

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 IV

miserere, *n.*

1. a prayer for mercy
2. an expression of lamentation or complaint
3. a medieval dagger, used for the mercy stroke to a wounded foe

HAVE MERCY upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness, for I have just torn the still-beating heart from the chest of Marcus Ravens. He was an innocent man – as innocent as an outlawed vigilante can be – and did not deserve a life so abruptly concluded. I pray to you in this pregnant moment that you might see I gave him meaning in his final hours. We all of us live in a flash of chaos: but from this Earthly void, this place of absent routine and sudden, fleeting emotion, we gaze into places more structured, through the tiny windows of comic panels and paperback pages, televisions and silver screens. From these worlds of Shakespearian tragedy and Pythonesque comedy, of romantic adventure and perfect brutality, we aspire to a grand truth that we will never – *can never* – feel against our flawed human skin. It is our best trick, perhaps our only one, and we have played it on ourselves. Except for Marcus. You see, I have written him free.

I have discovered the Corona is not my enemy but my friend. These past weeks it was sending me clues but in my ignorance and petty fear I had failed

to understand them. Yet when the typewriter returned to me at Riverview, wrapped in its benign package, and when I opened it on my cold hospital bed I saw not the demon I had seen before but a great, mystic entity, an entity as powerful as yourself, O God, but with a simpler objective: to bring this impossible truth, this glorious fucking truth, this ball-crunching, heart-rending truth, a truth that is explosively violent and, at the same time, as tender as the night, to bring it to each one of us individually; to give us that great dénouement we cannot get from our inevitable human deathbeds of ravaging cancer, our abrupt, silent wrecks instigated by just another out-of-control drunk in the night.

I could no longer ignore that the Corona had chosen me, in its galactic wisdom, to become this humble planet's harbinger of grander meaning. So I brought it first to Marcus. One thudding keystroke at a time.

ROGERS CENTRE, TORONTO
Once upon a time...

"HOLY SHIT," said M.B. "I can't believe we got in."

The pair – Marcus Ravens and his partner in crime, M.B. – walked out into the green centre of the field, under the quiet gaze of fifty thousand empty seats. There was such a sense of vertigo at the vastness of the space that for a moment they could only stand there, breathing the cold morning air as they imagined the echoing ring of an aluminium bat striking dense leather. Then, at once, they remembered they'd just busted into a heavily secured landmark with a backpack full of pyrotechnics and a pair of handheld video cameras and they did not have a great deal of time to get shit done.

"Got the plan down?" asked Marcus, slinging his pack to the ground.

"Yeah," said M.B. "We set the fireworks first – put them around the triangle, there, there, say, there? I'll set up the cameras – one on first plate, one at Row 117, Seat B. You get the amp and guitar ready. I light the fuses, we take our places, then I pitch the blood-soaked rubber head at you,

making sure the beret doesn't come off. We'll get a lightshow just as you hit it with the guitar for a homer straight over the corporate boxes, then you squeal out the main riff from *Highway to Hell*."

"Alright, good," said Marcus, already tuning the low E string on his cherry-red Stratocaster. "So we're going with the simple version. Let's do it."

The pair bumped fists and were about to scurry off to their respective tasks when there was a loud, grinding shudder from the field's maintenance entrance and the big steel doors began to rise with a mechanical whirring.

"Shit, we're done for, shit, shit," said M.B.

"Stay cool," said Marcus, and he let his red guitar fall to the green grass. They paused for a while, just watching the big doors slowly rise. "Wait, no. Fuckin' cheese it!"

They hadn't even made it as far as the pitcher's mound before two glinting black sedans tore in through the outfield to cut them off. Two men dressed in suits launched themselves out of the rear doors of the first sedan – a Chrysler – and tumbled toward the scampering duo.

"Watch out!" called Marcus, dodging one of the men with a big goose-step. "I don't think these guys are groundskeepers!"

"I don't think so eith—" began M.B., but one of the men grabbed him and wrestled him down with a white cloth against his face. A car came to a tearing stop next to the tangled pair and M.B. was promptly hauled into it. The car then turned slowly and cruised back toward the entrance.

"M.B.!" shouted Marcus. "Alright you fuckers, is that how you want to play?"

