



The Mourner

By wwwolf

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So, a quick heads up and a bit of a warning to any readers who dare to venture this far. This is the final book in *The Hunters* series. If you haven't read the previous books I highly recommend you do.

For those of you who have stuck with me this long, thank-you. I mean it. This book is effectively a full length epilogue to the series. The main thrust of the story ended with *The Prodigions*, but this gives us closure. Well, a form of closure.

To those who want the series to have a happy, upbeat, fairytale ending, I can't stress enough: stop reading now. *The Mourner* is aptly named.

For those of you who are brave enough to continue on, I hope you enjoy and I hope this is a fitting send off to my first and most enduring cast of characters. May you all find what it is you've been hunting for.

Chapter 7: The Scent of Flowers



We still did everything we could to leave a trail for Jon – which wasn't much – as we headed west.

I'll admit our pace picked up with Rebecca looking after me. I'd kept her from it for so long out of a feeling of shame. I hadn't wanted her to see what was slowly eating me from within.

But now that I'd laid myself bare – in more ways than one – I was nothing but glad for it. Her thin and nimble fingers, not to mention her better point of view, meant she was far better at keeping the slow horror at bay.

I can't tell you the precise moment we finally entered India, but I sure as the gods knew what marked it.

Rain.

I hadn't the slightest what the date was, but we were pretty much convinced we'd managed to get here in the middle of rainy season. If it kept coming down like this my fur might start to turn green with moss.

“What's wrong, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked as I checked the leather pouch at my hip again.

I nearly jumped when she set her soft hand on my shoulder.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing, Babe. I'm just checking up on English.” Turning, I showed her the ashes. “I just always get worried whenever we get wet that some of the moisture will get through to him.”

She gave me a lopsided grin and a chuckle.

It was long ago we'd decided, though never really *said* it, that it was easier to refer to English directly. In some ways the lion wasn't quite dead. He was still with us. And it was the cagey old cat who'd sent us on this quest to begin with.

“I'm sure he'll be fine, Wolfy,” she said. “He hadn't complained yet, has he?”

I grinned back as I carefully fitted the top tightly over his remains.

“Nah, Babe. This trip is the quietest he's been in a long time. I think he's just looking forward to seeing his family again.”

Unlike Japan and China, the entry into India was a... subdued affair. We didn't even know we'd crossed the boarder until we'd managed to run across a caravan of traders who spoke english. We were somewhere in West Bengal.

With every step we took the rain seemed to get nothing but worse. Okay, I've lived in Vancouver all my life. I *know* rain. Bugger, I work for a company called *Storm Front* for the gods' sakes and I've never seen anything like this.

The skies were nothing but an uninterrupted cascade of water, and the once hard packed dirt path beneath us was mixed to a froth of mud so deep I was up to my knees half the time. It was going to take me weeks to wash the mud from my fur.

“Do you see that, Wolfy?” Rebecca asked, pointing up ahead. I almost didn't hear her. The wind tried to steal her words away almost before they left her mouth.

Thankfully, I did. It was a light.

Slogging on, it took us the better part of an hour to make what should have been a five minute journey, but at long last we cleared the last ridge to see a small village.

Was it wrong I howled in joy at even the slightest possibility of a hot bath?

Down into the small valley that held the village, we had to be careful not to slip, and even then we spent more time sliding down at the head of a mudslide than we did walking.

“Namaskaar!” I shouted as we neared. It was the only word in Hindi I knew. We'd learned it from the traders.

At first there was no response. I yelled it again at the top of my lungs for all the good it did.

Continuing on to the largest building in town, we could only hope it was an inn.

Throwing open the door, I stepped inside. I hadn't really *meant* to arrive that dramatically, but the wind had its own plans.

Well, we'd gotten it right. This was an inn, or a pub, or something. There was a dozen men and women sitting in here at tables.

They all looked up at us like we were demons stepped straight out of a story book.

“Namaskaar,” I repeated, my voice softer now.

One of them stood up and approached us. I wiped the dripping mud from my hand and offered it to him.

He ignored it completely.

Walking around us, he gave us both a close inspection. Closer than I really would have cared for.

