

## V

They found themselves on a shuttle run by *iPhly*, a disgustingly well-kept Aero with beveled off-white everything. Vic forked over an unsympathetic premium to the ticket-taker, she wore a different Causeway's tattoos and the two handled the transaction with mutual contempt. The passenger hull was lined with seats that flipped down from the wall. Vic kept grumbling as they stowed their things and readied their compressed parachute vests.

"Fook bruv, I cant *believe* dat! Fitty a ticket— the costa doin anything in the jungle just jumped. Erryone who chutes for work gonna feel it."

The amount they had spent this morning seemed very high to Felix. He did the math against their reserve for the month, but realized that couldn't be right, so he pushed the thought away.

"Well, are you surprised?" he said instead. "It was inevitable."

"I remember when twenny was high—"

"The cost of everything in this city is only going one way." Felix shrugged and sighed.

Vic's good eye rolled. "Yeh yeh, well. Ent dat bad. Dont git all depressed wiff me. Yer startin to sound like dat flya lady back there, all dat kinda talk, drop it. Weve got shite to do today."

"Sorry, not like I made it up— if it's depressing, it's because it's true, it's reality. Anyone with their eyes open and half a brain can tell that things are bad and getting worse. It doesn't take a Wizard to see that. Heaven is just doomed."

"Then fook the resta Heaven bruv! No, Im *serious* bruv. Ye need to focus on you. All ye can do is make yer shite bettah. Figga out which way *yer* goin, not the fookin city. Cant do nuffin bout dat. Lifes always been hard, lowa Heaven's always been like this. Ye cant fight gainst it."

"That's what they want us to believe." Felix said, in dark vagary. "Speaking of which, where are we going today, if we're not going to the slug cliffs?"

"Alright, yeh. Lets do this. Jimmy, ye can hears me?" Vic fished a map out of his backpack. The young barbarian had gone glaring off into space again, and turned back to them with a blink.

The map was greasy with thumbprints and wax smudges. Diamond holes had torn into the intersecting creases from a thousand foldings. He flapped it open, and stuck a finger at an X crissed into the map with a red crayon mark.

"Right. So. We drop in here. S'the same dropsite we hit like normal, only today, were not goin up the trail to the Crevasse, were goin around, past all the idyots tryna make a nut offa slugs, and keep goin."

"To where?" Jimmy said, puzzled.

"Ill tell ye, but when were on the ground. Gotta good spot."

"Why shovelbills?" Felix said.

"Shh!" Vic hissed and jerked his head around the Aero, at the other teams and solos hanging around, in their own conversations.

"Dont say nuffin like dat bruv— Dis ting fulla dimlits who would *spaz* for wot I heard about."

"This land place," Jimmy said, pointing to the Crevasse, shaking his head. "Hath no birds. Too close to river. And too early. Only breed in dry season. Wanteth you the big birds? We go here. Here. Or here." He said, pointing around the map. "In one moon, after season turn. On different Aero. Not here."

“Ay!” Vic said, shutting the map. “Wot I juss say? Keep ye voice down round all dese hungry muthas. Yer gonna see when we git there. Juss be ready to hunt. I know wot Im talkin bout.”

“How?” Felix said.

“I fookin did research, innit? One of us actually prepares for dese trips.” Vic snapped.

“Alright, alright— and no slugs at all today.”

“Are ye deaf, mate? I already said dat.”

“Just making sure that’s the plan.”

“Yes! Fook blud.”

“It’s whatever man, I’m just here to help.”

“This land place,” Jimmy said again, “Is also big place for the Storm.” He left the word hanging, an implied threat on its own.

“Oh, don’t worry about that!” Felix said. “I got us there.” He whipped something palm-sized out of his vest. The tawny wood box had grooves to fit your hand, and a little cover that flipped smooth on hinges to show three circular dials with free spinning arrows. He scrutinized where each arrow pointed on its tiny wheel.

