



AXIS of CONFLICT™

chapter 8 : campsite three



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— campsite three —

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“Stay back! *STAY BACK!*”

Through squinted eyes, the shadows of long teeth and pointed claws drag threateningly across the loose fabric roof of a tent, and the girl feverishly jolts awake, falling with an earthy thud from her cot onto the dry loose dirt of the floor. She claws her way into the corner, knocking over a pedestal made of sticks and bark wound with twine, spilling its contents to the floor in a spectacular clatter of sharp tones that are quickly absorbed by the dirt and fluttering dull cloth walls.

Turntail winces in pain from the fall, landing upon her wounded shoulder, and tries to push herself into a sitting position from the ground, pawing at her wound and spinning her head from side to side in foggy review of the small tent. The square space is barely long enough to cover the cot she awoke on, but capable of holding another two side-by-side. The space contains nothing more than the one she awoke on and the simple tree-bark table upturned along the damp ground. Her eyes burn under the diffused warm light, as muted as it is, and her head pounds. Struggling to correct her hazy view, she pushes the walls of the tent awry as she flails and clasps at her shoulder with fright, squeezing her eyes closed once more. The panther girl fights to assemble any memory that could explain this place, but her recollections only bob at the edges of her waking mind. Her mind swims among confused visions and moments of high emotion, monstrous sounds and sharp injuries of her flight through the darkness, all separated by hazy gaps of mental murk and lost time. *Where am I?* She fears, unable to place the scents of the environment or recall anything relevant to her purpose in this tiny tent.

Her paw is sticky, and she peels it away looking to her shoulder and sees it dressed with a strip of tarnished white cloth, tied uncomfortably tight under her armpit and along the bicep, with new blood soaking through the outer layers as she massages it. Her mind flashes to the most recent events: *The highway. The desert. The reptile snapper ... The gunshot*, she creases her eyes into a mournful lament of defeat, reliving the moment over again in her memory; the long frozen walk in the desert dark, the abandonment, the sheer terror of being all alone. Tears bubble to her eyes as she tries to contain the pain both physical and emotional.

Through her blurred vision the dark shapes and shadows stab along the tent walls and she jumps with terror in sudden recollection of her escape through the forest. *The beasts!* The

filtered light and shadow form long claws and sharp fangs along the fabric of the tent, and Turntail remembers the terror of the snapping jaws and gurgling howls in the dark as she ran. Her heart pounds with the sight, bristling the fur along her neck and arms with renewed panic, and she digs into the dirt with her footpaws trying to stand. She grabs a spilled metal container by the handle, its contents soaking into the dirt near her knees, and raises it near her head aiming for the billowing flap of her tent door with horrified expectation. The raw nerves of her body revolt with the sudden jerks, and her wounds come to life, stinging beneath her eye and chin, and along the overspent muscles of her arms and legs. As her arm strains in preparation to launch her weapon, the shadows along the tent dance slowly from side to side in a predictable but unfamiliar sway, though do not seem to get closer. The pain in Turntail's arm forces her to relax, and she scrutinizes the movements with wonder and skepticism, calming to their rhythmic and graceful oscillation. Her breathing lulls to a quick wheeze as she perceives the pattern, struggling to understand it. The soft crackle of foliage becomes evident in her curiosity, recognizing finally the serenity of foliage cast upon the winds. The patterns are confusingly complicated and their movements irregular, swaying in soft angular circles that are sometimes still and sometimes wild figure eights. *The wind*, she names the memory in stark contrast of the night gales that froze her bones and choked her breath the night before. She looks then to her body and sees the fur of her legs clean and the red dusts and sands combed away. *Was it last night? How long have I been here?*

The flap of the tent flairs wildly into the air just then, jarring Turntail into attention and she recoils her arm to send the metal container sailing, scrambling back again behind the head of the cot.

"Whoa, whoa! It's okay! It's okay! Calm down! You're fine! Everything's fine. You're safe now!"

Turntail does not recognize the smoky voice, confident and crisp, but feminine with an accent that calms more than it provokes. The vowels of her words are forced in apparent overcompensation for her broken consonants, making the syllables rigid and exotic, as if each word is being pronounced for the first time. She pokes her head from around the cot frame, stuck in an awkward reverse squat between the wooden edging and the tent wall. She sees there a tall and lissome female just inside the entrance, her body a collection of long and slender limbs of brilliant blue and green attached to a svelte torso, bent over to hold the fabric of the flap door open. She leans in with one arm outstretched in offer of aid, holding the position while Turntail collects herself. Turntail moves slowly, staring at the graceful turquoise-blue arm and its sandy-brown clawed hand tipped with ebony talons. The surface of the girl's arm is furless, which is only the second time Turntail has witnessed such a quality, last observed on Shellback, and she marvels at the unusual texture of patterned scales.

The reptile girl slinks her way into the enclosed space more fully, allowing the tent flap to drape behind her delicately. It is then that Turntail sees the girl's tail snake into the room under the collapsed tent flap, coiling alongside her for an impressive distance. The tail is easily twice the length of the girl's standing height, and curls into tight spirals impossible for any mammal-type. Shellback is the only reptile-type Turntail has ever met in person, and she is wholly unfamiliar with them except for the stories equating them to legend, especially Sharptooth's brutal attack on the wolves.

The panther finds the reptile's tail to be a hypnotic and intimidating as it glints and slides through the air like ribbon in a breeze. The gesticulation appears alien against the comparatively mechanical movements of her arms and legs, making it difficult for Turntail to focus attention on her face. Her limbs and tail appear as two wildly different creatures inhabiting the same body locked in a battle for control.

Against the backdrop of gyrating whorls Turntail discerns a curved snout – if it's fair to call such a delicate shape as such – extending from an equally delicate and smooth face; a nearly unbroken surface save for two enormous, ice blue eyes ringed in long black lashes and two slits for nostrils no larger than a claw-tip, invisible except when she inhales. Her skin seems to be composed of extremely fine scales that transition in color from a brilliant golden-brown face to a magnificent blue-green of her limbs and tail. Her hands and feet share the same sandy warmth of her face, and her tail is an oily swirl of dazzling blue and emerald green with dark blue circles, shifting as it glides through the light. Her feet are much larger than Turntail's, nearly twice the size, though her toes account for most of the length. Four muscular lengths, gold in color, tipped with black claws rest in tight parallel to each other supporting her weight in a digitigrade stance similar to the mammal-type kin, with an additional, much larger toe held off the ground near the inside ankle of booth feet. The claw there is slightly larger with a menacing curl, though the whole of her feet, from the first joint of her toes to high on her calves is would tight with bright pink ribbon or cloth. Turntail seldom sees colors that bright outside of the fashion district of the Commons, and even less often worn on the kin themselves. Large scales of light grey travel down her neck and chest, broken into chaotic but symmetrical patterns like artistically designed cracked dry earth. She displays her long black hair in a loosely bound knot behind her head as thick as a fox's tail that does not move with the breeze as it's heavy and rigid with a texture visually similar to straw grass. Her clothing is far too tight for the accentuated curves of her bust and hips, stuffed into the standard issue black tank-top shirt and black denim pants, though she's recently torn them off at the midriff and thigh.

The mysterious reptile reaches her arm further into the room with a gesture intended for Turntail to grab at, holding the tent edge as though she's afraid of falling onto the cot. Her enormous eyes are exceptionally wide and unflinching, and Turntail cannot tell if the expression is especially attentive or just the common demeanor of her breed, but the orbs are alarming. She feels as though the reptile can see right through her and so hesitates to place her paw into her hand. She does not pull away however when the reptile takes it up finally on her own, and tugs at her. The girl steps completely into the room then, letting go of the tent and using her free hand to reach behind Turntail in support of her back, heaving her carefully onto her feet, and then back into a sitting position upon the cot.

"There now," the surreptitious girl assures, squatting back onto the ground to collect the toppled medical supplies.

"Where — am I?" Turntail whimpers with a touch of obvious apprehension, and the reptile smiles a wide and sealed grin that stretches the full length of her snout.

"Camp Three," the girl begins, "and you're safe now. You've got quite a story, I'm guessing. But right now, you just rest." She stacks everything back onto the crude table and resettles it further from the cot, stuffing it tight into the corner. Turntail sits in a daze and lets her footpaws dangle just above the dirt, feeling the cold soil and sparse blades of

grass tickle her paw pads. She releases her shoulder again, looking at her wound and seeing the red-brown stain of the gauze has grown wider than before. The fur and pads of her right hand paw now tacky with blood, she instinctively moves to wipe it clean on her shirt, and realizes that the white shirt she arrived in is gone, replaced with the traditional black tank-top.

“Muh... My shirt?” She asks, feeling shocked that someone dressed her while unconscious.

“So what’s your name?” The reptile prods before interrupting herself, “Ah! You’re bleeding again! Let’s clean you up.”

Turntail does not answer, pulling back along the cot, dodging the reptile’s grasp at her bloody shoulder and winces with a jolt. “Who *are* you?” She squeaks through the pain finally.

The reptile allows her hand to hover in the air motionlessly, and then retracts with a queer smile wrinkling one eye on her left side. She returns to a mostly standing position balancing her weight entirely on her left leg, thrusting her hip out with an exaggerated curve, and her tail snakes wildly to the opposite side in clear amusement.

“Are you serious?” She responds with giddiness, “Well that’s new!”

The golden panther presses herself into the cot feeling distraught. She rolls her ears back with a tense and confused attempt to hear beyond the tent walls, picking up dull chatter from at few other voices, and a crisp bristling noise overhead. “I’m sorry?” She admits, while twisting to the side but then gasps as a new surge of pain rockets through her arm and neck.

“Me too, dear!” The reptile counters, “I just figured that being the only female reptile-type in the Guilds would’ve made me famous, is all!”

“Oh.” Turntail says, quickly losing interest in the guessing game. She lays back onto the cot and curls into a ball, shivering with cold and pain. The reptile murmurs to herself with concern, and pulls closer to the side of the cot, holding a roll of gauze. She lightly grips at Turntail’s paw, digging a claw between the panther’s arm and clenched fingers trying to release the tight grasp of her shoulder. At first the panther girl only tightens her grip, but then releases herself in exchange for the edge of the cot, gripping it so hard she shakes.

“Poor girl,” the reptile admits with true concern, quickly but gently peeling the soiled gauze away from her shoulder. “I’m sorry — I’m not trying to play coy. I’m just surprised. It’s been at least fifteen cycles since I last surprised anyone! My name’s Betny, but everyone calls me *ShellShock*. I’m also the last of the laserta too, it seems – now that RazorClaw is gone,” she says with a softer tone of defeat. “Well, I guess you would call us the *lizard-kin* in the common tongue, though I hate that word.” ShellShock glances up to Turntail’s face and sees no change in her position, noticing that her shivers seem to be growing stronger. “I used to own that little —”

“—*ShellShock Fashions*,” Turntail interrupts suddenly, crying feebly into the thin foam pillow, clearly trying to distract and control the agony.

“Right!” ShellShock exclaims. “Over on East Market.” And she sighs, forcing a smile that goes unseen. “I know it’s only been a week, but I miss the place terribly. I used to make such great—”

“A we— *week*?” Turntail calls out, twisting her head just enough to look into the lizard’s enormous eyes. “*How* long?”

ShellShock removes the last of the bandages, placing them onto the foot of the cot in a pile and begins to delicately unroll the fresh gauze in a tight bind up Turntail’s arm, beginning below the wound along the bicep. She stops about halfway and grimaces at the sight of the injury. “Yes,” she says, distracted, “since the riots. Well, about five days, actually.”

Turntail rolls over onto her back to more squarely to face the reptile directly. “How long have I been here?” she calls out with surprise.

