

## XI

Felix got that freefall feeling again, less pleasant this time. *So this is when the dream ends*, he thought. They couldn't make their rent. *This is the brick wall to end your year drunkenly worshipping your feelings*. His brain scuttled around, probing for a rationale, some way to reshuffle the finances or facts of the situation. There was nothing to mortgage further. Not even the Storm-reader to pawn. No way to keep half-living his own life, or ignore the drag he had had on Vic's, which he was just now fully realizing, adding another layer of worry to the stack in his head. It piled on like garbage. Even moreso, because above it all, he harbored the thought that unlike Vic, he could walk back to his father's office in the Edifice and ask for his old room back, if he were willing. He'd never say such a thing out loud, but he knew it was true.

"Big crap pile." Jimmy said, interrupting Felix's internal monologue. They were a few long minutes back up through the low country they had crossed.

"Thanks Jimmy, I know."

"No. Here." His dreads bopped against his back muscles as he crouched, furling around in the underbrush. His hand popped above the leaves and called them over.

They were staring at a spongy coil of feces. Jimmy broke after a twig and stirred the pile, releasing a puff of steam. He swiveled his head, eyes active.

"Fresh."

"What made it?"

"Octorilla. Single. Male. One track." He had found a riff in the leaves and studied its contour into the forest, crossways to the path.

"Whoa! Cant be far." Vic said, swiveling.

"Hey hey hey," Regina said. "Aren't those things like, a thousand kilos? Not effing likely, for you three."

"Not three. Me. Goeth you three to the river."

"Wot? Im still rentin ye!"

Jimmy pointed at the sun, past its apex.

"Payeth you for half day of killing. Sayeth you you have not the other half."

"Yeh, but if we git a fookin octorilla—"

"*No!*" Jimmy barked, raising his voice. "You are loud. A risk! Goeth I alone." He squared up to Vic, and made a swirling motion over his chest, which ended with him poking Vic on the forehead and stepping away.

"Parteth we now." He confirmed with a nod, before loping off with long strides to show they'd been holding him back the whole time.

They watched him go. Vic raged, and made a two-handed gesture of his own.

"*I hope it fookin rapes ye!*" he yelled after, pinky fingers up. Incensed, he turned to Felix and Regina.

"Fook dat kid!" he said. As he opened his mouth to rant more, there was a flash between the limbs and leaves through the canopy behind his head. For a moment, a hole in the sky was a fiery, opaque lavender, before fading back to overcast slate. Regina and Vic both saw it.

Vic did two 180s.

"Wait, was dat a Storm?" Vic scanned both sides of his hands, making sure he was still there.

A gust of wind hit them in the face.

"I don't *think* so..." Regina said, but she crouched.

“EPP! An EPP! It was an Ephemerate Pinyon-like Phenomena!” Felix said, shocked back into Wizard-talk by the glow in the sky, already receding. This happened sometimes, rare crackles of the Storm that disappeared as fast as they came, you could miss them if you blinked.

## XII

“No way no way—” Vic twitched his nose, forgetting he was pissed.

“Smoke! Dat was close! Were in the sweet spot! Mebbe it hit a ting!”

He went crashing through the brush, widening Jimmy’s trail. Felix launched after, thoughts still catching up, anxiety rising. Each Storm was a beacon for jungle looters, scumbling for Stormtouched animals to turn into rare goods, anyone could be inbound. But by dumb luck it seemed they had ended up in the sweet spot by accident; it was just them and the forest.

The bellowing roar verberated, confirming Vic’s hunch and chilling Felix’s stride. He fumbled for the bow on his back with sweaty hands and tried to keep his eyes on the trees. Fumes made the air thick and hazy. Shapes leapt and danced through the particles. Small packets of flame singed branches and smaller animals crashed around, snakes, monkeys, and marmots streaming away from the site, staggering and chittering pained noises. He caught glimpses of iridescent jewelbox colors mixed in their coats as they fled through the burning treetops.

Bigger shapes moved through the dusky glade. A low hump became Vic, Jimmy was five meters in front, stalking with purpose towards a rocky formation jutting up dead ahead. Felix’s gaze drew up to look at the base of the strange rock, and saw something curled down there, shifting, moving.

The shape resolved itself into a head, shoulders, and multitude of shaggy limbs, its back to them. Two fists whiteknuckled the edges of the boulder, its other four arms heaved and slapped its body, clutching its face. It grunted and made little shrieks.

When the wind shifted, the yellowed smoke peeled off to show its fur had all gone a strange calico—contrasting vermilion, cream, and turquoise.

It lurched about with panic throes, clawing at its face with its two forelimbs. It hadn’t seen them yet. Felix got low, and looked around for Regina. He tried to speed up to get to Vic. He tried to nock an arrow to his bow. He tried to keep an eye on the beast at the same time, trying to figure out what was wrong with it, the best way to approach it without being killed, then took a brief tangent to doubt his own decision-making process and completely scrap all of his half-formed tactics.

