

AXIS of CONFLICT™



chapter 5 : she who dares



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— she who dares —

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The vast, multiple-story square chamber of *The Commons* has been measured to be nearly twelve-hundred paces from east wall to west, thirteen-hundred from north to south, and brims with sub-structures of various utility all capped by a mighty glass dome of individual panels. It is the central structure, the hub, of a long facility aptly named *The Complex* which houses, protects, provides employment to and a life for an estimated eleven-thousand souls: some four thousand Keepers rescued from the desolation of the Blight, and seven thousand guild-kin born within its walls. Of these, one-thousand-eight-hundred-ninety-eight are children under the age of twelve.

The Complex features a series of interconnected buildings forming two massive wings on the east and west ends split into unequal halves by the Commons. On the western flank are the dormitories of the *Male Guild*, so named for its male-only inhabitants following the *Division*. On the east, the much larger *Fem Guild* and *Mated Housing*, also known as the *Children's Guild*, where mated couples and their families live among the orphaned children. A handful of lesser towers are scattered across the two halves serving as Keeper Housing and medical bays. A tower on the westernmost flank of the Complex contains the waste and water reclamation facilities, and at the easternmost opposite fringe are the generators of the *Electrical Guild*. Apart from all these, attached only by a pair of enclosed sky bridges at the eleventh floor of Mated Housing, is a medical science facility where the Keepers work to understand and combat the Blight.

That building is a mystery. Under constant quarantine, it is intentionally closed off and set away from the population and therefore exists as both a place of legend and conspiracy. Strictly off-limits to all but the Medical Keepers and select IMPAC guards, its untouchable nature stirs the skepticism of many, most famously RazorClaw, who became a martyr following his hateful distrust of the Complex; an animosity focused squarely on that building. With time however, most of the guild-kin have come to pay little attention to the boring announcements that come from the Medical and Science Guild — unless the message refers to the recently deceased.

But at the heart of the Complex, morning light trickles through clouds of dust and the partly shuttered windows of The Commons, splashing its golden rays across the tan enamel of an exposed concrete floor. The thick outer windows are caked with build-up of blowing sands from nighttime winds, and have not been cleared as they usually are at this

time of the day. The kin of the Maintenance Guild have not been seen in several days. Nor have the kin of Sanitation, or Food Services, or Medical, or *anyone* it appears based on the ongoing eerie silence. The Keepers have also been absent following the riots, the first time that has ever happened, retreating to their private quarters in the east wing of the complex it is assumed, far removed from the catastrophic damage of the public spaces.

The mini-city under the dome contains many businesses critical to life here, including farmland, schools, grocers, grooming houses and even an arts district all connected with crisscrossing streets and paths. Grasses, herbs, flowers and trees grow in the places between, cleaning the air and providing materials for construction and food. The domed city is often loud at all hours, where hundreds of guild-kin go about their days and nights with steadfast precision – trading wares or moving goods, tending to chores or applying themselves in service.

Most of the kin are a proud people, trained or talented in one or more skills that benefit the whole, using these skills to barter for needs. It's not a perfect system, but one that has worked well to satisfy the needs of most, excluding the rare hermit who'd rather disconnect entirely. But in these past few mornings since the darkness of the riots, the vast covered streets under the dome are empty and their markets deserted. As many as two-thirds of the total population seem to have vanished into the Blight, abandoning the safety of the Complex to the absolute astonishment of the remaining third. Throughout their entire lives, the guild-kin have feared the Blight and its devastation beyond these walls but all it took was a handful of angry skeptics and the whole system came crashing down. The detractors abandoned their posts, the Guilds, the Complex, and so too then the remaining guild-kin who will pay the ultimate price for their traitorous venture, right or wrong. Those whom remain have done so mostly out of fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of hunger, fear of loss, and most importantly, fear of the all-consuming Blight which as recently as six days ago has claimed another dozen lives.

It's been three days since the riots, Kierlyn thinks, shaking her head in utter disbelief of the destruction that surrounds her. *Maybe four*. Light does not travel through the building very well with all of the smoke and ash hanging in the air, and the stresses of survival have caused her to lose track of time.

The shapely panther-breed girl balances between puddles at the intersection of East Market and Paper Street, her tail curling from left to right in irritated thought. She stands just in front of the ruins of *The Golden Basket*, a favorite bakery owned and operated for many cycles by the rabbit-breed female, Serafina – or 'Honey' as most know her – so-named for her penchant to include the ingredient in virtually everything she prepares. She is one of the many remarkable kin Kierlyn has been proud to know, and has served her community all manner of treats and breads, many of which she's donated outright to the Children's Guild. Kierlyn surveys the destruction of her friend's shop, shaking her head with disgust, wondering dolefully what has become of her friend.

She crouches through the smashed hole of the broken front door, taking care to avoid the jagged stalactites of glass still suspended along the doorframe. She easily slips through the pointed gap with elegance as if dancing with the shards, but can't escape the feeling that she's somehow violating her friend's property. Her slender legs glide silently, stepping one bare paw before the other, her black-tipped tail floating behind her like a

flag. She wears a pair of black pants purposefully torn off above the knees, and a black tank-top shirt coated in smears of dust and ash with a dark purple scarf tied loosely around her neck. A white and bloodied strip of cloth is wrapped tight around her left arm, high on the bicep, and the blood appears a few days old but still serious. Her fur catches a rogue sunbeam as she slips past, which illuminates the flawless burnt sienna color of her pelt, broken only by a solid patch of cream-white starting at her mouth and spreading down the middle of her torso, peaking out from under the edges of her tank-top and cut-offs. Her long, blonde, unwashed hair is tied back behind her head, allowing the rounded triangles of her ears to swivel unhindered for concerning noises in this part of town.

Without the IMPAC guard or the Peace Keepers around, Market Street has been burglarized continuously since the exodus. And without any of the Guilds on duty, food and water are becoming scarcer. Many of the stores have been smashed open and looted, making everyone a victim and a thief simultaneously. It is not safe to be walking about alone, as Kierlyn has discovered several times these past three days. Doors hang off their hinges, barriers smashed, and most of the windows along the street-level shops lay sprinkled across the pavement in sun-speckled fragments. It has become difficult to walk anywhere in Southtown bare pawed, but her shoes have been stolen and she therefore has little choice. Dried streaks of blood have smeared the pavement with the mistakes of others before her. The blood mixes repugnantly with the narrow streams and puddles left behind by the fire suppression sprinklers. Kierlyn does not know which came first: the riots or the three large explosions that sent the thousands of residents into the streets in a frenzy, but the damage is tremendous and affects nearly everything she has ever held dear.

Just inside the entryway of the bakery, she turns to verify that she is alone, surveying the long north view of Paper Street, and then westward along East Market. Her face catches the full light of the sunbeam, igniting the golden brown fur in brilliant flecks of blonde and cream patches surrounding her eyes, contrasted sharply by thick, dark black lashes. Her tempestuous blue-grey and bloodshot eyes have been crying a lot lately, stained in each corner by the salt of old tears. Her pink nose flicks with concern as she tries to see and smell through the floating clouds of soot in the street made opaque by sunlight. She believes she sees movement across the street in the alleyway between *ShellShock Fashions* and *Klips & Kuts*, and follows the ghosts of her imagination to the next block of East Market and Park Street, eying *D&C Corner Market*, but discovers nothing. Through the lifeless quiet of the cavernous space, brilliant white flecks of ash float through the sunbeams and then disappear gracefully into shadow like falling snow.

