The Proginers

By wwwolf

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Chapter 5: A Wolf for a Father and a Lion for an Uncle

I was at V-town General only moments later.

Well, I say moments, but it could have taken hours for all I knew, my mind was going in so many directions.

I didn't even slow as I passed through the front doors, slamming them so hard I almost thought I'd broken my shoulder.

And I got about three steps further before coming to a full stop. It felt like I'd hit a brick wall.

"Oof."

Well, close enough. English might have some gray to him but he was still built like a brick house.

He didn't say a word as he grabbed me by the shoulder, nearly lifting me clear from the ground and taking off down a hallway.

Claws skidding on the floor tiles as we took a corner at high speed, I could hardly hear his voice over my beating heart. "You nearly missed it, Mate. Any later and the show would be over. The Lass would have killed you then."

A couple more turns and we were in front of an unmarked door. I didn't even get a chance to catch my breath before he shoved me through, slamming it behind me.

Frankly, if I hadn't known better I would have thought this was an operating theater.

Plain white walls and bright lights above us, the only real furniture of note was a bed in the the middle of the room.

Noticeably, this one was equipped with a set of stirrups.

And sitting upright on the bed, completely ignoring all the paraphernalia, was Rebecca. She was arguing with Doctor Nesbit.

"We will wait until my husband arrives." Her voice wasn't shrill, but it sounded like she was at the edge of her endurance. "I don't care what you *think*. These are his children as much as they're mine. *I* don't want it, and *you're* not the one who gets to make the decision." She had to pause for a moment as her stomach clenched.

When she looked up again she saw me.

"Tommy." A smile crept to her face. Her voice was low and self assured. "Glad to see you made it. Is Jon alright?"

"Yeah, sure, Babe. But right now I'm more concerned about you."

She smiled sweetly, throwing a nasty glare at the doc.

"I'll be fine, Wolfy. But I think the *Doctor* wants a word with you."

Once again I found myself dragged out into the hallway. This man's insistence on talking to me without Rebecca was starting to get annoying.

"Mr. Taggert," he cleared his throat, "We've been watching the pregnancy and it's mot irregular. Our initial diagnosis was correct. There is no mistaking now that there is a human fetus and one wolf one." He leveled me with what I assumed he intended to be a confident glare. "This is *not* a normal pregnancy. I must insist that she be put under sedation and the children be delivered via c-section."

I leaned on the wall and took a deep breath.

"Listen, Doc, I know this isn't normal. I don't know how much Rebecca told you, but we're... special. This is no surprise." I paused and laughed. "Okay, I'll admit it blindsided the two of us, but it's not a *complete* surprise. I think we would rather try to do this as naturally as possible."

He glared at me. "Mr. Taggert, there's nothing natural about this."

I matched him glare for glare.

"Fine. You tell me. If there were two human twins, or even two wolf puppies of the same size and health, would you recommend a c-section then?"

He backed up a step, catching his breath. "No, of course not. In all other ways they seem to be healthy, but..."

"Fine," I shrugged my shoulders and stood up straight, "Then let's ask the woman involved. Right now the vote's one-for-one. She's the person you want to slice open, it's only fair she gets the final say."

"There's no way in the world you're cutting me open."

Well, those weren't *quite* her exact words. A direct quote would have been a bit more obscene.

Two hours later the three of us, Rebecca, Nesbit, and I, were ready for the big game.

And in a waiting room just down the hall sat English, Molly, Amstys, Jon, and my mom.

I'd never witnessed a birth before, and let's just say I'll thank each and every god there may or may not be that I wasn't born a woman.

Rebecca didn't scream much, but she held my hand so tight I could feel the bones in my joints grinding together.

The first child to see the light of day was a wolf. The doc didn't say anything, but I could see him relax a measure.

It was a boy.

Tiny, pink, and hairless, he didn't look much like a wolf. He didn't look much like anything at all. If it wasn't for the tail I wouldn't have even known the difference between him and a human baby.

Well, that was until he started crying. Only a canine can make *that* sound.

The doc handed him to the nurse who put him in an incubator. I felt a sudden flash of anger that they didn't immediately hand him to us, but it was only moments until we had something else to take our attention.

