



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 Prodigioners*, 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 4: The World Will Go On Without Me



Well, I knew all those world maps I used to have in bedroom when I was a pup would come in handy *someday*. It took a few decades, but now's the time.

English had never really said much about where he was born, most of what I know comes from a night years and years ago, not long after I first met him.

And now that I'm on a deadline I'd best get moving. I promised the cat I'd get his ashes back home. When I'd made that promise I'd expected that I'd have my sweet time to fulfill it. I'd expected I'd be able to put it off as long as I wanted and take the trip in style.

Yeah. Not so much now.

He was from Kenya. That much I remember. Shifting through my papers, I pulled out the only map I had of Africa. It was from before the Cataclysm. Most of the countries listed on it weren't around anymore.

Heaving a deep sigh, I began running my finger back and forth over the faded and worn paper, being careful not to rip it. Okay, DR Congo, whatever in all the gods' names that was, Angola, South Africa... Wait. Was that a country named 'South Africa'?

Well, at least the name was descriptive.

It took me a few more moments to find Kenya. I did heave a slight sigh of relief. Africa was still just about as far away as you can get, but at least Kenya was on the east side. It should be fairly easy to get to by boat.

Now, Kenya wasn't exactly a small place...

I remembered the name Lake Elemetia. Not much else, but that name was unique. Sadly, my map wasn't detailed enough to list most of the lake names. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be the many in the county. All I could say for certain was that the big lake to the north was Lake Turkana. That wasn't what I was looking for.

The only other lakes I could see of note were in the west-central. They were unnamed, but hopefully one of them was what I needed. I could always get a better map once I get to the country.

Now all I needed was a bloody way to get there.

Spinning on my stool, I turned to look at English's ashes. They were still in their leather carrying case, through now they were sitting on a low table in the corner. Somehow it actually felt peaceful to have the lion with me still, if only in spirit.

I heaved a sigh. I'd still to tell Rebecca or the kids about this. They were out right now. This could make for an interesting dinner.

I'd pulled one of my old hiking backpacks from the back of the closet and was starting to fill it when Rebecca came home.

"Wolfy?" she called.

"In here, Babe," I replied with a sigh. Well, better sooner than latter.

"What are you doing, Tommy?" she asked as she stepped into the bedroom. I had our drawers ransacked and the pack laying on the bed, half filled.

I turned towards her and did my best to keep my ears from laying flat.

"I'm sorry, Babe," I said stepping up and taking her hands. "I made English a promise just before he died. I'm taking his ashes to Kenya."

She rolled her eyes.

"That's not what I mean, Wolfy. We all figured that out when you started pulling out your old maps. I mean what are you *doing*? That's obviously not a big enough backpack. Here," she reached back out into the hall and pulled a pair of brand new packs in. "I just picked these up along with some supplies."

My mouth just about fell open.

"What? Babe, you can't be serious! There's no way you're coming with me!"

She leveled me with a glare that I was long familiar with.

"Tommy, if you think for even a moment there's anyway you're going to the other side of the world without me, and facing the gods know what, you're out of your fuzzy little mind." She set one hand on her hip and gave me a half smile. "I might have let you two boys go if English was in his prime, but he's in no shape to look after you now. Besides," she said with a laugh, "You've still never given me that honeymoon you promised so long ago. This of this as a raincheque with interest."

Dinner that night was a more somber affair that I was used to. It was a Saturday. That might not sound like much, but English almost always come over to eat with us on Saturdays. It was the same day he spent with Ging on the seaside and with Liz up in the Rockies.

As it was the boxes of takeout spread across the table seemed meager. I'd almost over ordered, being so used to having to account for the lion's mammoth apatite.

"So when are you leaving?" Ging asked.

I had to blink. I hadn't told them yet.

"Am I *that* transparent?" I asked, putting down my takeout box.

The young wolf looked at me over the lip of his own box, he had his mussel deep into the take out, eating like me. Only Rebecca and Liz used silverware.

"Dad," It was Liz talking now, "We all knew it was going to happen. You might have not noticed, but we all knew English was getting older. Look at all the work he did with his will. He had everything planned out..." She had to pause for a moment and take a deep breath. I could see the tears at the edges of her eyes.

