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Valle let Grid lead him to a different kiosk plaza, where there was less chance anyone had seen her pull him away. When she looked back at him he could see that she rankled at the defeat of giving up her name, though she already gave him only looks of the most virulent hatred. He didn't know whether to be angry about that or not. He also didn't know whether to risk throwing up his hands and calling for help.

They were aboard a train by the end of the day, deep in the middle of one of the mammoth passenger cars. The bird hadn't allowed Valle to pay for a private cabin. She accused him of trying to make them more conspicuous.

"I don't want to be caught any more than you do," he assured her, but she only scowled.

The third floor of the car was economy seating wall to wall, separated only by three aisles. Grid sat Valle down so she could trap his braceleted hand between his hip and hers, in case anyone recognized the device. She still had her splinter knife, which she had secreted between the pistons replacing the biceps of her right arm, to surprising success. She wouldn't deploy it into his torso, shooting fragments of hot ceramic into his gut like it was jelly, for him to bleed out visibly on the train next to her, but she could jam it into his arm if he tried anything.

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"This is going to be eighteen quiet hours," she said.

"It might be the last good night's sleep you ever have," Valle prodded.

"You keep acting like I don't know the risks. Do you think I'd come within a mile of someone like you if I had anything to lose?"

"A mechanic?"

"Shut up. You live off your brother's dole. You settle somewhere and then ride around in luxury when you get bored."

"I *would* ride in luxury if you would let me. There are at least six cameras that can see us here; we could've had privacy."

"You just wanted to trigger the, 'I agree not to use the private cabin for any of the following activities that are known to increase the likelihood of intervention by Osah.' We would've had to declare our relationship. It would be Red Flag City."

Valle had nothing to say. He wished he were that conniving.

"I spent all my life," Grid lowered her voice. "Thinking I was being watched by an agent of divine wrath. Thinking He flooded the earth when He was upset with humanity. Now I learn that 'He' is a committee of old men making decision from a board room about who to kill because they know too much."

Valle glanced at her sidelong.

"Are you sure you want to say any of that out loud?" he asked.

"I got myself cleaned out," she rolled her eyes. "He can't zap me. *They* can't zap me, I mean."

"That's not the only way they do it."

"Don't I goddamn know it."

She adjusted his rucksack, where it was wedged between their knees and the seats in front of them. For something to do that wasn't talking to him.

"I wanted to get rid of the money," Valle ventured after a minute. "I never ask for it. I don't want money from him."

"Sure."

"How do you know? About Osah."

Silence.

"It's dangerous to know it. I can't tell anyone. I have to pretend."

"Don't make me confiscate your neck."

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Valle let out a huff that came out with a discordant synth edge. People were still filing in from either end of the train car. It would probably take another hour to load all two thousand passengers.

"Wherever you want to get in, my DNA won't be enough. It'll know his gait and his nanite biome."

"Maybe. Maybe they're complacent."

"Crucis and I aren't the same."

"No, you're not. One of you does the killing, and the other one sits back and profits from it."

"This isn't *profit*," Valle almost spat, indicating the package of cash in the rucksack. "This is a thumb in my damn eye. I'm in hiding, he brings me his blood money because he knows I can't stand to keep it. It's a game to him."

"A game between brothers, that's sweet."

Before Valle could say anything else, someone a few rows ahead of them screamed. Grid stood, a hand on her splinter knife, to try and see what was happening. Valle, as much taller than she as he was, could already see over the seats.

A human passenger slumped into the aisle. As Valle watched, their exposed skin turned ashen, and then a dark gray, trails of red smoldering flame running like marble veins across its surface. Particles flaked off as their head bounced against their shoulder, scattering on the worn-down carpet.

"Sit down," he hissed at Grid.

She hesitantly lowered herself back into her seat, as others began shouting and screaming as well, and wails of shocked despair rose from the seat next to the victim.

"Holy shit," Grid muttered. She shot an accusatory glance at Valle, but couldn't sustain it and turned her eyes back to the unsettled crowd.

Cries of "Osah!" and "Praise Osah!" and "Turn your eye away, Watcher!" studded the rising din. A number of passengers were moving away from the body, while others moved towards it.

"What was he doing?" Grid wondered aloud, urgently. "He couldn't have been fornicating, or any of the things they zap you for."

"This is a decimation," Valle explained. "A random kill to make

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sure people stay focused on their fear of Him.”

She gave him a disbelieving look, but his seriousness seemed to convince her.

