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Expected Value

Erik van Mechelen

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Justin Meets Graff

Justin approached a teak desk in Liberty Hall's entryway, an impressive three-story atrium of glass and walnut-colored wood. Students marched in and out, like ants building a hill under a rock on Breakneck Ridge. Most wore sweaters or the occasional zip-up hoodie. Groups went by in colors. Navy, gold, forest green, red-orange. Justin held the straps of his backpack as he did when leaving underground poker games, a confirmation that it remained attached to his person.

An empty chair rested behind the empty desk. A small bell looked inviting, so he pressed it. At the light but high-pitched note, a shorter but athletic man wearing a black zip-up popped out of a nearby office.

"You'd be Justin, then," smiled the man. He rub his hands together, like he'd just won a pot.

"Are you Mr Graff?" said Justin.

"You bet. But call me Graff. You hungry? Let's head over to Spaghetti's. You can leave your bag here; I'll have Jenny watch it."

They left through the main entry and passed through the commons. This is the Felt," said Graff. "It's one of the few green places left in the city. Here and Central Park next door are the only green spots left." Justin had heard the school bought the south end of the park to plant their glass, teak, and limestone.

Justin looked around. Their current path led them toward a central fountain, spewing water into the air before splattering against the brick. Shrubs lined their flank. Healthy maples dotted the area. Students lounged under them on benches, enjoying the shade on this humid summer day.

“From the sky the trees make the shape of the nine of diamonds,” said Graff. “Headmaster Caby wanted that, even though planes and helicopters can’t fly over the school. Maybe for satellite photos.”

“Are those kids playing chess?” said Justin, pointing to a row of marble tables jutting from the ground like Stone Henge.

“Yes, some professors advocated for them—they thought there students were overworked, or needed a different type of stimulation.”

“You don’t agree.”

“We’re here to win elections. Besides, chess is an awfully linear game.”

They reached the fountain and circled it. Some of the water splashed from the cobblestone brick onto Justin’s leg. It tickled. His mom had taken him to the port near Stamford when he was young. It was a perfect memory. One not so clear but clear enough. Ocean spray tickled him then, too. Sailboats, sun, the wind from the Atlantic arriving from who-knows-where, a whisper from distant lands.

“What did your parents think of what I said the other night?” asked Graff.

“Not too much, except that they needed me on the vineyard. My sister Lindsey is helping Mom do what I normally would today.”

“I’ve heard of Lady Luck. That’s what you call your sister, isn’t it?”

Justin’s betrayed the slightest of eyebrow raises, curious if his sister’s reputation could possibly have extended into the city, or, more likely, if Graff looked her up in the online vineyard directory where pop had insisted she display the poker-related handle. Most of their family’s best clients were poker players or supporters.

“After you get settled I’ll show you the wine stores,” said Graff. “The headmaster has a thing for it. I’m afraid its a bit more expensive than what your family offers.”

“You’re making some assumptions, Mr Graff.” Justin stopped just beyond the fountain, so he imagined from Graff’s viewpoint the

water might be spouting right out of his head. He hoped not to reveal his dislike of Graff's frank words about his family's small business. It was all they could do to make enough money to plant the next summer.

"Please, as I said, call me Graff. Wine was democratized. Micro-breweries. Then micro-wineries. The northern part of this state was ripe for it. Your parents moved out of the city for that opportunity. They weren't the only ones."

"I meant about me staying here," said Justin. Of course he meant both.

"Oh. Well, come come," said Graff. He put his arm around Justin's shoulder. It felt like his dad's arm, when he taught Justin how to plant. "There's much for me to show you. The Felt is pleasant, but it's just the small blind in terms of what Poker University has to offer. You'll see."

They paced away from the spewing fountain. It stopped for a moment, and birds, probably nesting in the one of the trees that made up the nine of diamonds, sang a staccato tune. "There's something you should see before we eat—we're off to Las Vegas!"

