

Chapter 3

It didn't take long for Ella to feel guilty over leaving her roommate behind. But if the latter's heart wasn't really into it then it was probably for the best, because things weren't going to get any easier from here on out. Upon leaving the safety of their room, Ella proceeded to exit the dormitory through its less traveled halls and stairwells. It wasn't that she was particularly afraid of the other students figuring out what she was up to – frankly, she wasn't good enough friends with anyone but Liz that they'd even bother to ask – but there was no sense risking it either. Where things really started to get dicey was once she left the dormitory and returned to the main campus grounds. Unlike the students, many of the teachers *did* know her (some, like Professor Wells, even a little too well), and if just one of them managed to spot her in these clothes then the jig would be up. Luckily, she had a plan for that.

The loom was purposely modeled after its namesake, with its roofed walkway and outer training arenas encircling twelve long, rectangular classroom buildings laid out radially in the main courtyard. It was no coincidence then that the entire complex resembled an old fashioned spinning wheel from above. Unfortunately for Ella, the dormitory and front entrance were located on opposite ends of that circle, meaning she'd have to cross the entire campus to get where she was going. Rather than do that and risk being spotted, she instead followed the loom's long outer corridors not to the main

entrance, but to the old library in the East Wing. The school council had recently put it out of commission when they opened the fancy new one in the North Wing a few months ago. Now it was mainly used for storage, meaning it was usually empty. Once inside, Ella could then use the service ladder to climb to the attic and shimmy out onto the roof, which she would then follow all the way around the campus out of sight. In fact, her route was so honed by now that within five minutes of leaving the dorm she found herself perched atop the clock tower overlooking the main gate. That was where things got much trickier.

From her high vantage point, Ella sized up the two guards standing watch. Neither of them seemed especially alert or enthusiastic today – probably already thinking about the upcoming weekend. That was good news for her, since only upperclassmen were allowed to come and go freely from the premises. As a second year student, Ella technically had no such privileges. Good thing then that Selene technically never had a second year student quite like her before.

Unfocusing her eyes, Ella let the physical world fade into the background and at once reality became both blurry and yet crystal clear. Like the faux alley in the training room, glimmering silver fate threads gradually filled her view. They sat suspended above the ground like a silken spider web connecting

everything together: bees to flowers, birds to trees, even the guards to each other. Together they told the yard's entire story. Some were loose, granting leeway for those attached to wander, while others were more taught, drawing their subjects together like wires on a winch. Studying the weave carefully, Ella noted that one of the threads connecting the leftmost guard to the loom's front door was already taught. That meant that all she would have to do was wait.

“Hey, you mind covering for me? I gotta take a leak,” he asked, right on cue. His partner nodded, so he turned and headed into the school. One down, one to go.

Ella refocused on the remaining guard, letting the threads in her peripherals fade away to reveal more on his person. However, she was disappointed to find that, unlike his partner, this man's fate was much less cooperative. Although there were threads connecting him to the front door, the guardhouse, and a patrol path, none of them were taught yet, meaning he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. She was going to have to go with plan B.

Taking a few steps back, Ella turned her attention to the threads surrounding a large flag attached to a nearby mast. She eyed one thread in particular, waiting for it to tighten just enough. “Three, two, one,” she

whispered to herself, before taking off sprinting across the rooftop. She reached the edge just as the thread fully straightened out, and at that precise moment a gust of wind came along and shoved her in the back. Swallowing an exhilarated scream, she leapt off the roof and let it carry her halfway across the yard to the outstretched limb of a tree, which she barely caught under her armpits. Thankfully it didn't break. Then, using the sudden spike in adrenaline, she scrambled up the branch and quickly glanced behind her. Perfect! Just as she planned, the same gust had also lifted the flag enough to hide her from the guard's sight. Not only that, but its shadow hid her own shadow within it as well! Confident that she hadn't been spotted, she carefully shimmied to the end of the branch and vaulted over the outer wall just as the wind died back down.

Well, that couldn't have gone any smoother, Ella thought smugly to herself. However, the self-praise proved premature, because when she looked down there was someone standing right in her landing zone!

