

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 10: Bell Tower Fire

The journey back to police HQ was neither easy nor pleasant.

Hands cuffed behind my back, mussel clamped shut and legs in shackles, I was used to being surrounded by a pack of police dogs, but not like this.

There was more than one point I truly wondered if one of them was going to reach over and bite a chunk out of my shoulder. It was their training alone that kept them in check, though not by much.

This was a side to the dogs I'd never seen before. Even taking down mass murderers they were clinical and professional. Not now.

Into HQ, this was one of the few times I'd ever entered through a side door.

I got one last look at the humans I'd been captured with. They looked even more frightened than I did. For good reason too. I'd be able to walk away from this the moment I got my tongue free. They wouldn't.

I doubt the cops could keep me for accepting an assassination contract *on myself*.

Shoved unceremoniously through a door, I found myself in an interrogation room just like the one I'd seen so recently.

There wasn't much in here. A table, two chairs, the door I'd entered through, and a large window. That was, quite literally, it. There wasn't even a scrap of paper or a couple of dust bunnies.

It was only now I realized that they'd still to release the mussel that kept my lips clamped together.

Hobbling over to the chair, I had to take it slowly on account of the chains that still bound my feet. I let out a long breath when I finally sat down. Some days I just have a talent for digging myself in the deepest hole I can find.

Sniffing the air, it was air-conditioned and moved through the room at a quick pace to keep scents from lingering. Even then I could make out the background of years worth of people who had come through this room. They had all been petrified.

I just closed my eyes and wondered how I was going to explain this.

The case must be a top priority one for the dogs. I never even got a chance to nod off before the click of a lock informed me that I had a visitor.

I'll admit I was more than a little bit relieved to see my interrogator was a normal, uniformed, police dog. Not one of the *special* dogs they used to use for high level interrogations like the kind English and I had undergone so long ago.

He closed the door behind himself and walked around the table to sit before me. The smooth, measured click of his claws told me everything I needed to know.

The dogs who had arrested me had been at the edge of their endurance, nearly ready to snap the leashes of their training. This one was not so frenzied.

The click of his claws on the hard floor had been ever slightly off though. The officer who sat across from me was not immune to the same stress that affected the rest of the service. He just hid it better.

I nodded to him, cocking my head as I tried to mumble past my gag.

He took his time, seemingly ignoring me. It was a good five minutes before he'd set out all his papers and paraphernalia on the table between us. I noticed there was nothing sharp laid out.

At long last he reached across the table to unsnap my mussel, but only just enough to speak, not enough to open my mouth to bite.

"I am officer Ash." His voice was measured and clipped. "You did not have any identification on you. Who are you?"

A slight grin pulled at my lips despite all this. I'd taken some money with me in my wallet, but no ID. I hadn't really planned to be arrested today.

"My name is Tommy Taggart." I didn't even bother to laugh when I said it.

The dog wasn't smiling.

"No." His voice was level. I noticed him check a box on the paper before him. Craning my neck, I was just able to make out the text beside it. 'Uncooperative'. "We are aware of your arrangement with the Human Defence League. We've had them under surveillance for the last twenty-four hours. They were looking for someone to assassinate the City Administrator. You offered your services. Who are you?"

As you can guess, the conversation went downhill from there.

You'd think it would be easy enough to convince the dog who I was, but it seemed I'd done a little too good of a job rolling in the coal. I'd never met this officer personally – I had no reason to as he was a professional interrogator – and he didn't recognize my scent.

It didn't do me any good that the only dogs who might be able to pick me out under the coal weren't likely to come see a would be assassin.

Sayer was out of the question. Pine was currently off duty, and Jon was back at the apartment.

I was nearly running out of ideas when, I kid you not, I started banging my head against the table just to prove I had regeneration in some vague hope it would help prove who I was.

All it earned me in the long run was a mother of a headache and some blood loss. The dog was unimpressed.

"Fine." I let out a long breath. "I'll tell you everything. I swear. But I want to see Constable Jon Oaks. He's in charge of the Administrator's protection, right? I'll spill everything, but only if he's here."

The cop wasn't exactly happy to call in Jon, but I hadn't spent this much time around the police dogs without picking up a trick or two in the way their hierarchy worked.

Jon was in charge of my – being the City Administrator's – protection. He was *supposed* to be involved whenever someone said they had information about me.

It was the better part of an hour later than Jon came to stand before the window beside me.

