

Perry liked her.

It helped that she was, objectively, smokin' hot, or maybe just *subjectively* smokin' hot. She had a lot of enthusiasm for a lot of things, whether that was her planet, its people, or the mechs, and a lot of curiosity about Perry and the worlds he'd seen. She had *opinions*, which Perry had always found attractive.

The other big thing was probably a result of the last world. He'd been wound up tight like a spring, and it was very clear that they did things differently here. For one thing, being alone in a room together seemed like it wasn't even remotely cause for concern or comment, not even when Brigitta slipped into the shower. She didn't seem to think anything of being naked in front of him, and when she'd dried off, she got dressed with some clothes from a drawer. Perry tried not to be a creep about it, in part because he was worried about falling for a honey pot again. He caught her looking when he took a shower of his own, so he didn't think it was entirely innocent.

His mind kept going to Richter, like a record skipping. She hadn't been at the forefront of his mind in the last world, for a variety of reasons, but this was all bringing old memories back to him.

He wondered how much the hand of fate was involved. There *was* a hand of fate, he was pretty sure, though he didn't have the evidence to prove it. Thresholders got matched up with people somehow, and according to Maya, the 'spell' or whatever it was had been *intended* to get heroes (and villains) to where they were needed. How it decided that and how effective it was were both open questions, but the people Perry had gone up against were, with the exception of Cosme, people he'd definitely skewer through the heart without thinking twice.

He was reconsidering whether allies were a part of the equation, but if they were, Brigitta was *definitely* an ally, someone with power and connections who would help him out against the other thresholder. Of course, he'd thought the same about Luo Yanhua, and she'd been a less than stellar ally to him. He was going to go into this with watchful eyes, cautious of getting thrown under a bus — or thrown under a giant caterpillar city, as the case might be.

"Two worlds, both alike?" asked Brigitta. "Do you think there are other alternates out there?"

"I have no idea," said Perry. "I would guess so, but there are only supposed to be around a million worlds, so it seems like there can't be *too* many alternates."

"No other version of this planet, other versions of *us*?" asked Brigitta.

"Not likely," said Perry with a shrug. "I've spoken with a number of other thresholders, and while I don't trust their accounts for one reason or another, that remains the only time I've heard of a world that's entirely a copy of another world. Even our homeworlds, which seem somewhat similar to each other, have huge differences."

Brigitta didn't know much about her homeworld. She was at least ten generations removed from it, so it was more a matter of myth and legend than a place she could put a name to, even if

they *did* have surviving records. It would have been like Perry trying to talk about what colonial America was like. He probably would have mentioned Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, who weren't good starting points for a discussion of trade, culture, and society in the American colonies, not when his knowledge was deep as a puddle. Similarly, Brigitta tended to talk about specific *stories*, almost always with some key figures as exemplars, and most of those from the very tail end of her homeworld's history.

To hear her tell it, they had been confined to dark and inhospitable islands, gray rock with poor farming, deep oceans with little fishing, and had eked out a miserable existence for a very long time until one day the jet stream shifted and unleashed them on the wider world. They had no natural predators and hundreds of years of careful farming and fishing in harsh conditions, running through their late evolutionary history on hard mode. Subduing the planet was *easy* for them, and they'd never had too much in the way of division among their people.

Perry was skeptical, but kept his mouth shut. It sounded like the sort of story you told to bury harsh colonialism in the past. In a sense, it didn't matter, but he was halfway hoping that March's data retrieval had uncovered something a bit more concrete. He didn't *want* the fantastical history to be proven false, but he suspected that it was.

Brigitta cared a lot more about the current state of things with her people. A number of people had recently been elevated to positions of seniority, including her, and there was a bit of resentment about that. Perry was trying to read between the lines, but without a second opinion it was impossible to say whether this was a soft coup or just a wave of support for a few younger people. She was only twenty-five, Perry's age, and the other two weren't much older, a navigator, who guided their leggy ship, and a farmer, who was really more the person in charge of scavenging given that almost nothing on the planet grew well in captivity.