You'd never believe it with the way she's been bawling over the last few days, but Liz was normally the strongest person I knew. She'd broken her arm a couple of years ago while mountain climbing and splinted it herself. Then she'd walked the ten kilometers back to V-town, leading an

expedition none the less, to get it patched up at the hospital. I'd taken the news about that misadventure worse than *she* had.

But there's a big difference between breaking your arm and losing one of the most important people in your life.

"I've never been to Africa before," she continued. "Sounds like it..."

"No." I stopped her dead right there. With a thunk I put my carton down on the table. "You are *not* coming with us, Liz." Just for good measure to glare at Ging too. "And neither are you."

An 'I told you so' glance passed between them. Of the two Ging seemed relieved.

"But Mom's going with you!" Liz continued. It wasn't often she tried the little girl angle any more. She must *really* want this.

I shook my head. "No. And that's final. Your mom has her ways of coming, but the two of you are staying here."

I was rather surprised the argument stopped there. It's not often I have to put on my 'fatherly' voice, but when I do it tends to go over badly.

The next morning I buckled down and did something I wasn't looking forward to. I went to City Hall.

I haven't been mayor for years, but I still end up there almost every week. Bugger, I still get official dispatch boxes from the government all the *bloody* time.

Officially I was still the City Administer, but even that title was out of date now. These days I'm little more than a consultant. One of the biggest tasks I'd worked at over the last decade was to slowly chip away at my own authority.

I guess I wasn't so different from English in that respect. Like him I was slowly trying to worm my way out of the machinery, knowing that someday I wouldn't be here. Well, that day was going to come sooner than I expected. There was no way I'd be able to lend a hand running the government when I was on the other side of the planet.

City Hall was a nice, if somewhat plain building, designed more for its usability than its ascetics. I should know, I'd led its construction back during the rebuilding.

Up the front steps, I was happy to note there were no protesters darkening the plaza. Other than the occasional dust up over some minor matter or other we hadn't have any protesters in... gods, I can't even remember the last time we had something seriously go wrong with the government.

Heh. I smiled. Well, I guess I'd managed to get *something* right.

Through the lobby, I didn't even stop to check in at the reception desk. The ladies there just waved at me and smiled.

I still can't get over how odd it feels to be here again. These halls had been my home for far, far too many years. Most of them weren't spent as mayor, but close enough. The sound of my claws clicking on the floor brought back a flood of memories.

Up to the second floor, then onto the third, it wasn't long before I was standing outside the mayor's office.

And this was an annoyance.

I made a point of not coming around here much anymore. Perhaps I'd tried too hard.

The mayor's office had a new receptionist – separate from main reception they had downstairs – and she didn't know my face.

Now don't get me wrong, my name is well enough know around here, but not my face. I've always made a point of just being 'that wolf'. Only problem was now I was 'that wolf' with a few extra years and some grey fur tacked on.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the mayor is quite busy. Unless you have an appointment I simply can't let

you in.”

The receptionist was a deer, a young one, likely not older than Liz. I doubted she'd even been alive for the reconstruction.

“Listen,” I said, searching vainly for her name somewhere, “Lady, I'm Tommy Taggart. The mayor will be more than willing to see me.”

Yeah, I should have made an appointment, but I'd never *needed* one before.

She didn't say much, but I could see from her eyes a telltale 'yeah, right' expression.

Taking a deep breath, I turned from her desk. I'm sure she thought she'd won, but I had another trick up my sleeve.

That particular office had never been mine, but I've spent more than enough time in there to know the acoustics inside out.

And if memory serves the perfect place to stand was just about... here.

Still a good ten feet from the mayor's office door, I was just off center of the antechamber.

I grinned for just a moment.

“Black! Get your cottony tail out here!”

I don't have the lug capacity that English was famous for, but I can still vocalize well enough when I need to. Hey, all those public speaking classes had to accomplish *something*.

It was about ten seconds later the office doors flew open. Once again I was face to face with the current mayor, Edward Black. The man was a sheep.

“Tommy!” he said, coming towards me with an extended hand like this was just another social call. “How are you?”

