

Luo Yanhua dealt with the corpse of her one-time partner while Maya and Perry trekked to the first of the flowers that Marchand had identified. Perry was back in the armor, pretty much naked underneath it given that he didn't have any backup clothes, which wasn't comfortable but left him with some modesty, and more importantly, defense.

"I'm of two minds about it," said Maya. "On the one hand, if you go first, I get to see how likely it is to kill me. On the other hand, if you go first, that means that you get to the power before me, which isn't great."

"There's something that I wanted to talk to you about," said Perry.

"Sure, sure, go ahead," said Maya. "Or, you know, we could each go to a flower and do it at the same time, but I'm pretty sure we need to eat it basically right after plucking it. Also I don't have your robot to guide me. So I guess, fine, we can talk." She looked at him. "Alright, lay it on me."

"You're from an Earth," said Perry. "When you saw that sword stuck in me, you said 'Jesus Christ', which means that our common cultural background isn't just upper-middle tech with vaguely Western values regarding democracy and slavery, there's *Christianity* at the very least.

Maya pursed her lips and didn't look at him. "Alright, fine, I'm from an Earth."

"Which Earth?" asked Perry. "What was it like?"

"Your Earth," said Maya.

"Wait," said Perry. "How do you *know* it's my Earth? How do you know that it's not one of the parallel ones? My second world was an Earth, but —"

"Jesus fuck Perry, I've spent enough time with you, I've heard you drop enough references," said Maya. "We're either from the same Earth, or from Earths that are so similar to each other that it doesn't matter. I recognized the Mortal Kombat theme, alright? So pretty much right off the bat I knew."

"If you knew that, why didn't you say something?" asked Perry. "That's significant, not just for figuring out how thresholding *works*, for whether we really are destined allies, but — just for knowing each other, right?"

Maya tilted her head back and let out a long sigh. "Because I've been gone three years, and I didn't want to have this — I don't know, all this Earth shit, you know? I didn't want to talk about TV shows and movies. The memberberries thing. And you'd be like 'oh hey, you remember Star Wars? I remember Star Wars.' Earth sucked. I think there's part of me that would love to sit down and just talk about the things we miss, and I *hate* that part of me. What is my life if I'm talking to you about how I miss Sour Patch Kids, or popcorn, or just a bowl of fucking hummus with some baby carrots? So no, I don't want to do that."

"But," said Perry, then stopped himself. "Alright, fine, you say no, that's frustrating but I get it. I guess I'll just do my best to pretend that we're not from the same world."

Maya pursed her lips. "Fine, I'll give you five questions. Try to pick the burning ones."

"What was the date when you left?" asked Perry. He didn't hesitate at all.

"March 23rd, 2020," said Maya.

"Oh," said Perry. "That's ... right at the start of the pandemic?"

"Yup," said Maya. She had a far-off look. "Turned out okay?"

"Eh, it was more or less over when I left," said Perry. "Businesses had opened back up, there was a vaccine, masks were optional which meant most people didn't use them." He paused. "It's not a *question*, but I'm assuming that you thought you were going through a portal and getting out of what felt like a scary situation."

"As it's not a question, I decline to answer," said Maya. She sniffed the air, smelled the pus-trees, and grimaced. "Glad stuff worked out."

"Could be there are other Earths where it didn't," said Perry. "I mean, it's a multiverse."

"There aren't that many worlds," said Maya. "Something like one and a half million. So I wouldn't expect too many Earths, I guess, only maybe a handful of alternate histories."

"Er," said Perry. "Your wizard friend said that, huh?"

"He did," said Maya. She shrugged. "I've got no reason to doubt it."

They moved past another clump of the twisted trees. Most of them had thorns on them, which would have made moving fast a problem, if they both didn't have armor on.

"Second question," said Perry. "Where are you from?"

"I was born in Toledo," said Maya. "The last three years, before I left, I was living in the Bay Area."

Perry frowned. "You're from Spain?"

"What?" asked Maya. "Oh, no, Toledo, Ohio. You know, I was going to make fun of you for immediately thinking of Spain instead of Ohio, but yeah, it's one of those cities that most people would stare at you in blank confusion about. Toledo, Spain at least has some history to it. I mean, I've never been, but from what I understand."

"You said your parents were halfway across the world from each other," said Perry. "Was that \_\_\_"

"Dad was an engineer from India, came over on scholarship and managed to stay, loved America," said Maya, as though she was already bored of the biography. "Mom came up from Mexico at sixteen, a paralegal, big into woo. I'll be kind and count that as a single question."

