

CHILD OF ETHERCLAW



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Twilight Fox

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To Amanda, Holland, & Laina.

*The panda, the wolf, and the cat that
make everything worth it.*

“The things that we love tell us what we are...”

— ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

CHAPTER 1

UNDERCITY

FENLEE STRAINED AGAINST the pile of collapsed scaffolding pinning her to the wall, but couldn't dislodge herself. She smacked her palm against a bulky cross brace one last time, then slumped against the rubble in defeat. It was clear that she was going to lose her leg. Again.

Pipes and brackets, undisturbed for centuries, clattered as a small boy fought his way through the wreckage toward her. She hadn't wanted to bring him, given all the dangers in the undercity, but Elliot was her brother—*younger and far less experienced brother*, she kept reminding herself—and he refused to let her explore down there alone.

"Lee! You okay? I told you if you squeezed back there that thing was going to tip over and smash—" He stopped short



when he saw her, his soft voice reverberating through the still, dark chamber. “Oh. You don’t look so good.”

“Right, thanks for the reminder, Elliot. But yeah, definitely feeling a bit smashed up at the moment.” Fenlee was extremely not in the mood, but this wasn’t his fault, either. She tried to refocus and calm herself with one of those deep breathing exercises he was always trying to get her to do. Big mistake.

The abandoned undercity below New Cascadia always smelled foul, but the recent rains and summer heat had simmered the odors into a nauseating stew. A thin layer of sludge covered everything, and the crash had released a fresh stench of mold and fermenting rat carcass. It was so pungent she could taste it. She gagged on a bit of floating particulate and spit-drooled as she forced every last bit of the nasty vapor from her lungs.

It was supposed to have been just another late afternoon scavenging run with her brother. Simple and quick, like usual. Unfortunately, the areas were so picked over, she had very little to show for the day’s efforts. They were heading to the exit before the autodrone patrol showed up when Fenlee’s curiosity had gotten the better of her. Against her brother’s objections, she’d slipped behind some old scaffolding to get at a hidden panel that had caught her eye. It hadn’t seemed all that rickety at the time, but how was she to know the decades of decay had reduced its structural integrity to that of toothpicks? One misplaced elbow and the entire mess had tumbled down around her.

Now she was trapped, and the next autodrone patrol was due to come through any minute.

Elliot eased in beside her, dripping with sweat. He was paler than usual in the dim light of their lamps. With his scrawny

frame, Fenlee wondered if it would have been more effective for him to have gone in instead.

Nah. If this garbage was going to fall, better it fall on me.

She growled through her teeth and again tried to pull loose, but the mountain of cross braces, rails, and couplers wouldn't budge. "I'm all right. Left leg's a little stuck."

Elliot looked down and gasped. "Dad's going to murder you when he gets back."

"Yeah, well, when is he *not* going to murder me?" She tried one more time to twist free, but the prosthetic refused to cooperate and splintered with each movement.

"Fair. But we have to get you out of here. The drones—"

"I know! Just give me a sec."

The old service tunnels and transport bays were a great place to hunt for mechanical parts or other junk the waves of looters had missed over the centuries. Sometimes Fenlee lucked out and found scrap useful for her academy projects, or at least exchangeable for a few crednotes. She was the only academy student daring—or stupid—enough to brave the undercity for parts, and the quality of her work was better for it. The day had been fairly disappointing so far, so this little setback only bolstered her stubbornness and she wasn't about to return empty handed.

The panel's hinges were stiff with fresh rust, but after a few tugs, it finally gave. Other scavengers had stripped out any wiring long before she was born, but it wasn't wiring she was after. She shined her lamp inside and found that her intuition was correct—someone had been using it for storage.

"Real nice, Lee." Elliot peeked over her shoulder. "Two moldy ration packs, a totally corroded comm unit, and..." He

poked at the last item and recoiled, twisting his face in revulsion. “And a nasty bag of who-knows-what? Told you it’d be a bunch of junk.”

