



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
Chapter 9: Going Home Again.....	75
Chapter 10: Life is What we Leave Behind.....	85

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 9: Going Home Again



I...I don't remember hiking being this hard.

Gathii had been good to his word. He was charged with making sure I never returned to the village, and he would die before he failed.

The fact the mission had been nothing more than a cover for his own banishment hung heavy over him. He did everything he could to look brave and strong whenever I glanced his way, but I could see he was little more than a scared kid.

My lungs were burning and the stitch in my side felt like it was going to tare me to pieces when I called a halt the next afternoon.

Taking a long draw from my canteen, I looked out at the land spread out around us. Well, it certainly wasn't the lush forests of British Columbia.

Gathii sat down next to me. He hadn't said much since the funeral.

"So," I said, trying to strike up a conversation, "How old are you?"

I really didn't know much about the lion. We'd spent weeks talking, but it had always been him asking questions. He'd a keen mind and a curiosity about the outside world. I'd had to fight for everything I'd learned about him or his village.

"Nineteen," he said after a pause. "I've been a man for five years."

I just about choked on my drink. The kid was younger than I had been when *I'd* met English. Gods but I felt old.

"Is this your first time away from your village?" I asked.

She shook his head, sending his mane rustling.

"No. I am one of the few who were willing to venture to the outside world to trade. A little too willing it seems. I've always wanted to see what was on those maps. This is my chance to find out."

He smiled, but the expression was nervous and unsure.

"Don't worry, kid," I said, patting him on the shoulder. "As I see it I own you one. Or at least I

more than likely owe English one, and you're the closest person I can pay it too. I may be no expert, but we'll get you going."

It quickly became clear the Gathii wasn't kidding, he knew the world well around here. And that was good for me, as things were going I wasn't going to be able to keep at the trail long. I'd been getting pretty rough when I'd arrived at English's village. Now every step was a fight.

Not to mention that I was having to sneak off every night to keep the cancer at bay.

I can't quite put words to it, but there was just no way I wanted Gathii to see just how bad a way I was in. The way the kid looked at me after I told him my stories was... well, let's just be glad English wasn't still alive. The kid would likely think him next to a god.

"So where are we going?" I asked. This wasn't the way I'd gotten here.

"Not much further, Tommy," he said. "You said you wanted to journey to Mombasa? Nairobi is the city closest to us, another three days journey. From there..." he averted his eyes from me. "We should be able to find transport to Mombasa."

When the kid said the word 'Mombasa' he would look about nervously.

"I'm taking it you've never been that far before?"

His lip curled up in a faint smile.

"If I'd been asked before you arrived I would have said that no member of my village had ever journeyed further than Nairobi. I thought myself the most traveled of my family. It seems I was wrong."

I laughed. "Yeah, you've got a bit of a job ahead of you to beat English's record. Come on, let's get going."

Even with my slow pace Gathii was just about right on, we arrived in Nairobi three days later. It was likely the largest city in the county.

And as we were limping down its crowded streets I was finally able to put a finger on what was *wrong*.

Everything was normal.

That may sound like an odd thing to say, but it's true. I'd just put my best friend, and one of the greatest men I've ever known, to rest and the world... just went on.

Thankfully, Gathii had taken some coins from his village to shore up my dwindling supply. It bought us a room for the night and passage on a horse drawn caravan east, all the way to Mombasa.

Gods... gods, I feel so *hot*.

I wish... I just wish Rebecca was here right now.

I'd only had to cut myself open the day before yesterday, but yet again I was all but too weak to walk.

"Are you alright, Tommy?" Gathii asked, sitting beside me in the back of one of the covered wagons. He handed me a water skin that I pressed away.

"I'll make it," I wheased out. "I'm just an old wolf. That's all."

"Please, Tommy," Gathii whispered, leaning closer, "Tell me what it is that plagues you. Many of the traders are afraid of coming near me, much less you. They fear you've been struck with some disease and that they may contact it."

