

The queen had requested that Third Fervor stay close by, and Third Fervor had no choice but to obey, even if she thought her talents might be better used elsewhere. Given the threats against her station, the queen's desire wasn't rash or overly emotional. She was an even-tempered woman, though Third Fervor questioned whether the queen had what it took to lead.

The prince would have been a better ruler, but he had fallen ill the night the king had died. It was unfortunate, and there was some question of foul play, but the queen had ordered that there be no investigation. This was, most agreed, suspicious, but people had many different theories as to what was suspicious about it. No one could say for certain whether it was an attack from within or an attack from without, and the idea of suicide had been floated more than once.

The queen was still in her old room, as it would be quite a process to move her, the business of many maids and servants. There were two useless guards standing outside, men who had served in an army that hadn't seen a proper battle in twenty years. Peregrin would rip through them without a thought, and without so much as a drop of sweat for the effort. Third Fervor would too, of course. She had already planned how she would do it, if it came down to it.

The queen's bed had tall posts with many fabrics draped between them, and she slept fitfully, tossing and turning and occasionally crying out. Her pillow had been stained with tears.

Third Fervor had seen her kings in all kinds of states, from red with rage to slobbering drunk, and yes, sometimes sobbing too. There was nobility in that though, a man weeping for the fate of his people, or with the heavy burden of the crown. A king had unimaginable pressures placed upon him by his station, and Third Fervor had always had enormous sympathy for that.

With the queen, it felt different. The king had complained about his eldest daughter on a number of occasions, and because she had an older brother, no one had ever anticipated that the crown would go to her. She had none of the training or experience that would qualify her to make good decisions. The small moans in her sleep and the tears that fell in quiet moments felt like weaknesses, not a sign of the depth of emotion a king should feel for his power and position.

The shade of Peregrin was in a cell fifteen miles away, a safe distance. There were watchers with masks on the roof of the castle, ready to raise the alarm if there was any movement. The other thresholder, Nima, was being guarded down by the docks, a less safe distance, only five miles away. Third Fervor felt a temptation to portal to them, to make sure they were in place, but that would mean leaving the queen alone. The memory of the king's death was still etched in her mind, and she had her orders, if she considered them to be orders.

Third Fervor didn't need much sleep, but she knew from past experience that she wouldn't be at her peak if she tried to forgo it. She had slept in her armor the night before, and ached from it the day after, as miraculous as the armor was. Two nights in a row would leave her too weak the following day, and it was very possible that Peregrin would mount a rescue for his shade. She could only hope that it would take him some time to find it, and that once he found it, he would leave with it rather than launching an assault on the queen.

She waited, watching over the queen and only once portaling to the jail where the shade was kept to peek through the window and make sure he was still there.

After an hour had passed, Third Fervor began to strip out of her armor. It took time to remove and time to put back on. She was vulnerable without it, as much as she had trained her body and been improved by her adventures. She could put the armor on quickly, if she needed to, as it formed itself to her body, but taking it off was difficult, as though it had a mind of its own and was clinging to her like a whimpering child.

With the armor removed, Third Fervor used a wash basin in the room to clean herself, using a sponge. She didn't sweat like she once had, but she hadn't removed the armor since the king's death, and she was far from clean. Beneath the armor had been a paper thin material that stretched seemingly without limit, and she slowly slipped out of it as she gave herself the sponge bath. She tried to move quickly, as was her duty, but rest needed to come soon, and trying to speed through rest was a fast way to stay awake, vibrating with energy. Better to slow herself down for the washing.

Third Fervor washed the stretchy suit too, then hung it up to dry, which always took such a short amount of time it seemed like a miracle. She wasn't sure that it *needed* to be washed. Next to the wash basin were clothes that had been laid out for her, thin silken nightwear taken from the queen's own closets.

She had been injured. There was a bruise on her stomach and another on her breast, both of them swollen and purple, a result of the large guns that had been fired at her. If those guns had been fired at her just after the king had died, she was certain the armor would have protected her fully, but the righteous fury had started to wane. Any current weakness was one borne of her own thoughts.

She was to sleep in the queen's bed, at the queen's request.

