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The Self-Serving Giraffe.

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by Matias Travieso-Diaz.

*Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live,
it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.*
Oscar Wilde

Grumpff was a Somali giraffe male (*Giraffa reticulata*) in a herd that inhabited a dry savannah in northern Kenya. He was eighteen feet tall and two tons heavy, by far the largest and tallest living terrestrial animal and the largest ruminant on Earth. His very long neck alone weighed about six hundred pounds and his legs were six feet long. He had two distinct, hair-covered “horns” called *ossicones*, which he used to spar in dominance contests against other giraffes.

Grumpff’s coat had a pattern of large polygon-shaped orange-brown spots on a creamy white background, a pattern unique to him. In that respect, he was one of a kind. Otherwise, he was an ordinary, but very large and overweight giraffe.

Nonetheless, Grumpff had risen in importance within the herd by ruthlessly beating other giraffes in a series of dominance encounters, in which he would slam his neck against that of a competing

giraffe, strike the other with his ossicones, and conduct other physical assaults so ferocious that he was eventually able to overcome his opponent. Through these means, Grumpff had disposed of all opposition and become the leader of the giraffe tower that dwelt on that portion of the savannah.

While other herbivores anxiously searched for grass and small plants to eat in the inhospitable savannah, Grumpff and his tower of giraffes could feed on the high branches of acacia trees, having the tender, young leaves of the bushes all to themselves. The giraffes' prehensile tongues were eighteen inches long and protruded from fleshy lips, allowing them to strip leaves from the acacia's thorny branches without scratching their faces or eyes. Grumpff was voracious, and might eat up to seventy-five pounds of food per day. He would drink only once every few days, even when water was available, since acacia leaves were rich in moisture.

Grumpff was well adapted for living on the open African plains. He had excellent eyesight, which allowed him to see movement up to a mile away, and keen senses of hearing and smell that helped him keep safe from predators. He could run at thirty-five miles per hour for short distances and was able to deliver strong karate kicks that discouraged predators. He could utter a variety of sounds, including moos, roars, snorts, hisses, and grunts, which he used as warning signs. Threats — such as the presence of lions nearby — might warrant a loud snort.

Other ungulates often benefited from associating with Grumpff and his predecessors, as giraffes' height allowed them to spot predators from further away than they could. Zebras and wildebeests, for example, often assessed risk by watching giraffes and spent less time looking around for predators when giraffes were present. For that reason, other species had customarily established tacit mutual protection agreements with giraffes to enhance their chances of survival.

Over time, the climate of the savannah became more inclement. Droughts lasted longer, the spells of excessively hot and cold weather were more pronounced. Grumpff chose a dreary period of extreme drought to summon representatives of the herbivore species that inhabited the savannah: zebras, wildebeests, buffaloes, impalas, waterbucks, dik-diks, and others. They met around a dry lake, a motley crowd comprising animals of all kinds, sizes, and denominations. Grumpff addressed them all and sternly issued his demands, which he had unilaterally developed and imposed, since no other giraffes were able to contest his authority:

“You have gotten a free ride from us giraffes for entirely too long. From now on, all undertakings we made in the past to provide warning against lions, leopards, crocodiles, and other carnivores are no longer to be expected. Each of you who desires continued alliance with us must offer to pay tribute in comestibles *to me personally*. I will decide what is an adequate tribute and what measures *I* will put in place to better safeguard us. You have four moons to develop and submit a suitable plan for my approval.”

The other beasts were disquieted by what appeared to be a demand for payment of some steep fee and the absence of any real assurances of protection by the giraffes. Most animals ended up declining to yield to Grumpff's demands and, instead, developed their own mechanisms for warning and protecting against carnivore intrusions.

Meanwhile, weather extremes driven by climate variability and change placed increasing stress on acacia populations, reducing the abundance and quality of the forage that giraffes depend on in the northern Kenyan savannah. The reduction in acacia resources had deleterious effects on giraffe nutrition and resilience and, as climatic variability increased, Grumpff and his herd became weaker and more vulnerable to attacks by predators.

Finally, a day came in which undernourished giraffes were spending most of their time looking for food, and thereby became as vulnerable as other beasts to the incursions of predators. By then, Grumpff's hold on power had become so precarious that disaffected giraffes banded together to depose him and confine him to the more exposed, peripheral positions in the herd, where his risk of demise from predator attacks was the greatest. He eventually perished and the new leaders of the giraffe herd chose to join ranks again with the other herbivores and led them in a search for a safer environment where the safety they previously enjoyed could be restored. Grumpff's chaotic regime was forgotten or relegated to the realm of unsavory legends only fit for scaring the young.

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