nova·nevėdoma



Hunters

nova-nevedoma.com/hunters/

He knew nothing about how long the tranquilliser would last. The deadman, pale and thin with hands tied behind his back, had been asleep across the table for a few hours. His every breath filled the rusty, rotted room of the abandoned tavern with a symphony of rasp and rattle. The candlelight danced in the draught, turning the captive's pigmentless face yellow, making him seem almost alive despite all ulcers, bruises, and even a few protruding bones. The captive had a wooden substitute for one leg.

Maybe I should've finished him? the hunter thought. He sat across from his prey, watching it with curiosity and slight fear. Strange feeling. What to do next? Just wait? The knockout dose he'd given was large, not human at all. *How much does a deadman need not to wake up?*

The hunter was afraid of falling asleep himself, but it wasn't for fear of peril – for that, he was always prepared – but for fear of missing out on something he had never faced and never known. He had stopped counting a long time ago how many deadmen he slew. The hunter's job had him cornered: the more he killed, the scarcer they became, giving him only more time to ponder the grander meaning. But this time was

not the same. This time, he caught a dead man “alive”.

Maybe I should’ve–

Suddenly the captive’s eyelids flickered. His neck crunched, and eyes opened, dull as a deadman’s. Half of a nervous smile twitched on the hunter’s face. The deadman looked up at him, the eyelids squinting and continuing to flicker.

“It’s rude to stare, you know?” the hoarse bass in the deadman’s voice broke the surrounding silence.

“I’m not staring. I’m contemplating, waiting for the deadman to come alive.”

“What for? If I may ask.”

“To ask questions.”

“Well then, welcome. Here I am. Shoot.”

The hunter hadn’t expected the deadman to be capable of speech at all, much less to speak with such willingness and coherence. He recognised those intonations and notes in the voice. The deadman reeked of cunning; other odours were, fortunately, a few meters away across the table. The deadman’s speech was slow and laborious. He dragged words, wheezed and hissed consonants on purpose, so it seemed, whenever he could.

“Well...” the hunter exhaled. “What’s it like to be dead?”

A holey rictus stretched across the deadman’s face and froze there for a moment.

“I am quite alive, don’t you see?”

The answer didn’t satisfy the hunter. He reached for his large, black, leather-bound flask, filled his mug, and assembled the courage to take a sip.

“You know what I mean.”

The contents of the mug wrinkled his face.

“I’ve been wondering what you feel after you die.”

The deadman shrugged.

“Nothing special. It varies. Unpleasant at first, but you get used to the good bits quickly.”

“Huh, what’s good about it?”

“Not much. But believe me, better still than to lay in rot and feed the worms.”

Hard to argue. The hunter made another sip, his cheekbones tight.

“And now? Aren’t you rotting? You seem... not so well.”

“No, I have my own ways of preserving my “youth”. Although, sometimes a tooth falls out while I pick my nose. Or the skin comes off my back when I cough.” The deadman’s neck crunched hard again, and the corners of his mouth stretched into a crooked smile.

“Ha-ha. Yeah, that’s comforting. Will be a lot of fun, I guess.” Another quick sip, another grimace. “What about food? Smells? Tastes?”

“Whose nose and tongue are safe and intact can feel one thing or another. I was not so lucky. Fancy a demonstration?”

Without waiting, the deadman stuck out a blue-pitted tongue. The hunter pretended to be nauseous and palmed his eyes. In fact, of course, nothing could magnify his knowledge of what dead people looked like. The fact that one could talk was another matter. *And such a competent speaker!*

“No, I’d rather not.”

Both laughed for a while, filling the tavern air. The deadman’s holey smile stretched almost to his ears, and he coughed, grunted, gasped. The hunter wiped the sweat from his forehead and pushed his mug toward the deadman.

“Want some?”

“Well, my hands are tied. Remember?”

“Oh, yes.” the hunter rose and took the flask. “The deadman is my

captive, right. How could I forget?"

He reached into his satchel nearby and drew out a nickel plate. The deadman had been watching him, twirling his shoulders left to right, then right to left again. The hunter poured the limpid liquid into a dish and placed it under the deadman's face.

"Lapping from a plate? Am I a pet to you?"

"Like you have a choice."

The deadman squinted at the hunter. The hunter threw his hands up.

Only a few drops fell into the hunter's mug. He shook the empty flask and peered into its neck. The face of drunken irony he wore transformed into vexation quickly.

The deadman leaned towards his plate, lapped thrice, not even wincing, and glanced up to the hunter.

"And what is it?"

"Vodka," the hunter said, finished and savoured the rest of the spirit.

"It seems this is my first drink in ten years."

Never would have guessed, the hunter thought. An awkward pause. Silence. Grass and trees murmuring outside.

"The living rarely come in these parts, to my regret. Why are you here?"

The hunter reached into the satchel and drew his second flask. Meanwhile, the deadman started crunching his shoulders and rolling them back again.

