

# Trophy

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## Epigram

Dedicated to Africa, whatever that is.  
Dedicated to justice, whatever that is.  
Dedicated to fiction, whatever that is.

‘It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare  
of my choice.’

— Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

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**p 9-17**

The plane plunges from the pitch-black sky like a bird of prey, then slows – it seems to hang motionlessly for a moment before settling into a wide circling movement, as if hesitating between two possible victims, not yet having decided which it will swoop down upon. In the depths below, ribbons of light cut the darkness into strips and above them different, smaller lights move towards each other like ants, congregating, forming clusters and fanning out again. The land beyond the spots of light is dark, a gaping black hole, too dark even to tell if it is flat or undulating. Only later, when the plane gives up its hesitation and descends further, do legible patterns emerge: ridges bulge up, valleys sink away, water separates from land. There is not much time to look, now that the bird has chosen its prey, it dives at lightning speed. Buildings, trucks and cars become visible for a moment, then the landing gear hits the ground.

Dawid breathes again but feels no relief; on the contrary, he is immediately overcome by a feeling of heaviness, as if the earth in this new country is pulling down harder on him and the air is more difficult to breathe. He has been looking forward to this for years: day after day, and for as many nights, he has dreamed of it. But now, now he is actually here, he feels no joy, no triumph, not even contentment. Although the plane has arrived at its destination – as the tinny voice of the flight attendant assures him, just in case he or any of the other passengers should doubt that they have arrived – what overwhelms him is not the joy of arrival, not the relief of a man who has travelled from afar, reached his goal after many hardships and can celebrate that he made it there alive, but the sadness of a farewell, as though he is carrying the weight of his travels with him, and all the sacrifices he made along the way are clinging to him with their full weight.

The plane reaches a standstill with a jolt. Passengers stand up around him, grab their luggage, throng in the aisle. Dawid takes one last look out of the window. Only now does he see that the ground outside is white. It has snowed. He is surprised by the sight, because although of course he

is aware of the concept of snow and the word for it, he has never seen this phenomenon before. He looks upon it as if it were the birth of a child: a perfectly normal event that has been happening regularly for centuries and takes place in the rest of the world without much ado, but which, when it first happens in one's own life, appears to him like a miracle.

## I. The Hunter

*Two months earlier*

The blast of the shot tears apart the morning's silence. Though he braced hard, the recoil of the heavy shotgun unbalances Hunter, the force of the weapon lifting his left foot fifteen inches from the ground. Van Heeren, standing next to him, smiles. "Always gets you, doesn't it? Nasty fuckers, these old double-barreled riffles. But a fine shot."

He accompanies Hunter to the other end of the shooting range where Hunter is pleased to find a perfect hit. A small round impact hole is visible in the centre of the bullseye, barely thicker than his little finger, but the impact of the bullet has completely ripped open the sandbag behind it; thin streams of red sand trickle out.

He'll gladly accept the bruises on his shoulder for that firepower – it can mean the difference between life and death. The hunter's, not the prey's. He has never understood why so many hunters nowadays prefer smaller calibres, he wouldn't feel safe in the bush with a lighter weapon. Lighter munition requires a perfectly placed shot and on difficult terrain a hunter doesn't always have the luxury of choosing his angle. If a wild animal attacks unexpectedly, any kind of hit will do. In addition, a light weapon will kill most prey, but it won't stop them immediately and Hunter doesn't want to be crushed by a 'dead' animal charging a few feet further before it falls. That's why he prefers his old double-barrelled .577 Nitro Express for big game hunting – the same rifle Hemingway once used to shoot a rhino and a pair of lions here – rather than a lighter, more modern model. But that's not what he told the airport police this morning when chatting with the customs officers clearing his weapon. When asked why he hunted with such a high calibre, he simply replied that it was his grandfather's gun, which was true, and added something about masculinity, which was met with a chuckle of approval. Let sleeping dogs lie, especially in a country like this, where the number of shoulder stripes on a uniform indicated the degree of corruption. The fewer people who knew of his actual destination, the better.

He lovingly cracks open the rifle and hooks it over his arm. Van Heeren gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"I think you've earned yourself an aperitif."

They walk between the low bungalows towards the lodge together, crickets chirping all around them. Hunter takes a few deep breaths; despite the night flight and the oppressive heat, his body feels fresh and fit, ready for the hunt. His mind is relaxed and calm, but more alert than at home. His ears are pricked, he registers the unknown smells, tastes the faint tinge of iron in the air. Is a storm coming? He stops at his bungalow.

"I'll be right with you. First got to put this boy away and change into a fresh shirt."