I worked up a smile. Yeah, fat chance of that.

"Tell them not to worry, kid. What I've got isn't catching." I gave him a quick explanation of my cancer. It isn't as easy as it sounds as the lion had never encountered even the *idea* of cancer before, likely so much as regeneration.

When I got to the end of my little medical lesson he just nodded.

“So that is why you came,” he said.

“Heh?” The pain had lessened enough that I was able to sit up again.

“You feared your own life would end before you put your friend to rest. You wished to die without debt. Most... honorable.”

I grinned. “Yeah, sure. We'll go with that. I owe a lot of things to a lot of people, but English was a score I had to settle personally.”

The journey went on. I didn't get any better, but at least I didn't get much worse. Riding in the back of the wagon saved me the effort of walking and that seemed to help sooth my body some.

You don't get to see much from the back of a wagon, but what I did was still beautiful. That was a different landscape than what I'd seen when I'd walked to the north.

Heh. With a country like this I had to ask myself why English had bothered to run so far.

The caravan was quick. It only took us about a week and a half to get to Mombasa. I never thought I'd be so happy to smell the salty sea air again. It smelled like home.

Only problem, *home* was still more than a couple thousand kilometers away.

Pinching what we coins we had left, Gathii and I searched out a ship headed to Mumbai. I'd managed to arrive in Kenya in style, in a nice cabin. The two of us were headed back on little better than a garbage scow, wedged into the tightest little berth they could find. And that was about the point I couldn't slink away and deal with my cancer in privacy.

“It is a gift from the gods,” Gathii whispered as he watched my side heal.

I wasn't thinking of it quite so highly these days. When this had all started I'd been able to heal from my self inflicted wound in little under a minute. Now it was taking over twenty.

I lay on my back, panting as spasms of pain rocked me while my side healed. “Something like that, kid,” I said. “Just be careful with gifts from the gods. They always seem to be double sided.”

He nodded wisely and went back to watching.

India couldn't come into sight soon enough.

I was well past embarrassment now. I asked Gathii straight out if he would carry me down the gangplank. I could hardly walk.

And that was how we arrived in India. Gathii was wearing my backpack, carrying my limp and withered body in his arms. He looked around at the bustling, modern city of Mumbai like it was something completely new to him.

Much like I suppose English had when he'd first arrived here.

I would have sent Gathii on alone to find Rebecca, but I was afraid what her – and more to the point Jasmine's – reaction would be. The kid was a near carbon copy of English. I didn't want people thinking I'd just discovered reincarnation.

It took us a good many hours to press our way through the crowds of people in the street, but at long last we arrived at the tall wrought iron gate of Jasmine's manor.

Now all I had to do was convince the guards to let us in.

Sure then men at the gate had seen me a great many times when I'd been here before, but that had been when I'd been standing upright. As it was now I was alarmed to note my beautiful brown coat had gone almost completely grey and I must have lost a good thirty pounds.

And that's saying something as I've never been above one-fifty in my life.

The problem solved itself soon enough when I heard the sound of running feet.

"Tommy?" Her voice was breathless, "Is that you?"

A moment later the gate was thrown open and I was nearly crushed in Rebecca's arms.

I don't think I've felt this good in weeks.

"Hey, Babe," I whispered out.

I had to do some quick talking to explain Gathii, but at long last we were sitting in Jasmine's home again, as safe and sound as one could hope for.

Jasmine just about wept openly when she first saw Gathii. And I'd taken pains to warn her first.

Gathii, on the other hand, looked small and frightened. Nairobi was a fair city, but it was nothing to Mumbi. This was all new to him.

Plus, I doubt he'd ever been offered tea and clotted cream scones before.

"But what of you, Tommy?" Jasmine asked. "The journey has taken much out of you."

I sighed and used what little strength I had left to sit up. Rebecca reached discretely out to steady me.

"I'll make it," I said. "I'm going home."