“*Feeelix.*” Vic pushed Felix’s hand down into his lap, covering the device.

“Put it away, dese tings is crawlin with thieves!” he whispered close.

“Man, relax.” Felix said, jerking away. “Why are you so tense?”

“Cuz neitha of ye know how to act on an Aero, s’why. Im tryna be proffesh out here.”

The Aero was approaching the end of the rail. In a few minutes a flow of solar magic running through the rail would touch a contact plate on the undercarriage. The wings would unflip, allowing the technical Wizardry built into the machine’s rotors to animate. The thaumatic wave would flow into the guts of the rig until every ungrounded piece quivered with kinetic overlock. Touching a live Aero sent enough force into your bloodstream to stop the hearts of your family members three generations in either direction, and was generally considered a bad idea. The machines needed enough juice to loop out over the jungle and make it back to the Hub— there were no landing yards in the jungle, only drop zones and crash sites. Each pilot only got one shot, no kidding, so once an Aero had charged enough to be lethal, the doors were sealed, you were in or out.

“I don’t have to come,” Felix said. “I don’t want to mess up your plans.” A montage of saloons with daytime happy hours rolled through his mind.

“Oh, yer comin. Dis racket dont have refunds.”

That settled, they settled in. Felix turned away from his friend and leaned his head on the porthole window to try to clear his mind in vain. He slipped his hand into his vest pocket to give the Storm-reader and his flask a securing squeeze. As they passed a striped pillar on the terminal, the ticket-taker girl yelled for seatbelts and engaged a multi-stage lever controlling the pneumatics. She came to stand right over Felix, who had ended up with the end seat. He watched the grooved door close itself and closed his eyes.

The vibration running through the wall into his head gradually grew until his temple was knocking on the rubber gasket. When the quaking reached the level where Felix was sure it the Aero was about to detonate, it took a vomiting lurch forward and the shutters blocking the battered magic from its terminus swung open. His stomach jumped as the triplet rotors on each wing sprung up to full speed in a mighty rev, and the rest of him presumed to follow. When he opened them, they were shooting upward into the sky and leaving lower Heaven.

On their way up they passed through the Drone Belt strata. The hull of the ship *whooped* as something the size of a cat caromed off of it. A new conceptual arrival, the courier drones had proliferated as fast as the r-strategists they mimicked. It seemed as soon as the first prototype was released, a swarm of its ten thousand closest friends had trailed, and almost overnight the way town business was done had changed. Wizards loved them! It meant they could trade information between College buildings even faster and go outside less. As always, they frantically dashed out a few regulations in the spirit of public safety, fearful of drones crashing their scissory little rotors into windows, children, etc, anticipating the potential injuries to be avoided. Hence the Drone Belt, it was the lowest legal altitude they could fly at. This was fine with the operators as well, considering not everyone was happy with these unmanned deliverers, prime sabotage targets. Nothing was more satisfying than to swipe a low-flying drone out of the air, especially if you were one of the twenty thousandish human couriers who had just been unmanned out of a job.

The roar of the rotors slacked off as they stopped climbing, smaller air traffic making way for them. Out the window, two-person magekites plunged away on thermals, dipping and sailing beneath. Another Aero, returning to dock, leaned to avoid clipping a flame-colored luxury swingsail flying lackadaisically close. Felix saw the obscured outline of the pilot pounding his fist on the cockpit glass.

He gazed out the porthole at the varied, interplaying swarm of crafts, then looked down, to see the city-island shrinking against the choppy backdrop of the sea-lake.

“Hey, was that one of those new Storm-reader handhelds?”

He looked up. The ticket-taker girl was talking to him, fixing him with an expectant face. She was as fashion-forward as her work clothes would allow. Indigo dye-streaked hair carved to her neck, fading up to an aggressive, cloudy pompadour. A pair of snakebite piercings clicked in her lower lip and two blue orbs gauged her earlobes, a lapis and a turquoise, two asymmetric moons, matching the full bleed of cosmetological warpaint accentuating her face. The virile male part of him absently noted a brimming chest and thick upper legs, bulging out where she leaned on the wall.