By the time he reached Vic, Vic had caught up with Jimmy, and Regina had triangulated to the spot too.

“Okay, here’s the plan—”

“It hasn’t seen us,” Felix said.

“I know! So we gotta—”

“Challengeth it for single combat.” Jimmy said, slipping a rigid object over each hand. When his fingers moved away his knuckles were crenellated with a sharpened ridge of obsidian. He leaned to go. “Standeth back.”

“Wot? Blud, no, fookin lissen! You git ready. Ill shoot it in the backada head, try and one-shot it. Felix, you shoot right afta me, just hit it somewhere. Jimmy, ye ent got no bow, I dunno know wot yer gonna to do, just—”

“Killeth with hands.”

“It has six fookin arms, grow up! We gotta distract it first, try an git behind it or someting. Im goin for the headshot, if it dont work—” he said to Felix, “juss keep *unloadin* at it, good?”

“What about me?” Regina hissed.

“Are ye even *fookin armed*?”

“In fact—”

“I dont care, juss git the fook away, lemme git dis shot!”

He moved his body into position, and took a deep breath.

“Kay, on tree—”

“APE-BROTHER!” Jimmy said, at the top of his lungs, standing up. He made some exaggerated movements towards the beast.

“Jimmywotthefookmate—”

The beast screamed in query. It righted itself, and took its hands away from its face. It twisted the side of its head toward the sound of an enemy. Its whole head was a bloody mess. The six-armed hulk tasted the air with its tongue, stilling, perched on the or of a fight-or-flight instinct.

“It’s blind!” Felix said, but it was just part of the next moment’s chaos when Vic’s bow loosed, and the arrow’s stalk jerked out of the octorilla’s shoulder.

“Shet!” Vic yelped at the same time the creature howled. It ripped the arrow out and rocked around, slamming the ground and bouncing aggressively toward them. Jimmy strode forward.

“You idiots!” Regina said, backpedaling.

“Bruv, shoot!”

“I’m trying!” Felix said, hands shaking. He tried to push some wisdom up and the fear down, and pull up some tricks he remembered from Malliseum fights in his youth, see the arrow traveling where he wanted. He released and watched the shaft swim past the beast.

Vic grunted and let another zip, shooting over Jimmy’s ear to stick the beast in its ribs, eliciting another enraged scream but barely slowing it down.

“Keep goin!” Vic yelled at Felix, but now Jimmy was closing in and getting in a shot’s way, meeting the creature in the scorched clearing. He had the advantage of the octorilla’s attention being split, and blinded. But the beast still had a half meter, three hundred kilos, and four extra arms on the ambitious barbarian, any one of those muscled limbs had enough power to yank the head off his shoulders.

Felix was beginning to see that Jimmy had a pattern and really wanted it to continue. He stepped to the left to get a better angle, put an arrow in the air, and managed to stick it in the rilla’s side, not hard enough to sink the bodkin though. The beast barely noticed, and Felix spun his brain for something else to try.

Jimmy roared and rushed. He got close and put a two-fist combo into its spittle-filled maw. Its head rocked each way and the jawbone drooped, but already its forearms were batting him down while the fingers squeezed into a death grip.

Their friend’s next punch didn’t have the same panache. His feet left earth as the octorilla got three hands on him, wrapping around his neck, arm and knee. The beast started pulling.

There was lots of wailing at that point, and Felix turned his head to avoid the fuss of the next part. The beast’s screeches peaked and sounds crackled out of the back of its throat.

He opened his eyes to see Regina on the beast’s left shoulder, hanging into a knife plunged into its back and blasting a can of KolorSpray-brand rapist-repellant into its eyes. It dropped Jimmy and reached around for her, but its knees wobbled from the assault. An arrow grew from its throat, Vic finally finding his mark.

The long-haired hulk lost its footing. Regina kept stabbing at its spine. Vic rushed in with a long blade, warning her back, and inserted it into the beast’s throat. He was rewarded with a volcanic wave of artery blood. That still didn’t kill it. Vic got knocked down as the body jerked but he bounced off the hard earth and back up to hack the blade down two handed, whipping it against the beast’s neck until the bending metal was sticky and it raged no more.

## XIII

“WEOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Vic hollered, flipping the machete out of his hand. Birds scattered upward.

“Bruv! Look at the coat on dis ting! An its huge! Were *cakin*. Can ye believe it!?”

“No, not really!” Felix said.

“Ye dont even have to! D’ye know how *set* dis makes us? I mean, not the cleanest kill in the History Book, but! We could git a new Storm-reader *tomorrow*— all dat important life shite too! Nevamind wot I was sayin before, we’re all good, cummon, lets tag it.”

