



chapter 3 : into the blight



chapter : 3
— into the blight —

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It's a funny thing. He can remember the exact moment he was given his name, encircled by a score of his kin, knuckles bleeding, eye swollen, nose burning with the sharp sting of a fresh gash, but to this day Maverick cannot remember the specific individual who issued it. His opponent laid out upon the dirt of the recreation block floor, the crowd gasping and cheering in a divisive uproar of contradicting emotions. His head ringing with disorientation and confusion. But he heard the namesake chanted through the din; spontaneous and appropriate for the moment; invented in the excitement. These things usually happened that way. And of course the name stuck immediately even if he protested. Especially if he protested. He did not like it when it was first cast upon him because of the circumstances in which it was molded; he *loathes* fighting, but with time he grew to respect the moniker for its academic meaning of nonconformity and individualism, rather than as the loose cannon or dissidence as it was intended.

Maverick decides there are other times to ponder the origin of his name. It seems like such an odd thing to have popped into his head, way out here in the forests at night – on this night in particular – but it isn't the first time he's needed a distraction from the violence and fear surrounding him.

The fox-breed stands to an impressive height from a squatting position, reaching just over two arm lengths from the leafy ground. His brawny build has made him an intimidating defender in the guilds and it has likewise been useful in securing the trust of others when in need of an ally. Rarely has he had to use his physique to any violent advantage, which is precisely the way he prefers it, though these past few moons have shown him more aggression to last a lifetime.

Nearly two heads taller than Shellback, the fox is the closest mammal-type to Sharptooth for size, but the gator still retains the distinct advantage if for no other reason than his propensity for violence compared to Maverick's imperturbable nature. His face is more wolf-like than fox – the snout is boxed in shape with a trapezoidal quality far removed from the pointed muzzle of a fox, and shorter, too, but retains the same split-color scheme of a red-orange overcoat and a creamy white undercoat around his mouth and eye sockets. Near his sooty nose on either side are two dark brown stripes in either direction that roll downward into points, creating the indicative “fox's triangle” of his breed. His eyes are sharp and quite keen, of this he has always been proud; a luminescent green that

seems to glow brighter in the dark air. The ruff of long, ill-kept fur on the side of his cheeks sticks out farther than is common for his type, building further upon his wolf-like appearance. The rigid pyramids of his long ears cut through his shoulder-length, inky hair with a purpose, focusing intently on all that *creaks*, *cracks*, or *snaps* in the unseen night. His black denim pants match those of Shellback's and indeed all of their kind, as part of their standard uniform. His boots he stole, however, and they are slightly too big for his clawed foot paws, allowing space for the muscular toes. Boots do not work well on the digitigrade feet of his kin, but he'd rather the uncomfortable fit to the scorching burn of the hot desert sands and stone. There are two pockets in the front of his trousers and a custom-tailored hole in the seat just below the belt loops which features two silver clasps to fasten it closed. Through the hole sweeps a large fox's tail that just manages to brush the ground when he stands. The length composed of a thicker and longer pile of copper-orange fur that transitions slowly down its sum into black, and then terminates suddenly into a snow-white tip. The volume of the tail is mostly fur, though to look at it adds twice the mass to Maverick's silhouette.

Unlike his reptilian counterparts, he wears a black cotton tank-top shirt exposing his copper furred arms. As with the tail, the fur abruptly shifts into a near-black chestnut color at each forearm, creating the illusion of elbow-length gloves. The digits of his paw-like hands are likewise clawed, though the tips are blunted and filed down to the quick. The chapped and cracked fleshy pads on his fingers and palms are charcoal grey and rough to the touch from many cycles of manual labor.

Maverick withdraws the metallic form of a pistol from the front of his jeans, and squats back onto his ankles again staring at the dusty and cracked roadside before him. The grasses here, like everything else, are dry, half dead and blanketed in the shadows of nightfall turning their golden color navy. Selecting a suitable vacancy among the crispy vegetation that is not too obvious but not too hidden, he releases the weapon and places the gun at the road's curb with the barrel pointing in toward him; toward the forest and what lays beyond. He stands up slowly, and some branches brush his ear tips, making them flick instinctively. He does not like leaving a working weapon behind, where someone can find it who is not meant to, like the Keepers he is trying to escape. He thrusts his paws into his pockets again, to double check if the bullets are still there. *Maybe I'd put them back into the clip without knowing it.* He thinks dumbly, he has to be sure. They are still there, clinking together when his hand jostles them. *Maybe someone else put a new clip in.* He checks that again, too. He can *never* be too sure, but the gun is empty. He feels paranoid double and triple checking everything, but that is his job now. If things do not go as planned, his friends could all die, he could die ... The seriousness of his duty washes over him like a great wave, and his head swims; *Jennifer* could die. The little girl is the most important to him. She has barely begun to live at five cycles, and he believes he could easily sacrifice himself for her safety if he knew she'd live another day. But he can't do that either, now. Not now. Too many are involved now. *Rot, they're all involved.*

