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He dreamt about Mr. Walter's home. The bay window that overlooked the garden, the hall between the old man's bedroom and the pups'. He dreamt of Crucis being kind to the old man, though Valle knew that even at that age he had already begun to distrust and maybe fear his brother. Perhaps it was for the best that they'd been taken, and Mr. Walter hadn't had the chance to see what Crucis would become. Or perhaps, without Osah's intervention, unfeeling and unkind may have been the worst Crucis would have been.

When he woke, it was with a gun pressed to his chest.

"Do you think we don't know about the Fang of Osah?"

It was the human with the pitted cheeks. There was just enough light to see the muzzle of their gun buried two inches deep in the fur of his sunken chest, and the dark shapes behind it. Valle kept his hands still, palms up in case they were visible.

One of the shapes broke off from the one with the gun, and threw a bag over his head. Valle clutched the edges of his borrowed cot, resisted the impulse to thrash.

Not here. They couldn't. Crucis might come.

"Are there Vampires on the way already?" the human forced Valle to his feet, gun still in place. "Which way will they come from?"

"I'm not—" Valle managed, before being punched in the gut.

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“When they get here they’ll wipe us out, and the whole deeptown too, and you’ll be here for the photo-op. Right? With your cool sunglasses and big wings?”

Valle stayed doubled over for several seconds after the blow. It had come with a *crunch*: one or more of his organs hadn’t taken it well. When one of them tried to grab his wrists, though, he’d had enough. He shoved that fighter aside with his shoulder, and pushed the gun away. It went off, the muzzle flash a fire that singed away a swathe of hair from his chest and neck. The gun was built for low velocity fire, to minimize the risk of stray bullets damaging a dome, but that explosion would still have burnt a hole in his chest the size of a fist, and driven a bullet through him and into the floor. While the human struggled to bring the rifle’s butt around to strike Valle, the bat pinned them to the wall by the neck.

He may be weak, but his hands were big, and his claws were sharp. He made sure the human felt the big thumb claw against their jugular vein.

He pulled the bag off his head, though doing so revealed little in the dark.

“You don’t know anything about the Fang of Osah,” he growled, his teeth inches from the acne-scarred face.

Something struck him on the head then. The world exploded in bright white shapes, wheeling kaleidoscopically across his vision, and he fell to the side. The human shoved him to the floor, and both intruders laid into him with boots and claws. There were voices, several of them, but Valle only heard the impacts against his back and shoulders and arms.

“Get up,” the human snarled again, when the blows stopped. They had the gun again, and they swatted at Valle with it to unfold him on the floor.

Valle didn’t want to get up.

Wet footsteps sounded outside, and accelerated.

“God *damn* it.”

In seconds, Grid was in the old squamate woman’s hut, had the second intruder’s arm twisted behind their back and a knife to the human’s neck. Her tablet, in its mount on her forearm, illuminated

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their faces. Her hooked beak looked extremely dangerous next to naked human flesh.

"He's not who you think he is," she hissed.

"That doesn't make him a friend," the human muttered, head turned as far away from the knife as possible. "That doesn't make *you* a friend."

"Put the gun down."

After some hesitation, the gun clattered to the floor next to where Valle still lay. Grid held it down with a foot, and took her knife away. She still didn't release the corvine fighter, but let their arm relax a little in her grip.

"Of course he could take someone like you in," the human said, leaning against the far wall.

"Someone like me."

"You used to be one of us. You don't quit unless you aren't really for the cause." They eyed Valle, and the gun. "We've seen the pictures. It's him. He puts on a show, but it's him."

Valle moaned. It was the most he could do, beyond willing Grid not to reveal that she had brought Crucis's brother with her.

"He's a chiroprater, they're the same model"

She leaned down to help Valle up. It took some effort. His gut was screaming, and his face burned where the attackers had broken the implant over one of his eyes.

