

## VII

Regina spoke true, the drinks were cheap. Enough to get two more of the big-hipped concoctions, to go with a plate of barbecued salamander and yam strips. That and the third round of drinks after dinner about cleaned Vic's pockets out even as it filled them up. Jimmy refused to speak, drink, or eat, displaying what he thought of everything around them with disdainful squints and *tsks* every so often. Felix's head swam with liquor as his thoughts clouded and the color and noise all around him ran together.

"Bruv, wottawegonn do, bruv," Vic said a little later, his cheek squished against the base of his palm, holding his head up off the table. His cut had bled a little more, half-dry blood smearing his forehead. "S'hopeless. Fooked. The Rangers bruv, dey'll know. Im gonna git canned for sure."

*That's the least of his worries, one of the voices in Felix's head said. He's never seen where the Stormtouched get taken.*

Hardly no one, not even most Wizards, knew what all happened in the Bio Department basements. It didn't make pleasant dinner conversation. Felix declined to bring it up now, as he had so many times.

"It'z okay," Felix slurred, wobbling on the stool. "They can't tell. No one can. It'z a good thing, it bein the end an all. You'll zeee. Fook the Wizardz, Fook fookin Heaven. Fook alla it. Dezerve it."

"S'not good bruv, s'not. And s'not real. But s'okay dat its not. Its juss anudda ting in da way. But dats life."

They sat there in sodden solidarity for a moment.

"Zo you think zhe found zomeone? A ride *urpp* home?"

"She ditched us bruv, fuggeddit. She ent findin no one a ride buts herself. Bigmouth thief bitch." he said, missing his mouth a little with his cup and spilling on his shirt.

"Hey. *Hey*. Zhe's not that bad, don't zay that. Zhe zaid zhe'd figure it out, an come get uz."

"She dint say dat lass part bruv, she's out for erself." he repeated.

Felix raised his head from the table, slowly to allow the shapes to focus. He scanned for Regina nervously, trying not to catch anyone's eye on accident, still feeling like an intruder. Eventually he caught her hair color at one of the gambling tables.

"Over there," Felix said, pointing dumbly.

"Yeh I know bruv, shes bin chattin wiff dose same blokes for half an hour, en dey ent talkin bout no boats."

"Oh," Felix said. "Well..." he trailed, not sure what to do next.

"Fook it," Vic said. "She's had enuff time. Less go. Cummon." He stood and bottom-upped his drink.

"Wait, go where?" Felix said.

"Jimmy, up!" Vic said, snapping fingers in his zoned-out face. "Where ya tink bruv? She ent doin it. Im tired of dis goatshet, less git it done. Cummon."

And then he took off, cutting straight through the dancefloor, beelining for Regina. Felix's leg tangled in the chair as he stood up in haste, nearly falling. He recovered and grabbed his drink, and tried to catch up, weaving through casino crowd. Jimmy strode past him from behind.

Vic, with his soggy pack strapped tight to his back, confidently stumbled through the Big Boat's busy floor. Felix's lean courage faded further as they came close to the half-moon table, feeling like the room's eyes were on him.

Regina was sat on the scalloped red leather bench talking to two Ixbullix partiers, one on either side of her. Her body was cheated out to face them both, head switching side to side. She leaned back, stemmed glass hanging in her fingers. Felix caught a glimpse of her before she saw them, telling a story with an easy smile. As Felix, Vic, and Jimmy approached, her eyes hardened and she made them stand there without greeting them.

“...shouldn’t have to worry about the doors,” she was saying, between dice rolls, “we work for the Aeroline, we have the codes. Once its going down we hustle the passengers off easy, like, the hardest part is disabling the tracking device in the dash and on the wing, but one of the guys on my crew is like, a tech mastermind. Once that’s down, the Wizards and iPhly can’t find the thing, so it’s in the clear, we can *get away* clean.” The emphasis she directed toward them three, still unnoticed by her two new friends.

They were jostled around by the floor throng and Felix had time to observe the pair Regina spoke to. The taller one had the sides of their olivine head clean-shaven with a tight bun pulled on the top of their dome, their profile bald and colored with a writhing pattern of dotted paisley above an ear arrayed with silver dermal studs. The second, shorter and wider, ruddy skin charred with a long-term sunburn, hair pasted with pomade in a perfect middle-part, wore a dark suit with buttons open to frame a dangling gold medallion shaped like a monkey paw. Or it *was* a gold-dipped monkey paw, you never knew. They were younger among the Ixbullix, somewhere near twentyish, a few years behind Felix himself. Both wobbled with drink and leaned cockily toward Regina, hiding no intentions.