She punched the panel in frustration. So that was it. The sum total of their lame afternoon adventure. Elliot was right, as usual, he just didn’t have to sound so smug about it. She skipped over everything else in the storage compartment and stuffed the little bag in one of her side pouches. Better be something decent inside, unlike last time. The only other bag she’d found secreted away in the undercity had ended up containing a severed finger and a wad of hair. That had been a fun surprise when they got back to their apartment.

Now for the crushed, useless leg. Her heart sank. The prosthetic had been a gift from her father, and the cost had to have been extraordinary. It was a sleek, lightweight model with an advanced bio interface. Fashionable and high-tier, it was the first leg she’d ever been proud to wear. And now she’d wrecked it. She bit her lip, snapped the pin release connecting the leg, and pulled free, leaving the broken prosthetic behind.

Together, the pair stumbled out from behind the scaffolding into the main tunnel where she wrapped her arm over her brother’s shoulders. At sixteen, Fenlee was two years older and two inches taller, forcing her to lean into the lopsided arrangement and causing both to keep tripping on the cracked floor plates that littered the underground chamber.

A hot tickle crawled up the back of her neck. The drone? No, something else, something *alive*. They needed to hurry. “Don’t worry, I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Oh, *you’re* going to get *me* out of here? Have you seen yourself?”

“We still have a little time, we’ll make it.” But with some quick calculations, she determined limping speed wasn’t going to cut it; they’d have to find an alternate route. If one of the Sentry-class autodrones found them, they’d be dragged away by the Cascadian Authority Security Forces, locked up, and forgotten. Her stomach went cold. SecForce probably wouldn’t even bother to notify her father. Like so many before them, they would just disappear.

“Oh, no.” Elliot stopped so suddenly that Fenlee almost fell forward.

“What? What’s ‘oh, no?’”

He whimpered like a puppy in a thunderstorm. She followed his gaze toward the main entry tunnel behind them. “Um, drone’s a little early today,” he said in a broken whisper.

She yanked a pair of goggles out of one of her pouches. The infrared function was flaky and the lenses were scratched, but the basic optic enhancement was good enough; there was no mistaking the horizontal red beam combing the walls in a slow, deliberate search pattern.

Voiding hell! Why, today of all days, did the patrol have to be running ahead of schedule?

“Kill the lamps,” Fenlee whispered. Two soft clicks and the room plunged into a charcoal murk. “Okay. All right. We can do this. We can definitely do this.” She looked around, but without the lamplight, it was nearly impossible to make anything out. “There should be another small tunnel around here and then it’s maybe a quarter mile to surface access. I think.”

“You think.”

“Well, yes. If Casper’s maps are correct.”

“Seriously?” Elliot sighed. “You didn’t tell me you got it

from Cas. His mapping data always sucks. I don't get how you two are even friends—”

“There. Go!” Fenlee cut him off and pointed toward the far side of the room, opposite the way they'd arrived. Another tunnel opened into the darkness beyond. She jerked her head to the side as something small padded through a nearby puddle, just out of sight. It wasn't just the drone, there was something alive in there with them after all.

They hurried toward the smaller tunnel, stepping lightly to avoid kicking debris piles, splashing in muck, or anything that might alert the Sentry autodrone. There was no telling if it was equipped with an auditory sensor package, and Fenlee didn't care to find out.

The autodrone had entered the main chamber with them, conducting its slow, methodical scan. The menacing red light illuminated the single train track bisecting the room, elongating the rail's shadows toward them like pincers.

After a painfully slow pace, they arrived at the far wall. Elliot dug his fingers into Fenlee's arm as he trembled beside her. It turned out that Casper's maps had been junk after all—what had appeared to be a tunnel opening was nothing more than the vague shadow of a large domed fuel tank. They were staring at a dead end.

There were only a few smaller fuel tanks and a long row of overturned shelving units nearby. Not much to work with, but it was what was under the shelving units that now captured her attention: a pair of glowing green eyes sat a few feet away, staring back at her.

Elliot squinted to see what she was looking at, then smacked

his hand over his mouth, stifling a yelp. He backed up and tripped, knocking them both to the ground.

