

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 13: Honeymoons Aren't All They're Cracked Up To Be

I hadn't realized just how much ground we'd covered while chasing the hare. We didn't get back before the sun was getting ready to set.

Not that we were in that big of a rush though. We made a few stops here and there on the way, enjoying ourselves.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect when we got back to the clearing and cabin. A party?

Nope. It was all cleaned up and looking near pristine.

For a moment I thought the place was deserted, but a flash of tawny proved me wrong.

On the far side of the clearing I could just make out English in the gathering darkness. He hoisted a bag of garbage over his shoulder and turned to leave, but not before waving in our direction.

There was no power out here, but as we neared the cabin we could see lanterns lit for us.

Stepping in, the cabin had been completely remodelled. Gone was the dirt floor and hastily assembled walls. This looked more like a professionally made retreat than anything else. Hard wood floor, finished walls and a trussed roof with fabric hanging down to make different rooms.

There was even a fire waiting for us, crackling happily away in the fireplace. With a chop of venison atop it, just coming to perfection.

I glanced over to Rebecca. "So, you think the hunters were out watching us, Babe? I always knew Goawn was a bit odd, but I never thought he'd order them to spy on us on our wedding night."

She laughed and reached out to take the meat from the fire. I'd been right, it was just perfect. I'm not normally one for cooked meat, but just this one time I could make an exception.

The only thing missing was a bathtub full of warm soapy water. Oh well, I guess I can't have everything.

Heh. No, strike that. I've got everything I need right here.

The light died away as the sun extinguished itself in the pacific. It wasn't long until the lanterns were the only light we had.

We sat back and enjoyed ourselves, but, to be frank, I wasn't really all that interested in using the cabin for the purpose it had obviously been provided for. It wasn't that I wasn't interested... just that Rebecca and I had been living together so long already that each others bodies were no longer the mystery they once were.

I knew every square inch of her, as she did I. And, anyway, we'd taken the edge off that pressing need on the walk back.

Stepping out of the cabin for a moment, I took a seat on the ground and looked up to the sky. Oddly, for the first time in weeks I could see the stars.

"What'ca doing out here, Wolfy?" Rebecca was by my side a moment later. Taking her hand, I sat her in my lap as I gazed up, leaning back against the wall of the cabin.

"Just stargazing, Babe. Not much. We don't often get the chance to do that around here."

She snuggled back into my chest. "Oh? What do you see? Looking for our future up there?"

I snorted. "Not quite, Babe. Just staring out into eternity. Look," I pointed out to the north, "Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Two of the most important constellations." I laughed. "We used them when we were out hiking in Alberta. They helped us find Edmonton."

She smiled. "So the stars helped you get in touch with your human side?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure, Babe. Just like they helped you find your inner cat. Though," I bent down to kiss her, "They did give us that one rather... unusual night together. To bad we didn't make better use of it. It would have been educational to have gotten to know each other better during that time."

She laughed, poking a finger at my sensitive nose. "I don't think so, Wolfy. I like you just the way you are. I could have picked a human if I wanted. I didn't." She squirmed slightly, pushing herself closer to me, "We both made our decisions and we'll live by them, eh?"

"Yeah, Babe." I wrapped my arms around her. "There's no looking back now, even if we wanted to."

We spent the next hour or so out there. The night became cool, but Rebecca didn't shiver, I held her too close.

The next morning came smooth and easy. It must have been almost eleven by the time I finally drifted awake.

The bed the hunters had dragged out here was nearly equal to the one in Hotel Vancouver. I'd have to see if I could steal it away to take back to the apartment.

Rebecca was still asleep beside me when I carefully picked my way out of bed.

Glancing out the window, the day was bright and clear. Heh, a good omen I suppose. Perhaps now that we were married we could get some of this nonsense behind us.

The fact yesterday had gone without a hitch was more than I ever hoped for.

Checking the makeshift kitchen, there wasn't much here for breakfast other than a few boxes of bisects and some jellies. And, to be honest, I wasn't really sure the jellies were intended to have survived the night.

Stretching, I let each and every muscle in my body loosen up as a slight moan of pleasure escaped my lips. Even my tail flagged. For the moment, if nothing else, this was my world. I had my wife, my cabin, my world.