“Yeah. I work at Pagerock’s. Got a discount.”

“Hmm. Proud of yourself I bet.” She jumped on his sentences with an overcaffeinated bite.

“I mean, not as a point, there’s—”

“You shouldn’t be. Those things are just the latest tool to oppress the indigenous and poor people of this city.”

“I don’t think mine has that feature.”

“Cute. They all do. You’re lucky you have enough Wizard-privilege for that joke to be funny to you.”

“I’m not a Wizard, I—”

“It was bad enough when no one could predict them. Now with your little effing readers, which no one I know who actually works a job could ever afford, getting turned into a flyer becomes even more of a poor person’s problem.”

“Is that the tech’s fault? Someone could just as easily use it for the public good.”

“But they won’t.”

“You’re probably right.” he said.

“Yeah, it’s not your problem, why worry about it?”

“You know, I actually do work, like I just said, and I’d have gotten fired already talking the way you are to me.”

“Whatever. They can can me, I don’t care about this place. Also, what kind of Wizard has a job? You mean keeping your parents happy? *Bye.*”

“I’m not a Wizard. I dropped out a year ago. My father wishes I was dead.”

“Oh, so sad. A failed Wizard is still a Wizard.”

“I failed because I torched a classroom.”

“On purpose?”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone die?”

“Not in that classroom. Just my chances.”

“Yeah, sounds dumb.” She said, looking away with annoyance.

“So, does it actually work?” she said a second later, staring at her black nailtips.

“What?”

“The Storm-reader, duh. Does it work?”

“I thought you hated them.”

“I hate that the people who actually need them can’t afford them. Can I see it?”

Vic butted in, waving a hand at her. “Oo, sorry luv, nick one from someone else. Ye ent gettin ya claws on it. Step step now.”

She puffed out air and her lined eyebrows met on her forehead to form a rebuttal.

“She works here man, she’s not a thief. We were just talking.” said Felix.

“She from Freedom innit? Shes a thief bruv, I proms ye.” He wiggled a finger past Felix’s eye at the tattoos on the back of her hand.

“Fook off I said! Rangers ordahs.”

She looked at Felix with dismay. “You’re with an effing *Ranger*? Ew. Speaking of tools of oppression.”

“Babe, Ill oppress ye so hard, ye gonna hafta git both ye brothers to stop blowin each other to come save ye.”

The sides of her eyes pinched in discord. She stuck her little finger in the air and flicked, a universally understood sign of disrespect.

“Go get raped. Merit creep.” The girl huffed off the wall and walked to the other side of the bus. Jimmy didn’t move an inch, as if he was painted into the chair.

“Dats right, keep it movin.” Vic said as she walked past. He grinned his holey smile at Felix. Animosity between the children of the city’s three Causeways (aspirationally named for the City’s tripartite ideals) was alive and thriving. The rivalry twixt the gangs, businesses, public figures, Pit fighters and even average citizens from each of the island-city’s three big bridges was comedy fodder inside the halls of the Colleges where Felix was raised, and stereotyped as such:

- Merit dwellers (like Vic, and like Felix was trying to become) were drunk boorish goons, coarse as they were short-sighted;
- Logic folk were sheepish rule-followers, universally gullible, fatally dull;
- The Freedomers were inbreeders (hence Vic’s overture) and backstabby connivers, irredeemable deviants.

And so on. There were sports teams, pulp theatre series, brightly-branded pride window flags blazoned to fuel the intra-hood hype. It was all a little weird to Felix, who didn’t have any understanding of being proud of where you’re from, but when you added up all the gang

violence and development politicking, inter-Causeway business alliances, the tattoo language, and general spirit of difference, he had to admit it was a very real factor to a lot of people.

Felix regarded his friend with his head to the side.

“Wot, ye tink ye was gonna link her?” Vic scoffed.

