



# 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

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 6: Narrow Passes and Sheer Cliffs



Pulling out a map, my gut still tightened when I looked at how far we still had to go.

“Gods, English,” I said, turning to the leather pouch that sat in the corner of the small room, “You better count your blessings you were my best friend. I wouldn't have gone even *this* far for anyone else.”

As usual, the ashes didn't have much to say.

That was just one of the thousands of things that was so hard to get used to. The old lion had been a part of my life for so long I still kept catching myself seeing him out of the corner of my eye, expecting to hear a quick quip or sardonic comment when I least expected it.

“I'm going insane, aren't I?” I mused. “I'm talking to a man's ashes. Gods, I'm already insane, I'm toting them half way across the gods forsaken world!”

We'd gotten a bit smarter this time. The voyage from V-town to Japan had worn on everyone's nerves. This time we got three different cabins. Sure Rebecca and I spent most of our time together, but there is a limit on just how *together* even a couple can take.

Our first voyage had taken us from Japan to a little island town by the name a Jeju. From there we hardly touched land before setting off again, this time to China proper. Next was Shanghai. It should have been impressive, but after the neon lights of Japan the crowded streets of China weren't quite as awe inspiring.

Back on another ship, now we were going south-west. Along to coast to Taiwan, then to Sanya, we were almost to our destination. Up head was our last stop by boat for some time, Qinzhou.

Landing in China, we were able to slip past the worst of the formalities. We'd spent enough time around here that, while still foreign, we didn't look that out of place. Humans were an oddity everywhere, but there were dogs and wolves the planet over.

The streets in China were near the polar opposite from Japan. This place was closer to V-town

in it's level of technology. And that's not a totally good thing.

Dirt streets and collapsing buildings, it was like V-town *before* we'd began pulling it all back together.

And there was one major problem here. None of us spoke the language. I could speak precious little Japanese, but absolutely none of the Chinese people were using here. Well, at least I could still pick out the occasional written character.

Jon, ever the one present of mind, had brought with him a small phrasebook. We were making use of it now, haggling with a street vendor over some kind of meat on a stick.

Yeah, I'll definitely qualify it as *some kind*. I *really* didn't want to ask what it was. If I did then I could just as well guarantee Jon would refuse to eat it. And likely Rebecca and I for that matter.

We weren't exactly here for pleasure, but that didn't stop us from taking in the sights and smells of the market while our food cooked.

You think those stories of Asian street markets are fairy tales? Yeah, think again, I'm smack dab in the middle of one, and it's busier and more frantic than anything V-town could put up.

I was just reaching for my meal when the sound of a crash came from up the street. Like clockwork Jon, Rebecca, and I turned in unison.

It took a moment to make it out through the milling throng of people, but someone or something was coming this way.

Uh... I don't think I've ever met an elephant before. And by the looks of it that was about to change.

Old habits die hard, I can tell a chase when I see one. The elephant was running flat out down the middle of the street and a dozen men were racing after him.

Huh. I hadn't even known elephants *could* run.

Still more than a dozen meters from us, the beast of a man was clearing people left and right. And right in front of him was a old woman pushing a pram.

I would have rolled my eyes if I had time.

Not even bothering to drop the pack from my back, I leapt forward. I didn't need to look over my shoulder, I knew Jon and Rebecca were with me.

I took the elephant, Jon the woman, and Rebecca dragged the pram away.

It felt like I was no more than a mouse as I landed on the elephant's back. I didn't do much, but I did slow him a measure, and I was able to use my weight to edge him off course, giving Jon the Rebecca just enough time to get clear.

Well, perhaps I was able to do a touch more than that. Job finished, I was ready to leap clear. The only problem was that we were going down.

My extra weight must have set the elephant off balance. He was struggling for all he was worth, but he were headed towards the ground.

"Oh bugger," was about all I was able to get out before we hit the dirt with a thud heavy enough to wake the dead.

Thankfully I wasn't on the bottom. Well, mostly.

Save for my tail – that now feels like it's on fire in case anyone's interested – I was more or less free.

"Tommy!" I moment later Rebecca was at my side, joined shortly thereafter by Jon. The dog was standing guard, doing his best to keep the traffic moving and people away while Rebecca tended to me.

"Are you alright?" she asked, pulling the pack gently from my shoulders.

I worked up a grin.

