

VII

The drop site was a natural clearing that had been divested of its largest trees, forming a rugged ring. He smacked into ground and went to his knees, chute billowing down behind him.

His first thought was how strong that Storm was. His excitement forked with dread as he reached for his Storm-reader. It was missing. His empty pockets were flush against his leg and he went clammy, thinking of Vic's reaction.

There was a whush down behind him.

"You *prick!*" She was fussing with the carabiners at her shoulders, trying to unclick them with her glamour nails.

"Ugh! What are you doing? Help! First you pull me out of an effing Aero, almost *kill* me, and now you're just standing there? Help! Cummon!"

"It wasn't my fault! I was trying to stop the fight, I got pushed too!" he said as he fled to her and undid the clips, flinching as waved her arms to speak.

"You *grabbed* me! Your dimlit Zuri pal and bustface friend—" two more bumps touched down—"just got me *legit fired!* Do you understand? What are you doing, help me here, get me out of this thing! By the time I'm back they'll have hired someone else, those bastards! This is your fault!"

"I thought you said you didn't care about it?"

"Yeah, that doesn't mean I didn't *need* it, you *privileged* asshole. You don't understand! Now I'm out in the jungle, *completely* unprepared. Are you going to take me back to the boats? Are you?"

"Ayy! Wotsit say!? The reada, dat Storm!" Vic ran up, breathless.

"I...think it got lost," Felix said, getting the words out on the third stutter.

"Mate, ye *wot!*?"

"I had it up there! It must have fallen out of my pocket when I fell!"

"Da *fook!* I *knew* I shoulda held it! Ye—" He stopped, and vented his anger into the sky, pulling his hair and stomping around a little bit.

"I'm sorry! I had it!"

"Um, *hello?* It's cute and all watching you two fight about your toy, but how about taking me the eff to the river, now."

Vic rounded on her. "Not *fookin* likely, luv. Us mans here to range, til night. Dunno wot ye finna do."

"She can follow us—"

"She *fookin* cant! How can ye not git it, dis is my job bruv, I ent a *fookin* nursemaid! I already have *you* to look out for, I dont needa loudass chick who ent never been out here followin us around too! Oh, and *you*—" he got in Jimmy's face.

"Howsit goin, blud? Got anyting a *fookin* say for yeself?"

Jimmy with his arms crossed, shrugged and gave a noncommittal grimace.

"Toucheth me not during fights. Was fine."

Vic sighed angrily, then gave him a quizzical look, taking a step forward, examining him.

"Fine being a—wait— wheres ya bow?"

Jimmy sniffed. "I use one not."

"Mate, ye ent gotta bow!?"

"Is cheating. For cowards with no hand-fight."

"Ye said ye had gear! Wot, you gotta net?"

“No.”

“Sling?”

“No.”

“Well, wot den?”

“Just hands. Best way.”

“Are you *sure* you done a Shovelbill, bruv?”

“Yes. Good eating.”

“Sure, but how the fook ye catch em?”

“Trees. These shovelbirds you call. Loveth the Olli trees. Big time loveth the Olli berries. So findeth first the Olli tree, then climbeth. Then waiteth.”

“Uhhh,” Regina asked, screwing her face up. “for how long?”

“Until bird is beneath.”

“So wot, days? Weeks, in the tree?”

“Yes.”

“But Olli trees only bloom in the dry season, right?” said Felix.

Jimmy shrugged again and poked his head up a bit. “Truth. I sayeth so up there, on map, you listeneth not. No birds here.”

“Oh.” Felix said, his thoughts pivoting. “Well, if that’s the case, and we don’t want to go back with an empty canister—”

“No, no; shut up bruv.” Vic said, shaking his head. “Were not spendin all day takin smoke breaks and pullin stupid slugs off the cliff, dead it.”

“We didn’t get any cigarettes first of all, and I just don’t—”

“Bruv, bruv. I knew allat, bout the stupid trees. I know its off-season. Dats why the price is up. And were not gonna sit around in trees for days. Dats obvo, so I was juss tryna—ye know wot, nevahmind innit? Fook it.” He slammed his jaw shut and strode over to his sprawled-out chute, started lining it up to engage the auto-roller.

