

The Proginers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 13: The Highest Peak in Sight

And that was the way we went until well past midnight.

We did have to stop to make camp at some point. Even English's supernatural reflexes need a rest after hours of the razor's edge driving this route required.

The night was quick and cold, but dulled by the supplies packed in English's trunk. They were possibly the same supplies I'd picked up with him long ago.

My nose twitched as the sun peeked over the peaks to the east.

I'd been sleeping stretched on the hard ground, Rebecca tight in my arms. At first we'd tried to sleep in the back seat of the jeep, but it was too tight and lumpy.

I wasn't yet back to full consciousness yet, but the scent that pulled at me jolted me awake in a heartbeat. I'd promised myself I'd never forget that scent.

Brian Ferguson.

Setting Rebecca gently back to the ground as I stood up, she did a good job of hiding the fact she'd woken. We'd long practice at things like this.

The red furred wolf stood at the edge of the small clearing we'd parked in. He stood with his hands held before him and his head bowed.

"Tommy." His voice was soft.

"What in the gods' names are you doing here, Brian?" I asked. A moment later my eyes narrowed. "You... you're behind this."

He took a step back, his eyes growing wide. "No," he gasped, "No, please believe me. I didn't. Not me, not *me*. But I know where they went."

I took a step forward, but felt a hand fall across my shoulder.

"Why should I believe you, Brian?" I asked.

He gaze fell to the ground. "Because you helped me? And I just want to help you back? You gave me a fresh start in life again. Something I haven't had in a long, long time. The memories are coming back now, quicker than they were before, and I want to help you before I not *me* anymore. I remember who they are, Tommy. And I remember what I told them long ago. They're scared, and they fled to the one place in the world I'd told them would be safe no matter what. Safe because I made it

that way.”

“Where did they go, Brian?”

He began to shake like a leaf in the harsh autumn wind.

“Do you remember the letter we found in my bedroom, Tommy? The one that told of a book, a book of my memories? That's where they've gone, or close enough to. There's a cave in the crest of the mountain, and they've held up in a small fortress just below it. I know it well. I chiseled it from the stone decades ago. It was one of the few times I ever left the city... and it was so long ago that it all seems like nothing but a story now.”

I took a deep breath and stepped forward. Brian flinched away as though he feared it'd hit him.

“I don't care who *he* was with,” I said. “I need to know who *you're* with. Are *you* going to help me get my children back or are you on their side?”

He looked me in the eyes. I could see his adam's apple bob.

“I'm with you, Tommy. *I'm* with you.”

I turned and glanced over to Jon.

“There's no way we can get him back to the city, is there? The force isn't far enough behind us?” The dog shook his head. “And we can't leave him here for them to find.” I turned back to Brian. “Fine. You're coming with us. Get in the truck.”

It was starting to become crowded here. English driving, I called shotgun. Rebecca and Jon were in the back, on either side, with Brian sitting between them.

Jon still had that long, awkwardly shaped package with him. He hadn't had the time to tell us what it was yesterday, and the fact he made a point of not addressing it once Brian joined us was enough for me to let it drop. For now.

This was, as well, one of the few times I've had the chance to watch Jon openly argue with someone. Tempers were frayed as it was, and having Brian along didn't help. It was made even worse when Brian countered half the direction's Jon gave as they raced down the narrow path.

Jon would order English to take the left hand at a fork up the road, but the moment we got to the turn Brian would often as not pop up and command he take a right.

This did not go over well.

Not the least was that when he said such things it sounded less like the frightened *Brian* speaking and more like the commanding and condescending *Brian Ferguson*.

“Mr. Ferguson,” Jon growled after the fifth time they'd gotten in an argument. We were stopped in the middle of the road as the two of them bickered. “I must insist that you hold your tongue. My men have maps of this area, many provided by the hunters themselves. I have committed our route to memory and I can assure you that the best possible way has been chosen. You... may have *memories* but you, whichever *you* we'd like to discuss, haven't been out of the city, by your own admission, in decades. The woods are not like your precious city. Or should I say the way you'd *like* it to be. The world changes.”

