

As seen from Perry's mech, the city was virtually invisible, and would have been impossible to spot from a plane or drone if not for the heat that was escaping it. It was at least partially underground, but everything that stuck out on the surface had been encased in ice, with only a few small holes to vent gas. A trickle of smoke or vapor was all that could be seen from that, and it wasn't consistent. It would have been very easy to mistake it for something else. Some roads were visible when the angle was just right, but it was very dark, and Perry didn't think that he'd have spotted them until they were right on them. The roads certainly weren't paved asphalt or anything like it.

A hole had been cut into the side of the ice, which formed a tunnel that the rabbit mech led them into. It was more than large enough for their three mechs, built at a scale that implied a lot about the other things they had. A large door, at least two solid feet of metal, slowly rolled open as they approached. It offered only enough room to let them in single-file, after the rabbit, and Perry took the lead, because he was much more capable of surviving a sneak attack.

The room they came into was an airlock, with a second identical door made of the same thick metal. There was more than enough room for the four mechs to stand, which meant that it must normally be used for either more mechs to go out, or for much larger mechs. The air took a while to cycle, and he talked with Ruben and Largen over the radio while they waited. It seemed like overkill, but it was designed for even colder temperatures, -100° F. They jealously guarded their heat, it seemed.

"How are we playing this?" asked Ruben. "They could take us apart."

"I'll protect you," said Perry.

"There are all kinds of things you wouldn't be able to protect me against," said Ruben.

"True," said Perry.

"We'll talk, have some tea, sweet bars, get questioned, then leave," said Largen. "The transmission went out, didn't it?"

"I never got confirmation back," said Ruben. "Usually you hope that the signal will bounce around some, but we're further than we thought, maybe three hundred miles away."

"This is what we came here to do," said Perry. "If we can get to a terminal, I can probably break into their systems."

Perry had expected that they would come out into an engineering bay, like on the Natrix, but the room they exited into was only about twice the size of the airlock. It was a mech bay, that was clear from the robot arms hanging down from the ceiling and the tools laying around, but there were no mechs to be seen, nor any people. If this was where they built mechs, then all the parts and supplies had to come in from a door on the far wall, one which was built for, at best, a semi truck rather than a mech.

“Disembark here,” said the rabbit mech. “Food and water were delivered while the lock cycled. We can power your batteries, but our technology is incompatible. Engineers will deliver a plug within an hour. Do not attempt to go through that door. Do not touch our tools. Understood?”

“Understood,” said Perry.

The mech went over to one wall, near to the small door, and crouched down, appearing to go to sleep. If it was a guard, it was a guard without arms or visible weapons. Perry had expected a person to come out, but either the mech was unmanned (which would be surprising) or they were confined to the small mech until this situation was dealt with.

Ruben and Largen dropped out of their mechs first. Perry had something he had to do first: remove the power armor. There was barely enough room to do this, and it meant constantly struggling with individual pieces and rearranging both them and himself. He knew it was suspicious to stay in his mech for that long, but he didn’t want to come out clad in blue power armor, because that would *definitely* raise some questions whose answers would, at the very least, give away a tactical advantage.

There was a good chance the other threshold was somewhere within Heimalis City Seven. Perry was hoping to keep his cover for as long as he could.

“You look like a prince,” said Ruben when Perry finally slipped down into the bay. It was less cold than he had thought it would be, the airlock having done its job. “How are you still so *clean*?”

“I’m just special,” said Perry. “Keep it on the down low, there are almost certainly cameras pointed at us.”

“They’re going to take one look at you and wonder how much grooming equipment is in your mech,” said Ruben. “I have never looked that clean in my life, and even if I did, I wouldn’t look that good.”

“He’s quite handsome,” said Largen. He had gone to the supplies of food and was poking through them. “These won’t fit in my rack.”

“Possibly we shouldn’t eat them, might be poisoned,” said Ruben.

“If they wanted to kill us, I don’t think that’s how they would do it,” said Perry.

“Might be,” said Ruben, rubbing his chin.