Felix’s brain’s first instinctual impression told him one was male one was female, some old animal part immediately sizing up the prominence in the taller one’s neck, the bulge of breasts on the other, both of their general body shapes, seeing them as a primal ancestor would have when encountering any other being on the plain. But that unspeakable thought was immediately overwritten by the cultural factors that were loaded into his head, a second layer of context, where he was and what he had learned during his life. He knew what they were going for, an intentional rejection of the lanes assigned to people based on their born male- or female-ness. The way they were dressed, the aesthetics they each promoted, that was more true to who these people were than the arbitrary blueprint of gender roles any one society had set. Those more colorful expressions were what he was supposed to pay attention to. *But*, they both clearly acting in a way he thought of as masculine, without a word exchanged he knew they were both hitting on Regina, in an overt, dogged way he was familiar with himself.

*And they certainly have me licked in the muscle department.* But he wasn’t really supposed to be thinking about any of this, it was all to be unspoken. The processing power to not think about it filled up Felix’s drunk brain, leaving him with little to think what to say next, and he found himself paralyzed in fear of saying the wrong thing again. He didn’t want to get his ass kicked, or worse, offend someone, demonstrate how uncool he really was.

“S’bold lil plan there, citygirl.” The taller Ixbullix with the piercings said cordially. “But ain’t them company-type smarties ya work for gonna know it’s yins that took it?”

“Oh, right, that’s another cool part. There are so many employees there— they run 24/7. Too cheap to do SIN checks, so we all used fakes to get hired.” She bragged to them. “Schedules are set by iPhly central, and you’re supposed to log every shift switch, but it’s a hassle, no one actually does it. So for the day of, our crew will all just trade for the shift after the schedule is posted and we’re gorgeous.”

“I tend to agree,” the other said, putting some honey in their voice and leaning a little closer to her.

“Shet, sounds like she got it all figured out,” said the first to the second, “so she must ain’t got no *professional*-type reason to come talkin to us.” They grinned, showing off a mouth of gold caps.

“Seems not buddy,” said the second back. “This must be a purely *social* calling,” they said. “Is it? You tryna let that hair down tonight girl?” they leaned in and twirled one of her loose strands around a finger.

“Afookinhem.” Vic said, making their entrance known.

The two Ixbullix turned their heads to them, both with versions of a sneer that Felix immediately felt was going to define their whole interaction.

“Oh word,” said the taller one. “Wassup. Whatcha want, boys?”

“Hi. Hi.” Felix said, doing a little hand/smile combo for everyone he made eye contact with.

“You find dat ting?” Vic said to Regina, speaking past them.

“I was in the middle of a story.”

The shorter one glanced at her. “You with ’m three?”

“No—”

“Why ch’all here then tho?” they tugged at their collar and got ready to stand. “She busy.”

“No,” Regina put her hand on their shoulder. “I mean, I came in with them, but I’m not *with* any of them.” She gave their neck a squeeze. “I’ll come get you three,” she said.

“Wait,” Vic said with a winnowing look, “In yer likkle ‘steal the Aero’ plan ye’s juss sayin, wot happens wiff the people whose shifts ye switch for?”

She narrowed her eyes. “*Well*, we were going to do a three-way switch to make it more confusing, and like I said, fake IDs, so we’re fine. You should lower your—”

“Not *you*, wot happens to dem? The udda folk. Ye coworkas. The City Corps will come forrem. Prolly get dey doors kicked down, innit? En dey lose dey jobs, at least. S’wrong.”

“Oh what,” she said. “You going to report me, or just shake me down?”

“Ha! I ent tryna *git* nuffin, I ent no thief like you. S’just wrong, stealin is. Yer a bad person, the lot of ye, should be ashamed, forrilly tho. I told ye!” Vic said to Felix, drawing him in. “She a schema and a thief, true and true.” He finished the dregs of his glass off and placed it down on the table.

Felix knew this mode of Vic’s; sometimes when drunk he got itchy to throw a few punches, calm his agitations. He’d start needling away until someone took a swing at him. Which was one thing in one of their Merit neighborhood bars, but Felix really wished Vic wasn’t doing it now. He laughed nervously, like it was a joke, trying to think of how to change the subject.

“I spose tho,” Vic was already starting his next line, “Dat ent the kinda detail ye lot care about round here, do ye. S’all fair play. Innit? No honor mongst fookin thieves, but who needs dat, when ye got a posh boat anna fun outfit for the evenin? Nah.”

“The actual fook yins sayin, child?” the taller one said.

“You kinda sound like you’re tryna get knocked out,” the shorter echoed.

“Oh, ignore him, he’s just a drunk idiot, and an effing Ranger—” Regina tried to regain control.

“I ent neva been knocked out, dey can find out...” Vic said to no one in particular, doing a little hop-step in place, loosening up his arms and bouncing a little at the table’s lip.

*Whapp*. The croupier slapped the wedge-end of their stick down on the table, close enough for Vic to feel the wind. They had been standing in silent attention this whole time, an older Ixbullix with an immaculately drooping moustache.

“Bets for the next roll,” they said. “Gentlefolx, a game is in progress. If you are not playing, kindly vacate this area. And please, remember the penalties for upsetting the vibe with violence.”

“More violence, izzit?” Vic responded.

