

and the earth drank deep.

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Cool morning air rushed into and out of the hunter's lungs. The still dew-damp grass wet his legs to the thighs as he charged through it. His prey, a *nyala*, was fleeing right into the path of the rest of the party—downwind and invisible in the tall grass. As the panicked animal fled, the hunter watched a single spear arc gracefully aloft and find its mark in the *nyala*'s flank. The beast continued to run, its pace steadily slowing until it fell to the ground.

In his excitement on his first real hunt, he was the first to reach the downed animal. The young man was surprised to find it was still alive—breathing heavily, with a muddy pool of blood already forming. He looked into its bovine eyes, filled with exhausted panic. Or resignation. He wasn't sure. But he was drawn to it. The pain. The suffering. He found his own breathing was harder now than before, and his heart was pounding in excitement. He reached for the shaft of the spear buried in bloodied flesh, and twisted it gently, rapt as the eyes widened and the *nyala* let out a weak grunt of pain.

With his attention completely focused on the wounded animal at his feet, the hunter reached over to grab the spear with the other hand. He was startled out of his trance by a quick thrust of another spear directly at the *nyala*'s heart. It stopped moving immediately. He looked up and saw Zungu staring back with a mixture of disapproval and irritation. Zungu scolded him for letting the beast suffer, implying that he must not have been ready to join a true hunt. The hunter apologised, showing sufficient deference to cover up—he hoped—the enjoyment that must have been plastered all over his face just seconds before.

The rest of the party soon joined them and they set about gutting their kill, removing the offal with sharpened stone knives before mounting the carcass on a long yoke for the trek back home. By the time they were done and ready to head back, the sun was approaching zenith, bringing

with it the biting heat of summer. The party began the journey back with Zungu leading them in a victory song. They left the pile of offal for scavengers to find.

In the monotony of the march back, the hunter relived the nyala's death over and over again in his mind. He could smell its blood whenever the wind blew right, but now that it was meat, it was of little interest to him. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that his fascination came from seeing the essence of life extinguished. The fear and confusion and pain. He had seen death before—during funeral rites in seasons past—but he only now made the connection between the two. Life and death. Death and dying. He eagerly looked forward to the next hunt.

When they got back to the camp, the junior members of the hunting party were instructed to begin preparing the meat to be cooked and preserved. The seniors headed to *ndvuna* Nyathi's hut to relax with *buganu* brew and bid the sun farewell. As he was leaving, Zungu instructed the hunter to gather wood and kindling for the cooking fire. A child's job. Without waiting for a reply, Zungu turned and went on his way. The hunter regarded Zungu's retreating back with a baleful glare, then angrily made his way out of the encampment. He had no intention of gathering fuelwood.

He made his way down the rise on which the encampment sat. He intended to wander among the trees at the base of the hill and find somewhere to sulk until the food was prepared. Before he reached the treeline, commotion and sounds of distress caught his attention. Out of the brush burst a group of four young women from the settlement. Two of them were helping along a third, her arms draped over their shoulders for support. Her leg was bleeding profusely below the knee and she couldn't place any weight on it. The fourth was behind them, carrying a large branch, frequently casting nervous glances over her shoulder.

The hunter would have avoided them and let somebody else deal with the issue, but on the open path, they immediately caught sight of him. He knew that he couldn't ignore them now without fairly serious consequences to his social standing. He arranged his face into a sufficiently concerned expression and rushed to help. To speed up their progress, he lifted the injured woman in his arms and rushed up the rise to the settlement. He carried the injured woman directly to the *nyanga's* hut, then loitered for the appropriate length of time to show concern. Her shouts of pain soon attracted Nyathi's and the other men's attention. They made their way to the medicine man's hut to inquire. The hut was soon far too crowded, so the medicine man sent everyone away except one of the injured young woman's friends.

Outside, the other two young women, now calmer, explained to Nyathi and the gathered curious what had happened. Their party had been attacked by a jackal, apparently unprovoked, while they were gathering berries and roots from a particularly productive grove. Together, they had managed to scare off the animal with noise and kicks, but not before it had managed to bite one of them quite badly. There were murmurs of worry that the animal may have been afflicted with water-madness. It would need to be dealt with before it struck again, or passed its madness to other beasts in the area.

