

III

“MERIT, FREEDOM, LOGIC, *PEACE*—” the flyer-woman resumed, spinning away from them in the tent. They never got her name.

Vic tugged him away, and Felix stuttered a weak no thank you to the crazed woman but it didn't matter— she had gotten herself so worked up she had forgotten about them, stomping back into her one-person protest. They distanced themselves as quickly as possible, under the surrounding Zuris' glaring scrutiny. With the Festival coming up and the WSWN in full effect, none of the tribesmen were going to take a chance with the law by laying a hand on her, even if she was Stormtouched, but Felix could feel their restrained anger seething across the courtyard.

“Ye wanna go agree wiff the crazy racist Stormtouched lady summere, blud?” Vic asked in a hiss as they hastened away.

“They aren't all anti-Zuri. I didn't know, I was just trying to help her before—”

“Ye nevah know, dats why ye dont *talk* to em.”

“Just trying to be— nevermind.” He knew what his friend would say.

“Yeh, yeh, kay kay. Woteva. Forget it. S'over. Now.” Vic said with annoyance. “Help me find someone who looks like dey know a ting about hunting big birds.”

“Birds?”

“Yes, bruv. Beeg ones.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means? You're going to have to be more specific.”

“The shovelbills! Rememba? Stripey fellas, tallah den you, travels in gangs and shite, big fookin beaks, sharp nuff to stab ye eye out?”

“Oh yes, for the feathers, I remember.”

“Kinda, yeh. The beaks an feet sell too, plus the livah,” Vic said quietly. “Dont matta, were just plunkin it at all down wiff the Rangers Guild. Prices up all round. Wizard labs buyin erryting like mad. Nuffin but dosh in the forest, bruv, right now. Waaay betta den fookin ink slugs. If we git on it.”

“And ayy! I ent even tell ye all of it— I clocked sometin. So cummon— Lets find someone who ent cost a milli.”

“But I thought we were fine on money.” Felix said, walking along.

“Yeh, yeh, but dese mans hit ye ova the head on a contract if ye ent careful. We juss wanna one-an-done, juss-today-type ting.”

“No contract. Big birds.”

“Ye clocked it.”

They made it all the way into the tent away from everyone who had seen what happened, and started shopping. The canopied square was full of jostling bravados, young Zuri hiring themselves out as guides. They displayed themselves for the hunting parties that came and swept their gaze over the lot without commitment. Felix took the new place in, mind trying to figure out how this place worked without looking too nervous around all the armed men.

He began to see some patterns. All of the guides were garbed out somewhere between jungle guerrilla and security guard. *The more fur or scales or teeth around the neck, the newer in town they must be*, he thought. You could tell by how they stood too, planted unblinkingly next to their weapons, no idea how to market themselves.

Then there were that had lost the feathers, and copped a visored polyplax helmet, abandoned the braided belt for a bandolier, strapped with vials of healing potions, investing in the gear that

made them career mercenaries, motivated once a few successful contracts had given them a taste of what loose cash could buy you in Heaven.

These types were the clear market leaders of the AeroHub day labor pool. In addition to upgrading their gear, they had developed a basic notion of advertising. The most assimilated of the warriors had joined up with the branded companies, which lined up in colorful booths that formed an outward-facing square within a square, making a loop for would-be guide-renters to walk around. Some stood their finest warriors up on pedestals to flex and pose. A mix of Zuri glyphs and the letters of Heaven's language floated everywhere on banners and chalked slates, squeezed in with pictographs of various beasts, and prices, the universal language. Each booth had a barker, the most fluent of the pack bartering with all passerbys in choppy pidgin, each trying to speak the loudest, ignoring the solos, new immigrants to the city, to find space where they could around the tent's periphery to figure it out for themselves.

Felix shook his head to turn his brain on, and actually engage his eyes on the scene around him.

"Kay, bruv, who looks like a good bounty hunta?"

"Well, technically, we're the bounty hunters, so I think we're hunting for a mercenary to assist our bounty hunting."

