

# THE PATHFINDERS



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## Chapter 14: I Am, After All, A beast

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Stepping up to where the humans had prepared to execute me, I found one of their weapons laying on the ground.

It was an odd design. I don't know much about guns, but this wasn't a standard make. The mussel was oversized, like it was designed to fire an odd size of slug.

"Careful, Mate," English grabbed it from my hands before I could look at it, "That's what the wolf was carrying." He flipped open the chamber. An off stained red bullet sat within. "You ever seen a colour like this before?"

I stepped back, careful not to get too close.

"Nope. The green tried to kill me outright and the purple paralysed me. I have no wish to find out what the red does."

He smiled, showing each and every tooth in his arsenal.

"Oh, but I *do*, Mate. He was silly enough to leave it here. I want to return it to him. Personally."

"Fine." I took a deep breath. "But we need to find them. I can't track anyone over the scent of the fire."

English rolled his eyes. "Mate, haven't you learned anything? We've got dozens of witnesses that would be happy to help."

Talking to the people who had watched, they reported that the humans had indeed retreated into the woods, but the wolf had been separated from them in the chaos, losing his gun. He'd taken off into the city, down an alleyway.

It was my turn to smile now. I could track his scent anywhere. Anyone else and their scent would have been torn to shreds by the city. *Him* I would have no trouble tracking.

The bugger's trail wasn't an easy one.

It was obvious he knew we'd be going after him. And there was something wrong.

He was scared.

He must have doubled back and looped around at least a dozen times, but at long last we

tracked him to an abandoned apartment building in south V-town.

Looking up at the twenty story behemoth, I was surprised it was still standing. There weren't many like it left, and even fewer that had no people in them.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked English.

He only growled in response, cocking the gun.

Stepping into the building, it struck me just how much this place resembled my old apartment, back before I moved to my current place.

At first I thought the entire building was abandoned. I was wrong. We got about ten feet into the lobby before I saw something move in the corner of my vision.

Spinning around, I saw an old rat huddled in the shadows, clutching a thin rag to her body.

"Money?" She croaked out, "Alms for the poor?"

I shook my head. "Maybe later."

Pushing forward, it took us a good twenty minutes to find a way up to the higher floors. The wolf's scent was so strong in here that I couldn't follow his trail anymore.

The first stairway we tried was choked with rubble. The stairs in the second had given out. It didn't look like there was anyway up until I at last looked inside the elevator shafts.

The elevators themselves were long gone, having snapped their cables and fallen into the basement. The shafts, however, were relatively clear.

Groping around in the darkness, I was able to find a ladder built into the wall. Climbing wasn't easy in the pitch darkness, but I could still smell the wolf.

I wasn't going to be stopped.

The scents of the city fell away as we climbed higher. I stopped at each floor to check for the wolf's scent, but he seemed to just keep going up.

All the way to the twentieth floor. The elevator doors were wedged open here.

There was just enough light shining down into the shaft around us for me to glance down to English.

"Ready?" I fought to keep my voice level.

He didn't say anything. He couldn't. The gun he carried was held between his teeth.

I did however hear him growl.

Stepping out, silent as the fog, we surveyed the penthouse level of the building.

It was a rather change from the dilapidated lower floors.

The walls were painted, the lights all working. Oddly, the most unnerving was the designs. Everything here was *old*. Like... a hundred years old. Everything was from before the Cataclysm.

We were in a small antechamber. Ahead of us was a single doorway. There was a handwritten sign upon it.

'Go back where you came, beasts. Enter on pain of death.'

The writing wasn't the sloppy style that I was used to. It was smooth and cursive, like it had been written by hands that had studied a lifetime in calligraphy.

But even then... there was something different. I'd seen humans write, and it was *like* this. But not the same. It was a mixture of human writing and what might come from my own hands.

Stalking forward, I pushed the door silently open. To my surprise it wasn't locked.

The hallway beyond was much the same as the antechamber. Bright and in perfect repair, everything here could just as well be stocked in a museum.

From up ahead I could hear a high, pained, voice cursing.

About halfway to the windows at the end of the hallway we passed a widening in the hallway. It wasn't much, but there was a single thing sitting in the centre of this space.

Like a shrine, a photo sat on display. It wasn't large, only four by six. It was obviously from before the Cataclysm. It showed a family of smiling humans.

A mother, father, and three children. The all looked towards the camera, bright and happy.

A few steps further and we grew closer to the cursing.

I knew that voice. It was the wolf.

