

## XV

Vic kept the beratement level high as they ran, and Jimmy jogged up with their packs on his arms. Felix wasn't far behind, feeling fresh motivation.

"UH GUYS WE REALLY HAVE TO HURRY." He said, catching up. He glanced at what the sky was saying. There was no strange glow yet, but the clouds were picking up speed, creeping the same way they were. Where trees parted, he saw a thick pillar forming just ahead. His heart flailed. It was a system. Not an EPP, not a cloudburst, a full-on Pinyon Event, as the Wizards in his life would call it.

They made it up the rise to the Crevasse fork before the thunder started and dark colors began to leak out of the clouds ahead. Vic didn't turn toward the overhang— they barreled down the hillside, down the path that led to the river. Jimmy bringing up the rear was almost leaning on Felix's back. Their only hope was to get under the awning of the boatstop on the river before it broke loose now. Felix realized that the Crevasse overhang had probably been closer, but the time to express that thought had elapsed moments ago.

They felt the second *THUD* in their chest a heartbeat after the first, as two cells of clouds burst together. The gale wind deepened, and an unearthly light tinted their muddy shadows.

They were at a dead race, running shoulder to shoulder, so when they collided with it they all collided at once. One moment they were streaking down the last stretch, the puddles deepening into pools under their feet. The next, something was running crossways to the path and Felix's head was smashing into it, his feet weren't touching, he could feel them all colliding, skidding into the slick mud. He thought for a second that was it, the Storm— but as he unwound, he felt feathered wings beating him. He fell back and saw a flightless bird struggling up and flailing away across the path.

It was a shovelbill.

Pulling themselves up, he saw the look in Vic's eyes and just knew.

Felix yelled "No!" anyway, but he couldn't even hear himself. Vic was up, chasing the bird now, pulling the bow from his pack. Jimmy launched after it too. Felix instinctively moved in the same direction, and felt a weight hauling on the crook of his elbow. It was Regina.

"What are you doing? We're about to get *touched!* Don't follow those idiots!" her mouth said.

"Keep your hands off me! Do what you want, he's my friend!"

She recoiled and he dashed after Vic. There was still time, the sky above them was only a little orange—

He stumbled ahead for ten feet, and heard a keening squawk. Flashes of movement behind a tree. Jimmy was holding the bird's neck on the ground, throttling it. Vic was opening the transport container. There was an orange glint on his teeth. The Storm-reader was beeping so quickly now it was a solid tone.

"Guys, we have to go! It's going to happen!" he reached out to grab Vic's arm, and saw his limb wreathed in copper light.

And then nothing else could happen, because that was when his vision went and his ear drums emptied and a volcanic level of energy filled his earthly vessel.

## XVI

There was no transition. He didn't feel himself rise in the air, but next he knew he was up there, moving steadily west like an outbound Aero, a half kilometer high. The whole Valley was splayed before him, no wet season fogs obscuring the view.

His body was flying without his input. He couldn't change courses or steer, only see. And something was wrong with his eyes.

The Storm was invading his vision. It was like he could see too much. Everything he gazed at was reflected to him with such perfect fidelity, such immaculate resolution he could almost feel everything happening, down to each dew drop, as if it were rolling over his own skin.

History would come to show that Felix had scarfed quite a quantity of drugs on his quest already, and a variety to boot. This went beyond any chemical dissociative of mind or body he had tried to lose himself in, far beyond. It was like super-sobriety; the Valley lobbing cold hard bricks of truth at him from every angle. Plus, he could actually see others in his vision like he had been, taking said drugs, and he was feeling what they felt too, as a limited subset of the greater feeling that propelled him.

He flew on realizing he had crossed hundreds of kilometers in just a few seconds, taking him over the deep jungle now. If he looked back though, he could still see Heaven and every point in the rest of the Valley clear as crystal. The sensory soaked him. The range of faces he saw just in turning his head overlapped their teeth and merged their cries together in a dizzy kaleidoscope of humans in foreign and familiar places, their pain and rare pleasure blooming in him, maxing every nerve.

