears for radio telemetry antennas and save the lions they’d once taken such pride in hunting. Leela gave me a tour of the camp, then we sat in the shade outside her tent office, and she told me the story of Lion Guardians—her life’s work.

It began 15 years ago and a world away, on the redwood-shaded campus of UC Berkeley in northern California. Leela had been studying elephants as a graduate student at University of Wisconsin, but after reading about East Africa’s declining lion population, she was drawn to the challenge of how to save them. She’d called Berkeley Professor Dr. Laurence Frank, a renowned carnivore researcher, who was impressed by her mastery of Swahili and invited her to Berkeley to interview for a research assistant position.

Known as an eccentric in the conservation community, Laurence earned the nickname “Laurence of the Hyenas,” stalking the cats through Kenya’s Maasai Mara at night wearing infrared night-vision goggles. At Berkeley, he ran the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, which houses the world’s second-largest collection of hyena skulls, some of which he’d personally macheted off the bodies of diseased corpses. He’d also established a colony of live spotted hyenas housed in pens in the wooded hills above campus, which could be heard cackling and hooting at night by students walking home from class.

“ Africa can be a dangerous place for foreign 'do gooders.' In 2006, a British filmmaker combatting poachers was murdered in the Rift Valley. ”

Leela, in her interview, struggled to follow Laurence’s questions, which focused more on anthropology than her chosen subject of biology. “We don’t really need to know any

more about lion biology,” Laurence said. “What we need to know is about the Maasai and why they’re killing lions.”

Leela, then 26 years old, was hesitant. “But I don’t know how to work with communities,” she said. “Maybe you should find an anthropologist.”

Laurence laughed. “You just have to live there,” he said in encouragement. “Don’t ask too many questions. Just hang out and be useful.” A few months later, Leela was on a commercial plane over the moonlit Atlantic, bound for Maasailand.

Africa can be a dangerous place for foreign “do gooders.” In 2006, around the time Leela arrived in Maasailand, a British filmmaker combating poachers was murdered in the Rift Valley, reminiscent of famous gorilla researcher Dian Fossey, and an Italian author had recently been assaulted by poachers at her ranch in Northern Kenya. Leela, as a precaution, wore a dog tag her father gave her in case anything should happen.

Laurence lent her his beat-up 1974 Land Cruiser, formerly a Canadian Post Office vehicle (Leela has no idea how he got it to Africa), and she found a house on a bluff overlooking Mbirikani in the Chyulu Hills, a wooded lava ridge formed by the explosion of Mount Kilimanjaro 200,000 years ago. The house was owned by an Irish missionary couple. They were never around, so Leela moved in on the sly.

From Leela’s perch on the hill, she could see Maasai warriors gathering in the village for lion hunts, jumping in a circle with their spears and bellowing a battle cry, before running into the hills. It is illegal to hunt lions, and warriors can be arrested and jailed for it. But Leela never called the authorities. She was merely there to learn and observe.

It was painful to watch for Leela, an animal lover to the core. Growing up in Washington, D.C., Leela had always felt more comfortable around animals than people.

The daughter of Egyptian immigrants, she told me she felt too Egyptian for America and too American for Egypt, like a right and left shoe each on the wrong foot.



Courtesy Andrew Dubbins

The National Zoo was her sanctuary. Leela spent hours at peace watching the monkeys, lions, or her favorite, the elephants. Her parents didn't allow pets, so she and her identical twin sister would find frogs, turtles, and snakes and hide the animals around the house, their mom eventually finding them with a scream. In the summers, they'd visit the family home in Cairo, Egypt, where Leela's dad said he used to hear lions roaring from the rooftop. Leela would stay awake late into the night listening for the lions; her dad never had the heart to tell her all the lions in Egypt were gone now, hunted to extinction.

The Maasai tend to be wary of outsiders, having suffered a long history of colonization by the British, and many were cold to Leela at first. But over time, people got used to seeing her around. They usually only see white tourists in their Land Rovers speeding to and from safaris, but Laurence's truck was breaking down so often that Leela had to walk great distances between Maasai villages. "I didn't know foreigners could walk!" a Maasai woman said to Leela.

