

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 2: To Say This Was Unexpected

And at the foot of the long, gentle descent from the Lion's Gate bridge stood a lone figure waiting for us.

For just a moment my heart leapt. I'd swear I recognized the silhouette.

And I did, though it wasn't who I'd been hoping for.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Taggert. Mrs. Taggert."

The voice was close, so very close, and his appearance closer, but it wasn't Jon. It was Constable Pine, his replacement.

I nodded curtly to the dog as we continued past him, never slowing. He fell into step beside me.

Constable Pine was a near picture perfect example of a V-town police officer. I say that literally, I wouldn't be half surprised if his likeness had been used on posters for the force.

A German Shepherd, he looked, in broad strokes, similar to me. Brown fur, but his with streaks of black, a canine head, clawed hands, and digitigrade feet.

His motions and manner, however, could not be more different. I was a wolf. He was a dog. And a police officer at that.

I walked, or at least liked to think I did, with an easy, graceful loup and an economy of motion hard learned over hundreds of hunts. Pine moved with stiff and parade ground perfect steps.

He was almost as perfect as Jon, but not quite.

"I trust you had a relaxing time away?" His voice was clipped and sharp as any police dog's, but there was something else there.

When Jon spoke you could just tell that what you saw was what you got, a police dog through and through. With Pine I got the distinct impression he was a stand up officer, but there was a man – a true and honest to the gods *normal* man – hiding behind the mask.

"Yeah, Pine. Nice and relaxing."

Pine was a good guy and I had no complaints about him, but he wasn't Jon. The other dog was a best friend of mine, second only to English.

And now he was the Police Commissioner.

I had to shake my head when I thought of that. Sayer, the previous commissioner, had died last

year, Jon was his replacement.

Jon had an... interesting history with the force. Sayer had been his uncle. The police had an odd structure that I was more than keen to get rid of. They ran themselves like a pack of dogs. The alpha, or in this case the commissioner, wasn't a heredity position, but genetics *was* a big part of it.

And as for Jon, I hadn't seen his face in months.

Pine was another odd one. Jon had picked him out for me specifically. It's not that I don't like the cops... the gods know I've spent enough time working with them, but many of the dogs are a little to *perfect* for my tastes.

I'd worked with Pine a few times before. I suggested offhandedly to Jon one day that I might like him as my attache and when I got back to my apartment twenty minutes later there he was, standing ramrod straight and waiting for my command.

Walking down West Georiga street with Rebecca on one side and Pine on the other, it didn't take long for the city to good and truly close in around us.

The buildings out here aren't too tall, but they were definitely full. And, odd as it may seem, I was hearing far more languages than I could ever remember encountering before.

Now don't get me wrong, there's always been a lot of different kinds of people here in V-town, and no too few of them having come across from Asia, but I could barely make out one word in five around me.

I glanced over to Rebecca, she didn't seem to notice.

She did notice me staring and smiled.

"Thinking the same thing I am, Wolfy? I call dibbs on the first shower."

Things were a little bit more normal when we got back to the apartment in Monrou Hall. The building was in a slightly quieter part of the city, and – thankfully – there were no protesters to be seen anymore.

Stepping through the front door and into the lobby, I almost didn't notice Pine as he split off from us to head back to his office down here. He'd taken over Jon's old haunt.

But that wasn't before he discretely pressed my apartment key into my hand. I'd left it with him before we'd headed out.

I was getting smarter about these things. I couldn't even count the number of times I've lost that blasted key.

Opening the door, I got about five feet before shucking the pack from my shoulders and letting it fall to the hardwood floor with a solid thunk.

Like an echo, I heard Rebecca's follow suit.

And after that came a quick trail of footsteps. By the time I turned around all I caught was the bathroom door slamming shut.

The sound of running water wasn't far behind.

A smile worked its way to my lips as I shuffled over to a stool by the kitchen counter.

Heh, I never could quite figure it out, but somehow my body *knew* when it was home. I'd been walking just fine out on the street but the moment I stepped through the door my muscles wanted to turn to water. They knew there was a soft bed just feet away and were doing everything in their power to get me there.