“What, no!”

“Why not? I would, shes fit. Not at my place tho.”

“Dude, why are you so para today? Ranger stuff?”

“Dat Storm-reada is juss espensive bruv, keep it put til we outta here.” He crossed his arms.

The presence of good sense threatened Felix.

“I bought it with my money, didn’t I? It’s a free city, I can play with it if I want.” Felix clowned. Vic’s bony face darkened with a frown.

“Fine, be an idyot.”

“I was just joking.”

“Right.”

“And she was just talking to me.”

“En ask yeself why.”

Vic began to lean back all cool-like, but a harsh throat clearing across the way roused him. They broke their bubble to see an older man in full Jungle Ranger kit sitting there watching. Disdain fountained from his nostrils. Felix laughed and Vic shushed him.

He was the real deal, the picture of Jungle Rangerhood— a muckskin vest dyed and darkened to a mottled array of jungle colors, with the gloves and boots to match. His cheeks and mouth were consumed by bristly beard, the wisps shocking to gray. Which meant he was an above average hunter at least, or pushing his luck. He sussed Vic like meat gone bad.

“Bad form, younger brother. Very bad form.” He said, once they had all seen each other.

“Fook, *ah*, sorry, olda brotha, I dint—” Vic interrupted himself with a wince.

“You didn’t what?” The older Ranger puffed up with outrage. “*See me there?* You are a Ranger, whether you are being watched or not. And it is your job to stay *most* aware of your surroundings, so I’m not sure which is worse!”

“I know, sir.”

“That is not how Rangers speak to ladies.”

This earned an affronted ugh from the girl, who was still listening.

“I know, sir. Unacceptable. Wot an idyot I am. Lemme fix it. Ay! You!” He called down the tube. The girl looked away.

“Wots ye name, so I can do an apology?”

Vic popped up when she didn’t answer, and scooted to read her name tag.

“Regina!” he said, dancing back out of her reach, half turning back to the older Ranger. “Regina, so, so sorry. It werent true. On behaffa the whole guild, City and Jungle Rangers both, I ent meant none of it. Rangers promise. Ye forgiveness luv, I wants it.” He returned and deposited himself into the seat without waiting for her response.

“There, sir.” Vic said. Felix eyed the time until the drop, numbers winding down on a roloboard behind a wire cage. He could see the newsrag headline now:

**Young Thug Stabbed with Makeup Pencil on Aero,  
Disciplined by Work Superior  
Several Ruffians Held For Questioning**

## **Aeromobile Corporate Consolidation Continues Unchecked**

Vic's burst of manic energy pre-empted what the Ranger was about to do, which was make him apologize, so he regrouped. He had two companions himself: a hefty-armed Zuri at his left, who paid no attention, flicking dust from his armrest. On his right was another younger Ranger, closer in age to Vic and Felix, dark-complected with two brittle brown eyes, dancing between his boss and Vic, absorbing everything and saying nothing.

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate ye correctin my conduct sir, it was not up to Ranger standards."

The man gave a minor version of the grunt that had started this whole thing.

"Identify yourself, young brother."

"Vic, sir, Jungle Corps, Rank 1, badge numbah 4689, freeknife, ready to Range."

"Hmm, well, you'll be stuck freeknifing for a while if you don't learn your etiquette. The Guild clubs pay very close attention to reputation."

"Yessir! I agree sir. Dis is why I will proolly just continue to freeknife it actually, sir, it suits me."

This made the old guy laugh, he slapped his native companion's modern breastplate knowingly.

"Remember those days Tommy? New Rangers! Loba here was saying something similar earlier, how some of his friends think that. Like skipping from gig to gig is anyway to live. I remember how fun and exciting it was, watching the market, picking a mark, trying to get the next big catch, hunting something different every day. It is fun, grand fun when the days are full, but those empty ones get dire real quick. You'll learn."

"Sure, sir." Vic said, trying to remember a non-dire day in his short, poverty-filled life.