A moment later he had we led into the office, closing the doors behind him with a quick glance at the now sheepish receptionist.

And the second the doors closed the sheep seemed to change into a completely different man.

Now don't get me wrong, Ed is a nice enough guy. I didn't vote for him in the last election, but I don't have anything against him. It's just that I learned *real* quick after he took office that his stage persona is far and removed from who he really is.

Ed is a politician through and through. When he's up on stage he's in his element, shaking hands and kissing babies – that's what he does best. The man is, however, ill suited for is actually making decisions and running the government.

I guess in some ways you could call us night and day. I'd never been all that good on the campaign trail but seemed okay in the big chair.

Ed had been smooth and all smiles out in the hallway, but now he was shaking like a leaf in the autumn wind. From the man's expression alone it looked like he was about ready to have a heart attack.

“By the gods am I glad you're here, Tommy,” he said, lifting a cup of something I was sure wasn't water off his desk.

I took a seat across from him.

“Ed,” I said, trying to put on the calmest voice I could, “I'm not here for pleasantries...”

I didn't even get time to finish before the man's eyes went large.

“Oh gods. There's another riot isn't there? There's people pressed up against the front of the building. Protesters looking for my blood...”

I snorted and reached a hand across the desk to put a hand across the man's wagging mouth.

“Nothing like that, Ed. Calm down.” A moment later I let go and he began rubbing his bruised nose.

“Then what is it? I'm sure I'm not going to like this.”

“I'm going away,” I said. “On a long trip, short notice. Not sure when I'll be back.”

I will give it to him, Ed wasn't dumb. He didn't even ask why, he knew well enough.

"But what about us, Tommy? We need you! You can't just leave us!"

I heaved out a sigh and sat back.

"Ed, it's been decades since I was mayor. Years since I was really City Administrator. Gods, one of these days I'm going to die, you know. You've got to get used to the idea of running the place without me." I raised an eyebrow. "What about Max? Have you ever sat down with him? He was mayor for a good long time, longer than I was. Why don't you ask him for help?"

The sheep managed to somehow turn his nose up.

"Mayor Maxwell? You've got to be kidding. He's a member of the Open party. I couldn't possibly ask him for assistance! Can you imagine what that would do to my image come the next election?"

Is it wrong that I had to fight back the urge to leap across the desk and strangle the man?

"Ed," I said, trying to keep the growl out of my voice, "You do remember that I was the *founder* of the Open party, right? I chose Max as my successor."

He looked away for just a moment, abashed.

"Yeah, but you don't count," he said. "You're different. You got us through the reconstruction. It's not a sign of weakness to defer to you. Every mayor since has done it."

I sighed and set my forehead on the desk. This was going to take a while.

Four hours later and we were still going at it. So far I'd talked to just about *every* minister and department head in City Hall, and I don't think I'd be wrong to assume that runners had been sent out to get the heads from other buildings.

"Just... just do what you've been doing all along! What you think is right!" My throat was rough and my patience run ragged. I hadn't had to do this much talking in years.

"I'd just feel better if we went over the emergency plans once more," the man said. He was the head of the power department.

"No," I said.

He looked up at me. "Pardon?"

"No," I repeated. "We're not going over the plan again. *I* didn't write it. Gods, I don't even know the first thing about electrical generation. All I did last time was to rubber stamp it. *You're* the expert here, you and Ed. The two of you are the ones who should be doing this. I won't be here."

"But... but... but..."

I stood up and stretched backwards to work the kinks from my spine. I couldn't reach quite as far as I used to, and a stitch in the left side of my gut reminded me why I was here.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back towards the men and woman assembled in the office. This had to be the majority of the senior government.

A smile worked its way to my lips unbidden.

"Folks," I said, "You can do this. I know it. Come on, look at who you're replacing here, and old washed out wolf. If I could pick up the pieces after what happened I'm sure as anything know that a bunch of experts like you can do this."

"Bugger," I continued, "I hardly had anything more than rubble when I rebuilt the government, but *we* did it. That's a *we* not an *I*. That's what's going to make the difference here, folks. I don't care what stories they're spinning about me these days, but it was us all working together that got the city back on it's feet."