Once more the wind builds into a mighty gust, carrying a sharp blast of sand that stings the eyes and nose. Just as Maverick turns his head from the stinging gale, he thinks he hears a series of small, soft thuds in the near distance. When the wind calms, he turns once more to face the long road and squints at the dark strip of land covered in shadows. He inhales deep, allowing the brisk air to move into his lungs as if coming up for breath after a long plunge. He detects something familiar and concerning in the breezes that

move quickly upon him from the desert's edge, but he cannot place it. The scent is too faint to capture, but unusual with a floral aspect. *Perhaps a cactus bloom*, he thinks. Standing with one foot on the barren roadside and the other in the dry leaves of the forested shoulder, he can still see several of the looming monsters of stone monuments on the vista and the long, creepy shadows they drag along the ground seemingly pointed at him. Surveying his setting once more and detecting nothing, he returns both booted feet to the forest's edge and moves inward for the trees. He feels each mighty trunk as he passes them, amazed at their size and number. Only two moons ago, he doubted such things remained. If the situation had been less serious, he'd remove his boots so he could feel the nature against his paws, but he has a mission and he cannot forget it no matter how hard he tries.

It is useless going over it all again, he thinks. *There is nothing to come of anxiety*. He lets the bullets clink loudly in his pockets as he walks back into the forest, pushing past the mighty timbers, shaming himself for making so much unnecessary noise. The trees grow more dense as he walks, having to push branches out of the way so he can see his own feet. Insects buzz in his ears. *At least the bloodsuckers aren't out anymore*, he thinks, brushing a hand past his ear, *chill probably killed them all*.

The dreadful dark of the forest does not alleviate his growing paranoia. Leaves rustle, winds howl, birds abandon their places when his path draws too near, and even the branches under his own feet disturb him. *How am I supposed to keep everyone safe if I can't even keep quiet?* He imagines RazorClaw stalking in the shadows someplace behind him, next to him. *Maybe he already found the camp and killed them all!* His pace quickens and he fights to prevent the forest's noises from unsettling him although it is a losing battle.

The forest has grown darker. Moonshine cannot fully penetrate the rustling ceiling of the trees, shielding all light except when the wind tears open a hole in the canopy which quickly reseals. Maverick walks with his paws outstretched now, feeling in front of himself for leafy barricades or a tree trunk, but it doesn't do much good. Twice he stumbles on the undetected rises of roots, and both times he nearly takes a mouthful of dirt. *You rot, Shellback. Why couldn't you have stayed with the group?*

Shellback is Maverick's dear friend, but even still he cannot stay the curses that swallow his mind. *If it weren't for Shellback's arrogance and his need to keep everything to himself, I wouldn't be lost in this forest at night*. His thoughts collect. *If it weren't for Shellback, I wouldn't be here at all, most likely*. Several times he's been saved by the snapper during their work duties, and this escape was his design. He cannot forget that.

The land rolls. He seems to have been walking for a great distance, when he knows it could only have been little more than a few hundred paces, and he accounts for how tired he is. Despite the dark, Maverick can feel the ground begin to elevate under his feet. The climb up becomes more arduous as he progresses, tuning into a combination climb and dodge where the trees root themselves tight, like walls. The leaves that cover the ground are fresh fallen with the coming autumn, and the damp of the soil has made them slick. He slips on them three times, and once nearly finds himself at the bottom again. Again he curses Shellback's name. The hill finally plateaus into a second level of trees and slick leaves, encumbered by the night and the secret noises of the unseen. Water surrounds him, in small pools and puddles and the air hangs with moisture thick enough to moisten

his face as he walks, but it is cold air, and he is cold already. The air reminds him of his thirst, and he longs to be at his destination even more now.

With another muffled *slurp* of wet leaves beneath his feet, something bothers his ears and he knows to stop. The noise came from about twenty paces away; thrashing noisily in the wet leaves and then dies. It sounded like something had been stalked and killed, and Maverick's heart pounds with horror. He cannot see more than what is directly in front of him, and even that just barely. The noise was unmistakable. A dull moan of the injured or dying carries like a mournful warning, and he backs against a tree. *Would it do any good to climb?* He climbs without deciding. But the thrashing continues, and closer this time, much closer. *A pace maybe, not much more.* He realizes he is fondling where the gun should be, but frantically remembers where he left it and why. Again he curses, and this time he means it. *If I survive this, Shellback will be sorry.* He finds himself strangling Shellback in his mind. His face feels cold, and his chest pounds. *Maybe it's RazorClaw.* No logical explanation could account for how or why that would be possible, but the fear remains. The bloodthirsty and maniacal reptilian creature known as RazorClaw has been banished from the guilds long ago, pushed out into the Blight as punishment for his hateful rhetoric and savagery. *If indeed he still lives,* Maverick justifies. Sharptooth and Shellback left him for dead many cycles ago during the guild riots, when they were still aligned and all the guilds were unified. Despite these memories, Maverick finds himself succumbing to every child-like fear he has ever suppressed. The noises have stopped, he realizes. *How long? How long has it been?* He didn't know. *Two or three breaths, maybe?* Something stirs in the wind. Leaves fall from above him, in front of him. Spiral down below him and vanish into the dark. Maverick peers down reluctantly. He hates being in a tree. Everything, everywhere is black. This altitude gives no new perspective to anything that surrounds him and is just as dark as the ground had been. Darker. The only way he knows there is any ground at all is because the tree has to be rooted somewhere, but looking down, even that could be a hasty belief.

