

The Proginers



By wwwolf

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Chapter 11: A Monster Greater than I

We spent the next couple of days at English's home, only the rare police dog dropping by with packets to remind us of the real world not a kilometer away.

I ignored all the messages except for those from Max. It seemed that my stepping out had been the best thing possible for negotiations with Japan. Now the envoys *had* to deal with Max, he was top of the heap again and he – unlike I – knew what he was doing.

Things were wrapping up pleasantly now and, generally speaking, the smartest thing I could do would be to keep my cold, wet, black nose out.

That suited me fine.

Sitting with Rebecca on the patio, we watched Ging and Beth play in the garden. English was down there in the dirt with him. I can't say I've ever seen the lion willingly get dirty, but there's a first time for everything. He was on his hands and knees next to them, sharing in their wonders.

"You know, Babe," I whispered as one of the kids shrieked in joy over finding an earthworm, "I think the old golden lug is really taking a liking to them."

Rebecca smiled. "What was your first clue, Wolfy? I didn't think English had it in him to be paternal. You'd think they were his own by the way he puts up with their antics. He even holds back better than you do when they yank on his tail."

I smiled and rubbed my rear end, the ghost of a sharp pain coming back to haunt me. "Yeah, I'll give him that one. And his is so much easier to grab, too."

None of us really wanted it, but at some the vacation things had to come to an end as we returned to the city. The walk back took far longer than the one out had, now that the kids were awake. They wanted to stop every five feet to look at a flower or a signpost, or just an unusual rock on the road.

At long last we made it all the way back, through that was in no small part due to the fact the two of them quickly tiered out and we carried them as they slept.

Rebecca in the apartment and English off at Storm Front, I had something I needed to check into.

"Pine, you got a moment?" I asked as I poked my nose around the corner of his office door.

He looked up at me from his desk.

"Of course, Sir."

Sitting down across from the dog, I took a deep breath. There wasn't a trace of blood left in the air, but I could still smell the bleach they'd used to douse the walls.

And Pine's uniform was still a bit puffy across the chest where a bandage was wrapped around him.

"I'd like to know where Brian Ferguson is," I said.

I hadn't been quite sure what to expect from him. First the dog had taken him – and a lot of other cops – out, then I'd ordered the wolf released. I wouldn't have blamed Pine if he held a grudge.

"I can do that for you, Sir." There wasn't a trace of anger in his voice. "I should be able to find him for you shortly."

He hadn't been kidding. Turning to the radio behind him, he called up HQ. Something like two minutes later they not only gave me Brian's new address, but also his current location down to the block.

"Do I want to ask just how you know this?" I said.

Pine's lip twitched up. "You might as well, Sir."

I smiled. "How do you know that?" I asked, playing along.

He shrugged. "After the previous event, the force decided it to be best that we keep a *very* close watch on him. He knows it, we don't try to hide the fact. He's too... *notable* for us to afford to lose track of him again."

I headed off to see Brian, but I knew for a fact Pine had informed the force of my plans. I could hear him speaking into the radio as I left. Loudly.

By the time I made it across town to Brian's new home I could see members of the force, both in uniform and undercover, every ten steps. It seemed they didn't trust Brian any further than they could throw him.

It was a Monday, but late in the day. Most people were already home from work.

They'd given me Brian's new address, it was a small little apartment in one of the highrises. Up on the sixth floor.

Standing out in the hallway, I knocked on the door. My nose was twitching from the scents of all the other apartments. I couldn't imagine how I'd managed to live in a place like this years ago.

Perhaps it had been because *my* apartment hadn't been surrounded by police dogs.

It didn't take long for Brian to answer. I'll admit I was rather surprised. I'd been expecting *something*, but Brian looked as normal as any other man in the city.

"Hello, Tommy." His voice was bland, bordering on soft.

I nodded my head. "Hi, Brian. I just figured I should drop by and see how you're doing."

He shrugged his shoulders and stepped back from the door. "Come in. Please. I suppose I owe what I have to you." There was *something* in his voice. A hint of... venom? But yet at the same time he sounded genuinely grateful.