Hunter pushes up the sash window, lays his weapon in the open gun box on the bed, pulls off his sweaty shirt and hangs it over the back of a chair. Against his better judgment, he sits down on the edge of his bed. Immediately jetlag strikes: his body wants nothing more than to lie down and make up for the missed night. Just a little lie down, should be possible, right? But as soon as he stretches out on the bed, he realizes he is doing something stupid – if he closes his eyes now, he will be lost. He'll fall asleep and wake up in the middle of the night and then spend hours waiting sleeplessly for the morning. And the pattern will repeat itself for the next few days, until he is completely

exhausted. The secret lies in immediately picking up the rhythm of the new day. Just in time, he forces himself to keep his eyes open, and fumbles in his trouser pocket for his cell phone. He taps on a name and waits; above him, a heavy wooden ceiling fan spins lazily. The phone rings eleven times before anyone answers. The female voice on the other end of the line is warm and sleepy, but without reproach.

“Hi.”

“I woke you up.”

“Go figure, at this time of night.”

“Where are you?”

The sound of fabric gliding across fabric. Sheets being pushed aside. In his thoughts he pictures her sitting up on the edge of the bed, not yet fully awake, her face softer than it is by daylight. Although he fell for her sharpness, it is the night-time version that touches him.

“Mexico.”

“Wow. Work or pleasure?”

“Not everyone keeps things as neatly compartmentalised as you do.”

Hunter laughs. He pictures his office – the sea of computer screens, the shirted backs of the men who work there as interchangeable as the displays they look at. He doesn’t have to see their faces to know who is making a profit and who a loss: the tension in their shoulder blades says it all. Outside, behind the windows, dozens of towers reaching for the heavens. A vertical skyline. A greater contrast with the vastness surrounding him now is hardly conceivable; here he can see for miles without anything blocking his view. He raises himself up and, resting on his elbows, allows his eyes to glide over the landscape: nowhere a trace of human presence to be seen.

“Are you alone?”

His wife doesn’t answer immediately, which makes him suspect she isn’t. Why else would she get up to take his call? He hears fabric rustling, she is probably sliding open the mosquito net, then the sound of her bare feet on the wooden floor. Then her voice again, less muffled now.

“Would you be jealous if I weren’t?”

She’s awake now. The softness has disappeared from her face, and right from the other side of the world he can feel her giving him a defiant look.

“No.”

“No?”

“Jealousy is a sign of weakness. It would imply I felt threatened.”

Lions don’t attack all the young males in the pack. Only the young ones that don’t yet know their place are given a swat. An energy-saving, efficient way of living together.

Now it’s her turn to laugh.

“Good.”

She has filled a glass of water, he hears her drinking. Big gulps. Sees her moist lips. Suddenly he longs for her, with an intensity that surprises him.

“Are you coming home for our anniversary?” he asks her.

“Which home?”

“**Our** home. The house.”

“Can’t you come out here? The weather is better.”

“Tricky. I have a present for you.”

“So?”

“It’s not exactly hand luggage.”

He hears her inhale. Sharply. Tensely.

“Is it what I think it is?”

From the speed with which she asks her next question, he knows she wasn't expecting an answer.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"Two years."

The slight background buzz on the line echoes her appreciation. Then, when the meaning of his words has fully got through to her, he feels her shiver. A brief shiver, bare skin against the soft silk of her pyjamas.

"When will you leave? For—"

"I'm already there. I arrived this morning."

Silence.

"Hunter?"

She hesitates because she knows he hates it when she says this, but he knows she'll say it anyway.

"Be careful, won't you?"

Hunter reaches for his rifle, which is in the open gun box next to him, and runs his fingers over the wood for a moment. A wave of excitement sweeps through his body, filling him with a tingling desire for tomorrow's hunt.

"I will. But not too careful. I wouldn't want you to start finding me boring."

He hangs up, forces himself to get up, splashes water over his face, picks out a fresh shirt, and dresses for lunch. His wife's concern is no surprise, this is not any old safari. Not so much because of the prey, but because of the fuss surrounding the hunting license: the last hunter who managed to get one received several death threats. But her concern, understandable as it may be, is completely unnecessary: he had not bid for the license personally, but through one of his many small businesses, set up specifically to conceal controversial purchases by major customers. Compared to the dubious takeover practices and the semi-legal monopolies he sometimes had to keep out of the sight of the financial watchdogs, hiding the purchase of a hunting license for an African black rhino from a handful of avid conservationists was child's play.

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p 178-181

## V. Death

"You must help him to die quickly."

Dawid's voice comes from afar, as cold as ice. This is no place for ice; ice cannot exist in this heat. Would he know what it was, ice? Had he ever had ice cubes in a drink? Would he ever have seen snow? No, of course not – where would he have seen snow? Except on his phone. Of course. His phone. But if he has a phone, why doesn't he know what America is like? Why did he ask, "What is America like in real life?" Real life. What is real? Hunter's mind eagerly seizes upon every detail so as not to face the essential matter: that he missed, or worse, fired an inaccurate shot, and that the boy lying in the sand a few feet away isn't dead. The endorphins that filled him with pleasure a moment ago as the bullet hit home and raced through his body in a satisfying wave, drain away rapidly. He is overcome by a clammy, cold nausea. He hesitated. Hesitated and missed.

