



chapter 2 : deep breath



chapter : 2

— deep breath —

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Every vein in Turntail's arm pulses, and every nerve throbs. The pain of the gunshot is unlike anything she has ever experienced and it clouds her mind like a vice of knives and lightning. A cold and burning hot agony; a bone-deep misery surrounded by intense stinging of the flesh. Each fiber of her fur twitches with its own torment. She refuses to even look at it, afraid of what she will see. Her left arm below the elbow is alarmingly numb to the point where she wonders if she will ever be able to use it again. By contrast, her right arm, which has had to bear the full brunt of steering the motorcycle, has become weak with overuse and desensitized by the intense vibrations of the handlebars. The golden-tan fur near the wound is soaked in the thick red of her blood, the fibers matted together in crusty, sticky clumps. Both the entry and exit wounds are large enough to stick a finger tip through, and she imagines the gore she will see when she finally brings herself to gaze upon them. For now she only sobs as she rides alone, unable to calm or control her mind in the wake of all that just happened; unable to know what comes next, unable to decide what to do — unable to process linear thoughts.

The motorcycle sputters along lethargically. She is becoming increasingly unable to hold the bike steady with one arm and unsure how to change gears, and so she remains at the same holding speed in which the snapper left her. He told her to hold tight, and that is all she's been able to do without knowledge of how the bike works, how to stop, how to change its confusing gears, or indeed how even to steer. When her grip tires, and the bike makes the horrible gurgling sounds like it's about to stall, she turns the throttle a little more. When she overcompensates and twists too far, her increased speed causes her to lose control when she hits the many potholes and cracks. Thus she keeps the same less-than-comfortable pace of a noisy sputter just above stalling. The snapper fled her side several miles ago, *abandoned her in fact*, and she can hear at least one engine behind her somewhere far enough away that she dare not yet turn to look, afraid of toppling the bike. Instead she trusts to her ears.

The dark road, lit only by moon and starlight and one short-range headlamp, teases her vision persistently. The uneven pavement contains many long cracks and furrows that appear as deep fissures where the world disappears entirely. Dips in the road appear as endless chasms where shadow disguises them as cliffs. Blowing leaves and tumbleweed present unexpected movement darting out just ahead of her or within the boundaries of her failing vision. Each time, she jumps expecting the worst. All around her, the smell of sand and burnt stone. For a moment, not long ago, she thought she smelled the sweet fragrance of a flower blossom, perhaps a cactus bloom, but then realized later it was in

fact something emanating from the shirt she wears, which has only come into her possession quite recently, stolen unscripted from the complex.

Up ahead, through her glazed eyes, she begins to at first imagine the definitive sharp bend of the road, cutting left, and beyond that a vast pocket of deep shadow she judges to be a cliff. The moon cooperates briefly, exposing itself long enough to prove the existence of the cliff and the dreaded change of course. The prospect of turning that corner makes her terribly nervous as the first true steering challenge she's had to face. So far she's only needed to stay upright and straight, which has been difficult enough in her condition. She hasn't made any turns yet and isn't sure she knows how. Dodging potholes and avoiding deep cracks causes jostles of the handlebars that make her feel as though the bike is flipping over, and she's trapped in this one gear making it impossible to slow down.

The pain in her arm begins to surge and becomes very hard for her to ignore. Attempting as best she can to manage the pain, she tries instead to resolve the problem of the cliff. *Stay focused*, she thinks.

Every so often she adjusts her left arm but all movement sends a lightning bolt of torment through her body, and she's struggling just to keep still on this bouncy motorcycle. There's no way she'll be able to turn that corner. *What to do?* With each *zing* of pain she feels dizzy. The numbness is more than in her arm she realizes, it's also in her tail, her legs, her face and her ears. The biting cold at her tail and ear tips has given way to nothingness. The cold wind of the desert night cuts straight through her fur and chills the flesh, and pushes mercilessly through her nostrils and ear canals. Her nose and eyes have been watering for so long they feel dry and cracked, and her ears ache deep down at the drum. The road has been lonely and dark for so long she hasn't realized until now that the obscured edges of her vision are not in the roadside but in her eyes. She's failing, suddenly aware that the pins and needles she feels may be much worse than exhaustion, hunger or fear.

In this moment, a sharp metallic note strikes the air and her ears flick back to follow it. She blinks several times aggressively with a full scrunch of her face attempting to restore her vision but her peripheral is mostly gone. She spins her head once quickly to see behind but her hair becomes entangled in her mouth and around her muzzle. Returning her gaze to the fore, she becomes dizzy with vertigo and the bike wobbles. Scared now of the pursuer more than falling, she flicks her head to the side allowing the wind to gather most of her hair into a single stream and then she spins again quickly to look. This time she sees not just the one headlight as she expected but instead two. Her heart again beats into her neck causing the adrenaline to surge and the prickles in her skin to worsen. The cliff fast approaches.