"My bounty huntin. An ye know wot I mean."

They side-eyed the hawkers trying to reel them, trying to learn something useful without obligating themselves. They walked down one side, sussing prices and specialties while avoiding eye contact with the pushier man-peddlers.

"All dese mooks look like idyots, posers, thief tings." Vic said of the assembled sellers they were passing, frowning at the prices.

"We could try the solos over there, they're probably cheaper?"

"Cuz dats all the rejects who cant hack it and virgins who never done dis."

But they walked over that way anyway.

Along the tents back, all of the guides who couldn't afford booth space camped out, sitting on busted crates and dirty little rugs. Their faces alternated stoic and pleading, and the prices they charcoaled onto their wood planks were lower, but still had three digits each, steep. Felix watched Vic, could see he wasn't impressed either. This made Felix a little hopeful, if he just said nothing, Vic's thrift would get the best of him and they'd forget the whole 'hire a guide' idea entirely.

Then a sign caught his attention. KILL RATE 100% – NO CONTRACT NEEDED it said, and only that. Its owner had claimed one of the tent supports, and sat on a crate leaned against it, sign between his splayed legs. They couldn't see his face through the screen of dreadlocks, but his bandy bare shoulders and biceps poking out from his vest were inked in tapering leaf-shaped patterns.

"Ay, look. Featha tats. Prolly knows birds, innit?" Vic said.

"Mebbe?"

They approached. Vic took the lead.

"Ay, wha' gwan, ongooli-longa, good mornin innit."

The guy tilted his head up slightly and pulled the dreads out of his face. He had slim, bare cheeks and a large angular nose, and his eyebrows went up like a skeptic's.

"Olingolo." He said, enunciating the Zuri greeting correctly, "Hello."

"Eh, close. So, kill rate one hundo it says." Vic said, eyeing the sign.

"So far, yes."

“Ha. Kay. So—shovelbills. Ye know bout dem, bruv?”

“Mhmm.”

“Dats a yes? Shovelbills? Big bird-type ting?”

“Mhmm. Hath large talons. Liketh to eat eyeballs. Big as a man. Feathers, striped.” He spoke Heavenite in the stilted, outdated style most Zuri learned from old textbooks donated to charities in the South Bank.

“Clocked it. Kaykay, wass ye day-rate den?”

“Five hundo.”

“Wot? Blud, for a day? ye serious?”

“Art thou?” he asked, unblinking.

“*Pfft.* The most! Sorry, thought ye was someone who wanted to work today.”

“I doth. But for ones with five hundo for me. Can killeth everything. No contract. Readeth sign.”

“Vic,” Felix said. “This guy’s a kid, he can’t be more than sixteen, should we—”

Vic turned his mouth away from the guide and whispered.

“Yeh bruv, means we cans barta him down, I got dis—”

“Blud,” he turned back. “Git real. No one out here chargin more’n a hundo or two.” He squinted at the guy, not a pretty sight. “How old are ye even? e evah even done dis evah?”

“Yeah, you think you’re worth five of those guys?” Felix said, pointing at a booth across the way. At it, a contingent of Midnight Leopard Boys (according to their banner) shadow-boxed and arm-wrestled. They dripped in full body leopard tats, with themed helmets and shoulder pads to match. Their barker, a short fellow, zipped his head towards Felix, sensing the interest. Felix shoved his gaze back to the conversation, hopefully before it was too late.

“Haveth they contract?”

“Bruv, chill, I got dis— yeh tho, why shouldnt we rent anyadese man dem over there instead?”

“Thou should. Thou can payeth me not.”

“Eh, slow down, who said dat? Blud, we just talkin, innit. okay, forreal— wots yer low?”

“Five hundo.”

“Cummon! I give ye two. Juss for the day. Ye cant be gettin much work like dis.”

“I doth not need much work like this.”

“This guy really knows how to slut.” Felix said.

