

The Proginers



By wwwolf

Table of Contents

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

Chapter 12: The Scent of the Hunt

The journey from the edge of town to the apartment should have twenty minutes. A world record would be six. I made it in four.

There was a ring of blue uniformed police dogs around the building as I approached. I didn't give them enough time to identify me and make an opening. I lept right over them.

Coming to a skidding halt, there was yet another cop standing directly in front of the door, baring my path.

I snarled at him, a wordless order to get out of the way between me and my family.

He didn't need telling twice.

Slowing to a walk now, I entered the lobby. There was no need to run, I could see Rebecca sitting on a couch here, being attended to by police dogs and nurses.

The fact they'd had to call nurses in...

I stepped towards Rebecca, she looked up at me from where she was sitting on the couch. There was a deep gash across her forehead and a long tear down the leg of her pants oozing blood.

"Tommy," she said, her voice woozy.

Clearing the final few steps between us, I shoved everyone else out of the way. In a heartbeat I had my arms around her. She may be smeared in blood, but she was still warm to the touch. And, by the smell of it, not all of the blood was hers.

"What happened?" I whispered.

It took her eyes a moment to focus on my face. When she spoke her voice was low, sounding more like a growl that might come from my own throat.

"We were ambushed," she said. "I had the kids all bundled up and ready to go for a walk. We were here in the lobby, just waiting for you to come back. I thought we'd go out and get dinner." She paused for a moment, looked towards the glass front doors. Only now did I notice one of them was shattered.

"They came right through," she continued. "One moment we were sitting here, fine and safe, the next there was a boom and a flash of light. I was flat on my back before I even knew what was going on. Then I heard them coming."

"It couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds. A dozen of them stormed through the door and

into the lobby, as if they'd been waiting for us. The police were here, Tommy, it wasn't their fault. I could hardly see them, but the dogs were trying to protect us. Three were shot. I think one of them is dead."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Then they were gone. For a moment I didn't even realize what had happened. It wasn't until I could see again that I realized the children were missing. They were the only thing they took."

My vision was starting to go red. "They kidnapped Ging and Beth? Who?"

If she'd done a good impression of one of my snarls then I was doing a try at one of English's.

Any grogginess in her motions had cleared away. She looked me straight in the eye when she spoke.

"They were all humans. It was the HDL."

With a scream I leapt forward, ripping one of the cushions off the sofa. It was only a matter of seconds before I'd reduced it to nothing more than rags and down floating through the air.

I was just turning to leave, heading out on the street to track them by scent, when there was a commotion out beyond the front door.

That would be just perfect for me. If they dared return to the scene of the crime I would tear them apart just as I had the pillow.

Sadly, when the crowd of police dogs finally parted it was one of their members that stepped through, not a human.

The dog wasn't dressed in the usual blue service uniform, but a black riot suit with a full face mask pulled down in front. It wasn't until he raised the mask that I realized who it was.

"I'm so sorry, Tommy."

Jon.

Grabbing the dog by the shoulder, I hauled him off to the far corner of the lobby.

"What... the hell... happened?" It took everything I had just to form the words.

Jon looked me straight in the face. His blue eyes were wide and clear. "I failed," was all he said.

With a snarl I lashed out, scoring the wall behind him with my claws, leaving long ugly gashes.

"That's *not* what I asked," I snarled. "What happened? Why did they do this? Where are they? They have my children and I want their skulls!"

Jon, the man who I'd seen weather just about any situation with hardly so much as a glimmer of emotion pulled back now, afraid.

"Tommy, I swear to you we will get them back. You're... you're my best friend. I'll do whatever it takes to bring them back to you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Make it happen, Jon. Find them. Make them pay. I don't care if they're human. They're not human anymore, they're beasts. I *kill* beasts for food."

He didn't say a word as he turned from me and walked back to where the police dogs waited. His tail was held low and his teeth were bared.

I didn't hear much of the conversation that went on between Jon and his officers, I was too wound up over both the kids and looking after Rebecca's wounds, but I couldn't help but pick up snippets of conversation.

Especially with how loud they were talking. And police dogs never yell.

Able and Baker weren't here, but a number of the dogs directly under them were. They were trying to tell Jon he should be back at Police HQ.