We were just around the corner from the voice when it grew to a bone chilling howl. Then it died away into an exhausted panting.

Glancing over to English, we both stepped around the doorway. He raised his gun.

The red furred wolf stood in the centre of a large, clean, brightly lit bathroom. He was looking into a mirror and trying to dig something out of his flesh.

There were tufts of fur and squares of skin on the floor around him. He kept digging into his own body like he could hardly feel the pain.

Yet every time he pressed his claws deeper they were pushed back by his own regenerating flesh.

I took a deep breath.

"Agamemnon, I presume?"

The wolf stopped and turned towards us.

"What are you doing in my home, *beast*? Get out." He paused for a moment as he realized who I was.

And, much to my surprise, he laughed.

"You!" He shook his head slowly, rolling his eyes. He didn't even seem to notice English holding the gun levelled at him. "You truly are a challenge to kill." He snorted. "One moment. I can't be looking like this when I have guests."

He turned away from us, back to the mirror again.

With a grunt of pain he forced his hand once again deep into his own flesh. Blood poured out over his chest as his claws cut deeper.

A moment later I heard a relieved sigh of breath from him as he pulled something free. A bullet clinked to the floor. It had a slight red sheen to it that I couldn't attribute to the blood it sat in.

"Now," He turned to me, sucking in a breath, "Where are my manors?" Before our very eyes the gaping wound in his chest knitted back together. It was gone in only seconds. Even the pelt completely grew back. The only thing to suggest it had ever been there in the first place was some blood matted fur.

For seemingly the first time he noticed English.

"You can put that away, *beast*." He looked over to me. "Tell your trained animal that he isn't needed. You haven't anything to fear from me for the moment." He lifted a lip to show a wicked fang. "Not until we're both ready to fight again. As for you, Mr. Taggart, you must have more humanity in you than I ever thought." He laughed. "It's not often I encounter one such as you." He paused for a moment, lifting a claw to his lip, "No. No, I've *never* encountered once such as you. How old did you say you were?"

I just stared at him speechless as he brushed past me out into the hallway. English was only slightly better, turning to keep his gun aimed.

"Fine, never mind. Even an uncivilized compost heap like this city has to have a half useful tool tossed into it every so often. Come on," He glanced at us over his shoulder, "I won't kill you yet. I promise. We'll leave that until *after* we talk."

He disappeared around a corner. English and I turned to each other.  
The lion shrugged. "Can I shoot him, Mate? Just to shut him up?"  
I let out a sigh. "Not yet."  
We followed him.

There was a large kitchen and dining room in front of the windows.  
Like everything else of this floor it looked to have been completely renovated from its original design. And, somewhat obsessively, *everything* was clean and working.

"Take a seat," the wolf called over his shoulder from a bar built into the far wall, "I'll be with you in a moment."

Making sure English was covering my back, I turned to look out the floor to ceiling windows.

This had to be one of the tallest remaining buildings in V-town. Looking out the crystal clear glass I could see *everything*.

All of V-town laid out before me like a map.

And... did it look ugly.

Down on the street the city was a fine place to live, but from up here, looking down at the patched and re-patched roofs and dingy walls, it looked like a wasteland.

The sound of claws clicking on linoleum behind me pulled me back to the real world.

The wolf walked back towards us, three glasses sitting on a tray.

One was a tea cup. If anything it was older and finer than what even English had. The second was a large glass of bourbon, the third was a simple, unarmed crystal glass filled with blood.

The wolf smiled.

"I hope the selections suit you." A slight grimace passed over his face, "It's not often that I entertain."

He set the tray down on a small wooden coffee table. The design was old, but it matched every thing else in the sitting room.

Everything here, without exception, was of pre-Cataclysim make.

"You can drink it," the wolf urged me on as English and I found seats across from him on the small sofa. "I promise you it's safe. I'll even try some if you want."

English raised an eye ridge. "I doubt that would do us any good. Your regeneration is even better than Tommy's. You'd likely be immune to anything we could imagine."

The wolf chuckled sadly. "Yes, you'd likely be right. Oh well, you'll just have to trust me."

English reached out and took a sip of his tea. A moment later he smiled.

"You're not touching your drink, Tommy." The wolf noted as he took his own glass of bourbon.

I sniffed at the cup on the table but didn't touch it. "Sorry. I don't drink *blood*."

His eyes widened slightly, as if in honest surprise. "Really? You eat raw meat, hunt wild animals, but you're not interested in blood? It's freshly squeezed from a carcass."

I wrinkled my nose. "No, thank you."