The smells of sulphur, burnt woods and plastics waft pithily through the air, riding along on steady, olfactory waves of stale moisture and wet rock, obscuring any scents of nearby kin. The overhead sprinklers immediately following the fires drenched the Commons, and all five of the lower levels were doused in an artificial rain. Much of the water remains trapped in the cavities and basement shops since the runoff drains are all blocked by debris, creating foul pools of runoff. Many of the gathering places, like *Hope Park*, are located at the bottom of the slight hill and have therefore been flooded. Underpass walkways and alleyway tunnels are nearly impassable. Worse, the deluge has all but emptied the main water reserves, and with the kin of the Water Reclamation Guild gone, there is no water for cooking or drinking.

Kierlyn returns to her view of the unlit bakery, leaning forward with a solid grasp on the strap of her backpack. With her other paw held out in front of her for balance, she tiptoes carefully among the glittering glass shards and shallow puddles working her way along the storefront window. Lazy water dribbles rhythmically into the belly of the shop, *tinkling* softly into an unseen depression a few paces away. The room is dark and receives no sunlight except that which reflects from the water of the ground and so she toggles the light switch near the door several times to no expected effect, muttering to herself. She sees several glass display cases bordering the three far walls of the room; one is smashed along its top, and the other two have been toppled forward into the middle, their contents since stolen. She sniffs at the air in three short breaths and knows that she will not find what she needs in here. What dough that remains is stale and waterlogged, and any pastry that survived the sprinklers will be as hard as a rock with age. She was hoping for bread, but even a few cookies would've done.

"Anything?" she hopes aloud, calling into the darkness of the room.

The emptiness responds only with the soft plinking of water, concerning her. She steps more lively into the room, wading shin deep into the lower bowl of the upturned bakery. Urgently, she takes the fallen middle case into both paws and struggles to clear it from her path looking for something along the edges of the room.

"Bug?" She intones with hushed concern, careful not to raise her voice any louder than a breathy whisper, "*Jenn!* Where are —"

Along the floor behind the smashed cases she finds her little girl squatting on her ankles in shallow water with her muzzle pointing straight down at the ground. The small panther-breed girl looks to be about five or six cycles old based on her size, and is darker furred than her mother with a deep burnt umber fur featuring the spots of youth along the tops of each exposed limb. She wears little more than a short-sleeved, light pink shirt wrapped in a dirt brown blanket with blue and grey shapes pulled around her shoulder like a toga. Both hand paws are pressed atop her knees with her elbows thrust out at extreme angles in a comical display for balance. The fur of her paws is stark white and coated with dirt and soot from several days of scavenging. The little girl looks up quickly with a tiny pink smile and brilliant blue eyes to acknowledge her mother, and quickly casts her head back down again, indifferent to her mother's worry. Her long blonde hair matches that of her mother's and cascades loosely forward over her face dipping carelessly into the water at her feet. She stares at a tiny path of running water created by a gap between two of the display cases. It travels a very short distance, but the little girl imagines it as a roaring river mightily plowing along a titanic landscape in some fictional story.

"Jenn!" Kierlyn huffs again, leaning over to snatch her daughter up, "You can't keep running off ahead of me! I can't lose you, *too!*" She snaps her mouth closed quickly, upset at her word choices, pushing out a barely noticeable bead of tears and hoping her daughter does not notice.

"It's a little beetle!" The girl proclaims excitedly under her breath, "she's ex-kaping, too!"

Kierlyn squints away the tears and sees a black desert beetle clinging to a bit of torn

paper, swirling in dizzying circles along the miniature river on its tiny life raft. She doesn't know if her daughter is trying to save the beetle from drowning, or deliberately placed the beetle into its peril. Neither would surprise her. *Neither matter right now.*

"We're not *escaping*, Jenn, I've told you that. Right now we're looking for food. And I've asked you to help! C'mon! Let's go! Leave the poor beetle alone." Kierlyn commands in a raspy tone from too many days of breathing through ash. "And now you're soaking wet." Kierlyn furrows her eyes with inimitable maternal displeasure; half angry and half relieved.

Kierlyn coughs a couple of times into her fist and then pulls the handkerchief around her muzzle covering her nose and mouth. Gently pulling Jenn from her watery roost, she stands her daughter up and pulls the loose bit of fabric of her garb over her nose, mostly covering the lower portion of her petite face. The girl's eyes and ears are too big for her head, appearing especially large with her face half covered. Her mother allows herself a tiny smile.

"You have to keep the cover up, bug," Kierlyn instructs, turning to stand side by side with her daughter in assessment of the room, "This ash is bad to breathe."

"I don't like it," Jenn mumbles through the covering with a soft and muted voice, "It makes it hard to smell."

"I know, bug, but we need them. Let's do the best we can. We need to find food."

"I already *found* food!" Claims the little girl proudly, plucking the beetle and its raft out of the water and setting it atop the display case. The beetle scuttles reflexively in a direct line for the edge of the case and falls off the other side. "Oh no!" Jenn exclaims.

"Shhh!" Her mother hushes, "*He'll find us!*"

The girl spins to face her mother with her eyes split wide with terror, cupping both paws around her muzzle to prevent herself from speaking.

"*Quietly!*" Her mother reminds.

"You found food?" she echoes, quickly changing the subject, "Where?" But the little girl remains statuesque amid the trickling water with scared eyes tearing up above the ruffled edges of her scarf. "It's okay, it's okay," Kierlyn soothes, wading nearer her daughter. Jenn hugs her mother's knees and Kierlyn leans over sideways, wrapping an arm around her daughter's shoulder and running her fingers through her tangled hair. "We're okay. I don't smell him anymore, do you? You can't smell him, right?"

Jenn reveals her nose briefly and raises it into the air as a tear rolls out and then shakes her head.

"See? We're safe. He's gone. He's not going to hurt us any more, okay? Let's find the food and get back."

The little girl nods through a snuffle and wades over to a lonely standing cabinet in the corner. The closed bi-fold doors of the metal container are wedged tight by a leaning ceiling ballast that had fallen after the fires. The heavy metal beam cannot be moved, Kierlyn assesses, *but the cabinet can – if it's worth the noise*, Kierlyn surmises.

“In here?” She questions, gesturing at the sealed metal box, “Are you sure?”

The little girl nods again eagerly, turning back to stare at the bakery front door as if expecting to see a villain walk through. She fidgets fretfully.