ShellShock does not answer. She abandons the gauze, setting it purposefully onto the edge of the cot and smiles weakly at Turntail, standing up. As soon as she is clear of the cot, she silently pushes the tent flaps aside and darts quickly from the entrance. Through the gap, Turntail sees a blue sky and trunks of trees, and for three full strides ShellShock’s tail still occupies the tent until it slides away fully like water pouring out of a glass. As the tent flap silently falls into place, a gust of cool air washes over the panther carrying scents of green foliage, wet dirt, smoke, and cooking meat. For a moment her stomach growls with hunger but is soon squelched by the foul odor of infection. She has yet to look fully upon her wounds, but can no longer feign ignorance and decides to face the gunshot. Before she even looks at it, her stomach is already in knots and the tears of fright bud at her eyelids. She forces herself to glance at the injury, and the smell hits her before the vision of it, irritated and repugnant, crimson and yellow with a deep maroon pit as wide around as her largest finger tied tightly with a series of stitches. She does not attempt to spin her arm to see the other side, but assumes she will see the same where the bullet entered. Turntail is relieved to at least see the hole is smaller than what she imagined, but is troubled at the smell and color, which do not bode well. Gingerly, she touches the flesh of the outer ring of the wound, finding the mass swollen and hot, and terribly sensitive. The pit of the wound weeps clear and yellow fluids mixed with blood, and smells foul. She gags and turns her head away, feeling dizzy with fear and a headache that seems to grow as she thinks. She tests her left arm squeezing her paw open and closed and while she has tremendous difficulty in doing so, she takes small comfort in knowing she still can.

Before her imagination and despair run away with her, the tent flap opens quickly and a tan and brown mouse-breed female pushes in urgently dressed in a white shirt and grey pants. Turntail is surprised to see her wearing shoes, though they are modified boots with the toe-box cut away to expose her clawed toes. As soon as she enters the tent, she locks eyes with Turntail and then silently rushes to her side, pushing her gaze to the wound of her arm. When the tent flap opens a second time, she sees ShellShock standing there, and did not realize how tall the lizard was until now, comparing her to the mouse-breed who stands only to her chest. When the mouse spins to acknowledge ShellShock’s entrance, Turntail sees the red “x” of the Medical Keepers painted on the back of her shirt.

“I need you to hold her down,” the mouse-breed demands of ShellShock. Turntail sees that the lizard’s enormous eyes have narrowed considerably to worried slits and she suddenly prefers the wide-eyed expression.

“What’s wrong?” Turntail squeaks, feeling her headache worsen with new worry.

The pair do not answer nor do they look at her until finally ShellShock works her way to the other side of the cot. She leans over the panther and holds a stick above her muzzle, thick and wooden, as round as her wrist. “Bite down on this, dear,” she says, distressed.

Turntail’s eyes flare with concern and she looks to the mouse-breed nurse for clues as to her next actions, but the nurse becomes angry at the reptile and repeats herself. “I said *hold her down!*”

Turntail spins her gaze back to ShellShock, seeing the brilliant blue and green of her coloring has receded to a dull slate grey. The lizard stuffs the stick into the panther’s mouth with a knowing nod and then presses down on the panther’s forearms just below the elbow, sending a shooting spike of pain through her left arm that branches like lightning throughout the panther girl’s body. Turntail kicks and writhes her hips along the cot, but soon finds her legs held stationary by the crushing grip of ShellShock’s prehensile tail. Like thick metal rope, the heavy coils bind her to the cot surface and the immobilization sends Turntail into a mental frenzy. Without hesitation, the mouse-breed medic inserts a small tube into the pit of Turntail’s wound and flushes it with a freezing cold liquid that stings like knives and then burns like fire. The panther girl bites into the stick as hard as she can, feeling her teeth sink and jaws tremble while screaming with absolute agony. The medic repeats this process several times more, flushing the wound for longer and longer until Turntail feels her head become light with misery.

At last, the mouse-breed yields.

Turntail coughs and sobs, slowly easing her bite upon the stick. ShellShock carefully eases her pressure on the panther’s arms and legs, releasing her to deal with the trauma unimpeded, but the panther does not shift. Turntail floats on the edge of consciousness while her head struggles to clear the storm clouds of vertigo. She hears the pair talking low but cannot make out most of their words while her senses recalibrate. She feels something cool press against the wound, and looks over wearily, dropping her head along the cot, watching the medic smear a clear and thick gel along the skin of both sides. Finally, the mouse completes what ShellShock began and tightly wraps the wound once more, sealing the gore away with the gauze. The tightness of the wrapping creates a pain that was at first unbearable before the mouse-breed came in, but is now mercifully smooth.

She lets the stick drop away from her mouth, caring little for the bits of wood stuck to her lips and tongue. Her head rolls back onto the pillow, and she closes her eyes to focus on controlling the pain.

“It may need to come off,” the medic tells the reptile solemnly in a low voice, standing just aside the tent flap. Turntail heard the report clearly however, and opens her eyes just long enough to make sure they weren’t holding something sharp.

“I’m not her kin! That’s not my decision!” ShellShock relates, looking down woefully at Turntail.

“As long as she’s in this camp, she’s your responsibility! Don’t like it? Take it up with *him*,” she concludes, pointing through the tent wall with her thumb.

ShellShock opens her mouth wordlessly but the mouse-breed cuts her short by pushing past her through the tent flap.

“Do a better job! Or the decision will be made for you!” The mouse-breed yells through the fabric as she walks away.

The lizard stands motionless where the mouse-breed left her, her long tail held erect in a stationary figure eight at her back, rubbing one clawed hand along her arm in thought. She turns back to Turntail and smiles weakly, her eyes still narrow, her colors still muted.

“Is she going to take my arm?” Turntail blubs, fighting to catch her breath.

ShellShock looks on with sympathy, choosing not to answer right away, though her long delay wordlessly confirms a high possibility.

“We’ll do better,” ShellShock promises, sitting next to the panther again. “Are you hungry?”

Maverick gently closes a heavy metal compartment drawer of the truck with a resonating *click* and locks it, placing the key back around his neck, and tucking the chain into his shirt. He spins on his knees and settles himself down with his back against the compartment bay. His tail and arms droop clumsily along the floor of the truck bed at either side, laying flat with a silent flop. He pushes his legs and booted feet out in front of him to the other side of the covered truck bed in a stretch. The canopy truck features several stacked rows of bins, compartments and racks full of clothing, food and supplies. He lethargically rests his head against the metal container wall with a hollow *thud* echoing dully. After a moment of peace he bangs his head softly into the metal wall repeatedly with his eyes closed.

“You look tired.”

Maverick swivels his ears resentfully and squints his eyes open, rolling his head along the metal wall. He peers out through the open back of the truck searching for the owner of the small but markedly confident voice, and finds the tan and brown mouse-breed medic standing there, holding a collection of plastic bottles and gauze up into the air over her head with two overfilled flesh-pink paws, offering them into the bed of the truck with urgency. The fox stares at her face for a moment, and then to the supplies that threaten to escape her grasp and so begrudgingly rolls his body forward to collect them while still sitting upon the floor.

“We’re all tired,” he supposes, delicately accepting the medical supplies with one large paw while forcing himself to roll forward into an upright position. As he stands, he pulls the key from his shirt once more and spins to face the cabinets at his back. He places each item into its specific compartment, and reseals the drawers to lock them away, slipping the key back into his shirt. “We’re running low. There are only two more bottles left,” he reports, talking to his paws.

“I know. I’m being as efficient as I can, but no one here is trained,” says the mouse with an aggravated tone. “There’s a lot of waste. And it doesn’t help that no one is following directions. As it is, I should be using a whole bottle on her arm twice a day. She’s only getting a quarter of what she needs.”

“Will she lose the arm?” Maverick asks quietly, afraid of spreading gossip on open air. He sits back down on the end of the truck, allowing his footpaws and tail to dangle over the end and looks down. The mouse’s head and shoulders clear the bed but just barely, and she looks up to him for a moment with angry eyes that relax into worry when she sighs. “I think so,” she admits, turning to her side to lean against the bumper of the truck with one paw. “It’s infected and Blight is setting in. If that rottin’ *lizard* would listen to directions, the poor girl’d be better off! I need better assistants!”

Maverick feels the tension rising in the medic’s voice and fears for her. He’s exhausted to the point of seeing double, and so knows how tired the mouse must be. He cannot risk losing the services of his only medically trained kin to a collapse. He grabs a side rail on the truck’s bed and slides himself down, landing a half-length lower into the damp soil at the medic’s feet.

“Let’s not start that debate again,” the fox states glumly, pulling the noisy slatted door of the truck bed down, “Kin are worried enough. And please stop calling her *the lizard*, you know she hates it. You’ll get better assistance from kin who respect you.”

“I’ll drop it – *for now*,” the medic snorts, stepping away from the earsplitting roll of the metal hatch. “But I’m not as convinced as you that the Blight has been eliminated. And I’ll stop calling her *lizard* when she starts listening to me! She’s flighty and irresponsible! Do you see the way she’s parading around out here? Dressed like that? Like we’re still at home at one of her fashion shows? I need her to *concentrate* on her tasks and actually attend the kin in her care! Can’t I switch her out for Brown? Or Nell?”

The fox and the mouse walk side by side for several paces toward a tent setup near the rear of the truck. She walks with a hurried gait, meeting the sluggish lumber of the fox with two steps to his one. “No,” Maverick says as they reach the entrance of the tent, “they’re both working as scouts. I need them fresh-eyed and untethered.”

“But —” the mouse quickly bargains, raising a finger into the air to begin a thought.

“—*But* I will watch over her for a bit,” Maverick interrupts. “In the meantime, I want you to get some sleep.”

“*Ha!*” Laughs the mouse sarcastically, dipping her head back for emphasis. “Like that’ll happen! There’s *way* too much to do!”

Maverick stops abruptly and pivots with a slow turn toward the mouse, a light scowl drooping across his eyes and muzzle. He rolls his ears forcefully forward with an exaggerated and deliberate gesture understood to mean that he's completely focused on the mouse and her concerns. The mouse stops alongside him and pulls her head back slightly, suddenly aware of his anger. Maverick addresses her without raising his voice but his seriousness is clear. "Tresa — *Please*. I cannot have my only medic acting like a martyr. The kin are capable. The future of this camp does not lie exclusively on your shoulders, mighty though they are."

The exposed pink flesh of Tresa's rounded ears deepens to a rosy red with embarrassment and she retracts the full length of her willowy tail into an inverted loop. She's a headstrong kin with a penchant for overachieving, but she realizes now that Maverick has a point. She is not the only kin struggling in this camp, and feels relieved that Maverick recognizes her as an important figurehead.

Maverick's tail coils once and then falls into a steady dangle as he relaxes his ears to a less ominous position. "I'm asking you to get some sleep. For all of our sakes. I'll watch over things on the other end for a bit."

Tresa lifts one corner of her small mouth into a wry smile, privately doubting Maverick can keep up with her pace, but she nods her acceptance, growing her smile just enough to wrinkle the fur along her short, tan-furred muzzle. Maverick nods back in response, happy that she has accepted, and returns to the foot-worn trail leading away from his tent toward the center of camp. Tresa lingers a moment longer, concentrating her gaze on Maverick's lonely tent and the trucks parked beside it. Between the fox's solitary grey-fabric shelter and the large supply truck she can see the box end of a smaller vehicle, fully enclosed, and mostly hidden from view. With narrowed eyes and her ears back, the mouse curls her tail and catches up with Maverick.

"If you see Coal, tell 'im I'm looking for him," Maverick requests, "I need him to switch with me."

"*Coal?*" Questions the mouse with surprise. "Are you sure?"

He continues to walk onward ahead of her and swerves to his right following the perimeter of the camp along the outermost line of shelters. "Just tell him I'll be at the food truck," he directs with a wave of his left paw over his shoulder, aiming himself at fire pit thirty paces ahead.

The mouse says nothing, and parts ways turning to the left to cut through a jumbled cluster of tents crookedly erected along her path to the medical shelters.

Maverick hopes that she actually follows his commands and returns to her own lodging rather than stopping to check the kin along the way, as she is prone. He reserves his dwindling energy for larger battles however, and focuses on getting to the food tent before his legs give way. He was fortunate in convincing Honey to travel with him to Camp Three, as she was the most coveted cook in the Commons, and his party sorely needed something as an incentive to attract kin to follow them.