"You can't be in this for yourself. You need to do what's best for the largest number of people. It was greed and hubris that nearly destroyed the city. Don't let it happen again."

Have I mentioned that I'm no good at public speaking?

After a rousing little speech like that – and I frankly think it's one of my better off the cuff efforts – you'd expect some applause, or at least some 'yes we can' smiling faces.

All I got was a few nervous coughs and some unsteady shuffling.

Turning, I walked out of the office without another word. Well, it was sink or swim for them now. I wish them the best of luck, but this dog's day has come and gone.

Walking towards the front doors to City Hall, it quickly became obvious that news I was here had spread – along with the fact I likely wouldn't be coming back.

Every ten feet I was stopped by someone new, only half of which I recognized. They all shook my hand, thanked me for all the help I'd given them, and wished me the best of luck.

And all of a sudden I was starting to feel like a bit of a cad.

It took me over an hour to make the the couple hundred meters to the front door. By the time I finally stepped out it felt more like I'd just won an election then told them I was bugging off.

A deep breath and I was out into the clear air again. I looked around the plaza in front of City Hall. It didn't have an official name, but everyone called it Reconstruction Plaza these days.

They'd tried to call it Taggart Place, but I'd put the kibosh on that none too quickly.

Turning to head home, I make it about two blocks before I felt something. One doesn't survive half a lifetime as a bounty hunter without picking up some lifelong instincts. I was being followed.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed me nothing of note beyond the ever present churn of bodies.

I picked up my pace and ducked around a corner. Thankfully I knew this district well enough there was no way I could bet lost around here.

A couple more ducks and dives and my fear that I was being followed was quickly proven true. I still had yet to see who it was that tailed me, but they were buggers to shake.

The footfalls were light, their motions professional. I hadn't the slightest who was chasing me, but they were good at it.

Okay, time to think.

Pausing behind a dumpster, I knelt down. There was no way I was going to be able to lose them like this. I had to get smarter. If I hung here out of sight they should overshoot me. That would give me a chance to dart off in another directions.

I could still hear the footsteps coming my way. Wait... there was only one set. Hadn't there been two sets before?

I had only a heartbeat to realize I'd just been had when a hand fell over my shoulder, pinning me in place. Good thing too, otherwise I likely would have leapt halfway to the moon.

There was a long pause as I turned my head.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh.

I'd just been caught by two of V-town's finest.

The V-town police, under Jon's guidance, had if anything only improved over the years. I hadn't the slightest why these two were out after me, but I didn't feel any shame in having been one upped by them.

Of the two, one of them was the standard German Sheppard that were so common to the service – he almost looked like Jon's younger brother. The other was a bit of a surprise. I can't remember the last time I've seen a black footed ferret with a badge.

“What can I for you gents?” I asked after catching my breath.

And that alone was a little frightening. Even getting older I should have been able to shake off a scare like that in a couple seconds. As it was it took me almost two minutes until my breathing was back to normal, and the stitch in my side reminded me why.

"We apologize for startling you, sir," the dog said. His words were as crisp as one would expect, but I could see in his eyes they were more than just words. He'd likely thought he'd almost given me a heart attack. "We've been tasked to escort you to Police HQ. The Commissioner would like an audience with you."

I laughed and rolled my eyes. It's been a long time since I was last picked up off the street by the cops.

"And I assume this *escort* means you'll drag me there by my whiskers if I refuse?" I said, standing up and dusting myself off.

Both of their eyes widened like I'd just threatened their mothers.

"No... no, sir," the ferret said. His words weren't quite as crisp as the dogs. "We've simply been sent to extend an invitation. We meant to meet you at City Hall but you were already leaving. You can of course decline."

This time I out and out giggled. Okay, it's not the manliest thing to do, but I have a bad habit of it. I was just so used to being dragged from place to place by people who just *had* to speak to me that it seemed odd to be treated with some respect.

Shaking my head, I started off in the direction of Police HQ. The two cops fell in to formation around me without a word.

"Well might as well get it over now," I said, "Or Jon will never let me hear the end of it."