Kierlyn places one paw on the cabinet and one on the beam, looking up into the destroyed ceiling for anything loose that may yet fall. Wading to the other side of the cabinet, she straddles the beam long enough to clear its girth, and then slides between it and the back wall. Pressing her left shoulder and hip against the case, she digs her foot paws into the slippery floor trying to push but cannot find the grip. The pads of her paws slide along the slimy concrete as though coated in oil. She exchanges her position by placing both feet onto the frame of the neighboring smashed display case, and rests her back against the sealed cabinet. Pushing hard, she feels how tight the ballast is wedged, and she doubts she'll be able to budge the cabinet after all. Her empty stomach grumbles with the effort, and so she desperately tries once more, pushing off of the display case again with all the remaining strength of her legs. The smashed remnant of the display case begins to bend at the frame dropping chunks of shattered glass into the water, but after a moment more, just as she is about to give up, the cabinet finally yields, sliding along the wall with a shrill metal-on-metal scraping noise. A loose bit catches into the ballast, locking the cabinet into place and stops it dead. *Good enough*, she grants, exhausted and worried about what the clamor might attract.

Climbing down, she moves to the front of the cabinet and joins her daughter who has been impressed by her mother several times during the past few days. Wrenching on the thin handle, Kierlyn snaps it off with a loud *glank* that echoes hollowly through the small shop and out into the corridor. Both mother and daughter freeze and look to the door to listen for responding movement in the outer street but detect nothing, waiting a full four breaths. Kierlyn attempts to muffle the frustratingly creaky door, warped slightly from the pressure of the beam pressed against it.

The cabinet door falls open carrying a perfumed wave of sweet air from the surprisingly dry cavity, caressing their noses with the delectable fragrances of nuts, wheat, and honey. At once, their mouths salivate with suppressed hunger. Several of the inner shelves are stacked full of pastries individually wrapped in waxed paper; thin tartlets known to the kin as ‘biscotto’ seem unaffected by smoke or water. The soft dessert features a flakey dough crust baked with dried fruits and nuts inside with a honey glazing. Kierlyn has never been particularly fond of the especially sweet and sticky food, but she finds their aroma wholly satisfying at present and will not resist.

In a rush, she spins the bag from her shoulder and unzips it along the top, pushing a hastily preassembled collection of stuff as far down into the bag as it will squash and fills the remaining space with as many pastries as she can fit. Handing a biscotto to Jenn who has been bouncing at the ankles impatiently since the discovery, Kierlyn is pleased with this small victory. The cabinet still holds many foods, but the backpack hasn't the room to claim them. Kierlyn holds one of the wrapped treats in her mouth as she carefully re-

zips her bag and slings it back over her shoulder nestling herself into both straps. She calmly and delicately forces the cabinet door closed again, sealing away its treasure. *We may need this again*, she thinks. Retrieving the dessert from her muzzle with one paw, she reaches down and grasps her daughter by the arm, slowly climbing their way through the watery shop in silence. Jenn nibbles anxiously at her first meal in over a day, content to finally have something to eat.

“I don’t know where you got that remarkable nose, dear,” she whispers softly with a proud smile, “but it didn’t come from me!”

Jenn smiles in reply, wrinkling the pink of her nose a few times and nipping at her breakfast contentedly; her white-tipped tail sways softly behind, hovering just over the water’s surface.

The pair poke their heads from the shattered front door of The Golden Basket into the outer corridor of East Market Street, looking west. The street remains dark and quiet. Sunbeams streak down through the dome, painting the fog of dust and ash into long white pillars like giant swords. They keep to the shadows of the dimly lit street, walking in the edges of the shop façades as they move westward toward Park Street, carefully avoiding the myriad of broken glass shards that litter their path in every direction. They wordlessly pass a clothier, a grocery, and then Jenn’s day school, Green Primary; all destroyed by fire and water. Jenn pulls her paw away from her mother just then and runs to the front window of her school, stopping short of touching the scorched building, and looks in woefully.

Kierlyn jaunts quickly beside her, cautiously grabbing her by the wrist.

“We can’t,” Kierlyn states emphatically, predicting the question that’s come many times before. “It’s gone, dear, I’m sorry.”

Jenn only stares through the shattered window at an overturned desk near the center of the room. The desks are arranged in circles, five to a set. Most of them have been overturned with papers and children’s books strewn in every direction. Colorful drawings made from sticks of charcoal and colored wax cling to perfect walls, and just above them the utter destruction of a charred black ceiling. The placid water of the floor creates a flawless mirror, reflecting the seared ceiling above and the many devastated timbers that seem held together by sheer magic. Their condition is so dismal, Kierlyn is afraid to even breathe anywhere near the structure in fear it will at last collapse. Amid the wreckage sits a little toy feline dolly, black with white spots bearing a resemblance to its owner. It sits, staring out the window as if waiting to be rescued, and it breaks Jenn’s heart to look at it. It breaks Kierlyn’s heart to look at her daughter. But to enter the building in this condition is certain suicide and not worth the risk.

“I’m really sorry, dear. But we can’t go in there.” Kierlyn steps beside her daughter and guides her away from the window by the paw.

“But daddy gave it to me,” she sniffs under her breath in argument.

This emotional fact hits Kierlyn like a gunshot. Her face spontaneously implodes into a wretched silent pinch, rapidly turning her head away from her daughter’s view just as the

tears push free from her eyes in an uncontrollable burst. Silently, she only squeezes her daughter's paw harder, sniffing twice to herself with incredible restraint. Her stomach clenches, rebelling to force out the sob that dwells there but she imprisons the grief once more, swallowing back the ball of heartache. She must be strong. She allows herself to cry at night. *Only at night.*

"I miss him," Jenn utters to the ground, tears welling in her eyes. Kierlyn can only squeeze her paw in comfort, afraid to open her mouth in fear of releasing the horrible sob held just behind her clenched teeth.

They amble in commemorative silence for a short distance among the shimmering puddles of Park Street heading north. Avoiding the wreckage of the partially collapsed Guild Employment Offices, they swing north on Park Street, and then cut west down Artist's Alley between two singed studios and join the cobblestone eastern path of Hope Park. Listening and sniffing at the air for signs of friends or danger, Jenn *splishes* in the puddles as they walk, instinctively heading toward the sitting areas of the playground, lost in her own world. Kierlyn is always after her daughter for being too easily distracted, but in these past few days, she would give anything for a distraction of her own.

As they turn toward the park, they see a small piece of a simpler time gleaming unaffected by the chaos of the riots and destruction. Their favorite gathering place appears altogether spared by the fires, and it brings them comfort to rest their eyes upon it, even if they both know they can't linger. It's where their little family would always go to eat on the Off Days, and even though she finds this place raw with memory, she's grateful that at least one of her customs has survived.

The pair of panthers tread slowly down the cobblestone path momentarily forgetting the present danger in favor of happier memories. Kierlyn looks around the eerie cavern of the enormous domed city and finds its new shadows and long hollows overwhelmingly symbolic. Like her life, the city was normally well lit and well taken care of, full of reasonably happy kin with simple worries. But now, it stands empty and grim, and the future feels dark and difficult. She pinches new tears away with a thumb and forefinger, guiltily forcing reality back into her mind.