She smiled. "In that, I can believe you. Please, let me help how I can. You have brought me back my beloved, if only in death, then brought me news that his line still continues. It is the least I can do to book all four of you passage back home as quickly as possible."

I may be weak, but I can still cock my head.

"Four of us?"

Rebecca wrapped her arms around me. "Jon showed up a couple of weeks ago," she said.

About an hour later there was a sharp, perfectly measured knock at the door. A moment later a familiar German Sheppard walked in.

And stopped dead in his tracks when he not only saw me, but Gathii.

I didn't think I've *ever* seen Jon with his mouth hanging open. Too bad I don't have a camera.

Another round of explanations later and Jon was seated next to me, retelling how he'd made it Mumbai.

"It is not as complex as you would think, Tommy," he said. "The bounty hunters who chased us were competent, but not exceptional. I was able to draw them away from you with little difficulty."

"The problem," he continued, "Was their sheer numbers. As predicted they had the pass well guarded. I made a point of fighting my way as far as I could without causing any true damage. Then, when I was sure you two had enough time to properly escape, I surrendered."

"You what?" I didn't think I had enough power left to sit up, but apparently I could still all but bolt to my feet.

He smiled. "You needn't worry, Tommy. They were sent to capture us, not kill. I told them I would not struggle if they let you go."

"You can likely guess my journey from there. I was marched back east. However," he said, smiling, "I did not plan to go as far as they desired. Thankfully, they did not take me back to Nanning. Rather I was taken north to Qiandongnan." A smile crept to his lips. "That served my needs well."

"What I needed was a large city. A center of government. What I needed was somewhere I could contact the local constabulary."

I cocked my head. "You're kidding."

He grinned. "Not a all. I've no experience whatsoever with the Chinese police. But, as you

might say, we are all alike – on some level.”

“I simply waited until we were passing by a formation of police officer, then began making a scene. I acted as so that they no choice but to arrest me. As I expected, what the bounty hunters was doing was illegal.”

“Bounty hunting in China is, in broad strokes, the same as in V-town. The government puts outs contracts, the bounty hunters fulfill them. They are not empowered to simply abduct anyone they wish. It took some time, but I was able to get my story across while I sat in jail.”

He chuckled slightly. “It may surprise you, Tommy, but the Chinese do not use German Sheppard like I for their policing, but they are still primarily dogs. Between my training and my papers I was able to convince them of my authenticity in short order.”

“It was only a matter of time before I was free, and the bounty hunters who had chased us found themselves safely behind bars.”

The next two weeks passed pleasantly enough. Jasmine was good to her word. She was more than kind, and without her I likely would have wasted away.

It took time to arrange for passage back to V-town, and she used those days to call in some of the best doctors she could find. My cancer was still growing unchecked saved for Rebecca's nimble fingers with a knife.

When the doctors first arrived they were all but blown away by my – even greatly reduced – regeneration. India it seems has many things, but I am still an oddity even here.

Many rounds of pills later – and a few flashes of radiation – and I could at least walk again. I wouldn't be winning any sprints, but I could at least be *me* for a little while longer yet.

The downside, as the docs were careful to explain, was that this was a temporary reprieve. I was not healed, only given a brief moment of grace.

The day finally came for us to leave India. Jasmine had arranged for a ship to take us as far as Japan. It was a passenger liner. And a nice one. I only wished we'd had it on the way in.

I was ridiculously proud of myself when I was able to walk up the gangplank no more than holding hands with Rebecca.

Standing on deck, I turned to look at Jasmine and Gathii. They were still both standing on the dock. The tigress was whispering something in the young lion's ear.

And I'm pretty sure I could see the kid blush under his mane as he joined us.

The voyage was slow and gentle. The waters of the bay of Bengal all but rocking me to sleep as I lay stretched out on a deck chair in the sun.

Rebecca was to one side of me and Jon the other. It was only a pity I couldn't work on my tan.