“Which we certainly do not want.” Regina said, over Vic’s cracking knuckles. “That’s not very fun. One second, I’ll be right back—”

Regina slid out over the tall one’s lap and came around the table, shoving Vic and Felix back.

“What the actual fook dude? Are you trying to get drowned?” she whispered angrily.

“I fought ye was gittin us a ride home, not a ride on some dick.”

“I was! Those two have a boat, and I could have convinced them to take all of us but you effed it up! And you!” she flipped to Felix.

“Are you just going to stand there? I know why *he’s* not talking, what about you, standing there like a limp-prick? He’s your friend, not mine, control him!”

“I’m zorry,” Felix mumbled. Regina made a sound of exasperation.

“Fook. Okay,” she said. “You guys go sit down and be nice—”

“I dont wanna—”

“And I don’t *trust you* to not cause a scene now,” Regina kept rolling, “So you’re doing it. Talk about boats, or something normal, you effing drunk mongers. Maybe I can still convince them. Or maybe we can win enough money to pay them for a ride.”

“Maybe we could gamble with them for a ride home?” Felix piped up, trying to contribute something.

Vic laughed. “Great one bruv, an whaddya tink she’d have to wager for dem to be interested?”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, not a good idea. Just act normal, try to win a few rounds and let me do my thing.”

They rejoined the table quickly, with an incredulous look from the Ixbullix pair. Regina wiggled back between them the boys slid down, Jimmy and Vic on one side, Felix closest to the dealer. The red felt table was marked with white lines, each numbered. From the looks of it they played Muskarat, a dice game based on escalating stakes on what roll the dice dealer would hit next, with a complicated system of side bets for certain rarer patterns.

“You know the rules?” the dealer asked patiently.

“Yez.” Felix answered for them, holding down another burp. He didn’t add how he hated them, how since the probability of the next die roll didn’t change based on the previous die roll, it was essentially just a random guessing game.

“Yah, less fookin go,” Vic said, windmilling a few crumpled bills he had left out onto the table. The dealer gave him a circumspect look as they collected them and stacked a small handful of chips in front of Vic, who split them with Felix.

“And you?” the dealer said to Jimmy, who just stared at him.

“He dont talk,” Vic said. “He’s juss watchin.”

“Okay but,” said the taller Ixbullix to Regina, “I’m still confused why they’re here?”

“I’m sorry, I brought them aboard.” she said with a pout. “I need to keep them out of trouble. I’ll make sure they play nice. Let’s just see where the night takes us.” And then she put her mouth right against their pierced ear, saying something that made their eyebrows jump up. They clutched Regina’s body against theirs and flashed a nasty smile at Felix, Vic, and Jimmy.

“I could get behind that,” they said, lip rings clicking.

“And me in front,” the shorter said. He pressed close to her other side. Regina gave them an overstated giggle.

“You two are so bad!”

“Look how good she is at makin friends bruv,” Vic said across the table to Felix, “Wonda wot her secret is?”

“You talk pretty big for someone with short money,” the short one said, pointing a chubby finger at Vic.

“Dats efficiency, mate.”

“More like poverty, by the looks.” they said.

“Dis is wot the wages of honest work looks like, ever heard of it?” Vic was raising his voice again. Felix desperately wished his friend could find another way to distract himself.

“Brakka, Brakka, Brakka,” the taller one said to their friend. “Lay back, take a little chill pill. These fools...” the two shared a look themselves, across Regina’s brow, “don’t deserve our energy. I feel bad, honestly.” They looked at Vic softly. “I’d be angry if I were you too.”

“Im in a great mood, I made my moneys for the day, innit? I luv sittin round gabbin wiff lowlifes, spendin some pocket change.” He lay back on the chair, feigning relaxation, even though Felix knew this was basically all the money they had left in the world. Vic shot up again. “Can we get some more fookin drinks round here?” he yelled to the floor in general. Felix, eyes on the Ixbullix, watched them share a look at Vic while he was turned for a second, followed by a shrug.

“If you are all quite done.” said the croupier, talking to the drunk table like children.

“We’re sorry, we’re sorry!” Regina said, taking another sip and bubbling, though Felix could see the gears cranking behind her eyes, working hard to keep it all light.

“Bets for the next roll,” they said in all serious, cranking a ten-second timer. They placed a handful of dice into a bowl atop a small contraption, a ramped tower to spill the dice down onto the table.

Vic shut up and began shifting his tokens onto the numbered slots, hands cool. A server slid up and began taking a drink order. Even knowing it was all completely random, Felix stressed about making the right choice and thinking of the name of a drink at the same time, and ended up just covering all the numbers Vic hadn’t, just before the buzzer went off.

“Uh, rockmelon punch, please!” he said, as the dice dropped. His voice squeaked a little bit and he sounded drunker than he meant to, and was pretty sure the shorter Ixbullix laughed at him.