The thrashing noise has stopped. Nothing moves now, not even the wind. A dead branch falls from a tree and crashes loudly onto the leafy floor like they have been all night, sending a new quiver up Maverick's back. It is one of those sounds he has become accustomed to, but now he distrusts logic. *The dead grass, the dying leaves, the missing insects, the sudden cold, a strange creature in pain — now branches falling.* All signs, he believes, that the Blight is far more real than any of them wanted to admit.

Once more he can hear the winds pick up far overhead in the canopy of the treetops, transferring its momentum slowly down the trunks of the trees and then into their branches. He can count four shallow breaths between when he hears the leaves rustle to when his branch pitches. It is a big branch, but he is a big fox. A thought that begins as concern for the strength of the branch transforms into an early memory from a bygone cycle when he was younger and lying across a rope hammock, moments from sleep. It was dark then too he recalls, in the guilds, as it was midway into the Calming just before slumber and the Keepers would signal all to return to their dorms and dens for lights out. It was then he felt the rope give way and he fell the full distance of three standing heights onto his side, breaking two ribs and an arm and spraining his tail. He remembers yelling 'Rot!' as he was falling, which shocked him more than the fall as it was the first time he'd ever cursed. He was about half the age he is now, at roughly twelve cycles, and he remembers the surprised faces of the folks around him; their countenances he interpreted as appall to his cursing rather than concern for his injury. The memory jumps to the

bright ceiling lights and white tiles of the medical wing when he was carried there by Shellback, several cycles his elder. Shellback seems to have always been around when Maverick needed him. The waiting room was choked with the odors of medical solvents, alcohols, disinfectants and medicines, and the sickly unnatural odors of things he loathes. Scent has always been the first factor Maverick considers when assessing an experience, and never once has the smell of the medical wing carried a positive weight. He remembers nervously talking to Shellback as they waited for the Keepers to prepare an examination room for him, and how embarrassed he was at cursing in the public space. He remembers Shellback laughing at him in jest and thinking him silly for being so conservative. Shellback was more brazen then. More willing to be himself and less interested in the thoughts of others. He idolized Shellback for his solidarity and confidence. So unshakeable; willing to go with the flow, no matter what, and always found a way through. He remembers how gracefully Shellback explained away the indignity of his cursing and the shameful looks from his kin, refocusing the word on its humble origins; *Rot*; to decay or decompose. Something we all do with time. Nothing more than a word given further meaning with emotion. *Control the emotion, control the word.*

As Maverick considers the definition of *rot*, the loud roar of a fast moving wind high above pushes the leaves about in a mad fray. He counts his breaths once again and arrives at two before he feels the gentle sway. His breathing is calming.

In his daydream twilight, he remembers all three of the Keepers who fixed his arm and set his tail. He remembers that they were female, and how rare it was he saw female Keepers. They were seldom in the Guilds without special purpose, though few of his kin noticed their absence or seemed to care. As Maverick remained stoic on the medical examination table, doing his best to be brave for his caretakers, he found the courage to ask them questions. The male Keepers did not tend to answer questions at any great length, preferring instead to be helpful in small doses. Some were outwardly mean, and he knew those well. The fight between Shandi and Keeper Cutter still gives him nightmares. His is a name they all know. But the female Keepers seemed more patient and willing to communicate, and he pressed his luck with them on that table, talking about all sorts of things from the taste of his food to the friends he keeps in the guild, whom he misses and has not seen since the Division. It was then, as they were x-raying his arm and he was trapped in the whirring machine, he found the audacity to ask them boldly, *Why don't the Keepers have tails?* And after a long pause, the Keeper closest to him simply stated through her head-covering, *Because of the Blight.* Maverick remembers laying there in total silence after that feeling ashamed for asking. How horrible the pain and suffering and fear must have been that these poor Keepers endured. *To lose pieces of themselves.* Such a grim era. It was then that he gained a deeper respect for the Keepers and the traumas of their time, vowing to not take anything for granted, least of all the goodness of others. He also learned the emotional meaning of the swear word. '*Rot*' was more than a word. It was a curse, a nightmare, and a travesty to be feared. '*Rot*' was to invoke the devastation of the Blight, and no one deserved that, not even in the worst of times.

The world is silent again, and has been for a good long while. No new gusts have disturbed his branch or his train of thought, but his sense of duty becomes emboldened by lost time.

He thinks about climbing down and at first it terrifies him. *If there has been no noise, then the creature hasn't left*, he considers. A shiver runs down the full span of his spine and through the fibers of his tail tip, causing the fur to stand on end. But in that instant something stirs. He remembers his pledge to sacrifice himself for Jennifer, and he becomes suddenly embarrassed. *Such a coward*. He strains his ears and sniffs the air seeking any indication of a foe but discovers nothing. It becomes clear to Maverick that his fear has gotten the best of him. He has been alone with his thoughts for too long and he at last descends. *Paranoid fool*. Forgetting about the oily leaves, he nearly slides again when his feet touch earth.

"Ah!" He exclaims, louder than he meant.