One evening, some villagers pounded frantically on Leela's door. They said there was a baby suffering a severe and mysterious illness in the village, and the doctor was completely drunk. They asked if Leela could help, and Leela sped in her vehicle to the sick child's hut. She secured the baby inside the Land Cruiser, but when she tried the ignition, it wouldn't start! She cranked and cranked. Finally the engine coughed to life. Leela raced over muddy roads, three hours to the nearest clinic, where a different doctor managed to save the baby's life.

Weeks later, Leela became sick with malaria. She spiked a dangerous fever, couldn't leave her bed, or even open her eyes. Word of Leela's good deed toward the infant had rippled through the community, and a Maasai "medicine man"—known as a muganga—came to Leela's house carrying the bark of a local tree. He ground the bark into a fine powder and mixed it into a cup of hot tea that tasted horrendous. The medicine man motioned Leela to "keep drinking, keep drinking." She forced herself to swallow cup after cup of the foreign liquid, until she fell into a deep slumber. When she woke, as if by a miracle, she was cured.

A short time later, an old Maasai elder invited Leela to a local celebration, which she accepted with honor. She wore modest long skirts among the Maasai, careful never to dress promiscuously, nor imitate Maasai fashion. When she arrived at the celebration, some villagers still eyed her with suspicion, but others greeted her with warm smiles, and welcomed her into the circle of dancing Maasai warriors.

A group of Maasai ladies, laughing at the young foreigner, said, “If she’s going to be living here, we should give her a Maasai name.” The ladies argued for a while what to call her, until an old woman seen as very wise in the village stepped forward. “I see something in her,” the woman said, looking deeply into Leela’s eyes. “We should call her Nasera.” It was the old woman’s name, and in Maasai it means “woman of leadership.”

With the Maasai slowly warming to Leela, she managed to begin arranging interviews with lion killers in the area for her Master’s thesis.

Aided by a local interpreter who spoke the Maasai’s language of Ma, Leela invited the warriors to the missionary’s house. They’d sip tea under the gazebo in the yard, which had a stunning view of snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro, known by the Maasai as “White Mountain.”

In the male-dominated Maasai culture, the warriors didn’t view Leela as a threat, and spoke with candor about lion killing. In addition to ritual and retaliatory reasons, Leela discovered that a simmering anger toward the government was driving the killing.

“Those foxes have taken all our fertile land... for wildlife,” said one angry warrior of the government. He was referring to how Amboseli National Park once belonged to the Maasai, until the government evicted them to create the safari park in 1974, relegating them to the dusty volcanic lands on the outskirts of the park. “Now those wildlife are killing people,” he said, “eating our livestock, damaging our crops... They just get money from wildlife and they forget about the problems people encounter from wildlife.”

In 2006, after a year embedded with the Maasai, and talking to numerous lion killers, Leela felt she’d collected enough information to complete her Master’s thesis, which she

decided to write at Dr. Laurence Frank's house on the high plains of Laikipia in northern Kenya.



Courtesy Andrew Dubbins

Leela shared a room there with Laurence's new research assistant, Stephanie Dolrenry, a biologist from Missouri conducting research on hyenas, and the two grad students bonded over a passion for carnivores and their eagerness to save the lions.

They'd discuss lion conservation around the firepit with Laurence. Laurence was Jewish American but fascinated by Scotland. Regularly quoting Scottish verse and belting Celtic songs, he'd sip Highlands Scotch whisky while brainstorming conservation tactics.

Leela had an off-the-wall plan, arising out of her conversations with the Maasai. One of the warriors (who are known as murrans) had told her, "Let us murrans help conservationists monitor lions. Our tradition and culture make us the best and most experienced people to save lions. We can track lions in the dark, with our eyes closed, and we will never fail at it."

What if—Leela posed—we gave the Maasai warriors who are killing the lions responsibility for saving them? Pay the warriors a salary and train them in wildlife radio telemetry, blending the warriors’ traditional tracking skills with modern technology.

