



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 5: Brand Name



I'd had this vague image of departing from V-town in style, perhaps on one of the few cruise ships we still had afloat, or failing that a nice manly cutter.

Yeah, reality can never live up to my imagination.

The *Sojourn* was about seventy years old, a big bulk carrier. We'd be forced to pick it as it was the only ship heading where we needed without a month's wait.

There was no great and grand parting ceremony. We'd gotten that all out of the way over the last couple of weeks. The only people who walked with us to the dock were Ging and Liz. Thankfully, neither were crying.

"So you promise to make it back, Dad?" Ging asked as I gave him one last hug.

I smiled lopsidedly. "I'll make it back in one piece or I'll die trying."

For just a moment he froze, then he forced a smile. In so many ways he looked exactly as I had at his age. Even that perpetually confused expression I'd never realized I had until I'd looked back at my old photos.

Up the gangplank, it was quickly apparent this was no pleasure cruise. The *Sojourn* was freaking *huge*. The thing had to be the better part of a kilometer long. It came from Japan loaded down with electronics and finished goods, then loaded up with raw materials in V-town like timber and metals.

Reopening the old mines in the Rockies had been one of the best things the government had done to encourage trade. That had been Max's idea.

Next was a brief meeting with the captain, a komoto dragon. He spoke passable enough english, just enough to make it known that he doesn't care much for passengers. The extent of our tour was a list of places not to go. After that he showed us the door to our cabin and walked off down the hallway, feet stomping.

Opening the door to the cabin, the hinges made a scream worthy of the greatest horror production. Inside was a small, near unfurnished room. Gods, they didn't even have the good taste to provide us with a double bed. Off in one corner of the room were two bunk beds, hanging on chains off the wall.

There was a small porthole window in one wall and a sink on the other. With the two of us in here there was only just enough room to keep it from feeling crowded.

Only problem: There were three of us.

I just about threw English's ashes at him where he sat on the bottom bunk. He wasn't smiling, but there was an obvious sense of satisfaction on his face.

"Amstys."

I didn't even bother to phrase it as a question.

"Young master," he said, head bowed. "I'm glad to see you made it."

Rebecca shoved me to one side to peer past.

"What's he doing here?" she asked.

I snorted. "Taking up my bed, by the look of it." I paused for a moment before quickly closing the door behind me. "You didn't pay for your passage, did you?" I asked.

The big wolf cocked his head. "Pay? I simply lent a hand while they were loading their cargo. They were happy for an extra set of hands. You know I've been working the docks for years, Tommy. Capitan Ito knows me well. He didn't even ask when I walked up the gangplank carrying the ship's supplies."

I shook my head.

I'll say this flat out, I don't feel the slightest guilt in making Amstys sleep on the floor.

Feeding the big wolf was a problem as we couldn't exactly take a stowaway to the galley with us, but we made it work.

But other than the adventure in keeping a six foot, three-hundred pound monster of a wolf hidden, we didn't have much to do.

Relaxing ocean voyage my fuzzy butt-end.

The first day was full enough getting everything unpacked and sorted out, not to mention the novelty of sailing through Active Pass, then getting to watch Vancouver Island fade in the distance. Hey, Rebecca even got to point out Salt Spring Island in the distance.

The second day wasn't bad either. I enjoyed a few hours of calm. I even got a chance to write a couple lines in my journal, something that had saved my sanity once but had long been neglected.

The third day, however, was *boring*.

"Gods, Babe," I said, sitting on the hard deck plating outside at the aft of the ship, "How do they put of with it?"

She smiled. "Everyone else has jobs, Wolfy. Told you we should have waited for the cruise ship. Just imagine how much fun you could have playing shufflepuck."

I snorted. "Okay, good point. I'll take a boring and empty freighter any day over a whole ship full of people trying to strike up a conversation with me, thinking I still have power in the government."

"Do you want to go for another walk around the ship?" she asked.

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like there's much to see, Babe. And besides, they always seem to get pissy whenever we wander about." I paused for a moment and cocked my head. "I've heard them say they have other passengers, but I haven't seen a single one, have you?"

She shook her head. "Not a soul. Other than our room I haven't even seen anywhere *for*

another passenger unless they're sleeping down in the engine room.”

Yep, this trip was quickly getting on my nerves, and we'd yet to even make it past the first leg.

And worse yet, there *was* something we could be doing to pass the time, the only problem was that it was just short of impossible to get privacy back in our berth with Amstys loitering about and I just couldn't get in the mood out here.

“Thank the gods,” was all I could say when the first hint of landfall appeared over the horizon.