Third Fervor slipped beneath the sheets as softly and quietly as she could. The queen awoke though, if only barely, eyes opened just a crack, then closed just as quickly. The queen's arm found its way around Third Fervor's midsection, and the queen moved closer, by instinct more than intention. Whether purposefully or not, the queen's delicate arm narrowly avoided both sore spots. Once they were pressed together, the queen fell back asleep.

Sleep was more difficult for Third Fervor.

She was worried about Peregrin, of course, and Nima, and Peregrin's shade, and the other thresholder that Nima claimed was out there somewhere, if Nima wasn't a filthy liar too. Third Fervor was also consumed with her own failures, not just the death of the king, but her inability to end Peregrin in the aftermath.

The queen's fingers were clutching at Third Fervor, and her mouth was pressed against Third Fervor's shoulder, not quite a kiss. There were layers of fabric between them, but they were thin fabrics.

Third Fervor had presented herself as a loyal guard to every king she had ever had the pleasure of serving. For some this was a purely platonic boon, a warrior from another world who had come to them in their time of need. She was a woman though, and by some measures an

attractive one, and there were other kings who saw her and had other thoughts. For some, like the queen's late father, it had been a method of testing her devotion and commitment, a humiliation to see how much she could bear and what she would balk at. For others, it was simply their understanding of a woman's place in the world. Third Fervor's devotion and commitment were beyond question. She could bear the weight of the world, if it was in service to her king. She would not hesitate to do whatever was asked of her.

Perhaps in the later worlds she had invited it. She didn't know for certain. If it was a duty, it was one she enjoyed, though of course she would never be so improper to ask for it. Her wording might have changed, or her tone, once she knew it was a possibility, another way she could serve. She didn't imagine herself breathlessly telling the kings that they could do whatever they liked with her, but it was possible she hadn't been comporting herself properly around the question.

Third Fervor had these thoughts with her eyes closed, but after sleep didn't come, she turned to the queen and watched the gentle breathing of the newly crowned ruler. She had an aquiline nose and long eyelashes. She was soft, without muscle, perhaps even slightly chubby, in a way that was fetching.

Third Fervor tried to think about what it would be like to do that duty with a queen instead of a king. She resisted the thought, then tried to imagine it in more detail.

She couldn't imagine the queen giving the order, even if that was the queen's inclination.

A king took charge. It wasn't clear to Third Fervor that the queen was capable of that. A soft body didn't mean a soft mind, but in this case the two seemed intertwined. The queen hadn't even commanded Third Fervor to bed — she had said, 'I would prefer if you slept here tonight, to keep me safe'. Third Fervor didn't do well with that sort of thing. It was too passive, too open to interpretation, and even if she said to herself that she should do whatever her king or queen prefers, that wasn't the same as doing things because she had been ordered to. There was too much latitude, too much room for her own decisions, and she had never operated best in those conditions. It wasn't a *true* order.

Was it possible to train a queen? It certainly wouldn't be *appropriate*, but it might be necessary, especially with the kingdom balanced on a knife's edge. Right now the advisors and barons were running rampant, working of their own accord, and the crackdown that had begun on all elements of the culture within the kingdom had been borne of other people making their own decisions, though of course everyone would attribute every single action to the head of state. That was the nature of monarchy and the burden of the crown.

The queen was sleeping better with her arm around Third Fervor though.

Sleep eluded Third Fervor, even if providing comfort to the queen was a salve to the recent failures. And in the morning, the spymaster should surely have something from Peregrin's shade.

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Kes sat in the woods, huffing and puffing, just like in the story of the three little pigs, which was almost funny.

He had no idea where he was, except that he hadn't left Thirlwell. He'd gone full wolf there for a moment, with all the uncomfortable aspects of transformation, fur and a snout. It hadn't happened like that with Flora, he was pretty sure, though those memories seemed very far away. His clothes were shredded, all but the black nanite bracelet that was going to get him home.

The jail he'd been put in had been far from the capital city, which he was thankful for, because there were only brief moments of lucidity between the bouts of blinding anger and long claws. He'd killed and eaten five men in the jail, all of them guards. There had been no sign of Dirk, or Thom, or whatever he was calling himself. Kes had the scent of him though, and if he'd been of a mind to, could have tracked the traitorous bastard. His neck was healed now, but he could still feel the moment he'd been cut open, like a phantom sensation reaching from the past.

