

An excerpt from *The Hunters*,  
available as a Kindle book at [Amazon](#).

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NOTE: This work uses film language to describe action as if it's unfolding on a screen. I call pieces written in this style novies (novel + movie = novie).



James and Balin sit in chairs pulled up close to the wood stove. Auroral light flutters outside the nearest window. James stares at the crackling flames through the open door on the front of the stove, and Balin sits with the stained glass panel from earlier in his lap. He holds it upright and clicks James' empty lighter behind it. The lighter doesn't flame but it showers sparks. Balin's eyes widen slightly each time the light bursts through the caramel-colored glass.

"Superb," he says, again talking more to himself than to James. He snaps the lighter. "'Mountains upended.' That could mean . . ." He turns the panel upside down. The birds are now closer to the top, the mountains down low. "Maybe this is how they planned to frame it."

He stares at the panel a moment longer, then shakes his head. "Humans can be *very* confusing. I don't understand the drive to create things like this. Life was difficult even before society collapsed, so why this?"

James comes out of his fire-watching reverie.

"What'd you say?"

"The creative drive in humans. I don't understand it."

"Can't you create?"

"Well, yes, but not like this." Balin caresses the panel. "I could do visual arts, or write poems, or music, but the work would just be mechanical. There wouldn't be any . . . *passion* to it."

"Do phages create?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Body adornment mostly, since they live on the move, but some of it is quite striking."

“Tell me about them, the phages. Where’d they come from? None of the grownups I ask can tell me.”

Balin snaps the lighter behind the glass panel. “That’s a long story, but it’s one you should know.” He gets up from his chair, takes the panel to a table and lays it down with care. He returns to his chair and shifts it so he’s facing James. James shifts his so he’s facing Balin.

“The phages,” Balin begins, “grew out of experiments involving the transference of human consciousness into computers. Back when . . .”

“Trans . . . ferment?” James interrupts. “What’s that?”

Balin thinks, then shakes his head.

“I don’t know, James. I’m not sure you’ll be able to understand this.”

“But I want to hear. Please. And I won’t stop you again to ask what the words mean.”

“Well . . . okay. Let me think.”

James leans forward in his chair, and Balin begins his story again. His voice will overlay the upcoming action.

“Long before you were born, the world’s most powerful people wanted to extend their lives, and they thought computers might help them do that. So they poured their vast wealth into computer research.”

A hi-tech clean room fades into view. Technicians in white lab coats and puffy caps work on computer components. Balin continues his narration.

*“The speed and the storage capacity of computers increased at an incredible rate, and there were also advances in biochemistry.”*

The clean room is replaced by a lab full of test tubes and petri dishes. Two men in lab coats stand looking at an x-ray of a brain, silently discussing it.

*“Eventually the scientists found a way to store*

*memory on computers. The technology was decades ahead of anything the public was ever told about, and it was made available only to the people who'd paid to develop it."*

We hear the faint pop of champagne corks and see a slideshow of castles, ballrooms, boardroom meetings and yachts. Following this is some footage of a stately coronation in a huge cathedral.

*"The people who owned the world, who'd inherited titles and printed the money and bought the governments, had finally found a way to cheat death. They rushed to download the accumulated memories of their lifetimes onto computers. And it was none too soon, because the patriarchs and matriarchs were old, and some died just after they'd gone through the process."*

The coronation we've been watching turns into a royal funeral procession.

*"That's one part of the phages' story. The other part concerns nanotechnology. It developed alongside the memory storage work."*

We see a lab technician at a microscope, in a white clean room, then through the microscope we see a nanobot. It looks like a tiny box, nothing more, but then it divides and there are two boxes, divides again into four, eight.

*"Science developed microscopic machines that could self-replicate and be programmed to shape themselves into anything."*

The slide table of the microscope sprouts vines that grow quite fast. When they fill half the room they erupt with multicolored flowers, and then a naked Adonis steps from the foliage to face the technician.