I'm pretty sure he recognized me right away. He doesn't face palm normally. That's a trait he

picked up from me.

Officer Ash was called out of the room, and about ten minutes later he was gone. Jon came in to untie me. You have no idea how good it felt to get the mussel and handcuffs off.

“Do I even *want* to ask?” His voice was low.

“No,” I grinned, happy to finally be able to move again. “Probably not. Can you cover for me while I get out of the building?”

He shook his head and rolled his eyes, but his final answer was, “Yes.”

Making a quick stop in a nearby washroom to wash at least a little of the coal dust from my fur, I was starting to look a dirty brown again and get back to smelling like myself.

Getting out the front door of police HQ was another matter, but I managed to steal through then a group of people stepped in.

On the street, I'd just breathed a sigh of relief when a hand closed around my shoulder like a vice grip.

“Eurk.” I wasn't at my most eloquent today.

“Don't worry, kid. It's just me.”

I had to rack my brain for a moment to recognize the voice before I turned around. It was Brown. One of English's friends and a SF bounty hunter.

“Gods man, it's been a long time since I've seen you.” It had been. Last I'd seen Brown was before the quake, back when English, Rebecca, and I had to fight our way past him to get to Vanderhoom.

“It has, kid. Ol' English sent me to find you. He had a feeling you'd be here when he couldn't find you at home.”

I let out a sigh and followed him.

Well, It was obvious why Brown had been retired from active duty. The bear could barely walk. He made it without a cane, but his leg was messed up enough that it was obvious he'd never be able to run again.

“Where are going?” I asked.

Brown just pointed up the street. “SF headquarters.”

We were about halfway there when my nose began twitching. That's rarely a good sign.

Another ten steps and I could hear people yelling. That's *never* a good sign.

There was smoke bellowing out of the building down the street.

Falling to all fours, I broke into a dead run. I only spared a quick glance behind me to see Brown struggling along.

Skidding to a stop in front of the flames, I could see they were already billowing out of the windows of the building. There were no firefighters to be seen, though I had no doubt they were on their way. The damage was already so bad that I couldn't even tell what kind of business this was.

Grabbing a man as he stumbled out the smoke choked front door I dragged him to the relative safty of the street.

“Is there anyone left in there?”

He couldn't speak, his throat scratched with smoke. All he did was nod.

I didn't even bother to think about it. The fire chief would have my hide, but I could worry about that afterwards. Five seconds later I was back on all fours, diving through the door and trying to keep under the smoke.

I couldn't see more than three feet in front of my nose with the thick black smoke that swirled

around. My lungs itched enough to want to make me vomit. Not only was it the tingling sensation from the smoke that I breathed in, but also from my regeneration trying to heal the damage it caused.

The building, thankfully, wasn't all that big. I was able to push forward into the main room and down the centre aisle. There was someone passed out here. It looked like he'd been running only to fall from the smoke while he tried to escape.

Scrambling forward, I caught the hem of his black shirt with the tips of my claws. I couldn't tell if he was still breathing, but I wasn't about to leave him here.

Pulling him towards me, I was only just in time. I no sooner had him thrown over my shoulder than a flaming timber fell from the roof, crashing down where he'd been seconds ago.

This was quickly becoming an unpleasant place to be.

Turning, I made it most of the way back to the door before I heard an ominous creak from above. This did not bode well.

Rushing backwards, another part of the ceiling came down only inches from my nose. It was blocking the entrance.

Oh bugger.

The flames licking at my tail *were not* helping. You'd think by now I'd be smart enough *not* to run head first into a burning building, but no. Apparently that's just who I am.

Now what?

I still couldn't see worth a darn, so I just picked a direction at random and tried to ferret my way forward. What seemed like forever but couldn't have been more than a few seconds later I was pressed up against a stained glass window.

Well, okay, I *think* it was a stained glass window. Pretty much *everything* in here was stained by now. Setting down the man I'd found, I only waited long enough to make sure his head was still attached and wasn't going blue before turning my attention to the window.

Well, it was a pity to break was likely an expensive installation, but too bad.

Pulling back, I punched forward at the glass.

And nearly broke my fist.

Bugger! What were they making these things out of?

I hit the glass again, but I was too weak. It wouldn't break. I didn't do much more than tap on it.

Okay... got to think. My mind was going hazy from all the smoke in the air. There has to be another way out...

Looking around, all I could see were the flames closing in on all sides.

