Perry hadn't meant to talk to anyone. He had been trying to keep to himself, getting in and out of the libraries, eating food where he could, and spending his time preparing for a better cover story that would carry him to Berus.

The problem was, that wasn't the culture. Libraries weren't a place to get what you needed and get out, they were a place to talk, exchange ideas, and socialize. The food was free, this was true, but there had been a very deliberate attempt to make the cafes and restaurants into third places, somewhere that people could congregate and get to know each other. On balance, Perry found himself more comfortable with a big city approach to things, keeping people at arm's length and minding his own business, but that was difficult when people kept trying to talk to him.

"What do you think?" asked an orc from another table while Perry was quietly eating his lunch. It was the first proper sandwich he'd had since Teaguewater, and came with a strong nostalgia and homesickness.

"Sorry?" asked Perry. "I wasn't following."

"Just wanted your opinion," said the orc. There were five of them at the table, three orcs, a human, and a dwarf. They were all young, maybe Perry's age, though he wasn't that good at telling for the orcs and dwarves, not yet. "The question going around is what happens once Thirlwell is down, once there's no outside force."

Perry had a newspaper folded next to his plate, which he'd been reading a column from, and he pushed it to the side.

"This is a question about where the guards go?" asked Perry.

"Nah," said the human woman. "It's a question of where *everything* goes. This was always supposed to be a transition, getting rid of the system of kings. Once Thirlwell falls, there's nothing we're against anymore, it's all the culture, all over the whole world. There were always people fleeing from one monarchy to another —"

"Rats," said the dwarf.

"Leeches," said one of the orcs.

"But when Thirlwell falls," the woman continued, "when they have their own symboulion running things, we can scrap so much."

"And you're looking for an outside opinion?" asked Perry.

"I've seen you around," said the orc with a shrug. "You read a lot, I thought maybe you might be one of those smart guys." This was accompanied by some chuckles from the people around him, but it seemed good natured to Perry.

"I think you're always going to need to worry about outside forces," said Perry. "The culture isn't the same everywhere, by design. It's local because being local is part of the culture. Local

needs have local solutions. Symboulions are a piece of community, not a duke ruling over a place whose soil he's never walked on. But that means that those different versions of the culture have plenty of chances to butt up against each other. Not everyone has taken to it as well as here." This was mostly informed by what the papers said.

"So we keep the weapons to use against each other?" asked the orc. He shook his head.

"It's not just the weapons," said the woman. "It's *everything.* The entire justification for Command Authority is that we need to be able to stand up against the kingdoms, to handle troops landing on our shores, to have the technology necessary to *at least* match them if not outpace them. It should be dismantled when Thirlwell falls." She pointed a fork in Perry's direction, because Perry was now a part of the conversation. "We should downgrade everything."

"You're a dogmatist," said Perry. "You want to take everything local even when it doesn't make sense." Dogmatist was, so far as he could tell, a term that was coming close to an insult, a way of categorizing a group of people that they didn't really seem to like all that much. There were no proud dogmatists, it wasn't a term they called themselves.

"Why doesn't it make sense?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. She was giving a lot of energy to the conversation, and it was pretty clear to Perry that in spite of the orc being the one that pulled him in, it was the woman that had been driving things. Maybe the outside perspective was meant to cool the heat on the conversation.

"We have the domes," said Perry. "They work better the larger they are, and one of the tenets of the culture is reducing work. 'Work is a scourge,' right?" The line came directly from *Cultural Metamorphoses*. "There are tons of things that would be better done at scale, things that we don't do at scale because we 'don't need to,' but if you look at it as man-hours or opportunity costs, there's too much we should be investing in. That alone is a justification for Command Authority."

The orc wrinkled his nose. "You're talking megaprojects?"

"No," said Perry. "Even city-scale things. Taking the number of workers from two thousand down to a thousand means more people doing what they want to, more time devoted to the culture, and would help to minimize the scrip economy."