“Kamunu showed up at the treehouse one night. “I have found lions,” he announced.”

Stephanie worried the plan could backfire. They were lion killers, after all. What if they used the GPS equipment to find and kill more lions?!

But, Leela argued, what do we have to lose? During her time in Maasailand, she’d seen more dead lions than live ones. She’d felt she was merely documenting extinction and it was heartbreaking. The lions were running out of time, she said, and bold action was needed.

In 2008, Kamunu got a call from Leela, who said she was looking for trackers for her new conservation group—Lion Guardians—and invited him to interview.

Kamunu knew Leela from her periodic visits to ask him about lion killing, and he was intrigued by the offer. Because of the drought, the Maasai’s cows were becoming too emaciated to sell, so a salary could supplement his herding income, and help him support his family.

Kamunu agreed to the interview, journeying on foot to the Lion Guardians camp, located in a private game reserve in Eselenkei teeming with elephants, zebra, giraffe, and big cats. The camp was a treehouse, built in an acacia by one of Lion Guardians’ donors, a California eco-builder. Leela and Stephanie had requested something “Robinson Crusoe.”

The tented green canvas treehouse consisted of three stories, with a ground floor office around the trunk of the acacia, and Leela's and Stephanie's separate rooms in the branches above it. With half-made beds and *New Yorkers* scattered on the floor, the rooms were typical of two working women in their twenties, apart from being in a treehouse. The bathroom was a separate structure, open-air, and solar panels powered the camp. At the treehouse camp, in the animal-rich natural reserve, you'd hear bush babies howling at night, find snakes around the office, and watch elephants lumber by over your morning coffee.

Leela and Stephanie had already hired five Lion Guardians in Mbirikani and Kamunu was one of 27 warrior candidates interviewing for four positions in Eselenkei. Leela and Stephanie were looking for warriors with lion tracking abilities, enthusiasm for the opportunity, leadership potential, and a commitment to protect the lions.

Kamunu, in his interview, repeated his vow to continue killing lions if they attacked his cattle. Stephanie, talking with Leela afterward, said, "I'm not sure about this guy." But Leela wasn't giving up on Kamunu; she was just as stubborn as he was.

In round two of the hiring process, Leela and Stephanie gave each applicant the camp phone number and said, "Call when you find lions." Kamunu was the first to respond. Instead of calling, he showed up at the treehouse one night. "I have found lions," he announced.

To verify, Stephanie drove him to the area, and sure enough, found a young lioness resting in the sagebrush. She was about six feet long, with dark spots across her side and no black tip to her tail. Stephanie had heard stories of this "tip-less" lioness and was excited to find her.

With Kamunu beside her, Stephanie darted the lioness with an air gun—to tranquilize her. The lioness was pregnant, Stephanie noted, pointing to her swollen belly and

breasts. Kamunu knelt beside the lioness and placed his hands on her side, feeling her breath rise and fall. He'd never touched a live lion before.

Kamunu fastened the GPS tracking collar around the lioness' neck, as Stephanie watched him closely, noticing he wasn't showing any emotion. She wasn't convinced he'd made a connection with the lion until back in the Land Cruiser, Kamunu picked up his phone, called a friend, and excitedly recounted his experience with the lioness.

After a month's trial period, in early 2009, Kamunu and three fellow warriors were hired as Lion Guardians for the Eselenkei region. Their primary responsibility was to track the area's lions and warn local herders and villagers if a lion was in the vicinity.

Working from home, Kamunu would wake before dawn, shoulder his backpack of high-tech equipment, and set off tracking across Eselenkei's rocky mountainous terrain. He'd stop at intervals to lift up his telemetry receiver, which consists of an antenna attached to a receiver. The receiver is programmed to the frequency of the transmitter on the lion's collar and produces a tone that gets louder as you approach the collared lion. Kamunu would rotate the antenna until the tone became loudest, then follow in that direction. When he got close enough, with the tone blaring at full volume, Kamunu could switch to traditional tracking, looking for broken twigs, trampled vegetation, droppings, carcasses, and paw prints.