Experimenting, she leans on the seat a little to the left, noticing how the bike leans with her, drifting to the side. She sits straight again and the motorcycle returns to a straight course. She leans to the right, and the motorcycle does likewise. She leans a little more and suddenly the bike seems to have a mind of its own, wildly banking to the side of the road. In a panic she quickly sits up and the bike mostly follows with a violent wobble. She looks back again and notices the two lights are closer, but still a distance off. Unsure of herself, she gambles.

With a quick twist of the throttle, she feels the bike accelerate to the maximum of its

current gear. Eyes focused on the nearing bend, she barrels along at a steady clip on uneven road. The skips and jolts of the bike challenging her with every jitter, sending alarm bells off in her head to *slow down* and *stop* and *too fast!* She will be upon the full bell of the curve within ten to twelve breaths, and her heart races with the blatant disregard for self-preservation. Her ears pulse at the temple. She looks back once more and the cyclists are indeed closing the gap. Their pace has quickened to many times what she first calculated and are twenty or thirty breaths away and closing. Her mind races to concentrate on clearing the curve. Large rock formations line the road all along her left side, stacked or pushed to the inside of the turn and they block her view of what lays beyond. Clearing this curve is step one. Step two? *I have no idea*, she thinks. They're too fast to outrun.

Five breaths.

She returns her worry to the road and begins to lean left, preparing for the turn. The bike begins its slow glide to the left and she concentrates, feeling the uneasiness of the bumpy road fighting her constantly and growing worse with the road's condition.

Two breaths.

As she enters into the curve she becomes mortified. This is no gentle curve, it's a hairpin making a sharp 'U' hidden from view by the rocky outcropping. She leans hard, retreating on the throttle some, trying to make the turn at a high speed and the bike begins to lose grip in the dusty pavement. She can't hold it. The front tire has become so angled that it lifts off of the road and the bike slides on its metal frame. Turntail leaps from the bike in a panic, pushing away from the turn, but gravity and momentum drop her into a roll along the pavement, tumbling sideways just behind the sparking motorcycle and then end over end along the broken road, losing a boot in the turmoil. The motorcycle travels with great speed just ahead of her; the momentum of the failed arc turning into a high-velocity flight path aimed straight over the cliff's edge. The motorcycle is first to crash into the guardrails, snapping a "Warning Sharp Bend" sign at the weld and removing three posts worth of railing. The motorcycle, the road sign, and the torn chunk of rail all travel over the edge to meet their fate together. Turntail's tumbling body slides along the dusty pavement with dizzying speed. She instinctively throws her arms out to stabilize her roll but the road bends them back mercilessly as she whirls. With her right paw she manages to snag the torn edge of the metal guardrail as she passes. Catching it, the rail unbolts with sudden force and pops once from the frame. She holds tight as the rest of her body slides over the edge, followed by a plume of dust and debris.

Nauseous and trembling, her body settles into a dangle. She opens her eyes just as the motorcycle hits the ground far below and she at first sees the blast, feels its heat and then hears the *kroom* when it combusts. Through sheer luck, her shirt snagged the clipped sign post and assists in stabilizing her weight. Her left arm hanging nearly useless, she chokes back the pain to grab at the ledge, just above her head, but her wounded arm protests so intensely she sees stars. Her grasp immediately fails without strength. Her right paw still gripping the loose rail, she struggles to climb. At chest height, she notices deep lateral grooves cracked into the cliff-side that appear strong. With a quick pull, she strains to lift herself enough to get a foothold but slips a little to her horror, losing ground. Adjusting her weight with the assistance of the stretched shirt, she pulls again much harder with a moan, lifting enough to stuff her bare right footpaw into a gap in the rock. Pushing with her foot and straining with her arm, she at last pulls herself up enough to get her left knee

over the ledge, scratching her leg through her pants on some torn metal. With a grimace, she struggles through the last moment and rolls over onto the security of the ledge, quickly grabbing at her fresh wound with new tears, breathing fast and shallow; scents of burning motor oil and gasoline besieging her.

Absorbing the new pain, her ears direct her attention to the cyclists nearly upon her, just beyond the bend on the other side of the outcrop. In a daze, she scrambles to her feet with desperation and darts across the pavement to the stacked-boulder monoliths at the road's edge. In the dark, she finds a gap in the natural formation barely wide enough for her but she does not hesitate, pushing herself as deep as she dares into the unknown space.

