

# The Hunting Analyst

By Dante Harker

A banded wren signalled to his neighbour that the dawn was finally upon them.

That first call triggered a cacophony of ever-increasing enthusiasm that bounced around the forest.

And, as the sun's rays penetrated the dense canopy, the hunter's keen eyes swept over the scrub to the clearing in the hope of seeing his prey.

Moments earlier the beep of his phone's alarm had created nearly as much fuss in the forest as the banded wren.

The screech of his alarm had dragged him out of an uncomfortable sleep.

He really wished that he'd packed an airbed and ignored the disproving glances from the other shoppers at the out-of-town hunting outlet.

He was glad that he hadn't talked himself out of the easy-light camping stove as, with one click of the starter, bright flames burst into life.

The kettle sat neatly in the cradle on the top of the burner and as he waited for the water to boil he rubbed at his thigh in the hope of relieving the dull ache that crept around and into his lower back.

The pain didn't ease and after pulling back the green, plastic over-trousers, his actual trousers and his thermal layer he saw the dents the rocky ground had left in his thigh.

No wonder it hurt.

He rubbed again but to no avail; the edges of the dents had already started to turn mustard yellow.

He knew that by tomorrow they would be a rainbow, but one leading to a limp rather than a pot of gold.

'I want to hunt,' he remembered telling his work colleagues.

They had all laughed and told him to buy a sports car like every other forty-something-year-old caught in a midlife crisis.

The kettle hissed and bubbled water out of its spout.

There was no whistle, another concession to the judging eyes at the outlet.

The hunter liked the idea of a whistle: a clear indication that the water was ready.

Clear indicators were his thing and formed part of the jargon that went along with his business analyst job.

Four men in the last year had arrived at work in a shiny sports car.

They had used their time in life to justify the purchase and laughed self-satisfied laughs as they told tales of disapproving wives.

Wives who had moaned about mortgage payments, the damp course needing replacing or the unstable economy.

The men had held firm and they loved their new cars.

Of course, the economy is hard to ignore and mortgage payments don't pay themselves, so none of the sports cars were brand new.

The self-satisfied men played down the fact that none of them had the money for a new Ferrari or that two of them had actually sold the family car to make their purchase.

They just smiled at how wonderful their `vintage' soft top looked.

They blissfully ignored summer's drift into autumn and froze out thoughts of how much fun the car would be once the winter rains hit the leaking roof.

Being the fifth person at that particular party was not how the hunter wanted to enjoy his midlife crisis.

His wife was not one to stop moaning so doing anything that affected their finances was always going to be out of the question.

A career bound to his desk had left the hunter or rather, back then, the businessman, craving something different.

His crisis wasn't a sudden thing, he hadn't woken up one morning and decided that he must search out the nearest hunting supplies; this had been a gradual descent.

At the start of his descent, sensing that he might need money before he reached the bottom, the businessman had opened a midlife crisis bank account and, whenever he thought his wife wouldn't notice, he made a discreet deposit.

The first expenditure was on a selection of outdoors-y magazines.

He knew he wanted to do something out in the wilderness.

His first thoughts led him to mountain biking.

The bikes looked so cool and the riders in their matching outfits inspired a visit to a sports shop.

Sadly, though they made lycra cycling tops in double-XL, the image that looked back from the changing room mirror was less inspirational and more what a tennis ball would look like if forced into a sausage skin.

Mountain biking was out.

Hiking felt too sedate, fell running was a no go due to bad knees and laziness.

So that him led neatly to hunting.

Who would have known there was so much printed media dedicated to the art of hunting?

The businessman didn't know hunting was an art, not at first, but the magazines soon enlightened him.

They were filled with talk of graceful and artful hunters, silently making their way through the forests in search of prey.

Man against beast, and if the magazines were to be believed, man only won if he had the right clothing and equipment.

On a conscious level the businessman liked the idea of hunting because it evoked in him a sense of adventure and allowed him to dream of unlocking the rusty chains that bound him to his desk.

Plus, on a level just below where you have to admit it to yourself, he liked how portly many of the hunters appeared to be, no lycra vests here just chunky knits and a range of waterproof over garments.

At first his friends mocked him, even going so far as to buy him a mug that said 'world's greatest desk hunter'.

Everyone laughed even though the slogan made little sense.

But the businessman kept reading, he ignored his friends.

Who were they to judge?

They were not his peers, at least not his hunting peers.