"Sir, it's improper for you to be out here," one of them said. "As commissioner we can't afford to risk your life."

Jon whirled on him, voice in full snarl. "The Administrator's children have been kidnapped as a result of the incompetency of *this* force. The problem *will* be resolved. The officers who planned and implemented the security for this building will be dealt with. Until then *I* am in charge here."

"But, Sir..."

"This is *my* force. Or are you challenging my order?"

A moment later the dog backed down.

"And what in the gods' names are you still doing here?" Jon continued. "Who's following the trail? Who's finding them?"

"We called for a sniffer unit, Sir..."

That was about the point where Jon grabbed the subordinate by the ear and began dragging him off.

A moment later a shadow fell over me. It was in the shape of a dog.

"Hello, Pine," I said, never looking up.

"Sir." His voice was little more than a whimper.

The dog came to stand before Rebecca and I. His face was half obscured by a bandage, looking like his left ear was possibly missing, and his arm was in a makeshift cast.

Rebecca looked over to me. She didn't say a word but her message was clear enough.

"Come on." Rising, I led Pine away, letting the nurses get back to Rebecca. The dog followed me without a word, his tail between his legs.

"Was it as bad as they say?" I asked as we made it to a quiet corner.

He nodded. "It was an organized attack, Sir. Heavily armed and armoured. They were all carrying firearms and wearing body armour that made them all but impervious to our claws and teeth."

I looked over him. "But you took some down?"

He nodded curtly. "I did. I took one down. I was the only one to successfully attack. My target was... killed."

I let out a sigh. For just a moment I thought we might have had someone to interrogate.

"How did they do this, Pine? How did we not know, not even get a whiff?"

If anything he stiffened even further. "We had all the signs you might want, Sir," he said, keeping his voice soft. "Riots, demonstrations. The HDL demanding access to your daughter. They made it more than obvious what they wanted. We... we just didn't take them seriously."

I leaned forward and set my forehead against the wall. Right, I'd forgotten. So much had been going on, the trade delegation from Japan just being the latest, that's I'd almost forgotten just how aggressive the HDL had been.

Something changed inside me as I let the anger boil. My vision had been misted red when this had started, and it had only grown.

Now, when the anger had been threatening to crest, to wash me away, it was gone.

Not... gone. It was still here, but the red fog had gone crystal clear. I would get my children back.

But first I had to deal with this.

Turning to Pine again, I slowly sized him up. Behind the bandages he was still a model police dog, though he'd never see public duty again with the disfigurement to his face.

"Pine." The word came for my mouth a sharp growl. The dog flinched back.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Did you fight to protect my family?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you fight for them as you would have your own?"

There was a long pause. "No, Sir. I fought harder. If it were my own family I'd know I'd be the only one responsible. They belong to you. You've done more for this city, for me, than anyone else ever could."

I pulled my lips back in a snarl. "You lie! You would lay your life down for your own pups."

He seemed to shrink before me, but he never took a step back.

"No, Sir. I'd do, could do, no more than I did for your family. The other dogs fell when they were shot. I didn't. I've two bullets still in me that the doctors need to take out."

Pulling a deep breath, I looked once more at the dog.

"Thank you," I said, closing my eyes. "You've done more than I ever could have asked of you, and you've helped reduce their numbers." I reached out and set one hand on his unwounded shoulder. "Now get out of here. You need to get yourself looked after."

Walking back to the couch, I saw Rebecca had changed into new clothing. Her old pants and shirt were soaked through with blood.

"I'm going after them," I said. "You stay here and look after yourself."

I was about to turn towards the door when my face lit up with fire.

"Don't you dare!"

Hands flying up to clutch my nose, I had just a instant to see her fist pull away, covered in blood.

"Don't you think for even one moment you're going to go out there without me, Tommy," she hissed. "They're *our* kids. You're not going anywhere without me."

"But, Babe," I said, trying to sound calm, "You're hurt."

She narrowed her eyes. "Now you are too. And I'll be fine. *We're* going to find them. We haven't gotten through everything this far just to let a bunch of Luddites steal our children."

Reaching out, I pulled her into a tight hug, pressing her against my chest. She flinched slightly as I put pressure on her wounds.

"Babe... I'm so sorry. I wasn't here." I did everything I could not to cry, but the tears came anyway.