With a muffled gasp, she claws at the stone tightly compressing her ability to breathe. Her heart races, but her vision has been restored with the near-death adrenaline. She feels weak, her body shaking and cold, she cannot control the trembling in her five limbs, least of all her tail. Instinctively, she stuffs herself into the compact space right-shoulder first, allowing the injury of her left arm to trail behind. The rigid gap is unforgiving and creates a sense of claustrophobia that she is willing to ignore for its promise of shelter. She finds herself nestled tight into the pitch black of the long vertical gap between an assortment of enormous stone boulders, deceptively stacked with purpose. Her right paw held high near her head, pressed pad-tight against the stone she feels the heat from the day emanating out. She entered the gap facing forward and now finds it difficult to turn her head in the confinement, her muzzle unable to clear the width. Forcing her head to twist upward, she presses her neck against the stone and finally lowers her nose into a clear view of the entrance. Her perspective of the road has narrowed to a dark purple sliver of star-studded sky occasionally offering wisps of smoke from the charring bike below, and she fights to steady her breath.

A strong light approaches, illuminating the pavement just outside of the gap, and with it comes a low rumble of the two idling motorcycles. The sound seems to echo especially loud in the tight stone chamber, making it hard to focus and tune in when the cyclists at last begin to speak. Turntail can hear their muffled speech but not the words; excited and terse and apprehensive. They have very clearly stopped at the crash site, leaving their bikes to idle. For a moment, nothing. Then she sees the light flicker on the road which quickly turns to the long shadows of both cyclists moving about in the front of their bikes, no doubt exploring the scene. The two continue to speak in excited tones, obscured through the echoing drone of cycling engines and occasional punctuation of *skiffs* in the loose, dry dirt. Turntail's heart races with such a thud she fears they will hear it. *I'm a fool idiot*, she thinks, reassessing her hiding spot. If the cyclists come to her, she might as well have put herself into a cage. There is nowhere to go.

The inactive long silence plays into her imagination as a grave signal she has already been discovered. She is torn between the temptations of scooting even deeper into the gap or inching forward into the open where she may at least still have time and space to run. She is injured, and tired, but still faster on foot than either of them.

One of the cyclists's voices suddenly becomes clearer and less muffled. It dawns on her that he must have removed his helmet. Her desire now to move closer to the entrance doubles, if for no other reason than to spy on the figure at the roadside. She has always wondered what the keepers look like. She knows their voices, their size differences, and even their smells, but none of her folk have ever seen a keeper unmasked. From the earliest days of her memory, they have always worn protective head coverings. For

reasons of disease and disfigurement, they've been told, as survivors of the Great Blight that has destroyed the world and made them grateful hostages of circumstance within the protection of the Guilds. She sniffs at the air but detects only the sweetness of decay in the trapped leaves and grasses at her feet. She cannot smell the two cyclists, the wind is wrong, but of their voices sounds like the one called Keeper Cutter, whom she knows to be a serious hazard. He's never been mean to her, per se, but aggressive at times. As the memories come forward in her mind, she suddenly recalls a recent moment when Keeper Cutter beat one of her kin so badly he lost his sight. Toulouse, the fox-breed, and his mouse-breed friend, Shandi, would sometimes test and provoke the Keepers to see how far the rules would stretch. One day Toulouse and Shandi started a fight in the eatery that injured several bystanders and overturned a food station. Keeper Cutter violently struck many of her kin that day, and smashed Shandi's head so bad with a baton that he went blind in both eyes. Turntail shivers with recollection. After that, she always imagined Cutter as wolf-breed, with black and charcoal fur, piercing blue eyes and a menacing snarl of teeth.

Keeper Cutter's voice is inviting. It is so close. Despite her fear she had to see him. She monitors the light and shadow trying to get a sense of the figure's whereabouts. A dark spot entering and exiting the far beam leads her to imagine they are standing on the edge looking over. *This may be the best time, with their backs turned*, she deduces. Slowly, deliberately, she inches forward struggling to prevent the *scratching* and *scratching* of material and claw on the stone from giving her away. As she pushes through the tight gap, she hears a metallic scrape from the small of her back, and then feels the odd sensation, remembering the gun the snapper had stuffed there just before he abandoned her. She is amazed it's still there. The weapon is another mystery to her, having no idea what to do with it, but at least she has it. In the tight space she tries to reach her arms behind her to retrieve the weapon but cannot. At least, not quietly. Holding the weapon is not worth the risk of being discovered. She quickly decides to ignore the gun and move forward with a little more confidence than before. With her ears straining to pick up their noises, she pushes her face to the entry of the gap, holding her breath.

"— go off?" She hears Keeper Cutter say in conclusion to an unheard thought.

"I dunno..." comes the response from the other cyclist. "It sure looks like it. I can barely see anything down there, but that's definitely a fire. These skid marks are brand new... I'm seeing — *Oh shit!*" interrupting himself, bending down quickly to inspect something at the edge.

"What?—" Questions Keeper Cutter, walking over to him, away from the cliff's edge.

Turntail holds her breath and sticks her head out a little further catching sight of Cutter just as he's bending down, turned away from her in the far shadows of the road. She squints and struggles to see through the blinding beams of the dual headlights.

