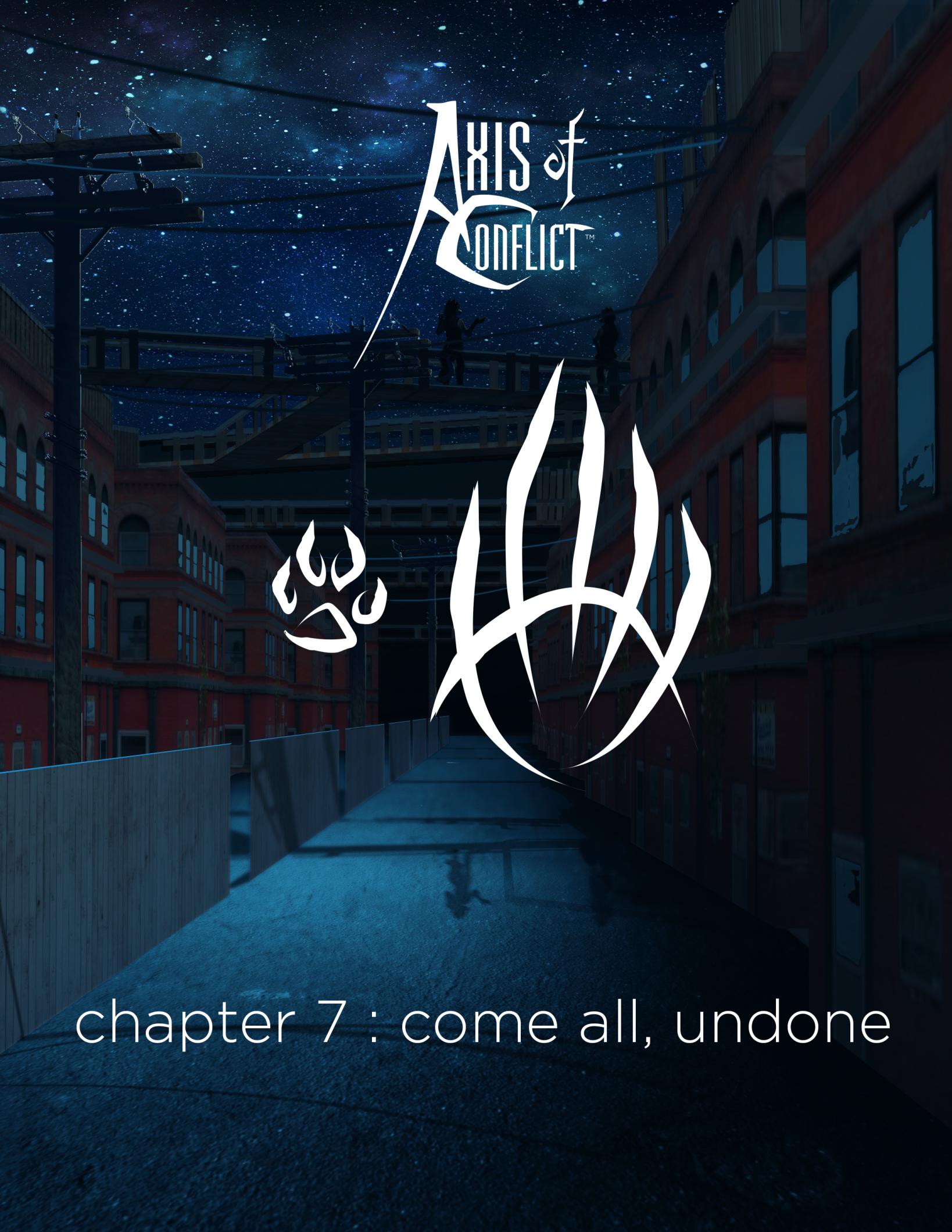




AXIS of CONFLICT™



chapter 7 : come all, undone



chapter : 7

— come all, undone —

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Loose planks of wood covered the exterior grating of the air duct, but when Kierlyn finally found the rectangular vent the planks were moved out of place. Fresh scrapes through the ash and dust proved they were slid away recently, and then she found a footprint that was small and feline, and undoubtedly Jenn's. The direction of the print pointed toward the closest gangway bridge behind her and to the left, adjoining the neighboring building. But from there the little girl could have gone in any of three different directions. *Oh, Jenn. Why did you leave? Where are you going now?* She manages to keep the panic from consuming her altogether, but the fear has become very real after today's turmoil. She doubts the majority of Neveah's illusory conspiracies and believes in none of her monsters, but there is enough real danger in the Commons for grave concern.

Kierlyn walks to the edge of the building and peers over, looking into the street. The air along the rooftop is cleaner, gratefully, now that most of the ash has settled into a sparse fog close to the ground. She inhales deeply to clear the stink of the apartment from her nose and to settle her uneasy constitution, which has been on-edge since she sat in the park. The constant surges of adrenaline have mixed poorly with the sugary dessert that was her supper and she feels ill.

The air of the Commons is still and stale. She looks with hope to the enormous vents that ring the base of the dome for circulation but finds them static and dead. Even at night the fans would blow slowly, but without power the dome is slowly becoming a suffocating hotbox. The glass of the dome remains mostly unchanged since this morning though the piles of windblown sand that once gathered along the western edge now mount along the east, and have cleared enough that Kierlyn can once again see the night sky far above. A film of dust mutes the brilliance of the stars, but the view is strong enough to invigorate her imagination and fill the gaps in her memory. She has never felt the same burning desire to leave the dome as many of her kin have, *over two-thirds*, she recalls from Neveah's report, but in this moment her heart tugs at her mind and she yearns to escape from everything.

A pungent whiff of manure serendipitously rolls along the face of the building and she lowers her eyes to a portion of the Commons she rarely sees, and never from this height. Using her height advantage to look over the high fence along the northern side of the street, she glimpses the lackluster wooden buildings of the Meat Packing District. Six

long sheds running in two even clusters of three. Parallel to each other, and separated by a muddy courtyard of grass and grime, the district sits in eerie silence with rings of ash hovering over the low roofs of each building. The meatpacking sheds are constructed of mostly light-colored woods stained from neglect. A single large window on the end of each one remains dark and desolate but intact, reflecting the brilliant white-blue starlight back at her in a gorgeous tranquil hue that she wishes she could share with Jenn. She scans her eyes slowly along the walls and fence line, looking for any signs of movement or obvious disturbances, but finds nothing. The area has been ravaged and many planks of wood from the fence have been removed or smashed, no doubt stolen by the Purebreeders of the Sheds to fortify their preposterous strongholds. Kierlyn rolls her eyes in silence, allowing the averaged emotions of contempt and disappointment from her evening conversations replay in her mind.

