

Hunting in Lost Space

Vasyl Gabor

Despite my dire premonitions, I still set off on that damn hunting expedition that caused me such anxiety and turned me, the hunter, into the prey.

When I was still in the Deep Forest, though I was carrying a gun and had a plentiful supply of ammunition with me, I suddenly felt that I was not the hunter but the game—at that very moment being stalked by someone who seemed not only more powerful than I was, but more dexterous and more cunning. I tried to flee the Deep Forest quickly, but some unknown force kept turning me back to its depths. Leaning against a hundred-year-old oak tree, I reloaded my gun. And then the sound of a beating drum reached my ears and for some reason I thought it was the beating of an African—yes, definitely an African—drum, and only afterwards did I ask myself whether it wasn't my heart, pounding from fear.

No, my heart was functioning normally and rhythmically, and the sound of the tom-tom continued to reverberate from the Deep Forest, evidently giving someone instructions on how to prevent my escape from the forest. My mind told me that the unknown hunter had set out to track me down and was systematically stalking me far and wide, determined to drive me, his victim, into a well-prepared trap. Well, there was nothing for it but to accept the challenge. For I, the hunter, did not intend to run away from the Deep Forest, even if I was cast in the role of quarry. I understood that in this case, fleeing was not the better part of valor and having resolved to stay, I thought first about this: if someone had indeed chosen me as a victim, they would find me a persistent thorn in their flesh. Anyhow, I would gain nothing by running away, because I had nothing to prove to anybody except myself.

“All this is just a hallucination, that's all it is,” I tried to comfort myself. “Or else an evil force has taken hold of me and is leading me astray in the forest. I'll rest a bit and then set off for home.”

I lit a cigarette and observed as though from the bottom of a well a small speck of sky showing between the majestic crowns of trees. Languidly, I blew out long puffs of smoke. But in my soul I still felt uneasy. Nonsense of all kinds ran through my mind. Suddenly, it seemed someone had seized me with bony hands and was pressing me to the tree I leaned against, smoking the cigarette. I tried to free myself but could not. Then the giant tree started laughing at me, its whole trunk shaking. Its bark split open and

white feelers, like worms with suckers on the end, came out and began to penetrate my body. I actually leapt away from the tree and aimed my gun at it, but a moment later I gave my head a good shake, driving away the evil thoughts, and burst out laughing at my own faintheartedness. All I needed now was to start imagining that every twig was a snake and that every bush or tree-stump was a wild animal.

After all, nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I had never known the meaning of fear, but now it seemed that fear was overpowering me.

I set off along a familiar path, and to my surprise I saw that instead of leading out, as I expected, it was bringing me back to the center of the forest again, as the sound of the tom-tom doggedly kept following me.

So I was right—I *was* in the grip of the evil force. From my belt I took the flask I still had from my army service days and swallowed a little cold and unsweetened tea.

It grew dark in the forest, though the sky in the wells between the crowns of the trees was still bright blue. The sun must have been about to set and so its rays no longer penetrated between the trees but glided along their tops. I decided that this was my cue to set off for home too.

Just then, the thought that I had not come across a single living soul or heard a bird sing or screech during a whole day of wandering about in the Deep Forest caused me to give a loud whistle. I hadn't even heard a breath of wind—only the rustling of fallen leaves beneath my feet, which had deceived my ears. No, of course I should not have gone off on the hunt, after those dire premonitions. I remembered one of them.

I vividly recalled waking up from a terrible dream. It was in Africa. Black African warriors with bands tied around their thighs were carrying long spears and bows, alarmed about something. Probably they were about to come under attack and their chief was preparing a determined resistance against the enemy. And I was that chief! I could see the great fear in the eyes of the warriors, and I knew I could not banish that fear from their hearts. I also knew the cause of that fear. One of the warlike tribes of the desert had bred a great black bird. It was as tall as four elephants standing one atop the other and as wide as four elephants side by side. Its sharp beak had easily dispatched the elephants of the defending armies of other tribes. With a flap of its enormous wings it had scattered the opposing warriors like specks of dust. With the black bird's help, the aggressors of the desert had subjugated one tribe after another. Ours was the only tribe still free. And now it was our turn to suffer defeat. I realized this but did not want to give in, though I didn't know how to fight the black bird. There was one thing that puzzled me—why did the bird carry out the orders of the aggressors so obediently? Why did it not desert them? Why did it not harm its masters, though trained to attack others?