Kes was naked in the woods, bloody and alone. He was as far into the brush as he could get, and he thought once he got further, he'd start moving toward more farmland. It was a managed forest, with hard packed dirt trails, and he was worried that he'd come across someone who was only out for a morning jog.

He was trying to use the techniques he'd learned as Perry. It was his second time going through a first transformation, and easier because it was in the daytime, but he was still insatiably hungry, and the rage came in waves that threatened to bowl him over. He hadn't realized just how dull his sense of smell had become, but the scents were back now, adding richness to the world.

How long would it take for Third Fervor to know he'd escaped? How long would it take her to find him? It would depend on the jail and when people came in. They didn't have radio, which meant that someone would have to find a horse, and Kes had no idea how fast a horse could go.

Or Third Fervor could find out at literally any moment by portaling into the jail. That was another possibility.

When Kes felt his breathing get close to baseline, he started running again, totally naked, trying to get through the woods. He was pretty sure he would eventually hit farmland, and that meant being around people before he was fully in control of himself, but if he didn't risk killing someone, he was at risk of being found and captured again. He had escaped once, and if she let him live, there was no way he'd escape a second time. With her portals, she could dump him on an uninhabited island, or worse.

The plants and brush scraped against him, leaving their marks on his bare skin. With the next surge of power, the scrapes would be gone and he would be whole, and if he could just *focus* he could keep going. He was trying not to travel in a straight line, to make him more difficult to track, but that was difficult, because he was constrained by the terrain.

He had made it another hundred yards before the smell of a deer caught his attention. It was wounded, limping along on one leg. Deer were prey that had no natural predators on this island, and he raced after the scent, all other thoughts but the hunt having left him. The wounds were gone and his footsteps had become bounding leaps through the brambles and shrubs. He would find the deer first, before Third Fervor could take it from him, and —

But he could fight her for it, if it came to it, crush her armor and suck the marrow from her bones.

There was no scent of her though, so he kept after the wounded deer, certain that he'd catch up with it. The trail was only an hour old, and he would eat around the wounded leg, whose stink was mingled with that of the deer's fur.

He bounded out of the forest and found himself on farmland with long furrows and short, leafy plants. The deer had come through here, eating around the edges, but it was the house in the distance that had caught the wolf-mind's attention. It was still early morning, and there would be people inside if it wasn't inhabited. He could almost smell them, their sweat and dirt. He sprinted across the field, crushing greens beneath his feet, taking in the smells that were growing stronger as he moved. Someone was cooking something, eggs and bacon, undercurrents of toast, butter and some of the very greens that he'd been trampling.

The farmhouse was small and ancient, heavy wooden slats painted white, with shutters on the windows that had been thrown open. Kes slowed as he approached, wary.

When the front door opened up, it was to an unfamiliar place, lit differently and smelling of wood and metal. A woman was standing there, with her hair in a tight bun, a spandex top, and cargo pants. Kes had been shown her image, so he would know her if he saw her, but his only thought was to kill and consume her.

"Kestrel," she said. "I need you to come with me. There's not much time."

He raced for her, and to his faint surprise, she ran to him. When he raised a clawed hand to slice through her face, she met him with a fist wreathed in purple smoke and punched him square in the mouth. His attack was foiled and he flopped to the dusty ground with a broken jaw, knocking the wind from him.

"Now," she said. "Snap out of it."

His jaw was knitting back together, but the anger was fading as the rush of strength and power started to leave him.

"Cah," he spat out with a mouthful of blood. He still wanted to kill her. His claws were extended. Even if he could have formed a full sentence through the injury, the rage hadn't ebbed enough.

"Come *now*, or I'm going to have to try to grapple you in there," she said, pointing at the door.

As the energy faded from him and he reached the bottom of the cycle, the place where he felt fleeting normalcy, he felt the desire to explain it all to her, that he was a werewolf, that he couldn't control himself, that he would be a danger to her and the others. As he was about to try

to tell her that, he realized she'd put him down with a single punch and hadn't seemed perturbed by it. That door was leading into the *Farfinder*, and if he didn't go with her, where would that leave her? Next to this farmhouse he'd have to spend the next few minutes running away from?

He started walking to the door, and she came up beside him.

"Hurry," she said. She gripped his arm. She was surprisingly strong, and he saw more of the purple smoke wisping off her. "She's on her way."