The dice settled, clinking against rogue chips, and the dealer leaned in to count, announcing each number as they cleared it from the table, the digits rattling off their tongue as they plucked them back up with both hands. Their stick swerved down on the table, pushing the pot of chips around to their respective winners, sweeping a good fourth of them into a slot on the lip of the table for the house. It was a lucky roll for him, Felix barely kept up with the action but ended up with a few more glinting tokens than he had put in. Vic’s stash was cut in half when all was done, and the play started over.

“So,” the taller Ixbullix said while considering their tokens and next bet, “She said yins a Ranger? Dunno, sounds a bit hip-o-critical to me, you talking about thieves and allat.”

“Yup,” their companion said.

“Like, all the animals and the plants and whatnot yins take from the jungle, who do they belong to? Sounds kinda like some stealing to me.”

“Cummon.” Vic said with a sigh. “Erryone hunts, since the beginna time. S’fookin survival ting, innit.”

“Sure, whatever you like to *telll* yourself!” they sing-songed under their breath.

“S’animals, not people. Dey ent claimed yet, s’different.”

“Ain’t they belong to’mselves, as you do, and I do?”

“Dat ent even the same ting, br— blud, be serious.” Vic said.

“So what sets the beasts in the jungle apart from people in your city? We’re all animals when it comes down to it.” the second piled on.

“I think the very fact of the city itself sets human animals apart, doesn’t it?” Felix jumped in, trying to help Vic out. “Yes we’re all animals, but we’re the only animals that have a collective society, and the idea of property rights, right?”

“Yeh, right.” Vic said.

Encouraged, Felix went on: “And the idea of ownership is baked into the foundation of Heaven, so, like it or not—”

“All bets placed.” The dealer cut him off, sending the dice down again. This time, Regina had split her bets evenly between Felix and Vic’s so they covered the whole board and then some, the croupier’s wand swam around.

“Ha! Imagine lookin so dirty and talkin bout some *property rights!*” the shorter one said. “You couldn’t catch me. See baby,” they curled toward Regina as the chips got redivvied.

“This is why, when it comes down, I’m sorry, Xbullix got it figured and the city ain’t shet. You see,” the one called Brakka went on, finishing a gulp from his tumbler, “I say all the time. City people look at the world a weird way. Always drawin *lines*, everywhere yins can. Ch’all take a look at the lands and the beasts, say: we are not you. We something else. We betta. Ch’all all something else, *pssht*. But Xbullix look at world, say: we *are* you. We *lovvve* you. We play the games of the world on their terms, then, we play the best. And so the world love Xbullix the most. It’s true. Look!” He burst up to indicate the whole room with joy, all the happy, spending people underneath the ornate spell of the evening.

“And, everyone knows your ugly city is falling apart, like, what is going on, do the Heaven people need help or something? You should think on moving out, quick like a bunny, mean it.” They leaned in, and their hand fell hard against the table, rattling the chips.

*They see it too, in their own way.* the Storm said to Felix. He realized he hadn’t thought about it for a while, but here it was, burbling up again.

“Brakka, chill,” said the other. The Ixbullix shared a weighted glance across Regina.

“Watch it.” The tired dealer said, without any chill. “Bets.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Brakka said, flipping their hands up, leaning back. “I have mighty, powerful energies on this topic. Property rights, pah. So basic.”

This must have put a look on Felix’s face, because when he glanced back up the taller one was staring at him.

“Well?” they said.

“Hmm?” Felix replied.

“You were making a point. ‘like it or not’, you said. I want to know if I like it.”

“Oh. No, I—” Felix stumbled. “Well, I was going to say, one could argue—”

“But one shouldn’t—” Regina tried.

“Let’m speak, girl. All of us juss talkin.”

Regina said nothing, giving Felix a heavy, expectant look.

“Well...” Felix said, now speaking on manual and nervous. He tried to push down the liquor and tried to enunciate his thoughts neutrally. “Just that ... and this doesn’t mean I think Heaven is better, because I don’t— but the Zuri, the Xbullix, the Royal Alien Blood Empire, any the

tribes of the Valley. You lived on these lands for how long, millennia? Same resources available, and never built a flying machine. Or a tall building with a narrow base. Or a bridge like the Causeways, that tens of thousands of people can live on. The people of Heaven, same resources, different way of thinking: invents flight tech in two hundred years. And like, so, property rights, like it or not I was saying, are part and parcel of how Heaven has accomplished everything it has. So there must be something of value there, right?”

The dice cascaded down with a rattle.

“Nope, don’t like it.” the tall one said as the dealer did their work. “So, your city take ‘resources’ from *our* jungle,” the finger line they drew included Jimmy this time as well, “rearrange them with ch’all’s Wizardy magic into buildings, and machines, so to go take more resources, and rearrange them faster, and say, we are betta, because we do this and you do not.”

Their friend lit up. “Xbullix have joke!” they leaned forward on the table with animation.