If he found a lion close to a herd of cows, Kamunu warned the herder to take a different route. If the lion neared a village or cattle enclosure, Kamunu called Leela and Stephanie, who'd speed over in their Land Cruiser and chase the lion to safety by revving the engine, honking the horn, or throwing loud firecracker-like devices called thunderflashes.

Kamunu's job also involved collecting scientific data on lion movements. He'd use a handheld GPS device to pinpoint a lion's location, then write the longitude and latitude

by hand on a data sheet. The first time Kamunu held a pen, he gripped it like a spear. But thanks to Lion Guardians, he was learning basic reading and writing, and could now fill out the data sheet by himself. He kept it in the cleanest, safest area of his mud thatch-roofed hut, and handed it proudly to Leela at the end of each month.

“ *The Lion Guardians had to work around the clock stopping lion hunts.* ”

Fellow conservationists had told Leela that Maasai warriors would never measure up to professional researchers in terms of data quality, but upon cross-checking the Guardians’ data, Leela discovered it was remarkably accurate.

Kamunu’s “tip-less” lioness was the area’s first to be collared. The warriors used to take the name of the first lion they killed, but now they gave the lions names. The one who found the lion got to name it, and Kamunu called his tip-less lioness “Nosieki” after a bush with beautiful red berries. Calm and mild-mannered, Nosieki was seen as a “good lion” by the Guardians because she never attacked Maasai livestock.

Nosieki was also comfortable around the Lion Guardians’ vehicle, which allowed Kamunu and Leela to spend hours watching her up close. Kamunu felt a special attachment to Nosieki. Not only was she the first lion he’d collared, he believed Nosieki was the daughter of the last lion he’d killed—the one whose stomach he’d sliced open. The belly had been swollen, Kamunu insisted, because she’d recently given birth to a litter of cubs that included Nosieki. Leela said there was no data to prove a relation, but Kamunu was certain.

The Guardians called Nosieki’s pride of lions “The Tara Pride,” and talked about its members like characters in a soap opera. There was Nasieku—meaning “the one that comes forward first”—because she’d lead charges toward their vehicle; Mognac—

meaning “Lucky”—because Kamunu had tried to kill him many times back in the day but always missed; and Selenkay—meaning “a young girl who has reached adulthood”—who had a reputation as a “bad lion” for repeatedly killing Maasai livestock to feed her cubs.

Whenever local warriors launched hunting parties to retaliate against the lions for killing livestock, Kamunu and his fellow Guardians had to intercept the hunters and defuse the situation, always through non-violence. One tactic was to share the lion’s story. “This is Selenkay,” they’d say. “She is a mother and is only attacking the cattle because her cubs are hungry in the drought.” They’d remind the hunters that lions are revered for their strength in Maasai tradition, and vital to tourism in the area, which creates jobs. “You are killing yourself by spoiling the food that you are going to depend on,” they’d argue.

The Guardians’ work also involved retrieving lost cattle and reinforcing cattle enclosures, earning the gratitude and respect of local villagers. When one Guardian was accepted to Oxford to study wildlife conservation, even as the Maasai were down-on-their-luck from the drought, the community raised \$700 dollars to help him on his way. Maasai women took notice of the Guardians too, impressed by their high-tech gizmos and courage working close-up with lions.

The cynical take is that here were Leela and Stephanie, two foreign outsiders, telling the Maasai how to do things the “Western way.” But the brilliance of their model was twofold. First, the organization was staffed almost entirely by Maasai men and women, and relied on participation and input from the Maasai community. And second, even in eradicating the Maasai’s tradition of lion killing, the Lion Guardians project preserved the prestige and pride of the Maasai warrior. Whereas a warrior’s pride once came from bloody hand to hand combat with lions, now it came from having a job, learning to read and write, helping the community, and courageously defending their lions. It was a more selfless and sustainable pride.