Aequitas guards shouted for order and tried to wade in from their stations in the corners of the car, but it was slow going. Looters were going through the victim’s pockets, even as his survivors sat, weeping, next to him. Finding nothing, but shaking the body, which was already little more than ash, apart as they hunted. When Osah smote someone, He killed every cell in their body simultaneously, with an electric current from nanites living within them. It might, in a way, be the most merciful death possible, while also horrible for onlookers. The genes that instructed the cells to produce those nanites didn’t express themselves in everyone, though. Hence the Veritas Army, and hence the rumored assassin, the Fang of Osah. Valle explained this all grimly, his braceleted hand out in front of his captor to discourage intervention.

Aequitas closed in, electric prods at the ready. Another human, manically shouting the praises of God the Watcher, wouldn’t move away from the body. Others chanted a song like those the Lookatmes sang, and stood aggressively between him and the guards.

When it came to blows, passengers abandoned their seats to get away from the fray, a shockwave of motion. The zoan between Grid and the aisle scrambled over their knees, knocking Valle in the chin on the way. Aequitas wasn’t known for its subtlety once violence had begun.

Behind that passenger crawled one of the fanatics, hands soiled with human ash. One of the Aequitas soldiers grabbed her by the leg, struck her repeatedly on the back with his prod. She clutched at Valle’s arms for purchase, unseeing eyes frantic in his face. When the soldier pulled her away she grasped at Grid instead, wrenching the bird out of her seat.

Valle knew better than to try and get Grid out of the violent huddle, though he was strangely distraught to see her struggle with the fanatic, and stiffen when the soldier electrified his prod and shocked both of them. She roared as soon as she had control back of her muscles, and threw the convulsing fanatic off of her. The soldier

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grabbed her unmodified arm in one hand and held it far behind her back, as he pinned her down, beak buried in carpet. He shocked her one more time, and she lay still, panting.

As her supposed traveling companion, Valle raised his hands and prepared to be arrested. He was already cuffed, after all.



They were in custody, along with several looters and now quite sheepish fanatics, until long after the train had departed, the price of their seats forfeit. Aequitas's office, which opened to a plaza directly off the terminal, was a dark and low-ceilinged space, undecorated and fouled by the passage of hundreds of detainees a day. The soldiers who had cleared the frantic crowd off the train led them all in, hands in magnetic cuffs, and locked them in a general cell while ground-level adjudicators questioned the soldiers and reviewed security footage. Grid was shaken and bruised, and Valle had taken several bumps himself, including a needless swipe across the shoulders from an uncharged prod to set him moving once he was cuffed. The bird was completely quiet, but looked around her with naked, fiery hate.

Soldiers called (or dragged) detainees out one or two at a time, to be questioned, or more likely merely barked at, by an adjudicator in an office across the busy floor from the retention block. Some were dismissed, while others, probably those who had fought back or looted, were taken back to another closed chamber. When Grid and Valle were called they went quietly, though the bird still had difficulty walking.

The adjudicator looked over their information on a tablet. Grid's eyes were on it, clearly in terror of what it may reveal about her. The black-garbed human seemed unfazed by anything he read about her, fortunately. Once he looked at Valle's section, however, he set the tablet down carefully, as if it were dangerous.

"The Aequitas Army is not going to charge you with anything," he said. He knitted his fingers together nervously. "And we apologize for the inconvenience. We will cover the price of your seats, if you still plan to travel"

"It's okay, let me pay for them," Valle insisted.

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“No, no. Aequitas will pay.”

He directed them to another office, where an Aequitas bursar, a position Valle would not have suspected existed, would take care of it. The look Grid gave Valle smoldered, but was too tired to burn.

The Aequitas bursar was a zoan of indeterminate mammalian model, something broadly felid, and also terrified of Valle. It made him ill, not only because they knew about his connection to Crucis, but also because he could never know whether they interpreted it in a practical or mystical way.

“The Aequitas Army extends its sincerest...” the cat stumbled through the scripted apology, and left it unfinished after seeing the travelers’ expressions. He fiddled with the surface of his desk, a screen swimming with myriad documents. “Do you...do you agree to be given passage to your destination at Aequitas’s expense?”

He presented them with forms to sign with their fingers on the desk. The names *Valle* (*no sur, chiropter*) and *Ingrid Kettunnen* entered the Aequitas Army’s files, tied together irreparably.

“Destination?” the bursar asked.

“Eurasia,” Grid said.

“Final destination, Eurasia, Atlantis Port One?”

Grid hesitated, and Valle took the chance to jump in.

“Dresden’s Bubble,” he said.

The hooked beak, scuffed and bloodied, opened to protest, but Grid said nothing. While in the Aequitas office, she was at the mercy of the next of kin to the Fang of Osah.