The neatly arranged stone path dips down a slight hill as they pass three hardware and supply shops, fully ravaged for makeshift weapons and provisions. The cobblestone path lines the eastern edge of the park and runs diagonally to the far north-western part of town, toward Remembrance Graveyard and lesser Poeville, the seedier part of town housing a collection of recluses whom, as far as Kierlyn knows, are still there and still blissfully unaware of what transpires around them. If they stayed on the path long enough, they'd pass Shimmer Pond, one of two large ponds that act as part of the water filtration process, and then ultimately Keeper Forest of the North West quarter, harvested for timber and other goods. The pathway has no formal name though everyone calls it Stargazer Road, which is as well enough to be formal. It passes directly under the center of the great dome, and at night, after slumber, when the lights are all off, the sky glows gorgeously with its many punctures of starlight. She remembers courting her mate, many cycles ago, walking this path after curfew – and how the Keepers chased them right into the pond. Galen fell in and came up looking like a skinny rail with fur.

Kierlyn laughs at her memory, and with it came tears of sorrow. She chooses to hold onto

the feeling of innocence as they approach her favorite trees of the park, illuminated by the full light of the sun pouring in through the dome far above. The natural shadows of everything else surrounding them feels like midnight by comparison, and she analyzes the area to be certain nothing unwanted lies in wait. Paw in paw, the pair step down the slight hill passing a number of lesser shops and storefronts that appear undamaged when viewed in shadow. Only when Kierlyn looks at them directly does she see how truly complete the vandals were in their pillaging. Some decorative windows were smashed that lead nowhere and protected nothing, but were destroyed in spite, regardless.

Jenn tugs on her mother's paw gently as if she's about to stop walking, and Kierlyn spins her head to face her quickly, "Do you smell him?" she whispers with realization.

"No," Jenn responds, increasing her pace to match her mother's. "I'm still hungry."

"I know, bug," she admits, "I am, too."

She leads her daughter down the stone path sniffing more anxiously at the air as they approach the park. The musty, oily smell of the stone and charred wood confuses her nose, masking what's familiar. *It's amazing how well calibrated Jenn's nose is*, she decides, thankful for small gifts.

The park is a wide-open space with short grasses and farming plots along the far western edge. Very few items within the park are taller than she, save for the Grand Stand at the park's center and the rest room pavilion near South Pond. Both are more than two hundred paces away, so anyone hiding there would give them time to escape. The openness of this spot will allow her to see anyone that might approach, but also leaves them completely exposed to those hiding along the flanks. She *hates* this. These horrible feelings of distrust and insufferable paranoia. Ever since the riots, everyone is suspicious of everyone else, violently so, and Kierlyn does not want to be caught out with Jenn. She regrets taking her out now, but she couldn't leave her with the others. Trust has eroded entirely and she does not trust any living soul with Jenn right now. When she came back after scavenging yesterday, she discovered the others had stripped her daughter of everything she was wearing and stole her food; that was a shock she was not expecting. They stole her clothes, her food, their shoes, and who knows what else they had planned.

Kierlyn shudders.

Even friends have turned against each other now that supplies have diminished to catastrophic lows and housing has become scarce. What was not damaged in the fires was destroyed by smoke and water. Anything surviving that was stolen, including living quarters. Several of the residential centers suffered significant fire and water damage, forcing out their tenants. Even with an estimated three thousand of her kin gone, more than one thousand remain and they compete for the same dwindling rations.

Hmmm, she wonders.

Kierlyn has never been to the far west side of the complex housing the Male 'Guild', but knows they have an Eatery on the lower level just like the Fem 'Guild'. *Except the Fem Guild and Children's Guild share an Eatery, so the rations went faster. Most of the kin that fled were male*, she deduces, *so it's possible there are open rooms and more food*

available there. She makes a mental note of this and plans how she might explore later, when Jenn is asleep. I can't leave her alone, though. She sighs audibly. I miss him so much. We could have done this together. It's not fair.

After the Division, not long after she arrived here, she and her friends have only known the sanctuary of the Fem Guild and the public spaces of The Commons. After she met the wolf male, Galen, they moved into Mated Housing on the outer edges of The Commons. For her, that's when the trouble started as it's generally taboo for members of different breeds courting, but with Galen at her side, she never cared. Their happiness washed the villainy of the world away. And after Jenn was born, the three of them were allowed into the Children's Guild, which was usually forbidden to anyone other than new parents and Medical Keepers. Many of the children there were orphans of the Blight, rescued from outer lands or orphaned onsite, and were taken in by the Keepers and as many guild-kin volunteers as were willing. Kierlyn and Galen were happy to help in this manner, and loved their lives as temporary surrogate guardians for many children until permanent homes were found with other kin. It is not without irony now, Kierlyn decides, that it was in part due to Galen's selflessness that got him killed.

That horrible reptile, she seethes, devising ways she could have helped smarter had she the time to plan. She grabs at her arm wound, petting it through its bandages, remembering nothing but a flurry of snapping teeth and claws, and the long tail that snaked away from her view after Galen was thrown out of the window protecting a group of children from the assailant.

She closes her eyes tight, and points her head down, pushing out new tears.

She catches her breath and inhales deeply, swallowing the lump again, struggling to push recent memories away from her mind.

They step over a short, knee-high picket fence that surrounds the park and find their way to the black metal benches of their special spot under a cluster of maples. She brushes off the light coating of ash that has collected along its parallel planks and hoists her daughter onto the seat. Setting the knapsack down beside her, she unzips the top and retrieves another two biscotto handing them both to her daughter to unwrap. Digging down into the bottom of the bag then, she pulls out one of her spare tank-top shirts and folds it once over into a loose square. Dragging it across her daughter's feet, she sponges away the water from between her toes, drying off the pads and then wrapping the shirt around each of her legs to wick away the moisture trapped within the fur. Jenn gently swings her feet back and forth, tickled by the light cleaning.

"Aren't you hungry, mama?" the little girl mumbles through a mouthful of food, flicking her ears.

"I'll eat later, bug, thank you" Kierlyn responds through her handkerchief, with a hidden, sorrowful smile, "there's plenty for later."

Kierlyn squeezes the water out of her shirt and flops it over the back of the bench as she sits down beside her daughter. Jenn seems satisfied in her meal, licking the honey residue from the pads of her fingers before setting upon unwrapping the second.

“Are you sure, mama?” She asks again holding the snack out for her mother, concerned for her mother’s hunger.

“Yes, yes,” Kierlyn responds with tired enthusiasm, “I’m fine. You enjoy,” she continues, preoccupied with their safety. She rotates her head from side to side nervously scanning the surrounding area for more of her kin, surprised she has not yet seen anyone in this long morning, and it’s been even longer since she’s seen a friendly face. *Where is everyone?* She wonders, relieved for the silence more than worried. She takes in a long view of the park, returning her scrutiny to the distant corner of East Market and Park Street, watching the slow streams of water bubble down the same cobblestone path of their retreat. She witnesses the opaque plumes of dust and ash hanging in the sunbeams like far away galaxies, ringed hazily around the collapsed structures. She follows Market Street west with her eyes as it travels behind the charred remains of the Guild Employment Offices.

All six dilapidated units of the three-story structure share walls with each other, which were once used to provide services to kin looking for work or assistance with personal matters, among other things. Kierlyn met the fox-breed, Tissa, in that office building, she recalls. The vixen had helped enroll Jenn into Green Primary School across the street just last cycle, and has since performed many similar kindnesses for her little family. Tissa later became a dear friend, despite their vastly different cultural circles. Kierlyn exhales disappointingly. She has no idea where Tissa is right now, and has not seen her in over ten days, much before the riots, when tensions were just beginning to come to a head.

