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As it happened, the ambush had occurred in one of the Switzerland domes, which meant that the elevator to Dresden's bubble was only a few hours' transit away, once they had cleaned up and found another cab. Moving through an industrial district, they weren't questioned about their bloodied fur and feathers and clothes. Valle was able to bribe an oil drill worker, who didn't know that the cash would eventually be seized and returned to him, for the use of the oil rig's showers; Grid summoned another car to take them the rest of the way.

With their voice boxes charging on the dashboard, Valle did what he could for Grid's arm, with tools from a belt he'd snatched from the showers. It amounted to little more than sealing the leaking pneumatic fluid. She signed something at him—he only shook his head, because he had never learned the language. Until his teens, he hadn't had the hands for it.

The umbilical to Dresden's bubble opened to a building on the second platter of the easternmost Germany dome. Without documentation from the Aequitas Army, Valle and Grid would never have been able to reach it without being questioned, if not detained. Where the ground level was a coagulated mass of huge, undecorated tenements, interrupted only by roads and the very occasional

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decaying park, the second platter was a brightly lit metropolis of green, populated with sprawling neighborhoods of detached houses and rental complexes surrounded by lawns and gardens. This dome was large enough to have a third platter, on which were the mansions, private estates, corporate campuses. For all that his life was a smear of small, poorly lit, and dangerous homes, he had spent some fair time in those, as well. Grid looked at their surroundings with naked disdain.

In what looked like a simple house at the end of a cul-de-sac, old-fashioned brown brick set back in a modest garden, employees of the Dresden family questioned the travelers, screened them for viruses, looked over the hundreds of pages of publicly accessible files attached to their names. The health screening involved nasal swabs and blood drawing, carried out on soft beds in a waiting room. Other zoans waited in the next room, and eyed the newcomers warily. Those had been waiting longer, and would take longer to clear.

When they were cleared after several hours, Valle and Grid were allowed to take the umbilical to the bubble. The glass tube departed from an elevator set into the house's upper floor, skirted the edge of the third platter, and exited the dome through a large metal ring. Once past the ring, it was a flexible tube, itself the tether that held the bubble in place.

It was cold, and dimly lit. An entire globe's twilit ocean pressed in from only a few inches away from its walls. The domes below vanished quickly into darkness, even as the water lightened imperceptibly.

Valle and Grid had not exchanged more than a few words since the ambush. They sat on opposite sides of the elevator car taking them up; the bird's wariness was as visible as her breath.

Dresden's bubble was a glass sphere that hung just within the bathypelagic zone, three miles in diameter and stabilized by a complex system of water jets and massive, stabilizers the size of a vertrain. The umbilical took Valle and Grid past two of these, hanging below the central platter like towers built upside down beneath it. Catwalks ran around the machinery, and dozens of workers hustled across them. The central platter, which crossed the sphere at its widest

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point, was several yards of steel supports, followed by layers of rock, then dirt, then grass. Above it was the placid, manicured property of an ancient aristocrat, beneath a smooth gray-blue dome lit to look almost skylike.

Dresden himself did not come to greet them at the umbilical's exit in his courtyard. Rather, more attendants came to bring them inside. Slowly, so that they could admire (if they wished) the huge, red-roofed villa, its wide wings that enclosed the flagstoned courtyard in their windowed and plastered embrace.

The scion only employed zoans. The attendants ushering Valle and Grid along, the cleaning staff polishing the railings in the villa's entry hall; even the engineers below the platter were all animal-faced, hooved and clawed. And their bionics were impeccable: steely eyes that almost matched their originals, artificial limbs hidden beneath organic skin, not a back-mounted mechanical lung in sight.

Even that, though, didn't prepare Valle for the strangeness of seeing Dresden in person. The hyenid—aardwolf model—had a healthy glow that only humans could typically. He was fully biological, possessed of a body with organs that produced necessary enzymes without complaint and did not suddenly fail, skin that was not so prone to infection that swathes of it had to be replaced with grafts. His fur was thick and had a healthy sheen that was hard to look away from.

He awaited them in what the attendants called his library, which housed one wall of bookshelves, but seemed also to be his gym and his general recreation space. As if the huge villa didn't have space for several of each of those separately. The common conception of Dresden was of a stuffy nobleman who dressed in antiquated fashion and had no countenance for informality. This seemed to be entirely untrue: the perfect zoan who greeted them was dressed in jeans and a black tee shirt kept a pair of sunglasses atop his head, disrupting hair combed to a dramatic curl over his forehead. His smile was both hospitable and mischievous.

"Am I going to have any trouble," he asked when he shook their hands. His voice was deep and resonant, accent American. "Taking someone in who somehow got the Aequitas Army to pay their way?"

He lingered at Valle's hand when he shook it. A very slight glance

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at the chiropter's eyes communicated that he had noticed the subtle bracelet.

"No trouble," Valle lied.

"It depends," Grid said at the same time.

Dresden considered that, and grinned briefly.

"I never turn zoans away," he said on his way to sit heavily in a reading chair. "My estate does. If they hadn't let you up, it wouldn't have been personal. They might have, if I hadn't told them to expect you. You do have a *lot* of blood on you. Down between the hairs, where it's hard to clean. And that arm doesn't look like regular wear and tear."

Grid hunched her back more with each word. Dresden continued.

"Lots of people seem to think that it's really important for there always to be a zoan bloodline that doesn't degrade. They send me money. They've sent my ancestors money for centuries. Not just other zoans; there are humans, too. They have a foundation that makes sure my air is clean, but not so clean that I can't fight off a bug; make sure I don't get a deficiency from eating krill paste food all my life. They're terrified of me dying. For my part, I think the route you took to reach me is very interesting. It isn't the route of a desperate person with limited resources hoping to beg for my largesse. So, explain."

Grid looked to Valle, fuming. Her arms would have been crossed defensively, if she were able to lift both.

"I dragged us here to buy time," Valle raised his braceleted hand. "so I could figure out how to get away from her."

"Uh oh," Dresden raised an eyebrow at Grid, who was aghast. "Was this a kidnapping?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want me to do anything about it?"

Valle considered.

"No."

The hyenid looked between them for several long seconds.

"You look like neither of you have had anything to eat."