Looking down into her eyes, I could see no fear there. Only determination.

"Let's get them, Wolfy."

I grinned, but there was no joy in the action. I showed every single one of my teeth.

Walking hand in hand, Rebecca and I brushed the nurses aside as we made our way to the front of the lobby where dozens of police dogs still stood, though more and more of them now were dressed in black.

"Jon!" I shouted.

A moment later a form broke from the mass.

"Tommy."

I couldn't see his face behind the mask, but he sounded as ready as I was.

"What do we have?"

"Little," he replied. "The sniffer unit is still on its way. The retreating kidnapers set a number of fires during their escape. That's slowing everything down."

I lowered my ears.

"Then we do this ourselves."

Stepping past him and over the broken glass, I found myself back out on the street.

It was a war zone out here.

A battle had raged outside during the kidnapping. There were splatters of blood and potmarks in the concrete.

Lowering my nose to the asphalt, I drew in a long breath. A dozen humans had passed this way. I had them.

At first the path lead straight down the road, then ducked into an alleyway. That's where they set the first fire.

Thankfully, the people who owned the shop next door had put it out fairly quickly. The smoke and ash obscured the scents for a few feet, but I was able to pick them up again in the exit to the street.

Weaving and dodging up and down the next three blocks, they didn't make the trail easy. They must have managed to beat the cops back by this point. They weren't making a straight dash as I'd been hoping, but deliberately covering their scent.

And the fact they'd been carrying the kids meant I couldn't try to track them directly. Whoever they were, they were smart. They knew full well that I'd be able to pick up my children's scent no matter what was in the way so they took pains never to leave it.

Another half block and I heard the click of claws, a *lot* of claws, coming up the street behind us.

"Sir," a voice said.

There was a tap on my shoulder. Raising from my four legged stance I'd been using to track, I turned to see a whole battalion of dogs standing there. They were all wearing special uniforms.

"The tracker unit is at our disposal," Jon said.

I didn't even have to give the order. They pressed past me to carefully arrange themselves on the road. I noticed they all wore rubber boots and gloves so as not to contaminate the trail. Their uniforms were ever so slightly different than what the regular dogs wore, they were tailored to these officers spending most of their time with their noses down.

And, I had to admit, they were good at what they did. In seconds they were off and it was all Jon, Rebecca, and I could do to jog along behind.

It wasn't that long before one of the sniffer dogs split from the group. "He's following another trail," Jon said. "They must have split up." Then, a second later, another dog left on his own invisible trail.

I grated my teeth. They'd been ready for us.

In less than four blocks at least half a dozen dogs had turned into alleyways or apartment doors, tracking their prey. That quickly cut down on our numbers. The cops had been taken by surprise last time. They were making sure all their tracking parties had enough officers now to take down *anything*.

Two hours later and the moon was well up. The three of us had stuck with the most likely scent trail, following along behind the dogs, but we were all dead on our feet now.

The trail had led just about *everywhere*.

We'd been uptown, downtown, through the factories and even across Stanly Park.

I had a distinct feeling we were on the wrong trail. No one could have made a journey like this with two kidnapped children and not be spotted. Every cop in the entire city was out looking for them.

But yet I still refused to give up. I kept putting one foot in front of the other and followed the tail of the sniffer dog.

It was four in the morning before Jon spoke up.

"Perhaps, Tommy, it's time for a shift change."

Glancing over my shoulder, I could only just see his face through his mask. He looked like he was about ready to fall over from exhaustion, and I wasn't far behind him.

Looking over at Rebecca, I could see her lips set in a hard line. She wouldn't be the one to call a stop.

Reaching out a hand, I pulled her close to me.

"Come on, Babe. We're no good out here. Let's get some rest so we're ready when they find them."

She gave me a hard glare. "I'll be ready, Tommy. We'll make them pay. Both of us."

We could tell something was up at the apartment before we even got within a block of it.

Jon pulled one of the officers aside. After a few whispered words he turned to update us.

"A letter has been delivered, Sir," he said.

I hadn't thought I had anything left, but I still managed to sprint the rest of the way home. Rebecca was at my side step for step.

The cops were fast enough to get out of our way this time. And, to be rather honest, I wasn't surprised to see a familiar golden pelt standing in the lobby, looming over the dog in charge.