The apartment wasn't much, little more than four walls and an attached bathroom. He ushered me over one corner where a small table stood, there were only two chairs. I took one.

The apartment really wasn't much. From where I sat I could see *everything*. A bed in one corner, the door open to the bathroom on the far wall.

There was no place to hide in this apartment.

"I sorry, I don't really have much to offer you, Tommy," Brian said. "I just got my first pay

cheque yesterday and I had to spend it on the essentials.” A smile pulled at his lips. “You have no idea how much toilet paper costs when you start off with nothing.”

I laughed. “You’d be surprised. I was in a situation not so far from this a few years ago. If you need anything, Brian, anything at all, just let me know. I had to suffer through these kinds of problems and I’d hate to see you have to do the same. And I had my parents to fall back on.”

He closed his eyes when I mentioned my parents. I stopped talking.

“Anyway,” I continued, clearing my throat nervously, “I guess you’re doing well enough. I should probably be off then.”

The wolf’s eyes contracted. “No, please, Tommy. I... I’d rather have some company. The hours can get long here when I’m all alone by myself.”

I shrugged. “Okay, I’m game. Feel like going for a walk? We can pick up dinner. My treat.”

He immediately brightened.

Leaving the apartment, I noticed he didn’t bother to lock it behind us.

I raised an eyebrow.

He simply said, “I’ve cops on either side, and more watching me. No one is going to steal anything and it saves them from having to pick the lock.”

Down the stairs and out onto the street, I noticed the officers in the shadows in all directions. They were doing their best to not stare at us but were failing miserably.

I didn’t have any real idea where to go, and Brian – despite living here – and no idea where anything was. I picked a direction at random and headed off.

Well, not quite at random. I headed in the general direction of the main food district but that was clear across town. What I forgot was how close that path took us to skirting Brian’s old apartment.

The derelict highrises here in V-town aren’t as common as they were before the quake, but they’re still numerous enough that most of us just don’t notice them.

That’s why I couldn’t figure it out when Brian began shivering.

“I don’t want to go this way,” he said in a whimper.

“What?” I asked, stopping dead in the middle of the street.

He pointed a finger up into the sky, at his old home that loomed over us. “I don’t want to go there.”

It took me a moment to register. “Oh.”

Thankfully, we were just a few steps from a takeaway shop. The food here was little better than garbage, deep fried chicken bits, but it filled our bellies.

And it let me grab the food and find a seat without having to move more than a dozen feet.

Getting Brian and I seated on a bench on the side of the road, I pressed the bucket of miscellaneous chicken parts into his hands.

His nose twitched. “What is it?” he asked.

I smiled. “That’s a question best left unanswered for those who are squeamish. They promise that everything in there is edible, possibly even tasty, but that’s the furthest they’ll go.”

Just as I’d been expecting, his first bite was hesitant, but soon after the chicken was disappearing with frightening speed.

It was a good thing I was used to dining with English, this wolf could out eat a lion. I had the feeling he hadn’t had much to eat in the last few days. Or if he had, his regeneration had burnt it all away.

With chicken grease on our lips and fingers we sat back on the bench as I tossed the now empty bucket into a nearby bin.

Brian belched beside me. He seemed to be down a few stress points. Well, that was one thing I knew for sure, at least among canines. A good meal can make anyone feel calmer, and the greaser the better.

Brian wasn't exactly *happy* now, but he was at least stable. He looked up at the tower the continued to loom over us, lit now by the setting sun.

"It was a bad thing that lived up there, Tommy," he said. His voice was bland, but there was an undertone to it that made me shiver. He knew better than anyone living or dead what had happened in that tower over the last hundred years.

We got up and started walking again, but this time it was Brian leading.

He didn't head towards the tower, I thought we were off somewhere else, but rather he circled around it.

Eying the building wearily as we wound around it again and again, in ever tightening circles, he seemed to slowly be working up his courage.

And more than that, he seemed to be *drawn* to it, unable to look away, now that it had been brought back to his attention.

At long last he stood on the scrubby green patch in front of the main door. The face of the building was lit a bright orange by the light of the setting sun.

