



The Mourner

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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 3: Trying To Hard



It's amazing how quick news travels, especially when it's bad.

You'd think it would take a little while for folks to find out that English is dead, but by the time I got back to apartment I'd been stopped no less than five times in the street – by people I've never even met – to receive their condolences.

I suppose the fact I'm carrying the lion's ashes attached to a heavy strap over my shoulder might have something to do with it.

It had taken English's body a while to burn down – he's bigger than most of the people they deal with. That had given me more than enough time to walk across the street to a nearby shop situated exactly for the purpose. It was there I'd bought a leather strap and carrying case. I had to search for a while to find an extra large one. Even then the lion's remains filled it to the brim.

And weighed a bloody ton.

Considering how – relatively – small they'd been able to reduce the lion's body, he still kept much of his weight.

Stepping out of the elevator, I took the short walk down the hallway to the apartment. I knew right off the bat there had to be a bunch of people there – the door was open. We never leave the door open.

Poking my head around the frame, I wasn't exactly looking forward to a crush of people. Thankfully, it wasn't too bad.

Rebecca was there, so were Ging and Liz. That was about it.

“Hey, everyone,” I sad lamely as I stepped in. I didn't even get more than a couple of feet before Rebecca was at my side.

“How are you holding up, Wolfy?” she asked.

I worked up a tired grin. To be honest, it wasn't all that fake. At least the worst of it was over. He was dead. The end of the line. At least now we could start to move on.

“Getting along, Babe,” I said. “How about you three?”

Rebecca didn't say anything, she just motioned behind her.

Ging and Liz were sitting at the counter. Ging had his arm over his sister's shoulder. She was crying.

I pulled off English's ashes and set them gently down on the floor. I was afraid they'd break any table I put them on.

“Hey, Elizabeth,” I said, stepping forward.

Liz was a human, like her mother. She got more than that, she inherited just about everything from her mom. Eyes, skin, her slender but strong build. The only thing I seemed to add to the equation was her brown hair.

“How are you holding up?” I asked, taking a seat next to her. Ging gratefully stood up. I caught a quick glimpse of his face. He didn't look much better than her, but he wasn't crying. Not just now.

“I just can't believe he's gone,” Liz said.

Her face was puffy and tear stained, but her voice was strong. *She* was strong. Where Ging had gone the intellectual route Liz had always been the stronger of the two. She was the one to climb mountains – literally.

“We'd just practiced shooting two days ago,” she said. “He promised me we were going to meet at the gym today. He was going to help me... help me with my climbing.” She lost her voice for a moment. Never once had she turned to face me.

I let out a long sigh.

English had all but been an uncle to them. Likely closer. The lion had been here practically since the day they were born. There very near hadn't been a time he hadn't been part of their lives. English never had children. Ging and Liz had been the closest he'd ever come and he'd doted over them exactly the way you'd expect. And it had been Liz he'd been the closest too, though he'd loved them both.

“It's never easy,” I said softly, whispering in her ear. “We all know that. He lived a good long life.” I closed my eyes for a moment. “I doubt he would have wanted to go any other way. It was quick, and he was able to at least make it as painless as he could. He didn't want to leave you, darling, but everyone has to go sometime.”

That had been this morning.

If there's one way to motivate people to move like their tails are on fire it's to use two words.

Those words are 'open bar'.

We'd gotten the letter at about three in the afternoon. It had come from an official Storm Front messenger, complete with red windbreaker and everything. Apparently English had left orders at the office for when he died. And they'd be buggered if they didn't follow them.

The entire company was going to be shutdown for the evening. They'd rented the largest bar in the city and they were going to be making good use of it. English was going to have the biggest wake in the history of V-town.

Included with the invitation from Storm Front was a sealed envelope. I took it from the messenger without a word but didn't open it until everyone was out of the apartment.

I knew who it was from. There was no signature on the envelope, but the all but illegible scrawl 'To Tommy Taggart' was obvious.

Sitting down on a stool at the kitchen counter, I slipped a chipped black claw under the flap of the envelope and pulled. A moment later it was free and a small puff of air hit my face.

It was faint, but I could smell English's scent.

Carefully, making sure not to nick it with my claws, I pulled the letter free. It was written in the same all but illegible handwriting.

Tommy,

The fact your reading this means I'm dead. Well... bugger.

I guess the only good news is that you *are* reading this. That means that I'm dead, but you're still alive.

I'm going to keep this short – dead men shouldn't drag on. I love you, Tommy. I have for years. You're the best friend I've ever had.