“What, Vic?” Felix said.

“Im goin. I know where. You can come or not, or go to the stupid slug cliffs or straight back home wiff her, but I got work to do.” He straightened the long straps and click-reeled them back into his pack with a cross look.

“You don’t have the reader.” Felix said quietly, standing over his friend. “And it looks like a Storm day. It’s not safe.”

“Fook it.” Vic said, packing up. “*You*.” He pointed at Jimmy. “Yer wiff me, where I say, or ye can gimme back dat dosh I slid ye.”

Jimmy eyed him, before grunting dropping his head and setting to work on his chute.

“Good, least Im gittin some backup.” Vic said, straightening and shouldering his pack.

“Of course I’m coming with you.” Felix said. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Uh huh.” Vic mouthed. He started walking. Felix moped backwards and hastened to roll his chute up as Jimmy walked to follow Vic. Regina was doing the same.

He turned to her. “Are you coming with us?”

“I can’t really walk through the effing tribal lands alone, can I? Creep. Make them wait for me!”

They did a quick job straightening out their chutes and engaged the retractors, handy tech. By jogging they caught up with the other two, nearing the mouth of a trail scurrying into the ancient forest they walked toward.

“So, do you assholes have names, or...” Regina said as they met up.

“Jimmy, Felix, Veek.” Vic spat, spinning his finger.
“Charmed.” she said, eyes doing a full rotation.

VIII

“Hey, so Jimmy, what did that guy say to you?” Felix asked the back of the Jimmy’s head. He savored the sound of his words over the hushed timbre of the jungle, no whirr of traffic undershooting his words, a rare relief. He sucked in the moist, sweet air.

“Lies. To protecteth he his mind. I calleth him out. I was not wrong.”

“No, yeah, of course not— but after that I mean, at the end, before you launched on him.”

The barbarian took a few steps to respond. “His joke deserveth my fists. But he was not wrong either.”

“There aren’t many White Crow left?”

“Ten old men six old women and a priest when leaveth I for lifequest. Now?” another shrug.

For fear of being punched, and for knowledge of history, Felix didn’t ask what happened. For thousands of years, the Zuri tribes had coexisted in a hierarchy modeled after the jungle’s own— so sometimes the Red Bears made raids against the Fervent Eagles, or the Swine Rooters would bicker over territory with the Clan of the Yamtree, but no one really feared going extinct. Two hundred years ago, the City unbalanced things. It wasn’t a matter of taken territory, none of the tribes had cared about the barren stone in the middle of the lake before then, and the Demarcation Treaty had made bloody sure the Heavenites had stayed there— only the lawbreaking Homesteaders had dared to cross the verboten lake line, and those ones were reviled equally by the tribes and almost all the Cityfolk as well. No, without conquering an acre, the economic stimulus of Heaven next door had rearranged tribal life, made every homesite a competitor against the rest. The lifequest thing was part of it. At adolescence, according to Zuri custom the vigorous young men of a tribe were ceremonially exiled, to return to tribal life only after they had accomplished or at least satisfied their ambitions— literally making a new name for themselves to wear through their remaining years.

There were other factors having to do with trade and politics, but the hard truth was that a huge percentage of young Zuri came to live, work, and die in the City without ever finishing their lifequest. As the number of young ones returning to tribal life dropped, the tribes adapted to soak up those who did, with many laxing longheld ideas on alcohol, sex, and other pleasurable bits of life that had always existed but never been a problem until they became available commercially. Others tightened up, appealing to true believers. And despite all this, many tribes shriveled, became examples. Now culture clash was the norm in the lower valley and extinction was its byword.

“That sucks man, I’m sorry.”

“Is whatteth tis. But is not funny.”

“Yeah, not like you guys dropping your little Storm-reader after worrying about it getting stolen!” Regina said, trying to get a reaction, but Felix just dropped his head in defeat.

“See, that’s how I know you’re definitely a richkid Wizard, I would’ve been practically *stabbin* myself if I lost something that cost that much.”

