

Hunter of Souls

By : **Tudor**

He has been alive for more than five hundred years. Chosen since birth to rid the world of the demons that haunt it, Llewellyn James roams in darkness, a light against evil. With little human companionship and a life of eternity stretching out before him, he longs for the day that he can finally pass on the mantle to another...and rest in peace. Alexandra Frost admits that she is hard to impress. But when she comes across the dark personality that is Llewellyn James, she can't help but to be drawn in. As their two worlds collide, she may be forced to chose between the love she has found and the world she must leave behind.

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PROLOGUE

Changing of the Guard

1400 A.D.

It was a scrawny old man that moved quickly down the unpaved road, his graying hair in tattered tufts, his watery blue eyes magnified beyond normal appearance behind the thick spectacles that insisted upon sliding continuously down his beaked nose and which he had to constantly push up with a withered hand.

The morning was a somber one, the clouds overhead a swirling gray, blocking out the bright friendliness of the sun. The fog was thick, so thick to where he could barely see a few feet ahead of him and the rain was already beginning to fall in the small land known as Wales.

The man, his moth eaten cloak flapping around his ankles, had begun to run now, moving hastily, weaving in and out of the people and carts that rolled by. His breath was coming in sharp, painful gasps, but he hurried on. On his person, a gold chain jiggled, the only testament to his great wealth.

If one looked closely enough, his discomfort would be more than clear as he turned a street corner to step more into the slums and back alleys. His eyes widened as he caught sight of the lepers begging in the street and the whores that called to him as he hurried by. "Riffraff," he said nervously, but not too loud. He remembered what the destitution was like, the sense of hopelessness, but he did not like to be reminded.

After a time, he came to the house he sought, a decaying one story structure, the only part new about it being the gleaming red door at its front.

As red as blood, the old man thought and shivered. For a second, a small moment of time, he considered merely turning around and going back home, but then the memory of his wife's agonized shrieks filled his ears, pushing his heart up to his throat, and a sudden surge of courage filled him, and he stepped confidently forward, raising a fist to knock upon the door--

It opened slowly with an ominous creak, revealing nothing but darkness, and just like that, his new found courage passed away from him. His tongue slid out to wet his cracked and shaking lips. He took a step.

"Nicholas?" he called hoarsely. "Is that you?" Silence and a cold chill greeted him.

"Nicholas!" He took another step, crossing the threshold, and the door slammed shut behind him. He jumped with a frightened squeak, his fingers twisting together.

In a sudden roar, a fireplace on the other side of the room crackled to life, revealing dark wooden floors, a closed window framed by torn purple curtains--and a blue armchair, already occupied by the very person he sought.

This man was the exact opposite of his visitor, and as he slowly rose to his feet, it was more than clear why. Everything about him was disconcerting. His hair was a flaming red, straight and thick, falling into light brown eyes that were a chilling cold, still and intense. His jaw line was sharp and angular, his face pale yet devastatingly handsome, and when he smiled, white teeth gleamed, although there was no humor in it. He stood tall and muscular, chest wide, arms thick. Hanging from his neck on a shining, silver chain was a curved knife, its hilt a turquoise blue. But even more disconcerting was the fact that this man looked no more than twenty years old, but he and the old man's great-great grandfather had played together as children.

"Henry," the young man now spoke, his voice deep, and Henry winced a little at the pure beauty of it, although he could listen to it forever. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Nicholas," Henry greeted with a stiff nod. "You look well."

"I would say the same about you, but I make it a habit not to lie," Nicholas replied smoothly, gracefully walking over to a small cabinet on the opposite side of the room, muscles rippling suggestively. "Tea?"

"Yes, please," Henry accepted cautiously, watching as Nicholas retrieved two small cups from a shelf.

"Thank-you."

"I was expecting you," Nicholas said after a time, waving a large hand casually over the glasses and Henry was not in the least surprised when they both began steaming from the hot liquid inside. He turned swiftly to hand Henry his drink, eyes probing yet emotionless. "I heard about Elizabeth."

