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Dresden took them to his dining hall, which was underground. So much so, in fact, that it protruded below the steel-stone-dirt platter, along with the stabilizers and the bubble's other workings. The wall facing the machinery was opaque, while the others—including the floor—were glass. They looked out into the depths of the glass sphere, and beyond it the ocean. The faint, faint cluster of domes that was Eurasia just barely showed in the distance below their seats. Birds and bats flew in the empty space.

"People usually think of the deluge as happening all at once," Dresden lifted a cat onto the table, one of the several that had followed him to the elevator. "like the antediluvians built the domes and then a six-mile-tall tidal wave just came up out of the ocean and covered everything. But it actually took hundreds of years to happen. About a hundred to cover the continents, and another three hundred to get this high. Even when the tops of the domes could see out of the water, where we are would've been far up in the sky. The domes were under construction for literally generations before the water reached them."

Servants brought in the food, which appeared to be roasted slabs of real-culture meat tossed with vegetables Valle had no names for, as well as a dish of krill paste for the cat. Valle wasn't hungry, but despite her discomfort Grid lay into it with urgency.

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"America and Eurasia weren't the only continents," Dresden continued. "The dome project was trying to make habitats for all of them; Africa, South America, and Australia, too. And bubbles like this one throughout the world for the islands. But these two were where the money was, and they undercut the others at every chance. In the end they said, 'Oh, it's too late, we have to cancel those and finish ours as fast as we can.' They built city-ships to send to the other continents, that would float on the water, but they didn't last. How could they be maintained? And that was if the air above hadn't become toxic and radioactive. So, what did the founders of our homes do with the money they stole from the other continents?"

Valle began to test the meat. He knew the answer.

"They founded companies," Dresden said. "They founded the one that still owns all the pumps. And the one that still owns all the rails. And the one that still keeps the glass up."

And the one that...

"They're all human-run," Grid mumbled around a beak full of culture meat.

"Mostly human-run. Human institutions created us to be their labor, then we built them their homes, now we've been free for centuries, but we live completely at those institutions' mercy. These are big, crushing forces, and they're the enemy."

"I was just telling him about the graves."

"It's terrible."

"I knew about the graves," Valle defended himself.

"He didn't know about the graves," Grid ate another handful.

"We're free under the law," Dresden continued. "but ultimately we'll always be their workforce."

"Rich zoans and poor humans," Grid agreed. "That's what we..."

She stopped and lowered her eyes to the floor and the empty miles below it, without finishing the thought.

"The point is," their host folded his arms, another cat in his lap. "that within this bubble, zoans are friends and allies. Whatever your conflict is, consider it mediated until you leave."

Grid harrumphed at that, half-heartedly. Good news as it was, Valle found that he couldn't eat any more.

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They finished the meal in quiet, Grid scarfing ravenously, Valle uneasy, and their host watching them both surreptitiously.

"I'd like you to stay," the latter said quietly, after he had finished eating. "I have other guests, I need to make sure they're seen to. Will you?"

Grid stood angrily. The plastic veins in her neck betrayed the blood draining from her head. She started to say something, but was quiet. Valle realized she had tried to raise her hand to jab an accusatory finger at him, but sliced through as it was, she couldn't lift it. She rubbed a hand over her eyes in frustration, kicked her chair away, and made for the elevator that had brought them. It opened for her, but of course wouldn't move without Dresden's say-so.

The hyenid looked at Valle, who could only show his hands empty.

"We'll stay," the bat said. "It's better for her, even if she doesn't know it."

The perfect zoan nodded.

"I'm gonna have to ask about it," he said, shifting the cat out of his lap so he could stand. "But once I do, you'll leave."

He smiled, sadly, and went to send the elevator up.



The cats climbed all over Valle while he tried to sleep, in a spare but uncomfortably well-appointed guest room—probably one of many. He let them, but they made him uneasy. Mr. Walter had cats.

There was a difference, this high up, between day and night. Not only a slight easing of the dark outside the glass, but actual daylight that made it possible, if just barely, to see without aid. It flooded the villa's windows with a cool green-gray that unnerved the bat before he realized its source.

He left the guest room and found his way to the entry hall, out to the courtyard and into the grassy field beyond. Even though he and Grid had arrived in the daytime, watching the morning illuminate the bubble was entirely different. Birds flew from trees—healthy trees, unlike the ragged, sickly ones in Atlantis gardens—and foraged on the ground. He might even have seen a squirrel.

"It's hard to imagine, but they bite."

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Dresden was outside with him, hands in his pockets and sunglasses still perched on his head. A sly smile on his dark muzzle.

"I want you to see something," he said.

He led Valle back inside, up the stairs and to an attic room with a low, sloped ceiling, where Grid already waited. The bird, clear-eyed after a restful night, looked sheepish.

Dresden flipped a switch on the wall, and a section of the ceiling parted. Directly overhead, a cable dropped from the peak of the glass sphere. Precipitously at first, then slower once it reached the villa's roof. The hyenid opened a panel in the wall and wheeled out a small elevator platform, into whose gear mechanism he fed the cable. Moments later, they were all three being carried up the long distance to the apex.

From there, they were closed into another umbilical. Dresden grinned.

"Are we..." Grid began.

The light grew stronger, until the LEDs ringing the car turned off. Currents rocked the umbilical gently. Fish swam by.

"Have you ever been to the surface?" Dresden asked.

"No," Valle breathed, not as a response but as an interjection of disbelief.

"The government ordered me to cut my platform loose. Maybe I will someday, if they ask nicely."

Directly overhead, a ring of much brighter light swam into view. Their host lowered his sunglasses. Valle stared at the light, and realized he wasn't breathing.

"I can't," he said. "Stop. Take me back down."

Dresden furrowed his brow.

"I can't," Valle repeated.

He sat against the corner of the umbilical car, putting a scant but vital few extra feet between himself and...and the surface. Dresden slowed the ascent, but didn't stop it until he looked to Grid and found the buteo also perturbed. When the car ceased to rise, their host flipped his sunglasses back up and dug his hands deeply into his pockets.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

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Grid stammered, made a number of attempts to speak before she managed, “Just go back down.”

Dresden pressed the switch again, and the car began to descend.



Back safely upon the bubble's platter, Dresden commanded the cable to retract and closed the roof again.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s too much.”

The descent had given Valle time to recover from the shock. He felt foolish, childish—but he knew that yes, it was too much.

The surface. Valle had seen artists’ renditions, computer generated movies, even actual camera footage of it—but he couldn’t accept it being a real place. His body couldn’t. His every cell recoiled at the thought of being physically present *at the surface*. Even with whatever protective glass his host’s floating platform boasted, it might as well be outer space.

“Yeah,” he agreed.

Dresden took them back down and to the courtyard, safely below the bubble’s glass, and far from the horrifying sky. He leaned on a fountain, arms folded restlessly.

“You need a new arm,” he said to Grid. “I can arrange that. I have surgeons on call.”

He looked Valle over, eyes lingering on the bat’s voice box and the implants over his eyes, but settling on the bracelet. He didn’t say anything, but Valle had to.

“The other company they founded,” he sighed. “is the one that keeps the public under control.”

“The Oversight and Sanctions Administration,” Dresden nodded. “*Osah*.”

“My brother works for them. Grid wants me to break her in.”

The aardwolf cocked an eyebrow and looked back at Grid, who stared back for a long time before she spoke.

“Osah has my wife,” she said.