



The Mourner

By wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Lion In Winter.....	1
Chapter 2: A Young, Foolish, Wolf.....	9
Chapter 3: Trying To Hard.....	18
Chapter 4: The World Will Go On Without Me.....	27
Chapter 5: Brand Name.....	36
Chapter 6: Narrow Passes and Sheer Cliffs.....	46
Chapter 7: The Scent of Flowers.....	55
Chapter 8: A Royal Welcome.....	65

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 8: A Royal Welcome



Jasmine had been more than kind. Ever since getting off the boat in China we'd been running scared, just trying to keep our heads above the proverbial water.

Now... well, I didn't quite feel like a king, but first class passage on a real *passenger* ship was a huge step up from anything I'd had so far.

Though I started missing Rebecca almost the moment the docks sunk from sight. It was hard to think of a time I hadn't had her by my side.

The ship may be nice by all comparisons, but I didn't leave my cabin much. I simply sat on by bed and looked out the window, watching the waves pass. And holding my best friend's ashes to my chest.

It was silly, I knew it, but I could almost hear the old lion's voice in my head. Encountering Jasmin has put a whole new spin on the man I'd come to think I'd known so well.

'Sorry, Mate,' he'd say. 'I did tell you about her, didn't I? She was a fine lass. Some days I can't even remember why I left.'

Landing in Kenya was an experience I won't forget as long as I live. It wasn't that it was remarkable in any way, but rather in how it *wasn't*.

We came to dock at Mombasa, a fair sized city. It was no V-town, but it had everything a weary traveler could want.

And that was what surprised me so. I'd had so many images running through my head about Africa, and Kenya in particular. It was almost impossible to reconcile the backwards, hostile place I had in my mind with what I saw before me.

English had never talked about his home much. I suppose that was more the culprit than anything. It left me to come up with wild fantasies of a barren land and an ungrateful people who had driven him out.

Mombasa was, as far as I could tell, a perfectly viable city. Sure it was smaller than V-town,

and it didn't have much of our newer tech, but it was far and beyond what I'd been expecting.

'Sorry, Mate,' English whispered in my ear as I walked down the gangplank. 'Didn't mean to disappoint you. I guess I never really expected you to make it this far.'

I grinned, never looking down at the leather pouch at my waist. "Never underestimate the perseverance of a wolf," I muttered.

He just laughed.

Thankfully, Jasmin thought ahead, even if I hadn't. Not only did I have the phrasebook but she'd also arranged for my cabin to be next to some native speakers from around here. They'd been more than happy to give me some lessons in exchange for a few coins.

Well, first things first, I needed to get a map.

I'd racked my brain during the trip, trying to remember where English had said he was from. *Lake Elementia* was the best I could come up with.

It took me a while to find a cartographer. English was laughing all the way.

'I could have told you if you'd just asked me,' he whispered.

"Yeah, lots of good that does me now. I wasn't exactly *expecting* for you to up and die on me like that."

"Trust me, Mate, I wouldn't have if I'd had the choice."

"Is this the best you've got?" I asked the map seller, stumbling over the alien words.

The man, some breed of wild dog I couldn't recognize, gave me a foul look.

"Tell me where you want to go and I'll find you a map of it."

I sighed. We'd already been through this a dozen times. The only thing keeping him from throwing me out was the steady supply of coins I was giving him for his time.

"Lake Elementia," I repeated. "My friend said he from a village near there, but none of your maps list it."

The man managed to both shrug and growl at the same time.

"I have maps of everything in Kenya. If it's not on my map then it's not worth talking about."

I snorted.

"Fine then," I said. "He might have been referencing a town from before the..." I stopped dead. I didn't have a native word for Cataclysm.

The man picked up quick enough though. "Before the Wrath? Yes, I've maps from back then, but they'll cost you."

I hefted my coin bag. It was losing weight at an alarming speed.

"I'll pay."

That was... okay. I've lost track of the days.

