

Hunting Hound

Raul held the rabbit by its front legs, its feet dangling in the air, limp and lifeless. Its head was bent, the back of its head and ears meeting its shoulders at an unnatural angle. Freshly dispatched only a minute ago, its beetle-black eyes stayed wet. It was almost living.

“Cleaning a rabbit can be done in ten seconds.” Raul said, to nobody in particular, knowing the young Don was more invested in the ivory of his buttons than in the lessons. Across him, Don Inocencio sat on a log, inspecting his jacket of stains and loose threads. Of stout tweed, he was informed most repetitively, tailored by an artisan from Italia. A fine coat with a dark olive green color blending in the green of the forest. Paired, unfortunately, with the brightest of cream-colored vests, nullifying the camouflage. “Wrap your thumb and index finger underneath the rabbit’s arms, pinching tightly. With your other hand, wrap around its ribs, and feel where its guts are. Now all you have to do is squeeze down it tightly and---” Raul squeezed the rabbit and felt the initial resistance of its meat and organs protesting against the force of his fingers before giving way to its evisceration. The guts exited its bottom in a bloody mass the size of a fist, splattering onto the grass.

The noise caught Inocencio’s attention, staring with disgust at the rabbit’s bowels. Raul held the eviscerated rabbit up, its midsection thinner. “Skinning.”

“Let me try it.” The Don rose from the log, patting his spotless self clean, snatching one of the bound rabbits on the ground. He grabbed it by its scruff with his fingers securing the width of its neck while his other palm pressed flatly underneath the

rabbit's chin and bent it all the way back. The rabbit's limbs jerked forward as its neck dislocated with a loud and familiar pop. The rabbit went limp, and the Don lifted it by the feet, glancing at Raul for reassurance as his fingers encircled underneath the limbs. He gripped the rabbit's torso and squeezed with all his might, succeeding only in choking the fresh corpse.

Raul shook his head. "Wrong. You were to squeeze downwards. Taper the force of your fingers to encourage the organs downward."

"I did so!" He scoffed, discarding the rabbit. "I did as you showed me. Perhaps you hadn't demonstrated properly, thus I was seemingly mistaken by your offense. But! I forgive you, Raul, if you are to promise me we shall hunt deer next week."

"I cannot promise that. If I may speak, in no way of offense to you, I believe you are too inexperienced, Don Inocencio." Impatient, and fickle as well, he wanted to add.

"And currently it is not the season for does."

"Then we shall hunt bucks, Raul. Simple as that."

He was so assured of his success Raul was left in disbelief. "Pardon my words Don Inocencio,"

Don Inocencio's brow quirked up.

"But hunting deer is not one for... people of your eagerness and passion, if you don't mind my saying so. It requires patience and silence, for we may be sitting amongst the bushes for hours on end waiting for a buck to pass!"

Don Inocencio would have none of it. He went on at length great length how Raul was indebted to him, for poor hunters like him to be conscripted as a hunting instructor

for the Don. He was to do just that, teach him how to hunt instead of sit around like ducks waiting for their meal to chance upon them. Don Inocencio left in a huff afterwards, stating he'll return next week and by then, Raul ought to have made up his mind.

Raul sighed as he watched the Don leave, grateful for the moment of respite until he was plagued by thoughts of how to satisfy the troublesome young man. For fifty reales, he was to turn from hunter to teacher. Fifty reales! By no means was it a humble amount; earning him a month of leisure if he were to spend it correctly. Most unfortunate it was, that he would have to sate the Don and his impulses. He had money to spare, and Raul could only lend his time and expertise. If only he had ears to listen as well.

The week had passed uneventfully, to Raul's dismay. He had hoped for something to befall him, some sort of illness or duty to summon him from the Don's presence. To think he would ever conjure such thoughts and petty reasoning to be further from the forests he loved so much! The Don had this rather unprecedented breed of influence about him that repelled as soon as you caught sight of his garish coat. Nothing of positive note was to be taken from the Don: his demeanor was brash and impatient, reflected in his words and actions; but worst of all was his feigned innocence to it all; or rather a staunch belief his words were resounding and true. The only aspect of his valid to Raul was the jingle of wallet.

