



The Mourner

By wwwolf

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So, a quick heads up and a bit of a warning to any readers who dare to venture this far. This is the final book in *The Hunters* series. If you haven't read the previous books I highly recommend you do.

For those of you who have stuck with me this long, thank-you. I mean it. This book is effectively a full length epilogue to the series. The main thrust of the story ended with *The Prodigions*, but this gives us closure. Well, a form of closure.

To those who want the series to have a happy, upbeat, fairytale ending, I can't stress enough: stop reading now. *The Mourner* is aptly named.

For those of you who are brave enough to continue on, I hope you enjoy and I hope this is a fitting send off to my first and most enduring cast of characters. May you all find what it is you've been hunting for.

Chapter 1: The Lion In Winter



And with that the great mayor Thomas James Taggert brought together the warring fractions of V-town to form a single cohesive government. It was a titan's task, one that not a single of us could ever achieve, but *he* did. It was through his action, and his action alone, that V-town is still here today.”

It was finally with that the prof paused to take a glance down at his notes. Gods, this was as bad as when I was back in collage... no, worse. This old man, a dog of some breed, was quite possibility the only person I've ever met in my life who could talk not only while breathing out, but also in.

And I've spent the last gods know how many years dealing with politicians.

Politicians!

I'd just about been able to convince myself that the bugger was done talking when he started up again.

He'd already been at it for over forty minutes. At this rate there wasn't going to be any time left at the end of the period for *me* to talk.

Perhaps I should just count my blessings.

I was sitting up on a spacious stage in one of the nicest halls of V-town University. I was supposed to be here to give a lecture about the structure of the government and the history of the city. I was one of the few people in the city in a position to actually be able to talk about such things, having a degree in history and being a former mayor, but I was getting a feeling I wasn't so much as going to get a word in edgewise here.

I wouldn't have minded so much but the dog just wouldn't stop talking about *me*.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not that shy. You have to get used to this kind of stuff once you've been mayor. Or a top bounty hunter. Or a governmental figurehead, which is all I am now. People like to have someone to worship, and I seem to have gotten myself up stuck up on that pedestal.

What I couldn't stand was what the dog was going on about. I was sitting just behind where the

man stood at his podium, lecturing out over the heads of what had to be a good three-hundred students.

Don't get me wrong, I've noting against a little embellishment here and there, but I do have a bit of a problem with outright lies.

"...it was Thomas James Taggart that restored order after the race riots. He and his party had just returned from their quest to the source of the Cataclysm. Returning to V-town, they took the reins of power form the weakened police department and reformed the government. Mr. Taggart directed all the new government's policies and he alone reformed the scattered and abhorrent laws of the previous administration into the solid groundwork for what we have today. He was the one to singlehandedly save the human population of V-town."

I could feel a growl tickling at the back of my throat. Trying to keep my fur lying flat, I looked out into the crowd before me. With the spotlights shining down I could hardly make out their faces, but from what I could see they were lapping this up, believing every word.

"... and it was Thomas James Taggart that discovered the plots of Brian Ferguson to unbalance the government of V-town," the dog continued. "He was the one to..."

That was when I stood up.

I like to think of myself as a pretty calm guy. Like I said, I've dealt with politicians, but even I have my limits.

"Thanks, Prof," I growled out between clenched teeth as I stepped up to the podium, pressing the other man aside. The dog didn't want to step down, but I've got years of experience bounty hunting. I know how to make someone move.

I didn't give the dog a chance to wheeze out another word as I took over the spotlight. There was no microphone here. The only way to get a message out to all the hungry young faces watching me was to practically yell at the top of my lungs.

Gods but I hate public speaking. I just wish I hadn't so much experience at it.

"Morning, folks," I said, pulling a grin to my lips. I'd learned long ago to dispense with any formality. It just didn't work for me. I'm not exactly *folksy* but it helps if I speak as I truly am. "I'll try to keep this short. Your prof already ate up most of our time and I'm sure most of you aren't exactly looking forward to hearing an old wolf like me natter on for the rest of the day."

There were a couple of polite chuckles. From the back of the room someone shouted 'Speech, speech!'

I could hear the dog behind me 'hurmpth' as he sent out a withering glare.

"First thing I want to say, folks," I continued, falling into my overly practiced speech voice, "Is that you can completely ignore everything your prof just said." For just a second the room was dead silent, then a cheer rang out. "Yeah, don't quote me on your test, but everything he said was wrong. Sorry, man," I said, glancing back at the man with a shrug. "It's true."

