

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 12: The Only Time You'll Hear a Wolf Pack Howl In Harmony

I don't remember much of the walk back to Jon's apartment, but it couldn't have been easy. Jon was still shaky on his feet, and both English and Amstys were dead drunk.

I practically had to carry them up the four flights of stairs to Jon's Place.

Remembering that both Amstys and English are twice my size, that made for a very bad evening.

The say the next morning came early would be an understatement, both literally and figuratively.

It felt like I'd only just set my head down on Jon's sofa when a loud knock came at the door. Checking a nearby wall clock, it wasn't even seven in the morning yet.

What the... oh bugger it all.

I was just about to peel myself off the sofa when Jon came through from the bedroom, stepping over English and Amstys where we'd set them on the floor. I could have reached out and slapped the dog. He was dressed neat and clean in his police uniform, fur combed back like the night had never happened.

It was only when he walked past me did I see his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes?" The policeman's tones were evident in his voice as he stepped up to the door, not opening it.

"Open this blasted thing, you mongrel! We have a wedding to prepare for!"

I smiled. I'd recognize the angry tones of Smith anywhere.

English must have recognized the voice too. Snorting from sleep, he rolled over to look at me.

"Is that who I think it is, Mate?"

I just rolled my eyes.

Considering I didn't have much to put on, I thought we'd be out the door and on the way to the wedding in a matter of moments.

I was wrong. Oh so very wrong.

Smith stood out in the hallway surrounded by multiple packs of police dogs. Looks like they were taking no chances today.

Stepping in, the fox took one look at me before turning to spit on the floor. I saw Jon grimace.

It was three hours before Smith was happy. Between him and English they must have gone over every square inch of my fur twice, combing and powdering me until I felt – and looked – like one big fuzzball.

I didn't look like a wolf anymore. I looked like a stuffed toy.

The final thing Smith did was to loop the belt around my narrow hips. It was obvious that it had been set for English at some point in the past. He had to cinch it down again and again to keep it from slipping off to lay on the ground.

“Here you are, my son.” The fox brushed his hand across some scroll work set in the age worn leather. I couldn't read a word of it. “Tommy and Rebecca Taggart.” He smiled. “You may not be of my family tree, but I can't think of anyone better to wear this.”

I did manage to get my revenge on English, and then later on Amstys. They both had to sit through Smith's tender meat-hooks as I had. Though their sessions weren't as intensive.

Ready to face the world now, at least according to Smith, we stepped out into the street.

Um... oi.

There had to be a good fifty police dogs out there. And each and every one of them was armed. I didn't even know V-town had that many working guns.

And the way the dogs held them, I had no doubt they'd been specially trained in their use.

We were off walking down the street before it even occurred to me to ask where it was we were headed. I knew where we *weren't* hosting the wedding, but Rebecca and I had never decided on where we *were*.

Jon leaned in from behind me, “Don't worry, Sir. It's all been dealt with. Most of the churches pulled their offers since the fire. The hunters, however, have graciously offered their services. The alpha will be overseeing the wedding.”

I just about laughed. My *father* would be ministering the wedding? The same man who had more blood on his claws than any other in the city?

He'd be marrying us?

I glanced over to English. He shrugged.

Well, I guess it fit. Who better?

We got some pretty open stares as we walked down the street. I guess it's not everyday you get to see a wedding procession like this.

They weren't as far as I could tell though... hostile. Despite all the attempts on my life, no one seemed to take much of an exception to me now. Folks just pointed and stared like we were a parade.

The cops around us became nervous and skittish the moment we stepped from the asphalt of the city and set foot on the soft earth. But, to my surprise, they stayed with me. The cops had always peeled off before, leaving us to ourselves when we left V-town.

It was a testament to their devotion that they stayed with me now.

We were no more than a few feet into the woods when the first of the hunters appeared. I had no doubt there were more watching us, unseen, but one by one they came to stand shoulder to shoulder with the police.

Then appearing beside me as if from the very earth itself, Gowan was at my shoulder. The

black wolf looked immaculate.

The hunter's beta, the hunt master, wearing a suit?

Well, that was a first.

In a suit that I could just about guarantee had come from Smith, Gowan was clad from claw to chin in an inculcate black suit that perfectly matched his midnight fur. He grinned at me.

"Glad to see you could make it, pup. We're just here to help you city folk the rest of the way and make sure you don't get lost."

