

## V

“*Fook you!*” Vic’s voice rang out, before he was even standing again. “TRY THAT AGAIN, YOU FOOKIN SNAKE!” Blood was welling from the gash on his forehead.

“We should take dis boat!” Vic said, dripping profusely. His assailant hadn’t even tied it down yet.

“Not a good way to stay alive.” Regina said.

“Come on man, just let it go.” Felix said. “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Wot, so I’m juss suppose to let em do woteva dey want to me? It ent fookin fair.”

“If you control your awful effing personality, we won’t have any more problems.” Regina said.

“I dint even say nuffin! Dats why I hate dese guys, girls, wotevah they fookin are. Fook.”

“Maybe don’t try to figure it out while we’re here,” she said.

“No problem! Dis were yer idea. I ent tryna make new friends or none a dat.”

“Oh, I know.” Regina said. “So sorry for getting us a ride. Now come on, we gotta move, this is someone’s houseboat we’re standing on, I think.”

True. There was a dim light through the curtained windows behind them. They had been dropped on the first boat with a deck big enough for them to stand on, the outer rim of the pad’s more solid core of mid-sized vessels. The craft were all jigsawed into place and connected with line bridges of thick juterope, holding each craft about two meters from the next, all woven together so that each dragged the ones behind them, all dragged by the bigboat at the head of the pad. The cabins, hulls, and outboard fan cages were so thick they couldn’t see across to the river’s far side anymore, it was like a whole neighborhood was sliding down the river on a snake’s back.

Regina led them into the mass, turning sideways to stand on the thick cord stretched between their deck and the next, grasping the rope at hand level to shimmy across. Once they all made it across, there were three more of the two-rope bridges, and Regina picked the one that pointed them diagonally inward and to the fore of the convoy.

The Xbullix, Felix knew, started as a small river tribe, living off longboats, trading and opportunistically pillaging tribes and animal populations along the river. After the Founders smoky, flaming arrival, riding down the failing hulls of the great Arks, plenty of tribes had noticed. The Xbullix, however, had been the first to approach them on the island in the lake, and after a brief meeting in a tent, they emerged with a handshake and began a swap with the Wizards. They accepted scraps of the Wizard’s tech and did deals on credit for delivering foodstuffs and knowledge of their new homeland, and this core relationship had never broken to date. It became the Xbullix’s main gig in short order.

Quicker than the Zuri, the Xbullix realized these daft newcomers’ magic and way of life was borne atop a deep and wealthy power capable of wondrous things no one in the Valley had ever dreamt. The minor river tribe adapted, eager to become this power’s ally by making trades with the early, helpless settlers in a way that met their purposes.

And as the city grew, they were the first tribe in line to prosper, molding their own shadow empire to the ridges of the Academocracy. They absorbed its tech and ambition, siphoning its wealth while scoffing its laws, so that most Xbullix lived (if they lived) fatter and more carefree than their citizen counterparts in Heaven, or really, anywhere in the jungle. Now they floated on that vultured wealth, running casinos and brothels off the boats up and down the water, reveling in their material success and using it to manicure their symbolic aesthetics to realized perfection.

The four of them moved more forward and in, becoming surrounded by a mix of custom craft, some long and speedy like Felix's favorite cigarettes, many rigged for fish or crab trawling, others fat and luxurious for slow living, all bound in a web one next to another, floating along with the same purpose for now, but able to fan out as a swarm in minutes if something big enough to threaten the pad emerged. They all pulled along at the averaged rate, almost as steady as flat land. They skulked past barrel cookfires and little barbeques, strummed music from porch groups cast in the darkness. Bugs were everywhere, curiously licking their skin. Fireflies made the depth of the stars unsure, popping off in random patterns that occasionally synced.

They found not every boat was connected. Dead ends abounded. Regina asked some drinkers for directions, and then they promptly got lost because the directions were conflicting and indecipherable. They kept bearing towards the loudest drum sounds, always on listen for padded footsteps trailing.

"Blud dese ships is slick, innit." Vic mumbled begrudgingly, wringing out his clothes as he went. Felix agreed with the rare positive thought from his friend. Vic was a total boathead and dreamt of owning his own one day, a deep-seated a marker on the personal quest for success his friend held in his mind.