A steady stream of small donations trickled in through their blog from all over the world: money from an elementary school cake sale in England, a crate of raincoats from Patagonia in Ventura, a new computer, used cell phones for the Guardians, and a new backpack for Kamunu. Reporters passed through the treehouse camp too—like Bob Simon of 60 Minutes, investigating lion poisoning, and Sir David Attenborough of the BBC. The Guardians proudly told the reporters not a single lion had been killed in the area since the project’s launch two years earlier. In fact, the lions’ numbers were growing.

One morning, Kamunu was excited to find Nosieki with two newborn cubs, a boy and girl. With wobbly legs and deep blue eyes, the cubs rolled in the grass and nipped playfully at their mother’s tip-less tail. Whenever they found a lioness with new cubs, Kamunu and his fellow Guardians had a special dance. With joyful excitement and pride, they’d sway in a circle, holding hands, and singing. They called it the “cub dance.”

Meanwhile, the drought stretched on. By 2009, after two years of insufficient rain, dust clouds covered the sky, and wells ran dry. The vegetation died, then the herbivores. In Amboseli National Park, which is dry even in good weather, wildebeest populations declined 83 percent from 18 million to a paltry 3,000. Ten thousand zebras died, as did over 300 of the Park’s 1,500 known elephants, mostly matriarchs and calves. Their carcasses littered the park, rib cages jutting out of the ashy volcanic soil like naked trees.

The Maasai lost more than 80 percent of their livestock, causing wealthy families to become poor, and poor families to lose everything. The price of livestock plummeted, triggering a catastrophic food crisis, and the government of Kenya declared it a national disaster. Some Maasai herders traveled for hundreds of miles in search of water, either south to Lake Manyara in Tanzania, north toward Nairobi, or east to the sea.

Maasai elders, who practice oral history, told Leela this was the worst drought in a century. They blamed God for swallowing up the rain. Some slaughtered their few-remaining sheep and goats to appease the Almighty, a desperate prayer to an empty sky. Leela, meanwhile, recognized a different reason for the drought: climate change. And the most tragic part was, it wasn't the Maasai's fault. They're a pastoral people whose carbon footprint is negligible. They were shouldering the burden for a problem largely created by the first world.

Amboseli's lions grew weak, as their wild prey diminished or migrated to greener pastures. Gaunt and thirsty, the lions could hardly tackle their prey, so they went after the easier target of Maasai livestock. Desperate Maasai warriors, in turn, fought to defend their few-remaining cattle, hunting lions with spears or by poisoning the carcasses of slain cows.

The Lion Guardians had to work around the clock stopping lion hunts. Despite her reputation as a "good lion," Kamunu's Nosieki grew so weak, she too resorted to livestock killing, joining fellow Tara Pride lioness Selenkay. After an attack on one Maasai livestock enclosure—known as a boma—hunters went searching for the lionesses over the drought-scorched land, shielding their eyes from swirling tornadoes of dirt known as dust devils. When they cornered Selenkay, separated from her cubs, the lioness charged a hunter and sank her dagger-like teeth into his leg. As his companions were advancing with spears toward the growling lioness, the Lion Guardian vehicle arrived, rushed the bleeding hunter to safety, and calmed the situation.

“ Could the Maasai’s ancient practice of pastoralism continue to sustain them? Or should they cash out and sell their land? ”

In another emergency, Leela and wildlife rangers had to deploy vehicles after an old male lion leaped into a boma and was speared by a Maasai warrior before disappearing near a primary school. Leela and the armed rangers fanned out in search of the lion, when they heard screaming from a Maasai elder, who'd been bitten by the lion in his side. Leela found the elder bleeding on the ground, as his little dog courageously fought off the lion. A group of Maasai warriors from the nearby village came running through the trees to save their elder and surrounded the lion with spears. Leela had never seen a lion hunt in real life and was struck by the fear in the animal's eyes, as the Maasai took turns spearing the wounded beast. "Shoot the lion," Leela told the armed ranger, who hesitated a moment. "You've got to shoot him!" The ranger fired, striking and killing the old lion.

