

Home is the Hunter

Incentives change constantly, but one thing never does—the idea that they are permanent!

By C. L. MOORE and HENRY KUTTNER

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THERE'S nobody I can talk to except myself. I stand here at the head of the great waterfall of marble steps dropping into the reception hall below, and all my wives in all their jewels are waiting, for this is a Hunter's Triumph—my Triumph, Honest Roger Bellamy, Hunter. The light glitters on the glass cases down there with the hundreds of dried heads that I have taken in fair combat, and I'm one of the most powerful men in New York.

The heads make me powerful. But there's nobody I can talk to. Except myself? Inside me, listening, is there another Honest Roger Bellamy? I don't know. Maybe he's the only real part of me. I go along the best I can, and it doesn't do any good. Maybe the Bellamy inside of me doesn't like what I do. But I have to do it. I can't stop, for I was born a Hunter. It's a great heritage to be born to. Who doesn't envy me? Who wouldn't change with me, if they could?

But knowing that doesn't help at all.

I'm no good.

Listen to me, Bellamy, listen to me, if you're there at all, deep inside my head. You've got to listen—you've got to understand. You, there, inside the skull. You can turn up in a glass case in some other Hunter's reception hall any day now, any day, with the crowds of Populi outside pressing against the view-windows and the guests coming in to see and envy, and all the wives standing by in satin and jewels.

Maybe you don't understand, Bellamy. You should feel fine now. It must be that you don't know this real world I have to go on living in. A hundred years ago, or a thousand, it might have been different. But this is the Twenty-first Century. It's today, it's now, and there's no turning back.

I don't think you understand.

YOU see, there isn't any choice. Either you end up in another Hunter's glass case, along with your whole collection of heads, while your wives and children are turned out to be Populi, or else you die naturally (suicide is one way) and your eldest son inherits your collection, and you become immortal, in a plastic monument. You stand forever in transparent plastic on a pedestal along the edge of Central Park, like Renway and old Falconer and Brennan and all the others., Everyone remembers and admires and envies you.

Will you keep on thinking then, Bellamy, inside the plastic? Will I?

Falconer was a great Hunter; He never slowed down, and he lived to be fifty-two. For a Hunter, that is a great old age. There are stories that he killed himself. I don't know. The wonder is that he kept his head on his

shoulders for fifty-two years. The competition is growing harder, and there are more and more younger men these days.

Listen to me, Bellamy, the Bellamy within. Have you ever really understood? Do you still think this is the wonderful young time, the boyhood time, when life is easy? Were you ever with me in the long, merciless years while my body and mind learned to be a Hunter? I'm still young and strong. My training has never stopped. But the early years were the hardest.

Before then, there was the wonderful time. It lasted for six years only, six years of happiness and warmth and love with my mother in the harem, and the foster-mothers and the other children. My father was very kind then. But when I was six, it stopped. They shouldn't have taught us love at all, if it had to end so soon. Is it that you remember, Bellamy within? If it is, it can never come back. You know that. Surely you know it.

The roots of the training were obedience and discipline. My father was not kind any more. I did not see my mother often and, when I did, she was changed, too. Still, there was praise. There were the parades when the Populi cheered me and my father. He and the trainers praised me when I showed I had special skill in the duel, or in marksmanship, or judo-stalking.

It was forbidden, but my brothers and I sometimes tried to kill each other. The trainers watched us carefully. I was not the heir, then. But I became the heir when my elder brother's neck was broken in a judo-fall. It seemed an accident, but of course it wasn't, and then I had to be more careful than ever. I had to become very skillful.

All that time, all that painful time, learning to kill. It was natural. They kept telling us how natural it was. We had to learn. And there could be only one heir ...

We lived under a cloud of fear even then. If my father's head had been taken, we would all have been turned out of the mansion. Oh, we wouldn't have gone hungry or unsheltered. Not in this age of science. But not to be a Hunter! Not to become immortal, in a plastic monument standing by Central Park!

SOMETIMES I dream that I am one of the Populi. It seems strange, but in the dream I am hungry. And that is impossible. The great power plants supply all that the world needs. Machines synthesize food and build houses and give us all the necessities of life. I could never be one of the Populi, but if I were, I would go into a restaurant and take whatever food I wished out of the little glass-fronted compartments. I would eat well—far better than I eat now, as a matter of fact. And yet, in my dream, I am hungry.

Perhaps the food I eat does not satisfy you, Bellamy within me. It does not satisfy me, but it is not meant to. It is nutritious. Its taste is unpleasant, but all the necessary proteins and minerals and vitamins are in it to keep my brain and body at their highest pitch. And it should not be pleasant. It is not pleasure that leads a man to immortality in plastic. Pleasure is a weakening and an evil thing.