Las Vegas

At the south end of the Felt glass doors slid open for Graff and Justin. Graff saluted a man with a green visor seated at a teak desk, similar to the one in Liberty Hall. Rising behind him stood translucent blue cases filled with poker chips.

“Once you’re a student here, you’ll pick up your chips from Jimbo. And, if you need daily refills, he supplies. Someone like you probably won’t be needing too many reloads, though.”

Justin smirked at Graff’s open compliment of his abilities. He nodded and kept pace with Graff, who walked as tall as he could into the room. They walked toward the center of what Justin later discovered was a club-shaped room, with three primary sections. Friendly chatter and a few warm laughs floated across the room from the left-most leaf. A nearby student snickered lightly having just dragged a pot. A man in an orange visor pushed the chips toward her, said “Congratulations, Annie!”

“You can play any game you want in here,” said Graff. “At the end each session just drop your chips with Jimbo. Oh, and you can also use those credits at the shops around campus. Some of our students like showing off their achievement, but don’t worry too much about that.”

“What’s most popular, here?”

“Well, you might notice we don’t have heads up tables despite that format dominating most elections. Reason is we want students to relax here in Las Vegas.” Graff pointed to the left part of the club. “Left side is poker. Hold’em, Omaha, Stud, Razz, Draw, you name it. Center is our prediction zone, right side is experimental games. We recommend students stop in here from time to time to get away from their studies or the online campus poker room. Face-to-face

interaction is important.”

“Looks fun,” said Justin.

“Some outsiders have commented that this place looks like it was designed with fun in mind. But it’s more than a Disneyland water park.”

“In what way?” Justin said.

Graff put his fatherly arm on Justin, again, pushing him to the far side. Four colors of zip-up hoodie occupied armchairs equipped with multi-screen terminals. Tapping his ear, Graff opened both arms outward, suggesting Justin take in the scene. The armchairs formed a semicircle surrounding a curved screen of movie-theater proportions. Some students even had small crowds.

“Crowds form around the high volume bettors,” said Graff, acknowledging a wave from a Japanese male with hair resembling Sonic the hedgehog.

“In a different age some of our students might have been day traders. Of course high frequency trading methodologies all but killed that profession, but we still lose some of the best talents to management in the biggest story-based trading firms. The edges in the markets are smaller but experiments like these proved to some there is still money to be made.”

The screen split to show the biggest current events, political, finance, sports, and poker channels. Justin noticed a poker tournament he didn’t recognize and made a mental note to ask Graff later. Another screen displayed a young local poker player in a post-election press conference. “He’s getting grilled for his post-flop play,” said Graff.

“How can you hear that?”

“Oh, I forgot to give you one of these.” Graff took an earpiece from his shirt pocket. “If you don’t come to school here you’ll have to return it. It uses the new skin adhesive so you can tuck it behind

your ear without being too obvious. You've heard of these right? You can connect it to any messaging devices you own."

"Yes, I've seen these," said Justin, sticking it behind his ear.

"Channel 14 is Las Vegas. We have our own feeds." Justin tuned the earpiece with a few taps and he picked up the interview loud and clear.

A shaggy-bearded member of the press asked: "Your technical ability let you down today—how does that feel?"

A boy, just a teenager, answered: "I misread his check-raises on the flop in several spots. I stubbornly thought I could outplay him. I didn't think delayed continuation betting was an option—next time I'll consider that strategy if I can't get a read on his check-raises. It was more about what I didn't do versus what he was doing."

"What's next for you?" Another reporter.

"I'll review the hands. We all do. It's standard, to learn what you can. I think I know what I have to do next time, even now. I'll be in the moment the same way I was tonight. That's what great players and leaders do. Fortunately I'm young so this won't be the last time you talk to me."

Graff tapped his ear. "Justin, let's go get some food." Justin turned off his earpiece, too.

"Do you know him?" asked Justin.

"I haven't spoken with him, but I keep tabs on the young talent. That's how I found you."

"That's hard work. There's plenty of elections."