Kes started running, and was through the magic door just before her. She slammed it shut and waited, fists at the ready, then after a few tense moments, started moving again. It was a long metal corridor with many doors, and what looked like a cockpit down at one end, but she stopped at one of the doors and opened it quickly.

"In, now," she said.

Kes followed after her. The room was small, also metal, with a single filament light bulb overhead. On the floor was a material like plexiglass, and beneath it, etched into the metal in blue, runic lines that faintly glowed. They were arranged in a circle with etchings coming off of them.

"In the center of that circle there," she said. Her name was ... Hella? Kes was confused and only barely lucid. He stumbled in, and she pressed something on the wall, which caused the light overhead to briefly dim. When it returned to brightness, there was a shell around Kes, a half dome that was only barely tall enough for him to fit in if he stood in the very center of the circle.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Our brig," said Hella. "How long will this take you?"

"You don't know?" asked Kes. "Can't you see the future?"

"In the future we saw, you died," said Hella. "Prognostics isn't *magic*, or — I mean, it's magic, but it has severe limits."

Kes punched at the barrier, not as hard as he could have, but hard enough to test it. He was naked save for the nanite bracelet. Her eyes hadn't been wandering, and she was being a professional about it, but he had essentially escaped one jail and then walked right into another.

He punched the barrier again, harder this time, which was awkward because of the curve. It was solid as steel, and he snarled at it, then got down on all fours and tried scratching his way through the glass with his claws. When that didn't work, he tried to wedge himself in place to push up on the dome, but that didn't work either, and he resorted to howling at and pawing fruitlessly at the barrier.

She stood there watching him with her feet shoulder-width apart and her hands folded behind her back. Her face was calm and impassive, even as he made a running jump at the barrier.

Quite a bit later, Kes came back to himself. He'd exerted his body and felt wrung out, and wondered whether the normalcy would stick this time.

"Better?" she asked.

"Temporarily," he said. "Thank you for rescuing me, by the way. I didn't say that before."

"You don't know how long this will go on?" she asked. "It didn't take that long for Maya."

"Ah," said Kes. "She was second sphere, and used her vessels. This is going to be an ongoing affliction for me." He let out a breath and ran his fingers through his surprisingly sweaty hair. "It won't last more than a day, I don't think. Maybe not even another hour. But it comes and goes in waves, and it's hard to know when it's stopped. You can leave me here, I don't need to be watched."

"I'll watch," said Hella. Her lips were thin. "If you get out somehow, someone needs to be here to stop you, and while the ship in its current form is a juggernaut, there's a chance you could wreck something we can't easily replace."

"How did you stop me?" asked Kes. "That punch, that was something you picked up on your travels?" He wanted to ask whether she could share it with him, but he held his tongue. That conversation would come later. "Wait, back at the town, Mette, is she —"

"Alive," said Hella. "Injured, and in the care of Perry. They've left, away from where Third Fervor can easily find them."

"Good," said Kes. "Good."

She didn't offer information on any of the others. Dirk was probably fine, otherwise his cover would have been completely blown, but the men with guns, Moss among them ... he took her silence for bad news.

"That punch, that was all me," said Hella. "Or ... maybe not, depending on what was actually going on with my Earth. I spoke with the other you, how much did he tell you?"

"Most of it," said Kes. It had sounded like superheroes to Perry, and Kes was inclined to agree, but Hella had been thin on the details. "Not, uh, your ... whatever."

"Because I didn't tell him," said Hella. "On the world I was from, there were some people who were born special and others that had specialness thrust upon them. Either way, you had two options. The first was living as a fugitive, the other was being conscripted. I came into my power on my sixteenth birthday, joined the army, and never looked back." She raised her hand, it was once again wreathed in the purple smoke. "The whole initial team were people with powers. And as soon as we'd made our second hop, they all stopped working."

"Ouch," said Kes.

"Yup," said Hella. "And this is the first time I've had it back. There are broad classes of physics, thaumics, that are shared between worlds, but the Earth that I came from apparently had a

non-standard one. It's possible that someone came to this world from my world, but it's difficult to know. We have the punch map, but mapping the punches from hundreds of years back in time is a challenge, especially when whatever they brought in with them hasn't been in use."

