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He disembarked at the vert station with a swimming head and a bad need to move his legs. Though he could have rid himself or another few dozen globals taking a bus or a hangshaw, he chose instead to walk the several miles between the vert and Atlantis stations. He and hundreds of others, who picked their way slowly across the suspended bridge.

Up here, the city consisted of a number of separate platforms, connected by rail tubes and sprouting buildings both above and below. The complex network of cables and beams holding them up was a feat of mathematical precision. Probably. This was the old city, built centuries ago, long before Atlantis spread both up and down from the original station. It all still shook when the titanic intercontinental trains blasted through it several times an hour.

Atlantis Station was a city unto itself, an enclosed agglutination of shops and motels and services and the homes of all their operators, clustered tightly around the enormous junction where trains met on the way from one continent to the other. From the outside it was like a fat disc, studded with varying shape and size, and hung with a number of gyroscopic balances. Inside it was a scarcely navigable mess of hallways connecting old plazas and courts. It was loud, it was crowded, and it was dirty. And by not having decided upon a destination, Valle had bought himself a longer wait within it.

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He felt eyes on him constantly as he trudged through foul-smelling concrete corridors to find an open space in which to consider his destination. Stranded travelers begging for transferable seats on a train; others trying to sell seats they had for money to send home. Street hawkers whose wares would do him no good and who weren't equipped to deal in cash anyway. Valle knew their plight; he had spent many hours hawking fruitlessly as a small pup when he'd been assigned to it. That was, in fact, where Mr. Walter found him and his brother.

Ah, he didn't like to think about Mr. Walter.

There were Aequitas sentinels posted in every corridor, and patrolling the plazas. Valle gave them wide berth, though they couldn't touch him. Veritas, maybe. But they could detain him, inconvenience him. And when they released him, it would mean that they had learned his secret.

In a wide, white-walled chamber with a digital sea for a ceiling, he shoved his way into a crowd filtering to an array of holographic station attendants selling rail passage. The press was tight, shouting broke out more than once in the time it took for enough hopeful travelers to secure their reservations that the crowd advanced any distance.

He considered destinations, as much as the din allowed for any focused thought. He had lived on both continents, both near to and very far from Crucis's masters. His brother was never more than a few days' travel away, should Valle lose in his game.

Valle was a good six feet tall, and his ears another several inches after that; he stood high over most of the people here, both human and zoan. He felt very visible: was there anywhere on earth where he wouldn't? Somewhere with a large and dense chiropter population, or at least majority zoan. Would the holograph at the kiosk be able to answer questions?

Something pressed into his side. He ignored it at first, assuming it was someone in the crowd trying to press closer. And if it was someone trying to get into his rucksack, he wasn't worried; it was padlocked at the top and lined with an electric mesh that would shock a hand that tried to cut it open. But the object jabbed at his ribs didn't

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pull away, and a heel stomped on his foot. When his knee reflexively buckled, a hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him downward.

“Don’t try anything,” a raspy voice said straight into his ear, just barely audible.

The owner of the voice, hand, and heel pressed the object harder against his body, and began to pull him away. It didn’t take much to conceal the abduction, the weapon being hidden in the crush. Nor would it have taken much for Valle to twist away and hopefully put several bodies between himself and his assailant—but that depended upon what kind of weapon it was. And he didn’t want to create a big enough altercation that an Aequitas soldier stepped in. He only gritted his teeth and hoped the robber would take a look at the useless contents of his rucksack once they were in private and turn him loose.

The hand on his shoulder guided him to an escalator that ascended to the mezzanine where another dozen hopefuls waited for their chance to reach the kiosks. When he tried to turn his head, the weapon pressed hard again. He had a chance only to see a gnarled, taloned hand, marking them probably an avian-model zoan.

They warned him several times to be quiet, down another corridor and through a thinning crowd, several more Aequitas, and finally into a hidden maintenance closet, where they tore the rucksack off his back. Probably one that was conveniently unmonitored and easy to access. Valle had to wonder how many victims were stripped of their belongings in it.

Once closed into the dim closet, Valle started to say: “I don’t have anything but cash and clothes,” but he didn’t get past *have* before that hand came up and undid the catch on his voice box; sweeping the device away and pocketing it in a quick, practice motion. In enraged surprise, he tried to pull away, but the bird swung him around and forced him against the wall with a strong elbow.