He shrugged. "No offence taken. So," He leaned back, lounging in his seat, seemingly fully at ease. "I'm assuming you'd like to know who I am?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

He smiled again. "You called me Agamemnon. I assume your father told you that name. I haven't used it in some time. I have to change every so often. Otherwise people will realize just how long I've been here."

I raised an eye ridge.

"My real name, Tommy, is Brian Ferguson." He laughed as I cocked my head. "Don't be so

confused. There are no living souls who have ever heard that name. I was a member of the Vancouver police force.”

It was a good thing I hadn't taken a sip of my drink. Even as it was I think English nearly drowned.

The wolf pulled a face, near snarling. “Not the so called 'service' they have now. I was an officer in the *Vancouver* police force. Not the V-town as they call it now.”

I cocked my head further. “Vancouver? The city hasn't been called that in over a hundred years, since the Cataclysm.”

He laughed softly. “Exactly. Look around you, young wolf. Do you see anything tainted by the Cataclysm other than...” He paused for a moment, “Me? *I* was alive when the world came to an end. I was an officer on my beat. One moment I was walking in a fine summer day, the next it all came to an end. And I,” His voice fell to a snarl, “Became *this*.” He raised a hand before his face.

“I became a *beast*. But I, unlike so many around me, retained my *humanity*.” He paused for a deep breath, moderating his tone, “It took me two days to fight my way across town, to get back to my family. When I did I found them all dead.”

He was little more than whispering now. “My wife had become... a rat. My kids...” He trailed off. “James. He'd stayed human. Not that any of it mattered. By the time I'd gotten there the fall of civilization had already begun. They were all dead. Killed by the *beasts* who had given into their new natures when they'd been changed.”

“I... I saw the beasts all around me. I even saw the beast that had taken over my own skin. I tried to join them, to murder myself.” He smirked. “That's when I discovered I had a second curse. I can't, it seems, die in any meaningful way. Anything I do I heal from in seconds. Not even the fangs of time seem to be able to destroy me. I've been looking out at the sunsets over the Pacific for over a hundred years now, and I'm the same as the day the world ended.”

“You were human?” I asked.

“I *am* human.” His fur bristled for a moment before he forced it to lie flat again. “I was born human, unlike you. I *am* human, no matter what my appearance may be.”

I laughed, glancing over to English.

“Don't see what's so great about it, myself. English and I tried being human and all that for a couple of days last year.” I snorted. “Bloody well good it did us. Just got sunburn and mosquito bites.”

The lion chuckled for a moment before speaking.

“But that, Mr. Ferguson,” His voice fell to a shade above a growl, “Doesn't explain why you tried to kill Tommy.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “I don't take kindly to those who harm my friends.” He set his tea cup gently down on the table.

Brian raised an eye ridge. “We weren't lying when we spoke to the crowd. You were encouraging interbreeding, killing off the human race. I can't allow that.”

I had to hold back my own growl now. “And what about all the work I did to keep the humans alive? The exodus, the return to V-town? What about all that? Where were you?”

He shrugged offhandedly. “Just because you didn't see me doesn't mean I wasn't there. I played my role. I do thank you for what you did. That,” He narrowed his eyes, “Is why you're not dead yet.”

I was about to reply with an angry retort when an ear shattering boom echoed through the room. The wooden coffee table between us exploded as a bullet tore through it.

English stood up and walked over to the crumpled form of Brian, smoking gun still in his hand. He gave the wolf a savage kick.

“*That*,” He spat, “Is for shooting Tommy the first time.” He threw the spent gun away. “And

this is for the second.” He raised his claws to swipe down at the wolf’s face.

“Wait!” I leapt to my feet to stop English. I needn’t have.

The bullet had buried its self in Brian’s upper chest, likely in the lung. It must have anti-regeneration properties, he wasn’t healing from it.

Before I could even get the two steps to where English stood the wolf had rolled away from him, kicking out with a foot to knock the lion off balance.

A grim smile spread across the wolf’s face. “Beasts. All of you. I knew it.” His lips pulled up in a snarl. I’ll kill you like I’ve slaughtered hundreds before.

He tried to launch forward into an attack, but pulled up short clutching the wound in his chest.

The look of surprise on his face was obvious. He wasn’t used to having to fight with a wound.

I smiled.

Stepping forward, I slashed my own claws though the air. He tried to step back, but moved too slowly. Four crimson streaks appeared in his red coat.

They began to heal, but not nearly as quickly as his wounds had before.

Turning to flee, he ran down another hallway parallel to the large glass windows.