“So, Wolfy,” Rebecca whispered, making me open my eyes again, “Is that it then? English has been laid to rest?”

I smiled and rolled slowly onto my back. “Yeah, Babe,” I said. My voice was rougher than I wanted on account of all the drugs. “I think Michael Jones has finally gone home again. I can't say if he's ever found peace, but he got his last request. And,” I grinned, “It looks like we've started up a whole new generation.” I sat up ever so slightly to see Gathii where he stood, leaning on the railing at the bow of the ship, looking out towards the horizon. “I think we should introduce him to Ging and Liz when we get back.”

Glancing over to my other side, I watched Jon for a moment. He had his reading glasses firmly back in place and was writing a report of one type or another. All he was missing was a uniform and he could just as well be back on duty.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He glanced up at me. “My reports, of course. I’ve been alarmingly lax in my paperwork during this trip.”

I just laughed.

It was later that night I was alone in my cabin. Everyone else was off having dinner, but I just couldn’t stomach the thought of food. The drugs were helping, but my gut still burned something fierce.

We had a small writing desk in our cabin. I was sitting there now, rooting through my pack that sat propped up next to me.

It has to be here somewhere.

And there it was. It had been sitting in the bottom of my pack since we’d left V-town. I’d hardly taken it out once.

My journal.

I lifted out the battered and scuffed leather bound book. Opening it up, I could see my entire life spread out before me.

The first pages were some of my earliest letters put to paper, crude and rough. They tightened up quickly enough. I flipped though to some pages about a third of the way though. There was an entry here from just days before I met English.

I smiled.

Moving on, I found the entries from our trip to Edmonton. And later yet from my time as mayor.

I almost cried when I found The entry from our wedding. I did burst into tears when I found the one from Ging and Liz’s birth.

Wiping my nose, I searched the room until I found an old, blunt pencil. I sharpened it with a claw.

Jon had reminded me. I’d better start writing this trip down.

It was only when I finished the entry that I realized I was almost out of space in my journal. I only had a single page left. I’d have to buy a new one when I got back to V-town.

Our ship made decent time. It wasn’t long before we were in the straights of Malaysia. We made dock at Kuala Lumpur to take on supplies.

None of us got off the ship, even though many of the other passengers did. We’d had enough adventure on this voyage, none of us wanted to tempt fate and get left behind.

Rebecca and I were down in our cabin when we heard a loud crash come from above deck.

Say old habits die hard, but we were both scrambling for the door before we could even think. Just a lot slower than we used to.

Do people still qualify as pirates if they’re attacking a ship in dock?

By the time we staggered on deck there had to be a good half dozen men storming up the gangplank. They’d already overwhelmed the skeleton crew left on the ship and were corralling the passengers off to one end of the deck.

“Don’t even think of it, Wolfy,” Rebecca whispered as she pulled me off with the rest of the passengers. “You’re not as young as you used to be.”

I fought up a smile. “None of us are, Babe.”

A moment later I felt someone bump into my side. A glance over and I saw Jon standing there. Well, all that was great, but where in the Gods’ names was Gathii?

“Alright, people,” one of the pirates shouted, raising a gun, “We’re going to do this nice and

easy. You're going to give us all your valuables in this sack here, then you're going to stay up on deck while we take a look-see in your cabins. Anyone who acts up gets shot, got it?"

I was rather impressed by the man's english.

Rebecca with a hand on one of my shoulders and Jon with a hand on the other we... just... stood there.

"Jon," I whispered, "You're just going to wait here and let this happen?"

He shrugged and whispered back. "I am out of my jurisdiction, Tommy. It is not my place to intervene."

I could hear the strain in the dog's voice.

The pirates were fast, it didn't take them long to get to us.

Jon and I were pretty straight forward, neither of us had anything in our hands, and no clothing to conceal anything.

Rebecca.

"Turn it out, lady," one of them said, coming forward.

