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Valle shared the illicit model with Grid when she had time to rest from her conditioning, and together they contemplated their approach.

The Osah complex was located in one of the contested England/France domes. Deep within miles of office blocks. Dresden's model showed them the roads that passed it, sewers, nearby utility tunnels, drone entrances. No indication of what different entry points might lead to, though Valle had his guesses at some.

The complex had its own umbilical to a free-floating bubble, which was not uncommon. And like many corporate bubbles, it was completely undocumented. Valle had never been to it, though he knew for certain that his brother had, even when they were young. He assumed it to be the meeting site for the OSA's omnipotent committee, or, more likely, the servers that allowed its members to convene remotely, and to monitor the underclass.

Grid joked idly about planting bombs there. Revolutionary habit, she said. Valle imagined the two of them being casually swatted away by inconspicuous Veritas sentries the moment they entered the dome carrying anything explosive.

Even so, it wasn't as though he hadn't thought about it many, many times.

At the end of their stay, Dresden saw them off with a firm

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handshake and drawn expression. Valle wasn't sure whether the hyenid was more concerned for their safety, or saddened that he would never have a hand in such espionage. They returned down the umbilical, into the much darker Germany dome, from which they had to find their own way to continue on.

Grid had a plan for that.

Once they were back within in the grimy and poorly lit sprawl of the lower city, the bird found a public comms terminal deep in a noisy and crowded market street. With music of all kinds blaring, hawkers pushing cheap tablets and peasant food from carts, and children crowding around adjacent terminals to play games in their allotted five-minute increments, she accessed it with Valle blocking the view the best as he could. All he saw was that she navigated to an article about some folksy crooner from a century ago, on a publicly curated information site he didn't recognize, and made an edit to the list of citations. He couldn't begin to decode the message she hid in it.

When she was done, Valle fed enough globals into the terminal that the kid waiting behind them (a young elk-model zoan fidgeting impatiently) could play for a week on end, to make sure no one had the chance to follow their tracks before the terminal cleared its cache. He would have enjoyed the commotion when someone noticed, but Grid dragged him along.

The meeting she had somehow arranged was to take place the entrance to a run-down factory elsewhere in the dome.

"We use those a lot," she explained as they waited for a car to take them to it. "They're loud and they're hard to monitor; and they have access to the deepways and distribution lines and anything else we might need."

The factory in question was a single, featureless gray block set in the middle of a packed industrial district and surrounded by intricate scaffolds and cranes that worked with unending, automatic fervor. There were no lights at street level, whether because Grid's contact had disabled them in preparation for the meeting, or because no one who needed them was expected to be near. Bird and bat snuck in to a service entrance by a dim red light she projected from her tablet.

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There was light inside, enough at least for machines that navigated by conventional camera. Much like the pump station in Atlantis, the interior was a vast network of catwalks, stairways, ladders, and overlooks moving between blocks of pulsing machinery so dense that a living engineer couldn't see what their innumerable arms were doing. Grid, who seemed to know the layout, kept to the tight passages on the ground level, until they passed through a pair of doors that led to the entrance of a dark tunnel. She stopped before the well-kept concrete floor abruptly became cracked and old.

"If no one's here in two hours, we can assume nobody checks the old drop spots anymore."

"How long have you been inactive?"

"Six years."

Grid leaned back against the door. She rubbed her new biceps and rolled her head, still unused to the new muscles.

"I don't know how Crucis finds me," Valle said seriously. "I don't want to lead him to the resistance."

"Ha! If the Vampires don't know where every one of our camps is at any given moment, I'd be really surprised. They don't come for us, because we're not worth the effort. They come for us when we poke our heads out, if we're not careful, but they never raid. Honestly, I think they like the sport."

Valle wasn't sure about that, but the logic was sound. It didn't mean there wasn't a risk, though.

"Two hours could be a long time to wait," he put in, self-consciously.

She gave him a grim look he couldn't interpret.

"Come here," she gestured with her beak. When Valle obliged, she took his hand and snapped the monitor bracelet off. "They aren't gonna kill Marn. They're still using her."

"Using her." Valle rubbed matted fur on his wrist where it had been trapped for days. He imagined civilians abducted and used in Veritas training ops, or even Crucis's. He would never advise coming anywhere near that.

Grid turned and looked at him for a long time. Directly into his eyes. Her plastic throat worked in thought. She took a long breath and let it out noisily.

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"She says she's in their computer. We didn't have a lot of time to talk, but she said they plugged her into it and she's like a processor for it now."

"Oh."

"She was...doing bad. You spend your whole life getting Ship of Theseus'd, but she had it much worse than me. There wasn't a lot of...we didn't think she'd make it much longer. And we couldn't exactly get the goddamn Aequitas Army to send us to Dresden."

She stopped and paced a quick couple loops in front of the door.

"I don't know why, but I think that made her a candidate for whatever this is, with this new computer. Something about the way her body took bionics, or just that they wanted a brain and thought no one would look into a poor zoan who was...on the way out already."

Valle kept his mouth shut. The possibility of getting Amarna out was seeming slimmer with every word.

"It is you," a voice said, from farther into the tunnel.

It's owner emerged into view, a human about halfway between Valle's and Grid's heights, dressed in an old jacket and face wrapped loosely in tattered cloth. Springgun in hand but momentarily lowered.

"Kierghan," Grid approached and embraced them forcefully. "Out of the slime and darkness I crawl."

Kierghan gestured to Valle with the gun when they separated. The bat kept his hands open and visible.

"And this?"

"A friend."

"Looks more like a washup."

"Don't we all."

