

The Old Huntsman

"The poets down here don't write nothing at all – they just stand back  
and let it all be."

- **Bruce Springsteen, *Jungleland***

CHAPTER I:  
INNERSTALE

THE 1910 Corona portable typewriter. Less than a hundred were made. It sat dormant on my desk as I idly thumbed the latch on its leathery, centennial case. I spent three years restoring this typewriter. It was my love and my passion. It was my fault I didn't lock the booze cabinet.

I had written my sister's wedding speech on the back of an hors d'œuvre napkin; I had written my most recent manuscript in Notepad. As I took a hard swig of neat gin I told myself that those had been trivial. It was deadline night and I was running out of time. The competition was tight; youtube wouldn't fly. Hollow photoshopped imagery had failed me. The only thing left was to harness the great beast's power. Years ago the rail-thin man at the hock shop had told me that Siegfried Sassoon wrote *The Old Huntsman* on this typewriter. Normally I wouldn't trust a pawnbroker, but there was something about the way his hands shook, slightly, when he slid it over the glass cabinet.

"I'll take it," I said.

"The latch on the case is a little funny," he told me. "You know. Hinky."

"I don't mind," I said. I didn't mind.

Now, after the first deadline has been weathered, I'm grateful, even, that the latch did not yield willingly then. In my drunken advances I was close to doing something that I would forever regret. But on that night,

moments before the hood was popped, the carriage clicked into place and the first heavy keys struck against thin paper, the whole damn exercise was rendered suddenly void by a private message bearing the sad story of Stale – my competitor – and his unnatural death.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
**three days earlier**

“SO YOU’RE saying it’s cancer.” Stale leaned back, uncomfortable, in his chair. The inglorious thing was entirely upholstered in a brown, itching carpet. After so many years coming to see the same doctor in the same office, he’d never gotten used to the chair. “The big C? I can beat the big C. I’ve beaten the big C before. Twice.”

“No, no, not quite cancer. Cancer is part of the problem here, but–”

“But what?”

“Well it’s hard for us to say. We’ve never really seen anything like this, but it’s driven by a virus. This virus is turning your cells into more viruses. I know, it’s hard to imagine. It’s a mutation similar to a malignant cancer, but it’s working extremely rapidly.”

“Well? How rapidly?”

“You don’t have much time, Stale.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Don’t be so blasé about this.” The doctor looked around his office; the walls were plastered with scans, X-rays, diagrams and line-illustrations of Stale’s previous afflictions. Stale was this doctor’s full-time job and his office was a shrine; these images were relics of past conquests. “This is the real thing, this time.”

“Well, fix it. I’ve got a big weekend planned. Friends are coming from all over.”

“Impossible.” The doctor pushed his glasses up with his index finger. “The hub of the infection’s activity is in your spleen – that organ is being torn up

from the inside out. For a long time science didn’t know the purpose of the spleen in humans, but recently researchers in Missouri have discovered it’s vital for one thing: the digestion of – ”

“– *barbecue*. God freaking damn. Yeah, yeah. I read about that.”

“So no more parties, I’m afraid.”

“Is there anything that can be done?”

“We’d have to literally destroy every last infected cell in your body. And by this stage, they’re being pumped from your nuts to your nose forty-nine times a minute.”

“I... understand.” Stale pulled himself up, heavily, slowly.

“Of course, at this stage there are a number of palliative options we cou– ”

“That won’t be necessary. Well, Doc – it’s been emotional.”

“Wait, please!”

“Goodbye, Doc.”

With that he closed the door on the doctor, the grim office, and that sad, itchy chair for the last time.

“Butters? Get over here. No. No, don’t bring your damn pornos, this is for real. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I see. I understand. Yes it sounds real kinky okay but I mean, hell, brother, you gotta get over here. I’m being serious. Yes. Shit just got real.”

Attached to Stale’s macbook there was an otherwise completely standard keyboard with a unique function key. This aluminium-cast deviation was a favour from the big man himself – Mr. Jobs – and it could be used in either of two ways; first, to instantly transfer all sensitive data held in the network’s storage onto a flash-drive small enough to fit in a swallowable capsule, then erase it from the server; second, more usefully, to open a hatch underneath his desk which led into the basement workshop. The workshop was vast, filled with more (and better) technology than all of Georgia’s universities combined. It was his little project – when nobody was around, he called it the StaleCave. When people *were* around, it didn’t exist.