"Yeah, check that one out!" Felix said, trying to stoke him up.

"True, fookin aye. Dats a solid ten thou propellah." Vic said. "Not like dese mans pay for anyting. Muss be nice."

"Hey, we're coming up to something here, be quiet. Be quiet anyway." Regina said.

The boat cabins ahead were thinning out. There was an open space, though the head of the ship was far off. They came to the last boat before it, and the water gap widened to uncrossable.

Before them was a huge, flat-roofed barge, big enough to fit an Aerobus launch terminal on. They looked left, and right, and saw the whole core of the huge pad was a train of these, stretching back as far as they could see. Across the barge rooves, they could see the layers of houseboats continue, so that the wide flat boats were all surrounded, invisible to view from the riverbank.

"That's why it looks so big," Felix said.

"Yeah, crazy, I've never seen these up close. And so many." Regina said.

"You've seen these?" Felix said.

"Yeh, it's a trash barge bruv, dey go by all the time on Merit, back at the ends." Vic said. Regina agreed with a sound.

"But it has windows." Felix said, pointing at the portholes every few meters on sides of the big blocky ship.

"Dey all do, bruv."

"Do they?"

Regina creased her brow and pondered. "I guess I don't know. I've never looked at one this close."

"Why do you think there are so many together? I've never seen this many."

"Ya ever been onna pad like dis?"

"No."

"Well den dats proolly why."

"But why would a trash barge need portholes?"

"To look at the trash? Someone got to, innit? But I dunno— ay, is dat where we goin?"

Vic pointed downriver to the head of floating, blocky structures. The line of barges ran almost to the pad's beginning, and they could see all the way up the line to the front. Over the empty space echoed thicker noise— instruments, laughing and shouting.

"If you can handle it." Regina said.

"I could handle a drink or five, dey got dat?" Vic said, glancing at Felix for empathy.

"You won't be disappointed about that part. Come on, more bridges, this way..." she said, leading them to the rope at the front of the boat with a swish of her hand.

"Yeah, we can sit down, have a drink, and hear what Jimmy has to tell, and then figure out what happened to us." Felix said, falling in behind them.

"Sure," Regina said. "And we can try to find someone with a boat who we can pay to take us to the city faster. As slow as this thing is moving it will be noon tomorrow before we get home."

"Ay, now she says someting smart! Fasta were off dis floatin junkyard the betta."

It took them another 20 minutes of rope, boat, rope, boat etc. to come near the front. The ships grew longer, bigger as they moved up, stratified by size. The four crawled across yachts big as apartment blocks in the city. They passed magnificent examples of Xbullix carving in the prow and hulls of boats, the faces of watery animals looking uncannily alive in the sporadic torchlight.

The Big Boat was twice the size of the largest mansionship they passed. A balustrade staircase rose up its backside, climbing in three splitting stories to the top, a balconied landing at each middle juncture, fluted with straight-sided columns. At the apex, an archway was lit, not by torchlight, but by fine magelamps that never dimmed. Off port and starboard of the ship, two gargantuan paddlewheels spun slowly, the teams of teeth-like wooden board rows that pulled the whole contraption forward and powered everything.

Felix felt a little thrill at seeing a Big Boat up close as they moved up the architectural steps. He was accidentally fulfilling a dream of his past self, a silly life goal of drinking on a fancy boat, but a life goal nonetheless. A little jolt of wonder pinged his brain as he looked up at the sky, and he couldn't help but smiling. The beauty of the world crossed his mind, and fargone for a second was the Storm-worry, the City, his life and his father, and he had a private naïve thought—*This is my adventure*. Very quickly the feeling was gobbled up again, but he did have it, for a moment.

## VI

They crested the last stairs. Their eyes grew level with a plain-air pleasure room. From a thatched bandstand a well-togged quintet dashed out a dancy melody. A moat of partners hugged and cut rugs, twisting each other around in complicated loops under the arm, grinding hips together with gusto. The backdrop of it all was a mezzanined wall, the Big Boat's bridge, rising above the deck to look forward on the river and steer, Felix guessed— a single weak light glowed through the glass window looking down over the floor. At each corner set a bar with a snappy tender and backlit colonnade of liquor decanters. A regular stream ran between these and the spread of gambling tables ringing the space between the dance floor and the boat's railings. Off either side, two gargantuan and groaning paddlewheels flipped liquid tons of water under and up over, creating a perpetual waterfall that meshed into the music and chatter, advancing the massive caravan.