He then said something, but I hadn't the slightest clue what it was. He said it again, but all I could do was raise my hands and shrug.

Rebecca was a little smarter than I. She dug into her pack and pulled out a small purse of Indian coins we'd traded for a week or so back. A moment later she was holding out what we *hoped* was about the right amount for a night's stay at a county inn.

The man backed away, his eyes going wide.

Uhh... am I missing something here?

Things just kept going from bad to worse when the other men and women in the room stood. And none of them looked too happy.

“Uhh, Babe,” I whispered, glancing across to Rebecca, “Perhaps they don't care much for visitors here.”

She didn't bother replying before we began to back slowly towards the door.

I wanted to run, but the day's hike, combined with my own infirmity left me gasping for breath no more than a dozen paces from the inn.

We were more than close enough to be caught by the angry mob.

Wonderful. How was this going to look? We'd journeyed half way across the world, beaten back monsters both natural and man made, escaped a whole *bounty hunting guild*, only to be caught by a pissed off gaggle of farmers.

I was just rising from where I'd tripped and fallen in the mud when I felt something heavy hit the back of my head.

Well... bugger.

I woke up twelve hours later. Or fourteen, or seventy-two for all I knew. I was cuffed hand a foot and stuffed – as far as I could tell – in a little shed out behind the village.

And it was *still* raining.

If there was one bit of good news in this whole thing it was that Rebecca was still with me. They hadn't tied her as tightly as they had I. For that I was grateful to any all all gods that may or may not exist.

“You alright, Babe?” I asked as soon as I came to.

Other than tussled hair and a few more scuffs on her old standby read leather jacket she looked not too bad.

“I was about to ask the same of you, Wolfy,” she said. They didn't bother hitting *me* on the head like that. You were the one who fought. As soon as I saw you go down I gave up.

I snorted. “What? You, Babe? That doesn't sound like you at all.”

For just a moment I could see the fear in her eyes, then she pushed it quickly away.

“Not normally, Wolfy. But this time I don't have anyone to carry your limp body away, and it wasn't like I was going to leave you here with a hoard of violent villagers.”

I worked up a grin.

“How about you scoot over here, Babe, and you let me chew through your bonds?”

I couldn't reach my own, but by the feeling of them they were nothing but twined rope. My teeth, no matter how dull, should be able to make quick work of them.

She rolled her eyes. “They're not *that* dumb, Wolfy,” she said. They tied me tight to the wall.”

I groaned.

Our wait, well longer than I would have liked, wasn't all that bad. It was the next day the rain *finally* let up. The land was still a mess, but at least you could look up without drowning.

And that was when we got to meet the head man of the village. He was an ox, or something along those lines. In his thick fingers I saw a phrase book that looked to be a long lost relative of the ones Jon had packed.

Locking the door securely behind him, he squatted down on the relatively dry dirt in here and eyed us.

“You. English. Speak.” I could tell by the way he said the words that they were hurting his throat.

And, oddly, he said them at Rebecca, not I. This poor little Wolfy was all but ignored.

“Yes,” she said. She spoke slowly and carefully.

The man grunted.

“You. Are. God.”

Okay, I'll admit it, I would have picked my jaw up off the floor if my hands hadn't been tied. Even Rebecca, normally unflappable, was taken aback.

She looked him straight in the eye. “No. Travelers.”

He paged through the book for a bit as she repeated herself. At long last he grunted.

“Lie. God. Rain.”

I would have face palmed if I could have.

“What now?” Rebecca asked. The man didn't seem to need a translation for that.

“Judgment,” was all he said.

I'm not ashamed to say that the single word sent a tremor of fear all the way from my nose to the tip of my tail.

A short time later a half dozen more of the villagers arrived with stout sticks. They untied Rebecca, but not me.

Rebecca was politely shown to the back of a wagon. I was carried in Zulu style.

“Anyone want to fill me in here?” I asked after I was none too gently dropped in the wagon. Instead of an answer I got our packs thrown on top of me.

Though I did still somehow manage to grin when English's ashes twacked me on the side of the head.