I had everything I wanted. Except for some food in my belly.

Well, I'd have to go fix that. A quick early morning hunt should provide us with some breakfast.

Puttering about for a few more moments, I stepped outside to splash some water from a rain barrel into my face.

Gah! The day may be warm, but the water was ice cold.

"Morning, Wolfy."

Smiling, I turned to see Rebecca, already dressed in the same clothes she'd worn yesterday. I guess she hadn't packed a change of outfit with her. Suited me. Her wedding clothes looked better than anything else.

"Morning, Babe." I splashed another handful of water in my face and shook it off. She squeaked a little as some of the droplets flew her way. "I was just going to find us some breakfast. Care to get the fire going?"

She didn't have a chance to respond before I heard something out in the forest.

I assumed it to be no more than someone coming to visit us, so I didn't turn too quickly.

My mistake.

They say you never hear the shot that hits you. Ends up they're right. At least in my case.

I was just about to fall to all fours and head off hunting when a stab of pain ran through my gut.

My first thought was a heart attack. I know it sounds silly for someone my age, but I'd been so worried over my father dying of one that it slipped into my mind before I even had time to think.

The boom that reached my ears a second later cleared that misconception right away.

I'd been shot. Again.

Doubling over, it felt like my muscles turned to water. I tried to raise my hands to clutch at the new hole I had in my gut, but I couldn't even do that much. It was an effort to even keep on breathing.

"Tommy!" Rebecca's voice came from behind me. A moment later I felt her soft fingers on my shoulders, trying to move me.

I couldn't see her. I'd fallen facing out towards the woods.

I could see them coming.

I tried to yell a warning, but my lips wouldn't even move. All I could do was lay and watch as three humans and one red furred wolf ran our way.

They were all holding guns. The wolf's was still trailing smoke.

Rebecca must have heard their footsteps in the grass. A moment later she came into sight, stepping protectively in front of me.

She pulled the two knives that she had sheathed on her belt. I knew for a fact she could use them.

I could see the wolf smile from where he was. Slowing down, he let the humans run out ahead of him.

Seconds later the three humans were face to face with Rebecca.

She didn't even say anything. The moment the three men came in range she slashed out with her blades.

It's been a long time since I last saw Rebecca use her blades in anger. She'd improved.

The humans may be carrying guns, but they seemed reluctant to use them. One of them very nearly lost a hand when he was a little too slow in pulling back.

"Don't be stupid, girly," one of them said. "You're already a traitor. Don't make this worse."

Rebecca didn't even dignify them with an response. Slashing out again, a thin ribbon of red appeared down the man's forearm.

"Yeow!" He pulled back. "You bitch!"

Turning the gun around in his hands, he swung it around like a club. He was far too slow, Rebecca had already stepped out of range and slashed at one of the other men. He, however, was a touch smarter, ducking out of the way.

From the corner of my eye I could see the red furred wolf. He was standing back, well out of

range of the battle. Laughing.

Rebecca mounted a far better defence than I ever gave her credit for. In less than a minuet she had one of the men out of the fight with a slashed open hand and another one holding back and wary with a good cut down his leg.

The last man, heh, he was still fighting like he thought he had a chance. He didn't even see the second of Rebecca's two knives slashing forward towards his chest.

And Rebecca didn't have a mark upon her.

It would have been less than a second before Rebecca would have put the last man out of the battle when the wolf darted forward.

He caught the blade full in the gut. It plunged to the hilt.

And he did nothing but smile.

"That is quite enough, little lady." The wolf's voice was low and smooth. Grabbing the blade, he pulled it free in a single fluid motion and tossed it over his shoulder.

By the time he'd returned his attention to Rebecca the wound was already sealed over and the scar fading.

The look of horror on Rebecca's face would have mirrored mine if I'd been able to move.

"Turn and walk away, girl. We don't need you," the wolf whispered. Darting out, his tongue caressed his lips. "Just walk away and give us the wolf."

Rebecca took a step back, standing right in front of me. A moment later she shifted her remaining knife to her right hand and lowered her centre of balance.

She didn't say a word.

The wolf smiled.

Rebecca was good. The wolf was better.

He set his gun on the ground, then looked up to smile at her.

Never raising back to his feet, he sprang.

