

III

He walked out through the fly netting to the dock, away from Zinvyk. Vic was now at the far spit of the little wooden jetty, gazing up the river. Jimmy sat cross legged on the planked floor, holding his own hands. Regina sat on the bench facing back toward the building, her chin in her hands.

Felix took a seat next to her, letting his heavy pack off his shoulders. The jungle energy had departed him about halfway through his conversation with Zinvyk and his body felt heavy as stone.

“Ugh, don’t look at me, I bet I look like ass.” she said as he landed. The words “dragged through” did spring to mind when he looked at her hair, but he didn’t mention it.

“Are you okay?” Felix said. “Feeling better than you were up the hill?”

“Honestly, no.” she said, jolted. “I’m just trying my best not to freak out. It’s like I’m feeling every bad thing I’ve ever felt at once. You know? And like I’m remembering bad things that happened to someone else on top of that. Or they haven’t happened yet. Eff. I’m just trying to figure out what I’m going to tell my mom.”

“Yeah. You live with her?”

“Kind of. Some days, about half the time. She’s in one of the old Causeway buildings on Freedom, right close to the island, the rent-controlled ones? But still it’s just been me and her since I was born so we still look out for each other.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

“That’s the thing, we’re already not really talking right now. Fighting. About other stuff.”

“So this wouldn’t help.”

“She has some... *strong* opinions on Stormtouched folk. I don’t *think* she’d report me, but...” she fluttered her hands and shook her head.

“What?”

“I was going to say I don’t think she’d ever look at me the same.”

A chuckle left Felix’s lips.

“Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. I’m just in a similar spot with my dad. We don’t talk either.”

“Because you dropped out?”

“Kind of. It was all part of the same thing.”

“Yeah, what was that like?”

He took a second. “This happened to my sister.”

“What, she got ‘touched? What happened?”

He didn’t respond immediately, not sure what parts to tell.

“She died. Just over a year ago. And my dad... could have helped her. I got angry at him. That’s why I dropped out. Got kicked out, actually. We haven’t spoken since. So this would definitely be a weird first conversation.”

“Yeah. Gonna be rough. But I’ll tell my ma. I just need a few days first.”

“She won’t mind you being gone?”

“No, she’ll think I’m staying with someone from my poly-pod, at least until one of them shows up asking for me... but they’ll be fine. For a few days. I need to think about this before seeing anyone I know.”

“Right, that’s what I was telling Vic— we need to all talk about what just happened. Form a plan for what we’re going to do. You can crash with us for a few days, if you need a place to stay.”

“She can wot, mate?” Vic said, walking back up the dock towards them in moderate furor.

“Wot did I say bout invitin skanks oer to the ends?”

“Hey, eff you!”

“We were just talking, again Vic—”

“Bout wot den bruv?”

“Dimlit, what the eff do you *think* we’re talking about?”

“Oi, I know innit— dont. Dem Wizards’ll hear you yeh? Whatchu tellem in dere bruv?”

“Calm down, man, chill! Nothing. We were just figuring out what we’re going to do when we’re back in Heaven.”

“Bruv, ent nuffin to say.”

“Dude, how can you be acting like this? You saw the same things we all saw, don’t you want to at least talk about it? That’s all we’re saying.”

“Nope. I ent for dat bruv. Im fine. Storm who?”

“So you’re going to repress it. That’s your plan.” said Felix.

“Woteva it takes.”

“Awwww, cute, where’s the bold Expansionist ready to make war on the whole valley a few hours ago? That’s part of what we saw, isn’t it? You’re not tryna be one of those armed men we saw in the jungle?”

“*Shh*, shut up! I dont want any part of nuffin. Im just me, Veek. You can all do your own ting, you en him en her. Im lyin low bruv, protection ting.”

“So you’re all talk then. Typical.”

“Listen, I don’t need nuffin from a skankin thief like you, specially not bad advice.”

“Dude, how is ‘skank’ still in your vocabulary? It’s almost 245!”

“Hey, hey guys, don’t start fighting! This is good, we’re all talking now. Now, I think Jimmy had something he wanted to tell us all too...”

Jimmy was deep in thought on the deck, seated at their knees. It took him a second to realize he had been called on.

“Jimmy, can you tell us what you had to say, while we’re waiting for a boat?”