"But the head engineer is *also* in charge of, uh, population control of the bugs?" asked Perry.

"Combat, yes," said Brigitta. "But that's because we're the ones with the mechs."

"And ... there's some kind of reason that it's got to be *you* that pilots the mech rather than someone else?" he asked. "How it works on most worlds is that an engineer is different from a mechanic is a mechanic is different from a pilot." He couldn't help but recall Cosme's scientist, Wesley, firing off the lightning machine. Maybe it wasn't such a hard and fast rule. There were plenty of counterexamples he could have given.

"No, it's always us," said Brigitta, shaking her head. "I designed the mech, I know its systems inside and out, I can identify problems before they start and fix them in the field if I need to."

"I guess," said Perry. "And if you die out there?"

"Then we get a new head engineer," she said with a shrug, as though it was nothing. "I have two replacements. But I've thought about how it would be if we had a hundred thousand people, or a million. If we did, it would be easier not to get ensnared in the problem of having someone who's made herself too crucial."

“And you can take two days off to quarantine with me?” asked Perry.

“Not really, no,” said Brigitta. “But I wouldn’t trust this to anyone else.”

She sounded like a bad manager to Perry, the kind that couldn’t or wouldn’t delegate and much preferred to be down in the trenches rather than giving orders. That sort of person could inspire loyalty and could *definitely* make herself utterly indispensable.

“You have an apprentice then?” asked Perry.

She held up her fingers. “Four of them. They’re on their own.”

“And being on the frontlines, that’s something *all* engineers are expected to do, or just you?” asked Perry.

“My apprentices have mechs of their own,” said Brigitta. “They have their own ideas about what works best, their own designs.”

“That’s crazy to me,” said Perry. “It sounds like something that, uh ... alright, so I don’t know that much about production or engineering, but there was this country in my world called Germany, and during this big war they were in, they were trying to build tanks, but there were constant changes to the specifications, which meant there was no standardization, which meant that repairs were much more difficult. You’d have two tanks that were meant to be the same model, but they’d have different cupolas for the turret, different cooling systems, different ammo storage, whatever. And their tanks *were* considered superior, they just got steamrolled by the other guys, who were making a lot *more* tanks which were generally much more reliable and didn’t need complex supply chains.”

Brigitta blinked at him. “What’s a tank?”

“Uh,” said Perry. “It’s a name for an armored fighting vehicle, usually with treads instead of wheels. Called that because during the war they were invented for, they wanted to mislead spies, and then the name just sort of stuck.”

“Treads ... around wheels?” asked Brigitta.

“Yeah,” said Perry. “To be able to move over rough terrain, through mud, stuff like that.”

“Could you draw me a schematic?” she asked.

“Sure,” said Perry. He put on the helmet while Brigitta found what looked very much like a stylus. He took it awkwardly in his fingers and made a few test markings, which showed up as black lines against one of the screens.

Onto Perry’s vision, March overlaid a schematic of a tank, which looked unlike any tank Perry had ever seen before. The center of gravity seemed too high, and the barrel too long, but he drew it all the same, tracing the image in his vision, which shifted and warped based on where he was looking. The stylus didn’t need to be placed against anything, only the ground, so Perry spent some minutes cross-legged until he was done.

Brigitta had cocked her head to the side and looked at it while he was drawing. "Like an angry little beetle," she said.

"Er," said Perry as he finished it by putting in a little drawing of a human for scale.

"Meant for flat land, slow-moving targets, protection for the pilot," she said, fingers tracing the diagram. "Designed to take fire?"

"From smaller rounds, yeah," said Perry. "And it's not one pilot, it's several."

"Ah," said Brigitta. "We've tried our hand at squads. It's not necessary."

"Why not?" asked Perry. "Isn't your attention split too much?"

"There are equations," said Brigitta. Her eyes hadn't left the crude drawing. She turned to the suit and considered Marchand, who was headless without the helmet. "How do they fight against each other, the suits and the tanks? Or do they?"