I was just about ready to call it a day and slump up against the wall next to the man I'd dragged here when I heard something from the other side of the window.

It was hard to make anything out over the cracking of the flames, but it sounded like someone tapping on the glass.

I reached up and tapped back.

A moment later, with an ear shattering crash, and massive brown furred fist punched through the window. It sent shards of multicoloured glass flying through the air. Some of it landed on me, most of it landed in the fire where it popped and sizzled.

"Are you in there?" It was Brown's gruff voice.

"Yeah, yeah." I was moving slowly now, but the fresh air let in by the new opening did perk me up somewhat. "Here." I shoved the man at him.

A moment later the man was safe and Brown came back to lift me like a pup to throw me over his shoulder.

"You shouldn't do stuff like that, kid," He chastised me like a friendly uncle, "It'd break English's heart if you died."

I coughed up a laugh.

The firefighters arrived shortly there after, along with the paramedics. This must be the biggest thing going on in the city right now, the fire chief and his A team were on sight. They began hauling all the people away. Including the fella I'd dragged from the flames.

It was only now I got a good look at him. I'd been too busy before to even notice he was a human. And now, seeing his face, this was the same man who'd accosted me in the apartment a few days ago about having my wedding in his church.

Turning, I tried to make out what the building was that still burnt cheerfully away.

It was hard to see much of it now, but it was a church.

A thought occurred to me as I began collecting my senses. It was just a little too convenient that this place should burn down after offering to host my marriage. I tried to sniff around the building as people ran back and forth, fighting the fire, but my nose was too choked with smoke to find anything but the scent of ash.

I didn't really have anywhere else to go, so when the paramedics insisted I come with them to the hospital for a checkup I just kind of followed along. I got a glare from the fire chief when I tried to slip quietly away. The dalmatian and I had more than a few run ins when I'd been mayor. He smiled pleasantly enough, but I knew he'd drag me off by the tail if I skipped out.

English must have gotten a tip off that something was up. He appeared by my side as we walked along and sent Brown back to Storm Front.

"You just can't seem to catch a break can you, Mate?"

I swatted at him, but he dived away. I did notice he kept an eye open for anyone who got too close to us.

We didn't talk much until I got discharged from the hospital. My lungs were still filled with soot and even just a couple of words would scratch my throat raw.

We were just short of stepping out the front door when I saw a familiar black tail disappear around a corner.

Huh?

Grabbing English's hand, I ran in pursuit. Skidding around the corner, I only managed to see the tail disappear around another bend.

Then up a flight of stairs.

Okay, now I knew he was playing with me. And, by the scent in the air, I knew who it was. My uncle Goawn. One problem. He didn't smell happy.

We were up on the third floor before I finally got a good look at him. My uncle was one of those people who tended to have a happy-go-lucky kind of attitude. Exactly the type that benefited a beta.

He wasn't smiling now.

Stepping up to him, I glanced into the room he stood beside without a word.

I knew who was in there without ever needing to see him.

Closing the door behind me, I sealed out both Gowan and English. I needed to do this alone.

The hospital room wasn't large, but it did at least have a window. The bed was pressed up beside it.

For just a moment I almost thought the bed was empty, the skeletal form that lay there was so thin it hardly raised the sheets.

“Dad?” My voice was cracked, and it had nothing to do with the smoke in my lungs.

Almost comically, I could see his ears pop up over the horizon of the sheet, swivelling to track me.

“Son.” His voice was weak, but stronger than I'd feared. “I wasn't expecting you.” A moment later his grey form pressed into view as he levered himself up on one arm.

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

A scowl cross his face. “Apparently I had another heart attack. Not a major one. I don't remember it. I'd just helped your mother move some jars and then I woke up here.” He let out a breath. “It's a damned annoyance.”

I sat on the edge of the bed beside him and helped him sit up next to me.

“Your mother was supposed to contact you...” he began.

I smiled. “She's not that fast. I was here anyway and saw Gowan.”

He sniffed at my fur. “What have you been up to, Son?”

I rolled my eyes and told him of my last few days. He just laughed at points.

“Keep going like that, Tommy, and you'll end up dead before I do.”

I was about to tell him not to talk like that when there was a quiet scratching at the door.

Who could that be? It wasn't English or Gowan, nor my mother, and few other people would be let in.

I didn't have long to wait to find out.

“Come in.” My father tried to shout it, but the words came as little more than a croak.