Only one more thing. I'm a greedy bugger. I've done my best to keep it from you, but we both know it's true. I just want to tell you that... well, I want you to ignore whatever my last requests were. I spent months thinking out my will, going over every possibility and eventuality. Same with this letter. I don't want our friendship to be ruined by some gods damned plea I made with my last breath. I'm strong, Tommy, and that's the way I want you to remember me.

I'm sorry I couldn't be with you longer,

Michel Jones

English

I sat there for a long moment after reading the letter.

In someways that was the English I knew. He was strong and self sufficient, wanting his own way. But I couldn't imagine ignoring my friend's final request.

Taking a deep breath, I folded the letter back up and slid it into the envelope. I'd read it again when I got back from Africa.

The Storm Front wake was later that evening. How they'd gotten it together so quickly I'd never know.

The invitation hadn't said what kind of occasion it was, so I came as I was, fur out. Rebecca had declined the offer to join me. She'd said that I was part of Storm Front, not her, despite the fact she'd been listed on the invitation.

The wake was scheduled at the single largest hotel in V-town. It was a new building, called the Sea Side. It had been built only a few years ago to help keep up with the ever growing number of merchants, not to mention those who were coming for more information on the Cataclysm, or a change.

Stepping through the wide front doors, I got in line at the front desk to ask where the party was. I'd only been there for a few moments when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Tommy? Is that you?"

I turned to see a familiar white feline face. The fact Graham had managed to sneak up on me only went to show just how out of it I was.

I smiled as I reached out a hand to the cat. He took it in it one remaining arm.

"Graham, I didn't even know you were still working. I thought you'd retired."

He gave me a scowl as he led me from the line and down a spacious hallway.

"I'm not *that* rich, Tommy. I'm not like you. Not all of us can afford to retire when the whim hits us."

I took a closer look at my old friend. I couldn't even remember when the last time I saw him was. To be honest, he wasn't looking all that well. I think he's a little older than me, and it shows.

Graham was a snow leopard, that meant he'd been white from the day he was born, but yet somehow he was still going grey.

“Anyway, man,” he said, leading me on, “You’re early. Not many of us are here yet. Mostly just those of us who knew E.”

I grinned when I heard that. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard someone call English ‘E’. He hadn’t gone by that in years.

One more turn and we came to a large wooden door. A pack next to it read ‘The Sandpiper Room’ and beneath it was a handwritten paper ‘Reserved for Storm Front’.

Pushing open the door, we were in one of the larger rooms I’ve ever seen. The ceiling wasn’t high, but the room seemed to stretch out forever. There had to be space enough in here for hundreds of people.

“Graham,” I asked, “How many people are working at SF these days?”

He didn’t even have to think. “Over four-hundred now. And they’ll be more at the wake. This place will be crowded, but it’s the largest room they have.”

He hadn’t been lying.

I pitched in a hand to help get everything set up. Slowly, people were trickling in.

One thing I noticed was that there wasn’t a single image of English anywhere to be seen. I asked about it, but apparently that was by his request. The wake was here for the living, not he, the dead.

It was at about six o’clock that the trickle of people changed to a torrent. The SF building must have closed, because they all arrived en-mass. In little more than ten minutes the room changed from quiet and sparsely populated to jam packed full.

I was suddenly glad there wasn’t just one, but *four* bars set up here. One against each wall.

There was one thing that really hit me though. I hardly recognized *anyone*.

You wouldn’t think it would mean so much to me, but it hit me hard. When the room had been nearly empty I’d known most of the folks. They were SF long timers, folks that English and I had dealt with time and time again. But now there was a flood of red and yellow windbreakers, and most of the people wearing them were half my age.

There were a few speeches now and then, but generally speaking the wake was more of a general party than anything else.

I found myself a quiet little table off in the corner of the room and nursed a green glass of the gods knew what. I’m not much for alcohol, but this seemed like as good a time to drink as any.

“Is this seat taken?”

I glanced up. It took me a long moment to recognize the form in front of me.

“Jon?”

He hardly looked like the Police Commissioner. If I hadn’t known the dog so well I wouldn’t have recognized him at all. This had to be the first time in years I’ve seen him out of uniform.

“Hello, Tommy,” he said, nodding to me. “Is this seat taken?”

I shook my head.

He sat down and twisted to look at the clash of milling bodies behind him. Someone had turned up a jukebox and cleared a space in the middle of the room as a dance floor.