On the other side of the meatpacking sheds is a thin road she has never set paw on but knows to be Ranch Street, a single-lane passageway that carves the meatpacking sheds away from the livestock ranches of the Northeast Commons. Comparing the two, Kierlyn can see from her perch that the ranches occupy as much space as the total of Keeper's Forest which makes them quite enormous though she cannot see any movement upon their spacious fields. The stink of the manure seems to amplify as Kierlyn looks upon the barren pastures, wrinkling her nose in repulsion as she rotates her head slowly scanning the spaces between the five, large ranch houses. The three wooden buildings look exactly like she'd imagine a livestock farmhouse to appear with red painted woods and white trim, though in the dark and distance the wood seems a dark purple. Movement catches her eye along ground of the far eastern wall and she is surprised to find two large basins of water, softly flickering and waving back hints of moonlight. *That must be the fish nursery*, she assumes, suddenly hungering for a plate of fish. *Or even beef*, she thinks, daring to dream. It's been eight days since she's had a proper meal, and she misses meat the most. Her stomach gurgles and an unexpected taste for blood comes to her mouth, making her mouth water and recalling the iron of Pike's blood vividly. She shakes her head and spins away from the ranches stare down along the street below. As her eyes flick away, a light catches her attention in a window of the central farmhouse, trembling softly as dull orange and she squints to observe it. Looks like candles, she thinks. That must be the kin guarding the livestock. She only thinks about them for a moment before her stomach grumbles again and she at last forces her view away.

The Commons of the North holds no sign of her daughter and she inhales again seeking any trace of her daughter's fragrant scent. Kierlyn's sense of smell is not as keen as some of her kin, especially that of her own daughter, but it's good enough when the trail is fresh. She observes the emptiness of Packer Street below and the desolate quiet of the neighboring alleyways. No one stirs. A single gnarled tree unlike any of those at Keeper's Forest or Bristlewood grows in a twisted, broken spiral near the building's face, and through it she makes out the small dark pools of blood glinting in the starlight like oil on the moon-pale concrete, but Pike is nowhere to be seen. She does not know if the wolf survived Cass's shot to the head, but either way his body has gone. Spinning to look into the alleyway where her daughter's grey wolf captor was defeated, she finds that he too has gone. Bloody scrapes on the pavement indicate that the grey wolf was likely pulled from beneath the wreckage. Dark pools can be seen where his head once sat; where she kicked at him so relentlessly. Her guilt manifests. She very well may have killed him.

Kierlyn forces her thoughts away from the events of the alley and tries instead to predict

where her daughter may have gone. She feels the tree would have been a perfect pathway down for her adventurous little girl but her scent does not lead there, to her surprise. She hopes then to find her somewhere along these rooftops, assuming them to be a wiser choice and safer option than what she may find below. Jenn has run off before, but never far.

The blue-white moonlight cascades brightly down through the dome, casting long indigo shadows across the rooftops, their edges tinged with a dull purple glow influenced by the sands upon the glass far above. Kierlyn sniffs at the air and detects only faint traces of her daughter, finding relief enough to know that she was at least here and treads the right path. She follows the scent to the rear of the building and finds a jumble of improvised loose-plank bridges crisscrossing shoddily over the alleyways, connecting all fourteen structures of the Sheds with a network of gangways. Most of these merely rest upon the ledges with no means of securing them, and some appear permanently attached though their quality is dismal.

By virtue of her best guess, she steps onto the wobbly loose planks of the nearest wooden gangway and moves carefully onto the next rooftop, eight terrifying paces over the alleyway that once held the grey wolf. The pain in her abdomen and hips reduces her sense of balance, and she falters with distrust of her own limbs. She steps onto the loose gravel of the neighboring rooftop and moves quickly toward a large wooden structure made from reclaimed woods of the Commons; several pieces seem to have been stolen directly off of the fences below as Kierlyn imagined. The blonde panther follows the fragrant scent of her daughter, picking out her hair specifically, though the traces of it diminish quickly as she approaches the rickety construction built atop the roof. She hears a light *skiff* in the gravel up ahead and moves toward the noise thankful to have found her daughter. She doesn't know if she will yell at her for running off, or hug her and weep, but either way she is relieved and ready to move on from this place.

"Jenn?" She calls out softly in the night air, "c'mon bug, let's get out of here."

The shadow along the far side of the shack moves then, and turns to the side. Kierlyn's heart drops when she sees the contours of a long muzzle and pointed ears stretch along the rooftop. *Rot!* The figure rolls forward then and its shape becomes that of a canid male standing broad chested and enormous in the moonlight. *It's Pike!* She fears, suddenly afraid for her life once again. *He's looking for me!*

She jumps to the side of the structure, her heart pounding with indecision and worry. She fingers along the wooden planks of the structure until she finds a loose panel as thick as her arm dangling half-attached to the cross beam. With a swift jerk, she peels it off and grips it near the base with a terrified and vengeful grip. Eying the metal nails that protrude from the end she wonders if she has the wherewithal to be this cruel. But then, Neveah's story of Micah's vicious attack solidifies her resolve and she does not hesitate. She hears the pawsteps crunch closer to the corner and so with a mighty swing Kierlyn swirls the shaft in a swift arc at head level. Her attack registers with a solid hit but the bat does not bounce away, instead locked into its point of impact. The figure steps then from around the corner, holding the wooden plank in its mighty grip. Kierlyn's eyes widen with disbelief and regret, struggling to hold on to the weapon, afraid to relinquish it to the wolf.

In the span of a single breath, the figure emerges from around the corner and lifts the stick high over his head, picking Kierlyn up with it until she finally lets go to fall back along the rooftop in fear. The shadows of the wooden structure fall away from the figure then, and Kierlyn is relieved and mortified to see Mum standing there, angry, holding the wooden shaft in his right paw. He moves toward her in a slow steady pace, and Kierlyn backs away seeing that he is not stopping. She watches his eyes seeing them mean and his brows furrowed, their stare glinting gold in the moonlight, and his ears back with anger. Her mistake was an honest one, but it is unlikely that he knows this, and his pace toward her quickens. She backs away faster in a clumsy stumble, still uncoordinated from today's assaults. Mum lunges toward her then, and she makes a clumsy leap backward stumbling along the low edge of the rooftop, reeling her arms in hopeless circles.

The large male fox thrusts forward and surprises her by catching her right wrist with his left paw, and then lifts the wooden plank, nails glinting, just long enough to cast it aside. He reaches forward with his right paw and quickly grabs her by the front of her shirt between her breasts, stabilizing her balance. With a single tug with both paws, he heaves her forward and throws her back onto the safety of the rooftop. He merely stands there when all is done, looking at her with his arms draped lifelessly at his sides. After a moment of awkward silence, he moves forward toward her again, bending over to retrieve the plank of wood. Kierlyn observes him cautiously, unsure of his intentions. The fox inspects the nails, gripping several of them in his mighty fingers one at a time to straighten them. He then walks toward Kierlyn again, and she backs away with her arms raised in defense, predicting an attack. But instead, the fox lumbers past her and returns the wooden plank to its original location as part of the walling on the wooden structure of the rooftop shanty.