To Maverick's disbelief, the forest appears darker yet. What was at least seen at an arm's length before cannot be seen at all now. Despite his strong night vision, his arms seem to disappear at the elbow. *It was never this dark in the guilds*. Another hill mocks his aching legs, and he sighs again in embarrassment. If he weren't wrapped around that branch like a fool idiot, he wouldn't be sore. He hopes the walk will unknot the kink, so he forces himself upward, taking note of the oily leaves this time. He steps his way carefully to keep from making noise, and he focuses intently on the silence around him, waiting.

When he crests the small hilltop, his eyes are met with the relief of a distant light, flickering faintly a few hundred paces away. *Ah! There!* He thinks, glad to be within sight of something familiar. *Home*. He lumbers casually toward the stark aura of the firelight, feeling the warmth immediately upon entering its light. He steps into the circle of the camp with a deep relief to be back at a place of relative comfort, and from across the camp, he sees a fellow he is very eager to speak with. The rodent-type sits among several of his kin, and he looks up feeling Maverick's eyes upon him. A wry smile crosses his pointed muzzle and he stands to walk over. As soon as Maverick reaches out his paw to greet his friend, a loud *crack* like nearby thunder breaks the sky, and the many faces of the camp look up with trepidation.

Turntail's condition is becoming dire. The moon has arced across the sky over a considerable distance since she lost Shellback, though her sense of time is disordered and her ability to focus has diminished. She has been tracing along the route of the forest's edge for many paces looking for her signal, but can go no farther. She has collapsed uncomfortably on the concrete, her muzzle pressed sideways into the sand; her eyes closed and dried out. Her throat burns with thirst, and her nose is clogged with the red clay powder. She is so cold her bones ache and her limbs no longer articulate. Her breathing has slowed to a series of curt, shallow half-breaths struggling for clear passage.

But at least I lost them, she thinks. *Whatever they are*.

She lays face first on the barren desert road convincing herself that she has outrun and outlasted whatever was producing those horrible noises, and she begs for relief from pursuit. Her fur deeply coated with red clay powder and dusty sand, caked into the sticky wounds of her shoulder. The pain has throbbed for so long she is becoming numb to it and does not know which of her ailments is causing her persistent dizziness, but the

world is fading and her senses are becoming fuzzy. She considers sleeping exactly as she is, face down and unsheltered, unprotected, exposed and exhausted, incapable of moving. She is extraordinarily depleted. The muscles of her legs and torso blaze with fatigue, and her chest heaves against the ground using more energy than it supplies just to expand her diaphragm. Gasping for breath through the chalky cold air, the frigid night wind carries smoky trails of soot and debris, which collect in her nose and windpipe, producing raspy bouts of coughing that grate horribly on her dry throat. It hurts to breathe. It hurts to stand. *It hurts*. She has succumbed to the distress of it all and has agreed to let fate assume control of the moment, choosing to remain here, face down, just for a while. *Just for a little while*.

Her breathing calms to a more predictable rhythm, sucking the air through her nose again rather than the deep, full-throated gasps of weary open mouth breathing. She lays unmoving in the swirls of sand that shift endlessly about, and she can feel them covering her form bit by bit. She imagines the shapeless mound she will become if she remains for too long, but this thought does not terrify her as it once might have. There is a poetic quality befitting of her hopeless mood, and thus she chooses not to fight. She hears a soft, crisp *clink* of metal somewhere not far away and sleepily opens her eyes to a slit just enough to let in the starlight but sees nothing. Rather than the noise however, she becomes curious about something else at the roadside that dances like a flag in the wind. A tiny bit of dark cloth nestled in the sand has become partially uncovered by the wind and an edge of it blouses and tugs with the stiff breeze. She reaches forward slowly with her right arm, touching it softly with two outstretched fingers assessing first if the vision is real. Numb, she cannot feel the material when it brushes against her paw pads but hooks it with a finger and pulls at it, using its resistance as proof of its reality. Bringing it slowly toward her face, dragging it free from the red sands, she catches a whiff of its scent and something flows from her brain down her spine and into every corner of her body that she was not expecting but desperately needed: *Hope*. She recognizes the scent immediately as one of her kin and she knows the face well, confirming it to be the male panther-breed, Roundabout – captain of their party. There are other smells too. Her mind twirls to life trying to recall any specific faces to go with the lingering secondary scents but cannot place them. The smells are corrupted by the red clay and blowing sands, but it is fresh enough to be recent and certainly no other would be out this far unless it was the company she seeks. She pulls the cloth to her face tighter like a pillow, filling her senses with it, and finds a few spare tears to shed in gladness.

Kik.

Kik-ik-ik-ik-ik.

Turntail's eyes pop open to the crisp, low sound, and she wails with an all-consuming despair the likes of which she has never known. *No!* She distresses, *I thought I lost them!*

Kik-ik-ik-ik! Kik-ik-ik-ik! The excited sounds chitter once more, louder and closer.