It had taken us the better part of a month to get across the Pacific, and I'm pretty sure even Amstys, the most patient wolf I've ever met, was more than thoroughly sick of us.

Rebecca and I were standing near the bow of the ship, as close as they'd let us get, watching the islands grow ever closer.

And... wow.

Okay, I know Japan hadn't fallen as far during that Cataclysm. Not only had I English's and Max's stories of it, but also the technology they traded us.

But... wow.

The islands were hardly in sight yet and I could tell you they were night and day from V-town. Suddenly my little city was starting to feel very bush-league.

What land I could see was covered from shore to shore with high rise towers, and not the dilapidated kind we have back in V-town. I'd say that everything they had looked pre-Cataclysm, but it looked *better*.

“I can't help but worry about Molly,” Rebecca whispered into my ear as we watched the land grow so agonizingly slowly larger.

I shrugged. “Not much we can do now, Babe. Amstys said he talked to her about it. They're not rich, but she should be well off enough to look after herself and the pups for a few months.” At that my voice turned hard. “And that's what it'll be. That flea-bitten mongrel will be heading back on the first ship I can find. He's *not* coming with us.”

She just laughed.

“If you say so, Wolfy. He's done a pretty good job so far.”

At long last we made dock. I can't tell you the joy of having solid ground under my feet again, even if it did leave me off balance. I was so used to having the floor roll that the earth left me staggering.

Down the gangplank, Rebecca and I were alone. We had to leave Amstys in the cabin to find his own way ashore. We'd gotten this far without him being discovered, I wasn't about to tip our hand now.

Now comes the best part of any international trip. Customs.

Well, one thing I knew we had for sure was our passports. There is one good thing about being the much beloved former mayor, when I walked into the passport office they'd *jumped* to be of service. A process that should have taken over a week for Rebecca and I was done in a day. A not only that but we had the darnded things triple endorsed and all but dipped in gold.

And it looks like we're getting the proactive treatment here. Waiting for us at the bottom of the gangplank was a group of a good dozen men of different species. They were all wearing business suites.

Oh bugger. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

“Mr. and Mrs. Taggart?” the one in the lead asked. His english was near perfect.

I cocked my head as I came to stop before him.

“How do you know my name?”

The man just smiled and bowed. I instinctively bowed back, having sat through *way* too many trade meetings.

“We were expecting you, Mr. Taggert. One of our envoy ships brought news that you would be arriving. We are only sorry we can not provide a greater reception on such short notice.”

I let out a long sigh. “Sorry, folks. I’m not sure what you’re expecting, but I’m here on private business. Nothing to do with V-town.”

The smile on the man’s face didn’t budge. I could tell you right away he didn’t believe me.

“Of course, as you say, Mr. Taggert. We are but here to humbly welcome you to our country, as you have done to so many of us.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Great, thanks...”

I was cut off before I could even finish.

“Please, Mr. Taggert, let us take you to our hotel, it is the least we can do.”

Now a growl slipped into my voice. Japanese hospitality is renowned, but it always comes with strings attached.

“I told you, I’m here as a private citizen.”

They were just about to say something in return when I felt a shadow fall over me.

“You heard the... Mr. Taggert. They are here privately. And with me.”

I almost laughed when the group’s heads all started tilting up in unison. And up, and up. Amstys was standing behind us with his hands on our shoulders.

I don’t quite remember what they said after that – it was mostly in Japanese which I can only catch one word in five on a good day – but they sure cleared out fast. I guess they’ve never seen a wolf the size of Amstys before.

And by the expressions on their faces he’d put the fear of the gods into them without even lifting a lip.

After that customs was a straight forward affair. I was glad Amstys had been smart enough to get a passport of his own. Molly must have helped him with that.

Stepping out of the customs house we were on the street soon after, and I’m in danger of repeating myself here, *wow*.

On a whole new level, *wow*.

In V-town we were lucky to have a dozen neon lights in total, here they were spread about like florescent candy. And with night approaching they were coming on like the gods’ own lollipops.

On the buildings behind them were massive, multi story animated signs. My jaw would be on the floor now if I hadn’t had to work with computers over the last few years. As it was it was only hanging around my knees.

Though I was speechless for rather different reason.

Half the signs around us featured a particular mascot. It was a young and virile lion. His face may be stretched and deformed by a hundred different artists, but I’d know him anywhere.

English’s grin adorned everything from state of the art cars to bottles of shaving cream.

My initial plan upon getting out on the street had been to track down to hotel for the night, but that was now secondary. Neither Rebecca or Amstys complained when I began searching out the source of the advertisements.

