

6

The cluster of domes that constituted Eurasia spread out over a stretch of a thousand miles. Few were fully separate, but connected by a short tunnel. Traffic to the eastern end, unofficially known as Asia, had to pass all the way through Europe, which it did through subterranean roads, raised highways, and magnetic peripheral tracks that ran along the walls. That also meant that all traffic intended for any dome, barring illegal and very dangerous submarine travel, had to pass through the Europe Gate station.

Aequitas presence was immediately much greater, or at least more visible, once they were in Europe. Black-armored soldiers oversaw the station as though expecting an attack at any time. They had frequent checkpoints beyond it: dark, brutalist huts at the entrances to tunnels and interrupting traffic oh old, dingy streets. Heads-up displays within their helmets alerted them to Grid's and Valley's status, so the travelers were never stopped.

The domes themselves were situated far into the plateaus that had once been the terrestrial continents for which they were named. Unlike Atlantis, the cities within them were far more like the classic ones described in stories, shown in ancient movies. Especially nearer the intercontinental station, asphalt streets ran between tight but orderly row houses and facsimiles of landmarks from the abandoned continents. An Al Hambra and an Arc de Triomphe, in memory

GROODS

of their originals. Beyond that, the inner-city monorail rumbled on an elevated track above dank streets, between high-rise tenements showing their three-century age, and below the elevated platforms where on which the wealthy built their estates.

The wealthy, but not the wealthy who could have their own bubbles.

Above the surface-bound city was another, made up of buoyant hemisphere domes and the occasional full globes, some tethered to the ground by elevator tubes and some permanently connected by enormous glass flutes that flared out at the base, as though the miniature city were a droplet of water about to fall upward to the surface. By nature these were all much smaller than the domes below, ranging from small private villas to university campuses. Dresden's, paid for by donations from zoans and guilty humans—the source of much of the family's fortune—was one of the former, tethered amidst the domes officially known as Germany. No short distance from Europe Gate.

Transit was free, as long as they remained en route to the bubble. Valle hefted his rucksack from train to cab to subcar, each able to take them partway through the next aging metropolis. Through the France domes and the Croatia dome, which had been his home for several months some time back. An entire day of slow urban driving. He slept again, in a privately owned cab that crawled slowly along a maglev track he could only trust was abandoned.

When he woke, they were stopped.

Outside the cab's windows was near total dark. A distant street light only showed the faint outlines of squarish buildings and run-down vehicles. The vehicle's screen was blank, and none of its controls responded when Valle tried them. He shook Grid, who lay with her head thrown back against the seat opposite him, snoring.

She tried to say something, but it came out as a strained whisper. Valle's voice did as well. Their voice boxes weren't working. A bright red light reflected in Grid's big eyes, the low battery symbol on her tablet. They'd been drained.

Valle clutched at his head in frustration. He opened his door and felt for the street outside with his foot. They were still atop

THE TWO FANGS

the maglev track; if he had stepped out he would have plummeted twenty feet and probably shattered his none-too-sturdy spine.

Still, whoever had drained them would no doubt be back soon to see whom they'd caught in their trap. He tugged the leg of Grid's pants and tapped the door frame: they needed to go.

They climbed out by what little light they could get out of Grid's tablet, clutching the narrow metal track with hands and knees, searching for a way down. Valle's eyes only gradually adjusted to the dark; their eventual assailants had made sure their power drain would catch any nearby lights, too. He found a spot where the maglev track came near enough the ground that he could hang from his fingers and just reach the street with his toes, and dropped himself down. Reluctant as she was to be helped down by her murderous quarry, Grid let him lower her too.

Conferring briefly once they were safely away from the stranded cab, they determined: they didn't know where they were, everything electronic on them had been drained of power, neither saw well in the dark, and the only weapon between them was Grid's splinter knife. The last couldn't deploy without a charge.

Valle liked his odds.

The hawk let him know she knew what he was thinking by clutching his arm tightly. Her grip was iron, and talons bit into his skin. She tugged him onward, inching along the edge of a featureless wall toward the only faint light available.

Once the light began to show the texture of the road, if not its shape, Grid moved out from the wall to inspect the corner that obscured its source. In a quick motion, Crucis grabbed at her ankle with the thumb of one foot, and whipped it out from under her. She stumbled but didn't fall—but she lost her grip on his wrist. As soon as he was free, Valle ran back for the shadows.

He didn't get far before he had to stop and catch his breath. His inert voice box was a heavy lump that made breathing through his backup trachea feel like hands strangling him. As long as he kept quiet, though, there was nothing to betray his location to Grid.

His captor followed him as well as she could. Puddles and loose gravel had made his footfalls noisy until he had slowed down, and

GROODS

similarly he heard her come close. He pressed himself against wall, around the corner from the alley that ended in the faint light. When he ventured a glance around the edge, Grid was a very, very slight silhouette, only edges moving, unrecognizable as a humanoid form. But it was enough to recognize her slow, cautious gait. Knife in hand, probably, its half-inch spike still dangerous even without the threat of its projected splinters.