"I— I'm sorry," Kierlyn breathes lowly, ashamed for her haste and grateful that she missed.

The fox, with his back turned to her, looks down at this paw and opens it several times, working out the pain of the impact. Kierlyn wonders if the gesture were meant in response.

"I'm really, . . . stupid." She concludes, changing her word choice at the last second. With this the fox looks at her silently, his eyes fiercely burning in the moonlight.

"No, no —" she says, "not you . . . *me*. I'm very stupid. I could've killed you. I'm so sorry. I don't belong here. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm doing everything wrong." The stream of consciousness comes with a new stream of tears as she admits her failures aloud. "Please tell Cass and Nev that I'm sorry . . . if you can. Or at least, know that I am. I left badly. You both helped us, and you didn't have to. And I made a mess of it. And I've ignored my daughter — and now she's run off, too." Kierlyn's eyes fill with tears and her worst worries begin to take form. She needs to find Jenn. "I have no idea where she went. I thought she'd be up here. Her scent ends here."

The fox stands in silence for a moment, and at first Kierlyn wonders if he even truly understands what she's saying. But then he raises his nose to the air and sniffs twice, repeating this tactic several times along the rooftop. He leads Kierlyn back across the same gangway and points to a rickety wooden bridge more permanently attached to the rear of Cass's building, connected to the second row of rooftops across the southern way.

A wide alley separates the two rows of structures, filled with trash and old stone. Very old wooden poles run down its center shaped like crosses with thick black wires dangling from them lifelessly. The ground seems farther away than it is, made ominous in the moonlight and shadow, so Kierlyn only tepidly places one foot paw onto the loose boards of the gangway, testing for security. A fresh hint of Jenn's scent wafts up then, giving her the courage and the assurance to move forward, but the fox deems her actions too slow, and so pushes past her rudely half knocking her out of the way. He ambles across the planks, causing the long bridge to teeter back and forth with each step, but still he makes it to the other side without incident. Kierlyn follows his lead and places trust in the menacing walkway, finding the other side holding her breath the whole way.

Mum stands like an impatient child, waiting in irritation for her to approach his side again before bringing one finger to the tip of his muzzle and then points down below. Kierlyn hopes to see some sign of Jenn when she peers over the building's edge but is disappointed to see three fox-breed males standing along the base wall in secret conversation. She cannot make out their words, but she hears the kind of soft laughter one makes when up to no good. She looks keenly upon them, struggling to identify any sign that Jenn may be among the group but finds nothing. One of the foxes spots Kierlyn's moving shadow in the moonlight and quickly turns his head to look up as Kierlyn pulls back.

"Hey!" he bellows, "Who's up there?"

Mum scowls at Kierlyn, pushing her into a crouch behind him. He points to himself and then at her, holding his palm open as instruction to stay low. He grasps the guardrails of the metal staircase and descends.

"Oh, hey, Mum," the smaller of the three calls up. "I thought you already went in for the night."

Mum touches the ground and simply shrugs his response. Kierlyn crawls along the rooftop on her belly despite the shooting pain coursing through her abdomen and inner thighs. Taking care to align her shadow with that of the staircase railing, she props her head onto the stone ledge and strains to hear and see. The cool stone feels wonderful through her fur, soaking away the heat and pain of her temples.

Mum stands almost two heads taller than the largest of the other three, making him appear like a caricature by comparison. Kierlyn realizes that the two outermost figures are likely quite young still. She guesses them to be around sixteen or seventeen cycles, though will not know for sure until she can capture their scent. *All foxes look the same to me*, she admits. All four of the males wear the same black pants, and all four are shoeless, preferring to go bare pawed. Mum's black tank-top shirt stretches to contain his bulk, though the light grey shirts of the others appear oversized by contrast. Kierlyn recognizes the grey color as the uniform of the Water Reclamation Guild, or the *grey water* kin. A highly necessary but disgusting occupation usually staffed by the mouse-breed. The foxes' facial features are similar enough in the dark to suggest that they are related, though Kierlyn admits that all foxes look related. The male in the center of the trio has seen some form of accident as he is missing most of his left ear, and his tail has effectively been cut in half. A rugged but gangly fellow that evokes a backstory of hard labor and difficult living. He has no head hair to describe, or he keeps it so short that it

blends in to the natural pile of this fur. The other two males stand at either end of their guardian, leaning away from him like mirror images of each other. The smaller 'brother' on the left wears his auburn hair in a thick, un-brushed mat that splits naturally down the center to drape along both sides of his head. Kierlyn imagines it is an attempt to make himself look older, but has comically created the opposite effect. The older brother wears his hair in tufted spikes which makes Kierlyn worry, as it's a look common among the Purebreeders for it's aggressive and sharp allure.

"It's as we feared," the middle fox begins, "Lank has died."

"And Pike is pretty messed up," the older brother adds, "he may not make it this time."

Mum spins coyly looking to the rooftop, but does not see Kierlyn. He frowns.

"Normally I'd be *gnawin' a bone* about that, but not like this," the elder states. "This is on us, now."

"Cass's started the war," the remaining brother concludes, urgently twisting the edges of his shirt into tight knots. "*First blood*. What was she *thinking*? Both Guilds were walking a thin line as it was, and then she goes and does *this*?"

The middle fox steps forward, drawing himself closer to Mum, looking around cautiously. "Listen, Mum, I know you've got like *a thing* for the *midnight maiden* or whatever, but this is a rotten mess and it's getting worse. Maybe it's time you convinced her to leave. Defect like the others."

Mum jerks his head back, angered, and pushes the other fox away.

"Hey, hey! Watch it, friend!" the middle fox snaps, and the two brothers close ranks, their tails swirling like ribbon in a stiff breeze. "We're not tellin' *you* ta leave, but unless that pantha' pays th' bill, we're lookin' at *war*. Th' wolves outnumba' all th' otha' Reds in here three ta one. Th' rodent breeds ain't worth their salt in battle. We got th' reptiles against us now, too! Ain't *no raised tail* in here worth *alla that*. You have decisions ta make!"

"And *fast*," the first brother inserts for emphasis, interrupted by a discernable slide in the dirt behind them.

With that, the elder fox hushes the group and places a paw across the older brother's chest, spinning around quickly and sniffing at the air. Mum and the two brothers spin to follow his gaze, peering deep into the shadowed edges of the tree-lined buildings. Through the dark patches they see movement of a figure walking toward them, undistinguishable in the blackness. The two brothers grimace though only one makes a growl, preparing to engage a foe. Mum places a calming paw on the older brother's shoulder and pushes his way through the trio to stand in front of them. As he does, Kierlyn steps from the blackness of the shadow to meet his gaze with an expression of angry worry.

"What *war*? *With the wolves*?" Kierlyn interrogates with a quick tongue, stopping well outside of reach from the group.

“*What?*” The middle fox answers, stepping forward toward her, “Who’re you? Get th’ rot outta here!”

“*Rot!*” jokes the first brother under his breath, “looks like she’s already *been* to war!” And the brothers snicker to each other.