"True, even the district level elections get press, now," said Graff. "Americans are turning on to this system. People are more politically involved without the waste of drawn-out campaigns. The media loves the almost sports-like tension of the heads-up matches. A battle of wills. But what matters is that we put the right people

in decision-making roles in this country. Leaders that know how to makes decisions and be accountable to them. Success in poker is predictive of that metal.”

“It’s remarkable that only fifteen years ago we voted on who would lead us. Dad talks about the old way sometimes,” said Justin.

Graff nodded as they paced back to the entrance. “Some countries still elect their leaders through voting-based elections. Those systems don’t have the merit-based model we do, though, where we’ve honed our students in decision-making and political acumen. And if someone gains a leadership position and makes bad decisions...it’s rare, but happens...then they won’t be in the next election.”

“What are these students doing?” Justin motioned to the seated students.

“They’re betting on current events, political outcomes, the finance markets, energy prices, technology, sports. Each terminal can be customized, like you might customize your Speak feed to ensure the news you get is relevant. You use the same credits for any other game in here. It’s busy around sporting events, but we’ve managed to encourage more attention around political events and the financial markets with the proper incentives.”

“But edges are small.”

Graff nodded. “True. If it weren’t for story-based models, there wouldn’t be any. Actually, a former student, Gemini Wiggins, left and started Eventful, the first story-based trading firm. Several joined him since when they couldn’t crack into the top echelons of the election primaries.”

“The edge is in patterns others are blind to?”

“In a way. The algorithms see trends and can predict them, but they don’t catch everything, especially Black Swans. If you stick around, ask Annie about it. She’s a Diamond sophomore. She won that pot as we came in the room. Light brown hair. Cute smile.” Moving

back to the entrance, they walked passed floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out to the Felt near the right side of the club-shaped room. “By the way, this section hosts tables for experimental games we get from professors, students, or weekly outside pitches from gaming startups. There’s a cross between black-jack and three-card poker that’s popular on campus lately.”

“No slot machines,” noted Justin.

“Quite right. As I mentioned, we’re here to win elections. Trivialities like slots or chess are distractions. I actually helped remove slots two years ago. We can call this building Las Vegas, but we don’t intend to make it a carbon copy of that suspect place.” Graff saluted Jimbo as the glass doors opened back into the Felt.

The afternoon sun beamed down on Justin’s face and he briefly thought about that same sun beating on his neck as he fertilized long rows back at the vineyard. His sister Lady Luck would be checking the vines by about now. He smiled, but then retreated to neutral when he saw Graff watching him. He parried: “What did you mean by Diamond sophomore?”

“Suits are the houses. You might have noticed the students in same-colored sweaters or hoodies earlier. Actually, there’s a group of Diamonds, there.” Graff pointed to a small group of guys and girls coming their way, donning red. “When you join the university we’ll match you with an appropriate Suit based upon a detailed analysis of your poker style, your political acumen, and of course who you are personality-wise. Most students intuitively know who they are, though, without the tests. For example, without me telling you anything, which suit do you most identify with: hearts, clubs, diamonds, or spades?”

“Probably hearts or spades.”

“Once you see the test, it’ll be clearer. For example, most Spades know with a high probability they will land there. I’m actually motioning to remove this pseudo-science from the onboarding

process; it's too expensive and wastes time telling us what we already know. Even though the important goal is to match you with like-minded individuals, professors, and training regimens, we can adjust these initial assignments later. We teach enough poker and politics to understand that repeatedly pursuing a losing strategy is madness."

The Diamond group waved at Graff as they passed toward Las Vegas. Graff waved for them to stop and meet Justin; they greeted him with light handshakes. Aaron, Jasmine, Rory, and Natalia. Graff congratulated Aaron on his online campus poker room tournament win, and Natalia on her political simulation performance. "Go get a load off," said Graff ushering them into Las Vegas. "Good kids," said Graff to Justin.