English and I followed him.

He didn’t get more than ten feet before the lion leapt.

Landing on the wolf’s back, English began snapping, trying to fasten his jaws around the wolf’s neck.

He almost made it before Brian turned and slashed him hard in the nose.

With a roar of pain English fell back, clutching his face.

That just left me.

Stumbling to his feet, the wolf leaned against the crystal clear windows looking out over the city.

I launched myself at him.

I had only an instant to realize just how bad an idea this was before I made and we both went crashing through the window.

For just a moment it felt like we were flying.

Then we were plummeting.

Oh bugger.

I’d never wanted to get *this* good a look at the city.

All around me the world spread out. I took just a split second to see the ocean and the mountains, the city sandwiched between them.

Below me, I saw a mask of near serenity on Brian’s face.

I was just closing my eyes, preparing for the fall when I stopped short.

“Ieahhh!”

Fire lit up and down my spine as a strong hand closed around my tail, sharp claws digging in.

I was dangling out of the twentieth story window of a skyscraper, held aloft by English’s firm grip on my tail.

Far below, I watched Brian, the last survivor of the Cataclysm, as he hit the empty, cracked, asphalt.

His body exploded into a million pieces, not so unlike a minotaur I’d seen so long ago.

There was no way his regeneration could ever recover from that, no matter how good it may be.

It took what seemed like forever for English to pull me back to safety.

The fact he yanked me up by my *spine* didn’t help. Without my own regeneration I had no



doubt it would have been torn clean off.

"So," He paused for breath, looking out the window, "That's the end of him, Mate."

I was still nursing a bruised rear end, jumping every time one of my vertebrae popped back into place.

"I guess so." I winced. "I hope so. But we're not done." Looking out the window again, I could see the black smoke of a forest fire to the west. "We've still got the true humans to find."

The cat grimaced. "This is going to be a long day."

Back out on the street again, the climb down had taken forever. A crowd had already gathered. Among them were the police. And one in particular.

"Jon!" I ran up to him, "I thought you were guarding Rebecca."

He looked away sheepishly, "I escorted her to police HQ. Amstys is still with her. She is safe. I needed to come and help you." He glanced to the blood that covered the street. "But it seems that the particular individual has had an accident."

"Fine." I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him towards the smoke in the distance. "We're going hunting. Come on."

He started slightly, regaining his footing. "Hunting? As in the forest? Wouldn't this... uh, be a better job for the *hunters*?"

I barred my fangs in a smile. There was no joy in it.

"Jon. These are the people who tried to kill me, hurt Rebecca, and break the very city in two. I'm offering you the chance to find them. Are you turning me down?"

He paused for a moment, straightening his uniform. "Someone from the force will have to, of course, accompany you. To make sure your safe. As your personal attaché that would logically be me."

We made it to the edge of the city without much of a problem. It was once we were here that I realized just how great the damage was.

The black smoke that rose into the sky was not just simply from the forest, it had spread to the outermost buildings of the city as well. It looked like every firefighter in V-town was here, and most of the cops too. They were working hand in hand to try and keep the fire from spreading.

I had no doubt Fire Chief Hamish was having a very, very bad day.

Taking a deep breath, I instantly regretted it as ash and smoke clogged my lungs.

Not sure which way to go, I started walking straight across the ash where fire had already burnt itself out.

The ground was hot against my feet, burning, but I kept walking anyway.

With the path clear it didn't take long to make it to the cabin where Rebecca and I had spent last night.

There was... nothing left.

I knew this was the place, but the only indication anything had ever stood here was a small pile of charred wood in the centre of the clearing.

I gritted my teeth and snarled.

About to set off again, at a more or less random direction, a call came from behind me.

Rebecca was running my way.

I rolled my eyes with a smile.

"Jon," I glanced over to the dog, "I thought you said she was safe at police HQ."

He just looked away and curled his tail around his leg.

"You're not going anywhere without me." Rushing up, she flew straight into my arms, nearly bowling me over backwards.

"And if I said it wasn't safe?" My voice was muffled by her hair.

She poked me in the nose as she took a step back. "Then I'd just remind you who saved you. So how about you don't?" She smiled and showed off a new set of knives.

I shook my head. "Deal. But we still have a problem. No one knows where they went."

"We may be able to help you with that."

From behind a charred tree trunk, Sunny stepped our way.

"I've dispatched some of my party to follow them. Last I heard they were heading north up the coast."

I smiled, showing my teeth.