Unless I miss my mark it was playing a song by Rush. English would have loved it.

“What are you doing here, Jon?” I asked. “And where’s your entourage?”

He grinned slightly.

“I feel I’m here for likely the same reason you are, Tommy. English was among my closest of friends. And besides, I received an invitation.” He glanced around the room for a moment. “And as for the force...” a grimace crossed his face. “I told them exactly where they should go when they attempted to insist on coming with me. There is a reason, Tommy, that I am out of uniform. I may be

the Police Commissioner, but I am still a man.” He grinned.

I chuckled and took a sip of my drink. It burnt all the way down.

I'd already had a chance to talk to most of the Storm Front folks who I remembered. They'd all been here when I first arrived. Any missing were already long gone, like Brown.

Jon and I simply sat at our table as the night wore on. Every so often someone would break away from the crowd and walk over to express their condolences. More than often I hadn't the slightest who they were.

It was round about eleven-thirty that things began to get a little out of control.

I'm not sure how much cash English had put aside for the open bars, but it didn't seem to be in danger of running out. Everyone in the room seemed to be floating on at least their fifth drink and things were getting sloppy.

“Should we be leaving, Tommy?” Jon asked, taking a sip of whatever it was that was in his glass.

I looked out over the crowd.

“I think I'd better stay,” I said. “This is English's wake after all. I'm just as responsible as anyone else to make sure it stays civil.”

I was just about to get up for a refill on my drink when I heard a scream.

It was short and piercing, and definitely female.

And not a single one of the hundred bounty hunters in the room seemed to take notice.

I hardly had time to take two steps before Jon was by my side. He may look like just another dog on the street, but he moved like a police officer.

Pushing through the press of bodies in the direction the scream had come from, it took us only moments to reach it.

Up against one wall a group of three hunters, cats by the look of them, had a woman pressed into a corner. From the look of it the three men were bounty hunters and I'd bet money the woman was a receptionist or office worker of some sort.

Her wide eyes caught us as we shoved through the crowd towards her, faster now. She didn't say anything, but it was plain as day she needed help.

One of the hunters reached towards her, his hand raising to cup her chin. She pulled back as far as she could.

“Hey, boys,” I said, finally coming in close enough to be heard over the music. “I'm thinking you've had enough party here. It's best you be finding your way home.” I kept my tone light, my ears up.

One of the cats, a panther, turned towards me, keeping himself between us and the woman. He was young, likely hardly twenty, and I'd bet you a wad of bills that he didn't have a clue who either of us were.

“Mind your own business, old man,” he said, a growl to his words. I'm sure he meant to make it sound intimidating, but I've been around bounty hunters for far too long for something like that to make me even twitch an ear.

Taking a breath, I fell into an easy stance, getting ready for whatever may come. I could feel Jon doing the same behind me.

“I'll ask one more time, boys,” I said, letting a shadow of a growl slip into my voice, “Let the lady go.” This was English's wake and I'd be buggered if I let something like this happen.

The panther laughed.

A moment later something moved in my peripheral vision. One of the other cats leapt forward.

I didn't even have time to make of who it was.

The cat was, thankfully, not all that big, but he was fast.

He leapt soundlessly at me, flying through the air.

But he was young and inexperienced. He came at me teeth leading, taking no prisoners.

I simply raised one hand. My fist connected squarely with his wide, flat nose. Bracing with my feet, I held my arm just stiff enough to force his path of flight away for me. It was still more than enough to stun him.

He was only lucky I hit him with my fist and not my claws.

The second cat, on the panther's other side, looked like a tiger. He entered the fray a moment later.

And Jon took him out with a single perfect strike to the neck like he was little more than a training dummy. In a heartbeat the kid was laying on the ground mewling like a kit.

I turned back towards the panther who still stood before me. He wasn't nearly so cocky now.

"Who... who in all the gods' names are you?" he studded.

I raised one lip, letting the lighting shine off my canines.

"English's best friends. Former Mayor Taggart and Police Commissioner Oaks. Any other questions?"

He looked like he'd just swallowed his own barbed tongue for a moment before backing away.

"Ah... no, sir," he finally got out. "I'll just be on my way..."

Before he could make it three steps a pair of shadows materialized out of the crowd. They weren't wearing uniforms, but I'd recognize them anywhere. They were police officers, a dog and an otter, and the badges that hung on chains around their necks proved it.

"We'll take it from here, sirs," one of them said as the other stepped up to the woman still cowering in the corner.