“I suppose it’s possible they’ve been cultivating strains of some disease and would try to get us sick with something that has a long enough incubation time that we would deliver it back to the Matrix,” said Perry.

“Is that possible?” asked Ruben.

“You’re the farmer, biologics is your specialty,” said Largen. “Is it?”

"I suppose," said Ruben, scratching his chin. "There's only been one sickness in the history of the Natrix, brought from outside, and who knows where *they* got it from. To cultivate a thing ... blegh. Hard to think they'd stoop so low."

"They would be able to take the Natrix for their own," said Perry. He moved over to the food. "But that would require an enormous expenditure of scientific and technological resources, and a great deal of foresight. So ... probably not."

Perry went closer to the food and sniffed it. It *smelled* fine, though it was obviously a lot different from what they had aboard the Natrix. He took one of the containers out and opened it up, smelling it again. Rather than a tin, it was hard plastic, like a lunchroom tray. The food was spiced, but the base of it was a grain, something glutinous, like rice. It was all of a single consistency. The boxes had a different form factor, deeper than those used on the Natrix, and they wouldn't fit the compartments on the mechs. He dipped a finger into the gloop and tasted it.

"Tastes fine," he said.

A small door on the side of the bay swung open, and an older man came out. He had gray at his temples and was dressed in something like a lab coat, completely white and with a hem that nearly reached the floor. His face was lined, and he was easily in his sixties.

"If we wanted to poison you, we would put it into the air," he said.

"We were just being cautious," said Perry. "We didn't come here expecting that you would let us in."

"You're in," said the man. "Do you think we're poisoners?"

"Not really," said Perry. He looked over at Ruben, who still seemed like he didn't want to take the lead. "I'm Perry, this is Ruben and Largen."

"I'm Jorn," he said. He looked at them. "You're from the Natrix."

"We are," said Perry.

"We have a meeting scheduled for six cycles from now," said Jorn. "Is this Leticia's method of intimidation?"

"No," said Perry. "You've been keeping your location obscured. When you take the children, you always send out a promena. The source of your radio signals always changes. This is Leticia's method of information gathering."

Jorn looked at the mechs. "We send a promena because the distance has always been long, and your people don't know how to build for the extreme cold."

"We made it here fine," said Ruben.

“And you should be fine to make it home,” said Jorn. “But while you’re here, we might as well talk.” He turned to the door, then paused to look back at them. “No harm will come to your mechs.”

“We have defense systems built in,” said Ruben. “It would really be for the best that they *don’t* touch our mechs.”

Jorn narrowed his eyes slightly. “You’ve found City Seven. You’d like to see inside, wouldn’t you?”

“We would,” said Perry. He looked at Largen. “Perhaps if there’s some concern about leaving the mechs unattended, one of us could stay back?”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” said Largen. He glanced at Perry’s mech. “Grab a radio?”

“Sure,” said Ruben. He went over to his mech’s cockpit and pulled one down, a large and clunky thing that Perry wasn’t entirely sure would be able to function through the walls.

When they were ready, Jorn left and Perry followed after, with Ruben a step behind.

“It’s a long trip to make, unannounced,” said Jorn.

“We’ve seen your planes,” said Ruben. “There’s lots of waste in buzzing by us like that, but we thought we had better repay the visit.”

“No planes of your own?” asked Jorn. “The trip isn’t quite so arduous. We’re now only a few hours away, if you’re in the air.”

“We’ve never had the need,” said Ruben.

“No ports,” said Jorn, nodding. “We had offered to build a landing strip along the upper deck of the Natrix, but your people never wanted that. And that was *before* the current betrayal.”

The hallways were utilitarian, even more so than aboard the Natrix. Pipes ran along the ceiling, and electrical wiring along with them. The doors were few and far between, and the lights overhead were long strips, with just a bit too much yellow for Perry’s tastes.