With a painful heave she pushes herself from the ground, Roundabout's shirt enclosed in her trembling fist, quivering with weakness, and her foot slides out from under her awkwardly in the sandy glaze of the road. She slips forward and lands with a crunch on her chin, bringing new tears to her eyes and a new pang to distract from her arm. Pushing the ground away once more she steadies her feet in the oversized boots and grunts deeply

with the effort. From the corner of her eyes, she sees two dark shapes, one on either side, pacing quickly against the rocks and cacti of the vista, darting between shadows with unnerving purpose. This is the first she has seen physical proof of the noises that pursued her since her escape from the stone gap, and they confuse and terrify her. They move on all fours; a posture she has never witnessed before, yet they have the familiar contour of her kin, though much smaller. There is fierceness in their low gait that makes them hard to envisage and in the featureless dark Turntail imagines monsters the size of guild-kin children. She cannot observe them well enough before they quickly disappear again into the murk, chittering at her from a scant few paces. She reaches her feet in a wobble and takes several hurried steps forward, clunking against the concrete loudly in her oversized boots. The boots are heavy, and loud, and make her journey more difficult. She considers discarding them, but the added protection they offer currently outweighs the hassle and she remembers vividly how Keeper Cutter was holding the boot like a weapon when she wa— *the gun!* She remembers suddenly the weapon stuffed against the weary-numb of her low back, still tightly nestled there between her pants and fur. She reaches backward as she jogs, simultaneously stuffing the piece of fabric into the same gap, and pulling the weapon free. Unable to fully grasp anything with her left paw, she instead stuffs the gun under her left armpit pressing it tight to hold it in place long enough to re-adjust her grip. Looking down to both sides with a whirl of her head she catches only blurs of dark shadows darting about the landscape. So far they are not approaching any closer, keeping a constant distance, though they surely could descend at any time. They move effortlessly between the trees of the roadside and over the hardships of the terrain, playing with her to some maddening objective. Worse, they present no target. Like the motorcycle, this gun is alien to her. She understands its principle, having seen them discharged before, but she has never held one and certainly never had the intention of using one. She fumbles in the moonlight to find the trigger hole and slips two dainty fingers through it across the rigid trigger, finding the gun's mass difficult to maneuver. Holding the gun tight in her paw, she runs down the road along the tree line thrusting it forward with each jaunt using its weight to help pull her through the night.

AWOOOOOOO

The assertive howl cuts through her spine just as it had before with a fur-raising tremble that instinctively pulls her tail in close. She looks back to see three shadows now on the road prancing more than running and she can tell from their stride that they have the energy to long outlast her; this is a game of waiting. The chittering turns more and more to growls and the confident sounds of hunters with an advantage, and their range tightens. She twists her body once more as she clomps along the dusty pavement and finally pulls the trigger two, three times aiming loosely into the shadows in pursuit. Bracing for the loud kickback of the weapon she is instead met with *clik, clik, clik*; the gun is empty. *No!* The panic grows stronger with the revelation of her false bravado, withering away all of the hope she cultivated not forty breaths ago. After a quick few steps she turns again long enough to toss the gun at the closest phantom but the gun sails harmlessly over their forms skidding across the highway with a soft *klink, link-link* coming to rest on the far side of the road. The three shadows gallop undeterred and unaffected, chittering once more in a mockery of her terror.

Her energy wanes. Turntail forces her body to propel itself forward, muscles burning and tearing with exertion, and does not know what else to do. She scans the roadside, looking in toward the midnight black of the forest's depths and spies nothing. She glimpses the

trees and their branches, hoping for a solution to present itself. She measures their distances, their heights and her strength. The lowest boughs are several arm-lengths up, and on her best days she could climb these trees with ease — their skins look soft enough to grasp with claws, but with her injured arm, she cannot climb. A pair of low branches appear in the dim light that she could likely reach — but her energy is low; she can barely get her feet fully off the ground as she runs; a strong jump is almost impossible. And even if she were successful, she could only dangle at best. *Can these creatures climb?* With each unknown variable, and each solution so quickly doomed, the sorrow fills her once more. There is nothing but the long, dark run which will only meet with a horrible end when the beast's apprehension finally expires. Her imagination begins to foresee the scenario where the beasts will first grab her, and then how they will tear into her, and how, if she is lucky, she will die quickly before they begin to feast. As her darkest nightmares begin to manifest, she kicks something unseen in the dust of the roadside during her low, quick shuffle; a metallic shape catches her boot tip and thrusts forward briefly along the pavement before coming to rest in another sandy pile, teetering on the pavement's edge. Turntail's eyes catch sight of the angular form just before it falls into the shadows of the roadside. For a brief moment she is confused to see the same gun she just discarded, but suddenly recognizes this as the mark for which it was originally intended; *the sign!*

Approaching the point where the gun slid over the edge, she leans forward briskly to grab it by the handle nearly losing it in the dust. The three shapes of her stalkers are directly behind her but when she whirls to greet them she discovers the three have become four. They are close enough now that she can see their faces; pointed ears and triangular muzzles; sandy brown coats with patches of white and darker browns; angry yellow eyes and gleaming white teeth bared through snarling black lips. They all hesitate for a moment at her immediate perimeter, growling and advancing one paw forward at a time. What startles Turntail most however is not their ferocity, but how shockingly similar they are to that of her kin. The faces of each creature are distorted reflections of the canine-breed guild-kin, trapped in bodies that make little sense to her. The familiarity is so surreal and so bizarre that it makes her gun quiver with uncertainty and moral confusion. Until now she did not know what to expect in the strange beasts that chase her, but as she gazes upon them in this brief moment she is as horrified as she is concerned.