He could see his sister's bedroom in the Farm Tower apartment, still empty, open balcony door letting the smoke blow in. He glimpsed a huge throng of clay-caked archers at the top of the Crevasse, firing volleys down at something approaching from below. And in the jungle and on Heaven's turf alike, enormous fires roared and stood towering steles of smoke in the air that marked his progress past their tops. Wherever his eyes touched confirmed that the Valley was not how he left it.

Everywhere, from the base of the cliffs to Heaven's lake, was on the move toward desperate purposes. People crawled out from the wreckage of their dwellings. Huge groups of men, thousands there must have been, cloaked with leaves and ash to hide blade-shine moved through the forest, a prey drive locked on one another. Just as many stood in Heaven's streets, alight in torchflame, a soiree of alarms echoing through the avenues. Wizards in trailing gowns flapped straight out of College windows a-burn, their metal beams buckling from the heat and battery bomb blasts. Armored squares of Rangers and dark, snapping hulks criss-crossed the grid system, in and out of the College's open gates. Students bled out on the trimmed and trodden quads, under the fummy olive clouds that everyone in Heaven knew meant burning solar panels.

He smelled and tasted, felt and heard it all. The Valley was unveiling itself to him, unburdening itself of dying worries. It fed in through his eyes and spray-coated everything inside. He could feel himself accelerating, and was now far past any point on the map he had ever traveled to in waking— he wasn't sure how he was seeing things and places he had never been, but he knew he coasted over snowy mountain plateaus running with floods, passing villages of yellow-eye crowds staring up as he passed. He saw a bleeding sore in the sky above the skyline of a dark, cliff-carved city. His ears filled with noise and voices from every angle until it all became audial salt. Vines and wires grew over ten-meter gravestones, beneath a tree so large his brain must have been exaggerating. A templetop grew slick with mixing blood, wetting

the feet lined down its stone staircase. The taste of smoke on everyone's tongue. Everyone paining. All together.

He empathized with a million heartbreaks. He imprinted as many dark facts as truth. He saw a host of never-realized solutions undreamed as he flew by. He truly felt what overwhelmed meant. He felt the outer limits of his brain's capacity to know, to hurt. He wished it would kill him, it felt like this should be killing him.

Dizzy from the view, he looked away from it, forward to where he was heading for the first time. He had risen without knowing, higher than any Aero could climb, to be almost level with the obsidian cliffs that made up the Valley's untraversable western edge, almost high enough to see what lay beyond, something no one knew. On the cliff's lip were three ridges that he flew toward. He was aimed right for them; he was going to smack into them. He tried to steer up, continue his unimpeded flight, but found out then he wasn't really flying at all.

He was being pulled. Trying to slow felt something he couldn't resist stringing him along through the air with a set destination, holding him on course toward it. He was still taking in impression after impression, but through them he tried to focus on the three points. The speed tried to force his head down and trying to maintain focus on one point almost blinded him.

Pictures of the Valley's worst day kept rattling by, but he was sure, from that moment til the end—the three faces on the cliffs, the ones who called him, their open mouths were screaming too.

The day came back like a punch to the temple. He was on his back, looking at a normal sky, dampening to twilight, stars starting to show through the cloud breaks. His eyes were normal again. The shovelbill's blood flowed out in slow bumps of its dead heart. The creak and cry of the forest picked back up in the distance. His eyes hadn't been closed, but he wasn't sure how long he had been sitting there with them open. His head turned. Vic was sitting cross-legged on a log. He turned towards Felix with a bright look, like had had something smart to say, but instead his lips parted and began to heave vomit out onto the rocks.

He saw Regina had followed them. She was on her hands and knees, breathing shallow. Crackles of static foamed off her hair. She fell to her side and let loose a stream of gibberish, tongue not working. Jimmy slowly pulled his knees to his chest and began rocking himself.

Felix breathed. Looking at his companions, a feeling overtook him, one he didn't recognize. The world looked normal again, but strange now. Little details were standing out, whispering to him.

"No, no, no, no..." Vic was beginning to say, louder and louder, over and over.