"You don't have to do this, Brian," I said. The words were more for my own comfort than anything else. I noticed there were whole packs of police dogs following us, but none of them were close enough to be within range if anything truly went wrong.

Brian took a deep breath and looked up at the tower. He had to kink his neck to see all the way to the top.

"I have to," he said.

Stepping into the lobby on the first floor, I noticed that it was empty of any transients making it their home. I guess the police had gotten a bit more serious about keeping this place clear since Brian had returned.

I let the other wolf lead. I knew where to go to get to the empty elevator shafts we'd need to get to the top floor, but I wanted to see if he still remembered.

I wasn't sure if I was happy about the fact that he led me unerringly, following a better path than I knew existed. In seconds we were in front of the shaft and Brian reached out to grab the first rung on the ladder to climb up.

"I remember this," he whispered. "I remember this climb. I've taken it a hundred... no, a thousand..." His voice petered off.

A twenty story vertical climb takes a long time. And when done in a claustrophobic, pitch black elevator shaft on a rusty ladder it takes even longer.

Every so often Brian would stop in front of me, my head bumping his feet.

He wouldn't say anything, but I could just make him out reaching for something in the darkness, hands tentatively stroking one thing or another.

At long last we made it up to the top floor and climbed out into the lobby of the twentieth floor.

Well, now I *knew* the cops had been back here.

The room was empty, but the police tape had been put back up, and it looked likely that there had been a guard stationed here until just hours ago. I had the feeling they'd pulled him out once Brian and I had started heading this way.

Somewhat more ominous though where Brian's own signs. They still stood where I'd first seen

them, promising that death would be the kindest thing visited upon anyone who dared trespass upon this domain.

Yet he hardly even seemed to notice either the police tape or the deathly warning. The wolf simply began walking forward, brushing anything and everything out of his way as he made a straight line for the apartment.

I noticed, as I trailed behind him, that his feet exactly followed a trail that been worn into the floor, likely over many, many years.

Opening the door to the apartment, Brian took a deep breath and shuddered.

"A monster lived here," he said.

"What?" I asked, stepping up behind him.

He turned to me. His pupils were so large in the darkness that it seemed his whole eyes were black. "A monster lived here," he repeated, "One far greater than I."

That was all he said before turning and slowly walking through the door. I stood at the threshold for a long moment, not sure if I dared follow him.

With a deep breath, the scents of the old and new Brian Ferguson pulling at my nerves, I stepped in.

Brian hadn't gone far, I found him just around a corner or two. He was standing in the kitchen.

When I'd first been here the room had been spotless, now it was edged in the dust and grime of disuse, but still serviceable.

He stood next to the sink, one of his hands resting lightly on the counter.

"I remember when I first found this place," he said. There was something about his voice that sent chills down my spine. "The kitchen was a mess, rotting food in the refrigerator and rats infesting the cupboards. It took me months to make the place fit for habitation again. Took me god knows how many hours of tearing everything apart and scrounging through every half razed husk in the city to find the supplies I needed to make it livable again, fit for human habitation."

Casting about for just a moment, he turned to a cupboard, reaching in to pull out a box of biscuit. They looked like they'd gone long stale, but he lifted the top of the cardboard box with a claw and took a sniff.

He never even thought twice as he reached a hand in and took out a biscuit. The little bread-like lump of dough snapped quietly as he crunched it between his fangs.

He left the open box on the counter as he walked out of the room. I followed him.

Casting about for a moment, he led me to the living room. This was where English and I had met him last time. When we'd thrown him through the window.

He walked across the shards of glass without even seeming to notice them. Running a hand tenderly along the pillows of the sofa here, he stepped up to the large ceiling to floor windows, almost unconsciously avoiding the ones that were plywooded over.

"This was where I spent most of my time," he said. His words were fogging up the glass, his lips so close. "I'd sit here and look down over the city. My city. I'd see just how ugly it was, how far it had fallen. How fast *I'd* let it fall. Every year it seemed that no matter how hard I tried that things just kept getting worse. The humans were dieing out and the civilization was ebbing away."

He raised a hand to touch the thick glass, falling quiet.

