

AXIS of CONFLICT™



chapter 9 : rot



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— rot —

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For many hours throughout that night Mum labored tirelessly, clearing stone and timber, simultaneously hoping and not hoping to find proof of the little pardus girl. One by one, the reluctant kin whom remained picked their way carefully through the school's remnants to clear away each scorched stone, crushed desk, plank of wood and smashed cabinet looking for signs of life. No one knew what they would find as they dug deeper into the wreckage but hope tiredly dwindled.

Morning light begins now to peek across the reflective bowl of the dome, refracting down through cracked and smoke-tarnished glass panels into the ruins of the primary school. And like a book cover fantasy of a fallen heroine, a lone beam of light encircles the pardus mother, splayed where she fell, atop the last remaining hill of schoolyard debris. She had succumbed to depletion and has been unconscious for many hours now as the kin of the guilds toiled on her behalf in awkward but reverent silence. Over the course of the night they wrought without sleep, exhuming the wreckage piece by piece, moving it into a wider circle around the perimeter.

As time pushed on, the workforce diminished one by one and the work slowed. In part due to exhaustion, but mostly because the likelihood of finding the child alive decreased with each uncovered stone and no one wanted that dreadful responsibility. Especially for kin they did not know. The wreckage had transformed into a ring of organized chaos encircling a small pile of stone and timber at its center, atop which Kyrten remains undisturbed with Jen's blanket draped over her shoulders. The morning light drains down upon her in a single eerie ray of golden color tinged with red, illuminating the pile of debris like a tribute, the front stained with the mother's blood, waxy and brown.

It is Mum who at first notices the unusually precise sunbeam, seemingly orchestrated specifically for the parda. He takes a small break to walk, exhausted and stumbling, to the pile and stares up at the domed ceiling at the light's origin. The sands there have cleared themselves nearly entirely with the night's wind, and the blue sky beyond is the clearest blue he has seen in a long while. Wispy white clouds streak high and full, drifting quickly past his view through the dome.

He does not know how long he was posed there, but soon comes to realize that several kin stand behind him looking up into the same sky, transfixed on the macabre poetry of this dark moment.

The center of the dome is built outward from a large circular glass panel which acts as the keystone for the structure, and the morning sun has struck it precisely, casting down this single beam. The light is given volume by the freshly upturned ash that streams thick and strong from dome to floor, where the kin turn to follow its path. They see Kyrren there at its base, spot-lit perfectly upon the alter of broken stone and splintered wood.

Kas sighs audibly just then, startling everyone. To the collective memory of the group, it is the first voice heard since Kyrren's sobbing eased those many hours ago and it punctuates the moment with surgical precision. What could have at first been dismissed as a cough soon became clear as a subtle cry. Kas was fighting to control the sudden emotion by pressing at her eyes with the palm of her paw, but fails. *She is dead*, she believes. *The little snot is dead. Rot, why do I care?*

Nevy stands beside Kas and places a paw on her shoulder while exhaling audibly, expecting to be pushed away by the proud black parida. But instead, her conflicted companion only droops her head and leans away, letting gravity to take Nevy's paw instead.

The team has worked all night to clear the wreckage and has found no one, and looking out upon the scene brings only compounded anxiety. Truly, the team was thoroughgoing and all that remains of the original wreckage is the pillar of material Kyrren rests upon currently. Without discussion, the group despairs at the same reality. *The little girl is likely beneath her mother. It is the last place to look.*

Mum wipes at his head to brush away the dust and ash and drags his paws across his face to wipe the sleep away. He pads heavily alone toward the pile preparing for the final phase of the rescue, now a recovery, and the group only watches as he goes without a better plan of their own. He will have to move her, but someone else will have to explain why. Like the tigri, who know's Kyrren best.

Nevy's gut contorts into knots with this same realization. She doesn't have the words. *How do I explain? A horrible night. This is my fault. The girl wouldn't have even been out here if I had just shut up. Let 'Len go to her daughter like she asked. Stopped arguing. Why do I push? Why do I always push?*

Nevy pulls a paw across her face.

Because she never listens, that's why. The girl would have never been in danger had she not come to me in the first place! 'Len should not have been exploring alone, with a kitt no less. Fool. Had she not been wandering the Komons, unprotected and helpless...like always. Had she not mated with the rotten lun in the first place.

Nevy flashes a pained expression in silence, embarrassed by the contents of her own inner monologue.

I can't do this.

Mum reaches the middle of the bowl and places a dusty paw under Kyrle's knees and high back, carefully deciding on a new location to place her. As he pivots to review his options, a soft gust blows over his shoulder noticeable at first only by the shifting ash in the ray of bright sunlight. The clouds of soot swirl more actively as he turns, upending into a whirling stream and then blows away. Mum tilts to inspect the dome and its perimeter of circulation fans, but sees that they remain cold and dead. Replacing Kyrle atop the mound, he turns to face the group of bewildered kin behind him, watching their movements and exploring their faces, waiting. The kin look around and at each other, confused by his actions. And then, another small gust – almost imperceptible but long and steady – caresses his nose and the fine whiskers there. He scoops at the air with his paws, curating the draft directly into his face to take in its scent, assessing its origin. Several kin wander to him inquisitively but say nothing, watching his behavior as he visibly investigates.

Without warning he leaps from the pile to the other side, standing there to reclaim the tail end of the gust. He spins to Nevy with his eyes wide and hopeful. She shuffles quickly to the large vulpin with tepid curiosity and clears her throat from a night's worth of dust, trying to read Mum's face.

“What ... did you find?” she wheezes, coughing through her words.

The vulpin sniffs enthusiastically at the air and then gestures for Nevy to do the same. At first the tigri stares at him with a puzzled expression and shakes her head, misunderstanding his request.

“What?”

“He wants you to smell something,” Kas interprets, eager to exchange moods.

Kas and Nevy turn their noses to the air, finding their breathing labored and compromised from dust and ash. Nevy lifts her shirt hem to blow her nose and wipe away the filth there, exposing her abdomen for a brief moment. Kas points to the tigri's exposed stomach with a raised eyebrow, mildly excited. “It looks better,” she says. “The rash is gone. The medicine is working?”

The tigri flattens her breasts with a paw and looks down to see the earthy brown patch of flesh on her stomach; an irregularly shaped furless area about two hands tall and two hands wide seen from beneath her pant-line extending up to her ribs, carved out from the thick creamy fur of her torso. The skin appears otherwise healthy save for the mangy look of absent fur. Nevy stifles an embarrassed grunt followed by a weak smile. She blows her nose again and drops her shirt without further comment, sniffing the air.

They quickly find Mum's mark; faint at first, though not an odor anyone would have paid attention to otherwise – but in desperate times every scent is a thread worth pulling.

“Oh,” she admits with disappointment, “Yeah, that’s just the girl’s blanket. I’ve been catching traces of it all night, too. I wanted to move the blanket away but I couldn’t bear taking it from ‘Len right now. Poor thing.” Nevy states with a glum expression, hanging her head.

“Nnh.” Mum grunts with a shake, pushing Nevy’s arm to focus her attention. He gestures to try again. The tigri and parda become riled.

“Mum! *Rot!* It’s the blanket! Calm down, you bliyter!”

Undeterred, Mum groans his frustration and bends over to collect a pinch of ash from the ground. They watch as he releases the fine powder into the air, confusing them at first until Kas’s eyes pop with understanding. The tigri, feeling outsmarted, becomes annoyed. “Will someone please *just use words?*” She demands with a wild sway to her tail.

“Wind?” Kas puzzles.

Mum confirms with a nod, and then makes a gesture with his arm to emulate the perceived direction of the gust. In unison, the two felina toss puffs of powder into the air to test for themselves and watch as the pair of ashen clouds float away toward Kyrlen, dissipating into the floor. It’s a weak breeze, but real enough.

Kas and Mum search the air for further clues but Nevy instead rushes confidently toward the southern outer wall of the Kompleks, deeming it the most likely origin of the foreign air. By now several of the lingering kin have re-invested their interests to follow Kas and Mum, observing as they inspect the great outer wall. New mysteries inject new energy into the fatigued muscles of the laborers, and the small group reach the outer perimeter together, walking with sluggish limps and paws pressed firmly into low backs.

The tiny park of Gryn Primary School is little more than a few paces worth of grass and sapling trees that doubles as a play zone for attending students. Normally fenced off from the Komons and exclusive only to the kitts of the school, this is the first time many of the adults have stood in this place since they were youngsters. They pace cautiously along the narrow road of Gryn Stryt, experiencing overlapping emotions and memory upon the simple cart path of cobble stone just inside the great wall.

On the day of the riots, several explosions rocked the Kompleks, bringing everyone out into a mad panic. The second explosion was one of the largest, and most keenly felt, since it was near the heart of the Komons itself. It detonated in a neighboring office building just cater-cornered from the school and leveled several of the nearby buildings, resulting in a deluge of sprinkler water that drowned everything that wasn’t already burning.

Nevy knew what it was immediately. She and the kin of the S’ceds had long expected this precise event to arrive, and they did not panic. Instead, they kept to their fortress and prepared for a battle that never truly came.