“So! Heavenperson is sleeping in cave, they are cold. Xbullix is there too. Curled up. Cold, so, but warm enough. Say Heavenperson: I am cold. Xbullix goes: Curl your legs like I. Say Heavenperson: I’m tryin, I cannot. I have idea, help me make my blanket longer. They have blankets, by the way. So, say Xbullix: how? And Heavenperson say: I will take one meter from the top and add it to the bottom, to cover my feet. Xbullix do the math and say: Okay. This great plan. And to borrow my scissors and needle will cost only one quarter meter!”

This time Jimmy’s face screwed up, with obvious disdain. He had been sitting there, face blank as a pillar, letting people lean around him to talk to one another.

“Ooh, you betta watch it, Brakka, “the rock here no liketh that joketh. Do you hate Ixbullix excellence too, chief?” the pierced one said with a leer.

“But that joke illustrates the point, doesn’t it?” Felix was unable to let the conversation shift now that his brain and mouth were connecting.

“Neither is actually adding anything, but the Heavenite is having the idea, and the Ixbullix is profiting off of them putting the idea into existence, so—”

“So this’ns a chauvinistic bigot too, I knew it Sandree,” Brakka bit his words off.

“Whoa,” Felix said, “No I’m not, I’m agreeing with you, both depend on each other and—”

“Talk talk talk. You two talking the same shet, all Ixbullix is just some thieves, taking, Heaven is bigger, betta, everything else is underneath! But yins don’t see, all this you are proud of, this is a game for fools! Ch’all have tricked ch’allselves, ya can’t even see it. There are *reasons* Ixbullix and Zuri and all others do not waste time, building machines to fly. All you have built is a machine to destroy yourselves, flatten your people. Do you even know who you really are, who you would be if not beholden to this monstrosity of yours on the lake? No,” they answered for them, incensed and sweaty, “You can’t even. You see people expressing their truest selves and it feels *icky* on a stick to you. You are surrounded by pure Ixbullix splendour, a place of joy, the vibe, and instead of being happy, you ignorant cityfolk want to compare, and pick fights. And so you *hate*, you hate seeing another culture succeed. You’re big mad, cause it’s *not yours*.” They leaned both elbows on the table, pushing their cheeks up with their hands insolently.

“That’s not what I was trying to say!” Felix said, trying to regroup, but not before Vic’s mouth was running again.

“But whered it all come from blod? Fookin shet.” he batted the palm of his hand against his forehead. “Yer people were fishin with fookin nets and survivin in huts fore we came along. Dese fancy boats, all dis money, ye ent get any o dis but by haulin trash from honest folk with

one hand and griffin em wiff the other. All dis expressin yerself dis, true self dat, wot gives ye the time for it? Say wot ye want about the Wizards, least they really built someting.”

“No no no,” Felix said quickly, “the Ixbullix are great builders too, I’m saying we are all part of keeping this system running, for everyone’s benefit!”

“All spoken like a true Wizard.” Sandree said, looking Felix up and down, as if for the first time.

“That’s whatches are, ain’tcha? Respect, hoo, talk about thieves, ain’t nobody done better than ch’all freaks up on the hill, glass-ass palaces, got a dag-gone whole city locked up. Who’s your family? Mabes we can do some business with your dad, where’s he at?”

“I’m not a Wizard.”

“Talk like one.”

“I dropped out.”

“Hmm, what a shame. So you playin at a hunter now instead.”

“I just help him out, he’s the Ranger.”

“And such a confident one. Sounds like yins had a good day out there, ch’all hook anything good?”

“Well, first, we got an octorilla, but—”

“Ey ey ey.” Vic interjected. “Shut up bruv,” he said to Felix. “Change the subject, whatcha askin him all dat for? We ent git nuffin, mind ya own bizness, innit.”

“Just curious, you know me,” the taller said with a smile.

“Nah, I don’t. Juss play the game, how bout dat.” Vic squirmed uneasily and readjusted the cuumcan, strapped under his arm, visibly bulging under his jacket.

An awkward hush fell, and finally the drinks came. Felix got his rockmelon punch in a highball tall as a Zuri prayer candle and the others likewise. The dealer took the chance to reassert control and called for the next bet.

Everyone looked down. Felix had been dimly aware of this happening, but with Regina, Felix, and Vic silently coordinating their placements, most of the Ixbullix’s chips had noticeably flowed to their piles, their starting position essentially reversed. The whole table took stock of this now in the silence and there seemed a shift, everyone waiting for the other to speak next. Jimmy gave a bored groan and slumped back in his seat. Felix caught Vic’s good eye and his friend flashed a smile across the table, then hid it.

“Ch’all all the fookin same,” Brakka slurred, after taking a mighty gulp from the blue concoction in their hand. They had been sweating more and more throughout. They set the glass down heavily, the aquamarine mix waving close to the brim.

“Coaster.” The dealer said grimly.

Felix and Vic were now actively making eye contact and nodding to each other as they placed their bets, Regina moving hers in place just before the buzzer rang to split the difference.