The journey west towards Lake Elementia took a *long* time. And I'm still not there.

The map maker hadn't know where it was English was from, but I had been able to find a reference to a city named Nakuru. All the references were from before the Cataclysm.

I remember English referencing that name. I think.

The lion just chuckled from beside me.

The land around here was far sandier than I was used to. And hotter, oh gods the heat. I think the temperature was a good ten degrees above anything I've ever experienced before. It had been alright on the coast, but rose freakishly fast as I pushed inland.

I'd had to stop a good dozen times to buy more supplies. The money Jasmine had given me was

a god send, but it was nearly gone now. I was saving what was left for an emergency. That, and a cabin back to Mumbi.

As it was now I walked towards every town I saw pop up over the horizon. Folks must not be all that used to foreigners here. Every time I stepped into a new village the children would yell out and come running to get a look at me. Hey, who was I to complain? I was getting good enough at the language here to finally begin to tell stories. It was those stories I traded for food, a bed, and directions.

How bloody hard can it be to find a family of lions around here anyway? I haven't seen a single Panthera Leo since English died. That was once thing I had been expecting... I'd been expecting to see lions thick on the ground here once I got to Kenya. There were lots of species I've never seen before, but no lions.

Although, one thing I did notice was the effects the Cataclysm had here. This was the far side of the word from where the Cataclysm had started, and it was noticeable. There weren't a whole heck of a lot of humans here, but they were closer to one-in-five as opposed to the one in a hundred we had in V-town.

Gods but there are some days I miss Rebecca. I miss how soft she is, how warm, how she always had time to listen to me. How she was always there to cry on.

And I missed her soft hands. Slicing my side open to cut out the cancer was becoming more and more common. When we'd left V-town I hardly had to do it more than once a month. Now it was practically every other day I was having to cut open my own body.

And it was taking longer and longer to heal now. Not to mention the dozens of scars that were left over. The fur on my left abdomen was now a mass of grey streaks, hardly any brown to be seen.

I was about to Lake Elementia when I was waylaid by a storm. What is it with me and storms? They were never a problem before this trip, now they seem to be coming up again and again.

The clouds seemed to burst upon the sky they drove in so fast. I hardly even had a chance to go to ground.

There was no village in sight. The best I could find was a single gnarled tree standing alone in the sandy soil of the Serengeti.

Even then I almost didn't make it. My tail got drenched as I dove for shelter.

Looking out, I watched arcs of lightning shoot across the sky. They light the land up almost like a clear day. Through them I could see a huge, cruel land.

'It's not that bad, Mate,' English whispered. 'It's like most anything else, if you're born into it then it's normal. I was young here, I ran these hills. It's all in what you're used to, Mate. Welcome to my home.'

The next day I finally had the feeling I was getting somewhere.

It wasn't anything in particular, but just a *feeling*. This *felt* like somewhere English would call his kingdom.

Cresting yet another hill, a lake spread out in the distance before me. I smiled as a hot wind caressed my brow. Clearing a spot in the grass, I sat down and unfolded my map.

Well, this *could* be Lake Elementia... I'd passed Lake Naivashi a few days ago and I'd going more or less north-west...

I was just starting to decide I was *here*, wherever *here* is, when my jaw hit the dry, silty dirt.

"What the... ow!"

My hunting instincts kicked in and I tried to roll onto my back to get a look at my attacker but

the heavy pack kept me immobile.

A weight slammed down on me and all of a sudden I was concerned with just breathing.

A deep grunting voice came from behind me. It was speaking in the same language I'd been picking up over the last few weeks.

"Still alive? My blow should have killed anything."

I snorted out a laugh. "Sorry to disappoint you," I said, gasping for breath, "But I'm harder to kill than most."

Counting to three, I waited just long enough for my attacker to let down his defenses before lashing out with a foot.

Bingo.

I couldn't see what I hit, but it felt like I'd just kicked a granite wall. Gods, what was this?