“Look o--!” she screamed, only to slam into him before she could finish.

After that, the world became a flashing colored haze as Ella gasped to replenish the air that had been knocked from her lungs. When her senses finally did return, she found herself lying face first on the gravel path just outside the loom. At first she tried to flip herself over, but her legs were twisted

together with those of a young boy who was gingerly rubbing the top of his head.

“Oh jeez, I am so sorry. Are you alright?” she asked, while struggling to untangle herself.

He looked about her age, or maybe even a year or two younger given his small stature – though size was hard to judge given his oversized cloak and thick head of mangy black hair. Just where had he come from anyway? She hadn’t seen anything in the threads about him. Could he have been another student?

“Argh, watch where you’re going!” he grumbled, interrupting her train of thought.

She was just about to apologize again when she met with his stunning golden eyes. Somehow, just the sight of them froze her in place and sent a shiver up her spine – as though catching the gaze of a stray cat crossing her path in the street.

“Hey! What was that!?”

Sudden shouts from the other side of the wall spooked them both, and much like the aforementioned feline the boy quickly darted away. “Hey wait!” Ella yelled after him, but by then he was already past the main gate where the

guards picked up the chase. Well if the stranger *wanted* to act as her distraction then who was she to argue? So rather than go after him, she used the opportunity to slink off in the opposite direction instead.

Ella kept a low profile until she was out of range of the main gate, then followed the road down towards the city center. The loom sat atop a large crescent hill – *the crown of Selene*, as the mayor loved to call it. Originally conceived as a simple mining town, Selene had since grown into the capital of the vast nation of Terra – one of the eight major nations of Moirae that also included Varuna (Ella’s own birthplace), Mercuria, Shani, Ouranos, the Republic of Marz, the Janus islands, and of course Luppita. Of them, Terra was the largest when measured by sheer land mass – rivaled only by its neighbor Luppita to the north. It would’ve rivaled it in population too, if not for a bloody war with their other shared neighbor – the Republic of Marz – over fifteen years ago. After that, Selene was pretty much the only major metropolis left in the entire country, forcing the once-quaint mining town to become its capital almost by default. Nowadays, most Terrans lived either here or in the small pocket communities spread across the temperate plains or mountainous peaks the region was known for. In a sense, that made Selene the entire nation’s crown jewel.

Ella descended from *the crown* into a larger district known as the *upper city*. As the name implied, this was Selene's most affluent neighborhood – a fact that was hard to miss given the two gaudy golden statues that stood at its entrance. Beyond them lay a perfectly manicured park, then a stone walkway through a colorful flower garden, and only *after* all of that did Ella reach the stone stairs leading down to the city streets themselves. Much like the loom, the rest of Selene was also circular, meaning the streets ran around it like grooves on a record. Between them stood rows of tightly packed buildings, each ten, sometimes even twelve, stories high. Most were constructed of the same shiny limestone – an especially pure blend native to Terran soil, and the chief reminder that Selene was once a humble mining town. Nobody else in the world knew how to shape and chisel it quite like the Terrans did, as proven by the beautiful yet subtle patterns etched into nearly every surface – from the sides of entire buildings all the way down to individual pedestals and benches. In fact, if one were to stand in just the right place, at just the right time of the day – when the sun hit those seemingly random patterns just right – they almost seemed to line up and string the whole city together.

All of that artistry was obviously meant to evoke the very best that Terra had to offer – a city skyline *like no other* for a city on the rise – but it always seemed wasted on upper city folk. Particularly around quitting time, when the streets became a rushing torrent of pushing and shoving like *every other* city,

people hurried past these one-of-a-kind murals like they weren't even there. But that was the way of the upper city. Nobody had time to sit around and admire art when they were perpetually late going *somewhere* or doing *something*. Literally everywhere Ella looked, people exited their fancy businesses, dressed in their fancy clothes, then got into their fancy steamobiles that zipped away without a moment's pause. In fact, the way they carelessly sped through streets and intersections without stopping or even slowing down would've led to sure disaster if not for the *oracles* vigilantly regulating their reckless behavior.