“I learned the ‘be quietly guilty’ coping mechanism instead, I guess.”

“Ew. I mean how much was that stupid thing, anyway?”

“A bleedin thou and some. Nuff for a months rent.” Vic gritted out.

“A thou! Eff mehehehehehe!” Regina burst out, the world dissolving into sustained giggling. “Haaa!”

“Sorry, sorry—” she said, “but that’s just ridiculous. I never even looked at them that close, wow. I mean, what did that little thing do that was worth an effing *thou*?”

“It had dials that tell you how strong, how close, and how likely the next Storm will be. And it alerts you when a Storm is about to break too.” Felix said, accepting the punishment.

“Alerts you? Like, it beeps?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, see, nah! That sounds stupid. Little storms happen all the time, it’d probably go off right when you’re about to like, make a stealth kill out here, right?”

“That’s why you can set the sensitivity threshold high, like I did,” Felix said, a little edge on his voice now. “You make it only ring for really big or really close Storms, that’s blatant.”

“Alright, fine, just tryna make you feel better. Sounds like, not that important.”

“Shows whatcha know, luv. Its to put ye in the sweet spot, innit. Or twas.”

“Sweet spot?”

Felix answered. “The ring around any given Storm, where you’re not going to get hit, but you’re close enough to run in get the first chance to hunt anything that did.”

She shook her head, and let him step ahead of her again.

“And that’s what you Rangers do out here? Great. Effing idiots.”

“It’s better than just walking straight into one.” Felix said.

Vic gave a wry caw of a laugh.

IX

The drop site and the well-worn path they walked were the territory of the Rock Sloth Zuri, one of Heaven's most docile trading partners. They made good time to the Zortell Crevasse. Thirty minutes on it was obvious they were close as the trees shrank and a plate of stone could be felt beneath the springy soil. They came into a clear rise of weathered rock cantilevered out over a ravine. Across the other side of the gap, a gray cliff towered tall next to the little pad of stone they stood on.

The Zortell Crevasse was a known location for junior rangers and part-time junglers. It was safe. The huge rock above it jutted out right over the river, you could swan dive straight in if your deathwish was strong enough. In case it wasn't, the overhang also served as a natural shelter big enough to hide out from a Storm if you got caught in one. At the bottom, black caverns yawned down into the earth. Felix and Vic had gulped over the Ranger Reports and the treasures extracted from within. Faceted fistules of milky blue stone. Hides of terran lurkers that curled and smoked when exposed to daylight. High bounty stuff—they could only dream of the equipment they'd need.

That's not why most people came here. The Crevasse's sun-fraught wall was a gathering place for regislugs, tubular annelids that came to the surface to absorb the day's heat before crawling back into the recesses they etched out of the rock with weak acids in their body. They grew up to a foot long, camouflaged into the rock, and were used by factories to make ink for the Wizards, who might as well have been drinking it for the constant demand. You could basically exchange slugs direct for cash at any time of the year and it was pretty mindless work, which is why it had made a safe bet for amateurs like they.

The regislugs were found to possess natural pigments and compounds which refined to a room temp opal liquid that could carry a thaumatic charge, to the delight of the Wizards and unknowing dismay of the slugs. The rock face dripped with rappellers, scathing their way down the wall, to pull the inky tube bodies out of their holes, wearing special gloves, shoving them into Cuum-cans to await extraction.

The bootprints in the mud bifurcated here. To the right, the trail would skirt the rim of the Crevasse and lead to the top of the slug rocks. Left, down into a lowland, the open jungle.

"Lookaddem. Sluggin the day away forra few skint bills. *Slaves*. Paffetic." Vic said, pausing to survey, without acknowledging they had been dangling from that wall the week before. He pulled his map out for a quick consult.

"Cummon, this way," he said after a beat, looking up to double check the wooden marker, picking a trailhead leading further west.

Jimmy made a grunt, staring at the horizon over the trees.

"Wot, wot now?"