“I’m a hunter,” the hunter said, half-turned, failing to deprive the flask of its cork. ”I hunt men like you.”

“Ah, then we are colleagues. What a lovely coincidence! I am a hunter too,” the deadman smiled. “I hunt men like you.”

A grim look spread over the hunter’s face. He turned back to the deadman. The crunches stopped.

“Well, you’re doing a pretty poor job. You got caught by your own prey.”

Pleased by his wit, the hunter returned to the flask. The cork didn’t give in. *What a calamity.*

“Actually, I was sleeping.”

“Huh. I’m surprised you need sleep at all.”

“Unfortunately, the brain needs rest.”

Jerking the cork tired the hunter out, and he pulled a machete-sized knife from his belt.

Something crunched. The floorboards creaked. The hunter turned around and a plate hit his head. The joy of the knife in his hand was

brief – a swift strike disarmed him. The hunter reached for his knife and was hit in the groin, then crouched, shrank. He tried to knock the deadman down, kicked in dismay at the wooden leg; it cracked and snapped, but the deadman was able to maintain his onslaught. The cold, coarse hands twined the hunter's neck and pushed him down onto the rotten chair, splintering it and raising a cloud of dust.

The bony hands clenched tighter; the hunter had no strength to withstand the deadman, nor did he have much desire to do so. *Not the worst ending*, he thought, and closed his eyes; there was no use in them anyway as the room wobbled and teetered in a blurry gloom.

"Quiet, quiet..." the deadman's stink whispered.

Darkness settled in the hunter's mind.

~~

Upon returning from the void, the hunter found himself tied with his own rope. In the same chair to which he had tied his captive not long ago. The hunter didn't know whether to be happy or not. His head was buzzing, and he could not fathom what had happened. Alive, alas. He sighed: frustrated, fatigued, disappointed, drunk.

Knocking his broken wooden leg, the deadman sprang into the hunter's face. He stretched his holey rictus again and stared what was his own prey in the eyes.

"Is the rope too tight?"

“Are you mocking me?” the hunter muttered through his teeth.

“No, no, not at all.”

The hunter couldn’t break free. He fidgeted in his chair, straining his muscles, shaking his head, but the rope was stronger. He should have tied it this way earlier, however the deadman had done it. *Though...* He made one last attempt, took a full breath and tried straightening his shoulders but to no luck.

“Now what? You going to kill me?”

“Time will tell. I might kill you, I might... eat you! One never knows!” The deadman grabbed a second chair and settled across the table, where the hunter had sat before. “But first, we talk.”

“Huh. About what?”

Silence. The same holey smile. The deadman pulled the candle to him and folded his arms. The light illuminated his face from below: all wrinkles and yellow creases, dull grey eyes, dry blue lips. His prey remained seated in the dusk.

“Well... What’s it like... to be alive?”

The hunter rolled his eyes.

“You tell me. At least you have something to compare.”

The candle danced as the deadman laughed, playing shadows on his

phosphoric face.

“If I could remember!” he shouted, and waved his hands. “The memory is, you know, like flesh, decomposing over time. I didn’t think about it then either. Neither do you now, I suppose. So, show some appreciation – seize the situation!”

The hunter furrowed and fell silent. Bony fingers began tapping on the table.

“So...? What is it like?”

“Not bad,” the hunter mumbled. “But more and more I find myself desiring death.”

“But you are still alive! It means you don’t really want to die. What stops you?”

“Instinct. I was born to survive. I’ll die surviving. Nothing else.”

“Me-lo-dra-ma-tic. It’s an ineluctable part of nature.”

“Except for the dead.”

The deadman smiled and wagged his head.

“Oh, if only.”

Silence lingered in the room. They sat staring at each other for a minute, two, five. The hunter had no desire to speak. The deadman was

wheezing. The candle kept melting, the draught whistling through the broken glass.

The deadman shrugged.

“You know... I changed my mind about killing you.”

“Really? Too bad. I’m already in the mood.”

The deadman smirked, stood up, and, shuffling the remnants of his wooden prosthetic on the rotten floorboards, approached the hunter.

“A hunter decided to leave without a trophy?” the hunter asked.

“Not quite.” A sly smile slit the deadman’s face. A large knife flashed in his hands. “I wouldn’t mind having a new leg.”

~~

The deadman stepped out of the tavern, looked around, and gazed upon the night sky. Clear, unencumbered by clouds, it was dotted with random patterns of stars: tiny glowing beacons encircling a large white bitten disk, like sparks, once blasted away from fire and froze in infinity.

A blissful, carefree smile reverberated on the deadman’s face, and he staggered down the road through a sunflower field: the field of a thousand little suns, the field on which will soon fall the dew, the field which dawn will soon enrich with colour.

Read next part

Phantomic Rabbits

https://nova-nevedoma.com/phantomic-rabbits/

nova·nevédoma

A literary locus and samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack

blog.nova-nevedoma.com