The orc smiled. "Tina thinks we should abolish the scrip economy," he said, nodding at the human woman.

"Before or after Thirlwell is gone?" asked Perry.

"After, probably," said Tina. She seemed much less sure of this proposition.

"I don't think that would work," said Perry. "We use scrip to get people to do the necessary things that no one wants to do, and if you're going to take away scrip, you have to hope that the culture is enough to make people do those things anyway. It might work, but then you have a split culture *anyway*, because most people aren't really in the scrip economy right now. Most

people wouldn't need to do any work, so they wouldn't, and you'd have a different class of people taking care of the nightsoil — but they wouldn't be rewarded by society, they would be acting under the weight of expectation and social censure."

"It would take some figuring out," said the woman, which Perry decided that he was going to take as a victory.

"I don't know," said Perry, which was his way of walking back his victory slightly. He thought that was good manners, if someone was gracious enough to cede ground. "The scrip economy is a problem, the large projects are a problem, and we're not where we were sixty-seven years ago, we have built up systems and the inevitable quirks in the culture." He turned to look at the orc. "I think keeping things as they are is the smart thing to do, at least right now, if you're worried about a destabilizing landslide ripping its way through the culture."

"A society needs change," said the dwarf. It was the first time he'd spoken. "If we don't change, we get locked in and live in the shadow of the past. If we don't change now, when will we?"

Perry personally felt that was a good point, so he just nodded. "I don't know. Maybe. Nice to meet all of you, but I have business with a friend."

They said their goodbyes, not having exchanged names, and Perry left not having blown his cover, which he was thankful for.

It hadn't actually taken all that much to be able to talk somewhat intelligently about these things. He had read through two months worth of newspapers, read or skimmed a handful of books, and listened in on a few dozen conversations. There were a limited number of conversations that people seemed to have, though he was unusually well-versed in the patterns of discourse, even for someone from the information age. Back on Earth, there was always a conversation that was dominating the news cycle, and Perry had been very good at teasing apart what everyone was saying, what the ground truth was, and then staking his own claim with more research and effort than other people were willing to make.

The difference here was that people seemed to think that this wasn't all idle chatter. When they talked about their culture, their society, or their government, they did it with the conviction that they were in *charge* in some way, not just voters but participants.

From what he had been able to find, this was only *somewhat* true. The symboulions were the primary unit of doing things, one part business and one part city council, maybe with a little HOA or PTA thrown in. The city was lousy with them and their meetings. Perry had a voice in the apartment building he and Mette lived in, and unlike on Earth, this wasn't just the province of busybodies and those with too much time on their hands. Attending the symboulion meetings and speaking up was a part of the culture, and people took it seriously. Symboulions were sometimes assembled for things that didn't exist or hadn't happened, *speculative* symboulions that would eventually result in some new project being created, after which they would take custody, but they were relatively rare. Perry was fairly sure that once they had the concept of NIMBYism, accusations of it would get thrown around a lot.

For many large projects or services, there was Command Authority, people and organizations who were empowered in some specific capacity to deal with society-wide things in non-local ways. There were relatively few checks on them, which he found surprising, and he was somewhat alarmed when he realized that if anyone came after him, they would *probably* be a part of a Command Authority of some kind. The giant hulking metal guards were certainly under a Command Authority, though even finding out who controlled them was more difficult than it felt like it should be.

“They’re cheating, in a way,” said Perry once he came home to Mette. She had a magical lantern sitting on the table, and he was going to ask about it, but she was in the midst of monkeying with it, and figured that he would say a bunch of things that she didn’t really care about while he waited to have her attention.

“How so?” asked Mette. It couldn’t be more clear that her mind was elsewhere. Maybe the polite thing to do would be to just shut up, or to talk with March.