The school was never a target, which is in part why the blast was meant to go off during the evening, when all kin were well away. But no one can predict the course of a raging fire, so there was bound to be collateral damage. They deliberately chose the S'ceds for this reason; being so well isolated from all other connected structures. Still, it is surprising that the fire jumped so far and so fast from its source.

Gryn Primary was one of the outermost buildings of the Komons that defined a portion of the southern perimeter. The school's southern face looked out fully upon the Weysts of the desert through the thick cantilevered glass walls. Many felt strongly that the school should be relocated to someplace happier, like Hoep Park, but the Kypers disagreed and won the dispute. *The Bliyt is the reason we were all here*, it was argued. *No sense in pretending otherwise*. And so, it was to remain the backdrop to the earliest memories of all kin whom ever lived and schooled here. The schoolmasters rebelled in their own way, allowing the young pupils to paint murals and scenes on the glass; stick-figure parents holding stick-figure hands, stick-figure flowers and stick-figure trees smiling on stick-figure landscapes superimposed over the bleak scenery of the unforgettably real.

On a normal day, the kin could see through the windows to a perimeter wall many paces away that defines the outermost limit of the kin city Kompleks. Though the protective metal shielding blocks all view of the outer world now, Nevy imagines the wall beyond with vivid memory, even though most kin have never been anywhere near it. The wall is approximately four standing heights tall and intersected by seventeen towers erected at equidistant lengths around its sum. Occasionally, both kin and Kyper can be seen patrolling the high towers and long walls in protective gear, looking for anyone misfortunate enough to be found wandering in the Weysts.

All the more reason to move the school.

“Oh! Here!”

The tigri and the vulpin spin away from the covered window-wall to look upon Kas, found crouching along the ground. “She was definitely over here,” the parda says confidently through her kerchief, and hoists the little black and white doll up to her face to breathe in, “Recently.”

Nevy walks over and takes the toy from Kas's paw and sniffs at it. “Yeah, that's definitely her. And it's fresh. New contact.”

Kas and Nevy look back to the monument where Kyrten remains unconscious and Kas looks to the tigri with concern. “Didn't Kyrten say the doll was *inside* the school?”

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

“Did anyone find this? And toss it here?” Kas shouts to the crowd congregating nearby, holding the doll over her head.

The small group look to each other shaking their heads and mouthing ‘no’ with fair certainty. Everyone wants to believe the little girl made it out of the building.

“Are you absolutely sure?!” Nevy shouts, demanding confirmation. “No one here has seen this before now?”

No change from the crowd other than a handful of audible and confident *No*’s.

“A lot of kin have already left,” says a canid male, shrugging. “No telling how that got here or who found it.”

Mum snatches the doll with a sigh and sniffs at it, shaking his head and gesturing a message for Kas to relay.

“Mum says there are no other scents on it – The girl musta dropped it here,” Kas reports. “But it’s too far from the wreckage,” she claims, grabbing the doll back to inspect for herself. “She must have pulled it free. And maybe the building came down behind her?”

“And gone where?” Nevy challenges. “There’s only one way to be sure. We’ll have to clear that last mound,” Nevy states, pointing to the pile beneath Kyrlen with a nod of her head.

“Are we sure the blast panels were already down?” The lapin asks of no one in particular, looking to Nevy. “Or did they only fall after the collapse?” He looks at the uncertain faces of the kin whom ponder in silence.

Nevy addresses the small crowd and points to the blast-paneling. “Does anyone remember if this was already down? *Before* the school fell?”

No one remembers.

The glass exterior of the Komons wall is normally covered by a protective series of interlinking metal panels latched tight during the night to guard against excessive winds and sandstorms. But there is an inner system of metal blast panels as well, apparently, lighter weight but still robust, that run along the inside of the glass. These have never been seen until the riots, which slammed down for the first time after the second explosion likely activated their defenses.

The search party moves cautiously back and forth exploring the metal shielding, hovering their paws near seams and break-points feeling for soft moving air. Mum determines that the slats are locked tightly into position and have not likely been moved since the riots, though several of these are slightly buckled and appear damaged, hanging loosely along their tracks at slight angles.

A pocket of stagnant air pushes away suddenly when a gust of new wind blows past, tickling the whiskers of a felina male. The breeze brings fresher air of the outer world past his nose, and he calls to the party with uncertain excitement. The group scans along the wall and the floor of the affected walling but find no obvious signs of traversable

damage, even leaving an undisturbed veneer of dust and ash still static-clung to its surface.

“These panels are still tight,” he says quietly to himself, “She didn’t go this way.”

Mum climbs the supports of the closest window ledge and pushes upward against a loose panel, testing its strength. The metal sections tremor and begin to recoil but do not move over any real distance, held in place by the sturdy gears of its machinery. The shades of this level all appear to be connected to each other, so the vulpin’s efforts make no difference on their own.

Several of the party observe this and jump to the ledges selecting panels of their own and push upward in unison, forcing the shades to retract with a loud mechanical screech of metal upon metal. As the kin heave, the labor becomes easier until at last the heft of the shade seems to grab a counter weight and rescind the remaining distance to the floor above on their own, where they bob and wobble dramatically. Mum jumps from the ledge narrowly missing a blow to the head when his panel swings loose from its track, rocking violently forward. The panel compresses his ear tips but fortuitously travels no further, caught in place by the lower bearings. Dazed, he stands feeling his crown for blood, but gives a long huff of glad relief.

Nevy and Kas do likewise, breathing out through their mouths in thankfulness, rolling their paws along the backs of their necks. Nevy observes the schoolyard artwork decorating the glass, and what she perceives at first to be a wrinkly painting of a pond between a cluster of stick-figure trees, but she recognizes it as something else entirely.

“There!” Nevy directs, pointing to the panel between Mum and a lapin male, immediately behind where the school once stood. A cluster of kin dash to inspect the glass pane, which has clearly been shattered and exposes the Komons completely to the Weysts of the outer world. The kin immediately pull any available cloth to their faces to protect themselves from the contagions blowing in, and through squinted eyes each member takes their turn peering through the jagged gap of the thick glass window. Some of them seeing the natural world for the first time, and realizing then just how blue and sad the glass made the world seem. The sands of their view glow with a warm tan in the morning sun, churned among patches of red clay and hard brown stone.

The wind that pushes in beats against the windows with slow pulses of early morning chill, before the temperature climbs and accelerates the winds into a torrent. It pours into the Komons with a freshness in stark contrast to the foul indoor air, and drier, carrying a raft of new scents that describe temperature, vegetation, rock, and a bevy of unidentified substances. None of them dare stick their head out. And after a brief explorative glance of the real world, the majority of the group prefers to back away from the hole altogether, wholly fearful of the pathogens known to exist there. They are so caught up in their discoveries that the crunch of loose pebbles goes nearly missed beneath their paws. Nevy is the first to look down and find tiny glass fragments, crumbled into harmless cubes the size of teeth.

“The window was blown *in*,” Nevy and the lapin state simultaneously, presenting the glass to each other and then their respective friends.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” says the lapin through a cloth held to his face.

The tigri ponders intently at the glass shards in her palm, staring first at the destroyed window and then a long glance at the location of the felled school.

“Maybe it does,” Nevy supposes, not finishing the thought. She steps back to the shattered glass hole and steps outside to the shock of her peers. Kas thrusts an arm out after her, catching Nevy by the elbow.

“*Don’t!*” Kas warns, “You’re already sick!”

The tigri flashes an angry look at the black parda but ignores her, pulling her arm away to touch down into the warm clay sands of the outer world for the first time. She feels the sand compress around her paws and drain between the pads, and in the back of her mind, a long cultivated seed of dread grows larger though she struggles to ignore that, too. Holding her breath with the cloth of her shirt pressed firm to her mouth and nose, she needs to look upon the outer wall of their city from *the outside*, and rotates her view with a sweeping panoramic twist of her neck that activates her entire torso to produce. *The Kompleks appears so much larger from outside.*

Kas stubbornly seizes Nevy by the arm a second time and reels her back onto the concrete of Gryn Stryt, nearly hysterical with caution. Though despite the interruption, the tigri managed to locate what she assumed to find: the damaged portions of the Kompleks wall, pushed *out* by fleeing kin days prior. Glints of broken glass and crumbled stone pepper the sands of the outer Komons perimeter, along the far west end, poking through piles of wind-blown sands. The section remains hidden from casual view and closed off by the interior blast panels only a few tens of paces from here. Though the damage is obvious to an outside view, it would be easily masked from the inside unless one knew where to look.

“What’s rottin’ you?” Kas screams. “Are you *trying* to get sick again?”

“I think I know why this glass was pushed *in*,” Nevy states instead, turning to look into the eyes of each kin beside her.

“Because someone came in!”

“Yes,” Nevy concedes with impatience, turning to the nervous mus, “exactly, but...”

“A wastelander!” He interrupts again, fearful. “This changes everything!”

“It changes nothing,” Nevy assures. “The glass direction is not the problem —”

“It’s the order,” another understands.