"They don't, not really," said Perry, though this was secondhand information. He hadn't gone up against a tank, and didn't really want to. "The suit is for rapid response, more lightweight, vastly more expensive, needs to return to base more often." March gave a small, sarcastic laugh in Perry's ear. "A tank is built to punch through hard targets for infantry, taking out those things that people wouldn't really be able to get through. The armor can't do that, not without armaments. Its role, aside from intimidation, is rapid engagement, especially against infantry." He thought that was mostly correct, and removed the helmet, worried he'd have to get an earful from Marchand.

"And what is infantry?" asked Brigitta.

"Men with guns," said Perry. "Armor, sometimes, but yes, mostly just men with handheld weapons."

"For fighting other men?" asked Brigitta.

"Yes," nodded Perry.

"Mmm," said Brigitta with a nod.

"You don't have that here?" asked Perry. "Infantry or something like it?"

"No," said Brigitta, shaking her head. "We have police, nothing more. A single person, without armor, or *with* armor of the sort they could carry, would be ripped to shreds by the mechs."

"I wasn't," said Perry.

Brigitta looked at Marchand. "You moved quickly. Not so quickly I couldn't have ended you, I don't think, but I was impressed. It's the argument for a micromech, though the armaments you can carry are limited." She looked at the sword and reached out for it before stopping. "May I?"

"Of course," said Perry. "Look out though, it's sharp."

Brigitta took it and hefted it for a moment, feeling the weight of it, then turned it over in her hands and examined the craftsmanship, especially around the hilt, where most of the finer work had been done. "Curious."

"Is it?" asked Perry.

"What's it meant for?" she asked. She turned it around and slowly swept it through the air, practicing a striking motion. Her form was absolutely terrible, though that was to be expected.

"Cutting and piercing," said Perry. "What else?"

"Cutting people?" asked Brigitta. "Unarmored people?"

"Or armored," said Perry.

"It can cut through metal?" she asked. She brought her face close to the edge of the blade, then sniffed the metal.

"Not really metal, no, though it can leave a pretty good gouge, and enough of those can do something worthwhile," said Perry. "But armor will always have a weak point, a gap, somewhere that isn't protected as well as other places."

"This is true," said Brigitta, but she was frowning all the same. "Not *a/ways* true. A sphere would have no weak points."

"A ... sphere?" asked Perry.

"Yes," nodded Brigitta.

"How would that work?" asked Perry. "A sphere doesn't have armaments, even if you could internalize everything else." The power armor could stay self-contained for an hour, with the primary limit being air, and the major output being waste heat, which didn't come up much.

"I would figure out a way," said Brigitta. "If I had to. Better to kill things before they get to you." She frowned at him. "You know that I was miscalibrated, right?"

"Miscalibrated?" asked Perry.

"The programming on the shoulder guns," she nodded. "It was set for different targets, larger, slow-moving." She nodded at him, eyes set. "It's fixed now."

"What?" asked Perry. "When?"

"Before I came in," said Brigitta.

Perry stared at her. "How?"

Brigitta went over to one of the screens, which was showing an exterior view from the mech's cameras. She pressed a latch that was inset in one of the corners and a keyboard popped out, a brutally mechanical thing, stripped of all accessories, with not even a back cover to it. The internal wires were exposed, and it was attached to the wall with a long wire. Brigitta frowned at it for a moment, then her fingers flew across it, dancing lightly across the keys. The screen changed to show what was clearly code, but Perry couldn't make heads nor tails of it. It was all brackets and symbols, many of them letters. It took him a moment to realize that there were no line breaks or indentation.

"I have no idea what this is," said Perry.

"Hrm," said Brigitta. "We'll have to work to bridge the standards."

"I mean, I'm not a programmer, not an engineer," said Perry. "Even if you converted this over to, uh, one of the programming languages that interfaces with my suit, I wouldn't have the first clue what it meant."

Brigitta looked a bit sad for a moment. "Nothing at all? Not even the basics? Childrens' work?"