"—What did you find?" he continues. The squatting cyclist, sitting upon his ankles, drags a finger over the torn metal post of the guardrail and brings his gloved finger up to the light for his partner.

"Yup. Blood. Shit."

Keeper Cutter groans and sighs at the same time, returning to a standing position. He

once again enters into the light beam, highlighting his near-full form from behind, and with his back turned, Turntail can see only the backside of the figure she knows as Keeper Cutter and becomes curious in his coloring. She cannot make out the fur color, surprised at first it is not black — he in fact seems to have *none*, but she shakes her head quickly to clear her mind of the fog. She sees only yellowy hair, shaved close near the nape and slightly longer on top. Where she imagined she would see black fur, she struggles instead to understand the pink flesh and two small flaps of what must be ears sticking out from the side of his head, not at the top as expected. *Is he diseased? Malformed?* She ponders, straining to see more. *Is this what the Blight has done? Is this why the Keepers wear protection?*

Cutter pulls a swabbing case from his side pouch and returns to a squat, hidden once more behind the bright glare of the lights to Turntail's dissatisfaction.

He opens a small plastic container with a flip-top lid and pushes from it a cotton-tipped wooden stick. He drags it thoroughly across his partner's outstretched finger, absorbing the blood. When the cotton swab is saturated, he encloses it into the plastic housing and prepares a second swab in the same way. For the second, he removes a tiny squeeze bottle from the pouch and dribbles a few clear drops onto the swab. The blood and clear liquid create a bluish mixture almost immediately.

"Damn." They both say in unison. Cutter closes the second swabbing case with a soft *click* and tucks them both back into the pouch, zipping it closed. Together they peer once more over the edge. Cutter remains in his squatting position, placing one gloved hand on the rail remnant for security. His partner crawls onto his belly, laying fully on the pavement, with his head and shoulders sticking out over the cliff's edge. He brings both hands up to his visor and finds knobs on either side, near his temples. With a slight twist forward, the amplification of his view enlarges. He twists the magnification dials several clicks forward and observes the fire of the bike, which by now has mostly calmed into a smolder with small crackling flames. A nearby dry bush burns with greater intensity than the bike. He moves his head in very subtle circles taking in the immediate vicinity of the landing. He sees nothing definitive or to his satisfaction.

"I'm sure as shit not going down there," he snaps to Cutter without looking up. "I don't see any goddamn sign of her. Fuck. The others we would miss — but *her*? Fuck. *Fuck.*" He repeats, clicking his visor back to normal and standing with a huff. "There's no body."

"But she's definitely gone over." Cutter says with absolution. "No sign of her?"

"No," his partner confirms, "but it's too dark to see the whole area. She may be laying just outside of the light."

These words make Turntail happy. As long as they believe that, the quicker they'll hopefully leave. *But then what?*

Cutter looks up at his partner, and they remain there in silence for a moment.

"What's a guard's boot doing way out here?" The partner says, gesturing with a nod over Cutter's shoulder. Turntail's eyes shoot wide and cast quickly to the far roadside. And there, where the twisted frame of the guardrail curls over the cliff side, she sees her boot sat against the frame as if casually placed. She gasps at the boot, pointing directly at her

in a taunt, afraid it will betray her. Cutter spins on his ankles, looking for the anomaly. Several feet away, he sees the riot boot of the guard uniform perched against the broken railing, directly across from Turntail. She's stares at the same boot with a lump in her throat. *Rot.* Cutter *hmm's* to himself and stands up with suspicion. Without turning, he pulls the helmet from his motorcycle and places it back on his head as he goes to inspect the lonely boot. Turntail gasps to herself and scoots back as quickly as she can into the darkness of her tight cage. *They've found me!* She casts her eyes down to the ground and sees a faint outline of her foot prints in the roadside dust, a series of left-boot, right-paw prints leading in a scramble right to where she stands. Her heart cannot take this stress. She feels nauseous with alarm. The wind has recoated much of the trail with new sand already, but a curious mind will find the tracks immediately. She struggles to reach the gun.

Cutter picks up the boot and looks at it in his hands, twirling it once over.

"This is an IMPAC boot. How —?" He looks over his shoulder at his partner in silence who merely shrugs his response. Cutter looks around the roadside and notices the stack of boulders across the way, seeing the gap hiding Turntail. Squinting at it through his visor, he takes several cautious steps toward it, fondling the boot as he walks. "It's way too big for *her*." He says, looking from the boot to the gap in the stones. "Was she wearing boots? ... I can't remember."

The partner shrugs again. "I honestly cannot recall. *A lot* has just happened."

