



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 2: A Young, Foolish, Wolf



We'd gotten to the hospital just over four hours ago.

I wasn't used to this. Every other time something like this had happened it had almost always been *me* under the knife. I was used to being on one on the cusp of death, not English.

I would rather it was I in there. Wherever *there* was.

The last I'd seen of English was around lunch time. Now it was almost five in the evening. I knew every square inch of this waiting room inside and out, upside down, and backwards.

When the doctor came into to talk to us I just about cried in joy that *something* was happening. Though after a moment I decided I'd best wait to hear what the news was before I began smiling.

The doctor was a rabbit, quick and nervous. His jittery motions weren't helping me any.

"Mr. Taggart?" he asked.

I stood up. Rebecca and Jon stayed where they were.

"Yes," I said.

The doc nodded and glanced down at a paper in his hands. "Mr. Jones doesn't appear to have any next of kin in the city. His living will states that you are to take control of his assets."

I swallowed hard.

"Living will?"

He nodded. There was something in the man's voice, in his motions. He wasn't enjoying what he was doing but at the same time I could tell he'd done this dozens of times before.

"That's correct, Mr. Taggart. Your friend has just experienced a major stroke."

And the world stopped.

There was no sound, no motion. The world simply ceased to be.

English? Stroke?

"Is... is he okay?" I asked, forcing out the words.

The doc didn't even flinch. "It was a major disruption of blood. That is why we are enacting his living will." He paused for a long moment. "I don't believe it will be long before he dies."

It was two in the morning now.

The hospital staff hadn't exactly wanted us in here so soon, but we'd given them little choice. There isn't much they can do to keep out the former mayor and the current Police Commissioner when we want in.

I hadn't quite been sure what to expect when we'd stepped into English's room. What we'd gotten wasn't much.

English was laying on a too-small hospital bed in a private room. No real surprise there, every bed in this place was too small for his bulk.

He'd been sleeping, eyes closed. When we'd first entered I couldn't have even told you there was anything wrong. Everything was calm and peaceful.

And that, in the end, was what had tipped me off.

English hadn't exactly had an easy life. I'd spent enough time with the man to know he *always* slept with one eye open and both ears twitching.

We'd walked in and he hadn't so much as flinched. That wasn't the English I knew.

"Will he... will he wake up?" I'd asked the nurse. She'd just shrugged and said something noncommittal.

At first all three of us had clustered around the bed. The room suddenly felt small with so many bodies in here.

Then Jon had been called off by some police work. He'd promised to be back.

Then Rebecca had to leave. She had to meet with Ging and Liz, tell them what happened. English was like an uncle to them.

We'd hugged. Rebecca said she'd be back soon.

And I was here all alone.

I flicked on the room light when the sun went down. I just couldn't stand the darkness.

Dragging up a chair next to English, I sat at his bedside, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Not even his tail twitched. If not for his breathing I would have thought him already dead.

"Don't leave me, buddy. I need you." The words hardly make it past my lips. They were little more than a whisper.

From the hallway behind me I could hear the day-to-day sounds of the hospital going on as it always does.

I'm not sure when, but at some point I'd fallen asleep. When I next woke up my head was laying on my arms as I slumped against the side of English's bed.

A moment later I realized what had woke me.

"Such a young, foolish, wolf." I could hardly make out the words over the sound of air moving in the room, but they were there.

In no more than a heartbeat I was awake.

"English! Can you hear me? Are you okay?" My own voice was barely any stronger than his. I was afraid that if I spoke too loudly the moment might shatter and he'd be gone again.

"Such a young, foolish, wolf," he repeated. His voice was stronger now, if only by the slightest measure. A moment later his great golden eyes opened a crack. He was still with me, if only held by the thinnest of threads.

"What have I told you about waiting at a hospital, Mate?" he asked, his voice slurred. "Crying at a partner's bedside doesn't do anyone any good. You should be out stuffing yourself on venison and chocolate. Sitting in here and crying is just getting both of us down."

The shadow of a smile touched by face, no matter how hard I tried to fight it back.

"I know, buddy, I know."

A moment later one of his hands began to tremble. It only just barely rose into the air, but it was far enough to grab my arm.

"Thank you for everything, Tommy. Thank you... brother."

I looked at him. I was just about to ask him what he'd said when he appeared to gain a touch more strength. His voice rose a hair and his eyes opened wider.

And he began to speak.