“Right,” Nevy affirms, addressing the full gathering. “Why would someone break in here, if all of those panels were already open?” She points west over the heads of the kin, toward the middle of the southern wall. “There’s no reason. This panel was broken first.”

“*A wastelander!*” The mus screeches a second time. “But that’s impossible! They’d never get over the wall!”

“The wall is *open*, you rotter!” Kas screams. “That Bliyt-ridden tera left it wide open when he left! Every half-dead bag of disease on two legs can get in here now!”

“But the tower guards —” he attempts to say, though is cut off immediately.

“Look around, *mus!* Do you see any Kypers? We’re alone! The Kypers are gone! The IMPAK is gone! There ain’t no one in here but us and the lun!”

“And him.”

A handful of kin cast their gaze in unison to the pointed finger of a lapin, and then to the mud of the play yard floor near the footing of the neighbor building. Embossed cleanly into the muck is a dual pair of foot prints: one set felina and quite young, and one set larger. Much larger. Bare and heavily clawed, as known only of two kin: *S’carpto’ott* or *S’celbak*. The two sets overlap; one in pursuit of the other. Three or four of the smaller prints paced evenly for every one of the larger.

“Rot!” Screams the mus. “I told you!”

Without word or warning, Kas knocks the smaller kin to the floor easily with a violent thrust to his chest. She leans over him, snarling. “If you open yer rottin’ skif muzzle one more time, I’ll gut you here! We’re workin’ on it!”

Alarmed, the mus recoils his arm to protect his face, trying to hide his fear with irritation. He waits for Kas to step completely away before attempting to stand.

“We can’t leave the Kompleks exposed like this,” Nevy states, seemingly ignorant to the unwarranted attack. She gestures at the destroyed glass panel and nervously fingers her stomach through her shirt, subconsciously breathing in short, shallow breaths. The open wall and the wind blowing through feels sinister and foreboding. “We have to block this up. Now. Can we pull the panels back down?”

Mum looks way back and tries to find a path leading to the mechanism holding the panels in place. Several of the kin climb back to the metal lattice and wrench on the bowed shielding but to no affect. The broken panel that nearly crushed Mum’s head has jammed the track, and the full line of eight connected panels remain locked a full story in the air.

“Fine,” Nevy concedes glumly, “Let’s get some cloth, wood – rocks, whatever you can find. Let’s plug it up. Make it thick and as strong as we can. We’ll come back with wood from the S’ceds. Who wants to run back? Someone needs to tell them what we found.”

“I’ll go,” says a weary looking vulpin male.

Nevy nods at this, and looks to Kyrren’s monument just over his shoulder. The light has moved on, and the pillar has settled back into darkness, plunging the parda mother back into cold shadow, encircled only by small coils of ash.

Several kin were eager to act, obediently searching the ruins to collect armloads of rocks and wooden debris from the demolished school. One by one they lay a foundation at the base of the unprotected window. With shirts and loose rags tied tightly around their mouths and noses, the barricade soon becomes a knee-high mound spilling out into the Weysts. Anxious murmurs trickle through the group arguing the relevance of the night’s many odd discoveries – *the broken window, the mysterious foot prints, the kitt’s doll, the missing Kypers...* The clues of the present soon turn back to the anomalies of the recent past, and critical scorn is spread over the events of the entire evening. *Kyrren’s presence at the S’ceds*, which came during an eerie period of lun inactivity; *silence and withdrawals* when warfare was expected. *This was planned*, they begin to piece together.

The kin immediately draw a line that connects all events, fueled by cynicism and the unexplainable, and the hushed volume of their declaration says as much about their mindset as their choice in words. As with the growing mound, so too pile up the bricks of paranoia, building into a new scare supplanting the original. The little parda girl is no longer a concern, if indeed she ever truly was – instead, there is a much deeper plot to uncover. One that surely involves the lun, or the Kypers, or both.

The mood has grown palpable. Exhausted, hungry, sleep-deprived and obsessed, the small group review the ruins as though hunting for different clues or expecting an ambush at any moment. They wonder specifically about the window and how long it had been broken – *how much foul air have they endured? How long until one of them becomes ill? Who has broken in? From the Weysts?* They wonder aloud. *And why?*

“Had the Kypers sabotaged the Kompleks, as Kas had long predicted?”

“Are the lun to blame?”

“Is the little girl a victim...or was she bait?”

“And what then of Kyrren?”

“Is she a distraction? A decoy?”

“What do any of us really know about her? Was this an accident?”

“Or an attack?”

“Has the war begun? Is she working with the lun?”

“Who’s guarding the S’ceds?”

“We’re exposed!”

The kin huddle tightly in their bubble of cultivated fear, eyeing Kyrten with wariness and a burning suspicion of having been taken advantage of masterfully.

It is agreed. *“This was no accident.”*

“Was the girl ever in danger at all?”

“Too many coincidences,” says the offending mus, pacing out of arm’s reach from Kas. “This whole thing is rotten. *Rotten!* With a rottin’ crossbreeder in the middle of it all,” he says. “This whole thing was a trap!”

“A trap for who, you bliyter?” Nevy counters, incredulously. “Everyone calm down –The little girl came here for her toy. Her father was killed, and she wanted it back. It’s that simple.”

“That’s stupid!” Someone calls out. “No one’s that stupid...not even a kitt.”

“What do you expect from a half-breed skif?” Someone else adds.

“I bet we were supposed to follow the runt outside! Into the Weysts!”

“No! The rotten half-breed would have brought the school down on us!”

“No, not *us*,” Kas says, spinning to look at Nevy. “*You.*”

The tigri clenches her teeth through pursed lips, lowering her ears and crossing her arms with doubt.

“That makes sense,” confirms the mus, “The lun are smart. They want the S’ceds. Which means they have to get rid of you. *Both of you,*” he adds with noticeable delight, locking eyes with Kas in the closest thing to a dare. Though Kas actually seems to agree.

“And who better to lure you out then yer ole’ rotten, bliyted, skif of a crossbreedin’ friend?” Kas snarls, turning on Nevy rather ferociously.

Nevy remains silent. *Could this be true? Could Kyrten be a decoy? Is she working with Piik’s pack?* It seems far-fetched. Though, the kin of the S’ceds have long been sparring with the separatists of Westfalen, and it’s true, the lun desperately want what is kept safeguarded in the S’ceds. *Now would be the time to strike, with the Kypers gone, and their attentions divided.* She looks around nervously scanning the shadows and rooftops for signs of movement.

We are cornered here.

The S'ceds are open.

“Calm down. We saw what Piik did to her,” Nevy claims confidently, defending Kyrren’s story but more so her own honor. “Piik nearly killed her, and the kitt. And do you deny her fear and torment tonight? Her pain is real. Her grief is real. She nearly killed herself digging –”

“You saw what she wanted us to see,” retorts a canid female, highly skeptical of the pardus mother’s motivations.

“She *mated* with lun — she’s one of *them* now. She’s probably been part of their pack for cycles! Her and Blakfeyng both!”

“Who *else* would help a crossbreeder?”

Nevy swallows her guilt.

“...And the half-breed probably sprang their trap too soon! *That’s* why the crossbreeder was freaking out! Her skif kitt wasn’t supposed to be in there!”

“We spent an entire night digging out a traitorous half-breed!”

The fury on Kas’s face begins to twist into its familiar shape of righteous indignation, focused squarely on the tigri.

“*YOU* brought her here!” She blames, “And she’s seen our place! She found *the wall!* Her filthy kitt knew right where to look!”

Nevy’s ears lay flat against her head and her tail tip swirls in angry, conflicted thought. *It fits, she admits. It all fits. Rot, could I be that stupid?*

She tries to replay every conversation she’s had with the pardus mother throughout the evening, scanning words and second-thinking inflections for clues. She recalls old conversations from long ago, before the separation, when they were still speaking as casual friends. But it’s all a blur. They never truly saw eye to eye on most matters. *It’s impossible to know.* To Nevy, *all* of Kyrren’s decisions were odd.

She just doesn’t know. *If Kyrren faked the attack, it was a flawless performance. Could she do that? Nevy wonders. Would she do that? Just to get back at me? She was pretty defensive of the lun... Though she didn’t even know I would be there. But she knows I live in the S’ceds. And she knows I always bail her out. It would work — draw me out into the open – have the lun kill me... Take back the S’ceds...*

“Well?!” Kas demands, accusing Nevy loudly of being an unwitting accomplice.

The tigri still doesn’t feel certain. She’s never known Kyrren to be vindictive or manipulative. Nevy knows these traits very well; they’ve carried her through life. Kyrren

does not have them. Unless she's good at hiding them. *Very good.*

"She stays with us, now." Nevy states, fraught with clear indecision.

"What?!" Kas protests.

"If what you say is true – *Kas* – then she *can't* go back to the lun, *can she?! We need to know what she knows. Or what she thinks she knows. You!*" Nevy selects a pair of kin standing off to the side whom seem available. "Take a few moments to rest. And then follow Kygan back to the S'ceds. Take the parda. You'll have to carry her. Don't let her out of your sight."

"That's a horrible idea!" Kas explodes. "And where will she stay?! Just push her out! Wall her out! We can do it right now!"