"Give me the blasted letter! You know he'd give me permission to open it!" English bellowed.

The dog standing before him held firm. "That may or not be the case under normal circumstances, but I can not allow you to open it at the present time."

The dog looked more than relieved when I stepped up and plucked the envelope from his hands.

It was a plain white envelope, the only writing on the outside was 'Taggart'.

That was about all I got to see before another pair of hands plucked it from mine. A golden pair.

"Back away, Tommy," English warned, his accent all but gone. "You remember the letter you got from Brian and the HDL last year. There's nothing saying this isn't laced with the same anti-regeneration poisons."

Jon's head shot up.

"You're right," he said. A moment later I felt his hands on my shoulders, guiding me away.

The only reason I let him move me even a step was that Rebecca stayed next to English, watching as the lion slit the envelope open with a claw. But moments later a number of the police clustered around them, obscuring any view I might have had.

With a sigh, I gave up and walked with Jon at my side to the nearest couch, all but falling onto it.

"What do you think will happen, Jon?" I asked more to just make conversation than anything else. I felt that if I closed my eyes for even a second I'd be out for hours.

He cleared his throat. "That's difficult to say, Tommy. If it is indeed the HDL that kidnapped them then I can see no reason they would be harmed. The Human Defense League's agenda has always been geared towards the preservation of their species. And they haven't been known active as a violent force since Brian Ferguson was removed."

I grunted. "Then it looks like our intelligence service needs some updating. Rebecca said that everyone in the attack was human, and she recognized them as HDL. She'd be the one to know, there aren't that many humans, and she knows just about all of them by name."

Jon was about to say something when there was a call from across the room.

"It's clear, Mate." The accent was back in English's voice, but I could hear how strained it was.

Standing up, I wavered on my feet. I likely would have fallen right back down if a strong pair of hands hadn't discretely steadied me at the shoulder.

I gave Jon a nod.

Walking slowly, step by exhausted step, across the lobby to where the crowd waited, I realized I could hardly see the walls for how many police dogs there were. And they, it seemed, were all armed to the teeth.

English handed me the letter. I took it in shaking hands.

Taggert,

We asked nicely. Now we're taking it.

You have the secret to keeping the human race alive. How else could you have had a human daughter?

You've done a lot for us. That's why you're still alive. And so are your kids.

We only want the girl, but we have the boy, too. Neither are hurt.

They'll stay that way only if you call off the cops.

We're not doing this to hurt you. We just want to stay alive.

Remember. We need the girl, but not the boy. Stay away.

There was no signature at the bottom, but there was a stamp. It was Leonardo's vitruvian man.

A hand fell gently on my shoulder. The weight was light, but it made me nearly collapse.

"I knew them, Tommy," Rebecca said, her voice soft. "I even recognized some of them through their armour. What could make a person do something like this?"

I let out a long sigh and turned towards the elevator.

"I could hazard a guess, Babe. It's the same thing that made the two of us fight so hard to keep the spark of humanity alive. We *killed* to protect ourselves. Gods, I can't even remember half the things we've done to keep the humans alive in V-town. And don't even get me started about Ferguson..."

Going straight as a rod, I whirled in place. Jon was by my side in an instant.

"Find Brian," I hissed. "He was with me all evening. It could have been a distraction."

I didn't even have the time to blink before Jon was across the room, barking orders to his men. Many of those dogs sprinted out onto the street seconds later.

I felt sick.

Could Brian have been nothing but a distraction?

The wolf had convinced me he'd lost his memory, but how much of it had been nothing more than a game? He had been playing games with V-town for generations. Could this have been nothing more than a ploy to learn about my children and open up a gap for him to send his men to steal them?

But then why go after Beth and Ging rather than the Phoenix technology directly? Easy answer. He didn't know about it. No one outside the police force and English, Rebecca, Lucy, and I knew of that.

Brian had to attack what he knew. And he knew Beth had been born to me.

"We're going up to the apartment," I said to the nearest police dog. "Tell me *immediately* if anything happens."

After all the crowd and carnage of the lobby it felt like another world stepping into the elevator.

"You okay, Babe?" I asked Rebecca as I leaned on the wall. She'd buried her face in the fur of my chest.