Kierlyn steps back and away timidly, a jagged scowl drawn across her face, suddenly aware again of the heat still pulsing around her swollen eye. Mum punches the arm of the offending fox.

“What rot!” The lesser brother howls, rubbing his shoulder. “You *know* her?” Mum glances at him sidelong with an angry expression and nothing more. The foxes observe this gesture and suddenly understand.

“What *war?*” Kierlyn again questions with a deepening concern in her voice.

“Oh.” The middle fox states then, recoiling. “*Oh!*” He repeats more enthusiastically, “It was *you!* *You’re* the panther everyone is looking for! Not Cass!” He steps forward quickly with his lips in a weak snarl as if still making up his mind about grabbing her. She does not give him the chance, and steps away quickly.

Mum grabs the fox by the arm instead, shaking his head wildly back and forth.

“Oh, dun’t lie ta me, Mum! Yer a rotten liar. Lookit ‘er! Those’re *wolf marks!* I’d bet muh life on it! We’re a breath away from a war because of ‘er,” he growls only loudly enough to be heard, “*Your* war!” he accuses, pointing directly at her. “We just buried Lank with the others – when the wolves find out he’s gone, we’ll be fightin’ fer our lives!”

Kierlyn backs into the shadows of the buildings again, watching the fox’s narrative play out on the faces of the others. She has no idea what he’s talking about but his anger is clear. “*What war?*” She repeats a third time with vivid irritation, posturing to run if needed. Suddenly Cass and Neveah’s reality is becoming frighteningly real.

The two brothers decode the subtle movements of the older fox and together the three males slowly creep their way toward Kierlyn in a clear act of intimidation. They puff their chests up with their shoulders pulled back and the wild sway of their tails calms into a sturdy flag, pointed at the ground as they tread closer. Kierlyn shifts nervously in her space within the moonlit shadows of the tree line, considering her next move. She dare not run; she can’t. She dare not fight; she can’t. *I have no idea what I’m doing.* After scanning the faces of each male she looks to Mum last and finds his expression unreadable. Though this does not surprise her, she was hoping, perhaps mistakenly, that he would step up in defense. But together the males halt within an arm’s reach of their prey, and seem content to merely intimidate with words and scowls. Again, the elder of the group points to her with a menacing stab of his fingers.

“I *know* you, girl. I know yer story. *E’eryone* knows yer story,” he incriminates with his eyes narrowed into slits of a disapproving scowl, his voice lowered to an angry murmur. “The golden panther with th’ blue eyes. Ain’t no mistakin’ *you*. It ain’t natural, whatchoo

done...”

Kierlyn steels herself.

“...*Crossbreeder.*”

The word finds its mark and stabs at the rawness of her broken self-image. She feels like a little kit again, backed into a corner by another bully. She didn’t know what to do as a child, and she doesn’t know what to do as an adult. Just then the aches of her trauma with the wolves seem to grow more painful as if calling for her to retreat immediately.

To her own surprise, her feet mutiny and she steps forward with three fast strides pushing herself well within the personal space of all three tightly knit males, causing their eyes to widen. The lesser brother quivers subtly but Kierlyn notices. The elder fox raises his paws to chest height as if preparing to push her away but does not make contact. It occurs to Kierlyn in that moment that the foxes may not know how to deal with an aggressive female, but she doesn’t want to test them. She raises her claws slowly, hovering her paw with indecision along her side at hip level considering what this action may unleash. Her emotions have been completely out of control all day, and she struggles to contain them. Kierlyn has never been a violent kin, but the shock of her ordeal has removed the hurdle of forethought.

Mercifully, Mum steps forward once more to softly grip her raised wrist with one all-consuming paw, cupping her fingers with the other. He tugs her slightly forward, leading her through the middle of the three antagonists, confident that they will cause her no harm and he was correct. The three males relax their postures and break away from each other, allowing Mum to pull the girl between them. Rather than meet their eyes, Kierlyn solidifies her expression into one of rigid discontent and slides confidently through the small gathering, thankful for Mum’s interference. The three fox males spin to face her as she moves through them, angry and confused expressions of their own.

“Lheev ‘er beee,” Mum croaks deeply with a low and crackled voice. The foxes look to him in astonishment confirming how rare his speaking must be for Kierlyn. His speech is labored and nearly indecipherable, splintered and bleeding. The very sound of it makes Kierlyn’s throat hurt. She raises her gaze softening her eyes for him in thanks, but he does not look at her. The males kept to their pod under the single beam of the moonlight, watching the pair mysteriously cross the desolate gap of Old Grand Boulevard. The bi-lane road is wide enough for one hand drawn carriage to travel in each direction but is separated by a thin boulevard of wilting grass and flowers. At one time, many cycles ago, this road was the center of town with the Fire Station on the corner and the textile mill next door, where Mum and Kierlyn currently stand. Firebrick Road separates the two buildings, and Mum leads her hurriedly to its mouth. They stand there together in the shadows once more, adequately apart from the three curious males whose scrutiny continues to sharpen. Once more, Mum sniffs loudly at the air trying to cut through the low hanging clouds of ash and residual smoke damage. Finally, the curiosity takes the better of them, and the elder fox yells reservedly across the gap, “Who you lookin’ fer?”

Kierlyn squeezes her fists and abdomen in unison. She was hoping the fox-breed males’ involvement in her affairs had concluded and so does not answer. She doubts ignoring them will suffice, but she has no energy for explaining herself. Instead, Mum surprisingly

turns his attention to them and raises his outstretched paw to be parallel with the ground, level to his hip. The three fox males look at him in silence. But then the older of the two brothers murmurs a guess, “A kit? A little girl?”

“Yes!” Kierlyn hollers in surprise, “My daughter! Where did you see her?”

The three foxes look to each other nervously, the elder clearly conflicted. After a breath, Mum slams the wooden wall of the textile building with his closed fist to create a deep *boom*, attracting their attention. He shrugs with annoyance, raising both paws out to shoulder height in an animated gesture to be read clearly in the darkness.

Again, the older brother looks nervously to his companions who seem to offer no sympathy. “Go on,” says the elder male, “tell ‘im.” The brother faces Mum to respond but Kierlyn does not like the way his tail twitches.

“She ran off,” the male informs, “up that way.” He points down the long dark of Firebrick Road, a bending and jagged street that only travels in straight lines for about twenty paces at a time before shooting into another diagonal.

“She was crying,” he continues, shifting from one footpaw to the other, “and, uh...”

“And what?” Kierlyn pries, growing nervous, walking halfway back across the street to face him.

“Go on, coward,” the elder fox gibes, pushing the older brother forward into the street.

“*Go on*, Mik!” repeats the younger brother, taunting his sibling.

“You shut yer yap!” threatens the elder fox, striking the youngest across the nose. “I told ye’ both ta watch yer rotten maws, didn’t I?!”

“What *happened*?” Kierlyn cuts in, wholly annoyed with their family disputes.