They came to a meeting room, one with a table and chairs around it. It was bland and featureless, with no windows, and not even the awful stock photo art that Perry would have expected to find in a corporate environment. A chalkboard was up on one wall, still wet from having been wiped down. The only sign that it was used was a piece of tape that held up a corner of blue paper, which must have been from where things were pulled down from the walls.

“So,” said Jorn. “We only talk over the radio, and not that often. It’s always scheduled. You have no authority, you’ve said, but you can still tell me things, and I can still tell you things, and perhaps that will make a difference to your masters.”

“Our masters?” asked Perry, seeming amused.

"Your accent is strange," said Jorn, looking him over with watchful eyes. Probably he was noticing how well-groomed Perry seemed, or that Perry didn't have blonde hair, or that Perry was pretty hairy. "Why?"

Perry shrugged.

"Are you from the north?" asked Jorn. "We have little contact with the Kjärni."

"Does it matter?" asked Perry. "I'm with the Natrix now."

Jorn looked thoughtful and steepled his fingers. "The Natrix has always depended on us," he said. "There are things we can make that they cannot, unless we misunderstand their capabilities. Their reactors are a step back from what we both use. We have metals and microchips, better manufacturing because our foundries don't need to move. That's what's been thrown away by your women."

"Your foundries *do* need to move," said Perry. "That's the problem you're facing. They just need to do it on a scale of every few decades rather than every few months. And you need our help to move them. It's not just children you want to take this time, but engineers, equipment, and the expertise that we have on hand. I wasn't privy to the full details of the old agreement, but you wanted a lot, and have been holding out for years in order to get this done. The change in leadership came at a very bad time for you."

"We had *agreements*," said Jorn. "That you think your people can coast on what you have for another decade without replacements is ... well, simply not true. The Natrix will decay. A replacement will need to be built, a larger one to handle the people." He folded his hands. "Leticia keeps speaking of the children as the sticking point, but I don't believe that's true. Do you?"

"If they're not the sticking point, then make an offer that doesn't include them," said Perry.

"We're moving to the other side of the world," said Jorn. "We'll be twelve thousand miles away from each other. It's an impossible distance for the promena, and beyond the range of a plane. We'll be out of contact with each other, unless you have a way to the stars."

"We do," said Perry. "We'll be putting up a satellite within the next two months."

Jorn stared at him. "How?"

"That's classified, for now," said Perry.

He'd been surprised that they didn't have satellites orbiting the planet. On his Earth, the first commercial communications satellite had gone up in 1965, Intelsat 1, nicknamed 'Early Bird'. On Richter's Earth, something similar had been shot up in 1942. It wasn't *hard* to shoot things into space, and not particularly hard to keep them there, at least for a few months. But as Brigitta had explained it, they were missing one vital thing that both Earths had: fossil fuels. Without those, the only way that anything was getting into space was with a fusion reactor, and those were too precious. The ability to make a new one was a long way off, and would require

extensive synthesis of materials, which itself would require parts and infrastructure that they didn't have. There were some plans for exotic methods of satellite launching, like something that Perry thought sounded a bit like a trebuchet, or a plan for making a hydrogen-oxygen rocket that would fly up high on battery and then launch where the air was thin — but none of them were considered workable. No one was getting even a tiny little metal probe to the stars, not without a whole lot of work.

Not unless they had a flying sword.

"That would open the possibility for communication, if true," said Jorn. "But the distances are still overwhelming, weeks of travel with all kinds of danger, stretching the limits of what we know to be possible. We have need of the children we were promised, especially now, when we are soon to move very far away."

Ruben chuckled. "Moving away won't be an issue unless you get our expertise. This city will have to be abandoned soon, there's too much metal and brick here to take using even the strongest of the mechs. And even then, you'd need huge foundries to pour out the metal, huge farms to make the plants to make the plastics. We're not sure you can get it done."

"With the people, we can," said Jorn. "We've been working on this for years. Our schedules had lots of room for slipping." He looked at Ruben. "Your people understand that failing to help us might be the death of this colony?" He pressed his finger hard against the table, so hard that the tip of it turned white from the pressure. "That's what's at stake. And if this colony dies, *your* colony will be far worse off. We keep careful track of the shipments we send you, we know what a state you'd be in without us."

