

Dinner was rice porridge with pickled vegetables, just as Luo Yanhua had said it would be, and Perry ate with Maya in relative silence. The pickled vegetables were unfamiliar, and there was a thick slice of something that Perry guessed was similar to fermented tofu, though there was a red tint from whatever sauce it had been marinated in. It was better than almost anything Perry had eaten in Teaguewater, and the water it came with was pure and cold. He watched Maya eat, though they didn't speak, in part because no one else was speaking. It was a strangely silent meal, especially compared to the loud and bustling taverns of Teaguewater. It was odd how easily one could get culture shock moving from one unfamiliar culture to another.

Following dinner was tea, which was done with great ceremony, long pours by a man and woman in special robes, first sphere for first sphere, second sphere for second sphere. They had all eaten the same food, but apparently the teas were different.

Maya was taking to it with enthusiasm, which didn't match the somewhat somber way that everyone else was eating. Maybe she was happy that she'd won their duel, or happy that they were being served fresh food and had a place to stay, but no one else was smiling or reveling in the meal. Perry had thought only the second sphere people were like that, but most of those at the temple in the first sphere were probably training themselves to undergo transition to the second sphere. Maybe it was something cultural, something taught. They hadn't been the same down in the village: there, he'd heard people laughing.

After dinner was a quiet time at the Moon Gate Silver Fish Temple, a time for meditation when sound was prohibited. Luo Yanhua had explained all that to them in a low voice, that they were not to so much as speak, to keep their footsteps soft, to not move things around.

"Alright," said Maya. She looked at Perry. "We'll see you in the morning, yeah?"

Perry nodded. There was more to talk about, *much* more, but he needed time, and more than that, some rest. It had been a long first day in a new world.

Perry had the armor laid out in his room. He'd taken damage in the fight with Maya, more than he cared to think about, but he was hopeful that they could come to some kind of agreement. He was totally clueless when it came to all but basic maintenance on the armor. He'd acted as March's hands on more than one occasion, and had learned a bit that way, but certainly not enough to replace tiny, delicate microchips or cameras. He *hoped* the cameras were okay, since they'd gone off toward the end of the fight. If they were permanently broken, the armor wasn't any good as armor, it was just a jail for his increasingly stupid AI.

"March, how are you doing?" asked Perry.

"I've seen better days, sir," said Marchand. "If I don't make it, tell my wife and children that I love them."

That was more of Richter's humor, Perry was pretty sure. It was preferable to Marchand's constant refrain of 'get me back to base for repairs', though Perry wasn't sure why the answer was different this time. It was possible that a screw had gotten knocked loose. He *really* hoped that he wouldn't be hearing that joke more than three times.

The cobalt blue armor was banged up. There were scars all over it, marks from the various battles they'd fought together. Perry had thought that the endless battles with the orcs in Seraphinus had been tough, but as soon as he'd stepped into Teaguewater the caliber of enemy had risen. It seemed that within the Great Arc, there would be another leap. The right arm of the armor was dented, as was the chest piece, and in a few places he'd come up against swords that were sharp enough to gouge the metal. That included a few marks from his own sword.

He frowned at that. It was a wonder metal, something beyond the material science of *his* Earth, nearly impervious to small-caliber weapons. Steel melee weapons, whether they were hammers or swords, could do sweet fuck-all against it. Yet it had been accumulating damage through the course of his adventures, and was getting to the point where the damage it had taken would mean *more* damage. One of the cuts on the chest had bitten down into the armor far enough that he could see a different color there, black instead of the gray of the metal, which was worrying. He didn't know enough about the suit's construction to say how bad that was, but it *seemed* bad.

The suit had felt like a dream when Richter had presented it to him.

"It's military," she said. "I'd say military surplus, but that's not quite true, more proper to say that it's military-derived, or maybe incidentally funded by the military. I have the machine to build them because I have a lot of money and because I have clearance. I've got certifications out the wazoo, basically, and a designated weapons testing range around the house, so long as I keep to within certain blah blah blah."

"So you're not a mad scientist," said Perry. "You're ..."

"A mad engineer, yes," smiled Richter. "A one-woman R&D facility, more or less, though I'm dangerously close to being a military hobbyist." She shivered. "Sends a chill down my spine. I can just *hear* someone saying that at a ministerial hearing."

There had been joy in watching her bound around in her suit, the gleeful way that she leapt up into the air and came crashing down, the ballet of bullets as she demonstrated the rock-solid targeting system that could compensate for zigzagging targets and fire precisely while she was moving at a sprint.