Mik looks away from his arguing companions and faces Kierlyn with shame in his eyes. “I told her to get back inside before the monster gets her but she come up to me with some sob story about how her momma don’t love her no more and how I guess her papa was kill’t or something...”

The fur along Kierlyn’s shoulders and tail begins to visibly bristle, rising to stand on end as she pushes her head closer to him, hanging on every word and afraid of what he will say next.

“... I could tell she was a wolf half-bree, um, *mixed kit*, if you get muh meaning,” he corrects himself quickly, seeing Kierlyn’s tail-tip flick irritably, “and I didn’t believe her story. I thought she was just another one’a these orphan wolf kin beggars lookin’ fer handouts so I told her,... ah. So anyway she went that way,” Mik claims, cutting himself short and pointing up the dark street once again.

Kierlyn’s head follows the direction of his paw, but her eyes remain on his face. “*What* did you tell her?” She presses with aggravated concern.

“Nothin’. I jus’ told her ta get lost!” Mik lies, shrugging away his dishonesty. From behind, the elder fox once again shoves him hard, making his head bob up reflexively.

“*Rot*, old cur! Fine!” Mik screeches over his shoulder, now a full step closer to the angry mother. “I told ‘er her papa was probably a wolf and *deserved* to die and ‘er momma never loved ‘er ‘cause crossbreeder’s are pure evil and don’t care about no one.” His arms spasm back and forth at his sides as if delivering a speech to a receptive crowd of sympathizers. His words, though curt and mechanical, were clearly used many times before and she can imagine the fox giving diatribes like this one to the likes of the Purebreed kin. Her temper flares and all the sleep that stung at her eyes is burned away with renewed rage. Even the soreness of her wounds drain away under the adrenaline. Her arm swings out on its own power and strikes the fox in the throat, collapsing him to the ground. He falls like a broken twig, landing on his knees and grabbing his neck with his right paw, *cacking* and heaving for breath.

The younger brother steps forward but the elder fox bars his advance with an outstretched arm. “He deserved it,” the elder asserts.

“*WHY!*” Kierlyn screams down at the panting fox, “*Why* would anyone *say such a thing!* — *to a child?*” Kierlyn squeezes her paws into tight balls, ready to pound on the fox with her fists but he does not look up. He rubs at his throat and makes no attempt to stand, looking back at his steadfast companions who offer no aid. “Did she go this way or not?” Kierlyn attacks, “Or is this another one of your pathetic lies?” She looks up to the other brother and elder male, casting her accusations upon them all. Mum steps over and helps the fox brother, roughly picking him up and standing him back onto his feet with a hefty slap to his shoulder. The two foxes exchange glances, though only Mum was smiling.

“Aye,” the elder responds with a calm voice and a near smirk, “He’s an idiot, but not’a great liar. The girl wen’ that way, like he said.”

Kierlyn spins away from the gathering to peer down the empty street that trails away from Grand Boulevard. Firebrick Road is a glorified alleyway, roughly paved with ancient brick and cobblestones. At its end, she will find the building of the Peace Keepers; the new home of the IMPAC. But with the riots, the Keepers have not returned to the Commons and the IMPAC has likewise disbanded. Kierlyn has told Jenn countless times over the cycles that were she to become lost or separated from her parents, she should seek out the Peace Keepers. *But there’s no one here, now*, Kierlyn considers, *Jenn knows this. And she wasn’t lost when she left. Why would she go* — “OH!” She screams loudly then with understanding, causing Mum’s right shoulder to jump. “No! NO, NO, NO!”

Kierlyn darts into the shadows of Firebrick Road, leaving the three fox males in their places. Mum takes several jaunty steps behind her before the elder fox calls after him, “The war’s a-comin’, Mum. Now ya see it. They’re not gone. Ya know it.”

A thunderous rumble fills the Commons like an explosion, echoing back upon itself several times in quick succession bouncing deafeningly through the empty streets. It begins as a slow build that can be felt more than heard and then grows wildly into a tremendous roar, vibrating the very air they breathe. Mum looks over his shoulder to the

trio in fearful excitement, and then returns to the chase, following quickly after Kierlyn into the shadows of Firebrick Road.

The three foxes stand in a loose triangle and watch as Mum disappears into the alleyway. The younger brother looks up to the rooftops of the Sheds, still rubbing his throat, noticing that a sizeable collection of its inhabitants have come out to stare into the night. Atop the third structure, a male calls down to him, “The wolves?!” he assumes loudly.

“I dunno,” the elder fox shouts back up to him, “I dun think so.”

Mum finds navigating the alleyway to be more difficult than he assumed. He’s been down this way before, many times, but not since the riots. The passageway is littered with rubbish and broken furniture, and many of the paver bricks have become loose and risen with the water from the sprinklers. Something stabs at his paw pads several times as he runs and realizes that the ground is littered with broken glass from the buildings and many of the windows are smashed out. He is not the only victim of the glass he notes, as several additional blood-scented waves concern his nose. Several of them are old and stale, but at least two are fresh and he can distinctly extract two odors, recognizing Kierlyn and Jenn without trouble. Mum changes his stride to run in wide circles around the empty windows of each building as he passes by, avoiding the glass almost entirely. Kierlyn has clearly not followed the same strategy, because the scent of her blood continues to grow stronger as he chases behind her.

Mum can see the pale silhouette of the IMPAC Peace Keeper’s station begin to emerge through the midnight blue low clouds of dust and ash as he runs toward the epicenter of the explosions several days earlier. Firebrick Road breaks left, to the east, turning into Second Avenue. He trusts to his nose to follow Kierlyn’s scent but soon finds himself unable to breathe. The clouds of dust and ash have been stirred up into large billows of dim, moonlit plumes rolling across the Commons as high as three or four stories into the air. He leaves Second Avenue, cutting its corner into an empty plot of land that was once a beautiful vegetable and flower garden, ravaged days ago. From here, he should be able to see the backside of *ShellShock Fashions* and *Klips and Kutz* but is met only with an unexpected wall of haze. He slows his pace to a sure-footed walk and waves his arms slowly in front of himself avoiding barricades. The ground of the gardens is marshy and saturated with rainwater from the sprinklers, and has turned the area into a bog of thick mud and vegetable slime where plants have been smashed and drowned. He crosses over onto Third Avenue finally, the southern border of the garden plot, and is amazed to discover that he still cannot see the fashion buildings. He knows them to be only a few dozen paces in front of where he stands but the ash consumes everything and he struggles to breathe. Lifting his shirt over his muzzle, the fox plods along trying to inhale without sucking in the floating flakes of charred wood and soot.

His ears swivel instinctively following a shrill wail off to his right and he believes it to be the little girl. Mum, with one paw covering his nose and mouth, sprints in the direction of the cry and notices how the cloud seems to be rolling against him. He is running toward the source of this disturbance and he becomes alarmed to what he may find.