Perry frowned. He wanted to know more about Maya, to fill in the details and understand her better, but he *needed* to know more about thresholding and how it worked. Knowing that she was from Earth, from the *same* Earth, had to mean something, and she'd had their entire time together to figure it out.

"I didn't hear anything about you leaving," said Perry. "Did you, I don't know, post it to social media? Because I think I would have seen it."

"Nah," said Maya. "The portals look fake. I mean, they look like an effect that a 15-year-old could do with some LEDs and bargain-bin compositing. Right? Give me five seconds and I could find a more convincing portal on TikTok."

"Yeah," said Perry. "Still, people would notice you missing, right?"

"I left a message for my parents and my boyfriend," said Maya. "But it was a 'I'm running away' message, not an 'I went through a mysterious portal' message. I figured that would be easier for them to swallow, so they didn't spend ages looking for me, but who knows. And *no way* would you hear about me going missing."

"But what does it mean?" asked Perry. "I mean, it's gotta mean something, that we're from the same Earth, the same culture, both from the West Coast?"

"We're practically twins," said Maya with a laugh. "But no, I've thought about it a lot, and I think it means fuck all."

"But how many people do you think have been pulled from Earth?" asked Perry.

"Oh, I imagine it's something like twenty-one percent of all unsolved missing persons cases," said Maya. She rolled her eyes at him. "How the fuck should I know?"

"Aren't you curious?" asked Perry.

"I mean, sure," said Maya. "But all I could ever have would be guesses." She shrugged. "Like, let's say that it works by matching you up with other people who have been through as many *successful* worlds as you. There's me, with six wins, right? So that means that everyone on my level is sitting at the top of a huge bracket. Map it out, it *started* with sixty-four fresh thresholders who stumbled through portals. That's kind of a lot. And if we're a composite, going against someone who's won *ten* worlds, that's, uh, one thousand twenty-four."

"Not quite," said Perry. "Because you can lose but not die. So a single person can just lose continuously, like that guy you met."

"True, true," said Maya. "And there's the time thing, I guess. Thresholders don't come in at the same time, but it *kind of* lines up, so what does that imply about our numbers? Unless there's a huge population, the queue should get worse the higher you go, since there are less people to match with."

"So you *have* thought about this," said Perry.

“Meh,” said Maya. “Sometimes you get stuck on a spaceship with nothing to do but think.”

“You’ve passed the flower, sir,” said Marchand.

Perry had known that, but Marchand had said it aloud. Whatever internal algorithm decided such things had apparently picked up on the fact that this was the kind of conversation he’d wanted with Maya for a long time. Maybe she was choosing to have it because they had fought together now. With the flower, it was going to be over.

“That’s it?” asked Maya, pointing to the flower they’d just passed.

Perry nodded.

It was smaller than he had imagined, no wider across than his palm, and the petals were thicker, more substantial than the delicacy that he’d mentioned. The pink interior was soft and subtle, the stamen tiny. If this wasn’t the flower, then it was something that was trying hard to *look* like the flower, or they had been given some very wrong information.

Maya plucked the flower and shoved it into her mouth, chewing twice and then swallowing.

“You’re going first, huh?” asked Perry.

“Yeah,” said Maya. “That taste is very distinctive.” She frowned. “Hey, if this was a trap, you’ll avenge me, right?”

“Sure,” said Perry. “I mean, a trap by people that could kill us at any time doesn’t seem likely.”

“Yeah, but a trap that was meant to be karmic in a way that a slit throat wouldn’t,” said Maya. “That would be —” She grimaced. “Ugh.”

“Are you okay?” asked Perry.

Maya collapsed to the ground, totally limp, hands not coming up to break her fall — but the nanostuff was fast enough to do it for her, making sure that she didn’t break or bruise. Perry leant down and looked at her face, which had gone pallid.

“March, what can you tell me about her condition?” asked Perry.

“She’s in poor health, sir,” said Marchand. “Her heart rate is erratic, blood pressure is low, and that twitch might be the sign of a low-grade seizure. If you touch her, I can give you a map of her internals and a better diagnosis.”

Perry reached out and touched armored fingers to her neck.

“Ah,” said Marchand. “Yes, sir, I would characterize this as a high-grade seizure, though some of what she’s experiencing doesn’t match the symptoms. We have no medicine on hand to help her, and I fear that all we can do for Miss Singh is to ensure she doesn’t hurt herself.”