The dealer fractioned the pile off and after the tilt the net balance was even worse for the Ixbullix.

Sandree was paying attention this time, and gave a searing look at Felix and Vic, and then took their arm from around Regina’s shoulder.

“Alright,” they said, peeling away. “I think Brakka’s about had enough, it’s about time we get to cashin out. Great talkin, ch’all are a class act.”

“Wait!” Regina said, after all but giving up on trying to control the situation.

“Yeah, cummon,” Vic said, leaning back. “Wot, did we take yer whole crew allowance for the week? Dats right, I know how yer shet works.”



“Fook you,” Brakka said plainly and drunkenly.

“Vic, they are trying to go—” Felix said, willing to call it here.

“Ahhh, we’s juss talkin,” Vic said, really having fun now. “S’all in good humor. Less keep playin, next bet.”

“Cash us out.” Sandree said to the dealer.

“I want dat fookin monkey paw.” Vic said abruptly, pointing at Brakka’s chest. “Less roll for it, cummon. Juss me and dis one.” He sipped at the dark drink in his tumbler. “See? Dats how I git shet I want. I see it, I challenge ye for it. Scared?” Vic pushed all his tokens forward.

Brakka, making to leave, was caught off guard, and flinched a little bit.

“That pile, t’ain’t worth that piece, get bent.” Sandree said.

“Aw? Nah?” Vic said. He made a show of fishing in his jacket, humming and hawing. The Ixbullix shared a tense look.

“Here, wot I got...” and out he tossed a holstered dagger, landing with a clunk on his towers of chips. The scabbard was inlaid with ornate printed designs and solid rivets, the hilt inset with three red stones. Felix winced, it was Vic’s one ornament, his prized possession, won in some adversarial meeting sometime before theirs.

The dealer slapped his whipstick down on it immediately.

“No weapons! Withdraw this at once!” he said.

“Easy, its on the table, wrapped up, Im bettin it, not usin it. If dis fookin gelled-up *thief* ent gunna run away.”

“No.” Brakka said.

“Dare ye. Triple dare ye.” Vic said, all hyped now.

The table froze, some line had been crossed. Direct challenges meant something extra to Ixbullix. A rumor that they had backed down from something could follow any of them for the rest of their life, and the three of them had all heard the words. The shipmates passed glances, conferring, counting, measuring each other. They looked at the dagger, and the pile of their chips on Vic’s side of the table. Brakka didn’t say anything, looking to Sandree for guidance. Sandree turned back to Vic with a heated look and pushed Brakka back into their seat.

“Do it. Set the timer.”

“Yeh, do wot dem says, chain on the table,” Vic said. Felix was all nerves again, a very thin thread connected everything together right now. He wanted to say something but everyone seemed really caught up in the moment.

Brakka’s eyes flared and they threw the chain in. Everyone held their breath and turned to face the dealer. They set their lips and wound the timer to 10.

It was all a farce, the dice uncoachable, the unchangeable future contained in eight-sided glass beads, soon to become distinct, permanent, a fork in the river of time. Felix drank as much as he could. Vic chose a seven, and Brakka a two. The clock ticked down, all anyone was listening to under the heady noise of the deck. Vic and Brakka locked eyes, Vic gritting him hard, leaning in. Felix saw Brakka’s eyes swim and maintain, glancing over at Sandree, down at the table. A drop dripped from his forehead on his hand, right as the buzzer rang, and the dice dropped—

“Wait!” Brakka yelled, losing their nerve, shooting forward to change their token at final moment. But the hand that reached bumped the tall blue drink onto the table, glass knocking into the chips and dice as they fell and dumping the mix onto the red tabletop.

Everything really changed then. Vic jumped up, knocking the rest of the drinks on the table over, Sandree bolted up too, hand on the table to steady it.

“Ye fookin idiot!” Vic roared at Brakka.

“No violence! Hands off the table! Hands off the table!” the croupier yelled, slapping the stick down repeatedly. They blew a whistle attached to a ring on their finger, again and again. The music paused, room turning to them.

“Vic, watch out!” Felix yelled.

And it was hard to see what happened next, but there certainly were several hands on the table, all grabbing something, and then a wince of metal and a thunk. There was a scream, and as it all unraveled Brakka was the only one who didn’t come away, hand skewered with Vic’s knife pushed clean through it into the table below.

Felix grimaced. Vic had, on numerous occasions since they’d been acquainted, bragged about the quick-release holster and the weighted blade, the edge he kept worryingly sharp, polishing in the dull evenings as they lay about the apartment or acting out old knife fights in the living room. Felix had seen him hunt with it but there was indeed something different about seeing it used on another human.

The screams mixed with the whistle, until Jimmy stood up and stroked the dealer hard across the jaw. The crowd, heads already turned from Brakka’s shouting, oohed as they saw that and then again as they stood to see the scene on the table. Sandree was squaring up with Vic, only to get their nose broken by Jimmy’s second wallop, sending several piercings to rattle in with the glass shards, spilled drinks, and gambling chips beneath everything now. Sandree went backwards into the booth.