A strong gust of wind comes from around the bend and Turntail watches impatiently as her prints slowly dissolve into obscurity. She can make out the toes of her paw prints, but they're faint. *Will Keeper Cutter see them?* Cutter is now standing just outside of the opening of the stone, inspecting the ground and then looking up to the top of the monument. Then, chillingly, he peers directly into the dark void, straight into Turntail. Her paw covering her mouth and nose, she stares wide eyed directly into his reflection-less visor, her heartbeat furiously trying to betray her. The vision of Shandi's bleeding skull prominent in her mind's eye. She sees her boot squeezed tightly in Cutter's hands and imagines him using it on her. *What will he do to me?* She dreads.

"It really doesn't matter anymore," says his partner, stealing Cutter's attention. "With this many out all at once, we're going to have major, *major* issues. We have to get back to base and start forming a containment unit if it isn't too late. They'll be balls deep into the contingency protocols by now, so we're already screwed—"

"Yeah," responds Cutter with a tone of grave concern, turning away, "—Poor McMillan" he states randomly. "I'm going to really miss him."

"He'll remember you in time," his partner states. "We all signed the agreement. It's better than the alternative."

Cutter nods, dropping the boot where he stood and returns to his bike.

"He didn't see me! *He didn't see me!*" Turntail mouths to herself, wanting to scream her relief.

The Keepers take their places on their motorcycles once more, each twisting their

throttles in a single loud roar. Walking their bikes back onto the road, they reposition themselves side by side pointing into the direction of their approach.

“Let’s meet up with Ryan and Rove. I’m sure they’ve managed to subdue Shellback by now.” Cutter says loudly over the engines.

“...Especially with Sharptooth there,” his partner adds, “...provided he hasn’t gone rogue again. This was such a mistake.”

And with those words hanging in the air behind them, the two Keepers grind deep into the dust of the road with their tires and depart in a plume of upturned debris.

The air stirs softly, blowing the dust and sand gently through the slice of Turntail’s view covering the last remnants of her footprints forever. She reaches out a trembling paw and takes hold of the boot by its tongue, sliding it on to her exposed foot. Tying the laces does little good for something so comically large, but she tightens them anyway. Standing in the open, she listens to the diminishing sounds of the engines moving farther away, and so gathers the courage to approach the curve once more, peering around the large boulders to see the red tail lights of two motorcycles shrinking into the blowing dust of the desert night. She pivots slowly to follow the skid marks of her bike, remembering and half-imagining what happened when she nearly went over. She sees the smashed wreckage of the guardrail and the overturned dirt where the bike sailed free into the night. Cautiously she draws nearer the edge, peering over at the motorcycle far below. *That was Shellback?* She thinks to herself, picturing the snapper and remembering the name from the Keeper’s conversation. *I guess that makes sense. Not at all what I expected.* Suddenly she feels very guilty and finally retrieves the gun from her pant line, pressed firmly against her spine, just above her tail. She looks it once over gingerly, afraid of it. Replacing the gun into the back of her pants, she returns her gaze over the ledge to the ground far below. The smoldering of both bike and bush reduced to a red-orange glow of dying ember. Surveying the scene, she tries to understand what was said between the Keepers, piecing their words and actions together. She saw them scraping at something on the ground, and then understands when she notices the smears of her blood on the torn metal. *But what were they doing with it?* She ponders.

From her position, she tries to see what the Keepers saw, shivering once more when she realizes how close her hiding spot was from the danger of discovery. She peers then down the lonely road before her, in a renewed fear of the unknown. She has seen now the horrible effects of the Blight, and imagining what such a disease or condition may render unto her makes her question everything she believes. They all knew the escape would carry risks of life and limb, but chose to flee despite them. The elders concluded that the fear of the Blight was no longer a strong enough reason to remain. She wonders now how certain they truly were in that decision, and how foolish she was to believe.

Staring down the long road, her ears detect a sound she cannot identify; a crisp and distant rustle, like a score of small stones tumbling over and over. The peculiar noise draws her eyes to a large patch of dancing black, which swallows the road for a great distance. The sound she perceives is a new texture of foliage, tall and lush trees, the number of which would be innumerable. She becomes lost in those trees. Perhaps there is hope.

A—A—AWOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Turntail spins like a top in place, ears fully erect and tail tucked tight between her legs, her fur standing on end all the way down her neck, arms and tail which is fluffed out twice its normal size. Her eyes wide, seeing nothing in the dark expanse before her save for the long foreboding shadows of static formations. *What the rot was that?!* She quickly scans in a full circle, desperately trying to pin point the foreign noise, but there is nothing but the wind. Small particles of sand and pebble blow down from on high, tinkling against the stone formations of her hiding place. She spins with a paranoid expectation but sees nothing. Her gaze then returns first to the location of the retreating Keepers, seeing their red lights long gone, and then casts her eyes toward the tree-lined road many paces ahead. With resolve, she quickly moves toward the trees and away from the horrid noise. She has forgotten entirely about her arm.