Her wheezing breath, the occasional scrape of talons on asphalt, let Valle know when she had passed him. He slowly shuffled the rucksack off his shoulders—the money would be returned to him, after all—and threw it as hard as he could in the direction she was headed, then slipped around the corner and made for the light, keeping near the edge to hide his silhouette from her if she looked back.

Jogging near-silently, he put distance between them, first a few yards and then several. He only needed to reach the light and find somewhere to hide, where he could work at undoing the bracelet before it began to regain its charge. Once he was free of that, she would have no power over him. He could get the Aequitas marker scrubbed off his file, maybe. Or, if necessary, he and Grid could continue, even together, to Dresden's bubble, to as Aequitas expected them to, and afterward she would have no choice but to let him walk away.

If he could get the bracelet off in time.

But the light disappeared. It took Valle a few careful steps to notice, as thin as it had been. He slowed, kept a hand on the wall—until something struck him hard across the chest.

"I've got this one," a voice called from directly in front of him.

While he was staggered, hands closed around his wrists and drew them together behind his back. Valle tried to struggle, but between his shortened breath and the blow to his already sunken chest, he couldn't summon any force.

Another voice called from behind, as Valle's new captor dragged him back the way he had come. Valle saw the glints of eyeshine from modified tapeta—several of them.

"It's just the two," someone said.

"Waste of a drain," the one restraining Valle muttered.

THE TWO FANGS

Someone else patted Valle down, inverted his pockets, came up with only a handful of global bills and an archaic paper receipt from the vertrain. There were sounds of struggle from farther back in the alley, quiet but sharp *thuds* as Grid either hit or was hit. A cry of pain, and another voice shouting, “Hold her damn beak!”

“They don’t have anything,” one of the bandits reported.

“They’re zoans,” the one searching Valle announced. “Every zoan has something.”

The edge of a knife briefly glinted in the reflected light from the disembodied pupils in front of Valle. It disappeared and the eyes turned down, and then the knife was biting into his stomach.

“Let’s just get a look, see if they’re worth the trouble.”

The cut was shallow, but still painful. Valle’s heels scrabbled against the ground. Gloved fingers felt the edge of the cut and drew it open, so the bandit could get a look at the texture and weave of the synthetic muscle underneath.

“Okay brand. Not a rich man’s guts, but not a poor man’s.”

“This one’s just scraps,” the one investigating Grid called over.

“Take her somewhere and let her loose. We’ll get something from this one.”

Seething with frustration and terror, Valle had given up pleading, and only clenched his teeth as one of the hands moved to the side of his neck, felt for the carotid artery. He only hoped that whoever had learned about Grid’s beak had lost several fingers in the process.

The knife didn’t come, though. The arms restraining Valle’s shifted, the bandits looked away. When Valle followed their urgent gaze, little as he could, it took him a moment to recognize what he saw.

One of the lights hanging in the pitch dark wasn’t eyeshine. In the middle of the half-circle of bandits shone a single orange light that hadn’t been there before; then it went out.

Crucis’s assault was swift and sharp. Bandits shouted in surprise and horror, the sound of wings, footsteps, crunching bone. The Fang of Osah blinded them with bright flashes from his visor, revealing cruel tableaux of teeth and sickle-clawed thumbs dripping with gore, knife-wielding hands severed—and not cleanly—on the ground.

The last one he illuminated, for Valle’s sake. A zoan Valle didn’t

GROODS

get a close look at, desperately wan and wielding a knife tremulously. Crucis's belly split down the middle, and his full retinue of mantis blades and circular saws yawned like insect legs. He closed his wings around the bandit, and the sounds from within the leathery tent were unrecognizable.

Then there was silence, and darkness.

hello brother

hello brother

hello brother

Valle sank against the wall, his strength sapped. The killing had bloodied him as well, he could feel it in his fur and ears. Thick blood, and gobbets of things that weren't blood.

you have a friend

you have a friend

you have a friend

Fortunately Valle didn't have to wonder whether his brother had included Grid in his rampage, because the marquee was suddenly knocked to the side by a shape Valle could only just recognize, by the visor's dim light, as the bird.

Immediately, Crucis had her arm in his thumbs—he had full chiropteran wings, this time—and her leg locked behind his knee. His abdominal blades were still out. Valle saw all this by the light of sparks exploding from the point of contact between Grid's metal biceps and a circular saw.

Valle didn't make a move. There wasn't a move to make; Crucis could beat them both, and another ten more, when they were at their strongest. Effortlessly.

The shrieking of the buzzsaw stopped, thankfully, before it reached real flesh. Crucis let Grid fall, and shone an easy, neutral light in his visor by which to see.

He smiled at Valle, who only stared back. An icon of a waving hand bounced across his visor twice, then he lifted off and was gone.

It was dark again, and Valle was free, but he didn't try to get away before Grid could come after him. He could only assume she was on her back, cursing soundlessly and clutching her wounded arm

THE TWO FANGS

where it leaked hydraulic fluid. She wouldn't be chasing him, and he couldn't run now anyway.

Along the old monorail track, a line of lights began to slowly come back on, illuminating the carnage that both zoans were too exhausted to leave behind.