

The free housing was both better and worse than Perry had thought it would be. He had half been expecting that it would be a flophouse, people stacked on pallets or something like that, and when it became clear that it wasn't that, he had thought that it would be more like a bog standard hotel.

The room had virtually nothing in it, and while the walls weren't terribly thin, Perry could tell that there wasn't nearly enough privacy for his tastes. The bed that he and Mette would be sharing was wide, and they'd been provided with sheets and pillows, but there wasn't any other furniture, and the clerk had seemed confused by him asking about housekeeping. That was a blessing in disguise though, because it meant that *in theory* Perry wouldn't ever need to worry about someone coming in and disturbing him. The door to the room locked, and he was told that there was only one person with the key, a man who held elected authority over that particular housing commons. The communal bathroom was down the way, though it had come with a warning that the nightsoil man didn't come by until the morning, and there could be a bit of a stink toward the end of the day, something that the commons was in the process of fixing. Indoor plumbing was apparently not something these people had mastered.

No one had asked them too many questions, and the housing commons was supposedly only half full, though it *felt* like they had plenty of neighbors. Perry was still trying to work out what housing actually looked like, and it did seem like there were more options than just free housing and scrip housing, but that was far, far down the list of things worth worrying about.

"First thing is getting me into mage school," said Mette. "I need a problem to start working on or I'm going to go insane."

It had been three hours.

"First thing we need to do is focus on this killing across the sea," said Perry. "I'll read through the papers, which should get me working knowledge of the things that we need to know pretty fast, and that should let me list out the known unknowns, like what in the hell a symboulion is."

"You think that's your man?" asked Mette. She was smoothing out the dress she'd picked up at the library, which she didn't seem entirely happy with.

"I do," said Perry. "Three months ago there were three kingdoms left in this world. As of today — or a few days ago considering how slowly news travels — there's now a single king left, in Thirlwell. I don't think that's a coincidence."

"And you're ... going to go after him?" asked Mette.

"I don't know," said Perry. "I need to know more. But on Esperide, I spent two years thinking that any day might be the day that the enemy showed up. I was jumping at shadows. If the enemy is here, I want to point myself in their direction with my shield up, and *then* I can get on with going to Hogwarts or stealing a magic sword or whatever."

"You're talking about *stealing*?" asked Mette. "You never stole from us."

"Relax," said Perry. "I'm not actually talking about it, I'm just ... speculating."

“Speculating about breaking the law?” asked Mette. She had one eyebrow raised, and her issues with her dress were forgotten.

“We’re up against an anti-monarchist,” said Perry. “At least, that’s what I’m thinking based on these news articles. Maybe he’s more like Maya than Jeff, but my guess is that he’s a fanatic. That’s what regicidal tendencies mean to me. Given the timeline, my guess is that he’s been here for three months and has been accumulating power, and that means that I need to be accumulating power. Except I haven’t been traipsing across this world toppling kingdoms like he has, which means that yeah, I need to at least consider the possibility of stealing military-grade equipment.”

Mette frowned. “Okay.”

“Okay?” asked Perry.

“I don’t like it, but if you think you’re destined to fight this man, then okay,” said Mette. “I don’t think it makes sense to jump right to that though.”

“No,” said Perry. “It doesn’t. We need the background information first. We can split up if you think that would be better, but we need to know what’s different about this world, what things we might be able to exploit, what the police and military forces look like, how their spy networks function, and what they might say once we’re unmasked.”

“And also if there’s a history of thresholders,” said Mette.

“Right,” said Perry. “So we go to a library, or I guess a ‘book library’, or ... maybe a museum.”

“Problem,” said Mette. She pointed to her stomach. “I’m hungry.”

“Alright,” said Perry. “We’ll go out into the city, exchange the ingots for scrip, and find a place to eat.”

“Do you think that eating *requires* scrip?” asked Mette. “I mean I know your people pay for food, I saw it in the movies, but this society seems sensible.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” said Perry. “I’ll get Marchand out and start seeding the neighborhood with nanites, get us listeners so we can know how things are done. Shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes, since it seems like they have food carts and restaurants all over the place.”

“Alright,” said Mette.

“There’s also food inside the shelfspace, not that I would trust it. At some point we’re going to have to take a day to run out into the country and dump everything out, clear house, maybe spend some of the gold we have and fill it up, so long as gold is worth something here.” Perry rubbed his chin. He had three small ingots of gold from Brigitta, which he kept in the power armor, each about a hundred grams, acquired and kept for a rainy day. In Jeff’s shelfspace there was an entire vault’s worth, more than five hundred pounds, along with sacks of precious gems.

