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It was possible that the resistance members who received the anonymous warning Grid sent from her tablet would be doomed to a swift execution by the Veritas Army. That was something she and Valle had to accept. Still, she only sent it to cells in America, ones that were likely in the path of the hecatomb already.

Valle acknowledged the plan when she explained it, but he was despondent. He sat at the sub's controls, knees drawn to his chin, eyes on the field of seaweed through which they drifted.

"We can hope they get the word out," Grid drummed her fingers on the console. "If enough people know, maybe Osah will cancel it."

Valle shook his head.

"Or maybe Marn can..." Grid stopped, and tucked her beak into her chest, suddenly shuddering.

Valle had nothing to spare for her. Not with the truth about Mr. Walter weighing on him. Not with the coming disaster. He could set a hand to the side, in case she found and took it. Which, eventually, she did.

"We're out of the system," Grid observed after a long silence. "That's a new feeling."

"We can hope. There'll be printed records. People who remember." A long sigh fluttered the bristles around Grid's cere.

"They'll come after us, won't they," she said. "Even if they don't

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have eyes on us, they dan follow us anywhere.”

“There’s a place,” Valle muttered.



The feeling of the water breaking over the back of the submersible was like the world being hung by a string and shaken. For hours, Valle and Grid had watched the ocean lighten, not only penetrable but now pierced visibly by rays of sunlight that danced in the cloudy water. Valle wanted to back away from the window, to set the sub diving at dangerous speeds and cower far from the glass. Instead, he stayed at the front, fingers clenched white-knuckled around the arm rests, while the pearlescent surface grew, spread, enveloped him. When it broke, and the blue sky shone in the window, he felt faint.

They nudged the submersible forward, drove it into the sand. Opened the top hatch, emerged into open air.

When Valle stood in the water, on an island in the Himalayan archipelago, the water lapped and dragged at his shins. It threatened to trip him as he took his first steps inland.

The island rose to a peak, miles away. Beyond it the ocean stretched on and on, broken by the faded blue shapes of other mountain islands. Valle had never seen anything so far away. This island was studded with trees and brown with grass, and seabirds wheeled. How long had the radiation been receding? How long had it been kept secret?

Bat and bird helped each other up the shore, weak and starved after several days in the cramped vessel with only its emergency rations to share. Not to mention the terror of surfacing, that wouldn’t fully subside any time soon.

The ground flattened, where the tide created an ankle-deep pool that shifted only gently with the waves and reflected the sunlight brightly. Valle stopped to rest, knees in the sand.

“Valle,” Grid called to him from where she had stopped a few yards away. Her voice sounded different in the surface air and the firm wind. It sounded like the smell of lavender.

The body she pointed to was halfway buried in the sand, fur waving in the gentle current. Valle didn’t need to see more than the

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broad shoulders, the tall, gray ears, to recognize his brother.

His faint hope that Crucis was dead slid away when the sand partially enshrouding him shifted, and the assassin began to heave himself out from it. Valle urged Grid to run. Either to the trees or back to the sub. For a moment he expected to do the same, but found himself only waiting.

He was so tired.

Crucis must have deduced their heading, beaten them to the island in an equally weakened state. Dripping with saltwater and sand, he faced his brother, hands tense and jaw slack.

hhHhHlbBr

Wing-hands extended, braced against Valle's shoulders.

brother

Valle brushed Crucis's hands away and stepped back. The other smiled wanly. Claws readied, he settled into a combat stance.

The first jab was slow, and Valle dodged it easily, though he hadn't been in a real fight since his training. The second was faster, and Valle blocked it. He kicked at Crucis's knee, with equally little success.

One connected with Valle's muzzle, shocking him inter vertigo. Then Crucis's hand gripped the side of his neck, and flung him down into the water. He dug his claws into Crucis's foot to disrupt the fist that was coming down then to finish him. Rolled over, lethargic with the buoyancy of the pool, tried to trip his brother but only took a kick to the stomach.

Crucis leaned down, gut blades whirring.

whatdid you dotome

Valle backed up, but Crucis caught his arm. The wing-hand drew his, with surprising force, toward the grinding metal maw. Valle only escaped with his fingers intact by lifting a foot to drive the heel into Crucis's hip and separate the two.

They faced each other down again, each ready for the next attack.

they're gone

they're gone

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they were all i had

Crucis lifted into an aerial kick that struck Valle hard in the cheek. Pain exploded behind Valle's rapidly sickening eye, and in his jaw.

i can't HEAR them

Crucis stumbled, fell to his knees. His visor followed Valle, who hadn't recovered yet to press an attack.

Valle stumbled back, fell with one hand bracing his weight against the loose sand.

i miss our game

"Your game," Valle managed to sputter through the seawater in his mouth and nose.

my game is our game

Valle stepped forward to punch Crucis hard again in the face. His brother didn't resist, but only looked back with the same wan smile.

"Are you going to kill me?" Valle demanded, but his brother was silent. The visor showed only flickering red spots. Valle hit him again. "And go back to your masters, to help protect their hecatomb?"

No response, though Valle continued to hit him. Crucis tumbled into the water, unmoving.

Valle stood over his brother's body, fangs bared and fists bloodied. Crucis had spent himself reaching the island, spared no time to adjust to the air pressure. That last was all the fight he'd had. Otherwise Valle and Grid would have been dead before they reached the sand. Valle sank to his knees, haunches on heels, beside him.

In the evening, he found Grid sheltering among the trees, eyes serious and wary. It was wise. Neither of them would have been left, if Crucis had been himself. Valle knelt and embraced her, brotherless chiropter and widowed buteo.

They watched the sun filtering through the trees, casting long shadows like in antediluvian movies. The venerable Everest towered far in the distance.

"There's no one here to maintain us," Grid said. "Your eye won't last."

Valle nodded.

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“We’ll feel the quake when it hits. After that, we’ll find out if people are looking to Osah or the surface.”

In the morning, they would drag the sub farther ashore, to be their shelter and generator. They would take stock of what the island offered for food and water. They would bury Crucis in the rocky soil of the mountain.

Tonight they slept under the stars.