For just a moment I could see something in Brian's eyes. Something trying to break through. I unhooked my seat belt and prepared to spring.

And in a heartbeat it was gone. There were only the nervous shake of Brian left.

“I'm sorry, Commissioner,” he said, manner cowed. “I don't want to... it's just...”

Jon let out a sigh. “You are instinctive. You'd never make a good officer.” His voice softened. “I spend so much time around my own men that sometimes I forget not everyone is trained to our standard.”

"Well folks, this looks like the end of the road," English said, throwing the jeep into park not feet away from a sheer rock face. "My baby can handle just about anything, but she's no mountain goat."

He threw open his door and stepped out without another word.

I had to lean forward to see the top of the cliff through the windshield. We were at the foot of Cathedral Mountain.

"Shake a leg, Mate," English said, poking his head back in. "We need to get a move on. The jeep was our advantage. Now that we're back on foot we'll be no faster than the hunters, likely slower. We need to keep moving if we want to beat them there."

I glanced back at Rebecca. She shrugged.

A moment later the rest of us were out of the truck, pulling packs from the trunk. The only one of us not to have one was Brian.

English growled at him. "If you're coming with us then you're carrying your fair share." He glanced over to Jon who was double weighed down by his pack and parcel. "Take the cop's pack," he ordered.

I was starting to have flashbacks to when English, Rebecca, and I went mountain climbing back in Alberta. That was *not* a good thing. I'd fallen a couple thousand feet back then. I'd rather not have have a repeat performance of that little number.

When I'd said the rock face English had stopped in front of was sheer I hadn't been kidding. English had gotten us right up to the foot of the mountain. From here on out it was straight up.

The first thing we did was to gear up. The climbing supplies the lion had bought months ago were coming in more than useful now. Not that anyone but the cat had even the slightest how to use them, and even then not all that well. The heavy ropes and leather straps did at least make me feel better.

"Come on, folks," he said, reaching out a clawed hand to get a firm grasp on the stone. "It's time to show me just how much muscle you've got. Just remember to lift with the legs, eh?"

We had three hours of climbing behind us before the night began closing in. Thankfully it looked like much of the straight vertical ascent was behind us. Brian truly had been this way before. Despite the talking to Jon had given him the wolf had quickly been able to work his way out in front of English and show a far easier way up than we'd ever have been able to navigate ourselves.

The evening found us on a small plateau. We weren't anywhere near the top yet, but this was a nice enough clearing to make camp.

"You holding up alright, Babe?" I asked, setting down my pack. Taking a couple of paces, I stepped up behind her, wrapping my arms around her and brushing a lock of sweat slicked hair from her forehead.

"I was about to ask you the same thing, Wolfy." I could detect more than a hint of stress in her voice, but it was the undercurrent. Far stronger was the grim determination. We were both resigned to what we were going to do, and we both knew it wasn't likely to be pretty.

I let out a sigh and forced a wan smile to my lips. "Just like the old days, eh? You and me, and English, and Jon out on the road. The fate of the world in our hands again, in one way or another. Not exactly what I dreamed of when I was a pup."

She laughed and began pulling our tent from her pack.

"What? You didn't dream of being mayor, of being important, of adventure? What did you dream of as a kid?"

I knelt down next to her and helped assemble the tent. Our actions were long practiced and smooth.

"Honestly, Babe? Of not much. I grew up the only son of the hunter's alpha. My dreams for the future likely paled in comparison to that anyone else. I never wanted *adventure*. No one understood why I didn't follow in my father's footsteps by joining the hunters. Even after I could hunt it wasn't what I wanted. I'd seen what that could do to a person. All I wanted was a nice quiet life. A home, a family I could come back to every night. The old KDP office job wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but it was close."

She laughed. "Then we're about as different as could be, but we knew that already. Growing up on Salt Spring, nothing ever happened. Nothing. I was like most kids, I always dreamed of adventure, of getting away and seeing the world. I only got as far as Edmonton, but I've had enough adventure for the moment."

