

13

Along the way, Valle had studied Dresden's model extensively, and decided upon a point of entry. His, at least. Some ways down from the rooftop where they knelt to eat, there was cargo door with a platform for a drone or helicopter to land and unload. It wasn't the pair of large slatted garage doors he was eyeing, but a small slot off to the side, a conveyor belt peering out through it. The size and shape of it was so specific: it was to carry bodies. Or, he predicted: one particular body.

He and Grid didn't say goodbye before they parted. Rather, Valle clasped the hawk's hand and gave her the most forceful look he could conjure. Then she fired the harpoon to string the zipline across for him, and he swung down to the cargo platform.

Following a frightful, clumsy descent, Valle's feet touched down on the gravel of the Osah building. He dislodged the harpoon so that Grid could retract it, and approached the slot.

It was covered by a metal shutter hung over with a sensor. That was what Grid's plan had hinged upon since she had decided to seek him out. Valle heaved himself onto the conveyor belt, lay still on his back, crossed his arms over his chest. It began to roll under his weight, bringing him to the sensor.

The belt stopped, when it his ears just brushed the shutter. Lights shone on him, a computer processed their results.

THE TWO FANGS

The shutter opened. It had identified him as Crucis.

Both relieved and deeply disappointed, Valle allowed the belt to carry him past the thick exterior wall. The bright white space beyond it was narrow and shallow, only just large enough for him to pass through. Machines whirled, rows of lights passed over him, vents blew and sucked air. Automated diagnostics, presuming the prized assassin had just returned from an assignment. Valle held his breath. He could only hope no one would notice that Crucis's intake tube had come active. If so, they would report a bat in quite ill health, compared to how he had left.

After what seemed a long way under the blinding lights, the belt brought Valle out into a mercifully open space. He stayed still, looked the room over as carefully as he could without moving, swung off the belt and onto the floor as soon as he confirmed that it was empty.

It was some kind of medical lab, an operating room. Very different, though, from those that attended to civilians. Computer consoles lined one wall, racks and mounts the others. A reclined bed, over which hung a surgical robot like the one that had replaced Grid's old bionics, but heavier, and grim. Restraints, lasers, bone saws, needles.

Along one wall, limbs. Arms, legs, wings, hung by the clear plastic caps fit over the openings where they would attach to a trunk. Different feet, different hands.

This was where Crucis came when he arrived. Checked for damage or contamination, reconfigured for his next outing. Was he rendered into parts and stored away? Or restored to a default, and allowed to stalk the headquarters?

Valle had to turn away from the robot, and from his brother's spare parts. He rested against a bank of computers, ill.

Held by an arm above the slab, there hung a replacement visor. It stared, lifelessly, as though Crucis himself stood before his brother, unseeing. Valle couldn't look away from it for a long while.

The thing was dormant, when not plugged into the ports on either side of its owner's skull. Exposed circuitry behind the lenses would jab into Valle's eyes, if he dared try it on. Valle stared into its LCD screen for a long time, somehow sure that it was here to watch him. He unhooked it from the arm that held it and set it face down on

GROODS

a computer bank, before it could suddenly come to life and...greet him.

The lab stretched several more rooms, all filled with machines and tools whose uses Valle could only guess at. In one was a floor-to-ceiling tank, bubbling eerily with chemical-sweet-smelling fluid, in which hung a harness and a number of loose tubes. He had to imagine his brother suspended in it, infused with restorative formulae, or perhaps tested for environments with different chemical or pressure levels. Another room was lined with diagrams of teeth and gums and tongues; models on shelves, racks and racks of teeth. A sloped slab with a mount for a chin much like Valle's, implements to brace and stabilize the head, hold the mouth open.

All this to weaponize a sickly zoan foundling.

Would they have shared it, had Valle proven acceptable to Osah like his twin?

Everything in the lab responded to Valle's touch. He could use the computers, but it seemed that Crucis didn't have full access. Naturally, the assassin would have a history of trying to alter the engineers' plans for him. Valle could look through records, logs, and diagrams, but he had neither time nor use for those. He needed at least a floor plan, if not access to the loading doors.