“*BruvIgotdis*— so, wot, you got like a, a dosh-back-guarantee-type ting if we dont catch nuffin, or wot?”

The feather-woven teen ruffian gave them a haughty laugh and sneered. “Goeth to them. The contract-men. They will helpeth you and your little pockets.”

Vic sizzled, and pinched his temples. Felix tried to lighten the air.

“Hey, it’s no worries man! It’s cool. Sorry, if you don’t mind me asking, what tribe are you from? I don’t recognize those marks, and I always like to ask.”

The young guide looked Felix up and down before answering. “White Crow.”

“Oh! That’s interesting, I never learned about that one. Is it a smaller tribe? Is your homesite very far?”

“Not far.”

“Okay kay kay kay kay.” Vic said, waving away their side-conversation with a brusque hand, “Ye dont have a contract.”

“As sayeth sign.”

“Alright... all yer own gear? Ye got a chute?”

“Here.” He patted a bundle next to him.

“Okay, super super!” said a high-pitched voice from waist level behind them.

“Signeth here boss, good picks!” Felix felt a rapid poking in his back. The Leopard Boys barker was stabbing him with the edge of a clipboard. He was a shorter fellow with big silver gems studded into the sockets of his leopard head hat. He looked a little bigger with his five muscled friends behind him.

“Five of these guys! You sayeth, delivereth we! My best Leopard boys, for your hunting trip today!”

“Yup, no money down. First trip free, goodeth choice, super stuff boss. Signeth thee!” A sinking feeling hit Felix. He looked at the guy with the crow tats, who just shrugged, still seated.

“Err, hey, wait, we were talking to someone already here—”

“Pah, the suckling, no crew? Friend, looketh. Purple Leopards stand here and taketh his business all the day, cuz better we be. You look smart, a Wizard right?”

“Dont sign.” Vic pushed Felix out of the way. “Ay. Ye and yer guys can roll the fook on, no one hired ye idyots.”

“Sure, sure boss! No problems. Incurreth a cancellation fee tho, how payeth thee?”

“I dont, cuz I ent stupid.”

“Hey, big agree here. Keepeth it one hundo. Knoweth I *you* the smart one here, and knoweth you this the best deal. No money down today, meaneth more for you, today.”

“Listen, please, this is a misunderstanding—” Felix said.

“We worketh on credit, no moneys down, includeth we free health potion, free AeroHub pass promotion, first time, *super* good deal. Better than dis guy, on the realeth real...”

He just kept going. All the sell-language swam into Vic, and some didn’t come back out. Felix could see his friend moving mental abacus beads around.

Vic was about to say let me read this, when someone screamed up front by the street. A mammal-noise. It crimped the hairs on the back of Felix’s neck, and he turned with everyone else. The noise repeated in tormented bursts. Everyone was coming out of their booths, moving to the middle of the square to stand on toes for a glimpse.

“No, HAAAAAALP!”

The cry morphed into words, piercing over the heightened hush of the watching crowd.

The black wagon was blasted up onto the curb. Its suicide doors hung open like mechanical labia. Out of it, a pair of Rangers walked. Three-color armbands, black overcoats— unlike Vic, a Jungle Ranger, this was a City Corps Storm Response Unit.

The City arm of the Rangers Guild were the only ones the Wizards paid to employ violence to get things done, the rest of the City had to do it for free. They were the ones who answered the call when streets needed to be kept safe from rioters, saboteurs, looters, madmen, kidnapers, Homesteader-robbers, blatant pimps and chem pushers, escaped Civic Workers, grifters, drifters, vagrants, graffitists, battery addicts, the unlawfully assembled, anarchists, flyers, child predators, and the homeless.

Both of them carried a silver device slid over their right wrist, one part tight-fitting glove and one part halo, encircling their hand around the thumbknuckle. The strapshot was a marvel in crowd control tech. It was sensitive to pressure and responded to hand gestures fluidly, so effective at its job it was unlawful for citizens to possess. Anyone could have one used on them though.

