

The Proginers



By wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1:	The River may be Running, but I have no Urge to Chase it.....	1
Chapter 2:	To Say This Was Unexpected.....	12
Chapter 3:	A New Breed of Cop.....	25
Chapter 4:	Pot Marks and Ashes.....	37
Chapter 5:	A Wolf for a Father and a Lion for an Uncle.....	55
Chapter 6:	Dirty Politics.....	68
Chapter 7:	I'll Rip Your Heart Out. By the Gods I Swear It.....	80
Chapter 8:	From a Single Drop of Blood.....	93
Chapter 9:	An Invasion from the East.....	105
Chapter 10:	Washed Up on Shore.....	116
Chapter 11:	A Monster Greater than I.....	126
Chapter 12:	The Scent of the Hunt.....	138
Chapter 13:	The Highest Peak in Sight.....	152
Chapter 14:	The Spartan Way.....	161

Chapter 14: The Spartan Way

English and I returned to where we'd left Jon and Rebecca. We made better time on the way back. I wanted to sprint all the way, but I knew we'd still need the energy for the rest of the climb. Not to mention what would come after it.

English was beside me step for step.

"I knew we couldn't trust that bugger," he growled. "A weasel is a weasel no matter their species. I'll bet you dollars to donuts that he'd never lost his memory in the first place."

I didn't say anything. How could I put into words for him the night I'd spent with Brian, the confusion there had been in his eyes, the fear?

I gave myself a mental shake. English was right. No matter what I might have wanted to believe Brian had betrayed us. He knew this mountain better than we did. For all we knew he might just have well been leading us in the wrong direction, or even into a trap.

That thought made my feet fly even faster.

Jon and Rebecca waited for us at camp.

"He's gone," I said, nearly out of breath. "Divvy up what he was carrying and let's get going. If we hurry we might be able to make it not long after he warns them. That's all we can hope for now."

Jon nodded. "Already done. But," he motioned us closer, "We do have one advantage." A feral smile pulled at his lips. I'd like to introduce you to what the force has been working on these last few months. Tommy," he nodded at me, "You're more intimate with this than anyone save myself."

Kneeling down, he unzipped the long canvas bag he'd been totting with him since we picked him up on the forest.

"This is the outgrowth of project Phoenix. We call it Iapetus. The piercer, father of the god that created mankind."

Reaching inside the bag, he slowly pulled free what looked more than anything like the rifle Renfu had fired at us long ago. Only this one had far more circuit boards and blinking lights.

Jon flicked a switch and the gun made a distinct *zi-hi-hi-um* sound as it powered up.

"What does it, uh, do?" English asked, taking a step back and making sure he wasn't in front of the weapon.

Jon's smile grew wider. "It's a weaponised form of the computers from Edmonton. We've discovered how to store the energy of their calculations. This... tool has been charged with two shots. Whatever it hits will be affected the same way as what we're familiar with."

"What's it good for?" Rebecca asked.

For just a moment Jon looked crestfallen that we'd have to ask.

"Primarily? It will knock out *anyone* it hits. Secondary, considering what's happening to begin with, I think it's safe to say the HDL will lose it's fight when they discover we have the power to make them... *not* human."

He flicked another switch and the weapon powered down. Pulling out a carrying strap, Jon slung it over the shoulder.

The rest of the journey wasn't as fast as I would have liked. It was only after Brian was gone that we realized just how much he'd been helping us. Jon knew *approximately* what rout to take, but he'd never been here before. At least Brian had been here once long ago. Any hope we might have had of beating Brian to the summit, or even making it a close race, was long gone.

Soon enough though our progress improved. Once you get this high there are only a few ways up the mountain. We were following the same path as the kidnappers. I could smell them.

"Alright, folks," I said, "I can smell fresh tracks. They can't be far ahead, only another half hour or so." I took a deep breath. "We need to know what we're getting into. If this was a bounty I'd be happy enough to just spring on them... but it's not."

English put a hand on my shoulder. "I've got this one, Mate."

"What? You can hardly survive out in the forest."

He grinned. "Yeah. But in case you hadn't noticed, the forest stopped a thousand or so meters down. And I'm not a bad hand at mountaineering, or had you forgotten?"

He pulled out the ropes and harnesses from his pack. "They'll be expecting us to approach on the path. I don't plan to entertain them."

He tied one end of the rope around an outcropping of rock and the other around his waist. Then he was gone over the edge.