"I'm not killing anyone, especially an old friend!" Nevy screams back, snarling.

"You're weak! Old friends go bad! She's turned her back on her kin, the Kompleks, and her own breed! You heard what she said earlier! She has no place here! If she tricked you that easy, we have a lot more to be worried about!"

"Like these tracks!" The mus adds, choosing a moment to heighten the tension further. "Now we have the rotten *krokody* against us, too!"

"We don't know that."

"Who else would those tracks be? It ain't the tera! Ain't no way he came back! That's S'carpto'ott!" Continues the mus, pointing with shaking fingers at the massive foot prints, "And that means *he survived!*... and he's working with the lun!"

The kin look to each other with flashes of regret and deep concern. They scour the area looking for further evidence of the trail, particularly of the *krokody's* prints, all but forgetting the original plight of the little felina kitt.

"There's no way," Kas insists. "We all know Kutter was—"

"Not here!" Nevy interrupts, spinning to face her, waving her arms as if to knock the words out of the air. The two felina look at each other in silent disagreement, but Kas yields and lets the dialogue go silent, peering around into the shadows for eavesdroppers.

"We still need to find the half-breed," Nevy reminds. "She has a big head start on us. We need to find her before she gets back to the lun."

"She's going the wrong way," the mus reports. "The lun are still holding the male guilds — west of here. I don't know where the kitt is going, but the tracks head away from there."

A handful of kin struggle to ignore the infighting between the two dominant felina, and quietly continue to build up the mound of the barricade. Nevy's two volunteers steal the opportunity to likewise escape the bluster and wander over to gather up Kylern, eager to be away from this place which has become toxic on a number of levels. The core of the small group takes it upon themselves to uncover the path of the footprints, finding their presence to be the most prescient of threats, and the little girl's whereabouts chief among them.

Despite their anger, or perhaps because of it, Kas and Nevy follow the footprints together, convinced that the other will use any evidence they discover against them. Mum reviews the alternative teams with envy, preferring to be in a place of manual labor, but he goes where he is needed, electing to follow the black pardus and her frequent sparring partner. Together, the ill-matched trio and handful of others follow the footprints in a straight line through the flooded play yard sands, across damp stone and then over the low picket fence before becoming lost in the tall grasses. Mum is able to pick out the scent after some disagreement, leading them further southeast into the hard corner of the Komons where they pick the trail up again near the last building of Yst Market. A second scent, faint at first, grows strongest here near a series of blood-tinged gashes clawed into the corner of the building. The scent is unfamiliar to all and thus the foe remains faceless, but the odor is sickly and strange.

Kas inspects the wall, stunned and slightly terrified by the depth of the gouges carved into the stone.

"So are they working together, or not?" Kas challenges of the mus's theory. "This doesn't look friendly."

"You have a better explanation?!" He fires back, still keeping his distance. "Why else would the kitt and the krokody be in the same place? *Here?* Where no one ever goes?"

No one answers.

From this particular corner, the only route forward is an unused footpath that leads north and joins ultimately with Sowtt Yst Stryt. That road is likeliest to take the little girl and her pursuer into the fem guild or mated housing, unless they travel the long perimeter back into the market center, and, potentially, Grand Bulevard.

"They're taking the back road to the S'ceds!"

"No – She's going home," Nevy speculates immediately. "With S'carpto'ott in tow."

Kas and Mum look to each other with a raised eyebrow.

"This only proves it then," the mus says, "They're working together. This is bad. This is really, really bad."

Nevy takes a long time to process. She still feels tremendous shame in the way the night unfolded, though now debates for whom. *Did I drive Kyrlen and her kitt innocently into*

harm's way? Or was I tricked into playing a pawn? Nevy has never felt this insecure in her life and it's as infuriating as it is chilling.

Kas begins another dark opinion but Mum cuts her short, clamping his paw over her mouth and raising the other to cup his ear. Kas beats against him indignantly, protesting as loudly as she can through a clenched muzzle. Nevy jabs the parda sharply and shushes her, waving to the small crowd to remain quiet. "Shut up! I hear it, too," she says. "Be still."

Kas breaks free of Mum's grip and stands away, glowering at the vulpin and tigri equally. Together they peer into the long dark of the sun-starved south passageway of Yst Stryt trying to uncover the source of the muted hums and low groans.

"Kitt?" Kas softly calls into the still quiet, trying to remember the little girl's name. The small group strains to collect some kind of acknowledgment from the darkness. "Hey, kitt – yer, uh, yer *mom* is down here..." she promises coldly, "...she's really worried about you."

Silence.

"You there, kitt?" Kas calls again a little louder, cupping her paws to her mouth.

Thin strands of ash float unbothered in the yawning darkness but provide no response.

"It might be the lun," the mus whispers, his head whirling in circles.

"Shut. *Up*." Kas snarls quietly, spinning her head to fully threaten the mus with her expression.

"*Shh!*"

The small group strains to recognize the sound bubbling just above perceptible levels, and they turn in circles trying to pinpoint its location. The nearly inaudible tone seems to gurgle out of the ground, softly echoing from nearby buildings to dribble into their ears. The low droning describes no known voice or clear source, provoking the mind to wander.

"There's more than one," Nevy states with heightened unease, the hackles of her neck beginning to rise. "It – it sounds like –" she hints, drifting off with a tilt of her head.

"What's that smell?" Asks a canid female from the back of the group, sniffing wildly while backing into the crowd.

From around the corner of Gryn Stryt come heated blasts of shouting and a pair of shrill screams accompany falling stone, forcing Nevy and her group at once into a gallop to they retrace their path toward the school's play yard. When they turn the corner, Nevy expects to find a portion of the wreckage collapsed or further damage to the glass wall,

and so quickly probes forward through the small trees and grasses, peering along the hazy street of the broken glass panel.

“*You okay?!*” Nevy yells into the surprisingly calm clouds of ash. “Everyone alright?”

The tight lane of Gryn Stryt seems clear of any threat save the sickly-sweet smell of old meat or sewage and the soft blowing winds that push inward over the hip-high wall of loose stone, now abandoned, do not clear the foul odor. The wind intensifies only slightly, casting ash and dust into thick spirals that roll into the Komons. As the ash billows, a large figure appears to be standing several paces from the gaping window, just on the periphery of their view where the clearing is impeded by the backs of the damaged buildings.

“H’oy!” She calls, flustered at the unresponsive kin. The tigri looks back at her companions with concerned irritation but continues to walk vigilantly onward even when her party slows down. She soon moves on alone, leaving Kas and Mum a short distance behind. As the tigri treads further, she notes the intensity of the stale odor until at last the ash clouds thin enough to expose the form of the pardus mother. Nevy exhales slightly and feels the fur relax along her neck and tail, turning to lambast the fools of the rear.

“It’s just Kyrln, you rotten blyters!”

From a distance, she finds Kyrln standing perfectly still, facing the shattered hole of the glass window-wall. Arms draped lifelessly at her sides, her posture defeated, her head barely elevated enough to look forward. Her tail hangs limp at the total mercy of gravity and does not twitch or sway when Nevy calls to her. In fact, she does not move at all. Not an ear, not a whisker.

Nevy calls to the devastated parda a second time, increasing her pace which only serves to congeal the fears of the party in tow. Kas’s rage at seeing the parda awake and conscious forces her to break away from the apprehensive group, pulling Mum into quick step behind her. She bounds forward after Nevy, casting unrelenting volleys of invective accusations and cruel threats against the parda as she approaches.

Kyrln suddenly launches forward, crumpling into the mud and rubble of the loose stone wall just inside the broken glass window. Nevy tosses one arm out in a failed attempt to catch her estranged friend, turning her momentum into a spin to face Kas instead, holding one paw up with her fingers spread wide in warning to stop moving.

“*What’re you, doing?*” Kas accuses angrily, ignoring the command to stomp closer to Nevy.

“Stop!” Nevy screams back, again thrusting her paw out at the black parda.

Kas is nearly upon the tigri when she at last sees an assembly of forms gathered amid the ash of the ruins, waiting.

A lun male stands just behind where Kyrln’s erect form once stood, confident and

strong. He's thin for his breed, but athletic. A classic grey, with black fur accents and coarse white hair pulled back into a knot behind his head. He's dressed only in black denim pants torn off at the knees, and shirtless. He wears the white cloth wrappings of a lun pack soldier, tied tightly around both ankles and forearms, marked with the names of kin he's battled etched with the victim's own blood – a gruesome trend of the *growlers* that evolved some weeks prior to the riots. The lun soldiers at his command hold the exhausted arms and necks of the search party kin captive, daring Nevy or her friends to act.

“Sloen,” Kas breathes quietly, backing down with a grimace and her ears pulled back.

The lun, already watching her with a wide, pert smile, licks his lips.

“It's good to see you again,” Sloen rumbles lowly with an evenly metered growl full of self-assurance and condescension. “...*Kas*.”

Kas shivers. She glances subconsciously to the cloth wrappings of the lun's left arm, and although she cannot read the letters written there, she sees the blotted mark of her name near the inside of his elbow. The marks cause her blood to boil and her stomach to fall.