Each creature lowers its head with ears pulled back as they advance forward upon her slowly, teeth bared and snarling in low, continuous growls. Turntail points her aim of the gun at each figure briskly, gambling as to whom will act first. Any concern the creatures had over their strange prey quickly dissolves when they sense the potency of her fear.

During this heartbeat, the closest creature from the middle left leaps at her with a snarl and Turntail is compelled to pull the trigger to the reception of a mighty *crack* that echoes throughout the trees. The ringing of the sharp explosion carries immediately, repeating several times over the landscape to a diminishing chorus until it sounds like a low rumbling thunder in the far distance. Four mouths share the yelp that comes next. The bullet grazed the side of the creature's head and frightened the other three back into a diminutive posture. The injured beast falls to the pavement with a high-pitched whine, spinning in circles. The remaining three back away in unison, two glancing at the wounded fourth, but remain facing Turntail in a semi-circle. Seeing that she has not yet won this standoff, Turntail pulls the trigger twice more but is again greeted with the frustrating *clik, clik* of an empty chamber. *Rot! ROT!*

Surveying the void in the sand of the roadside where the gun once lay hidden, she tries to determine which way the gun was originally pointed in its hiding place. The dust is too heavily disturbed with their shuffling to know for sure. Assuming the most logical course, she darts straight into the forest perpendicular to the road following the imaginary path of the gun's barrel. The creatures seem indecisive for a moment and do not immediately follow, the first of them still whining at the roadside with its injury. The creature's delays give Turntail a moment of relief and a much needed span of separation as she darts noisily through the dead branches and needling twigs of the new terrain, poking and whipping her chest and face. Obscured branches snag her ill-fitting boots, their stems jab into her calves and knees as she furrows through the murk. She has trouble seeing any significant distance in the near black of the forest now that the cover of moon and starlight has been stripped away by the trees. The leaves form a greasy layer over the cold wet dirt and clay beneath, and she slips several times on the topography, sliding forward and down a steep embankment until she lands uneasily, but still upright, in the shallow ravine. From behind she hears the chittering and barking of multiple savage voices and the cracking of foliage under many paws.

AAAWWWOOOOOOOOO, they bellow in affirmation of their chase.

Turntail struggles up the other side of the embankment, maintaining a vice grip upon the gun's handle, her ears pressed flat against her head and her tail straight back for balance. Slipping downhill several times in the loose soil, she reaches the top in time to witness two of the beasts leap from the far edge of the small ditch and land just beside the place she pulled herself from. She fights to gain solid footing again and then pushes hard through the thick branches and tree trunks not waiting to see where the others land. The moonless hollows of the forest floor obscure her vision but she runs full bore, leading hard with her right shoulder. She tucks her cheek to her shoulder as she runs, deflecting some of the branches over her head, where they become entangled in her hair and tear at her ears. She mewls as they lash her face, but she does not slow down, dodging trees as they appear suddenly within her limited vision in the dark. She hears the trampling of twigs and leaves under-paw, nearby to her left, and she twists her head slightly to learn their distance. When she spins back again she slams headlong into the point of a fallen limb catching her under the eye on her left cheekbone. A burst of brilliant stars and agonizing pain fills her vision causing her to stumble backward two full steps, ducking instinctively to gather her face into her paws. As she leans forward in that instant, the same branch crunches with the full weight of a lunging attacker, narrowly missing her. The creature yelps, falling into the leaves near her feet. With a swollen and unfocused eye, she again darts forward with her right arm held before her cocked in an inverted angle, gun clenched near her face, cleaving through the dark with her elbow.

Kik-ik-ik-ik! Kik-ik-ik-ik!

The chittering becomes a beacon for Turntail, sprinting through the forest using the high-pitched clicks and unsettling mirth as a measure for the beast's proximity and speed. They are gaining on her more intently, snapping with unseen jaws at the edges of her tail and just behind her boots and calves. They have not yet managed to sink a solid bite, perhaps due to her speed, or perhaps because they are as blind as she, or perhaps they are herding her toward a more odious fate. The notion of being directed into a trap, racing blindly forward into the nothingness of the forest adds a new tier of panic and indecision,

and she second-guesses her every movement. *Am I still on track?* She wonders, staring at the gun as she runs. *Where am I even going? What am I looking for? Who is out here? Is anyone out here?* Her mind reels desperately trying to recall clues from her recent memory.

Using a roadside marker was a last-moment idea proposed by one of her kin just as the riots were evolving into a full breach of security, threatening to upend the master plan. The chaos in the guilds had grown out of control soon after the onset of the escape, and small-numbered groups were already leaving the grounds long before they were intended. The confusion of the escape, and those inevitably left behind, were predicted but not entirely accounted for, and the shortcomings of that failure are painfully obvious now. The plan to abandon the guilds was in fact many plans – all crafted by many voices, fated only to be torn down again and again in place of something else. Each time the variables and tactics would change. The ferocity of one plan was replaced with cleverness from another, and then replaced again with rage. Careful planning replaced instead for harnessing moments of opportunity. Strategy for brute force. The plan had been evolving over many cycles, and with many opinions but one goal was always the focus: *get far away*. The guilds were now a prison. The Keepers were no longer to be trusted; impossible figures emerged that challenged the fabric of their contained reality, and above all, the Blight was no longer feared as it once was having regressed into legend. *We have RazorClaw to thank for that*, Turntail recalls.