Too bad I wasn't quite ready for a good lie down just yet.

I must have been mayor too long. Once you're an alpha of an entire city the whole 'business before pleasure' thing kind of gets ingrained into you.

Someone had been in here while we'd been away, by the smell of it I'd say it was Pine. Only a police dog would have been able to enter my apartment, and only a police dog's scent would keep my nerves from going on edge.

There was a pile of papers sitting on the counter. Nothing too big, but enough that I felt the urge to go through them before setting off on anything else.

The first letter was, unsurprisingly, from Max, the current mayor of V-town.

I have a bit of an odd relationship with the city government. I *was* mayor, but I'm not anymore. I'd stepped down long ago. Or at least tried to step down.

Back then Sayer had still been running the V-town police, and that dog had held of bit of an... odd opinion of me. He basically saw me as just short of a god, whether I wanted to be or not.

He was gone now, just as dead as my father, but his efforts lived on. I'd stepped down, but I wasn't able to escape. Not quite. My official title now was 'City Administrator'. I had no official power, no office, and no staff. I only had a single ability.

I could overrule the mayor.

Yeah, how about those checks and balances, eh?

Ripping open the tough seal on the government envelope, I wasn't surprised to see Max's neat handwriting on the letter within. What *did* rather surprise me, however, was how up beat he seemed.

Max, knowing my hatred for being kept in politics, made his message brief. Basically it was a 'over all we're on the up and up'. Though I did note a passage at the bottom where he – in a round about way – mentioned that there were more inter-species fighting again.

Gods, hadn't we *just* gotten over the last of the riots?

A couple of minutes later and I was starting to feel a bit restless. The small pile of mail hadn't taken me long to work my way through, and there was little else to keep my attention. The fridge was empty.

Creeping my way towards the closed bathroom door, I could smell the scent of steam leaking out. That, and the tang of soap.

I didn't say a word as I softly pressed the door open. Any sound I made was easily covered by the falling water.

Claws ever so softly clicking on the linoleum, I edged closer to the shower. Through the fogged glass I could see Rebecca's silhouette as she soaped down.

A smile was full bloom on my face as my tongue slipped from my mouth.

In a single fluid motion I yanked the shower door open and stepped inside, closing it behind me. I'd bet I was fast enough not a single drop of water got out. All that netted me was a punch to the gut. It would have hurt like a bugger if I hadn't been expecting it.

"Surprise, babe," I whispered in her ear as I folded my arms around her. In a second my coat was soaked through.

She just rolled her eyes. "Can't a girl even take a shower in peace?"

What should have been a fifteen minute process of getting clean quickly drew out to a good hour. Though I'll have to admit by that point our main goal wasn't cleanliness anymore.

"You sure you have to go, Babe?" I asked while still toweling off. One of the advantages of being human was how little hair she had to dry. It took me *forever* to truly dry out after a shower.

"Sorry, wolfy," she said, reaching forward to tweak my nose, "but I've got an obstetrician

appointment in an hour.”

I rolled my eyes. “What? And I'm not invited?”

She shrugged. “You can come if you want, but being a *man*,” she managed to stress that word in a way I'd never heard before, “I figured you wouldn't be so interested. You can go off and do *manly* things.”

I snorted. “Yeah? Like what, drink beer and ogle the strippers?” I was half expecting that to earn me a playful slap, but all it got was a grin.

“With you, Tommy? That would almost be progress.” Pulling on her red leather jacket, she turned to leave. “Why don't you go see English or something?”

She'd hardly left half an hour ago and I was already going stir crazy.

I'm not one to pace, but it was taking everything I had to keep still on my kitchen stool. I wanted to do *something*, but I hadn't the slightest idea what it might be.

Go see Max? No. He'd just rope me into doing government work.

Go see Jon? Good luck, I hadn't been able to net a spot on his calendar in weeks.

As painful as it might be – well, not *that* painful – I might just have to prove Rebecca right and go visit English. Only I knew for a fact if I went to see the lion he'd drag me off on a hunt.