Dinner was a meager affair of whatever English and Jon had packed with them. We were close enough to the peak of Cathedral Mountain now that none of us wanted to risk a fire in the night and give away our position.

Chewing dried meat and dog kibble didn't help anyone's mood, but at least we got to look up at the glorious night sky. Or at least what part of the sky wasn't blocked off black and menacing by the dim outline of the Rockies.

"Do we have a plan for what we're going to do when we get there?" Rebecca asked from beside me.

The night might be complete, but I could still make out the bright eyes of English, Jon, and Brian in the darkness. The starlight reflected off them, making them burn with their own inner light.

"That we don't, Lass," English said. His accent was firmly in place, but I could hear just how hard he had to fight to keep it there. "We don't know much about exactly how they'll be set up. I've never seen this place, and I doubt you have either. We'll simply have to scout the place out and see what we can come up with before we're spotted. With any luck they won't expect us showing up so soon."

I glanced over to Brian as English spoke, but the wolf didn't add anything. There was a hardness to his features that hadn't been there when we'd first picked him up.

"There's only one rule," I said, my voice low. "Don't kill them."

English glanced at me, then Jon. "That's a tall order, Mate. They don't seem to want to play fair, with their guns and all. And we have to remember why we're here. It's not for them, eh? It's for the kids."

A soft growl escaped my lips. "That's why I want the kidnappers alive. Death is too quick a punishment for them. I want them to *suffer* for what they've done. If we kill them then I won't have the satisfaction of showing them just how wrong they were to steal my children away from me."

I felt a soft hand rest of my shoulder.

"We'll get them, Tommy," Rebecca whispered. "And we'll bring them back to the city where they'll face justice. They'll face the courts just the same as any other person would who kidnapped any other child. You didn't put so much time and effort into reforming the justice system to throw it out now. We'll get them, I'll promise you that, but we'll hurt them more by treating them like everybody else than we ever could by stringing them up by their toes." She paused for a moment, then added even more softly, "Not that I don't want to make them suffer too."

This night out among the stars was so unlike the last time Rebecca and I had spent in the

mountains that I could hardly even pull up the memory of us vacationing in the soft, stress free meadow. The ground now was cold and hard, the only soft and warm thing in the world right now was her curled beside me.

It could be no later than two in the morning when I woke. There had been no sound, but there had been motion.

And it had been enough to wake me.

Slipping carefully from the tent, I left Rebecca sleeping. No need to wake her yet until I knew what was going on.

The sky had clouded over, leaving us in near perfect darkness. It took everything my night vision had just to make out the dimist of outlines. And I *needed* to see. We were camped on a small ledge with sheer dropoffs on three sides. One too many steps in the wrong direction and the last anyone would hear of me would be a shrill scream.

I had to stand stone still and wait for the next flicker of motion to come to me. It was a canine silhouette sitting on the edge of the plateau.

"Brian?" I asked, my voice rough from sleep.

He turned ever so slightly, catching me from the corner of his eye.

"I am here." His voice came to me otherworldly, as if someone else were speaking.

"What are you doing up?" I asked, carefully picking my way towards him. He was sitting right on the edge of the drop off, his legs dangling over into the void. It had to be at least a thousand meters straight down. For all I knew the jeep was right beneath us.

He paused a long moment before speaking, waiting for me to find a seat beside him.

"Tommy, I need you to know I wasn't responsible for this. At least not directly. Not me."

I took a deep breath and looked out into the darkness. "I trust you, Brian. At least on that one. You're many things, but I don't think you've ever lied to me."