They didn't quite trust us *that* much. I was bound hand and foot, and Rebecca, while fairly free, had her ankle tied to the wagon. Though it seemed more ceremonial than anything.

“Where are we going?” I asked more than once. The answer, when I finally got one, was ‘Mumbai’.

Well, it beats walking.

The wagon took us to another village. From there we were transferred – with a piece of paper – to another wagon. From there to a barge, another wagon, and finally a truck. The paper stuck with us the whole time.

And, rather surprisingly, we were treated none too badly. Rebecca better than I, but we were fed and generally looked after.

Well, right up until we got to the truck. Then this little vacation came to an end. The truck was surprisingly modern. And in its back were individual jail cells.

When the truck doors finally opened again we were met with a... rather surprising sight.

I hadn't been quite sure what to expect of Mumbai. From what I'd seen of India so far I wasn't expecting much. Instead what I got was an impressively clean street and a row of relatively new buildings.

The man opening the truck door was dressed in a dark blue uniform. Somethings it seems are almost universal. A cop.

The man, surprisingly polite, cut both our bonds and helped us down. I would have howled in joy of being able to move freely again after almost a month of one type or another constriction.

There was only one problem through – they took our stuff. All of it, even English's ashes.

And from there I was shown into a cell and left with a lot of time to think.

I hadn't seen Rebecca in over a day. They separated us the moment we got in here. I can only assume she was sent to a woman's wing.

As for what it's worth this had to be one of the nicer prisons I've ever had the opportunity to be locked away in. Though I think that's more because I'd been speaking english during the booking procedure than anything else.

I had a nice little cell all to myself. The door was iron bars, but the walls were painted white concrete. Hey, I even had my own little barred window looking out at a little blue square of sky.

The sound of claws clicking down the concrete hall outside my door snapped me back to the here and now. There's aren't many folks locked up in this wing, so any activity is of interest.

At long last a man in a blue cop's uniform came to a stop in front of my cell.

Gods but the man reminded me of Jon. He wasn't a German Sheppard, but he was a dog. The way he stood, the way he walked... I nearly cried.

"Tommy Taggart?" he said, reading off a paper.

I nodded and slowly stood up. I didn't bother saying anything. It was obvious he didn't understand english.

A moment later the key turned in the lock and he ushered me out. I was more than pleased to note he didn't cuff my wrists.

This place was *big*. Outside of V-town, I'm pleased to say I haven't had to get too up close and personal to that many jails. This building put the cells we had sequestered under and around Police HQ to shame.

I shivered at *that* memory.

The further we walked the nicer the place became. From the bare and whitewashed cells to clean if spartan mess halls and exercise gyms, to halfway pleasant processing areas, to offices and meeting rooms.

It was one of those office that we finally stopped in front of. My escort reached out to knock on the door. A moment later a voice called us in.

The guard opened the door and motioned me onwards. He didn't follow.

The office, like the guard and the jail, was pretty universal. I'd know a low level manager anywhere.

The room was tight, but pleasant enough. The walls were the same white as the rest of the building, but there was a desk, a couple of chairs, and a window far nicer than the one I'd spent yesterday looking through.

And sitting on the other side of the desk was the scrawniest tiger I've ever seen in my life. He couldn't be more than twenty-five, and topped out at a hundred pounds. From where I stood he looked almost anorexic.

He smiled at me. The first words out of his mouth made me smile in return.

"Ah, Mr. Taggart. So sorry for the inconvenience." His voice had that stereotypical British-Indian accent that suggested the kingdom was still running some schools out here. "Please," he continued, "Have a seat."

I did, and my butt end was more than happy for a little padding after the gods only knew how many days of bumpy wagons and truck beds.

"The government would like to extend it's most heartfelt apologies for what you've been through, Mr. Taggart," the tiger continued. "You have to understand that we are still in the process of rebuilding after the most unfortunate events that left us like..." he gestured down at himself, "This."

I let out a long sigh and rolled my neck to get out the kinks. Well, here was something I could deal with – a bureaucrat. I was back in my element.

"Care to tell me what exactly I did wrong?" I asked, keeping my voice carefully level.