Vengeful, angry, violent, unpredictable. The reptile-type known as RazorClaw came by his visceral name with little imagination. He was always chaotic with a mad bloodlust for aggression, but his distrust of the Keepers, the Guilds, and even the Blight grew darker with every cycle. His conspiracy theories and rhetoric created so much tension between kin that the violence was no longer containable, and Sharptooth and Shellback fought him out of his post. He was ultimately banished into the Southern Wastes of the outer Blight, to the tremendous anger of both guild-kin and Keeper. That revolt birthed other civil battles, pitting type against type, and breed against breed. Finally the Keepers were compelled to wall off large sections of the Guilds and forced the different factions apart from one another. The Division of friends and families was traumatizing, but it contained the hate and it preserved life. Then too, the Keepers formed the IMPAK, which sought to elevate guild-kin to positions of authority and accountability over their immediate brethren. Sharptooth and Shellback were among those elected into these roles. Sharptooth accepted with a mighty sense of responsibility, though Shellback declined to the shock of all, most of all Sharptooth, his life-long friend who saw the infraction as a slap to the faces of his charges.

Or so went the stories, Turntail thinks. She crashes shoulder first into a sapling just then, causing many of its leaves to crumble off and float down. Delayed but uninjured, she swivels around the nearly invisible tree and continues once more to regain lost momentum. The snapping jaws do not relent, and they have gained more ground. Still, she searches for clues.

Turntail flashes back to that moment when the guild alarms began to wail. Long asleep when they began, she was bewildered and scared wondering at first if it was a bad dream; she'd been having so many of those lately. She sat up quickly in her high bunk, alone in her modest den, and looked about in waking confusion. The flashing red bulbs spinning close enough that she could see their glow brightly through the windows of her front

door. Normally she could not hear much of the public spaces through the thick walls of her dwelling space, but she could hear the screaming clamor of the sirens quite clearly, which meant the outer alarm would be blazingly loud when she opened the latch. She was not prepared. She was not wearing anything worthy; she had nothing set away. It was all too soon. Nothing to take, nothing to grab. She looked back in a panic to scan the contents of her room and her eyes darted promptly to a wood and straw-grass figurine sitting near her bed, on a small shelf. She ran to grab it, and that's when she heard the explosion that immediately knocked her over along with the vast majority of the contents in her room. She snapped-up the figurine that spilled from her paws in the unexpected trauma, and darted to the door. The window was partially cracked with shrapnel, and shard of pointed metal was sticking partly through the door. She will always remember the two things that happened next: when her door opened, the noise of the blaring alarm and raging fire across the way was so loud that she fell forward with its crushing weight. The fear and confusion that came with that uproar made her feel like an insect in a maze beneath stampeding feet. And in her crouch, she brought her paws to her ears in an attempt to dull the wail but caught sight and sound of her neighbors next-door shouting angrily at each other. On the floor laid Carmine, a female panther-breed like her and about the same age, bleeding badly; Turntail scanned her quickly and found a shard of metal like the one in her door had impaled her through the side of her abdomen. Her first instinct was to run to her, but the dying girl already had a guardian screaming and crying over her. Her custodian, Cat, another female feline-breed was trying to erect her friend but Carmine seemed determined to remain. She pushed Cat off and Turntail could see their wretched faces painted in the spinning red lights of the deafening alarms. She could see their mouths working frantically, their paws grasped in knowing finality, but she could not hear the words. Just then, through the chaos, she heard nine strange words that made little sense at the time; *Look to the road's edge! It points the way!*

And then, they were separated forever by a second explosion.

The flashing memories of the past two days offer few clues as to her next moments. So little was discussed openly, so few of them knew the plan. The more Turntail tries to orient herself in the darkness of the forest the more confused she becomes; everything is the same and she had thought she'd have found something obvious by now — some new signal, a group, a camp, a familiar scent or sound, something! *Follow the mark if you get separated! That was the plan! Wasn't it?* ... Or did she misunderstand? Her hopes plummet further and leave behind a deep hole of cold fear and desperate loneliness. *But there was a sign! Just like Cat said! That can't be a coincidence! The gun must be the sign! ... or was it the shirt?* The half-buried remnant she found in the desert sands many paces before? It had not occurred to her until now. The pit of her stomach churns with new indecision and new horror. The starbursts have mostly cleared from her vision but she still sees blobs of liquid color and electric sparking in her left eye, so she does not notice the red-orange light when it first begins to appear on her left periphery as a very faint warmth against the placid cool. But then another sharp wind cuts through the trees from her left, pushing a pile of leaves into the air which she at first interprets as another lunge from a beast. She braces for the impact but the leaves cascade around her like water against rock, and through them she sees the dim glow of the distant anomaly. It is quite a distance off, but within range and her spirits dare once more to rise with hope. *Yes! That must be it!*

Two of the beasts vocalize something profound just then, wailing low and long with a serious tone Turntail had not heard before. The pert calls and high howls from before seem playful compared to these new noises which have devolved into something sinister and gravely foul. With the howling she senses a new quickness to their steps, landing faster and brisker, dodging hurdles with less grace and more force. The desperation she exerts to escape her hunters is the same fuel the hunters use to capture their prey. The gladness at seeing the soft red-orange glow is quickly pushed away by the awful event before her; she must still get there, and there are many steps yet to go.