Scrambling forward, I make off downhill on all fours. After a few seconds I worked up enough speed to dig my hands into the dirt and spin around in a half circle. There was just enough momentum left to help me stand upright.

I blinked.

There was too much dust in the air from my escape to see clearly but...

I almost cried out when he stepped into sight.

It... it wasn't English, but he was so, so close that it took everything I had to keep from running forward and tackling him in a bear hug.

Well, he looked like English likely did forty years ago.

The young lion stopped when I stared openly at him. A moment later a growl began to grow deep in his throat.

"Why? Why does your kind keep coming here?" he yelled.

And that broke the illusion. He may look like English, but he didn't sound like him. My old friend's voice had been smooth and cultured, dripping of his careful British facade. Even when the mask slipped English's voice had still been deep and mature.

This young lion was just that. Young. How voice was higher than his large body would suggest, and the rolling, almost sing-song accent that had been all but worn out of English was far more pronounced.

I stumbled, trying to find the right words in the local dialect to word him off, but I was too slow.

Again, my old memories betrayed me.

I knew English too well. I expected the young lion to move like him, to *think* like my old friend.

Having the high ground on me, a mark laid down with a heavy pack, English would have fainted a leap, but come in low instead, sweeping my legs and sending me to the ground while keeping his distance.

This man... he did things I've never even seen before. For starters, he roared.

English *never* roared, except perhaps in pain. It was one of those things that made him a *lion*. And as such it was something he tended not to show off to the world.

I'd never found the roar of any creature all the intimidating, but then again I've never before had the chance to hear one in battle.

My brain was telling me it was nothing but a meaningless display of bravado, but my feet didn't want to listen, they were stuck to the ground as surely as if nails had been driven through my toes.

And that was when his weight crashed into me.

You remember how I said English would *faint* a leap? That's what I expected of this man, too. And I was wrong.

In a heartbeat I had several hundred pounds of lean lion muscle laying atop me. Than a moment

later beneath.

We were rolling down the steep incline of the hill, end over end.

Thankfully the lion hadn't thought his plan through too well. My back was protected by my now worn and stained pack, and *he* was laying atop my chest, cushioning the blows there.

Sometime later the world stopped spinning and we came to a rest at the bottom on the hill among scrub grass and shallow pools of sand.

The lion was laying daze beneath me.

Staggering to my feet, it took everything I had not to empty the contents of my stomach right then and there.

Turning, I saw the lion rise from the corner of my eye.

"You alright, buddy?" I asked off handedly.

And that's when he jumped me a second time. And this time the lights went out.

When next I came to I was bound hand and foot. I almost thought I was back in India until I looked up to see the clear blue skies. And slightly closer to hand, the lion who was rummaging through my pack.

I let out a long breath. Who wants to take a bet I'd just met English's family?

"Well, buddy," I said, speaking to the ashes that were still hanging at my waist, "It looks like we've made it. We've got the royal welcome and everything."

When I spoke the lion's ears pricked. He looked up from my torn and battered backpack to stare at me with his large golden eyes.

"You... speak... english?"

It took me a moment to separate the name of the language from the name of my friend. The answer to both was the same.

"Yes," I said, cocking my head. "You do, too?"

He grimaced and went back to ransacking my pack with a renewed energy.

Well, I have to give the lion genome one thing, strength must run in the family. After digging through my pack and finding little of value save some hard biscuits, the lion stuffed it back together and threw it over his shoulder.

I was almost afraid he was going to leave me here until he reached down with his hand and hefted me, like a scrawny rucksack, over his other shoulder.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but he only grunted and gave me a shake to shut me up.

The lion was a fairly long way from home. It was the morning when we met, and the sun was just kissing the dusty horizon when yet another village appeared in the distance.

Ah, *this* was more of what I'd been expecting of Africa.

He details came out as we moved closer. The village was little more than a small collection of huts and adobes. Everything was mud colored and seemed to be trying to merge back into the earth.