“They’ve got *straps*,” Felix murmured.

“Dey all do now bruv, wake up. They proolly juss keep em on Net mode for her tho, here goes.”

“No! *Do you see?* HAAALP!” The Stormtouched woman cried, backing into the tent plaza. The thin crowd near the front moved out of the way of the black-clad lawmen. They approached her with slow, wide stance. Everyone else was silent.

One of the Corps beckoned to her with a cupped hand.

“IT’S STARTING! IT’S ALL STARTING!” she screamed. They crouched at her. She darted backwards, and cried in anguish. The front of the crowd didn’t yield. Someone pushed her back towards them with a grunt. She stumbled, tripping on her signboard, almost fell.

They kept closing. Both lifted their arms, thumbs jabbing out. As they crooked the digit, the silver halo filament circling the strapshots made a click and a flash, and two white webs of plasma burst out to ensnare her.

She went flat out—the first plasma net went low and missed, scrambling with energy on the pavement as it faded inert. The second one hit her, but wrapped mostly the signboard. She clawed it off her neck, scampering up on tattered limbs and scrambled right, to the wall. The men saw where she was going and dashed toward, as she grabbed at the line that tied down one side of the canopy tent.

Hauling herself up, she used the rope and the pole and the brick wall to brace herself but there was nowhere to go. In a second she had treed herself, but couldn’t get out of reach of the Corps, who came behind her and yanked at her legs and hips, breaking her hold, digit by slipping digit, sending her crashing to the pavers.

Then it was over. Her last sounds clipped off as the black bag slipped over her face. The second Ranger made a show of flipping her over, and binding her wrists and ankles with a pack of cable ties at his waist. The first walked and collected her sign, before they tossed both through the van’s waiting hole. It clapped shut, and disembarked down the side street.

Some people clapped a little. Others just went back to business with an axiom or jibe. The noise rose back to normal levels. Felix mopped the cold sweat from his face, and sucked in breath, trying to slow his heart rate and unsee all of that.

“Finally,” Vic said, sympathetic. “Fore she hurt somebody, or got stomped out. S’good. She gonna git some mental fookin help now.”

“Yeah, good, good...” Felix managed to say, from deep in the library of dark memories he now found himself. He knew what kind of help was waiting for her at the Colleges, in the labs. His old Bio department work-study job.

Don’t think about it, he told himself. He just focused on those words. *Don’t think about it. Act normal. Stop shaking. Open your eyes.*

An expletive from Vic made it easier. His friend was agog. Felix now became aware that all of the Leopard Boys were on the ground. Sometime in the commotion they had all six of them decided to take a lie down. A trickle of blood was sliding out of more than one of their hidden noses. The casual Zuri with the feather tats was standing up now, cracking his knuckles and looking at them, face *blasé*.

None of the crowd or other Leopard Boys by the tent had registered it yet, but they were starting to.

“Oh, fook—go, bruv, go, we ent need no guide, quick, before mans see—”

Felix obliged. They hurried back towards the front to leave, but found more to see. A bunch of guys were clustered in the front right corner, shouting at each other and pointing up.

The tent was not designed to be ascended. Where the woman had climbed, a rope had pulled out of tautness, and this little change had put enough slack in a corner that the constant rain was beginning to pool. This was putting a growing sac of rainwater directly above their collective heads. It seemed simple to just tighten the slack, but all of the braided lines securing the canvas to the poles were linked together, so the time it would take to readjust one section would allow just as much rain to accumulate on its neighbors. To truly fix it, you'd have to clear everyone out, and re-erect it from scratch. That was impossible obviously— not enough time, so there *had* to be some way to fix this one problem in isolation, or what a major design flaw it would be. No one was agreeing on it though, or getting a cogent plan together. Meanwhile, the weight of the water was building, and putting more strain on the poles and other ropes, minute over minute.

Felix sussed the building tension on the lines: outlook not good. Some precocious individuals around started to pack up their things, or just stood and left, noting what was about to happen.