"Horseshoe Bay." I glanced at Rebecca before turning my attention back to Sunny. "Thank you. I don't know how to repay you, but I will. Stay here and talk to Max. Tell him you have my blessing for whatever it is you want."

We set off moments later, the four of us. The walk to Horseshoe Bay was a long one, but it was familiar. We made it in record time.

It wasn't long after we neared Horseshoe Bay that I picked up their scents. This was going to be a problem. They knew they were being followed.

The trails split and rejoined time and time again, then looped around upon themselves.

There were a few times we saw the flash of a human in the trees, but they had planned for this.

With their guns I couldn't close the distance to them to make a capture. We needed a plan.

"Babe," I pulled Rebecca to my side, "We need a distraction."

She smiled. She didn't have the teeth I did, but the grin was no less feral.

"Use a human to draw them out?"

I shrugged. "They won't run from you the way they will from us."

Seconds later she was walking out in front of us, making the racket that human's normally do when they walk in the woods.

Sending English off to my left and Jon to my right, I hunkered down and hid in the undergrowth.

All I had to do now was wait. Wait and stalk my prey.

It wasn't long until one of the humans poked his head from the trees. He thought he was being stealthy, but he was plain as day. Feet behind him English crouched unnoticed.

The next human was on the other side. Jon was behind him before he'd even gotten ten steps.

And one last human...

He appeared from the trees on the far side of Rebecca, across from me.

I didn't have a choice. In seconds he'd be upon her.

With a silent snarl I leapt through the woods, catapulting myself between the trees. In the blink of an eye I was before Rebecca. My legs bunching beneath me, I leapt over her to pounce upon the man.

The snap bark of the man's gun echoed through the woods. He didn't hit anything.

I wanted to kill them. I so sorely wanted to rip them limb from limb, but I didn't.

I was not just a beast.

Binding them with handcuffs thoughtfully brought by Jon, we began the walk back.

It was only now that I looked at the few remaining buildings of Horseshoe Bay. They still looked lived in.

"Why?" I had to ask.

The lead human looked up at me sourly, flicking his head to try to brush his long black hair from his face.

"You're a beast, just like Brian said. You'd never understand."

It took every fibre of my being not to turn and maul him.

"*Understand?*" I nearly screamed it. "What's to *understand*? I saved all the humans in V-town not just *once* by getting you out of the city, not *twice* by keeping you alive over the winter, and not *three blood soaked times* by welcoming you back to V-town! How can *I* not understand? You'd be dead if not for me!"

He simply glared at me.

"Right. *Oh great saviour*. We owe so much to you that we shouldn't even *dare* to doubt you." His voice positively dripped as we walked. "It doesn't matter *what* you do. The entire species in doomed is we don't do something radical. Every union between a human and a beast produces a beast. No exceptions. The only way the human race is to survive is to sequester ourselves. We *could* have survived in Horseshoe Bay. We were doing just fine until you came to yank our chain again. It's people like her," He glanced over to Rebecca, "She's what we need. We need her, and women like her, to help us make the next generation."

In a flash Rebecca was before us, her fingers wrapped around the man's jaw.

"What?" Her voice was as cold as the arctic snow. "Are you saying that you want to *breed* me?" Her fingernails were starting to dig into the man's face, drawing blood. "Are you saying you see me as nothing but a... a *bitch* to give you human babies?"

Stepping up behind her, I softly encircled my arms around her chest, lifting her arms and pulling her back into me.

"Jon," I glanced over to the dog, "Get them out of here. It's not that far back to V-town. You don't need us."

"You okay, Babe?"

We were laying out on the exposed stone of the Rocky Mountains, looking down through the trees to the city below us. I could just make out Jon and English as they stepped from the forest.

The cops were around them in an instant, taking the men into custody.

And I could see English looking our way, surveying the trees.

He waved before turning away and disappearing among the buildings.

"I guess, Tommy. I was just thinking about what he said..."

Rolling on my side, I reached out and kissed her, my tongue brushing her cheek.

"Don't worry about it right now, Babe. We've got the rest of our lives to work out a plan to keep the human race going. We'll figure *something* out."

"But he was right. We're dying. The entire human race could be gone in only a few generations."

"Babe," I let out a breath, "We'll think of something. There's still a lot about the Cataclysm we don't know. Remember, we found that machine up in Edmonton."

The slightest smile touched her lips.

"Yeah, I guess. We'll think of something."

I grinned. "Now," I reached out to take her hand, "What would my wife like to do with the rest of this fine day? It's our first full day of being married, we should do something."

She laughed. "Why not help me look for a job?"

I groaned.