“Stop,” Nevy whispers to her friend. “Don't.”

The black parda breaks eye contact with Sloen to acknowledge the tigri, but only creases her brow in response.

“*Don't*.”

“Oh, please do try,” Sloen taunts, stepping closer to the felina pair. The confined kin groan and mewl as their captors twist and bend various appendages. Kas stops.

Mum places himself near the black parda, placing a paw on her shoulder intended to hold her in place more than to comfort, and Sloen chortles.

“It's time,” the lun captain states with a misplaced grin.

Three lun from Sloen's left and two from his right move wordlessly past their leader, circling around the search party to gather near Kyrlen. As the party looks on in brooding silence, two of the lun soldiers seize Kyrlen by her legs and pull her across the uneven ground to the middle of the circle before Sloen.

Nevy's heart beats with wild fury, scared and worried and wholly uncertain. “What are you doing with *her*?” She finally demands to know.

“You've all been quite busy this evening,” Sloen answers instead, sweeping his gaze in a slow, full circle from the center of the ruins. His eyes seem to linger longest around the muds and floor of the bowl, rebuilding the events of the evening in his mind. “Did you find her?” He asks.

“Find who?” Nevy feigns, playing dumb with a low growl of her own.

Sloen stares with irritation at Nevy, crossing his brows with a stony conviction.

“We were just—”

“If the tigri speaks again, break something important,” Sloen directs of the lun closest him.

Nevy’s fury expresses itself only in her tail, spinning wildly as though trying to escape her body.

The lun paces slowly around the epicenter of the wreckage, guiding himself to the small mound of material that was once Kyrlen’s resting place. He delicately reaches over and fondles the edge of Jen’s blanket, still draped over several large stones.

“It’s such a shame when the kitts die,” he atones, looking back at Kas again. “Even the half-breeds, eh, Kas?”

“That’s not ours,” Kas sneers after a long pause, holding her ground even as the kin of her small group step back to survey the circling danger.

Sloen looks up over the cloth of the blanket with ice blue eyes and steps down gracefully from the broken mount of Kyrlen’s platform. He inhales the scents of the blanket, walking a few confident steps closer to Kas, and she folds her ears back, baring her teeth in defiance. As she does this, a small group of lun appear at Sloen’s side.

“You’re absolutely right,” he says. “It’s the half-breed’s. Let’s make sure she gets it back.” He hands the blanket over to his soldiers and they take turns breathing it in to capture the girl’s scent.

“What do you care about some little half-breed?”

Sloen coughs up a single laugh and then sighs, shaking his head. “I ask you the same question, Kas. How unusual. For your kin in particular.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“When I heard what happened, and who came to the rescue, I thought I was being lied to. But sure enough, here you are. I thought, maybe it was one parda looking after another; some kind of breed loyalty. Very commendable – I would approve. Or maybe, Kas had reconciled her past and has grown up at last. Doubtful. I had to see for myself. But it turns out the little girl has information we need. And the mother, too, I gather.”

“*I knew it! She was working—*” Kas screams

“—With Piik?” Sloen interrupts, laughing harder than any kin has laughed in recent memory. “Oh my, that’s adorable, Kas, thank you for that! No, you foolish parda.”

“You lie!”

“Maybe. Sometimes. When it suits me. But would you even know the difference? You,” Sloen accuses, sweeping his paws out at the kin circled around them, “and all of the kin of the S’ceds. So paranoid. So many conspiracies. Drowning in all that *truth*. It must be hard to trust others. I mean, how do you even make a meal? So, I *knew* something special was happening down here at the school if even the reclusive black parda was out here.”

Kas’s eyes dart between Nevy’s and Sloen’s repeatedly, feeling Mum’s large paw gripping her tightly as a reminder to control her temper. Kas can feel the handle-grip of her sling-shot stuffed into the rear pocket of her pants, but there is nothing she can do with it so heavily outnumbered. The thick swirling dusts around them reveal at least ten lun, and she knows there are others she cannot see. Her breathing becomes shallow and quick, and her tail begins to emulate the tigri’s, displaying her annoyance to the world.

“You’re horrible,” Kas responds through gritted teeth.

“You found her, then?” Sloen prods, peering around the scene once more looking for bodies or other signs of the child. The lun trackers slowly walk through the wreckage trying to locate the girl’s scent.

“*What do you care?*” Kas blurts with the full force of her usual brand of sarcastic rage, despite Mum’s claws digging into her clavicle.

“Shut up, Kas!” Nevy warns.

Sloen raises his right paw and the lun soldier there slowly bends the arm of his captive back until it snaps out of the shoulder joint with a nasty wet pop. The canid male tries to drop to his knees with pain, howling in torment, but the lun prevents him from buckling, forcing him to stand through the anguish. Nevy made a motion to yell but immediately closed her mouth to stare at Sloen’s feet instead, furious and filled with new guilt.

“Oh, Kas,” Sloen taunts, ignoring the wounded canid completely. “You know how much I love the little ones. They are our future, are they not? What hope have any of us if not for them? What was all this for, then?” He says, looking up at the dome ceiling with arms spread wide. “I hope to have a great many someday, as you know. Rebuild our populations. Do my part. All that.”

Kas boils.

“What about you, Kas? How many kitts would you like someday? When the right kin comes along?”

The black parda can sense the eyes of Mum and Nevy boring into her. She can feel the heated stares of the lun captain and his soldiers. She predicts the unbridled rage that will fill her mind when she looks up to Sloen’s arm to find her name there, the letters much clearer now. She pulls her lips and ears back, feeling her claws extend with anticipation.

With a smile, Sloen begins to raise his left paw, and Kas darts her view to the soldier standing there, holding a young vulpin girl by the neck, his massive paw bending her head to the side.

Kas drops to the ground, sobbing.

“Aww, don’t worry,” Sloen mocks, lowering his paw again. “You’ll find that right match someday. Now...where’s the kitt?”

“Why?!” Kas defiantly challenges through tears.

Sloen audibly sighs. “I’m so bored of this, Kas. *Because kitts are easier to threaten*, and after listening to you and the tigri screaming like idiots about all your little secrets and *maps and walls and knowing where to look*, I’ve decided to make my life easier.”

Kas and Nevy immediately exchange worried glances, and through her tears, Kas immediately understands just how irresponsible she’s been, and how badly she’s messed up. *Rot*.

“Oh!” Sloen muses, “I almost forgot.” Without disconnecting his gaze, he jerks his head to the side and a trio of lun walk forward with captives of their own.

“Speaking of Piik,” the grey lun reports as if bored, “he’s dead.”

Nevy’s eyes pop open wide and she stares at Kas with enormous, silent concern.

“Lank too, I hear. And I’ve come to collect their bloodshares,” Sloen continues, turning around. “Which of them is to pay?”

“What?!” Kas protests.

“I’m not talking to you anymore.”

Sloen’s soldiers walk out from behind a scorched pillar pushing a trio of vulpin into the open. Mum grunts, disheartened beyond words to see Mik, his younger brother, Darik, and the elder vulpin, Berwyk, shuffling into view. They move forward on their own steam, struggling to make their small frames seem larger, though the youngest is most visibly unsettled.

“I tol’ ya war was comin, Mum!” The elder vulpin declares, swirling the stump of his tail. “I tol’ ya! This was th’ only way! Jus’ give ‘im the parda and be done wit’ it! C’mon now! Fer Darik’s sake, there! For all our sakes! Keep to yer own! Do what’s right, now!”

“Yes, yes, that’s enough,” Sloen commands. “So who is to pay?”

“Rng?!” Mum growls, scolding the vulpin elder with devastated eyes.

“No!” Kas screams squarely at Berwyk. He averts his eyes long enough to find Mum, and

folds his ears flat with shame.

“*Your kin*,” Sloen begins, turning once more to face Kas and Mum, “tell me that the parda has killed some of my pack.” Without warning, he grabs the youngest vulpin brother and tosses him onto the ground beside Kyrlen, crashing him arms first into the mud, terrified. “But there seems to be some disagreement as to which one.”

“H’oy! H’oy, now! We had a deal!” The elder calls, thrusting an arm out toward his son. “*We had a deal!*”

“I think we can all agree once and for all,” Sloen taunts, looking between Berwyk and Mum in particular, “that a deal with a vulpin isn’t worth a rotten bone. So we’re going to make sure we’re all telling the truth. The *truth*-truth, not S’ceds-truth ... whatever that is.”

One of Sloen’s enforcers steps forward and presses a knee into Darik’s back, pinning him to the ground with his weight. He takes the vulpin’s head in his large paws and pulls it far back with a twist, preparing to snap his neck. Mum steps a half-pace forward, alarmed and frenzied. Through the corner of his eye, he sees Nevy squat on all fours, her head turned to the side. In that single breath, he sees her face and the troubled expression written there, though she does not look at him, or to Kas, but backward along the glass wall. Mum raises his nose once more in a subtle twist forward to face Sloen, hiding his movements in the spin. Pretending to look at the lun to his right.