Felix tried to participate. "We were doing cliff slug runs for a while, for the ink factories. It was pretty good money too, but we can do better."

"Ah! Ink slugs at the Crevasse, that's a good start, part of how I came up myself. So you do understand how it works."

"No no, we ent runnin dat hustle nomore, it ent worf it. The Crevasse drop is juss close to where were goin. Sorry sir, but dat just ent a good come up dese days. He ent know wot hes talkin bout." Vic said.

The older guy laughed again. "You may think differently at some point, my boy! Listen to your cautious friend there. It's an opportunity to prove your worth, even if it's not glamorous. Consistency is just as key to ranging as flashy kills, over time. Your stats at the Guildhouse will show, you'll see what I mean. Give it a few seasons. You work up your reputation in the field, and once you've shown you can deliver what you say, on schedule, you will have everything you need for a club to recognize you when you apply. And then you can see some real perquisites—bounty shares, club equipment, the pension, if you make your twenty seasons. You'll come to appreciate the structure, and someday you'll be telling someone young the way it goes yourself. Though you probably can't even *hear* good advice at your age, none of those things mean much to you yet. It all just sounds like settling to you young ones, I'm sure."

"Sounds like a miracle," Vic said. "Musta been nice back in the day, when dat would actually work in your pocket, innit."

Felix snorted, he loved watching Vic run after his own mouth.

The bristles stiffened. "Back in the day, it wasn't all about the money. There was honor in being a Ranger, actual love for the game."

Felix perked up and took this one. “Well, the game is a numbers game. There just aren’t enough contract jobs for the clubs to sustain all of the Rangers, or pension funds to pay all of them. There are only so many good-paying, steady spots, in the Rangers Guild and the whole economy. Especially with gear tech and medical tech making everyone live longer, the plan for older, established people to cycle out and allow others to advance doesn’t actually work. And people have to look out for themselves, so of course the money is going to be the most important.”

“Yeah, and Im from a Causeway, no dosh for gittin into a club, plus I look like I been kilt once. So I ent gettin no club spot over no one. Scuze me sayin so, sir. Ent even got enuff dosh to try really, juss figga’d dat one out lass week. S’lookin like the ol freeknifey way for me.”

“Well, young cynical sir, since it’s so impossible, I suppose you don’t want me to offer you a job on a club contract right now.”

“Wot, are ye?”

“I could. I already have young Loba and my trusted companion Tommy to assist, but I could use three additional hands. With pay for all.”

“Huh. Wot den?”

“It’s a club contract, but I can bring as many subs with me as I want. Adrenopomes, standard rate per. As many as you can carry.”

Now Vic laughed, and thumbed at Jimmy. “Oh, wow. Danks. No danks tho. Sounds fun en all, but I already paid for dis one, en we gonna get nowheres pickin fruit.”

“Mhmm, see boy?” he said to the younger Ranger under his wing. “Like I told you before, even when it’s offered right to them, some of you youngsters, you just can’t take good advice. It’s something different about your generation, I swear. Loba, you’re saving yourself some time,” the man said to his silent protégé, who just nodded after a second. The lack of verbal response was contagious and the convo broke down for a second.

“To each their own,” Felix offered.

“Oho, sounds like a toast! And look at that, it’s about that time. Five minute call.” the older ranger said robustly, rustling in his pouch. These guys were going a bit farther, out to the next stop Felix inferred. They themselves were due to drop in less than two, meaning if what he sensed was right he had little time.

“Indeed!” Felix said, perking, “And what was your name, good sir?”

“I am called Donagan, Jungle Corps, Rank 12, badge 789, lieutenant, Big Game Legion! And in desperate need of a morale boost. Would you like one?” he proffered a hollowed crab shell, the size of his hand, fitted with a stopper and hopefully a wineskin on the inside.

“Well I—” Felix had his own flask, but if he took one of this man’s now he’d have more of his own for later. He leaned forward to accept and Vic pushed his hand down.