The first child had been a long affair, a good two hours of pushing and clenched teeth. The second took another twenty minutes until the head came into view.

And there was no question this was a a human, and a girl to boot.

One last push, this time a scream did escape Rebeca's lips, and the child was free.

Before I even had time to wipe the sweat from Rebecca's brow I heard the squeak of a wheel turning.

"What in the gods' names do you think you're doing?" My voice was cold as the peek of Mt. Logan when I turned to the nurse. She'd begun pushing the incubators, and the children in them, towards the door.

"Mr. Taggert," Nesbit stepped between us. Between me and my children. "You must understand this is unheard of. The children look healthy enough, but we must take them for observation. We need to understand what's happened to cause this."

Calmly, almost casually, I stepped forward and put my hand on the cougar's shoulder. My claws cut through his lab coat and into his flesh without the least resistance.

"Doctor, you are going to leave them here." I kept my voice level with nothing more than sheer will alone. Glancing back to Rebecca, I saw her slumped against the bed, half asleep. "These are not some lab rats for you to experiment with. They're my children. Do whatever the normal procedures are, but nothing more. Do you understand me?" I smiled grimly. "I just spent the last three months bottled up with police dogs. Don't play the rules game with me, *I'll tear your throat out.*"

The incubators didn't move any further.

I must have made an impression on the cat, he left the room, a small trail of blood oozing from his shoulder. He didn't come back.

There was an argument in the hallway outside, then a small, dark skinned human walked in, wearing an identical white lab coat.

"Tommy," despite her size she leveled me with a withering glare, "Why didn't you request *me* in the first place?"

"Hello, Doctor Manson," I said, leaning up against the table Rebecca laid upon. I felt almost as exhausted as she looked. "Long time no see."

The doc didn't waste any time before getting to work. Opening the first of the incubators, she turned to the nurse and began reading off statistics, weight, length, stuff like that.

Then, once she was done, she put the wolf in Rebecca's waiting arms.

It was amazing to see how she perked up as soon as the baby was within reach.

"Here you are, dear," Doctor Manson said, voice soothing.

Turning, the doc began the same procedure with the second child, the baby girl. She did the same things, didn't deviate from the standard, but she did take ever so slightly longer.

"Both healthy, and the size we'd expect for twins," she said before handing her over to Rebecca. The two of them were an armful. "Have you decided what you're going to call them?"

The breath caught in my throat. I'd been spending so much time down with Jon that I hadn't had the chance to talk to Rebecca about their names.

Rebecca was looking like she was ready to fall asleep again, but her voice was strong. "Your mother and I were talking, Tommy. What about Gingivere for the boy and Elizabeth for the girl?"

"Ging and Beth?" I said with a slight laugh, "I like it."

I noticed she called them 'the boy' and 'the girl'. Not 'the wolf' and 'the human'.

And that was pretty much that.

With Doctor Manson running interference for us, not to mention Jon and English and everyone else, we were able to sneak out of the hospital a few hours later.

We even managed to miss the bulk of the media. It looked like we were celebrities again. Everyone wanted to know how we'd had a human baby. Most of them seemed to think she was adopted.

I decided not to enlighten them.

Stepping out onto the third floor, we'd decided to take the elevator this time. I was carrying the kids in my arms and Rebecca, still weak, was leaning on me.

I'll admit I wasn't totally surprised to see a team of police dogs waiting at our door. The number included both Pine and Jon.

Jon was having a quiet word with my personal attaché, and what little I could make out it seemed to be a much more positive conversation than Able had gotten earlier that day.

"Mr. Taggert, Miss. Taggert," one of the lower level officers said, stepping up to us the moment we got out of the elevator, "we apologize for the inconvenience, but the commissioner has ordered a clean sweep of all the security in your home. The force has been... preoccupied these last few weeks and we simply wish to ensure you will be safe."

I waved him off and went to go talk to Pine and Jon. Suddenly that little corner of the hallway became far more crowded with the addition of four more souls.

Jon nodded to me. There was just the slightest smile to his lips, poking out from behind his near perfect mask of institutional indifference.