"English!" I scrambled to the edge and poked my head over. He was clinging to the sheer stone like a spider and grinning up at me.

"No worries, Mate. Be back in a jiffy."

We sat there, in the middle of the path, keeping an eye open in case anyone was coming.

"You ready for this, Babe?" I asked.

She adjusted her red leather jacket. It was only now that I realized she was dressed in the same outfit she worn so long ago when we'd fought our way into Storm Front. Knives glinted from her belt.

"As I'll ever be, Wolfy." She sighed. "I was doing my own research while the police and hunters were tracking them down. I *know* them."

My ears pulled back. "Yeah?"

"Well, I already *knew* that I knew them, but it's more than that. One of them, his name is Trevor. I went out with him back when I was couch surfing, before I met you."

I had to force myself to swallow. "Yeah?"

She looked up at me and forced a smile to her lips. "It's not like that, Wolfy. I've hardly seen the guy in years. The last I remember of him was when we were in Horseshoe Bay. He was a nice enough guy, but a..." She laughed. "A bit of a hardline."

"A bit?" I replied dryly.

She shrugged. "He wasn't like this last time I saw him. Trevor was a nice guy. He was like me, lost both his parents. It's not an easy thing to live through when you're young."

I shivered slightly. "Okay, I'll give him that one, but it's no excuse."

She set her lips in a ruler straight line. "It's no excuse. I just wanted you to know, Tommy. These are *people* we're going to be fighting. Not figureheads. They're humans, not HDL. Gods, from what I'd heard the HDL is all but dead now. Jon and the cops came down on them so hard they nearly imploded. These people are all that's left. It's their last stand."

Jon perked up from where he sat a few feet away, watching the road.

"She's correct. I've received no further reports of HDL actions since the kidnapping. It would appear they put all their remaining resources into the attack. They don't have the backing of the general populace anymore. If we're fortunate this may be the end of that particular threat."

"*If we're fortunate*," I repeated. "These are our children we're talking about. We can't take the chance something will go wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong, Sir," Jon said, returning to the perfect and crisp motions of the service. "I am responsible for their loss, and I will not allow failure again."

Rebecca gave him a hard glare. "*You're* responsible? I'm their mother. I was *there*. I'm just as responsible as you are."

For just a moment I almost thought they were going to get into an argument – not a good thing with tempers flaring already as they were, but we were interrupted by a grunt from over the edge.

"A hand here, Mate?"

Crawling to the edge I could see English, his belly plastered to the rock face.

"I'll pull you up."

The lion was *not* light. I had to get Jon and Rebecca to give me a hand with the rope to get him safely back on solid ground.

"What did you find?" I asked almost before he had time to steady himself.

"Just a tick, Mate," he replied between pants. "That took a lot out of me. Gods, I'm not as young as I thought. Another five minutes out there and I would have just as well lost my grip."

Reaching up, he brushed a strand of grey hair from his eyes with a snarl before continuing.

"The cops were right with their guess of four. That's what I counted."

"What about Brian?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I didn't hear him. Remember, folks, I didn't exactly have the greatest view, below and beside as I was. I had to count voices. I heard four humans, three male. I didn't hear Brian, but he could just as well been keeping his yap shut."

I took a deep breath. "Could we have beaten him here?"

Jon shook his head. "Unlikely. Unless he slipped from the path and fell to his death, I can see no reason he wouldn't already be here."

I furrowed my brow. "Brian talked about a book he'd stashed here on the mountain. Somewhere above where the kidnappers had holed up. He could have gone there."

Rebecca glanced over to me. "We'll have to assume he's already been here, Wolfy. He could have let them know we're coming then continued on."

I suppressed a shiver. "Fine. But we have to remember how deadly Brian is. The humans may have guns, but he has regeneration. *You can't kill him*. Jon," I looked over to the dog, "Will your gun work on him?"

He shrugged. "I would have to assume so. The effect worked on you, Tommy, without consideration for your regeneration. In fact, you said it canceled it out after the change."

"Fine. Jon, whatever you do, make sure to save at least one shot for Brian. We don't know if he's here, but if he is we have to neutralize him."

Jon nodded.

"Fine." I held a growl back from my voice. "What about the kids, English. Did you hear them?"

