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Opening extract from

The Hunted

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His teeth sank into the boy's neck and he felt a warm spurt of blood fill his mouth. A deep calm came over him. The chattering in his head fell silent. The fidgeting and twitching in his arms and legs stopped. The deep itch dulled. He felt like he was plugged into the universe, or as as if the universe was plugged into him. As he drank, he looked up at the stars. They seemed to spell out a message for him, if only he could read it. He squinted and strained, his brain throbbing in his hot head. What were they trying to tell him? No good. No good. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the blood. It tasted like life, clearing out all the poison inside him, cleaning his tubes and guts, lighting up a million stars within his brain. He shuddered with pleasure.

The boy was still moving, feebly trying to break away from his grip, but St George was holding him tight. When he'd drunk his fill, he'd give him to the others. They were sitting in a circle around him, waiting. The closest were the ones who'd been with him from the start. His lieutenants. And behind them, in circle after circle, the others, spreading out, filling the park. Sitting there, quietly waiting, their faces lit by moonlight. And out past them, all around, working their way through the city streets . . . his

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army was hunting. Maybe that's what the stars were showing him. The sky was a map and each star was one of his people. He was at the centre, the brightest star of all. And they were all connected, in a circle of light, so that he was out there hunting with his people, and they were feeding with him now.

They'd only found this one child so far tonight, but there would be more. Each night it took longer as they emptied the nearby streets, and had to search further and wider.

He was always the first to feed. Sometimes only drinking the blood, sometimes tearing off the flesh. The blood was the best part. The blood was electricity, driving his brain and body, blowing away the darkness and the fog. And with the blood came the memories. Flooding into his thoughts. His life up there in the stars, and in the jungle, travelling across the sea, searching for a new home and finding it inside this body.

This body.

This man.

Greg . . . Greg Thorne. Of Greg's Organic Gaff.

Meat is life.

He was Greg. He had to hold on to the memory. It was like waking from a beautiful dream and feeling it slip away from you. He'd been a butcher. With a son. A boy. His own boy. *What was his name . . .?*

His boy?

No good. Not coming.

He was Greg, though. He remembered that. He'd worked with animals. Cutting them up, chopping through the fat and the muscle, the tendons, skinning and deboning. *Eviscerating*. Yes, he remembered it well. Pictured the

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carcasses hanging from the hooks in the cold store at the back of his shop. Cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, children. Animals and children . . . Was that right? Had he always butchered children? Or had life been different then? That was the problem with the blood. For a few brief moments everything would be clear, lit up, written in the stars. He could read the messages. And then the clouds would come down, the mist and fog and shadows, and he would be so bloody hungry and the rage would take him. There could never be enough children to feed his hunger.

Already the images were fading. He'd known his name. He'd remembered a place. Knives and hooks and skin . . .

Cold. A cold place.

His head ached with the thinking. What was he to do?

He loosened his bite and looked down at the boy in his arms. The boy looked back at him. His eyes were sad. Blinking. His body trembled. Like a little bird. A chicken before you break its neck.

'Liam?'

Greg smiled at him.

'We should get home,' he said. 'Or we'll miss the game. The Arsenal are playing.'

He closed his eyes. He could hear the cheering. The hard, tight thud of boot on ball. The half-time whistle . . .

His team was going to win. It was an away game next. They would have to travel. Meet the opposition. He was captain. He was general. He was king. He was a saint. St George and he would slay the dragon.

First he needed his army. He had to wait. There were more of them coming, more of the others, more glinting stars, a universe of them, all moving towards him. He could hear them out there, calling to him, telling him to

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wait. From everywhere they came, and when they'd all arrived, when he was strong enough, when he was unstoppable, he would move on.

Move on to where *they* were. The enemy. The fast ones. The young ones. They had to be herded up like sheep, penned in like chickens. And when they were ready they would take his sickness from him; the host would move on and live inside them.

He felt the boy struggle and he opened his eyes.

Until the time was ready, they were just like this boy. Just meat.

He snapped his neck and threw him to the others, who leapt up and tore into him.

The boy was nothing, but there were others who were dangerous, and those they had to kill. The shining ones. The ones who wouldn't take the sickness, the ones whose blood was strong. And, strongest of all, the bright little one, the little twinkling star. Twinkle, twinkle . . .

He had the power of light, that one did. He was made of light. He had to be destroyed. And all the others like him. Not as powerful as him, but dangerous all the same.

The stars had told St George this.

That was their true message.

He knew what he had to do.

To make the ripest children ready to take the host.

To kill the rest.

To kill the bright little star.

He'd seen him that time. At the Arsenal. The stars hadn't given him his orders then, though. He'd let him slip away. If only he'd known the small boy was a nasty little dragon.

It wouldn't happen again. He was St George and he

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would slay the dragon. That's how it worked, wasn't it? He knew the story. He was a hero, a patron saint. He was England. This country was his. His people were marching towards him from all corners. He would take his throne.

But first he had to destroy the dragon.

He would butcher him like a piece of meat; a long pig, that's all he was: cutlets, chops, ribs and chitterlings. He would make sausages out of him, ha, because in the end he was nothing more than a side of beef . . .

No, smaller than that.

He was just a lamb.

A leg of lamb.

Yes.

He would slaughter the lamb.

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