“The cross—” Chokes the young vulpin, gurgling, “—*breeder!*”

Sloen turns with a queer cock of his head to look upon the youngest brother, kneeling down on one leg to see his face. “*Not Kas?*”

“It was the crossbreeder!” Mik screams from the rear, defending his brother. A lun soldier grabs him by the neck, but he persists. “She’s the one who done it! Mum knows! He saw it! We ain’t risking life an’ limb ‘cause of some filthy crossbreeder or ‘er half-breed kitt!...” He turns his gaze to plead with Mum directly, appealing to his breed. “The lun jus’ want the parda that killed Piik an’ this all goes away! C’mon, Mum! Tell ‘im!”

“Ahhh, the *crossbreeder*,” Sloen repeats, standing. A fresh smile splits his pointed muzzle into halves, sharp teeth clenched tightly behind black lips. He pulls his paws through the floppy hair of the youngest vulpin brother twice, clenching a handful to hold his head steady. “So, it’s S’ceds-truth, then.”

The lun near Mum grab him and separate the black parda, preventing him from interfering when a second pair push Kas to the ground face first. With the soldiers cleared from view, Mum can see the glass outer wall of the Komons once more and the hole leading to the Weysts. The soldiers pull Mum away violently, lurching him backward almost completely off his feet, but he catches himself on one knee. He looks to the hole once more. The moving air that pushes over the gathering is much slower than before, but filled with a growing stench that sickens the stomach to inhale. He thinks he sees a shape that wasn’t there before, a static shadow in the swirls of dust just outside the window.

The lun contort Kas into a position identical to Darik's, holding her head back painfully far to expose her throat. She struggles to push them off, but cannot from the excruciating angle. She claws into the forearms of her captors, but the thick wrappings conceal splints of wood which she cannot penetrate.

"Mummm!" She pleads.

"It was the crossbreeder!" Mik screams. "I swear on my life! She's the one who done it!"

"Mummm! *Please!*" Kas gurgles a second time.

"I promised the mates and children of Piik and Lank that I would return with the killer to pay their bloodshare. Frankly, I have no preference for which parda pays. But I'm sure you do. So..."

The soldiers search the restrained kin, pulling out Kas's slingshot, Nevy's map and a handful of nails from Mum's pockets, tossing them into the mud near Sloen's feet.

No! Nevy thinks, staring at the folded paper as it tumbles once with the wind, blowing against Sloen's toes.

"Interesting..." he says quietly to himself, unfolding the drawing. "This would be the time to admit the *truth-truth*."

"Hnnngg! *Lewkk!*" Mum grunts urgently, struggling to stand against the downward force of the lun soldiers. For a moment, they beat and knock him to the ground, though each time he struggles to stand grunting the same raw noises. On the third attempt, Sloen finally looks to the thrashing vulpin. "It appears we're finally getting somewhere," he says.

"Ee's tell-nng ya ta *look!*" Kas chokes as the soldier pulls back harder.

Sloen coughs out an irritated laugh and dismisses the vulpin's feeble delay entirely. For the first time since his arrival, the lun captain appears visibly frustrated, lowering his ears. He sniffs the air less assured of himself, quickly finding the broken glass window and the swirling dusts blowing in rhythmically. Narrowing his eyes, he nods to one of the soldiers hovering over Mum.

"Check it out," he directs, nodding again at the window.

For a brief moment, the Komons is quiet again. Only the sounds of labored breathing and scared whimpers filter through the upturned ash and sandy-dusts that wash over the school yard ruins. The soldier steps through the mud and stone silently reaching the soggy grasses that line Gryn Stryt and then finally the window itself, where he stops to touch the glass. He looks back to Sloen, shrugs his shoulders, and returns.

"Take all three," Sloen commands, angered and vengeful, turning away from the window

to climb his way back out of the ring of wreckage.

“No!” Scream Nevy and Berwyk at the same time.

As the lun soldiers begin to dig their claws into the necks of Kas, Kyrln and Darik simultaneously, a jarring squeal explodes from the window cutting short into a burble of wet air. Even the lun freeze to observe the horror that unfolds near the window, as the returning scout falls into a shadow as two pieces. The air itself seems to have swallowed him, though the crunching of bone and ripped flesh is unmasked and easily understood.

Nevy jumps to her feet, though the lun do not immediately react. She falls into the center of the lun, pushing one soldier away from Kas who relinquishes her without quarrel to instead back away from the window with dread. Kyrln is dropped without provocation and used as a stepping stone as the lun launches himself upright using her back and neck as a foot hold. The lun that restrains Darik pierces the vulpin’s neck severely, reflexively, startled into reacting. He looks at Nevy first with shock, but then shifts instantly to aggression, tossing the wounded male to the ground as he flees.

Sloen calls to his soldiers to return for their prey, but it’s too late.

“Rotten!” Kas screams, *“It’s the Rotten!”*

Nevy heaves Kyrln back to her feet and stands eye to eye with the parda trying to make a panicked connection but the mother’s gaze is hollow and far away. Awake but unaware. In a single motion, the tigri pulls her own shirt back up higher over her nose and mouth and slips Kyrln’s purple kerchief around her face. Mum and Kas have likewise re-drawn their coverings over their faces, looping quickly around to rejoin the immobile pair. Without request, Mum automatically gather’s Kyrln up, slinging her over his shoulder and darts into the center of the school’s ruins to stand atop the remaining mound for a better view. Only three of the remaining excavation party members follow, leaving the others to scatter through the buildings calling out in fright as they flee.

Berwyk and Mik, at first frozen utterly in place, run to the youngest son and struggle to lift him, a thick trickle of blood running down his neck into the mud. They heave him finally and stumble forward, the elder brother weeping and cursing.

Kas leaps forward and gathers up her slingshot and a paw-full of stones, joining Nevy and Mum atop the small mound. Together they watch and listen to the gruesome consumption of what remains of the lun soldier, though frighteningly not much can be seen. A dark patch of the Komons seems to have come to life near the window, ravenously ingesting. Several lun gather with Sloen carrying poles and broken shafts of pointed wood to convene upon the source of the noises, shouting curses as they assail its position. The shadow changes positions effortlessly, and seems to appear several paces closer to the attackers, splitting one of the soldiers in half at the waist with a blood-curdling shriek.

Nevy looks to the window, seeing the utter futility of the half-built barricade, and she discovers a handful of dark shapes in the swirling sands and dusts, swaying in place. A

canid male of the search party hoists a large stone up into his arms and runs back to the wall with it, dropping the rock quickly onto the half-completed barricade.

“Hurry!” He yells, running back with a second. “Wall them out!!”

Bizarrely, the figures do not move, frozen with apparent disinterest in a trance-like rhythm despite the gore just several paces away. Kas feels her heart thunder inside her chest. She loads her sling with a rock and reviews her surroundings, beginning and ending with the shattered portal. She watches two of the canid males run behind the battle with small boulders back and forth to build up the chest-high barricade while the cryptic crowd outside merely sways.

One of the lun manage to wound the shadow, stabbing it with a solid hit, and it shrieks with a voice much higher pitched than any kin.

The blowing sands subside and a small army of forms emerge like dead grass fluttering in a breeze. The figures are grotesque and alike only in their condition which can only be described as *rotten*. Their skins are a patchwork disease of mottled fur patches and bulbous growths, stunted arms with half-formed fingers, partial furless tails and misshapen appendages. Tumors and cysts form patches of their own along skeletal shoulders and bloated abdomens. Hands and feet seem ravaged and peeled, bleeding along the edges where thick talons and claws poke through at random locations along each remaining digit. Their disproportionate heads are most unsettling of all. Some have lumps of flesh for ears in two different locations, some have torn the lumps away completely leaving raw flesh behind. Where present, eyes are wildly large or unsettlingly small and misaligned. Noses and muzzles push forward from faces at perverted angles, exposing fangs that grow sharply from chins and through thin lips and puffy cheek bones. In a handful of figures the eye sockets are filled with teeth. They are all naked against the elements, and their skins range from putrid translucence to impossibly dark.

The stench magnifies in Kas’s nose to look upon them. She stands frozen in abject horror, but the barricade has grown to nearly shoulder height and the canid struggles to carry over a large section of a fallen pillar large enough to seal the hole completely. Kas adjusts her aim several times in rapid succession trying to decide on a target for her shot but then catches sight of the slab in the canid’s grip and screams out to him just as he prepares to drop the section into place.

“Stop!”

The male turns slightly to look over at the black parida, simultaneously dropping the stone to seal the Rotten out.

“Not that one!” She warns.

He shakes his head and lifts his paws inquisitively, but it’s too late.

The silent mass begins to stir and within a breath they cascade against the glass wall like a tidal wave. The canid male scarcely has the chance to turn his head before the barricade

of loose stone begins to collapse under their onslaught.

“Blood!” Kas screams, pointing at the stone slab now atop the pile. Streaks of the lun’s blood coat a sizeable portion of the slab’s surface and the canid’s arms.