The fox’s paw touches down on concrete again, and assumes to be on Market Street, across from the Golden Basket. The wailing noise continues, still to his right and a few dozen paces into the slow rolling cloud. He moves quickly west through the fog

following the road as best he can, using his ears to orient himself. A sudden odor of blood becomes clear as Mum walks, and there is no doubt Kierlyn is near. The smell fades immediately into the murky ether of the street, and Mum coughs harshly. His voice sounds like stones tumbling in a deep box. When he opens his eyes, he has entered a pale clearing near the corner of East Market and Park Street. The corner is normally unmistakable by the unique architecture of the primary school, but the silhouette of the extraordinary building is gone.

As he approaches the felled structure there is no doubt in his mind that this was the loud noise they heard, created by the collapsing building. He treads carefully toward the ruin wondering where the wailing voice had gone. Several desperate whimpers grow anxiously somewhere amid the wreckage and Mum squints to locate their source. The dust and ash swirl as slow thick smears of moonlight, emulating the organic shadows of figures moving in leisurely arcs.

Mum's toes crunch painfully into a fallen slab of concrete that now lies as a crumbled line of lesser boulders forming a small wall between he and the ruins of the school. He hefts himself up the half-length onto the barricade and from this height he can detect the distinctive whimpers of Kierlyn, snorting through tears and weeping somewhere just below him. He can hear the heavy, hollow sound of stone scraping across stone and dropping to the floor in a dull thud. Mum lowers himself into a clear space and scrunches loudly through the toppled stone chips and charred wooden beams, allowing his presence to be heard. He sees Kierlyn's silhouette rise and spin toward him in a half-crouch, but when she realizes that the noises came from the fox and not her little girl, she returns to her digging with a long sob.

Kierlyn stands atop a small mountain of wood, steel and concrete near the place she estimates Jenn's dolly to once rest. The paws of her hands and feet bleed profusely as she grips jagged boulder after boulder, struggling to roll them away.

"Help me!" She sobs incoherently, hysterical with woe and fear. "Please!" The words tumble out of her.

Mum looks around the scene and sees it hopeless. The ash and dust hide much but they do not disguise the devastation. Anything at the bottom of this pile is lost. He does not move, letting his arms dangle at his sides without purpose.

"PLEASE!" Kierlyn howls in mindless panic, lifting and rolling and tossing anything and everything that she touches.

"*PLEASE!*" She begs through desperate tears. She reaches down and grabs the edge of a fallen timber and heaves it to the side carelessly, and it begins to roll back toward her. Mum catches it as it tumbles and clears it properly, tossing it noisily over a mound of stone. Kierlyn's sobs seem to fill the Commons. The mournful wail fills the cracks and crevices of every structure for a hundred paces, Mum is certain. He does not know what to do in this moment, but there is no rescuing the little girl and his efforts to do so are half-hearted. He tosses an armful of lesser stones away, but does not see the point. The smell of blood is thick as he labors, and he sees the pools growing slightly darker beneath the paws of the panther. She slips backward several times as she labors, indifferent to her wounds. Mum decides it's time to intervene and places a paw on her shoulder. She at first

ignores it until he reaches around and tries to pull her away from the wreckage. In a blast of unexpected fury she pushes him away hard enough to send the enormous fox backward through the air onto his tail.

“HELP ME!” She bawls in exasperation, the ash and soot clinging to her tears in thick dark streams down her face. She spins back to a large steel pillar that she’s uncovered and wraps her fingers under it. Mum shakes his head in disbelief. She heaves at the enormous pillar with a painful moan that shatters the night but it does not dislodge. The pillar is solid metal and Mum estimates it weighs the equivalent of thirty kin. She groans loudly again and tugs at the beam once more, her bloodied feet sliding out beneath her. Mum finally stands and ambles toward her again; she must come away. “*NO!*”

The panther lurches and the beam astonishingly gives way. She lifts the end to waist level and takes one wobbly step to the left, transferring it to the side. Mum stands with his mouth agape and eyes wide. He jumps to her side when he sees her begin to falter and wraps his arms around the beam. Even with her help, he has trouble supporting the weight and in that moment is overtaken by awe. He cannot believe she has moved this beam at all let alone lift it. She finally lets the beam go and Mum has no choice but to relinquish it; the mass is too much for him to bear. The beam drops with a sounding *thoom* that crushes several of the concrete boulders beneath it and rolls slightly away. Mum watches to make sure the beam does not attempt to roll back upon them, but when he looks to Kierlyn again she has already moved on to another pile of stones revealed from beneath the beam, tossing them aside as quickly as her body will move. She screams into the stone at her feet, “Jenn! I’m coming, baby! I’m coming!”

Piece by piece she clears a small pit and at last finds the watery floor of the school. Sheets of paper with writing and school-age drawings tear away under her busy paws.

Mum has silently begun to dig. He cannot stop, despite his logic. He cannot stand by and do nothing. He digs though he knows it useless, but with steady breath he excavates around the frantic mother, opting to tackle some of the larger stones and timbers to spare her the grief.

“I’m coming, baby!” Kierlyn weeps though gasping sobs. “Hold on — *Oh, my little girl* — I’m coming!” The words stick together like liquid, gagging her as they empty from her mouth.

To look upon Kierlyn in this moment is to see two beings. Her mind is blubbering and thoughtless, drowned in panic and fear and insufferable woe, clinging to reality by the thinnest of strands. And her body has become an automated machine, digging through the wreckage apparently immune to pain or duress, confidently tackling one obstacle at a time. A catastrophic split between the two halves looms. Mum is not an educated kin, but the severity of her condition is impossible to miss. He brushes his hair out of his eyes and stands in preparation to forcibly remove her from the pit. When he steps up the side though he is greeted with a sight he did not expect. Kierlyn has stopped and stands motionlessly in the center of the cauldron, looking unflinchingly to the side. Mum moves away from his current position to see what she sees, blocked by a large pillar of standing stone. There, he sees the three foxes: Mik, his brother and the elder male, standing awkwardly in silent repose. Mum takes one step toward them angrily but then he sees through the wreath of ash that they are not alone. A dozen kin of the Sheds appear at their

sides as the haze shifts, standing along the edges of the ruin in silence. Mum observes this, confused, and worried with the talk of war still heavy on his mind. He takes another step down, sliding noisily into the pit alongside Kierlyn with small pieces of stone tumbling and tinkling behind him. When he looks up again, the group is larger. He guesses that a group of forty or more have arrived, standing silently, watching.

Kierlyn grabs a stone and hurtles it into the crowd, aiming loosely at the mass as a whole, and it *cliks* along the concrete somewhere unseen. She takes another stone and tosses it hard with more precision at the closest blurred silhouette but again misses when the figure dodges.

“Come on, then!” Kierlyn sobs shamelessly, teetering on the edge of a mental snap. “Come *on!*” She tosses a bevvvy of stones, some bouncing off of the crowd, some missing their mark. The crowd shifts in place silently, but does not move any closer so Kierlyn decides to move on despite the consequences. She drops to her knees, nearly blind with tears, pushing another boulder away from the collapsed school floor. Mum grabs the boulder with her, and together they roll it away to find more submerged drawings, torn school papers, and Jenn’s blanket.