I stepped up beside him to gaze down.

He was right.

This was possibly the tallest building left in V-town. Looking down from here the entire city

looked... dirty.

"I looked down on this every day," Brian continued, his voice an even monotone. "Summer sun or winter snow, I looked down on my city and saw nothing but ugliness. I still fought to keep it stable and right."

He closed his eyes and turned from the window. Never bothering to open them, he strided confidently through the nearby door and down the hallway.

Room by room, we made our way through the apartment. This was a large place, it was a good thing we had time.

Brian narrated each room and the treasures within. It wasn't *him* talking, per say, but something closer to the old man. That alone made the hair on the back of my spine stand up.

He said a few words about the room with all the books, but not nearly as much as I would have liked. Gods but this room made me all but drool. I could spend a year in here and hardly even scrape the surface.

We even came back to the main hallway, out where, on a pedestal, stood a framed photo of a man, woman, and two children.

Brain walked up and lifted the photo into the wan light to get a better look at it.

"Who are they?" I asked.

He didn't respond for a long moment, his forehead creasing as he thought.

"I don't know." His voice was rough. "I *should* know. I know that I once knew. It was something important to me. But I don't know. Everyone there is a stranger to me."

Taking the photo gently from his unresisting fingers, I gently set it back on the pedestal.

I couldn't tell you for certain who they were, but I could make a good guess. If I had been in Brian's position there were only a few people I'd worship on such a way, and the fact all of them in the photo were human – dressed in clothing I'd never seen before – only added weight to my theory.

The photo was that of Brian and his family. And he couldn't even remember *them*.

At long last we came to the final room. Brian's bedroom.

He stood out in the hallway, toes at the threshold, seemingly unable to take the final step.

I stood behind him, setting a hand on his shoulder. It was the first time we'd made contact since coming up here. He jumped.

And then, like someone had flipped a switch, he was *Brian* again, the wolf I'd been talking to on the street.

"I... I don't like this place, Tommy," he whispered. "I can remember things, but not *how* I remember them."

With the he took a step forward.

The bedroom was a nice place, on par with the best rooms that Hotel Vancouver had, or better.

Brian stood in the center and looked around. His mouth was held firm, but his eyes were wide.

With halting steps he walked towards the far wall. There was a painting there. I hadn't the slightest who'd drawn it, but it was pretty enough. I had a feeling it was worth more than all the money I'd made in my life.

He reached up and unhooked it from the wall, setting it aside without another thought.

Behind it was a plain plaster wall.

I cocked my head. "Were you expecting a wall safe or something?"

He didn't respond. Hands out before him, he began feeling the wall, the pads of his fingers brushing the smooth painted surface.

His motions were slow and methodical. He covered the entire space behind the picture before stopping just long enough to pull down another, and another.

The room was starting to look a bit on the cluttered side now.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

He didn't respond for a long moment. When he did he never slowed in his search or turned to look at me. "Don't know."

The sun was starting to set now, the light in the room fading out, casting us in the blood red of the sunset. I would have turned on the light switch, but I doubted there was any power to make a difference.

At long last he stopped dead, one hand poised in front of a featureless section of wall about three feet off the ground.

He growled.

Before I could take a step forward a snarl escaped his lips.

Plunging his hand forward with a dry crack of plaster and the wet crunch of bone, he made a neat hole in the wall.

I winced. That had to have *hurt*.

But this was Brian Ferguson. By the time he'd drawn his fist back it was already half healed, the small little bones of his knuckle sliding back into place.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Blinking, he seemed to surface from his trance. "I... there's something there."

Reaching into the dark hole, he fished out plaster until he could get to a small compartment that had been sealed away behind it. There wasn't much there, only a single envelope.

Brian passed the envelope to me so quickly you would have thought it was on fire.

I took a look down at the simple white paper envelope. It was sealed and yellowing with age. There was no address written on the front.

"What is it?" I asked.

Brian looked at me wide eyed. "I've found them before. Every now and then since... I woke up. It's," he paused and took a deep breath, "From me."

I walked over and sat down on the bed. The scent of Brian Ferguson was strong in this room, both old and new. It was a little easier to withstand now.