The lion nodded. "I thought you'd never ask. They were there. I'm not sure if they stuck soothers in their mouths or just flat out gagged them. They didn't sound particularly happy, but they weren't shrieking to high heaven either."

"Both of them?" I asked.

He nodded. "I couldn't make them out individually, but I heard one of the kidnappers talking about feeding them." He let out a dark chuckle. "Wet nurses these men ain't. Sounds like Beth's taking to the bottle well enough, but our boy Ging is giving them a run for it. Sounds like he managed to all but bite off one of their fingers."

I glanced over to Rebecca. She began laughing.

"Fine." I glanced up at the sun. It was getting towards late in the summer's afternoon. "We better do this now. The sun will be at our back as we approach. This has to be clean. Let's try and make it count."

Rebecca set her hand over mine. "We're doing this together, Wolfy."

I smiled. "I might just have a plan."

Walking up the path, hand in hand with Rebecca, we kept our pace slow and sedate. She had her knives carefully stowed inside her jacket, out of sight.

Jon and English were nowhere to be seen.

Rounding the last turn, my jaw nearly dropped. Brian had once referred to this as a fortress. He hadn't been far off.

It wasn't all that large, perhaps being only ten or fifteen meters a side, but it was carved straight from the face of the mountain.

Large, square, and likely ageing concrete of some sort, the kidnappers were in a miniature castle that hung out into the void.

One of them saw us as soon as we rounded the last corner. He was still a good hundred meters away but I could hear him cry out clear as day.

For just a moment I had a vision of a colony of ants mobilizing after the hill has been kicked. Only problem was that there were only four ants and we were still well away.

"Don't come any closer!" one of them cried.

Rebecca and I came to a stop in the middle of the path. We still had to be a good dozen meters from the front entrance of the fortress.

The fact that it still stood open was hardly lost on me. Peering about, I took another look at where they were holed up.

Ancient, that was for sure, the worn grey concrete was definitely of pre-Cataclysm make, but this didn't look like much of a place to make one's last stand.

There was no way to shut the front entrance, and I doubted there ever had been. The walls were high, but not so high one couldn't climb over them given a little time. All in all it's only redeeming factor was that it was surrounded on two sides by open air and the mountain on a third.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself, fighting to keep the growl out of my voice.

"We're here for our children," I said. I knew my voice was strong enough to carry, even over the cold mountain winds.

"Go away, Taggart. Go make some more pups. We're here for the girl."

I blinked. 'Taggart'? I'd been expecting them to call me 'beast'.

"You know I can't do that. They're my children. Would you let this happen to your kids?"

I'd been fighting to keep the growl out of my voice, but the human didn't even bother trying.

"Kids? I *want* kids! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a human woman? It's like you practically took the last one in the whole city! The government was targeting them specifically during the purge. There's hardly enough left to even keep our population constant."

My blood ran cold.

"You kidnapped Beth to *breed* her?"

The ice in the man's voice was clear. "What do you think we are, Taggart? Monsters? She's a little girl. I'm not sick!"

I took a step forward, my self control slipping.

"Give me back my children," I snarled.

A shot cracked the air and a chip of stone flew up from the patch a few feet away.

"That's your last warning, Taggart. Turn around and walk away. We won't hurt the girl. She's one of us."

It wasn't what he said that made me shiver. It was what was left unsaid.

"Where is my son?" My voice was harsh.

Even from this distance I could see the man smile. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"The flea-bitten fiend? Don't you worry, he's staying with us. We can't hurt the girl, he's our insurance you'll leave us alone."

"What do you hope to accomplish? You can't last out here. You have no food, no supplies."

He laughed. "We have all the resources of the city behind us. Don't we, *Administrator*. You want your kids to stay alive and you'll provide us with everything we ask for. We starve and they'll starve with us."

I was ready to leap forward and see how much of the distance I could close before he got off another shot when Rebecca's hand fell across my shoulder.

"Trevor." Her voice was soft but it carried. "Don't do this. We both know what it's like to be hunted down, to lose what's dear to us. We both lost everything we cared about. Don't do it now, Trevor. You know Tommy's done more than anyone else to save the human population. We both seen it with our own eyes. Actions like this only make things harder. They make us look like extremists in the eyes of everyone else."

He face screwed up. "Maybe that's what we need. To be more extreme. You've seen it. Taggart canceled all the special concessions we were getting from the government. Made us compete with everyone else. How in all the gods' names am I supposed to compete with all the non-humans? I'm not as fast as a rabbit, not as strong as a horse. The dockworks only wants otters and their ilk. I'm *human* I can't compete with people like that."