As yet he had no hunting peers, not until the arrival of Bud.

After reaching his magazine saturation point and in search of something more tangible, the businessman took the next step and drove out to the hunting outlet on the edge of town.

There he met Bud, the proprietor; a snappy old man who knew only one way to hunt and that was Bud's way.

Bowing to the man's greater knowledge the businessman allowed Bud to transform him into a hunter.

On his first visit, at Bud's suggestion he had bought a hunting hat.

It seemed that every hunter needed a hat; forget about the weapon, clothes or camouflaging face paint - a hat was the start of the transformation.

Even though he was yet to go on his first hunt or own a weapon, from the moment he put on his red hunting hat he thought of himself as a hunter.

At Bud's suggestion he had gone for a fleece-lined beauty that, if the sales pitch be true, would keep his head warm while allowing it to sweat at the same time.

A new hunter was born and he didn't care if the hat had cost him a day's salary, he'd saved the money, though he told his wife the hat was a five pound bargain.

The hunter drove to work in his hat, from home to the parking lot and then home again.

During his time at work, no matter how many encouraging pep talks he gave himself, the hunter remained hat free.

At his failure to wear the hat around his work colleagues, the hunter was at least able to rationalise that perhaps all of his hunting garb should stay away from work; and that might reduce the urge to bring in a rifle on rough days.

Not that he owned a rifle.

Bud told him that before he got to the fun stuff he really had to decide what he wanted to kill.

This had come as a shock to the hunter who, through all of his adventures in hunter-ville, had given very little thought to the idea of actually killing something.

Well, he had known, of course, that killing was involved but he was yet to give his intended victim a name.

The names turned out to be plentiful, it turned out he had the option of legally killing a whole range of animals.

There were the animals you could kill en masse, assuming your shot was up to the task.

Ducks, pheasants and grouse were always popular if you liked to hunt birds.

Hares were also good if you wanted a bouncy challenge or had the need to kill something fluffy.

These required a shotgun, however, and after the bruised shoulder that came from an afternoon's clay pigeon shooting, the hunter decided that that wasn't for him.

Deciding that killing en masse wasn't his thing, the hunter then put some thought into the one or two animals per hunt category.

For example, you could hunt foxes if you knew the right people and weren't put off by protesters and the moral debate; all a little too much effort for the Hunter.

So if small birds, bouncing mammals and pompous pursuits were out then he was really only left with one challenge: the one that had been staring him in the face all along.

On the wall of the outlet shop hung a poster of a glorious red stag with the tag lag line, 'if you're man enough to meet the challenge, you'll need the Deer Hunter.'

The Deer Hunter was a compound bow.

A silent hunting bow that would have made Robin Hood wet his pants in excitement if one had landed in his lap.

The Deer Hunter was perfect, with the help of carbon fibre it was light and strong, and ingenious pulleys made it easy for even the flabbiest arms to use.

But best of all, it was super cool.

Especially as it came with a free hunting jacket the same colour as the hunter's hat.

When he'd told everyone he was going hunting alone, just him and his bow, they had thought him insane.

Even more so when he explained he would camp the night and wake up fresh, ready to go, man against beast.

He had practiced at the shooting range which had a section for bows.

He had tried practicing at the local park but only just escaped with a police caution.

The yellow around the dents in his thigh were being joined by flecks of purple.

By tomorrow he would limp and his leg would look like rotten beetroot.

The kettle held just enough water for a second cup of coffee.

The hunter watched the steam drift up from the hot brew and he wondered at what time he could legitimately call it a day.

This wasn't the first time he had taken an idea too far, though this was the first time the idea had been stupid enough to sleep in the woods alone and without an airbag.

So many times yesterday he had nearly shied off.

He desperately wanted to tell his work colleagues and perpetually unsupportive wife that he couldn't go.

Yet none of his reasons sounded good enough for that time or would save him from future escapades.

The hunter looked at the equipment in front of him, most of it still packed away.

The waste of money, the bragging, the need to be different had all come to this: a bad night of sleep, a bruised thigh and camp fire coffee.

Still, he could spend the day playing the hunting games he'd downloaded onto his mobile phone.

And there was the deer carcass in his carboot.

The internet was an amazing thing, with a bit of research you can buy anything.

Once he'd driven past work, he could drop it off at the local butcher and they'd be having venison for dinner.

The hunter smiled at his madness and, as he clicked play on the first of his games, a banded wren chirped along in time with the tinny music.

---