The concept of the Three Camps has been a staple of the escape plan for many cycles,

and has been a critical component of its construction, surviving every major revision. This is in part because the three most coveted personalities within the Guilds had three very different plans for governance and agreed on little else other than the need to abandon the Complex.

The reptile-type kin have been long thought to be immune to the Blight, or resilient at the very least, which became the foundation for their legendary status. This popularity bolstered the selflessness in Sharptooth, as it gave him magnified purpose to help his kin, despite their reluctance to trust him. For RazorClaw, it heightened his arrogance, which quickly bloomed into campaigns of mutiny and resulted ultimately in his exile. ShellShock's natural endowments of exotic beauty coupled all too well with the gift of status and allowed them to make her vain. And then there was *Shellback*, the loner, who wanted nothing to do with any of it though ironically, or perhaps because of his apprehension, became the figurehead for the Great Escape. The kin trusted him because of that reluctance, and eventually he embraced the mantle. It also helps that Shellback is the least physically menacing of the reptiles, representing the last of the ancient Tera-breed kin.

As such, Camp One is governed by Shellback, the architect of the escape. He took with him the majority of the escapees, nearly twelve-hundred, which meant more food and supplies, more and at his side a bevvv of the Commons' most skilled kin.

Camp Two is lead by the mated tiger-breed pair, Antony and Lyra, two of the most tenacious kin Maverick has ever known, and set off for the desolated and Blight-ridden town of Chindi with wild expectations of reuniting with their exiled savior, RazorClaw, rumored to still be living in the ruins of the desolated city though seldom few believe he has survived.

Camp Three was intended to be lead by Sharptooth, the fearless and legendary reptile-type beloved by all, until he was shockingly recruited by the very kin they were trying to flee, and became sympathetic to the Keepers. Very few kin trusted that he would not betray them as a result, and thus Camp Three became a toxic prospect.

Maverick sighs openly and worries.

Camp Three was once meant to be the closest of the three camps, reserved for those who could not travel far or fast, like the very young, the new mothers, the elderly and the sick. But in the final day before the escape, Shellback convinced the kin that Maverick would enact a secret *Plan B*, which merely doubled the escape route into unknown territory. It was out of an excess of caution that Shellback felt the group had to abandon the original location in the wind-carved rocks of the derelict highway. Maverick had trained for deserts and sand, and was relying on rocky structures for protection — not forests and mud, surrounded by Blight and unexpected wild beasts. And using a Keeper's gun to mark the route seemed especially bizarre but it was the only item distinctive enough to prove useful.

The fox twirls his view to take in the hundreds of tent-like shelters the kin have erected from blankets, shirts, clothing and sticks and he feels ashamed. Hidden away in these pitiful structures, baking in the already hot morning sun, are the miserable souls of his expressed charge; some three or four hundred kin trusting in him to preserve and protect,

and nearly a third of these meager kits and pups under eighteen cycles.

Maverick sighs again.

He reaches a long line of tents positioned tightly beside each other like a wall guiding him to his destination. The smells of cooking meat, beans and eggs hook him by the nose and he finds renewed energy in his limbs, even his tail sways a bit on its own, reflecting his contentment. *Meat Day*, he thinks to himself, *Oh, thank the Maker for small miracles*.

The campsite begins to stir, and the long shadows of the mighty ring of thick trees have fallen away from the tents and fire pits, exposing the grounds to direct sunlight. The air still blows in cool and fragrant through the trees, but has adopted the musty smell of standing water and old foliage. Once the sun is at its apex, the breezes will slow to a halt and the open field of tents and kin will bake in the windless heat. Maverick considers the day's tasks and objectives he will instruct his captains to complete in preparation for their next move, dependent entirely upon the reporting of Brown and Nell when they return tonight.

As he approaches the food truck in the northwestern corner of the camp, he sees a number of his kin already sat upon the ground or on logs and rocks eating small servings of food with their fingers. About half of the kin brought a bowl with them, but those that did not support their food on their bare hand or paw, picking at it with the other. Maverick sees a row of parents supporting food in their hands instead of bowls allowing their kits to eat while the other parent feeds them both. In the cases of a dejected few, the single parent only waits patiently for their kit to finish so that they may begin. Every morning, this act of silent selflessness goes unnoticed by all, but it provides the strength he needs to get through his day.

His hunger mounts as the aroma builds, obsessing over the salty thick allure of sizzling pig meat and sweet tang of Honey's beans. He has not eaten since breakfast yesterday, and he is dizzy with depletion.

As he moves around a sturdy tree in his path, he finds the lines at the food truck rather long already, and despairs. Unlike the other leaders of the Camp, he does not like using his privilege to cut ahead of lines and always waits his turn, but today he does not think he has the energy to wait. Honey always saves him a special portion though, ensuring that he is fed, despite his argument that he be treated and served like everyone else. She catches his gaze as the fox approaches, and quickly disappears behind the high counter of the truck window leaving the labor to her assistants. The auburn-furred rabbit appears again through a hatch on the front of the truck, facing away from the crowds, and beckons to him silently with a wild curl of her paw. Maverick assumes at once that his face must be pitiful indeed if she could see his desperation from forty paces. For once though, he does not quarrel and lumbers with determination to the front of the truck.

"Morning, Maverick!" Calls out a tired voice from the middle of the food line, and the fox turns with a weak smile and waves toward the whole line, not knowing for sure who spoke. Several kin wave back, and a few even smile, though most of the line fidgets with anxious eyes fixed on the high counter of the serving window. As he approaches the truck's cab, he watches Honey place a bowl of beans stacked high with strips of fried pig meat and tousled eggs onto the seat of the driver's seat for him to claim. She gives him a

quick nod and a smile, and spins away to assist once more with serving the line.

“Maverick! Hey!”

Maverick’s paw stops upon the door handle. He turns toward the smoky voice calling his name and follows crisp foot steps striding toward him with bouncy enthusiasm. The striking brilliance of ShellShock’s blue and green skin shimmers in the sunlight like millions of glass beads making her very hard to miss. She bounds up to him with a wide smile and enormous blue eyes rimmed in dark black lashes, and her long tail stands straight out behind her like a needle pointed at the sky. Maverick greets her smile with apprehension, turning sidewise to glimpse his food bowl on the vehicle’s seat, taunting him.

“Morning, Miss Betny,” he says politely. His stomach growls a protest loudly as if on cue.

“*ShellShock!*” She corrects, “Please! No need to be someone else just because we’re out now!”

“Fair enough,” Maverick acknowledges, trying to remember his old name. “What can I do for you this morning, Miss *ShellShock*?”

The reptile comically rolls her eyes at the formality and turns to her side, allowing the fox to see beyond her to the sluggish panther-breed girl awkwardly trailing behind. Maverick squints and sees the pitiful girl wearing a sling over her shoulder with bandages under her eye and wrapped around her arm and legs. She seems lost, turning her head in timid circles to review her surroundings. She attempts to insert herself into the food line twice, but is blocked out by other kin that stood in place sooner. Instead, she steps aside and stands in place, swaying with what Maverick can only assume is utter weakness. With an angry face he looks to ShellShock and scolds her. “What is she doing out of medical? She should be resting!”

“She finally woke up! And she said she was hungry, so—” the lizard girl reports confidently.

“—Then you bring the food *to her*,” Maverick interrupts. “Your job is to *comfort and assist* the sick, Miss ShellShock, not make them *do it themselves*.”

ShellShock puffs her cheeks up a little with apprehension as if confused by her purpose. Her tail waves behind her like ripples in a pond, and she looks at the long food line. “Well if I get in line now there won’t be anything left,” She decides. “I figured they’d see her and we could cut to the front.”

Maverick closes his eyes for several breaths and tries not to raise his voice. “Miss ShellShock, she needs to be in bed. Her condition is dire. Until you are told otherwise, she remains in her tent. If she needs anything, food, medicine, toilet, you will bring it to her. Do you understand?”

ShellShock makes a disgusted face at *toilet* but knows better than to argue. She nods convincingly and rests her hands on her hips. “I was going to introduce you, but I’ll just

take her back,” she says glumly.

“No,” Maverick breathes lowly, “the poor thing barely made it here by the look of her. I’ll take her back. Leave her with me. Get out of here before Tresa sees you.”

“Oh, she went to sleep,” she says, “I watched her slink into her tent before I came over.”

“Good. Good.” Maverick nods his approval, more for himself than for the reptile. “Well then please get back to your other charges, and make sure they’re hydrated. It’s going to be hot today, it seems. Mammal-types need way more water than what you’re bringing now.”

ShellShock nods and quickly turns back to Turntail, finding her sitting on a small boulder near what was once the end of the food line but is now only the high middle. The reptile approaches Turntail before Maverick can, talking to her quickly and excitedly, and then points to Maverick, brings her hands to cup the panther’s face fully, kisses her forehead, and runs off to get into the food line for herself.

Turntail does not look after ShellShock as she runs off, instead locked onto Maverick’s face with something akin to admiration. She struggles to stand as he approaches, but Maverick calls to her with his paws pushing downward as instruction to remain seated. “Let me help!” He instructs, finally standing next to her. “You don’t belong on a rock right now,” he says, gently picking her up like a father lifts a kit. She winces in silence as he jostles her wounds, but he is surprisingly cautious and gentle, stepping slowly back to the front of the food truck where his cooling food awaits.

He sets her back down near the truck’s cab, and looks to the food line for an assessment and finds it wrapped almost all the way back to his tent on the other side of the camp. He looks at Honey, seeing her frustrated and feverishly serving food, and therefore decides not to bother her. He opens the door on the passenger side of the truck and helps her make the first step to the foot plate, asking her to sit in the padded seat. Closing the door, he walks around to the other side and climbs in, wobbling the truck with his mass, and closes the door a bit more loudly than before. The intoxicating aroma of the food has permeated every fiber of the truck and his stomach grumbles so hungrily that his eyes water. Without a word however, he hands the bowl to Turntail with a compassionate smile and a nod and settles back into the driver’s seat, rolling down the window to lean his arm out.

“Was this yours?” The panther girl asks weakly, the edges of her mouth already glistening with saliva.

“No, no,” he assures, “it’s yours. Miss Betny, er, Miss *ShellShock* wanted to make sure you got something to eat.”

“Oh,” Turntail speaks into her lap at the food bowl, “She told me I had to stand in line. Are you sure this isn’t yours?”

“Absolutely! And yes, you normally have to stand in line, but it’s not every day that our mysterious heroine returns from oblivion!” Maverick smiles with kind humor, easing her hesitation and encourages her to eat. Turntail nestles the bowl between her legs, cradling

it high upon her thighs and picking at the fried meat and eggs with her right paw. Her left arm hangs tightly at her stomach in a cloth full sling, partially resting on the padded armrest console between her and the fox. She eats in silence while Maverick looks on for a moment, but then spins to look out his window to grant her some privacy, resting his chin into his paw, elbow upon the sill. The noises of kits playing and kin talking drift in through the open window, and when Turntail closes her eyes she almost feels as though she were sitting in Hope Park again under the apple trees.

“Heroine?” Turntail asks finally, realizing she has not responded to the fox’s unusual description.

Maverick pushes his muzzle to face her sleepily with an endearing smile. “Sure!” He glows, “You’re the talk of the camp right now; the way you burst in from the dark, five *other-kin* on your tail. Some of my best scouts won’t go anywhere near the forest once the sun goes down,” he teases, crossing his arms and leaning into the corner of the door. “No one here seems to know you, so naturally, we’re all quite curious about how you found us out here. I’m sure you’ve got quite the story.” Maverick’s tone remains upbeat but Turntail detects a note of concern in his words, as if he’s testing her.

