

16

Valle would have expected that the house at the address on Eckhart Walter's OSA profile would be on high alert, barricaded and blocked off by an Aequitas force, probably with subtle Veritas support. Or else deserted, its owner drawn into the government's protective grasp. He saw some small guard activity, which he and Grid easily evaded. The Aequitas soldiers manned their posts halfheartedly, and the garden that dominated the lawn of the second-platter home in the western Ural dome gave them plenty of cover. If there was to be word of high alert, it hadn't reached this councillor's estate yet.

If this was the house they had lived in for that single, all-important year, Valle didn't recognize it from the outside. The dark wooden siding might be familiar, the scent of the garden. That was a last shred of hope he could grasp, that he was mistaken, and Eckhart Carol was not Mister. When Grid pounded on the door while Valle stayed out of range of any cameras, that shred vanished.

Mr. Walter answered the door dressed in an apron and soil-stained gloves. He looked pleasantly but blankly at the unfamiliar buteo zoan at his door, until Valle emerged from behind a pillar to shove him back into the landing, one hand clamped over his mouth.

This in here, this space was familiar. Valle took only a moment to glance at his surroundings, before his eyes slid back to the human.

THE TWO FANGS

He took his hand away, but kept the other braced against Walter's neck, prepared to pierce it.

"What is this?" Mr. Walter demanded.

"It's a—" Grid began, but Valle hushed her. He stared, gave Mr. Walter ample time to remember.

The frightened but friendly eyes widened.

"Valle!" His voice was pleased at first, but it was only a moment before he recognized what this visit must mean.

Valle let him loose and shoved him into the den, where two couches faced each other, while Grid closed the curtains over the very familiar bay window. He sat across from the old man, pushed the coffee table out of the way.

There was a long silence. The old human dispensed with any pretense and waited for Valle to open, while Grid searched the room for weapons or cameras.

"It's been twenty-six years," Valle said.

"It has." Mr. Walter's eyes were steely, but a tremble in his jaw belied his demeanor.

"Do you remember the first book you read to us?"

"It was Doctor Seuss."

Valle nodded. He produced the broken visor, held it idly, where Mr. Walter could see the bullet. It didn't elicit a response.

"I still see Crucis every now and then. He's very different now. But I guess you must see him a lot."

"I don't," Mr. Walter swallowed. "We use code names, so I don't have to hear it's him."

"But who else would it be? He has such a specific application. That's what you developed us for."

Jaw trembling, Mr. Walter looked around as if for help.

"I was tasked with finding candidates," he said, when he found he had no allies present. "and monitoring, and reporting. You were unattached, and undocumented. You were a zoan model that carries appropriate connotations. And twins—either a second equal instrument, or..."

"Or one could be used to *fine tune* the other."

Gloved hands spread, helpless.

GROODS

“Nothing was insincere,” he continued. “You were my sons. I took care of you exactly like I did my own son. And I didn’t love you any less.”

“But you still gave us up when Osah came.”

“Every parent has to give their children up. I only knew when it would happen. And it was hard, having so little time.”

“So hard.”

Mr. Walter steeled himself, rested his hands firmly on his knees.

“Were you on the Sanctions Committee then?” Valle asked.

“Not yet. I was with Veritas. I moved up in tandem with...with your brother.”

“You were the chair for a while. I guess that made you Osah Himself, as much as any one person is.”

“The OSA is vital. I gave my life to it.”

“And our lives.”

“*And your lives.* Any number of lives is worth giving, no matter what we *want* or *feel*, as animals of the earth.”

Valle was quiet.

“Hundreds of years ago, humankind—and I count zoans among them—had the surface. We could afford to have nations, and to drop bombs, and to sabotage each other. We don’t have that luxury, living underwater. There are as many of us now as there were then, but we only have our domes. Fragile things, ready to be crushed or flooded at any moment. We have to be kept in line. However ugly it is, the OSA does that. Osah does that.”

“Tell us about the hecatomb,” Grid said from where she had taken her place behind him, hands full of loose wires and sharp objects.

Mr. Walter’s set features slackened with shock. He shook his head.

“I should have been notified of any break-in that got deep enough to know about that,” he said.

“I guess we’ve got some help,” Grid tried to disguise a hitch in her voice by shoving the couch hard.

“I can’t tell you about that,” Mr. Walter clutched at the cushions beneath him. His eyes were on Valle’s.