“There’s ideological impurity,” said Perry. “There are things that I like about that. They have a phrase they use a lot, ‘so what?’, as a defense against their systems. It’s this common rejoinder, and very clean, because … I don’t know, you say ‘there’s some waste in the systems’ and people have just been conditioned to say ‘well, is that actually a problem?’ It’s good. It’s also good that they have some acceptance of contradiction, I guess. But the *ideology*, this very local, helpful, communal ideology … they cheat when it comes to the big stuff.”

“How do they cheat?” asked Mette as she opened and closed an internal aperture. “They just ignore things?”

“Well, there are obvious problems with the mentality,” said Perry. “Being able to defend against foreign powers is one of the big ones. You can’t have a very local military, you’d get crushed by a highly coordinated top-down force, at least in the near term. Resistance movements *can* work, if there’s widespread local support, and you can encourage lone wolves, but you can’t go toe-to-toe with the big guys, not really. So they just say, ‘oh, yeah, we’re breaking with our ideology for that.’ It’s like talking to a libertarian who’s in favor of universal healthcare.”

Mette stopped what she was doing and looked over at Perry with a frown. “I have no idea what any of that is.”

“Libertarianism is a position that advocates for minimal state intervention in people’s lives, and usually a minimal state,” said Perry. “Universal healthcare is a program that sees the state providing healthcare to everyone through taxation.”

“I’m still not sure I understand taxation,” said Mette with a sigh. “But they don’t seem to have it in this world, so I guess I’m fine. And before you start, I understand taxation *in the abstract* but as a governor I’m not sure how it would work *in practice*. From what you’ve said, it all sounds kind of stupid.”

“Sure,” said Perry. “Sorry, I was talking to some people in the cafe, and there were all kinds of things I couldn’t say to them.” He gestured at the lantern. “Tell me about this.”

Mette gestured to herself. “You’re looking at the city’s newest nightsoil collector,” she said. She patted the lantern, which was a foot tall and made of shiny metal with an aperture that pointed down and a ball above it, along with a chamber that sat on top of the ball. The ball was where the ‘light’ came from, and it was open along a hinge, showing that there was nothing inside. “They gave me this lantern.”

“Which collects poop, I take it?” asked Perry.

“That’s what it’s meant for,” said Mette. She closed the ball and hefted the lantern, which seemed to be pretty weighty. “I was given my training and then allowed to take it home, which surprised me, because it would seem more sensible to have them all in one central location.”

“We could use it for other things?” asked Perry.

“Maybe,” said Mette with a frown. “There are three parts, the fuel, the ‘wick,’ and the ‘flame’ In theory, I could swap out the fuel, but the ‘wick’ is this little bit here,” she opened the lantern back up and pointed at the piece of mesh that sat between the upper chamber and the empty ball. “I’m only starting to figure out how it works, and the man who trained me had no idea. I think most people have only a vague understanding of how the lanterns work, which is a problem. The books have been more helpful than talking to anyone, but I think I just haven’t found the right person.”

“So are you actually going to do the job?” asked Perry.

“I am,” said Mette. “I have. You go into buildings, place the lantern in the right spot for a few minutes, then leave. It’s a very primitive way of dealing with waste, but running pipes to every single building in the city is apparently a big ask, and no one is much interested in it, not when all you need is a collector to come in for five minutes. It’s the first thing *I* would implement, but it would need a Command Authority.”

“What are your thoughts on weaponizing the lantern?” asked Perry.

Mette let out a sigh. “It’s apparently possible but somewhat difficult. They fought their giant war with lanterns of all kinds, dirty ones that spewed effluence while they ate into flesh and bone. Most of *those* were enormous though. The body is resistant to the light of a lantern, apparently. With the right fuel, the right wick, the right design … this would still be too small, mostly an annoyance.” She shook her head. “Against the *bugs* it would be easy enough to have a huge one atop the Natrix, the ultimate weapon, something that would eat through them when they so much as came near. We’d set up on open ground to give us enough time, and — Perry, if I can get this back to them, it would mean the end of our worries, at least about that. We could replace the reactors.”