"I'm 'for the cause,'" she said. "The *cause* is people like him and me. The cause is people like my wife. We fight the Pinnacle because they hurt people like my wife; that doesn't mean taking care of her isn't also *the cause*."

The look she gave the human was softer than Valle would have expected. Softer than the one he was giving them.

"We'll have to see if they have a medic," Grid put a hand on Valle's less-damaged shoulder to guide him back out.

"It's him," the human growled when they were out the door. They was already going for the gun before Valle could turn to see.

They had it aimed when Grid spun back around and brought the knife down into the back of their neck. They hit the ground heavily, at the same time that the squamate woman, watching from

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just outside, shrieked.

Valle stared at the body for a long time, unable to determine if the knife had killed them, before Grid took him by the arm and tugged him back into the depths of the shantytown.

"This complicates things," she said softly.



"**They'll understand,**" Grid repeated to herself all the way to the edge of the town. "Some of them will understand. Kierg'll understand."

Still dizzy and sick, Valle followed her without a word. The lights on the ceiling had been dimmed to provide something like night time, but the tiny sparks at their cores left blinding trails in Valle's vision. He couldn't look ahead at what Grid's arm illuminated without the pain redoubling.

The cart was where Kierghan had parked it. Valle didn't remember approaching or sitting in it, but he was acutely aware of it moving, with him in it. There were voices, but they might just have been Grid's.

By the time the lights came back on, some indeterminate interval later, Grid had taken them down several long, damp passageways, referring frequently to maps on her tablet. Where the wide ones may have been the start of unfinished subway tracks, this one was far too small for that. It was like the tunnel from the factory to the shaft, but darker and colder.

"So we're on the outs with the resistance now," Valle observed.

"Maybe," Grid muttered. "Maybe not. Probably. I hope not."

"What were they going to help with?"

"We had a route planned. They were gonna get us in, all the way up into a building just a couple blocks away from Osah. They knew where there was security and they were gonna help us get around it."

"Oh."

"Yeah. And they cleaned the cash so we could use it without your ID on it. They would've taken a cut though."

At least that meant the cash was gone. Silver linings.

"So, what, then?"

"I got pictures of most of the maps. We'll just have to hope it's

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enough, and that they don't send someone after us, since they know exactly where we'll be."

Valle leaned his head back to try and stop the bleeding in his large leaf nose, which unfortunately created perfect channels for the blood to spread and get everywhere. He felt the smashed implant over his right eye. It didn't affect his vision, but it managed the chemical balance in and around the eyesocket and nerve, and without it, the eye would wither and the socket collapse, as had his brother's. That might take weeks or months to happen, but he certainly wasn't going to have a moment's calm until he could get the implant fixed.

He'd seen the mutilated mess behind Crucis's visor. That had happened after they had parted, and Valle had already spent months' worth of his wages to arrest the deterioration beginning in his own eyes. Why the secret police didn't replace Crucis's was a mystery; most likely, it was at his own insistence.

Valle had often contemplated the extent to which their bodies were mirrors of one another. That happened with zoans more than with humans; monozygous human twins diverged immediately, bit by bit, after division, but zoan twins remained strictly identical. Human genetics, like those of any natural animal, were infinitely complex, an incalculable construction of chemical survivalism forged by eons of random reproduction. Zoan genomes, coded in a few decades, however expertly, were rough, coarse, and caricaturish by comparison.

He imagined the (probably dead) resistance fighter's scenario: a team of Veritas operatives descended upon a target and annihilated it, and then he, with his stringy arms and sunken chest, would step in, be made up with sharp sunglasses and a set of blades, to pose amongst the bodies for blurry, badass stills to spread among the populace and fuel rumors.

As much as it made him want to laugh, it was also more believable than he'd like to admit.

There was a degree to which he wondered if it even mattered that it wasn't the case.

"What are you laughing at?" Grid looked back at him from. "Are you okay?"

Valle shrugged. There were several answers to that question.