Bellamy within—do you hate me?

My life has not been easy. It isn't easy now. The stubborn flesh fights against the immortal future, urging a man to be weak. But if you are weak, how long can you hope to keep your head on your shoulders?

The Populi sleep with their wives. I have never even kissed any of mine. (Is it you who have sent me those dreams?) My children? Yes, they are mine; artificial insemination is the answer. I sleep on a hard bed. Sometimes I wear a hair shirt. I drink only water. My food is tasteless. With my trainers I exercise every day, until I am very tired. The life is hard—but in the end we shall stand forever in a plastic monument, you and I, while the world envies and admires. I shall die a Hunter and I shall be immortal.

The proof is in the glass cases down there in my reception hall. The heads, the heads—look, Bellamy, so many heads! Stratton, my first. I killed him in Central Park with a machete. This is the scar on my temple that he gave me that night. I learned to be more deft. I had to.

Each time I went into Central Park, fear and hate helped me. Often it is dreadful in the Park. We go there only at night, and sometimes we stalk for many nights before we take a head. The Park is forbidden, you know, to all but Hunters.

It is our hunting ground.

I have been shrewd and cunning and resourceful. I have shown great courage. I have stopped my fears and nursed my hate, there in the Park's shadows, listening, waiting, stalking, never knowing when I might feel sharp steel burning through my throat. There are no rules in the Park. Guns or clubs or knives—once I was caught in a man-trap, all steel and cables and sharp teeth. But I had moved in time, and fast enough, so I kept my right hand free and shot Miller between the eyes when he came to take me. There is Miller's head down in that case. You would never know a bullet had gone through his forehead, for the thanologists are clever. But usually we try not to spoil the heads.

WHAT is it that troubles you so, Bellamy within? I am one of the greatest Hunters in New York. But a man must be cunning. He must lay traps and snares a long way in advance, and not only in Central Park. He must keep his spies active and his lines of contact taut in every mansion in the city. He must know who is powerful and who is not worth taking. What good would it do to win against a Hunter with only a dozen heads in his hall, while risking your own collection and your own head?

I have hundreds. Until yesterday, I stood ahead of every man in my age-group. Until yesterday, I was the envy of all I knew, the idol of the Populi, the acknowledged master of half New York. Half New York! Do you know how much that meant to me? That my rivals loathed me and acknowledged me their better?

You do know, Bellamy. It was the breath of life that True. Jonathan Hull and Good Ben Griswold ground their teeth when they thought of me, and that Black Bill Lindman and Whistler Cowles counted their trophies and then called me on the TV phone and begged me with tears of hate and fury

in their eyes to meet them in the Park and give them the chance they craved.

I laughed at them. I laughed Black Bill Lindman into a berserker rage and then almost envied him, because I have not been berserker myself for a long while now. I like that wild unloosening of all my awareness but one—the killing instinct, blind and without reason. I could forget even you then, Bellamy within.

But that was yesterday.

And yesterday night, Good Ben Griswold took a head. Do you remember how we felt when we learned of it, you and I? First I wanted to die, Bellamy. Then I hated Ben as I have never hated anyone before, and I have known much hate. I would not believe he had done it. I would not believe which head he took.

I said it was a mistake, that he took a head from the Populi. But I knew I lied. No one takes a common head. They have no value. Then I said to myself, "It can't be the head of True Jonathan Hull. It can't be. It must not be!" For Hull was powerful. His hall held almost as many heads as mine. If Griswold were to have them all, he would be far more powerful than I.

The thought was a torment I could not endure.

I put on my Status Cap, with one bell on it for each head I have taken, and I went out to see. It was true, Bellamy.

The mansion of Jonathan Hull was being emptied. The mob was surging in and out, while Hull's wives and children were leaving in little, quiet groups. The wives did not seem unhappy, but the boys did. (The girls had been sent to the Populi at birth, naturally; they are worthless.) I watched the boys for a while. They were all wretched and angry. One was nearly sixteen, a big, agile lad who must have nearly finished his training. Someday I might meet him in the Park.

The other boys were all too young. Now that their training had been interrupted, they would never dare enter the Park. That, of course, is why none of the Populi ever become Hunters. It takes long years of arduous training to turn a child from a rabbit to a tiger. In Central Park, only the tigers survive.

I LOOKED through True Jonathan's view-windows. I saw that the glass cases in his reception hall were empty.

"So it is not a nightmare or a lie—Griswold does have them," I thought, "and True Jonathan's, besides."

I went into a doorway and clenched my fists and beat them against the brownstone and groaned with self-contempt.

I was no good at all. I hated myself, and I hated Griswold, too. Presently it was only that second hate that remained, so I knew what I had to do.