About twenty minutes later we found our way out of the thick trees of the forest and into a large grassy clearing with a cabin in the middle.

It took me a long moment to realize where we were. This was the same cabin the hunters had been based out of after the quake. The slipshod structure had been redone until it looked respectable, and the churned muddy field had been smoothed out with grassy turf and patches of wildflowers strategically placed here and there.

The cops and hunters spread out as we entered the site. They covered the perimeter while the rest of us walked up the soft grass. Glancing back, I could see Jon and Amstys starting to trail further behind me with each step. English, carrying Smith in his arms, was with them.

They kept falling back until it was only Gowan and I. We walked straight to where a small reception table had been setup.

My parents sat there.

Dad was naked as always, his old grey fur brushed up almost as fully as mine. Mom was beside him in a simple brown dress. She was neither dressed up nor down. She simply *was*. I was glad to have them both here.

"Alpha." I bowed my head to him as I stepped up. "I'm honoured that you decided to host my wedding." Slowly, trying to avoid grass stains on my knees, I knelt down before him, lowering my head.

He looked out over me, wise and strong. The frailness that had contaminated his body last I'd seen him was covered over. He was every inch the alpha of the V-town hunters that I knew he was.

"Get up, you silly pup." Reaching out he grabbed me by the ear and pulled me closer. There was a smile on his lips. He let out a heavy breath. "So this is where it ends, does it, son?"

I cocked my head. "What ends? I've already been mated for over a year. This is just a formality."

He smiled, showing his cracked and yellowed teeth. Reaching out, he put an arm around my mother, pulling her close. "You know what I mean, Tommy. You're not *ours* any more. I suppose you haven't been for some time, but now we have to admit it. It's not easy letting go." He pulled back a snuffle.

For a moment my heart almost stopped. It was unheard of for my father to display emotion like this in public.

Glancing around, I noticed that every man and woman was, conveniently, looking away.

"We're gaining a daughter. That's the way we need to think of it." My mother smiled. "It's just a pity that there's no one here to give her away." She glanced over to Griss. Something passed between them. There wasn't a word spoken, but it was there.

And they wouldn't tell me what it was.

"We're proud of you, son." Dad reached out to pull me closer until he ruffled my so laboriously prepared fur. "You've done more to bring the city together than anyone in its history. Not just the humans, but all of us. V-town wouldn't even be standing if it wasn't for you."

I was about to protest when a shadow flirting at the edge of the woods caught my eye.

It walked on four legs.

I let out a long sigh, but forced a smile to my lips.

"Dad, there's someone you might want to meet."

I called to the hunter that was closest to the trees and a moment later he had brought in all the Class Fives that had stalked out there. How they'd managed not only to avoid the notice of the cops, but even the hunters, boggled my mind.

"Mom, Dad, this is the delegation from Powell River. They've come here to talk to the government. I've been putting them off, but they don't seem to want to talk to anyone else."

Sunny bowed his head as he stood before us with the other dogs. There was something about the way they looked at my father. They knew who he was... or, more than that, they knew *him*.

"Good... good day," Sunny stammered. "We didn't mean to intrude. We just took what you said last time to heart. You said you were in danger, so we figured the fastest way to get it resolved would be to find your attacker." He looked down again. "We haven't had much luck yet."

"Powell River?" My father broke in, "Isn't that north, up the coast?"

The dog backed away slightly. "Yes... yes, sir."

My dad raised a hand to his chin, glancing over to my mother again. "I seem to remember being up there once, long ago. Do you remember that, dear?"

She smiled. "Honey, you're making our guests uncomfortable. Let's talk about it later."

Finding a chair tucked away, seemingly especially for me, I sat out in the sun with my parents, watching the rest of the guests trickle in, each and every one of them vetted by both the cops and the hunters. Practically everyone I knew was here, and more than a few people I didn't even recognize, mostly human, likely Rebecca's friends. But there was something missing.

"Dad? Where's the media? You know, the newspaper and pundent people?"

"Who, those rats?" He lifted a lip, "I didn't invite them, did you?"

"Well, no, but won't they find a way in?"

He laughed. "In? Past your cops and my hunters? I should hope not. I'll flay any hunter that allows one past. Your bride and your fried Jon made a rather extensive guest list. And I do believe they made sure to keep out anyone who might cause even the slightest trouble. Trouble," He turned to me, "Son, is something you've had enough of for the moment. I can't promise you much, but I can promise that your wedding day will go smooth and pleasant, just as it should. Now stop worrying. This day is for you and Rebecca, let us take the load for once. My bones may be brittle, but I can still stand to lead every so often. And if I can't manage something as simple as a wedding than I really should be in the ground."