Butters had heard about it. On some nights after big parties, when he was drunk and lying naked in the yard, staring at the stars, and Stale was leaning on the porch with a beer and a deep contentedness, they'd talk about things. Stale mentioned his projects. In the haze of the hangover Butters always forgot the details but he knew that his friend was into some heavy duty stuff. Weaponry – and not just guns. Quantum physics. Occultism. Real scientific shit.

But no inebriated conversation could have prepared him for what happened at the end of that dark, secret passageway.

“Hey,” said Stale. “You took your sweet-diddy time. Butters – meet Cane.”

Glinting in the low light, moving slow but with purpose, its great hydraulic arms shifting with immense power, was Cane. Butters felt the concrete rumbling when the mechanized thing took a step forward.

“What... what is it?”

“It's my backup plan. Watch.”

The machine bent over. From the forearms up to the shoulder and chest, its metal shielding began to unravel and open into limb-shaped hollows. The legs, too, curled out into empty casings. Finally its eyeless robot head flipped up and back to reveal the chasm inside. Stale hobbled over to it and looked up at Butters with a smile that had in it a hint of fear.

“Cane,” Stale said, from the construct's shadow. “Engage Downey Jr. mode.”

In one violent movement, the exoskeleton consumed Stale entirely.

“What. The. Fuck.”

It brought itself erect. The once vacant face of the mechanical man came to life with the rising glow of two red lights. When it finally spoke it spoke with a voice that was hollow and digital, but one that was immediately familiar.

“You ain't seen nothing yet.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, when Butters walked red-eyed into the police station to report the strange and horrible things that had happened, he gave a list of the exact equipment used in the procedure. Fifteen pints of saline solution and three pints of type AB-negative blood. A complex piece of temporary matter-reduction nanotechnology that Butters could only describe as ‘the Shrink gun thing.’ An extremely potent solution of distilled habanero chillies and the venom of several gila monsters, for bodily paralysis. A colander wired to a set of starter cables. Three pizzas with the lot, and no anchovies, for sustenance.

“He neurally linked himself to a remotely controlled robot, and then literally entered his own body. Like in that episode of Futurama,” said Butters, gravely. The lieutenant looked equally grave.

“Hold up a second, blondie. You're going to have to go over this all again, a bit more clearly. Only not so clear on the urethra thing, this time.”

“Alright,” said Butters, “Where was I?”

Stale looked down on his own corpse-like body and prodded it with an enormous metal finger. He had never before felt so powerful – but nor had he ever felt so fragile. There was the faint urge in him to abandon his human body entirely. As an invincible robot, he could rampage unhindered through the crass and undeserving suburbs of middle America, detouring to violently take out those unfortunate enough to have ever wronged him. For sure, a lot of stuff would catch on fire. But it could not last. And if he left now, his body would wither and his mind would die.

“I think I'm ready,” he said, with the sigh of inflating pistons. “Let's do this.”

Butters tried to aim the gun carefully but his hands were spasming madly with anxiety. Stale, in Cane, stood stone still and waited.

“Take your time, buddy.” said Stale. “You're going to have to be calm for me. I mean, not too calm. Remember, once you shoot that thing – once I'm *corporeally minimized* into the prepared solution – you have to act

quickly. No mistakes. If the nanotech timer wears out while I'm still inside myself... Well, I'll burst like a bloody piñata. A piñata stuffed with three tons of hot metal."

"Oh Jesus help me," said Butters, and he took a deep breath and fired.

The solution was drawn up into a syringe. Butters took it carefully over to where Stale's limp and naked body lay hooked into a computer terminal that flashed with a waterfall of green symbols. Delicately, Butters slipped his spare hand to cup Stale's enormou-

"Hey, genius, I told you I already heard this part, I don't wanna hear this part again," said the lieutenant. "Just skip ahead a little."

As soon as Stale broke into the hepatic artery the devastation was immediately clear. Clinging to the cylindrical walls were the infected cells – thousands of them. They hissed from their red, mouth-like chasms over the throbbing sound of his slow pulse. Their limbs were like tentacles, and in random gestures they would reach out into the stream and haul in hapless blood cells. Penetrating the victim with a vile proboscis, the new host would then be discarded back into the system. At other points in the stream, Stale came across the cells that were transforming. Docile, translucent skin writhed and then popped like a bubble from the burnt and deformed nucleus growing inside.

One of the cells, unseen, lashed out at Stale's mechanized legs and tripped him. He quickly rolled to see the thing bearing down on him; it could not have been, surely, but in the silence between pulses he thought the creature had howled. After a moment of disorientation, Stale remembered the power he had in the shell of Cane, and pushed himself upright as he ploughed the virus into the moist wall.