She was looking at him like he had the answers.

“I haven’t seen anything to say that anyone knows how to travel between worlds,” said Perry. “So far as I know, there are portals, and they appear under specific circumstances, always taking us away.”

Mette frowned. “How are things going with the baby thresholder?” she asked.

“Fine,” said Perry. “Fine enough, anyway. I don’t trust her. I’ve been burned before, and honestly, I think it would be easier to lay things out for her if she were a guy.”

“What? Why?” asked Mette.

“Because I know my biases,” said Perry. “I’m more inclined to trust a pretty woman, and I *know* that, which means that it’s a weak spot, so I need to be on my guard.”

“Hmm,” said Mette. “So you trust women *less*.”

“Women I’m attracted to,” said Perry. “I mean, it’s not misogyny. It’s just me realizing that I need to correct for my natural inclinations.”

“Uh huh,” said Mette. “And that … doesn’t apply to me?”

“I’m not worried about getting stabbed in the back by you,” said Perry. He hoped that she wasn’t asking whether she was pretty. She was, especially when she had that look of focus, but he didn’t want to tell her that. “Though maybe I should be worried, given that we’re not *entirely* on the same page. If you had the option of turning me in to the government in order to secure your own position … that’s just about the only way that I can see a betrayal going. And even with Command Authority, I don’t think there’s actually a place you could go where you could say, ‘hey, I’m from another world and need some protection, here’s what I have in exchange.’”

“I wouldn’t do that,” said Mette, folding her arms.

“You said yourself that you were trying to seduce me for what, at *least* a year,” said Perry.

“That’s different,” said Mette. She was rolling her eyes, but looked slightly flushed as she carried on. “Brigitta would have taken that in stride, it was only *you* that didn’t want to pass on your gifts to our people, or more generously, you that didn’t want to leave behind children you couldn’t raise on your own. You knew what I was doing, and if I had succeeded, it would only have been because I got past your own defenses. That’s hardly *betrayal*. It’s just … forward-thinking.”

“It was manipulative,” said Perry. “Tempted as I was, I think that’s why I never went for it.”

“You *were* tempted?” asked Mette. “Because it was *very* hard for us to tell. You do this stoic thing sometimes, letting nothing come onto your face.”

“It’s a second sphere thing,” said Perry. “It’s useful when you don’t want to give anything away.”

They had been sleeping in the same bed without incident, and were technically pretending to be husband and wife, though they hadn’t been pressed on that just yet, and hadn’t had to develop any elaborate lies. By the time they had gotten aboard the blimp to Berus, they would have something else worked out, maybe with a more platonic cover story. Perry was working on it, and Marchand was collecting information from all over in order to synthesize a list of information for them to memorize based on the things that people seemed to talk about most often.

And they *were* going to Berus. It was where the action was at. One of the things that Perry had learned in his reading was that the kingdom in question was an island nation, one of the reasons that it had held out for so long. The last remaining kingdom, Thirlwell, surely the eventual target for the kingkiller, was a *different* island nation, and closer to Berus than anywhere else. From what Perry had seen from maps, they weren't quite as close as England was to Ireland, or New Zealand's north and south islands, but they were cousin kingdoms, and what they learned at one could translate to the other.

"Are you stealing that?" Perry asked, pointing at the lantern.

"No," said Mette. "It would stick out."

"It wouldn't stick out if it were in the shelf," said Perry. "The armor sticks out, and that's not going to be seen by anyone."

"I'd rather stay within the bounds of the law," said Mette. It was an opinion she'd expressed a few times before. She had done a *coup*, and the more exposure Perry had to her, the more he thought that Leticia and Brigitta had been the main drivers. Maybe she had just mellowed with age and the birth of her children.

She hadn't talked about the children at all since they'd arrived in the world, and Perry wondered whether she ever would. He didn't know whether it was his responsibility to prod her about it, but they were slowly getting past the honeymoon period.