She looks to him with a content smile, and then returns to her food gratefully, letting the moment pass. When the eggs and meat are gone, she raises the bowl to pour back the beans, taking daintier bites to prevent a mess, and looks out her window to the camp. The truck points into the forest and produces a view of thick brown-black trees emerging through a bed of old logs and rotten limbs coated in a blanket of golden orange leaves. The land dips and rolls with wide ravines and meager hills, punctured by thin strands of daylight that pierce through the canopy far above. Even with the new sun, the forest floor is dark and secretive, barring her eyes from peering too deep. Her panicked dash through the wood remains top of mind, ruffling the fur along her neck and tail with a chill, despite the heat. *All those trees*, she thinks. *How far did I run?*

The impossible odds of her escape from the gnashing jaws and teeth hit her suddenly, peering out into the forest depths. *The motorcycle chase. The cliff. The Keepers.* Tears well up into her eyes though they are a mix of retroactive fear and blissful appreciation.

Maverick notices. He looks to the ceiling of the cab while Turntail snuffles too herself, and he pulls down the visor, allowing a fold of fabric to fall into his paw. He folds it over once and hands the black tank-top shirt to the girl. She accepts it with a smile and dabs at her eyes taking in the familiar scent of the cloth and then with a look of surprise turns back to Maverick with wide eyes. “Where did you get this?” She questions.

“From you,” Maverick responds matter-of-factly. “You were carrying this when we found you.”

“Yes,” she responds with enthusiasm, “I remember now... from the road!” She falls silent for a moment, piecing the events back together. *It was so dark. So cold.* “Is he here?” She asks, pulling the shirt closer to her nose. “Roundabout?”

Maverick curls the left corner of his mouth several times without realizing, and then pulls a paw over his muzzle in thought, looking away to his left.

“Friend of yours? Family?” Maverick inquires with a sober expression.

“No,” Turntail begins, “Not really. He’s just someone I know. This is how I found you. It was in the sand. On the road.”

“Oh yeah?” Maverick turns to her and exclaims. “Did you find anything else out there? Near the shirt?”

Turntail thinks, running her fingers over the shirt and balling it up softly. “No, nothing I remember. Just the, uh, the gun. Oh!”

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Maverick assures, “Thank you for bringing it back. We must have just missed each other out there, that night. I don’t think I even made it back to camp when you found it.”

The news makes Turntail angry.

“Was that you who fired a shot?” The fox presses, troubled by the prospect, confusion hanging lightly from his words.

Turntail looks to the bowl in her lap, now empty, and creases her brow with guilt. *What were those things in the dark? Did Maverick call them ‘other-kin?’* “Yeah,” she admits with tears in her eyes again. “They were all around me. I didn’t think I was going to make it.” Her lower lip quivers and her eyes brim. She dabs at them before the tears can fall, and she feels the fox’s sizeable paw press sympathetically on her wounded shoulder.

“Like I said,” he begins. “Our heroine!”

Turntail’s lips and eyes tremble wider, fighting the transition into a thankful smile.

“Though I emptied the clip,” Maverick continues, “— at least I thought I did. I checked it three times. I musta’ left a bullet in the chamber. I’m too tired to think straight,” he sighs. “Though I’m glad I did. It appears to have made a difference.”

As the panther girl dabs at her eyes a shadow appears to her right, through the truck window, and she turns to inspect it with a deafening scream, clawing at the armrest to escape her seat. Maverick winces with ear-ringing pain and he whirls to see around the girl, simultaneously exposing the gun he hid secretly between the seats. Though before he saw need to use it, the fox stuffs the gun back into the seats again and pats a calming paw onto the girl’s knees, “Ho’ now! It’s okay!” He promises, “It’s just a friend of mine.”

Turntail has pressed herself deep and low into the truck seat away from the window as far as physics will allow despite her pain. Through her sobs, she looks from Maverick’s face back to the window to find a black wolf standing shirtless outside her window. He lowers his head enough that she can see his face clearly, his yellow eyes inset deep among a mask of solid black and dark charcoal grey with a faint stroke of white fur that lines the lower lid of each eye. He contorts his face into a sealed grin, knowing better than to expose the whites of his teeth in the moment.

“A *friend*, you say.” The wolf calls through the closed window, walking around the front

of the truck to meet Maverick on the other side. Maverick does not stir though Turntail noticed that the tip of his tail bushed up at the sound of the wolf's voice. "I do believe that would be the first time you've called me that." He steps away from the window and walks around the front of the vehicle, circling around.

"Keep your eyes on this one at all times, dear," Maverick murmurs lowly. "I don't trust him worth a rotten bone".

The wolf drums his open paws along the hood of the truck a few times in a cadenced beat, smiling wide in through the window at the panther girl and her bright red ears. "So sorry, love. I didn't mean to startle ya," he chirps.

"Yes you did," Maverick remarks quickly.

"Yeah, I did," the black wolf beams, staring directly at Turntail with a toothy smile. His voice is remarkably upbeat and smooth with a texture as thick as honey, and his demeanor exudes a confidence bordering arrogance. *If he's this brazen at a time like this, he must have been unbearable in the Guilds*, Turntail thinks, rubbing at her arm.

"Oh," the wolf subdues, "I forgot about the arm. Again, so sorry. Really."

Turntail finally turns her gaze to look upon him fully, catching his eyes just long enough to accept his apology with a tiny nod and smaller smile, folding her ears back with lingering awkwardness. She pulls herself upright into the seat again, drooping her head forward and trying to cover her eyes in embarrassment.

"This is Coal," the fox states blandly, rolling his paw out the window with a weak flick. "Degenerate, camp nuisance, and regrettably my back-up."

"Ouch!" Coal reacts with simulated shock, "And who is this pretty young thing?" He interrogates, placing both paws on the window ledge to poke his face into the cab a little further with his ears cocked forward and a mild sway to his tail

Maverick flinches. He turns to look at the girl with a touch of embarrassment, "Forgive me. I have not yet asked."

The wolf retracts his head from the cab to blurt a mighty chortle that rolls heavily across the roof of the truck like tumbling stones. "And he calls *me* degenerate! Well today is indeed quite the gift, young miss! Our camp has been blessed with another exquisite pardus — *and* — I am granted this rarest of opportunities to out-etiquette the insurmountably noble vulpin, Maverick." Coal delicately but rapidly offers his paw in through the window and across Maverick's lap to the reception of rolling eyes. Turntail hesitantly accepts his greeting with a discerning smile, squeezing his thick fingers unenthusiastically. She has never been flirted with before and does not recognize the game, focusing instead on her general trepidation of the wolf-kin. She releases his fingers quickly, satisfied to have completed the cordial ritual of reception, and grasps her arm again with a wince that she tries to hide.

"And what is your name, then?" Implores the wolf a bit stunned that she did not offer it on her own, returning both paws to the edge of the window and ignoring Maverick's

presence entirely.

Maverick shifts in his seat to create a wall between the panther and the wolf. “Leave her be, Coal,” he requests, glancing at the girl and her growing pain.

“Why the secrecy? I don’t need *The Vulpin*’s permission to make new friends now, do I?” Coal huffs with a notable absence of humor, sweeping his muzzle toward Maverick in a manner calculated to intimidate. Maverick greets his look with an unfazed frown and dismisses the micro-aggression with grace. “She has just awoken,” he reports coolly, “Keep it light, please.”

Both of the males turn to look upon Turntail when she shuffles uncomfortably in her seat, wobbling the cab, and her eyes bounce between their stares feeling suddenly uncomfortable. “Nessa,” she declares, trimming her response short, afraid of over-indulging. The fib surprises her, unsure why it so easily sprang from her lips; it has been many cycles since anyone has called her that, and Maverick raises an eyebrow. There’s no way he could be aware of the lie, Turntail believes, having never met him until now. And he does not flinch much, just a subtle twitch, but Turntail notices and frantically considers retracting the lie. She doesn’t know why she reverted back to the old name, but the sudden sensation to preserve her identity bubbled up with powerful conviction, and she chose to ride the wave. Perhaps she was more desperate to rid herself of the moniker than she realized; a chance to start over. Meeting Maverick’s questioning leer, Turntail smiles bashfully, returning the food bowl, and he sets it aside.

Coal nods a casual reception of her name, and glances between Maverick and the girl with a look of mischief across his muzzle. In these short moments since meeting the inky wolf, Turntail already believes his suspicious smile is a permanent part of his identity. She fidgets on the cloth seat, growing uncomfortable in the mounting temperature of the small cab. The wolf releases Turntail from his penetrating gaze and returns to his conversation with Maverick again while the girl struggles with the mechanics of the window handle. She tries to decode the volley of vague updates and mysterious requests but the context is lost on her and the words are utterly meaningless. They discuss *perimeters* and *rations* and a fair bit about *shift scheduling* which sounds about as dry a topic as Turntail had ever heard and elects to ignore them, finally rolling the window down to feel the cool breeze flow over her nose. The wind carries a smell of warmth with it – not heat itself, but a symptom of it, and she can tell at once that the day will be as hot as she last remembers it. She recalls the miserable heat of her chaotic motorcycle ride with Shellback, and how for a time her biggest complaint was the sun – until the Keepers caught up. For a flash, she thinks about Shellback as she looks blankly into the dark forest again, and wonders what became of him. In the long and lonely moments since he fled from her side, she’s only focused on the terror of his abandonment and did not consider the sacrifice he’d made. The revelation hits her then with a force like an epiphany, and she mews loudly enough with guilt that the fox and wolf turn to her with silent concern. She smiles lightly with a single tear in each eye and plays the moment down as if responding to the pain in her arm. Truthfully though, she is finally relaxing the pain of her arm enough to successfully ignore it, and is grateful for the peace. Perhaps the food has provided a natural anesthetic, and given her body something else to focus on. The heavy meal sits in her belly like a form of much needed therapy, and it was fried pork no less, which she has not had for a long time. She does not even remember when she last ate, let alone enjoyed pig or cow meat, but it was a meal consumed in the

Commons, which, according to the lizard-girl, was almost a week ago. *I can't believe I've been asleep for five days*, she thinks. *Where could Shellback be?*

Coal interrupts her thoughts when he taps his fingers rhythmically along the window ledge again in response to something Maverick had said. "Yes," the black wolf states clearly, although Turntail wasn't paying attention to the pretext. "So we'll take care of it. It's not much longer, now," he adds.

"Thanks," comes Maverick's response. "I'm going to walk Nessa back to Medical and grab some sleep. I haven't slept in three days. I need you *up front* for a bit," he says to the wolf.

Coal raises an eyebrow and cocks his head gently to one side. "Really," he asks sarcastically, leaning harder onto the window ledge. "Why are you asking me and not Ash? And why are you doing the laserta's job? *Again?*"

"I can't – uh, ShellShock's been assigned another set of tasks for awhile," Maverick reports dryly, hoping to avoid a deeper conversation. He hates gossip. "And Ash is with Brown and Nell scouting the northern pass for water."

The wolf whirls around on the ball of his foot to face Maverick squarely, "Why didn't anyone inform me?" He asks with an elevated tone. "I should have been the one to go on that expedition. I know the territory best."

"Because we had to decide quickly before the storm rolled over," Maverick retorts, annoyed. "And no one could find you, Coal. Again. I would have rather you went, but you seemed to be chasing tail again."

"Ha! Oh, Yeah," Coal remembers the night of the rain with a hearty laugh that he truncates with a snort, "That's the night that I was, uh, *enjoying the company* of a cute —"

The fox closes his eyes tight and breaks off the wolf's response, "—I don't want to know, Coal. It's none of my business and I don't care about your escapades unless they affect your job to govern here, and they are." Maverick bounces two closed fists gently at his side for emphasis.

"And what about the laserta, then? Where is she?" Coal presses of ShellShock, "Looking after a sleeping girl was still too much for her, eh?"

"Nessa needs additional care now," Maverick simply implies, trying to avoid Coal's fishing attempts.

"Oh!" Exclaims the wolf, drumming along the window ledge again. "*Oh! Now* I see!"

Maverick's ears become bright red and he spins quickly from Coal to Turntail to gauge her reaction. The panther girl seems confused and unaffected, and so he punches the wolf's arm with his left fist, but the wolf only laughs all the harder, backing away from the open window with a proud sway to his tail.