"Congratulations, Tommy," he said. For just a moment he worked up a scowl of annoyance that looked like it would have been more comfortable on Sayer's face. "I think we can all expect they'll cause just as much trouble as you have." He smiled again. "And we're all looking forward to it."

A moment later the dogs stepped from the apartment. I had to hold back a growl at the thought of them having been in there without my supervision.

"All clear," one of them said.

Almost as an afterthought, I called Jon in with me. I had to hand the kids to Rebecca for a moment, but I returned to him the papers on Phoenix he'd given me so long ago.

He nodded is head once and turned to leave without a word.

I did see him lower his nose to the papers, taking a sniff, picking up the scent he'd had as a human.

Thankfully, Rebecca had gotten the nursery finished while I was away. We laid the Ging and Beth down in two cribs, side by side.

Rebecca leaned heavily on the wall.

"Well, Wolfy, I guess we're parents now." She worked up a soft laugh.

I shrugged and put my arm over her shoulders, pulling her close. "Looks like it, Babe."

She leaned into me, almost coming off her feet.

"Come on, Babe. Let's get you some rest. I think we all know you earned it."

About half an hour later she was sound asleep on the bed. Our room was right next to the nursery.

About five minutes after that I heard the first off colour notes of a cry.

Stepping into the nursery, the wail was just starting to wind up. I flicked on the lights as I stepped forward.

This one sounded canine.

I never even got the chance to pick up the crying Ging before Beth woke and began crying in

harmony.

And, oddly enough, I do quite literately mean *harmony*. It was like the two of them were singing, the opposite of a canine's howl.

I had, thankfully, gotten at least a little bit of training in advance of the birth. Their diapers were still empty, so it was most likely they were hungry. Yeah, I'd be hungry too if I'd just been forced to go through the whole act of birth on an empty stomach.

They'd fed them a bit at the hospital and sent us away with some bottles of formula. I fetched a couple now.

It may not sound like much, but it took me about five minutes to warm the bottles over the stove.

Those were some of the longest minutes of my life as the kids cried away in the background.

At long last I had the bottles ready and the nipples cleared. What Rebecca could have done naturally in seconds took me *forever* and a whole list of contrivances.

Thankfully, it seemed I had it right. They both became so occupied with the bottles the moment I lifted them to their faces that they forgot everything else.

Holding Ging in the crook my of left arm and Beth the crook of my right, it was a hard trick to lift the bottles to their mouths as I slowly paced up and down the room, rocking them in my arms.

Hey, this wasn't so hard. I'd been mayor, alpha, to a whole city. What's a couple of kids after you've pulled a feat like that?

About three seconds later Beth let the nipple of the bottle fall from her lips and she began crying again.

Only this time I hadn't the slightest what she wanted.

That night went slowly. And the night after it, and the one after that.

Rebecca and I had fairly quickly worked out a routine without ever really discussing it.

She took the days, minding the kids while the sun was up and my head was buried under the covers. She took them out in a stroller and pushed them down to see my mom and everyone else.

I took the nights. Rebecca got a good sleep in the freshly soundproofed bedroom as I played nurse to the kids as they woke every fifteen minutes – seemingly on the dot – over the night, wanting their diapers changed, or feeding, or just a cuddle.

I may not have the curves – or breasts – that their mother had, but a thick, warm fur coat is just the right thing to cuddle with.

And for those short interludes between looking after the kids I got to sort through government documents and watch the moon rise.

It wasn't so bad. I could get used to this.

On the twentieth day Rebecca came to wake me around noon.

I'll admit to being not in the greatest of moods. The two of us had worked out a pretty good schedule, but even then having a pair of newborns will run you ragged no matter how well you plan it.

"Wolfy?" Her voice was soft as she closed the door behind her, sealing away the light.

For one terrible moment I almost thought it must be evening already and she was here to change shifts.

Nope, the clock beside the bed read 12:24 PM.

"Yeah, Babe?" I said. My voice sounded like it came from the pits of the earth.

"You feel like getting up for a little bit, Wolfy? We've got visitors."