Several hours have gone by since Cutter and his partner split from their team and they return now along the same lonely road unsure of what they will find when they rejoin. Several silent miles have gone past where neither figure has said a word.

“What do you think he chose?” Cutter’s partner asks at last.

Cutter, visor drawn, looks over finally to his sidelong partner without a word. He looks back to the road for another long moment. “You mean in his contract?” he returns.

The partner nods while agreeing, and Cutter again looks at him sideways.

“I really have no idea. I try not to think too much about it. Besides, that’s pretty personal.”

“What did *you* choose?” The partner asks.

Cutter does not look over this time. Instead he maintains a stony lock on the road ahead before responding dryly, “That’s *really* personal, Booth. And the group forbids discussing it.”

“I chose *Novus Vulpes domesticus*,” Booth responds matter-of-factly, unashamed.

This time Cutter spins his head toward him in surprise, and then back to the road.

“Fox-cat?! A cross-breed?” He challenges with a concerned tone in his voice. “We’re nowhere near that capability!”

“Not when we took on,” Booth admits, “But we’re much closer now, and the pay is far better than standard, being higher risk n’ all.”

“I guess!” Jokes Cutter, morbidly. “I was wondering how you could afford that Breitling!”

Booth and Cutter return to a temporary silence amid a few muffled laughs that bubble up in each Keeper, replaying the conversation in their heads. After another mile, Booth turns to Cutter and laments.

“I just wanted someone to know in case,... you know.” Though confident, his words trail off a little at the end partially consumed by the roaring of the dual engines.

“Well, you’ll definitely stand out!” he laughs.

Booth laughs along uneasily, not sure if that was a supportive or judging comment.

The pair ride along for several silent miles more, tracing over the tracks they’ve left in the otherwise untouched dirt and dust of the abandoned road. Wind has obscured and recovered much of it, but the unnatural zigzagging lines still remain if you know what you’re looking for. Feeling impatient, both Keepers privately wonder how far out they remain from the rendezvous point. Time has become confused during all of the excitement, and neither was truly recording their movements. They both feel they should have rejoined *someone* by now.

On the instrument panels of both motorcycles, first one and then immediately the other, a high-pitched *chirp* trills into the hush. Both looking down they realize together their plight.

“How far *were* we?” Booth questions.

“Must be close to thirty miles. We’re back within range *now* it seems,” Cutter responds. “We’re about halfway from ole’ Winslow.”

“We’ve really gotta get some support, *and fast*,” Booth portends, “before they’re over-run. If the girl made it that far on bike, the others could be as far on foot by mid-day tomorrow. We’ve got very little time!”

“I still can’t call in,” Cutter reports, pressing his call button repeatedly.

“Me either. Activate your beacon. That’ll grab the satellite for sure,” Booth affirms.

Cutter nods his agreement and rolls back the outer layer of his right sleeve, pressing a large yellow button on the side of his watch and holds it for five seconds. The dial of his watch illuminates into a solid orange light displaying a countdown that began with ‘40:00’. He looks up to see Booth complete the same process, displaying his watch-face as confirmation to Cutter.

“What’s that?!” Booth calls out, staring straight up the road.

The two cyclists see amid the blowing dust and night shadows a stationary ball of flicking red and orange that becomes an obvious fire the closer they travel. A blaze just aside the road burns brightly, and the Keepers recognize it as the place where they separated last from the team. Together, they speed up with concern and a few moments later roll upon the scene stopping short to investigate cautiously. From their angle, they see two pairs of legs sticking out from behind the flames; one pair toes up, and one pair draped as if thrown. Both immediately recognize Sharptooth for his size, but cannot identify the other victim. And where is the third? McMillan fell several miles south of here, so one member remains missing. And where is Shellback? Dread fills the stomachs of both Keepers as they look at each other, and then quietly dismount their bikes and looking around the scene wildly for danger, cutting the engines immediately.

“Wolf”, says Cutter quietly.

“Where?” Whispers Booth, jerking his head around.

“No no,” he corrects, “*wolf*,” pointing at himself with a thumb.

Booth huffs a laugh lowly under his breath. “Ah! Nothing about that surprises me at all,” he muses, “Then I’ll never find you.”

As they approach the fire watchfully, each Keeper rounds the blaze from different angles, Booth choosing the path on the road, and Cutter choosing the roadside. They see the distorted forms of the motorcycles, the blast radius that charred the vicinity, and the massive timbers atop it all, reduced to black chunks of carbon with white-edge accents of ash and glowing ember. Shellback is nowhere to be seen. A curious loop of footprints under Cutter’s feet reveal themselves to be clawed and irregular, and this causes him pause. He sees Sharptooth, spread along the ground in an intentional position as if sleeping. Through the flame, he catches sight of Booth looking at him through his visor. Together they look at the unnaturally draped cyclist alongside him and see him helmetless, with eyes wide open and unblinking. They recognize him immediately as Co-Captain John Ryan and assume him dead. They see the many footprints that lead away from and then back to the fire. Where is Rove? Or Shellback? In a rapid partial retreat, they both step away from the immediate vicinity to be further from Sharptooth.