Not that it was hard. Each and every one of the smiling Englishs had the name ‘Gifu Corporation’ down at the bottom, and in english text, too.

Like I've said, my Japanese is piss poor, Rebecca's is worse, and Amstys' nonexistent. That made doing *anything* around here more trouble than it should be.

Thankfully, we did meet a street vendor that spoke our language. All I had to do was buy dinner from him and he was more than willing to direct us to Gifu.

Though the cheeky little lopsided smile on his lips made me think he saw us as nothing more than misguided tourists.

The Gifu tower was... well, have I used the word 'wow' too many times already? Add it a half dozen more.

The building had to be a good thirty stories tall and nothing but gleaming, spotless glass. It was lit a blazing red by the setting sun. I may have been a mayor, but I felt suddenly well out of my league.

Walking up the wide boulevard to the front door, my ears twitched. Turning my head, I glanced around.

"Amstys," I whispered, "Do you hear anything?"

The wolf looked down at me with a confused expression. "No, young master. Should I? Everything here is so..."

I shook my head and set a hand on his forearm. "Nah, it's just me."

Up to the front doors, I was glad to see they weren't locked yet, but a closer examination suggested this place *never* closed. It looked like it ran twenty-four seven.

Into the reception, it was like we'd just stepped back three-hundred years into the past. The room was rustically wood paneled and the light was indirect. There were no flashing neon advertisements to be seen here.

At a low desk in the center of the room sat a woman in a deep red kimono. She had a painted white face. Oddly, it actually looked good on her fox features.

I'd practiced my Japanese in my head the entire walk here. I think I had it at least passably right, if nowhere near perfect.

Stepping up to the woman, I bowed slightly at her. She seemed a little taken aback at my formality. Oh well, that's what I get for only mingling with people during trade agreements.

"*A pleasant evening to you, most honorable woman.*" I forced my lips to make the alien sounds. It left my throat aching almost instantly. And not only that, but I could pick out a dozen mistakes I'd already made.

She blinked a couple of times and bowed back to me. When she spoke her words were slow and carefully formed. It was obvious she knew I was a forger.

"*And a good evening to you, most honored gentleman. What may I humbly do for you?*"

I grinned. Well, at least I'd gotten past the first hurdle.

The next problem, however, was to prove far more annoying. That was mostly because I didn't *know* what I wanted.

I tried to ask her about the lion themed advertising outside. At first she thought I wanted to buy a product.

Coming for a different angle, I at least got though that it was the *advertisements* I was interested in and not the things they were selling. At least that got us a little bit closer. She called one of the marketing managers down.

It was then, when I had another person down here that I finally came up with a bright idea.

It took a little routing around in our packs, but at long last we were able to dig up a half dozen photos of me and English mugging for the camera, arms over each other's shoulders.

Well, *that* got them off and running.

I hadn't been expecting quite that reaction, but it was like kicking a bee hive. Suddenly we were hustled out of reception and into an elevator. I'm not sure how far up they took us, but it was enough to make my ears pop.

Out of the lift, we were led to a richly – and by the gods to I mean *richly* – appointed meeting room and left to our own devices.

But not before they took every photo of English we had.

That was about forty-five minutes ago.

“So, Wolfy,” Rebecca said, gazing out the window, half mesmerized by the lights so far below, “Do we have a plan here?”

I rolled my eyes. “When do we *ever* have a plan, Babe?”

It was only after being sequestered in here that I realized how hagged we looked. I was used to dealing with people as a member of the government. That meant being freshly groomed and slipped into one of Smith's world famous suits.

But right now I was little more than fur out, and I hadn't had a good brushing since we'd stepped on the *Sojourn*. I'd groomed enough dead hair out of pelt over the last half hour to almost make a whole new wolf.

I was on a chair, Rebecca standing next to the windows, and Amstys was sitting on the floor, half hidden by the conference table, when the hallway door opened.

It wasn't as though he had a name tag around his neck, but I knew he had to be the head of the Gifu family the moment he stepped through the door. He was wearing what was perhaps the only equal I've ever seen to one of Smith's suits.

And, thank any and all gods that might be looking down at us, he spoke english – if fractured.

“I am Eiji Gifu,” he said, his voice surprisingly smooth.

I stood up. “I am Tommy Taggart.”

I began bowing and bonked my head into his outstretched hand.

We stopped dead for a moment, before both breaking out into laughter.

“Please, Mr. Tagger, let us do things *your* way. You do outnumber me,” he said. His face was still deadpan, but there was at least a touch of humor to his voice.