Before I even knew it I had taken a step between them, blocking the man's way. A growl was growing in my throat.

"Oh! So we've got a brave little dog over here do we? Looks like you've already been hit with the mange. Get out of my way, mongrel."

I didn't budge. The growl in my throat just grew louder.

The man, I only noticed now he was a dingo of some sort, raised a knife.

"Get out of the way, mongrel or I'll slice you."

I couldn't help the morbid smile that slipped to my lips.

"With a butter knife like that?" I said. "I've fought a dozen men, better than you, at once."

And it was true. Under other conditions, twenty years ago, with English by my side, I wouldn't have hesitated to take them on.

Now...

From somewhere off in the distance I heard a scream. It didn't sound like a passenger.

A moment later it was followed by a roar.

The thug holding a knife to my nose turned towards the sound. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Lunging to the side, in perfect time with Rebecca, I shot one of my hands up, my claws coming in solid contact with the soft underside of the thug's wrist. A moment later I heard a heavy *clink* as the knife dropped to the ground.

Then bugger all broke lose.

Okay, I have to explain this some.

I'm a professional. A professional hunter, a professional bounty hunter. I've done stuff like this for a living for years. I must have bounty hunted for longer than almost anyone else in V-town save English.

There are certain things you make sure of before you start taking someone down. One of the most basic is *you get all the civilians out of the way*.

It may not sound like much, but there were a good twenty passengers up here, not to mention another two or three crew. Plus the half dozen pirates themselves.

That made of a very crowded, very confusing, deck.

Someone pushed past me to try and escape and very nearly sent me overboard. It was only Rebecca's quick hands that kept me on this side of the railing.

"Come on," I said, pressing forward. "We have to make sure no one gets hurt."

Glancing down, I wasn't too concerned about the one man I'd disarmed. Jon had struck him and

the dingo was out cold on the deck.

There was another scream from the general direction of the pirates. Now I *knew* who it was. I'd been around English long enough to know a *dear gods, there's a lion trying to eat me* scream.

I smiled grimly.

About ten seconds later and we'd pushed our way to the main group of pirates. There were three of them still standing. Two were armed with knives, and the boss was waving his gun around.

"Get back or I'll shoot!" he screamed.

Standing at the far end of the deck I sat Gathii. He was kneeling behind two prone pirates. The pirates weren't moving.

"Rebecca the left, Jon the right," I whispered. "I'll take the one with the gun."

"But..." I never did figure out who said that. I was already putting everything I had left into one final spring.

As far as my attacks have gone, this one was nothing in particular. I made a lunge though the air, clearing the distance between me and the pirate boss in no more than a heartbeat.

But, on a more personal scale, I couldn't help but be proud. My side felt like it was about to split open and I was already short of breath, but I was still a Taggert.

I landed on the man with an ooph. He hadn't seen me coming, and I wasn't in any condition to cushion the landing.

My motions were slow and weak, but I still fought with him for control of the gun.

And I nearly had it when the lights went out.

A moment later I came too, my ears ringing and my jaw aching.

I spat out a tooth.

Opening my eyes, I saw the pirate standing. He was raising the gun, aiming at something I couldn't see.

I heard a roar. It was growing louder.

"Ah, bugger."

Reaching up, I put every last ounce of strength I had into my arms.

Reaching out, I grabbed the gun and pulled it off target.

Only one problem. I could only pull it down.

A single bang left my ears ringing, then my gut erupted in a whole new world of pain.

I wasn't sure how long I was out, but it couldn't have been that long. When I next came to I could hear screaming and people running.

Also, far in the distance, I could hear sirens.

"Tommy! Tommy, talk to me!"

"Hey, Babe," I whispered.

A moment later I felt her arms close tightly around me. Glancing down, I could see she was staining herself in my blood.

"So," I asked, fighting for breath that simply didn't seem to want to come, "How bad is it?"

Jon stepped into my vision from the wavy edges.