The implications for the young woman in the hut went loudly unspoken.

Nyathi quieted the crowd, then asked the young women patiently if they had seen the tell-tale white saliva on the creature's mouth. Neither could say for sure, pleading that the entire incident had happened too quickly for them to remember many details. The hunter, who had slowly been making his way to the edge of the crowd, happened to glance across and catch Zungu's gaze. .

The other man did not break eye contact. The hunter, thoroughly irritated by Zungu's endless condescension, decided to do something about it.

The discussion had turned to the question of who should form the hunting party to remove this threat. If the animal was indeed afflicted, it would be exceedingly dangerous. The hunter raised his hand and volunteered, staring directly at Zungu. The other's features remained an inscrutable mask. The hunter only broke eye contact when he turned to answer Nyathi's question. The young man assured the *ndvuna* that he understood what he was volunteering for, but that he wanted to protect his people. He added a smile to convey youthful bravery.

Nyathi nodded, then, speaking to the rest, asked for another volunteer to join the hunt. A man soon spoke up; one of the oldest of the men who still hunted, Mvubu. He was a quiet man; had been since losing his wife and infant in childbirth many seasons previous. He had never taken another. The hunter did not know Mvubu well, and didn't particularly care one way or another who joined him, as long as it was not Zungu.

With limited time until the sun sank below the horizon, Mvubu and the hunter quickly gathered up their weapons and headed down the hill at a run, working on directions to the grove given them by the gatherers. Mvubu volunteered no conversation and the hunter was happy to keep the silence. The only sound he could hear was the wind rushing by his ears, and his own breathing.

At their pace, it didn't take them long to reach the grove. They stopped and assessed the situation. The warm air carried the distinct smell of jackal droppings. Mvubu was a much more experienced tracker, and he soon found the traces left by the fleeing group earlier that day. He signalled the hunter and they worked backwards, spears at the ready, ears alert for any sound in the still air. From

where the trail of blood started, Mvubu walked carefully in a growing spiral, seeking the signs of the jackal's retreat. He soon found it, and again quietly signalled to the hunter to follow.

Then, the silence was broken by a low, menacing growl. It was coming from a small, well hidden den among some bushes. A jackal crawled out from under the bushes. Its abdomen was distended and it seemed barely able to stand. Its countenance was nevertheless writ with the deadly determination of a mother protecting her young.

Realising what must have happened earlier in the day, Mvubu and the hunter retraced their steps, moving away from the den slowly and deliberately. They made sure to avoid eye contact or making any kind of noise. The mother jackal remained en garde, teeth bared until she judged they understood the score, then she once more laid down heavily, watchful.

Eventually Mvubu turned to the hunter to suggest they head back and report their findings. Suddenly, a brown blur burst forth from the bushes behind him and charged into his legs. This second jackal was on top of Mvubu in an instant. Once he was on the ground, it latched onto the wrist of his spear hand and began shaking it, while pulling his arm outstretched. He was screaming in pain, and trying to beat it back with the shield in his other hand, but it was no use. Their struggle kicked up dust from tufty ground.

The enraged jackal was intent on maiming him. Mvubu shouted for help, but the hunter stood by, transfixed by the spectacle. He felt his skin tingling with excitement. With great effort, Mvubu finally fought his way into a prostrated position, trying to stand up. The jackal saw its opportunity and struck. It relinquished its grip on his wrist and charged for his neck with a snarl.

The force of its charge once again knocked Mvubu to the ground. He tried to fight it off, but with his shield arm pinned under him, it was of little use.

Seeing that the jackal was completely focused on Mvubu, the hunter seized his opportunity and rammed his spear into its heart. It yelped briefly and was still. He switched his attention back to Mvubu. The dying man tried to speak but his mangled throat did not allow it. The hunter did not say anything. Mvubu tried to stand but was too weak and fell back into the muddy puddle of blood that had formed beneath him. He stared up at the hunter in confusion. His eyes asked why. He saw no reply in the hunter's face, only naked excitement. The cough and gurgling of his breathing soon quieted to nothing. The hunter crouched down and brought his face close to the other's, watching. Waiting for the last blink.