"Gods, Tommy, do you remember just how long ago it was we first met? It's been decades but I still remember the day. Funny that. It wasn't anything special at the time, it was just another Tuesday."

"I still remember that hunt. Huston and I were chasing down a human. That was back when they still made up most of the docket – though we didn't know why yet. We were chasing him down the street, another runner, when he turned and socked Huston flat on the nose."

"That tiger was a piece of work. I'd been keeping an eye on him for the better part of a year before I brought him on as my partner. The kid was a killer, vicious and mean. But there was something more to it. He was in it for more than it looked. I was never able to fully understand it, but he was in the business for the money. He made a point of making it look like something else, but he was there for the payday and nothing more."

"And that was the problem. I'd been watching Huston for a year and teamed up with him three months before. He was just about everything I wanted in a partner. Strong, fast. A little trouble with following orders but he knew he'd make more money by doing what I told him. And every day I watched him fall further and further into Vanderhoom's pocket."

"Huston wanted money. He knew I was his meal ticket, but he also knew that Vanderhoom was his multiplier. I could make him money today, the lizard could make him money tomorrow. It didn't matter what I did, every day the kid became less of my partner and more of Vanderhoom's property."

A sound worked its way up from the lion's lips. At some point it might have been a laugh, but by the time it reached my ears it was nothing of the sort.

"By the time I met you, Tommy, I was already well on my way to looking for a new partner. Not that Huston knew – he didn't take it well when he got the news. When I saw you, Mate... well, it wasn't exactly love at first sight."

"My first thought when I saw you, Tommy, was that Strom Front was going to have another lawsuit on its hands. I saw you laying spread out on the ground clutching your nose and spurting blood all over the concrete. I was expecting to have to turn back and bribe you with a few bills to keep you from coming after us."

"That might have been the first of my mistakes. I was thinking about you instead of the hunt like I should have been. When I caught my quarry he'd found a weapon, some scrap metal. He reminded me why I should keep my mind in the here and now as quick as you please."

"Then you were there again. You were the last thing I was expecting to pass my way after I saw you laid out. You walked past us, hardly a speck of blood on you. I almost thought you had a twin brother."

"That, Tommy, was when I had a stroke of genius. Or at least I thought I did."

"It was obvious you had regeneration – the best I'd ever seen – and you were young. You were perfect."

"You know most of the story from there on out. I'll admit it didn't go quite the way I expected." His lips pulled up ever so slightly to form a lopsided smile. Only one half of his face was moving.

"My plan, Mate, was to treat you like my own little mushroom garden. Keep you in the dark

and feed you dung as they say. I didn't do too badly at first. But you were a fast learner.”

“Though I will admit I did get a bit of a surprise when I heard you were the son of the great hunter Griss. I won't admit the memory of getting him to join Storm Front didn't pass my mind. Griss and Gowan are the best fighters I've seen in my very long, very experienced life. It had still cut me to the quick when they'd refused to join Storm Front so many years ago. The thought of you, the scion to the Taggart house, under my sway didn't hurt much.”

“For just a couple of days I thought I was back on top of the world. Gods, Tommy, I was so shortsighted then. I knew Storm Front was no longer mine. I *knew* there was something wrong. A lot of things, but I didn't care. I had my hunts, I had my money. I didn't worry about anything other than making it from day to day. For that I needed a contract, a partner, and someone to give me a cheque. Now I had all three. The fact the Vanderhoom was pulling strings, catching me in a cat's cradle, didn't even cross my mind. I doubt I would have cared much if I'd ever even bothered to open my eyes.”

“You never saw the conversation when I told Huston to bugger off. He came to my office one night, storming up to my office door like he owned the place. He was still young and dumb, he likely thought he did.”

“The stupid cat slammed his fist down on my desk and demanded to know what I'd done. He just received a letter that he'd been reassigned. He wasn't mad that he wasn't with *me*. I knew that cat well enough. He was mad that being with anyone but me he wouldn't make as much money.”

“Tommy, I didn't even feel a shred of remorse. The kid hadn't done anything wrong. He danced on Vanderhoom's string, sure, but so did I. I dropped him because I thought I could make more money, have more control, with you. I dumped the kid so fast it made his head spin and I didn't even tell him why, didn't even give him a chance. The kid was pissed, and he had every reason to be.”

“But, Mate, that's done now. We both know what side Huston cashed his chips in with. He was in Vanderhoom's pocket when I curbed him, and he was in all the way when he died.”