Unfortunately that very Monday, greeting him with a garish blue coat, was the Don and his companions: a man named Eduino Luna, and his sister Valentina, of whom Raul noted had a high arch to her brows yet a demeanor disinclined towards the Don, but otherwise polite, if not courteously so, to Raul. Eduino was boisterous, and had an air of

confidence puffing out his chest. The siblings wore matching hunting gear. Eduino's a similar style to the Don's, but of a dark brown color that matched the dark bark of trees, whereas she wore a bloomer suit, a hunting attire for women with trousers; not quite unheard of but a surprise nonetheless. Aptly dressed, they were, which pleased Raul. He presumed then, the Doña knew how to hunt like her brother. On the other hand, the Don boasted a dark blue coat that shimmered, likely to do with silk woven into the fabric. He stood out against the backdrop of tall trees and bright orange leaves; the sign of autumn.

"Today is a fine day for hunting bucks, don't you agree Doña Valentina?" Asked the Don. He must have taken her silence for agreement, turning to speak to Raul. "Well then, shall we begin?" He pointed his hunting rifle at the forest, and Raul complied. That is where Eduino decided to part ways with the group. He wanted to hunt pheasants on the plain to practice hitting moving targets and to use their feathers for fishing lures.

An hour of their time was dedicated trekking through the forest, following beaten paths and off trails Raul was familiar with. He knew these forests like the back of his hand; every oak and every stone pointed him towards the funnel: a strip of trees and thick bushes between the lake Sanabria and an open field. Deer were reluctant to traverse open spaces in the morning, and fared better under the cover of trees and foliage than water. The strip connected two areas of the surrounding forest; the west a breeding ground for deer. With any luck, a buck looking to rut a female should come by, unsuspecting of the hunters amongst the bushes.

They would do well not to make noise. Eyesight was not one of a deer's foremost strengths, but the slightest snap of a twig would send it fleeing and it would be

impossible to chase down. Much went the same for most animals he hunted, and thus Raul watched the ground closely for twigs or dried leaves he could be stepping on, obeying silence as a rule. Meanwhile the Don obeyed persistence; his target the young Valentina, her smile steadily diminished by the time they had arrived. His doggedness, which she entertained with curt politeness at first, turned into a monologue portraying his mastery of the hunt and his 'kills.' If she were open to his proposition of visiting his estate then perhaps he shall put on an exhibit, just for her, of the preserved corpses of bears, boars, and other slayed beasts.

Correction: Don Inocencio would do well not to make noise. Splendid, actually, if he were capable of closing his trap for ten--- no, five minutes! Raul felt for the Doña who was subject to most of his inane mutterings about this and that, then of his academic and his intellectual prowess, the hallmarks of his wealth and his father's influence in the Islands, a land far away from the Motherland. All the more it made sense to Raul he was but an insulares! How great was Raul's desire for the Don to return where he truly belonged; to the land of savages certainly too uneducated to discern his true nature. Though a poor trapper, he was of pure Spanish blood and it brought him a degree of satisfaction, in comparison to a half-bred Don with full pockets.

Eventually the Don's yapping tapered off after an arduous length of time. Either he exhausted his repetitive tales or he noticed nobody listened nor cared. Or perhaps he had finally understood they were in the middle of a hunt! Without his noise in the background the forest was louder; the whistle of a breeze, the rustle of leaves, the chirp of birds; their flapping wings, the constant buzz of the June cicadas, the shift of fabric, and their

breaths, all welcome infiltrations to his ears. And so they would sit there in silence concealed in the undergrowth. Sunlight shone above them, pinpricks of heat on their exposed skin as it filtered through the leaves overhead. The sheen of sweat on his forehead cooled by the breeze informed him they were in a headwind, advantageous for the deer wouldn't pick up their scent.