"Anyway," I continued, "It's wrong for a single reason. The past he told you, and the past other folks told him, is too neat, too clean." I let out a long breath. "He says I journeyed to Edmonton to find the source of the Cataclysm. That much is true. But I went with Rebecca, English, and Jon. If I'd gone alone I wouldn't have made it any farther than Squamish. He says I returned and rebuild V-town. Well... I returned. It wasn't *me* that rebuild V-town. It was *us*. Well, not perhaps you guys, you likely weren't born yet. It was all of us who were left in the city. Me, my friends, the police, every single man and woman in the city. We all worked together during the reconstruction to pull things back from the brink. Sure I was in the middle of it, but I wasn't the only one working. I don't deserve any more credit than the rest of the people involved. Bugger, you want someone to put on a pedestal? Try Commissioner Sayer. Without him V-town would be nothing more than rubble."

Narrowing my eyes, I tried to peer out once again into the dark crowd that sat before me. The spotlight trained upon the podium made it hard to see anything beyond my nose. It was only by raising

a hand to shade my brow that I could cut through the bright yellow light. I knew it looked bad. No professional speaker would ever do something like that.

A smile touched my lips when I made out a familiar form sitting in the front row. Unlike many of the other students he wasn't hunched over a book taking notes.

I winked at Ging.

My son smiled and winked back.

"You need to remember folks," I continued, picking back up and looking out over the audience again, "That anything of this magnitude doesn't just happen due to a single person. Sure the right guy in the wrong place can make all the difference, we've all seen that, but that's not the way things like the rebuilding works. It takes hundreds, thousands, of people pulling together in the same direction to make it happen. Sure there has to be *someone* at the top to get everyone going the in same way, but they're only a focal point, not the source of the energy. Anyone who tries to tell you that a *single* man is responsible, a *great man* they used to call it back in my day, is trying to sell you something. We all have to work together."

I let out a long sigh and leaned forward on the podium.

"That's what you need to be careful about, folks. I've seen it. That was one of the many problems that got the city in the way it was before. People thinking – and people being encouraged to think – that a single person can be *all that*. That's not a healthy way to operate. I'm not a a god." I paused a chuckled. Thankfully, there was some light laughter from the crowd to go along with it. "I may have not done a half bad job at what I turned my hand to, but that was more by sheer chance than anything else. Even when there is a single person who's driving a major project, it's not a good thing to have."

I thought back to Sayer and shivered. If we hadn't had Jon to step in and take over the police force when the old dog died we'd have been in a bummer of a sorry spot. And none of us had actually been all that sure Jon was going to be able to do the job back then.

"Anyway, folks," I said, forcing my ears up and a smile to my lips, "I'd best keep this short. You've all heard me speak before and I'm sure I'm just as boring as your prof." I took my hands off the podium and stepped back. Here was the best part about not needing a microphone, I could get in a parting shot. "Just remember to vote in the next election, eh? We need voters, and more than that educated voters. And you," I grinned, "Are for better or worse the best we've got."

I'd gotten my time good. I was just sitting down and the prof was clearing his throat when the class bell rang.

Heh. It's been a long time since I'd attended school, but I've *never* seen a lecture hall clear out this fast. In no more than sixty seconds there were only three people left in the room. Me, the prof, and Ging.

Stepping down from the stage, I was happy to note that someone had turned on the overhead lights. I could see where I was walking now.

Ging was still sitting in his seat at the front of the hall. He had a textbook open before him and was reading away. If I didn't miss my mark, I'm pretty sure he'd been reading it the entire class. How he'd managed with the light so low I hadn't a clue.

It wasn't as though he'd really needed to pay close attention as his dad lectured. He'd already heard every tale I had to tell long ago. I'd used them as bedtime stories when he and Liz had been young.

"So how'd I do?" I asked, slipping into a desk next to him. I was pleased to note I still fit.

He carefully dog-eared a page in his book and slipped it into his bag before looking up.

"Not bad, Dad, but I've heard you do better. You really aren't that good at ad-libbing. I'm not

sure why you always insist on going up without a script.”

Ging had grown into a young man almost without me noticing. He was a wolf like me, with a rich brown coat that matched his mother's hair. But unlike me he didn't have a white patch on his belly. The only cream fur he had was just under his muzzle.