"So you want to be treated differently? Isn't that what caused this problem in the first place? We're human, Trevor. We're just the same as anyone else. We need to work for what we get. We can't simply expect the government, or anyone else, to shore us up if we can't survive on our own."

Another crack split the air. This time the rock chips flew up close enough to sting my leg.

"Get out of here," Trevor yelled. "This isn't up for debate. We have your kids. We're going to find out how you managed to give birth to a human and we're going to use it to bring back the human race."

I took a deep breath. I had to keep telling myself that we were standing out here in plain view for a reason. I had to keep him talking. And, more than that, I had to get the other three kidnappers out

here.

"I know why she was born human," I said, my voice low. "I can tell you."

The man looked like he'd been shocked with an electric cable.

"What? You said you didn't know!"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "I lied. I know how she was born human. Give them back to me and I'll tell you."

The man's eyes narrowed. "No. You tell us first. *Then* we'll decide if you get them back."

I took a quick glance around. I still had to stall for time.

"Show me my children. Prove to me they're safe."

Rebecca elbowed me in the side.

Another human walked into view. He was holding a riffle in one hand and a bundle of cloth in the other.

The bundle was squirming.

A moment later there was a scream of pain.

"He bit me! Again!" the human yelped.

A smiled slipped to my lips. A real one. Pups grew their milk teeth quick, and by the gods were they *sharp*.

I glanced over to Rebecca. She looked about ready to burst into laughter.

A moment later there was a yip of pain. That sound was *not* human.

"Ging!" I took two steps forward before another bullet ripped through the air.

"Stay back!" Trevor screamed.

Staring into the long shadows that grew around the stone walls of the fortress, I could just make out the other human. He was still holding Ging, encircled as the pup was in a swaddling blanket. He was holding him well from from his body now, and with both hands.

Trevor spared a glance at the pup.

"Keep back, Taggert. Take one more step and you'll regret it." He took a deep, nervous breath. "The pup will regret it if you come any closer."

"Give me my family!" The snarl roared through my lips as my vision went suddenly red. Seeing Ging in their hands, and having them threaten him...

I fell to all fours and began running forward.

From the corner of my eye I could see a tawny form leap over the far wall, silent as a ghost.

And from behind me I heard the distinctive *zi-hi-hi-um* electric sound of Jon's rifle powering up.

I was still three strides from the humans when Trevor raised his rifle. He we experienced, knew what he was doing.

And he was moving faster than I could ever hope to.

The other human's eyes went wide when he saw the mussel of the rifle swing towards him and the squirming bundle he still held in his hands.

"Trevor, no!" I was never sure where the words came from. It could have been the human yelling, or Rebecca, or me.

I was still a good two strides away when the rifle leveled on Ging's small form.

I was too late.

There was a bang and a scream.

I leapt.

My outstretched claws found nothing but the thin, cold mountain air.

Temporally deaf and dumb from the gun shot so close, I landed in a heap on the hard concrete ground and went sprawling.

But the tears that sprang from my eyes had nothing to do with the bumps and scrapes that covered me. "Ging!" My voice was hoarse. "Gingivere!"

Forcing my eyes open as I fought back to my feet, for a moment all I could see was the clear blue sky.

Turning, I saw Trevor laying sprawled out behind me. Atop him, snapping and snarling was Brian.

And there was no confusion in his eyes.

The other human, the one still holding Gingivere, was staring at us wide eyed. On the wall behind him and only scant feet away were the pot marks of buckshot.

The bundle squirmed again.

"Ging?" This time my voice was little more than a whisper.

The bundle giggled.

I leveled the man with a glare that only my father could have matched.

"Give me. My. Child."

His jaw dropped open as the blood drained from his face.

Turning, the man sprinted off, deeper into the fortress.

And he made it about three steps before quite literally running flat into English's muscle bound chest. "Give the man back his kid." The lion's voice was as flat as the prairie.

Without a word the man held Ging out to him.

The smile that split English's lips hadn't the slightest hint of humour to it as he took the child in one huge hand.

Just as English's arm closed around the bundle the human yipped.

"Serves you right, you bugger."

Swinging around his free hand, English clubbed the man soundly on the head. He fell to the ground like a side of beef.

"Where's Beth?" Rebecca asked.