Outside the lab was a hall of simple cinderblock walls and cold tile floors. Glancing into the shuttered doors along it, Valle realized that he had found himself in the home barracks of the Veritas Army.

Here, around Crucis's entrance and fitting facility, was the armory and storage. The doors in these winding halls opened into rooms lined with shelves weighed down with weapons, armor, tools, probably drugs. Behind one was an automated factory, where arms hung from the ceiling helped hand-sized hovering drones repair suits of black Veritas armor, perhaps assembled them, too. There had to be a quick route from those to the loading bay.

Valle had been here before. Taken, first from his cell and later from his quarters, by silent humans in suits, ushered down hallways and elevators to the barracks, and handed over, on lucky days, to a combat specialist. Sometimes side by side with Crucis, and sometimes alone, the soldier, face obscured by a dark mesh mask, would

THE TWO FANGS

attempt to gauge his ability and then teach him the fundamentals of assassinship. The result would be a beating: fists, prods, the butt of a rifle or even simulated bullets, while the human silently willed the bats to internalize and utilize the demonstrated methods. At the start, the pups tried to defend each other, one twin to onto the trainer's back to claw and bite him while he struck the other; soon they ceased. Valle suffered the beatings, and Crucis learned how to deal them back.

On unlucky days, they would be brought to a different part of the barracks, sat down in an amphitheater along with dozens of recent Veritas recruits, and made to watch an event. It might be a soldier slaughtering a series of animals, or the execution of a deserter. Sometimes a decimation: a stranger would be brought before the crowd, and would suddenly die horribly as they watched.

And, finally, it was within these barracks that the brothers were made to hurt each other. One handed a knife, and delivered the ultimatum that neither would leave until the other's blood was on it.

All of that was written into the smell of the place, and the faded gray of its walls.

Valle considered trying to take a suit of Veritas armor as a disguise, but it was out of the question. Whereas the Aequitas Army employed a fair number of zoans, Veritas was nearly completely human. Furthermore, there was no time to find out how to deactivate the security that would tell the suit that it was being worn by an unassigned wearer. Valle had only his worn jeans and now sweat-and brine-stained sleeveless shirt, which made him feel like a bright, loud beacon in here.

A custodial drone buzzed past him as he searched the hallways. He stopped as soon as he saw it, stood completely still as it hummed around his feet. It slowed when near him, opened a cap on its oblong, hemispherical top, which Valle took to be a chemical receptor, then moved along without raising an alarm.

He heard a door behind him open, lowered voices chattering. He just made it around a corner before the two armed Vampires emerged. Would they have mistaken him for his brother? It didn't seem possible, yet if they came his direction, it would be the only

GROODS

outcome he could hope for.

Hope for. He would almost rather be caught and killed.

Their footsteps continued to come this way. Valle edged away, as silently as he could. He glanced into doors he passed, saw humans exercising and practicing with weapons. Finally, just before another corner, he found a room that seemed empty, and slipped in.

He stood up against the wall beside the door for a long time, eyes darting and taking in nothing but shadows that could have contained hiding assailants. None of them did, however. When he dared, Valle recovered his breath and surveyed his hiding place.

It was a small room, only a few paces across. Soundproofing on the walls made Valle worry it was an interrogation room, but the seat in the center wasn't intended for torture. Recessed a few steps below the doorway, the chair was built into a console: above it, a downturned cup waited to be lowered over it. It was a communications terminal.

Hesitantly, Valle moved towards it. The gate enclosing the seat folded open, and he sat. The tube above came down, bathing him in a gentle reddish light. While he was searching for a key on the touch screen keyboard that would allow him to start, an icon lit up in the field of red. A toothsome jack-o-lantern, in bright orange, bearing a leaf nose like the twins'. Valle sighed; it had already identified him as Crucis.

"Good evening, Crucis," a pleasant voice said. The message appeared in text as well. "This is an unusual time for you."

Valle tensed. There was no telling if he was speaking to a live person or a machine. Either way, his instinct to respond aloud would see him discovered.

>late night, he typed.

"You aren't using your neural link. Why is that?"