Perry looked down at Maya. She didn't *look* like she was having a seizure, but he didn't have any idea what a seizure actually looked like, and was going to have to trust Marchand. Given that there was no suggestion to do anything invasive, Perry thought that he might as well wait.

He'd been there with her for half an hour when Luo Yanhua showed up. She was as clean as ever, and Perry wasn't actually sure what she'd done with the body, given that the mountain had very little in the way of soil to dig up. She had techniques up her sleeve though, he knew that.

"She's eaten the Celestial Ascension Blossom?" asked Luo Yanhua.

"Yes," said Perry. "I guess we'll see?"

"I'll watch over the two of you," said Luo Yanhua. "There are some threats on this mountain, beyond those from Moon Gate itself."

"I'd like to watch her for a moment," said Perry. "I want to make sure that she's safe. We have time, don't we?"

"It will take half a day," said Luo Yanhua. "Do you worry that she will die, or that you will?"

"Both," said Perry. "I don't know whether to have my suit on or off for this. Will I throw up?"

"I do not know," said Luo Yanhua. "The Celestial Ascension Blossom is never given to those of the first sphere, except in the most dire of circumstances."

"You said that our bodies would be able to handle it," said Perry.

"I believe that they will," said Luo Yanhua. "I've seen the way you both fight, the speed and strength, even if it's unrefined. The Celestial Ascension Blossom works on the spirit root alone, but the spirit root descends down into the body, and an unhardened body is what kills a person of the first sphere when forcible transition takes place."

Perry's eyes fell to Maya again. There was something about the hoodie, which was a size too large for her, that made her look small.

"You're having second thoughts," said Luo Yanhua.

"I'm contemplating my own mortality," said Perry. "Seeing her just ... drop. I don't know. I'm thinking that getting all this way and then dying because I ate a poisonous flower would be, uh, pretty fucking stupid, if you'll pardon the language."

"Even if she lives, it will be no guarantee that you will be safe," said Luo Yanhua. "Your matrices are different, complementary in some respects, opposing in others, and while the details still elude me, the gulf should be wide enough that what happens to one won't necessarily happen to the other."

"And if she lives through it and ascends to the second sphere, it's still possible that I would die," said Perry.

“It might be an act of wisdom to not eat the flower,” said Luo Yanhua with a slight incline of her head, the smallest nod she could possibly have made. “It offers power, but it comes with danger.”

Perry considered that. Moon Gate wanted them elevated for their own reasons, and Luo Yanhua had goals aside from those of her sect, namely research. They had *motives*, in other words, which was very different from it being a trap. He’d known all that though, and his second thoughts were feeling more and more like simple cowardice.

“I’m off to find my own flower,” said Perry. “Do I have enough time to come back after I’ve plucked it?”

“No,” said Luo Yanhua. “Eat it immediately, lest it lose its power. I’ll find you. Remove your helmet.”

Perry did as instructed. His hair had grown long in the last week, faster than it had ever grown before, and he was going to have to keep up with more frequent haircuts and shaves. He wasn’t really sure why being a werewolf meant faster hair growth. Wolves were hairy, but their hair didn’t grow faster than a human’s, he didn’t think.

Once the helmet was off, Luo Yanhua reached forward and cut off a lock of his hair, which was done with nothing more than the sharp edge of her fingernail. She held the hair up, then tied it in a knot and slipped it within her robes. There was something mildly threatening about it, but also a bit alluring.

“Go,” said Luo Yanhua. “I will find you soon enough, and bring her to you. The two of you will endure this inner battle together.”

Perry nodded and floated up through the air behind his sword, away to the next map marker.

He was there ten minutes later, flying swiftly through the air. The flower was in the bed of moss, just where the drone had found it. Perry observed it closely, making sure it was the same as the one that Maya had eaten, then began the process of getting out of his armor.

“March, fully automated defense,” said Perry. “Shoot to kill if someone tries to steal you, set Luo Yanhua and Maya Singh as trusted while I’m unconscious, look to them for guidance, record absolutely everything.” He didn’t feel great about that, but extending trust was necessary. His misgivings said more about him than about them, he thought. Maya had knocked herself out in front of him, seemingly not worried that he could take her out then and there, and it was likely that Luo Yanhua would have little problem killing him, especially now that she’d seen how the gun worked.

