THE LION OF MOGADISHU

They took the market on foot. The bill came in names.

A FEATURE FILM · MOGADISHU, 2011





Seventeen years after Black Hawk Down, a Ugandan commander must take al-Shabaab's last Mogadishu stronghold on foot, with soldiers Europe pays and America trains, without shelling the market inside it.

On 4 October 1993 an American rescue convoy ends its night at a football stadium in Mogadishu, and a girl on a wall across the road counts the vehicles on her fingers.

In May 2011 PAUL LOKECH, forty-five, arrives in the same city to command Uganda's contingent of the African Union force. His men have been five hundred metres from Bakara market since February. The market is al-Shabaab's last stronghold in the capital, and in its money-exchange section SAHRA, thirty, keeps the remittances of a thousand families in a ledger and pays a share to YASIN, a young collector with a book of his own. On his first night Lokech climbs to a slot in the wall of a ruined factory, asks two privates their names, MOSES KASOZI and PETER WANDERA, and says them back.

The offensive opens within days. Shells fall on the market's clothes section, and the force calls Bakara a registered no-fire zone. On 23 May the African Union announces that it will not bomb or enter the market but will cut its supply lines, and Lokech has to make that true on foot. The cage goes up through walls, not doors: paid for from Brussels, fed from New York, trained from Washington, and manned by privates on eight hundred dollars a month less what their own government keeps, beside a Somali soldier who has not been paid since January. Each time a mortar fires from a Bakara roof, Lokech's officers ask for the guns, and he sends men.

A lieutenant colonel dies in Bondhere. The deadline passes. On 20 July the UN declares famine in the south, the hungry reach the wire, and Lokech turns the cage into a gate. Sahra pays the families at a table on the road in sight of the collector, and Yasin takes her ledger. An unarmed mentor from a Washington non-profit is hit and flown out the same afternoon. On 5 August Wandera is killed in a building beside the stadium. Kasozi asks for the guns. Lokech says no.

That night the front goes quiet and headlights leave the market. Lokech will not fire into the dark. At first light he walks his men into Bakara, and out of the stalls a woman comes toward the rifles holding a book open. Kasozi's finger holds. Not one shell is fired into the market to take it.

The President calls it a golden day. Four days later the New York Times reports that America relies on contractors in Somalia; four days after that, Human Rights Watch finds that every force in the city, the African Union's included, has broken the laws of war. Lokech seals a casualty return nobody will publish. Kasozi signs for his friend's chalk and phone. Sahra opens her stall and pays the first name in the queue. Al-Shabaab says it remains in other towns. In 2018 Lokech hands the stadium back.

FORMAT	Feature · 110 pages · May to August 2011, with a prologue in 1993 and a coda in 2018
GENRE	Historical war film in the siege form, with a money strand
TERRITORY	Mogadishu: the airport, the front line, Bakara market, the stadium
LANGUAGE	English
COMPARABLES	All Quiet on the Western Front · Dunkirk · The Battle of Algiers

WHY NOW

Uganda went into the city America left, first and for most of 2007 alone, and its army has never published the number of its dead. When Paul Lokech died in 2021, the name Lion of Mogadishu was in every Ugandan paper, and had been since 2017. The film gives the battle behind that name to the people who paid for it: a private, a money-changer and the city itself, with the money on the table and the record as it stands.

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