Lifting the envelope to my nose, I could pick the scent out plain as day. It could be from no one else.

"Do you want me to open it?" I asked, looking up to meet his eyes.

It took him a long moment, but he nodded.

We walked back out to the living room with the big floor to ceiling windows. It was the only place in the apartment with enough light for me to read by.

Finding seats, we sat across the now ruined table from each other.

Slipping a cracked black claw under the seal of the envelope, I pulled.

The paper tore away freely, but only after a fight. It had been well sealed, secure from the ravages of time. Much like Brian himself.

The envelope open, I reached in and pulled out a single page of paper. It was a thick and rich sheet, almost more of a parchment.

The handwriting on it was clear and concise, but still full of expression. The man who's had had written this letter had worked decades on his penmanship and it showed.

Reading it out, word for word, I tried to keep my voice neutral, but it was difficult. The words

were chosen in such a way as to force my lips into the passive snarl of the Brian Ferguson I'd once known.

The words, nothing more than ink on paper, scared me.

I won't get into the exacts, but they were from Brian, to Brian. He'd written the letter years ago, perhaps decades, there was no date.

It seemed he'd known that this would happen one day – that he'd lose his memory. By the sounds of it my fight with him hadn't been the first time he'd lost. He'd been beaten to a pulp – and come back – at least a couple of times before. And he'd lost his memory those times too.

Brian had written this letter, and the others that had been cropping up, in order to provide a bit of a 'jump start' to get his mind running again.

In short, even my throwing him out of a window and splattering him across the asphalt twenty stories below had been planned for.

I was little more than a speed bump for the man who was Brian Ferguson.

I finished reading the last words of the letter out loud. There was a signature below, written in the same perfect script. It put anything I could ever do to shame.

Looking up over the top edge of the paper, I could see Brian sitting in the chair across from me. It was the same chair he'd sat in when I'd met him up here a year ago. And he was the same wolf, on the outside at least.

"Brian?" I whispered.

I couldn't make him out well in the growing darkness, but I could see his face. He was crying.

"What have I done, Tommy?" His voice was little stronger than mine had been.

"What do you mean? The police told you what happened, right?"

He closed his eyes. "They told me we fought. That you killed me. Or close enough to. But... that's not it. What did I do? I know those words, I remember writing them. *What did I do to become like that?* I can remember how angry I was when I wrote that letter. How many long months I took to choose just the right words. I know what I did to *you*, but what did I do to the people before to make them kill me? And how could I have ever wanted to kill you or anyone else?"

"Brian, it's not like that," I said, reaching out towards him. "Things were different, you were a different person. That's why we're here. We don't want it to happen again."

He pulled away from me when I reached for him, shrinking back in the chair.

"I can't go back to being that, Tommy. The police told me about who I was. What I did. I don't want to be *him* again."

I took a deep breath. I could only imagine what the cops had told him. The police had *not* been happy when Brian had tried to kill me. They weren't much of a group for physiological warfare, but I'd put money on the fact they hadn't put the old Brian Ferguson in a good light.

Not that I'd cared much for him either.

"Come on, Brian. Let's get out of here. There's nothing more to see."

He sat there for a long moment, not moving.

"Tommy, give me the letter."

I shrugged and handed it over.

He stood up and, letter in hand, walked to the kitchen.

Reaching out a confident hand, he found a pack of matches in the back of a cupboard without having to search for them.

Striking a match, he held it to the letter.

"Brian, wait! The cops will want to read that!"

Seemingly deaf to me, he waved the little flame back and forth under the paper. I stopped fighting to pull it from his fingers when I realized it wasn't bursting into flames.

Whatever the letter had been written upon it wasn't normal paper.

Holding the match until the flame was licking his claws, Brian kept the heat to the letter.

I could see words forming at the bottom of the page, underneath the signature. They hadn't been there before.

A second later the flame was snuffed out, the embers of the match singing the skin of Brian's palm.

He handed the letter back to me. "Read it." His words were not a request.

The writing on the hidden lines was not like that above it. These were directions, straight and to the point. "The book is located at Cathedral Mountain. North face. In the cave two hundred meters from the top. You remember it. It's where you buried the bodies."