There was the nudity to worry about, but Perry swallowed his uncomfortability. Hopefully he’d get some indestructible Hulk pants soon, because ripping through his clothes was easily the worst part of being a werewolf, at least until the first time he ended up killing an innocent.

He plucked the flower, then didn’t hesitate to put it in his mouth. He chewed twice and swallowed it down: the taste was a bit like sucking on a penny, distinctive and sharp, and it

reminded Perry of something, though he didn't quite know what. He laid down as soon as it was out of his mouth and looked up at the sky, waiting for it to take effect. He'd had his wisdom teeth out, and had tried to fight the sedative then, and this was no different, all the willpower in the world making no difference. He slipped into unconsciousness, the outcome inevitable.

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When Perry woke up, the first thing he noticed was the chill on his skin, and the second thing was how dry his mouth was.

The third thing he noticed was that he had an extra sense, one that touched the vessels and meridians inside of him, the flow of energy within his body suddenly as simple to see as the shaggy head of brown hair in front of his face.

"*Finally*," said Maya. "You up? You good?"

"What," said Perry, blinking rapidly. He was in a bed, not on the mountainside, in white clothes, a sheet on top of him. The room was in a temple somewhere, but not one that he remembered seeing before. Maya was on the edge of the bed beside him, still wearing her neon-print hoodie, like nothing had happened.

"You were out five days," she said. "More than anyone expected. Both of us, actually, but for me it was only three days. We're at the other temple, Crystal Lake Temple. Luo Yanhua brought us here when we didn't wake up."

There was a fading dream in the back of Perry's mind, a dream of a sinuous white dragon, but it was fading quickly. "How?" he asked.

"Whaddaya mean?" asked Maya.

"She carried two bodies, *and* the — wait," he sat up straighter and looked around the room. "Where's March?"

"Robot buddy is in the armory, relax," said Maya. She held up her wrist, to show that it was bare. "I gave him a black shrink-wrap treatment, just so if anyone tried to mess with him, they'd die a swift death."

"Alright," said Perry, breathing out slowly. "But how'd she get us here?"

"She's strong as all get out and does moon gravity shenanigans," said Maya. She slapped him on the chest. "Come on, get up, the day's wasting, we have training to do."

"I," said Perry. "Uh, am I — fine?"

"Seems like," said Maya. "What they *said* was that your spirit root needs to dig deep into your body, but I don't know about that, because I don't know why it would take less time for me."

"Less body than me," said Perry. He moved so that his feet were off the side of the bed. "Urgh. I need some water."

“Here,” said Maya. She handed him a ceramic cup that had been sitting on the small room’s end table. Perry drank it down greedily, and wondered how he’d been fed, bathed, and kept clean while he was asleep. Five days was a very long time. He felt lucky that he hadn’t gotten bed sores.

“I feel less awful than I should,” said Perry.

“They’ve been watching us closely,” said Maya. A frown graced her face. “I got read the riot act once they learned that I had killed *whats-his-face*, and Luo Yanhua didn’t speak up much in my defense. We’re *also* not on our home turf anymore, and Camp Crystal Lake is, shocker, not the greatest place. They gave me a ‘disciple’, which in this case really just means a PA, but with no pay instead of shitty pay.”

“Heh,” said Perry. “Camp Crystal Lake.”

“I’m going to be honest, I haven’t watched any of the Friday the 13th movies,” said Maya. “But I’m glad the reference landed.”

“Reconsidering that?” asked Perry.

“What?” asked Maya.

“The Earth stuff,” said Perry. “You said you didn’t want to share it, didn’t want to think about it.”

“Yeah, but come *on*, the place is literally just called Crystal Lake,” said Maya with a toss of her head. “If you talk Earth to me in front of other people, I’m going to look at you like you’re crazy, and if you try to explain it, you’ll *sound* crazy. Got it?”

“Sure,” said Perry. “Unless it’s a sick reference.”

“Everyone knows you’ve got the best references,” said Maya with a smile. “Now come *on*, you’re behind on training and we’ve got to make the most of being second sphere.”

“I literally just woke up,” said Perry. He looked down at his clothes, then at his hands. “I don’t feel much different.”

“That’s what the training is for,” said Maya. “Luckily there’s a lot of stuff that comes easily. Eating the flower is already paying off, really.” She gestured at her face. “Perfect skin. And it took me a day, but I got the translation thing working, which feels *so good*. I can actually talk to my assistant. And you can probably feel the meridians that they were talking about, yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Perry. “Not as distinct as I would like, but it’s all there, plain as day.”