I smiled and sat back. Closing my eyes, I let the sun wash over my face.

"Where is Rebecca anyway?" I asked.

My mother just laughed. "Don't you worry, Tommy. She's just fine. It takes the bride a little longer to get ready on her wedding day than it does the groom."

I wasn't sure quite when it happened, but things had changed from *getting ready* to *getting going*.

I was still sitting at the small table tucked off to one side, but my mom and dad were gone the gods knew where. It was English and I now, and the lion was getting regular updates from people running back and forth. Updates he refused to share with me.

"Uh, shouldn't we be getting up there or something?" I asked, fidgiting in my seat.

The final touches had been put on an aisle. It lead from the cabin to a small stone alter that had been carried by a dozen hunters to the middle of the clearing. There were no chairs out here, but the better part of a hundred people had arrived and found seats on the soft turf.

From what I could tell there were no divisions. Humans sat next to wolves, and both of them next to all manor of other creatures. Every so often a knot of one species would form, but some of the younger hunters, acting as guides, gently began nudging them apart like reverse sheepdogs.

Heh. I laughed at that mental image.

At long last I recognized a form coming towards us. Lucy. Her fur was brushed out and there was a flower perched in front of one of her ears. She stepped up to English and said only a single thing.

“It's time.”

The lion smiled and nodded. A moment later he was on his feet.

“Let's make this happen, Mate.” He held out a hand to me.

“I can walk, you know. I'm not Smith.”

He snorted and brushed a speck from dust of the shoulder of his suit. “That's not the point, Mate. *We're* here to make sure you can focus on what *you're* here for. Think of it like campaigning for mayor. The rest of us are just running interference to make sure you and the Lass make it to the alter together.” There was something in his eyes, a shadow passing over them. “Just humour me, eh? I want to make sure your wedding is perfect.”

There was little fanfare as English and I walked up the aisle to stand before the alter. Just about everyone was here. My mother was in the front row, smiling.

The only people missing were my father and Rebecca.

My ears began itching a moment later. At first I thought it was just me, but then I heard it plain as day. A howling.

Non-canines don't often know this, but a pack of wolves *never* howls in key. That's the way we are. Every member of a pack picks their own individual note to carry, to make sure their heard and represented.

This was the only time in my life I'd ever heard not only a whole pack, but every single canine hunter howl in harmony.

It sent chills down my spine hard enough to cause my tail to poof out.

A single unique note flowed into the song. My father stepped out of the woods a hundred feet from us.

He was running flat out on all fours, like he was in the prime of his life again. There wasn't even the slightest limp to his leg, but I could see the lines of pain etched around his eyes as he neared us.

English stood a step behind me all this time. He didn't say a word. I think he was shivering as hard as I.

In the blink of an eye my father was before us. Rearing up on his hind legs, he looked nothing so much as like the purest representation of the wolf god.

And then Gown, clad in his black suit, stepped up behind him.

The howl cut off mid note. The only one singing now was the alpha.

Slowly, with a long drawn out wail, he fell silent.

It seemed that even the birds in the sky and the bees on the flowers had fallen silent with him.

There was a creek from behind us as we all turned back to the cabin.

Rebecca stepped out. She wasn't in the hideous wedding dress that had plagued me so, but

rather she was in a pair of black jeans, good hiking boots, a tight white shirt, and the same red leather jacket I remembered her in.

She looked just like she had the night we'd fought our way through Storm Front.

She looked spectacular.

There was no wedding march to play while she walked up the aisle towards us, but each hunter she passed began a low howl.

I'd worried how this would look, her walking up the aisle alone, but I needn't have. Smith was on her arm. The old fox did his best to stand straight and proud beside her.

When she made it to the top of the aisle she let go of Smith to let him take a seat. My father began howling.

I was the only canine to hold my tongue.

I didn't need to tell the world I was here, I didn't need to stake my claim.

All I needed was standing right here.

Two more steps and Rebecca was beside me. I reached out a hand to help her the last step. She took it with a smile.

Turning, we looked into the emotionless face of the hunter's alpha.

His voice was low when he spoke, but I had no doubt it carried through the whole of the clearing and beyond.