The fox opens the door and dismounts from the truck seat quickly, closing the door behind him in a huff. “Do not imply such things!” He whispers aggressively to the smirking wolf.

“What do you want me to do with the *other-kin*?” Coal asks through his laughing, deliberately breaking the tension with a pertinent question. Maverick looks over Coal’s shoulder into the distance with a distracted frown, and returns his gaze to the bemused wolf. “Do not start rumors you know to be false,” he commands. “The camp needs to trust me.”

“And you think they won’t trust you if you have a piece of tail on the side?” Coal stretches another toothy smile and peers animatedly over Maverick’s shoulder at the girl in the truck, waving to her innocently. “It might even do you some good,” he whispers humorously.

“Do not *create* problems, Coal,” says Maverick with intensity. “We have more than we can handle right now. These kin have been through tremendous hardship and loss, and—”

“—Alright, alright, alright,” Coal breaks in, “Your unblemished reputation shall remain intact for another day. Now — the *other-kin*?”

Maverick grunts doubtfully but accepts the wolf’s promise. He returns to the truck and walks to the passenger side, resting his paw along the hood over the wheel. “Bury them,” he decides at last, “In the forest. Tresa has had enough time.” He opens the door and Turntail sits back into the seat, waiting for instruction. When the door opens fully, Coal walks around to stand near the front of the vehicle with an evil smirk, intentionally making Maverick uncomfortable. He slinks closer, sliding along the quarter-panel to speak quietly. “And what about *the key*,” he inquires.

The fox surveys the immediate area and finds no eyes or ears directed his way. Reluctantly, he pulls a pair of keys from around his neck and hands them balled up with their chain directly into the wolf’s paw. “No one gets in,” he commands solemnly, staring into the wolf’s eyes to underscore his urgency. “*No one.*”

“It’s going to be hot today,” Coal surmises, “do I pull around like last time?”

Maverick offers his paw to Turntail to help her step down from the elevated cab, and he looks back to Coal with a sideway glance. “Make sure no one is watching. Do it now, before breakfast is done.”

With the mention, Maverick’s stomach growls loudly and Coal’s ears perk in observance.

“You should eat before you turn in,” Coal recommends with a disparate tone of concern, “Don’t miss out on meat day.”

“I will,” he says, glancing to Turntail’s eyes to again gauge her reaction. This time she looks embarrassed and he can feel his ears heat up. “When I can,” he adds.

With that the wolf pads off quickly upon his tasks making a deliberate wide swing around the periphery of the camp. He vanishes almost immediately against the backdrop of the

dark forest, remaining out of the light and upwind, disappearing with an unsettling mastery. Turntail gathers her energy feeling renewed with the meal and finds her feet, lowering herself to the ground and closing the truck door behind. She looks to Maverick wordlessly with a troubled crease drawn across her brow. Silently, the fox reads her expression and smiles apologetically. "You deserved the meal more than I," he confirms with conviction, "I will not starve."

For a time, Maverick and Turntail amble together patiently southward, following the arced line of ancient trees defining the natural amphitheater of their campsite. A dirt and sandy patch of barren land save for a handful of young trees and evergreens stretches out as an irregular oval, carved out of the forest as if intentionally. Turntail estimates its distance to be two hundred paces wide, about the same distance as the courtyard around the pavilion in Hope Park she recalls, though she was not paying attention to her footsteps when ShellShock drove her from the tent. She feels the strength return to her legs, and the knots in her back and tail have cleared themselves with the exercise. And for a fleeting moment she enjoys the warmth of the sun before the heat increases, forcing her to seek a shaded path beneath the heavy boughs of the trees. With Maverick between her and the forest she feels safer than when last she entered, but she keeps an attentive ear focused on the crinkling noises within nonetheless.

They arrive at a lesser campfire flanked on either side by familiar twin evergreens like a gateway, surrounded by a small number of kin finishing their meals. Some attend toddling kits or dutifully gather branches to keep the fire burning, but the majority of the small group seems lost in disassociated conversations and pays little attention to the approaching pair. Turntail has been scanning the faces and scents of the camp for signs of familiarity but has thus far been disappointed. In a way, she is happy to be unknown here; there is a freedom of renewal. But her life in the Guilds was often spent alone and lonely and she has had her fill of empty wandering between chores and errands. She often wished for friends of her own, but the art of making lasting relationships is a skill she has not mastered and it has long bothered her. She thinks herself pleasant and kind, but the kin of her life seldom had time for her, and she felt awkward in every group. She eventually gave up trying, particularly when she became known for *turning tail* every time a group gathered anywhere near her. *The lonely loner*, she thinks.

Maverick is the first to pass between the enormous twin evergreens and settles himself on a log in the shade of the trees with his back to the forest. Turntail follows his lead, choosing to sit a respectful arm's length from the fox but continues to monitor the forest for disturbing noises. They sit side by side for a time listening only to the chatter of the kin going about their morning duties, seemingly ignoring the pair on purpose. For someone who is supposedly the 'talk of the camp,' Turntail is unimpressed with their overwhelming lack of interest.

"They seem busy," Turntail observes aloud, partly trying to justify their rudeness. She is used to being ignored by kin whom know her and is frustrated to see the trend already starting anew.

When Maverick does not respond, she becomes further dismayed and turns to find him with his eyes closed and his ears at rest, leaning backward against locked elbows, and his

muzzle tipped up slightly to the sky. His stomach gurgles loudly.

Turntail looks awkwardly to the ground, afraid he will open his eyes and see her staring. Instead she watches small insects scurry beneath her paws. She wishes she were an insect. Building something, scouting for something; serving a purpose.

She sighs.

The fox inhales audibly, long and deep, prompting Turntail to peer over again. He raises his eyebrows before opening his eyes, turning sluggishly to the panther with a series of long blinks followed by an expansive yawn which he apologizes for.

“I’m so sorry, Nessa. What did you say?”

The name bothers her. Being bothered by the name bothering her bothers her. She’s been uncomfortable with her nickname about as long as she’s had it, though grew accustomed to it over time. Having subconsciously chosen to resurrect her *old name* feels as though she’s deliberately violating a sacred code; one that will come back to haunt her before long, she believes.

She continues to watch the tiny insects explore her toes, disappearing and reemerging from under her pads and between the short fur. “The mouse says I may lose my arm,” she states without emotion, speaking as though referring to someone else.

A moment passes in silence, and Turntail looks up to see if Maverick has fallen asleep again but instead catches his troubled gaze slowly scanning over her wounds before he looks away with a frown. With confidence, Maverick states, “Tresa is always afraid of the worst. It’s what made her the best medic in the Guilds,” he consoles, “Do not despair just yet. We’ll make sure you’re fed and the wounds kept clean. It will be easier to care for them now that you’re awake. And do not be afraid of calling on Betny— er, *ShellShock*,” he corrects, “The Maker’s know she needs *something* to do and she owes it to you.”

Turntail glances to Maverick’s face quickly, expecting to see a smirk but finds his brows furrowed and lips turned down. “Have I really been here five days?” She asks, rubbing at her bicep subconsciously.

“Do you really not recall?” he responds with surprise in his voice. “I guess I can understand that. We’ve been talking to you, and you’ve been responding, but only a few words at a time, and you’ve not made a lot of sense.” Maverick stretches his back and sits forward, leaning onto his knees. “Tresa said you were in shock. You’ve had some broth to eat, but ShellShock has had to feed you. We were beginning to fear your condition was dire.” He looks to Turntail momentarily and finds a placid face, eyes wide but her brows even, and listening attentively.

“I don’t remember any of that,” she admits, sliding her paw down her arm to scratch at the healing bite on her calf.

“Your wounds are healing, Tresa tells me, but will need to be closely monitored. I wish we could offer more relief, but supplies are short. We use only what we must.”

"I understand," Turntail grants, reviewing the meager condition of the camp and its kin. As her eyes wander, she discovers a construction of timber poles erected against the far tree line to her right, partly obscured by a row of tents and pair of large deciduous trees. At first, she believes the dark-furred shapes hanging from them to be kits and pups at play. Through squinted eyes she gasps when their forms become clear, seeing a row of four beasts hanging from bound paws, suspended from a cross-pole, unmoving and bloodied. Resting her paw atop her muzzle she shields her eyes, and Maverick traces her gaze.

"Ah," he says regretfully, standing up to look over the tent tops at the hanging quartet of creatures. "The *other-kin*." He reaches behind his head with one paw and scratches at the base of his head, swaying his tail only once to the side. "Yeah. I'm sorry to bring you this way, but it was the shortest route to your tent. We can go around if you'd prefer."

"No," Turntail allows, "I'd like to see them." The panther stands with a groan, heaving herself to her feet.

"You, there!" Maverick shouts, "help her over!"

Turntail looks up and sees two males congregating near a trio of tents along their path, twenty paces to the right. She is embarrassed to find them both attractive, and of her age if not slightly older. She blubs her objection but Maverick insists she accept the aid, and before she can protest further both kin are on either side of her, supporting her weight from under each arm. To her left, a scrawny but muscular pardus male with wheat fur mottled with subtle rosettes of dark tan and random black flecks. His hair is trimmed short, nearly to the furline, and pulled forward into a messy horn just above his nut-brown eyes. To her right, a dusty grey-brown vulpin with a broad stroke of white fur down his shirtless torso, dark, tousled black hair and bright green eyes. The pair are swathed in thick layers of sweat and pheromones stirred in with musky scents of upturned dirt and broken foliage as though recently back from hard labor in the forest. She finds the pair intoxicatingly striking and is mortified by their aid and attention, forced to move forward with Maverick's lead.

After a few clumsy steps the pardus laughs to himself and shuffles to better accommodate Turntail's limp. "I'm Sanca," he says while adjusting his posture to better assist, "and that's Mane," nodding toward the vulpin. Mane grins wide and only glances to Sanca briefly with the mention of his name, returning to his coordinated glide timed to Turntail's gait. Turntail responds only with an embarrassed mumble and two bright red ears, following Maverick in awkward silence for the remaining short journey.

They pass by the trio of tents; one large moss-green fabric structure flanked by two smaller dark brown shelters made of sticks and stretched cloth. The slow moving wind drifts casually, carrying the scents of three new faces. She identifies the two smaller structures as belonging to Mane and Sanca, and the larger smells like Coal.

"This is Coal's quarters," Maverick states with a half spin as he walks, nodding toward the larger tent as Turntail correctly assumed. "There are three leaders here at Camp Three: Coal, myself, and Hayda." Maverick informs, returning to his sluggish march. "We've set ourselves at the outer edges of camp. I'm set up on the north side, way over

there through the center of camp.” Turntail follows Maverick’s paw when he gestures to his left, imagining a tent similar to Coal’s on the far edge beneath the distant ring of trees. “And we’re walking toward Hayda’s place now,” Maverick continues, “on the other side of the medical tents.”

“This place is familiar,” Turntail notes, swiveling her head from the campsite to the forest on her right.

“I wondered if you’d remember,” Maverick states, stopping within the shade of the last tree between them and the hanging beasts. “This is where we found you,” he says, pointing to the sand of the campfire on Turntail’s left, “or, more accurately, where you found us.”

Turntail stops abruptly and her companions predict it halting beside her patiently, relaxing their grip on her wrists and waist.

“I was here,” Sanca reports giddily. “It was quite the scare! I just came back from supper and was collecting branches for the fire when I heard something crashing through the forest, there.” He nods into the forest and Turntail looks to the dusty grey tree trunks with futility. She does not remember details, and can recall little more than abstract panic and terror. The last vision she can educe was the surreal detail of the beasts’ faces snarling up at her in the pallid moonlight. “You sure were lucky, miss...uh?”

“Oh,” Turntail squirms, “uh... *Nessa*.”

“Nice to meet you, Nessa,” Mane claims from her right, “I really like that name.”

Turntail’s ears burn red.