The whole room’s attention recentered, and Felix saw several faces were moving towards them with a purpose. Wordlessly, Vic and Jimmy put their backs together in a martial stance to meet the rushing attackers.

“We have to stop this, they’ll kill them!” Felix yelled, turning to Regina, who was gone.

He tried to get in front of Vic, hands up, trying to make peace, and immediately caught a punch to the mouth. He was pressed back into Jimmy and Vic and as the shock of the blow went through his nervous system, his survival instinct reluctantly kicking in. He put a knee up hard, into someone, and tried to fight back but there was increasingly less room to operate. The Xbullix were crowding in, trying to get a grapple on them. The forest of arms swayed and sprouted. The band switched to a tarantella. Vic and Jimmy boxed out and held their own for a while, until a bottle arced into Jimmy’s head and dropped him below Felix’s line of sight. He cried out and dove toward his friend and the pile closing over him, only to catch someone’s shoulderblade in his forehead as they backpedaled.

But before they got completely closed in, Vic pulled his machete from his hip holster. He brandished and carved out some space for himself as the Xbullix danced out of the long blade’s touch. A ring formed around them just outside it. Felix said whoa whoa whoa a lot but the weapon was already out. He backed up to Vic. Jimmy, bleeding now from the scalp, joined them silently.

The wrecked and metallic face of Sandree pushed forward, a long spiked club in his hand, knees bent, squaring up.

“Ye think ye faster than me, ye fookin thief?” Vic panted. “Yer friend did, didnt she?” he said, cocking his head to the table where Brakka had by now passed out.

Sandree laughed and spun their club, sniffing blood.

“Swing, cityboy. Entertain us more.” Sandree jibed, but maintained distance, holding the standoff. They all knew Vic would have time for one go with the machete, and none of the front

row wanted to catch it. After that first chop he was the crowd's, they would launch on him, fully justified to go lethal since he had escalated the blade size all by himself.

Vic spat through his toothhole and his forehead bled and both hands gripped the machete's hilt at his waist, the point twitching left and right.

"Got us surrounded, ent dey." Vic said to Felix, unable to turn.

"Yep."

"Figgas. An the girl?"

"Appears to have ditched us."

"Fair enuff at dis point... can you run?"

"Definitely trapped."

"Mm, sorry bout dis den."

"It's okay. You were in the right this time, I think. Those guys sucked."

"Danks bruv. Dat means a lot."

"HEY!" A shout rang out. It was Regina. Felix watched the crowd's head turn to her and all recoil. A good half of them walked away, immediately discouraged at the sight of what she was holding. Felix chanced a glance away and saw her on top of a table over his left shoulder, on Jimmy's side of their trapped triangle, clutching something.

It looked like a potato with a handle, but Felix knew from the reaction if he looked closer the round part sticking outward would be made of pot-steel and dimpled with a pattern of little indentations. She was pointing it at Sandree.

When Felix's head snapped back, the crowd's attention was no longer on them in the middle. All the Xbullix were watching the thing in her hands, and slowly backing up.

"I didn't ditch you guys." Regina said.

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Felix called up to her, neck craning back and forth. "What are you doing!? Where did you even get that!?"

"I collect tech, I told you." she said, feet planted and both hands extended at Sandree's head.

"Yiss!" Vic urged."Fookin send it luv. Do em,"

The blunderpot was the strapshot's ugly super-illegal cousin, basically a bearing bomb crossed with a firework. Where a City Corps-issue strapshot had multiple incapacitation settings available at a wave of the hand, including Net, Stun, Chop, and more, emitting a clean ray of plasma to get the job done, a blunderpot had only one setting: Explode. It was a sheet of scavenged metal as thick as you could work with, bent into a can-shape. With a ball-peen hammer (or rock) you would add little concave depressions near the closed tip before you coated the interior with an accelerant from a local garage and rolled it up. The most expensive part was the handle, telescoping metal rod to get it the fook away from your body. The trigger could be made in many ways, but the cheapest was to hang two cloth sacs inside the barrel with a long fishhook in each, so that pulling would rip the bag it grabbed. One was filled with brimsalt, the other with ignitre, things you could get from a gardening shop typically if you were willing to sift. In Heaven this created in the city a very niche subculture of diy weaponsmiths with a penchant for indoor horticulture.

To rip the first primed the pot. To rip the second and combine the minerals in processed form would kick off a reaction at the motal level, creating a rapid liberation of heat and pressure within the can, as a Wizard would explain it. Or a reliving of an ancient battle between two earthbound fire gods, if you took the indigenous perspective.

Either way, it pushed the little divots in the metal sheet inside out at a thousand meters an hour, curling into fiery starbursts of metal that chewed casually through flesh and thin walls like a pack of wild dogs.

“Okay, everybody back off, fight is *over*. Drop your weapons, now!” she commanded.