The crowd was diveish, a loud-laughing harder sort, perambling about and grinning at one another beneath the plumes of good-smelling smoke making way to the sky. It was only about half Xbullix on first scan— there were just as many Heavenite faces, some Homesteaders, many Zuri women in scant dresses woven from colorful reeds, some sitting on the laps of jubilant Rangers with dice in their hands or luring others to the dance floor. Some Xbullix covered themselves in drab, practical gear for boating, airy tunics, belted shorts or reed skirts. Most went the other way, and dressed in heaps of colored fabrics, facial features extended into fantastic proportions with indigo, rougebush powder, hair sculpted with sap and wax into flame shapes, or left long and braided around the shoulders.

*Expression of their soul*, Felix presumed, as if they had chosen to turn inside out somehow. He felt a familiar pang, of looking at people who belonged where they were. He had never had that, before or after his raising in the Colleges, always with that looking-in feeling, unable to shake the self-consciousness of an outsider. The Wizards called themselves the Community, but he had lived in Lower Heaven long enough to make it laughable. The chilly exchanges and power transactions that passed for closeness in those towers was nothing like the bonds that Xbullix, or Zuri, or even Causeway kids shared, so it seemed to him.

The currents of the room swept them to an unoccupied bar top, a horizontal block of wood extended outward from a pillar holding up the rain shade over the bar lounge. The more comfortable seats were reserved for the gamblers on the floor, here they hopped up on barstools that bit their rears.

"You three don't move. I'mma get us a drink." Regina took off toward the bar.

Vic grunted. "How bad is dis?" he said, daubing the new head wound he had acquired. "Fookin garbage, mate, am I a need a stitch?"

"Better safe than sorry, you could get a health potion. Doesn't the guild provide those once you're a Ranger?"

With infection rampant between the City and jungle's prolific diseases, adventurers kept close watch on any wounds that weren't going to heal solo, making sure to apply a health potion to accelerate the skin growth. It burned though, and of course cost a beautiful bill if you couldn't get them wholesale through where you worked, so Vic was adverse to them and his face showed it. He played with the flap of skin.

"Not for freeknifers bruv. Not less ye pay into a pool beforehand, and dats juss payin for shet ye ent bought yet, innit?"

Felix made a show of squinting at it again.

“You’ll probably be fine. Not that deep.”

“Yeah, prolly, true. It ent even hurt. Cause dese frogs is pussies bruv, innit.” He said, whispering and checking over his shoulder. He used the opportunity to appraise the room, eyes lingering on the more extreme spectrums. Baroque was in every corner— Felix saw a bedraggled man with a shag beard down to his bared nipples, half naked on a tabletop, slashing ink with a pen onto a notebook, crumpled wine-soaked pages making a bower around him. A shifty looking man in an immaculate sharkskin suit and oversized fedora talked and laughed to himself alone at an empty table while a dancer with a face painted on her stomach did contact acrobatics with a girl in a tigerskin, moving the robe between their bodies as they flipped and suspended each other.

“Uh! So fake bruv. S’a fookin mistake, dats wot dis is. Mandem here bruv, deys gonna smile in ye face, jub ye inna fookin back, en den act all offended bout doin it! Like, tellin me how to talk, I should be the one offended, not him. Makes my fookin head spin.”

“Well, you were a little snappy with hi— with them. And you called them ‘bruv’, they hate that shet. You know that.”

“I dint even think about it. Man! Lotsa people say bruv. Friendly ting. An erryone knows, including dese mandem here, it ent like how dey make it. S’like, dey always make it bout dem, outta nowhere. Dey *tryna* git pissed off, ent my fault.”

The boat shifted beneath them gently. Felix thought about what he thought.

“Well, it’s more like, if they don’t speak up, it’s like they’re agreeing with you, tacitly. Implicitly... subtly I mean. Because it’s not really everyone, it’s just people you know, right? So to speak in ways that assume everyone agrees with you, or knows a particular thing, means that everyone who doesn’t isn’t included in your definition of everyone. Which is kinda like implying you’re better than them, or your way of life is, that they are outside of normal, and less worthy of respect. They take it personally. Respect is a really big concept to these guys. Them. To them.”