The rocky barricade tumbles forward and the creatures spill in with terrible speed, snagging the canid male by the arm, the leg, and the tail. He releases a horrified yell for help but is cut short as quickly as he began by the swarm of repugnant forms. They tear into his flesh with savage tenacity, pulling limbs free from his torso until at last his gurgles quell with the removal of his head. Save for a feasting few, the horde rushes in without aim, spilling into each direction like roaches released from a box.

Kas releases several rocks from her sling, striking several in the head and missing others altogether. The Rotten that fall immediately share the same fate as the canid, disappearing into bursts of blood and sinew as more creatures file in without end.

“What do we do?!” Kas screams, releasing shot after shot, “*What do we do?!?*”

“Fight!” Sloen commands.

“*Run!*” Nevy squawks back, barely dodging the grasp of a clawed hand.

The kin splinter, needing no further incentive to flee, each retreating to places unknown. Two seek shelter among the shops of Yst Market Stryt. Three escape alone onto West Market heading for Hoep Park. The lun seem to retreat toward Westfalen though enough of them scream as to indicate they remained too long. Two kin from the search party remain with Mum and Kas as they retreat behind Nevy up Park Stryt to the S’ceds. The crooning moans and rabid gnashing seem to fall farther behind them as they flee, each stealing a calculated glimpse over their shoulders as they run.

“*Did you see that?!?*” Yodels one of the tag-along males; a scrawny lapina male with pallid brown fur and stumpy ears for his breed. “*Did you SEE THAT?!?*”

No one answers the obvious question, concentrating instead on navigating the marshy grasses and slick pavement of Park Stryt. The five kin turn the corner together onto Grand Boulevard, the only bi-lane mall and oldest road of the Komons, dodging the short shrubs and decorative accents. The road is not the longest of the Komons, but with no sleep and a night of hard labor and stress upon them, the twelve-hundred paces is a marathon difficult to maintain. Even for Mum, Kyrren’s added weight is a near-impossible burden and he begins to fall behind, breathing hard with raspy wet gasps.

“Keep up!” Kas pleads without looking back.

The group reach the head of the boulevard, assembling at an old but impressive staircase built of the same stone as the road, rising into two divided spirals, one curling left and the other to the right. The spirals are decorative and like the street itself, harken back to a much earlier time in the history of the Komons when fewer kin lived here and life was simpler. None of these kin were born then. Or at least, not living in the Komons. Both

staircases ascend to the same place, but the group travels the staircase on the right, skipping steps as they dart upward. The first platform is a full three stories up, nearly level with the rooftops of the S'ceds now behind them. As they reach the top, several voices call to them from along ledges and open windows.

“The Komons is breached!” Kas screams back, assuming the duty of informant. “Rotten! Rotten from the Weysts! They’re inside!”

“How many?!” Bellows a disbelieving male.

“Many tens!” The parda reports. “*A hundred!*”

Standing now on a third-story overpass hovering above South Yst Stryt, Nevy and Kas turn hard to the left with Mum right behind, and the duo of stragglers follow blindly. They align themselves with the first building of the S'ceds and take turns traversing the rickety gangway bridging the gap to the rooftop. Kas is the first to make it across the twenty-pace span into the helpful arms of gathered kin along the other side. A commotion at the end of Grand Boulevard reveals a small group of eight or nine Rotten clumsily navigating the corner and sprinting down the street toward them. Several spectators scream from their windows and toss objects to no effect.

Nevy coaxes Mum to take the next position on the plank against his denials. He begrudgingly moves forward at her insistence, carefully moving over the wooden slat, and the beam bows heavily under their combined weight, dipping perilously. Moving quickly, the gnashing throng gains ground and reaches the base of the stairway much sooner than hoped, just as Mum touches down on the rooftop. Two of the Rotten elect to attack the building instead, trying to peel planks of wood off of boarded windows or to smash through barricaded doors.

Nevy tries to get the brown lapin onto the gangway but he resists. She did not even acknowledge until now that the tagalongs are the lapin couple from the search party, though she does not know them any better than that. The two appear alike enough to be brother and sister, though she is unsure of their relationship. *It doesn't matter.*

Nevy does not argue. She grabs the female instead and pushes her onto the narrow timber, shoving her forward hard. The terrified lapina takes several quick steps but cannot gather her footing and overtakes the edge, causing the plank to twist despite the powerful grip of the rooftop kin. The plank shimmies sideways and she spills from it, catching it firmly with both paws as she plummets. Mercifully, the plank remains bridged though she lacks the strength to pull herself back up despite the tearful pleas of her mate. As the Rotten begin to swell along the balcony level passage, the lapin leaps onto the plank and tries to pull the girl up by the arms, leaving Nevy alone to observe the rushing mass of teeth of snarls.

The kin of the rooftop shout and holler desperate instructions and hysterical warnings but can do no good. The lapina couple continue to struggle atop the plank, tossing their weight in a frantic bid to save themselves when at last the board splinters and plunges the three stories onto the concrete of South Yst. The bones and wooden beam sound almost

the same when they crack upon impact, and the Rotten waiting there make no delay in ravaging the pair to a gruesome cacophony of wails.

Nevy now stands but a pace from the nearest set of teeth and claws. The closest creature reaches for her but then spins half-long to the side and collapses. The Rotten behind it also falls, landing atop the first. Nevy hears Kas calling in the background like an ayer in a distant tree before she understands. She steals a quick glance to the black parda, who animatedly points to the north.

“Bridge at Paker!” Kas cries with doubt in her voice, releasing another rock at the neck of a foe.

The Rotten that follow do not stop to consume their fallen members as they once had, electing to ignore them and focus entirely on the tigri with surprising speed. Nevy sprints with dwindling energy northbound along the balcony until she aligns with the next row of the S’ceds where the kin there prepare for her. They scramble to meet her, shouting at each other to *hurry* and *move it*, and work together to position a long plank onto the balcony, missing the ledge the first time. Kas is now too far away to produce any real damage with her sling, so her bullets bounce off the heads of attackers with virtually no lasting impact. They swat at them like casual irritants, barely drawing any attention at all.

On their second attempt, the rooftop kin let the plank crash down atop the balcony surface and Nevy scales it before it has the chance to fully settle, still bouncing with its pliable weight. She scrambles on all fours, not wasting time to stand, finally reaching the other side into the eager clutches of her kin. They grab the back of her shirt and pants heaving her onto the rooftop as if tossing a sack of flour, and immediately two males push the plank away allowing it to crash to the ground along with the three creatures upon it. Two of them land upon the third, and when it does not get up, they consume it aggressively.

Nevy’s heart beats so loudly that the kin comment on it, but she ignores them, pushing herself through the crowd that has gathered to grab Kas by the back of the neck, pulling her into a thankful two-armed hug. Kas submits.

“Bliyers. Crypers. *The Rotten!*” Yells a stocky fellow at the east edge of the building, leaning far over with the nub of his amputated tail held erect behind him. He observes the massacre still unfolding beneath the first fallen bridge, and does not turn away. “I haven’t seen them in several cycles,” he reports dryly. “The perimeter wall must be breached. Or S’celbak left it open, most likely.”

“Bren,” Nevy declares, surprised. “You’re here!”

Bren turns from the ledge to look at the tigri, still leaning against the brick with both paws. He assembles himself then, twisting to face her fully and pads over confidently. The lun male is shorter than what is standard for his breed, but sturdy, with a thick gut and wide shoulders supporting two heavy arms and a pair of compact legs. No one ever remembers what his tail looked like, or if he ever even had one, cut down smaller than that of a lapin’s. His face matches his body perfectly with a short, wide muzzle covered

in coarse white fur with flecks of black near the ruffs of his cheeks. It is often joked that his coat was once a solid black but he has lived so long that the color has drained away completely. His ears are a light grey – bushy and dense – book-ending a patch of tufted hair barely longer than the natural pile of his fur. He wears the same black shirt and pants of the common kin, though appear too tight on his frame – a sign he’s not kept up with his health. The only personal decoration he seems to wear is a simple rope necklace made of reddish-brown hemp tied into a tight knot behind his neck. The necklace is all but lost in the thick fur of his neck and chest.

He stands before Nevy, breathing loudly through his nose, and places one paternal paw on her shoulder, patting her arm with the other.

“Not good.” He states matter-of-factly. “Bridges up!” He yells into the open air, and the same phrase repeats back to him several times across several rooftops, accompanied by scraping and knocking of retracting gangways. The planks that connected the rooftops of the S’ceds to the surrounding balconies and mezzanines are all removed, isolating the gathering of buildings entirely from any potential outside entry. The only passages that remain are the lesser planks between buildings, turning the collection into an island within the Komons.

Nevy and Kas join the rooftop kin, hurriedly crisscrossing buildings to inspect the perimeter in search of movement, finding several Rotten clawing at fortified planks along the floor-level. The kin find three foes tearing hard at the bars on a window of T’tisl Stryt, the central unit of seven stood along Paker Stryt, and also Nevy’s home. Her comrades notice too, and before she has the need to defend her property, the kin drop heavy rocks to dispatch them, taken from a stockpile kept in a wood shanty. The kin spread out along their respective rooftops, scouring edges and shadows for signs of penetration.

