

Excerpt from:

*Dronikus*

Chapter 19

By dawn the train had left the rain zone well behind. The sun shone, even at that early hour, with a blazing intensity. While Chesa and Chun slept on in the darkness of their hoodies, Zola snapped awake with the bright light entering the carriage. The train had stopped in a station and people jostled as they readied themselves and left; others jostled as they entered and claimed seating on the benches. Although the three-seat bench opposite Zola was fully occupied by two large women and their parcels, a man squeezed himself between the one at the end and the carriage wall, politely insisting, undeterred by her reluctance to make space and her mutterings of discontent.

Despite being of a dark complexion and having jet black hair, the man in every way resembled an elderly, early twentieth Century colonial country gentleman – a corpulent body, attired in a tweed-cut suit with waistcoat, quaint particular manners, and a fastidious style of communicating. From the moment he entered, until much later when he left the train, the man talked, holding a non-stop dialogue, seemingly, between two parts of himself. Zola kept his

hoodie low, dark glasses still covering his eyes. He watched the man as he talked and pointed and laughed and argued with himself.

For no apparent reason the man leapt up and, still talking, appeared to swat – but actually grabbed – a fly on the carriage wall above the window. As he sat back down he held the fly before him and proceeded to dismember it. He then reached into his bag and pulled out a small sack into which he stuffed the remains of the dronikus. Hardly had he finished when he leapt up and grabbed another ‘fly.’

Zola felt a shiver of panic as he looked around and noticed other ‘flies,’ small and black, on the carriage walls and roof. Were these dronisects there for general security surveillance, as found on most trains and public places? Or did they have a more specific target – like tracking runaways from the post-RePO Day crackdowns?

‘You, sir, what do you say?’

Zola looked up cautiously. Was the man talking to him? Zola was relieved to see that he was not.

‘That’s what you always say, isn’t it? I say it’s a passage and you say it’s a corridor...’ He leapt again to grab a dronisect, bumping against the woman alongside, who stared at him sternly, aggrieved. ‘This is true,’ he continued as he sat and dismembered his catch. ‘But can’t we just agree that my corridor and your passageway lead to the same place? Hahaha, that’s funny my passageway leading to the same place as your corridor, hahahaha... and you sir? Might you not agree with my learned friend?’ Zola peeked up at the man. This time he was indeed talking to him and had caught Zola looking. ‘We would be most pleased, nay honoured, to hear your esteemed opinion on the matter.’ He waited, staring intently at Zola.

Zola had little choice but to engage. Against his better judgement he spoke, ‘what is it you wanted to know?’

‘It *is* a delicate matter, I am aware, sir. My learned friend and I are both very aware that it is the destination that is important, and not the journey. However, the physical space that will

deliver one to one's destination, be it a corridor or a passageway or, indeed, a hallway, walkway or gangplank, these are all in and of themselves important in the very definition of that place. And my learned friend and I, the whole lot of us assembled here – I'm sure they will forgive my referring to them as a "lot"...' He sprang forward again towards Zola and grabbed a dronisect on the wall just behind him and where Chesa slept, her head on Chun's shoulder, causing her to stir in the process. She looked up, confused, but immediately dropped back and snuggled closer under heris arm. The man dismembered the dronisect and stuffed it in his sack. 'As I was saying, passageway and corridor...'

Zola interrupted his flow: 'You are very good at catching flies if I may say so, sir.'

'We are, aren't we? These little monsters. Show him the sack. What? I said show him the sack. Oh, alright. Would you like to see inside the sack?' Without waiting for a reply, he leant forward and held open the sack. Zola craned his neck and looked inside. 'It's our collection. Tell him it's our collection. He can hear. It's our collection. Yes, these are very special flies. Did you know they have little wires inside them?'

Zola looked perplexed: 'Oh really? Wires?' He reached across Chesa and nudged Chun who woke, immediately alert. 'Show my friend too, please sir.'

'Oh! We all want to see the little buggers, now do we? Show the ladies too. Think they'll want to see dead flies? Just show them. You show them!'

As the man opened the sack to show Chun and the two women, Zola noticed a small device on the inside of the man's ring.

'Can I?' Chun asked and put heris hand into the sack and pulled out a handful of dismembered dronisects. Most were the size of flies but others were larger, the size of moths. 'Wow! You are good! The two of you.'

Zola pulled Arturo from his tunic, woke it up and instructed it to perch on the window ledge out of the man's line of sight. Zola pointed to another small fly on the wall next to him and watched closely as the man caught it.

‘Now try that one,’ said Zola pointing to Arturo.

‘Oh, that’s a big one!’ exclaimed the man. ‘We only do the small ones.’

‘Go on, give it a try,’ said Zola.

The man hesitated but then stood and leant towards Arturo. As he raised his hand the dronikus took off, circled their section of the carriage and landed on the wall next to Zola. The man had a few tries but missed every time. ‘Oh, it’s so fast,’ said the man.

‘Try again, one last time,’ said Zola, and then under his breath told Arturo to stay still.

‘There you are!’ said the man triumphant, as he held Arturo in his hand.

‘Wonderful!’ Zola reached up and took Arturo and returned it to his tunic.

‘Why do you have that?’ asked the man, suddenly quite nervous. ‘Are you with... I mean, do you work for...?’

Zola laughed and reassured him. ‘No, no, no. Say it’s a hobby, just like you and your ring.’

‘You mean?’ The man, surprised, opened his hand to reveal the ring before realising his mistake and quickly closing his hand, only then to also realise that it was too late to try hide it. Somewhat embarrassed he said, ‘it’s how we make a living. It’s a good living, too. And honest. Yes, yes, yes, he knows it’s honest.’

‘You do shows?’

‘Yes, and people ask us to catch them. They pay for us to come to their homes. And offices,’ the man said, recovering his composure.

‘And you talk while you’re doing it?’ asked Chun a bit cheekily.

‘Yes, we explain, don’t we? Yes, we explain and we break them open for the children to see inside. The children love it.’

Zola asked to see the ring. After long discussions ‘between the man and himself’ he took it off his finger and handed it to Zola who showed it to Chun. It was a compact, high-speed frequency light.

‘It’s the frequency,’ said Zola.

Chun nodded: ‘It works on the dronikus’ visual receptors. But I’ve never seen such a simple application. Brilliant. But that’s why it couldn’t catch Arturo. It’s on a different frequency.’

‘Can I buy this?’ Zola asked the man.

He/they were shocked: ‘Oh no! What? No! Tell him it’s a laser. No, don’t tell him it’s a laser! Tell him it’s how we make a living. We do have another one. No! I said. Sorry sir, he said no.’

Zola already had a bunch of notes in his hand. ‘I understand, sir.’

The man turned to the women next to him, who were now most friendly, and soon the discussion about the ring was forgotten under the multiple dialogues of the two women and the ‘two men.’

‘What’s the thing with the ring?’ Chesa asked, rousing herself.

‘It generates a light frequency that messes with the frequencies of the dronikus’ receptors and they lose all their speed advantages over humans,’ said Chun.

Not long afterwards the train pulled into a station and the man and the two women stood and made ready to alight. As they moved away the man, holding his hand close to his body, furtively held it out to Zola. In his palm sat the ring. Zola grabbed it and placed the notes in its place.

‘Don’t tell him,’ the man whispered, pointing vaguely over his shoulder.

‘No, of course not,’ whispered Zola in reply. He passed the ring to Chun who put it in her pocket.