In Eselenkei, a young Lion Guardian named Sitonik was patrolling the thickly wooded northern border when he came upon a sickening scene. It was Nosieki and her female cub lying beside six sheep carcasses, which had been laced with poison by hunters.

Nosieki was still alive, kicking and wheezing, as her baby daughter lay dead beside her. Two poisoned vultures had fallen dead from a tree, as had hundreds of flies. Nosieki's male cub was alive—hiding in a thicket—but ran away when he saw Sitonik. The cub was barely a year old, and Sitonik knew his chances of survival on his own were slim. Sitonik knelt reverently, as Nosieki took her last breaths and collapsed in a lifeless heap beside her dead cub.

Later, several Guardians helped Sitonik assemble the corpses of lions, sheep, and vultures into a pile and set it ablaze, to prevent other animals from eating the bodies and dying from poisoning. Bright flames enveloped the corpses, like a funeral pyre, releasing the foul smell of poison in the flat dry air. When Kamunu learned Nosieki and her cub had been killed, he wept.

At last, in late 2009, rain emptied from the heavens in a deluge. Water gushed down the slopes of Kilimanjaro, feeding the streams into Amboseli, and patches of hardy grass jutted through the dry, cracked soil. The zebras and wildebeest returned, flocking to Amboseli's marshes to fatten themselves on marsh grass. Maasai herders returned too, their cows growing healthier by the day, soon even milking again.

The Maasai community had survived the blistering drought, but had suffered greatly, some losing 95 percent of their cattle. And the tribe's confidence was shaken. The Maasai people have a great fear of the unknown, and the drought had left many lingering questions. Would similar droughts follow? Could the Maasai's ancient practice of pastoralism continue to sustain them? Or should they cash out and sell their land to the wealthy Western investors, farmers, and tour companies, as many elders' school-educated sons were urging them?

Leela sometimes felt overwhelmed by the countless threats not just to lions, but to the Maasai way of life, from climate change to subdivision to Westernization. She could understand the anger of many Maasai warriors, watching their way of life disintegrate.

But nothing prepared her for the tragedy of July 2012.

It began when a buffalo killed a young Maasai herder in a village just outside Amboseli National Park.

Maasai leaders first attempted diplomacy, requesting compensation from the government for the boy's death. Compensation is required whenever the Maasai or their cattle are killed by wildlife, up to \$10,000 for a person, or market price for cattle.

An official with the government-run Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), however, refused the Maasai leaders' request for compensation, insisting the child's death was the Maasai's

fault. Enraged, local Maasai leaders demanded a meeting with the director of KWS, which was scheduled for a week later. The Maasai leaders wanted to discuss not only the boy's death but also a long-held point of contention between the Maasai and the government: Amboseli National Park's unfair revenue split with the Maasai.

At 300,000 acres, Amboseli is small for a national park, and animals frequently move outside its protected borders into the Maasai-owned lands. Most of the park's elephants, for instance, spend their nights outside the park, trampling Maasai pastures, while the park's lions and other predators prey on Maasai livestock. The Maasai support about 85 percent of the park's total wildlife population on their lands, shouldering the costs of living with the animals, and yet the tribe received only 3 percent of the revenue generated by tourism in the park.

Maasai leadership wished to ask for a fairer split from the KWS director, but when the day of the meeting arrived, the KWS director sent a community warden and two board members to attend in his place. The Maasai leaders stormed out of the meeting.

They knew the only thing the government cared about were the animals and the rich tourists who came to see them. To make the government listen, the Maasai leaders gathered 40 hunting parties of over 400 enraged Maasai warriors and instructed them to target the tourists' favorite animals: "Kill all elephants, lion, buffalo," they directed.

Like rioters, the hunters fanned out across the park's borderlands, wading through the swamps with their spears, and vaulting over volcanic boulders in search of their targets.