“Then let’s get going,” said Mette. “I really am hungry.”

It didn't take long to get Marchand set up, and once he was, Perry began spreading the nanites out, some of them down the hall, others tossed out the window to be taken by the wind. The tiny spiders they could make of their combined bodies at Marchand's direction could scurry all over the place.

Perry sat on the bed with the helmet on, looking at the map that Marchand had built up. It covered the building and the surrounding block in varying levels of detail, showing all the people, giving tags to them and records of their conversations.

"Can I see?" asked Mette.

"Sure," said Perry. He handed the helmet over, and she sat there for a while. "You can talk to March, he'll show you what you want to see."

"You ... had something like this running on the Natrix?" asked Mette. "This is the power of the nanites you kept from us?" She took the helmet off and gently set it on the bed.

"Yeah," said Perry. "I didn't use it to spy on people, but yeah, I had total information access."

Mette let out a low whistle. "We would have been pretty upset if we'd known," said Mette. "There were private conversations you listened in on."

"No," said Perry. "There were private conversations that I *could* have listened in on, if I had wanted to violate your privacy and make enemies. Same for the total access to your computer systems." He shrugged. He was hoping that this wasn't going to be a sore point with her. "When Jeff came calling, it was good to have everything in place."

"All those logs, they're still there?" asked Mette.

"Yeah," said Perry.

"I want you to purge them," said Mette. "All the ones with me, all the pictures of me, all that."

"No pictures," said Perry. "Sound is easy, vision is difficult. But ... sure. I never listened in anyway. It was just a precaution. Marchand, purge it."

"Yes, sir," said the helmet from the bed. "It will take some time unless you wish for me to purge everything from the entire time we were on Esperide, sir."

"Take it slow," said Perry. "Keep everything that either of us were present for, or that you think is pertinent."

"Yes, sir," said Marchand's head.

"I think ... we might need to talk about you and me," said Mette. She folded her hands in her lap.

"I really don't think we do," said Perry. "We need to gather as much information as we can, devise cover stories, make a plan of defense, then maybe a plan of attack." He gestured

between them. “We’re friends, we’ve been friends for years now, we’re allies here, that’s all that needs to be said.”

“Right,” said Mette. “But ... you were potentially listening to every conversation on the Natrix, which means that you might have heard *anything*, every whisper about you that was said in private. So there are things that you might know that —”

“I don’t,” said Perry. “I never had any cause to crack open those vaults. Marchand listened, but those were his secrets to keep. It was more something that was in place in case, I don’t know, someone was plotting to kill me, which seemed like a very realistic possibility early on.”

“We *were* plotting against you,” said Mette. “Leticia and I, we thought that it would be best for the Natrix if at least a few of the next generation had even a few of your advantages. Perry, I was selected — self-selected — to seduce you.”

Perry stared at her. “Did you think that I didn’t know that?” he asked. “No, I knew, I was with Brigitta though, and made it pretty clear that I didn’t want to leave children behind.”

“We never talked about it,” said Mette. “We’re going to be living together, sharing a bed, I left everything behind to come to this place, and *you* left Brigitta, so ...” She balled her hands into fists. “I just want to know where we stand.”

“All forgiven, if it needs to be forgiven,” said Perry. “At least on my end.”

Mette nodded slowly. “I guess I’ll say the same.” She had been looking down at where her dress covered her knees, but looked up at him. “All forgiven, all in the past, all a world away.”

Perry nodded. “Now, let’s get something to eat.”

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They went to one of the free restaurants that was just a street over, close enough that they’d been able to listen in and watch a few people order their food. It was all free, though it didn’t have the feel of a soup kitchen to Perry. He had volunteered at a soup kitchen briefly but hadn’t been able to handle how depressed it made him feel. It was too much decayed linoleum and torn clothes, thin soup and women with haunted looks on their faces. Maybe if he’d been a better person he would have volunteered more often and tried to endure the bad feelings or change his shitty outlook on it, but he’d contented himself to just donate some money every now and then like a medieval noble being sold indulgences.