Like hawks perched up on their roosts above, the specially trained fortune tellers known as oracles kept a watchful eye over all aspects of the upper city. They paid careful attention to fate's weave, reading and reacting to the threads in order to subtly manipulate everything from traffic flow to city maintenance. If an accident was imminent they could speed up or slow down the flow of traffic to avoid it, or if a water main was about to burst they could deploy the appropriate authorities to prevent it. It was thanks to them that the city ran like clockwork day in and day out – a fact that even the laymen (or *non-fortune* tellers) had come to accept. For those who lived here, fortune telling had become an integral part of everyday life.

As a fortune teller in training, Ella should've been more impressed by all of this. However, Selene was hardly the first city to employ oracles. That honor belonged to the Luppitan capital of *Ganymede*, which not only did it first but better. At least there the oracles actually did *important* things, like prevent fires or even crimes, rather than act as the glorified babysitters that they were here. It was just another in a long list of ways that Selene couldn't compare to Ganymede – like an immature younger brother trying to imitate his sophisticated older sister. To be fair though, Ganymede (and the entire nation of Luppita by extension) was one of a kind. It was a fortune teller's paradise – the only place in the world where one's worth was measured solely by their fortune telling ability, regardless of gender, race, or even age. There, people weren't just allowed but actually encouraged to explore the limits of their abilities, which was likely why they made so many more fate discoveries and breakthroughs on a normal basis. Of all the things for Selene to copy, why couldn't *that* have been one of them? Thankfully, there were still a few places left in the city where she could stretch out creatively – so long as she was willing to take the risk.

As Ella got further from the loom, her surroundings slowly changed. They were little things at first: decorative fountains and statues beginning to show their age, or the road beneath her feet starting to crack and crumble. Before long, fewer and fewer steamobiles were heading her way, and those

that did become less *hyper-luxurious* and more *on the verge of shaking themselves to pieces*. Meanwhile, foot traffic thinned out even faster as streets quickly transitioned from *frenzied bustle* to *casual stroll* within a block or two. Compared to where she'd just been, everything here may as well have been moving in slow motion. Part of the reason for that was that most people living in this part of town – mechanics, steamworkers, and even artists working in the upper city – still had another two to three hours left on their work schedules. That meant that those walking the streets now were mostly spouses taking care of the children, or unemployed folk. Either way, they were much friendlier than anyone in the upper city – willing to give Ella a polite nod or even smile as she passed by.

Over time the sky opened up as multi-story towers gave way to more modest quads, quaint little townhomes, and individual businesses. Gone were the fancy carvings and other architectural flares of the upper city – abandoned for the practicality of patch job roofs, exposed piping, and homegrown gardens light on flowers but heavy on fresh fruits and vegetables. What these homes lacked in polish they more than made up for in character – each was as unique as the one before it. However, her favorite part of the walk was when the network of steam pipes that provided the city with heat and power came out of hiding. In the upper city, engineers did their best to conceal these eyesores in alleys, across rooftops, and even underground, but here they snaked proudly

between buildings and above the streets like the roots of some massive inverted tree. She liked them because they reminded her a little of fate threads, and to the population of factory workers and mechanics that lived here they were just as important.

This was the district colloquially referred to as the *lower city*, and was the only place in all Selene that still bore any resemblance to that quaint little mining town. Ever since the politicians and bureaucrats had moved in, they'd been on a mission to systematically erase any trace of what Selene once was. Only a lack of platinum now kept those plans at bay, which was what ended up forming the upper and lower districts in the first place. As one might expect, the folk living here didn't exactly feel that they wanted or needed any sort of makeover. For that reason, they were *especially* spiteful towards fortune tellers who, in so many ways, were the ones who made the upper city way of life possible. That was why Ella had to be extra careful down here.

Revelry Row, the lower city's premiere entertainment district, was her destination today. Unlike its stuffy equivalent in the upper city, that didn't mean elegant theaters or classy cafes but dive bars and rowdy taverns. Some of these places had been here since even before the war (and had the battle scars to prove it) while others had been built a little more recently. Since city officials weren't as stringent about little details like zoning laws and land

ownership down here, enterprising entrepreneurs regularly took it upon themselves to erect new businesses wherever there happened to be space. The result? One could literally stand in any spot, spin around, and *see* the decades layered atop one another like some sort of architectural period cake. It was this eclectic mix of eras combined with the physical maze of misaligned streets, jutting buildings, and crooked alleys that gave lower Selene its infamous reputation as a labyrinth. Even the extensively detailed training arenas back at the loom couldn't really do it justice.