The creature slowly emerged from under the shelves. Fenlee scrambled backward on all threes until her head hit the wall. They were caught between an autodrone and...a giant under-city death rat?

“Wait.” Elliot bent down and extended his hand toward the creature. “There. It’s okay. You got a name?”

“Death rats don’t have names, and—what are you *doing*? ”

“It’s all right, he might be lost.” The creature nuzzled his hand and looked up at Fenlee. “And he’s not a death rat.”

An orange cat with deep brown stripes stretched its claws and twirled its long, ringed tail around Elliot’s legs. The patterns on its body reminded her of images she’d seen of tigers or other large exotic cats now long extinct. But this was just a scrawny old house cat, what was it doing here? The cat trotted off, disappearing underneath the row of overturned shelving units. A moment later, it paused to look back at them from within the crawlspace. Elliot was quick to follow.

“Lee, check it out, there’s a passageway back here. It’s kind of cramped though. Can you crawl for a bit?”

Fenlee eyed the Sentry as it hovered closer, almost within scanning distance, then considered the little creature beckoning them with its enigmatic eyes. “Fine,” she grumbled. “But your little furwad friend better not be leading us to another dead end.”

Once they’d crawled a few feet in, there was enough room to stand up. The passage was covered in black mold and blocked about twenty feet down by a jungle of green growth dangling from the ceiling. On their left was a door, slightly ajar, and on

their right was a heavy retractable gate, slouching in its tracks. The cat ran to the door and looked back expectantly.

It was dark beyond the door and Fenlee didn't want to take the chance that it was a storage room where they'd end up cornered. She eyed the gate—a faint light was coming from the other side. "That looks promising. Come on and help me get this gate up."

Elliot felt along the jagged edges of an upturned corner. "Sure, but *what* is it promising, Lee?"

"Got any better ideas?"

"Pretty sure we should follow the cat," Elliot mumbled. "He seems to have some thoughts about the best route."

"We don't have time to debate with a cat. There. Is. A. *Drone* behind us. Anyway, it's probably trying to lead us back to its cat lair with its cat family, and they'll all cat-attack us and have us for their cat dinner. And I refuse to be mauled to death by a fluffy flurry of displaced house cats. Not today."

Fenlee tried to pry the gate up. It opened a few inches, but with a deep metallic groan. The autodrone rotated, accelerating toward them. *Of course we'd get a drone with audio sensors.*

"Help me lift it!" cried Fenlee.

"I'm trying! It's jammed or something!" Elliot strained against the weight of the gate, but it didn't budge.

"Move." With her butt on the ground in the tight corridor, Fenlee braced her leg against a piece of broken flooring and shoved upward with all her strength, but it was hard to get leverage. The gate abruptly shifted and she fell hard on her back, the impact knocking the wind from her.

Elliot made it to the other side and tried to help drag her through. "You're...too *heavy*," he gasped.

“Not helping, *little* brother.” She ground the words out through clenched teeth and clambered past him.

It was doubtful the autodrone could get through the cluster of shelves, but Fenlee wasn’t going to risk it. The cat let out a low growl behind them as she slammed the gate down with a grating screech.



They emerged from the gap in the gate to find a vast underground loading bay. Several dozen lengths of track ran parallel with platforms between each at regular intervals. Stacks of heavy intermodal shipping containers sat empty, the contents salvaged or ransacked long ago. A few cranes were left, all but one toppled on their sides. The light they had seen was coming from a bank of thin windows at the top of the opposing wall, giving the impression they were inside a massive bunker.

Fenlee stretched and the tension left her muscles, but the anxiety remained. In all the years she’d been scavenging, she’d never had such a close call. From falling, crawling, and trudging through the dampness, she was a sopping wet mess. Nearby, Elliot wiped the filth from his hands while chewing on a few strands of his hair—a nervous habit he’d had as long as Fenlee had known him.

She leaned against the grimy metal wall and activated her holoquip, one of the cheap, compact wrist computers common among low-tier citizens. It had a small holographic projection display and a few other features, but it was nothing fancy. She had no maps for their current area, and she couldn’t find any positioning data to calibrate against. If mapping data even

existed, it wasn't publicly available, and there hadn't been a functioning global positioning system in over two hundred years.