My muscles were already aching.

The walk to SF was a familiar one. I was a part time bounty hunter, and Storm Front was the premier bounty hunting organization in the city. And the entire thing was owned by English.

Turning the last corner in the busy street, the building came into sight. Once, not so long ago, SF had owned a nice place. Big front windows, wide steps, and water fountains in the lobby. They were all long gone, destroyed in the quake.

What stood on the lot now was far more down to earth. Roughly based on the design of police headquarters, the new SF building was a three story square of dull gray concrete.

The construction was well and done now, but the place looked little better for it. It was almost a challenge to even find the front door.

Stepping into the main lobby, the room looked about as removed from its old design as possible. Bare whitewashed walls and a pitted wooden bench down the middle. There were a couple of burly bounty hunters standing behind either side of the counter along the far wall, keeping an eye on the half dozen or so people who milled around waiting.

I nodded to the fox who manned the counter and walked through the 'employees only' door next to it. No one even batted an eyelash.

That deposited me squarely in the belly of the beast.

The new SF building was labyrinthine at the best of times, and it's been a couple of weeks since I'd been here last.

Heading off in what I *thought* was the right direction, I quickly hit a dead end while looking for the stairs.

Picking another hallway, I suddenly had to duck under a mass of pipes coming out the wall up ahead that I never remembered seeing before.

The building wasn't all *that* big, but it still took me fifteen minutes before I managed to find someplace I recognized, even if it wasn't where I was heading.

The office door to my right had a masking tape label. On it was scrawled 'Human Resources' in a messy hand. Beneath it, not that much smaller, was written 'A.K.A. The Meat Grinder'.

Poking my head through, I could see a familiar form within. Graham the leopard was sprawled

forward across his desk, snoring softly, his one remaining arm under his chin, fingers still clutching a fountain pen.

I couldn't help but smile.

I'd have to see how much English was paying him and arrange for a raise.

Okay, I was never going to find my own way to the third floor.

Another ten minutes of searching only got me as far as the second story. That's when I had to give up and ask a passing fox for directions.

English still had the best office in the whole place, a wide room that looked down over the street, I was able to track it down once I got in the general vicinity by homing in on the sound of swearing.

Creeping the last few steps to the half open door, I could hear the lion talking to someone. Well, I say 'talking' but it was mostly English cursing and the other man getting a single word in every minute or so.

"Sir, I insist. We really must cut expenditures."

Oh gods. I knew that voice. I hadn't seen that man in years. I hadn't even known he was still alive.

Rounding the doorway, I found the huge leonine form of English towering over a scrawny squirrel seated in the guest chair.

"Don't you even dare, Tin! I've already laid off a dozen good hunters. I can't cut anymore."

The smaller man just cocked his head. "Then we'll simply have to cut pay, or reduce perks. It's your call. The money has to come from somewhere."

I was getting the distinct feeling that English was about to throw a chair at him. I took that moment to clear my throat and step into the room.

"Mate!" The change in English's mood was both instant and palpable. In a single fluid motion his lips went from a baby eating snarl to a wide smile.

I wasn't sure which displayed more teeth.

"When did you get back?" he asked. "And where's the Lass? How have you been?"

Three strides and he'd crossed the wide room to wrap me up in a crushing bear hug. You'd almost think I'd been gone for a year rather than a week.

Now it was Tin's turn to clear his throat.

"Get lost, bean counter," was the only response he got from English. The squirrel was smart enough not to argue.

"What was all that about?" I squeaked as he pressed the air from my lungs.

"Huh?" A moment later he set me down. I had to lean against the wall to catch my breath.

"That? Just the paper pushers trying to take over the world again."

I gave him a hard glare. There was no need for me to say the name *Vanderhoom*.

"Nah, nothing like that, Mate. The bean counters are telling me that the company's unprofitable for the first time ever. And they won't shut up when I tell them to."

I cocked my head. "Really?"

For just a moment I saw something cross his face, then it was gone. In its place was the mask of easy confidence he always showed the world.

The same mask I'd learned to peek behind long ago.