“All fine ova here, danks.”

“Fine then. Tis moosewine, a Ranger tradition, but no matter. What are you going for, anyway?”

“Pref not to say.” Vic shot a pointed glance at his young Ranger counterpart sitting next to Donagan. The old man rolled his eyes.

“I can also remember the days when Rangers would actually *talk* to each other about Ranging, instead of all of the cloak and dagger.”

“Yeh, well. If I could afford the cloak.” Vic said. He leaned back to close the conversation, feigning relaxation, looking tense. Ranger Donagan gave a knowledgeable tut-tut and uncorked

the crabshell, pouring the liquid into three little wood snifters. He passed one either way. Felix watched the drinks with longing.

“Alright boys, to steady work!” he said, and upended his drink, shuddering with cheer. Loba did the same. Tommy, the Zuri, froze instead though, looking across the way. It was then Felix noticed their new friend Jimmy was still bent forward, and that he wasn’t staring off, but was fully fixated on the better equipped version of his self across the way.

Donagan noticed the half of this on his side. “Tommy, bup bup, tis bad luck if we don’t all do it.” Nodding at the little cup in his warrior’s hand. Tommy flashed an evil glare back at Jimmy, who was still cooking him optically. He sniffed, and then tilted the drink, and Jimmy said a word.

“*Unlurn.*” It sounded like. And spoken from the heart.

All six of them (and all others in earshot) stopped talking. No one knew the translation, but knew it was a grave Zuri insult, a prelude to blood and drawn blades; notable, considering that the quarters couldn’t be closer.

The warrior Tommy choked on his drink. He gulped and let his face descend to rage. He sized up Jimmy for weaponry and checked his own knife on his lap, very deliberately not moving his hand to it, yet. He shifted his around at everyone watching him, and then back to Jimmy.

As far as Felix could see now, Jimmy didn’t actually have a weapon on him, which they might have wanted to ask about before they left.

A hail of harsh syllables drilled out of Tommy’s mouth in the Zuri native tongue that only Jimmy there could understand:

TOMMY: You’ve done it now, young one, the fools are watching us. Close your flap and quickly. I am Tomicohtencatl, on quest from the Mother Red Panther. My lifequest goes sixteen seasons. Tell me who are you are, who say this word to me.

JIMMY: A true son of the forest still. Cauhjimmociuitl of the sacred White Crow. My lifequest only began. My eyes and flap are wide open, and I see only your transgression.

TOMMY: Oh great, a holy-boy. Do not front with me perfect-one, what are you trying to do here by baiting me to murder you and crash this fly-demon-box? Impress the fool-boys you travel with?

JIMMY: I do not think of these fool-boys or the safety of the fly-demon-box. I just call you what you are, brother. You drink the City poison and forget the jungle. I see it is working. I am your reminder.

TOMMY: Oh you say? You are lucky my fool here pays me so well, or I would shred the asshole on your face upon the dull side of this blade.

JIMMY: Which side is that? I cannot tell. All I see is equally dull.

TOMMY: You are seriously asking for it, aren’t you? Death hits on you. You must be new, so I am trying to find a reason to not end your journey here.

JIMMY: We all do what we must in this life.

TOMMY: Do not throw scripture at me. You sound like a dickless priest, while I try and speak reason to you. We cannot fight here, you do not want to, take time. You will come to see how things are. The fools have built a great blasphemy for a homesite and have no idea how to live outside of it, no gods to guide them. My fool is a fine one, he pays me steady to walk him in circles and hunt small, easy things a child could. Your fools? They will not live long, you see, they will lead you to death. You find a fine fat city-pig like mine, he wants your work, you are



hungry, you will drink the city poison too if he insists. It is not so bad. We are still Zuri. Still on lifequest. And yours just begins, obviously, so I will let it continue, if you speak no more.