Jimmy frowned and searched the sky for a second. He popped his knuckles and listened to how they crunched, then shook his head in disapproval. "Untied day. Storm's days. Air feeleth full."

"Yeh, dere was a hit like, a half hour ago, so wot."

"No. In air. Still full. Heavy."

"Ye full of it mate, no one can feel a Storm comin, dats why dey suck innit."

The young warrior looked at them like they were dumb. "Zuri can. True Zuri."

"Yeah, I nevah hearda dat— when den? Where at?" Vic said.

"Knoweth not. Feeleth only."

“Well, I *knoweth* I cant afford to pay ye and go back with nuffin, so— if ye feared, gimme dat money back now and head forra boat wiff dis one here, skraight up.” He gestured at Regina.

“Ooh, yes! Please choose that! Who here doesn’t want to get turned into a flyer today?” Regina said, raising her pointy hand.

Jimmy turned to Vic, grim.

“Offereth I guidance. As *guide* you hireth. You listen not? Fine. But I feareth? No. Never I feareth.”

Felix didn’t say what he was thinking, that there was still plenty of space on the cliff, if they were worried about going back empty-handed, and Vic was thinking about their finances. Sticking with a sure thing until they got through Fervidor might be a safer plan. He stood there and waited for the others to make a decision.

“Good to fookin hear. Right den, wot we standin round for?” Vic said, withdrawing his machete from a sheath in his backpack, and turning toward the brushy, vine-choked path.

X

They quieted up as they battled down the trail, which soon dwindled into a narrow brown line mushed through the underbrush. They curved away from the overlook and down the soaked descent. The air stunk with humid heat trapped beneath the canopy. Felix wished like anything he had that Storm-reader. Until very recently, even expert Storm-trackers used little more than guesswork. The invention of the handheld Storm-reader was widely hyped. Felix followed Storm news with morbid curiosity. He had had to have one when they came out, starved himself for weeks so he could afford one, a few months before they started pooling their checks.

The purpose of the device was to help users avoid or find the spots where creatures touched by a Storm's rays were most likely to be. From all the radiant, ramparting, thousand-hued beauty of the Valley, the Storms stood above all. It was a phenomena discovered after arriving in the Great Valley, and they had remained unexplained since. Random swell-ups of an unknown energy tore great glowing rifts across the vault of the clouds, to seal and silence minutes later. They weren't proper storms at all—whatever they were though, that force started in the low sky and drew the rain and lightning into a swirling radius, so Storms they were called. They were sublime enough just to witness—towers of bearded clouds rushing to assemble, a jubilee of colored lights exploding in the stria beneath, cyclones braiding the edges, the whole massive event limned with coppery-orange godhead tracing out to the sky surrounding.

It was what the Storms did for which they were feared and valued. The rays that fell instilled themselves in whatever they touched, and changed it. Minerals metamorphosed, melted, crumbled to salt in seconds. Most living creatures caught in it were liquefied, but some were altered less extremely. Their coats and feathers sprang out in garish new colors, heads spouted second rows of teeth, necks sprouted second heads. Stormtouched beasts fetched the most rival of prices with top-cat buyers—high line chefs, wizard-academics performing unique experiments, couturistas seeking furs of the first quality. Plants were for some reason unaffected, except when struck by actual lightning, in which case they typically caught on fire.

What happened to people caught in these occurrences wasn't as spectacular. No flamboyant physical shifts. You just went crazy. There was a property to that energy that scrambled the conscious brain so it could never be set right again. You were just Stormtouched then. 'Touched. Call them flyers, if you were less sensitive, for the unceasing urge they got to flap their arms off the nearest rooftop.

There was little left of you after you got hit. The Stormtouched wandered into the jungle, never to return on a riverboat, or they disappeared more obliquely, splatteringly, publicly. If it only harmed the infected person, like a regular disease, it wouldn't have been an issue. But the Stormtouched had an unfortunate tendency to fixate on specific social issues, seeing invisible connections and levers and hinges and acting to move, or sever them. When there was a stabbing spree in a school, a bomb in a theatre, a false-consciousness chem cult inciting a race war, it invariably traced back in the news to a Storm-riddled mind who hadn't been reported to the Wizards for treatment in time.