Ging was an intellectual, even more than I, but there was something in his voice that reminded me of my father. The boy had spend too much time around his great uncle Gowan, alpha of the hunters. His voice was deeper than one would expect. It carried a calm, smoky quality.

“Well I thought he did fine. It's not often he gets a chance to speak to his own son's class.”

I glanced up and smiled. I'd recognize that new voice anywhere.

“Hey, Babe,” I said, reaching out a hand. A moment later I had Rebecca snug against me. I reached out to kiss her on the forehead. “I thought you were still out exploring that campus.”

She rolled her eyes. “It's not that big, Wolfy. It only took a half hour to walk all the way around it. I got back just before you started talking.” She grinned and reached up to tickle my nose. “At least you're better at public speaking than you used to be. Do you remember when you were courting the vote for your first election?”

I sneezed.

“Yeah, Babe. That was back when I was still searching for the human vote.”

Rebecca herself was human. One of the few in V-town. The Cataclysm a hundred odd years ago had wiped out most of the humans, replacing them with wolves, cats, and all forms of mythological creatures.

And then the purges instigated by the previous administration hadn't helped much either...

“Shall we, Babe?” I asked as I took her arm. She smiled and leaned into my side.

From behind us I heard a grown.

I rolled my eyes. I could hear Ging get to his feet and stuff the last of his things in his book bag. He had about the same reaction to watching his parents cuddle as I had when I was his age.

Too bad. I was old now and I could afford to put him through a little bit of embarrassment.

“So what do you have now, dear?” Rebecca asked as we made our way towards the lecture hall door.

He didn't even have to pause to think. “Law class,” he said. “This was history. Next I have my law class over in the Sayer building.”

I ground my teeth slightly. I wasn't sure who'd decided to name one of the new university building after the late police commissioner, but I wasn't a huge fan of it.

Don't get me wrong, Sayer had been a smart man, dangerously smart, he'd been the one to force me into becoming mayor, but naming a place of higher learning after him just didn't strike me as the greatest idea.

I let out a sigh. “That's way on the other side of the university, isn't it?” I asked. Ging nodded. “Well, I guess that means we won't have any time to catch up them. You'll need to hoof it if you want to make it there in time.”

He grinned. That was something Ging had inherited from me. He might be a wolf, but yet there was still somehow one of his grins looked friendly. Not many wolves could pull off showing their teeth in a friendly manner.

“Yeah, I guess I'd better get going.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “I'm sure you're so sad to leave your embarrassing parents behind.”

He was long used to the teasing. Throwing his book bag over his shoulder, he reached forward to give Rebecca a hug, right out here in the middle of the university courtyard.

“Love you, Mom. I'll see you this weekend?” he said, his face buried in her hair.

She wrapped her arms around him like only a mother can. “You'd better.”

A moment later they were done. He stood there, looking at me.

“Well, see you latter, Dad...” he said.

I lunged forward and caught him in a tackle hug. No a single one of the hundreds of people milling about around us even raised an eyebrow.

Ging was too big to lift off the ground now like when he was a pup, but I still held him tight.

“See you soon, son.” I had to crack a smile. The left was left unsaid.

I could feel him press his face against my shoulder.

“I know, Dad. I'll try to live up to the example you set, even if it's not all that true,” he whispered.

A moment later Ging was gone. He'd melted into the the milling crowd of a hundred different species that flowed through the university.

Walking hand in hand with Rebecca, we crossed the courtyard and climbed the steps to a smaller building on the outskirts of the campus.

I'd noticed a piece of paper when we'd arrived here this morning. It had all the different lectures listed. There was one name I'd recognized.

I could hear his voice as we walked down the polished wooden floor of the hallway. And that in itself was odd. The man I knew would never run late.

Poking my nose around the open doorway, I could see why he was still talking.

My lecture hall had been fairly full, but this one was packed – standing room only. The center of attention was a single dog on stage, dressed in a dark blue uniform. Like me, he had no need for a microphone when he spoke.

Jon was answering questions being posed to him from the audience. Half of those in the room were civilians, the other half looked to be police cadets.

“Sir,” someone said, who looked to be a police dog in training, “Is it true that ten years ago the police force was completely staffed by canines, particularly those of a German Sheppard line?”

A frown pulled at Jon's lips when he responded. He himself was a Sheppard.