“Hey, this whole thing is about to come down,” Felix said, in a detached, sing-song way, pointing at one particular strand of rope coiling and pulling thin. Vic looked up and came to the same conclusion.

“*Oosh*— no good! Wottarye doin bruv, juss wotchin it— bail!” he said, loud enough the people around them heard and looked up. These folks saw they were already behind the getting out of dodge power curve, and chaos bred. It was a stampede by the time they made it to the threshold, people shoving one another to escape.

SNAP. The thin line broke. A half-ton of water went into freefall for a few feet, before being caught by what tension was left, doubling the strain placed on the remaining supports. This paradigm lasted for a few seconds, until the cumulative weight became too much for one of the middle poles.

It didn't split and flatten all suddenly like Felix anticipated. It yawed to the heavy side like a capsizing boat, ripping one by one the other lines still attached to their eyelets, so that the light side collapsed first, from the edges. The water, with no counterbalance, crushed down to the ground, splintering the rigged-up posts, and finally deposited its reserve onto the square, smashing and flooding everyone and thing in it. Mortal cries emerged from the back of the wreckage.

The two friends saw all of this in steals over their shoulder, running away, still looking out for purple leopard helmets following them.

Felix's heart was hammering. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his flask. He tilted it and sucked as they pushed through the crowd, watching Vic's back ahead of him.

He knew it was early. He knew he shouldn't. He needed it still. The WSWN was in full effect.

It's not as bad as what's about to happen to that woman, a deep-down voice said.

He drank some more.

Don't think about it.

IV

Felix and Vic fled back around the block and into the AeroHub proper before more corps came. Felix tucked the flask away and fished a mint out of his pocket to cover his breath. His head was floating nicely now, memories once again distant. They came to the rear of the queues, leading to the different terminal gates, and were soon blocked in by more arriving behind them. Vic pulled them into a line slowly parading beneath a roloboard, ZORTELL CREVASSE + SNAKEPIN DIP + ZUMELIN'S LAKE picked out in its flipdown letters. As they came to a stop and made a quick final check for any vengeful Leopards, Felix noticed that the Zuri with the feather tattoos had followed, standing right next to them in silence, looking straight ahead.

"Wot a shiteshow! *Aha!*" Vic shook off the excess energy. He gave Felix a perilous grin, riding the adrenaline high like the grime-lifed Causeway kid he was. He bounced a few times and slapped their new Zuri friend on the arm.

"Ayy! Ye *dosed* dem mooks bruv! Whatcha do em wiff!?"

"My hands."

"Bruv! How!?"

The young one shrugged. "By hitting. In the right spots. I knoweth the right spots." He jammed two fingers at his clavicle, and at a bone on his jaw, demonstrating. "And I haveth hate for them."

"Wot, dem purple boys?"

"All like them. The city tribes. The meat-men. The self-sellers. I am a real one. They fake."

"Right, cuz its diffrent den wot yer doin out here, cuz..."

"Wait—" Felix blurted. "Real ones...you're Zuri Orthodox! Well, I guess you wouldn't call yourself that, it's an externally-ascribed moniker."

Both of them looked at him blankly, and he realized he was talking like a full-blown Wizard student.

"I mean, there are some Zuri who have come to live like city people, and then there are ones who only follow the old ways of living, like you."

"Yes." He said. "I liketh to hit the first kind."

"Wots the diff, ye can hunt a bluddy shovelbill yeh?"

"Well, actually, for instance—" Felix called up the memories of a Zuri anthropology class he had taken years ago.

"Yes." The newcomer continued to Vic as if Felix hadn't spoken.

"Great. Guess ye wiff us den."

The dread-headed one scratched his tattooed neck.

"Almost," he said.

"Ah. Right." Vic turned away and hunched over for a bit, and re-faced them with a pad of bills, aqua-green and pink. The bills were murky with stains, overlaying the diorama of civic imagery printed on the fabric strips— ideal views of the Colleges overlooking the Causeways, the city pictured as it was just after the Settlement, framed by scrolled banners decrying the three Ideals. He held them out, but their new friend did not reach.