English paused for a moment. I couldn't see it, but I'd swear a tear ran down his cheek.

“And it's my fault, Tommy. Huston wasn't a perfect kid, but he wasn't *that* bad. If I'd been a bit smarter, a bit smoother, he might still be alive today.”

“But we all know the moment my great and grand plan fell to little more than shreds in the wind. It was the infernal Joyce James. That... that *human*.” English's mouth twisted, both sides of it. “When he took upon himself what he thought to be *my* image... that was more than I could stand.”

“You know my story by now, Tommy. You know it better than anyone living or dead, possibly better than even myself. I'm here to be far away from those like me. To be far away from my family, my father.”

“But it simply wasn't enough. I thought that being alone, adrift in a sea of people I'd be able to control myself. We both saw that wasn't the case.”

“And then you came to me, Tommy. I thought you were the same as all the others. I thought you were there for nothing more than the money. But you came to me after I ran from you. You tracked me down and...” he chuckled softly, this time it really was a laugh, “You broke into my home. No one has *ever* done that before. If it had been anyone but you, on any day but that, I would have torn them limb from limb,”

“You saved me, Tommy. You brought me back to life. You weren't there when I'd first come to. In a way neither was I. I... I wasn't sure I was going to survive it, Mate. I was close, I was so close to ending my time on this world right there. I... I was afraid. I'd seen my father in the costume of Joyce James and it looked just like me. When I'd last seen my father I'd still been a young man. But then... when Joyce dressed himself up... I saw in my own figure that I was his spitting image.”

“Do you know what that's like, Tommy? No, of course you don't. You've never woken up one day to realize that you've grown into the very thing you hate, the very thing you've spent your life

running away from.”

He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. For a moment panic welled inside me. For just a heartbeat I thought he was dead. Then he opened his golden eyes again and looked me straight in the face.

“That was when I realized I needed you, Tommy, and no one else. You... you're not like the others. You never cared that I had money, never even noticed I had power. You were my friend, nothing more. And that was what I was in dire need of.”

“I didn't need a lackey, I could pay for them, I didn't need a partner, they were a dime a dozen. What I needed was a friend. Someone I could sit in a hospital waiting room for and worry over. And someone who would do the same for me.”

Ever so weakly he raised an arm to gesture at the room around us.

“This, Tommy. How many people in the world do you think would do this for me? It's two in the morning and you're here, by my side, asking nothing in return. That was what I needed.”

“We all laugh at the word *humanization* but there really is no better for it. I needed *you* Tommy, I needed you to humanize me.”

He fell silent again, eyes clouding over.

“I'm proud of you, Tommy. You've done things I can only dream of.” I cocked my head and he smiled. “Sure we've moved mountains together, and I've done my own fair share, but you've had a life, I've only had a story.”

“You've managed something I can only dream of, Tommy. You had parents who loved you, supported you. You've had friends beyond number who've been there when you needed it. Tommy, you have the Lass. She'll be there until your dying day, I guarantee you that. And you've had a family. That's something I simply couldn't ever do.”

“Don't get me wrong, Tommy. The squirting out kids part isn't it. Anyone can have kids. We all know there's far too many people in the world who shouldn't. That's not it. You have a *family*. That's far harder. The Lass, Gingivere, and Elizabeth. You've brought them together into something greater than any one of them. You've created a bond that wasn't there before.”

I set a hand on one of the lion's massive paws. It took everything I had not to pull back. His flesh was cool and motionless.

“You've got it wrong, buddy,” I said. “It's not Rebecca, Ging, and Liz. It's the five of us. You're in there too. The kids see almost as much of you as they do me. You're as much as part of my family as anyone else. The gods know they love you.”

His lips pulled up into a soft smile. Now I could see tears slowly sliding down his cheeks.

“Thanks, Mate. It may not sound like much, but that means something to an old man like me. I may not make it out of this world alive, but it's nice to know that I will leave *something* behind.”

I smiled. The action hurt.

“You don't need to worry about that, English. I don't think the world will forget about you for a long, long time. They're aren't many lions around here to take your place.”

At that he closed his eyes. A smile returned to his lips, one that looked far easier and more peaceful now.

“I never did tell you much of my homeland did I, Tommy?”

I didn't say anything. The silence of the room around us was deafening. Even with how close I was to the cat there were somethings he simply didn't talk about.

“I haven't been back there since the day I killed my father, Tommy. Gods, it's been so long I can hardly even remember.”