Near the village of Elarai, a hunting party of 150 warriors found a herd of elephants making their morning march toward Lake Amboseli in the Park. The hunters surrounded the herd and hurled spears into their bodies. A gentle 46-year-old elephant named Ezra, famous as one of Park's oldest bulls, was struck by multiple Maasai spears,

including one in his forehead. He wandered several miles, in agony, before collapsing dead.

Within hours, KWS was reporting ten elephants and ten buffalo killed and many more injured. The rangers and conservationists could do nothing to stop it, outnumbered by the Maasai warriors. KWS requested backup from neighboring Tsavo—including Elite Special Unit ranger teams, and aerial support—but the reinforcements would take time.

Local Maasai leaders cautioned the rangers and conservation leaders in the area, including Leela, that anyone who remained on duty or tried to stop the hunting parties would be beaten. One scientist, ignoring the warning, was monitoring the situation from his airplane when Maasai spears came hurdling toward the low-flying aircraft.

From her tent office, Leela called her Guardians near the Park to warn them about the marauding hunters. “Dig a hole and bury your equipment!” Leela told them, worrying the equipment would expose them as conservationists if discovered by the hunters. “They’ll beat you and try to kill you if you get in their way!” Leela said.

But her Guardians didn’t listen. Eager to protect “their” lions, and the other animals, the Lion Guardians set out gallantly to stop the hunting parties. Dodging elephant stampedes and charging buffalo, the Guardians communicated by cell phone, reporting the hunting parties’ positions.

Having slaughtered many elephants and buffalo, the hunters set their sights on their third and final target: lions. They searched areas where lions tend to congregate, such as the Lava Forest, a thick black field of frozen lava located at the base of the Chyulu Hills. Lions go there to hide in its deep crevices and caves, and to drink the water that pools in its craters.

“ Kamunu told me he regrets the many lions he killed in his youth, but Leela is quick to remind him of the many he’s saved ”

Each Guardian, when he found a hunting party, used his most trusted technique to stop the slaughter. One shy Guardian wiggled his way into a hunting party and—pretending he was one of them—led the group in the opposite direction of a pride of lions. Another sly Guardian convinced a hunter that the lions’ collars came fitted with a camera, which would take pictures of the hunters and send them to the authorities.

One team of five Guardians intercepted a hunting party and, using their training, simply talked to the young men. Whether affected by the Guardians’ words, or simply weary of killing innocent animals, the hunting party turned back for their villages.

It was the Lion Guardians’ finest hour, and despite the other tragic animal deaths, not a single lion was killed that day. “The Guardians really put themselves on the line,” Leela told me, as the light darkened and my visit to her camp drew near an end.

Kamunu joined us, now a senior leader of Lion Guardians, which now has projects in Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Mozambique, and even in India, protecting tigers. Kamunu proudly told me his Lion Guardians salary has allowed him to put all his children through school.

Leela’s co-founder, Stephanie, introduced me to her young daughter, who guided our group to a pair of lion paw prints near the tent.

“The lions know they’re safe here,” Leela said.

I asked Leela, now in her early forties, if she too has any family in Kenya.

“Other than these guys?” she said, nodding to Kamunu and another Guardian.

I remembered the little girl—too Egyptian for America, too American for Egypt—standing now with her warriors on a hilltop over Maasailand, finally home.

Kamunu told me he regrets the many lions he killed in his youth, but Leela is quick to remind him of the many he's saved—like Selenkay. Thanks to Kamunu and his fellow Guardians, the fierce livestock raider lived to be one of the area's oldest lions and birthed over 40 cubs.

When she went missing some years ago, Kamunu wondered if she'd finally met her end at the tip of a Maasai spear. Then one afternoon, he picked up her radio signal on his receiver and ventured into the bush alone to track the lioness. In a clearing, he found Selenkay with her grown daughters, and their eight chubby cubs, devouring a zebra kill. Kamunu sat and watched quietly in the setting sun as the cubs pounced and tumbled, and grandma Selenkay enjoyed her dinner.

Kamunu could recognize a young male traveling in the group too. It was Nosieki's son, who'd survived the poisoning. The young cub had found his way back to the pride.