Kes looked down at his hands. There were no claws. It had been a bit since he'd felt the rage, and he was hoping that it would stay away. He tried to think about how long it had taken Perry that first night. It felt shorter, which would be a good thing, because that would mean that the experience wasn't wholly wasted. He couldn't be let out of the dome though, not until he was certain that he wouldn't be a danger to anyone — though with Hella, he wasn't sure whether he could actually beat her if he was trying to kill her. The punch to the jaw suggested he'd be toast.

"Tell me about your power," said Kes.

Hella watched him. Her eyes were still on his face. She didn't seem fazed by his nakedness. "You're not technically a part of this," she said. "We try to help people, where we can, but rescuing you, that was interference. We did so on my orders. We're hoping that helping you will convince Perry that we mean to be allies. We're also hoping that we haven't kicked the hornet's nest, that we don't become a part of the ongoing conflict, *particularly* with Fenilor."

"So you don't want to tell me," said Kes.

"I grow stronger with danger, up to a point," said Hella. She held up her hand, and the purple smoke was wispy, barely visible. "It's got a mind of its own, this power, and knows things that I don't. Sometimes I feel it surge and I know to be on the lookout for something. Against you, back there? That was a four out of ten, but I was stronger because she was close. The two of us against each other, no other considerations? I think I could take you, but it would be because I have training and you're a ball of rage."

"Against Fenilor?" asked Kes.

"I don't know," said Hella. "I've been trying to avoid him, which would be easier if we had a better sense of where he is. When I was with Perry, it was at an eight out of ten, and I think it was only that low because the odds that he'd attack me were low, not because he couldn't kill me. My power is good against guns, less good against swords."

"You're showing weakness," said Kes. "I'm surprised."

Hella shrugged. "We have other tools. There are worlds where tools that Earth would consider a miracle are commonplace, either technology or magic. We prefer technology, but some of it has a bit of magic woven into it, so we have to be careful."

Kes looked down at his hand. "I think I'm good."

"We're going to keep you in observation for another hour or two," said Hella. "Sorry. I can keep you company if you'd like."

Kes sat down, giving himself a bit more modesty. "I'd prefer that."



“Sorry for hitting you,” said Hella. “I was just trying to get you moving. We don’t know the bounds of her power. We don’t know whether she could have opened up a portal into the *Farfinder* when the door was open. We still don’t know, actually, but it produced a vulnerability.”

“It’s good you stopped me from hurting you, or worse,” said Kes.

“Worse?” asked Hella. “We don’t have records from when Perry turned. Our ability to see into the past only spans a single world.”

“Nothing,” said Kes. “The rage, it comes with ... lust, sometimes.”

“Ah,” said Hella. She looked discomfited.

“He didn’t — that wasn’t something that happened to him either, for the record,” said Kes. “He had a ... I guess I would call her a girlfriend. She had powers, and ... got him through the night.”

“You have those memories,” said Hella. “But you don’t consider yourself to be him?”

“I don’t know,” said Kes. “Maybe it’s easier to disassociate from those memories.”

They sat in silence for a bit. He was hoping that she set a timer, and that when the time had passed, she would be good to her word and let him out. There was some potential for this to be an interrogation, but given everything they could see, he had no idea what good that would do them.

“It must be nice to travel the many worlds like you do,” he eventually said. “You run into issues with powers not working, but at least you have each other. Thresholding brings loneliness with it.”

“We’ve seen so many thresholders, directly and indirectly,” said Hella. “That ring of yours — of his — that’s the only way we’ve seen that lets you take another person with you. More than that, it seems to carry the magic. It’s not moving around the spell, it’s moving *with* it, otherwise Marjut would have lost her powers when she got to Esperide. And it incorporated Mette into the system, for better or worse.”

“I could become a thresholder,” said Kes.

“You could do that just by going through the portal,” said Hella. “If you wanted to come with us to the next world, and not get tangled in the spell, you could just ride the ship with us.”

“That would be nice,” said Kes. “If you’re offering.”

“We are, if we all make it through this,” said Hella. “Third Fervor is scary, but we have plans for her, and we’re hoping that we can help without dooming ourselves. It’s Fenilor that’s the real problem. He’s slippery. He knows more than we do. And we don’t know that he’s going to accept that he can’t go to another world.”

“Sorry if you’re going to have to have all these conversations twice,” said Kes.