Decision

A few minutes later Graff and Justin sat across from each other, arms resting on a red and white checkered tablecloth. Graff saluted a man with a white hat across the restaurant, made circle with his fingers, smiled when the chef gave him the OK sign back.

“Spaghetti and meatballs work for you?”

“Sure, I’m hungry.”

“You won’t be around here,” said Graff. “Spaghetti’s is off-campus but your campus credits are good here.”

“The same ones that I can reload with Jimbo?”

“Exactly, they’re also good in the cafés and shops on campus. Our online store also takes them. If you join up we’ll make sure you start with enough to pick up your course materials and online resources. Make sure to do that, since some of the professors get pissed if you don’t buy their recommended textbook.” Graff laughed at his own joke. Justin laughed a bit to match Graff, a little unsure why he was laughing.

“Look, our university is progressive but still holds onto some of the traditional—may I say backward?—ways. I realize your middle and high school in the country probably didn’t require textbooks.”

Getting it, Justin said, “Right, we just downloaded the open-source equivalents.”

“Exactly, and that’s just fine. Texts are almost all freely available now, at least education-related ones. The Creative Commons movement at the beginning of the century got things moving. Some of the professors we brought in at the beginning—we only built this school sixteen years ago pre-empting the first tournament-based

elections—received packages that included provisions for their personal textbooks. I'm trying to get rid of those, too, but I don't have too much jurisdiction over this school's purely educational components."

"So, what do you think?"

Justin twisted tomato-clothed noodles onto his fork. He pictured Lady Luck's hands on her hips, warning him to make the right decision, that he didn't have to decide right then and there.

"I like it."

Graff wasn't convinced. "But?"

"I'd prefer to talk it over with my family."

"Justin, you have the chance to change the world. Just twenty years ago it took money, influence, and time to build your brand into a political seat. Potentially great leaders never had a chance to scratch the surface of the elite clubs within the Democratic or Republican parties. The barriers to entry are gone."

"When I'm here I can't support my family. Dad's getting old. Mom didn't used to have to help too much. Lady Luck is a big help, but there's some heavy lifting to do."

"If you win a political seat, you'll be paid a salary. You'll have enough to hire a couple hands and you won't need to play the underground games for extra cash."

"I know you can't guarantee me a seat—I'll have to win an election. Poker tournaments are fickle. Even heads-up formats."

"Justin, think bigger. There's always a bigger game."

Parents at Vineyard

Justin lounged in the plastic burnt-orange train seat, his ear buds singing the hopes of Matisyahu's "One Day", a song recommended by his childhood friend Scott. Bobbing his head and opening his heart, Justin watched the city fade into the sunset-basked horizon. He closed his eyes, recounting Graff's words at Spaghetti's. Think bigger. There's always a bigger game. Matisyahu's lyrics joined in, all my life I've been waiting for, I've been praying for...

The bike locker beeped affirmatively as Justin punched in his passcode. He tightened the straps on his backpack, then rolled the bike down a dusty ramp to street level of Cold Spring station. He waved at a salt and pepper bearded man, hunched below a lime-green umbrella, elbows resting on a transparent fridge.

"You're early," said the man, wagging his finger. "Bad session?"

"I didn't play today. I visited the university."

Scratching his ear, "They want business?"

"No, they don't want our stuff. I hear they import their grape drink."

"So what were you doing there?"

"Just paying a visit," laughed Justin, flicking the man a coin.

The old man grasped the silver from the air. He slid open his fridge, handed Justin a beer.

Justin winked at the man. "No thanks, Vic, just don't need people around here knowing I went to the university." He swung his leg over the bike, started riding away.

The salt and pepper beard called after him: "What about when they want you for good?"

Coasting down from atop the small hill where the station stood, Justin looked out on the dusk-lit landscape. Lamps dangled like fireflies on rows upon rows of vineyards. Brighter lights shown from homesteads spaced one and a half or two acres apart. Justin's bike settled into the dust path. He had taken this two-mile ride many times. The dancing fireflies and the consistent stars above welcomed him on a win or healed the wounds of an occasional loss. Breakneck Ridge and Storm King Mountain watched on.