"Leticia has been firm," said Ruben. "We won't give you the children. She's said, privately, that we could loan people to help you, run a deficit while our people worked on your problems here, at least for a period of a few hundred cycles. Engineering thinks they could make that work."

"She wants your citizens to have a choice to come back," said Perry.

"A choice?" asked Jorn. "What does that mean?"

"There are people here who grew up on the Natrix," said Perry. "There are hundreds of them, or should be." Leticia had shown him the manifest. There were seven hundred and eighteen people on it, though some of them would be quite old. "Leticia wants to welcome back those who prefer their old life, those who were sold."

"That would ruin us," said Jorn. "Even if we moved, it would be the death of our colony."

Perry narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

Jorn frowned at him. "Our birthrates have been low. Unsustainably so. As for the cause ... we don't know. Either those who left were less fertile, or living in our manufactured sunlight hasn't kept us well, or ... any number of things. We're no closer to finding a solution than we were a hundred years ago."

"It's healthy living, being on the move," said Ruben. He seemed proud of his people for not having had some kind of population catastrophe.

"Leticia knows about this problem?" asked Perry.

"No," said Jorn, shaking his head. "It's a problem we didn't wish to reveal, but I had meant to speak about with her personally."

"It's leverage for us," said Ruben. "You don't just want the children, you *need* them."

"We do," said Jorn with a sharp nod. "It's why we can't leave without them."

"It's a hard life, on the ice," said Ruben. He seemed very satisfied with himself. Beliefs he'd had his whole life were being confirmed.

"We're making better progress than you are," said Jorn. "And now you wish to condemn us to death."

"To death?" asked Ruben. "A slow death of old age, maybe. A death inflicted by the way you live. There's nothing to stop you from building your own Natrix, one that could walk alongside ours."

"That would stick us both with the same problems," said Jorn. "You would be lacking all the things we have historically provided you, and we would lack those things too. Besides, I don't think that Leticia would accept that. It doesn't give her what *she* wants."

"Which is?" asked Perry.

"Justice and revenge," said Jorn.

"She thinks about the colony," said Ruben. "The colony before all else."

"She lost her mother to this place," said Jorn. "A mother that's since died. She lost two sisters too, when she was young, sisters who left the Natrix in tears and never found their footing here. One thing I've learned is that we must never underestimate the power of emotion, even in the face of logic."

"We can help you with the fertility issue," said Perry. "We can solve the problem, whatever it is."

Jorn looked at him. "Who are you, that you think this is a problem you can conquer?" He looked Perry up and down. "Where are you from?"

"That's not important," said Perry. "What's important is that if there's an environmental contaminant, there's a good chance I can find it. It's likely that I have a different perspective on biology and chemistry than you do."

"He knows more than either of us," said Ruben.

"Then it *is* important where you come from," said Jorn. He leaned back in his chair. "Off-world."

“Technically, yes,” said Ruben. Perry gave him a dirty look, and Ruben put a hand up.

“And yet you don’t come here with a promise of salvation, you come attempting to broker peace,” said Jorn. He was staring intently at Perry. “You come here with cryptic clues and mild suggestions. You have heard their side of the conflict, but not ours.”

Perry frowned at him. “So tell me. Show me around. Take me somewhere other than a room with the messages erased from the walls and papers that have been stripped down. I want to see the people, their work, how they’re treated. ”

Jorn stood from his chair. “Then you’ll need to give us some time.”

“Time for what?” asked Perry.

“I’m not the sort of leader that Leticia is,” said Jorn. “I need to speak with the other stakeholders. If there’s new information or new demands, there needs to be a discussion about it.”

Perry nodded. That seemed wise to him, the kind of thing that you had to do in a democracy unless you were vested with ultimate authority. The trio of Leticia, Brigitta, and Mette made all the decisions, and didn’t have to answer to anyone, save for the fact that the good of the community was one of the reasons they had any kind of mandate.