I just groaned. Thankfully, no one had come to see us since the kids were born. I didn't feel

like dealing with bureaucrats trying to curry favour right now.

"Who, Babe?" I knew she wouldn't wake me if it wasn't someone of consequence.

I could just see the flash of a smile in the darkness.

"Amstys and Molly."

I rolled out of bed without another complaint.

I should have taken the time to brush my fur, but Amstys had already seen me at my worst and Molly... well, we'd dated long ago.

Stumbling into the front room, my eyes were still adjusting to the light when I was suddenly engulfed in a bear hug.

At least my eyes appreciated the pitch black fur blotting out the light.

"Young master, it's good to see you again," came Amstys' voice from somewhere about a foot and a half above my head.

He still called me 'young master' on occasion. It's... well, it's a long story. We'll just call the big wolf's mind a bit of damaged goods and leave it at that.

He was, however, still a really nice guy.

"Hey, Amstys," I said, my voice muffled by his fur, "I haven't seen you two in a long time."

"Honey," Molly's voice came, "I think Tommy might want to breathe."

"Oh." The arms dropped away a moment later. I had to scramble to cover my eyes. "Sorry, uh, Tommy."

A moment later I got a quick, and much lighter, embrace from Molly.

Both Amstys and Molly were wolves, but they couldn't look any more different. Amstys was a hulking Adonis, his fur black with flakes if silver here and there. Molly was no more than a third his size and her coat pure white. She was as feminine as he was masculine.

A moment later Rebecca, who looked far more awake and chipper than she had any right to be, seated us around the kitchen table. There was a tea pot in the center – just guess who'd bought us *that* as a wedding gift.

Cradling a steaming cup of tea in my hands, I tried to force the fog from my brain.

Molly and Rebecca were making small talk, but I could just *tell* Molly had something she was just itching to get out.

"Alright, spit it," I said.

Molly looked my way with a smirk on her lips.

"Rebecca, you really should work on domesticating him," she said with a laugh, "Even I've managed to do more with Amstys here."

Both Amstys and I managed to snort at the same time. That just made both the girls laugh.

"But if you simply *must*," she said with a giggle and a flick of a wrist, putting on her best valley girl imitation, "we thought the two of you should be the first to know. I'm pregnant."

I cocked my head and drew in a deep breath. She didn't *smell* pregnant.

"We just found out yesterday." She smiled and drew Amstys' arm over her shoulders like it was a shawl. For all the world the bigger wolf didn't seem to mind being treated like a piece of clothing.

"It's true," came Amstys' deep voice, "We've been... trying since we heard about the two of you. It just took a while for it to be the right time of year."

I smiled. Well, at least the two of them didn't have to worry about what species their kid would be. They were both pure wolf. And Amstys hadn't been close enough when we were in Edmonton to get caught up in the computers.

"Congratulations," I said, reaching out to shake Amstys' hand. "How soon?"

It was about three months later we decided I should return to work.

Well, change that. I would have been just as happy to stay in the apartment, but I think I was starting to drive Rebecca crazy. That, and the kids were starting to sleep through the night so we didn't need to play switch shifts anymore.

It wasn't that I didn't want to go back to work at Storm Front, but... well, I hadn't seen English since that day at the hospital.

Don't get me wrong, we hadn't had a falling out or anything, but I hadn't seen whisker nor hair of him since Ging and Beth had been born. We'd gotten a bouquet of flowers from SF but nothing more.

And the letters I'd sent to him had been replied to, but every invitation I'd made to get him to drop by had been politely refused.

He'd claimed business was picking up.

Standing in front of the SF building, I was tempted to believe him.

Last time I'd been here the street had been quiet. Now there was a steady stream of bounty hunters heading out and marks being dragged in.

I took one look in the front room and turned right around to head in via a side entrance. The place was packed.

At long last I stood on the third floor, outside English's office. I was still outside because I had to get in a line to talk to him.

And unlike last time I'd stood here eavesdropping, he wasn't bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"Next!" He yelled from inside the office. If I didn't know better I'd almost think he was enjoying himself.

I only made it a few steps into the office before I was taken off my feet in a flying tackle.