"One of the arguments for going to Berus is that the law won't be a settled thing," said Perry. "Even with the king dead and a symboulion in place, there's going to be fighting, flare ups, that kind of thing. It's a better space to operate in, if you're someone like me. More confusion, more opportunity to steer things, to blend in with the confusion."

"Blegh," said Mette. She clearly had a distaste for the mindset, and Perry didn't know what to do about that. "And yet I somehow agree. Not about warfare, but when things are uncertain is the best time to get access to resources, get training, get in on the ground floor." She had gone to a few of the mage colleges and gotten told the same thing at pretty much all of them: she would have to do an apprenticeship or test out, and testing out was mostly reserved for people who had come in from other countries and already knew their stuff. "It *does* seem slightly crazy to come to a new world with plentiful food, clothing, and shelter, then leave our relative safety to go into what you're describing as a high-threat zone, all so we can chase down some maniac."

"We're not going to be subject to the same things that everyone else is subject to," said Perry. "I'm working on getting lots of things into the shelf. I'd feel guilty about taking from them, but their response to the objection of 'but what if people take more than their share' is always 'so what.' They *want* to help, to give, to make sure that scarcity isn't driving people too much. That's the culture."

"Mmm," said Mette. She looked at the lantern that was sitting on the table. "Not these though."

“I think they would hand them out like candy if not for the pollution,” said Perry. “But they’re controlled.”

Mette was still looking over the lantern, as though trying to place it in the context of its history. “Not *that* controlled.”

“Well, I’m going back out,” said Perry. He stood from the bed. “We need to start building up supplies now, if we’re going to do it discreetly.”

“When do I get to meet the baby thresholder?” asked Mette.

“You know, from some perspectives, it would be *you* who was the baby thresholder,” said Perry.

“Suckling at your teat, you mean?” asked Mette. There was a slight twinkle in her eye. “I don’t even have any powers yet.”

“Someday,” said Perry, though she *did* have a gun that was kept in the ring, the ability to project force about as strong as a haymaker using firmament magic, and was far from helpless.

Perry walked through the city, feeling relatively good about himself. He was preying on them, in a way, but the whole culture was *designed* so that this sort of predatory behavior wasn’t really a big deal. If someone wanted to steal a library book, more power to them, that was what the libraries were *for*. If you kept a blouse because you just ended up adoring it, that was *good*, that meant that people got to try things out and then keep what was most dear. Society was set up to make more books, more blouses, more of *everything*. Social censure would help most people to give back most things they weren’t using, and if there were deficits, the librarians would report them, meaning that more of the most favorite things would eventually end up on the shelves.

It didn’t feel *great* to be a leech, but it was what it was. They didn’t have computers for him to download a bunch of information onto, and he was very skeptical about the prospect of giving them werewolf teeth given that their moon was large enough that he could feel the pull of it even when it wasn’t full. He could help them with their science, and knew that was something that Mette planned to do, but that was the best shot of leaving the world better than he found it. Cosme’s plan to uplift the worlds was something that still tickled Perry’s mind from time to time, and he tried to assuage the guilt he was feeling with loose ideas about good.

He did try to be respectful in what he took and not simply fill the shelf with everything that he found, but it was difficult, because so many things he looked made him imagine some scenario where he might use it. He would have simply *paid* for things, since he had traded in half a small gold ingot for scrip, but clothes, food, and furniture weren’t a part of the scrip economy because they were basic rights, masks needed to be created by the user, and lanterns were heavily regulated. That left relatively little for him.

He had a heavy cloth tote that he put clothes from a library into, stuff that he thought was relatively versatile and universal, that might help him to blend in on some other world. When that was done, he found a quiet alley, dumped the tote out into the shelf, and went to the next library. He picked up some books in the same way, mostly books on the basics, things that would stay

the same from world to world, principles of engineering and science that wouldn't be that different. He took some books for Marchand to copy into the databanks, and others that were considered classics, mostly so he could plagiarize them.