Raul heard it before anyone did. A continuous rustle of foliage and the stamping of cloven hooves upon grass and dead leaves. A young buck traversed over the bracken, following the funnel's trail as Raul had predicted. He could tell it was young; the deer's body was slim and resembled the lithe frame of a doe's, and its antlers looked like thin branches stuck on its head. The buck nosed the forest floor, snorting and flicking its tail in repetition. It sniffed the air and turned its head as if it caught wind of a female, emitting a continuous grunt akin to a door creaking open. It continued along the path, clueless to their presence.

Despite Raul's warnings the Don rose from the bushes and aimed his gun. Startled by the noise the buck froze for a split-second, its hesitation before leaping away punished by the loud crack of the rifle echoing throughout the forest. The bullet passed through its hindquarters, and immediately blood gushed from the wound. The deer stumbled, making no noise save for its hooves scrabbling against the forest floor, galloping away while its shot leg dragged uselessly behind it, dripping blood all over the ground. The buck slipped between the trees.

Raul winced seeing the buck struggling for its life. He suspected the barrel had been aimed for its head but as the buck jumped and likely the Don's aim unsteady, the

bullet had missed its mark. He grit his teeth, for the impetuous fellow had thought to put his pride over mercy!

The Don cried out in success, urging them from the bushes to take pursuit.

Valentina was pale, but followed him regardless, and Raul soon after her, finding means to move his heavy feet.

It wasn't difficult to track it; the bright crimson spilled over verdant green ensured a direct trail to the buck. It barely made it over thirty yards before it had collapsed on the ground, lying in a pool of dark and sticky blood; a young buck with not much to spare wouldn't last a chance. Its chest was palpitating; breathing quick and ragged, and its desperate eyes still seeking escape. It kicked with uselessness as it was approached by the three spectators of its suffering.

Raul stepped forward, drawing his hunting knife from its sheath. He located the atlas joint in an instant; a dotted line marking the spot where the jawline met the neck. "Allow me, señor Raul!" Pushing him aside, the Don strode over to the buck.

"With all due respect, Don Inocencio," he hissed before lowering his voice. "I have not taught you how to dispatch a deer. Until today we had been working on pheasants and rabbits."

"And whose fault is that?" The Don asked with a cool gaze. "Perhaps I may do well! Experience is a great teacher, as they say, possibly even better than yourself." He chuckled, patting Raul on the shoulder. Then he knelt, brandished his own hunting knife, took the buck by its antlers, and pulled the head back to expose the neck.

The fool! Handling deer by the antlers was a risk. Were the buck to suddenly struggle, the Don could risk himself a serious injury. He's had a number of scars from such encounters himself, earned from decades spent dispatching and bleeding deer. Before Raul called out to him, The Don slashed the throat. A burst of red spurted across the air, staining the grass like spilled tempranillo. The Don stuffed the wound with his blade, making hasty thrusts. The buck kicked and kicked up dust, convulsing in his iron grip, unable to cry out or even wheeze. The blade rattled against the bones, the Don unable to find the atlas joint that connects the head to the rest of the body. It was a method of dispatch he had only told him about; never shown. The amateur twisted and plunged the knife further, forcing the blade's edge between bone, but succeeded only in staining his hands, his trousers, and his bright blue jacket.

"That is enough, Don Inocencio! The buck has suffered enough!" Raul's voice boomed. He surprised even himself.

Doña Valentina shook her head, groaning, perhaps with disgust and disappointment. "Savagery. Pure savagery."

However their voices fell to deaf ears. Unsatisfied with his gore, the Don, seemingly transfixed, pulled the deer by the snout, splaying the crimson meat and white tendons. Blood continued oozing from the gash, and the buck's fur had turned from tawny to black, sticking up in dry spikes. The neck, laid between his legs, was subject to the Don's repetitive impalement, raising and slamming the knife up and down and up and down; a series of quick obscene strokes, the blade squelching as it sank from tip to hilt,

tip to hilt. His eyes were focused---on what, Raul didn't know. Nor had he the desire to know. It bored cavities in their chest.

Raul's throat was dry. His breath was suspended in his throat, mouth hung loose at the display.

He was left distraught with the utter lack of courtesy the Don treated the buck! What spectacle did he intend to display? Only carnage, only the ruthlessness persistence of his knife!