JIMMY: I have said what I need to. Your speech reveals it. You are lost on your lifequest. You would feel my entrails with your hands if it were not true, to prove it. You sit instead, because you are afraid to lose your precious fool's money. You stand for nothing. Everything you just said is a lie you have told yourself. This is why you are what I say. *Forgetter*.

The word again. Tommy ceased talking, his face sank to grim and he squeezed his fist. Jimmy, barely moving, shifted his center of gravity to aim dead ahead. People started backing up. The two bent towards each other, like a bow tautening. Everyone in the Aero knew enough Zuri to know what was bound by generations of tribal ways to happen next.

Then a whistle blew. A wave of bodyspray and Regina was back, interposing her hips between the two snarling men.

“Uh uh! No Zuri-on-Zuri, not on my ride!” She clapped her hands three times, hard. “Come on guys, sit back. Both of you. Seatbelts on.” She crossed her arms and tapped a foot til they both clicked and complied. Felix leaned back, relieved.

“Good,” Regina said, “Now. if you can wait two more minutes, the effing amateurs can spill out at the Crevasse, and you three can go rape whatever part of the jungle you're bestowing with your presence today. Any questions?”

“Luv, we nevah got our free health potions.” Vic said.

“Don't speak to me.” she said, stalking away to apologize to the other startled riders. He sneered after her.

Donagan puffed and chortled. “Hoo! You three. Watch it lad, you got a feisty boy there, trying to pick a fight with Tommy here— Boy! What tribe are you from?”

“White Crow.”

“Ah, I'll look out! I may wish to hire a hothead like you for a fight in the Malliseum one day!”

Tommy, restrained and bitter about being insulted, saw his opening.

“Ha!” he said with a mean smirk, “If thou can findeth any others.”

Donagan gave a brief chuckle, then there was a second of silence. Then the alarms popped off. The light bar beveling the Aero's ceiling began to pulse, a klaxon started klaxing. A minute til first the drop.

As the light went red and the first-timer instructions began flipping down the roloboards, Jimmy hit the buckle button and rammed forward, landing on Tommy's chin fist first. The whole craft wobbled and the crowd went ballistic, equally pushing in and trying to get away from the fight, causing more turbulence.

Vic rose with a pejorative word and tried to insert himself. Tommy pushed up with the wall and heaved Jimmy back off of him, knocking both back into their seats. The older Zuri's dreadlocked head bent at the ceiling when standing, towering over. That dagger came unsheathed.

“Are you all *'touched?*” Regina screamed, dashing up to them. “You're gonna effing *roll* us! That door is about to open!”

Jimmy lunged back heedlessly, catching Tommy in the stomach with a punch and grappling his knife hand. Vic was up again, trying to push them apart.

“Ay! Stop, I fookin paid ye mate!” he said, getting shoved as the two slammed each other around.

“Bruv, help!” he cried to Felix in the same breath.

“What do you want *me* to do!?” he watched the knife, in an arm wrestle at waist level. He stood but fretted there for a second behind the twisting melee.

He was still thinking when all the sound of the fight got towed out as the door gasket released and the screaming sky rushed in. It crept open on a hidden wheel, filling the transport cabin with buffeting wind, and leaving nothing between them and a two thousand meter drop.

Vic tried pulling one more time. Felix was still trying to figure out where to best place his efforts, with hands and bodies flying at each other everywhere.

Stop stop, Vic yelled, and he wasn't the only, a total chaotic impasse, when someone caught a second wind or got a good angle. Jimmy was flung back. Felix flinched out of the way. He stepped, and got dangerous-close to the gaping door. In terror he wobbled and reached back into the Aero. He wrapped his fingers around something, but he was already too far— foot touched cloud and his body followed, toppling into the air.

## VI

He was normally a nervous jumper, so actually this was the quickest Felix had ever cleared a takeoff. He fell out backwards, giving him an excellent view of the ship's underbelly speeding past. As the sun flared out from behind the shrinking craft, he had time to notice what he had grabbed for support was the ticket-taker girl with the angry green eyes.