While he walked about, he had some idle thoughts about *ethical* uplifting and whether it was actually necessary to give credit where credit was due. He could see the arguments either way, though he felt it was a bit like giving credit to dead people who wouldn't care one way or another about it, being dead. Perry would never claim that he'd invented the things that were in the books, not that he thought he'd ever be able to get away with that.

He was making his way through a busy plaza when he heard screaming from the air. He looked up and set his feet, frowning slightly and fearing the worst. He had been in the city for a few days, and had enough background that he was able to get through random conversations without coming close to anyone noticing that he wasn't from nearby. Still, there was the fear that he would be unmasked in the worst way, either by the Command Authority or the enemy thresholder, and there was no reason for it not to be at the hands of whatever was screaming through the air.

After twenty seconds, other people in the plaza seemed to hear the sound, starting with the elves. They looked up to the sky, then at each other, and conversations broke out or were diverted to the subject of the sound.

The flash of light appeared to the east, where the sound was coming from, and the explosion rippled through the air above the city not long after that. Perry was ready to turn into the weakly anemic wolf if he had to, and he was cursing himself for not having brought the power armor with him. He could duck into the shelf if need be, but doing that in public seemed like a bad idea.

There were six explosions in total, and they didn't seem to be getting any closer, so Perry simply stood there, waiting, fighting off his urge to get the sword from the shelf and rise up into the air to get a look. He wasn't showing himself, not for this. If it wasn't an attack, it was an accident of some kind, but Perry couldn't believe that it was coincidence for something like this to happen just as he arrived.

When the explosions had stopped for a good half a minute, Perry started running toward them. He ran fast, but not so fast that it would draw suspicion. He was going to be one of the helpers, he had already decided that, but being in the thick of it would mean that he'd get information before anyone else.

People were running and screaming, and it wasn't long before Perry saw that some of those people were clutching at wounds. The wounds got worse the closer he got, and then he started to pass people carrying the wounded on stretchers. Some of them weren't just wounded but dead.

He almost stopped when he came across the first guard. It was nine feet tall, a more advanced version of the one that Perry had seen in the museum, the plate armor it was covered in

showing no easy gaps. It was only standing there though, not helping, and Perry realized at once why that was: it was on a war footing, not interested in humanitarian aid.

The site of the explosion was bedlam. Buildings had been demolished, some of them flattened, and there were bodies strewn everywhere. It was thick with dust and smoke, but a man stood at the top of the rubble, yelling out orders for more stretchers, more movement, a yellow ribbon tied around the wrists of the wounded, a red ribbon tied around the wrists of the dead. Perry set to work, guided by his nose, helping with his brute strength and not trying too hard to hide that he was special. He poured energy into healing a few times, but to no great effect, because healing others was still far beyond him. When he was finished, he would move to the next, always working, not stopping for any breaks, which he knew would also be suspicious.

The reports on the ground were confused. No one knew what had happened, and especially early on, it was all wild speculation. People were saying that it was a dragon, a creature that had died during the Effluence, but dragons had never done anything like this even when they had it in their heads to attack settlements. There were also theories about the golden domes having gone wrong somehow, a rollout of new technology having had some catastrophic failure, but Perry thought they were just saying that because the lay people didn't really understand how the golden domes worked.

It was well into the evening before Perry started to hear the theory that would become the dominant one, which was confirmed by the papers the next day.

The King of Thirlwell had a weapon, one that was great and terrible, capable of striking from afar at a range hitherto undreamt of by anyone. He had seen Berus fall and was making his last stand, which was apparently to begin with an indiscriminate bombing campaign just to prove that he could. There were more weapons laying in wait, and he had no compunctions about using them.

It was the last gasp of what the newspapers had already been calling the Last Kingdom, but that made it no less dangerous. It remained to be seen how the Command Authority would react, but the peaceful city now found itself on the frontlines of what would surely be war.