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Henry's eyes began to water and his nose turned red. "That's why I came, Nicholas. Elizabeth has been in labor for two days and they're considering cutting her open. The baby is in danger. She might die!" he shouted, annoyed that the other man seemed not at all affected by this news.

"That's what you get for trying to have a child in your old age," Nicholas replied smoothly. "How old are you? Fifty? Sixty?"

"Fifty-four, but that's not the point!" Henry set his cup carefully on the small table beside him.

"Nicholas, you must save her."

Nicholas sat back down in his armchair, taking a quaint sip of his tea, his eyes closing leisurely. "This is quite delicious, no?"

"Damn you!" Henry spat, voice trembling. "I need you!"

Nicholas began to laugh. "So you curse me and ask for my help in the same sentence!"

"She is dying." Henry ripped off the gold chain on his person, throwing it at Nicholas's feet. "A long time ago, you gave me that with a promise that if I ever needed anything, you would aid me. Out of love for my great-great grandfather, you have been a friend to me. Before this moment, I have never asked you for anything. I have built up my fortune, I have lived well. But in this, I cannot be independent. I cannot."

Nicholas stared at him calmly for a few minutes and Henry stared right back, feeling oddly sick. Then, he smiled. "Well said, Henry. Perhaps you are right."

The old man sighed with relief. "Thank-you, Nicholas."

"Do not thank me, Henry, because you will not to after I am done!" He said it harshly, eyes flashing.

"Your wife I cannot help. She is too far gone. I am sorry."

Henry's mouth gaped open in shock. "How do you know that? You have not even--"

"She is carrying your son," Nicholas cut him short. "Congratulations." His brown eyes had begun to glow brightly.

"A son," Henry muttered in disbelief. "A son." He smiled. "Thanks be to God."

"Yes, a son. I can save him, he clings to life stubbornly, even as we speak." Nicholas stood once again, towering over his friend. "Henry, you know what I am, what I've been tasked to do for these past decades, almost for one hundred years."

Henry shivered. "Yes." "Oh yes, he knew, how could he not? His family had kept Nicholas's secret for years, out of both respect and fear, for Nicholas was worse than any mythological beast.

He was the Hunter of Souls.

Such a name, when he was younger, meant nothing to him. Nicholas had merely been an old family friend then, a shadow, a protector in the background, always watching, never still.

Never aging.

The thought had not occurred to him until he grew much older, but even then, he had never wondered why. He had just assumed that some got all of the luck, that some just got to keep their thicket of hair and smooth faces until death.

Oh, but how that had changed that night exactly fifteen years ago! The cloaked man that had accosted him in the street had given him the chills, had made goose bumps rise all over his skin. And when the cloaked man had thrown back his hood to reveal decaying flesh and sharpened teeth, Henry had screamed, sure that he was going to die, as--as the thing opened its mouth, leaning towards his neck, to surely tear out a chunk of meat. What would've happened had Nicholas not shown up when he did, Henry didn't even want to think about. All he remembered was a ferocious growl accompanied by a high shrill of pain as a wolf, the size of lion, leapt at the hideous creature, teeth sinking into the graying, molding flesh, blood coloring the dirt upon the ground. The thing was screeching, wails of pain that were so chilling that the air itself seemed to turn cold. The wolf, amber eyes glowing, tore its head from its shoulders in one swift bite, and then turned to stare at him.

Henry had wanted to run, but those eyes had been hypnotizing, and he watched, amazed, as the wolf's figure contorted, then grew longer, fur disappearing to be replaced by a man none other than Nicholas.

"You must never reveal to anyone what you have seen this night," he had ordered him sternly. Henry could only gasp and gape, pointing as the creature's torn and bloodied body began to glow, lighting up a bright white.

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Nicholas turned and cursed, unsheathing the knife that now hung about his neck, symbols that were a dizzying blue decorating the blade. "Leave now," he had spat. "Leave before I lose them."

Henry hadn't known who they were, but he had been quite happy to turn and sprint back down the road, not stopping until he was safely behind his bedroom door back at home.