"Deeper in the observation platform," came a voice from behind me. I recognized that voice.

Turning, I flexed my claws and raised my lips.

"Hello, Brian Ferguson."

The red furred wolf nodded at me from where he stood atop the struggling Trevor.

"Yes." His voice was not that of the confused pup-in-a-wolf's body who I'd known for the least few weeks. It was the same man who had tried to kill me. "I am. Again." His eyes narrowed. "But I made you a promise, Tommy. And I am a man of my word."

"Let me up, your traitor!" Trevor screamed, struggling again. "This was all your plan to begin with! You told us to do this if anything should happen to you! You *gave us these plans!*"

Brian took a long breath and let it out through his nose.

"The man you worked with is dead. Brian Ferguson is dead. Long live Brian Ferguson."

It took everything I had to turn my back on Brian.

"English," I said, touching the lion's arm as I stepped past him. "Stay here. Watch Brian. And... watch Ging. If anything goes wrong, run." I looked straight into his eyes. "If anything goes wrong, *run*. At least save Ging. If Rebecca and I don't come back out... he's yours."

The lion didn't say anything, but he nodded. I could see his adam's apple bob.

I hadn't realized just how far into the mountain the fortress dug. I thought it perched on the edge, but instead it was rooted deep into the heart of the rock.

A moment later I heard the measured click-click-click of black claws on the concrete behind

me.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I couldn't get a clear shot."

"Don't worry about it, Jon," I replied, reaching back to find his warm hand. "The battle's just begun."

Rounding a corner in the tunnel there were lanterns and compact camp lights bolted to the concrete ceiling. They didn't provide light so much as they created shadow.

And from somewhere up ahead I could hear a child crying.

Beth.

The hallways were cramped in here, dark, twisty, and labyrinthine. I could pick up the scent to two humans up ahead.

None of us said a word as we crept forward. I was on all fours, holding back a growl, Rebecca was right behind me, just out of range of my swishing tail. She had her knives free. Jon had taken up the rear. He was slow and clumsy, holding the long rifle out in front of him. He'd had to power it down again. Its flashing lights, not to mention its sound, would be a dead giveaway.

Poking my nose around yet another corner, I nearly got it shot off.

The booming echo of the gunshot felt like it would never end in the concrete tunnels. It rolled around us again and again like a marble in a glass, threatening to deafen me.

"Keep back!" This time it was a woman's voice. High and shrieking, there was a note to it I couldn't quite grasp. "Anyone tries to take her away and I'll kill them!"

"Give us back Beth." This time it was Rebecca who spoke. Good thing, I don't think I was in any position to form words right now.

Edging back up to the corner again, I played the old trick of lowering my head flush to the floor before peeking around. It worked. I could make out a low, wide, room made of poured concrete. It was lit by camp lights and glowsticks.

And out in the middle of it stood two humans. One was a woman, holding a still smoking rifle. The other was a short, black haired man.

He was holding one of the larger machine guns I've ever seen.

"You won't take her away from us!" The woman cried.

There was a note to her voice. Something in the way she screamed... it was more than I would have expected. I'd been out on more than enough bounty hunts over the past few years to know how people acted when they were backed into a corner.

Hysterical, yes. Maniacal, sometimes. Coldly calculating, not this time. There was something in the woman's tone, the way she spoke, that was more than what I would have expected.

It was the way Rebecca or I would be if our places were switched.

I held my breath and peeked around the corner again.

It was hard to make out in the dim light, but now that I was looking for it the signs were plain as day.

The human was pregnant.

"Oh bugger," I whispered.

I wouldn't let Rebecca or Jon poke around the corner – they didn't have may regeneration and the human's aim was too good – but I filled them in on the details.

Oddly, Rebecca was more worried about the machine gun and Jon was more worried about the woman.

Though not in the way I'd have expected.

"This could make things more difficult," the dog whispered. I was about to nod in agreement when he continued. "Her decision making and rationality may be affected. She will be harder to predict."

"Wait," I said, holding up a hand. "That's all you're about? Not the child?"

He looked at me funny. "Of course I care about the child. Beth is why we're here."

I shook my head. "Not just Beth. The unborn baby."

At that both Rebecca and Jon stared at me, their mouths just about falling open.

"I'm sure you're kidding," Jon whispered.

The fur on my spine went up.