He approached the other mystery agent with his fists raised, poised in a fine stance for a right-left-right, but before he could let a punch fly the other car slowly came beside him and its tinted rear window smoothly descended.

"Just get in the car," came a voice, and Marcus realised the man he was about to fight had already drawn a pistol, and it was aimed at his head.

"I'm not talking until you tell me what you've done with M.B.," said Marcus. The dim interior of the car was curiously spacious, and had facing seats in the style of a limousine.

"Don't worry about your friend," said the bald man. "You won't be seeing him again. Brandy?"

Marcus said nothing.

"Well, I'm having a brandy," he continued, as the crystal bottle he held clinked against a glass. "You are Marcus Ravens, no? Don't tell me I've picked up another... child, playing games."

"Well, I am Marcus Ravens, but—"

"Excellent. You're quite the efficient vigilante. I've seen your documentaries on, oh," he tapped against the glass behind the driver's seat, "What do they call that again, Agent Carson? Oh yes. The You Tubes."

"Christ," said Marcus. "I'm not a—" but he was again cut off.

"I'm not here to find out what you aren't, I don't want to know what you aren't. I'm here to tell you what you *are*. You are now an agent of the government, and you have been issued with a most critical mission. Tell me. Have you heard of the Australian?"

"Not the Australian you're talking about, I'm pretty sure."

The man revealed an enormous dossier he had somehow been keeping inside his coat.

"Born in an orphanage in the desolate centre of New South Wales at an indeterminate point in the 20th Century. He was abandoned by his carers, having not developed language skills, only to be taken up by a rogue mob of wandering Aboriginals. As a youth he was arrested in Darwin for a failed heist attempt on a cruise ship, and then again in Singapore on microchip smuggling charges. He escaped, as is his habit, and was not seen again until the late Nineties, where it's suspected he led a covert Yugoslav military group in attacks against Kosovar civilians. As such, he is wanted for multiple war-crimes. He was last seen in a Canadian mental asylum, though his whereabouts are currently unknown. We have an idea or two."

"You realise that none of that makes any sense?"

"Au contraire, Agent Ravens!" said the bald man. He took a deep draught of the rust-coloured liquid just as the car thudded over a speed-bump. "It makes perfect sense. Brandy?"

The sedan came to a halt just beyond the limits of Hope, British Columbia, and the door next to Marcus popped open without anyone touching it. It was a frigid afternoon, and foggy.

"That's it?" said Marcus. "You're just going to leave me here?"

"We gave you a good gun, and a knife," said the bald man.

"And an extra layer of flannelette," chimed in Agent Carson from the driver's seat.

"That should be plenty for a man of your distinguished abilities. No?"

"You're a loony."

"Agent Carson? It seems Agent Ravens needs some, ah, motivation."

A hatch popped open from the leather between the booth seats. Before Marcus could scramble away, the bald man grabbed him tightly by the forearm. As he turned, he saw the man's gold-toothed grin and a syringe plunging right to the base of his neck.

"Fuck, fucking ow! That... hurt?"

"Yes, that should do it. Now remember. You have to kill the Australian."

Marcus felt woozy. He toppled over in the car, falling across the bald man's knees. He rubbed his eyes and the moment of nausea passed – but he felt strange. He instinctively grasped for the gun holstered at his hip.

"Sorry," said Marcus, sitting up straight. "I missed that last bit, what was that last bit again?"

"I said," said the bald man, "You have to Bring Righteous Justice."

"I... understand."

Marcus stumbled out of the car and tripped on his own feet. He got up, fighting off the next head rush, and righted himself on the bonnet.

The front window rolled down.

“Have a nice day!” said Agent Carson, and the black sedan tore away from Agent Ravens, sending loose gravel everywhere.

“Hey man, want a hit of this? Good shit, man.”

The kid would have been ten, at most. He was wearing a hooded sweater with a picture of Bart Simpson on it. He took another long draw of the crack pipe, then spat on the sidewalk with a grin.

“Give me that,” said Agent Ravens. He snatched the ice-crusting bowl from out of the horrible child’s dirty hands. “What are you doing with this?”

“You’re in Hope, now, man.”

Ravens growled. He crushed the fragile glass pipe into shards in his hand. But then – a head rush. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and rubbed them clear. Something changed. He opened his grasp to reveal no blood, glass, or methamphetamines, but a pink sugary powder and the broken plastic head of a C-3PO Pez dispenser.