“Yes. I must.” He stood, gathered himself. Lowered his head, took a deep breath. “I, we, becometh Ziro. All of us. This meaneth plenty. Beginneth I at the start. The ancestors tell of a time before—”

“Nah! See! Now, ye not listenin bruv, I ent wanna hear none of dis, no way! All I want is to git home, sleep, cash in dis bird, and git back to work! Whats so hard about dat?? Im serious, bruv. Til den, nuffin! You do ye own ting.” He huffed back away to the far end of the dock. Felix, for his part, just remembered right then that he too had a job, that he was supposed to be back at the morning after tomorrow, something he really didn’t want to/couldn’t picture himself doing. But he wasn’t going to mention that to Vic right at this timing.

“Ugh, he can’t tell us not to talk! What an asshole. Jimmy, keep going.”

He shook his head. “I cannot. He is Ziro too. Whether or notteth like. Must tell all. Will not repeateth, loseth power.”

“That might have to wait til we’re back then, he’s not gonna talk in front of anyone who picks us up.” Felix said.

Jimmy shrugged. “No more than can I say. Til these words are said, no more me is there.” He abruptly excused himself then, and dropped back to the deck, placed his back against a piling, and shifted into the recumbent, eye-hooded position they had first found him in. Felix watched this and sighed at Regina.

“Well... Vic’s fine. He’s just shook up, he reacts badly to stress. He’ll come around.”

“What will you do if he doesn’t?”

“I have no idea what I’m going to do either way.”

“Great,” she said. They both sat still for a second.

“It keeps coming back to me. The feeling of the end.” Felix said.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Actually,” she said after a second: I like, *literally* can’t think or talk about it any more right now, my head’s going to blow. Can you, like, go sit over there? I need some space.”

“Oh! Yeah yeah, sure, my bad.”

Felix gave it to her, and that’s why he went and slumped down near the fire.

He tried to define the problem in his tired head. What he had seen, he truly believed, was a glimpse of what would happen if the City’s many, systemic problems continued unchecked; they would reach a breaking point. Each riot, each solar power failure, the rising cost of living— each in turn made the whole system more fragile, and now the system wound through the routes and cultures of the entire Valley. He could see it happening, the instability would reach a peak, there would be chaos in the City, until some unspeakable decision was made that caused all of the other cultures of the valley to bring a war on the Heavenites they could not withstand. The *when* he wasn’t sure of, it felt like a time bomb, waiting to explode, if it couldn’t be defused. Dismantled would be closer. Felix thought of the complex, interlocked systems that formed Heaven, all connected, each controlling some crucial aspect of how thousands of people survived daily, yet each corrupt, inefficient, bleeding onto the adjacent. Where was the starting thread to change that would be more peaceful than what they had just glimpsed, and better than what they had? And if the very idea of making real change was thought of as inherently dangerous, crazy, who would even listen if he thought of it? He couldn’t even convince his best friend.

He fished for a cigarette, before remembering he didn’t have any. The thought of a smoke alone tightened his shrunken stomach, he hadn’t eaten since last night and now that he stopped moving he could feel it. There was ache in every organ, mind especially, he couldn’t think of a single right move to make next. He felt glum and anxious both, but his tired body and low blood sugar glued him uselessly to the bench. At least there weren’t many people around. The river’s shush and cricketing night merged with the heady citron burning in the fire and set him into a passive dozy state.

IV

He must have fallen asleep, next thing he knew the scene changed to a darkened matte, the sky mottled with stars and planets' light. Jimmy was shoving his shoulder with a sharp palm to wake him.

"What's happening? Boat? How long did I sleep?" Felix said, looking up in a moderate panic.

The young Zuri didn't move his lips, but nodded.

"What, you're *really* not going to speak again until we all hear you out?"

Another nod.

"And it's about the Storms, huh? What the Zuri think of them?"

Another.

"Does it have to do with the Zuri doing an uprising, against the Wizards?"

Jimmy's silence intensified.

"I mean, if that's part of it, tell me! Seriously, I'm down, I want to help, just— whoa what is *that*?"

Felix walked around Jimmy for a better view. He saw fires spread on the water, coming down river. He shook the remaining drowse from his brain— the flames were real, small and spread out, illuminating the edges of structures, like a large camp site bobbing toward and past them. A drumbeat tattooed the air in steady, pace-setting roll.