This was a far cry from that, and like the room they’d been given, everything was clean and in good repair. If he didn’t know better, he’d have said that it was some hipster place, but that was mostly because of the heavy wooden tables and chairs, which read as retro to him. It was well-lit and lively, with a number of people at tables, some by themselves reading books and others just chatting. Perry had seen enough now that he was getting to know the collection of different races, though he still had no idea about the history of them. The elves seemed to dress light and the four-armed blue skinned people dressed like it was the middle of winter. Most of

the people were young, in their twenties or thirties, but there was a decent enough collection of other ages, and two families were playing in one corner where the children had a small table.

The food was handed out by a guy at a counter, all from a collection of big trays. He was a dwarf — a fantasy dwarf, not a little person — and the area behind the counter was elevated for him, though it seemed to be a temporary measure with large boxes. The kitchen was open behind him, and Perry looked at it closely, trying to make sense of what equipment was back there. The most glaring omission was a refrigerator, but there was a big stove, currently off.

“Dol’gamsh, the greens, and a bit of cherry trench,” said Perry. It was the same order that someone else had made not twenty minutes ago, said in exactly the same way, which was probably overdoing it.

The dwarf eyed Perry up and then loaded the plate with the three dishes, all of them scooped from thick metal trays. The dol’gamsh was steaming hot and the greens were chilled, and Perry was glad for the food. Mette ordered the same, and Perry was interested to note that she was given a slightly smaller portion of everything by the dwarf, probably because there was a substantial size difference between the two of them.

They sat at a table together and Perry opened up the small drawer on the side of it to pull out a long-handled spoon and fork for each of them. If he hadn’t been watching from a distance, he wasn’t sure he’d have been able to figure out where the silverware was.

*Dol’gamsh* translated literally to ‘stirred meat’, something that second sphere translation let him know, but in spite of the name, it appeared to mostly be root vegetables of one kind or another. There were little bits of what he *thought* was meat, but to his nose they didn’t smell quite right. The greens were a bit like cooked down spinach, though they had a nice color on them, and there were bits of orange and yellow in there too, finely chopped, which investigation showed were carrots and the zest of some kind of citrus. The last part of the meal, cherry trench, was some kind of cobbler, with very identifiable chunks of apple and relatively few cherries.

Off to one side of the ‘restaurant’ was a self-service area with various breads and side dishes, and at the table there were three bottles containing a thin fishy brown sauce, a thicker red sauce, and a lighter brown sauce with little tiny beads of something. Perry had to imagine that these were the equivalents of ketchup and mustard, and after his first bite, he sniffed at the bottles and poured some of the brown sauce onto his dol’gamsh.

It was all surprisingly good, given that it was both free and cafeteria food. The dol’gamsh had a bit of char on all the little chunks of meat, and the mixed vegetables were clearly pretty fresh rather than reconstituted. If the dwarf was the one who’d cooked everything, he was pretty good at his job. Perry had experience with a whole lot of cafeteria food and the products of institutionalized processes, and the rules that governed all that — cheapness, keeping for a long time, reconstitution — didn’t seem to apply. He pretty quickly cleaned his plate, then waited for Mette, who was taking a long time.

“This is what we’ll be eating while we’re here?” she asked.

"Seems like it," said Perry. "I guess I don't know how often they change the menu, and after we've gone to trade in some of what we have, we'll get some scrip to see how the other restaurants are."

Here their cover as immigrants or tourists would serve them well, he thought, because they could talk about things without it being obvious that they were a very different *sort* of immigrant.

"What is this, do you think?" asked Mette, holding up a chunk of vegetable from the dol'gamsh.

"Root vegetable," said Perry with a shrug. "I couldn't identify it. It's nothing that I had before, but a close cousin to, ah," he weighed how much to say, "a carrot, potato, something like that."

Mette ate the piece of vegetable and had a thoughtful look on her face. "Different in a good way," she said.

Perry nodded. His eyes were on the others around the place. The more he looked, the more it seemed like it *wasn't* a restaurant, it was instead a social place where people happened to eat food. Maybe it was past the busy hours, but there were a lot of people sitting around and talking, no longer engaged in eating.

Perry got up from the table and grabbed a cup from the self-serve area. There were two kegs and a number of earthenware cups. He got one for himself and one for Mette, taking from each of them. One smelled floral and the other smelled herby, and he'd have called both of them tea if not for the fact that he didn't really know how they'd been made.

"So we're off to the museum after this?" asked Mette. "Or a library?"