"Never mind it, Mate. It's money they want? Let's earn some. I've got a hunt I've just been waiting on you for."

A moment later he'd fled the luxurious office like it was a cage. I had no choice but to follow.

To say this was an uninspired hunt would be an understatement.

English must have thwacked himself at some point while I was gone, for the moment we got out of sight of the SF building he started limping.

"I'm..." we were only a few blocks and he was breathing hard. Some of the sheen was gone from his golden coat, "Getting too old for this, Mate. Bugger. I really am, you know that?"

Reaching out a hand, I was surprised when he threw an arm over my shoulder. The English I'd meet a few years back would never have admitted physical weakness.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He snorted. "What? Everything." Then a moment later he laughed. "Okay, Mate, you've got me. It's not *that* bad, I'm just starting to feel my age at a bad time. Do you know who our mark is today?" I shook my head. "A parole jumper, Mate." He spat. "A bloody parole jumper. Not even a dangerous offender. Some lout who tried to steal a cart-full of machinery and got caught. Gods, for all we know the man could just be asleep in his bed, having forgotten to show up for court."

I cocked my head. "Why are we after him. Or, for a better question, why *you*? It's your company, you have the pick of the jobs. Why bother with something so trivial?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Because it's the only thing on the docket, Mate. You heard Tin back there, business isn't so great right now."

I almost laughed at that. "How do you figure? There's more immigrants in the city than ever before. Crime has to be on the rise."

He shook his head. "If you say so, Mate. Not that I've seen though. SF doesn't deal with *crime* per se, we only deal with a specific kind of problem. We deal with the stuff the cops don't want to."

The walk across town took a good two hours, the mark's home wasn't in the same high rent district as SF headquarters. You could see the money drop away with each block we walked. So we worked our way west, towards the docks. The city was rougher here, workmanlike, salt-of-the-earth and all that.

Finding the man's place wasn't all that tough. It was right where the address said it would be, on the fifth floor of a decaying walkup apartment. I almost had a flash back to my old place.

"Care to do the honers, Mate?" English asked, crouched behind me in the dark and narrow hallway.

The lion was panting now. The climb had not been good to him. And, oddly, in the dim light I could see the silver strands stand out vividly on his mane. Less than a year ago I would have taken great pleasure in pointing them out to him. Now, not so much.

"On it." A moment later I stepped up to the apartment door. I really hated doing this, but I didn't want to take the time to pick the lock.

Bracing one foot against the floor, I kicked out at the latch. My foot hit home with a solid crunch.

Particularly solid as *both* the door and my foot crunched.

Ow, ow, ow. Oh bugger.

Biting my tongue, I fell back into the hallway as the door swung sedately open.

"Herman Ruben, you're under arrest." Well, there was one thing in English that was going strong, his voice. I should have been the one to shout that line, but right now I was occupied with the sensation of all the little bones in my foot slowly popping back into place.

Thank the gods for regeneration.

Now that the hunt was on, the years seemed to drop from the lion. In the beat of a heart he was

past me, little more than a blur as he lunged through the door.

I caught only a flash of his face, but this was still a man I'd be more than hesitant to meet in battle. Teeth barred, ears down, he looked like the picture perfect ideal of a bounty hunter.

I couldn't see what happened next, but there was a crash and more than a little swearing. All of it English's.

A moment later I could make out his words again. "It's alright, Mate. Clear. No one's home."

Limping around the door, I had to lean on the frame to keep upright. Every so often my body twitched as another bit of my poor foot slipped back into place.

The apartment wasn't much to speak of. Dull gray walls and dirt brown furniture, both likely older than I, were all there was to see.

And sitting on the floor in the middle of it, amongst the tatters of what must have recently been a geriatric end table, sprawled English, pulling splinters from his fur.

What a sight we must have looked, two of V-town's most famous bounty hunters, and we were both down for the count, nearly put out of action by an empty room.

"Find anything, buddy?" I asked as I nosed around the kitchen yet again. I could pick up our mark's scent, a monkey I'd wager, but hadn't the slightest where he might have gone.

There was no answer for a long moment, then English came limping in from the bedroom.