Felix went to where Regina and Vic were standing at the edge of the docks. Back to him, she waved signal torch, a long branch dipped in the pitch bucket and lit with the brazier fire. He dodged the smoldering embers she threw about.

"Mornin luv! Sleep well?" Vic sniped at him as he walked up.

"What *is* that?"

"An Xbullix pad!" Regina provided cheerfully. "A big one!"

Felix looked back towards the boatstop, now empty.

"Where's Professor Zinvyk?" he said, halfway caught up.

"The ol Wizard geezah? Dey got onna likkle skipboat, half hour back, no room for us. Ye slept, he didnt seem keen to wake ye."

"So we're getting on an Xbullix boat?" Felix said, panicked for real now.

"Whoa," Regina said, "It's called a pad. And why'd you say it like *that*? What's wrong with Xbullix? Racist. I've never had a problem with them."

"Ovvo." Vic said, looking up and down her body. "Yer a criminal."

"Oh come on! Are you going to hold that against me? Like you've never lifted anything from anyone, your whole life. I didn't even *know* you guys."

"Not a fookin ting, luv. Erryting I got I worked or fought a mug for en took it. Neva thieved nuffin. Ye pretty low in my book."

"I'm surprised you own one."

"You two, stop!" Felix said. "Listen, it's not like we're racist, I mean, I don't have a problem, it's just... Vic?"

The two roommates shared a look. Felix didn't like to stereotype. But, between the two of them, they had been robbed by Xbullix people five times— basically every up-close interaction either had had with the river-trading, knife-wielding, veritably amphibious humanoids had been a net loss. Three of those times they had not even realized they had been swindled or stolen from until hours later. And that was in Heaven, in daylight. Felix had heard more than one ear-

curdling screech from Vic on what the frogs as a culture amounted to and deserved. Hence Felix's questioning of the situation, stepping onto their floating home turf. But obviously neither had any interest in staying in the boatstop, or in being the least brave member of the party, so they both slowly began nodding, following one another's cue.

"S'only a few hours back from here, innit." Vic said.

"Right." Felix said.

"Right."

After a minute watching, they saw one of the lights detaching from the main cluster and move towards them faster and specifically. Their ferry driver was singing, a gruff timbre like a washbasin that had married a slide whistle, borne forth a beehive, and started a family band. The lyrics carried clear across the water, but Felix couldn't understand a word of the language.

It wasn't that all Xbullix were criminals, their society just didn't have any laws. No written statutes, no policing, no courts, no jails. So being, they observed the highest standards for individual behavior. Every one of them had to stand fully on their own respect, knowing they could be killed without legal recourse or protection at any second. Your personal level of trust, realness, was all that validated your existence in Xbullix eyes. They never stole from each other, but treated Heaven like a field for harvest, its people all fair game. When you had something they wanted and thought they could take, they became anarchy incarnate, swift-moving, unpredictable, prone to harm. The enterprising riverfolk, above all the jungle's cultures, had benefited from the city's arrival in the valley.

Felix had read in school that their society was actually deeply formalized and hierarchical, each individual someplace in a vast family tree, growing from the river's middle reaches down the river into Heaven's great lake. They arranged themselves in parafamilial teams, and came to Heaven to perform its important lower functions—hauling the waste the city couldn't reuse, maintaining the underwater sewer ducts, fixing the wet parts of the lake-wall and river-gate. The Xbullix were proud monarchs of anything slimy and untouchable, and the Wizards were happy to pay their brokers to have their problems efficiently solved. It was a distributed, decentralized, entirely honorbound operation which was really quite elegant, but this didn't occur to you when they were conducting a wolfpack-style mugging, or bleeding you dry in a darts game you didn't realize was rigged. Their utility to the City gave them a foothold in it, which they backfilled with as much self-enriching crime as could fit. And where it had spilled over the legal boundary, the individuals punished with years in the CWP barges managed to weave the graft into the penal system as well.