Jon poked his head around the door a moment later.

“I'd been told I'd find you here, Sir.” He glanced over to my father and nodded. “Hunter's alpha. May I come in?”

“Of course, Jon.” I spoke before my father had a chance. “You're always welcome.” I smiled. “I owe you anyway. How did Sayer take it?”

Jon scowled. “It would appear that he was less than thrilled you were placing yourself in danger.” He cleared his throat, “But we came to an understanding. I had to make him a few promises, but the matter has been dropped.”

I didn't care much for the vague term *promises*, but I decided not to bring it up.

“I thought you might be interested, Tommy, that the search of the service's records has been completed. There were no matches.”

“Huh?” I scratched the back of one of my ears.

“The list of citizens with regeneration.” Jon took a few steps into the room and, not seeing a chair, fell into a parade rest stance. “The service keeps exhaustive records of every citizen born with regeneration.”

I cocked my head. “So it wasn't a citizen? Could it be someone fresh off the boat? Or even someone from inland?”

Jon shook his head. “While anything is possible, it would be highly unlikely. You're not aware of this, Sir, but regeneration is one of the few things we keep an open dialogue regarding with all the other fractions in the city. Including the hunters.”

Glancing back to my father, he averted his eyes for a moment before nodding. “We all know of the dangers a rogue wolf with regeneration could be.”

I let out a long breath. “What about you, Dad? Did the hunters turn up anything? *Someone* has to know who this wolf is. Everyone takes records when their born, it's not like this guy could just have

popped out of thin air.” For just a moment I had a flashback to the fight I’d had with him. His wounds healed so fast that my claws nearly got stuck as I struck him. “That wolf had the strongest regeneration I’ve ever seen. *Someone* has to know who he is!”

“Sorry, Son. We’ve nothing.” For just a moment he barred his teeth in a snarl that the years could never soften. “We’ll wait for him to attack again. And we’ll rip him limb from limb, all the hunters and I. One does not attack a hunter without retribution. We *will* find him, Son. Don’t doubt me. And when we do his regeneration will be a curse rather than a blessing. I’ll make sure he lives until he tells us everything. Then we’ll make certain he’s dead. Regeneration doesn’t do much good when your head isn’t attached to your body.”

The ice in my father’s voice reminded me just who I was talking to. He may be old and grey, but this was still the hunter’s alpha.

My mom arrived shortly thereafter. She was a little surprised to see me. She’d just sent the message that they were in the hospital.

Jon headed off when we were ready to go. My father was set to be discharged from the hospital.

The police dogs tried to form up on us as we stepped out the front doors, but they were beat by a pack of hunters.

The police may be ordered to guard me, but they weren’t suicidal. They let the hunters fill the first ring. The police then fanned out a few steps away.

My parents and I were making our way slowly down the street when my father tugged at my ear.

“There is one thing, Son.” His voice was soft, hardly a whisper. I wasn’t sure if he was being covert or just couldn’t work up the energy to speak louder as he pressed on my arm. “I only know of a single wolf with the regeneration you described. His name was Agamemnon. Or at least that’s what he called himself. It couldn’t be him though. I remember him from when *I* was a pup. He wasn’t a hunter, but I did run across him now and then. He wasn’t a pleasant fellow. All I know is that I saw him recover from wounds faster than I ever imagined. That... gods, Tommy, that must have been sixty years ago, and he was fully grown then. He must be long dead now.”

The walk back to my parent’s house took forever. There were more than a few moments where I seriously considered just picking my father up in my arms and carrying him.

The thought passed quickly, though it did make me smile.

I was one of only a handful of people who my father would ever so much as lean on, show a sign of weakness near. To pick him up and carry him would net me little more than a bite to the shoulder.

The only way I’d ever carry my father would be hefting his dead body during the funeral.

At long last we made the final turn down the tree lined street and walked up the steps to the house. When I turned around to dismiss the hunters they were already gone, melted into the shadows of the street.

My police guard, however, were still there. Looking at me with expectant eyes.

“Just wait for me here.” I ordered them as I slipped into the house.

There wasn’t much to do here, but it just didn’t feel right to leave so soon. Every moment with my father was precious now. It was a bit of an odd concept, I’d never really thought of life without him.

Helping him the last few steps, I eased him into the bedroom and retrieved his cane. When I turned around he'd already fallen into a peaceful sleep.