"Mate! It's good to see you again. How ya doing? Gods, I've missed you."

Two seconds later he'd dragged me off the floor and all but carried me over to sit across the desk from him.

I looked around. The office almost looked normal. There were no piles of papers here, no bare walls. The place was nicely furnished, almost looking like an office someone might even do business.

"So I take it things picked back up, eh?"

He nodded a head, a sparkle in his eye. "Almost right after you were last in here. It seems having the old mutt Jon under the weather resulted in a rise in crime. And it's continued to grow ever since. No matter what the cops try they can't seem to stem it. It's not *good*, Tommy, but it *is* good for business."

I shrugged and tried to change topics. "That's great, buddy, but couldn't you have spared a moment to drop--"

He didn't let me finish the question. Looking like a man thirty years younger, he leapt from his chair and grabbed me by the shoulder, dragging me off.

"Come on, Mate. We've got hunts to make."

The lion hadn't been lying.

Gods but my muscles ached. I'd been expecting to ease back into the bounty hunting lifestyle, but he never gave me the chance.

I'd come to see him at nine in the morning, we made a capture by eleven, were back on the street without even having so much time to blink, and had another capture by three.

It was six o'clock now and we'd just tagged our *third* mark for the day.

Gods, what in the world was going on? Not months ago the city had been the safest it'd ever been. Now there were so many bounties out that we couldn't even keep up.

English was sitting beside me on the steps to some run down apartment complex, running a hand through his mane and massaging the back of his neck where he'd been hit during the last capture.

He glanced over to me and grinned.

"Feel up to one more, Mate? I can promise you a cut that would make a prince jealous."

I shook my head and yawned. "Sorry, Buddy. It's getting late and I promised Rebecca I'd be home for dinner. I'm probably already late. Things are on more of a schedule these days now that we have the kids." I grinned as I stood up. "It seems all they do is eat and sleep. And they don't like having to wait for their meal."

He shrugged. "Your loss, Mate. I'll see you tomorrow?"

I nodded. "Of course. I'm back on the job now." I turned back to him. "Why don't you come with me? I'm sure Rebecca would love to see you again. It's been too long."

For just a fraction of a second I saw something cross his face. His lips hardened and his eyes clouded.

"Sorry, Mate. Gotta keep making hay while the sun's shining, eh? The bounties don't hunt themselves. Gotta make the city a safer place and all that." He forced out a nervous laugh.

The next day was much like the first, and the day after.

Every morning I met up with English and we hunted. And hunted. There was never a lack of bounties on the board.

My pay cheques were huge, and the lion smiled every time he brought in a bounty, but no matter what I tried he just wouldn't talk to me the way he used to.

Near everything was business, and what wasn't was superficial. He was still the English I knew, but that was just it. He was the English I'd first been introduced to, not the one I'd come to love.

It was on the fourth day I finally got pissed off. Even Rebecca was wondering what was up. In the past English had never turned up a chance to drop by the apartment.

We'd just put our last mark in the bag. English and I were walking down the road towards Storm Front at five in the evening.

This was about the time I normally called it a night, but I had other plans today. All I needed was to find a suitable place...

"So you're off then, Mate?" he asked. "Give my best to the Lass and kids, eh?"

He was just about to turn off down a side street when I reached out to grab his shoulder. This place should do nicely.

I'd almost forgotten about Plato's Rest.

The place looked, if it was even possible, even more run down than the last time I'd been here. And that was years ago.

"Uh, Mate, what's up?" English looked genuinely confused as I dragged him through the door.

The bar was, thankfully, just about empty. You'd think this would be a busy time for them, around the dinner hour, but they didn't seem to have much of a crowd.

"It's time we had a talk, pussy-cat."

I'd picked my words carefully.

"Pussy-cat?" He smiled. "It's been a long time since you've called me that, Mate."

I slid into one of the many times darned vinyl booths.

"Well," I smiled, "I could call you a poof tailed tomcat if you want."

He grunted and pulled a face, but it couldn't cover his smile.

"Come now, Mate. No need for names. You'll hurt my feelings if you keep calling me such vile things."