"I will be, Tommy," she whispered after a moment. "I never wanted to be a mother, but now that I am... It scares me right down to my heart to think Ging and Beth are in danger."

I looped my arm around her and held her close, trying not to shiver.

"Jon said they have no reason to hurt them. They wouldn't go to all this effort to kidnap them if they were going to hurt them."

"But they only need Beth."

I closed my eyes. I'd made the choice *not* to tell Jon to order his force off. Jon would do what he thought was best. He'd do everything he could to get them back.

And the thought of letting them get clean away was too much for me to bear.

The elevator door opened a moment later, letting us step out into the dark hallway.

I'd almost forgot it was the middle of the night. With all the lights and bodies in the lobby it'd seemed like day again.

There was only a single source of light up here, flooding through the open door to our apartment.

"I didn't leave it open," Rebecca whispered.

Weariness just short of dripped from my fur, but I fell into a hunter's crouch. If there was the least chance that one of the HDL was up here I wanted to deal with them *myself*.

Stalking forward, I stopped just short of the door. Rebecca stood behind me. From somewhere in the deep folds of her jacket she pulled a long, wicked looking knife.

Taking a deep breath, I bunched my legs and leapt through the open door, landing in a ready crouch.

Only to be confronted by the golden form of English laying sprawled out on the sofa. He opened one lazy eye to peer at us.

"Thought the two of you would never get here," he said in a sleepy slur. "The stairs are faster."

To say I didn't get much sleep that night would be an understatement.

Rebecca and I were still used to having to get up ten times every night to sooth crying infants, feed one and rock the other.

That night, save the sound of countless bodies marching in and out of the lobby beneath us, was disturbingly silent. Not even English's snores could fill up the void where a pair of soft breaths should be.

It wasn't long before morning came, only scant few hours. Sitting up in bed and looking out over the city, the buildings and streets looked dirty and ugly.

I was disappointed with Jon that he'd let us sleep the whole time. I'd been half expecting him to show up at my door, a tight, nearly imperceptible smile on his lips as he handed Ging and Beth back with one hand and held up the kidnappers by their toes with the other.

No such thing had happened.

Stepping out into the front room, leaving Rebecca asleep on the bed behind me, I expected to see English still sprawled out across the couch.

He was nowhere to be seen.

A quick case of the apartment brought back a pang of pain when I peeked into the children's room.

No lion, and no children.

I was just about to head out into the hallway when a hand touched my shoulder.

"You ready for this, Wolfy?" Rebecca asked. She was already dressed in fresh clothing. If not

for her trussed hair and the deep rings under her eyes I'd almost have thought this just another day for her.

I wondered what in all the gods' names *I* must look like.

"Yeah, Babe," I said, taking a deep breath. "Let's get this over with."

I wasn't surprised to see a police dog guard out in the hallway, but I was a little taken aback to note there were *a dozen* of them up and down, all the way to the elevator. And none of them had broken arms. They must have sent Pine away to recuperate.

Not bothering with the elevator, we took the stairs down. It felt good to stretch my muscles. I'd been so tensed up all night that every motion made me feel like a slab of hamburger getting pounded.

Out into the lobby, it looked like half of Police HQ had been transported here overnight.

There were dozens of dogs walking briskly to and fro, and clusters of temporary desks and offices that had been set up. How they'd done this all without waking either of us I had no idea.

Though getting down here did answer one of my questions. English was sitting at a desk on the far side of the room. The flow of people that came to report to him were most definitely *not* police dogs.

Rebecca and I were on our way over to him when he noticed us and handed over the desk to one of the employees.

"How are you two holding up?" he asked, meeting us in the middle of the room.

I glanced over to Rebecca.

"As well as can be expected," I said.

He nodded gravely.

"Come on, let's find Jon. I think he needs to talk to you two."

A moment later we were seated in one of the police's little cubicles. Jon's was a cut above the others, it had walls.

"We've continued our search overnight," he said, not a hint of emotion in his voice. I had the feeling he'd been up non-stop and was running on autopilot, nothing left. "Out of the dozen attackers, one was killed in the initial assault and we've managed to track down seven more. Six of those are in custody. The last drowned while trying to swim the inlet."

I closed my eyes for a moment. English and I had had to swim that once. That had been back when we'd been on our way to Horseshoe Bay.