"I made you soup," said Lady Luck. She rubbed his back as she set a red bowl with red tomato soup on the table.

"Thanks," said Justin, feeling the unfinished wood table, noting the contrast from the teak desks at the university. He slurped the soup. "Better food than the university."

"Whatever," shrugged Lady Luck, her way of saying thank you. "What'd you think? Mom and Dad wanted to know, too, but they couldn't stay up late. You know how tired they get these days." Justin nodded, knowing sneaking out for underground games in the city was only possible because his parents slept so soundly.

"Not true!" said a man from the shadows on the edge of the kitchen. "Just needed a cat nap!" Justin rose and hugged his father. "Easy there, it's not like you just got home from war!"

"Missed you, Pops."

"It's all we talked about today," said a woman's voice. Justin's mom, wearing only a extra large tee shirt, pulled up a chair at the table. "Your sister showed me some of your work today, too. Say, Lucy, could you turn on the lamp? No reason to sit in the dark!"

The lamplight showed his family's weariness and expectation. Mom's hands rested on the table. Dad crossed his leg. Lady Luck leaned against the sink's countertop like she did when potential boyfriends asked her out for dinner. A firefly lamp swung lightly in the breeze through the window behind her.

"Did you meet some of the students?" asked Mom.

“A few. Graff, who we met in Cold Spring, showed me around. There’s a qualification tournament Thursday. There’s no guarantee I’d get in.”

“Others like you?” asked Lady Luck.

“Right. Graff is pushing to bring in students from outside the system. The administration isn’t rushing into it, though.”

“Do you trust Graff?” asked Dad.

Justin remembered Graff’s words again, there’s always a bigger game. “He’s a bundle of energy.”

“Optimistic, too, don’t you think? When we met he said you’d have a shot at political office.”

“It’s a top poker university. I’d have a shot. No guarantees. Like our wine customers. One season they buy; the next, they may not.”

Mom asked: “What happens if you gain office?”

“Then I’d get some decision-making power. Some influence.”

“And a salary,” noted Dad. “But you’d have to win an election tournament. Even if you win the play-in to university, what makes you think you could win an election against the purebreds? You’ve only ever played poker with your uncle before he passed.”

Justin waited, then glanced at Lady Luck. She stepped in. “It’s odd he’s picked you out,” she said. “A wine boy without any background except an uncle who had fifteen minutes of fame on the semi-pro circuit. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to do the play-in, see what happens. You’ll probably lose, anyway.”

“We want the best for you,” said Mom. “There’s plenty of work here, though. I learned that today.”

“Go Thursday for the play-in,” said Dad. “If anything it will be a good story for our poker customers.”

An hour later Justin and Lady Luck sat backs against a shagbark hickory on Breakneck Ridge overlooking the Hudson. A half-moon

lit the path up the ridge from the vineyards below them banking the river.

“Thanks for your help,” said Justin.

Lady Luck stood, paced to the gneiss rock jutting from the earth, stepped onto it. She turned and Storm King Mountain framed her silhouette. “I know you’ll win. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of Mom and Dad until you get elected. Send money if you can.”

Justin could not make out her face. Unsure of her tone, he said: “I’ll bring money.”

Lady Luck’s folded arms shifted to her hips. The moonlight played a trick and for a moment she looked like the light butterflies that hung around shagbark hickories. She spoke firmly, though, a touch of heaviness: “If you go, you go. Be focused.”

“I’m not just going to leave you and Mom and Dad.”

“I would have gone if I had the chance. People like Graff weren’t around a few years back. Heck, this new system wasn’t either. Go, and remember what I taught you.”

Justin nodded, stood. Lady Luck skipped off her perch, hugged him. Justin thought he felt a butterfly rest on his neck, but when he reached back he found only the tickling skin of the shagbark hickory.