Kierlyn pulls the blanket free, drawing it to her face in a long knowing wail.

“*NOOO!*” She howls with heart wrenching despair as loud and as long as her breath will carry, and the misery reverberates off of the dome itself as if it were a tiny thing in a tiny room. Her face contorts and implodes in upon itself with a wretched quiver of anguish stronger than any emotion she has ever known and the sorrow disables her muscles completely. It is at last that she is alone.

Her poor little girl.

Her poor mate.

Everything.

Gone.

Kierlyn has lost control of her body and has fallen into the jagged stones and shards of rock. She lays upon them along her side, the fur of her knees and paws soaked red with her blood from frantically clawing at debris. She clutches the blanket close to her face, and snuffs deeply into it extracting the smell of her daughter’s hair and face, and wails unbearably with each breath. The soft innocence of the fabric beside her nose is a stark and cruel contrast against the dismal reality of this broken hell, and the symbolism floods her mind with an explosion of memory. She recalls every moment of Jenn’s life from her first steps, to the first time she said *I love you*. She remembers Jenn’s first tooth, and the first real argument. She remembers her hugs and nighttime kisses, and the little noises she would make when eating something sweet. Most painful of all she pictures the major life events her daughter will never know, and with this torture the future withers before her eyes like a grapevine starved of water.

The ghastly sobs were coming so hard and so fast that Kierlyn could not even breathe and choked herself with sorrow.

And then she lost the color in her ears.

And then her nose.

And then the primal sobs turned to soft consistent whimpers.

Kierlyn's body writhed and struggled for breath, but she did not care. Even as the chalky dust and pain gagged her airflow, she sobbed. And this is how she remained.

After a time, soft *clicks* of movement follow pawsteps climbing their way through the wreckage, but she does not stir. The circle of kin stand at their distance, in silence, watching and waiting. There does not seem to be a purpose in their presence after all, except to bear witness to the crossbreeder's suffering.

Mum stands an arm's length away from Kierlyn and finds the spot where the blanket was pulled free, seeing there a small paw print of dark blood from beneath the stone. He looks to the crowd, and finds them infuriating. He reaches into the wreckage and turns over another large rock, hoisting it to the side but the crowd does nothing.

Again, he pulls up a timber and the rocks around it shift and *crunk* into the void left behind, but the crowd watches.

The fox sweeps his head in a panoramic view of the figures standing there hidden in shadow and clouds of ash, and he listens to their silence as Kierlyn sobs.

The void is deafening.

"*HERLLP*," growls the fox as loudly as he can. The raspy word tears loose from his throat like a barbed wire through flesh, astonishing the crowd, many of whom had never known Mum to be capable of speech. The heads of the front row spin to look at each other but they do not move.

"*HERLLP HRRR*," he snarls again more infuriated than before, but they did not move.

As Mum spins his head to judge them, the crowd recedes. One by one the figures disperse until at last there were only a handful whom stand silent in isolation.

Two sets of paws come to stand beside him then. The figures bend down beside Kierlyn and each grab a fragment of wreckage tossing it onto the outskirts of the ruins. Kierlyn squints through the blurry pools of her eyes and can barely make out the solid black legs of the panther at her right. And at her left, the striped legs of the tigress.

Mum drops his head in disappointment and returns to the center of the concrete cauldron, lifting away large timbers and pushing them over the ruins with as much rage for his kin as despair for the little girl.

He carves away space one block at a time, while Cass and Neveah pick through the wreckage looking for signs of life, casting aside blocks as they go. Mum tosses another post to the top of the pile but it lands awkwardly and rolls back, striking a freestanding

pillar of un-felled stone. The damaged blocks begin to shift and lurch threateningly forward into the center of the ruin with a groan. Mum rushes to where Kierlyn lies and braces to push the stones aside, but they are too large. As the stones begin to finally give way, three males lurch from the perimeter and slam the pillar together with enough force as to redirect it off to the side. The stone lands against the pile with a deafening boom and crumbles into smaller fragments that roll back and away from the search party. Mum looks to the faces of the three figures and finds two canine-breed and a rabbit-breed, which looks more shaken than the others. Mum smiles to them weakly and exhales, returning to his work.

The group grows to a party of ten with time, carrying debris away in utter silence punctuated only by Kierlyn's low, metered sobs.

For many hours the group labor tirelessly.

One by one, the kin step their way into the mountain to clear away rubble. No one knows what they will find as they dig, but hope dwindles. Morning light begins to peak across the reflective bowl of the dome, refracting down into the devastation of the primary school as a beam of light encircling the panther mother. She has succumbed to her exhaustion and been asleep for several hours now as the kin toiled in respectful silence. Over the course of the night they did not rest and worked straight through, exhuming the wreckage by moving it into a wider circle around the perimeter. Only at its center remained a small pile of stone with Kierlyn spread atop it, left undisturbed by the kin to sleep.

The morning light drains down upon her in a remarkable single ray of golden color tinged with red, illuminating the pile of wreckage like a monument, with Jenn's blanket draped upon her shoulders. The front of the pile is decorated with several tiny streams of the mother's blood, dried and brown. It is Mum at first whom notices the irregular sun beam, seemingly aimed directly at the panther. He walks, exhausted and stumbling, to the front of the pile and stares up at the dome ceiling. The sands have cleared nearly entirely with the night winds and the blue sky above is the clearest blue he has ever seen. Wispy white clouds hang low and full, drifting slowly past in a calm stream.

He does not know how long he was standing there, but he realizes that other kin from the night were behind him and were looking up into the same sky, transfixed on the poetry above. The center of the dome features a large circular glass panel that acts as the keystone for the structure, and the morning sun has struck it precisely, casting down this single beam. The light is given volume by the freshly upturned ash and streams thick and strong from dome to floor, where the kin turn to follow it. They see Kierlyn there at its base, spotlighted perfectly upon the alter of broken stone and splintered wood.

Cass snuffles audibly just then, surprising everyone. To the collective memory of the group, it is the first voice heard since Kierlyn's sobbing in these many hours and it punctuates the moment with precision. What could have at first been dismissed as a cough soon became a clear subtle cry. Cass was fighting to control the sudden emotion by

squeezing at her eyes with a paw, but fails. Neveah stands beside the panther and places an arm around her shoulder expecting to be pushed away, but instead the black panther drooped her head onto the tigress's shoulder and sniffles again.

The team of kin worked all night to clear the wreckage and found no one, and looking out upon the scene brought only dread. Truly, the team was thorough and all that remains of the original pile creates the pillar Kierlyn rests atop. Without a word, the group despairs at the same reality. *The little girl is beneath her mother.* Mum wipes at his head, and drags his paws across his eyes and face to wipe the sleep away. He begins to walk alone toward the pile and the group watches as he goes without a better plan.