Perry shook his head.

"You don't design, code, build?" asked Brigitta. "What do you do, aside from fight?"

"I fight," said Perry.

"You said you have knowledge, information," said Brigitta.

"I do," said Perry. "Most of it stored within my suit, some stored within my brain." His eyes went to the screen. "So you don't just use the guns, you don't just understand the algorithm that fires them, you understand it all on such a deep level that you're capable of altering it in a handful of minutes to correct a design flaw, while you're in the middle of other things."

Brigitta frowned at him.

"I don't think that would be possible for the people where I'm from," said Perry. "Not unless it was a very, very simple problem to fix."

"It was," said Brigitta. "The solution we'd been using was specific, not general."

It was Perry's turn to frown. "Alright. But you made the *whole* mech, all the parts, all the programming, all that stuff? And it's the case that everyone does that?"

"Yes," said Brigitta. She seemed perplexed.

"And the Natrix," said Perry. "It's huge. It was designed with a population that would be considered tiny by almost any standard, built with limited resources in a hostile environment. I think things might just be ... strange here."

"Strange how?" asked Brigitta.

“There are things I’m missing, that’s all,” said Perry. “But even if you’re an exceptional example of your people, I think maybe you’re above what I would expect. Either it’s genetic engineering deep in your history, a divergence of the species, or something like that.”

“What’s this ‘genetic engineering’?” asked Brigitta, cocking her head to the side.

“Er,” said Perry. He tried to say it again, translating his intent this time, but he could feel that it wouldn’t work. They didn’t have genetic engineering, or a word for it. Maybe they had, when they had lived on the station, but if they’d had it, they didn’t anymore. “It’s complicated, a branch of science you haven’t discovered, I guess.”

“You said engineering,” replied Brigitta. She folded her arms. “Not science. Those are different.”

“Engineering follows science,” said Perry.

“Science follows engineering,” Brigitta countered. “We know enough of our own history to know that. Telescopes allow the study of the stars. Microscopes allow the study of bacteria.”

Perry looked at one of the still-active screens, the one that showed the millipede-city’s butt. “Tell me about the Natrix. I’ll be living there once the quarantine lifts, right.”

“You wish to know about its operations? Or its design?” asked Brigitta.

“Its people,” said Perry.

“Mmm,” said Brigitta. “Nine thousand, as I’ve said. The work of generations goes on. There are many promising apprentices among the little ones. With the Natrix in its current form, there is room for another four thousand people. After that, it will need expansion, but expansion is not difficult, and we have plans in place which will not be too difficult to execute.”

“Even though you’re worried about death by a thousand cuts?” asked Perry.

Brigitta shrugged. “A death can happen in many ways.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” said Perry.

“There are many things we’re not telling each other,” said Brigitta.

“Then we start with smaller things, if that’s what’s needed,” said Perry. “That’s what I was trying to do, asking what life was like on the Natrix.”

“Food goes in, shit comes out,” said Brigitta with a shrug. “We work on raising the next generation, we maintain the equipment, we do science, we kill the bugs.”

“That can’t be all it is,” said Perry. “Or I guess it might be, if you’re different enough from the humans I know, but ... look, it’s my belief that cultures are driven by material conditions, but even if they are, there are some basic things that are the same between all cultures I’ve ever heard enough about to form an opinion on. Games, do your people have games?”

"Mmm," said Brigitta. "Karlunk?"

"Never heard of it," said Perry.

"It's a game, played on a board, with pieces," said Brigitta. Her hands went to the keyboard, almost without conscious thought, and the code vanished from the screen, replaced in an instant by a huge grid of black and white. There were icons on each of the squares, a set of maybe twenty that repeated. "With pieces, usually, but sometimes like this."

She tapped some keys, and the board simplified in one section, the icons changing. She kept up with this for a moment, with one side changing, or maybe both sides changing, if it was a two player game, then abandoned it to turn back to Perry.