Vic rolled his eyes and flicked a lamp moth away from his face. “But like, bruv. With the genda thing— it litrally is everyone but dem. Us, the Zuri— right Jimmy? Lookaddem. Boy. Girl. And it’s not like I was telling em dey had to be like, *anything*, dey the one tryna tell me how to talk! Why can dey make such a big deal out of it, innit?”

“Well, *because* they can, right? Agree with their methods or not, they’ve carved out space for themselves and their ideas, including that one, and we are in that space.” He kept explaining to Vic, before Regina got back and the two of them started picking at each other again. “But they’re also not wrong— even if they weren’t going to stab you to assert themselves, we should apply the same logic to ideas from other cultures as we do for the ones we grew up with. You like your differences respected, right? Everybody is outside of the norm on something, and if you immediately write something off because it doesn’t agree with your worldview, it’s ignorant, dangerous even. Like with the Stormtouched...”

“Ughhh, bruv, fooks sake, dead it.”

“No! Real quick, just listen. I’m saying, for a lot of the same reasons they don’t use gender, Xbullix society doesn’t have any negative connotations about being Stormtouched. Well, that’s not entirely true. They still see it as a madness, but like, I read about their artists...”

“Okay, what are we talking about?” Regina said, swooping up with three baubled glasses, filled with fluorescent orange liquid and chunks of melon. She set them down in a sweating triangle and popped up on a stool.

“Juss some bollocks.” Vic said.

“I was saying, how the Xbullix see the Storms differently.”

“Yeah, totally.” Regina said, head turned away, casing the room.

“Yeah, and like how, because of that, this is actually a pretty good place to talk about things...”

Vic took a huge glug of his drink and groaned skyward.

“Right, right.” She said, swinging her head back. “So, what then, are we listening to Jimmy?” Regina said.

“Yes! Please. Let’s start there.” Felix said. He turned to Vic. Vic set his drink down and leaned forward towards Jimmy.

“Alrite, how long is dis gonna take blud?”

Jimmy cleared his throat and looked back at him with a pause.

“It is a legend of my people since before time’s counting.” he said.

“Rite, how long.”

Jimmy thought.

“Two hours, giveth or take.”

Vic puffed his cheeks and blew air. “Yeh, not here, innit? Too many ears. You draw attention wheneva ye git goin.”

Jimmy’s eyes narrowed. “Fine.”

“Ay! Dont screwface at me, ent like anyones tellin *you* not to talk.”

Jimmy flipped his hood back up and leaned back out of the conversation, crossing his arms and putting a tough look on his face.

Regina cocked her neck. “He’s standing up for his *ancient cultural ways*, something you don’t have any, or any perception, of.”

“Lay off me, yer a fookin Causeway kid too, innit?”

“Hey, we can still talk about—” Felix started.

“Bruv! No I said!”

“I just want us to discuss what we saw! Why is that so wrong?”

“Cuz. Im tryna help you. Up dere, you was talking bout makin a plan or some shet. Like if we talk, it means we gotta do a ting. But dats the trap, innit? How it gets ye. Like dat lady dis morning. She had a whole plan written down, ent she? Think bout it. I ent the one, bruv. I ent got time or the dosh to be a flya. I got *goals* bruv, I ent givin em up. You too. Like I said yesterday— ye gotta focus on you. Dats ye plan, or should be. Anyting else is the You Know Wot workin on ye, and I dont want it workin on me.”

“No!” Felix cried. “You don’t get it! We are not going crazy!” he said, rattling the drinks when the flat of his hand hit the table.

“Sure, sure bruv.”

“Can you back me up here?” Felix said to Regina, who was looking over towards the gambling tables again.

“What?”

“The Storm!” Felix whispered harshly. “Does it not make you see how things need to be changed?”

Regina thought. “Uhhhh, I mean, yeah, of course. I’m all about change, don’t get me wrong. Ask any of my real friends, they’ll tell you, I’m deadass Miss Eff the System. All day.”

“So?”