As she'd told Liz back at the loom, Ella had a particular purpose in mind for today's trip. However, she couldn't just go in cold; she needed to warm up first. So she prowled the streets like a predator stalking a very specific type of prey: local street vendors. Her first victim was a particularly seedy looking fellow in a bowler cap and bushy mutton chops who ran a simple cup and ball game out of a suitcase on a stand. Before she'd even approached, he smiled at her with his toothy grin and tried to strike up a conversation. He may have reeked of alcohol and cheap cologne but otherwise seemed harmless, which was about as much as she could ask for down here, so she played dumb and followed along. After some idle chit chat, she then allowed him to "convince her" to put down a few platinum pieces.

Round and round the cups went, as fast as the vendor could shuffle them. To be honest, the game would've been challenging enough *without* him cheating by using a simple sleight of hand trick to try and fool her. But that was okay, because she cheated too. By following a thread attached to the ball, rather than the cup itself, she had no problem seeing every move it made. That was probably why he was shocked when she found it on her first try. However, rather than quit while she was ahead, Ella doubled down and played again. Again he tried to fool her and again she saw through it, winning for a second time before doubling down on a third. Over and over he tried to trick her, using more elaborate methods each time, but nothing worked. "Left, right, middle, up your sleeve" – Ella called it right every time. Before she knew it, an audience had gathered to ooh and ahh, until she eventually sent that poor grifter packing with his tail between his legs. Then she turned, gave her winnings to a couple of downtrodden kids, and walked away. As she listened to the hero's applause that followed, all she could think was what a shame it was that Professor Wells couldn't be here to see this. Not ready yet? *Ha!* She cleaned out three more grifters before finally setting her sights on the main stage.

The big dog in town was a joint named *Gracies* – located right at the end of the strip so it was impossible to miss. Part bar, part casino, and all trouble, it was practically as old as Selene herself, having somehow survived not only the war but three major fires, a dozen police inquiries, and countless bar fights.

The place even looked the part of grizzled old veteran – what with its gnarly stone foundation peppered with mortar holes and haphazardly supported by wooden struts where necessary. While it lacked the bravado of some of its younger counterparts – there were no fancy lights or signage boldly pronouncing its name, just a faded title etched into a wooden board above the front door – Gracies was an icon on this strip and still the most popular spot in town.

The first time Ella had actually managed to sneak inside these hallowed walls, she'd spent three trips just casing the place before concocting a complicated plan involving a trash can, a fire escape, a policeman's whistle, *three* rotten eggs, and a stolen waitress' uniform. Thankfully, her skills had improved since then, so now all she needed was a few threads attached to the bouncer's line of sight and a well-timed crowd to distract him. After that, it was a simple matter of slipping in behind him and hopping through the main vestibule. She'd successfully done the trick a few times now, but that still didn't stop her hands from shaking throughout the entire process. The shook even more once she was close enough to hear the raucous laughter and clinking glasses coming from inside – although at this point it was more out of anticipation than worry. She just never quite knew what to expect on the other side of those double doors.

The first thing to hit her were the pungent-yet-familiar aromas of dried ales and pitted olives. She remembered gagging the first time she ever smelt them, but now she barely even flinched. Nor did the sight of all that tacky mismatched furniture, grease streaked wallpaper, and flickering kerosene chandeliers bother her; if anything, they now only contributed to the establishment's unique ambience. In fact, about the only thing that could faze her at all these days was the bar's actual clientele, but only because it varied so heavily day-to-day. Given that the weekend was upon them, the joint seemed especially crowded and boisterous today. Some folk she recognized, such as the burly bearded man arm wrestling the even burlier bearded man at the center of a cheering mob. Others were a little harder to tell, like the couple making out in their own little corner (likely their own little world too). Then there were those she'd never seen before – in particular, an entire group of thirty-somethings sitting at a long table at the far end. They were easily the rowdiest lot, spontaneously breaking into song with an off-key player piano before lifting up one of their drunken comrades and parading him around the bar. He laughed and high-fived anyone within arm's reach, and somehow Ella ended up with a wallet-sized picture of his adorable newborn daughter. Looking at the photo, she smiled. *This* was Gracies. Large and loud, dim and dank – it was everything the upper city tried so hard not to be anymore.