I looked up at him after I read the words. He was as still as a corpse.

"I remember it," he repeated, voice soft.

"Brian, are you alright?" I asked, backing away slowly. I didn't like the look in his eyes.

For just a moment he looked like something was ready to snap deep in his mind, but then he shook his head like he was throwing water.

"Yeah," he said, a pained look on his face. "I want to get out of here. Now."

Moving towards the elevator, he didn't exactly run, but there was an urgency in the man's step as he headed towards the outside.

He never said a single word as we made our way down to ground level.

Stepping from the building into the green space out front, I noticed a police dog out of the corner of my eye. He nodded politely to me and slipped away into a shadow. Brian never even saw him.

Brian wasn't in much of a position to notice anything. Down on his haunches, he was kneeling in the scrubby grass, gasping in deep breaths as though I'd been holding his head underwater for the last hour.

"I won't go back there," he said, voice rough. "There are too many memories up there. To many years fighting to get back inside my head. It's dirty."

I set a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Come on," I said, "Let get out of here. I think you could use a walk in the fresh air."

Brian seemed to perk up the moment we got out of the shadow of the apartment building.

The sun was low in the sky, but there were still lots of people out enjoying the warm summer evening. We passed a school in our wanderings. Brian slowed to a stop on the sidewalk. Not a stone's throw away a dozen kids were running about in a playground.

It wasn't the greatest or grandest thing in the world, but a little community school yard, a set of monkey bars, a slide, and a sandbox, but the kids seemed to enjoy it just the same.

There were cats in there, and canines, onis, trolls, and everything else you might come to expect to see on your average day in V-town. There were even some human children.

Brian watched them. His lips were trembling.

"This is what I never saw, Tommy," he said. "I spent so many years up in that skybox, looking down over the city. I only ever came down when I absolutely needed to, when I needed food or supplies. I spent decades up there, looking down from a distance, planning... scheming for the future of the city."

"I was doing right," he continued, "Trying to keep the spark of humanity alive. But... I never

saw things like this. I never saw children playing, never talked to people on the street. I never saw that *people* are still here, even if they're not human."

I laughed softly. "It took you a century to realize that? How could you not notice? Like you said, you had to come down for supplies every once in a while."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. I *saw* things, but I didn't *see* them. All those years up there, I'd already decided what was right and wrong, what was real. It didn't matter what was around me when I came down to the real world, I saw what I believed to be here, not the real world around me. I didn't see children playing, I saw inhuman abominations taking up space for *real* children, learning how to hunt and kill."

I didn't have a good response to that.

"You can remember now?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I can remember snatches, passages from a book. Images and sounds, thoughts. I can remember having been him, but I can't remember *being* him."

Putting an arm over the other wolf's shoulders, I gently guided him away, walking down the street again.

It may be nothing, but I just didn't feel safe having him close to so many children. This may be the *new* Brian Ferguson, but the thought of him being close to kids, any kids, made me uneasy.

It didn't take us long to wander out to the edges of the forest. V-town may be a decent sized city, but it ends quickly enough if you know what direction to walk.

Brian stopped dead when he saw the street end ahead of us.

Well, I shouldn't say the street *ended* per say. It just kind of got gobbled up by the trees. One moment you're on the asphalt, the next moment your standing on the mossy grass, the earth having reclaimed its rightful place. There was hardly more than a few feet where the change occurred, where the city and the earth transitioned.

"I don't want to go that way," he said.

"Huh? What's wrong."

"I've never... never been out of the city before."

I tightened my grip on his shoulders. "Then you're talking to the right wolf. I grew up in the forests, with my Dad. But then I spent years hardly setting foot out there again. I know, it can be a bit intimating at first. Don't worry, you're a wolf. It's what your body was designed for."

He began shivering.

"I'm not a wolf, Tommy," his voice was a whine. "I'm not like you. I wasn't born this. I'm... I'm human."