Play-in Tourney

Orange lights like intense sunsets on Breakneck Ridge blinded Justin whenever he took his eyes off the poker table. Harsh and unyielding instead of calming. Maybe he wasn't ready. Juno's underground game had no cameras, no flashing lights, no television audience. Nor were games hosted in the mornings; mentally preparing on the train in broad daylight contrasted his nighttime escapes into the city.

Justin looked back to the turquoise felt, where the dealer, Jim from Las Vegas, dragged chips from the pot to his opponent, a Brazilian teenager. "Jack-high straight wins," said Jim.

"Good hand," said Justin to his opponent, customarily.

"Lucky river," said the Buenso the Brazilian. Justin knew Buenso played it well, though. A delicate check-raise on the wet turn card. Justin correctly tempered the aggression, but flipped a coin then called the even wetter river. Lady Luck, if she was watching, wouldn't have approved. Stay focused on the present situation. Justin felt he'd talked himself into the call without fully examining the probabilities. In the previous match, hasty decisions almost put him at risk against Lisa, the Italian girl.

Justin shuffled his remaining chips with one hand, then signaled through the fiery light for his last bullet. Each player had three reloads. A man in a forest jacket placed another stack of chips in front of Justin. His late uncle's words came clear then, they say you need a chip and a chair, but usually you have much more than that. He smiled when he noticed the spotlights formed the shape of a butterfly on the felt.

Settling in, but not quite getting over the blazing lights, Justin shut out distractions, deciding to dismantle Buenso hand by hand. The

Brazilian soon made another large check-raise on the turn in a big pot. Justin noticed his smirk as the chips fell from his hands, too casually, as if he wanted to part with them. It was the same smirk in a previous pot he'd called flop and raised turn with air. Justin didn't have shit, but re-raised.

"Ten-high here," said Buenso tossing his hand into the muck.

"Nine-high," said Justin turning his hand face up. He normally wouldn't taunt his opponent. Maybe it was the television. Or the microphone attached to his chin. Poker players said stupid things sometimes. Lady Luck wouldn't approve, but at least he was winning.

Fortunately for Justin, Buenso continued to smirk his way to ruin. Buenso's chips fell like the forests at the base of the Hudson Highlands that made way for the micro-vineyards. In less than an hour it was over.

On the final all-in, Buenso put his hands up, suggesting there was nothing he could do. He stood, a slightly amateur move, after the flop missed his hand. "One time," he said. Another childish act. Twenty years ago pros said that on TV, but only as a joke. Card distribution varied like the banks of the Hudson, but comparing a stroke of fortune in poker to the rare strike of lightning went too far.

The turn and river blanked out. "Pot to Justin," said Jim with sports announcer volume, like an umpire who had carefully prepared his strikeout move in the mirror before the game. Justin wondered if the exclamation would have carried the same gusto if Buenso had won.

Justin rose from his chair to accept Buenso's congratulatory handshake. "How'd you beat me?" Buenso asked, wearing the same smirk that sent his chip stacks tumbling like the Amazon rainforest.

"Better cards today," said Justin, humbly.

Graff materialized from the volcanic glow to shake hands with Justin and Buenso. He winked at Justin. Justin's smile said well you got what you wanted.

Sorting Hat

“You’ll be in Hearts,” said Graff to Justin as they climbed a brief brick staircase around a modest heart-shaped garden. “The students will be your new family. Oh look, Jen is waiting for us.”

Jen waved from her perch on the treated wood stoop. Short blonde hair covered her face as she folded away her tablet into a slim bag, but she flicked her bangs aside to flash a warm smile. “Hey Graff!” Then, to Justin, “Glad to meet you Justin.” She extended her hand; it was soft but the handshake proved firmer than expected.

“Nice to meet you, Jen.”

Graff, running his hand through imaginary hair, said: “Congratulations, again, Justin. Jen will set you up. I’ll catch up with you later. I’m off to coffee with Headmaster Caby.” Justin nodded as Graff skipped down the steps like high-spirited Wizard of Oz characters on the yellow brick road.