>no visor today

"That must be hard for you. Shall I connect to your visor ports?"

A pair of cables snaked down from the apex of the dome, seeking Valle's temples. On a hurried command of *no*, they retracted partway.

"What do you need tonight?"

Valle's hands hovered over the keyboard nervously. He ventured:

>the usual

THE TWO FANGS

The voice said nothing, but a sound began to play. It took Valle a moment to realize that he was hearing antediluvian throat singing. The volume rose, until it seemed deafening. If there was a visual to accompany it, the terminal wasn't showing it, thinking Crucis had entered without the replacement for his decayed eyes. Other sounds followed after several minutes, that he could less identify. Rushing water, perhaps, and the sound of muffled voices. A brief animal scream, and the rolling of large machines. The last faded slowly into silence. What images accompanied those, Valle had no guess.

"Do you feel better?"

Valle said nothing.

"Tell me about your assignment."

There was no safe way to answer that. Could he hang up? He gave the most believable response he could think of:

>no

"I understand. Your most recent target was a seditionist in France. She has been found by her associates. You did lovely work with her entrails. It's a shame I can't show you pictures tonight. Hmm. I see that you're in a submersible outside the domes, yet you're also here with me. This is unusual, but I'm told that I shouldn't worry."

What?

"You've been distracted, and you've taken personal time frequently. Why is this?"

Still shocked, Valle scrabbled for the keyboard.

>bored

The computer was silent for a moment.

"The last time we spoke, you indicated that you were feeling stress regarding memories of your childhood. Particularly in the orphanage. Please pursue that."

Baffled, Valle typed:

>i don't have time

"I'd like to pursue it."

Valle rubbed his eyes.

>he made me beg, pick pockets, hawk

"You were very young."

>5 to 9

GROODS

"Typically you say 'us,' referring to yourself and your brother. Why did you say 'me?'"

>i led

"You aren't being open with me, Crucis. Openness is extremely important."

Valle dragged at his face, and began to type:

>hard to type, only thumbs today

But instead, he typed:

>i didn't want him there, i was tough and he wasn't

"I know it causes you stress to talk about your brother. When did you last see your brother?"

>atlantis a week ago

Better not to tell the computer that he was nearby.

"I'm glad you could see him, if you wanted. Did you express your affection?"

>no

"Your brother elicits guilt in you, I'm sure you said something to him."

Valle breathed. He didn't know why, but he typed:

>i gave him money

"Only the usual amount that you earmark in your salary. Your stress levels are very high right now. In fact, your hormone levels are very different from the normal range. You should consult your engineers about your current setup."

>new guts

"I'll say. Do you want a quick response or a thorough one?"

>q

"Your brother is a weight on you which you should abandon. Remember that you love the OSA, and other interests are not to interfere. I will ask you again: will you accept an assignment to terminate your brother?"

Shakily, Valle struggled with the non-tactile keys.

>no and stop asking that

"I understand. Do you need any other assistance?"

>open the loading bay doors and turn off any cameras near them

"I'm afraid I don't have access to the cameras, but I've opened the

THE TWO FANGS

doors.”

>where is the new computer

“If you’re referring to the project codenamed Temno, it is in located in Bubble 1. You should know; you spend a great deal of time there. I’m told not to worry that you don’t remember.”

>show me a floor plan

“I’m told not to notice what is strange about that request.”

With that complaint, the round screen lit up with a model of this sector of the building, and Valle found what he needed. He took a picture with the small tablet Kierghan had left him, saved it to his throat in case he had to leave the device behind.

>end session

Whether or not that was the proper command, the terminal shut down and the immersive screen lifted away. Valle poured out of the seat, heart pounding as though he had run a mile without his voice box in. It seemed certain that he had given himself away twenty times over, but as before, no alarm sounded, and no—very nearby—Vampires charged in to apprehend him.

He followed the route he had found into the loading bay, a large warehouse stacked with palettes and dangerous-looking vehicles, where he found Grid waiting along the back wall with a springgun in her hands.

“We’re in,” the hawk observed, quietly. Valle thought her heart was pounding even harder than his.