Without wasting another second, Ella dove into the crowd and, with a little effort, waded past the bar onto the open floor. It was here that folk typically gathered around large circular tables to cheer and bet on high-stakes card games. For her part, Ella took her usual standing spot near the balcony staircase, next to a giant taxidermy bear; it was the ideal place to watch almost all the tables, while also shielding herself from the bar staff. Ordinarily, she'd be content just to stand here and observe from afar, using her fortune telling skills to count cards and predict the outcomes of the games. However, after the day she'd just had, she was feeling a lot bolder than that.

Over the course of her past few visits, Ella had been slowly working up the courage to inch closer and closer to the tables – but today she was done taking baby steps. So as soon as the coast was clear, she made a break for one such table and wriggled her way deep into the surrounding crowd. She chose the one with the biggest crowd of course – she was bold, not stupid – and although the fit inside it was rather snug, the risk was well worth it. Suddenly, rather than just watching from afar, she found herself immersed in excitement as men and women on all sides both heckled and cheered the players on. They shifted endlessly while trying and get a better look, jostling her and occasionally even shouting side bets directly into her ear. Yet rather than be annoyed, Ella actually joined in! It was impossible not to, given the frantic, excited energy bouncing around in here! What a difference it made being just

a few feet closer to the action, and now she imagined that the only way to top it would be to actually sit down and...

“Dammit!”

Ella’s train of thought was derailed when the player closest to her suddenly stood up and threw his cards down in disgust. He then cursed a few more times, particularly at the bald man in the tank top sitting opposite to him, before storming off. The bald fellow just chuckled as he leaned over and shoveled in his winnings. However, Ella didn’t pay any attention to that because she was much more focused on the empty chair now sitting in front of her, causing her heart to race. For months she’d been content just standing on the sidelines, watching and imagining how she might do if she were to ever play. Could this have been the opportunity she was waiting for?

“Well, are ya gonna sit or ain’t ya?”

An old whistle-y voice snapped Ella from her daze, at which point she found the four remaining players at the table staring straight at her. That was because, without even realizing it, she’d already approached the open spot! *Well I guess that settles it*, she thought to herself, as she sat down between two of the bar’s more well-known regulars. Mr. Kline, a blue-collared steam plant worker still dressed in his hardhat and blue overalls, tipped his head cordially as she took her seat, while Edgar, a retired veteran and bar regular (everyone

just called him Honest Ed, due to his tendency to always speak his mind – whether people wanted to hear it or not) smiled at her through a mouth of mismatched teeth. Filling out the rest of the table was a nervous looking fellow in a faded shirt and sunglasses, and of course the current table-runner, the bald man in the tank top. He seemed the least pleased to see her, going by his dismissive grunt the moment she sat down.

“Oh terrific. Who let this kid in here? Look, I ain’t interested in winning the change from your piggy bank...”

Ella was still a little too shell-shocked to think of a snarky comeback at the moment, so instead she let her platinum do the talking. Throwing down a small satchel of about twenty pieces, she caused the crowd to gasp. Suddenly, the bald man wasn’t so dismissive anymore. If anything, he immediately began dealing cards so that she wouldn’t have a chance to back out.

The game they were playing was *Attrition* – a popular laymen game involving both a board with game pieces and a deck of cards per player. Each player began with an army, and then drew cards from their deck into a five-card hand to determine how far they could move their pieces. Usually the game was played head-to-head with the objective being to wipe out the opponent’s army. However, in this five-player variant, a player needed only to capture and hold the center area of the table to win. Taking opponents’ pieces was still

a valuable strategy though, since doing so not only weakened their armies but also cost the respective owner a certain amount of platinum.