I snorted. "Fine then, your majesty."

I hadn't been trying to, but it seemed that with that one I struck a nerve.

We both went silent for a couple of minutes as the waitress came by and took our orders. One platter of meat, a beer for English and a cup of tea for me.

He grinned when I ordered my drink.

"It seems I'm rubbing off on you, Mate."

I shrugged. "Well, I can't recall the last time I've seen you order a beer that wasn't during a job."

He shrugged back, but the shadow had returned to his eyes.

"I've got a feeling what this is all about, Mate. And I could use a little buzz to get me going."

We had our orders soon after. English wouldn't talk to me about anything deeper than the weather until he had his beer sitting on the table and a few deep pulls inside him.

"Alright, Mate," there was a slight slur to his voice but I knew for a fact he was nowhere near even buzzed yet. "Let's get this on. Say what we're here for."

I took a deep breath and leaned forward over the table, trying to get a better look at his face. The lighting was dim enough here that his eyes were held in shadow.

"Why are you avoiding the kids?"

I was expecting a nervous laugh from him, perhaps a denial. He simply sat silent for a moment.

"Those were beautiful names you chose, Tommy. Gingivere and Elizabeth. Good, proper, British names."

The silence drew out between us as his voice died away. I didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, Mate," his voice was soft as he gazed down at his reflection in the drink. "I'm sure you're little ones are wonderful." His accent was wavering now, at the edge of total collapse to the rounded, unfamiliar tones of his original tongue. "You know my story already. My parents... I'm not sure I'd be the best role model for *any* kids, likely so much as yours. It's not that I don't like kids, Tommy. I've got nothing against them, like them fine. But... they're *yours*. My father messed me up so bad I'm not sure I could..."

He gazed down into his beer for a long moment before taking another pull.

Reaching out, I put a hand on his.

"Don't worry about it, Buddy. We both figured out long ago you're not your father. Your father was a bugger. You're not."

He grinned at me, showing a full array of teeth.

"You say that, Tommy. I'm a right bugger, I know that for a fact. I'm just a different kind of bugger."

Hailing the waitress, I ordered another cup of tea for myself, along with four shots of whiskey for English.

I was going to get him to meet the kids one way or another.

And at least I knew the lion well enough to be sure he was a happy drunk.

It didn't take long. English knew full well what I was doing and was happy to go along with it. One hour later he was drunk off his tail – though it had taken more rounds than I'd expected – and I was under his arm as we staggered back to the apartment.

It wasn't even seven in the evening yet. Rebecca was up and waiting for us in the kitchen. The

kids were laying out next to her.

"So you finally decided to drop by," she said dryly as we stumbled through the door. Her eyes widened slightly as she picked up the scent of just how much alcohol I'd had to ply English with. "That bad?" she asked.

I nodded as I maneuvered English down onto one of the chairs.

He'd been a beast to get out of the bar. I'd thought he'd just been a bit uneasy about seeing the kids, but he'd been almost shaking with fear until I'd gotten him good and plastered.

Now? Now there was a wide grin on his face as he sat back in the chair.

"Come on, Mate," his voice was slurred but accent back firmly in place, "Let's see these little ones of yours. It's high time they met their uncle Michael."

I raised an eye ridge and glanced over to Rebecca. I couldn't even remember the last time English had referred to himself by his real name.

First making sure English wasn't about to puke everywhere, I walked over and picked up Ging from where Rebecca had set him on a blanket on the floor.

The little guy had grown a lot in the last few months. No longer hairless and pink, he'd grown out a short little brown coat. He opened his eyes when I picked him up and began softly mewing until he recognized my scent.

Standing before English, the lion seemed to magically have purged some of the alcohol from his system. Either that or he'd never been quite so drunk to begin with.

His eyes were clear and tracking as I brought the pup slowly towards him.

His pupils had contracted to pinpoints.

He didn't say a word as I stepped closer. He held out his hands to take Ging.

I noticed that, ever so slightly, he was shaking.

Setting Ging in his strong arms, it was only now I discovered how loathe I was to let go. English's arms looked as steady as a rock, but his face gave me the distinct impression he was about to break down.