Perry nodded, still looking around. "Hopefully they archive their newspapers somewhere. I think we go from three directions, from the present into the past by way of newspapers, from the past into the present by way of history books and possibly a museum, and then from the side by way of dictionaries or some other set of definitions. And *then* we talk to someone." He kept his voice low, hoping that no one was listening in on them, though it didn't seem like they were.

"How much danger do you think we're in?" asked Mette. "They seem ... friendly."

"They do," said Perry. He frowned. He had heard of worlds like this, where everything was relatively copacetic and rosy. Sometimes people seemed to have society figured out. Cosme had said that he'd been to a place like that, some kind of space-faring civilization that took food and housing to be basic human rights. All that was well and good, but there was another threshold out there, and if the kingkiller wasn't a thresholder, then a thresholder was still bound to appear. "We're not going to test how far that friendliness goes."

Mette snorted. "Seems like eventually we will."

Perry considered that, then gave a short nod. It would have been safer to talk only in the relative safety of their room, but that was probably a level of paranoia that was just a bit too far. It wasn't like their room wouldn't be easy to bug with the right technology, though he'd have been

relatively surprised if they had a thriving surveillance state, especially given the slip of paper that was supposed to serve as his library card.

Perry was worried that when they left they would be asked to pay — that there was some hidden system in place that they didn't know about, or that the others were all regulars or something. There was no trick or catch though, they just placed their used dishes in a little alcove where they were taken away for cleaning. Perry was curious about that too, given the lack of plumbing, but he couldn't see any obvious trick they were doing, and didn't really have any idea how people had kept dishes clean in medieval times, not that this city was anywhere close to that.

The museum was closer than the book library, and was housed in a far more impressive building, so they went there first. The museum practically loomed, and must have once been something else, unless these people really went all in on their museums, which he supposed was possible. There was no one at the front to take a ticket or money, though there was a donation box, which was filled with slips of what had to be scrip. It was the first time they had actually seen any, and Perry wished that they had some to offer.

Perry had been to a fairly large number of museums in his life, mostly because they'd often travel when his mom was going somewhere to play cello. His dad had always made a point of making a weekend of it, and making a weekend of it meant going to whatever local museum there was to see.

Perry was pretty sure that the museum had once been a church or something like it. The long center hallway felt like it had once contained pews, and while the iconography was unclear to him, it felt like it didn't have much to do with being a museum.

Front and center was a work of obvious propaganda, so obvious that for a moment Perry was dumbstruck by it. It was a telling of revolution by those who had revolted, a canonization of events of the recent past, and a union of different races. To their credit, this was the only time that Perry had seen their faces, but the statues still seemed to him to be a little much. It was the pose more than anything else, the way the elf had stoic benevolence on his face. Even the name, Fenilor the Gilded, felt like it was putting too much grease on the lens. It was good information though, the sort of thing that would pretty much never be printed in a paper because it was very far from being news: the revolution had happened sixty-seven years prior, one kingdom over, and from there, spread to the whole world. It had pretty clearly been violent in most cases, but the plaque downplayed that.

"Hard to imagine what it was like before this," he said. "Sixty-seven years seems short to me."

"Does it?" asked Mette. "That's three generations, maybe four if you're pushing it. The Natrix — can I talk about that?"

Perry looked around. No one was paying them the slightest bit of attention. If they had landed in a small town of a few hundred, he'd have wanted them both to clam up tight, but in a city this large and diverse, it really did seem like they were the same as everyone else, at least until he turned into a giant wolf or flew into the air with his sword. He looked well-kept thanks to being

second sphere, but under normal conditions he was pretty sure that people would just take him to be a well-groomed man with a fastidious attention to his personal appearance.

“Fine,” said Perry with a shrug.

“Sixty-seven years ago? The Natrix would have had, ah, something like a population of thousand, maybe less.” She shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to see what it used to look like, but with a population of a million you could build a city like this from scratch in half that time.”

Perry was deeply skeptical of that. Maybe her civilization could have, but she didn’t seem to understand just how bad things had gotten on Perry’s Earth. Building a city from scratch was something that could basically only be done in China, and even then would probably fail unless they were willing to put massive amounts of money into relocating people. The Natrix was never in one place for longer than a year, and the entire colony was united in singular purpose. On the Natrix, there were projects that could be directed, but a city got, at most, large bridges or new districts done. They didn’t just transform.

Besides that, the cathedral-turned-museum they were in, along with the castle that definitely no longer contained a king, were both proof that this city was built on old bones.