The resistance fighter gestured to Valle to let him search his rucksack. The process involved a great deal of prodding and tearing before he was satisfied. In the end he handed it back, significantly worse for wear, and waved for them to follow. He lit the way with his tablet and fell behind, in case Valle proved untrustworthy. Or Grid, for that matter.

"You got new gear," he observed.

"It's brand new," Grid rolled her shoulder uncomfortably. "I kind

of hate it.”

“Still the same cheap voice though. Then again, I don’t know that the guys would believe it’s you without it.”

The tunnel slanted downward, then ended at a vertical drop. The platform Kierghan had ridden up hung from simple pulleys drilled into the ceiling, and a spider drone, which had probably hung the pulleys, waited for them.

“You’ll vouch for him,” the human said, pointedly.

“I will,” Grid confirmed.

Kierghan ushered them on to the platform and set it descending. The shaft was old and probably little-used. Tracks set into the walls probably allowed delivery robots to crawl up and down, if something had to be carried to or from the factory via the deepways. That must not happen very often.

The shaft cut deep below the ocean bottom. Where the factory had been hot, just a few dozen yards down, Valle could see his breath, and they still descended.

At the bottom, Kierghan sent the spider drone up to undo the pulleys and cover their tracks. He guided them a little maze of tunnels like the one above when, probably leading to similar entrances below other buildings, and then they were in the deepways.

There had been deeper tunnels cut for mines and rail systems prior to the deluge, but the deepways were the farthest down anyone had dared cut since, and the logistics of maintaining them had seen the project mostly abandoned. Deepways caverns ran below most domes, but their sizes and shapes and levels of completion varied widely. While a few were still usable for transit, most had collapsed or flooded during digging; many were completely inaccessible.

This surviving network was composed of long and wide chambers, orderly and rectangular but incomplete. Reddish earthen walls, damp floors, no lights except for ancient bulbs run along frayed wires stuck to the ceiling. Such a strong smell of brine that it was hard to breathe sometimes. Kierghan had parked a cart, little more than chassis, at the exit of the tunnels, in which he drove bird and bat a long way to the encampment from which he had departed to meet them. The tires slapped and flung spumes of watery mud, which didn’t bode

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well for the future of these caverns.

What Valle expected to be maybe a circle of tents amidst stacks of supplies and a fire was actually a shantytown that dominated a section of cavern. Shelters, shacks, lean-tos of all sizes, built from industrial leftovers clogged the space like a pipe filling with debris.

Their contact parked his makeshift vehicle and ushered them on. The people they passed were not resistance fighters, but disheveled and impoverished deepways dwellers of all ages and species, watching the newcomers with disinterest, and the one human with disdain. The encampment itself appeared to be several huts the resistance had claimed, deep inside the town. More of its members stood watch around its perimeter, brandishing knives and low-velocity guns of different kinds. Kierghan conferred with them before bringing his guests through.

No one else in this camp knew Grid. Those not on guard duty were seated around a table in the largest hut, which was a slightly lopsided space formed by mismatched sheets of fiber board. One, a gaunt human with sallow cheeks, gave them a cynically appraising look.

"So it *was* a distress call," they said.

Kierghan pulled the loose fabric away from his face, revealing a scarred, bald head with a friendly brow but twisted nose.

"This is Ingrid," he gestured.

"Grid," she corrected.

"This is Grid. She was with us for ten years."

"Was," the sallow one said.

"She's out."

"You can't just 'be out.'"

"You can if your dying wife needs you with her," Grid leveled a venomous glower at them.

The explanation didn't seem to impress the younger human, but they didn't press it. After a brief consultation, the fighters in the hut patted the two down, searched their pockets and went through the rucksack again. The search produced Grid's splinter knife, the bracelet, and the package of money. All three were swiftly confiscated.

The bird gradually won her erstwhile colleagues over with tales of

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her younger days, plotting bombings on state-owned server farms and kidnapping low-level government figures to terrorize and ransom. She'd never ranked highly, it seemed, never had a very illustrious success rate, but she had dedicated years to the resistance. And she had taken that splinter knife off a Vampire whose given name her cell had discovered and whom they had attacked in his home, off-duty.

The resistance fighters were willing to accept Grid's vague explanation, that Valle was merely a friend who had agreed to help her. All except the sallow one, who seemed to trust no one they had not personally seen murder a Pinnacle Class sympathizer, as well as a corvine zoan, who stayed quiet but eyed him thoughtfully throughout the meal they all shared. To be fair, Valle wouldn't have trusted himself, either.

Grid explained Amarna's abduction, though she prudently omitted any details about the OSA—too dangerous of knowledge, even in this company. She couldn't expect any fighters to help her; she only asked for help reaching a particular office block in a particular dome, secretly and silently. The power structure in this cell seemed to be pretty horizontal, so it was only a matter of Kierghan and another two volunteering to help, and it was settled. They then ushered Valle out into the cavern so that they could look over maps of the deepways and whatever other passages they might use—secret information, and all.

Valle waited in the narrow space between huts, the air bitterly cold and the floor unnervingly squishy. Beyond the armed guards, more than one civilian deepways dweller saw him and made the sign of the Watcher. He started, terrified that he had been recognized, but reminded himself that they had reason to distrust anyone coming down from the domes. He wondered if they would believe him were he to say that he had lived for a year or two in the deepways of the American domes.

That memory wasn't particularly comforting, given that Crucis had found him there, too.

A fighter emerged from the fiber board hut, young mustelid zoan wrapped in a thick parka against the cold. They informed him that this meeting would be a while, and took him out past the perimeter,

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to where an old zoan woman, squamate of some variety, accepted a few non-global coins in return for use of a cot in her hovel. Valle could be glad, at least, that they hadn't tried using his globals.