

THE PATHFINDERS



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Chapter 15: Singing In Discord

The doctor's office was drab enough that it needed something, anything. Even one of those 'hold in there' posters with a photo of a cute kitten would have helped.

And that's saying something. I *hate* those posters.

Dr. Janson was one of the few remaining geneticists in V-town, or the entire world for I knew.

"Well, Mr. Taggart, the projections are back." The mouse frowned. "It took a fair bit of effort. We even had to make use of a computer, but we were right. At current rate the last of the humans in V-town will be gone in a little less than four generations. Something like two hundred years."

I shut my eyes for a moment. "What about humans in the rest of the world?"

He whistled.

"That's even worse. We sent some envoys to other cities. It looks like they have even smaller human populations than we do. You said something about a rogue wolf helping the human cause? I wouldn't doubt he worked to bring as many humans as he could here."

"Fine." I stared up at the tile ceiling, rubbing my temples. It's been two months since we'd killed Brian Ferguson and so far it looked like everything he'd said was true. "What are our options?"

The doctor shrugged. "The only thing we can think of is a breeding program. It would have to be extremely rigorous to even hope to stabilize the population likely so much as rebuild it. We lost a lot of humans just before the quake."

"I know." I sighed. "But I'm not about to start telling people who they can and can't screw." Getting up from my chair, I set my hand on his shoulder. "You'll keep looking, right? We need a better answer."

He smiled. "Sure."

I turned to leave, "Oh. I know it's not your area, but did they ever get back about how all those poisons I survived affected my system?"

I heard a few papers flip on his desk. "Don't know. Everything checks out, but we really don't know what the long term effects will be. We'll just have to keep an eye on you. They could do strange things to your regeneration."

"Thanks, doc."

I closed the door to his office behind me.

Out into the hospital proper, I climbed the steps to the third floor. The private rooms were up here.

I let out a long breath, trying not to taste the disinfectants on the air.

I'd gotten the message today that I'd been dreading for some time.

Passing a nursing station, there were only two rooms currently being used in this wing.

One room was guarded by hunters. The other, across the hallway, was guarded by police dogs.

None of them spoke as I turned to enter the room flanked by the hunters.

When my father had first been moved in here I'd tried to pay for everything – there was no way my parents could do it themselves and I wouldn't let my father have anything but the best care – but to my surprise the bill had already been taken. The hunters had passed a collection pot amongst themselves to cover the expense.

Stepping into the darkened room, my father lay flat on his back on the bed. His face was in shadow.

There wasn't a sound in here, and not a breeze stirred. For all the world it looked like time had stopped.

Kneeling beside the bed, I tentatively reached out a hand. He was barely breathing.

"Dad?" My voice was rough.

His eyes fluttered open ever so slowly.

He didn't say a word, but I knew he was there.

I took his hand in mine. Lifting his arm, it felt like there was nothing there, like he was already a ghost. Nothing like the strong, solid as the earth man I'd grown up with.

"Dad..." I couldn't speak.

Bowing forward, I rested my face on his soft grey chest, just feeling it ever so minutely rise and fall.

And I cried.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

And then the gentle rise and fall stopped.

I looked up. His eyes were closed.

He was still.

I couldn't hold back the cry that escaped my lips as I turned my head to the sky.

A single long, pained note escaped me. It was a funeral dirge.

I held that note until my lips were dry and my lungs were raw. All the other hunters in ear shot, likely the whole city, joined in with me.

We didn't sing together. Every one of us put our own soul into the howl, making a nerve-wracking, painful, and unforgettable cry of anguish.

I started the cry and I ended it.

I was once again alone as I howled.

Running out of breath, my howl came to an abrupt, sobbing end.

A hand came to gently rest on my shoulder, as light as an autumn leaf. It was my mother.

She didn't say anything, but only helped me to my feet.

She'd look after my father now. She'd make sure his body was returned to the forest he'd loved so much.

Back out in the hallway, Rebecca was waiting for me.

I swept her into my arms and held her so tightly I never wanted to let go.

On the other side of the hall I could see into the remaining room.

It was crowded with police dogs. And at their front, the only one next to the bed, knelt Jon.

I couldn't see Sayer, but I knew the moment it happened.

The hunters had howled, showing their mourning to the world. The police dogs simply bowed their heads.

One of them pulled out a radio and whispered a single word.

I had no doubt that every other dog in the city was also showing his or her respects.

With clinical efficiency they moved on. No more than a minute later they had dispersed, returning to their duties.

The lead dog may be dead, but there was a new lead dog. And the city still needed protecting.

Jon stepped out to meet us as I watched over his shoulder. The other dogs were already carrying Sayer's body away.

"So that's it?" I asked.

Jon nodded. "And you?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Yeah."

We descended to the basement of the hospital, where they'd constructed a cafeteria. English was waiting for us there.

It wasn't until now I really got a moment to look at the building around us. This wasn't an old human building, nor was it the slapdash construction that had been the hallmark of V-town before the quake. The General Hospital was a new breed of building. Taking what we knew of the pre-Cataclysm human works and adding to it our own strengths, it was a design like none that had come before.

Sitting down at a table next to English, he was nursing a tea. He nodded to Jon and I. He didn't need to ask. It was obvious.