“Take a chance for one of your sons. You’re in the perfect position to send someone after me, once I know.”

THE TWO FANGS

“Crucis wouldn’t kill you,” Mr. Walter scoffed. He realized, visibly, that it was a mistake. “I’ve never voted in favor of ordering it, I swear.”

“I don’t care,” Valle showed his fangs. He’d had a couple days in the open ocean to stop caring, after all.

“It’s a mass sacrifice,” the pebbly tenor voice was weak. “It’s already moving forward. It’ll happen in the next few weeks.”

“What kind of mass sacrifice?”

“They’ll make me send him for you. If it’s urgent enough they can override him. They’ll condition him so he doesn’t know it’s you.”

Valle leaned forward, close enough that the other’s heavy breath brushed his leaf nose.

“You were glad to know when you’d have to give your sons up,” he said. “Do me the favor, for everyone I can’t help.”

Mr. Walter buried his head in his hands.

“They’re going to trigger an earthquake in America,” he said.

Valle sat back and blinked.

“What the hell,” Grid muttered.

“Why?” Valle’s question came out almost in a laugh. A well-placed earthquake could flood half the continent’s domes.

“So the people will turn their eyes to Osah,” the steely look was back. “It’s worth it, with what’s coming.”

“What could be worth that?” Valle shook his head, still bemused.

Mr. Walter raised his head. He reached a hand for Valle’s. The bat wasn’t able to resist taking it.

“You’re still my son,” the old man said. “Don’t make me condemn you.”

Valle didn’t have to say anything to make clear that his one-time father had condemned him decades ago.

“The atmosphere is healing. The surface isn’t lethal anymore. There will be anarchy when people learn. A race to colonize the peaks; ships flooding the surface. It will be calamity.”

Valle almost believed that, but a look from Grid broke the spell. The hawk shook her head.

“You mean, you’ll lose control,” she said.

Mr. Walter’s eyes were wide and almost frantic, as he gripped

GROODS

Valle's hand. He didn't try to defend his explanation.

"You have to let me help you," he said. "I can't hide that I told you, you're going to be in danger like you've never been."

Valle breathed several long, slow breaths. He withdrew his hand.

"If you can't do anything to stop it, then I don't want your help."

"We want his help," Grid cautioned him.

Valle clutched at the visor in his hands, so that its circuits dug sharply into his fingers. He stared at its undamaged half, in which his face and the pitched ceiling were reflected.

"Then you can erase us. Take us completely out of Osah's system, so they can't follow us, they can't see us, they don't even have any records that we ever existed."

Mr. Walter balked at the enormity of the request, but he nodded briskly.

"Let me get to my computer," he paused before standing, looked up for permission.

He led them up the stairs, dropping his gardening gear along the way and keeping his hands visible. Grid checked ahead before he entered his office, and stood behind him when he sat down at the computer there.

Valle knew this room. He ran his fingers along the grain of the wood of the desk, and knew its texture. Pictures and framed certificates crowded the walls, the former showing a much younger Eckhart with the family that had been taken from him before the bats' arrival. They were all familiar. Valle remembered the faces, the clothes they wore, but especially the backgrounds.

Only one picture, framed and stood near the back of the desk, showed the later family. Mr. Walter stood in his garden, the dome in the distance lit to its full twilight, one ten-year-old pup—Valle couldn't tell which—seated in the crook of his arm, holding a handful of pulled weeds and grinning. To have even just this one might be dangerous.

"It'll take me some time," Mr. Walter said. "A purge is already hard, and I'll have to override every security measure to access you."

"Not me," Grid reminded him she could see everything he did. "I'm already a deep cut, I'll be easy."

THE TWO FANGS

Valle took a seat across from the desk to wait. He was starting to feel dizzy.

Had Grid come for him a month earlier, maybe they could have... could have what? Influenced Mr. Walter's vote on the matter of the hecatomb? He recalled the image that had haunted nightmares as long as he could remember—and probably those of billions of others—of a dome being broken, of the ocean powering its way through the cracks to redress this air-filled affront to its dominion. He thought of Atlantis's pump stations, coming near to complete failure nearly once a year. The original settlement of Atlantis high on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge had, after all, been destroyed by an earthquake.

"I-I have a ticket in," his human father said. "The AI will start searching for you and overwriting what it finds. I'll start on..."