"Tommy Taggart. You, one of my hunters, have come towards me to ask permission to wed this human. Is this so?"

I struggled to fight down the lump in my throat. All I could do was nod.

"This is no a minor thing you ask of me, young wolf," his voice was grave. "What you ask for today is the blessing of the pack. Every single one of us. This is no moment of fancy, young wolf. A marriage in the eyes of the pack is irreversible, for life and beyond. To break such a vow would expel you from the pack. Is this something you are willing to accept?"

I coughed and sputtered for a moment. I knew what I had to say, I knew what I *needed* to say, but I couldn't get the words past my throat. The larger than life visage of the alpha towering over me, I was terrified to admit, made me want to turn and slink away, give up on all this foolishness.

I could feel Rebecca squeeze my hand.

"I do." The words slipped out, little more than a whisper. I relaxed now, having gotten them out. Again I repeated them, louder now, loud enough for the world to hear. "I do, alpha. I want to be married to Rebecca McCarthy"

I saw just the barest hint of a smile pull at my father's lips.

"Do you, young human? This wolf has pledged his life to you. Will you take it and do the same in return? It is rare we extend membership in the pack to one such as you, but in this extraordinary case we shall."

Wait... what? He was offering Rebecca a position as a hunter...

"I do." Rebecca answered before I could even think. Her voice was strong and clear, not a hint of hesitation or worry.

"Then so be it." Now he did smile. "As with anything in life, something must be sacrificed for something to be gained. What have you brought for sacrifice?"

What?! Oh bugger. I didn't realize my father was going to do a full traditional service. I... I hadn't brought anything.

"Tommy." Amstys was behind me. He pressed a large white box into my hands.

I didn't even have time to whisper a thanks before he was gone again.

Opening the box, my nose wrinkled at the overpowering scent of the wedding dress.

Rebecca looked my way and grinned slyly.

Lifting the dress out, she showed it to the crowd that watched us.

"We sacrifice this. A wedding dress made by the finest seamstress in the city." She gave me a knowing look. "It was our dream that I wear it today, but we are willing to sacrifice such luxuries in order to ensure out time together."

With that she threw it up into the air.

It didn't even have time to reach the ground before a dozen young hunters, hardly more than pups, rushed forward and ripped the dress to shreds. They each came away with a small strip of tattered cloth, carrying it above them like flags.

A growl came from my father. It took me a long moment to realize what was happening. He was speaking in the old language of the hunters.

Gowan stepped up to translate his words.

"Then... so be it. With the pack... to look after you... I pronounce you... married."

A cheer went up from the crowd behind us. Not only was it a howl from the hunters, but a holler from the humans and barks from the police dogs.

I wasn't listening. Leaning forward, I put my hand on Rebecca's back and leaned in for a kiss.

"I love you, Babe."

She just smiled. "The whole world knows that now."

I was just as happy as not to let the world drift away now, but what seemed like seconds later there was a tap on my shoulder.

"I think your alpha has something more to say, Mate."

Glancing over, my father held a snow white hair in his hands. It must have just been collected from the forest, it still kicked and struggled as he held it.

Once again he was speaking english, "And to this is your final act. A blood bond there will be between the two of you. Hunt the hare and may it bring you good fortune."

With a flourish he released it to land on the ground running. It was out of the clearing and into the woods before I could so much as blink.

And Rebecca was already running after it.

"Babe! Wait!" Bugger it all, I was off and chasing her a moment later.

Another cheer came up behind us, but this one did nothing more than egg us on.

I got a slap from English as I raced off. Ouch that smarted. He nearly made my hindquarters go numb.

Rebecca may be good, and she may have had a head start, but she couldn't move a fraction as fast as I could. Especially once I fell to all fours.

"Thought you'd never make it, Wolfy." She reached out to ruffle the fur between my ears.

"Don't you worry about the hare, Babe." Rearing up, I pulled her into my arms as I took her to roll on the soft ground. "It's just a symbolic gesture. We don't really have to catch it. It's just to give us a head start on the honeymoon."

She gave me a face as I tried to pull her close. "Frisky already? We've only been married five minutes. You can at least wait until I've managed my first real hunt."

"But, Babe," I did my best to make puppy eyes. She only laughed. "That's the *whole point* about being married. I don't have to wait anymore."

"Well you're going to have to wait *now*." She tried to struggle out of my arms.