"This isseth *not* five hundo."

"Its half, an dats generous. Ye can git the rest back tonight when were back, or wheneva we hit a catch. Take it or leave it blud."

The youth's eyes wrinkled, before he placed a flat hand out. Felix watched his best bruv wince as his money vanished into the guide's side pouch. He suspected Vic may have been trying to drive him away with a lowball, but ended up getting a payment plan instead.

The newest member of their crew issued a half-satisfied grunt. "Fine. What doth I call you?"

"Call me Veek bruv. Dis mook is Felix, my backup. He from the Colleges, the pyramids, the big shiny buildings, ye unnastand wot Im sayin? How long ye been here? Good. Wizard ting, now hes slummin it wiff me, we live on Merit." Vic was here referring to Merit Causeway, but there wasn't much else holding them up so it worked the other way too.

"An ye?"

"For cityboys— Jim-mee," he baritoned.

"Jimmy, sure. Works for me."

Another grunt. The barbarian pointed at Felix with his forehead, talking to Vic.

"So he is a Wizard? With the brain magic?"

"Nah, nah. He dropped out, s'okay. He ent do it no more."

"But isseth he a good hunter? I have workethed for Wizards."

"Dude, Jimmy? I'm right here, you can talk to me too. I know how to hunt, he and I have done this a dozen times."

Jimmy moved his mouth to the side, and his eyes flipped up and back down.

"What?" Felix said, to both of them. The barbarian gave him a rank twitch of his nostrils.

"He drinketh the city poison," he said to Vic. "This hour, drinketh he. Can smell. This, in jungle, is very bad. When drinketh the city poison, men get slow, heareth things not, is dangerous. Drinkers watcheth not the backs of others."

Felix suppressed a wily hiccup, and burned under another look from Vic. He egged on a smile.

"Hey, come on, I'm fine! Come on, it's my day off. I'm fine, definitely by the time we jump. I'm here, I'm serious, no worries."

Jimmy continued to speak to Vic.

"For why did you hireth him?"

"He ent gettin paid, hes my roommate. Free. Hes an *idiot*, but worth it. Mosta times. Now cummon."

Jimmy made a very professional noise. Vic didn't like something about this and hardened a little.

"I said cummon blud. Git ova it, play nice. Be fine. I ent hire ye as a moral fookin compass, yer here to murda wildlife wiff us, innit?"

During this convo, they had moved up the line and through the turnbuckle and maneuvered through the packs of other jungle-bound travelers. They pushed up into one of the raised terminals to buy a ticket from an Aeromobile line operator. This choice brooked no argument. Felix and Vic were die-hard Choppers Unlimited loyalists.

Other airlines coddled their passengers— secured them in padded seats, bribed them with complementary protein snacks, free health potions and other meaningless swag. These operators invested in petty comforts for their fleets, like shock absorbers and hand rails. Choppers Unlimited, LLC gave no truck to such "compete-on-quality" touches. A ride in a CU rig was like being thrown through the air in a perforated metal bucket. Their customers were on average more knowledgeable about the absolute minimums of Aero maintenance and cleaning required by law, because of the CU corporate family's daily example.

Working class para-commuters like Vic swore by the brand. Felix and other social derelicts enjoyed the leeway to drink and smoke aboard without peer judgement.

Choppers was also the smallest Aero-enterprise, the only one that hadn't been conglomerated or ventriloquized by the larger companies, a hold-out in the prevailing industry winds. Which was crazy, Aeromobiles hadn't even been a thing until twenty seasons agoish.

It had taken two hundred and twenty years for Heaven to reinvent flight technology, the wreckage of Arks recycled long ago, useless without the Old Continent fuel anyway. Felix remembered watching the first modern flightcraft he ever saw as a kid, looking out through the shaded blue window of their loft apartment in the Farm Tower, where his father was posted before being ascended to his current position in the Edifice.