"Heh, yeah, Babe. You always had a thing for guys with docked tails, right?" I let out a groan

as the behemoth behind me shifted.

A handful of heartbeats and a new type of shout entered the mix. I couldn't make out a single word they were saying but I knew the sound of bounty hunters when I hear them.

And good ones by the sound of it.

They came from the same direction as the elephant had. And I had a feeling they'd seen everything.

Shifting, I tried to pull myself free from the weight that pinned me, but it was no good. I couldn't do much more than breathe without fire shooting up my back. Some days it really is the pits to have a long protrusion sticking out of your backside *that's directly connected to your spine*.

I couldn't quite see what was happening up front, but someone stepped up to talk to Jon. A big someone by the looks of it. A moment later the dog shifted and I was able to make out a tiger.

He was speaking to Jon, but the dog was simply making 'I don't know' gestures.

Even I could hear when the cat switched to english.

"You brought him down, yeah? The three of you?"

Jon shrugged. "That would appear to be correct."

The cat grinned showing each and every one of his teeth.

"Let's get the weight off your friend, yeah? Good hunt. Good hunt."

Well, the cat was good to his word. A moment later he and a group of mixed comrades stepped forward and started prodding the elephant with long spears.

For his own part the elephant still seemed stunned, surprised to find himself laying on the ground. Thankfully our new friends were careful to make sure he rolled the right way to get up without crushing me.

The stitch in my side was acting up again, but thankfully my regeneration was taking care of my tail. Once the elephant got off I was happy to see the damage wasn't that bad. It had been pinned rather than crushed.

Though I was more than a bit concerned to note it didn't heal nearly as fast as I would have expected.

"Good hunt, good hunt my friends, yeah?" the tiger said. They'd already led the elephant away, but a good half dozen of the bounty hunters were still loitering around. I didn't care much for the way they looked at us.

It made me think of the way a house cat looks at a mouse.

"You not from around here, are you?" he asked while staring at my tail. My regeneration wasn't running at anything near normal speed but he was still enthralled watching it.

"No," I said, rubbing my backside. "We're from far to the east."

He twisted his ears. "You're not from Japan, yeah?"

I glanced at Jon and Rebecca. I *really* didn't want to tell this man too much.

"No," I said. "We're from further than that."

He seemed to shrug it away. "But you're a bounty hunter. I can see it in the way the three of you move."

Jon stiffened when he was called that. Jon was one thing and one thing only, and that was a police officer.

I stood up, leaning on Rebecca. My balance was still off with my tail not working properly.

"Long ago," I said offhandedly. "Right now we're just travelers. Just passing through."

I knew I'd made a mistake the moment the words left my mouth. The cat's eyes lit up like it was payday.

“Yeah? Yeah! You're bounty hunters! You can't hunt here! You need to be part of the guild. I help you with that. Hu help you.”

I didn't care for the way he said *help*.

A moment later the other bounty hunters who'd been loitering about began closing in.

Well, there was at least one upshot to this mess, our new *friends* were taking us northwest to Nanning, the general direction we wanted to go anyway.

I kept doing my best to reason with Hu, but it was obvious the tiger didn't want to hear. I'd bet my last whisker he got a commission for pressing new bounty hunters into the guild and we, the three of us, were likely a good payoff for him.

The hike was hard, but not unusually so. It did at least give us a few days to take in China. This was the longest we'd spent off a ship since leaving V-town. And bugger was this place green. I was used to the verdant mountains of British Columbia, but this was bordering on silly.

In any event we made it to Nanning in our own good time.

The place was a good sized city. Nothing to be compared to what there was in Japan, and even a fair bit smaller than V-town, but a good sized place none the less.

The guild house sat at the outskirts. This must be just a regional branch as it didn't look like much.

“So this is it?” I asked. The question was more rhetorical than anything else.

“Yeah,” Hu said in response as he pushed us forward.

Well, this was getting really annoying, *really* fast. It seemed Hu was the only person around here who spoke english, and he'd buggered off as soon as he'd gotten his payout. That left the three of us alone with a good dozen of what I could only assume were the high mukky-mucks of the Chinese bounty hunters.

And they were about as pissed as I was that we couldn't get a word between us.

I did my best to mime my way into telling them we were just passing through. Even Jon pulled out his phrase books and tried as best he could.

Yeah, this was not going well.

It was about an hour before they finally lost their temper. They called in some clerks who arrived with pots of ink and papers. The only problem was that the contracts – and I'm sure that's what they were – were written in, unsurprisingly, Chinese.