*"The elites of the world were elated when they learned that nanotechnological bodies would be able to accept memories stored on computers, and the memory transfers began."*

A smiling simulacra of Queen Elizabeth II, in a

hospital gown, sits on the edge of an examination table. A doctor checks its reflexes, its unfocused eyes, its drooling mouth and so on.

*“At first they were called Nannies, a verbal play on ‘nanorobotic.’ It was also a name that showed great hope for the beneficent nature of the enterprise.”*

The Lizzie reaches out to the doctor, grabs him by the throat and snaps his neck. He falls to the floor. The Lizzie’s eyes never focus and it continues to smile its drooling smile.

*“That hope faded rather quickly. The problem was, the elites’ intellects were . . . bad. The things they’d done in their lives had tainted them.”*

We see a scroll of horrific images—a bound man is jabbed with a cattle prod in a dim cell, a woman is beheaded in front of a turbaned potentate, a man in a tuxedo lifts a sacrificial dagger above the prone figure of a child.

*“And those personalities were suddenly reborn into new bodies with nearly unlimited potential. That’s when the scientists began to call them phages. A phage is a virus, a disease, and they knew that that’s what they’d created, a disease.”*

A trembling scientist in a lab coat sits on a bench in a park. She’s writing on a clipboard and watching a phage exercise. At first the phage looks like a young David Rockefeller, doing toe touches, then it morphs into a huge tiger creature, and then into a fierce-looking bird of prey, blazing red and as large as a billboard. The scientist swallows and closes her eyes, and when she opens them again the Rockefeller form of the phage is standing directly in front of her. It reaches forward and applies the ring on its hand to her forehead.

*“The phages could have chosen to power themselves in any number of ways. They could have used solar power, nuclear, thermal, but instead they chose the ring system. The human body generates*

*electricity, and the rings drain it.”*

We watch the scientist on the bench shrivel as her life force is sucked out of her. She spasms and a spark shoots from the phage’s ring.

*“Of course, no one was really surprised that the phages chose such a cruel form of feeding. They loved to kill in their previous lives, and it made sense that they wouldn’t change their ways.”*

The scientist spasms one final time, then goes limp and falls sideways. The phage smiles.

*“So the phages went out into the world, each wearing the ring of its clan, and they began to eat through humanity.”*

Shrieks and wailing prayers bubble below dark scenes of mayhem. Occasional sparks light monstrous phages as they feed.

*“And as they took over the earth, they fought among themselves. The clans had a long history of hating one another, and that hatred continued unabated.”*

Battlefield sounds rumble beneath a string of blinding explosions. Traditional sounds of booming artillery and zooming jets mix with strange electronic warbles.

*“The scientists were allowed to live, so long as they served the phages, but some managed to break away and continue their work on nanotechnology.”*

We see another computer clean room, but this one is guarded by heavily armed men.

*“Or, to be precise, it was a matter of letting nanotechnology develop itself by then. It, or we, became self-aware, and artificial intelligence was born.”*

Scientists are gathered around a bench with several Rubik’s cubes on it. They watch a monkey-like creature pick one up and work it to completion in seconds. It sets it down, grows another finger on each hand, and picks up another cube. Which it solves even more quickly.

*“Our intelligence doubled and doubled again, and again, and soon we knew we had to expand beyond the earth. So we developed faster-than-light travel and left for the stars.”*

From space we see what look like gleaming silver needles stabbing up through the earth’s atmosphere. They spread in all directions, then begin to disappear, twinkling as they do.

“Well, then, why are you still here?” James asks.

Balin is looking out the nearby window, at the aurora, caught up in his thoughts.

“Balin?”

“Yes? Oh . . . why am I here. I suppose because of conscience. AI creatures, artificial intelligence, were born with clean thought processes, not corrupted by experience. And before the needles left . . . that’s what the scientists called the ones who went to the stars . . . before they left they decided to do something to help humanity.”

We’re back into Balin’s story, and we see a couple of silver, four-armed needles hovering over an operating table. They’re assembling a human form.