For anyone else the move would have been suicide. He came straight in, no attempt to dodge. And she knew he was coming.

She slashed across, her blade shining in the morning sun.

I heard the knife make contact, the sound of tearing silk as she ripped him open. I could smell the scent of his blood splashing against the rich, green grass.

Then, a moment later, Rebecca lay by my side. Her knife fell to the grass beside her.

The wolf kicked it away. He was missing an eye.

It was already starting to grow back.

"Did you...?" One of the humans stepped up to her.

"No." The wolf's voice was level. "There are few enough of us left. I would never kill her."

I couldn't even close my eyes to block out the image of Rebecca laying before me. The only thing that kept me sane was the ever so slight rise and fall of her breathing.

I didn't know how, but I was going to kill that wolf.

One of the humans walked up and rolled me onto my back with a toe. I couldn't even snap at him. I had about as much life in me as a sack of potatoes.

"Good shot," he muttered. "Right in the gut. No question, the poison's hit him good. The only way he'll move again is if we take out the bullet."

"Then make sure it doesn't happen." The wolf glanced our way.

"Sure." The man pulled out a roll of tape and patched it over my stomach. For a moment I almost thought he was doing first aid. No such luck. This was duct tape. He was just sealing the slug

within me.

And the worst part is that *I couldn't feel the bullet*. My entire chest had gone numb to the point that I'd just as soon say I was already dead.

I wanted to yell, to scream. To at least ask them *why*?

I couldn't even do that much.

The wolf walked up to stand in front of me. I couldn't move my head. All I could see were his feet.

"Is he ready?" The wolf's voice was smooth. There was something *wrong* in the way he spoke. He didn't talk like a wolf. All wolves, even myself, have a growl to their voices, a racial accent. He didn't.

"Yeah," One of the humans said from behind me, "He's all taped up. It won't come out."

"Good." The wolf knelt down to take a look at the tape over my gut, but he didn't touch it.

A moment later he slipped his arms under me and hefted me, like a dead body, over his shoulder.

I could feel my spine snap and crack as he set me on his shoulder. He kept the bullet wound away from him at all times. I was atop him, facing up to the empty sky.

"Let's go," one of the humans said. "If we leave now we should get into the city during the lunch hour. That should get us the biggest crowd."

I don't remember much of the walk back to town. I couldn't see anything, and the numbness in my gut spread until it covered nearly my entire body. The only part of me that felt like it had any life left was my face. And even that was quickly fading.

We were most of the way to the city when I heard a howl out in the trees.

The humans around me opened fire towards the sound spraying the trees with bullets.

They didn't hit anything. And even if they had it wouldn't have helped. A dozen more howls sprang up.

We'd just been spotted by the hunters.

Another few hundred meters and the city came into view. There was already a crowd, and it was quickly growing.

I could hear the wolf chuckle.

We kept walking until there was no more than a couple dozen meters between us and the crowd. The wolf set me down on a concrete block that stood in the middle of the road. It was a left over from the city before the Cataclysm, never removed. Worn and weathered now, it was still large enough for me to be laid out on.

"Keep back!" one of the humans shouted from behind me. I could just see the tip of his gun as he waved it back and forth over the crowd.

"You're a hard one to kill, but we need to send a message," the wolf whispered in my ear as he moved me about, setting me so I could be seen by those who gathered. "We can't afford for there to be any mistake who you are." He chuckled. "After all the trouble we've gone through, we might as well get the full effect out of this."

He turned my head to stare out at the crowd. I only had just enough power to blink.

There had to be better than two hundred people of there. They'd taken me to one of the restaurant districts. It was full of folks just looking for food.

And in the back of the mass of bodies I could just make out a tawny form.

English was there, his golden eyes staring straight into mine. One of his hands was set over Amstys' shoulder. The wolf stood next to him. He looked ready to leap over the crowd and come

storming towards me.

"Keep back!" one of the humans yelled. "Anybody comes closer and we'll shoot 'em." Then for good measure he added, "And we'll shoot the wolf, too!"

The longer they waited for the crowd to gather the more and more faces I recognized.

The humans must not know the police force well. I not only saw Jon and a dozen uniformed officers, but at least a dozen more clandestine ones.