"Mayhaps, Mate," he said holding up a glass mug. It was adorned with the logo of some bar or another. "There were a dozen of these next to the bed. Looks like our friend might just be a professional drinker." He paused for a moment and flashed me a perfect white, if rather toothy, smile. "Care for a pint?"

The logo on the mugs wasn't exactly an original one. It was for a place I'd never heard of called 'The Blind Duck', but it was easy enough to find. All English had to do was offer a few coins to a crowd of kids near the front door of the apartment building and we were on our way two blocks down and one block over.

The brick facade on the front of the building was still cracked from the quake a few years ago. Someone had come by and plastered it up with a paste white mortar, but it clashed with the red bricks.

I could only assume the owner either didn't care or thought it somehow gave the place *character*.

English hid his limp away as we stepped up to the entrance. There had been a window in the door once. Now it was boarded over with a cheap piece of plywood.

"Looks just like a place for us, eh Mate?" English laughed. "I have a feeling I'll feel right at home here."

With that he pushed open the door and stepped into the smoky darkness within.

This place didn't even rate the neon signs that you see in most dive bars. All that illuminated the room were the more persistent beams of light that found their way through the gaps in the wall and a single dull incandescent bulb that hung back behind the bartender.

Even with my night vision I couldn't make out anything more than the vague shapes of the other patrons. And, frankly, once I got into a situation like this eyesight wasn't going to get me far. I was able to tell more from my nose now anyway. I couldn't tell who the other people were, but I knew *where* they were well enough by their body odor.

And I didn't feel like getting any closer to them.

Following behind English step for step, we bellied up to the bar. Somewhere, back around

when we'd entered the place, the lion's gait had changed.

When he'd been at SF he stood straight and proud, looking every inch a captain of industry. Then, while we'd been stalking around the mark's apartment he'd moved quick and sure, a hunter in motion.

Now? He slunched forward and all but stomped his way towards the bar. In the dim light I couldn't tell him from just another joe off the street, fresh from an eight hour shift at the docks.

"Hey, some service?" English's voice had lost its upper-crust accent, replacing it was a wide, unremarkable slur. The voice could have come from a bear as easily as it could a moose.

The bartender turned around a moment later. I couldn't make out his face with the light behind him, and I was sure English and I were positioned carefully enough that neither could he see ours.

"What can I get ya?" His voice had a deep reptilian rasp to it. It suited him perfectly. He was a gator.

English hardly even blinked. "A couple of whatever the house beer is."

A few seconds later our order was filled. I couldn't see the bill that English set on the bar, but I knew it wasn't what the bartender was expecting.

The fact the gator just sighed and shook his head made me smile.

"What is it you want?" Reaching out, he managed to pull a minor magic trick and make the bill disappear. "And for that matter, why is it *everyone* thinks it's a good idea to always come to people like me when they're looking for something?"

English snorted. "Because it's *people like you* that have the answers."

A few quick grunted words and English began talking to the bartender while he sipped his drink. I wasn't much interested in mine, so I turned to look around the bar. Well, that was useless. I'd almost forgotten just how dark it was in here.

I was about to turn back to the conversation when my nose twitched.

That was strange...

I couldn't quite place it, but there was something *off* about the scents in here. I knew it should be as plain as the nose on my face, but I couldn't quite put my claw on it.

I was about to think about it and take another breath when the tone of the bartender's voice changed. "Sorry, buds. I... ah, can't help you. Yeah, gotta go." With that the man tried to back away.

He got about half a step before English reached across the bar and grabbed him by the strings of his stained and worn apron.

"What's the problem, *friend*? Something you can't tell us?" With a sudden jerk the lion pulled him forward.

Taking in a deep breath, English sniffed the man. His eyes went cold.

"Where is he? I can smell him on you."

The gator let out a long sigh.

"Basement. He's my brother-in-law's son. He came here when he skipped court."

"Thanks, *friend*." English let him go a might bit gentler than he'd grabbed him. "And the stairs would be?"

The gator jerked his thumb.

And I thought the bar was dark.