He coughed and looked away. "Ah, you see, Mr. Taggart, you arrived at a most inopportune

time. The rains that accompanied you were far more than is seasonable. You were outsiders in a small, rural town that was in the midst of a disaster. They did what so many might. They assumed you evil spirits and took action to keep you from doing mischief.”

My jaw just about dropped.

“They thought *we* brought the floods?” I asked.

He coughed again. “Ah, well, not *you*, Mr. Taggert. There is a goddess, particularly popular in Western Bengal. She's a human, controls the seasonal rains, and is most often seen with a canine companion and protector. I'm sure you can see how an honest mistake like this could be made.”

I laughed.

It started out as a soft chuckle but grew until I was almost falling out of my seat. I laughed so hard it felt like the stitch in my side was going to rip.

“So,” I asked, wiping my eyes, “What now? Are we going to be burnt at the stake?”

The tiger's eyes went wide. “No, no. Of course not, Mr. Taggert. We wouldn't dream of it. Some of our outer provinces may be less than civilized, but I can assure you *we* are not. We'll simply clear up your paperwork, write you both official pardons and you'll be free to go.”

Pausing for a moment, he reached down under his desk. I heard the familiar rustle of fabric.

“It is your good fortune,” he continued, “That your passport made it all the way here intact. That should speed the process considerably.”

And then came the most feared of all beasts, the paperwork. Thankfully, the tiger called for a tea service to help sooth my parched throat.

Between the man's accent and his penchant for tea, I couldn't help compare him to English.

“So, Mr. Taggert,” he said, “We're almost done. What is your reason for coming to India?”

I shook my head. “Just passing through,” I said. “We're on our way to Africa. I promised a friend I'd bring his remains home.”

“Ah.” He scribbled on his paper. “That would explain this.” Reaching down behind his desk again he pulled out the pouch holding English's ashes. Let out a a breath when I saw them. “We were wondering what this was.” He paused for a moment and signed. “You are aware that the transport of body remains is restricted?”

I rolled my eyes.

He looked at me and shrugged. “Don't worry too much, Tommy,” he said, a smile slipping through. “We'll make it simple. Just another piece of paper.”

I signed and leaned back in my chair. Well, at least I didn't have anything to hide.

I did make a point to leave out that the bounty hunting guild was looking for us in China though.

Reciting the story to this point, I gave the man the quick once over on our journey – remembering to let him know that if they ever encountered a particular German Sheppard wandering this way that he was with us.

“Very good, Mr. Taggert.” the man said. “We'll just have to go over the identity of the ashes. Just a formality, you understand. We need to assure that there is no fowl play.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “They're of a lion. My best friend, Micheal Jones. He was from Kenya originally. Everyone called him English.”

It took me a moment to realize the tiger had stopped writing. He'd stopped dead the moment's I'd said English's real name.

“Uh, yes,” the man stuttered out, “I'm sure that will be more than enough. We'll just get the paperwork sorted out and have you free in a few hours.” With that the man stood up and quickly

walked around me to the office door. He slipped into the hallway, leaving me here alone.

I couldn't make out a single word that was said in the hallway, but it sounded like the tiger was talking to the guard outside. A moment later I heard a set of footsteps taking off at high speed.

Bugger. What have you gotten myself into *this* time, English?

When the tiger returned he left the office door open behind him.

"Sorry to keep you, Mr. Taggert. Your escort will be with us in just a moment to take you back to your... ah, *accommodations*."

I wasn't quite ready to call this an uptick in my fortunes just yet, but when I got back to my cell I noticed my bed had been changed. Now, rather than the thin straw weave that had sat there before I had a halfway decent cloth and wool mattress.

I cocked an eyebrow as I sat down.

What is all the gods' names was going on?

My fortunes didn't end there. When evening meal came around I was expecting the same simple gruel they'd fed me before. Instead I was pleasantly surprised.

Curry has never been my thing, but after a month of whatever people scraped off the bottom of the slop barrel, curried chicken was a delight beyond description.

Sitting alone in my cell, I hungrily lapped up my meal from the bowl provided and looked out my small window. I could only hope the *paperwork* didn't take too long to process.