Later, much later when he could look Nicholas full in the face without feeling physically ill, it was all explained to him. Those things out there were demons, creatures of the night that ate human flesh and took one's soul to render themselves immortal. They were brutal, strong and virtually undefeatable. Except, of course, when Nicholas was on their tails.

There was only one Hunter of Souls in the entire world at one time, only one that could rid the world of such evil. Nicholas, therefore, had to be immortal, only able to die when another hunter was born to take his place.

Now, standing before Nicholas, he repeated more clearly, "Yes, I know what you are."

"I have served almost one hundred years as a hunter, protecting mankind from its enemies. I have done so with dignity and honor." Nicholas closed his eyes, a small smile gracing his lips. "I am tired, Henry, and old. I might not look it, but my soul is weary. I am ready to die. Ready to give up the ghost, per say." His eyes snapped open. "I will ensure that your son lives, Henry, under one condition."

"What condition would that be?" Henry asked suspiciously, eyes narrowing behind his thick glasses.

"That your son takes my place. That he becomes the next Hunter of Souls."

Nicholas watched calmly as Henry's face drained of blood, eyes overly bright as he tried to digest the ultimatum given to him.

"You--you're serious?" Henry questioned weakly.

"I am."

"Then you're mad!"

Nicholas shrugged, a flowing movement of his broad shoulders. "Say whatever you like, but I suggest you make a decision quickly. Even seconds are now precious for your son."

Henry took a threatening step towards him, hands curling into fists at his side. "You would condemn my son to an eternity of hell?"

Nicholas's eyes flashed, a flicker of warning. "Hardly hell, Henry."

"Do not insult my intelligence! I know the agony you go through daily as you watch those about you die, knowing that you remain an ageless shell! You've battled evil and the darkness for so long that you've forgotten light and happiness!"

Nicholas growled low in his throat, the sound of a ferocious animal, and Henry was instantly reminded of how dangerous being in the same room with this man was. "Listen to me, and listen to me good, you old fool.

Do you think that you can meddle in the things of the eternal and emerge unscathed? Are you so presumptuous to believe that you should not pay your debts, even when it is, as you say, to the darkness?

What would I gain by saving your son? Cannot I merely pick another at will to serve after me? Just as Samuel's mother promised him to God, so you will promise your son to me, if you want him to live. I will watch over him when I can and when he gets older, I will train him and not leave him until I feel he is ready.

That is beyond generous, even you aren't so stupid that you can't understand that! Yes, he will experience loneliness and pain, as do all creatures, but decide now whether having none is worth his life, Henry James! It matters none to me!"

Henry turned, closing his eyes, feeling the pain, sorrow and unspeakable anger pressing down upon him, cutting his heart like a blade. He wanted to say no, no to condemning his first born, and his last, to the only life offered to him. What kind of father was he, if he allowed such a travesty? Ah, but the consequences of refusing Nicholas's less than generous offer! His wife of almost thirty years would've died for nothing, nothing at all.

When he turned around to face Nicholas once again, his eyes were like a burning fire, his face resolved.

"So be it," he granted, and a single tear fell upon his withered cheek.

600 years later--Present Day

The lights hovering above the black street flickered, providing on again, off again halos of yellow, giving off an ominous feeling to the deserted road. The houses on the left and the forest on the right were both perfectly still, except for the slight rustling of the leaves upon the looming, emerald trees, partially blocking out the full

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moon overhead, a bright luminous sphere that sent out a silvery glow to the earthly inhabitants.

There was a slight howl of wind, small and quick, and seemingly out of the darkness stepped a young man, his smooth, pale skin a stark contrast to the dark eyes that flickered to take in his surroundings. He was tall, but not unnaturally so, and the black shirt he wore, long sleeved and buttoned up as if he had just come from an elegant banquet, was stretched almost painfully across his broad chest. Although he also wore jeans, a faded blue, he seemed almost out of place, as if trying to desperately blend in by wearing such clothes, but there was something about him otherworldly, as if he did not quite belong where he was. On the ring finger of his left hand he wore a band with the crescent of a roaring lion. Around his neck, hanging on a silver chain, was a curved knife, the hilt a sparkling blue.