"I think we had best get you to the local hospital. Now."

One last thing I saw before blacking out again was an image of a lion running towards me. He looked to be in a panic. I wonder why?

Gods, what hit me?

When I woke again I couldn't even tell I'd opened my eyes, everything was black. The only thing telling me I was still in this world was the gentle rocking of the room. We had to be on a ship.

“Hello?” I tried to call out but my words were little more than a soft mew. When I tried to move it felt like my bones were made of water.

It's dark. I can't move. And I'm all alone.

I'm not ashamed to say I cried.

I'm not sure how long it was before a sound reached me in through the darkness. I could hear footsteps.

“Hello?” I called again. My voice was no stronger.

The footsteps quickened.

It felt like my brain exploded when someone opened the door. Even the dull light from the hallway seemed enough to burn. And then they turned on the lights.

I hadn't been able to say much so far, but I did cry out at that.

“Tommy?”

My eyes were screwed shut to lessen the pain, but I'd know that voice anywhere.

“Babe...” I whispered.

Another two days and I was no better, but at least they decided I could sit up now.

That was the first chance I got to look at my chest. Gods but I was a mess.

I remember thinking long ago, when I'd nearly lost my leg, how cruel a world it must be to live without regeneration. Now it looks like I've been sent to live there permanently, dropping in head first.

“You're a foolish wolf, Tommy,” Rebecca whispered into my ear as she changed my dressings.

“A brave one, but foolish.”

I managed to smile. “Hey, Babe,” I said, “After a lifetime with me, what else would you expect?”

She'd told me that I'd managed to save Gathii from being shot, but only managed to take the bullet myself. And right on top of my cancer.

“What?” I'd asked, “Wouldn't that be the best place?”

She shaken her head.

“Tommy, we don't have any doctors here to treat you. We were able to get them to patch up the bullet wound in Malaysia, but the cancer was ripped apart. Now it's spreading.”

I'd sat there for a long moment after she said that.

My cancer had been somewhat controllable as long as it stayed in once place, as long as it could be cut out.

Putting all the strength I had left, I raised one arm from beneath the blanket they had me under.

There was little to it but fur and bone.

Another week... or something close to it, I can't tell going in and out of sleep these days, and Rebecca, Jon, and Gathii had come to my room. That was unusual as there was hardly enough space in the infirmary for even one visitor.

“Tommy,” Rebecca said, “We're almost home.”

It hurt to smile now, but I did anyway.

“Will you take me up on deck?”

There was a single wheelchair on the ship, and I was now in possession of it. I could feel every bump in the floor and every panel of wood on the deck as we slowly moved forward.

We were just behind the railing at the very bow of the ship. I knew this place. We were in Active Channel. We'd left this way on the *Sojourn*.

And there, off in the blue distance, just peeking above the horizon, were the towers of V-town. They were grander and more magnificent than I remembered.

Chapter 10: Life Is What we Leave Behind



I sat there in the wheelchair for the hours it took us to come to dock.

“Are you ready, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked from beside me. She'd never left my side as I sat here.

“Yeah, Babe,” I said. My voice was stronger now. “I'm ready.”

She reached for the handles of the wheelchair, but I waved her off.

“No,” I said, shrugging the blanket from me. “I will not return in disgrace.”

It took what little I had left, but I rose from the chair. Holding the railing before me in a death's grip, I slowly straightened.

And had to hold back a cry.

“I'm ready, Babe,” I said though clenched teeth. “Let's go home.”

Walking down the gangplank, we'd waited until everyone else had disembarked. That meant I had all the time I needed.

Jon and Rebecca by my side and Gathii standing behind, I walked sedately down to once again set claw on solid ground. I never tripped, never swayed, never clung for the rail.

I was home.

There was a small crowd standing before us. How they'd gotten here I had no idea.

“Dad!”

If Jon hadn't taken a firm hand on my shoulder I would ended up a crumpled heap as Ging and Liz crashed into me.