They must have completed my case at record speed. The sun was no more than kissing the horizon the next morning when I heard the *tat-tat-tat* of claws coming down the hallway towards me.

The same cop as yesterday let me out of my cell and led me off.

"Wolfy!"

I didn't even get two steps into the processing room before Rebecca had both arms, and possibly both legs, wrapped around me.

"I'm happy to see you too, Babe," I whispered, kissing her cheek.

We were interrupted a moment later by someone clearing their throat.

A clerk, a different one than the tiger I'd talked to yesterday, stood before us, our backpacks leaning on the wall next to him.

"Please ensure you have all your belongings and I'll sign your release," he said. He had the same British accent as the tiger, but didn't speak the language nearly as well.

About ten minutes later we were ready to go. All our stuff was here, though all I really cared about were our passports and English's ashes.

"Very well," the clerk said, scrawling on a piece of paper. "There is only one more thing." Stiffly, he reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch. "I'm sure you will find this sufficient compensation for your troubles."

He dropped the surprisingly heavy bag in my hand and turned to leave.

I don't think giving folks money like this is normal procedure, but we didn't question it. The man's back had hardly turned before Rebecca and I were hoofing it towards the door, and the fresh air it so tantalizingly promised.

We would have made a sprint for it, but that just would have been uncouth.

Out in the sunlight again, I couldn't help but stretch my arms. It felt so *good*.

There was a wide set of steps leading down from the building to the busy road beyond. We took them at an easy stroll.

“Well, Babe,” I said, “This wasn't exactly my plan, but you can see the Arabian Sea out there. We're almost to Africa.”

She snorted and smacked me lightly on the side of the head.

“Don't get ahead of yourself, Wolfy. We've still got a long way to go to get to Kenya.”

Descending the last few steps, I noticed what was setting me off about the street here. It had cars.

We don't have many cars in V-town, but I'd gotten fairly used to them in Japan. Here there was a near perfect mix of pedestrians, rickshaws, and motor vehicles swarming the street. And one long, black, car in particular was stopped right at the foot of the steps, its doors open.

“Mr. and Mrs. Taggert?” a cat asked. He was standing in front of the car, clothed in a black suit that must be sweltering in the heat.

We stopped dead.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

The cat smiled. “My employer would like to meet with you.”

I took a step back.

“And who is your *employer*?” I asked.

The cat cocked his head slightly as if to ask, *you don't know?*

“All will be explained, I'm sure,” he said. “After all, she was kind enough to arrange for your speedy discharge from jail and the bag of coins you now hold.”

And with that we got in the car. The driver offered to stash our packs in the trunk, but Rebecca and I declined. We'd only so recently gotten them back that I didn't want them to be out of arm's reach.

I can count the number of times I've been in a motor vehicle on my hands and toes. Most of those were his English and his baby. They'd never prepared me for this.

Even the ambulances in V-town tend to drive rather slowly, I don't think I've ever been above forty kilometers per hour. The way this guy drove left both Rebecca and I cowering in the foot wells. I couldn't make out the words he screamed out the window, but I had a feeling they weren't blessings.

In due course was made our destination. And we were all suitably impressed.

The house in front of us was on par with the greatest and grandest of what you might find in V-town, and far above my own rather meager apartment. Large wrought iron gates opened as we approached, pulled aside by workers seemingly standing there for that exact purpose.

We were expected.

Up the graveled drive, the car finally came to a stop at a large white, colonial style mansion. Yet again there were people just waiting for us. I didn't even have to open the car door.

It didn't take many steps after we crossed the threshold for me to start developing an inferiority complex. Don't get me wrong, I've been to lots of places like this before, but always while wearing one of Smith's suite.

As it was, dusty, dirty, strung out, and reeking of our time in jail, all I could do was stare.

“Thank you for coming.”

My head snapped up. In front of us stood a grand staircase, and down it, ever so slowly, stepped a grand old dame of tigriss.

I don't think I've ever used the phrase *grand old dame*, but this was one case where it fit.