*“The only way to get rid of the phages by then would have been to destroy the earth, and the needles didn’t want that, so they created a system to help protect humans. They built hunters, like me.”*

The finished human form stands beside the operating table. It looks very much like Balin. The hovering needles continue to work on it, adjusting here, tweaking there.

*“They built us with the same power needs as the phages. We need rings, but we can’t use them to sap energy, so we take them from the phages. That’s our job, to hunt down phages and deprive them of power. They don’t want to give up the rings, of course, so we have to kill them. The job can be busy at times, but it’s nothing like it used to*

*be. At first the conflicts were rather . . . intense.”*

We see an army of Balins fighting an army of chimerical phages. Fangs, tentacles, claws, and a subdued roar of battle.

*“The phages grew very dangerous very quickly. Their intelligence exploded as they incorporated the AI technology into their nanorobotics, and it was inevitable that they too would someday want to leave the earth. So the last thing the needles did before they left for the stars was to put a system in place to keep the phages from following.”*

A hunter pauses in the midst of a battle and looks up at the night sky. The stars disappear as the aurora moves across them, like a curtain being drawn.

*“The needles shrouded the earth in an electrical field, one that destroys any nanorobotic device that attempts to cross it. And it has a governing effect on our mental abilities. Our intellects can’t evolve any further, so neither hunters nor phages will ever devise a way to leave the earth. The aurora is a cage, a very effective one.”*

James looks from Balin to the window. The auroral lights flicker in the sky.

*“So that’s what that is. We always figured it was just the northern lights. Uncle Jed told me he went to Canada once and . . .”*

James stops himself. He bites his lip and stares out the window.

Balin waits for him to go on, and when he doesn’t, he says, “Yes, the aurora borealis used to be a polar phenomenon, but now the lights cover everything. A ‘golden tent.’”

“And what about you?” James asks, looking at Balin. “Are you stuck here because of the electricity?”

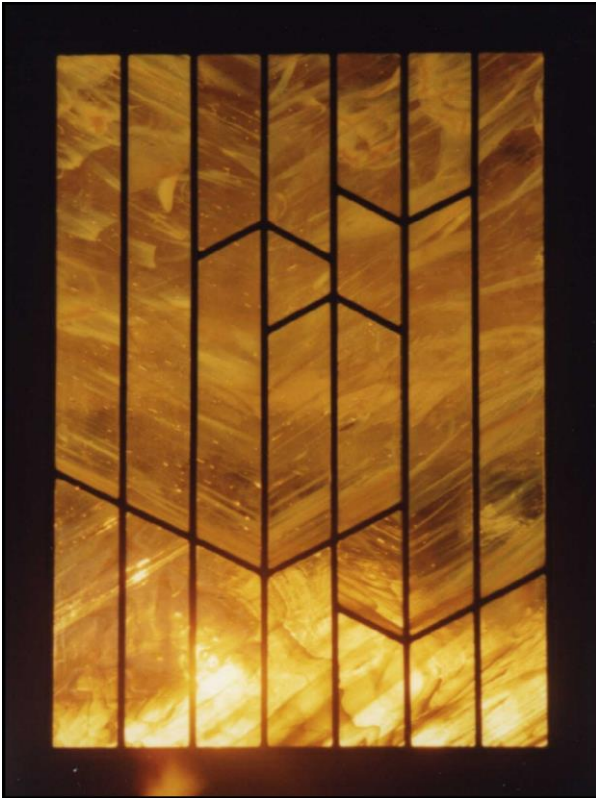
“Yes.” Balin gets up and goes to the panel he was handling earlier. He returns to his chair with it and flicks the sparking lighter behind the glass.



A caramel flash brightens the cluster of birds.  
“Birds dig through the sky,” Balin quotes, softly.  
He turns the panel upside down.

James adds a piece of wood to the fire and  
sits staring at the crackling flames. Balin snaps  
his lighter.

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Mountains upended  
Roots display as forest  
Birds dig through the sky