Maverick ignores the banter and exits the shade, leading on for a few remaining paces before stopping directly in front of the hanged animals swaying gruesomely from a wooden beam. Mane and Sanca move Turntail along until they stand beneath the same tree Maverick abandoned. The companions release her arms for a moment, allowing the girl to brace against the grey bark of the weathered tree where she looks on with wide eyes full of remorse and amazement. The wooden perch of the beasts’ morbid showcase stands at the very edge of the forest before her just to the left, dappled by sunspots and dancing leaves of shade. The daylight dissolves their obliquity, revealing lean, short bodies covered in scraggly brown and black fur caked deep with red sands and desert grime. They vaguely resemble the wolf-breed kin of the Guilds, though considerably smaller and more compact. She remembers how they ran and moved on all fours, which is a posture observed only in the cows and pigs of the livestock, never once in the kin. They are clearly dead, pungent with a nauseous aroma confirming several days of decay, but Turntail perseveres, stepping closer with a paw clenched tight around her nose. The mouths of all beasts are heavily fanged, more so than her wolf-breed kin, and coated with dried blood. At once, the calf of her leg begins to throb in remembrance of the bite that finally toppled her into the sands of the fire pit, but she realizes the blood is likely their own, since they all share the same dark condition. She does not linger at their eyes very long, merely testing her bravery to inspect them quickly but abandons immediately when the insects feasting there become disgustingly apparent. Barely noticeable stains of dried blood streak down the bodies away from the mouths and ears of three animals, except one

which appears badly injured along the crown of its head. Turntail immediately assumes it to the wound she inflicted with the gun and feels culpable. Thankful to be alive, but guilty nonetheless.

The quartet of beasts looks nearly identical to each other except for slight differences in size and coloration, but they are clearly related. They hang by their forepaws from a horizontal cross-pole balanced atop vertical stakes punched into the ground. Even pulled upright as they are, it is clear that their bodies are not constructed in any familiar organization, and Turntail's mind swirls to understand.

"What are they?" She cries, her gaze locked upon the familiar muzzle and bloodied teeth of the closest victim.

"Well," Maverick begins, "we don't know. We've been calling them the *other-kin*. Tresa — the mus medic you met earlier — thinks maybe they're the result of the Blight somehow. She's been studying them. There's a fifth in her quarters, but I do not recommend going in there."

"*Mus*?" Turntail asks.

"Old tongue for *mouse-breed*," Maverick establishes. "Vulpin, luna, canid, laserta," he checks off, rattling off a handful of breeds. "...Pardus," he says, pointing at her.

Turntail feels embarrassed. Some of these are terms she's heard before but never questioned, having felt as though she misheard.

"Don't feel too bad," Mane defends with a whimsical look, "no one uses the Old Tongue anymore except the grey-muzzles."

Maverick ignores the comment and Turntail blinks with a far away look in her eyes, reliving countless conversations from cycles past, realizing all at once that the slights she imagined were not insults at all, just old jargon.

She feels stupid.

"There were five?" She asks, "Five...*other-kin*?"

"Six actually," Sanca reports, "but one ran off. We fought with them for a long time. They wouldn't give up!"

Mane's ears perk up. "Some of us took quite a beating," he admits, showing off a thin strip of gauze bandaging along his arm.

"That's not exactly a beating, Mane," Maverick scowls, "you tripped and burned your own arm."

Mane flattens his ears and his tail hangs limp, looking dejected. Turntail stifles a curt laugh, expressing a small smile instead.

"Leave us, please." Maverick commands, dismissing his two youthful assistants. "Thank

you. Report to Honey for clean-up duty, please. Breakfast should be wrapping up.”

Mane and Sanca walk away the way they came, looking over their shoulder at Turntail as they depart. After a few paces, the pair engage in low conversation, beaming smiles, with a bounce in their tails as they stride finally away. Sanca cranes his neck once more before disappearing around the grouping of trees and is gone.

“Do they frighten you?” Maverick asks seriously, nodding to the hanging beasts swarming with insects. The foul odor drifts toward them in steady bursts occasionally, forcing her to cover her nose, but she does not answer. “They scare me,” he says, taking them in with a long, steady observation. “Every day I look on them and find their existence disturbing. I have no idea what they are, or where they come from. Or for that matter, what other surprises may yet be out here.” He slides his gaze angrily over the forest line with his ears fully erect as if on guard.

Turntail surveys the forest as well and tries to remember her gauntlet, but there was only the dark.

“We lost three kin that night, Nessa,” Maverick reveals solemnly. “I am sorry to report your friend Roundabout was among them.” He looks at her to assess her grief, though at first she is blank and unreadable. “Forgive my timing, but I don’t foresee a better time.”

Turntail looked at him for a moment and then to the lifeless beasts, and then to the forest depths. After a short silence, she returns to the fox and smiles weakly. “I didn’t really know him,” she says calmly. “Though I wanted to. He seemed nice.” She sniffles once and Maverick notices her eyes glisten. “I only really saw him in the Commons once in awhile. He worked in Hope Park.”

“I see,” Maverick offers. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Turntail accepts his condolences with a gentle nod, pulling her loose hair back behind her ear. “How did he die?” She asks of the fox, her eyes scrunched with grim fretfulness.

“Oh,” he says with a poignant pause. “Heroically. He defended the camp and should be remembered with honor.” Without explanation he turns from the gruesome view of the hanged villains and continues his walk westward. They pass an un-attended fire and an expanse of open land suspiciously empty of tents or activity. Virtually everywhere else in the tightly-packed campsite, kin have pressed their tents and structures tight together battling for space. After a few paces she recognizes the area then as the first free land she saw after emerging from her tent, coated in layers of flat red stones half-buried in the sifting sands and short grasses. ShellShock’s bluster and excitement blinded her from the surroundings at first, but realizes now she has circled back to where she began her day, and to her right she sees her tent. Turntail recognizes now that her tent stands entirely apart from everything else; a solitary shelter thirty or more paces away from everything with its backside an arm’s length from the forest. “Why?—” she blurts angrily, confused and offended by the isolation.

“— I will let Tresa explain,” he says with irritation of his own. “Let it be known that I did not agree.”

Turntail drops the subject but the insult burns on in her mind. *Do they not trust me? Or like me?* She thinks. *Have I been left to the beasts like some kind of bait? What rot!*

Sullen, she follows the fox slightly slower than before, no longer feeling the desire to impress or keep up. *I'm going to give that mus a piece of my mind!*

They approach the other side of the barren half-moon and Turntail scans the body language of passersby with renewed scorn. The silence that followed her through the camp made sense now, though she does not yet know the reason: she is being avoided. The pit of her stomach drops a little with the insight, and a lifetime of loneliness rests heavily upon her shoulders. *So much for starting over.*

Maverick guides her through a cluster of tents arranged in a broken ring and past a smoldering campfire that produces no flame. Just behind the outermost arc of structures nearest the edge of the encroaching forest rises another large shelter similar to Coal's. Taught fabric stretches around an architecture of wooden branches collected presumably from the forest and bound with heavy twine. The center of the tent ascends into an apex, erected by a long metal pole at its middle clearly seen through two open flaps, rolled tightly and tied back along the front face of the entryway. As they near, Turntail deduces that she is being lead to meet with Hayda, the third leader of the camp as Maverick has named her. She imagines a brutish female of solid muscle and snappy retort with no time for introductions or conversation, engaged in some emergency. She imagines a tigress or perhaps another wolf, well groomed but rugged, sharing more traits in common with the males of the Guilds than the females. Above all, Turntail imagines she will be criticized and judged, and already she can feel herself begin to diminish. Maverick has been struggling since leaving the truck, she has noticed, and she worries that he will abandon her to Hayda's care soon after introductions.

She hates cold introductions, and despairs. The overwhelming instinct to flee creates a yearning to return home.

Through the open flaps Turntail sees a low rectangular table built around the base of the tent's support pole jutting lengthwise through the middle of the space from back to front. Fashioned out of wooden crate tops and stones for legs, the long but narrow surface is crowned with place settings for eight: three places along each length and one on either end, all marked with a simple black square of cloth. The table is short with no signs of chairs, but the floor beneath it is covered in a long blanket and Turntail assumes it is for intended for kneeling. *Tigress*, she confirms, connecting the eccentric custom with the tiger-breed kin.

Finally, she glimpses movement from behind the right wall of the entrance panel, and the arced curl of a dusty black, thickly furred tail peeks into view altering Turntail's assumption of the inhabitant as wolf-breed, not tigress. As the tail banks slightly toward her, the panther's heart jumps a beat when she notes the wide white streak running lengthwise along its top. *A skunk!*

The elusive black and white breed has a steady reputation for introversion and self-reliance, and are normally considered master crafters due to their preferences for isolation and independent work. Turntail however has never met one in person, and has no ready-made plan prepared in dealing with this moment. The 'tiger' and 'wolf' breeds are

familiar personalities at least, despite her disfavor, which she prefers to a totally new experience, which forces her to engage the moment fully and thus opens her up to self-doubt and careless mistakes. Her heart beats quickly and she can feel it pulsing in the wound of her arm and cheekbone.

Maverick stands just outside of the entrance and mildly clears his throat with a soft growl before announcing himself at speaking volume. The tail twirls away from view and then a series of soft *clasps* can be heard of a box or container being sealed and slid along the surface of another unseen wooden crate. A moment later, and a medium-height female of stout but shapely build steps fully into view of the entranceway. Turntail's surprise expresses itself unconsciously, parting her muzzle into an open gape and flaring her eyes and ears as if caught in a crime.

The skunk-breed female is wearing a hemp robe, pulled tightly across her front and tied with a single sash dyed a sharp blue in perfect contrast with the raw brown of the fabric. The short sleeves end just above her elbows, and the hemline just above her knees, revealing the charcoal black fur of her arms and legs. The slight plumpness of her cheek ruffs create a youthful allure of a kit barely into her twenties, but Turntail cannot believe such a young kin would be established as a *leader*. The skunk stands patiently with a firm paw pressed into the crook of her hip, smiling knowingly with keen blue eyes that seem full of confidence and depth making Turntail's stomach squirm with distrust. The fear of *condescension* is added to her list of pitfalls for the fast-approaching gauntlet of wits.

The skunk's smile broadens sharply and she winks at Turntail unexpectedly before directing her smile to Maverick with a polite nod and swish of her tail. "Morning, Maverick!" She says eloquently with perfect diction and finessed mannerisms. Her voice is buoyant and full of hope, nearly erasing Turntail's fears of gruffness entirely. "Why am I not surprised that you're still awake? The sooner you start to trust us, the sooner you'll be feeling well again. Come in, and lie down." She moves away from the entryway expecting Maverick and Turntail to follow.

"No no," Maverick affirms, "I'll just head back to my—"

"Nonsense," the skunk interrupts with a wave of her paw, still facing away from the pair. "I saw Coal heading that way, so I know you've already dispatched him. You won't get any rest with him around. Just lie down here. No one will mind."

"I really shouldn't." He reports.

The skunk spins around again with a tray of food on it and places it at the short table. "You can, and you will," she says. "Here."

Maverick hangs his head bluntly with a breathy laugh and smile, letting his hair flop forward around his eyes. Once presented with food the moment has turned into a social affair and he can no longer deny the offering, as doing so is discourteous, and Hayda knows it. The skunk is well aware of Maverick's predictable prison of virtuousness, locked within his personal code of ethics and etiquette. He runs his fingers across his brow to push the hair out of his eyes and sweeps his paw into an upturned address of defeat at his hostess.

“Allow me to introduce you to our mystery guest, the *pardus* Nessa, with a story untold and a heart of courage,” Maverick flourishes his paw in a circle at the wrist aiming it at Turntail with a bow. “And this is our esteemed third leader, the *mefeet* Hayda, perhaps the youngest leader of the three camps and probably the smartest. As you can see, she has easily bested me in a battle of wits.”

Turntail giggles comfortably at the welcomed change of tone, receptive to the silly mannerisms and calm introduction so disparate from her expectations.

“Yes indeed!” Says Hayda, “Now accept your defeat and eat this food before you pass out and I have no choice but to overthrow you.”

Maverick bows comically and sets himself upon the ground of the far side of the table to pull the bowl closer. “Have you eaten?” He asks Hayda with his paws hovering over the unspoiled rations.