The stairs were over in a corner of the room. My nose kept twitching all the way there. I told myself it was just the scent of my mark, but it wouldn't listen.

Pulling up the trap door, I descended into the pitch blackness, English at my back.

My whiskers *should* have been of help here, but my half-human half-wolf body defeated their

purpose. I had to stumble forward with my hands stretched out before me. Thankfully, the hallway wasn't long. There was a door just a couple of turns ahead. Light spilt out from behind it.

Letting English nimbly step ahead of me, I could see his silhouette as he crouched before the door.

I didn't feel like breaking my foot again.

He smashed into the flimsy wooden door, it shattered before him.

"You're under arrest!" In the darkness his voice sounded as strong as that of an avenging god.

The primate yip from the other side of the room told me that we'd found our mark at last.

I was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the man started throwing things at us. I hate it when they fight.

The bar wasn't so dark when, twenty minutes later, English and I climbed the steps back up. Someone, likely the barkeep, had turned on the overhead lights. It wasn't exactly *bright* in here, but at least now I could see my hand in front of my face.

English had the monkey, bound and gagged and out cold, thrown over his shoulder.

We stepped up into the bar expecting trouble. This was the only way back to the street and neither of us knew how the patrons would take to us dragging one of their own off.

Surprisingly, not a single one of them made a move towards us.

"Good riddance," I heard the gator mumble from behind us. "He was drinking all my stock and wasn't paying. I'd 'ave turned him in myself if my sister wasn't involved."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I wasn't really looking forward to another fight.

Half way to the front door, I took a closer look around me, trying to pin down what was still nagging at my nose.

Now I could see it.

Despite the barkeep being a gator, it looked like three quarters of the patrons in here were human. I wasn't sure if they recognized me in the relative darkness, but I remembered no small number of them.

And behind them hung the banners of the Human Defense League.

I suddenly felt the extreme need to get out of here. *Right now.*

It was only a few seconds before we made it to the door and out to the street, but it felt like hours.

Leaning back against the wall as I drew in a breath of fresh air, I couldn't help but think back to the League. The HDL and I were not exactly on the best terms.

They'd grown out of the Horseshoe Bay population, a group of humans who'd felt they'd been mistreated. Well, okay, they had a point there, but they'd *still felt* they'd been mistreated after my time as mayor.

And I'd put no small amount of effort into getting them on even footing with everyone else.

The HDL wasn't an illegal organization, but they were definitely on no too few watch lists. They'd been, among other things, manipulated by Brian Ferguson last year in an attempt to have me assassinated.

Yeah, I was glad to be out of there.

English didn't say a word as we started down the street, but I did notice him glance back a time or two more than he normally did.

I expected us to head back to SF headquarters to process the capture, but instead English led me to a downtown police station. It wasn't police HQ, but it was one of their larger locations.

We'd been here before, English favoured this station.

"Don't you have people who do this for you?" I asked.

He gave me a dour look. "I *did*, Mate. I used to have a whole department. I had to get rid of most of them in the last round of layoffs."

I didn't bother saying anything more.

We didn't have long to wait in line. That was good, our mark was starting to come to.

The police dogs here were fast and efficient, as it seems every cop in the city is. They were all pressed and perfect, professional in their dark blue uniforms. They were all German Shepherds. They all looked like Jon. Or Pine for that matter.

There was a pain in my gut when I thought of Jon. Gods, it's been forever since I last saw him. How must he be doing these days?

All of a sudden I felt like a cad. Jon had been one of the few people to stay by my side when I'd first become mayor. I wouldn't have lasted two days without him. But now that he'd been promoted to Commissioner of Police I was nowhere to be seen.

I *really* had to go see him.

A few moments later we were at the front of the line and English was manhandling our captive over to the cops. In return they wrote him a cheque.

I didn't quite get to see how much it was for, but even at this distance I could tell the amount was pitiful.

English was in a pissy mood when we left the station.

"You want to go for a snack?" I asked. That was a near fool-proof way to cheer him up.

He very nearly growled at me.