“Don’t.” Sandree said. They spat in Regina’s direction.

“Hold up ch’all. She aint doin nothin.”

“Oh yeah?” Regina said. She ripped the first hook, and leveled it with both hands at Sandree. The steadfast Xbullix compadres behind Sandree began to slink.

“Don’t yins move!” Sandree barked. Then, to Regina:

“Don’t kid yerself girl. You aint gonna do it. Probly blow yins own head off too.”

“Yes,” she said, “but it’ll def blow yours. Drop the club. Step back. *Now*.”

He waited. “No. You ain’t gonna.” The entire boat was watching at this point.

“I will!”

She kept hesitating. No one spoke.

“Quit waitin, do it!” Vic bellowed, his voice a rage and fear cocktail. In the next three seconds it became evident she was not actually interested in discharging flaming shrapnel into a crowd of people.

“See?” Sandree said, looking back to Vic. All the Xbullix watching this exchange tightened their posture up again. And a few were starting to close in around Regina’s table.

Regina’s arm trembled, and she saw the ones surrounding her, calling her bluff.

“Awwwwwww *eff*—” she groaned, and as one lunged at her leg, she swung the hand cannon up and pointed it out over the starboard rail. Her head ducked and she ripped the second fish hook out.

The burst burned a deep hole in everyone’s eardrums. The can immolated with a ragged deafmaking *CRACK*, devouring its metal skin to a frond of burning light and wet smoke that leapt twenty meters from Regina’s stiff wrist. Felix saw the crowd throwing themselves to the floor at the same time he did, smacking face as he covered his head. The high-set motelights and chandelier shattered and the bandstand roof and captain’s deck received a backwash of metal studs. There were screams as a smoky stink of rocks meant to stay buried waved over the deck.

Felix looked up, his teeth aching from the blast. Instead of ducking Vic and Jimmy had dashed off under the explosion and were pushing and kicking their way through the rising crowd. Felix’s anxiety soared as he got his feet underneath and scrambled to chase.

He reached them at the boat’s railing, and was about to ask them where they were going next, but of course there was no plan, there was nowhere to go. The huge paddlewheel gears blocked the river, even if it wouldn’t have been self-murder already to try and swim through the open water. So he just crumbled toward Vic with his mouth gawping.

Vic pulled Felix in and stepped forward to face the Xbullix right behind, screaming a cry in their faces and receiving the same. The crowd didn’t give him any space this time, and someone caught his arm as he swung, twisting the blade out of his hands. Felix saw Vic go down with a passionate fook you and there were hands on he and Jimmy now, so he punched and bit and kicked, because this is what one did when one was about to be killed, and even if he knew it was hopeless it was his last chance to punch or kick or bite anything, so he tried to get into it. They were overwhelmed by then, restrained, ropes slipped around their arms and middle. The Xbullix were howling each other on as the three of them were thrown down in a pile, a hundred web toes slamming into their body parts without discrimination. Felix felt another rope go over his neck

and he was lifted up and set roughly on his feet. A close gang pushed them forward on their leashes, spit hitting them in the face, fingers pulling out their hair.

Sandree's mouth was moving and he led the crowd binding them. He pushed a table beneath the cross beam of the mast tree. Felix realized he was putting up less of a fight than Vic and Jimmy and was about to be put up on the table first. That kicked him into gear. He did a 180 and dipped his head and managed to get the noose up onto his forehead. He shook it off and flopped around with his arms at his side.

"Wait! Be fair! You have to give us a chance to explain! This isn't *cool*, this is anarchy! Let me explain! We're Stormtouched! It's our first day!" he said looking one of his captors directly in the eye, trying to find empathy. They looked *him* in the eye, and punched him in the stomach, as he was pulled backwards hard onto his ass. Then up onto the table with the rope around his neck. He was screaming then, as they held him in place and Sandree flung the loose end up and around the beam above. Felix tried to explain some more and realized they might have made a mistake with all the punching and swordplay and running and making explosions. The crowd's energy sure was up, even though he was pretty sure no one knew what was going on other than that Sandree had gotten in a fight and was proving a point of some sort. Felix scanned his last crowd and saw Vic and Jimmy in similar formations on tables, a cabinetful of rope lassoing Jimmy's arms down by this point. holding his head straight so he couldn't butt or bite. Vic was now gagged. Regina had made it away again, somewhere, apparently. Never having done this before, Felix thought there might be a speech of some sort, but he may have missed it because all of a sudden he was lifting, in the worst way you can lift a human. All his limbs tried to help his head but the ropes were winning, and a small, scared, animal part of him was taking over. It tried its best but then the realness made it let it go, and he saw the next part of his adventure was going to happen after life.

He stopped hearing things except his own choking blood as his last toe left the table surface. He rolled and twisted his neck and kicked but there was no escape, he just lost air faster.

*This isn't the worst*, a voice said as his brain shut off. *At least you never had to tell anybody.*