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The Life and Death of a Noble Pig

by Steve Ramirez

HE HAD THAT STRANGE FEELING you get when you know that something is watching you. The hairs on the back of his wrinkled neck stood up on end, and his tiny, ugly eyes began to shift back and forth searching for the danger he so instinctively felt. The first thing he heard was the rushing, crashing sound of something coming at him through the heavy brush. In an instant, he saw the anthracite colored flash of light moving close upon him and his sister.

"Run!" he grunted, and without thinking he began running headlong into the mopane, the thorns ripping at his ugly flesh, the flies unable to keep up; and then there was a squeal, and then there was silence, total silence, save for the beating of his heart. The leopard had killed her, and there was nothing he could do about it. He would be safe, until the next time. There was always a next time when you were a pig, and he was certain that someday the leopard would catch him, too.

Predawn has always been my favorite time in Africa. I awoke as I always do to shave by candlelight, the stars still overhead. Zumele, the skinner, started the generator and the magic of the moment was gone, traded for the magic of another. The single light bulb began to glow amber and the camp began to stir. After a breakfast of hot tea and hard biscuits, I climbed into the back of the hunting vehicle, passing my rifle to Pete my Bushman tracker. As the hunting vehicle lurched forward, the air of the cold African morning brought tears to my eyes as we settled into the rhythm of the rutted

dirt track. I ducked my head to avoid the overhanging mopane branches, and smiled at the trackers. I felt alive, truly alive.

He was resting beneath the mopane tree enjoying the morning. So much time had passed since the death of his sister, and there had been many narrow escapes with the leopard. Each time, he felt him coming

and had been able to evade him among the thorns. Today was a good day, and he began his morning walk toward the waterhole as he always did. He felt alive, truly alive.

The hunting vehicle began to make its way down a steep hill, and my professional hunter Fred Burchell stopped just before we reached the bottom. He motioned to me. "There is a water hole just ahead. We will move up slowly and have a look."

As we moved within 50 yards of the waterhole, a movement caught our eye. It was a big boar warthog, and he seemed to be sensing that we were watching him. The mopane and thorn bush were dense, and there wasn't a clear shot as I brought my rifle to the ready. It was then that he made his move. Running headlong through the thorns, he ran across our path. I placed my crosshairs on an open space that was ahead of him, and when he entered it, my rifle drove sharply into my shoulder. He was down, his heart beating its last, bleeding heavily into the Namibian soil.

When I walked up to him, he was already dead. It was a clean heart shot. It had killed him as fast as a leopard's bite, and I was grateful. A big old boar with one tusk broken off halfway down its length, he seemed to me to be a noble, ugly pig. I thanked him for his life, as is my custom. Fred took

his back legs, and I held onto his tusks as we carried him, heavy and cumbersome, toward the hunting vehicle.

Fred had told me how the local Hereros love the meat of the warthog, and I had decided that if I took one I would donate it to the local village. I only requested that they give me the tusks to remember him by after the butchering was done.

Later that night as I sat by the fire under the Southern Cross drinking a Castle beer, I thought about the old boar. I began to wonder what his life had been and where he had traveled. His end was my end. After all, no one gets out of life alive. It was just then that the second professional hunter in camp, Jon, came over to the fire.

Smiling he said, "Do you want to go to the village and see your pig?"

We jumped into the hunting vehicle and made the short drive to the village. As we drew closer, I could hear happy voices and singing coming from a fire-lit clearing. Getting out of the truck, I saw children jumping for joy as they watched several of the men butchering the warthog. The women were tending to a fire, and everyone stopped to greet me as we walked forward.

I was struck by the happiness the death of this one old pig had brought to so many people. The smiles on the children's faces told the whole story, an understanding we "civilized" people have forgotten.

As we watched the men butchering the pig, Jon turned to me and said, "He sure is an ugly old pig isn't he?"

I thought about it as I enjoyed the warm campfire in the cold African night. With my eyes still fixed on what was left of the old boar I replied, "No, actually, I think he's noble." ♦

"There was always a next time when you were a pig, and he was certain that someday the leopard would catch him, too."