“No,” I said, crossing my arms before me. I think that action was pretty much universal.

They said something, but I didn't catch it. A moment later someone stepped up behind me, grabbing me by the shoulders. I could hear Jon and Rebecca struggling as well.

“Get off!” Twisting, I was constrained by the heavy pack on my back. Under normal circumstances I'd be free of the man in seconds, he's wasn't that good, but as it was I was all but immobile.

There was a loud barking sound from the men presiding over us. The clerks walked up and dipped my forefinger into the pot of ink. Setting the paper down on a table, they pressed me forward. I'm guessing a fingerprint was their equivalent of a signature.

I let a grin slip to my face.

They hadn't caught it, but I'd snuck away last last night and cleared the cancer from my body. I felt better today than I had in weeks.

“Not going to happen, you buggers,” I growled. Taking a quick glance over my shoulder, I

made eye contact with Jon and Rebecca. Jon was stoic as ever, but Rebecca looked as ready to get out of here as I did.

Not to mention I didn't care for the way her guards were holding her.

Snapping up my arm I made a quick and unexpected, if not terribly hard, contact with my guard's nose.

There was a grunt from behind and the arms around me loosened slightly. I took it for all it was worth and fought my other, ink smeared, hand free. It also went back. I had better aim now that I knew where his head was.

The black ink that they'd intend to sign me up with now now splattered across the guard's face. Following that up by stomping my foot down on his was enough for me to break free.

I'd like to say it was as clean as that, but anyone who's ever had to fight in a crowd knows it never works that way.

Thankfully, this may be a bounty hunter's guild hall, but there seemed to be precious few actual bounty hunters *around*.

One of the clerks rushed forward to try and help the guard restrain me. I spun and he got the heavy metal frame of my pack to his face. Next I looked he was down on the floor, dazed.

I'd thought I did rather good there, but when I turned to Jon and Rebecca I realized just how out of practice I was.

Jon's guard was laying neatly on the floor, hogtied up with a rope I didn't even know he'd had. There wasn't a bruise on the man's body.

Rebecca? Well, she'd gone for the quick and efficient approach. Her guard was perhaps the largest of the three – a watter buffalo or something like that. It worked well for her. It meant the guy's crotch had been at perfect striking height for her fist. The man – and he had my sympathies – was laying in the fetal position, clutching his balls.

Regrouping at the back of the room, I took a moment to case our surroundings.

Well, this was no Storm Front. The room was simple wood, and not all that large. The three administrators who we'd tried to talk to me were still standing up on a low stage on the far side. They were yelling their heads off now, calling for help. And, by the sound of heavy footfalls, that help wasn't going to be long in coming.

"Did you catch the layout on the way in?" I asked Jon.

The dog nodded. A single, curt, motion. "Of course."

And with that we were gone. Out into the hallway, we hardly got ten steps before encountering the first wave of reenforcement coming our way.

Well, I had this one.

Raising my arms, I began shouting incoherently in something I hope vaguely sounded Chinese. I waved and pointed back towards the room we'd just come from.

Chalk one up for overacting, it worked.

Running full speed back the way we came, we made it to the front doors. Each group of bounty hunters we passed were easier to fool than the last. They all seemed to expect us to stand and fight rather than run.

I grinned. Resting a hand on the heavy leather pouch at my hip, I could only guess what English would have done at a moment like this.

Out into the fresh air, it was only a matter of seconds before we were down the street. Too bad it wasn't fast enough. From behind me I could see the guild had managed to get its act together. Bounty hunters were streaming from the doors of the guild house like hornets, all coming our way.

And I don't think my little charade was going to work a second time.

Just... just how far have we gone?

It's been over two weeks. Two weeks of running nonstop, hightailing it through an alien and mountainous country with a team of bloodthirsty, professional bounty hunters at our heels.

"Does anyone have a clue where we are?" I asked as I set my bruised and strained butt end down on a worn thin bedroll.

Jon glanced up from where he was tending the fire with a bird – hopefully edible – roasting over it.

"Somewhere to the south of Dimapur," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Great. Now anyone mind telling me where in all the gods' names Dimapur is?"

"To the west of where we were last time you asked," Rebecca said with a chuckle.

You know, we should all be on edge and frightened, having been on the run for our very lives for the better part of a month, but it just seemed like another day after what we'd all been through together.