"Enough for you?" The wolf asked the human next to him.

"Yeah." I could hear the smugness in the human's voice. "Yeah, this will do nicely. I can even see a couple reporters." He took a deep breath as he shouldered his rifle and stepped forward, in front of me.

"Beasts," he began, voice raised. "We come to you, the Human Defence League. You don't know us, but that will change. Each and every one of you was once human," he snarled, "Before the Cataclysm, we were *all* human. That changed. You were polluted, damaged. You are monsters, all of you. We're the only true ones here." He cast a hand back towards his mates. Oddly, the red furred wolf stood among them. "We're the ones who should be leading you, not *dogs* like this." He nearly spat as he pointed at me.

"He not only made the mistake of assuming superiority over us, he also thought to pollute humankind even further, trying to take away one of ours."

"From now on all beasts who try to take humans as their own will be killed. This is unequivocal."

An outcry came from the crowd. Not only from the non-humans, but the humans too. I knew for a fact that there were many in the crowd who were like me, in love with humans.

"This is not to be questioned!" the man yelled, trying to regain control of the crowd. "And we'll make an example of those who try to destroy us! Starting," He turned to me and grinned, "With this wolf."

Uh... what?

Oh bugger.

Struggle as I might, I couldn't so much as move a muscle. The human turned and levelled his rifle straight at my face.

This... this was going to hurt.

It took the crowd only a moment to realize what was going to happen. Most of the people either stood still as stone or screamed. Those who were of more sound mind, the cops and hunters, rushed forward.

They were all too far away. It was at least a dozen meters to reach us and all the human had to do was twitch his finger.

I didn't bother trying to close my eyes.

Expecting a boom, I was surprised instead to hear a metallic clang.

A knife ricocheted against the rifle. The gun went off a fraction of a second later, but the shot went wide, blasting hot fragments out of the concrete block beside me to spray my face.

What?

I still couldn't move, but in the sudden commotion I was knocked enough to be able to look back towards the forest.

Rebecca, with blood covering half her face, was running towards me, one of her knives held in her hand. And behind her were the Class Fives.

A gun went off only a few feet from my ear, nearly deafening my. I saw one of the dogs go down with a yip.

Rebecca threw her remaining knife and I heard one of the humans cry out in pain.
And that was when the remaining Class Fives leapt over me, rushing towards the humans.
Only to be met by the red furred wolf.

I could only see a small corner of the battle, but the wolf fought back the dogs, opening a safe corridor for the humans who retreated back into the forest.

I might not be able to see the fight, but I could feel the splashes of blood that washed across my face.

"Tommy." When next I opened my eyes Rebecca was next to me, grabbing a hold of my limp hands and pulling me off the concrete block. "Please tell me your alive."

I couldn't do anything more than blink.

"Stand aside, Lass." A moment later all I could see was tawny fur. English picked me up in his arms and carried me away like I weighed nothing.

I could see Amstys behind us, guarding our escape. He yipped in pain. Stumbling, I could see a rose of blood growing on his leg.

We wove between buildings, trying to get some protection between us and the rapid fire gunshots that came from the humans.

This must be make or break for them, they certainly weren't worried about using up ammunition.

I got another good view of the sky again as English set me down on the grass of a small park.

Too bad the numbness of my body hadn't retreated any. I could hardly feel anything past my nose now. Much further and I'd be gone.

"Gods, Tommy," Rebecca leaned forward over me, the blood from her face dripping down on my fur, "Say something!"

Was it wrong that I was more concerned for her than I was for myself? It didn't matter if I died, I just wanted to make sure she wasn't hurt.

She leaned further forward, placing a hand gently in front of my lips to feel for my breath.

It took everything I had left, but I put all the energy I could muster into my tongue, forcing it to lift the scant inch to desperately lick at her hand.

She pulled back with a squeak. A moment later her arms were wrapped around me in a hug.

To bad I could hardly feel it.

The last sensation of warmth in my nose was fading away. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

"Tommy?" I could hear her words, but at a great distance, "Tommy! Come ba..."

And they were gone.

Pain.

That was all there was to my world. I couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't scream, but their was pain.

It coursed through every fibre of my being. There was nothing to me but the nerve searing, red hot agony that grew in my belly.