The child started to sob uncontrollably – and ran away.

“Sorry, kid,” grumbled Marcus, tossing the ruined candy to the gutter. Then, calling out to the frightened child: “Winners don’t do drugs! Remember that!”

The screen door slams. Mary’s dress waves. Like a vision she dances across the porch as the radio play–

Officer Leroy clicked off the RCMP cruiser’s radio as he slowly came to a halt alongside the stranger. He wound down the window. He raised his sunglasses.

“Howdy there,” he said. “Passing through town today?”

“I’m lookin’ for a place to eat,” said the man. He was wearing red flannelette, had an overgrown beard, and stank. “And... the Australian.”

“Well I don’t know about any Australians but there’s a place about 30 miles up the highway you can get some food. I can set you on your way.”

Marcus opened the door and slid into the cruiser’s passenger seat.

“Any law that says I can’t eat here?”

“Yeah,” said Officer Leroy. He started the car and pulled out into the quiet main street of Hope. “My law.”

“That so,” said Marcus. They passed the neon lights of a pharmacy.

“This is a quiet town, friend. Some might even say boring.”

“Boring.”

“Yeah, and that’s how we like it. We don’t need any drifters. Now I want you to take off that holster and put your gun – easy! – and put your gun on the dash.”

Marcus looked at the ginger-haired lieutenant, then looked away as he unbuckled the holster and placed it where the officer had gestured.

“That’s a big gun for a civilian. I see you have a knife, too. That’s for hunting, I take it? You hunt with that?”

Before Marcus could even grunt a response, the officer had whipped out a pair of handcuffs from his belt and clasped Marcus’s wrist tightly to the door.

“Hey now, be cool. We’re going to take a trip downtown. Don’t do anything stupid, alright? Good. Let’s all just stay cool and listen to some music.”

–ut when you get to the porch they’re gone, on the wind. So Mary climb in. It’s town full of losers and I’m pulling out of here to win.

“Hey, Mitch, how are ya? Woah, that’s a fine specimen you got.”

Marcus squinted under the bright lights of Hope Police Department’s foyer. Officer Leroy buffed him toward the front counter with a sharp elbow.

“Hey, Bill,” said Leroy. “I want you to book this guy on, ah, geeze, say vagrancy? Take him downstairs and get him cleaned up, yeah? I got his gun and his knife. You take his dirty beard.”

Marcus did not feel good. He didn’t have enough energy to fight back against even the two junior officers, who had wrestled him into an undefeatable lock. He might have vomited everywhere if it wasn’t for the steel baton digging painfully into his throat. He stopped lashing out. He waited, and breathed deeply. He let the strange head rush take over.

When Officer Bill Teasle came towards the cell, whistling happily, holding before him a barber's tray stacked with scissors, foam, and a straight razor, Agent Ravens saw something different. He saw the bald government man, his gold-toothed grin, and a tray full of noxiously filled syringes. He struggled half-heartedly against the stiff grasp of the men behind him who, glancing again, he now knew were Agent Carson, and the agent who'd taken away M.B. Ravens felt his strength return, real strength, but he didn't use it yet. He waited longer.

When Teasle was just close enough that Ravens could smell the heady shaving lotion, the drifter launched himself upward, kicking the officer right between the legs – first with his left foot, then his right. The junior officers hesitated for just long enough that he could wrestle free, and he went immediately for the razor.

Bill Teasle was the first to die. Agent Ravens didn't even pull him up from his doubled slouch – he sliced the groaning policeman's neck cleanly open with the shaving blade. Jugular blood gushed everywhere on the concrete, and Ravens growled as he took the dead man's pistol. He turned towards the juniors. For a moment Marcus felt pity, but soon his other half took over and he knew nought but anger and righteous drive. With two bullets he splattered the young mens' brains all over the cell's clean walls.

Agent Ravens fought violently through to the foyer of the Hope Police Department, shooting stomachs and punching faces. Officer Leroy was holed up there, crouched behind a computer desk, and he exchanged a few shots before the deluded vigilante escaped through the double doors and into the busy streets. Leroy and another officer rushed outside to watch Marcus tackle an innocent man for his dirt bike.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" cried Leroy, diverting the aim of the other officer's gun. The red-headed senior put his sunglasses on. "This is the chase scene."