"We have games too," said Perry. "Every world I've been to, I've found them. See? That's the starting point, not the big things, like knowing how the sewage system works, or where you get your food from, though I want to know that in time."

"Tell me of your games first," said Brigitta.

"Well," said Perry. He looked around. "If I describe it to you, can you put some images up on the screen?"

Brigitta snorted. "Do you think we're incompetent? I suppose you might." She had her fingers ready at the keyboard.

Perry described the game of chess to her, and she was fast enough at writing code to program most of it as he spoke. It was astonishing to watch, especially given that she was talking to him at the same time and flying blind. She asked a few clarifying questions, and more symbols and letters were added to the screen.

"This is a working game of chess?" asked Perry when he was finished talking and she was finished typing.

"Yes," said Brigitta. "Or, it should be."

"You have confidence that it will work perfectly the first time we play it?" asked Perry.

"No," said Brigitta. "Anyone who tells you they are confident without tests is lying."

Perry nodded. *Not superhuman then.* "Then let's play."

Perry had been thinking that maybe she was just orders of magnitude more intelligent than a normal human, some kind of super genius who looked human but was something more.

He crushed her, then crushed her again, and while her play improved, it was the improvement of someone who had gone from just learning the basic rules of chess to someone who had played a game, not the crazy improvement he had an inkling he would find.

"How are you doing that?" she asked after her fourth loss.

"I've played the game a lot," said Perry. "I'm nothing exceptional." He had been in chess club in high school, and played a lot during the pandemic. He'd hit a wall at 1400 ELO and stopped playing not long after, but the four games they'd played were shaking off some of the rust.

"We play until I win," said Brigitta, looking at the screen.

"That might take a while," said Perry. He didn't smirk, instead keeping the second sphere calm benevolence on his face, but she looked at him as though he had smirked.

"How many times do you think you can win?" asked Brigitta.

"Uh," said Perry. "There are fundamentals of the game that you would need to learn to have a hope of beating me. And I'm not even really that good. So I think I might lose a game here or there from an absolute blunder, but in general, I'm going to keep beating you until I teach you what I know, or until you figure out a lot of stuff on your own — things that are established theory, elements of the game that were discovered over the course of centuries." He gestured at the screen. "I'm *certain* that if you told me how to play that game you showed me, I would be absolute shit at it for *at least* a few days, and after that, I probably wouldn't rise to the level of a kid who's good at it."

"It doesn't have hundreds of years of history though," said Brigitta. "It's a decade old."

Perry shrugged. "That's still enough time for the skill level to rise, if you have a lot of people playing it."

There was silence for a moment as she mulled that over.

"So, the food, what was I eating?" asked Perry.

Brigitta shrugged. "I didn't watch."

"But what do people eat, in general? Are the plants and animals edible?" asked Perry.

"Oh," said Brigitta. "Yes." She got up and walked over to the cabinet and opened it. "There is ample life, depending on where the Natrrix is, whether it's closer to the cold when the heat. At the leading edge, the ice melts, and dead things bubble up, to be eaten by plants and insects."

"And ... we're mostly eating insects?" asked Perry. "I saw some furry things during the trip."

"We eat what we come across, or catch," said Brigitta. "If you wait an hour or so, you'll see the gatherers go out."

"More mechs?" asked Perry.

"More mechs," nodded Brigitta. "But they don't stray far from the Natrrix, not while it moves."

There was some silence again, which was mostly because she was thinking, and Perry had no follow up questions until he could see the harvesting process in action.

“And for entertainment, art, joy, what do your people do?” asked Perry.

She considered that. “You ask that because you think it’s universal to humans?” she asked.

“I do,” said Perry. “And if it’s not something that applies to you and your people, then I want to know about it.”

“Mmm,” said Brigitta. “There is beauty in —”

Her eyes went to the screens and a flicker of motion that had been shown there. Her fingers went to the keyboard, as though drawn to it of their own volition. But before she could type in a command, long guns hanging off the side of the Natrix began firing, the sound audible from outside the mech even though the screens didn’t seem to carry sound. Brigitta watched closely, then typed off a few quick commands, some kind of chat program that came and went too quickly for Perry to decipher it.