The lion who carried me let out a haunting *hoh-hoh-hoh* call as we neared the town. That brought everyone running.

The feeling wasn't all the different from what I'd experienced upon entering the other villages over my travels. First the children rushed out to see who I was, then the woman looked out from their homes, and finally then men came out to meet us in the street.

The big difference was point of view. I wasn't used to seeing all this laying atop the shoulder of a lion.

The welcome hadn't exactly been a warm one. No one said much to me. They'd spoken to the kid who'd caught me in quick, on-off beats of language that I couldn't quite catch, then tossed me, still bound, into a small outbuilding.

And, by the look of this place's construction, this particular building was a part-time chicken coop, part-time jail.

I was getting good to being hogtied and thrown in jail. Not a talent I'd recommend picking up for wide eyed adventures.

The important thing in times like these, as boring as it sounds, is to stay calm. Panicking, particularly here where my entire journey *requires* me to make friends with the family to use their graveyard, wouldn't do me much good. Sure I've got some experience in escaping jails, but where would I escape to? I'm already here.

They'd stripped me of my pack, but not what little clothing I was wearing, and that includes English's ashes.

"Well, buddy." I said to them somewhere in the distance as I squirmed around on the hard packed dirt to get more comfortable, "It looks like I met the family."

He didn't bother chuckling. 'I never said it would be easy, Mate. If home was so welcoming do you think I ever would have left?'

I drifted in and out of sleep, catching what I could of the sunbeams that filtered through the high, empty pained windows of the building. The day was hot and I was panting. It didn't do me any good to exert myself.

It was that evening, when the light was failing, that I hard footsteps coming my way. You know, I'd just realized how that young lion had managed to get the drop on me. As adapted as my body was to hunting in the forests around V-town, these lions were at home hunting on the savanna. I laughed, my parched throat cracking. Well, they likely looked at me the same way I'd looked at English the first time I'd seen him out and bumbling about in the woods.

A moment later the whisper soft tread of the feet came to a stop outside the door. I could hear the sound of the door jam being pulled free.

And, somewhat more relevant to my immediate interests, I could smell the aroma of food.

A moment later the door opened and I saw the same lion who'd caught me. He was carrying a bucket of water and a plate of what looked like raw meat. Hey, I wasn't about to start complaining.

He paused for a long moment in the doorway and looked at me. When he spoke his words were clearer than they had been when we'd first met, though sounded like he'd learned them without ever hearing them spoken aloud.

"You are from far away," he said slowly, carefully pronouncing each syllable.

"Yes," I replied, rolling into a sitting position and nodding my head.

He looked down to the food in his hands.

"This is for you. The elders will decide what is to be done. Until then you are my responsibility. I was the one to capture you."

I couldn't quite make out the expression on the young lion's face in the failing light. He looked half proud, half sad.

I worked a cautious smile to my lips, careful to keep my teeth covered.

"I'm Tommy," I said. "What's your name?" There hadn't been much conversation on the way here. I didn't even know who he was.

He paused for a long moment. "My name is Gathii," he said, voice stern.

"Nice to meet you, Gathii," I said opening up my smile a bit more. "Do people around here normally assault travelers?"

He set the food and water down on the dirt in front me. It may be impolite, but I didn't waste a moment before dipping my head forward to take a lap from the water bucket, though I could only hope he'd untie for to eat the meat.

The lion kept a fair distance from me, almost as if afraid to come too close – odd considering I'd made the journey to the village on his shoulder.

"We... do not welcome strangers. This is a king-less kingdom. We have chosen to live apart. We are the only of our type we know."

I paused in my drinking.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask. Was this really English's home? Was *he* their lost king?

But there was something about the way the kid said *king* that made it plain the word was loaded. There was a reverence there, but also a fear. I may not be the sharpest claw, but I didn't want to tip my hand too soon.

Gathii left soon after, never untying me. That made for a difficult dinner. Sure real wolves can eat without hands, but that's not a skill I've had need to develop before.