"It's your duty, as a hunter."

Hit, but not dead. Every hunter's nightmare, save for a few rare sadists. Anyone who enjoys seeing prey suffer is not a hunter, but a criminal. Those with any sense of honour train themselves to kill with a single shot. The pleasure of the hunt lies in that mastery: to hit an animal with one shot in such a way that it stops running without ever knowing what happened. It's a lesson his grandfather banged into him. An image emerges from the depths of his memory that he has been carefully

repressing for years. He'd shot a wild pig, a sloppy shoulder shot that had missed heart and lungs. The unexpected charge of the beast, a female with young, had intimidated him, and surprised by the attack, he had hesitated just too long before pulling the trigger. The sow had run away; wild pigs are tough animals that can run a long way even after a well-placed shot to the shoulder.

When the dog found the animal hours later, it still wasn't dead. His grandfather had stood beside it impassively, not lifting a finger. He had taken away Hunter's gun - "you can't seem to handle that anyway" - and given him his hunting knife, telling him to finish the job by hand. The memory, even now, half a lifetime later, is more vivid than he cares. Hunter envisions his younger self, somewhere on the border between boyhood and manhood, muscular and tanned from life outdoors, tough as willow wood, struggling with the wounded sow. He sees himself throttling the boar to make it stop squealing, or trying to do so, feels the strength of the animal fighting for its life, his own impotence, the resistance the knife meets as it ricochets off the tough skin and powerful muscles, smells its endless dying, feels the lukewarm blood gushing over his hands, an endless, dark red stream, until the body finally slackens between his thighs - more of a fight than a necessary slaughter. In the struggle, the sow had cut open his leg with one of its tusks; he was left with a big scar. He sees himself sitting there: viscous, brown blood smeared all over his clothes, a gaping wound in his thigh, his grandfather looking down at him, cursing and saying that if he never wanted to go through this again, he'd better start shooting more accurately. He'd never missed again. Until now.

Now he looks at the boy, who, unlike the animal, does not struggle and fight, does not scream or shout, but just lies there, still and waiting, until his fate is met. There is no hatred in the look he give to Hunter, only disappointment. It is more than he can bear. He grabs the boy by the shoulder, sets him upright against the tree, his body slips away, sinks crookedly. Again he lifts him up and props him against the trunk, the boy's head nods to the side, and still he doesn't flinch, doesn't moan, doesn't scream, doesn't say anything. He just looks at Hunter, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, pink bubbles forming on his lips with each exhalation. Only the wet rustle of his breath can be heard. He should kill him, he knows he has to kill him, as you kill any animal that is suffering, but something in him refuses - his body has disconnected from his mind and is acting without him.

Now that he is seeing a person again in this prey, a person who understands what is happening to him and doesn't resist but accepts it without question, his hunting instinct gives way to a duty taught by civilization. Instinctively he takes off his shirt, rolls it up, and bends over the boy to tie it around his shoulder, hoping to stop the bleeding. The bullet has entered his chest above his heart but below his collarbone. The entrance wound is not too bad. But then when his arms pull the boy towards him, his naked torso falling heavily against his chest, he sees the havoc the bullet has wreaked on its way out. The heavy hunting ammunition has not only drilled a hole in his shoulder blade but also ripped away muscles and tendons. Splinters of bone have torn open the flesh and the shockwave has probably ruptured a lung, which would explain the pink foam on his lips. It is a miracle that he isn't dead. A gruesome, undesirable miracle, but a miracle all the same.

He sits there for a moment, holding the boy to him, confused, dazed, unsure of what to do. Then the stench of scorched flesh enters his nose: a powdery, sickly slaughterhouse smell, sulphur and warm blood and guts. The smell of death. Although the boy is still breathing, he already smells of death. Shocked, Hunter lets go of him and recoils. Nqate collapses against the tree, his head bouncing briefly as he hits the trunk; the chamois horns come loose and sag crookedly.

There is something gruesomely comical about it. Like a character from a silent movie, balancing on the border of grotesque and hilarious, he sits there, looks at Hunter and doesn't say a word. Hunter wants to look away, but he can't: he is drawn to the sight like to a magnet. It reminds him of something he has never experienced, never seen. Doesn't want to see. Is this what happened to his father? Did a shot from a shotgun penetrate with the same brutality that warm, wiry body, that safe body that had lifted and carried him when he was tired, that body whose salty smell was

so familiar, sweat mixed with dark tobacco and wet leaves? It was a bear hunt. His grandfather must have fired this rifle. Who, besides him, had gone along on that hunt? Who fired the shot that killed his father? Now, for the first time, he realizes that he has never been told. He feels his knees go weak, his stomach churns, a cold sweat runs through his body. Away. He has to get out of here.

“You must help him die.”

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