“Graff’s great, isn’t he?”

“I’m here,” said Justin, shrugging and waving his arm at the campus grounds.

“You’re the first of your kind,” said Jen. “You played smart against Lisa and even better against Buenso. I can see why Graff sought you ought.”

“Thanks,” said Justin. “I’ve got a lot to learn, though.” Lady Luck coached him to make his first impressions modest. Just act natural.

“We all do. That’s why we’re here. And poker is only half the equation. Anyway, the view is great, but let’s get set up.” Justin stole a glance at the campus below them. Scanning right to left, several limestone buildings gave way to the Felt, then to the Wynn-shaped Liberty Hall, the entrance to Poker University. Beyond it, New York

City's skyline, with Freedom Tower playing centerpiece, glittered in the cloudless midday sun. Noticing Justin's pause, Jen added that the Hearts tower, their dorm, was designed by Danny Lebiskind, grandson of Freedom Tower's architect, Daniel Lebiskind. That explained the similar angles and glass exterior.

"This is your chip," said Jen, handing Justin a circular token, only slightly larger and thicker than a clay poker chip. One side showed a silver heart emblem, the other his smiling face on a mini-screen. Jen explained that the chip gained Justin access to their tower and most buildings on campus. Reaching into her navy zip-up sweater, she revealed hers, which attached to a ocean turquoise necklace. "Most students find it easiest to keep them on their necks. You don't have to, but there's usually a first year or two that mistakenly bets his chip in Las Vegas. Ready?"

Jen put her hand on Justin's back, guiding him forward. A glass door, inset with teak, slid open. They stood in a naturally lit common room packed with students. One of them pointed to Justin and Jen; the room filled with applause and some light cheers. Justin heard his name shouted.

A wavy brunette, blue zip-up tighter than Jen's, stood from a bean bag, patted him on the back. "I'm Anna. Welcome to the family!"

"Thanks," Justin said, only slightly grinning. If Lady Luck's would-be suitors from West Point could see Anna, they might jump ship in favor of this well-endowed gal.

"We watched it all," said Anna, her head nodding toward the six-foot displays on the edge of the common room. "Nice bluff-raise on fourth street. While an exploitable move, you got a rise out of some of the first years. And Jen." Anna laughed when Jen rolled her eyes. "When Graff messaged Jen and I that you were representing Hearts we brought the group here to watch. After you won, we decided to keep everyone here to welcome you. We're a fun group and it's only fair since the rest of the first years got their welcome party Monday."

“That’s kind of you,” said Justin. Even Justin’s biggest wins in Juno’s underground games were solitary occasions. He slipped some of his cash winnings into the pockets of his family’s best customers, then walked New York’s Lower East Side alleys, reflecting on the night’s important hands, before boarding the shuttle up 5th Avenue to Grand Central. At 3:00am the driverless buses were usually empty. On a handful of lonely moments, he splurged on a driver-on-board Uber cab to have someone to talk to. Regardless, unless a drunk student lost his way, Justin normally found himself solo on the train back to Hudson Highlands.

“Well, enjoy the victory!” said Anna. “With hard work it could be a sign of things to come.”

“I think some of your peers want to congratulate you,” said Jen. “The third and fourth years are heading for lunch. See the Chinese student in the back? That’s Lee. He’s your roommate. Ask him for anything you need right away. I’ve also left introduction messages in your inbox.”

Jen, Anna, and a few other blue zip-ups headed out into the sun after giving Justin high fives, fist-bumps, or a variety of other congratulatory handshakes. “You killed it!” “Crushing on your first day.” “You’re a natural.” “Bet you can’t wait to get started.”

Then Justin’s peers surrounded him, showering him with love. Maybe this could be a family. He remembered hugging his dad only three nights before. Then Lady Luck’s voice in his head: make a first impression. Justin remembered to offer a genuine smile for each complement thrown his way.