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"I came home and she was just gone."

Grid explained, both fury and a hitch in her voice. "But she got word to me. The Vampires took her."

They had relocated to the stand of trees outside the villa's walls, a private spot Dresden assured them even his attendants knew not to approach. Grid stood with her back against a tree, drumming the fingers of the hand she couldn't lift against its bark, eyes downcast. Valle only stood and listened, afraid to attract attention to himself.

"She said...she told me about Osah, the OSA, being secret police, and how when He zaps you it's just nanomachines or whatever that kill your cells. She gave me someone's name who could scrub those out of me, and she...said goodbye."

"Was she in the resistance?" Dresden asked.

"I put her name in our records, but that isn't what this was about. She..." Grid fell quiet, and with a grunt pounded her good fist against the tree a few times. "Whatever. The guy who scrubbed me told me the rest. Like about the Fang of Osah. I knew about *that*, about the 'avenging angel' people saw, but not his name, and that he's the one they send after dissidents who don't have the killer nanites

"I did some poking. Some really dangerous-ass poking, and I got a hold of her one more time. She told me all about Crucis, and that she sees him come and go, because Osah has her at His headquarters.

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And she told me that Crucis gives large sums of money to a twin brother. An identical twin brother.”

Their host let out a huff. He picked something out of his teeth thoughtfully and looked to Valle.

“You said you didn’t want me to do anything about it.”

Valle was quiet for a long moment.

“I still don’t,” he said.

“It’s suicide.”

“I know it’s goddamn suicide,” Grid interjected.

“Suicide plus one,” Dresden halted her with a finger. “Batslaughter. I can’t be a party to it.”

He turned back to his villa, cast in a dreamy twilight, itself a sign of ostentatious luxury. He gestured at the outstretched wings that enclosed the courtyard.

“I have ten zoans here being cared for,” he said. “I have a heron who needed an entire new spine, and a lupine who needed extensive skin grafts and a number of muscles replaced. And a rodentine in hospice. There’ll be twenty more before the month is out. I can only do this at the government’s grace. I’m open about my stance, but I’m not a revolutionary. I can’t be.”

“We’re not asking you to help,” Valle said. He dropped his eyes to his feet. He knew what he was saying.

Dresden rested his hands on his hips, still facing the villa still.

“I wish you would,” he said, softly. “I wish you’d ask me, or that you’d drop it. And stay here.”

“I’m not dropping it,” Grid said, her eyes on Valle. “I’m gonna see my wife again. I’d take that chance if Osah *were* an omniscient murder god waiting to send me to three kinds of Hell.”

“Does it matter what Osah is?” Dresden turned back finally. “How different is the OSA from what people think He is?”

“I’m going.”

A long silence.

“Not with that arm.



At Dresden’s insistence, Grid accepted service to several of her bargain-quality bionics. While he couldn’t offer much for her

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neck, not without keeping her in his bubble for months to recover, he had most of her hydraulic piston-muscles completely upgraded.

That arm, her hip flexors, a number of her shoulder and pectoral muscles had wasted away and necrotized years ago, and it had only been by scraping savings together for years that she had been able to have all of them addressed to some degree. She expressed no sentimentality for the noisy stopgap bionics when she prepared to be anaesthetized and lose them to the many-armed surgical robot that would install their replacements.

Her recovery lasted two days, and Dresden mandated that she remain for three more for conditioning. The new muscles were similar to organic ones, slim and fibrous and taut, and, naturally, had never been used prior to installation. Moreover, the hawk would horribly unused to the tactile sensation her pistons had provided very little of. A mere five days was a laughable time frame.

"Then make the old one run again and let me go," Grid had growled when he suggested she wait several weeks.

Five days it was.

Valle sat with her when she was bed-bound afterward. She woke slowly, several hours after the surgery, and promptly scowled at the new bionics and the angry scars around them. When she was fully lucid, she turned her eyes to Valle.

"I'd hoped," she considered her words. "that you'd be just like him. Because then I could jam your face up against a retina scanner or something and dump you outside their building and not give a shit."

"You still could," Valle admitted. "But Crucis doesn't have any retinas."

Grid laughed a single time, and sobered at the unsettling implications.

"What's her name?" Valle asked.

Grid blinked at him, several times.

"Amarna," she said.

She looked down at the blanket covering her, a heavy quilt that mutedly mimicked the colors of the mahogany furniture and cream walls. Recovering in a bed that had curtains on it. Even Valle had never slept in one of those.

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“I’m not gonna talk about her.”

Valle nodded. He had spent the night stewing on the image of his brother appearing in the shadows of Ingrid Kettunnen’s home, seizing the resistance fighter’s terrified wife, and vanishing. Crucis had probably not been involved; more likely, Veritas team had broken the door off its hinges and carried the woman away with hands bound and a bag over her head.

But what was the difference? The Veritas Army *was* Crucis. A version of Crucis for when there was no need for theatrics.

“The man Osah took Crucis and me from,” Valle said. “we called him Mister Walter. I don’t know if Walter was his first name or last name, or if it was his name at all and we just called him that. He took us in, and he taught us how to read and use a computer, we were both sick—obviously—and he got us taken care of.

“He had money. Not like this place, but he lived in a big, free-standing house, with a garden and a fountain. Croosh and I would jump in the fountain and run around the garden chasing squirrels. Mister Walter caught me eating one once. I couldn’t figure out why he was mad.

“I don’t know who it was, but he took us in because he’d lost someone. I don’t think I even realized it until later, but you could tell. There were parts of the house he didn’t touch, and there were mornings that he wouldn’t talk, and just looked out the window. Then Osah came and requisitioned us, when we’d been with him for just a year.”

Grid didn’t look at him.

“Osah takes people,” Valle said. “And He leaves people behind.”

“Did He kill Walter?”

Valle didn’t have an answer to that. The requisition had been quick, just hushed voices and then a needle in the neck, before he and Crucis had woken in separate cells within the Osah complex. He could only imagine their adopted father pinned in his office by a Veritas officer delivering the secret police’s demand that he remain silent in perpetuity. Or else the kind old man being silenced where he stood.



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The longer Valle stayed in Dresden's bubble, the more it reminded him of his time in Mr. Walter's home, which became increasingly unbearable. While Grid's scars rapidly faded, thanks to the robot's extreme precision and the estate's expensive drugs, and while the nursing staff helped her adjust to the new muscles and their range of motion, the bat could only wait.

"They'll kill her," his host insisted, when he spared the time to check on them. "They'd kill her just for having thought about it."

"If she didn't have me to get her in, she would walk up to the front door and start stabbing. They won't kill me. Crucis wouldn't let them. They've tried."

On the other side of the window by which they stood, a civet-model therapist held and flexed Grid's arm, while the hawk struggled to repeat the motions herself.

"Even if she got scrubbed, they'll send Vampires after her. Do you have enough pull to protect her?"

Valle didn't answer. That depended if it amused Crucis to humor him.

"First and foremost," he said. "I lived in the Osah complex for six years. It isn't a fortress, it's just an office."

"I know," Dresden sighed, and offered his tablet. On the screen was a model of that office, its plain stone walls and mirrored windows a severe presence within the cityscape even with no indication of what it was.

"What is this?" Valle breathed. He thumbed the model briefly, turning it a few degrees.

"It's only the exterior and the offices right in the windows. I couldn't probe any deeper than that without being caught."

"I thought you couldn't be a party to this?"

"I'm not a party. You found that yourself. Ingrid did some hacking. How dare you take advantage of my hospitality, and so on."

Valle studied the very, very familiar building for a long time, before saving the model to the internal storage in his voice box so he could share it with Grid later.