“Thank you, Mr. Gifu. That will make things much easier,” I said, taking a seat the table. He took one across from me.

“Now,” he said, pulling out the photos of English and I, “It would appear we have business to discuss.”

The conversation was civil enough, but Eiji wasn't happy to see us. The fact we were connected to English meant we were dirty in his eyes.

Mostly because he and his father had tried to murder the lion and thought him gone for decades.

“So,” I said, finally broaching the issue I'd come here for, “I'd like to inform you that Michael Jones is dead.”

For the span of five heartbeats not a sound could be heard in the room.

I honestly expected the man to smile. I expected him to be happy that this little lose end had been cleared up. Rather he scowled.

I couldn't translate the words he said, but I think their meaning was more or less universal.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

He turned back to me, almost as if he'd forgotten we were here.

“We just invested in a multi billion yen advertising campaign with his image. We'll have to

scrap the whole thing when news gets out.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“It's bad luck to use the face of the recently dead. It will suggest bad connotations for our product.”

I let out a sigh. Well, it was all I could really have expected anyway.

“That's all you care about?” I asked. “That's it's going to cost you money? You didn't seem to care about using his face when you *tried to murder him!*”

The man pulled back as if he'd been slapped. It was clear he wasn't used to being talked to in this way

“I'm sure I don't...”

“Save it,” I said. “English was my best friend. He told me all about the *other world*.”

I didn't think it was possible for a man to go white behind his fur coat, but I could see him pale clear as day.

“You... you mustn't speak of such. It would ruin the whole company if...”

I waved him away. “I don't give a spent hair over you and your company. English is dead. And he died of natural causes. That's all that matters to me now. If you need to take him off your advertisements, all the better for me.”

I was about to break into an angry tirade about the way they'd treated him when there was a soft knock at the door.

Eiji held up a hand, silencing me.

He called something that I'm pretty sure translated to 'Come in.'

A moment later a stunning woman clad in a kimono stepped into the room. I'm not quite sure what she said, but I did pick up the word 'disturbance'.

Eiji turned to me.

“Mr. Taggart, it would appear your associate has been causing trouble with my building security.”

I cocked my head and looked around. Everyone was here, me, Rebecca, and Amstys.

“I don't have any associates with me,” I said.

Exactly three minutes later I heard the soft click of claws on the carpeted hallway outside the room. Two sets were so soft as to almost not be there at all. The third was measured and precise.

I raised a hand to my forehead. I know who it was before they even rounded the corner. Although, I will admit to my surprise I'd never seen him in the body hugging black spandex uniform before. They must have made it custom for him, it even had a pocket for his reading glasses.

Jon stood at attention before me, between two dragons who must be the Gifu security staff. Both guards wore odd, fireman like hats.

The dog didn't say anything, he simply bowed his head ever so slightly.

I could have strangled him.

“He is not with you?” Eiji asked.

I sighed. “Yes, yes, he's with me. But he's not acting on my orders.”

Eiji grinned ever so slightly. “Ah. I've had experience with such things as well. There are no others about, I trust?”

I glanced at Jon. He shook his head.

We were just getting ready to leave, Jon included. So far we'd yet to make much headway with Eiji. He was willing to strip English's face from his company, but he wasn't happy about it. He kept

muttering that he had nothing to replace it with.

The sun was well down and I was so tired I was starting to see double.

"Come on, folks," I said. "Let's get going."

Rebecca and I stood up, and Jon took a position at my side. Eiji waved us out with the flick of a hand, not caring.

Then Amstys stood. He'd been mostly hidden behind the table. When he stood up to his full height his ears brushed the ceiling.

And Eiji's mouth fell open.

I cocked my head. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No. No," he said, stuttering. "Please, let my staff help you find a place to sleep for the night."

He never took his eyes off Amstys as we walked from the room.

Even the budget Japanese hotels are nice, and if you tell me this place is budget then I have a bridge to sell you.

The Gifu staff had been good to their word. They'd suggested this place for us, just a couple of blocks from their tower. I had a feeling they'd called ahead and paid for no small portion of our room.

And yes, *room*, as in singular. I didn't quite feel safe enough to spread out our forces.

Letting the pack from my back with a heavy thunk, I carefully reached up to pull English's ashes from my shoulder.

"Jon," I said, never turning to the dog, "Start talking. Now."

With anyone else there would have been the slightest curve to his lips, either up or down. With Jon there was nothing – just a ruler perfect line. I could just have well been talking to a mannequin.