"What about the rest?" Rebecca asked.

Jon shuffled the papers in from of him and cleared his throat.

"I just received an update on them moments ago. They seem to be the group with the children. They were the most difficult to track and the best prepared."

There was an edge in Rebecca voice when she spoke again. "Where are they?"

Jon glanced down at his papers.

"They've fled the city, heading north-east."

I glanced over to Rebecca.

"Towards Horseshoe Bay?" I asked.

Jon shook his head. "No. That would be north-west. They went straight into the mountains."

For just a moment time stopped for me.

"They left the city?" I asked. "They're in the forest?"

Jon raised his lip ever so slightly, exposing just the shadow of a fang.

"Yes." His voice was deadpan.

"Get me Gowan," I said. "Bring me my uncle, the hunter's alpha."

Jon sent off a half dozen of his blue uniformed men to fetch Gowan.

The dogs looked distinctly nervous. I could make a pretty safe bet that no one *fetched* the new hunter's alpha. I could tell you in no mean words what my father would have had done if someone had tried that on *him*, likely police dogs.

Gown must not have lost his sunny disposition. He stepped through the front doors of the lobby not a hour later, tailing a half dozen of the highest ranking hunters.

I knew they were here before I could even see them. The reactions of the police dogs told me everything.

"Hunter's alpha," I said, standing to meet Gown I bowed my head respectfully.

It was only after Jon had sent off his dogs that I realized just what I'd done. I could have pulled this trick with my father because... well, *he'd been my father*. I wasn't quite so sure with Gowan.

The other wolf must have matured in his new role of alpha a bit since I'd last seen him months ago. He wasn't quite up to the regal bearing my father had cultivated, but he no longer looked quite the happy-go-lucky beta he had been.

"You sent these *dogs* to retrieve me, Administrator?" He asked. Gowan's voice wasn't quite as I remembered it. It was deeper, with the edge of a growl. The way he looked at me, the way he moved, both with a confident and easy motion the belied the power he held.

He was acting like an alpha. And he was pissed.

I fought to pull my ears back, to lower my tail, but I was too on edge. My children were missing and I was going to cow down to no man in a moment like this.

A little fact in the back of my mind itched. It was one of those million of little bits of minutia that I'd helped Gowan work through when last I'd seen him. One of the old, obscure hunter's laws.

"Alpha," I said, working only just enough reverence into my voice to avoid affronting him, "I place my case before you. I am a hunter, ordained and bloodied. I was born to a hunter, and my wife and I were married under the eyes of the pack. My children are hunters until they grow old enough to make their own will known."

"Alpha," I continued, raising my voice as the words came smoothly to me, "You are the leader of the hunters, but you are also our protector. My children have been stolen from me. My good and trusted friends, the police, have informed me the kidnapers have fled the city, to the forest and the barrens beyond. That is not their domain. It is ours, it is yours."

I took a deep breath. "By the bond between us, forged when I became a hunter and you became my alpha, I enact my right to bring the full force of the pack to find these men. A threat to one of us is a threat to us all."

He watched me for just a moment, eyes narrowing. At last he spoke. "What do you think I've been doing, you silly pup?"

And with those words the spell was broken. He spoke once again as a beta. He was neither happy, nor go-lucky, but he was stressed and harried, and pressed to his limits.

He was a beta, but he was doing his best to help me, to become the alpha he knew he had to be.

"I sent the pack out after them hours ago, Tommy," he continued. "We mobilized the moment we heard they'd been taken. Gods, what did you think we were doing? And I might add *you* didn't bother to even tell us what happened. We had to learn through the grapevine and the news reports."

I fell back into a chair I didn't even know was behind me.

"I... sorry, alpha," I said.

He turned his eyes to the heavens and let out a long suffering sigh. "Tommy, we're family. Did

you really think I wouldn't already be out looking for them? I've been run ragged tabulating reports." I perked up but he shook his head. "We've got a dozen leads but the city is a big place. We're still searching for exactly where they left it."

"I, ahem, may be able to aid you there, hunter's alpha." Jon stepped up from behind me. He looked more animated now, like he'd found an extra reserve of energy now that something had come up. "My forces have been able to track them to the edge of the city. My sniffers should be able to afix your trackers to the proper scent trail." He raised an eye ridge. "Together, we should be able to track them down."