He walked, no, waltzed slowly, almost regally, down the street, the small heels of his shoes clicking in a hasty tempo. The wind rustled his dark hair, which was long enough to fall to his eyes, yet short enough to manage: he brushed it back casually with a pale, blue veined hand, eyes still sweeping the street.

As he moved on, he began to whistle, first softly, then more loudly, the sound echoing across the midnight skies. It was a somber tune, one he had learned decades ago, and it soothed his mind and helped him focus when nothing else could.

Suddenly, he stopped, becoming an impenetrable alabaster statue, cocking his head slowly to one side. He remained as such for a few minutes, not one muscle twitching, nor did he even blink. Then, with all of the speed one man could possess, he leapt into the air, turning into a silvery mist as he spun, his body disappearing to break into hundreds of smoky molecules.

He streamed away, weaving in and out of the trees with all speed, flowing with the wind that carried him further north. Even in this state he was on the alert, flaring out his senses to include the whole forest, from the hooting owl some feet away to the tranquil splashing of the lake down the road some fifteen miles.

Abruptly, the mist that he had become jetted towards the earth, and before he was ten feet away from the ground, he had shifted gracefully back to his human form, his feet touching the grass without so much as a whisper of sound.

He crouched low, then sprang back up, the movement taking him less than half of a second, and he stayed absolutely still once again, listening to the movement of the trees and the leaves. Suddenly, he smiled and let out a bark of laughter, rolling his eyes. "Three," he muttered. "One." He jumped up into the air, twenty feet, and a split moment after he did so, a black figure ran beneath him, shrieking in black rage. The hunter landed back down, the smile, beautiful yet cold, still upon his face. "Hello, Stefan," he greeted.

The black figure swiveled around, and the sight, to anyone else, would've been beyond horrifying. Its face was discolored, as if bruised many times, deep cuts running all the possible directions, blood streaming continuously down its withered cheeks, dripping onto the ground and burning there like acid. Its eyes, deep within the sockets, were a dull white, pupils invisible. Its figure was hunched over, his mouth full of yellowed teeth, that were sharp and pushed together, as if there were too many for the size of its mouth. Its clothes were tattered and torn, probably stolen off of the bodies of one of his many victims.

"So, if it isn't Llewellyn James, the mighty hunter," the demon, Stefan, sneered, its voice grinding and unpleasant.

"It's nice to see you again, Stefan. How's the face?" Llewellyn asked pleasantly, grinning slightly. The demon winced at the pure beauty of his voice as one of its mangled hands, complete with sharpened claws, flew to the mess that was his face.

"You managed to scar me in our last battle, hunter, but you know that you are not powerful enough to kill me," Stefan hissed, black spittle flying from his mouth, but his eyes were moving about, searching for a means of escape.

"Is that a challenge, destroyer of souls? I only ask because I would be quite willing to take you up on it," Llewellyn answered smoothly, taking a confident step forward. "Yes, you were lucky and escaped with your life last time, but I promise that you will not be so fortunate again."

Stefan laughed, although the humor did not sound very convincing. "Your heightened sense of bravado is courageous, yet sad, hunter."

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“As is yours,” Llewellyn said, and in a flash, he attacked, shifting yet again, this time into a wolf, hazel eyes fierce, a vicious snarl ripping from his mouth, lifting up his muzzle to show a row of gleaming teeth. The demon returned the growl, darting to the side, swiping at the hunter’s furred back with a clawed hand, drawing blood. The wolf yelped, turning to face its attacker, shaking off the pain, hackles raised, midnight black fur shining in the moonlight.

“Come on, is that all you’ve got?” Stefan yelled, eyes beginning to glow an ominous red. The wolf seemed to smile, eyes lighting up to a bright amber, and faster than the demon could keep up, it moved, still in its form, yet fast, as if, for a moment, it had possessed the body of a cheetah. The demon let out a blood-chilling scream as the wolf clamped down on his arm, tearing frantically at the flesh there, the demon’s acid blood, making his gums burn, but it was manageable.