“I’d say shut up,” they rasped. “but I think we got that settled. Where were you going? Meeting up with your brother?”

In the seconds before they mentioned his brother, he’d had time to concoct a suspicion that the assailant wanted something he had in the voice box’s spare local storage, not that there was anything

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important in it. Now, only the considerable pressure holding him against the wall prevented him from losing his feet. Head spinning, he shouted silently, just a whispered hiss escaping his throat, spittle bubbling from the unoccupied ports in his neck.

“Good for me either way. I thought I was going to have to go all the way down to the bottom to get at you.”

Valle had some muscle from the physical demands of his work, but by and large he was weak and spindly. He tried to use his far greater size to throw the bird off balance, but already breathing through his narrow backup trachea was making him lightheaded. In the end he sagged, face against the concrete.

How did they know? Were they from Osah? Osah would have sent Crucis after him, or if he were on assignment, then a Veritas team. That meant someone else knew.

That someone else leaned on him with one shoulder to keep him pinned, while they worked something over his hand and onto his wrist. Whatever that was, it tightened once it was in place, while the bird tapped loudly on a tablet, mumbling all the while. Valle had stopped hearing them. With his heart racing, it took a lot of concentration to keep his shallow breathing up to speed.

“Okay,” the scratchy voice said. “If I lay off, will you behave?”

Valle loosed a long, unvoiced whine in lieu of nodding or mouthing an affirmative. A moment’s more vigilance, and then the pressure came off him. He slumped to his knees and rested for a long while before turning to sit on a duct running along the floor.

As expected, his abductor was an avian zoan, generic buteo model. Large, blue, hooked beak between tired yellow eyes. They were small, they probably didn’t even come up to Valle’s shoulders, except maybe for the highest points in their short, teased wig.

Most of their neck was mechanical, as was the elbow they’d pinned him with. Almost the very cheapest zoan bionics, made of ancient pistons and wheels that provided little tactile feedback and needed frequent greasing. In front of their plastic esophagus was mounted a very similar voice box to his. He should have noticed the electronic twang it gave their partially synthesized voice.

“Don’t mess with the bracelet,” they raised the tablet they held.

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“It’s all-purpose; I can track you, I can hear you, I know if you pick at it. If you don’t cooperate, it’ll stick out a needle and knock you out.”

Valle glanced only briefly at the bracelet. It was slim and low-profile, and the same color as his fur. A variation on the cuffs Aequitas used, but it didn’t latch itself to a twin on his other wrist. The bird had plans for him.

“I’m gonna give you your neck back. You aren’t gonna yell or anything?”

Valle didn’t say anything. The bird took it as agreement, and handed his voice box over. As soon as it clicked into place it whirred back to life, and soon he could breathe normally again.

“You didn’t spring for the lethal model?” he mumbled as soon as he could.

“You never know what’s lethal these days. What brand of liver do you have?” They jangled a splinter knife clipped to their belt, probably the weapon they’d had in his back minutes before. “And if I need lethal, I’ve got this.”

The bird had a moderate European accent, maybe northern, based on how they sounded some of their vowels. Very familiar to Valle, but not quite the accent of the region he had lived in for a year. From the Baltic district, maybe.

“That one cost me just about everything I had,” they said. “I’d rather not have to use it up. Maybe I can return it.”

“What is this?” Valle sighed. It was supposed to be a growl, but he was so tired now.

“All you need to know is that I’m taking a train to Eurasia with the identical twin brother of Crucis, the Fang of Osah.”

Valle dug his fingers into his hairpiece. That could only mean that they meant to use him to get into a Veritas building, or the Osah complex itself.

“Does the bracelet come off when you get tortured to death?” he asked. “Or will I have to take it to a locksmith?”

“If that happens, feel free to crack a shitty joke over my bleeding corpse. I won’t care, I’ll be dead.”

They finished searching his rucksack enough to confirm that it

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indeed held nothing but clothes and cash.

“Come on,” they said. “We have a train to catch. Act casual and stay in my sight.”

Valle stood.

“And if we do get separated,” he said. “who do I tell them I’m traveling with, so you don’t have to maybe-kill me?”

The bird glowered for a long time before finally saying, “Grid. She-her.”