She flailed and twisted before getting her head pointed down. He was floored with the horrible thought he had pulled her out without a chute, but a second later her hand went to the rip cord at her breast. Herpack popped out and Felix fell away another two hundred feet before he flipped over and followed suit. The parachute hitting the air felt like the grasp of large talons sliding over and around his shoulders. His fall was arrested and the whistling wind slowed in his ears. He couldn't see her directly above him, but by twisting and craning he saw two other chutes expanding him high to the left.

As soon as he was sure he hadn't just pulled someone to their death, he looked around, trying not to miss a second. Getting up early, Vic's incessant haranguing, the fees of transit and the jungle's perils, this was all worth it for the minutes between the Aero and the earth.

For these few minutes he didn't have to be anyone, or have any answers. This was what the Founders had seen on their first approach to the lake in the valley. A world nude of anyone else's harmful imaginings. He wondered how that moment felt, when they realized they had a second chance. He longed for it fantastically. Like anything he wished he had the ability to reshoot his life's trajectory. Most people in Heaven were lucky to get one shot at a good life though, let alone two. He threw his chance away. The fortunate birth, the clear path forward. He had given it up and wouldn't get another, and he knew well enough he was not a hustler like Vic who could create his own from nothing. His job at the department store kept him working almost all of his waking hours. There, he was barely holding onto a job, much less thinking of it as a way to advance himself. If he tried to get a Ranger's license like Vic, his overeducated ass would be laughed out the door before they'd hand him the test. Same as just about anywhere he applied. Normal people didn't get much chance to express their distrust of the Wizards often. He could dress scruffy as he wanted and an average shopkeep or manager could see it on his face still somehow, the shine of privilege they never had, and reflected it back with a scowl. And his father made it clear what would happen if he wanted to come back to the Wizarding Community in the Colleges. All Heavenites were refugees in this new land, and Felix doubly so. Bereft of a satisfying idea for his future, Felix wasn't quite sure what he was living for anymore. Even the pleasures of Heaven's unlimited bar scene were starting to wilt. He was just trudging through the hours, usually steps behind Vic, feeling less and less like there was any place in the world for him.

He squeezed the taut cords holding his shoulders and looked down at it. Heaven and its lake-straddling Causeways back to the east was a gray smear, getting lost in the monsoon mist.

He fell towards an emerald canopy squeezed by the impassable black cliffs defining the Valley. The obsidian walls reached higher than any Aero could fly, cradling the jungle between two upturned palms. At some point far down the range, past the Zuri homelands, past the engorged middle swamps where the Ebulio river pirates dwelt in their lawless havens, past even the holy *Copa* tree where the Zuri pilgrimmed, and where the terraced temples of the Royal Alien Blood Empire were rumored to stand, a titanic aquifer breached and poured down to form the relentless waterway that split and meandered through the valley's bed. It eventually deltaed

and bayoued out into the lake Heaven claimed, before seeping into the salt-estuaries to the southeast and joining to the dead, bone-peeling Poison Sea waters at the continent's shore.

The objective beauty of it hit him every time somehow, soothed the dark knot of his mind with a blissful knell. Just for a second. Then as soon as he let his brain relax, it started prepping for what Regina was going to say, and whether Vic'd be mad at him, etc., and then he was more than halfway down, his horizons shrinking back in as his perspective descended, and started feeling bad about how he had wasted the best part of the trip overthinking and worrying, with nothing to show for it.

As he shed the last five hundred units of altitude, a bass thud growled his chest cavity. In the mid sky, rapidly getting angled out of view by the tree line, a low hanging patch of cloud imploded into a Storm patch, swollen dark at the middle, far away enough he could see the whole huge thing. The dark gradient in the center strobed bruise purple and glowed, blinding worms of orange light bled out through creases in the cloud and then burst, sending ball lightning and stria rays marauding cross the clouds. The crazed shine lit the rainy air like a second sun, dousing the ground beneath with its weird energy.