Mette was, of course, drawn to the magic, and not in the way that Perry was. She looked at the lanterns and masks with child-like wonder, even though they were only replicas. They’d seen no obvious signs of magic in their time in this world — called Markat, apparently, if the diagrams for children were to be believed, a spherical planet that still believed in a geocentric model. There were apparently three different types of magic though, and one of them had almost drowned the world.

Three hundred years prior, the magical lanterns had started getting bigger, burning better fuels, and flooding the great cities of the world with what they called ‘effluent’ and which Perry read as ‘pollution’. The power of the lanterns was great, and allowed the mining and creation of rarer and more powerful fuels for the lanterns, and this was the bedrock of much supposed prosperity that was put toward enriching the lives of the few and making war using fantastical new devices and the blood of the masses. So far as Perry could tell, it was a world war with all the major nations involved and scrambling for power, most of them ethnostates, and everything had broken down in the wake of it all until the people who had statues made of them had forged a new path forward.

The lanterns weren’t in use anymore, at least in the vast majority of countries. They had been replaced by somewhat inferior devices that followed different principles, and there was a whole display that had far too much information to take in. The upshot seemed to be that the oblate golden domes that Perry had seen from above were power centers and factories, responsible for making quite a lot of the textiles, furniture, and building materials that they had seen. Each of them was controlled by its own symboulion, which in turn interfaced with the local community, but of course ‘symboulion’ wasn’t defined.

“This is it,” said Mette. She was looking over the wing, which had quite a few artifacts and displays, including a wide range of masks.

“Possibly,” said Perry. The masks were separate from the lanterns, and required no fuel. They were instead attuned to and had a pretty wide range of effects. They hadn’t seen much in the way of masks yet though, but apparently the masks were bespoke by nature, and had largely fallen out of favor except as continuations of tradition. Part of the reason the museum had so many examples of masks was that when the mask wearers died, there was nothing to do with the mask but display it.

A mask let the wearer ‘see or be seen’, and what intrigued Perry most was that they put a part of themselves into the mask’s construction. Perry had more ‘himself’ to put into a mask than most of these people would have, or at least he hoped so, if the different systems of magic overlapped or interacted with each other. If he could funnel the second sphere into one of these masks and spend the weeks necessary to attune to it, he could have another multiplier on his power.

Berthor Half-Shaft had a mask that allowed him to perceive the world as moving slower, which made him move faster. Perry read that twice, and couldn’t tell whether it made sense or not. It seemed as though the actual power he’d been granted was mild superspeed, which very much appealed to Perry, but it was framed as being a question of perception rather than velocity, which seemed intentionally confusing. Some of the masks would cloak a person, making them blurry or even in rare cases invisible, but some seemed to just be power — a mask that made it appear to you that the world would crumble at your touch, which meant that it *would* crumble at your touch.

Perry wanted it badly the more he read about it. It seemed more promising than a lantern that would burn things, at least to him, though he wasn’t sure whether it would work over or under the helmet he normally wore. The museum had some example tools used to carve the masks, but neither the tools nor the substrate the masks were carved from seem like anything special, which meant that there had to be some technique that he’d need to learn in order to make it work.

They spent more than an hour in the wing of the museum dedicated to magic in all its glory, though there was also a fair amount of engineering and manufacturing mixed in, including a display on bicycles, which were apparently only a few decades old and only possible given certain advancements in precision metalworking.

It was when they got to a wing devoted to the waging of war that Perry really perked up.

The world of Markat was fairly old, and had seven different sentient species to it, all with their own histories of warfare. War was, supposedly, a thing of the past, though not exactly the *distant* past. The wars leading up to the revolution had been fought with highly disciplined military forces, but the wars that were a *part* of the revolution were something else entirely, messy guerilla warfare that no one seemed to like to talk about very much. Perry had to read between the lines, but that section of the wing had a ‘never forget’ kind of feel to it.

"We have to hope it won't be like that in Berus," said a white-haired old man standing next to a display that showed a mask once fitted to a 'war butcher'. "You young people don't remember. It's easy for you, seeing the world as it is now, to think that it wasn't won with blood and tears."

"We're actually from Berus," said Mette. "Before the king fell."

Perry stayed silent. He wouldn't have said anything but non-committal pleasantries, wouldn't have called attention to himself, would have disengaged. He hoped that Mette knew what she was doing.