Like someone had done for that woman that morning. Like his sister, plus all the others, beneath the subfloors of the Farm Tower—

Nope, he told himself, shutting those thoughts down before it took control of him. Don't think about it.

They made it thirty minutes down the jungle slit before Regina started making complain-y noises about the heat and the mud. Vic shushed her for this, which begat an exchange of rapidfire

insults/getting-to-know-you questions, as the two sussed out each other's connections and affiliations within the city, all for which they fell on rival sides, opinions opposing. They built on their base loathing of each other's neighborhoods with more specialty disagreements about the political du jour— Regina was pro-South Bank, Vic anti-. He called her an efficient cock-user for her pro-birth control stance. She implied the Rangers Guild had an intelligence maximum for their entrance requirements. By the time The Expansion Question came up, they assumed (correctly) that this was a non-starter as well.

“S’gonna happen, any mans who dont tink so is *‘touched*, or an idiot child, innit.”

”Kay, so you’re like, a full-on warmonger. *Wow*.”

“Try practical luv. I have *eyes*. The city is *full*, but the youfs keep comin. No one realize it growin up— but dey aint enuff jobs, no place to put anyone else. If ye tink Heaven can stay the same size foreva, ye dreamin.”

“And you’re *an effin dimlit* if you think that expanding the borders will do anything but start a war. Like, it’s not empty space.”

“Yeh but we would prolly win tho.”

“Oh yeah, sure. Against all the Zuri, who are our *allies* by the way— *plus* the Ebullo, *plus* the Royal Alien Blood Empire—”

“The RABE dont even fookin exist, the Wizards made dem mans up, s’a threat to scare simps, like ye, ovvo— And the rest, I mean, have ye seen wot the new strapshots can do on Chop mode? No question, innit? No offense, Jimbo. Heaven’s gettin bigga.”

Jimmy snorted. “Tryeth. Never bigger than jungle.”

“Well see, innit? One day soon, jussayin. Nah. Look, I dont want it to go down either, but Im a realist, and theres no way were gonna avoid it.”

Regina persisted. “You know we’re not just running out of *space*, right? It’s resources. Everyone in the city, especially the *rich*—” she jagged a look at Felix, “consumes too much. Food, water, solar. We don’t have to start a war, we just need to get everyone to stop using more than their share. Then the city will never have to expand, and mongers like you can die disappointed.”

“*Ehhnhhhhhhhnh.*” Vic made a sound like a quiz show buzzer. “If ye tink *errryone* in Heaven will evah agree on anyting enuff to do dat, yer more naïve den I tought. Expansion’s happenin, I swear it.”

“Expansion would be barbaric. Maybe I just have hope for a less bloody solution.”

“You want a lot of people to die, but dont want to see any blud, luv?”

“Um, no. Less death I said, less death.”

“So how do ye expect to fix overpop wiffout gettin ridda some people??”

“Um, like I said, better planning for the future. That means birth control. That means rations, limits on consumption, especially in the Colleges. Better agricultural efficiency on the lake farms, less waste. A max one kid per fam for a few generations might be a good idea too.”

This caught Felix’s attention. “You think the Wizards should be in charge of the birth rate? What would you do with all of the second and third kids that got born on accident?” he said, for the sake of debating.

“Someting not bluddy, deffo.”

“So *you* think we should steal the Zuri’s lands too.” Regina said to Felix.

Felix shrugged. “Oh, no, that definitely won’t work either.”

“So what’s your solution?” she asked.

“I don’t have one— Not my job, I’m no Wizard, I’m just getting through life. Trying to enjoy it.”

She scoffed. “Ugh, you’re even worse than him then, barely. A privileged-in-the-face-ass Wizard dropout with no concept of the struggle and an ignorant wannabe Ranger warmonger from effing Merit, great.”

Felix got nervous at the criticism, his skin glimmered and he stumbled over a root.