There were more things that it paid to know about Xbullix, or rather, would cost you if you didn't:

- Ixbullix could hold their breath for an incredible amount of time. They took any frog-related insults very seriously and would gladly give Heavenites tours of any body of water to their breathing capacity and beyond.
- Mercadillo, their home site deep in the swamp at the river's swampy waist, was legendary as the paradise of the vice-driven, a sprawl of casino rings and rager ferries, an uninterrupted, unsleeping moon market, unopposed and unrivaled. The same legend applied to the pad clusters they floated the river on, which Felix in his more whimsical drinking years had always wanted to experience. Outdrinking an Ixbullix was out of the question.

- They completely didn't observe the concept of gender, and wielded this difference like a weapon. They used makeup and other artifice to assume whichever appearance served best for the work they were doing. This made their scams, and negotiations in general a little befuddling for most Heavenites at the baseline.

"Fookin frogs," Vic groaned. "I can nevah tell if Im talkin to a boyish girl or a womanly man."

Regina's eyes widened. "Please do *not* say shet like that while we're on this pad."

"Yeh yeh, I know how dey are. Im gettin it outta my system."

"Just let me do the talking."

"I speak for myself, danks."

The boatperson stopped singing as they hove close, peering back at them under their hooked lamp at the helm, standing upright and steering a whirring rudder one-handed, the other hooked on hip. They wore form fitting dress that split at the crotch, pale blue with a fringe of white tassels running along the seams.

"Hey-*looo*— new boat, who dis?" the Ixbullix called out in the characteristic sing-songy drawl.

"*Heyy!*" Regina called back. "Where's the party, friend?" Then to the three of them, harder: "Keep it light or don't say anything, let me lead."

The boat sidled up to the pier, bringing all of them face to face.

"Oo! Dang girl, you lookin fierce! Jungle-style, whassup?"

"We're heading back to Heaven. Gotta mirror on that thing?"

"I sure better. Yins menfolk comin too? *Lo there, boys.*"

"Yes, us too please." Felix said.

"Oo, this one's polite! Look atcha witcha Wizard, dang girl! So. Ch'all cool, right?"

"Oh, of course! Super cool. They're with it. All forward-thinking minds here. Jimmy is Zuri, and Vic here, he's super poor too, got a working class type thing going on."

"Hmm."

"In a cool way."

"Well alright. Getcher all on then."

"Wait, yent gonna charge us nuffin?" Vic said.

Regina rolled her eyes. "Come on."

"Wot? I tought dey might do us a ferry fee, s'cool wif me. Yeh, en danks en all." he remembered at the end.

"Whatsa friend but a free ride?" the Xbullix said. "Here. Yins gonna fit, butcha gotta squeeze, come on, yep, boat's rollin."

They sat down in the boat, squeezing all their stuff in. Their boat guide leaned sidesaddle on the outboard fan motor and toggled it with a long arm. It surged up to speed, and went to rejoin the huge convoy of boats now flowing past them. Regina leaned to the rearview mirror on the oarlock and rearranged her face the best she could. The boys said nothing, Vic fidgeting, Felix petrified, Jimmy angsty and pensive.

"Dang, lively crowd, huh?" the Xbullix said to their silence.

"Sorry, my friends are all tired," Regina said. "Long hunting day."

"No trubs hun, I like 'em strong and silent too. We just be a little before yins can putcher feet up. Hold on now." they tapped the rudder, angling them sidelong, and popped the little outboard motor up to speed.

Felix filled his eyes with the train of boats. They were cutting to intersect it at its shoulder, by now it filled the expanse of river in their view, and was still curving around the bend upstream. The procession was made of all sorts of craft. The biggest at the head, the Big Boat, had a deck on top— three stories above the water, a basket of bright lights and the drumbeat they could hear, over the dull roar of the paddlewheels crushing on the surface. Behind it a segment of smaller-but-still-huge ships swept, yachts and multimasters, tapering down into the convoy of hundreds of mid-sized boats that made up most of the pad being pulled downstream. He awed at the bigness of it.

“This is massive.” Felix said off-hand, when they were slowing down. “I mean, I’ve seen big pads in the harbor, from a distance, and read about them— but this is the biggest I’ve ever seen.”

“Ooh! Cutie!” their captain laughed and fanned themselves with their hand. “You gotsta stop, you know I have a little thing for cute curious Wizard-type boys, right? Where on the island you stay at?”

“I, um...” Felix started, flustered.

“Dont,” Vic grunted under his breath.