At long last I let go and he drew the pup close to his chest.

For just a moment I was sure Ging was about to wail, but instead he reached out his hands and grabbed hold of the fur of English's mane.

It was only then I noticed that both English's fur and mine was still splattered with blood from our hunts. No one seemed to care.

A moment later I went to retrieve Beth. She'd grown too. Not quite as big as Ging, she grew as a human would, not at a mix of human and canine speeds.

If anything she took even more quickly to English. A moment later he was weighed down with two kids in his arms. For a long moment the expression on his face was unreadable.

Rebecca came up to stand beside me. She didn't say anything, but I just knew she was here in case we had to pull the kids away for any reason.

Then English smiled.

Truly and deeply, the lion smiled. For just a moment he reminded me of my father. My father had possessed the most hideous smile imaginable, huge cracked and yellowed fangs he'd show off when he was happy and at ease.

English's smile was in some ways the exact opposite. His teeth were just as large, but straight and pearly white.

And something about that grin told me it wasn't *English* smiling, it was the man behind the mask. That smile came from Michael Jones.

The next morning was different from what we'd had in a long time, but familiar in its own way. We awoke to English passed out in the front room, where we'd left him in the chair.

Surprisingly, he was more than willing to help with the kids. His actions were slow and halting, but he was more than willing to partake in everything from feeding to changing of diapers like it was all a new and grand adventure to him.

Out on the street again, English and I were on yet another hunt.

There was something about the way the lion moved today, and not just the kink in his neck from having spent the night sleeping in a chair. There was an ease to his muscles, a calmness to his motions.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He favoured me with a dazzling grin.

"You could say that, Mate. It's nice to have seen the Lass again. And, well..."

I snorted. "You better be careful. You tell me you *like* changing diapers and I'll give you the job full time. The gods know I'd rather someone else do it."

He cuffed me in the back of the head and we headed off to the SF building to get a listing of contracts out today.

The boarding house was called 'Sundown'. So of course it had to be on the far east side of town.

Gods but this place was a dump. A small two story building, it crouched between the decaying hulks of old pre-Cataclysem wreaks on either side of it.

Stepping into the front office on the heels of English, I followed the lion to the front desk.

Our latest tip placed the mark here. It was a bit of a long shot, he hadn't been seen in weeks, but it was better than nothing.

To be honest, my heart wasn't really in the hunt. This was our fourth contract of the day. Two of our earlier ones had fallen through and the mark we did bring down had been a bugger of a fight.

I left English to talk to the landlord as I wandered around the small lobby of the boarding house. And I use the term 'lobby' loosely. The room was only perhaps five meters square and felt hemmed in with the addition of a ratty threadbare couch in one corner and the drab grey walls and mud brown carpet.

From behind me I could hear English's voice rise. I guess the landlord wasn't being as cooperative as we'd been hoping for.

I was just about to go stand next to the lion, lend my support and all that, when my nose twitched.

It took me a moment to lock onto the scent. So many people passed through this room everyday that it was hard to pick out.

But once I did it stood out like a blinking neon sign two feet from my face.

"English," I stepped up behind the lion, setting my hand on his shoulder. I didn't mean to, but my claws dug in.

"Yeow! Mate, let go!" He turned to look at me. "What is it?"

I narrowed my eyes, taking another breath. "Brian."

What English said didn't merit repeating.

The landlord hadn't been much help in letting us into our mark's room, but he was touch more open to spilling what he knew about Brian Ferguson.

Or at least he became more amicable once I threatened to pull his heart out through his throat.

I was getting smarter this time though. Rather than blindly charging into what could be Brian's

new hideout, first I headed back out onto the street to find the nearest police dog.

This wasn't exactly downtown, so it took me a few minutes of criss-crossing the streets to find a cop, but once I did I got an immediate reaction.

All I had to do was say the words 'Brian Ferguson' and the dog was off like a shot, sprinting towards the nearest station.

I had no doubt we'd have our reinforcements in moments.

But that wasn't quick enough. Returning to the boarding house, English was standing guard, making sure Brian didn't pass by.