The old man raised an eyebrow at them. "You saw it coming? Left?"

"It's not like there was much warning," said Mette.

"You should go back," said the old man. "They'll need you. That's the culture." There was reproach in his voice. He'd just told them that a revolution had to be won with blood and tears, and was suggesting that they return to what might be an active war zone at that very moment.

"We're still figuring things out," said Perry. "We only got in this morning and read the news then."

"They'll need you," said the man with a self-satisfied nod. "The revolution has swept through the world, there are symbolions everywhere, but they're not all doing as well as they could be. They were given the map, but the map isn't the culture. The culture is the culture."

"We're from Berus," said Perry. "You think we should know the culture? Until this morning, we had a king."

"You're here," said the old man. "You've seen how we do things. Take a week to learn, then go, be with your people, tell them how it's done, what the culture is. It's what's needed. There are blimps going over with teachers and planners. The symbolions will be established, and the culture will grow, but it needs to be the *right* culture."

"Where can we learn more?" asked Mette.

"The culture is the culture," the man repeated. "You learn from being here. People will tell you what the culture is, but it's a mistake to think that it can be taught or learned." He swept up a hand toward the displays of war. There were suits of fine armor and half-burnt lanterns, along with a giant painting of what must have been a horrific battle. "This is the thing we wish to avoid, what must be avoided in Berus. It should be clean, if it can be."

"And if it can't?" asked Perry.

"Then it must be bought in blood," said the old man. He moved on, and Perry let him have the last word.

"Good to note, I guess," said Perry. "Not just the 'bought in blood' part, but that people think we're cowards for not helping out."

"I don't think he meant we would be cowards," said Mette. She was watching the man as he'd moved on to a rack of spears. "I think it was deeper than that."

"In what way?" asked Perry.

"I don't know," said Mette. "The culture. They place an emphasis on it. I've overheard it. There's a particular phrase they use, 'that's the culture', as sort of a way of commenting on things. Or 'that's not the culture', used to shame, maybe."

"Mmm," said Perry. "We'll have our friend try to suss it out."

Mette nodded. "I don't know what would happen to you if you *weren't* a part of the culture, if you did something that was, say ... uncultural."

"We'll return our library books on time," said Perry. "We'll keep the noise down in our apartment and return our plates to be washed."

They came to a stop at one of the largest displays, a suit of plate armor that had been painted in green. It was nine feet tall, built for a giant, with layers of metal overlapping each other and not a single gap to be found. It rivaled the construction of Perry's own power armor, though of course there were no small studs where cameras were, and the internals were definitely much more crude.

The plaque had a hand sign, which is what drew Perry's eye first. It was a C-shape, placed against the chest. Supposedly if enough people in the city did that, it would summon one of these armored behemoths as an emergency defense measure for the city. They weren't police, they were military, and if something really bad happened, these were the big guns that would come down for enforcement.

The sight of the thing sent a chill down Perry's spine, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. This was what they had, some kind of super soldier that would appear from nowhere. It was *large*, but probably not as large as Perry was in his mechawolf form. It had no obvious weapons, but that didn't mean much. The plaque said nothing about how this thing got from place to place, nor about who was piloting it or what it did, and *that* was interesting, because everything else was an open book. There were still, it appeared, state secrets.

According to the plaque, this was an older model, dating back twenty years prior, put in the museum because of 'internal problems'. To Perry, that meant that whatever was out there might be even better. Mette might not have been right that sixty years was long enough to build an entirely new city from scratch, but twenty years was more than long enough for huge investments in magitech to have some serious payoffs.

He hadn't said it out loud, but he'd been having the feeling that maybe this society they'd landed in was a little bit soft. Maybe having two or three 'libraries' every block had made him feel that way. Free food, free housing, free healthcare, it had made him feel like he was a hardened warrior walking among helpful little lambs. He held no ill will toward them, hadn't put much

thought toward taking advantage, and hell, he might have worked a job if that was asked of him, as he'd regularly done on the Natrix.

These were the teeth, the weapon by which at least part of the war had been fought. The city would be sending people over to help with 'the culture' in what was now the former kingdom of Berus, shipping them via boat and blimp, but Perry would be very surprised if something like *this* wasn't coming too.

He would focus on the masks, send Mette to learn about the lanterns, and everything else, but if this world had a pathway to *true* power, the kind that the other thresholder probably already had, he was staring at it.