And when she'd made him his own suit, it had been even better. He dove down into the ocean to swim with the fishes, sprinted up hills, shot targets that she'd set up, and then they'd done all that *together*, like two armored gods. He'd felt invincible.

Looking down at the battered armor, he felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. Maya's nanostuff was exactly the sort of thing he'd wanted, but she didn't seem to be fully in control of it, and there were bound to be technological barriers between it and March. He didn't trust her secondhand accounting of what was going on with the portals and the entire concept of thresholds, but he had trouble imagining how it could possibly be a trap. All the scenarios he'd been able to think up had seemed far-fetched.

"Alright," said Perry. He put on the helmet. It showed two percent battery, even after all that time dormant. The screen was black, but the HUD was up. "March, please tell me that the cameras are working again."

"Yes, sir," said March. "I had closed them during the battle, as the overload of light threatened to render them inoperable, especially with a second or third attack of that nature." What March had thought it *actually* was interested Perry, since obviously the AI wouldn't think that it was literally 'a woman shooting light from her hands'. "As it stands, we sustained damage to a few of them, but I believe with a bit of elbow polish I can compensate. Would you like me to turn the display back on?"

"Yes, please," said Perry with a sigh. "Why was it off?"

"The suit has been taken apart," said March. "I was attempting to conserve power."

Once the display was back up, Perry started feeling a lot better. If there was a fault with the cameras, he couldn't easily detect it. The suit was studded with cameras all over, and a few of them were completely shot, but the primary cameras that fed the normal view seemed to be fine, more or less. He was thankful for that. That this was the work of 'compensation' worried him a bit, since if Marchand was in charge of inventing details, something like Photoshop's autofill, it seemed like there were significant opportunities for Perry to be shown either hallucinations or to have magic and miracles disappear from sight.

"Alright," said Perry. "I want to go over the fight with Maya, if we can. There are a few things that I wasn't able to see in detail, that got glossed over at the time. Mostly, I want to get a look at the nanostuff on her arm, to see how it reacted to the big hits. What do you know?"

"The 'nanostuff', as you say, sir, appears to be some material unlike anything I've ever encountered before," said Marchand. "The bracer on her arm began moving, and when it did, there was an extremely high frequency radio signal."

"You used that to turn her armor off," said Perry. "You ... overloaded it. You could do that again?"

"I believe it might be possible, sir, though with any attack we must bear in mind that defenses tend to crop up in the wake of success," said March. "In this case, the overwhelming interference I was able to generate appears to have made the device reset itself."

"You said that, yeah," said Perry. "You said during the fight. How'd you know?"

"I would like to claim some ingenuity on my part," said March. "But unfortunately, I was only reading a message sent out along a protocol in plain English with several markers to allow one such as me to read it."

"It *broadcast* that it was doing a reset?" asked Perry.

"Apparently so, sir," said March. "I'm not entirely sure why. Perhaps I was identified as a friendly device who had overloaded their communication in error."

"And you tried the attack again?" asked Perry.

"Yes sir," said March. "There didn't appear to be a response."

"Do you think you could communicate with this device?" asked Perry. "If I can get the two of you in a room together, you and this bracer, do you think that you could give it instructions?"

"I can hardly say, sir," said March. "Having deciphered the message, there's some basis for such a 'conversation' to take place, though even assuming that the device is programmed in such a manner as to allow that, I can't imagine that I would have any authority over it. If the device was manufactured using libraries I'm familiar with, I might have some luck."

"You could hack it," said Perry. He wasn't sure what a 'library' actually was, though Richter had talked about them. A collection of code someone else had written, something like that. He would have to look on Gratbook, or ask March about it, but a primer on computer programming or hacksmithing wasn't on his agenda.

"I dare say it's possible, sir," said March. "Though your last command to me with regards to signals was that I should listen but not speak. At the time we were fighting, I interpreted that instruction as allowing for the emergency use of the transmitter in combat, but now I'm less sure what you desire from me."

"Keep silent, except for communicating with this other device. Ideally no one listens in, but if they do ... whatever." Perry bit his lip. "This nanostuff, I'm really hoping that it can be used to help repair you. The microfusion reactor, the microchips, the armor plating itself ... you've seen better days, and without you, I don't know what I really have."

"Very well, sir," said March.