I heard a soft chuckle. "I'll take your word on that. I didn't even know if I'm telling the truth half the time. The memories... they're coming more and more often now. The closer we get to the mountain, the book. It's the walk itself. I've taken this journey before, recovering my mind each time. Tommy, I need you to know that the man you fought wasn't *me*. It at least it wasn't the original me. I can't tell you how I know, but I know it as sure as the stone beneath us. Every time I've come back... it's almost been like a reincarnation. I'm not the same person. It's the same as how I'm a different person now than when you first met me. I'll regain my memories, but it's the times like this when I'm starting from scratch. What's the term? Tabula rasa? I start as a clean slate and it's what and who I'm with when I first return that works to shape who I am. My memories will pull me towards a centre point, but you and these last few months are the foundation, my memories can only build atop of."

I snorted. "You're getting pretty philosophical for a man who can't remember much."

I could just see him turn to me, his eyes glinting in the nonexistent light. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, you stupid wolf," he snarled. "*I'm starting to remember.*" As if an invisible hand had come up to slap him the growl suddenly fell from his lips. He jerked so suddenly that I almost thought he was going to fall off the cliff.

"Tommy?" When he spoke again his words were soft. "I'm.... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... It's just that things are coming back to me. And they're not all things I *want* to remember. I won't hurt you or your kids. You have my promise on that. I swear by God. You've done too much to help me this time around, but I can't promise you anything after that. Brian Ferguson, the man you knew, or at least closer to it, will be back soon."

I reached out and found his hand in the darkness. It was shaking.

"Brian, I never knew much about the man I killed, but I am honoured to call *you* a friend. You've promised me you'll do your best. There's not much else we can do."

He didn't speak for a long time. We both simply stared out into the black void of the night. The lights of V-town were completely obscured from here.

"I wonder who'd I'd come back as if I did it again," he whispered.

"What?" I had to force myself back to the here and now, I'd been dozing off.

"If I leapt," he said. "Who do you think I'd come back as if I killed myself? I've never committed suicide before. Well, never and been halfway successful. This is further than I've ever fallen before. There would hardly be anything left of me if I jumped from here."

Reaching out, I gripped him roughly by the scruff of the neck and braced myself.

"Let's not find out, shall we? I've already got the stain on my soul from killing you once. I'd rather not have a second one."

He laughed softly. "You don't have to worry. I've already promised I'd help you get your kids back. It's just... something to think about. I wasn't always like the way you saw me, Tommy. I was always a bit of a shut-in, but in some of my lives I at least *tried* to make the world a better place. Did you know I once ran for mayor, long, long ago?"

I jerked, almost enough to send us both hurtling off the edge.

"You what?"

He laughter grew. "I just remembered a few hours ago. It was at least seventy years ago. I ran, and I lost. I don't remember too much more about it. I'll tell you when it come to mind."

A grin touched my lips. "Heh. Yeah, I'd like to hear that. You really ran for mayor?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I think so. I was a different person back then, literally."

Swinging his feet in from the void, Brian stood up beside me, then offered me his hand.

"Thanks, Tommy," he said. "I needed to talk to someone. I think we'd both better get back to sleep now."

Morning came too soon, but I didn't have the luxury to complain about it.

A meal of cold rations, we all looked up at the climb before us. And felt out muscles ache.

None of us were built for mountain climbing. We'd been able to manage it yesterday out of sheer desperation, but it was going to be a bear of an ascent today.

And there was going to be a fight atop it.

I tried to get Brian talking again, in front of everyone this time, but his lips remained stubbornly sealed. Every time I tried to lure him in to conversation his eyes flashed and he turned away from me, from all of us, to stare out into the now bright blue void.

"So that's it, is it?" I asked, scoping the last of my dried meat into my mouth. There was hardly enough to sooth the ache in my belly. "We really don't have a plan. We just walk straight up there and get into a brawl with the people who'd beat off no too few of V-town's finest."

Jon bristled like I'd just insulted him. "I'm sure we'll think of something, Tommy. And in any event, there were a dozen of them against three of my officers. There are four of them now and five of us. Those are far more favorable odds. And," he growled slightly, "They won't get the drop on us this time."