Thankfully the pheasant – or whatever the local equivalent is – was good enough to get us back on our feet again the next day.

You might think we were just being paranoid, thinking that we were still being tracked after this long.

Yeah, funny that.

We'd managed to pick up a few snatches of Chinese over the last few weeks, just enough to get by. And then read the wanted posters that had seemingly been posted *everywhere*.

By the sounds of it Nanning wasn't exactly a big bounty hunting outpost, but we'd managed to get there while some higher ups had been watching. I was starting to think that's how the tiger had timed it.

And, as many great and grand bosses are, they didn't take kindly to us showing them up. We'd made the news, and news travels faster than a group of foreigners like us. Every time we entered a new town they already knew who we were.

Well, that had its ups and downs. It looked like the bounty hunting guild here wasn't quite as well respected as back in V-town. A good half the people we met were more than willing to help us. The problem was with the other half, those who did everything they could to turn us in for the reward.

We were up in the mountains again. Gods, this place had more mountains than the Rockies!

Our supplies are getting low and, unlike back home, we didn't don't know enough about the wildlife here to say for sure what's safe to eat and what's not. Not to mention it would be nice to know exactly where we are again.

None of the maps I'd brought from home had anything more to say about this part of the world other than 'yeah, it's here'.

When we saw a sign for 'Noney' we were more than happy to follow it. Not that any of us knew what in all the gods' names 'Noney' was.

Thankfully, it looked to be a village.

Stepping in, it was clear we weren't in China anymore. For one thing all the effort we'd put into learning the language was for not.

I had to laugh. Jon couldn't even figure out which phrasebook to pull out.

Up the hard packed dirt path, we stepped into town. Well, you know you're remote when



*everything* stops the moment visitors walk into town.

For a long moment all people seemed to do was stand and stare. The only motion was that of the rest of the village walking tentatively up to their windows to get a better look at us.

At long last an old fox woman stepped forward.

I smiled.

Why is it always old women? They seemed to be the ones that made the *real* decisions the world over.

She said something that was totally lost on me.

"Sorry," I replied, keeping my voice calm, "I don't understand. We only speak english."

There was a long pause, then she made a gagging sound.

"English?" she said.

My eyebrows just about hit my ears.

"You can understand me?"

She smiled, showing the most hideous gap toothed grin. I felt right at home.

"Well enough." Her words were slow and rusty, but I can't tell you how good it felt to have someone new to talk to.

Things proceed quickly from there. A few stern commands from the woman and the rest of the town got back to work as if we weren't there, save for a few quick glances out way when they thought we weren't looking.

The woman led us down the street to a small timber building that I could only guess was her home.

"You are welcome," she croaked, waving us on, "Enter."

Brushing off our dirty feet, we stepped in.

Well, wasn't this *charming*.

To call the village the middle of nowhere would be praising it. The inside of the home, well serviceable and clean, could best be called rustic.

The woman made sure to close the door behind us the moment we were inside.

"Not safe," she said, fighting against her own throat to form the words. "The..." she made a coughing nose, "Are not far behind. They were at the neighboring village. On their way here."

I didn't even bother sitting down.

"Okay, folks," I said. "We'd best get back on the road."

"No," the woman said, laying a hand on my shoulder. "It is dangerous at night. You must stay here. They are no friends of ours. They have taken far too many of our brothers and sisters over the years. It is right we should shelter you. You are our guests."

I was a little bit concerned about what they might feed us, and how we could pay, but the issue sorted itself out.

The woman cooked up a thick soup of meats and vegetables I had no names for. The was a welcome change from the trail food we'd been living on for so long.

Paying her, and the village, back was surprisingly easy.

I'd said Noney was out of the way and I'd been right. We were likely the most distant travelers they'd seen in a century.

The woman had to translate, but Rebecca and I told stories of V-town and Canada. I didn't think they'd ever even heard of it.

I made sue to leave out the fact I'd been a bounty hunter, myself. Or mayor.

The evening passed pleasantly, and far more comfortably than any in recent memory. Even the

beds she provided were soft.

Well, it was nice while it lasted.

It had to be about ten at night and we were good and bedded down. We were warm, and the town was quiet. I was just about as happy as one could reasonably expect.

And it had to happen. From outside I could heard the heavy trod of many feet.