As the winner of the previous game, the bald man drew first. *Ten of swords*, Ella whispered, just as he did. He smiled, and then immediately placed the ten of swords down on the table. Immediately, her nerves calmed and she hid a sly grin. This was going to be fun.

From that point on, things picked up fast and furiously. The bald man struck first, taking the lead early by preying on both Mr. Kline and Honest Ed's armies. Ella on the other hand kept a much more even keel, losing some pieces here while taking others there. In reality though, she was playing a completely different game from them. Using her fortune telling skill to predict what cards each player drew, her challenge was to instead to figure out how her opponents would use them. Whether it was a U-formation attempting to snare her from the front, or a flank attack from the side, she sniffed out each individual player's style and countered accordingly. It went well at first, so long as she sacrificed the occasional piece to avoid suspicion. They even managed to play several incident-free rounds without anyone suspecting a thing. However, it wasn't long before her competitive drive got the better of her, and her win-loss ratio began tipping out of balance.

“That’s another sweet pot you just collected there, little girl,” the bald man grumbled, shuffling his deck forcefully after she won another game. “You seem to be quite a *natural* at this.”

“Beginner’s luck,” she shot back, perhaps a little too quickly.

“Oh come off it,” Ed interjected. “Don’t need t’be no fortune teller to predict that last move you made. Even I knew you’s gonna do it.”

“So then why’d *you* fall for it?” Mr. Kline teased.

“Shaddap!”

The two friends laughed at each other, completely unaware that they’d just saved Ella’s skin. She immediately made a mental note to throw the next two games. However, that didn’t stop her from returning the favor by discreetly making moves to keep her new friends in the game. Thankfully, they remained blissfully unaware of her charity, as they continued to chatter on.

“So, rumor is *he’s* been spotted nearby,” Mr. Kline said, putting down the nine of swords that Ella had whispered under her breath just seconds before.

“Who?” Honest Ed asked, while mulling over whether to counter with the king of cups or jack of wands. “Dominque the Longshot? Nicholas Nine-

Lives? I tell ya, he'd be crazy to show up in these parts again, nine lives or not."

Mr. Kline shook his head. "*You* know who I'm talking about."

"You don't mean... Where? When?"

"The town of Cetus – just a few days ago."

"And is it?"

Mr. Kline nodded, mournfully. "Gone. Just like the others."

Everyone around the table lowered their heads in a moment of silence. Honest Ed even took off his old bowler hat and held it over his chest. Meanwhile, Ella looked around in confusion.

"I'm sorry, who are we talking about?"

Mr. Kline peeked at her. "Why, the *Human Hurricane* of course."

"Who?"

Before the question even left her lips, the entire table and half the surrounding crowd suddenly turned to stare at her in disbelief.

"You ain't never heard of the Human Hurricane before!?" Honest Ed exclaimed in outrage. "What, you been livin' under a rock or somethin'?"

“Something like that.”

“Seriously? The Scourge of the West? The Twenty Million Platinum Man? You seriously ain’t heard what he did to Lacerta? Cetus? Grus?”

Old Ed was practically falling out of his chair to lean into Ella’s face now. At that range, it was impossible to avoid his spittle as he shouted. Thankfully, Mr. Kline soon came to her rescue.

“Relax old-timer. To be fair, I doubt if half the people in here have heard of those towns you just mentioned. After all, *the Fringe* isn’t exactly well mapped out. But surely you must’ve heard of the *Disaster at Orion*.”

Now that one she *had* heard of – after all, who hadn’t? It referred to an event that happened a couple of years ago, when half the border city of Orion was mysteriously blown away. And by that she meant *literally* blown away, as entire blocks were reduced to rubble in the span minutes during what Terran and Luppitan officials would come to call the worst natural disaster in Terran history.

“That’s just what they wanchya t’think!” Honest Ed replied, the moment she brought that up. “But it weren’t no natural disaster! It was *him*! It was the Human Hurricane I tell ya!”

Ella could only blink repeatedly at the old man – but his nickname was *Honest* Ed, so he must've believed what he was saying. “That’s ridiculous. Orion’s at least half the size of Selene, isn’t it? How could one man level half of it in just a few minutes?” she eventually tried to argue.