Jorn left, shutting the door behind him, and Perry was alone with Ruben.

“That could have gone worse,” said Ruben. He picked up his radio. “Checking in, how are you doing?”

“Dead,” said Largen’s voice over the other end. “They killed me, a thousand bullets shot in my direction. But I managed to take out twenty of them before I fell.”

“Shame,” said Ruben. He rubbed his neck with his free hand. “We’re waiting here, apparently they need to talk.” He set the radio down and looked over at the terminal that was embedded in the wall. “I don’t suppose they left that unlocked, but you might as well try.”

Perry went over to it. It was turned off, naturally. The keyboard was the same as those on the Natrix, and he still didn’t really have the knack for navigating it. He pressed some buttons, trying to get it to turn on, which was probably fruitless if they had cut power to it from the outside or initiated a shutdown prior to the meeting. Still, he got his black nanite bracelet close enough, and March, reliable as ever, commanded a tiny contingent of nanites to break away from the main mass. Once that had stopped, Perry pulled away from the computer. From the outside, it would look like nothing.

“It’s dead,” said Perry. “As expected.”

“If they’d let us in, we couldn’t trust what we found,” said Ruben.

“I’m sending runners through their system as we speak, sir,” said Marchand. “When the terminal powers up, it appears I should have full access. Their computer systems are more sophisticated

based on my reading of the internals, but so far I've found them to be well below my level. I'll let you know more as I find it."

"We need to know what they're hiding," said Perry, which was as much to Marchand as it was to Ruben. "So far we've gotten a sterilized look at things."

"Thin walls," said Ruben. He'd gotten up from his own chair and was rapping his knuckles against them. "I suppose with that thick a shell, there's no need to make the walls all that thick, but it's unsettling. There's insulation, I think, but still, I noticed it in the bay too." He turned to Perry. "You think you can solve their lack of babies?"

"You should assume they're listening in on everything in this room," said Perry. "That's what *I'm* assuming."

"Just yes or no, that's all I'm asking," said Ruben with a shrug.

"Long term, maybe," said Perry. "Short term, it seems like it's going to remain a problem. My guess would be some kind of endocrine disruptor." With that sentence, Perry had officially gone out of his depth, and he knew it. "And yeah, assuming that they have logs of how everything is made, and we can build some lab equipment, I think we could at least rule that out."

He was hoping that there would be some silver bullet, a dangerous thing for a werewolf to wish for. Richter's world knew all about environmental hazards and industrial contaminants, and there were hopefully lists of things known by the state of California to cause cancer, as well as all the other bad stuff.

It was also possible that he would strike out completely.

"Sir," said Marchand. "I have made a connection with a terminal on the other side of this room, which is powered on. There is some risk of detection if I proceed. A competent security system will note the login attempt, even if it's not flagged, and I may need several attempts to log in successfully."

"Wait," said Perry under his breath. "We're in no rush."

"You think we're safe here?" asked Ruben. "I mean, you think they'll give you a tour?"

"Maybe," said Perry. "They're giving themselves enough time to clean up what they can, take the malnourished and put them out of sight, clean up problems that have been lingering for a long time. And there are places that I wouldn't be able to go, I'll bet."

"You're crafty, you know that?" asked Ruben.

"I know a thing or two about how people do diplomacy," said Perry. "This is terra firma for me." The translation for that was an idiom which he spoke without much thought. "They're buzzing you with planes because they want to show their might, it's saber-rattling, but they don't want war any more than you want war. They want a workforce, a boost to their falling population. It doesn't actually serve them to strap bombs to those planes and blow the Natrix up. They need

*workers*, and historically, you don't have a bunch of luck with intellectual labor when you take people hostage."

"I never knew you were much of a thinker," said Ruben.

"Not every world," said Perry with a grin. "Some worlds aren't worlds where you get to think too much. It's a pleasant change of pace. But I *am* a scholar."