"I've had enough, Don Inocencio." Doña Valentina's face was twisted with repulsion. It appeared the Doña shared his sentiments. Her voice cut through the monotony of blade, blood, and bone.

The Don's red knife halted in mid-air. As if wrenching his eyes away from the carcass, he mustered a smile at the Doña, his eyes creased at the edges.

"Perhaps I've made a bit of a mess, Doña Valentina."

But the Doña simply would not have it. She turned her heel and trudged back the way they came, following the trail of dried blood.

Raul and the Don were left alone.

Furious, the Don rose to his feet, dropping the buck's desecrated head. His trousers were speckled dark, knees brown from dirt. He combed his stained fingers through his hair, slicking it back. He took in a deep breath, exhaling from the back of his throat, as if he were snarling at Raul. All of a sudden, he smiled. It pulled up the corners of his lips and pushed his cheeks upwards so much that it was a strained smile, accompanied by a vein bulging at the side of his sweaty temples.

“Señor.”

The weight of the rifle strapped on his back made itself apparent to Raul.

“Don Inocencio.” Raul bowed his head.

“That is not what we had agreed upon. You were to teach me how to hunt—”

“That, I did, Don Inocencio.”

“And yet!” Fury flashed in his tone. “I haven’t learned anything of value, señor! Look at the fool I’ve made of myself, and you,” he pointed a dirty, accusatory finger at Raul, “you did nothing to guide me! You probably enjoyed watching me fail, didn’t you? How you must resent me, señor!”

Anger bubbled in his chest, quickly subdued. Raul shook his head. “That is not true, Don Inocencio. Had you been more patient, or have shown the slightest amount of respect for animals or the hunt itself then perhaps, you would have learned.”

“I thought hunting was for the pride of men, and the thrills of pursuit. Instead, all I had done was lay down crude traps for sickly rabbits, and skin them! I wanted great stags, ferocious boars, and wild wolves!” He said. “So tell me about respect! Whatever for? Such a mind-numbing experience is barely worth an iota of respect.”

Difficult to believe, coming from him. Raul snorted through his teeth. “Don Inocencio, was I hired simply to further your ego? If so, you’ve approached the wrong man. The hunt is not merely a sport of pride, and yet that is all you appear to be concerned with!”

“If not for pride, then what? Nothing else drives the hearts of men, señor. But a hapless old man such as yourself, peasantry and the like, would be unable to understand what pride is. Why, I suppose it is because you have none!”

None? Raul wished to laugh. Though lacking wealth, he knew his own skills to be true. Though lacking a title, he had something the Don did not: the privilege of being born in the Motherland. That, at the very least, was something to Raul. Upon remembering, he no longer saw Inocencio as a contractor, but as a pity.

Had he been otherwise, perhaps Raul might have let his naive words slide. However, a fact surfaced: the Don was an insular, perhaps resultant of that was his temper, his impatience, impertinence, and his barbarity.

“Don Inocencio, I mean you no insult, nor do I think ill of you in the slightest. We are no equals, I retain some pride, though incomparable to yours, however.”

Unable to accept his words, the Don’s face twisted with fury. “You mongrel! You are but a useless, decrepit—subversive!” He was seething, spit flying from teeth. Stark blue eyes pierced Raul, framed in curly brown locks stinking of rust. “Contempt is written all over your face.”

At this, Raul decided the Don was simply deranged. There was no reasoning with him; or rather, there was no point in doing so, be it in his state of rage or the nature of his birthright. If the Don was so insistent on Raul’s fabricated contempt, then Raul shall let him have his way a last time.

“Perhaps it is, Don Inocencio.”

Stunned, the Don’s eyes widened. He was pink and shaking; akin to a kettle boiling over before he collected himself a half-second later, straightening his jacket and fixing his tie. “Very well, let us hasten the process! I, Inocencio del Rosario rescind your

tutelage.” He dug up a wallet from his jacket, disregarding his dirty hands prying the straps open and threw a fistful of coins at the ground by Raul’s feet.

If he expected Raul to kneel, the trapper would never reward him the satisfaction.