It wasn't until the next evening I saw him again. It wasn't until then I saw *anyone*. Everyone else in the village seemed to be keeping well away from my little cell.

"So what are they going to do with me?" I asked.

Gathii shrugged. "As with so much, they do not know. You are my responsibility. I must fed you, I must look after you. You are my burden. Perhaps you will be traded off next time we need medicine from the outsiders."

Wonderful.

The next night he came again, but this time he tarried longer.

"Where is it you are from Tommy?" he asked. His english was getting better by the day.

I smiled.

"About as far away as you can get, kid. I doubt you've ever heard of North America?"

He narrowed his eyes for a moment and then nodded. "Yes. It is far to the east. Or... it is far to the west as well."

I laughed. "I'm impressed. That's where I'm from. From a city called V-town."

It wasn't long after that Gathii left, but there was a difference this time. I could hear him running as fast as his feet could carry him.

"Tommy?" the next night he was back. This time he carried more food and water than normal. He also carried a stack of old, leather bound books under one arm.

I nearly began drooling the moment I saw those books, never mind the food.

"Tommy, I'd like you to help me read these."

I was more than happy to oblige.

It wasn't many days after that Gathii cut the bonds, on my hands at least.

The books were exquisite. Old, sure, but they were text books, written in British english. I had the feeling these were the same books English himself had been raised on by his mother.

The days went by. I've been for here three weeks at least. Yesterday Gathii cut the last of my bonds. He even managed to bring me back my backpack a few days ago. I was still stuck in this little

hut, but other than that things were looking up.

And I have to say, Gathii was an impressive student.

He'd asked me to work through every book he had. We've covered everything from pre-Cataclysim geography to language and even a smattering of science.

He'd just arrived again with my nightly ration of water and meat when he sat back on his haunches and asked me, "Why did you come here, Tommy? You're not simply a traveler. No one, even the most lost tourist could ever find themselves in our kingdom of sand and ruins."

I let out a long sigh. It had taken a lot of careful dancing around the issue to keep English a secret. I'd had to deflect questions about the ashes a dozen times over.

I leaned back against the wall behind me and cracked my spine.

"Gathii, you're right. I came here for a reason." Reaching out, I picked up the leather pouch. "I had a good friend back in V-town. His last request was that I take him home."

The cat stood there for a moment, trying to puzzle out my words.

"Your friend was to the east of here? That was the way you were heading."

I laughed softly.

"No, kid. Far as I can tell he was from right here. I called him English, but you might know him as Micheal Jones."

For just a moment he stood there, staring at me. I could see him working it through in his head.

"No," he said at last, his voice just a whisper. "The king is gone. He said he would never return."

The silence stretched out between us for a dozen heartbeats, then the young lion sprung to his feet.

He said something, but it was in a language I couldn't understand.

Then he was gone. He left his precious books behind, though he didn't forget to bar the door.

Well, *that* could have gone better.

Last I'd seen of anyone was two days ago. My food was gone, and my water was running distressingly low despite my rationing.

There had been a great commotion outside once Gathii run off. Then... nothing. I haven't seen or heard a body since then. If they left me alone much longer I'd have to try and break out.

I had my backpack loaded and a mud brick pried from the wall. I was only a couple of minutes from getting ready to bash the door down when I heard a set of footsteps in the dirt.

Well, that was unusual. All the lions around here naturally walked all but silently. I normally had to strain my ears to hear them at all, yet this one was plain as day.

There was a heavy scrape as the bar was pulled from the door.

"Come out, Tommy," Gathii called. "You are free to leave."

Shrugging on my pack, and none to discretely keeping my brick in hand, I stepped out into the dark night. The young lion was the only person in sight.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

The kid shrugged. "They're waiting for you to take him away," he said.

I cocked my head. The lion motioned me on, so I followed him.