When it was over, the hunter lifted Mvubu onto his shoulder and began the journey back to the settlement, holding his own shield and bloodied spear in one hand. He marched as quickly as he could while carrying Mvubu's weight, not wanting to have to navigate his way back in darkness. Sensing the death of her mate, the mother jackal howled her grief into the cooling evening air.

Despite his best efforts, the sun was on the horizon and it was getting dark before the hunter had reached the settlement. Carrying Mvubu's lifeless weight was more tiring than he had anticipated, and he had been forced to stop frequently to rest. He had considered leaving the corpse behind, but he knew that social convention prohibited such a thing unless his own circumstances were truly dire. He would lose much respect. It would invalidate any acclaim he was due for killing the jackal. So, he marched on, determined.

All the colour drained from the land as the sun set, leaving only shades of darkness. In the failing light, he could still make out familiar landmarks, and he realised he wasn't far from the settlement. Once on clear ground, he knew it would be no struggle to follow the light from the firepit. In extremity, the hunter knew he could also wait until the stars came out to guide him. As it turned out, neither was necessary. Once he was out onto clear ground, he could faintly hear sounds of conversation carried on the cold night air.

After one final rest, the hunter began the climb up the dark flank of the hill to the settlement. As he drew near, the smell of cooking meat triggered a flood of saliva in his mouth, and he noticed how hungry he was. And tired. He finally made it into the settlement and headed towards the *nyanga's* hut. The medicine man would need to begin preparing funeral rites. He took a circuitous route, avoiding the central fire pit and the crowd around it. If they saw Mvubu's corpse immediately their attention would all be focused there, he thought, and not on the fact that he alone had slain the jackal.

When the hunter reached the medicine man's hut, the young woman who had been bitten was asleep, and the medicine man was changing the poultice on her wound. He put Mvubu's stiffening body down on the floor, then the medicine man waved him off without a word. The hunter did not have opportunity to tell the medicine man that the jackal did not have water-madness. He shrugged to himself and left the hut, making sure to take his shield and bloodied spear with him. He paused for a second, deciding what the correct course of action was, then he made his way to Nyathi's hut to report Mvubu's death. The hunter had never been inside the elder's hut—his status was far too low for that. He stood outside and hailed the leader. A conversation inside stopped mid-sentence and he heard Nyathi's voice give him permission to enter. He stepped past the threshold



and was immediately displeased to see a scowling Zungu. He kept his features neutral with a hint of sorrow as he reported Mvubu's death from a jackal attack.

The hunter recounted the event, carefully adjusting his account of the jackal attack to hide his own culpability in Mvubu's death. He intentionally focused his telling on the attack on Mvubu. Then, when Nyathi asked about the jackal the hunter was able to mention in an off-handed way—as if he had forgotten—that he had slain it. When the old man asked whether the beast had appeared water-mad, the hunter paused, as if his whole account had not been mentally rehearsed multiple times. He told the truth—it had not been water-mad but defensive of its den-mate and newborn pups. Nyathi applauded his bravery in killing the jackal and his sense of duty in bringing Mvubu's body. Then, the elder dismissed him, advising him to get himself some food. Zungu remained silent.

When the hunter was gone, Zungu listened for the sound of his footsteps moving away, then asked Nyathi for his leave to go to the site of Mvubu's death. He wished to retrieve the fallen man's spear and shield to be buried with him as was customary. Nyathi's wrinkled face broke out into a smile and he commended his protege's sense of duty. However, he told the younger man that such things were the duty of elders. At Zungu's protest about the distance, Nyathi merely raised a gently silencing hand. He assured Zungu that age had not yet taken the last of his strength. Knowing that the matter was rested, Zungu pressed no further and allowed Nyathi to guide their discussion onto other topics.