“That’s the thing— I already try. I try not to eat meat, I support small businesses on the Causeway, I am outspoken about my queerness and go to the displacement protests whenever they tear the old buildings down... I mean, I do work for corporations when I have to, but I spend

the whole time stealing from them to make up for it. Like, I was actually planning to steal a whole Aero soon and try to sell it *to* the Xbullix, before you three effed *my effing employment up* for me. Half for the money, yeah, but also, like, as a political action, cause eff iPhly, charging fifty bills a head, buying out smaller companies, driving the price of everything up. Eff em, I'll take their shet, eff yeah. But, like, what else am I supposed to do? Kill a Wizard? A Ranger? I mean, I joke around and yell about that sort of stuff sometimes when I'm fired up, but what's it actually going to do besides get me thrown in a prison barge? What are you proposing we actually do with this plan of yours?"

Now Vic swung his head back to Felix, reinforcing her question.

"I don't know! I'm not saying I know, I'm saying we won't even know where to start looking for an answer if we don't ever think through what we just saw. It will just fester there in our heads, this vision of the end, as much as you try to repress it, or say that you're already doing enough, you'll *know*. You'll know in your heart that something more needs to be done, and you will always have questions, about what you could have. That's where I think the madness comes from— not from trying to do something, but from letting the pressure of the vision and the pressure of life all build up until you snap. That's why I want to talk about it Vic! I feel like I *am* going to go crazy if I don't try to do something to stop what we saw. So please!"

"Sounds personal bruv. It ent affectin me none," Vic said.

"Oh come on!"

"Boys. Hey. Boys. Simmer," Regina hushed them. "Not cool. You two obviously aren't going to figure it out tonight. Just shut up and drink, please. They're cheap." she said.

Felix flung his hands up and slouched on the barstool. There was a beat of silence.

"Hey. How much money do you two have left?" Regina said to Vic after a sip.

"Wot?"

"I'm trying to find us a ride out of here. But I might have to buy some drinks, schmooze a few people. I can't just go up and start asking, or they'll think I'm a mark, like you two."

"Ha! Dats farfookinfetchd luv, me lettin you hold a cent."

"Are you thick? I'm trying to get us home faster."

"Ask the mute ova here, I know hes got sum. Y'ent chiselin nuffin off me."

"Okay," Regina's hand flipped up. She popped off the stool with her drink. "I can't, I can't with you anymore. You were better when you were full of yourself. *I'll* go figure it out, *you* all stay here and keep your heads down."

She picked up her drink and walked away with a parting eyeroll. Felix couldn't think of anything to say as she left.

"Fookin good riddance." Vic said when she left earshot, raising his glass.

"Dude, you're being a total asshole to everyone."

"An you wanna be Lord o' the Flyas, parently."

"No, I just— actually, whatever. You're acting weirder than all of us combined after the You Know What. It's making you act mean as shet."

"Eh, well, Erryone tinks Im juss a fookin Merit scumbag, innit? So it figgas."

He took another drink and scooped some of the drunken cubes of melon into his mouth with the garnishes. Felix hadn't picked his up yet.

Vic pointed at the untouched glass. "Ye say Im actin weird— come on man, drink it off. Feel betta."

Felix watched crystal condensation shedding off the glass's bell. His fingers itched. His throat pulled towards it like a lodestone. His body craved it. The first drink promised so much, a

shortcut to the person who didn't hate himself, a person who could enjoy this moment. A person who others could stand to be around. A person who could forget enough to sleep. It levered in a distance from his Problems, but those had just been his old problems, dropped now to lowercase by the Storm in his head.

The world was dying. His world. Of which he was a part. As much as anyone. The difference he made was no different than anybody else's difference. The Storm showed they were all bound together, equally doomed. And with that thought stuck in his head, he couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that his choices mattered now, and even worse, that they always had.

And, Vic's speech yesterday had him all prickly and self-conscious, made him realize his drinking had at some point become a Thing, a concept people could identify and point at as a part of him. Which probably wasn't good.

These were all just thoughts though. He was definitely still about to slurp this glass clean, once the thoughts were over. Plus he was really hungry and was stalling to make sure the first drink didn't make him vom. He checked himself. *I'll be fine for one.* He took a centering breath, reached for the glass and began.