“You get more with training,” said Maya. “Pretty much *everything* is about training here.”

“Alright,” said Perry. “Then let’s get training.”



“First, you’ve gotta get chewed out by the masters for going off and doing this thing that you thought they wanted you to do,” said Maya. “I would *personally* avoid telling Shan Yin that he asked for this, but that’s me.”

“I think it’s part of the game,” said Perry. “He needs to pretend that he disapproves.”

“Well, you figure it out,” said Maya. “I pretended it was prom night and just sort of sat there quietly until it was over.”

“Can do,” said Perry. He stretched out, feeling his muscles. He didn’t *feel* any stronger, but he’d been laying in a bed for five days, so really, it was a miracle that he didn’t feel any weaker. His eyes were a little better, maybe, but when he focused on his vision, he could feel the meridians within him. The flow of energy passed down the body into the liver, and from there, into the stomach, with other meridians flowing close by the eyes. He couldn’t *quite* manipulate it, but it was within reach. His vision had always been fine, but it could be better.

The room he’d been recovering in was small, but it opened out onto a wide balcony which oversaw the entire temple. The temple was at least ten times the size, maybe more, with a solid grid of students going through their forms in a courtyard that extended its way into a lake that was entirely free from waves or ripples. Perry reached out and felt a cool breeze, then frowned down at the lily pads and lotus blossoms that graced the titular crystal lake.

“Magic,” said Maya, tracking his gaze. “The surface of the water doesn’t move. Even if you go swimming in it, you won’t make any waves. It’s weird. There’s some kind of mineral down at the bottom there, which they fish out from time to time and use in some rituals. Stillness is the name of the game here, which ties into the moon somehow, I guess.”

“So many people,” said Perry, taking it in. The population of the temple might have been as high as a thousand, depending on how many people were students, and at ground level there were long dorms and other buildings to house and feed them all. The other thing that Perry noticed was *children*, dozens of them, playing off in what must have been a schoolhouse not far away. They were of all ages, and some of the students who were training were younger than at Silver Fish Temple, early teens or maybe even younger.

“I mean, come on, you said you were from Tacoma,” said Maya. “That’s a city with what, like at least two thousand people, right?”

“Yeah, I was just getting used to it,” said Perry. “It’s so much less ... picturesque.”

“Giant magical lake, bamboo forests off in basically all directions, large, old, well-tended trees, and you’re *complaining*?” asked Maya.

“I dunno,” said Perry. “I liked the seclusion. The feeling of being alone. Last world was crowded, this world was a good change of pace. Crystal Lake Temple is already feeling like a cult leader’s compound.”

“Oh, more than you’d think,” said Maya. “They don’t quite have child brides, but it’s a near thing, which is lucky, because if they were molesting children I’d have had to fight them, and I’m a bit underpowered for taking on a whole temple on my own.”

“Sorry, back up,” said Perry.

“They’ve got families here,” said Maya. “Families are only for the inner and outer disciples, second sphere, but apparently marriage between spheres is fine. It’s a *wild* power imbalance, and they’ve also got plural marriage, so some of the younger people go from being raised by the temple to being married off to someone much older within the temple. Definitely raises some eyebrows.”

“Gross,” said Perry.

“It’s not sexist, at least,” said Maya with a sigh. “Men with a bunch of wives, women with a bunch of husbands.”

“Not polycules?” asked Perry.

“Fuck me, you really are from the West Coast,” said Maya. “But no. I haven’t really cracked why, but it’s some cultural thing. I just needed to make sure that it wasn’t something I couldn’t stomach.” She shrugged. “My stomach is fine. I think it’s just weird.”

“And what was the plan if it wasn’t something you could stomach?” asked Perry. He was honestly curious about that, how far her moralizations would go.

“Eh, probably stay on as long as I could, so I didn’t have to figure out all the second sphere stuff on my own without reading the reams.” She was looking out at the students moving through their forms in a passable imitation of synchronicity.

“Reams?” asked Perry.

“Yeah, read-mes, sorry,” said Maya. “Sometimes I feel like I’m going to be shaking slang for a the rest of my life.” She looked at him. “And you’d put up with anything if it got you one step closer to bringing your dead girlfriend back to life?”

“I don’t know,” said Perry. “Depends on what it was. If they were keeping slaves, obviously I’d have to kill them all.”