“I have, thank you.” Says she, pulling alongside Turntail. “Honey brought some leftovers for you, courtesy of Frolic.” Hayda smiles. “You’ll need to speak to that vixen sooner or later, you know.”

Maverick, already several bites into his food, peers up from under his hair and crinkles a smile along his muzzle and raises one brow. “I know,” he whimpers.

Hayda shakes her head and rolls her eyes, returning her attention to Turntail again with a pleasant smile that embraces her like a hug. “So!” She begins. “Nessa! How marvelous to finally meet you! As you can appreciate, the camp has been very curious about you! As am I!”

Turntail glances out through the open flaps of the tent and watches the kin pass by and toil in the heat. None seem to look her way, and she doubts how ‘curious’ everyone really is. “It’s nice to meet you, too,” she responds with a small smile along her left, deliberately freezing the movement along the right of her muzzle on account of the pain beneath her eye.

Hayda reaches over from her left and grasps Turntail’s right paw, squeezing it firmly with a slight tug. “Come sit with us. I want to chat. You must have a lot of questions.” She leads the panther to the long edge of the table opposite Maverick and produces a large pillow stuffed with fur and they sit along the ground.

Turntail looks about the tent and finds the interior space more ornately considered than anything else Turntail has seen since awakening. She turns to face behind, visually inspecting the arrangement of cases and crates stacked neatly against the right side of the tent. A dark green cloth is draped along the top of the crate artfully, acting as a tablecloth. She is amused to find the cloth decorated with little pink, purple, orange and red flowers painted randomly in a border pattern along its edge. Arranged atop the cloth is a small pile of straw-grass and twine, and several tiny cup-like items that look to be stolen from a machine of some form.

“Are you a crafter?” Turntail asks with a note of surprise, turning back around to face her hostess, sat at the head of the table and facing out into the open courtyard.

Hayda smiles proudly and shifts in her seat to rest upon her knees, raising her broad tail high and laying it long upon the ground behind her. “I guess we’re all crafters in our own way,” she acknowledges humbly. “I do enjoy making things, though.”

“So do I,” Turntail adds, “Though I am not very good.”

“Oh?” the skunk asks with interest, “What kinds of things do you like to make? Did you sell things in the Guilds?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” Turntail rejects. “I’m not that good. I worked in the eatery. I cleaned dishes and washed floors. Nothing special.”

“Every job is important, Nessa. There’s no shame in working,” says Hayda, flattening out the black square of fabric before her into perfect alignment with the table. “I spent most of my time building furniture out of scrap for kin who can’t afford better stuff. There are better crafters than me. A *lot* better. But the stuff I make is appreciated too, and it makes me happy to help kin, you know?”

Maverick nods wordlessly.

Turntail nods too, and pushes her paws down between her crossed legs into the pillow below, making herself more comfortable with a whimper. “I’m— Well, I guess I just try to do a good job. Not much skill in washing things, though.”

Hayda reaches over and places a tin cup in front of Maverick, and then Turntail, and then herself, pouring water from a covered container. She raises her cup and scoots herself closer to Turntail so that their shoulders are almost touching and peers intently into her own drink. She nods to Turntail’s cup and instructs, “take a look.” The panther grasps her cup and likewise looks into it, seeing a clear and clean water rippling about.

“Our kin have known great trauma, Nessa,” Hayda begins. “You’ve heard the stories same as I. The Keepers have done what they felt was best – good or bad – and despite it all we live when so many of our kind have died — *horribly*,” she adds for emphasis. “Our parents, and their parents; so many lives lost.” Hayda’s tone darkens as her narrative unfolds, causing Turntail to become sad and wonder as to her point.

“The Blight has taught us to fear the unseen,” she continues. “We have not only been reminded how precious and how fragile life is, but have also become aware of how important even the smallest jobs are. These cups have been washed thoroughly by a kin somewhere in this camp I probably have not met yet. Someone like yourself. If they did a poor job, I could become sick. Or worse.” Hayda stares out into the courtyard for effect, garnering Turntail’s attention. “Now, I could do two things: I could be skeptical of everything and trust no one – like my parents, like my breed – and redo everything for myself so that I know it was done correctly. Or, I could trust in my peers and in my kin, and have faith that they will do the correct thing because it’s in our collective interest.”

Maverick harrumphs.

“I am no fool, Maverick,” Hayda responds, “I am aware that in addition to honest

mistakes there are many kin whom are lazy or even blatantly destructive and there are risks to having faith in strangers. Risks that can harm me or even cause my death.”

Maverick rolls his head with obvious agreement but continues chewing his food in silence.

“Then why do you trust in others if you believe that?” Turntail asks, rocking forward. “Why *not* just do things for yourself rather than be worried all the time?”

“I’m not worried, Nessa,” the skunks says while taking a drink of her water. “Because I know kin want to survive as badly as I do. They’re just as likely to be on the receiving end of their own poor work. We trust in each other because we must. We are all connected.”

Turntail sits in silence impulsively wanting to argue. Like Maverick, she doubts the kin are so in-tuned to the same connectedness that Hayda believes. Still, it is true that all kin affect each other in what they do or do not do. At least, when they were in the Complex and believed staunchly that the Blight kept them prisoner. *But now?*

She drinks from her cup, feeling the cool liquid slide down her throat, coat her intestines and disappear from sensation.

Just then, a rush of noises bustles quickly at the tent flap and Turntail turns to see a collection of young kits bouncing impatiently at the entryway with wide smiles and wider eyes.

“Ah!” Hayda exclaims! “My! Is it that time already?”

The children do not answer directly but eagerly bobble about with ears pulled forward and tails wagging, incapable of reserve. Hayda stands up which only energizes the children further and they begin to talk over each other incoherently until Hayda cuts them off. “Shush, shush! You’re all being rude! There is a guest present!”

The energy subsides but the smiles do not, and Turntail counts eight active heads swiveling about in blissful confusion until the tallest of the bunch, a female fox-breed of roughly eight cycles, steps forward to introduce herself and her sister as *Mita* and *Asha*. Turntail smiles and introduces her self as *Nessa* to the group though most of the eyes were transfixed on Hayda.

“Don’t be rude, the rest of you! Say ‘hello’!” The skunk commands.

In unison the group of kits turn to face Turntail and deliver a lengthy, “Good morning, Miss Nessa, Good morning, Mr. Maverick” that echoes the morning ritual of her formative school years.

Turntail grins and Maverick nods.

Hayda stands to the far side of the tent, holding an armful of straw-grass items and instructs the kits to line up which they do immediately according to size, Mita and Asha at the front. One by one, Hayda bestows each kit with a straw-grass doll decorated to look

like its new owner. The designs were modest and feeble, but well crafted, especially so given the austere conditions of the camp, but none of that mattered to the delighted young faces standing here. Only two of the kits ran off immediately upon receipt, but the rest provided a proper ‘thank you’ before gleefully returning to parts unknown. Turntail watches as the final kit ambled off with their new toy and she remembers vividly the day she received a similar gift, from a Keeper, and how much she suddenly misses the figurine. The memory of it leaps forward along with the horrors of that early morning, remembering how Cat and Carmine died in the explosions, the chaotic and panicked escape through the Commons, and ultimately how she watched the figurine – her only possession – tumble from her hands into a fire.

“That was very sweet,” she says to Hayda, forcing the sadness from her mind.

“We’re all connected,” the skunk repeats with a soft smile and returns to the short table.

“Thank you for the food,” Maverick states from his squatting position, “I certainly feel a lot better.”

“Make sure to thank Frolic, then!” Hayda responds, “Not me! That girl looks after you.”

“Do you want some more?” Maverick asks, tipping the tray toward Turntail, “There’s a lot left still. I’m sure you’re still hungry.”

Turntail stares at it for a moment and begins to decline before changing her mind, accepting the tray and the remaining portions of bread, beans and a few strips of pig meat. Maverick lays back against another pillow he pulls over from the far wall and Hayda returns to her perch at the head of the table with a smile.

“Do you make many of those?” Turntail asks.

“Of the dolls? I do now, yes.” Hayda says. “The kits and pups here lost a lot on this journey. More than I did, certainly.”

“How do you mean?” Turntail counters between bites.

“You and I got a chance to grow up with consistency; like parents setting rules and building little traditions. These kits will never know what that feels like. They’ll be shuffling around from place to place, struggling more than you or I have ever had to do. They’ll be working harder to win the same things we were simply given. Like hot meals and steady shelter.”

Turntail’s eyes droop. “Well, *you* maybe,” she says, trying to hide her sadness. “I never knew my parents. I don’t think they made it to the Complex.”

“Oh,” Hayda announces, immediately recognizing her grave error, “I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have assumed,” she says with Maverick looking on. “You were one of The Found, then?”

Turntail shrugs, watching Maverick’s sympathetic gaze. Something about his eyes allows her to believe they share the same backstory. “I guess so, yeah,” the panther admits.

“When I was five, I learned of a special day that the Keepers reserve for kits like me who lived in the Children’s Guild without traditional parents. They came to my classroom and pulled me and the other Found out of lessons for the day. I remember being afraid of the female Keepers; I only see female Keepers at the medical Guild, so I thought something terrible happened. They lead us all into a little room full of toys and spent the afternoon telling us about the Blight and how we were rescued by the Keepers – mostly as babies – found during scouting expeditions into the old cities. And how some of us were abandoned at the Complex doorstep,” Turntail stares blankly into her water again as if remembering a long-buried memory. “They made it all sound very happy, of course,” she continues, “like we were given a great opportunity by our parents and by the Keepers who found us. Even then I remember being extremely sad. I don’t think I was ever really sad before then,” she says with an introspective pause. “After that afternoon, when all the other kits were playing with their new straw-grass dolls and toys, all I could imagine was the fear and suffering my parents endured. How messed up is that, you know?” She suggests, dropping her head low. “Two kin I’ve never even met, never thought about, and there I was in tears over phantoms. I couldn’t stop thinking about them after that. I never knew them of course.”

Turntail locks her gaze at the table and forgets to look back up. For a moment she thinks about leaving the conversation there, but it feels good, if not a little selfish, to release her worries. This is the first time she’s had an audience. With a sniffle, she continues, “The Keepers never told me anything, no matter how much I asked. I don’t think they even really knew anything. Before that session with the Keepers,” she recalls, “I had never wondered about my parents. I just figured I never had any and that was just the way it was. But then they put the idea in my head, highlighted what I lost, and now its all I think about. I mean, they only gave me part of the story. They didn’t finish it.”

Turntail stops for a moment and the trio sit in meditative silence and slight breeze ruffles the tent flaps.

“I’m sure I would have wondered about my parents on my own, but who knows? I cried a lot, when I was young. Did my parents know I’d been taken? Or did they die afraid for me? Or did they hand me off like a rotten loaf of bread, happy to be rid of another problem? Did they even know me at all?” Turntail snuffles loudly at this, and she is surprised to hear Hayda snuffle, too. She looks up to the mefeet and finds her eyes fully engaged and welled-up with tears, so Turntail looks away embarrassed. She didn’t mean to make anyone cry. No one ever really listened before.

“Anyway,” she shrugs off, “They didn’t tell me anything about my parents.”

Hayda snuffles again and wipes at her eyes with her thumbs, offering a weak smile and Maverick exhales a long sigh.

“They never do,” he interjects matter-of-factly. “It’s protocol.”

“Well it’s a stupid rule,” Turntail counters aggressively. “I don’t see how it helps anyone to only give part of a story like that ... To keep a secret like that.”

Maverick arcs his head slowly in a wishy-washy roll, half agreeing with the panther. “I don’t think they’re *keeping a secret*,” Maverick defends, “I just think they didn’t want to

make a sad situation worse by making you relive a tragic story you can't change."

Turntail considers this in silence but does not agree. She would rather know the truth, regardless of how dark it may be. *Knowing is always better than wondering*, she firmly believes. She has long imagined what her parents were like, or where they lived before a place like the Complex was ever conceived. She fantasized about what they'd be like as a family or if she had any siblings. But again, she shuts the fantasy down. It always leads to loathing.