"Looks like this thing is useless," Fenlee said, shutting down her holoquip. "But I'm pretty sure I know where we are. This has to be one of the old freight transfer hubs. It's where bulk cargo would come in from the sea before they shipped it underground to distribution centers around the region." She cocked an eyebrow. "Probably worked much better than what we have now. People could actually get what they needed. Anyway, hubs like this in the Waterfront District were built right beside shipyards, so there has to be an exit close by. If we hurry, we might still have time to catch a maglev back home before the station shuts down for the night."

Fenlee peeled herself off the wall and wrapped her arm around Elliot. Together, they started forward. She swore this would be the last time they'd venture together into the undercity. The only problem was, the loot she'd scrounged together on these scavenging trips was expensive elsewhere or, in many cases, outright impossible to find. But she needed it. She loved her mechatronics projects, and it was imperative that she rise to the top of her class if she was ever going to get a job that paid enough to get her and her family out of the low-tier.

About the only route up and out of the bottom rungs of society in New Cascadia was through Norfayne Labs, the global science and engineering conglomerate. She would have to prove herself, and her academy studies alone wouldn't be enough. She excelled in working with mechanical and electronic components and the bits of code that glued them together. And if she could get a position at Norfayne, it would be the path forward that she needed. It wasn't that she really minded life in the low

tier, but she wanted something better for Elliot and her father. Like it used to be.

“So, um, have you figured out how you’re going to explain your leg this time?” Elliot asked.

Fenlee grimaced. “I have my old one as backup, so I can just wear that for a bit. Dad won’t be back planetside until tomorrow, so I have a little time to get this all sorted out.”

“Sure. But isn’t your old leg still about an inch too short?”

“Half-inch,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m used to dealing with this. I’ll be fine.”

“Check it out—I bet we could get out that way.” Elliot pointed to a set of stairs with a landing at the top. It was high enough to be partially obscured, but there was a hint of light coming from an opening with rainwater dripping down.

Relief washed over her. “Makes sense to me. Let’s go.”

They walked past several open shipping containers, but not all of them were empty—a few held bedding and other personal objects. Elliot stopped and stared inside one. “Lee, do people actually *live* down here?”

“Nope. Well, I mean, supposedly, people tried living in these hubs for a while. Climate refugees from the south who couldn’t get citizenship, mostly. But the Cascadian Authority wasn’t having it, so they kicked them all out.”

“But this area isn’t used for anything. Why would they force out refugees with nowhere to go?” Elliot asked.

“Because the Cascadian Authority SecForce is full of terrible people. You know that. As little as they care for us, they care even less for...” She trailed off, the blood draining from her face. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Elliot, we have to get out of here. This place should be crawling with autodrones. When

they kicked everyone out of these places, they meant for them to stay out. Rumor is, they killed any stragglers.”

As she spoke, a rumbling hum approached from behind to underscore her point. Fenlee froze. “Not after all this.” Her voice shook as she breathed the words. “No way.”

Too late, Fenlee saw this autodrone wasn’t like the Sentry from earlier whose duty was to survey and report. This was a shoot-to-kill Guardian-class autodrone. And the offensive models never hesitated.

“Shit! Elliot, *run!*”

But there was no time. The moment the Guardian hovered into view, the housing around its mini-turrets retracted and the guns rotated toward them. Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around her brother and dove on top of him.

Fenlee’s world went supernova, and she collapsed into a black hole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matty Roberts began their career in journalism where they earned an Emmy and had the privilege of working on several other award-winning projects. They hold an MS from Johns Hopkins University and are now an engineer in renewable energy in Denver, Colorado where they live with their wonderful partner, two extraordinary kids, and the best doggie ever.

In addition to writing, engineering, and parenting, Matty is a vegan enby nerd who is in love with this world and will forever be doing all they can to make it a better place. And they may be known to occasionally play in a punk band here or there.

For more information about Matty and their upcoming books, visit www.mattyroberts.io.