“Sure, yeah,” he lashed as he recovered. “And he’s the the angsty, hardline Zuri kid, and you’re just the spazmouth from Freedom who is actually parroting the same non-solutions as the Wizards through a mass-produced, trendy, self-righteous, social justice lens, thank you very much. We’re all *something*, so—”

“Wow, tell me how conservative you are without saying it.” Regina rushed out over his last words, raising her voice— “You don’t know me, so effing stupid, let me tell you. I’m not *parroting the Wizards*, I just think we can try other options before starting a war with the whole Valley? And I don’t know why you’re going off about social justice now, it’s ovvo you’re just projecting your own anger and misogyny on me, okay? You do *not* know what it is like to be a queer, poly woman with mental health issues in this effed up place so don’t go there. This is a society built on *Freedom*, but everyone forgets that as soon as a woman says something or behaves contradictory. Just by existing in this body I am a problem this system can’t handle and I am not afraid to exist. I fight the system in my own ways, and *I* get to define what those are so *excuse me* for imagining that could happen without a catastrophic war as the context.”

“Did ye juss say ye was poly? *Hmm.*” Vic said.

“*Uhhhh*, did you say that we were actually going somewhere? If it’s much farther, you picked the wrong drop site, or more likely have no idea where we are, and that’s my guess.” her coif was melting off one side of her humid head. The iPhly jacket she wore was insulated for the high winds, and hung heavy and damp on her. Floes of undereye makeup smeared on her cheeks.

“Still a while, still a while... why, ye feelin hot luv? S’good look for ye.”

“Eff dude, you are *beyond* help. Like, I’m trying to decide which of the things I’m carrying to stab you with right now.”

Vic dismissed this with a hard laugh and neither of the other two had anything to add, so they fell back into quietness, now just ignoring Regina’s ughing. They slunk through the jungle for close to an hour like this, ranging the boundless, sticky landscape, a muddy infinite scroll of glossy leaves and swollen flowers, bell clusters, nectaries, dragon-tongues, pistils by the trillions, licking the steam.

The trudge was hypnotic. Felix’s mind played games, imagined nice conversations that wouldn’t actually happen. He pretended one of his companions asked what they’d all wish to be if the Storms affected people like it did animals. Transformed their bodies, instead of twisting their minds. Vic, he was sure, would want to be something powerful and smart, something no one could eff with— a dragongator maybe, or a Malga from the arena at the Malliseum. He didn’t know Jimmy or Regina so well, so he fast-forwarded the conversation to how he might answer.

The first thought was pretty depressing— in all of his fantasies, he was just nothing— something that took up no space and didn’t have any volume, nothing at all. He thought about this a lot. Not like, he wanted to kill himself, that would essentially prove everyone right about him, but he had decided he would take the choice to phase out of existence as if he’d never been if it were given. He had gotten a bird’s eye view of Heaven through his childhood and in the last year a worm’s perspective too. Nothing he could be or do in this world seemed better or worse

than anything else, all options tasted like dust to future him. Most people wanted to be happy, but he knew just what happiness was, a bodily response to validation, a moment's distraction from the city, still trapped in its walls. So he had stopped seeking or expecting it from his life at all. He had learned enough about how it all worked in school to make himself an alien in his own home, an unskilled bag of gruesome, depressing facts about the WSWN, but had dropped out before he was anywhere near the levers of Wizard power that could enact any sort of change. Not that the city wanted to change. Or that he would have had any clue about what to change if he hadn't dropped out, stayed in the insulated world of the Colleges. So he was predestined to uselessness no matter what he did.

And don't forget you brought all of this pain on yourself, his brain made sure to remind him one more time.

As noon came, they were still walking, Vic filled the air more and more frequently with justifications and reassurances that their destination was near. It was a relief to all of them when these murmurings peaked in excitement. Vic rushed forward.

"Lookaddit! Olli saplin! Ayy!"