Both buildings are destroyed, Kierlyn notes of her daughter’s school and Tissa’s offices mournfully. *Everything I know is destroyed*. Every street level window within her view has been smashed out, with long black tongues of charred wood and sooty stone reaching skyward from every window. The office building was one of the three known targets of the bombing vandals, destroying the structure almost completely in the explosion. The fire damage alone was so severe that it has caused the top floor to drop into the story below it. *Tissa’s office was on that level*, she recollects with a heavy heart, hoping that her friend’s disappearance beforehand is a sign she’s safe somewhere else. *Wherever she is*.

Why that building was targeted, she’ll never know.

Kierlyn forces her gaze farther to the right, casting a wider view over the distant southwest corners of the park. East Market Street re-appears as *West* Market from behind the ruins of the office building for a brief span before curving southward around the water tower and then looping northward again as Water Street. The far end of the road has not yet been met by the rising sun and is still bathed in a deep, unmoving shade. The hard edge of shadow cast down from the dome wall far above gives way to the tall rows of desolated corn stalks, jumbled trellises of grape vines and tangled rows of beans designating the beginning of Westfallen Farms.

The farmland supplies virtually all of the enclosed community’s fresh produce and was therefore the first target of the raging guild-kin when hunger set in. The obliteration of the crops overlapped the last gasps of the riots and marked the official beginning of lawless life for all those whom remained. Kierlyn reaches to her left cheek below the eye and touches a stinging pink wound there, received from an unseen competitor trying to

pull crops off the same lines two days ago. In the confusion of thrashing foliage she never caught sight of who had attacked her; the assailant moved on as quickly as he or she struck, leaving behind only the sudden sting of a dripping wound. Kierlyn becomes angry at the memory. In part because of the lingering pain, but mostly for how distressingly wretched her kin had become in this past cycle; so willing to hurt and steal things that were once so freely given.

Westfallen Farm composes the entirety of the west end of The Commons, with South Pond marking its southernmost tip, growing ever northward in endless rows of corn, tomatoes, beans, potatoes, cabbages and carrots; all pulled up in one ferocious afternoon of hoarding. Lining the farmland in a great loop is a tidy row of oak trees growing in a straight line to the northern reaches before jutting east through the middle of Hope Park, forming a small wooded area known as Bristlewood. A sparse but handsome orchard of fruit trees and maples grows denser as it moves east ending abruptly at Park Street where the two girls currently sit. The respectable forest lies just behind Kierlyn, several hundred paces north of her bench. *I see no one*, she notes of the calm spaces. Just behind them is the brightly colored wood of the children's play place with its swinging seats and climbing walls, and Jenn enjoys the memories of she and Galen chasing Jenn around the structure during a recent visit. Kierlyn prepares an excuse for her daughter if she asks to play upon it again.

As she spins her gaze slowly across the wide interior landscape, she rests her eyes momentarily on the pavilion and restrooms on the western footpath where she thinks she sees movement. There is no wind in the giant domed city. The circulation fans have been turned off or damaged, so the air is stale and still. Shifting clouds of ash and dust create jolts of fear every time Kierlyn detects one, since it can only mean something has moved through them. She sniffs audibly enough that Jenn looks up from her feet in curiosity, but does not speak. She determines the threat to be another phantom of shadow, though stares for several breaths to make sure. She's observed too many of these little disturbances to feel comfortable. She moves her scrutiny to the vaulted grand stand in the middle of the park. It's a clever little two story erection built mostly for decoration and stands far enough removed from the epicenter of the riots that it gleams white in a picturesque beam of red sunlight pouring down through the great dome fifteen stories above.

She looks up to see the dome coated lightly in red sands around its edges. Without the Maintenance Guild on duty to clear the sands, she suspects the sun will be blotted out entirely within days, and then the glass of the dome will likely crack under the mounting weight. All of the foliage that she surveys, such as it is, will be dead and gone within a season. *Our time here is doomed*, she prophesizes. *Ironic*, she sighs.

She and those like her chose to stay when all the others fled because of a shared fear of the Blight. But it was more than fear alone; many that remain still believe in the Keeper's ways and do not want to see society sink once more into disease and despair. The remaining guild-kin had no desire to risk the wonderful life they've built for themselves here in the Complex, but it has been stolen from them anyway. This life has ended. Resources will be gone very soon and the Commons will no longer sustain life. The Keepers seem to have abandoned them at last, though Kierlyn cannot blame them. Everything they had built has been defiled and destroyed. The protection of quarantine against the Blight has been utterly destroyed by explosions, which carved gaping wounds into several outer walls. Any hope of safeguard against disease has dissipated with the

smoke. And with that, the simple comforts of life are gone. Friends have become competitors, even foes, and life has once more become a savage struggle.

Kierlyn can feel her mood souring further, and the depression takes a firmer hold. With so much lost, she feels like a deep hole of impossible goals have been set before her. The dome over her head, slowly sealing with sand, feels like a tomb cap lowering to snuff them out.

Plink.

Kierlyn snaps out of her woe and turns to look at Jenn, still swinging her feet, long finished with her food. In the short grasses at her feet she sees an acorn sized stone. Looking up, she skims the high outer walls of The Commons and squints to observe the residential balconies of the Mated Housing units that overlook the public spaces. The lowest level of units are about eight stories up, and the highest on the eleventh. Everything after that is the dome. With the odd sand-starved light, she can barely see the eight story, but spins slowly in a semi-circle with her paw shielding her eyes against the sun inspecting the balconies of each one.

Plink.

The noise came from another small stone bounced off the back of her bench, cast from their left, and Kierlyn whirls to the rooftops of the adjacent shops. Crouched along the rooftop of a nearby hardware shop she sees an unfamiliar black panther-breed female, pointing animatedly over Kierlyn's head toward the cornrows of Westfallen. Kierlyn's heart drops and she spins to the west with her stomach in her throat. At once she sees a shadowy pack of figures running directly at them across the grasses just behind the pavilion. She jumps up without saying a word and tosses the backpack over her shoulders, snatching up Jenn into both arms. Jenn wraps her arms and legs around her mother's neck and waist, looking over her shoulder as she runs.

"What's wrong, mama?" Jenn cries, her voice filled with worry and fear.

Kierlyn does not answer with words. She spins her head to the left looking over her shoulder and identifies at least three males running after them in silence. From what she could see of their tails, and two of those are wolves. *Rot!* Jenn follows her mother's cue and adjusts her gaze to look at what she sees, realizing then the level of danger. In a sudden burst she begins to sob and clutches deep into the fur of her mother's shoulders.