"Alright, you fuckers," he said. "Let's get physical."

"St ~ ? ~ ear me? You don't ~ ch time. Wh ~ doing in there?"

Inside the right atrium Stale stood atop a vast mountain of dead and dying viruses. He had fought long, but with every beat of the rubbery walls

more of them writhed in from the adjacent chambers and passageways. He missed more than he killed. It was a battle he could never win – not in a year, let alone a few short hours.

"Yeah I know. Time's up," he said. He snatched a zombified cell from out of the ether and tore it cleanly in two. "It's worse than I thought. They're everywhere."

"You hav ~ outta there. It ~ ~ time. Pl ~, Stale, we need to ~ and ~," there was a long stretch of garbled static, "–jaculation in time."

"Not like this," he said to himself. He rose from a defeated slump, and unsheathed Cane's final defence system – an enormous Bowie knife. "Butters. I'm going for the spleen."

"Wha ~?"

"It's okay. I know a shortcut."

"~ ~ die!"

"I know, Butters. But I can't give up on what I love."

Stale knew something was unusual as he paced cautiously down the splenic central artery. It was quiet. A few jittery blood cells tumbled past him as his heavy footfalls drew deeper inward. He had imagined he was headed for a vast chasm of viral activity – a million bugs compacted into a convenient slaughterhouse. But he hadn't seen a bad cell since the marginal zone. And the silence was becoming unsettling.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," he cooed, if only to mask his nervousness. He thought he heard a snarling in the distance.

"How am I going, Butters?"

"Less th ~ of an hour to go. It's ~ a matter of minutes."

"Listen. You've done good. Okay? It had to end this way."

"I'm not ~ ving you."

"That's up to you now," said Stale. "But be ready."

At that moment, a splenic sinus opened before Stale and there, in a room that seeped with brown, hickory-smoked plasma, was the primal virus – the king of the viruses – slithering contentedly on a throne of fatty tissue.

It looked up at Stale with two mean nuclei and a forked proboscis that appeared as immense tusks. It snorted.

Stale tossed his knife from his right hand to his left, and then back to his right.

“Let’s dance,” he said.

They’d broken out of the spleen within seconds. The tumbling mass of tusk and blade tore through veins and muscle, glandular tissue and deep cavities of fat. On a platform of bone Stale clutched madly for a shield-shaped white blood cell; he used it to fence away a brutal charge. At a standoff in the hazy lungs, the pig-virus was close enough that Stale felt its hot breath. It retreated with a squeal when Cane’s brute strength cleanly broke off one of its deadly tusks – but it only made the thing madder. It charged, and again they wrestled in a deadly embrace.

Meanwhile, in another world entirely, Stale’s naked human form was reflexively jerking with an immense inner pain.

At the end, when both the mechanical man and the virus-king were spent and breathless, they came to a gentle rest somewhere in an unremarkable stretch of small intestine. With the pig’s lone tusk wrangled under his heavy arm, Stale took a moment to appreciate the peace. The thing could do nothing but squirm. He looked straight into the part of it that might have been its face.

“Time’s up,” came a muffled growl. Was it the virus? Was it Butters on the radio?

“It was worth it,” said Stale, as he flipped up the blade and sliced the beast in hal-

“That’s it,” said Butters.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. I went upstairs, I mean, I had to have a shower, I had to get off all the, the,” he wiped at something on his face. “You know. I had a beer.

I had a beer out on the porch and I watched the sun come up, you know? Then I came here. I came straight here.”

There was a knock at the door. A colleague wearing a suit was standing in the doorway, dark glasses still on.

“You better see this, Bob,” he said.

The lieutenant stood up.

“We’ll be in touch,” he said.

And Butters was left there, alone, his fumbling hands picking nervously at the blood beneath his fingernails.

Even though I never so much as opened its case, it’s hard to put aside the feeling that the Corona played a part in what had happened. It has this gravity, you know? When I picked it up and put it back in the locked cabinet, it was heavy. Heavier than a mere machine for words should ever be.

I slept restlessly, telling myself in a mantra that what I was feeling was an impossible superstition. A man had died in uncertain circumstances; that was all. On another continent, in a small apartment barred up from the rain and city lights, I couldn’t have played a part in that. My typewriter, as powerful as it seemed, could never have done that. It was just a damned typewriter.

But here – at the second deadline – I guess that’s been proven wrong.