The Natrix came to a stop, and the mech they were in — she’d called it a promena, but he didn’t know if it had a name — came to a stop too, scuttling a bit close to shelter underneath it.

A few moments passed, then the air lit up with quick flashes of green, laser strobes that came from some part of the caterpillar city that Perry couldn’t easily see. They never seemed to go in the same direction twice, and their vantage was poor, which meant that Perry couldn’t see exactly what they were shooting at.

Brigitta changed the view on the screens, instead showing an information-dense geometric display, one which mostly used primary colors and simple vectors. The Natrix was clearly shown, a green snake, and the incoming enemies were red dots, disappearing one by one until they got too close. There were lots of them though, and Perry didn’t know how long the Natrix could keep up its laser defense.

“It’s just insects,” said Brigitta with a sigh of relief.

“As opposed to?” asked Perry.

Brigitta looked at him as though she’d forgotten he was there, which might very well have been the case. “Other threats,” she said darkly.

“The real problem?” asked Perry. “The one that has you worried for the future?”

Brigitta nodded. “You’re more perceptive than you look.”

“Thanks?” asked Perry. “Though that does feel like a veiled insult.”

“If I wanted to insult you, I would do it to your face,” she said.

“Then tell me about the troubles you’re facing, the ones that *don’t* involve getting attacked by bugs or needing to walk between scorching day and freezing night,” said Perry. “I mean, this is why we’re doing this, right?”

Brigitta frowned. "I need to think, to talk with others," she said. It seemed like a painful admission for her. "Wait until the quarantine is finished. Yes?"

"Sure," said Perry, though he was itching to push it. They were trapped in a room together for two days, and it seemed to him like the ideal time for him to get read in on what all their problems were, *especially* if some of those could be chalked up to the presence of an enemy thresholder.

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The quarantine only lasted a day and a half instead of the full two days. There was some kind of emergency on the Natrix that demanded Brigitta's full attention, so she cut the quarantine short and returned to the ship, bringing Perry with her.

The latter half of their time together had been spent mostly in silence, since she needed to do some remote work, the kind that mostly involved a keyboard and a screen filled with white symbols on a black background.

He learned more about the Natrix and its people, of course, but Brigitta seemed to view the world as a place of machines and their challenges much more than a place of people. She had boundless enthusiasm for the machines and their inner workings, and spent basically all of an hour talking about the sewage system in the Natrix and all the last-mile challenges involved in collections.

The promena climbed up onto the Natrix, and rather than going up through the ladder, the entire side of it was pulled away by a huge robotic arm that hung down from the ceiling. Perry was, almost at once, exposed to the interior of the vehicle bay, which was actually just a mech bay.

It was disorganized, but in a way that made him think that made him think that the people in it had no problems finding what they needed when they needed it. There were tools in holders and cabinets on wheels, machines with pumps and hoses to service the mechs and crates of ammunition, both bullets and missiles. He hadn't inquired about the provenance of these, but was a bit curious, especially given the constraints they had on production and supply.

"This is Liv," said Brigitta as she turned and started to walk off, apparently without a goodbye. "She'll get you sorted."

Liv was, from the looks of her, eleven years old.

She had the same blonde hair as everyone else, long and twisted into pigtails, and she held a clipboard in one hand, which had a tiny keypad at the bottom. She had serious eyes, for a child, and was dressed in what he took to be a uniform.

"Uh," he said. He looked over at where Brigitta had gone. She had vanished, and he caught sight of her again only briefly, riding up an elevator.

"Follow me," said Liv.

"I need my armor," said Perry. It was in pieces, having been examined by Brigitta as much as she could given that she hadn't been allowed to actually disassemble it. She had marveled over many aspects of it, and Perry had told her what he could.

"Will you wear it, or have it in a container?" asked Liv.

"Wear it," said Perry.

"I'll wait," nodded Liv.