Alone, Kierlyn might try to fight them off but she will not risk it with Jenn. *She's already lost one parent.* And she's tired and hungry, without energy enough to carry the backpack and Jenn while running. She should have eaten when she had the chance. *Stupid!* Her mind reels to form a plan. She's too far away from her hideout in Keeper's Forest, which is still another nine hundred paces from here. *I'd never make it.* She considers her back-up spot; *No, not there,* she huffs without any real choice. She runs along the decorative eastern fence of Hope Park dodging several apple trees, passing the play yard and splashes through the spongy grasses leading to the swollen banks of Shimmer Pond. She hops the knee-high park fence barely clearing the low tops and almost trips with the added weight. She can hear the wolves gaining on them, and her daughter's mewling has been an effective gauge of severity, becoming more urgent as the gap closes. Jenn's mass

is becoming difficult to manage in her tired arms, countering her gait and spoiling her balance. Against better judgment, Kierlyn decides finally to head for her back-up location and turns abruptly east, returning to the slick concrete of Park Street and then onto Packer Street, lining the meatpacking district. The building she seeks is less than two hundred paces away and wedged fatefully between Lupine Alley and Vulpes Way. She has an old friend there that parted ways on bad terms when she began courting Galen, but an unfriendly face is far better than what follows.

The Packer Street studios are nothing more than derelict shops overrun by squatters who've selfishly broken away from the main housing centers. The Keepers have tried for cycles to remove them, but have given up since the squatters tend to keep peacefully to themselves. The buildings are better known as *the Sheds*, and are a misshapen grouping of stand-alone edifices of various heights with nothing in common except the improvised rooftop catwalks and gangways that tie them together. Most of the structures reach about four stories tall, with vacant commercial spaces on the ground and second floors. The doors and windows of the first two levels are all boarded up however; an aggressive symptom of the Sheds occupants' shared paranoia, and can only be entered through the upper levels.

Kierlyn leaps over a small curb separating Park from Packer Street and when her bare paw touches down on the other side her legs spill out from under her, tumbling along the slick pavement. She manages to wrap her arms around Jenn's head before hitting the ground, but it left her own body exposed and she landed hard on her right shoulder and temple. Jenn scraped along her shoulders and high back, skidding forward under her mother's weight, though did not cry out right away. Processing the shock, the adrenaline pushes away the pain for the time being. Kierlyn stands again with a wobble and a burning gash across her forehead and nose, nauseous and extremely dizzy. She took a full blow to the head and is seeing double. Her daughter lays on the ground still, terrified to do little more than wail as the wolves round the corner. Kierlyn turns to face them, still lightheaded, feeling the warmth of blood trickle down her forehead and across her nose. Positioning herself between the advancing group and her daughter, she prepares to be badly beaten.

"Jenn! Run!" She yells down to her daughter, scrambling to get up, "*RUN!*". Jenn scrambles to her feet, letting her blanket fall away to expose her tiny frame clothed in nothing more the little pink shirt and her underwear. She sobs uncontrollably with giant terrified tears rolling down her cheeks, and walks with arms outstretched to her mother confused and panicked, but Kierlyn only pushes her way, hard. The little girl gasps, more confused than before, and more scared, but her mother pushes her away a second time.

"*RUN!*" Kierlyn screams with teary-eyed hysteria, "I love you so much, bug! *NOW RUN!*"

Jenn at last obeys against everything she feels to be right, escaping along the building fronts of Packer Street without any knowledge of where to go. She climbs the first scaffold she finds, tucked around the corner of Rollin's Place alley. It's a shaky affair, poorly built and barely attached to the wall with missing bolts and intentionally noisy slats.

Kierlyn turns to face her attackers just as the leading male smashes her across the head at

the muzzle, spinning her around with a mighty blow she could not absorb. The nausea and lightheadedness intensifies, and she flounders on the ground incapable of finding her bearings. Her ears ring so loudly she misses the vitriol spewing from the pack of five whom settle around her in a circle. Kierlyn is shocked to smell that two of them are female, a fox and canine-breed, standing slightly behind the other three male wolf-breed males.

“I KNEW IT,” the leading male howls down at her scornfully, “Even through the sewage I could smell your filth!”

The vixen laughs from the back.

Kierlyn chokes on the salty fluids clogging her nose, and rolls onto her arms to let the blood drain free. Through her tears she looks sideways to the alleyway where she last saw Jenn, and catches sight of her staring down from the rickety third-story ledge of the four-story building. *Not like this*, Kierlyn thinks.

“I’ve been waitin’ for this for six long cycles, CrossBreeder,” The wolf sneers with disdain, pacing back and forth near Kierlyn’s head.

“Pike,” she sputters, *“please!”*

“It’s far too late for *‘please’*, you rottin’ bitch!” Pike bellows, his deep voice anxiously bouncing off the building fronts in a dull echo. “BlackFang was one of *us*! *My kin*! Not *yours*! You had *NO* business foolin’ ‘round with him! It ain’t natural and it ain’t right!”

“Please!” she begs, imagining her daughter’s life without a father *or* a mother.

“NO! There is no *‘please’*! There is no *mercy* for crossbreedin’, thievin’ whores!”

“I never stole anything!” Kierlyn sobs, trying to push herself off the ground. One of Pike’s cronies, a wolf-breed on his left, kicks her arms out from under her, nearly breaking her left arm and re-opening the wound in the bandage. She lands on the pavement with a crunch, wheezing.

“Oh, *no*?” Pike howls. “So my sister’s heart was *nothin’* to you?”

Pike’s associates grow uneasy, pacing anxiously, waiting for permission to assail her. The blood in their eyes is inescapable. The vixen and canine seem especially eager, despite their hypocrisy.

“Nnn – not what – I – meant...” Kierlyn coughs up through blood and agony.

“Yes it is,” Pike scoffs confidently, looking down his muzzle at her. His fur is a dusky mix of charcoal and midnight with a faint line of brown separating the two hues. His haunting ice-blue eyes pierce through a mask of pitch-black fur. At one time, Kierlyn thought him handsome but she sees only evil now. “You knew exactly what you were doin’ when you were seducing Black with those sweet blue eyes of yers — he left his pack, his job with us, *and my sister*! And fer what?! Some skanky feline *slut* and her pretty raised tail?!”

“Galen and I—” she begins in defense. But with that the vixen finally pounces and grabs Kierlyn by the scalp, pulling her head way back, “His name, was *BlackFang!*” she screams furiously, bouncing her head off of the pavement, “And now they’re *both* dead!”

“My sister’s dead now because of you,” Pike continues, “She killed ‘erself a cycle after you stole Black away from her. She couldn’t go on anymore. You *KNEW* she needed him. But you didn’t rottin’ care, did you? And now BlackFang’s gone, too. I heard Sharptooth rottin’ killed him. How’s that for ironic? You know, he never woulda’ even rottin’ *been there* if you hadn’t turned him into such’a *flower* — *OW!*”

The wolf drags his paw through his hair and checks for blood. He looks up to the buildings and sees Jenn balancing on the gangway above tossing jagged pieces of broken stone, peeled away from the crumbling walls.

“Heh,” Pike mocks with the upturned lip of a sinister smile. “Go get her,” he commands of his companion on his right. The light grey wolf stalks off silently, eyes fixed on the little panther girl.

“NO!” Kierlyn shrieks, preparing to run after him. The other companion, a dark grey and white male, grabs her by the backpack, pulling her off of her feet and casting her aside to the ground, ripping the backpack free. Pike moves closer to her crumpled form and stands very deliberately on her hand paws, bending down low to be muzzle to muzzle with her and raises her chin with a finger.