“Tight!” Felix said.

They slapped hands, sending blood gobs off of Vic. He started strutting around the body.

Regina threw down the shriveled ColorSpray and bent to wipe her arms and hands off in the dirty and remaining plant life. She crouched down over Jimmy, just propping himself up.

“Are you okay? Need help?”

“No worry, am fine.” Jimmy coughed out, his neck a patchwork of black and purple. He staggered to his hands and knees and vomited into the earth.

“Suit yourself,” she said.

“Hes better den okay, hes gettin paid!” Vic said, still parading. “Bruv, look at those extra eyes, the Storm messed its whole face up. A fookin specimen. *Dat hide*.” He stroked a patch of relatively bloodless arm hair.

Regina’s eyes rolled. “Gloat more.” she regarded the half-ton-at-least carcass. “You idiots do have your own Cuum-can, right?”

Vic’s teeth glowed. “S’matta fact—” he whipped a short shiny tube from his pack with great satisfied.

“Oh, why yes, dis *is* the deluxe model from Pagerock, good eye luv! Yes, the kind wiff a extra five cubic meters of space. Whyd ye pay for the extra meters? S’cause I just knew Id need enuff space to haul back a *full-grown*, Stormtouched octorilla? Nah! Trick question. I *dint* pay for it, s’free, *from the Rangers Guild*, because the Rangers Guild is a class establishment. *haHa!*”

“No argument there.” she said, pulling out her own, slightly more dinged canister with stickers on it. “But let me get mine first. I bet you’re going to whine about the head, so cut off the feet for me and all of the claws and toenails and we’ll call it even. Don’t front like I don’t know what this is worth.”

“Wait, why do you have a Cuum-can?” Felix said. “You’re not a hunter.”

She shrugged. “I collect tech, like I told you.”

“Waitwaitwait luv.” Vic said. “This is my trip here, who said ye git a cut?”

“*You’re* about to get a cut.” She said, wiggling her little switchblade, still soupy with gorilla fluids.

“Cheell! Look, wot Im sayin, s’worth more all togetha, I can break ye off some bills *afta* I sell it whole to the Rangers, so—”

“No, now. I don’t have any income after this, I’m not leaving it up to you.”

“Then yer completely dumb! All we gotta do is git it back to the City. Ye wanna start choppin it into bluddy hunks and pullin its toenails out out here? No!”

“I’d never take money from the Rangers Guild.”

“Well, I cant bring back seven-eiffs of an octorilla carcass! Ill look like an idyot!”

“Hey! Don’tcha worry much ‘bout allat naow.” a voice said. There was a click and a swoosh, then three men with three crossbows were in their midst.

“Mang, these new cloakin’ devices actually work! Wizards, pah! Can’t keep the city lights to stay on, but dang they make one helluva gadget.” said the one with his shooter leveled at Vic’s left eye.

“Drop it,” another said to Regina re: the blood-coated switchblade back in her hand. He stroked his finger on the firing dial until she complied.

The last one remained silent, and pushed Jimmy to prone on the ground, resting the bolt tip on his brainstem.

They wore jackets patched with scraps of odd fabric, and animal-skin hats with the feet and tails still attached. The red bandanas around their necks, they didn’t bother to pull over their faces— all tangled beard, rotting teeth, and florid skin. They had text tattoos all over their necks but not like the Zuri, and the faces of Heavenites. These announced them as Homesteaders, cityfolk who broke the law and settled illegally beyond the wall at the lake’s edge. Despised by city and scourged by the tribes, they survived in feral colonies, hunting and robbing indiscriminately. Felix felt a little minimized that none of the robbers had thought to point a crossbow at him, but not for long.

“*Pah*. Awright kid.” Vic’s new friend spat at Felix to indicate him. “Listen up. Don’t do nothing fast or stupid.” Felix pondered this as the bandit explained.

“You just do what I say an’ your crew don’t git all lit up. If youse a selfish type who don’t care bout that, please do note, these are some *repeating* crossbows, so we got some for you too if need be. Good?”

He nodded, looking at Vic, his good eye bulging to look at the would-be murder weapon.

“Good, boy. Now listen close. You don’t hafta say nothing. You just gonna take one of those Cuum-cans your friends got, shove that there octoriller in there, and hand it to me all nice like. We won’t hurtchas none, just don’t say a word and do like that and we’ll all be on our way.”

Vic made a noise like there might be better options and got punched in the gut and kicked to his knees for his attempts. The bandit replaced the firearm against Vic’s head.

“Git. Naow. Nuttin funny.”

Felix looked around at the six expectant faces waiting for his next move. He hesitated, hoping some creative answer was about to spring into his mind, but nothing arrived. He bowed his head and stepped slowly to Regina.