Perry was left to put on his armor inside the promena, whose side had been taken off. It took a while, but he felt better stepping into it after two days. The Wolf Vessel felt like it was in its proper place, his meridians no longer twisted or stretched. During the time Perry was putting it on, a young boy, maybe thirteen, came over to Liv and exchanged words with her, which sounded loud and harsh, but he tried to give them their privacy, at least for the moment. March would be recording absolutely everything, and if Perry ever needed to know, it wouldn't take long.

The sword was the last thing, and Perry lifted it up, feeling the weight of it in his armored hands. He was ready for battle, if need be, which was always a good feeling, even in a relatively peaceful setting.

Liv had seemed cool as a cucumber, but with his armor on and sword drawn, some of that iciness had broken.

"This way," she said.

Perry followed after her.

"Status," Perry said to March.

"It's good to be back, sir," said Marchand. "I can't say I particularly liked the looks that Brigitta was giving me. She would have taken me apart if she had been allowed, and I don't trust that she could have put me back together again."

"I'll protect you," said Perry.

"I've had enough time to look through their encryption, sir," said Marchand. "It seems to be quite good, though if I had access to a supercomputer it would melt away in a few moments. However, I have a few observations based on the unencrypted information, if you would like it, sir."

"Wait until we have some space," said Perry. The mech bay was quite long, and they were taking their time walking down it. He was stepping after Liv, who was walking quickly, and there were many heads turning their way. The mechs were totally unstandardized, built for different philosophies or scenarios, and most of them had no one working on them. Where work was being done, it was usually solo with the help of mechanical assistance, cranes and robot arms to carry the heavy pieces.

There were a lot of children. The average mech pilot, if these *were* all pilots, was a teenager, and some, like Liv, were even smaller.

*Child labor isn't a good look, Perry thought, but when you're hanging on by a thread ...*

Perry wasn't actually sure they *were* hanging on by a thread. There was so much metal everywhere that if he couldn't feel the motion of the Natrix beneath his feet, he'd have thought that he was in the middle of a major industrial sector of a city literally a thousand times the size. Even if they had ready access to metals, which was entirely possible, it was an insane amount of material, and it had all been processed into this shape *without* an enormous foundry. Perry had no clue how cruise ships were built, but he knew they were massive undertakings. If their whole civilization had devoted itself to building the Natrix ... maybe, but he didn't know how many people they had. He'd have readily accepted it if it had been done by autonomous robots, but it didn't seem like there were any of those around. The mech bay was one place where he'd expect them most.

"You're going to be on the upper level," said Liv. "We're taking this lift."

"Alright," said Perry.

The lift was utilitarian, open to the air, and without much in the way of safety features. Liv got it moving by pressing a button, and it rumbled up, wheels creaking as it stayed in its tracks and the counter-weight descended.

"Your armor is impressive," said Liv.

"Thanks," he said. He had no idea how to interact with kids. He had even less of an idea how to interact with kids who had been pressed into service at a young age.

"I looked at the schematics Brigitta shared," said Liv. "We're not sure of its capabilities."

"Mmm," said Perry. "You're an engineer?"

"No," said Liv. "I'm in Ops. But I know a few things, and I talk with others."

"Right," said Perry. "And Ops is ... what?"

The elevator had gone up into the roof of the mech bay, and was traveling through a tube of metal, still exposed at the sides. Perry was pretty sure he could have lost a finger by extending his hand just a bit.

"I help the engineers," said Liv. "I make sure they're fed, that they sleep, that nothing gets in the way of their work." She looked up at him. "Nothing should get in the way of their work."

Perry considered this. "That's how Brigitta grew up? Nothing in the way of the work?"

"No," said Liv. "It's how she would have liked to grow up."

The elevator finally juddered to a halt, and Liv pulled the door open.

It was like coming out into an entirely different world. They had left the smell of grease and electricity behind, and instead there was a floral scent, vaguely chemical to Perry's enhanced nose, but pleasant all the same, like someone had mashed up a bunch of flowers, dried them into a dust, and then squirted them through the vents. It lingered in the air, and was the first thing that Perry noticed.