"And this is about how fast the battery charges now?" asked Perry. "It's going to take a day of doing nothing to get back up to full."

"I apologize, sir," said Marchand. "I've been using significant amounts of power on self-diagnostics. Would you like me to go to sleep so the battery can charge faster?"

Perry thought about that. He had some affection for March, in part because March spoke like a person, but also because they'd been together for so long. Richter had also given the AI a personality, and that personality had pieces of Richter in it.

"Are the diagnostics you're running actually helping?" asked Perry. "Is this ... I mean, is it productive for you to stay running, drawing a lot of power?"

"It's difficult to say until the process is complete," said March.

"And how long will it take?" asked Perry.

"It's difficult to say until the process is complete," March repeated.

“Great,” said Perry. “Alright, fine, I’m going to really hope that we have a day or two to relax. Take whatever power you need. Are we going to be net-positive on power if I look through Gratbook for a bit?”

“We will, sir, yes,” said Marchand. “Is there anything I can help you find?”

“I’ll be fine on my own,” said Perry. “You focus on yourself.”

What followed was three hours in which Perry mostly sat back in the small, spartan room they’d given him, reading up on a diverse set of subjects. He’d turned the brightness on the display almost all the way down to ration power, but the display was so energy efficient that it probably didn’t matter much. He got lost in Gratbook, which was Richter’s equivalent to Wikipedia, mostly trying to make some connections to the things he’d seen.

Perry had always liked research. He was good at it, with both the aptitude and personality for it. One of the reasons he’d always felt compelled to argue with people online was that the internet had been such a boon for humankind, and no one seemed to be using it properly. They would just say things without citations, and worse, without checking whether the thing they were saying was completely untrue. Usually it didn’t take more than five seconds to back up a claim, and five seconds more to drop a link that people could look at. He couldn’t fathom why people didn’t do that.

Sometimes, research was like falling down a hole. That was where Perry found himself, looking at pages on Buddhism, Taoism, Legalism, Mohism, Confucianism, syncretic approaches and the Warring States period, folklore, all kinds of other things. But the *recent* history of China, at least according to Gratbook, was all kinds of wrong, and that made Perry wary of how much he should trust any of it. Everything after Napoleon had been different, sometimes *wildly* different, and new traditions and schools of thought had grown up in the wake of some very different people writing very different books. Communism and socialist thought had developed without Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels, who were both born past the point of divergence in their world histories.

Of course, none of this was directly helpful. He wasn’t *in* China, or even China-with-magic, he was on a ringworld whose people and cultures shared some surface resemblance to Chinese folklore or cultural conceptions of history. Knowing about vampires and werewolves had helped him almost not at all in Teaguewater, and he’d had to take what he could get from Flora. He wasn’t going to go into this assuming that he could take anything from Gratbook as guidance, though he was hopeful that he’d gleaned some insight into their philosophical positions.

When he took his helmet off, the sun was threatening to set, which meant that it would be shining against the underside of the ring, at least if he understood the ring’s orientation in space. With a sigh, he prepared to lock himself into his suit for the night.

Luo Yanhua appeared at the entrance to his room, whisper-quiet. There was only a piece of cloth instead of a door, and while it was well-tailored, it offered almost no privacy. It didn’t even go all the way down to the floor, instead leaving a gap like a toilet stall.

"You're settling in," she said.

"I am," said Perry. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"The masters will meet within the next few days," said Luo Yanhua. "The master of Silver Fish Temple, Shan Yin, will sit with you tomorrow to inquire as to your origins and abilities. We hope this is acceptable."

"It is," said Perry. He felt the urge to give little bows, and he wasn't sure why, because he hadn't really seen the temple disciples doing that. "Is Maya fitting in well?"

"She is her own person," Luo Yanhua answered. It was an exceedingly diplomatic answer, but the kind that left no mistake about what she'd meant. "She does not share your approach of careful watching, nor a desire to comport with our way of life in the temple."

"She's been to many worlds," said Perry. "In some of them, that's the right approach. It can be difficult when you don't know the rules, when people won't *tell you* the rules."

"You are curious by nature," said Luo Yanhua.

"I'm not sure I would agree with that," said Perry. "There are certain things that I like to know about." There were others that he felt entirely dismissive toward, particularly the crazier elements of religions and cultures. He'd briefly had a Catholic friend in college, and their relationship had chilled to freezing when she'd spent an evening trying to explain the finer points of doctrine to him.