"Fine." I rolled my eyes and got to my feet. "It went this way, Babe."

"How can you tell?"

"Scent." I grinned. "Remember, I kept us fed last winter by hunting hare like this one."

We spent nearly two hours tracking the blasted hare, but it looked like Gowan had gone out of his way to catch a particularly lively fellow. We never even so much as caught a glimpse of its tail.

"Huff." I was getting run down. It was hot out today, and it's been a while since I've had to chase anything for this long. Most hunts are over in seconds, either won or lost.

Raising my head to the breeze, I could smell water.

"Babe," I glanced over to Rebecca. Her white shirt was stained with sweat. "Isn't it a human custom to be carried across the threshold?"

I gave her just long enough to look my way before reaching over and sweeping her from her feet with a grunt.

Trying to navigate the trees with her in my arms wasn't an easy task, but I managed it. A few moments later we stood before a small, quick running stream.

"I need cooling off, Babe. How about you?" I didn't give her a chance to respond before I took a step forward, sighing as I felt the cool water rush between the beaten pads of my toes. A moment later I sat down. The stream wasn't deep enough to reach my belly, but even an inch of cool water felt great on a day like this.

Rebecca smiled. "Well, I guess we could take a break." She pulled off her boots and socks, then dangled her feet in the water next to me.

"Well, Babe, do you think it was worth it? Getting married and all that?" I closed my eyes and turned to the sky, letting the warmth of the sun soak into my fur.

A moment later I could feel her hands on my face, gently massaging me.

"It's what we both wanted, wasn't it? It wasn't quite what I expected, but I'd never change it."

I let out a long breath. "The only question, Babe, is what now? The world isn't exactly a stable place, but now I have the *obligation* to protect you."

"Obligation?" She mocked my words. "Since when have I ever asked you to protect me? I've saved your life at least as many times as you've saved mine."

I chuckled. "Fine. I'll give you that. But at least give me my moment, eh? I'm the big scary newly wed wolf here. I'm allowed to indulge in my instincts for once right?"

She reached forward and tweaked my nose. "Only if I say you can. Remember, I didn't just marry a wolf. I know what you look like as a human. I married *him* too. I didn't marry a wolf, Tommy. I married you."

I snorted and reached out to pull her down into a kiss. "Yeah, we're odd ones aren't we?"

I was only inches away from a kiss when I heard something rustle in the trees behind us.

It was close, the sound of its approach having been masked by the soft rushing of the brook.

Leaping from the stream, my fur sprayed water everywhere. I half expected to hear Rebecca squeak, but a glance her way showed she'd turned with me, pulling a knife from her belt.

I couldn't see anything in the trees for a long moment... then a golden form timidly walked towards us, its head down. There was something struggling in its jaws.

"Mr. Taggart." Sunny's voice was muffled by the hare he carried. The small animal was still alive, struggling between his teeth. "I didn't want to interrupt you... I found your prey. I..." He paused for a moment, looking embarrassed, "I didn't think you were going to be able to catch it, so I brought it to you. To say we're sorry for bothering you so."

Rebecca stepped forward to take the hare from Sunny's jaws. Yep, the creature was still alive. It didn't take well to Rebecca's handling, but she had enough experience from our walk across the

Rockies to know how to safely hold it.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft. “You needn't have.”

He cocked his head. “It's a gift. It's done because I thought it would be nice. We have skills you don't.”

I stepped forward, falling to all fours to stand nose to nose with him. “Thank you. We appreciate it.”

His tail wagged for a moment before suddenly turning. “You're welcome. I'm only sorry we couldn't offer a better wedding gift. Now,” He bounded off, “I should leave you to your honeymoon!”

We watched sunny disappear into the trees.

“You'll have to remember to get them fixed up when we get back.” Rebecca turned to me.

“But,” She reached down to stroke the ears of the hare that still struggled in her grasp, “What do we do with this? I...” She laughed, “I wasn't *really* expecting to catch it. I just wanted to try hunting.”

I smiled. “Well, there's always soup.”

She laughed. “No, I don't think so.” Taking a step towards me, she knelt to the ground. Gently, she released the creature. It took one look at us and sprinted instantly into the trees, melting away as if it had never been at all.

Odd. I didn't have to suppress my instinct to chase it.

“Well,” I rose back to my two feet, “I guess that's as good a sign as any to start our marriage.”

Reaching out, I took her hand and we started the long walk back to the cabin.