“The sky was blue,” he said, pausing for a moment to chuckle. “Just as it is here, and everywhere else you might wish to travel, but it's a particular shade that sits in my memory that I

haven't seen since.”

“It's not that the sky was different, it was that the world beneath it was so far removed to the world here as to seem alien.”

“Here in V-town, Tommy, the trees a deep and lush, the world is a thousand shades of green. There's water everywhere you might hope to look and the winters are soft – at least by the standards that you see in this part of the world.”

“Back home the land is red. Not with blood, but with *soul*. The very earth beneath your feet is a deep russet that you've never seen anywhere else. It sets of the same skies we have in a way you could never imagine. The winds never stop there. It's not like the sea breeze we have here. The wind is dry and content, it brings scents to you from a hundred kilometers away, mixed with the dust and the very sky itself.”

“It doesn't rain there Tommy. Not for months at a time. They say that once, long before the Cataclysm, there had been great farms around my home. That's not the way anymore. The rains are long gone save for a short time each year when they beat down on us, mixing the red earth to a blood that sticks to your feet and bogs you in the endless plains of mud.”

“That was where I was born.” The lion's voice grew rougher, fading. “That was where I first opened my eyes and saw the world around me. Gods, Tommy, that was where I grew up. I can still remember my first hunt out on those plains. I can still remember chasing down a wildebeest, my father following along in my wake.”

“Hunting might be woman's work back home, but we all had to bloody ourselves at least one. That was my first time. My father and I went out one day when I was little more than a kit. He hardly hunted himself, but it was him or my mother and there was no way mother could ever teach me to kill.”

He paused for a long moment, his eyes turning to meet my own.

“You could say it was the exact opposite of your first time, Tommy. My father was still strong then. He was always a hard man, a cruel one, but he loved me. We set out at the first rays of the sun, left searching the empty and desolate plains of my father's kingdom for my prey.”

“My father may have been no hunter, but fate smiled on us that day. It was hardly more than three hours before we found the herd.”

“They were all clustered about one of the few watering holes in the territory. There's normally a peace of sorts around the water holes – even between the beast and the creatures such as us.”

“It's bad game to hunt at the watering holes. Bad for us all. We all need to drink, and scaring they prey animals away from the water would cause them to bypass our territory completely. Even we were smart enough to know that it was better to manage our herds and keep them coming back than have a quick meal.”

“The hot African sun was directly overhead when we were ready to start the hunt proper.”

“Normally no one hunts during the heat of the day, but this was a special exception. My father wanted to make sure he saw me make my kill. He wanted to make sure there were no mistakes.”

“And... and, Tommy, that was what I did.”

“You may not think me the greatest hunter of game,” he said, chuckling. I couldn't help but agree. I could still remember how poor English had failed in the wilds around V-town when I first met him. “But in my homeland I was in my own. I may not have been experienced, may have been young and small, but I was in no way timid or unwilling.”

“I... I don't remember the hunt itself. It may sound like a cop out, but it's true. I remember my father pointing out a wildebeest, I remember him whispering in my ear, and I remember him lifting his hand from my shoulder. Then... then I remember little. There were sounds, Tommy, scents. I remember images, vague and fleeting as I rushed forward, my young legs pumping and the breath coming hot in my lungs.”

“And then there was the taste of blood in my mouth. I'd done it, Tommy. I'd made my kill. On my first try, with my father watching.”

“I was a man. I'd taken my rightful place on the blood red plains of the Serengeti.”

The lion paused for a long moment there, his eyes staring unfocused at the painted white ceiling of the hospital room.

“Tommy...” his voice was strained when he spoke again. One of his hands raised to take mine. His fingers were weak, but he held on to me for dear life.

“Tommy... I want to go back.”

I couldn't speak.

“Tommy... please tell me you'll take me back. I've been gone for too long. I... I need to go back to my home.” The tears that had graced the lion's cheeks before returned without restraint. He was crying.

“I had to leave, the gods know I did, but I need to go back. You have your family, Tommy. You have Rebecca and your kids. You have your cousins and uncle. All I have are my memories. I need to go home, Tommy. Please, please tell me you'll take me home.”

He took a shallow, shuttering, breath. “I need to rest next to my mother. And... and I need to see my father again.”

There was no sound in the room save our breathing. The lion's breath was slow and labored. It was all he could do to keep his eyes focused on me.