"No." It came out as more of a growl. "We're here for Beth. But I won't allow us – or anyone else – to sacrifice the life of one child for another." A wicked grin came to my lips. "We'll make the adults pay, but the unborn baby has done nothing."

Rebecca shook her head, a smile on her face but at the same time looking ready to cry.

"Tommy," she whispered, "I love you."

There was only one way into the chamber where they held Beth, so that limited our options. Thankfully, the humans didn't seem to be doing much. They simply stood where they were, in front of the wooden table they'd laid Beth out on, and waited for us.

Beth, for her own part, was unusually quiet. She laid there calmly, watching, eyes wide.

A moment later the distinct electric sound of Jon's rifle powering up echoed through the chamber.

Zi-hi-hi-um.

It sounded far more menacing down here in the depths of the earth than it had out in the open air.

"What was that? Can you see them?" The male human asked.

The woman spared him a quick glance. "Shut up, Howard."

In my head I silently counted to forty-two. That's the number we'd agreed upon.

Tensing my leg muscles, I sprang.

The distance between us and the humans was much too far to take in a single leap, at least a good twenty meters. They would have cut me down long before I cleared it. Instead I scrambled off to the side, parallel to them where a support rose from the concrete floor.

And in any event, my goal wasn't to get to them anyway.

My claws clicked on the stone as I took off. But it was only too late I realized that I hadn't the purchase I thought.

Rear legs sliding out from under me, my clear jump of the distance to the support pillar was cut short. I hardly made it more than half the way before falling flat on my belly.

From behind me I saw a flash of red move. Rebecca's leather jacket among the shadows. Jon held out an arm to keep her from rushing to me.

Scrambling to my feet, I heard the human's cry out as I started running.

The support pillar was only meters away...

My fingers brushed the concrete and iron support as I heard the bark of a gun from nearby. It was joined by the scream of the machine gun.

Anyone who's ever referred to the operation of a machine gun was a rat-tat-tat has obviously never been in close proximity to one as it's being used.

It felt like someone was taking a baleen hammer to the inside of my skull via my ears canal as the man fired. The woman might have squeezed off another shot or two for all I knew but I couldn't

hear it.

Two more steps. That's all it was. I could feel the bullets kicking up flecks of concrete behind me as I ran. They were getting closer.

One more step...

My toe crossed the threshold to safety. I let out a sigh of relief.

And a second later it felt like my collarbone had been ripped from my body.

A scream escaped my lips. Thankfully, my momentum carried me on, into safety. I had to fight to stop lest I step right out the other side.

I could feel every beat of my heart as my blood coursed through the gaping wound right above my right shoulder.

Another inch or two and I would have been shot straight through the neck.

As it was it took everything I had to draw a breath. It felt like I was trying to drive red hot nails into my lungs.

Falling to my knees, I was panting, holding back tears.

"Ha!" A cry came up from the other side of the room. "Did you see that? I got him!"

"Tommy?" My name came as little more than a whisper.

I glanced over to Rebecca, still huddled in the safety of the hallway. I nodded at her.

Then I flinched, letting out a groan of pain.

The wound in my shoulder *should* be healing by now. But it wasn't.

I felt a cold shiver run through me.

Glancing back to Rebecca, I saw the fear in her eyes as she realized as I did. These were anti-regeneration bullets. No wonder Brian hadn't volunteered to come in here with us.

Drawing another breath, I gestured to Jon with my good arm.

Get ready.

Straightening, one agonizing inch at a time, I stood again, still safely behind the pillar.

And I ran.

I hadn't the slightest where I was going, but I ran. Directly away from Rebecca and Jon. I had to draw the humans' attention from them.

I got about ten steps before my foot caught in a crack.

"He's still alive!" came the woman's cry. "Kill him! Kill him! He'll take her from us!"

A moment later the machine gun picked up again. Its hail of bullets turned towards me.

For a moment all I could see was the flash from the muzzle. Fractions of a second with each shot, it lit the dark room.

Then, from the hallway a dark form moved. It was dressed in blue.

It took Jon a good five seconds to level his rifle. It was long, heavy, and ungainly.

Exactly the same length of time it took the human to bring me to bear in his sights.

Jon pulled the trigger as I felt the first of the bullets rip into my toes.

I hadn't been sure what to expect from the cop's new weapon.

A flash of light, perhaps? A boom? A laser beam?

Whatever it was, I didn't get it.