Who is their right mind would be traveling at this time of night? Well, it didn't take long to get our answer. Soon there was a soft but frantic knock on the door.

A moment later a man was in the room with us, speaking in hushed tones with the old woman. I couldn't make out a single word, the thrust was simple enough.

We'd been found. Again.

"Okay, folks," I said, sitting up. "It was a nice few hours, but it looks like it's time for us to vamoose."

The old woman raised a hand.

"There are only three ways out of the village. Everything else is blocked by the mountains. And," she paused for a man to speak with the man, "They've all been guarded. Your arrival here was seen." Her expression grew dark. "It was not one of my village that betrayed you, but you were seen none the less."

I let out a long sigh.

"Fine, then what?" I asked.

"You wait."

And that was that. Much of the night was a stand off. The bounty hunters wanted to search the village building by building, but not even they could pull it off with nothing but moonlight.

That didn't stop them from trying.

The village wasn't large, perhaps only a dozen or so structures in total, all clustered around a single dirt road.

And, from what images I could snatch out the windows of the home where we sat, there might just be more bounty hunters chasing us than there were villagers.

"I'm open to suggestions," I said once the old woman was gone, leaving us alone.

"This is my fault, Tommy," Jon whispered. "I should have scouted the terrain and stopped us from camping here."

It took everything I had to keep from laughing.

"Your fault?" I reached out and set a hand on his shoulder. "No, my friend. It's my fault for bringing the two on this adventure at all."

At that we smiled.

And the bounty hunters came another building closer.

One more building to go. They were just about on our doorstep.

"Okay," I said. "Here's the plan. We wait until there just about in here, then pile out through the window. We'll head towards the west pass. That's where we want to go anyway. We'll have to fight our way though."

Jon shook his head.

"No, Tommy," he said. "There has to be at least twenty men out there, never mind who they might have guarding the passes. Not even we can make those odds."

I was just about to begin arguing when the old woman stepped carefully through the door.

"I'm sorry," she said, her words halting. "There is nothing more we can do."

Standing up, I took her hands. "It's not your fault."  
 Rebecca was by my side a moment later.  
 "Thank you for everything you've done," she said.  
 Turning, I looked for Jon. He was nowhere to be seen.  
 Oh bugger.

I couldn't even tell how he'd gotten out of the house. The door was still closed and the windows intact. Nonetheless a moment later I heard a howl.  
 A clipped, on-key, textbook perfect howl.  
 I swore so much under my breath I'm surprised the room didn't turn blue.  
 Rebecca and I scrambled to the window just fast enough to see a German Sheppard shaped silhouette racing south through the moonlight.  
 Jon was off and running like a champion sprinter in the prime of his life, and behind him, falling fast, were at least two dozen bounty hunters.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.  
 We'd made a run from the house as soon as the coast was clear. Heading west, Rebecca and I followed the original plan, the one Jon knew about.  
 I couldn't think of anything else to do.  
 The pass was already clear. The guards here must have taken off after Jon.  
 I didn't like that dog's odds.

"But what about Jon?" Rebecca asked as soon as we'd put enough space between us and the village to stop for a much needed rest.  
 My tongue was lolling out and the stitch in my side was screaming bloody murder.  
 "I... I don't know, Babe," was all I could get out. "He..." I stopped and closed my eyes.  
 "But we can't leave him," she said, but there was no conviction to her voice.  
 "I know, Babe." Reaching out, I pulled her close, pack and all. It suddenly felt *very* lonely, surrounded by his alien land. "If anyone can make it, it's him."  
 The night was the longest one I've ever seen.

We traveled slowly for the next week, straight as an arrow west, stopping at every town to ask if they'd seen a brown and black dog skulking about.  
 Nothing.

We had to be getting close to India now and every step was a test for me.  
 "Are you alright, Wolfy?" Rebecca asked one day when we stopped for our fifth break of the day. We were in a nice little clearing with the sun shining down around us.  
 "I... yeah, Babe. Just out of breath," I said between pants.  
 Reaching into my back, I pulled out a small knife. It looked like it was that time again.  
 "You might want to go for a walk, Babe," I said, gasping for breath. This is going to get bloody.  
 And I wasn't lying. Every time I'd had to do this the cancer had been worse. Soon it would be filling up my whole insides.  
 "No." Reaching out, she took the knife from my hands. "I love you, Tommy." Leaning forward, she kissed my rather surprised lips. "How do we do it?"