Sure enough, a few little Ollis were fringing their way, and around a shrouding rock ledge, the path ahead flushed out and shot up between two steep slopes, forming a gully awash in shiny new growth green, studded with a galaxy of white flowers. The grove jumped out from the baroque foliage behind and around, immediately a strange sight, seeing hundreds of the same tree planted next to each other. In stark contrast to the swarming brushy tangle they came through, these straight lanes looked more like a place in the city. Mulched trunks flattened the underbrush, and trapped heat in the soil. The place had a stink of a killing ground, aerobic body fluids and animal musk percolating in their flared nostrils.

"Were here!" Vic cried out.

Their guide stopped, blanched, murmuring Native words under his breath and making a hand symbol over his chest.

"What is this, Vic?" Felix said, anxious and awestruck.

"The seekrit off-the-books Ranger ting I was tellin ye about bruv!" Vic hissed, crouching. "We found it! Dis where dey got mans comin out here, gassin the soil up with Wizard farm chems. To force the Ollis bloomin a few weeks heada dry season, clevah innit?"

"What is that smell?"

"Predator pellant— keeps anyting big away, and the birds cant smell anyting, no noses bruv."

Felix's eyes zipped to the even tree plantings, the hauled in mulch, the man-made shack, out alone in the jungle.

"Vic, is this place sanctioned?"

"Sure, by someone, deffo."

"Doubt it. I know all of the real out-of-City sites from my job, my *former* job, and I've never heard about this one. If this was a real site, there would be a dropsite near." Regina said, all a bit muffled as she tried to fit her nose into her jacket.

"Well... its special. Some arrangement with the tribe here. I dunno, I juss clocked it listenin in da Guild Hall bruv."

"Vic— that means this is homesteading, man, poaching. If there is any sort of deal, it's some backdoor thing between whoever is bringing fertilizer out here and the tribe. This is an unsanctioned, illegal outside-the-Settlement site."

Vic rounded on him, fists tight.

“Wot are ye doin, bruv? We *talked* through dis.” He said, voice hot and low, crooked eyes searching Felix’s face.

“Ye dont even rememba, do ye? Ye were blackout when ye said yes to it lass night. Ye forgot.”

“No I didn’t!”

“Dat’s why ye been cagey all day, fookin underminin me, and now shes here—”

“No, I remember, I remember! I just, we’re just saying—whoever set this up is breaking the Treaty, we could get in trouble—”

“The Treaty bruv! Fook, ye so fulla shite— its fookin year 245 bruv, mans dont care where jungle stuff comes from. And if dey did, wot dey gonna do— send the Rangers to arrest emselves? Be real bruv. Dis the type ting smart people do to git ahead— dis is wot I was tellin ye bruv!”

Felix balked. “Yeah, yeah, no, you’re right—”

“Im not staying here. This is *sooo* dumb.” Regina said.

“Ye can go anytime if ye want— were stayin. This is a jewel mine bruv.” he said to Felix.

“Plus, look, no ones here! We got dibs!”

He strode into the grove. The Olli trunks jostled thirty feet into the sky, stretch-marked from their synthetic feed, terminating in a draping frond that swept down to head height. Juvenile berry pendulums weighted and varied their drift in the heavy wind.

“I been readin. This is early, even for early season— but its been warmer this year, innit? So figure were a little heada the almanacs. So stop bitchin bruv— or go do someting else, I dont even care bruv— Jimmy, cummon lets git set up.”

Jimmy didn’t budge from the grove’s rim.

“We cannot.”

“Ye fookin too. Oh yeh yeh—I know, I knows, dis kinda ting gonna destroy the jungle, but ye know wot? Its gonna *undestroy* us blud, so Im okay wiff it. Now *shift*, cummon, lets go.”

“They will liketh that not.” he said.

“Blud, Im serious, if ye say the Great Crow and his mates—”

“I actually meaneth your folk.”

“Wot? Who, where?”

He jabbed his finger around. “In trees. Sitteth there. There, there. Thereth. There. There.”

His digit pointed down the row, wherever it went, the edges of treeblinds, camouflaged wooden platforms and hammocks began to stand out in their eyesight every ten meters or so.