I took a moment to dive into the shower. I'd had the coal dust on me all day and it was starting to itch. I'd done my best to wipe it away at police HQ, but a hot shower was what I really needed.

And I wanted to get it here. Rebecca would take one look at me when I got home and kick me out before I could track coal across the newly cleaned floor.

It was a bit of a blast from the past to be back in the old house. I'd spent my life growing up here, my parents constants throughout my childhood.

My father was always the hunter, the provider. The big bad wolf that I could look up to no matter what. He was always there. Even after he'd been wounded he was always in my corner no matter what.

My mother was the other side of the coin. Quiet and always just around the corner. She wasn't loud or aggressive. No one knew her name or trembled when she entered the room, but yet she always got her way. There had to be *something* about her, otherwise how would she have ever met my father?

I watched as the black coal dust slowly sloshed away down past my feet. Decades ago my father had ripped out the human style shower that had originally been installed here and replaced it with a large tile stall over twice the size. That, and he'd replace the shower head with one that put out far more water. He'd often come back from his hunts hot, sweaty, and smelling of blood. Both the prey's and his own.

I could still smell him, reeking and victorious from yet another hunt.

It was rare he ever came home anything other than victorious.

I'd still been fairly young when he'd hurt his leg, but I could remember the night clear as if it was yesterday.

I'd been sitting, looking out the front window with my tail wagging, waiting for him. I couldn't have been more than twelve. That was the age that most kids began to doubt their parents, become rebellious. Heh, I didn't have that problem. Other kids only grew up *thinking* that their father was a god. I *knew* it. He was the hunter's alpha. He was the strongest wolf in the city. And he was my father.

And I sat there and waited, and waited. He was hours overdue, but that wasn't all that uncommon. He lead the hunters, sometimes things came up. He *always* came home. He was just a little late today. He'd be here soon enough with a smile for me and an embrace for my mother. And he'd bring dinner.

I'd fallen asleep by the time a knock came at the door. It was well past sundown by then.

It wasn't my father that came home that night, it was my uncle Gowan.

I couldn't hear what he said to my mother, but soon enough she was gone. That left Gowan and me alone in the house.

I knew Gowan, he was my favourite uncle. He was my *only* uncle. He tucked me in that night and told me a story about being out hunting with my father. I always liked that story, I'd been told it dozens of times. Gowan always had a way of making me feel like I was five years old – in a good way.

He didn't say a word about where my father was. But I didn't worry. This was my father, he was indestructible.

The next morning I woke up and Gowan was asleep in the front room, curled up on the couch. My mother – and father – were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't until I got home from school that day that I saw my mother again. My mother wasn't much of one for hysterics. She didn't even look sad when I came home.

I asked her where Dad was and she just told me he'd been hurt. She'd take me to see him that

evening.

That night was one of the first times I could ever remember that I didn't eat freshly hunted meat. Instead my mom had picked up some at the store. It wasn't the same.

That evening we went to see Dad at the hospital. My father, the man who was close to one of the gods in my eyes, lay broken and beaten in a bed, his leg plastered and elevated.

And yet he was still awake. He'd refused sedation just to see me. I could hardly make him out under the cuts and bruises that covered him, but he was still my father.

He reached out for me, taking my hand in his still firm grip. His first question was how my day had been. He said he was sorry for not coming home last night and apologized for having to send Gowan.

And he told me I'd have to be strong and wait a few more days until he could come home again.

Gods. I had to wipe the water out of my eyes as I snapped back to present day. I was only glad I was still in the shower. I didn't have to worry about crying. The water may be warm, but I still felt cold.

Fresh and clean from the shower, I stepped out into the front room. My mom was sitting on the sofa, tending to her plants.

"Thank you for coming, Tommy." She looked up at me with a half smile. "You're just what Griss needs now. Having you around gives him something to focus on."

I sat down on the sofa next to her, taking a long look into her face.

I knew she was a sprigen, a spirit of the plants. She aged different than most of us did. She looked *exactly* the same as she'd when I'd grown up. Her face today was still as smooth and gentle as it had been in my first memory of her.

The only difference was that my father had stood beside her in that memory. He wasn't the same now.

"Yeah, Mom. No problem." I slid closer to felt her warmth against my side. "I should come by more often, I really should..."

"Shh..." She reached out an arm and set it across my back, pulling my head down to rest on her shoulder.

I didn't feel the least shame when I started crying.