Even over the rain of bullets, I could somehow hear Jon pull the trigger as clear as day. It was a heavy mechanical click, somehow seeming at odds with the high-tech look of the rifle.

And then the human's machine gun came to a stop with the strangled snarl of cooling metal.

"Howard!" The woman's voice was a panicked scream. "Oh, gods, oh gods, what have they done to you?"

Rolling onto my side, I couldn't stand. All I could see from here was the woman unsteady

silhouette kneeling over a prone figure.

She shifted slightly and I could make out the limp form of a ferret beside her, dressed in ill-fitting human clothing.

Next came a muffled set of footsteps. They were fast and direct. A shadow slipped past my vision.

"No! You can't have her!"

The woman's rifle barked again. This time it was answered by a canine grunt.

Jon fell into a heap not feet from my side.

"Give me back my child." Rebecca's voice came from somewhere I couldn't see.

"No!" The woman waved her gun, back peddling towards where Beth lay. "She's not yours! She's not yours anymore. She's mine! She's just a baby," the woman screamed. "She needs *proper* parents. Not monsters like you!"

"Like *us*?" Rebecca's voice was cold. "We're the monsters?"

"You're all monsters!" The woman screamed. "All of you! You're one of them!"

The woman took another step back, standing right beside Beth.

The wall stood in shadow behind her, but I could see a pair of eyes burn in the darkness.

Rebecca stepped slowly forward from behind the woman, carefully avoiding Beth.

And Beth remained oddly silent through all this, not making a sound.

"You can't have her!" The woman rambled, "You can make another one, another wolf. She's--"

The woman never got to finish. Rebecca stepped up behind her and gently unsheathed one of her knives.

"*Never* threaten my family," she whispered into the woman's ear as she raised her blade ever so lightly rest against her throat. "Just be glad my husband has decided to spare your life. I'd gladly kill you here and now."

A moment later there was a loud metallic clang as the rifle dropped from her hands.

"Please..." the woman whispered, crying now, "Please don't hurt my child."

I was fading in and out of consciousness as Rebecca tied up the humans. Or the human and one ferret, I should say.

She came to Jon and my side as soon as it was safe. And after she'd checked Beth.

"Tommy? Can you hear me?" Her voice was soft as she propped me up against the pillar I'd been taking cover behind just minutes ago.

I reached out with my tongue to flick her nose.

The four of us stumbled out of the labyrinthine hallways looking like a bunch of horror play rejects.

I was still dripping blood from a wound that was still trying to close now that Rebecca has dug the coated bullet out and Jon had taken a shot to the leg. We were leaning on each other, shuffling forward.

Rebecca had her hands full too. Beth it seemed had just been waiting for us to show up before coming alive. She was, in intervals, laughing and squirming and trying to make up for three lost days of meals.

Stepping out into the late afternoon sunlight, it was near blinding after spending the better part of an hour in the dark.

"English?" I called, expecting the lion to be waiting.

There was no reply.

I didn't think I had anything left, but my heart began racing again.

"You still have one shot left, Jon?" I whispered as I let go of him to stand myself. He'd carried the rifle back out with us.

He nodded

I glanced back at Rebecca. She already had her knife out. I could see in her eyes that she wanted to join me, but she wasn't about to set Beth down after all we'd done to get her back.

Limping forward, I was hardly the most elegant sight. It was all I could do to keep my claws from clicking on the weathered concrete ground.

A moment later I heard something move. Then a high-pitched canine laugh.

Poking my head around a corner, I saw Ging sitting on the ground, giggling, playing with English's tail.

The lion was out cold.

"What happened?" I asked as soon as we could get the man up and moving again.

"Gods, Mate, I haven't a clue," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "One moment I was out here with Brian and the humans. I was just going to check on the men's bonds when everything..." he shrugged. "Then you were slapping me."

I'd already checked on the two human prisoners we'd left out here. They were still bound, and out cold as well.

Brian, however, was gone.

"Do you think we could track him?" Rebecca asked.

I shrugged. "Don't know. He's more than a match for any of us at the best of times even without his his memory back. Now?" I sighed.

We were just getting ready to pack up and move out when I heard footfalls on the path leading to the fortress.

Poking my head around, there was a wave of hunters and police dogs sprinting our way. They were moving in perfect synchronization.

"Hey, Jon," I said, glancing back at the dog, "I think the reinforcements just arrived."