He kneeled to pick up the magic storage container at her feet, and pressed a few buttons to warm it up. He looked at the strangely-spangled behemoth one last time, before tapping a button and watching the biggest catch he’d ever been a part of disappear into the tube with a final pop. Vic groaned. Felix turned around and handed the canister to the bandit.

“Ha! Thank you kindly young sir. You rookies did a real fine job on that one. Now, and we hate to be so needy, but there is the matter of any potions, weapons, boots, tech, loot, whatnot you happen to have—”

“You said that was all! Please, we’re super broke, we really don’t have anything—”

The lead bandit leaned out and grabbed his arm, laughing.

“Oh? That’s what you think *now*, city boy. Trust me it gits worse. Now strip, all youse, throw it in a pile.”

He didn’t offer any alternatives besides close range archery. Felix dropped his bow, pulling shreds of trash out of his many jacket pockets, and finally pulled his half-empty flask out, hands shaking, deciding if he should chug the last few mouthfuls, wishing now, more than anything that he had found time for one last drink. He foisted it down and clapped out the crap his pockets for anything else, but really had nothing else left.

As they were shaking down the others, there came a beeping. A city-sound, not jungle. The bandit covering Vic pulled a Storm-reader from his back pocket, and tossed it to the one on Regina, saying, "Check it."

The recipient caught and bumbled it open with one hand, considering the dials very quickly.

"We gotta go. This is the fourth since dawn."

The one standing on Jimmy's back looked up for a second. "Ain't see nothing yet," He said of the sky. As his weighted shifted, Jimmy twisted and made a reckless grab at the bandit's crossbow hand.

He found it. It broke at the wrist with a sideways yank. The bandit screamed out, and Jimmy rolled and pulled him down on top of him. He came up with the crossbow and pointed it at the leader who ducked, pushing Vic down.

He yelped and bolted. The second followed, kicking Regina's knees from behind, and ducked until they were out of range.

As soon as they got the upper hand, Vic was yelling *shoot them, blast em up bruv, send it!*

As soon as he realized Jimmy was just pointing the weapon, not aiming, he lunged for it with a *gimme gimme, cummom bruv shoot dem please shoot dem*, his mind on the canister clutched beneath their leader's arm. But Jimmy stiff-armed his attempts and as they left sight he tossed the bow in the dirt. Vic screamed in agony.

"Why!? Why dint ye shoot them bruv!?"

"True Zuri killeth not with coward-weapons, city-weapons. It is forebode."

"You coulda let me do it den! Mate, yer fookin 'Touched! Dat was our meal ticket! Dat was our fookin *life* you juss let run away!"

The Homesteader under the young barbarian stirred. Jimmy reached down and placed his thumb on a certain spot of his neck until he passed out. He shrugged.

"The Great Crow giveth, and The Great Crow taketh away."

## XIV

Felix heard his friend draw breath, and braced for another plush sally of expletives, but Vic just exhaled.

“I... mate, I cant do nuffin wiff dat. Ye right, were partin ways. Yer fired.”

He turned to Felix. “Lets juss git home.”

Felix nodded. “We’ll figure it out man, don’t worry.” but he realized he didn’t believe himself by the time his sentence finished.

He looked around and down again, unable to bear the sight of anyone right then. They started moving towards their packs, dropped before the fight. Felix loved a good somber moment so it took a while to register, but it was there. A faint noise mixed into the wind. The woodlums were gone, but the Storm-reader sound wasn’t.

“Wait! Stop for a second.” Felix said, hunkering his body. “Do you guys hear that?” everyone but Regina stopped crunching the underbrush.

Vic heard it. He did a double take at Felix, and then turned his head back towards her, walking away. Regina’s hand was sliding into her pocket. The beeping was steady. The two roommates looked at each other, then back to her.

“Is dat—” Vic said. The wind whipped up.

“Okay! Yes yes yes, here, just take the effing thing, it’s not worth it!” she yelled, spinning around. “You two sadboys need it more than I do! I just want to get to the boat and never see you three again!” She pulled out the beeping box, flipped it into the air and ran back towards the path. Vic took off chasing her.

Felix caught the device, opened the lid, and read the dials. His eyes dilated.

“I knew it! I knew it!” Vic yelled after Regina without looking at it. “Wot I tell ye, Felix! Bare thieves on the Aeros! Lookat her, A chiselin, lowlife, sticky-fingered Freedom leech! Thats ye job? Pickpockin workin folk? Oh! *So* much betta en bein a Ranger, wot good work ye do! Yeh, ye rilly give a shite about oppression. Greedy fookin hypocrite, innit? Mebbe ye wouldna got ye ass pulled out of an Aero if ye hand werent in his *pocket!*” He yelled, catching up with her.