Turntail holds up both arms to shield herself from a sudden thicket of thorny twigs, and she pushes through like a battering ram. A thrashing of aggressive thorns find their way through her fur and hook her flesh but she does not yield, instead only breaking her stride long enough to mowl loudly. Pushing another volley of branches aside she regains her stride to gallop noisily through the forest floor. *Where is it?! Where did it go?* The light seems to be gone. *There!* She notes, seeing its light emerge once more from behind a cluster of silhouetted trees.

Kik-ik-ik-ik! Kik-ik-ik-ik!

As Turntail heaves herself forward through the forest she crosses upon a fallen tree trunk, backlit dimly with a pale red aura; just enough to see. Assessing its height she shakes her head as if to convince her own mind not to attempt the hurdle, but she vaults upward anyway with every ounce of energy she can expel, planting her right paw onto the moist bark of the log and thrusting her weight over, landing with a crash on the other side. The beasts manage to burrow quickly under the timber with a series of muffled barks, and return to the chase having lost ground. Turntail focuses her weary eyes on the middle-distance, trying to understand the faint glow still hidden behind a line of broad trees. A set of jaws gnashes at her left boot, gripping just enough of the hard rubber near her ankle to tear a small piece away.

Kik-ik-ik-ik! Kik-ik-ik-ik!

Turntail's eyes flood with new tears; in part from the morose ongoing memories of the past day and in part with dire circumstances threatening her now, snapping and gnashing a mere breath away. She clears a pair of trees forked in a 'V' by jumping through their center and the beasts travel around. The maneuver purchased a quarter breath of time, but every moment she can steal back the better. She slides sideways once more, her improperly booted left foot pushing into a slick of leaves and muddy clay that works to her favor until she slides into the adjacent tree, slamming her wounded shoulder into the rough bark. Another lightning bolts of pain courses through her shoulder as though she were shot a second time, and the wound begins to bleed once more; she can feel the warmth of it encircling the wound, spreading along the flesh below the fur. With a desperate sob she tries to clear the tears from her eyes but her vision is blurred. The creatures behind her receive the intoxicating aroma of a fresh wound and they wail with arousal. And then, the elusive red glow emerges through the trees. Just ahead and slightly to the right, she sees the flickering firelight as clear as a sun cast against a dark sky. She risks a quick pivot on the slick leaves to realign her course, and passes the trunk of a massive tree. She immediately breaks to the right as she passes behind it, nearly tripping over one of the beasts in pursuit whom clearly did not expect the shift, kicking it

accidently in the dark. The creature produces a sharp yelp but scurries back to its course with terrifying precision.

Kik-ik-ik-ik! Kik-ik-ik-ik!

The beasts seem to understand the fire ahead and sensing a turn in the tides of fortune, they intensify their assault with a desperation born of hunger. They have committed to this prey and they cannot leave unfulfilled. Turntail also senses the same growing uncertainty unraveling with every passing step. She sees the light more clearly now, hoping it has not been yet another cruel false hope. The fire is rather large, and she sees it ringed by several logs with seated figures. Off to the side, she notices the hard unnatural edges of a vehicle and recognizes it immediately as one of the Keepers'. At first her heart sinks once more with doubt; there was no plan to steal a vehicle, but she has come this far with only the barest clues of the master plan and has no choice but to have faith. Her options are to run headlong into capture, or be torn up by ravenous beasts. In either case, her long depleted muscles burn and revolt with every step — her game ends here. She foretells that if she is recaptured and entered back into her old life, then it is a fate far better than this. *Even under the heavy paw of Keeper Cutter.* She catches sight of several figures walking around near the fire peering intently into the dark of the forest, several of them carry torches, but through the sting and blindness of pain and terror she cannot identify them. She attempts to hail them, but her voice cracks, blistered with stress and drought and manages little more than a series of small whines. She aims her trajectory at the largest lumbering shape closest to the forest's edge. It has stopped pacing and has turned to nearly look upon her. The backlighting and screen of trees makes his shape hard to decipher, and she hopes for pity fearing punishment from the Keepers.

At long last Turntail is within several short paces from the camp's threshold when the nearest creature manages to sink its teeth deep into her calf with a guttural growl, gripping the full back of the boot but catching also her unprotected flesh along the top. With a loud gasp of pain she vaults forward into a rolling tumble, crashing along the sandy campsite floor like a meteorite. She is followed without hesitation by the biting beast, and then four of its companions. Turntail lies on her right side upon the ground with her head nearest the fire, gasping and panting for breath unable to calm herself, reeling with the full body torment of overspent muscles. She dry heaves, and her head limply falls into the sand. With eyes half-open, she loses focus on the world around her, fading quickly into a senseless darkness. Through the flames and her low angle, she catches blurs of figures running back and forth with their torches, swirling and thrusting them at the snarling creatures. Her vision blurs and fades to black, followed quickly by her hearing.

“Maverick! *Maverick!*”

“Here! *Here!*”

The words float into Turntail's ears as if in a dream, and with them the darkness takes her.