"Woah." I stepped back. I couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. "It's not so bad, Buddy. Here," I put an arm over his broad shoulders, "I'll pay."

With a sigh he rolled his eyes and forced a grin to his lips.

"What would I do without friends like you, eh Mate? I could use some happy food right now."

I was just about to swing us around the next corner towards the nearest fast food outlet when I heard the frantic scrape of someone running our way.

English and I turned in unison, instincts still running in hunting mode.

The pure white blur that sprinted our way though was no threat.

Well, no threat other than she seem determined to run right into me.

"Tommy!"

It was Molly, a pure white wolf. She was an old girlfriend of mine and a friend of Rebecca's.

"Tommy," she gasped again as she leaned against me, panting for breath. "You... you've got to..."

Rolling my eyes, I reached out to steady her. Molly was known to be a bit over dramatic.

"What is it?" I asked, gently guiding her off to the side of the road. People passing by were giving us odd looks.

"It's Rebecca..." she gasped out.

My blood ran cold.

"The appointment. They... they found something."

Oh bugger.

From behind me a felt a sharp shove. English's claws nearly cut into my back.

"Go, Mate. Go look after the Lass. I'll help Molly here."

I wasn't one to argue. Three seconds later I was already down the street and around the corner, sprinting the ten blocks to V-town General.

Those were perhaps the longest ten blocks of my life. And that was despite the fact I managed to clear them in superhuman time.

V-town General was likely the most modern building in all of Vancouver. We needed it. With dozens if not hundreds of species in the city we needed at least one place where we could all go for medical treatment.

And this was the it.

There was a nice lawn out front of the steel and glass building, dotted with benches and garden paths. I ran past them without a second glance.

In through the wide front entrance, the doors boomed back on their hinges as I hit them full force.

It wasn't until I'd skidded to a stop in the middle of the lobby that I realized I hadn't the slightest idea where I was going. I didn't know where the obstetricians were, or even who to ask.

I nearly snapped when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

Whirling about, I saw an orderly standing there, a mouse by the look of it. It was hard to tell for certain with the shapeless scrubs he wore.

"Tommy Taggart?" he asked, voice meek.

I had to fight to keep my lips down. "Yes. Where is my wife?"

Turning, he gestured for me to follow him. Much to my annoyance he moved at only a brisk walk, not the sprint I would have preferred.

Down one set of hallways, across another and up a set of stairs, I was already lost and the heavy antiseptic scents of the hospital were clouding my mind, giving me an instant headache.

"Right this way, Sir," the orderly said. "She's waiting for you."

He pushed open a door to a small waiting room but didn't step in.

Two paces further and I had Rebecca in my arms. She, to be honest, looked rather surprised to see me.

"Tommy? Why are you here?"

I blinked. "Didn't they... but... Molly said there was trouble."

She snorted. "Right now the only *trouble* is the blasted doctor's left me waiting in this little room for over an hour and a half. I was just getting ready to leave." She paused for a moment before speaking again. "But I did come here with Molly. The last I saw her was before they took me in for an ultrasound."

"And that's what we have to talk about, Mr. and Mrs. Taggart." I'd never even noticed as a mountain lion in a lab coat joined us in the room. He had a name tag that read 'Dr. Peter Nesbit'.

I'll be honest, I took an immediate dislike to the man.

"What's the problem, Doc?" I asked.

The man sighed. "We got the images back from ultrasound. There seems to be an... oddity. I just wanted to make sure you were here when we presented them, Mr. Taggart."

I bristled. "Why?"

He cleared his throat and averted his eyes. "It might be best if you looked yourself."

With that he pulled a letter sized film from an envelope and tacked it up in front of a light box in the wall.

To be honest, it didn't look like much to me.

A grainy black and white image, all I could make out were a couple of indistinct blobs.

"Sorry, Doc," I said, "You're going to have to give me some help with these."

Glancing over to Rebecca, I took her hand. She held me tight.

The cat cleared his throat again.

"Ah, well, you see..." He reached forward with a claw, tracing the curve of the blob on the left hand side. "This is the outline of a fetus."

I cocked my head.