"You said not to talk about worlds," said Ruben. "And you said that they might be listening in on us." He looked at the terminal, though it didn't appear to have a microphone, and in any case, was powered off.

"I did say that," Perry nodded. "But at some point they're going to have to know what I am, and what I represent. Brigitta thinks that the work of generations might be shortened to within this lifetime. That changes the math for everyone. If what I have to offer means we can avoid a war, that's got to be the direction we take. I could help get you people off this planet. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"It is," said Ruben. "Not sure what that would look like. I've heard stories of Naran, the planet we come from. No movement necessary, fields that can be worked a hundred times over, the ability to set down roots ..." He gave a little yawn and left the thought unfinished.

Perry sniffed the air. "Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?" asked Ruben.

It was a chemical smell, something strange and new, which hadn't been there before. Perry had never smelled anything like it before, but it was stinging his nostrils, making them flare out.

"I don't smell anything," said Ruben. He reached for the radio. "Get in your mech," he said. "Be ready for ... something."

There was silence from the other end.

"March, status," said Perry.

"Largen appears to have fallen asleep, sir," said Marchand. "If there's something in the air, as you seem to suggest, I cannot detect it, but I'm within the mech at the moment."

"Fuck," said Perry. He looked over at Ruben, who was leaning back in his chair, fingers only barely touching the radio. His eyes were still open, but that was clearly going to be a battle he'd lose.

Perry was feeling it too, and when he concentrated, he could feel it soaking into his vessels, the biological reality tainting the spiritual reality. They were gassing him, the fuckers. There was a small vent in the room, and Perry moved toward it, taking off his shirt and blocking it up. That would help a bit, and might keep Ruben up and awake.

"March, open the mech just enough to let the sword out," said Perry. He moved to the door and tried it, but it was locked shut. When he looked down, he saw a thin strip of rubber that on close inspection looked like it was new. They must have put it in while the airlock was cycling, or maybe a bit before that while the mechs were making the trip across the snow and ice. Maybe it was just a contingency, making the room more air-tight so that the gas could work better, but it was a contingency they were now using.

Fortunately, after nearly passing out while in space, Perry had been practicing going without breathing.

The first step was to get out of the room. For this, he punched a hole in the wall. As Ruben had said, the walls were all relatively thin, and his fist went straight through. It was sheetrock, or some local equivalent. Clearing away enough so that he could slip out took more work, but eventually he was through, busting out like the Kool-Aid man.

"Hack in, now," said Perry. His commands to Marchand were subvocalized, using only fractions of the limited air in his lungs.

"Right away, sir," replied Marchand.

The sword flew down the long hallway to Perry, and he grabbed it as it came close to him. He felt better now that he had it, since it meant that in theory, he would be able to deflect a few hits. He would be doing it without Marchand's help though, which was a dicey proposition, and without the armor, a bullet that wasn't blocked could be lethal.

Perry looked down the hallway toward the small mech bay they'd come into.

"How are we feeling about opening up that airlock?" asked Perry. His heart was beating faster, but he hadn't taken a breath in three full minutes. From his tests, he could last a full hour, or half an hour if he was exerting himself, but that was if he'd taken some full breaths beforehand.

"I don't have root access yet, sir," replied Marchand. "I'm currently downloading a rather large dataset for synthesis, but the information is all public. Their computing architecture is as-yet unclear. Furthermore, I believe the airlock has been designed so that it physically cannot open both doors at the same time."

Perry looked back in the room at Ruben, who had fallen asleep in his chair. He was going to be difficult to move, assuming he was still alive.

*There goes any chance of avoiding war.* "Work on it. I'm going further in."

"Might I inquire why, sir?" asked Marchand.

"I want them to understand who they're dealing with," said Perry. "I want them to see how out-classed they are, and know what war would cost them. Let me know if you find any answers in the public data dump, but I need to see what it is they didn't want me stumbling across. In the meantime, break their systems over your knee, gain control but don't shut it down just yet, and spread the nanites as we go."

With that, he set off down the hallway, sword in hand.