"Michael Jones," Gathii continued. "His name is... remembered here. He was the son of a foreigner and the mad king."

"Singa," I interjected.

The cat jumped like I'd slapped him.

"We do not use his name, Tommy. To do so would be to welcome back the madness." There

was a pause as we continued on. “The mad king had many children with his many wives, but it was the one you know as *English* who finally stood against him. We all saw the king's madness grow to overtake his mind, but it was your friend who put an end to his reign.”

“Then he left, Tommy. None of us knew why at the time, but the prince became king, and he abandoned his people. You are not one of us, Tommy. You do not understand what it is for a pride to be without its king. It was long ago, but we remember it. We were directionless, without identity. For many months we could not forgive him for abandoning us. Then we discovered why.”

“We thought the madness gone with the death of Singa, but we were not so fortunate. The madness that took our king had already spread its seeds deep into our people. Before the year was out the signs of madness were seen in the younger men.”

He stopped at the crest of a hill, taking a deep breath and looking at me.

“Tommy, we have never been a large people. Even at our height we were less than five-hundred. Four-hundred of those were women. The madness of Singa spread through his line, and *all* of the tribe's younger generation were of his line. More than ninety percent of they male cubs began to show signs of the madness as they grew older. I am one of the few that has not. I... I have but five remaining brothers.”

The lion pointed out into the darkness. Just at the edge of my vision I thought I could see a mass of huddled people off in the distance.

“My family, Tommy. I would do anything to protect them.”

My skin went cold.

“And I will,” he continued. “I have always been a suspect case for the madness. My... my obsession with the books is not considered healthy. As a result I have been chosen to take you and our king from the village.”

I let out a breath.

“So you'll escort me back to the coast?” I asked.

He shook his head as he began walking again. “No, Tommy. I am to ensure you *never* return. I have been given that as my... task. The result of the task is that I shall not return either.”

I wasn't sure where Gathii led me. The night was too dark to see, and I didn't know where I was in any event, but the lion's paws never faltered.

“Here, Tommy,” he said after we'd been walking a good half hour.

At first I didn't see anything. We were in a scrubby patch of dirt like any other.

Then the clouds shifted and I saw the moonlight fall on something. A gravestone.

It was small and hastily carved in a bit of rock. Likely etched by a claw.

Bending down, I tried to read the text. It was in two languages, one of them was English.

‘To my beloved mother. May you rest peacefully even if you are to never see your green hills of home again’.

I let out a sigh and looked at the ashes I'd brought so far.

‘Well, Mate,’ he whispered, ‘We made it.’

I didn't do anything more that night save sit and wait. It didn't feel proper to do this with the moon above us.

When the sun came it welcomed a hot and calm day. The perfect day for a funeral.

Taking out the leather pouch once more in my hands, I looked down at it. It was no fine work, simply what they'd given me back at the hospital, but yet it had survived all this way.

“So is this it, English?” I asked.

There was no response, not even the ghost of a whisper.

Taking another look at the grave site, I noticed there was not one mound here, but two.

"Who's the other body?" I asked.

The lion took a deep breath, as if steeling himself for the word. "King Singa. He had brought a great curse down upon us, but we could not leave his body to rot."

I shrugged. So be it.

Digging with my hands into the sandy soil, I made a small hole in the earth next to English's mother. I hadn't a full body to bury, so it wasn't hard.

Setting the pouch gently into the hole, I couldn't step back. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"Gods, English," I whispered, "Why did you have to die and leave us?"

A heavy paw set gently on my shoulder.

"He has done everything he could, my friend," Gathii whispered. "He saved both our lands from madness."

At that point, I'll admit, I began bawling.

It was a good hour before I could work up the strength to fill in the hole, sealing English away forever in the red soil.

I wanted to hear his whisper on the wind, I *needed* him to tell me he was at peace now, but there was nothing.

At long last I had the strength to stand. Adjusting the pack on my back, I turned east.

"Come on, Gathii," I said. "I'm going home."