On the other side of the settlement at the firepit, the hunter was quickly surrounded by people wanting to find out what had happened. He was happy to oblige, making sure always to show the appropriate level of sorrow for Mvubu. By the time the fire had burned down to embers late that night, he had told and retold the sanitised version of events many times, and cemented his

place as a hero—at least among his peers. The hunter retired that night with a satisfied smile on his face, replaying in his mind the thrill of that afternoon.

At first light the next day, Nyathi set out for the site of Mvubu's demise. He still clearly remembered the directions that the young women had given the previous day. He was confident he could easily be there and back before the storm that was threatening rolled in.

Nyathi did not have any trouble locating Mvubu and the hunter's tracks once he was near the grove. He immediately spotted the dead jackal lying on its side. A cloud of flies was already buzzing around the neat wound in its side. Nyathi quickly located Mvubu's shield and spear. He was about to leave when something about the scene caught his attention. He surveyed the area more closely. He wasn't sure what had caused him pause.

Using Mvubu's spear, he levered the jackal's stiff carcass up to look at the other the wounds the hunter had presumably inflicted. There were none that he could spot in the animal's blood-matted fur. He looked more closely, and satisfied himself that there were indeed no wounds besides the single one its sun-ward flank. One, very neat wound. The result of extraordinary luck, skill or an unmoving target.

He crouched to try and read the story in the earth of what had happened. He chided himself for having thoughtlessly trampled some of the tracks. Fortunately, there were enough left that he could make a reasonable guess about what might have happened. Recalling where he had picked up Mvubu's discarded weapons, he was able to spot where the jackal's claws had torn up the ground as it charged from behind a nearby bush at Mvubu. That explained the positioning of the spear, which he replaced as close to its original position as he could.

Now fully engrossed, Nyathi carefully searched around the area for human tracks—the hunter’s—tearing up the ground, sprinting to Mvubu’s aid. He found none. He decided to try another tack. Still holding the shield, he placed it back where he had found it as best he could. He guessed that Mvubu had been able to keep it on his arm because of the leather straps, unlike the spear he had dropped. Using the shield as a guide, Nyathi tried to imagine the position Mvubu had been fighting in. He thought the blood coating the edge of the face-down shield must have been Mvubu’s own, from trying to fight the animal off. From the sheer amount of blood on the ground and coating the jackal’s maw, Nyathi judged that the animal had almost certainly taken hold of Mvubu’s neck. He would have been utterly helpless.

Feeling a lump form in his throat, Nyathi gathered up the spear and shield and left the grove without a backward glance, curiosity driven from his mind. He felt the weight of death press on his chest.

By the time Nyathi returned to the settlement, heavy, dark clouds had rolled into the sky above. The breeze brought with it the dusty, sharp smell of a brewing storm. Nyathi headed straight for the medicine man’s hut to return to the shield and spear to their fallen wielder. Inside, he found the medicine man struggling to manoeuvre Mvubu’s stiffened body into a more serene supine position. Nyathi was ill-prepared for the sight of Mvubu’s mangled neck and still-open eyes, and he gasped. No matter how many times he was forced to confront it, Nyathi was still sometimes caught unawares by the spectre of death.

The *nyanga* took the shield and spear from Nyathi, and commiserated with him. Mvubu’s injuries were severe. The medicine man judged that although the damage to his wrist may—alone—have been survivable, Mvubu surely would have succumbed to water madness in any case. Perhaps

in the end, he mused, this was a kinder death. Nyathi was about to correct him, realising that he must not yet have heard the news that the jackal had not been water-mad after all, when a thought suddenly struck him mute.

Injury to the wrist. To the wrist. The wrist. Why would an attacking predator relinquish a death grip on the neck, only to grab onto a limb? Surely it would not, he thought. Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle fell into place in Nyathi's mind. He realised why he had failed to find the tracks indicating the hunter's rush to aid Mvubu. The youth had made no such charge. Nyathi realised how he had been able to so neatly slay the jackal, and why its lower flank was covered in Mvubu's blood. Blood was already on the ground when the jackal died. Mvubu was already twice injured and bleeding by the time the boy had slain the attacker. He must have delayed. That was not the story he had told.