Stefan turned, contorting his body, his own teeth sinking into the wolf’s leg. The animal jumped away, releasing its catch, and with a howl of fury, the demon leapt into the air, sprouting a black feathers as it shifted into a hawk, flapping away as fast as it could.

The wolf snorted and rolled its golden yellow eyes before it, too, jumped into the air, legs shortening, fur disappearing, until it was the shape of a cream-colored eagle, tearing after the escapee.

Hey, need any help? The amused voice of his friend, bodyguard and fellow hunter, John, shimmered in his mind along their strong mental channel.

No, no, I’ve got this. I’ll be with you in a few minutes, he assured him. I’m flying now.

Are you sure? Now the voice of Natalie, his other friend, bodyguard and fellow hunter was with him, sounding concerned as usual. He could picture her now, big blue eyes as wide as saucers. We can come to you now.

There’s no need. Both you stay where you are. He made sure his voice was commanding, with no room for argument, and he heard none. He found himself smiling inside the body of the bird. His two best friends were what made life tolerable. They had been with him for a long time, all of them fighting together, living together. He had never been able to figure out why on earth there were three of them, three hunters to fight the demons when he had been told by Nicholas many times that there could only be one at a time, and he would’ve asked his old master, but Nicholas had been dead since Llewellyn’s twenty-third birthday and he hadn’t gotten a chance: Natalie Dionere had been born in 1656 in Paris, France and John Thompson in 1788, in Boston, Massachusetts.

Well, it was not as if Natalie and John were Hunters of Souls, because he was the Hunter of Souls, but they helped, mostly, providing comfort, confidentiality, and occasionally aiding him in, as the twenty-first century saying went, kicking ass. And although they did not possess all of the powers he did, such as being able to collect souls, they were invaluable to him. They were his family. He sent them warm waves of assurance through their telepathic link and kept on with the pursuit.

The onyx-colored hawk ahead of him was becoming steadily weaker from the blood loss, dipping lower and lower as it flew on, wings beating furiously in a desperate attempt to stay ahead.

The night was growing old and quite frankly, Llewellyn was becoming weary. He was beginning to long for the bed waiting for him back at the mansion he and the others shared, thanks to the large family fortune that his father had passed on and that he had multiplied. He didn’t sleep often, maybe once or twice a month, but when he did, it was long, blissful and hard.

He pulled back a little, letting the wind catch his wings, rising higher and higher into the sky directly above the hawk, wings beating silently. It was time to take desperate measures.

Hopefully, he mused, it is true when they say that all cats landed on their feet.

He closed his eyes, allowing his body to go through the change once again, talons transforming into paws the size of a man’s face, strips running through his skin, fur replacing feathers. As it fell, the tiger opened its emerald eyes, not making a sound as it sped downwards towards the unsuspecting hawk.

The bird gave a screech of both surprise and pain, and Llewellyn, underneath the tiger’s paws, could feel it attempting to shift back to its form, twisting about to attack him, but it never got a chance. With one ferocious growl, the tiger bit off its head.

The hawk fell limp and Llewellyn could only enjoy a few seconds of triumphant relief before he remembered that he was falling hundreds of feet and an incredible speed.

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The ground was rushing up to meet him and he braced himself, rolling in mid air as he landed, to balance the force of the fall throughout his body. As he rolled, he shifted back to his human form, sighing and stretching, massaging the knots out of his neck, and spitting out the feathers that had gotten caught in his mouth.

The demon, in death, had also returned back to its original form, and it lay still upon the grass, body in one place, and the head tucked underneath the branch of a tree.

And the body was beginning to glow.