"Today," I thought, "he stands where I stood yesterday. Desperate men will be talking to him, begging him, challenging him, trying every means they

know to get him into the Park tonight. But I am crafty. I make my plans far ahead. I have networks that stretch into the mansions of every Hunter in the city, crossing their own webs."

One of my wives, Nelda, was the key here. Long ago I realized that she was beginning to dislike me. I never knew why, but I fostered that dislike until it became hate. I saw to it that Griswold would learn the story. It is by strategems like this that I became as powerful as I was then and will be again, will surely be again.

I put on a glove, with hair and knuckle-lines and nails painted on to look like a hand, and I went to my TV phone and called Good Ben Griswold. He came grinning to the screen.

"I challenge you, Ben," I said. "Tonight at nine, in the Park, by the carousel site."

He laughed at me. He was a tall, heavily muscled man with a thick neck.

I looked at his throat.

"Tonight at nine," I repeated.

He laughed again. "Oh, no, Roger," he said. "Why should I risk my head?"

"You're a coward."

"Certainly I'm a coward, '- he agreed, still grinning, "when there's nothing to gain and everything to lose. Was I a coward last night, when I took Hull's head? I've had my eye on him a long time, Roger. I'll admit I was afraid you'd get him first. Why didn't you, anyway?"

"It's your head I'm after, Ben."

"Not tonight," he said. "Not for quite a while. I'm not going back to the Park for a long time; I'll be too busy. You're out of the running, anyhow, Roger. How many heads have you?"

He knew, damn him, how far ahead of me he was—now. I let the hate show in my face.

"The Park at nine tonight," I yelled. "The carousel site. Or else I'll know you're afraid."

"Eat your heart out, Roger," he mocked me. "Tonight I lead a parade. Watch me. Or don't—but you'll be thinking about me. You can't help that."

"You swine! You rotten, cowardly swine!"

HE laughed; he derided me, he goaded me, as I had done so many times to others. I did not have to pretend anger. I wanted to reach into the screen and sink my fingers in his throat. The furious rage was good to feel. It was very good. I let it build until it seemed high enough. I let him laugh and enjoy it.

Then at last I did what I had been planning. At the right moment, when it

looked convincing, I let myself lose all control and I smashed my fist into the TV screen. It shattered. Griswold's face flew apart; I liked that. It was very satisfying.

The connection was broken, of course. But I knew he would check quickly back. I slipped the protective glove from my right hand and called a servant I knew I could trust. (He is a criminal; I protect him. If I die, he will die and he knows it.) He bandaged my unharmed right hand and I told him what to say to the other servants. I knew the word would reach Nelda quickly, in the harem, and I knew that Griswold would hear within an hour.

I fed my anger. All day, in the gymnasium, I practiced with my trainers, machete and pistol in my left hand only. I made it seem that I was approaching the berserker stage, the killing madness that overcomes us when we feel we have completely failed.

That kind of failure can have one of two results only. Suicide is the other. You risk nothing then, and you know your body will stand by the Park in its plastic monument. But sometimes the hate turns outward and there is no fear left. Then the Hunter is berserker, and while this makes him very dangerous, he is also good quarry then—he forgets his cunning.

It was dangerous to me, too, for that kind of forgetfulness is very tempting, the next best thing to oblivion itself.

Well, I had set the lure for Griswold. But it would take more than a lure to bring him out when he thought he had nothing to gain by such a risk. So I set rumors loose. They were very plausible rumors. I let it be whispered that Black Bill Lindman and Whistler Cowles, as desperate as I at Griswold's triumph over us all, had challenged each other to a meeting in the Park that night. Only one could come out alive, and that one would be master of New York so far as our age-group counted power. (There was, of course, old Murdoch with his fabulous collection accumulated over a lifetime, but it was only among ourselves that the rivalry ran so high.)

WITH that rumor abroad, I thought Griswold would act. There is no way to check such news. A man seldom announces openly that he is going into the Park. It could even be the truth, for all I knew. And for all Griswold knew, his supremacy was in deadly peril before he had even enjoyed his Triumph. There would be danger, of course, if he went out to defend his victory. Lindman and Cowles are both good Hunters. But Griswold, if he did not suspect my trap, had a chance at one sure victory —myself, Honest Roger Bellamy, waiting in berserker fury at a known rendezvous and with a right hand useless for fighting. Did it seem too obvious? Ah, but you don't know Griswold.

When it was dark, I put on my hunting clothes. They are bulletproof, black, close-fitting, but very easy with every motion. I blacked my face and hands. I took gun, knife and machete with me, the metal treated so that it would not catch or reflect the light. I like a machete especially —I have strong arms. I was careful not to use my bandaged hand at all, even when I thought no one watched me. And I remembered that I must seem on the verge of berserker rage, because I knew Griswold's spies would be reporting every motion I made.