The second thing he noticed was the decor. There were actual carpets, and paneling on the walls. The material seemed like it must have been derived from the plants down on the surface, which had been cut and pressed.

"Huh," said Perry. He had sort of expected that the rooms would be utilitarian, like the mech bay was, cramped quarters, but even the hallway was pretty spacious.

"This way," said Liv as she stepped out.

The hallway was also pretty long, and the doors were few and far between, a sign of how big the rooms must be. "Am I getting special treatment?" asked Perry.

"Yes," said Liv.

"This isn't where Brigitta lives?" he asked.

"She has a room right next to the mech bay," said Liv. "She lives with Engineering."

Perry nodded. "But the others live here? The, uh," he tried to think of a different word for 'important people', "important people?"

"No," said Liv. "You will be the only person living here."

They came to a door, whose name plate had very obviously been removed, and she typed something into her keyboard and then connected it to the door. It opened with a hiss.

"Sorry," said Perry. "You have a bunch of fancy rooms that no one uses?"

"They'll be repurposed, eventually," said Liv. "She said that there was still quite a lot you didn't know."

"I don't suppose you want to tell me, while we're waiting around?" asked Perry. The armor wasn't good for showing a genial nature, but he did his best.

"No," said Liv. She moved into the room, and Perry followed after.

It was a large place, like a penthouse apartment, though the sway of the legs moving over terrain gave it a very different feeling. There were wide open windows and a terrace with a view of the forests and fields, and beyond them, a mountain range. It was all in unfamiliar shades of green, rippling in a light wind. But it was the interior of the apartment that caught Perry's eye, especially since it stood in such contrast to the mech bay down below. There was hardly any metal, and everything that wasn't made of the strange woods was soft or plush. This was a very

rich person's room, or had been, at one point. Slightly wilted plants — native species? — were one of the only signs that it had been some time.

"I don't think I should live here," said Perry.

Liv said nothing. Her eyes were moving over the room, same as Perry's, and he wondered whether this was also her first time seeing it. "Brigitta insisted," she finally said. "Take it up with her. There's a bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom. You'll have your own terminal, I'll set that up before I go. There's no food in the kitchen, but I can have some sent up from the mess."

"I'd rather eat in the mess," said Perry.

"Brigitta doesn't want you wandering around," said Liv. She looked at Perry. "Especially not in the armor."

"Doesn't want me around as in ... I'll be locked in? Or as in she strongly advises against it and thinks it would be rude?" asked Perry.

"The latter," said Liv. "I'll set up the computer, then you're free to enjoy yourself."

"From a small room to a larger room," said Perry with a grimace that the armor had no way of conveying. He stepped over to the terrace and looked out over the land, then down at the Natrix, which had people milling about on the decks below. Aside from the fact they were moving over land, the comparison to a cruise ship kept coming to mind, and if that's what this was, then he was in first class. He turned back to the small girl, who had plugged her keyboard into a desk with a chunky monitor on top of it. He wanted to ask her questions, but she was eleven or so.

Instead, he looked out at the greenery that was stretched below him. There were bugs, yes, and they were dangerous, attacking in waves, but he had yet to meet the real threat of this world, that was obvious enough.

"You should be set," said Liv. "I apologize, but you don't have credentials for much."

"That's just fine," said Perry. He moved over to where she was and looked down at the unfamiliar keyboard. He recognized the letters, at least, just not their positions, nor the other symbols.

"Brigitta will come find you once she's fulfilled her duties," said Liv. "In the meantime, let me know if there's anything I can get you. As part of Ops, that's my job."

Perry nodded, but he was absolutely not going to take her up on that. There were certain places he drew the line, and having young children do labor for him was one of them. He just hoped that whatever else was going on aboard the Natrix, it wasn't something he'd have to put a stop to. As it stood, he was going to have to have some *very* pointed words with Brigitta.