The sound English made was somewhere between a growl and a chuckle. "Don't worry yourself about things you can't change, Tommy," he said, his voice without a trace of accent. "In my old language they have a word for something like this. Loosely, it translates into 'scream and leap'. It's the sign of being a man that you can make something like that work."

I snorted and stood up, leaving the rest of them to sit around where a fire would be if we were

brave enough to start one.

Back over at the tent Rebecca and I had spent the night in, I was just starting to pull the rods out and stuff them back in their bag when a flutter of motion caught my eye.

It spun my head around, pulling the rest of my body with it as I turned to track it.

I could hardly make it out, but there was something there, dashing back into the small strand of trees tucked up against the cliff of the mountain.

Down on all fours before I could even form a coherent thought, I was off and after it.

Gods, it could be one of the humans. We had few advantages, but surprise was one of them. I'm sure they expected us to come, but not this fast, and not in this number. Our only ace in the hole would be lost if one of them saw us and reported back.

There was hardly any space up here on his small plateau. The strand of threes was a meter thick and hardly five meters long, tucked up against the lee of the rock.

Diving into the greenery, I had to throw my hands up to keep from braining myself on the rock cliff that hid behind it.

There was another flash of motion to my left.

Spinning, I leapt. By the time I landed it was long gone.

In the distance I could hear raised voices. Everyone else must have noticed me disappear.

Another flash of motion and I leapt again. I overshot this time, but I finally got a good look at who was chasing. Or more to the point, *what*.

A scraggly hare. It was thin and grey, and I hadn't the slightest how it'd gotten up here.

My mouth watered at the thought of fresh hare for breakfast.

The hare started off again as soon as I reoriented on it, but this time it wasn't fast enough. Now that I knew what I was hunting I could adjust for it.

Springing low this time, my jaws ripped through the foliage.

The hare made one more leap, and this time the great blue of the sky opened up around me as I followed.

"Iyae!"

When I say opened up *around* me I'm serious about it. The hare, in desperation, had leapt right off the sheer face of the ledge, the same thousand meter drop Brian and I had hung our legs over last night.

It was airborne in a slow arc out over nothing. And I wasn't far behind it.

Thankfully, despite what I would have sworn to you at the time, I hadn't gone all that far. My snout was off into the void, and even one of my front paws, but most of me was on solid terra firma.

Or at least enough of me to scramble back to purchase.

The hare must just have realized what it had done too. It twisted and tried and get back to the relative safety of the mountain too, but it was already in mid air.

Reaching out a hand, I simply couldn't let the meal escape. My fingers brushed the hare's ears. An instant later I had it firmly in my grasp.

It was dead before it touched the ground.

"What in all the gods' names is going on?" English yelled from behind me. A moment later I felt his strong arms close around my chest and pull me back from the edge.

Wiggling in his grasp, I turned around and raised the hare.

"Breakfast," I said with a smile. The stress that had been building in me moments ago was still there, but I'd managed to find a relief valve.

We still didn't have a fire to roast the hare, but that didn't matter much to English, Jon, and I. Rebecca never cared for raw meat – having a bit of an odd taste – and I was rather surprised when Brian refused his share.

The wolf looked at the meat with a disgusted sneer, almost akin to Rebecca's. That was odd. I remember him eating fast food before, and that's often served raw.

Setting off again, we were able to find a fairly walkable path hidden among the trees back where the hare had been. We'd never have thought to look there if not for the animal.

Today's walk was no shorter than yesterday's but at least it wasn't *vertical*. Today was a walk rather than a climb, though definitely a steep one.

It was coming up to eleven o'clock and I could tell things were going downhill – figuratively speaking – right away. Brian had been soft spoken yesterday, but today he was positively tight lipped.

When he did speak it was only to tell someone they were doing something wrong or going the wrong way. There were no insults in his words, but there was a venom to his voice that set us all on edge and it only grew more caustic as the day wore on.

“Would you shut your mouth, tail-chaser?” English snapped as Brian abruptly told him he was going the wrong way. “We all *know* you've been here before, but the path's changed in the last twenty years!”