Neither Keeper needs to speak, arriving at the same rushed conclusions based on the same sparse facts. Together they fear the worst and their heads swivel in search of more clues. They both back away from the scene in different directions, removing their side-arms. Cutter steps back into the roadside and slides off the edge of the broken concrete slightly into a loud *scrunch* of the dry dirt and rock. The foreign noise jars the ambience and Sharptooth’s eyes shoot open with a stir. Cutter repositions himself into a fighting stance, placing both hands onto his gun and aiming squarely at the waking alligator hybrid. Booth does likewise, flanking the creature from the opposite angle. They are unsure what to think, but likewise take comfort in the idea of pacifying the unknown variable. Something bad happened here, and everything points to Sharptooth.

The alligator-man stirs like a dragon. Easily the combined mass of both Cutter and Booth, his chest expands with a deep waking breath and his tail uncoils with a slow slide along the chalky pavement. With a flick, the dual membranes of his reptilian eyes slide back, unsettling Booth who receives Sharptooth’s full attention. Slowly, he heaves himself into a sitting position, turning his back to the flame, either Keeper at his sides. He is slow with the cold, and lethargic. His muscles have been sapped of their speed and energy and he is in no condition for battle. His head pounds with hunger and fatigue.

“Morning, sir,” Booth says through his helmet, his hand steady on the gun.

Sharptooth blinks at him once slowly, acknowledging him with a slow nod and a long exhale which is understood as a growl. With a heedful turn of his head, he stares next at Cutter, standing slightly further away with his outstretched arms aiming at him.

“We need to take you in, sir.” Says Cutter stoically.

Sharptooth glides his vision down to the Keeper's gun, solidly held in a point at his chest. On the same hand, on his right wrist, Sharptooth notices the blinking yellow light of his watch with the countdown. "32:19"

"I sssee." He snarls dryly. "It's come to that already, then." Sharptooth pulls his lips high and wide with deliberate movement, rasping his words. Speaking is harder for him in this state, and the noises of a primal reptile are far more pronounced; his long pointed teeth glinting gold and orange in the strong firelight. "You don't need thossse," he assures, nodding forward at Cutter.

"Would Ryan agree?" Booth asserts, insinuating a need for protection.

Sharptooth turns his head with a slow conscious spin, and begins to stand. The Keepers become rigid and prepare their weapons for discharge. "Yesss," Sharptooth says allowing his hands to be seen. "This is Shellback'sss doing... I regret." He admits. "He's not... dead. Ryan. He was ssstuck. With the thio— *mmmm*" Sharptooth fades away into a moan, rises completely to his feet, his tail limp and his posture wobbly. "With the thio...pental. All of it."

"And Shellback?" Inquires Cutter, suspicious.

Sharptooth struggles to steady himself but slumps backward slightly grasping his knee with his right hand. "Gone." He concedes. "He also knocked...the shit out of Rove." Sharptooth's labored words come slowly, "and I don't think he made it." Booth and Cutter both lower their guns slightly with this news. "He's in the road." Sharptooth continues, "back there," pointing with a limp left arm down the road.

Facing Cutter, Sharptooth replaces his left hand back onto his knee, supporting his weight with an uneasy teeter. Booth pulls a pair of fortified handcuffs from his belt and steps toward Sharptooth with immense trepidation. Booth quickly latches a cuff around Sharptooth's right wrist who makes no move of disobedience. Sharptooth casually places his left arm behind his back with the right and Booth latches the other steel cuff into place.

"Our ride should be here in about 25 minutes," Cutter announces checking the face of his watch with a tone of confidence, "so we can all get a little comfortable and talk," Cutter says to Sharptooth, his gun still drawn.

"What the fuck happened to Rove? What happened to the bikes?! This was no accident and this was *not* Shellback!" Booth accuses cynically, "Mighty convenient you're blaming him *now*. You two have been thick as thieves for *years!*" Booth's arm movements and pacing become agitated. "You've been in on this whole thing fro— *AHHHHHH!*"