The landlord hadn't had a clue who we were talking about when we'd asked him about Brian. The man, it appeared, didn't even know the wolf's name.

Brian had simply shown up one day with a wad of bills and prepaid the room for a whole year. That had been enough cash the landlord hadn't asked any questions.

It was that room English and I stood in front of now.

The hallway was dimly lit, and the walls and carpet were of the same dingy colour as the lobby.

The door was a light gray plywood. It looked so flimsy that it seemed I could almost just shove it out of the way.

The landlord stepped up to it with a key. The sound of the lock turning was loud in the suddenly silent hallway.

I was just about to step forward when English put an arm in front of me.

"Not this time, Mate." He pushed me away. "Remember, last round he had things designed to kill people just like you."

The lion's frame was so large he took up the whole doorway.

He didn't even say anything as he slammed the door open so hard it bounced back on its hinges.

English's roar echoed off the walls as he leapt into the room. I couldn't see him anymore as the shadows consumed him whole.

A second later his voice came from the darkness.

"Clear." He didn't even bother to try and suppress a growl.

I had to hold myself in check a I stepped into the room. I noticed the landlord, wisely, stayed out in the hallway.

The scent of Brian was so thick in here that it nearly left me seeing red. And it was fresh.

The place wasn't large, no more than a quarter the size of my apartment. There wasn't much to search.

One main room with a mattress on off to a side, and a grime encrusted bath.

There was a writing desk pushed up against one of the walls in the main room. That's what attracted my attention. Other than the mattress, it was the greatest source of Brian's scent.

Pinned to the wall in front of the desk was a collection of photographs and news clippings.

English stood beside me as I read through them. The growl grew deeper in his chest.

'Mayor steps down to position of Administrator.' 'City Administrator to marry human.' 'Taggert nearly murdered on honeymoon.' And the most recent, 'Taggert (wolf) and human wife give birth to unexplained human child.' With the clippings were photographs. Every one of the snaps was of me. My face was circled in red.

A chill ran through me from nose to tail.

The cops arrived a couple of moments later. I couldn't fault their response time.

It was only another half hour or so before Jon himself appeared on scene. By this time the

entire boarding house had been cordoned off.

Six months later and there was still no word on Brian Ferguson. The cops had covered the apartment from ceiling to floor.

Both Jon and I had stayed to make sure they did it properly this time. Too bad it didn't do us the slightest bit of good.

"You ready, Wolfy?"

I was jolted back to the here and now as Rebecca rested a hand on my shoulder.

We were in our apartment, I was sitting next to the window, looking out over the city.

"Oh, yeah, Babe." I stood up and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "We'd better get going. I promised Mom we'd have them over there for supper."

She smiled. The long days of minding the kids were wearing on her, but she still looked amazing.

"I'm sure she won't mind if were a few minutes late."

The walk to the old house was smooth and quiet. Well, as quiet as one could expect with half a dozen police dogs in tow.

Brian may have yet to show his face, but neither Jon nor I wanted to take any chances.

"Tommy." My Mom smiled as she opened the bright blue door. "It's been too long."

You'd never know my mom was in her sixties, for all the world she looked like nothing more than her late thirties. Well, that was one of her advantages, sprigens age differently.

It was nice, for once in a long time, to have a home cooked meal that neither Rebecca or I had to make. And the fact it was made by Mom was just all the better for me.

Tonight was a gift from her. We were leaving the kids here. Rebecca and I got the night off.

I was just about ready to leave when I looked out the back window.

I didn't even realize what I was doing as I found my feet slowly walking down the back steps and across the meticulously maintained yard.

There was an old tree back here, and a familiar little depression in the earth just in front of it.

It looked so empty and lonely now.

This had been my father's favourite place to lay on quiet summer evenings. It just wasn't the same without him here.

"Tommy," my mother's voice came from behind me. A moment later I could feel the ever so soft touch of her hand on my shoulder. "He was proud of you, Tommy. So proud. You were everything he ever wanted you to be and so much more. I'm just sorry he couldn't have met his grandchildren." There was the softest chuckle from her. "You have no idea how pleased he would have been to find he had a *human* as a granddaughter."