"I'm used to it," said Hella. "That's the nature of being captain, even on a small ship. You need to distribute information, and people don't read their emails."

Kes nodded. He was getting tired of being in the dome of shame.

"And it gets lonely, yes, even with the five of us," said Hella. "Did you get lonely, when you were him?"

"I had Marchand," said Kes. "That wasn't quite the same. But yeah, the impermanence of it, always off to another world with different people, the way it disconnected me from everything that came before, the way that it always feels like this world is going to be left behind just like the other ones ... and I'm still early on in my career. Or he is, in his. What it will be like when we've been through twenty worlds, when we're fifty years old and have been mutated beyond belief ... I don't know."

"We're trying to put a stop to it all," said Hella. "How we do that, we don't know. But it would mean the end of it all. And ... I would like to return home, at some point, if there's still a home to return to."

"Why wouldn't there be?" asked Kes.

"The thresholders did damage," said Hella. "And in their wake, they left magic. It had been bad enough when it was people with me, with our powers, the heroes and the villains, all that, but suddenly we were balanced on the precipice, teetering on the edge. There were mage clubs popping up all over the country, massive government projects trying to give countries an edge over each other, and riots in the streets. We didn't have a way to keep order."

Kes considered that. "You've been away for a long time. And there might not be a home left to go back to."

"Yes," she nodded. "That's not the case for you? For your Earth?"

Kes thought about that. It would be an election year in America, he was pretty sure, which never inspired a lot of hope in him. Global warming, income inequality, rapidly advancing artificial intelligence, fascism coming back in style ... but Earth would probably still be there, if a bit worse than when he'd left it. Maybe he could bring the answers to all their problems, if he had a stack of books he could slap onto the internet, or maybe he could take control somehow and right the ship, but he wasn't Perry, and even Perry wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance against the United States military. An uplift project of some kind could work, but he was skeptical that it wouldn't just make the rich richer and advance some causes he didn't wish to be advanced. That was what had happened with Cosme, more or less, a tyrant king gaining control.

But when Kes thought of the future, and specifically of a future that might not be there anymore, he thought of Richter.

They had the cloning machine, or would have it before they left this world. All it needed was some blood, but it wasn't clear whether that blood needed to be taken from a living person, or if a dead one would do. Back on Earth 2, Richter had been a part of some kind of cryonics

program, and he was pretty sure they'd done their best to preserve her. They removed the blood for that, she had enthusiastically explained to him, but even if they hadn't, blood went bad pretty quickly, and it had been years. Still, with their medical technology, cloning more blood seemed like something they could do.

It had felt, for a long time, like he was getting further and further away from that goal — not just further in practical terms, but further in his heart as the memories grew stale. The pieces were falling into place now. It was moving from a pipe dream to something that looked like a nebulous plan.

"There's something to go back to, yeah," said Kes, after far too long. He rubbed his face. "You'll help with that?"

"If we can," said Hella. "But our goal, our mission, is to stop all this from happening, to rip the Grand Spell apart. If we can build something better from the pieces, that's what we'll do, but stopping it is enough."

Kes nodded. He reached out and flicked the barrier between them, and found that it was quite intact.

"Any chance we could borrow one of these?" he asked. "Might be useful for containing Third Fervor."

"It wouldn't stop the teleportation or the portals," said Hella. "We're working on our own solutions. But even once she's dealt with, it's Fenilor that we have to watch out for. He's more dangerous, by far."

"You don't even know what he can do," said Kes.

"We know enough," she said, with dark undertones. "We think he's been here for five hundred years."

"I guess that's one way to deal with the loneliness and impermanence," said Kes. "Stay on one world for five hundred years, take a vacation every now and then to fight off someone from another planet ..."

"Except we don't know how it was done," said Hella. She clucked her tongue. "We're pretty sure that Fenilor doesn't know about us, but the more he knows, the more danger we're in. Same goes for Third Fervor. It was much, much safer when we weren't coming in hot to an active thresholder war zone, especially not one of this magnitude."

"Alright," said Kes. "I'm done with the rage monster thing. Let me know how I can help." He spread his hands wide, to show that he was hiding nothing, and she finally did glance down at his dong. She hid it well.

Hella went over to the control on the side of the wall and flipped the switch, bringing down the dome. "Come on. You're staying with us until we make contact with Perry again. I'll show you your room."