“Where? Ooooh, shite. Fook. shhhh, shh! Dont move. Dont move.” Vic wavered in the clearing, flustering a glance around. He was still scanning the trees when a whistling crossbow bolt plugged itself into the ground a few feet away. A paper fragment was poked around its shaft. Vic ripped it off and read.

FVCK OFF, ALL TREES TAKEN. BEEN HERE 2 DAYS

“As I had sayethed,” Jimmy said to Regina out the side of his mouth.

“Wot, alla dem?” Vic shouted at the trees, spinning. “S’a lotta trees out here— *cummon!*” Another shaft fell from a different direction:

YES/BYE

Vic read the new note and his eyes tightened. He balled his fists and squeezed out a strangle noise like something had burst inside.

Felix dove out and yanked Vic toward him as a swarm of pointed statements zipped into the ground where he had been standing. They kept moving before the shooters could reload,

hightailing it back twenty meters, out of range. Felix slowed up, out of breath. Vic followed through with his momentum and punched an Olli sapling, before tearing off its branches and ripping its roots from the ground. He yelled a little bit more til he ran out of steam and crouched over his knees, vibrating.

Regina's arms stayed crossed through all of this.

"Wow, so you're like, not even good at being a Ranger even."

"Fook off!"

Felix chuckled.

"Ah come on buddy, its okay. We can fill up on slugs today and try a different spot next weekend for something big. That spot is sketch anyway."

Vic laughed too, but with no shred of humor. He quieted and righted himself. He forced Felix to make eye contact.

"Sometimes bruv, I wonder wot world ye live in."

"Uh, the real, real messed up one, same as you."

"Yeh, yer always bitchin, I clock dat, but, s'like, ye ent clock how broke we rilly are. S'like ye gotta mental fookin block bout money. Dese fookin slugs ent cuttin it bruv, not wiff *you* a fookin round."

"Dude, what?"

"I didnt git it fer a while, it shoul da made sense— plenty. But den I maff it wiff the extra costs...we come up shorta and shorta each month. Since I moved in with you. S'all fallin apart bruv— not like it stops ye from drinkin yer cut plus half of erry one ye paychecks, but I dont even try en talk bout dat anymore, innit?"

"Whoa, well," Felix said, off-guard, backbone stiffening, taking unawares for a serious conversation. "It's my money and I pay my half of the rent so—"

"We got the lights bout to turn off bruv, where ye haff the solar bill? En ye lost the Storm-reada, juss like ye drunk ass broke the stove—"

"Dude, I didn't do that! I told—"

"But it don't even matta, cause we got no dosh for food, my Ranger dues coming up— fook it. I could use some help here bruv! Dats why we hafta do someting like dis— s'do-or-die ting. If ye and me dont make some money dis trip, tings is gittin cut off. I cant even afford this do-nuffin *Gooli* his udda half— I werent gonna fookin hire ye except I felt bad, blud— Like, Im sayin, by next week: we dont eat, we lose the apartment, or I lose my job, which means all three. Were fooked mate! Were priced out! I ent got dosh for anudda deposit— were headed for the barges, bruv! Were Civic fookin Workas!"

"Hey buddy, come on, we'll figure it out. Let's think!"

"Blud! I *have* thought— dats the worst part! We had dis whole fookin convo last night. I told ye how serious today was, an ye got smasho'd in front of me en dont even rememba nuffin."

"Vic, I—"

"S'true, bruv! I cant count on ye bruv. And now look."

"How is any of this my fault? I was just trying to help you on *my* day off!"

"Fook bruv! Im not saying it is! Juss dont act like ye ent out here *contributin* to the fookin WSWN ye always bitch about, en dont chat me off wiff dat tings-is-gonna-be-okay-dude goatshite. S'rilly, rilly not."

Felix shuffled and looked down. "Sorry man." He had never seen his Vic lose it so hard.

His friend, never one to stop moving long, rolled his neck and picked up his pack. The other two stood by, not saying anything this time.

“Fook yer sorry bruv. S’woteva. Cummon— or not. Dere’s still day. We can hunt *someeting*. We still got time. En if ye have any good ideas, spit em now.”
He walked past the torn-up sapling, back the way they came.