As he hiked further up the mountain trail (he had left the plucky Yamaha

far behind him), over mossy rocks and the stumps of fallen fir trees, Marcus heard:

dry branches crack under his frantic footfall.

the violent barking of dogs, incessant, on the mountain slopes below.

the deep thrum of a helicopter somewhere distant in the valley.

popping gunshots, in a sudden burst of three.

his own slow, heavy breath.

an eagle crying out as it lethargically circled, far, far above.

And Marcus heard something else: a specific kind of clattering. It was quiet at first but it rose, just as he rose on the mountain path. A sound immediately familiar, but one he could not place: chk. Chk chk chk. Then, amidst that, a whirl. Chk. Chk chk chk. Whir, chk chk. Chk chk chk chk. A strange Morse code.

He followed the noise. It led him away from those other dying sounds, and it rose, it rose, chk chk chk, chk chk, until finally, exhausted, he discovered the source. It echoed out from a dark tunnel, hewn deep into the great mountain itself.

When he came to me, birthed into the flickering light of my poorly constructed fire, I noticed that Marcus's sleeves were torn off at the shoulders, and his arms were caked in blood. That was a nice touch, and one I hadn't specified. I stopped typing.

"Right on time," I said. I was sitting cross-legged on the dirt floor.

"Bank Shot Jezz," said Ravens. He spoke with wild eyes, through gritted teeth. "So you are the Australian."

"Well, I'm *an* Australian..."

"I heard they had you locked up in Riverview."

"Funny thing, that," I said, standing. I shuffled through the pages piled next to the typewriter and took one over to him. "As it happens, there was a disused maintenance hatch in my ward. Under my very bed, believe it or not. Here."

Marcus snatched the page and glanced at it.

"A Very Specific History of Riverview," he read. "By... Fakington H. McMadeUp?"

"Hah! You know the strangest thing about it, the amazing thing, the thing that surprised me most of all... it's not just that every idea I typed was manifested, down to the mouldy carpet and the skeleton key under a rusting Coke can, but that thing's sheer power, well! Let's just say Fakington H. is now semi-retired and keeps the books for a toy store in Winnipeg."

"You're insane," Marcus said. "This world has gone insane."

"You're never gonna survive, Marcus, unless you get a little crazy."

"Ungh," he groaned. He doubled over, and rubbed his eyes. Then he rose up, raising his police-issue pistol. "This ends now."

He fired four or five times, and the bursts resounded around our stone chamber. Marcus yelled "Die, die!" and fired twice more, and I scratched the back of my head. He looked at the gun.

"Blanks?" he asked. "That's not possible."

"And yet," I said, gesturing at the loosely stacked pile of paper. "It is written. Open your shirt, Marcus."

"What is this?" he asked, unbuttoning slowly. "Why have you brought me here? Why, gnh, why can't I stop?"

"You haven't had any fun? Oh well. I thought you might've had fun. You know *First Blood* was filmed here, in Hope." I came to him, and he spread his arms wide. "I thought that was pretty clever, anyway. You're here to die."

"No... Fuck, no, what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry. But this part, at least," I crossed myself, then looked from the heavens above to my flexing fingers, "This part I'm sure you can appreciate."

His dying screams echoed out from the tunnel and around the mountain slopes, drowning out, for a moment, even the eagle's sad cry.

O God, accept this miserere, even though I admit that when everything was over I licked a little blood from my hurting knuckles, and said out loud how much I always wanted to do that. I have acted, at times, in vain. But understand my one aim was to give Marcus that which we humans can never

otherwise have: a grand finale. A resolution with meaning. Dénouement. His end was inevitable, of course, as is all of ours, but you will agree that his was at least scripted cunningly. O God, have mercy on me now for I am afraid that next time your judgement may not be so kind. You see I have been getting to know the Corona, and the Corona, it is impatient. There are more men in the iron sights of its ancient type guide. Yet I fear that it will be long, slow work. Too long. Too slow. And while granting a man his noble exit is a fine thing indeed, to give it to the thriving masses all at once, ah!

I have been thinking. I am starting to understand why, almost a century ago – as he sat behind this very typewriter – Siegfried Sassoon began to write about War.