"Ingrid," Grid folded her arms. "Kettunnen. Buteo."

Valle wrung his hands. He might be sacrificing his eye for this. Admittedly, that was a nearly laughable concern.

He stood, and nodded to Grid, an instruction to keep watching the old man. He needed to move his legs.

He could remember running down this hallway, which stretched the length of the second floor, and opened into several other rooms. The carpet was unchanged, a pale rusty brown with a loose pile. The walls may have been different. The full-length mirror at the end of the hall.

One door opened to a guest room, walls hung with inoffensive art and bed untouched. Valle didn't know it. He sensed vaguely that it had been a closet when he had lived here. Another was a bathroom, another Mr. Walter's impeccably kept bedroom. Which meant that opposite it was...

When Valle nudged open the door to the room he had once shared with Crucis, his brother was there.

Crucis stood, facing away from the door, in the dusty room. The old furniture was there, the two small beds and two small desks and two small dressers, but the rest was packed into dusty boxes scattered around the floor.

The assassin turned, grinning.

GROODS

hello brother

Their year with Mr. Walter hadn't been time enough to accumulate many personal affects, but Valle knew the stuffed bat in his brother's hands, a decoration that had once adorned his dresser. Crucis let it fall back into the box he had opened to explore.

i haven't been back either

Crucis had been repaired since their last meeting. The bullet wounds in his trunk were only small disturbances in the fur, and the leaf of his nose had been replaced. His visor was new and pristine.

"I'm going away," Valle found that he had to whisper to get the words out.

i always find you

"Not this time."

Crucis's smile faltered, but recovered. He opened his arms. He had opted this outing for wings like they had been born with, the outer two digits extended like those of a natural bat.

then let me say goodbye

Valle stared the visor down, as it flashed images of weeping cartoon bats at him. He pulled away, and made for the office, shouting for Grid.

The bird stepped out of the office, dragging Mr. Walter by the collar, in time for Valle to grab her by the arm and turn to see his brother emerge from the old bedroom.

hello father

hello father

hello father

The marquee ran across Crucis's visor briefly, to a shocked but wordless sound from Mr. Walter. Grid stumbled at the sight. She threw the human down the stairs and braced to meet her wife's killer.

Crucis was on her faster than Valle could see him close the distance. Her knife plunged harmlessly into his chest, while he took her by the back of the neck with one hand.

THE TWO FANGS

widow

widow

widow

He opened his mouth, as though he intended to close it over her face. His teeth were all sharp, an array for ripping and tearing.

Valle only just got her out of Crucis's grasp before the teeth could dig into her skull. They both tumbled backwards down the stairs, ribs and knees crunching. Crucis looked gleefully from above, before he began to descend casually.

A hand found Valle's shoulder, while he struggled to stand. Mr. Walter, battered by the fall, pulled his ear closer.

"I took him out too," he whispered weakly.

Valle didn't wait to hear more, before helping Grid up and heading for the door, cameras or no. They crashed through it, out into the garden, and ran.

Crucis leapt from the door and landed in front of them, at the end of the driveway. He took them both by the neck in his partial hands, wing fingers wrapping the leathery membrane around them.

you're going to have to watch brother

He studied the struggling Grid, while Valle kicked and tugged at the thumb and fingers at his throat without success. The mantis blades slipped out of the assassin's belly, ran up Grid's sides, before biting into them as more emerged.

this will hurt

Valle tried to kick the blades away, little good as it would do, but Crucis held him farther out. The blades prepared to shred Grid's abdomen, gut her for Valle to watch.

what

The blades curled, like the legs of a frightened spider. Crucis stared into the space between his victims.

what

When Grid renewed her struggling, she got free, and Crucis didn't try to recapture her. Clutching at her bleeding but intact sides, she

GROODS

helped loose Valle.

Crucis dropped to one knee, gut blades hanging limply from his hollow abdomen. His visor flickered, and his joints twitched.

what

Valle couldn't know how successful Mr. Walter's attempt to purge Crucis from Osah's systems could possibly be. Even a former chair couldn't have that kind of power, and certainly not from a home office. But something was happening. A storm of overrides. A corrupted permissions tree.

Mr. Walter would pay dearly for that, when he came to face the committee. Valle would have to think later how he felt about that.

They left Crucis suffering in the street, ran despite sprained knees and open wounds, for the nearest train that could take them back to the sub port.