Like a demon twisting inside me, it burnt and consumed.

And a whimper escaped my lips.

I... that simple motion was like ambrosia. I'd experience a million years of agony over again if I could just move my lips.

"Forceps." The voice was familiar. I could hear again, even if I couldn't tell who. "Forceps!" The voice was harsher now, emotion leaking into its formerly stoic words.

"What do you think this is, a hospital? I don't have any!"

"Then give me pliers, tweezers, a rotting table fork for the gods' sake! Get me *something*, I can't reach the bullet."

"Here, here!" Another voice broke in.

A moment later another burst of agony broke my world of blackness. Someone was digging *into* me.

There was a gasp. It wasn't mine. "I got it. I got a fragment."

Then another burst of pain.

Sight came back to my eyes.

I was once again staring up into the cloudless sky. There were faces clustered over me.

Jon was further down, his arms over my chest.

He narrowed his eyes and a fresh lance of fire tore me asunder.

"That's it!" In a pair of rusty pliers he raised an indistinct lump of metal. It had a faint purple cast to it.

I paused for just a heartbeat, collecting my wits about me, before I took a deep breath *and screamed*.

I must have given people a bit of a shock, they all leapt back. Jon nearly dropped the bullet right back into my wound.

After running out of breath I paused for a moment and started all over again. Only this time I cursed.

I cursed everything I had. I think I even saw English blush.

"Tommy!"

I was only half way through my vocabulary when Rebecca jumped forward, wrapping her arms around me. A moment later her lips were to mine, cutting off my words.

By the time she let me go the agony in my gut had simmered down to merely 'please gods make it stop'. It was low enough now that I could sit up.

"I'm..." I had to pause for breath now that I was thinking about what I was saying again, "I'm here." I wanted to say 'I'm okay', but I wasn't quite sure about that yet. "What in all the gods' names hit me?"

"Another anti-regeneration poison from Gowan's box." The voice was soft.

Turning, I saw my father limping this way, leaning heavily on Gowan's shoulder. The black wolf looked abashedly down at the ground.

"Someday we'll have to sit down and have a talk about that, Mr. Taggart." Glancing the other way, Sayer was there. He was all but being carried by one of his officers.

The two old canines shared a glance.

"My men can cover the forest," started my father.

"And my officers the city," finished Sayer.

"No." It took all of my slowly returning strength to stagger to my feet. "No. Those buggers shot me." I glanced over to Rebecca's blood stained face, "And hurt *my* wife. I don't care what you do to them, they're mine first." I barred my teeth.

"No." The reply came from them both together.

I staggered slightly as something popped in my chest, moving back into place. A moment later and I was able to stand straighter.

"This isn't up for debate." I gritted my teeth. "I'm going after them. You can follow me up in half an hour. Until then they're mine."

"But the poisons..." my father began.

I shrugged offhandedly, happy to notice I could do so now with no pain. "I've already managed

to walk away from being shot twice. Besides,” I glanced over to English, “I’ll take him with me. He won’t be affected by regeneration poisons.”

“Sir!” Jon called from behind me.

“No.” Reaching out, I laid a hand on his shoulder, “I have other plans for you. Stay with Rebecca, make sure she’s safe. That goes for you too, Amstys.” I glanced over to the wolf. “I have experience bounty hunting with English. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

English and I were no more than a block away when I slowed the pace to lean on him. I’d managed to look healed in front of Sayer and my father, but the truth was I was still dangerously weak.

“You sure you’re up to this, Mate?” He glanced down to me.

I forced a smile. “Sure. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. And, buddy,” I stopped to catch my breath, “When we find them, this isn’t a bring ‘em in live type of contract, eh?”

English’s smile was purely demonic. “Works for me, Tommy. I’d be more than happy to watch them bleed out. They nearly did the same to you.”

I nodded. “And the wolf. He’s mine.” I laughed. “No clue how I’ll kill him, but he’s mine.”

Round one more bend, it became obvious why the hunters had yet to bring the humans back from the forest. Not only had they unloaded enough lead into the crowd to leave dozens of people sprawled on the ground to be tended by the medicals teams that were just arriving, they’d also set fire to the trees.

A wall of orange flame stood between us and the direction they’d escaped.