Rebecca beat me to the question. "Then what's the form on the right?"

The doctor shrugged. "A fetus."

"Oh." I said.

"So we have twins?" Rebecca asked, letting out a breath. "That's good news... I guess."

The doctor cleared his throat again. "Ah, yes... I suppose it is."

I closed my eyes. "But what? That's not what you called me here for."

The cat reached down and grabbed a hold of the end of his twitching tail. I'd never seen a man do that before.

"There is..." he gestured forward with his free hand, "Something more. Do you see this faint line here? That's the beginning of a tail. Normal for canine development at this stage."

My eyes nearly crossed as I tried to make out the blurry forms.

"Alright... but where's the other one's tail?" I asked.

The doctor was clearing his throat so often now that I almost thought he was having a coughing fit.

"That's just it, Mr. Taggert. The other fetus is... not what we'd expect. Do you see the head here? It's noticeably larger than the other fetus'. There's only one species who's head is of that size during this stage of development."

I blinked.

He didn't cough this time. "A human."

Okay, this is just something that *doesn't happen*.

Every time a human and a non-human get together the children are *always* the species of the non-human. That's just the way it is. That's why the human race has been shrinking for the last hundred years.

There are no exceptions.

Except that the ultrasound on the wall before us showed one wolf and one human fetus.

You know there has to be *something big* going on when the hospital brings in over two dozen doctors, one at a time, to look at the ultrasound and confirm we were seeing what we thought we were seeing.

I glanced over to Rebecca and yet another doctor shuffled out of the room with a bemused expression on his face.

We were both thinking the same thing. This had to have something to do with Edmonton.

The last of the conga line finally filed out, leaving just Rebecca, I, and Dr. Nesbit.

I was about to take Rebecca and get the two of us out of here when Dr. Nesbit discretely laid a hand on my shoulder and led me from the room. Well, I'd bet money on him *thinking* he was being discreet, but it's kind of hard to pull that off when Rebecca's the only other person in the room.

Closing the door behind us, he spared a quick glance up and down the corridor. There was no

one else in sight.

"Mr. Taggert," he cleared his throat again, if anything even more nervously. "In a case like this it might be easiest if we looked at the simplest solutions first." There was a expression look on his face. "I've never heard of a recorded case of a human giving birth to another human with a nonhuman father. While dual pregnancies from different sources are not unknown, it is a more likely explanation than..." He petered off a moment later. The man was watching me closely.

"Are you suggesting the cub could be mine and the human child someone else's?" I asked, trying to hold back a laugh.

"Well," he glanced up and down the hall again, "That would seem to be the simplest answer."

Reaching out, I set a hand on the cat's shoulder. He jumped, seemingly expecting me to slug him.

"Doc, have you ever dealt with humans before? I know they're a minority, but have you *ever* dealt with a human pregnancy?"

"Well... no. But I am, I can assure you, a qualified doctor," he replied, becoming indigent.

I didn't bother trying to hold back my smile now. "Sorry, Doc, no offense. But I can tell you right now the biology of a human is different than that of a feline. They have babies, not litters. You can't have a pregnancy with more than one father. It's just not possible. The kids are mine. Both of them."

"But that's not..." he began.

I patted him on the shoulder and turned to open the door. Rebecca was waiting for me within. The expression on her face told me she was as ready to get out of here as I was.

"We've been through a lot, Doc. Don't worry about it."

With that I stepped forward and offered Rebecca my hand. We turned and walked from the hospital without a glance back.

I think the Doc tried to stop us at some point, but he was smart enough not to lay a hand on me. Or Rebecca.

Back at the apartment, dinner was a rather subdued affair of whatever was laying around. We both knew she should be eating better with two kids on the way, but it was just too much to take in right now.

Laying awake next to her that night, sleep it seemed just wouldn't come to me. Rebecca had dropped off somewhere around midnight but I was still wide awake.

My one hand was draped over her, reaching down to cover the slight bump in her belly.

Then, all of a sudden I could feel something move.

And something else.

No, not something. *Someone*.

Sleep came easier to me after that.