Regina stepped in to explain. “So I’m from Freedom, but these two—”

Vic cut her off and turned to their driver.

“It aint nuffin, kay, can ye juss do da boat ting bruv? Leave him alone, we all tired, like she said.”

Their driver went silent. If a pin dropped somewhere nearby; they all heard it.

The Xbullix sucked their teeth.

“Hey,” Regina said, “sorry, he didn’t mean it like—”

“I ain’t no *bruv*,” they whipped at Vic.

“Yah,” Vic said, “I know—”

“Then whyja say it?”

“Its juss the way I talk, innit? Wait, dint ye call her ‘girl’ a sec before?”

“Yah,” they replied with an eyeroll, “cause she’s presenting as *femme*, ovvo. Xbullix don’t *present*, we *are*. Don’tcha get it twisted.” All of the playfulness had been replaced by indignation with a flash. They gripped the wheel and hmped forward without another word.

“Well, fook me then, fine.” Vic said, a little too loud, slapping his hands down on his pants.

“Hey, so we’re just trying to get home, when we get to the boat, do you know anyone who will take us to the city?” Regina said, lightening her tone.

“You *said* they was cool.”

“We are! We’re *cool*, I swear, Vic’s just had a rough... life, really, he’s still learning.”

“Luv, I can—”

“No you cannot speak for yourself, not right now.” Regina said swiftly to him, then smiled a waitress’s grin.

“*Mmmm-hm.*” The boat pilot said, looking coolly back to the river, the tension thick. After a second more of awkward silence, Felix tried to bridge the gap. “Hey, so, just so you know, he calls everybody that, like, friends from the neighborhood. He’s from the Causeways and he doesn’t use it like in a, you know, a gendery way, like to assume—”

“Ugh, he ain’t cute no more, girl, make him stop! Fore I just drop yins all off right here instead.” They casually indicated the watery deep.

“Both of you, please, just shush.” Regina said. “Be like Jimmy.”

She turned to their captain sweetly. “Thank you again, just anywhere dry is fine.”

“Sure,” the Xbullix flashed back. “Good thing yins are headed back quick.”

The ferry driver suddenly dashed the motor off, and shrugged off their lacy white garment, the flipped backwards off the boat, leaving it strewn in the empty seat. In three seconds, the water in front of the boat broke, and their ferryperson reappeared, pulling a towrope keithed to the prow.

The boat was coming to the thicket of little skipboats like theirs, a layer of smaller boats on the pad's edges. As they drew close Felix saw how they were all tethered together, being pulled along in a tensioned grid of rope that held every vessel all the way from the front of the cluster.

Swimming, the Xbullix guided them into the narrow space between two boats, forcing all aboard to duck the neck-level connector cord without warning. They were guided in through seven layers of dinghies, pole rafts, and skiffs lashed in tandem before coming to a three-meter alley before a row of bigger boats, the real start of the pad cluster's edge.

The skiff captain's form splashed back onto the dock ahead of them, dripping naked. They let the boat coast the last few meters before extending a long leg, catching the craft and bringing them within stepping without a bump.

They extended one hand, fingers pointed down, and Regina handed their clothes back up.

"Look, again, I'm sorry for him—" Regina said.

"Oh, don't worry bout me, I ain't petty." They said, slipping the garment back on. "Yins juss worry boutcher friends there. Come on, pop on up," the Xbullix said, tone clipped, but forgiving. They stood in turn to carefully cross the gap above the swarming waters, between wood and metal and thick twisted knots. Jimmy crossed, and they handed the packs to him. Felix stepped over relatively smoothly, and then thought maybe he should have let Regina go first, but wasn't sure. She followed.

Vic took the step. As he did, the Xbullix nudged the boat lip with their foot when his leg was up. The boat moved out and Vic fell forward, missing the dock with his toe, feet splashing the water as his head hit the wooden lip and he scrambled for a grip, nails slipping on the boards.

"Whoops," the Ixbullix said, taking a step back.

Felix heard the splash and turned, but Regina got to Vic first. He scrambled down to help her pull him up. He felt Vic's anger through his tensing forearm as he hauled up, spluttering and swearing.

"Welcome aboard, bruv!" The Ixbullix said with a caustic smile. As Vic lunged, they jumped back down into the water behind the dock, disappearing into a heap of bubbles.