He reaches the middle of the bowl and suddenly a wind softly blows toward him, noticeable at first only by the shifting ash in the ray of light. The clouds of soot swirl more actively then, upturning into a whirling stream and then blow away. Mum cocks his head to the side and looks up to the dome inspecting the fans, but they are off and unmoving. He treads carefully up the small pile of Kierlyn's monument and waits. Soon another small gust disturbs the ash and he presses first his paw and then his face into the swirl, gauging its origin. Several kin walk over to him in continued silence wondering as to his strange behavior and watch as he curates the air to his nose.

Without warning he runs to the other side of the pile and stands there to reclaim the gust. And then, he spins to Neveah with his eyes wide and excited. The tigress settles Cass onto her own two legs and then shuffles quickly over to the large fox with excited curiosity. She clears her throat from a night's worth of dust and tries to read Mum's face.

"What did you find, Mum?" she gasps quietly with low enthusiasm.

The fox sniffs animatedly at the air and then gestures for Neveah to do the same. At first the tigress stares at him with a puzzled expression and shakes her head lightly. "What?"

"He wants you to smell something," Cass says, wiping her eyes one final time with conclusive snuffle, her tone returning to one of sarcasm.

Cass and Neveah turn their noses to the air but find their breathing labored and compromised from dust and ash.

Neveah pulls her shirt up to blow her nose and wipe away the dust and filth there, and Cass points to the tigress's stomach. "It's getting better! A lot better!" She says with mild excitement, properly measured for the moment.

The tigress looks down to see the rash and swelling gone, and a fine layer of new fur coming in. "Huh," she says with a smile. She blows her nose again and drops her shirt to sniff the air, and finds Mum's mark. "Oh," she admits with disappointment, "Yeah, that's just the girl's blanket. I've been picking up that scent all night, too. I wanted to move it away but I couldn't bear taking it from Lyn right now. Poor thing." Neveah states with a glum expression and hung head.

"Ngh!" Mum mumbles, pushing Neveah's arm to get her attention again.

Slightly irked, the tigress and panther both look to Mum who again sniffs at the air in an

animated gesture and Cass become riled.

“Mum! It’s the blanket! Calm down, you big rotter! I can’t handle any more false hope right now. This whole thing s my fault! She wouldn’t have even been out here if I coulda’ just *shut the rot up!*”

Undeterred, Mum only grunts and bends over to pick up some ash, caked into the ground. They watch as he tosses the fine powder into the air, confusing them both until Cass’s eyes explode with acknowledgement. The tigress, clearly feeling outsmarted, becomes annoyed. “Will someone please *just use words?*” She demands with a wild sway in her tail.

“Wind!” Cass exclaims, with the most potent form of legitimate excitement Neveah has ever known her to produce.

Mum smiles and points at her and then makes a gesture with his arm to emulate the direction he felt the gust come from. In unison, all three toss a puff of ash into the air and watch as the little trio of clouds float away toward Kierlyn. The kin bystanders who circled around peer on as though the three were crazy.

The three noses lift into the air again and sniff, and all three pick up the little girl’s scent, but only Cass cries. Her tears are the first true sign of hope the evening has seen.

The rabbit-breed male approaches them finally with ash and dirt caked deep into his fur. He steps to their periphery with an angry but curious tone and demands, “what’s the excitement? Find something?”

Neveah looks to the rabbit with giddiness and explains, “There’s *wind!* Her scent is being carried by the wind! Somewhere over here!” the tigress says, walking hurriedly over toward a strip of grass leading to a playground behind where the school once stood.

The remaining four figures walk as quickly as their weary legs will take them, fatigued and sore with hard labor. They reach the park together, and Mum tracks across the thin span of grass and low trees to the farthest wall of the Commons. The park of Green Primary doubles as a recess play zone, and is normally fenced off entirely for the school. The second explosion that destroyed the neighboring office buildings leveled several of the nearby buildings and the resulting deluge of sprinkler water drowned everything else. The school was one of the outermost buildings that defined the perimeter of the Commons, and its northern face looked out upon the Blight of the desert through the cantilevered glass walls that lean inward toward the dome at a soft angle. The glass is normally covered by a thick protective series of metal panels during the night and excessive winds, but when school was in session during the daytime, the panels would be raised to let in sunlight. Mum finds that the shades are all still closed and have not been opened since the riots. Several of them appear damaged and hang loose along their tracks in slight angles. The party quickly scans along the wall and the floor finding no obvious signs of damage, so at last Mum elects to jump up to the closest window and pushes upward against a panels until at last it begins to recoil but does not move far. The shades appear to be connected to each other, so the fox’s efforts can only move the panels so far alone.

Seeing the struggle, Neveah and the rabbit-breed male jump up to the window ledges selecting panels several sections away from each other and they push together, retracing the shades with a loud mechanical whine. As they push the labor becomes easier until at last the shades seem to grab a counter weight and retract the remaining distance to the next floor, where they bob and wobble. Mum jumps from the ledge narrowly missing a blow to the head when his panel finally falls from its track, swinging heavily forward to dangle into the Commons.

“There!” Neveah yells, pointing to a window between Mum and the rabbit, directly behind where the school once stood. The trio dash to inspect the window, clearly blown apart and exposing the Commons completely to the outer world. Neveah and the rabbit instinctively bring their shirts to their muzzles, afraid of the contagions blowing in. Each member takes their turn peering out through the jagged gap of the thick glass window, some of them only seeing the natural world for the first time and realizing how blue the glass was. The sands glow with a warm tan in the morning sun, churned among patches of red clay and brown stone. The air, already hot, carries a raft of new scents that describe temperature, vegetation, rocks and minerals and a bevy of unidentified features. The trio are so caught up in their discoveries that they miss the crunching pebbles beneath their paws. Finally, Neveah is the first to look down and realize that they’re standing in thick glass shards, crumbled into sizeable cubes of safety glass and they look to each other.

“This window was blown *in*,” Neveah and the rabbit state simultaneously.

“That’s not all, gang,” Cass reports.

The tigress, the rabbit, and the fox spin away from the window to look upon Cass, found squatting along the ground. “She was definitely over here,” the panther says confidently, and hoists the little black and white feline doll up to her face, “Recently.”

Neveah walks over and takes the doll from Cass’s paw and sniffs at it. “Yeah, that’s definitely her. And it’s fresh. New contact.”

Cass and Neveah look back to the monument where Kierlyn sleeps and Cass looks to the tigress with concern. “Didn’t Kierlyn say the doll was *inside* the school?”

“She did,” Neveah confirms, “So how did it get way over here?”

“...Unless she made it out,” the rabbit interjects, but he adds, “And she wasn’t alone.”

The three peers walk over to look at what the rabbit has found and they stare at the muddy ground together. Pressed deep into the mud is a dual pair of foot prints, one set feline and quite young, and one set reptilian, and very heavily clawed.

“She was running.” The rabbit says.