Maya frowned at him. “Alright, but you know that you would, right? Ethically?”

“Mmm,” said Perry. It was non-committal. He wanted caveats, and didn’t think she’d like them.

“Wow,” said Maya.

“Depends on how much it’s going to cost me,” said Perry. “If it’s a year of my life to effectively end slavery in one world, freeing hundreds of thousands, then yeah, I think you’ve gotta do it. But if there’s a good risk that I’m going to get my shit kicked in by slavers with superpowers and state-level actors, then no, I don’t think I’m *obligated* to die in the name of justice.”

“Alright, I’ll give that a pass,” said Maya. “Now come on, they’re going to want to chew your ass out about the fight and the flower.”

Maya had only been awake for two days, but she seemed to know the place well enough to walk confidently through its halls. People stared at them as they went, but that was something that Perry had experienced at Silver Fish Temple as well, and he was almost used to it. Two small children ran up to them, and tugged at his clothes before being pulled away by their mother, who looked mortified.

It was a decidedly less serene place, in spite of the magical lake whose waters didn’t move. The children were most of that, so many of them that Perry wondered what the demographics of this place looked like, and where they all ended up going once they turned into adults. There were also just so many more people, enough that he couldn’t hope to know all of them and their personal struggles. He hadn’t actually known anyone at Silver Fish Temple, in spite of having learned their names from Marchand, but *in principle* he could have.

Once they made it to another of the large buildings — Perry was already mentally calling it a campus rather than a ‘temple’ — Maya spoke to one of the men standing outside it, and then they had to wait for quite a bit.

“Less safe to talk here,” said Maya. “Just so you know.”

“I don’t have anything to say that I’d be worried about other people hearing,” said Perry.

“Right,” said Maya. “Sure.”

“And they already know everything from you and Luo Yanhua,” said Perry.

“They do,” said Maya. “They might ask for your opinions, and it would be good if you had the right ones. Just keep that in mind.”

“You’re the one that loves kicking hornets’ nests,” said Perry. “Not me.” He paused for a moment. “No sign of another thresholder, right?”

“Oh, yeah, his name is Jim,” said Maya. “He’s over on the other side of the valley, has powers leaking out his butt, and we’re going to have a fight to the death in six days, so you had better get powerful in a hurry.”

“Working on it,” said Perry. He looked at the closed doors. “But seriously, nothing?”

“Nothing,” said Maya. “Which is good, because it means we have time.”

There was no particular signal, but the man outside the building, who Perry took for a guard, opened up the door.

“That’s you,” said Maya. “Go on, take your lumps.”

Perry stepped into a large, open space with a balcony looking down on it from the second floor. It was sized for a few dozen people to gather, but there were only two occupants sitting on

pillows near the center of the room, legs crossed. One of them was Master Shan Yin, but the other was a woman that Perry didn't recognize. She was dressed in all white, but the outfit was far from simple, instead having differently textured lapels and decorations that could only be seen by the play of the light over white-on-white embroidery. Her hair was pure white, put up in a tight bun with a white butterfly clip. Her face was impassive, and like Master Shan Yin, she wasn't as wrinkled as he might have expected, though she had hard wiriness to her that came through even when she was calmly sitting on a pillow. He assumed that she was the master of this temple, but hoped that introductions were in order.

"Peregrin Holzmann, you stand before Grandmaster Li Meifeng of the Crystal Lake Temple," said Master Shan Yin.

Perry bowed low, and when he rose, saw from a slight lift of her lips that he hoped was a good sign rather than amusement at his faux pas. He said nothing, waiting for them.

"How do you feel?" asked Li Meifeng.

"I'm well, grandmaster," said Perry. "Thank you for your hospitality while I was indisposed."

"He *is* much better behaved than her," said Li Meifeng as an aside to Shan Yin.

"He is the more dangerous of the two, I think," said Shan Yin. "In temperament rather than the techniques he possesses."

Perry still stayed silent. If they wanted to have a private conversation in front of him, he would have to hope that he wasn't expected to interject. Personally, he wouldn't have said for a second that he was the less dangerous of the two, since Maya had as much as promised that she'd turn against them if she found something she couldn't accept. Crystal Lake Temple was already reminding Perry of a cult, and he knew what sorts of things came with that particular territory.

"Peregrin," said Li Meifeng. "You fought with Zhang Lingxiu atop Dragon's Breath Peak over your desire to ingest the Celestial Ascension Blossom. Do you believe you were justified in doing so?"