Reaching out with my free hand, I set it on his massive paw.

“I'll do it.” My voice was soft. “If that's what you want, I'll take you home, English.”

A smile pulled at his lips again, but they barely twitched.

“Thank you. And my name is Michael.”

His eyes closed shortly thereafter. For a moment I was just short of panicking, but his slow, steady breathing was all the reassurance I needed.

Soon I was falling asleep myself. Leaning back up against his bed, I did the best to make myself comfortable. One way or another, I wasn't leaving here without him.

The sun was bright when I woke up the next morning, streaming through the windows of the hospital room.

For just a moment I didn't know where I was. All the panic came back. Every time I'd been in the hospital something was wrong.

Looking down at English, I remembered.

The lion was laying still and composed on the bed before me. His eyes were closed and his brow was unworried. His mane had long gone grey, but it still spread out majestically about him. His fur was immaculate and his bearing regal.

He looked like a king. He was composed and perfect.

And he was dead.

I sat there for a moment after the realization came to me. I'd seen lots of people die... but not like this. Memories of my father's death, not so unlike this, came to mind.

Reaching out, I touched a fingertip to his nose. It was cold and dry. He was long gone.

I let out a long breath and stood up. Tears were welling at the edges of my eyes, but I just couldn't seem to get them out. He'd been alive and well not twenty-four hours ago. The thought that he could be gone was still fighting to penetrate my mind.

I walked out into the hallway to go find a nurse.

Rebecca and the kids arrived about an hour later. Both Ging and Liz were well into their twenties, but they bawled like babies when I told them English was gone.

I could only envy them. I wanted to do the same.

I was getting ready to pack up and head home with the three of them when a man in a suit stepped into the hospital room.

English's body was long gone, taken by some orderlies. We were just packing up what few belongings had found their way here.

"Mr. Tommy Taggart?" the man asked. I glanced up at him before nodding. He was a human.

"Yes?" My voice was dry.

He looked like he wanted to extend his hand but thought better of it.

"My name is Nick Black of Black, Allan, and Associates. Mr. Jones retained us to enact his final wishes upon his death."

I blinked.

"A bit quick aren't you? He's only been dead for an hour."

The man coughed and looked away.

"Yes... well... I don't normally do these types of things in person either. Mr. Jones was our premiere client. He spared no expense in ensuring that we fulfilled his wishes. And..." he coughed again, "We also hold a blanket contract with Storm Front. It's in our best interests to ensure Mr. Jones is treated with all due dignity."

I let out a long sigh.

"Alright," I said, "Let's get this over with."

I'll give Black props where he deserves it. He knows what he's doing.

Not only had he snagged English's body before it could disappear into the gods know what bureaucracy of the hospital, he'd also brought a copy of English's will.

I didn't even bother trying to read it. The language on the paper was enough to put any government contract I'd ever had to deal with to shame. Long story short: Storm Front was being handed over to its hunters. The company was turning from a sole-proprietorship to a co-op. Apparently English had been planning it for years. Beyond that, some of the lion's assets were going to charity, some were going to people he's had dalliances with over the years, and the bulk was going straight to me.

I just rubbed my forehead.

Chasing off the lawyer, and sending Ging and Liz off with Rebecca, I went to do the one thing I could right off the bat.

There was a single piece of English's will that was plain enough for even me to understand, and it dovetailed nicely into my promise to him. He'd asked to be cremated.

Not so surprisingly, the hospital had a crematorium in its basement. Thankfully not a place I'd ever had to visit before.

The staff here were efficient. English's body arrived before I did. They were just getting the furnace ready when I stepped into the front room.

A rabbit sitting at the desk looked up at me with a start.

"Uh, hello?" she said.

I fought to pin a smile on my face as I stepped up to the desk.

“I'm guessing you don't get many people here,” I said.

She shook her head and grinned.

“No, most folks aren't in a state of mind to be down here so soon. Normally we have the departed ashes sent to them.” She glanced down at her paperwork. “I'm guessing you're here for the lion?”

I nodded.

She shrugged. “Fine by me, but you'll have to wait. The cremation process isn't all that fast.”

I took a seat in a chair next to the wall and looked over her shoulder. I could just make out the furnace behind her. There was only one body sitting ready to go. English was laying on a slab, still as stone and buck naked.

A moment later they fed him into the fire.

I couldn't see him burn, but I had no doubt it was business as usual.

He had been my best friend, but now he was dead, the same as anyone else.