Her fur was long gone grey, and she was as thin as a reed, but she simply carried an air of... well, not quite royalty, but close to. Even her voice was smooth and cultured, only ever so subtlety

cracked by the ravages of age.

"My name is Jasmine," she said. "I do believe you are carrying my dear Michael."

I had to rack my brain for a long moment before it came to me. One of English's first adventures after leaving home had been to befriend – and *almost* marry – a tiger named Jasmine in India. She had been the daughter of a local governor or something like that.

Well, it looked like she wasn't doing too bad for herself.

It was only moments later we found ourselves in a calm and sedate sitting room, cups of tea and cream biscuits spread before us.

"So you're her then?" I asked, slurping my tea. I may have gotten a good meal in jail last night, but I had a lot of calories to catch up on.

She nodded her head gently. "Yes," her voice had that same British schooling accent I was getting used to. "I'm pleased to hear he hadn't forgotten me."

I closed my eyes for a moment and set a hand on the pouch that sat on my lap.

"I don't think that could ever happen, Jasmine. English... he was a unique person. I wouldn't be surprised if some of his final thought were of you."

I decided not to mention his widow in Japan.

"Tell me," she said, her voice shaking, "How did he die?"

I relayed the story of English's time in V-town, and how we'd met, than finally parted. She cried now and then, but was smiling when I continued with our journey to here.

"Ah," she said, wiping away a tear, "Then we are most fortunate that my grandnephew happened across you."

I smiled. "That would explain a lot. I take it these coins are yours?" I offered her the pouch but he pressed it back to me.

"No, my dear friends, think of it as my gift to you. I haven't seen my Michael in so many years, but he still means a great deal to me. It truly is the least I can do."

And she hadn't been kidding on the *least* part. Jasmine, it seemed, was rather well off. No matter how hard we tried to refuse, we just couldn't turn her down when she offered us a room in her home.

Over the next few days as we recuperated she came to me again and again, asking for stories about English. I was happy to oblige. I was rather surprised to hear she wasn't married. Apparently the old lion had meant more to her than he'd ever known.

Jasmine spoke to me a great many times, but even more to Rebecca. The tigress may have a sizable staff here at her home, but she seemed to have precious few *friends*. Like most anywhere in the world, money didn't automatically buy you a happy life. The two woman spent more and more time together each day.

Worked well for me. Gave me time to plan out the next step in the journey.

"Rebecca," I said on the forth day as we were waking up and getting ready for breakfast, "How would you feel if I went the rest of the way to Kenya alone?"

I think she just about punched me.

"Tommy! There's no way you're leaving me alone now. Now after all we've been through."

I grinned and leaned forward to kiss her.

"It's not that, Babe. It's just... well, English asked *me* to do this. I shouldn't be long, it's just across the Arabian Sea. I should be able to book passage. And besides, someone needs to hang around in case Jon shows up."

Rebecca wasn't exactly happy about it, but I did at last convince her to stay here, and Jasmine was more than happy to accommodate us. She even found me some Kenyan currency and a phrase book.

It was on my last day in India before boarding a westbound junk that Jasmine came to me.

I was sitting in our bedroom, making some final adjustments to my pack when a soft knock came at the door.

"Yes?" I called.

She stepped through slowly, as if afraid to enter a room in her own home.

"Tommy," she said, voice barely above a whisper, "I have a request to ask of you."

I motioned her to take a seat on the bed beside me.

"Anything," I said.

Pulling a small locket from under her blouse, Jasmine flicked it open to show me a tiny black and white photograph. I had to look hard before I could recognize the two people.

A frighteningly young lion and tiger.

"It's the only photo I have of him," she said, voice yet softer now. "The only thing I have. I... I would ask you for a pinch of his ashes to keep with me. To remember him." She smiled shyly, "And to bury with me when I pass on not so long from now."

I let out a long sigh and smiled.

"For you, my dear lady, anything." I was a poor imitation of English's voice but it worked.

Leaning down to my pack, I pulled out the heavy leather pouch. I opened it to find the perfectly uniform gray ashes.

Reaching a hand in, I took a careful pinch and let it fall into the locket, making sure not to lose a single grain.