“Oh, don’t worry about your little half-breed spawn,” he growls slowly, pushing the stink of his breath into her face. “We’ll do her fast. We’re not *heartless*.”

Kierlyn growls low and snaps her jaws at Pike’s finger, but he expected the attempt and so only pulls back quickly with a wide smile and catches her muzzle fully with his massive paw, holding it shut tight. With her muzzle securely held, his claws poking painfully into her lower jaw, he forcefully cocks her head to the side demonstrating how much control he’s gained. He glances over her head to his companion standing behind her, and nods at him with a queer smirk.

“Are you going to give us any trouble?” he asks, and then shakes her head back and forth, physically directing her by the muzzle.

Pike’s crony positions himself behind Kierlyn and begins to undo the zipper of his pants.

“You’re going to be a good kitty now?” Again directing her head by the muzzle, forcing it up and down.

“You play nice, and I promise not to hurt the half-breed,” he says with a dark chuckle, “We’ll keep her around. Who knows? Crossbreeds must be good for *something*.”

Both males laugh under their breath while Pike digs his clawed feet harder into Kierlyn’s hands, pinning her firmly to the ground with his weight. She thrashes as hard as she can, trying to pull her arms away, kicking her legs and flailing her tail but the males are too heavy and too strong.

“MAMA!” Jenn screams from above, followed by a lashing of squeaking metal and scraping brick. Kierlyn looks up from between Pike’s legs and sees the light grey wolf has already captured her daughter, holding her around the waist as casually as one carries a sack of potatoes. The wolf balances himself on the rail and prepares to descend with the tiny panther, his tail swaying with victory.

Kierlyn muffles a scream through Pike’s clenched paw, flaying about with every ounce of her strength in desperation to secure at least one small opening she can exploit, but the males are rigid and unmoving. She can feel the heat and weight of the wolf behind her pressing down, elevating her panic. The dark grey wolf jabs his finger down the back of her pants, huffing audibly, splitting open the two snaps of the tail hole, and tearing it wider.

“Why are you fighting?” Pike grins, “I thought this is what you liked?”

The dark grey wolf only smiles up at Pike and pulls her pants down over her hips.

Kierlyn shrieks with a long high whine muffled through the grip of Pike’s clenching paw and hopes that Jenn somehow managed to get away.

“MAMA!” Jenn screams again, with a new urgency.

Kierlyn looks up through the voids of Pike’s hunched form and sees her daughter dangling by the ankle over the edge of the building, held aloft by the light grey wolf.

“You bite me again *and I swear I’ll drop you*, you rotten half-breed!” He hollers, shaking Jenn threateningly from the four-story landing.

Oh, rot! No! Kierlyn cries in her mind, helplessly.

“Just drop her,” Pike calls up to him callously, with a proud smile of betrayal. “I’m not dealing with a kit.” He looks around to meet Kierlyn’s horrified eyes with an evil smile. “Oh. I guess we *are* heartless.”

Kierlyn’s eyes flick nervously back and forth between Pike and the light grey wolf holding her daughter; the only action she can still perform freely.

Just then, the light grey wolf is pulled backward and Kierlyn lurches assuming the worst, but Jenn is still in his grip, and they both fall onto the landing behind the east face of the wall, out of view.

“What the—” Pike utters under this breath. Jenn stands up looking at whatever action is taking place along the other side of the wall, backing away against the railing. A short series of muffled whines and the light grey wolf’s body comes rolling down the scaffolding stairs in a cacophony of clanking slats and twisting metal. When his body strikes the second story landing, his momentum loosens the shoddy construction and the whole bottom half rip away from the wall, landing upon the hard pavement below in a deafening shower of raining steel.

Pike stands and turns to face the alleyway and in so doing releases Kierlyn's muzzle. She immediately seizes the opportunity and snaps at Pike's leg with as much force as her jaw will produce. He yips and shifts his weight from the affected leg long enough that she can yank her arm free, and swings hard with a fist at his knees. He manages to catch her arm mid-swing and bends it backward with an angry snarl.

"I'm going to kill y—"

Suddenly then, Pike jerks his head to his right, fully releasing Kierlyn's paws and arm, stumbling to the side in a full uncoordinated step. The dark grey wolf behind Kierlyn stops his assault, and stands nervously curious. Pike fumbles to one knee, wordless and quiet, holding the side of his head, and then finally collapses to the ground. His dark grey companion steps away from Kierlyn spinning his head in a full circle of the street looking around with shock, his pants unbuttoned and hanging half-open at his waist. The two females of the party are jolted with alarm; the vixen runs to Pike's side to inspect his condition, and the canine stands opposite the grey wolf, back to back, sharing his shocked surveillance of the streets.

"Who's there!?" The grey wolf screams with an anxiety poorly masked by anger.

A jagged barb of metal strikes him across the forehead sending the wolf into a reeling spin of pain. The canine girl's eyes widen when she sees the blood gush forward down his face into his paws. She quickly ignores him to scan the rooftops for herself finding then along the uppermost ridge of the fourth story a black panther girl more heavily muscled than her typical breed. She's holding a stretched and loaded custom built slingshot, aimed directly at her.

The canine girl backs away and jumps behind the crouched and whimpering shield of the grey wolf.

"Coward!" The black panther condemns, screaming down at her. "Where's your spirit *now?! You pathetic bitch!* Get the rot outta here before I put this through your eye!"

"YOU ROT!" The vixen screams back in her friend's defense, kneeling beside Pike with his unconscious bleeding head in her lap.

The panther releases her shot and the barbed pellet parts directly between the vixen's erect ears, skimming the flesh of her scalp.

"TRY ME," she retorts, loud and unsmiling.

Flummoxed and scared, the vixen and the canine dart away leaving behind the unmoving forms of Pike and his half-buried light grey partner in the alleyway, abandoning the dark grey wolf to his own devices. He hesitates on his own steam, staggering away behind the girls, and casts an eye several times up to the panther. Growling lowly under his breath, his tone tinged with subtle whimpers. Blood drips freely down his arm and away from his elbow leaving droplets along the ground as he flees.

The clawed feet of the attackers *tick* quickly along the street finally disappearing into the grasses of Hope Park. Packer Street is reclaimed by an uneasy calm and inactive silence,

punctuated only by the soft whimpers of Jenn, hidden somewhere out of view from her mother, high on the damaged balcony.

“You. *CrossBreeder*,” calls the black panther from above, “Alleyway. Now.” She starkly commands, pointing to the collapsed wreckage of the staircase and the unconscious wolf buried beneath it.

Kierlyn stands up slowly, shaking. She pulls her torn pants up, not bothering with the clasps, and holds them in place with one paw. She tries as best she can to recapture her dignity but feels so wholly violated and helpless that she doubts she’ll ever again be able to feel safe. Despite her shock and despite the still ringing pain in her head, the same three words repeat over and over in her mind, *Did she see?*

She’s tried, successfully, for Jenn’s entire life to normalize the world around her in their strange little domed city, removing fear and installing hope whenever she can. She’s been a wonderful parent, she and Galen both, at saving her from excessive turmoil and unkind words. But all of that work has been undone in these past few days, as they have experienced the absolute worst of their kin in extreme doses, all at once.