Righteous anger welled up in Nyathi's chest. The boy had lied. Cleverly, but a lie nonetheless. To hide his cowardice, no doubt. Nyathi did not fault the boy for wavering in the face of such danger, but to lie this way to his elders was unacceptable. To spit on the death of a tribesman! The issue would have to be dealt with, and soon. His mind whirring, Nyathi left the medicine man's hut without another word.

He made a beeline for his own hut, but not before stopping a passing child. He instructed the child to find Zungu and inform him that he had been summoned. The child, feeling the iron in the old man's voice and in his grip rushed off to comply without question.

As the storm approached, thunder rumbled ever louder. Rain would fall by the evening, Nyathi judged. When Zungu arrived, Nyathi had been ruminating at length and remained in two

minds on the issue. On one hand, the boy was young. Was it not expected for youths to be egotistical and seek to protect their image? On the other hand, what lesson would the young man learn if his duplicity went unchecked? Also to be considered was the effect on the morale of the village as a whole to know of the true circumstances of Mvubu's death. Nyathi was glad to have a second set of eyes with which to view the problem.

When Nyathi had apprised Zungu of his findings from the scene, and from Mvubu's wounds, the younger man was quiet for some time. Outside, the first large drops began to fall from darkened sky. The trickle quickly grew to a deluge. When Zungu spoke, he had to raise his voice to be heard over the din. He relayed to Nyathi the incident with the *nyala* on the day of the boy's first true hunt. At the time—though he had found the boy's behaviour strange—he had dismissed it. Subsequently, when the boy had come to report Mvubu's death, with no blood on his own shield or body, Zungu confessed he had again found it strange but had again dismissed it.

In the face of Nyathi's findings, Zungu asserted, the boy's behaviour could no longer be dismissed. The two men discussed the problem into the hours of darkness, stopping only to strike a fat-soaked torch alight. After much discussion, the men finally settled on a tentative plan for handling the youth. They would tackle the issue after Mvubu's body was returned to the ancestors the following day.

Both feeling a weight off their shoulders, they bid each other goodnight and Zungu left. Outside, the storm was still at full strength. Zungu paused at the threshold to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then made his way to his hut by the glow of light from nearby huts and the frequent bolts of lightning. Thus distracted, he did not see the single set of quickly disappearing footprints in the mud leading from the front of Nyathi's hut and around the back.

His heart racing at the close call, the hunter took a few deep breaths and then headed to his own hut, feeling grateful for his good fortune. If he had not—on a complete whim—decided to go to Nyathi and offer to retrieve Mvubu’s shield and spear, he would never have overheard that conversation. He guessed that he had missed much of the discussion, but he had heard enough to know that the situation had to be dealt with, and quickly. If the news got out to the rest of the settlement, he would be a pariah. He had some thinking to do.

The thunderstorm lasted well into the night, but by the early hours it had weakened to a light drizzle. The next morning the sun brought with it a day of great sorrow and tragedy in the life of the small village on the hill. Early that morning, a group of young girls on their way to river came across the body of Zungu, who had apparently slipped and struck his head on a sharp out cropping of rock.

One of the girls, distraught, had rushed to Nyathi’s hut to report the death, but he did not reply to her hails from outside. Knowing she was not allowed inside, she rushed to inform the medicine man. He went to Zungu’s side to examine him, and determined that indeed the young man had expired. The *nyanga* sent the young women on their way, then enlisted one of Zungu’s peers to carry the body to his hut. Then, feeling puzzled and saddened by the village’s recent streak of misfortune, the medicine man went to Nyathi’s hut to report this latest calamity. He dreaded the task. It was known how fondly Nyathi thought of Zungu. The old man would be devastated.

When Nyathi failed to respond to his hails at the door, the medicine man stepped inside to wake him. The old man was lying on his sleeping mat, with his back to the entrance. The medicine man spoke again, quite loudly, but Nyathi did not stir. Strange. With a growing sense of foreboding, the

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medicine man reached out to shake Nyathi awake. He grabbed his shoulder. It was cold to the touch. He rolled the him onto his back and felt for a heartbeat. Stillness. The *ndvuna*, it seemed, had died in his sleep.