"Anyhow," she blurts at Hayda, "I know what you mean, is all I'm saying. Their lives will be different. But they also won't know what they're missing, unless someone tells 'em." she prophesizes. "You can't rightly miss what you never knew, but you can still be jealous," she says firmly, more for herself than for the room.

"You have a good heart," Hayda concedes, backing away from the debate. Her goal is not to argue and she realizes she was beginning to preach without knowing anything about her guest's struggles. "There is a strength to you that I think you don't see yet," she adds. "I hope someday that you do."

"I agree," Maverick adds. "Which is why I brought you here. I think it's time you told us how you came to be at this camp, and how you received *that*," he says, nodding to her gunshot with a very concerned look. Hayda shares the expression, leaning closer onto the table.

Turntail's lower lip bobbles as though she doesn't know where to begin.

She begins at the beginning.

Coal deconstructs Maverick's cot, folding it down into a compacted frame and rolling the thin felt pad into a tight roll, binding it with twine. He sets the completed items onto a stack of locked and sealed boxes along the interior wall of the vulpin's tent, clearing the center of the shelter.

Surveying his work, the dark luna walks to the closed flaps of the entrance when he notices a glint of metal in the sand at his feet. Thinking it a key, he clutches at his neck expecting the chain to be missing or its dual keys gone but finds both still trapped deeply in the thick fur. Curious, he bends over to pry the object out of the compacted sand and uncovers a metallic silver disk the size of his thumb-claw generously coated in red dust. Before he can inspect it further, a male announces himself just outside of the tent flaps looking to report to Maverick. Coal mindlessly stuffs the small disk into his front pant pocket and pushes the tent flap aside, stepping out to greet the scouts standing there.

"Hello, Brown. Nell. Where is the rest of your party? Where is Ash?"

The two canid males step back to clear the way for Coal to exit, surprised to see the wolf exit Maverick's personal tent. They back up quickly to create room and nearly collide with the rear bumper of the black, covered truck that faces away from the tent entrance.

Both are dressed in the common black denim pants and tank-top shirts though neither wears a foot covering except a tightly bound wrapping of gauze along the arches of both paws, heavily soiled in mud and red dust. Over this, each male is shrouded in a tattered cloak covering their heads and torsos, hanging as low as their knees and stained with the same red sands. Their faces are wrapped along both muzzles exposing only their brown eyes and masks of fur; brown on the left, and hazel on the right.

“Er, hello, sir!” the male on the left greets with formality. “We have news.”

“You have come to report, then?” Coal asks with confidence, letting the tent flap fall closed behind him.

“We have, sir,” says Brown. “We should wait for Maverick, sir.”

Coal narrows his eyes slightly and smiles to compensate, looking then to the scout on his right. “Hello, Nell.”

“Sir,” says Nell.

“Maverick has turned in for the day and is not available. I’m in charge.”

“Understood, sir,” Brown confirms. “He asked that we report directly to him, sir. He gave strict instructions, sir.”

Coal reaches to his neck and draws the chain away from his chest, allowing the tinkling keys to come free from their hiding place buried within the thick fur of his chest ruff. “I’m commanding you to proceed if this information is of concern to the kin of this camp,” he says assertively.

Brown’s eyes flick to the silver keys on their long chain and then to meet the eyes of Nell for guidance. Nell only raises one eyebrow in response.

“Yes, sir,” Brown acknowledges, “it does.”

Coal turns his paw over with annoyance and says, “Proceed, then.”

Brown and Nell exchange nervous glances again and Nell steps forward drawing something forth from the hidden satchel belted to his side.

“Wait,” Coal says quietly, holding a paw up. He jerks his head once to the side and walks away from the tent and truck, leading the pair of scouts to the farthest point away from camp into the tree line of the northern arc. He sniffs the air inspecting for eavesdroppers and uncovers none, waving a paw for the scouts to continue.

Once more, Nell steps forward opening his satchel and pulls forth a folded piece of hemp cloth seemingly torn from his own cloak. Coal opens the fabric swatch and finds it marked and drawn up with dried blood.

“Excellent,” he says reviewing the markings. “This is us, then?” He deduces, pointing to a circle amid a pattern of lines and arcs, and Nell confirms with a solid nod. “And this?”

He asks, touching a claw to another loose circle near the edge of the map with little semi-circles drawn through it.

“A pool, sir” Brown responds. “About one day out. It’s quite large and rather clean.”

Coal nods his head with a smile. “Excellent, excellent. Great work. We will need to gather volunteers to refill our reserves. The rainwater we collected was a gift; there’s no telling if that will happen again. We got lucky once but we can’t take that chance again. The three of you will need to collect volunteers — we’ll make the announcement tonight at supper, after I’ve spoken with the Leaders. Where is Ash?”

“About that, sir. There’s more, sir,” says Brown.

Coal folds the cloth map into its original position and places it into his back pocket, ignoring Nell’s outstretched paw to reclaim it. “Oh?” The wolf says inquisitively.

“We were not alone out there, sir. We were being followed.”

Coal looks back and forth between the two sets of eyes and focuses on Nell’s stare. “Followed? By who? No other camps came this way.”

“That’s what we said, sir,” affirms Nell, “but we were being followed by at least two kin, sir. At least, we *think* they were kin, sir.”

“Explain,” says Coal stepping back one half-step to gauge their mannerisms.

“We never got sight of them directly, sir. Only their paw prints and scent. But we were aware of them after day two, sir. They stuck with us for two days, and we couldn’t seem to shake them, sir.”

Coal’s fur rises along his shoulders and his lips begin to curl into a snarl. “If you lead danger to our camp I will personally gut you!” He growls, his tone and size shifting alarmingly fast.

“No, sir!” Nell interjects with both paws raised out. “Exactly, sir! We didn’t want to lead anyone here so we took the long way around and double-timed it, sir. We have not found more evidence of being followed. We’ve lost them over a day, sir.”

“I’d hope so, for your sake!” Coal threatens.

“It’s why we were delayed, sir. But it’s also how we found that pool, sir. And...” he continues, “the other-kin.”

“The other-kin?” Coal asks with alarm. “You ran into more of those beasts?” He claims, pointing out in a general direction of the hanging monsters of the far courtyard.

“Not exactly, sir, but yes,” Brown adds, pulling a hidden bag away from over his shoulder and dropping it slowly to the sandy floor of the forest. Coal looks on as Brown’s paws work quickly to untie the knots of the twine, emptying the bag from its bottom to allow the mass inside to spill out. Coal’s ears lay flat against his head and he backs away

one full step in shock. It takes a moment for the wolf's eyes to make sense of the creature laying lifelessly at his feet.

"What is that? A severed tail!?" He gruffs incredulously, trying not to raise his voice, "Why have you brought me some rotten reptile's tail? Is this who was following you? I thought you said you did not make contact!"

"We didn't! This was hiding under some shrubs, sir," Nell recalls, "And then attacked us!"

"Hiding! Attacked!" Coal mocks, looking closely at it. "Tails do not move on their own! This is — " but he stops when he sees it has eyes. Rightly enough, the mysterious fleshy length at his feet appears to be a reptile's severed tail, though from no breed or kin he has ever met. He recounts the four reptile kin of the Guilds: *Sharptooth the crocodi*, *Shellback the tera*, *Razorclaw* and *ShellShock the laserta*. *There are no others*, he believes. He knows this to be true, but also knows their legend of immunity to the Blight. *Perhaps there are many reptile-kin out here*, he considers, *perhaps we are not alone afterall*. The potentially fatal flaw to their plan sends a cold shiver down his spine. *We are not prepared!*

The mass at his feet can only be described as a long fleshy tube covered in scales, approximately one full pace long and as thick as his forearm. Its pattern is a series of stripes perfectly ringing its body in red, black and white with a solid black bulb at its thickest end covered in blood. Coal squats onto his knees and pokes at it with a stick, inspecting the thicker of the two ends. The wider end is mutilated and deformed but upon scrutiny he discovers it does indeed contain two unblinking glassy eyes and a gaping mouth which he explores with the stick, finding two arced fangs along the top.

"It attacked you?" Coal repeats with disbelief.

"It did, sir," Nell confirms. "We were setting down for the night and we caught vision of it under a shrub. When we went to trap it, it lashed out, surprising us! It struck Ash and we finally dropped a rock on it."

Coal lifts it with the stick and places it back into Brown's bag, cinching it closed quickly.

"And where is Ash now?" Coal inquires, fearing he knows the answer.

"He seemed fine at first, sir." Brown reports depressed, "but after a time he did not respond and we found him convulsing. He died, sir. We couldn't do anything for him."

Coal's eyes narrow with concern and he blows a steady blast of air through his nose signaling his frustration. The three canids stare at each other in silence listening to the leaves rustle. "I'll be sharing this with the leaders," he says finally. "I am sorry for your loss. And thank you," he says. "Is that all?"

"It is, sir," Brown says.

"Then you are dismissed," the wolf grants, "Good work. You just missed breakfast but I'm sure if you hurry over Honey will have something for you."

“Before we go, sir – if we may,” Nell inquires hesitantly. Coal nods his approval with curiosity.

“We had a thought about...*that thing*...” Nell states, pointing to the cloth bag. “We think it might be somehow connected to the Blight, sir.”

“It is a possibility, yes,” Coal agrees. “Why do you say this?”

“The Keepers are all tail-less, sir ... as you know.”

“We all know the stories, Nell, yes. Because of the Blight,” says Coal.

“Well,” interjects Brown, “what if the tails...*lived on* somehow?”

A moment of silence.

“Lived on?” Mocks Coal. “I think you’ve been listening to too many RazorClaw stories, Brown.”

“I know it sounds crazy, sir,” Nell adds, “But the Keepers have long told us how the Blight has created gruesome changes and caused parts to...*fall off*. Maybe we were foolish to leave the Complex, sir.”

Coal’s eyes squint contemplatively and his ears flick back and forth uncomfortably as he processes this information. “That is for the Leaders to decide,” he says while staring at the bag. “Now – go eat and rest up.”

“Right, sir. Thank you, sir,” Brown and Nell respond in unison and turn to leave, backing out of the forest and retreating toward the center of camp.

Before the pair gain much distance, the wolf calls them back. “Not a word of this to anyone, do you understand? I don’t want a panic.”

The duo nod silently and depart.

Coal carries the bag in his right paw, holding it away from his body with a childish fear and returns to the front of Maverick’s tent setting the cloth bag down along the ground just aside the flaps. He walks around to the front of the truck and pulls the second key from his neck, opening the cab and climbing in. Quietly, he places the key into the ignition barrel and twists it just long enough to hear the *ding-ding* chime out, and then pulls back on the gear shifter until it clicks into “N”. Climbing back out, the luna places one paw on the steering wheel and one paw on the frame of the open door, heaving its heavy mass backward, slowly lurching the vehicle until the back end of it is nearly enveloped by Maverick’s tent.

Feeling satisfied, he returns the gear shifter to “P” and removes the key, locking the door, and placing the chain back around his neck. He collects the cloth bag and sneaks through the tight gap between the tent fabric and the vehicle and faces the solid rear doors of the truck, fingering the keyhole with trepidation.

Coal inhales once, sucking his breath as if preparing for a deep plunge into water. He inserts the key from around his neck, twisting until he hears the clack of the tumblers release, and pulls the key away letting it dangle free around his neck. Holding his breath, he places both paws on the bar handles of each door and tugs them forward until gravity takes over, allowing them to bob on their hinges.

The light streams into the dark inner chamber highlighting two pairs of boots, and then legs, and finally the full forms of two figures pressed back against the far front of the truck bed. Shackled with their hands in their laps, wearing white uniforms and a white cloth over their heads. A foul odor of biological waste rolls out of the open doors like a solid plume, nearly knocking Coal over with its repugnance.

“So,” he coughs through the stench, “I think I found one of your friends,” and he tosses the cloth bag into the middle of the truck bed at the feet of the two Keepers imprisoned there. “At least, part of one.”