"It was decided, Mr. Taggert," he said in police dog perfect pitch, "That as a former mayor of V-town you are automatically extended the protection of the force whenever you leave the city. Furthermore, it was decided that the officer most familiar with you should be selected to accompany you as you are known to be a... difficult charge." He blinked once. "Furthermore, it had already been noted that you would decline any escort provided to you. It was decided that the officer in question should accompany you in secret." Now there was just the faintest ghost of a smile to his lips. "The *Sojourn* was more than happy to take on one additional passenger in order to avoid a surprise inspection that came upon them just hours before they were scheduled to leave port."

I sat down on the low mattress the passed as a bed here.

"And when you say 'decided' I can safely assume that you made up your mind and the rest of the force jumped to it?"

At the he scowled slightly. "Not quite, Tommy," he said, his perfect posture slipping slightly. "The force was not... encouraging of my sudden leave of absence. In fact much of the force, and all of the public at large, are not aware of my departure."

I rolled my eyes.

"And just how hard did you have to fight with Pine to keep him from coming along?"

At that the dogs mask slipped entirely. Not only did he smile, but his tail wagged ever so slightly. Something I'm not sure I'd ever seen before.

"Just short of coming to blows," he said, finding a seat of his own. "You wouldn't believe what I had to offer him to keep the man from pulling a trick like what I did years ago."

I laughed. Back when we'd gone to Edmonton, Jon had accompanied us. He'd only been able to pull it off by threatening to quit the service entirely if not permitted to go.

Reaching out, I grabbed a hold of Rebecca and laid back on the soft mattress. This was the first time in a month I'd actually had a real bed. And by the gods were we going to make use of it tonight.

To sleep.

The next morning came sooner than I would have liked.

Thankfully Gifu Corp. must have us well in their hands. No one came to disturb us, and when I opened the front door there was a breakfast waiting.

And, thank all the gods, a western style one. No rice to be seen.

At ten o'clock we were just finishing up and reloading our packs when a knock came at the door.

I couldn't tell you who it was from that knock, but I could tell you they were used to getting what they wanted.

"Come in," I shouted from where I sat on the floor. "It's open."

There was a slight pause, then a nonplussed Eiji stepped in.

"Mr. Taggert," he said.

I took one look at him and decided he'd been up all night. His carefully combed fur was dull and his ears were drooping, but there was still a smile to his lips.

I nodded at him, doing the best I could to bow as I was sitting on the floor.

"What can I do for you, Eiji? We were just getting ready to head out. We still have a long way to go."

He cat blinked once. "Oh, yes. I'm am sorry for detaining you. Let me come to the point. I'd... I'd like to thank you for bringing news that we are now free of that infernal lion."

I stopped dead.

"What did you just say?" My voice was cool as ice.

He took half a step back and raised his hands.

"So sorry, no offense intended. It is not what it seems. Gifu has spent so much money, so many years, investing in the image of your friend that we have practically become inseparable from it. And you know, are among the few who know, why that has been a shame pressed to my soul for so many years. My father... and I, did a most dishonorable thing when we had him... sent away. There have been many times we as a company have tried to distance ourselves from his image, but it simply has never to be. Now with his death becoming public with have an honorable way to... how would you say, put his image to rest."

I shrugged. Well, it was for the best I suppose.

"Works for me," I said. "What are you going to replace him with?"

At that the cat beamed.

"Gifu Corp. has long been associated with a... nontraditional image. The image of your friend was seen as unique, distinct, and strong. I believe we have found a suitable replacement model."

I didn't much care for the way he was looking at us.

"You're not talking about *me* are you?"

The cat laughed so hard he nearly choked.

"Ah, most certainly not, Mr. Taggert. I was referring to uh, physical strength."

Turning, I looked at Amstys. The huge black and grey wolf was completely ignoring us, toying with something from one of our packs. He was sitting on the floor but yet he still towered over us.

"You can't be serious," I said.

The wolf started slightly.

"Were you talking to me?" Amstys asked.

The stay in Japan had taken a bit longer than I'd expected, over a week, but we finally had everything sorted out. Amstys had out and out cried when we'd parted, leaving him in the capable care

of the V-town envoy.

It had taken the big wolf a long time to finally understand what he was being offered, but he more than jumped at it once he saw what the pay out was.

I made sure to agent him under our envoy, with explicit instructions to look after him. And in two months send the wolf back to V-town. In that time he should have made enough to last him the rest of his life.

And now we were back on another gods forsaken boat.

Well, at least this time we could see our destination. The Chinese mainland wasn't that far off. It was only too bad we couldn't find a ship to take us straight to Africa.