“Yes, that is correct.” he said. His voice still had the perfect, razor sharp diction of a formal police officer. “I can not speak exactly as to why that was, but it was the decision of my predecessors to closely limit the intake of the V-town police force to a few specific families. I am happy to say that is no longer the case. The force is still *prominently* of those lines, but we are slowly diversifying to include a greater cross-section of the city's population.”

Creeping our way into the room, Rebecca and I took spots against the back wall. It was the only place with room for us.

I grinned as I watched Jon. We were all getting older now, but he hardly seemed to change. Pushing forty-five, the dog looked as pressed and perfect as the day I'd met him, perhaps better.

Definitely better when I think back to the getup he'd been wearing when he'd gone undercover back then.

Jon was the picture-perfect image of a police officer. I can say that for a fact as I know he's been used as a model for no small number of reconstituting posters. Still in super-human condition, the only concession he'd made to his slowly advancing age was a pair of thin, wire frame glasses that perched atop his mussel.

To be honest, I wasn't sure if he needed them or if they were just there to make him look dapper. The gods knew he didn't need any help with *that*.

We waited for a couple of minutes as the questions went on. For not the first time I wondered if Jon would have made a better mayor then me. I was just a wolf. The moment I stepped down from the

podium I was just another canine. Jon, he was the Police Commissioner. He looked, acted, and sounded like the Police Commissioner every moment of every day. You could strip him of his uniform and cover him in mud and he'd still be in charge.

Bugger, you could turn him into a human and he'd still be in charge. I'd seen *that*.

At long last one of the TAs had to step up to the stage and call a close to the lecture. They'd already run out of time a while ago and people were going to need this space soon.

To say it was a little different than my own speech would be an understatement.

At long last the seats were clear and it was only the three of us left in the hall, Jon, Rebecca, and I. Jon was bent over a briefcase, filing away his paperwork.

It was only then I noticed that he didn't have any of his attendant police dogs. That was something that just didn't happen. The force was obsessive about protecting their Commissioner. If he didn't have a guard or two he always at least had an aid standing at his shoulder.

The hall was empty and quiet enough I could hear my claws click on the floor as I walked up to the stage.

"Hey, Jon," I said as I walked up the steps. "I wasn't expecting to see you here today."

He flicked an ear in acknowledgment as he snapped the briefcase shut. A moment later he straightened and turned to me.

"Tommy." For just a moment the perfect neutral face of a V-town police dog looked back at me before it split in, what was for him, a wide smile. "I'm here every other week as part of the new justice course."

Rebecca was behind me a moment later. "When did that start?" she asked.

Jon shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. It was one of Pine's initiatives since I promoted him to head of public outreach."

I grinned. I remember Pine, he'd been my personal *atache* after Jon has taken over the police force. He'd stayed that way during my entire run as mayor. The dog had even stayed with me for a number of years after I'd stepped down. It had only been a couple of seasons ago I'd finally convinced the man my workload was light enough today that I didn't need him full-time.

Jon had been more than happy to have Pine's experience available to him again.

"Looks like you're popular," I said as we turned to walk back outside.

He shrugged. "It would appear. But you must remember that the justice course is one of the most popular at the moment, and attendance to the Force's lectures is mandatory. People's interest in building a respectable society in many cases stems to their new found knowledge of exactly what can happen when they let their vigilance slip for even a moment. I think it safe to say that none of us want a return to the time before the rebuilding."

I shook my head as we stepped out into the fresh air. That was something we could *all* agree on.

We were little more than a dozen paces down the graveled path that stretched across patchy grass when a shadow fell in front of me. Looking up, I recognized the the dog that stood in the middle of the path, his arms crossed. It was the prof who'd been giving the dry, endless introduction to my speech.

"Mr. Taggert." He gave me a disapproving glare. Most of the people I've encountered have a different tone of voice they used when they're giving a dry lecture as opposed to when they're speaking normally. This guy didn't.

"What can I do for you, Professor..." I had to rack my brain for a moment, "Inman?"

He let out a 'hrumph' and leveled me with a fresh glare.

I'd hate to have to tell him this, but his glare was strictly second rate. I'm sure it's more than sufficient for when he's cowering students, but I'm not a student any more. And I've been in enough

life or death situations that a simple look of disproveal doesn't mean much to me anymore.

"You're speech back in the hall was most... unprofessional," he said.

I cocked my head.

"Okay, I'm sorry for interrupting you back there," I said, trying to step around him, "But we were running out of time in the period."