I went toward Central Park, the entrance nearest the carousel site. That far Griswold's men could track me, but no farther.

At the gate I lingered for a moment — do you remember this, Bellamy within me? Do you remember the plastic monuments we passed on the edge of the Park? Falconer and Brennan and the others, forever immortal, standing proud and godlike in the clear, eternal blocks. All passion spent, all fighting done, their glory assured forever. Did you envy them, too, Bellamy?

I remember how old Falconer's eyes seemed to look through me contemptuously. The number of heads he had taken is engraved on the base of his monument, and he was a very great man.

"Wait," I thought. "I'll stand in plastic, too. I'll take more heads than even you, Falconer, and the day that I do, it will be the day I can lay this burden down . . ."

Just inside the gate, in the deep shadows, I slipped the bandage from my right hand. I drew my black knife and, close against the wall, I began to work my way rapidly toward the little gate which is nearest Griswold's mansion. I had, of course, no intention of going anywhere near the carousel site. Griswold would be in a hurry to get to me and out again, and he might not stop to think. Griswold was not a thinker. I gambled on his taking the closest route.

I waited, feeling very solitary and liking the solitude. It was hard to stay angry. The trees whispered in the darkness. The moon was rising from the Atlantic beyond Long Island. I thought of it shining on the Sound and on the city. It would rise like this long after I was dead. It would glitter on the plastic of my monument and bathe my face with cold light long after you and I, Bellamy, are at peace, our long war with each other ended.

THEN I heard Griswold coming. I tried to empty my mind of everything except killing. It was for this that my body and mind had been trained so painfully ever since I was six years old. I breathed deeply a few times. As always, the deep, shrinking fear tried to rise in me; fear, and something more. Something within me—is it you, Bellamy?—that says I do not really want to kill.

Then Griswold came into sight, and the familiar, hungry hatred made everything all right again.

I do not remember very much about the fight. It all seemed to happen within a single timeless interval, though I suppose it went on for quite a long while. It was a hard, fast, skillful fight. We both wore bulletproof clothing, but we were both wounded before we got close enough to try for each other's heads with steel. He favored a saber, which was longer than my machete. Still, it was an even battle. We had to fight fast, because the noise might draw other Hunters, if there were any in the Park tonight.

But in the end I killed him.

I took his head. The Moon was not yet clear of the high buildings on the other side of the Park and the night was young.

I summoned a taxi. Within minutes, I was back in my mansion, with my trophy. Before I would let the surgeons treat me, I saw to it that the head was taken to the laboratory for a quick treatment, a very quick preparation. And I sent out orders for a midnight Triumph.

While I lay on the table and the surgeons washed and dressed my wounds, the news was flashing through the city already. My servants were in Griswold's mansion, transferring his collections to my reception hall, setting up extra cases that would hold all my trophies, all True Jonathan Hull's and all of Griswold's, too. I would be the most powerful man in New York, under such masters as old Murdoch and one or two more. All my age-group and the one above it would be wild with envy and hate. I thought of Lindman and Cowles and laughed with triumph.

I thought it was triumph — then.

I STAND now at the head of the staircase, looking down at the lights and the brilliance, the row upon row of trophies, my wives in all their jewels. Servants are moving to the great bronze doors to swing them ponderously open. What will be revealed? The throng of guests, the great Hunters coming to give homage to a greater Hunter? Or—suppose no one has come to my Triumph, after all?

The bronze doors are beginning to open. And I'm afraid. The fear that never leaves a Hunter, except in his last and greatest Triumph, is with me now. Suppose, while I stalked Griswold tonight, some other Hunter ambushed even bigger game—what if, for example, someone has taken old Murdoch's head? Then someone else would be having a Triumph in New York tonight, a greater Triumph than mine!

The fear is choking me. I've failed. Some other Hunter has beaten me. I'm no good ... No. Listen. Listen to them shouting my name! Look, look at them pouring in through the opened doors, all the great Hunters and their jewel-flashing women, thronging in to fill the bright hall beneath me. I feared too soon. I was the only Hunter in the Park tonight, after all. So I have won, and this is my Triumph.

There's Lindman. .There's Cowles. I can read their expressions very, very easily. They can't wait to get me alone tonight and challenge me to a duel in the Park.

They all raise their arms toward me in salute. They shout my name.

I beckon to a servant. He hands me the filled glass that is ready. Now I look down at the Hunters of New York—I look down from the height of my Triumph—and I raise my glass to them.

I drink.

Hunters, you cannot rob me now.

I shall stand proud in plastic, godlike in the eternal block that holds me, all passion spent, all fighting done, my glory assured forever.

The poison works quickly. This is the real Triumph!



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