Two gun shots echo loudly across the plain striking Booth twice in the chest. He falls to the ground with a pitiful moan and curls into place. Sharptooth and Cutter both spin their bodies in the direction of the gun shot, eyes wide. Sharptooth ducks slightly lacking the strength for anything more agile and Cutter runs to his side, placing his hand on the small of Sharptooth's back, pushing him forward onto the ground. Together they kneel into the dirt hard and then collapse forward. A second round of *popopopop* echoes once more through the night air, five shots carving a straight line between Sharptooth and Cutter,

causing them to pull apart and fall in opposite directions. Again, *popopopop!* Another line of gun fire cleaves the roadside, cracking chunks of the concrete and sending a spray of debris and dusty stone into the air. *Popopopop!* With each blast, the gunfire separates Sharptooth and Cutter further from each other, the Keeper tumbling away in a frantic search for cover, trying to anticipate where next to avoid. *Popopopop!* The line of bullets scars the concrete directly surrounding Cutter, and this time he sees it. *There!* He thinks, catching sight of the small star-shaped flares of light way out in the desert, much too far for a standard rifle and far more heavily equipped than anything they own. *Popopopop!* This time cutter realizes the pattern; these bullets are meant for him. Nothing has been directed anywhere near Sharptooth since the shots began. He flashes a glance back to Sharptooth:

“*Is this you?!*” he bellows the accusation.

“*What?!*” Sharptooth howls, “This has nothing to do with me!”

Popopopop and this time Cutter is struck in the left leg, falling to his right. Sharptooth spins on his knees and with a mighty heave, uses his tail to push Cutter nearer him and the fire. For now, the shots stall leaving them once more to silence. Cutter, holding his leg with a well of tears in his eyes, looks up to his partner and sees Booth motionless on the ground several paces away. A pool of blood has formed under his body, flowing into one of the deep fissures created by the bullets. Cutter squeezes his leg in burning pain, closing his eyes, and presses his helmeted head against his other leg in agony. *Oh, God. Booth.* He thinks, recalling their self-assured and jovial conversations from mere moments ago. *Oh, God.*

And then, *popopopop, popopopop, popopopop, popopopop!* Multiple rounds of gunfire tear up the scene all around them, striking the motorcycles and knocking them over. Several of the shots bury deep into the fire directly at their backs, but deflect on the motorcycle corpses instead.

Cutter opens his eyes again to inspect his leg and notices instead the dim yellow-orange light of his watch peaking from beneath his sleeve cuff. With a quick flick, he notes the time is “00:23”. Straining his ears, he looks wildly to the sky for some glimmer of rescue. *Popopopop, popopopop, popopopop!* The bullets continue to riddle their haven, causing Cutter to grow more desperate.

“*This isn’t you?!*” Cutter demands with a tone more akin to a plea, hoping there is some way Sharptooth can call it off.

“*No!*” Sharptooth snarls again, “This is *NOT* me!”

Looking up again, Cutter prays for rescue. Whatever he is looking for in the sky has not yet materialized and he despairs. Checking his watch once more, it remains at a static “00:00”, unchanging. The countdown to nothing has expired. Expecting rescue, expecting support, expecting a response, expecting a great many things that did not happen this night, he is depressed and alone. He rationalizes in his woe that the support is too busy with other matters and will thus not be arriving. *Poor Booth. Oh God. Poor Rove. McMillan. Only Ryan, unconscious, is most likely to survive this night.* Cutter thinks.

Just then, he hears it. At first he thinks it’s the noises of some new onslaught but then the

clear crisp sounds of a helicopter's propellers beat the night air with the unmistakable *whoop whoop whoop* bringing delight to his soul. The helicopter is soon overhead, atop the fire, when it turns its searchlight on, spotlighting Cutter and Sharptooth first, and then Booth's fallen form. The helicopter begins to descend, scattering dust and sand into an abrasive tornado pelting Sharptooth's flesh mercilessly and swirling the flames of the fire into chaotic flares.

Popopopop, popopopop, popopopop! Goes the gunfire once more, striking with loud *klanks* and *clinks* against the side of the helicopter, causing it to rise immediately back into the air. It remains stationary for only a brief moment before flying out into the desert in the direction of the gunfire. From Cutter's position, he cannot see what happens next but he can imagine a soldier leaning against the landing gear with one foot to steady himself for return fire from the mounted rifle aboard. Almost as Cutter imagines it, the much deeper *poompoompoompoom* of return fire descends down upon their unseen assailant off in the shadows. The shots continue from above for a long moment before the helicopter returns to Cutter and completes the landing.

With propellers spinning and engines burning, the helicopter lands with the long barrel of the rifle pointing out into the desert. Two figures dressed in full-body military uniform with similar helmets to the cyclists leap from the open belly of the chopper and run to Cutter's aid. After a brief moment, one of the soldiers runs to Booth.

As the two soldiers toil about in their assessments, Cutter and Sharptooth sit very uncomfortably beside each other. Sharptooth, arms behind his back and wrists cuffed, looks into Cutter's visor unable to see his eyes but knowing what is there. They sit in silence like this until the two soldiers from the helicopter lift Cutter to his feet, having placed a tourniquet around his leg. Cutter rises into a limp, looking back over his shoulder through the dark glass of his visor. Sharptooth cannot see the expression but he feels the hatred nonetheless.

"Booth didn't make it," one of the soldiers says to the other, "get him to the center immediately for prep."