A thought suddenly struck me. "Suppose we introduced it to the taste

of human flesh and the smell of human blood. Perhaps, intoxicated by the smell of blood and human flesh, it would then attack the aggressors instead of submitting to them."

I already knew how the bird could be made to acquire a taste for human flesh. We would appear to prepare for battle, and when the warriors sent the bird after us, we would quickly hide in the mountains and give it someone from our tribe to devour. But who? Deserters? They would not be able to provoke the black bird sufficiently for it to devour them before its masters arrived to drive it away. Then I felt a gentle touch on my arm. It was my son, the one who most takes after me. I saw that he was pale-skinned and I noticed that my own skin was white and not actually black—just heavily tanned. I looked at my wife. She was black, like all the other women. All our other children, standing beside her, were also black. I recalled that I had joined this tribe a long time ago and was not actually born here. I had been made chief because of my white skin. Now here was my son, my favorite and most beloved son, touching my arm and saying:

"Father, order me to go first. Then the others will submit to your will and sacrifice their own children."

"No," I replied firmly, wondering how he was able to read my thoughts.

"Otherwise they will not submit to your will. And if you go first, the tribe will not be able to defeat the black bird, because it will be left leaderless."

"But perhaps the bird can be destroyed by some other means—not at such cost!"

"Father, you have no time to choose. The enemy is close; they are already preparing for battle." My favorite and most beloved son warmly kissed my hand.

In a loud voice, drowning out the pain in my heart with a sharp cry, I declared my intention to send my favorite and most beloved son to be the first to die.

"And each of you will sacrifice your most beloved child, and when the bird acquires a taste for young human flesh, it will attack the children of the aggressors, and then our enemies will kill it themselves. That is the only way we can defeat the black bird."

But as I spoke, the thought tormented me ceaselessly—was I doing the right thing? What if our sacrifices were in vain?

But there was little time to think: it was vital to act decisively. I ordered some of the warriors to take the women and children to safety in the hills and the remainder to prepare for battle on a hill above the field. I knew that my son was standing in silence nearby, but it was torture for me to look at him. When we were ready for battle the gigantic black bird appeared on the field. Suddenly, I changed my mind.

"I don't know how long our struggle with the black bird will last," I

told the warriors. If it devours all our children, who will continue our tribe and who will combat the bird? So I declare my last will: my son will now be your leader, and I will go first to confront the bird. That is my final word!"

With these words I ran down the slope to the field and our warriors began to beat loudly on tom-toms. I saw the gigantic black bird coming languidly towards us from the other end of the field. I was as small in relation to it as a worm is to a hen, but for some reason I was cheered by that thought. I began shouting loudly and brandishing my spear.

The aggressors from the desert also shouted something to the bird, and I was surprised at the rapid change that came over it. Its clumsiness vanished and it became viciously agile. The next instant it flew at me like a hurricane, aiming its beak at my chest. I leapt aside in time and with all my might thrust my spear into its eye. Although it would seem that the spear could not have done more harm than a thorn, to my astonishment the black bird shrieked furiously with pain. I realized that I had hit the target and at that same instant understood that this was the last moment of my life. I just had enough time to glimpse the bird's bloody eye before it swallowed me.

I vividly recall waking up in a cold sweat, with the sensation that I was inside not a room, but the entrails of a black bird the size of our three-storey building. For a long time afterwards I could not rid myself of this sensation.

But, it seems, things did not happen that way but differently. One morning I woke up suddenly with a strange sensation. Lying in bed and looking about the empty room, I felt as though I was inside some great black bird. I could not fall back asleep, unable to shake off this thought: "Who could have bred such a great bird?" The thought went round and round in my head. I began to think that it could only have been an African tribe. And I began to fantasize about why they had bred it. Then I drifted off into half-sleep and clearly saw our tribe beginning to fight this bird. And everything that had happened was real, for nothing is without cause.

And I remembered the first time I had seen the black bird and calculated that it was exactly a week before the hunting expedition. In setting off for the Deep Forest, I had attempted to dispel my dire premonitions and what seemed to me to have been a bad dream. Only now, in the Deep Forest at dusk, did I fully understand. This Deep Forest and this world are in reality a black bird, and although we think of ourselves as hunters with guns and plenty of ammunition, we are in reality victims who are being stalked. For we have gone hunting in a lost space. Or, perhaps, we cannot escape from the one we are locked into.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

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