"You were, Brian," I whispered reassuringly in his ear as I help him fast. I didn't push forward but neither did I let him back away. "You were, but that was long ago. You've spent ten times as much of you life as a wolf than a man. Don't you think that could be part of the problem? You're holding on too tight. Nature made you what you are now, but you refuse to accept it. Accepting what you've become doesn't mean you have to let go of what you were. You become more than you were without losing what you had before."

I paused for a moment, lowering my voice further.

"And I'll tell you a secret, Brian. I was human once too. Only for a few days, but I've experienced the same change you have. I know of frightening it is."

I'd been planing on taking him on a hunt, but now I realized we were a long way from anything like that.

It took everything Brian had to take that final step off the asphalt. When his toes touched the soft moss of the earth he leapt as if burned.

It had been difficult for me, who'd spent less than a decade trapped inside the city, to return to the forest. I could only imagine how hard it had to be for Brian, who'd spent easily ten times that in the city, and hadn't likely been much of a nature lover before anyway.

He leaned heavily on my shoulder as we journeyed deeper amongst the trees. The footing wasn't so treacherous here that he really had any reason to clutch me so tight. I think it was more of the fact I was the only thing he had with him that remained of the city.

We could have wandered in the forest, but I kept us straight and narrow, nicely in the middle of one of the well trod paths. This had been a highway once, long ago. For someone like me it felt just about the same as the city.

For Brian, however, I could see in his wide eyes that his was far and away from anything he'd ever experienced.

He looked at the trees around us like a month old pup. It was with a shock I realized the expression on his face was not so different than Ging's had been, or even Beth's, when I'd taken them out to English's home.

Tugging me gently to a stop, Brian reached out a tentative hand towards the nearest tree.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's a birch," I replied. "You could climb it if you wanted."

Hand reaching out again, his claws snagged a loose flap of the tree's white, paper like bark.

He cried out slightly and pulled back. His claw caught on the bark, pulling a decent size chunk back with him.

"Get it off! Get it off!" All but leaping up and down, he waved his hand in the air as if afraid the tree was some kind of blood sucker. I had to hold back a laugh.

"Come here, let me handle that."

Grabbing a hold of his flailing hand, I gently tugged the bark free.

"See, just some birch bark, nothing to be afraid of," I said, holding it out to him.

He leaned forward, sniffing it. It seemed some measure of his courage was back now that he didn't have nature attached to him any longer.

And that was the way the rest of the evening continued. It flat out amazed me just how little Brian knew.

Even for a man who'd lost his memory he seemed to know less than anyone but a new born babe would. Other than grass and the occasional ornamental pine, it seemed he hadn't seen anything green in far longer than I'd been alive.

Much to my surprise we came across a rabbit as we wandered. It wasn't much, a stingy and unappetizing fellow – likely why he'd yet to be caught – he stood on the path not a dozen strides before us.

I called a silent stop to our progress and pointed it out to him.

"My daughter used to have one like that..." he whispered, then suddenly cut off, going cross eyed.

"You remember her?" I asked.

He raised a hand to his forehead and winced. "No... yes... images. I can..." He stopped and looked up at me. "Tommy, I want to go home. I want to go back to my apartment surrounded by police dogs."

I nodded. "Okay."

When I looked up again the rabbit was long gone.

The towers of V-town had still to break through the canopy of leaves above us, and it wasn't yet dark enough to see its lights, yet I already knew something was wrong.

We were still a good five minutes walk away when I started getting nervous. I'm sure Brian could feel it. He kept up with me step for step and I moved faster. It wasn't long after that I was running flat out, Brian fighting simply to keep up.

And there, on the edge of town, with his toes right on the last pebbles of the fractured concrete, was a police dog.

Not just any dog. It was Pine.

Sprinting past, I didn't even need to say a word, he started off with me. I never even slowed.

"What is it?" I asked, panting.

His ears were down.

"Rebecca is safe," were the first words out of his lips.

I skidded to the halt and grabbed Pine by the shoulders, my claws digging through the fabric of his uniform.

"What is it?"

He paused for a moment, looking like a deer caught in the headlights of a north bound train.

"The children--" was all he got out.

I took off again, sprinting for home at a speed that would have giving anyone else a heart attack.