The creatures seem intelligent enough, predicting attacks and dodging, sometimes to gather up the same ammunition used against them to send back in a melee of their own. Though they are ferocious and strong in short bouts, capable of ripping lumber off of walls and climbing as well as any kin. They are not easily distracted, unless the bait is right. Many times, Kas was able to ambush one or more of the Rotten that came to inspect the wretched remains of the lapina couple, which worked as a trap. As Kas was able to fell an enemy whom ventured too close to it, they would in turn act as another slab of meat which worked to draw another foe. The technique worked well for a time, and Kas taught two other kin skilled with ranged weapons to reproduce the tactic, and together they removed several tens of Rotten. But soon, the creatures learned to avoid the baited mounds and the strategy could not be used again.

Bren calls for Kas to return to his side atop Nevy’s place, though it takes her some time to get there. She must cross several gangways congested with kin fervently defending the perimeter, though Bren is impatient and demands she hurry. Flustered, she finds the furious lun pointing animatedly at six Rotten along the high-fences along the other side of Paker Stryt, rending planks from the frame and struggling to squeeze through.

“Stop them! Don’t let them through!”

The fence is the first blockade separating the Komons from the meat packing houses, a gateway to the coveted ranches that house the precious few livestock that remain.

“They can’t get in there or we’re lost!” Bren warns.

Kas takes aim and delivers shot after shot, striking creatures in the back, the head, the leg — but they are not phased. She is too far away to inflict real damage. The Rotten occasionally glower at her but do not stop their assault and soon the fence is split wide.

As the fence falls with a mighty *crack*, it is met with a trumpet of booming yells when four kin males emerge from the open brick doorway of the central packing station. They carry long metal poles with meat hooks and hand cleavers, swinging wildly at the closest foe they encounter knocking several down immediately. Despite their weapons, they are only evenly matched and the Rotten move through the quartet undeterred, killing one and maiming another across his chest. Several well-placed shots of Kas’s sling provide just enough distraction for the ranchers to dispatch the trespassers, carving them down in a final flurry. Without words, the fence is lifted back into place, leaned against its pillars, and secured with a wheel-cart but it will not withstand a second attack.

Bren waves a salute to the only male whom looks up to him, but is met with the wailing cries of a brother grieving his sibling.

It is unknown how many Rotten found their way in to the Komons. By mid-day, they became disinterested and wandered off into the shadows, usually alone. All that remains of their existence as seen from the rooftops are the gruesome carcasses of fallen kin and bloody footprints zigzagging the local landscape. No one was brave enough to venture back to the broken glass panel found earlier that day, though everyone knew the perimeter and dome walls have to be repaired as soon as possible. Occasionally, blood-curdling screams and the noises of battle would pop up throughout the Komons, though no one of the S’ceds dared investigate. They would help when someone made it here, but that was all.

It’s every kin for them self, Nevy thinks, the images of the lapina couple still vivid in her mind. She tries to shake off their phantoms but they haunt her, dancing in her vision every time she closes her eyes. *How did the lun fare, I wonder?*

She crosses the floor from the great room of Kas’s apartment to the cooking room table where she sat the night before, pondering in shock and reflecting on the surreal chaos that has befallen them since then. Kyrten remains laid out on a spare bed in a locked room one floor down guarded by two canid males for her own safety. During the battle she was stopped from deliberately trying to throw herself off the edge of the building. She hasn’t spoken a word since her collapse on the mound and she stares off into space with eyes as empty as her daughter’s doll, which rests beside her, staring right back. The toy has been

used as both a form of torture and reward incentivizing her to talk, though neither tactic has worked. She just sits. Trapped in her mind.

Nevy is mostly convinced that her old friend is innocent of the crimes leveled against her, but the dots connect too cleanly and the parda has not tried to defend herself. Sloen has both confirmed and denied her involvement, though she would expect nothing less from the lun liars. Kas was completely certain of Kyrlen's guilt and as usual, the black parda's temper was a contagion that infected the cowering crowd of her apartment. *After all, none of this would have happened had Kyrlen not appeared on Paker Stryt. Or indeed, had she never mated with Blakfeyng at all.*

Selfish crossbreeder.

The kin of the S'ceds, carved down in number from *two-hundred-nine* to *one-hundred-five-tens*, have suffered losses on multiple levels today. The remainder has become blind with self-preservation and revenge, and so Kyrlen's condition may likely be a blessing; ignorant to the hatred currently pointed at her. Nevy is all that stands between them.

The tigri is found pacing behind the cooking-room table when Bren throws the curtain aside and sits down with a heavy *thud* that rattles the dishes. She stops to look at him, and then takes up a chair at the head of the table in the same space she sat with Kyrlen. Nevy muses at the dichotomy.

"It's an original drawing," he says, resting his elbows upon the table and folding his fingers into a loose clasp over his muzzle.

"You're positive?" Nevy asks foolishly, forgetting with whom she speaks.

"The colors match perfectly," the lun rumbles contentedly, hooking his red hemp necklace with a thumb. "I knew we'd find something here."

"But how did the kitt know?" Nevy inquires, still defining her stance on the conspiracy. "She found it immediately. She must have been working with P—"

Bren only shrugs and raises one corner of his lip into a speculative snarl, cutting her off with nothing more than a look. "We're not the only ones looking," he notes strongly. "Maybe the Westfalen kin know more than we thought. Maybe the Kypers haven't left and they still walk among us. Maybe the pardus mother is a pack mate – like you say – Or maybe you and Kas should learn to keep *your rotten maws shut!*"

Nevy's ears flush red with embarrassment.

He considers, but then throws his paws up in mild frustration, "...Or maybe the little girl just got lucky. You left her in here for a long time, alone. Kitts get bored. The Mother knows – kitts are curious. Get into all sorts of rot. And if that's the case, it's a bit of a claw to the nose for you and Kas that a child found it so easily."

Nevy nods, the heat in her ears burning, but the theories do not make matters any clearer.

She needs her friend to snap out of it. To respond. To fill in the gaps. *To clear her name.*

“Why won’t she wake up?” Nevy asks with a flop of her tail, annoyed and clearly deflecting.

Bren frowns at her intensely, taking a slow breath through his nose.

“Mother, Nev. Her mate was killed. Likely her kitt. She’s torn a whole building apart with her bare paws; raped and beaten — *She’s in shock,*” Bren reports. “Your lack of empathy is certainly something.”

“Lots of kin died today, *Bren,*” the tigri unfurls a palm heavily onto the tabletop, “you don’t see anyone – else – *in shock,*” she says with a sarcastic snap of her voice.

Bren rolls his eyes with a lick of his lips. He’s not having this conversation again.

“She does not behave like someone hiding a secret,” he simply says instead. “Her pain, and her behavior, seem genuine,” he admits with a nod. “Unless she’s a tremendously good liar.”

“A really good liar,” Nevy adds. “That’s what I thought, too.”

“Do you not trust her?” He asks, surprised. “I thought you were old friends?”

“I don’t know,” the tigri says. “Right now, I want to believe her involvement was a bad coincidence, but there seems to be an awful lot of those lately.”

Bren nods at this, sharing the same skepticism.

“So what does the map say?” She asks, changing the subject. “How badly did I rot it all?”

“Yes,” he says, pulling up a satchel to the table and unfastening it. He pulls out a hand-bound book stuffed fat with drawings, legends, notes and clippings that *crackles* when opened. The edge of a strange tree leaf peeks from between pages near the middle. He sets the book at the table and opens it, navigating to the early pages near the front. As he does this, he spins his chair noisily a half-circle to get a full view of the marked wall and rests one paw on the book, following the map drawn there with his fingers.

The maps of the wall and of the book are very similar, though certain symbols are different and paths diverge in different places; some longer, some shorter. Some are altogether new, which concern Bren the most.

“I don’t know where S’celbak was going,” he says quietly to himself, tracing a finger along the talon-carved arcs and lines, “but he didn’t find it.”

“Does it matter? Good riddance, the bliyter.” The tigri stresses angrily.

“It does matter,” Bren retorts with a serious scowl, looking right at her and slamming the

book closed. “It matters very much. Because they weren’t gone very long,” he worries, standing from the table, “And that’s very bad news for all of us.” He walks into the front room, irritated, past the medicine tables and clutter of the floor and stops at the large bay window looking out onto Hoep Park.

“What do you mean, *not gone very long*?” Nevy inquires, stepping beside her mentor with a grave curiosity in her voice, ears drawn flat against her head.

“We’ve been here for many cycles, Nev,” he ends with a depressed *huff*. “How often can you recall seeing or even hearing about a Rotten near here? Perimeter wall notwithstanding. Two? Three times in all these years?”

The tigris does not respond.

“And now, a hundred all at once? Where do you think they came from?”

Nevy’s ears and nose begin to drain of their color. Suddenly she understands and knows exactly where they came from, and she scratches at her stomach subconsciously.

“We tried to warn them that the Bliyt was still upon us,” the lun continues pitifully, dragging a clawed finger up to the window and tapping one claw on the glass pointing out at the park. There, fallen half on the pavement with its grotesque face pushed into the grass, lays the ravaged body of a large rotten creature, a large shell upon its back.

“But they just didn’t listen.”