A few minutes later Jon and I were outside the hotel, strolling down the road, back into the city.

"I'm taking it you knew they were there all along?" I asked, rubbing my side. The battle may have been quick, but it took a lot out of me.

He shrugged. "Not really. I asked for no police escort tonight, but it doesn't surprise me that there were other members of the force that received invitations. Pine, for example. I know he was invited. It was just a shame he wasn't able to make it."

I snorted as we continued on. At least I'd been able to drop my police guard years ago when I'd stopped being mayor. Jon hadn't been so lucky.

"Are you alright, Tommy?" Jon asked.

I glanced over to him. His face was in shadow, but I could see the concern in his eyes.

"Alright enough. Why?"

He set a hand on my shoulder, bringing us to a stop.

"You're clutching your side," he said. "And you've been favoring it all night. What's wrong?"

I blinked and looked down. Well what do you know?

It was only when he drew my attention to it that I realized he was right. My left hand was holding my gut so tight I could almost feel my claws digging in. And somewhere beneath it I could feel a tingeing sensation.

The feeling wasn't new, now that I thought about it, but it was growing.

"I'm not sure, Jon," I said. Suddenly it was getting hard to breathe. "I'm... I'm sure I'm fine."

Pulling him along, I set off again, but didn't get more than a few steps before my pace faltered.

"I think... I think I need to sit down," I said between ragged pants. The tingeing sensation in my side was growing worse.

And now I realized why I hadn't noticed it before. I normally just ignored this feeling offhand. It was the feeling I got when my regeneration was doing something.

"Tommy?" I heard Jon say, but his voice suddenly seemed far away.

There was a dull thud as I fell to the hard paving stones. The just seemed to leap up to meet me.

I'm not too sure that happened next. I could hear Jon say something, but it was as if it came over a kilometer of cotton fuzz.

Then there was a piercing whistle. That I did hear.

I'm not sure how long it was after that – I had no way of telling time save for the growing pain in my side, but I felt the earth shake.

That was a new one... the last time I'd ever felt something like that was when... English had driven us around in his jeep.

Forcing my eyes open, I was able to make out flashing lights coming this way. And now that I bothered to notice, there was a new set of pain, this time through my ears. The sound of a wailing siren.

Heh. I'd bet dollars to donuts that was the sound of the one and only ambulance in V-town coming this way. It was one of the first motor vehicles to be produced in V-town in a century.

I remembered being at it's ribbon cutting ceremony.

I remember the feeling of motion, and people shouting around me.

Less shouting than arguing really. People were yelling back and forth about what could be wrong with me and what drugs they could use.

The motion was more interesting than the gobbledygook of their voices. I could feel each and every paving stone and rut beneath us as we rocketed across the city. At least I had no doubt on where we were going. V-town General.

I groaned and laid back. I'd just gotten out of that gods forsaken place after looking after English. I had no desire to go back.

Too bad my lips were too numb for me to ask them to just drop me off at home.

I blacked out for a little bit there. Not sure how long.

I must be at General by now, on account of the room not moving. Now don't get me wrong, it was still *spinning*, just not *moving*.

"Doctor, are you sure we shouldn't wait for an expert?" someone was saying. "He has the greatest regeneration of anyone in the entire city. His records show it plays havoc with most procedures."

The sound that came wasn't exactly a snort, but it was close enough.

"You can see what's happening as well as I can! We can't wait at the speed that's growing!"

Letting out a groan, I raised my head.

I think I must have surprised just about everyone, they all jumped back when I opened my mouth.

I meant to say 'What's going on?' but it came out sounding more like a squirrel drowning in a vat of strawberry pudding.

"He's awake!" someone shouted from off over my shoulder.

"Then up the anesthetic!" someone else yelled back.

A few seconds later I was enveloped by a cottony blanket of blackness.

I came to again and immediately wished I hadn't. The remaining anesthetic was dulling most of

the pain in my body, but I could still feel myself split open. There was a hole in me. It ran down the left side of my abdomen and was large enough for someone to stick their hand through.

And that was *exactly* what was happening.

That part of me was, thankfully, numb, but I could still feel it happening, even if it was only in a second hand kind of way.

And it was *not* pleasant.

I tried to speak, tried to move, tried to do anything to let them know I was here, but I couldn't seem to do anything more than breathe.

A moment later I felt something shift inside of me and the doctor pulled out his hand. Out came a double fist full of what I could only call *mass*. It was white, spongy, and looked angry as the gods after an all night bender.