He waved her off. “Psh, it’s easy when you’re seven feet tall and five hundred pounds of pure muscle. I heard he crushed those buildings with his bare hands!”

“I heard he’s a vampire! Sucks the blood out of women and children and kills the men,” claimed another random shout from the crowd.

“Yer both wrong!” a third chimed in. “He’s a demon – a real one! He stalks the Fringe and attacks settlements whenever he feels like it! My uncle’s neighbor saw it!”

Before long, claims were shooting out of the crowd left, right, and center – everything from bandit king, to revenge-seeking warlord, to angry spirits. The drunker the person was, the more ridiculous his or her theory. Yet all of them had one thing in common: they repeatedly referred to the *Fringe*, putting Ella’s skepticism on high alert. As Mr. Kline noted earlier, so much of that region – located smack in between the borders of Luppita, Terra, and Marz – was uncharted territory. Who knew what went on half the time in that lawless desert? But that didn’t stop this crowd from speculating anyway – right up

until the bald man sitting across from her suddenly pounded his fist on the table like a judge's gavel.

“Listen to yourselves! Five hundred pounds of muscle? Vampires? Ghosts!? How can you all say such ridiculous things when the truth is so obvious? Or are you all too afraid to say what you *really* think?”

At once the drunken speculation ground to a halt, replaced instead by uneasy looks of silence that only pissed him off even more.

“Well I ain't afraid to say it! The Human Hurricane is a fortune teller!”

Ella nearly choked on her own saliva when she heard that, then turned away to clear her throat. Thankfully, the bald man was too into himself to notice.

“Think about it; it's just the kind of thing *they'd* do! First they try to take us out in the Marzian war, and now they're back to finish the job – starting with Orion City! Meanwhile, our government's the one that let'em waltz right in and build their fancy little fortress up there on Crown Hill. Who knows what dark deals they're whisperin' in fate's ear up there!?”

Discontented rumblings broke out all around the room as bar patrons swapped worried looks. Eventually, it got to a point where Ella just couldn't stand it anymore, causing her to shout in frustration.

“Spoken like a true idiot!”

At once the room fell deathly silent. Oops, had she just said that out loud? Now every eye in the room was glaring at her – particularly those of the bald man. But it was too late to turn back now, so Ella did the only thing she could think of and doubled down instead.

“Come on, *whispering in fate’s ear*? What is this, the dark ages? Fate isn’t some magic spirit that you whisper incantations to. It’s a science, pure and simple! And that *fortress* up on Crown Hill? That’s a school! You do know what a school is, don’t you? It’s where you go to learn things like *history*! Because maybe if you did then you’d realize that Luppita and its fortune tellers helped *save* this city!”

For that entire rant, Ella had practically forgotten to breathe, so she finally took a moment to catch her breath. Only then did she realize that the entire crowd now loomed almost directly over her.

“Well, well. You seem to know an awful lot about this *fortune teller school*, don’t you? Tell me, just how old are you again?” Baldie asked, as he cracked his knuckles with a grin on his face.

Ella turned sheepish in an instant. After all the card games they’d played this afternoon, she’d picked the absolute worst time to overplay her hand. “Hey

now, I just read a lot of books is all. Seriously, you could look it up yourself if you wanted! All I'm saying is that with all the marauders and bandits wandering around the Fringe, don't you think it's a stretch to believe in something as ridiculous as the...?"

She was right in the middle of backtracking when somebody far off suddenly shouted "watch out!" Just seconds later, a large man came stumbling out of the crowd straight toward them! Ella and the other players leapt from their seats just in time to watch him barrel past, only to crash headlong into their table and send the platinum pieces atop it flying. In an instant, both bystanders and players alike dove to the ground for the scattered winnings, but Ella didn't join them. She was too fixated on the bearded man who now lay groaning between the two halves of broken table. Was he really *that* drunk? As if to answer her question, a second man in a long hooded cloak came leaping out of the same spot in the crowd. However, he was able to stop there, at which point he took one look at the bearded man, pointed his finger, and shouted.

"I've got you now, Human Hurricane!"