"So," He took a deep breath, "What's on the agenda for the rest of the day?"

Jon glanced up from beside me. "I'll need to be going in a moment. My uncle did his best to leave everything in order, but taking over for him is a big role to fill." He smiled sadly. "I still wish I didn't need to do it."

I patted Jon on the shoulder. "I understand."

He stood up and walked away. It was no more than ten feet before a guard of police dogs formed around him.

There was something in the way Jon walked now. He was taller. Firmer. He was a police dog through and through, but he wasn't just *a* police officer. He *was* the police.

Glancing back to English, he was sipping from his cup, making a face. He never did like mass produced tea.

I couldn't help but notice the grey strands of hair that were starting to show out on his brown mane.

I shook myself like I was throwing water.

"And that reminds me, Wolfy," Rebecca said softly from beside me, "I need to go see the obstetrician. My appointment is in ten minutes. She just wants to make sure everything is coming along alright with the pregnancy."

I couldn't help the soft smile that slipped to my lips, fighting with the tears that still wet my face.

"That's great, Babe." I pulled her down to kiss her cheek, "I guess it's a new start for us, eh?" She laughed and pushed me back. "It should be, we tried enough times!"

She was gone a moment later, disappearing into the crowd of people around us.

Looking out over the masses that flowed through the hospital cafeteria, some were happy and jubilant, having just started new families of their own, others were worn and broken, having lost those close to them.

Me? I was still having to work out where I was.

“So, Mate,” English pushed his half finished cup of tea away, “Like I said, what are you up to today?”

I shrugged. “I don't exactly have any plans.”

He smiled, showing off his still white teeth. “Well, Mate, how about coming with me? There's always another contract that needs hunting.”

I let out a breath, rolling my eyes skyward.

“Yeah. That doesn't sound bad.”

Author's Note

Well hi there. Welcome back (again).

Here we are, having taken another swing at Tommy and *The Hunters*. It's good to be back. This mark's the forth book in the series, we're past the mid-point now. Tommy's not a young wolf any more, or at least not as young and wide-eyed as he was when this whole thing began. With a little bit of luck you'll continue to watch him grow as the series progresses.

So, after all my vague hints of doom and gloom you've finally seen the new big bad. Brian is the final major antagonist of the series. On a technical level he appeared very, very briefly in the previous book with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo. If you're thinking everything is good now with him gone... well, problems have a way of coming back when you least want them.

We're starting to enter the endgame now, and things are firming up. Tommy finally has someone to face who can truly test who and what he's become over his previous adventures. And more than that, this is an antagonist who'll... Ahh, but that would *still* be telling.

There were so many ideas I wanted to get out in this book. Too many, honestly told. The book likely could have ran on for another three chapters, but it already crested one-hundred thousand words as is. There was a lot of different concepts, plots, and world building in this story, not all of them fleshed out to the level I would have liked. I hope you kept up, this got real busy, real fast.

And with so many ideas running amok, something had to get left out. I feel sorry for Rebeca in this book. I wanted to work on developing her as a character, giving her a life and story that wasn't dependent solely on Tommy. Unfortunately, time just didn't permit.

Everyone else though, yeah, they get *backstory*. I suppose you could almost call this 'Exposition: The Book'. I think it weaves in well enough though. Everybody has to come from somewhere.

I will say, however, that this book contains one of my favourite scenes in the series. The idea of Tommy being hired to run his own assassination may be a little far-fetched, but I couldn't resist it the moment it popped in my mind. That, and I can never turn down the opportunity to give Jon a migraine.

Oh, and the scene of him smacking his head against the table? Yeah, that's pretty much me in

real life – just minus the regeneration.

In a previous essay I nattered on about sequels and how things never seem to change or grow in long book series. This is *not* one of those series. I'm quite proud of the fact that each book build upon the previous, often going in a different direction. Tommy's done his time as Mayor and come out the other end. Some things have gotten better during that time, some things have gotten worse. One thing is for sure, he's not the same wolf that went in, though he might like to think he is. The times are changing, and the old power structures that held V-town in check for so long can't remain forever. Including the ones that were invisible to the naked eye.

And this ain't no comic book, people don't come back from the dead.

And speaking of death. Yeah, the epilogue was a bit of a punch to the gut. It wasn't easy to write, but the two were old. Having Sayer and Griss leave the world in near lockstep only goes to show – to me at least – just how similar the two of them were. The men spent much of their lives trying to pull the city in opposite directions, but in the end they were far more alike than either of them would ever admit.

So, the question is where do we go from here. I've got the final two books in *The Hunters* ready to go, but it'll be a bit before you see them. Tommy's next adventure is *The Proginers*. The wolf will quickly come to find that being the alpha for an entire city was only training for heading up a family.

And woe upon anyone who would ever bring them harm...

But first, here's something completely different. Keeping up my tradition of a *Hunters* book, then a one off story, I present to you *We Don't Just Fade Away*.

A story of minor gods, encroaching darkness, a young magician girl, and a large, white, fluffy dog.

It's borderline for being something that can be posted on FA, but we'll see if we can get away with it. Hey, it's got Anubis as a minor character, so how bad can it be?

You're still here? Well, thank you for reading, and staying with me so long. If you've faved or commented (and you know who you are!), thank you. I mean it.