"Yes, grandmaster," said Perry. "I come to the Great Arc from another world, to battle a foe of great strength. It is imperative that I have the means to wage war. I also believed that he was motivated not by his duty to the sect, but by personal anger."

"He was your superior," said Li Meifeng. Her affect was flat, as though she was merely making an observation, letting a neutral fact pass her lips.

The word was a language problem for Perry, since he didn't know whether 'superior' was meant as 'better than you' or if instead it meant 'someone in your chain of command'. He paused, for maybe a little too long, while he tried to work out what she was saying. "There was bad blood between us. If he wanted my respect, he had done nothing to inspire it. The last time he had expressed his authority over me, it had been by beating me over a perceived slight."

Li Meifeng watched him, waiting, or perhaps contemplating. Her face gave nothing away. Now that Perry was second sphere, he was going to have to learn how to be implacable, but it apparently didn't come just from eating the right flower.

"You do not mention Luo Yanhua," Li Meifeng finally said.

"She was there only as an observer and chaperone, grandmaster," said Perry. "She didn't take part in the fight, nor did she speak, except to argue in our defense. It didn't involve her."

"We have spoken to her already," said Shan Yin. "There is no need for you to defend her when she has already defended herself."

"I'm not defending her, master," said Perry. "I'm only explaining why I didn't mention her." He kept his lips tight. He wasn't sure what was going to happen if they decided not to let him train with them, and he thought that was probably the least of the punishments they could legally inflict upon him. Capital punishment didn't seem *entirely* out of the realm of possibility, but if that was what they were going to do, he thought they would probably have handled it differently.

"Your victory over Zhang Lingxiu removes a stain upon Moon Gate," said Master Shan Yin. "Yet your pursuit of the Celestial Ascension Blossom was something that you did outside of the advice and counsel of the sect."

Perry nodded his acceptance of that.

"You are hereby barred from ever becoming a member of Moon Gate," said Grandmaster Li Meifeng. "Yet we will help you to train, in exchange for learning your techniques. You will be given a disciple to tend to your needs. When the time comes, you will leave Crystal Lake Temple without discussion or complaint."

Perry clenched his teeth slightly. This wasn't what Maya had prepared him for, and he wondered whether it was the same thing she'd been told. *She* had gone in for the killing blow on an enemy who had surrendered, whether she'd known that he had given up or not. "I understand, grandmaster," said Perry with a small bow.

"There is one other matter," said Grandmaster Li Meifeng. "The armor you wear."

Perry held his breath. If they were going to say that the armor needed to be destroyed, he was going to have to fight them, or at least try to get out from under their thumb. He would go live in the woods if he had to.

"You may not wear the armor for the duration of your time here," said Grandmaster Li Meifeng. "Armor is the tool of cowards, a detriment to technique, a crutch that weakens the vital spirit. Like a plant grown inside a bottle, it will constrain you. You are not a disciple here, and never will be, but if you take training from our members, you are never to use the armor. It will stay in the armory, forgotten until the moment of your departure."

"I need to visit it, from time to time," said Perry. He was thinking on his feet. "It needs maintenance that only I can do."

Grandmaster Li Meifeng looked over at Master Shan Yin, and he gave a slight nod. "That will be acceptable."

Perry let out a breath. That way he would be able to take the earpiece and at least *talk* to March. "Grandmaster, I've been using the armor to keep myself contained when the moon is out," said Perry. "What am I supposed to do without it?"

"Learn to control yourself," said Li Meifeng. "Luo Yanhua has said that you can endure the arcshadow without the armor."

"But a full moon —" began Perry.

"The three moons will be at their fullest in two and a half weeks," said Li Meifeng. "You have until then to ensure your control is like the hardest steel."

Perry nodded. That wasn't ideal, but he could work with it.

"You are dismissed," said Li Meifeng. "I have summoned the disciple who will be responsible for you during your time here. Go now, and bear in mind that your place here is impermanent."

Perry couldn't get out of there fast enough. It felt like utter disrespect for them to say that he would never be a disciple, but he wasn't sure why he cared, given that all he was really after was a place to stay and some training in the mystical arts.

For the time being, he would have a place to explore what this new power was, and to hone it into something that would allow him to become a capable combatant. When the other thresholder showed up, if there was one, he would be ready. And if there wasn't another thresholder, he would have to figure out what to do about Maya Singh.