Turning, the lion went face to face with the wolf, lifting his lips and showing his fearsome array of teeth.

Brian narrowed his eyes and looked up into English's maw without a hint of fear.

“Listen to your better, beast,” Brian spat. “You're nothing more than a killer.” Brian paused for a long moment before adding in little more than a whisper, “You're the one who shot *me*.”

“Alright folks,” I said in a breathless pant, pushing my way between them. “I think this might just be a good time for us to stop for lunch. I think we're all tired.”

English steeped away immediately, pulling off his pack and sitting on the hard rocky ground. “I'll second that one, Mate.”

Brian, however, held where he stood. “I won't be eating with beasts,” he said though clenched teeth.

It had been like this all morning, since last night even. Every step we took towards the summit seemed to make Brian nothing but worse. The only people he'd talk to without a snarl were Rebecca and I, and I didn't seem to be far from being dropped from that list.

We'd eaten all of the hare this morning, but at least that left us with a little of the dried rations left for this meal. We hadn't any idea what we'd be doing for dinner, but at least there were a few scraps left for lunch.

As we'd progressed further up on the mountain the conditions had, oddly enough, improved. It seemed the steepest parts were at the foot. Where we were now was relatively pleasant. I wouldn't call it the greatest place for a vacation, but there were scrubby pines here that stretched a good five to ten meters in the air and the ground was covered with a bed of grasses and wildflowers.

Lunch was carried out more or less in silence. We'd gotten through just about all the talking we needed already. We were all just itching to find the humans and get the kids back.

“Brian,” I said, turning to the wolf, “Are you alright? Are you sure you're going to be able to go through with this? You seem... a bit off.”

He favoured me with a scowl that looked to be pure poison. “I'm *fine*,” was all he said.

Concluding lunch, we broke camp. English and I walked into the trees a dozen meter or so together. We were there to see a dog about a man, but I had something else to discuss.

"Hey, English," I whispered, never looking up from my business, my voice nearly drowned out by the sound of falling water. "Are you getting the same vibe off of Brian?"

He grunted, just as softly. "Yeah, Mate. I knew we never should have brought him. I think his mind is coming back too fast. He could turn on us at any moment."

I sighed. "Bugger. What do we do?"

He shrugged as he finished up his business. "What can we do, Mate? Just hope he holds it together long enough. It was a lucky shot I got in on his last time. He'd be a right horror to try and take down out here."

Returning to camp, we began pulling on our packs and getting prepared to head out.

"Everyone ready?" I asked. There was a round of nods.

Except one.

"Where's Brian?" I asked, keeping my voice mild. The wolf's pack was sitting on the ground next to where I'd last seen him but he was nowhere in sight.

"Bugger," English swore under his breath.

A moment later both he and I had dropped our own packs and started out into the trees.

"Jon," I called over my shoulder, "You and Rebecca stay here and watch if he comes back."

Jon was weighed down with his still mysterious package and I didn't want Rebecca following us in a headlong sprint over mountain shale.

Tracking anyone by scent can be a difficult proposition, made only harder when you're in unfamiliar territory. Trying to track a fellow wolf across the side of a mountain was no small task. Thankfully, this wasn't Brian's home turf either. He was a city dweller. I was a hunter.

We still managed to make good time. Brian's head start was only scant minutes and we were gaining. It wouldn't be long until we'd be able to make out his footsteps.

My heart went cold when a new sound came in at the edge of my hearing. I would have welcomed it if I hadn't been tracking. The gentle trickle of a mountain stream.

"Drat."

Like an arrow, Brian's trail led straight towards the water and dove in. The stream was perfect for his needs. Only perhaps six feet across and no more than a foot deep, it was easy to ford and even easier to walk up or down stream. And the current carried any and all scent of him away.

I looked over to English. He said it best.

"Bugger."

We still spent a good half hour trying to pick up his trail again, but it was hopeless. Brian was many things, but he was not a dumb man. He made sure to cover his tracks.

He was gone.

And we were in very big trouble.