Gowan laughed. Not a condescending or nervous sound, but deep and from his gut. It was what he, as a beta, had been well known for.

"Together? Do you have any idea how foolish that sounds, Commissioner?" he said. "The hunters and the cops have been at odds since time immemorial. Or at least through the carers of our immediate predecessors. And that's as far back as most people seem to be able to remember these days." He laughed again. "But Griss always did call me the stupid one. You're on. We'll follow you're officers through the city and you can follow my hunters through the woods. Let's find the bastards and let's *kill them*."

I heard a deep chuckle from over my left shoulder. Craning my neck around, I saw English leaning on the back of my chair. "You know, Mate," he whispered. "The conditions may not be what we'd wish, but I think this could be the start of a beautiful – if pissy – friendship."

Gowan and Jon disappeared a few moments later, out into the street to start tracking. Rebecca and I were first in line to join them, but they both pushed us back.

"Sir," Jon said, "It may not be advisable for you to join us. You may be too... close to the situation."

"What the dog's saying," Gowan cut in, "Is that you're sitting this one out. We'll handle this hunt and that's the end of it." He gave me a one-hundred percent alpha quality stare to settle the point.

Sitting back on a chair in the lobby, I couldn't quite bear to head back up to the apartment again. Both English and Rebecca were off working with the dogs, doing something or other.

I just felt useless.

"How're ya holding up, cuz?"

I nearly jumped through the roof when the voice came from just an inch from my ear, lips close enough to brush my guardhairs.

"Gah!" I *did* jump high enough to fall out of my chair and kink my tail as I landed heavily on the floor.

A couple of the nearest police dogs paused to glance my way before returning to their work.

"Worse off now that you've given me a heart attack, Lucy!" I snapped at her.

She just smiled and pulled up a chair next to mine. "Well, arn't you glad I just used up all your nervous energy then? It's like a battery. It builds up over time and you have to let it out or risk it exploding everywhere."

I sighed and worked up a smile from some unknown reserve of good cheer. I didn't *want* to feel happy, but it was hard not to smile with Lucy around. She'd grown up the daughter of a beta and Gowan's nature had more than rubbed off on her.

"Just waiting?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Not much else I can do. The cops are doing their thing and the hunters are doing theirs. Neither of them want Rebecca or I in the middle of it with them. They don't trust us to act

rational.” I spat the word. “Though I can't say I disagree with them.” I paused for a moment and eyed her. “Speaking of which, what are you doing here? You're one of the best hunters Gowan has. You should be out with the pack.”

She smiled, showing each and every one of her bright white, and very sharp, teeth.

“You'd think so, wouldn't you, coz? I have to sit this one out. I got in a smack up with a moose last week and twisted my knee. It's still on its way to healing.” She gestured down to one leg. I could see it was slightly swollen. “And anyway, I've got a more important job to do than just being another hunter.”

“Oh?” I asked, cocking my head. “What?”

“Looking after the parents of the kidnapped children. A couple of people in a state like that, and powerful folks too, who knows what they'll do. And I'll tell you a secret,” she said, leaning forward conspiratorially, “They're not know for being predictable. Especially the father. He tends to disappear on a tangent and do his own thing. Not a good idea with things the way they are now.”

I let out a breath and slumped back.

“Fine, Lucy, you've made your point. You can't blame me for being scared. You'd know if you had pups of your own.”

For just a moment she looked offended.

“Coz,” she said with a slight edge to her voice, “You live your life and I'll live mine.” Then she tossed her head and a smile returned to her lips. “But we haven't talked in a while. I should invite the four of you over sometime when this is all done. You can meet Calamine. She'd love to get to know you.”

The rest of the day dragged slowly on.

Jon had taken a radio with him when he'd left. He made check ins back to the lobby every half hour or so. More often then I think he really needed to. I'd put money on the frequency being mostly for my benefit.

In the end it just made me feel all the more useless.

Rebecca was working with her contacts to try and scrape up more information on the HDL, English was sending his bounty hunters hither and yon to double check the city, and I just sat in the middle of it, feeling miserable for myself.

It wasn't until early in the evening that the radio attracted my attention again. Jon was sending in another report.