“Damn,” he sighed, standing in one fluid movement, dark eyes wary. He unsheathed the knife at his neck, stepping forward slowly, kneeling by the demon. With surprising gentleness, he slipped the blade in the creature’s heart. The glowing grew brighter, lighting up the area surrounding him. It broke off into small bulbs of light that floated about on and around the demon’s corpse, hovering towards the knife, and the blade began to glow, the blue symbols upon the gleaming silver illuminating. A shiver of warmth went up his arm and he could oh so clearly hear the soft, loving whispers of those already gone on filling his ears, telling him of eternal secrets.

The voices of the souls.

Llewellyn had never liked the name Hunter of Souls, because he didn’t haunt them, he redeemed them. The knife was the necessary tool he needed to do so. What the blade did exactly, he still did not know, or how it helped to liberate lost souls, he never understood. Nicholas had explained to him once, but he hadn’t been listening.

He wished that he had.

But it was easy to perform this task, for the words, Nicholas had also said, had been imprinted upon his brain since his birth, the birth that had killed his mother. So the words that slipped out of his mouth next he chanted as softly and lovingly as he could, a small whisper that the wind accompanied.

“I reclaim you back to eternity,” he murmured and the blade trembled in affirmation. “I take you into my keeping. I know your sacrifice, your dignity in life, what you held onto, what you gave away. Vengeance releases you, my brothers, my sisters. Go in peace, dwell in love.”

He bowed his head as the lights flickered then went out, leaving him in utter darkness, the warmth quickly replaced by the cold.

How nice it would be, he thought warily, to be a soul and enter into eternal rest.

But although he had lived a little more than six hundred years, death, and therefore peace, seemed so very far away.

With a prolonged sigh, he shifted into a tawny owl and took flight towards the south.

Scotland’s green hills and valleys rose and fell, a vast landscape of emerald beauty, a jaded jewel. The sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon and far off in the east, the hulls had been bathed in a dull yellow glow, the ocean sparkling a blue and gold some miles away.

His sharp owl’s eyes spotted two lone figures standing upon a hill a distance away and with a small screech, he headed in their direction.

“Finally,” John rolled his eyes as Llewellyn landed in front of him, already human once more. “Took you long enough.” His brown eyes were dancing with mischief, his light brown hair long and unruly.

“Oh, shut up,” Llewellyn grinned, punching him playfully in the chest.

“Ouch,” John winced, rubbing the tender spot. “Careful.”

“Are you alright?” Natalie cut in, sapphire blue eyes worried, long blonde hair shimmering in the early morning sun, as she tugged her expensive white leather jacket closer to her shivering figure.

Llewellyn turned away from her, lifting up his shirt to show her the long scratch running down his back. It was red and nasty looking, but not too deep. “Not too bad this time, eh?”

She glared at him, tapping a heeled foot, which was no doubt Prada. “We should help you more, Llewellyn. We--”

“How long are we staying here, anyway?” John interrupted her and merely grinned when she shot him a nasty look.

Llewellyn sighed. “We’ve been here in Scotland for two years. I’m sure that we should move on.”

“Where to next?” Natalie asked eagerly, and she smiled. “Russia! We haven’t been there in--”

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“Fifty years,” John completed her sentence, shaking his head. “Come on, let’s go somewhere new!”

“I’m thinking America,” Llewellyn nodded. “And not just anywhere in America. Hollywood. California?” they both cried, excitement lighting up their faces.

He laughed. “Sure, why not? I mean, just because we’re risking our lives every single day and wake up in the morning knowing that we could have only hours left to live shouldn’t be an excuse not to have fun.” His voice had turned teasing. “It should be interesting.”

“How long will we stay?” Natalie asked now, eyes daring John to cut her off as the trio slowly walked on.

“A couple of years, at least. We’ll attend high school,” Llewellyn decided, thrusting his hands in his jean pockets.

John gave a snort of disgust. “And graduate. Again, I suppose.”

Llewellyn laughed. “Sure, sure. We should go back to the house and tell Pete to start packing.”

“Hollywood, California, here we come!” John hooted, and in one swift motion, all at the exact same time, the three jumped into the air, taking on the forms of owls, flapping on before full morning came.

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