"The Great Crow." Jimmy intoned to himself, thousand-meter staring at a rock.

"*Flying!*" Regina finally managed, eyes alight. "We were flying! All flying!" she pointed at each like a child, with both fingers. Vic lolled his head and moaned.

"All fooked ye mean! Were all fookin broken in the head now. Fook!" Vic said, scowling at his hands.

"We're not broken!" Regina cried. "We were soaring! Above everything!" she fluttered her arms a little, trying to regain the feeling.

"Dats literally what dey all say— *uhhhg*." Vic said. His cheeks bulged with nausea again.

"Then they must all be right! Oh, eff— they're *all right*. So you two saw it too, right? We were flying, and then—"

Jimmy nodded. He turned to look west, at the great black cliffs.

Vic kept moaning *no* and shaking his head, refusing to listen. Regina grabbed Felix for stability.

“Felix! Tell him it was real! Tell him you were flying! Say what you saw!” her voice cracked.

“Mate, please, tell me ye see wots goin on. dont do dis.”

Felix looked at them for a long second.

“I saw the Valley changing.” he said.

“Fook. You too? Dats it. Were all gibberin maniacs in six months.”

“If it will even last that long.” Felix said.

“Mate, dont.”

“I think we saw how it all ends.” Felix said.

“But we flew above it, so it’s not doomed!” Regina said, “We flew up there. There is something on the cliffs. That means there is a way to survive, whatever that was! Where do you think it comes from?”

“The Great Crow, she approacheth. Soon.”

“And the three people at the end.” Felix said. A chill ran down his spine.

“Who?” Regina said.

“Oh no, no way! Dont talk like its real! Dis is how it starts! Dis is how you get Stormtouched! No way. None of dat talk. Woteva it was, whereva its from, I ent lettin it git to me. You all can let ye brain turn to mush if ye want.” Vic said.

Felix stood up, feeling light. He laughed. It was a real laugh he didn’t control. It surprised him.

“Guys, I think you’re all focused on the wrong things here.”

“Im focused on how Im a freak now, and its only a matta of time before were screamin our head off in the street. Am I missin sometin?”

“Yes! I think so. Everyone says the Storms make you dangerous and crazy. But look, we’re fine. We’re talking normally. We’ve never been Stormtouched before, obviously, so how could we actually know what it was like? I feel a little different, but not *crazy*.”

“So?”

“So I think I just realized something. I don’t think the Storm breaks people. I think it makes them see the city, or maybe wherever they’re from, is broken, and needs to change, to avoid what the Storm showed us.”

“Ye thought it was broken already, Felix.”

“Yes, but I see it clearly now— it’s almost over! I get it now, I think. I’ve been hating myself for as long as I can remember. Telling myself why I’m not good enough. Why I couldn’t make it in the Colleges, why I can’t hack it in lower Heaven. Why I’m barge-bait, because there’s no other place for me.” He looked down at his hands, then the backs of them, and his torso, and legs, as if realizing they were connected to his head for the first time.

“But I just saw it all falling apart. It’s wrong, not us. It’s going to happen, it can’t not, I’m sure of it now. The Colleges, the Causeways, every system...it’s all ending. That’s why there’s no place for me, for any of us. This stress— we’re not wrong, the city, the Rangers, my... the Wizards— they’re all wrong! We’re going to outlast them! And it’s beautiful.”

There were tears in the bags under his eyes. He sniffed and closed his eyes and there it was again, the ending, with sureness. He opened his eyes to a look from Vic.

“Fook bruv, nice knowin ye I guess.”

“Oh don’t mope! Let’s get up. Get that bird. We have things to do!” Felix said. Vic stared at his kill, recognizing it for the first time. Its feathers had sprung out golden in the storm.

“Come on, let’s go!” Felix urged, waving them up with both hands. He shook his bushy head and looked at the three of them, psyched out and worrying.

“Wots the rush, flya-boy?”

He looked at his friends with eyes wide open.

“It’s the best rush in the world! Our world, this world is ending soon! And that means there is something coming next! We have to be part of it! I don’t want to miss a thing!”