“Hey,” was all I was able to get out. “I'm glad to see you too.”

Well, I'm now likely of the few people in V-town who can say they've ridden in our once and only ambulance *twice*. Thankfully, this time the sirens weren't blaring. There was a dalmatian doctor in the back with me. I may hate the smell of antiseptic, but right now even it was welcoming.

I was once again bound for V-town general.

“So this is your city, Tommy?” Gathii said from his chair behind my bed. “It is very nice.”

I smiled. The action was less difficult now that the doctors had me hooked up to enough painkillers to tranquilize a horse.

“You’ve been given the grand tour?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, your son and daughter have been very accommodating. They’ve wanted to know everything about your time in my village.”

I would have laughed, but I *knew* that would hurt.

“I am concerned, Tommy,” he said, “I... my mission was to prevent you from returning. It is obvious you will never do that. I don’t know what to do now.”

I reached out and put a too-thin, too-frail hand on his.

“There’s a company called Storm Front,” I said. “You should check them out. I’m sure they’d be more than happy to hire you.”

When I woke again I could smell flowers. They were almost enough to cover the pervasive, soul sucking stench of the hospital.

When I opened my eyes I could just as well have said I was in a greenhouse. Every flat surface in the room was covered thick with vases and cups of water. I could hardly see the walls through the riot of colors.

And on my chest rested a small red box.

“You’re awake.”

I glanced over to see Rebecca sitting on a chair beside me. Is it wrong that my first thought was ‘she looks old’?

Well, it was true. There were rings under her eyes, wrinkles on her cheeks, and more grey in her hair than I remembered. Though she was still dressed in the red leather jacket I so always thought of her in.

I smiled and fought to sit up. I failed.

“Hi, Babe,” I said. My throat was rough.

She reached out to the little box on my chest, opening it.

“We had this specialty made for you, Tommy. I remembered once you said you’d like it. And,” she fought to work up a smile that looked fake even to me, “I don’t think you need any more flowers.”

My nose started twitching immediately.

There was only a single thing in the box. It was a long strip of dried meat, dipped in something brown.

“Chocolate venison,” she said.

I smiled.

“So,” I said, having to pause for breath between almost every word, “How goes the government, Max?”

The oni sat in a free chair next to Rebecca. He was just the latest in a long, long line of people come to see me.

I suppose that was what *really* brought me to understand I would never be walking out of this room. Everyone I knew was coming here, in single file, dressed in their finest black suits, to say goodbye.

Gods but it was morbid.

“So what will happen now?” Max asked. “In just one year we’re not only losing English, but you as well. It... it’s like we’re losing our royalty.”

I sputtered and coughed, then at last worked up a laugh. It hurt like a bugger, but I laughed. Straight from my belly.

“Man,” I said, trying to suck in a breath, “That’s the best joke I’ve heard in a long, long time.”

“Hey, Babe,” I whispered, “Did they bring my pack in here with me?”

I heard a rustling, but I couldn’t work up the energy to open my eyes.

“It’s here, Tommy. What do you want?”

“My journal.”

A few seconds later I felt a weight come gently down on my hands. It was all I could do to close my hands around the worn leather.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes.

Opening the book to its final page, I looked at the space left. There wasn’t much.

“Pencil?”

She pressed one into my hand.

I smiled.

My hand was shaking, but I ever so slowly wrote. I didn’t quite fill the rest of the paper, but it was close enough.

I wrote only two words.

The End.

Setting the book and pencil softly on my chest, I laid back.

“Well, Babe,” I said, “It’s been a nice run, hasn’t it? I’m surprised I even made it to... how old am I anyway?”

From out in the hallway I could hear two sets of footsteps coming my way. I’d know Ging and Liz anywhere.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath.

The black at the corners of my vision was growing, something greater than mere darkness.

“Hey, Babe,” I whispered, “Do me a favor. Give the kids my journal.”