Kierlyn no longer sees the point of holding herself together. The emotions overrun her system, and she sobs so fully that she cannot see where she’s walking. The light grey furry mound of Pike’s crony remains motionless as a blurry blob through her tears, partially buried under the wreckage, his upper torso laying exposed across the narrow alleyway with arms splayed. Kierlyn accidentally kicks his wrist as she walks over it, and it became the metamorphic catalyst her subconscious craved. Her sorrow and self-pity transform with a single breath into pure rage, and she kicks the head and neck of the oblivious wolf repeatedly. Her rage manifests into alarming tenacity, built up with a force that shocks even her even as she assaults her foe.

“Mama?” Cries Jenn, overhead. Her voice has calmed but has become unmistakably thick with concern, traumatized no doubt *at* her mother – *for* her mother. Kierlyn feels ashamed and does not look up, unable to look into her daughter’s face at that moment. There is no greater mirror for shame than a child’s face. Instead, she scrapes her left paw along the shabby brick of the alley as she hobbles forward, moving past the bloodied head of her child’s oppressor and the wreckage of his prison. Already, the guilt grows. Despite everything, this is not who she is.

“*H’oy*. Up here.”

Kierlyn sniffs back a nose full of mucous and blood, wiping her eyes clear. She refastens the snaps on her pants, though the torn hole reveals a gap running between her legs. She looks up finally to see her savior standing beside another metal framework. The black panther pulls a latch and the staircase drops in a series of sharp *bangs* and *clanks*. A muscled fox-breed male appears at the black panther’s side, with a paw on Jenn’s shoulder. Jenn appears shocked, but unharmed and her posture relaxed. She looks so small next to the broad fox.

Small, but brave.

“Oh,” she says just then, remembering something. She turns around and heads back into

the street, sniffing loudly to clear the steady flow of fluids pouring from her nose and mouth. She completely and deliberately forces herself to ignore Pike as she treads nearer to him, bending over painfully to collect Jenn's blanket and then her backpack. One of the straps is torn at the seam, but is otherwise intact. She doubts the food has survived in any suitable condition.

Climbing back over the beaten mound of the light grey wolf, she ambles down the short alley and takes hold of the rickety ladder of the staircase looking up to her daughter. Meeting her eyes, she offers an awkward, squared-off smile as she ascends the four noisy flights and stands finally at the narrow passage onto the rooftop, blocked by the black panther with her arms crossed menacingly. Kierlyn has known several black panther-breed kin – the breeds all know their number – but this female eludes her recollection. She has no memory of her face or scent. *Not surprising*, Kierlyn dismisses, *if she's spent her time living as a recluse*.

"Is that true? Yer BlackFang's girl?" The black panther asserts, her expression and manner quite serious.

"*Galen*," Kierlyn corrects after a pause, implied with an unflinching tone all her own.

The fox guffaws, recognizing the subtle challenge, and the black panther cracks a wry smile of approval.

"Right, right," she says, stepping aside to let Kierlyn pass, and the fox steps aside as Jenn runs over to her mother. Kierlyn drops her bag and blanket and kneels into the loose gravel of the rooftop, seizing Jenn up in a full hug. Jenn whimpers with a tiny voice, crying again into her mother's hair and shoulder.

"Thank you," Kierlyn whispers over Jenn's shoulder, staring up at the fox whom she assumes to have defeated the light-grey wolf. The fox nods once subtly.

"You're such a brave girl!" She whispers then to Jenn through sniffles, combing her daughter's hair over her ears. Jenn whimpers and offers a quivering smile, glancing at her mother's bleeding forehead, mouth and nose. After a moment of reconnection, Kierlyn stands and takes her daughter tightly by the paw, turning to face the other panther-breed female who clearly acted heroically in her dark moment. "Thank you," she says, opening her arms in offer of a hug.

The black panther looks down at the open-armed gesture, raises one solemn eyebrow with her arms still folded, and merely says, "ah, yer fine," backing away from the offer. Kierlyn just nods, drops her arms and takes up her daughter's paw again turning to the fox, whom only nods again at her acceptingly.

"How do you know my mate?" She says first to the silent fox, moving her attention over to the black panther. She uncrosses her arms, resting one ebony paw solidly on her hip and the other casually behind her head to scratch at her ear. Her fur is solid black and is one of the rare kin she has ever met with such a solid color pattern. Most of her kin are patterned with two or more colors in their coats, and she finds this panther's pelt exotic. Her eyes are a near-solid green with a ring of yellow around each pupil, and her nose and lips a deep rose. Even her short hair, chopped into a spikey tuft around her head, is solid

black. “BlackFfff – er, *Galen*, is well known here. Nicest wolf I know,” she says, walking between Kierlyn and the fox toward the center of the rooftop. “He’s always been good to the kin. And there ain’t no arguin’ that.”

“No,” Kierlyn admits whole-heartedly, looking down as she remembers Galen’s final moments of selfless defense.

It’s the fox’s turn to cross his arms, placing one thick limb over the other before turning to follow his partner toward a tiny hatch in the roof. The portal is probably the only manner of entrance into the bizarre structure. All of the windows are either boarded up, cracked, or blacked-out with cloth and other materials clearly intended to keep curious parties well away. The buildings remind her of the pirate ships in the stories she read about as a kit, only stationary and more ridiculous. The idea of kin opting for seclusion when they’re already in a dome isolated from the world seems especially pathetic. *But* – this ‘pathetic’ loner just saved the lives of she and her daughter, and so recognizes that her judgments are misplaced.

She notices how the smoky fogs of ash and soot are all but gone at this altitude, having settled as a low haze along the street level of the whole Commons. *No wonder I couldn’t see or smell straight*, she thinks. Spinning her view to the east, she finds the gangway bridges and catwalks connecting most of the buildings as another comical reminder of the pirate ships. *Who are these people?* She tries to imagine the make-shift houses as she’s known them from the ground, remembering where her old friend Neveah once lived. The tiger-breed female has been holed-up in one of these units, but a lot has changed in the cycles since she last saw her estranged friend. Mentally, she plots a course using the gangways and over the rooftops to the grand staircase at the east end of Grand Boulevard, which at one time was the primary entrance from the housing guilds into the Commons. After the Division, and the guilds were split by gender and breed, the Grand Boulevard entrance was locked up. But she can still use the long balconies on the seventh floor to work her way back around. She can still make it to Keeper’s Forest before sun down if she dares risk it. After her savage attack, she only wants to lie down. The withdrawn life of the Sheds seems highly appealing in this moment.

“Is anyone gonna get angry if I use the bridges?” Kierlyn calls out after the black panther, just as she opens the rooftop hatch.

“Ha!” She blurts, “you were safer with *those* clowns,” she says pointing at Pike’s general location. “Don’t be daft. That little kit of yers ain’t in shape for running right now. Neither are you.”

Kierlyn hesitates, thinking about her options. “I can’t—”

“You can pay me with what’s in that bag,” the black panther interrupts. “Been a long time since I had biscotto.” And she disappears into the hatch without looking back.