He and his sister had commentated the airship's bumbling flight, laughing and rooting it on as it rose up almost level with their balcony on the twenty-eighth level. It crashed a minute or so later, one rotor failing with a chunk, sending the mechanical carapace spilling down into the lake with a distant splash. That happened a lot, in the early months. After two Wizards-gone-private-sector finally cracked the brainlock on sustained flight by combining the latest applications in streamlining, rotor tech, and battery magic, the island had become a battlefield of tinkerers and contraptionists racing their prototypes into the sky, littering the lake with attempts. Several dozen companies ended up with working models, originally launching from floating runways anchored in the lake, before the Wizards stepped in, and mandated several coastal neighborhoods be rearranged to create the AeroHub.

They began offering parachute flights to outbound Rangers, and commuter flights out to the Province cities on the edge of the lake, the whole dosh-making point of it all, injecting the city's hunters directly into the jungle's heart and cutting out days of overland travel out through the city's walls and gates at the far end of the Causeway bridges. Within a few weeks of the tech going public, the range of Heavenly exploration expanded by hundreds of kilometers.

A good half of the original operators dropped service in the next two years; couldn't hack the ensuing regulatory cycles that hounded the inventions. The tech had proliferated far faster than the Wizards had anticipated and the racket disturbed the neighbors. The Zuri tribes now had men raining into untouched regions. This precipitated a new wave of bloody clashes in the jungle and more tension between the city and the tribes since the sanguine seasons leading to the original Demarcation Treaty, which reserved Heaven's settlement at the Lake's shore and no further. Hunting, travel, and trade were all provisioned for into this Treaty, but this new skyborne pipeline was seen as beyond the pale.

Limitations came down hard and knocked even more Aero companies out of the sky in order to maintain the goodwill that allowed Heaven to remain on the map. More were lost in the labyrinth of permits and safety specs that led unerringly to more fees at every turn. Of those who made it through to the modern Aeromobile paradigm, a select few managed to find the favor in the lower branches of the Academocracy, with the Wizards doing the regulating. These groups turned their familiarity into alphas.

That was fifteen seasons back, if Felix remembered right. After the initial crisis subsided, none of the rules or laws had been updated since but the field had narrowed, as the strongest competitors bankrupted and bought out any industry mates who flagged into a vulnerable position. The number of different Aerolines running active flights had absorbed down to ten, and then to seven last dry season, after three company's fleets were ransacked past salvation by crowds (or competitor-paid crisis actors, who knew?) during the worst of the heatwave-driven

solar farm brownouts. When the lights came back on, the city's growing population found itself with less options to fly with than ever.

There was a terminal on either side of the AeroHub. You had to find the code for the dropsite you wanted to get on with the ticking rolboards, then find a flight number going there. You'd then turn around and find this flight number in real life, emblazoned in fat figures on the hulls of the Aeros to give even the most illiterate customer no doubt. The last part was to get on one and buy a ticket before it hermetically sealed itself and blistered off the business end of the launch rail.

The Aeros were all styled and colored by brand, but followed the same base schematic— A beetly hull with a chunky cockpit for a head, a riveted metal thorax big enough to hold twentyish chute jumpers in a go. A four-blade rotor lay slicked back on the roof like fly wings and the miniature versions hung in tandem from the wings, which were hinged up, hugging the body of the beast, in resting position. Every minute and fifteen seconds a bell blared and a hidden crankshaft ratcheted the whole procession forward, kicking the front spot out to do its thing.

The three of them noted a strange air as soon as they stepped in, and the board confirmed it. Choppers Unlimited was gone. There were no brushed silver Aeros (CU never wasted customer money on paint) and no gray glyphs on the board. It seemed the ineffable had happened. The stalwart of the AeroHub, the last dissenting alternative to the overpriced and shiny had finally succumbed. This threw Vic into a brief conniption, as he calculated how much the average cost of flying had just increased, out loud, for several minutes.