Police HQ was the same red brick three-story structure that's been as long as I can remember. Only difference now was that they'd remodeled the front reception. It used to be whitewashed walls and hard wooden benches and little else. It's still pretty utilitarian, but at least now you can see effort had been taken to decorate it and soften it a little bit for those people who have trouble enough to need to come here in the first place.

For better or worse HQ was nearly my second home. I still don't know the complete internal layout, but I was well enough known here that I didn't even have to wave at the dogs manning the counters, they just waved me through.

A dozen or so twists and turns and we were at the Commissioner's office. Once again I was waved through without so much as a twitch of the ear.

Unlike at City Hall they tend to keep staff around for a while here. Or, more to the point, the police department is something you're born into in V-town. And it tends to be something you're in for life.

Stepping through the last door into Jon's office, the dog was exactly where I expected him. The years have run on, but Jon seemed to be all but immovable. Other than his reading glasses, he could have been the exact same man who'd taken over just days after Sayer's death.

Only, save one thing. Years ago there had been nothing but paper on this desk. Now there was a computer off on the corner, its screen flashing status reports every few seconds. Jon's eyes never moved from the paper before him, but I had no doubt he read each and every one of those screens.

I felt a grin slip to my lips as I settled into my normal chair across him. I'd picked his chair myself, it only made sense with how many hours I'd spent here.

"How goes it, Jon?" I said. "Long time no see."

He looked up at me, setting his papers down. There was a scowl to his lips. Call me perverse, but that only made me smile wider.

"You're not doing it, Tommy," he said.

I cocked my head.

“What?”

His scowl etched deeper.

“You're not going to Africa...” he said before I cut him off.

I snorted. “What? You think you're going to stop me? Everyone already knows I'm going, and there's no bloody way you're going to stop me from fulfilling English's last wish.”

The flutter of a smile crossed the old dog's lips. “If you'd let me finish, Tommy. What I was going to say was that there's no way I'm going to let you go without me.”

I just about face palmed.

“What? No. Absolutely not. I spent *years* working my way out of the machinery here and they still won't blow their noses without asking me first. You're my friend, Jon,” I said, reaching across the desk I set my hand on his, “But if you were to leave the police would fall apart.”

The scowl returned in full force.

“Tommy, you might not see it, but we've made great strides here at the force. You yourself were picked up by a... non-traditional officer. I'm sure the force could survive for a few months without me.”

I let out a long sigh.

“Jon, I love you like a brother. Bugger, English was your friend too, but no. This is my millstone to bear.”

The argument stayed civil enough – this is Jon we're talking about here – but it went rapidly downhill from there.

I was more than happy when I stepped out from HQ an hour later, this time free of police escort.

A warm breeze ruffled my fur as I set off down the street. I closed my eyes and enjoyed it.

Gods, I have to stop being so stupid.

I got about two steps before running flat into what felt like a brick wall.

Landing flat on my tail in the middle of the street, I looked up.

And up, and up.

“Master.” The voice still sounded like it came from the bottom of a well, but now he said the title with a grin.

“Amstys.”

Reaching down, the massive grey and black – now with some extra grey – wolf helped be back to my feet.

“What are you doing here, Amstys?” I asked, starting off down the street again.

He cocked his head, as if that was a silly question.

“I'm coming with you.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “You not just talking about a still down the street are you?”

And with that I delved into yet *another* argument, almost word for word the same I'd had with Jon, how there was no *bloody* way he was coming with me.

“So, is that it, Babe?” I asked, hefting the pack onto my shoulders.

She shrugged. “As well as anyone can figure, Wolfy. It's the best supplies money can buy. You do realize that neither of us have ever been further than Edmonton, right?”

I grinned. It had taken us two weeks to get this far. We had a fairly small window to catch passage to Japan. There were lots of ships going back and forth these days, but it was harder to find someone willing to take passengers on short notice.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the one last thing I needed. English's ashes. Gods but they

were heavy. The pack on my back already weighed me down and the ashes almost felt like they were going to drive me through the floor.

Stumbling, I nearly fell over backwards.

“Tommy!” A moment later Rebecca was at my side, steadying me. “Are you okay? Is it the...”

Lifting a finger to her lips, I warded away the word.

“No, Babe,” I said. “I’m just not used to so much kit, eh?”