He looked out his small window, which was open to the air with no glass, only a shutter that could be pulled closed. The sun had just begun to touch the western rim of the ring.

"I need to prepare for bed," Perry said.

"The temple has a small bathhouse," said Luo Yanhua. "Maya Singh has already used it. Tomorrow morning you should clean yourself and prepare for training. We will have clothes for you, at your door by dawn."

That surprised Perry somewhat, given that he knew about textiles. "Clothing for a stranger is generous."

"It is," said Luo Yanhua. "You would be expected to take care of it, and return it to us when you were able to secure appropriate clothing of your own."

"Of course," said Perry, and there he did give a little bow, in part because he couldn't help himself. "Er ... I have nothing in the way of money, but I can put in work." He hesitated, then went into his pack. "I also have this." He opened his hand to show her the single gold coin he had left from Seraphinus.

"Gold," she said. She took it from his hand, deftly moving her fingers so that they didn't touch his own. "Solid gold."

“Yes,” said Perry. “I was hoping that it was worth something here, that it could pay for things like clothes, food, or for my other needs.”

Luo Yanhua handed the gold coin back. “It is the most precious metal of the first sphere,” she said. “A tenth of that coin would keep you fed for a year, clothed in finest silk, with a courtesan to keep you company every night.”

Perry felt himself flush at that, though he didn’t know whether this was a casual mention of prostitution or if she was running into the language barrier.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Perry. “I’m fine with living a spartan existence here. I had little in the last world.”

“Eschewing the material is the path of wisdom,” said Luo Yanhua. “Sleep well. I will see you in the morning.”

She slipped away, and the piece of fabric that served as his door shifted back into place.

Perry put on his armor, reluctantly. He’d slept in the suit before, and had never enjoyed it, but that had been when he had the skinsuit. Now he was in the rougher textiles of Teaguewater, which had been dampened with his sweat. It was going to be uncomfortable, and the promised morning bath was going to be sorely needed.

If what this world demanded from him was that he should sit back and be a monk who spoke rarely and didn’t indulge himself much, that was something that he could definitely do. He was no stranger to hard times, didn’t feel the need to seek out indulgences, and in spite of how different he was from these people of Moon Gate, he thought he could fit in. He would become an ascetic, eating only rice porridge, taking only cold showers, showing no outward signs of aggression, annoyance, or desire.

He did put on some of Richter’s anime before he went to sleep though.

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The morning bath was far, far better than he’d thought it would be. The temple had a bathhouse, and while it wasn’t clear where the water was coming from, it was heated by a wood fire. There were other people in the bath, all men, and while no one had explicitly said that there was gender segregation, he thought that was probably the case. The gender ratio of the disciples was skewed toward male, but only slightly so, with four women to every six men.

Perry had been using Flora’s shower in Teaguewater, and to hear her tell it, the mere presence of running water, let alone a shower, was an absolute luxury. The water hadn’t been quite right though, with a taste to it that he was hoping hadn’t been lead. The overwhelming pollution of Teaguewater certainly hadn’t spared the water. Perry had gone the full month and never felt entirely clean, always like there was something sticking to his skin.

Here, the water had a crystal purity to it, though Perry wasn’t entirely sure where it was even coming from, whether there was a hidden cistern that collected rainwater or a deep well that it

was pulled from. The other men were silent, and they gave him a few looks, for whatever reason. He was a hairy beast compared to them, taller too, paler skin. He stuck out, in a word.

When the communal bath was over, one of the disciples came over and helped him to put on his new clothes, which he hadn't done properly when he'd woken up in the morning. The help was wordless, as they didn't speak the same language, though the bath had much more conversation going on than the dinner had. He'd done his best to wordlessly thank the man who'd helped him.

Luo Yanhua was waiting for him, dressed in a different outfit, this one green with crimson along the lapels. It was just shy of being Christmas colors, but obviously they wouldn't have that association here.

"You look better fresh and clean, in proper clothes," said Luo Yanhua. She seemed to approve of the attire, though her gaze stopped for a moment at his five o'clock shadow, which was really more like a ten o'clock shadow. Without a shave, he was going to have a beard in short order. "We take breakfast light here, an egg, tea, nothing more. If you're willing, it would be best for you to eschew that so you might speak with Shan Yin."

"That would be fine," said Perry. He looked around. "Where's Maya?"

"She's spoken with him already," said Luo Yanhua. "He wished to see you separately."

Perry nodded. "Very well."