I couldn't make out what they were saying around me. I didn't need to. I already knew what it was. Cancer.

Thankfully, I was out like a light soon after. I'm guessing the trauma of having a good five pounds removed from my gut was enough to let the anesthetic kick back in.

When I next opened my eyes I was in a clean white hospital bed.

No, no, *no*.

I don't think it's an understatement to say I leapt out of it like my tail was on fire. This may not be the same room English had died in but it looked way too close for comfort.

Landing on the floor with a thunk, I think I bruised my rear.

I say *think because* I was a little preoccupied pulling and tearing will all the strength I had at the bandage wrapped over my gut.

They make these bloody bandages to last these days. It took me a good three minutes of frantic ripping to get past it to where it ended and I began.

And I breathed a sigh of relief.

I still had a bad feeling I knew what was going on here, but at least I seemed to still be in once piece.

The big 'ol hole that had been ripped in my gut was already long gone. The cut was healed up by my regeneration and most of the fur was back. I could see where it had been, but that was only because I know how my body works.

Pressing tentatively with my claws, a stab of pain came up once I put a little pressure on the spot.

Getting up, I looked around. Well, there was one good sign. I was in a normal hospital room, a nice one, but a normal one. I'd be more frightened if I woke up in the negative pressure room again.

Taking a deep breath, I walked up to the door, checking each part of my body to make sure everything was back in order.

My gut was still stiff where they'd made the hole, but other than that I at least seemed to be a-okay. Then again, that's what I'd thought ten minutes before I'd collapsed.

Through the door and out into the hallway, for a moment I was at ka loss on which way to go. A moment later I heard a familiar sound.

Too familiar. I'd heard it only days ago, when English had died.

It was Ging and Beth crying. I could also hear something else... and someone talking.

Walking towards the voices, I stopped just around the corner to a small waiting room. I could make out everything now. And I knew what the other sound was. I hadn't heard it in a long time.

It was Rebecca. She was crying too.

"He's resting comfortably now," a voice said. It was a man. He sounded young, too young.

“We removed the malignant mass, and got everything we could find, but with his regeneration it's only a matter of time. I'm sure you've already been told. Cancer is by far the most common way for individuals with regeneration to die. And Mr. Taggart's regeneration is unusually potent. If I'd been asked I wouldn't have expected him to live past twenty-five.”

There was a pause, then Rebecca's voice came. When she spoke she was strong and stable. I could almost convince myself I hadn't heard her crying a moment ago.

“Thank you, doctor. What can we do for him? I'm not willing to give up without a fight.”

I forced a easy grin to my lips and stepped around the corner. If I put a little effort into it I could walk without any pain.

“Neither will I, Babe,” I said.

In about three seconds I had three different folks trying to tackle me to the ground. It took everything I had to keep on my feet.

“Dad!”

“Wolfy, how do you feel?”

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Mr. Taggart! You really should be out of bed so soon!”

I brushed them all gently away and looked at the doc.

“Okay,” I said, “Let's get this over with. I know I'm in trouble. You tell me just how much.”

About four hours later I was back at home and, as they say, resting comfortably.

It was as I'd expected. My regeneration had just taken a turn for the worse. It had latched onto a cancerous growth and was regenerating it in the same way it would the rest of me.

That wasn't good news.

I was already well overdue for it, but that hardly makes it any easier.

“You okay, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked as I slipped into bed next to her that night.

“Yeah, Babe, I'll be fine,” I lied.

I woke up a few hours later. There wasn't a shred of light anywhere to be seen. Rebecca was sound asleep when I slipped out of bed and into the bathroom.

I had to shade my eyes when I flipped on the light. I wasn't here for a piss, there was something else I needed to do.

Sitting down in the toilet lid, I lifted a knife I'd grabbed from my old hunting equipment. It wasn't large, but it was sharp.

I flicked on the fan before I started, there was no reason to leave the scent of blood.

Taking a deep breath, I plunged the knife into my gut, right on the near invisible line left from where the doctors had cut.

My incision wasn't nearly as big. I didn't need to hunt around the same way they had.

Reaching my fingers inside, I had to bite back a howl of pain.

It was there. It felt like a grain of sand or a bit of grissel.

The cancer was already starting to grow back.

Taking a deep breath, I bit down on my tongue and pulled. Something inside of me ripped and the gods forsaken thing came free.

When I next came to I was laying face down on the bathroom floor, my hand still clutching... it. My side was already mostly healed. All that was left now was a deep, wordless ache.