The Don turned his nose up with a scoff, and left.

Raul watched him, a weight released from his chest. As the blue-eyed man and his blue jacket disappeared down the road, he surrendered himself to the forest; the brush of wind against his threadbare clothes cooled the sweat from his body, and he longed to return to his cot. Daylight was running out, and stars made their appearance between the dark silhouettes of trees. Home was calling for his weary bones, as were the carrion crows to their murder, to the carcass. He saw what coins glimmered in the sinking light, a mere fifteen reales compared to what was promised, and followed the trail of young blood home.

He wouldn’t see Inocencio until a few months later, weeks before winter, while returning from a hunt. The blue of his jacket was unmistakable, contrasting against the brown of the trees and the bright orange hues of the leaves. He was accompanied by a hunter, a younger one by the name Lorenzo. Hoisted on their shoulders was a massive wolf, bound by the legs with its limp tail waving with every step of its captors. He merely sighed and moved on. A few days later Raul paid Lorenzo a visit. Lorenzo welcomed his appearance and invited him to see his most recent commission. He praised Raul’s trapping expertise, wanting a second opinion.

Suspended taut outside his cabin on a drying frame was the wolf.

It was even more massive up close. The wolf pelt was as tall as a man, and spanned twice the width of a well-built individual. The tawny fur was immaculate; no bullet holes scarring its surface. Its hairs were cleaned well, long and feathery but thick and firmly attached to the root, even as he tugged. Combing his fingers through, they were swallowed by fur. Warmed by the sun, it felt almost alive underneath his touch. His body was tense; expecting it to shake itself free and snap his fingers off with its jaws. The head was wonderfully preserved, lines of sharp white teeth protruding from it. A big black nose sitting at the end of the snout. The sockets were dark, and yet it bored holes into him with its emptiness.

The only flaws were at its scruff and its sides. The scruff he had nearly missed while running his fingers through; some hairs felt shorter than the rest, and stood in uneven spikes. The skin was bumpy as well, and he recognized shortly the pattern of a thick chain that must have choked the wolf before its untimely end. The sides were hardly noticeable to an untrained eye, but the jagged edges of its neck and belly were signs of a haphazard hand cleaning--- no, gutting the wolf. Touching the uneven ridges of skin, a swelling sensation gripped him by the throat, crushing out his breath.

The wolf had been dead for days. Lorenzo's work was impeccable. He insisted Raul stayed for supper, and he did. They shared a meal of stewed pheasants the younger had caught earlier, while conversing over *tempranillo*. Raul took the opportunity to ask about the wolf.

It was a she-wolf, guarding its den. Eventually lured by some meat, they shot it with tranquilizers provided by the noble, then hauled it off.

By then, the sun was setting and Raul ought to head home. Lastly, he asked about Lorenzo's commissioner. His throat was being pinched again.

"Quite the deep pockets to have requested a wolf pelt on such a short notice," Lorenzo said, quite red from the tempranillo. "And quite a peculiar one, too. He wished for it to be sedated, then we returned to my backyard and he killed it there himself." He took another swig. Lorenzo was hiccuping. "Shoddy work, if I must say, and I had to remind him not to strike the stomach lest he penetrate the bladder, so he tore the skin apart with his bare hands." He paused, staring at the dark hole of his cup. The expression in his eyes was unreadable. "I will see him again in a fortnight, once the pelt is finished drying."

Raul left a while later, waving farewell to Lorenzo. While cutting through the forest to reach a beaten path, he touched his neck. It throbbed, and Raul remembered the wolf and the jagged edges of its belly, and the tight grip of a chain. An inconsolable sorrow cut deep through his chest with its intensity. A chill gripped his body; the wind plucking red, orange, and yellow leaves from the branches of trees. He glanced at the dirt searching for the glimmer of reales, a glimmer the wolf's sockets used to have. Raul wondered, his feet trudging the dirt road, whereas in his mind the she-wolf was sprinting, clawed paws kicking up dust; her massive body free of bindings, without the hands of men brushing their fingers through her fur, only currents of air leading her through the forest, her territory; leading her home to her den.