The temple was relatively small, but on the third level, the temple's master, Shan Yin, had his own large room. For all the size, the interior furnishings were minimalist, and the central area had a large pillow which Shan Yin sat cross-legged on, with a pillow across from him, slightly smaller. It was a bit of a power play, Perry thought, like a CEO giving himself a bigger, more prominent chair.

"Peregrin Holzmänn," said Shan Yin.

"Shan Yin," said Perry, bowing from his seated position.

Shan Yin was the white-haired man that Perry had seen at the temple the day before, leading training exercises, what looked a bit like calisthenics. He was by far the oldest person at the temple, but up close, some of that age seemed to melt away. He was a small man with white hair and white beard, but he carried himself well, and he wasn't that wrinkled or covered in liver spots. If Perry had run across a guy like that on Earth, he might have gone as low as early fifties. *Here*, he suspected that he should assume much, much older.

"You may call me master," said Shan Yin.

"Yes, master," said Perry. They were already off to a bad start. Perry hated that petty bullshit, and hated *more* that it had been framed in that way, an *offer* to use a special title.

"Why have you come here?" asked Shan Yin.

Perry blinked. "I don't know where I'm going when I step through a portal, so you could say that I ended up on the Great Arc by accident, master. I suspected that there would be someone here who was evil, or committed to evil acts, and that I would be one of the only ones willing or able to stop them. I can't go it alone though. I need the support of others, and I'm willing to support them in kind, even if it's only through common labor." He wasn't sure how often he was supposed to say 'master'.

Shan Yin nodded. "You are a warrior."

"Yes, master," said Perry, without hesitation.

"A warrior with no master, no credo, no allegiance," said Shan Yin.

Perry's lips twitched into a frown. "I'm not sure that I would say that."

"What would you say?" asked Shan Yin.

"I — I want to leave each world better than I found it," said Perry. "I want to stop my enemies from finding success in their pursuits." He was still trying to ape their way of speaking, still trying to fit in, and somewhat convinced that this was not at all working.

"Peregrin," said Shan Yin. "You are named for a bird. A migratory one."

"I am, master," said Perry. "You have them in this world? Peregrines?"

"We do," said Shan Yin. He turned away from Perry and faced out toward the window, which was situated so as to show a view of the Great Arc. He wondered whether that was a key feature of architecture here, always showing off the view. "There are many things that you do not know about this world."

"There are many things that I will leave having not learned," said Perry. "I've made my peace with that."

"Maya Singh had some confusion about the seasons," said Shan Yin. "Winter moves ever northward. There are birds that migrate to stay in the warmth of the sun, but curiously, there are two *types* of migratory bird. Some fly north, and others fly south. Can you think why?"

Perry thought about this. He wasn't sure what the lesson was, if there was one, or if this was a doddering old person story. "They move north to flee winter, or they move south to fly *through* winter," said Perry.

Shan Yin turned back toward him. "And which are you, Peregrin?"

Perry thought about that, first to see what the answer would be, then to see what answer the master wanted. He didn't know the master well enough to guess, so he said the truth and hoped that would win him some points.

"It depends on how long winters last here," said Perry. "It depends on how far you need to fly in order to go straight through one. If it was a month of flying to escape a month and a half of

winter, then I wouldn't think it was worth it. But if it could be only a few days of hardship, freezing weather, then yes, I would go straight through."

Master Shan Yin was silent for a long moment, and Perry worried that he hadn't been punctuating his answers with 'master' enough times.

"I must speak with the other masters," said Master Shan Yin. "There is a place for you at Moon Gate, for the time being. You will train and learn with the other initiates. You will eat with us, live with us, learn the language as best you can. Luo Yanhua believes that your transition would be in the best interests of Moon Gate, but I am as yet unconvinced."

Perry sat there, silent, offering no defense of himself. He just didn't know the master well enough, and advocating for your own interests seemed like the kind of thing that might be proof of bloodthirstiness or something equally asinine.

"You may go," Master Shan Yin said eventually. "I must think."

Perry got up and left. Luo Yanhua was waiting by the door, kneeling, but she stood when he came out. He wanted someone to commiserate with, but he knew that it couldn't be her. Saying 'I don't know how well that went' would have been met only with mute interest from her, and they weren't nearly on the same page yet. He wondered whether people like her could *have* friends.

"Training in the courtyard will begin soon," said Luo Yanhua. "You will join the initiates."

Perry nodded. He felt a little relieved. This, at least, he could do.