“They appear to be making better time than us, they're breaking away,” he said, his voice cut with static. “We're in Upper Lynn and they've crossed the creek. Trail has been temperately lost.” He paused for a long moment. “We're going to need a faster mode of transport than foot. Contact HQ. See if they have anything rugged available in the motor pool.”

In the blink of an eye English was on his feet and reaching for the radio.

“Hey, woof, I've got a better idea,” he said. “You remember my baby? The one we rode back from Edmonton in? She's gassed and ready to go, and can take the worst the world has to throw at her. You're in Upper Lynn? I can meet you there by nightfall.”

As fast as English may have moved, Rebecca and I were faster.

“You're not going without us,” she said.

I had only vague memories of English's 'baby'. It was a large, bright yellow jeep that we'd found up in Edmonton. It has been a godsend for getting back to V-town then, cutting our return trip from months to weeks.

But all I remembered about it was how crowded it had been. And bumpy. English hadn't exactly been an experienced driver.

The lion didn't bother trying to dissuade Rebecca or I as we followed him out of the lobby door at a jog. I could hear Lucy yelling from behind, but we quickly outdistanced her. And it didn't look like she was trying all that hard.

English must have called ahead. By the time we reached Storm Front HQ the jeep was parked around out front, its engine idling.

People walking past were giving it curious looks, but no one dared get close to it with a half dozen bounty hunters standing guard.

"Thanks, Brown," English said as he pulled the driver's door open. "She's ready to go?"

The massive bear nodded his head. "And you supplies are stowed in the trunk."

English winked. "You're a life saver, old man." He slammed the door and rolled down the window. "What are you waiting for, Mate? Get in!"

About five seconds later Rebecca and I were buckled up and we were off down the crowded streets of V-town. We didn't see another vehicle the whole way to the forest.

The night was already closing in by the time we hit the trees. English had to switch on the headlights to get a look at where we were going. Thankfully, he had an extra set of lights mounted on a bar above the cab that lit up the forest like day.

The road, however, was a bit more of an inconvenience than the failing light was.

We did in due time make it to the location Jon had reported to us. Or rather, most of the way there.

We were picking our way through the trees when a form appeared around a bend in the road.

"Aiya!" English cried, pitching forward and slamming his foot onto the break. His voice was high enough that I almost thought it was going to shatter the windshield.

We didn't even have time to come to a full stop before the rear door was pulled open and a dark form leapt in.

"Drive," came a command from the backseat.

English was about to turn to glance over his shoulder, but he thought better of it, stamping his foot down on the gas instead.

The lion had come to trust Jon, even if he'd never admit to it.

"What in all the gods' names is going on?" I asked, popping off my seatbelt and twisting around in my chair.

I regretted that decision almost immediately as we hit a rut and my head went slamming into the padded roof of the jeep.

Even with the padding I was seeing stars.

Jon was covered in mud and fighting to pull a pack from his back. His motions were further hampered by a long, heavy canvas bag he had resting in his lap. It was long enough to reach over to Rebecca seated on the other side of the back seat.

A smile pulled at the dog's lips.

"We have them."

My mouth dropped open.

"We *what*?"

The smiled widened. He looked past my shoulder.

"Take a right here, English," he directed before turning his attention back to me. "We know

where they're going. Or at least we have a good idea. Cathedral mountain. That's they only landmark this path leads to."

I reached up a hand to rub the quickly receding bump on my head. "Where's everyone else, the force and the hunters?"

For just a moment his smile faltered.

"I decided this was something that we could best handle alone." His expression grew dark. "They're your children, and it's my fault they were stolen away from you. *We* will get them back. You're, ah, uncle didn't agree when I broached this idea to him. I directed Baker who joined me in the expedition to waylay and misdirect the party until we've had time to settle this."

"You ordered Baker to *lie* to them?" Baker was just as straitlaced as every other police dog I've ever met.

The smile slipped back to Jon's lips. "More than that. If worse come to worse he's been ordered to arrest the hunters, and any of the force who side with them, until we've gotten our head start."

There were a million questions I wanted to ask Jon, but there simply wasn't the time. Every few seconds he had to look past my shoulder and direct English down yet another fork in the narrow little path we hurtled down at breakneck speed.