He shifted to block my way again.

"That is not what I'm referring to, Mr. Taggert," he replied. "You were most unprofessional. You directly contradicted much of what I said in my lecture. If the students make us of the... information you provided them they will likely fail their exams."

I stopped trying to get around him and turned to look at the man. He was dressed in a conservative grey suit. It wasn't as good as the one's Smith used to make, but it was decent enough. He must be making a pretty good salary for a university professor.

I leveled him with a glare in return. "What were you expecting me to do? *You* were the one who asked Ging to get me to come in and talk. *You* were the one who make errors during your lecture."

Canines like us can't blush or go red, our fur prevents that, but I could see from the set of the man's ears and tail he was *not* happy.

"Mr. Taggert," he said between clenched teeth, "I can assure you *I* did not make any mistakes in my lecture. May I remind you that I am the university's premier expert in the modern history of V-town and it's government? I've spent over a decade of my life researching."

The prof looked like was about ready to snap at me. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

"You're the expert?" I asked, glancing back at Rebecca and Jon. "Do you even know who you're talking to? *We're* the people who lived through it. I'm the one you were talking about for the gods' sakes!"

The 'hurphed' again and for just a moment lowered his eyes.

"That's not withstanding. I've done more research than anyone else." Reaching out, I set a hand on the man's shoulder. He shrugged it off. "It doesn't matter what you *did* Mr. Taggert," he said. "What matters is what history records."

I narrowed my eyes.

"That sounds like something the previous administration would have said." It took every ounce of willpower I had to get the words out without a growl.

A moment later the bell rang for the next period. The prof turned and walked away without another word. I couldn't help but wonder what stories he was going to tell his students now.

Out of the university district, we walked the relatively short distance to a very familiar upscale part of town. None of us lived here, but we all knew these roads by heart.

A particular restaurant was located here, and we'd dinned there more times than we could remember.

"Mate!"

We'd hardly gotten so much as within the wrought iron gates of Cafe Bristol before the voice boomed out. It wasn't as loud as it had been in the past, but there was still more than enough force behind it to shove all other conversation aside.

I smiled as we stepped up to our customary table.

"English," I said.

The lion was sitting in his normal place, in front of an endless platter of food. Like the rest of us he was older than we'd been twenty years ago. Unlike the rest of us though he was well into his sixties or beyond – No one was quite sure. I think he'd stopped bothering to count his age some time ago.

I had the rare strand of grey fur here and there, and Jon had his reading glasses. English was well beyond that. His coat had been a perfect gold as long as I'd know him, now it was shot through with silver, especially on his face.

"Lass, Dog," he said, nodding to Rebecca and Jon. "How goes it this fine day?"

I took a seat across from his at the table, picking off some meat. Rebecca and Jon joined me.

We didn't really need to talk. The four of us spent so much time together, meeting practically every day, that words didn't mean much anymore.

I glanced up at the lion. He was wavering back and forth slightly, a large hand was resting on the table to still him.

"You alright, buddy?" I asked. "You look a ill."

He waved a hand at me and snorted. "Don't mind me, Mate. I've been feeling a bit off since I got up this morning. I think I must have pulled something last night with the shella. At my age you have to be a bit more careful to get a proper warm up before exercise, eh?"

I was just about to roll my eyes when something went very, very wrong.

The wavering that had taken English stopped suddenly. He was still as stone.

I never did figure out exactly what he was starting to say, but his voice suddenly slurred.

The lion raised his face to look me in the eyes. There was something there I hadn't seen in a long, long time.

I saw fear.

A moment later one of his golden eyes dilated. One eyes was wide and black while the other was nothing but a pinprick.

I never figured out what it was I said either. The words died on my lips.

All the sounds around us died away. All that I heard was the sound of a single chair sliding back over the rough concrete beneath us.

A moment later Jon was beside English. The lion didn't even seem to realize he was there.

I'd never heard Jon swear before.

No more than thirty seconds later all of Cafe Bristol was overrun with police dogs. Where they'd all come from I hadn't the slightest. They formed a protective shell around Jon and I until Jon snapped at them and directed them at English.

A moment later they had the lion's still huge body hefted into the air and were running full tilt down the road. I knew what lay that way, V-town General Hospital.

Looking across the suddenly empty table, I looked at Rebecca. She looked as frightened as I felt.

A heartbeat later we were both on our feet and chasing after the lion and dogs.