

"Tell me your name," said Perry as he looked over the glowing chain.

"Helge," she replied after a moment. "You're ... like him?"

"Like Jeff?" asked Perry. She flinched at the name, then nodded. "I'm a world traveler, like him, but we're not all evil. I'll get you out of here, don't worry." He looked at the chain again. The glow meant magic, unless it was just a mundane glowing metal. "How long have you been in here?"

"Two weeks," she said. "Maybe a little more." Her eyes had gone to Perry's sword. "I was a ballerina, with one of the major companies. He took women back to his hotel room, and paid well."

"Paid well?" asked Perry.

"Paid for the company," she said. She looked away when she said it. "He gave out lavish gifts. It was in all the papers."

"Ah," said Perry. He was frowning at the chain. His sword had trouble with metal, and unknown magic *also* smelled like a trap. "Do you know how this chain works?"

"Cut my leg off if you have to," said the woman, Helge. She gave Perry a deadly serious look. This was a *ballerina* saying that, he noted, a woman whose legs were her life, her livelihood. "Unless he's dead?"

"No," said Perry. "Unfortunately not. March, are we getting a signal in here?"

"No, sir," said Marchand. "In fact, I can't pinpoint our location at all, and extended mapping has been worrying."

"Worrying?" asked Perry.

"There does not appear to be anything beyond this room, sir," said Marchand. "I would say that we're trapped underground with no way out, but there does not appear to be any rock or earth past the walls."

"Well, don't worry about the worrying," said Perry. "I'm going to try to break the chain."

"You're talking to someone?" asked Helge. She was wary about Perry, and there wasn't really a reason for her not to be. She'd been stuck down in a rape dungeon for two weeks.

"I have an assistant," said Perry. He didn't feel like explaining it further, not until he knew what her reaction would be. She was clearly from another world, and he'd come to that conclusion before she'd said 'ballet'. Esperide had never had anything of the sort. "Look, time is short right now, I need to be on the outside."

"He's going to come for me," said Helge. "He sees me as a pet. You can stand against him?" There was pleading in her voice, but also something else, a hardness, as if daring him to say no so she could berate him.

"I've stood against him," said Perry. "That's how I got in here. He had a piece of magic, a ring, and I bit his fingers off." He realized only after he said it that this wasn't the most reassuring thing to hear from a would-be savior. "Look, while I do this, you tell me how you came to be here."

"I already answered that," she replied. "He invited me back to his hotel room."

"And then he dragged you in here?" asked Perry. He knelt down and grabbed the chain in both hands, giving it a tug. That wasn't the best way to break a chain, he didn't think, but he would need some tools to do a better job. He strained, and the HUD highlighted a weak link, though Perry wasn't sure how Marchand had determined which one it was. They all looked the same to him.

"He did," said Helge. "I've been chained up here ever since."

"That's awful," said Perry. "I'm sorry." He strained again, putting the full power of the suit into it, supplemented with his internal well of energy. He was going to have to make another trip into space to recharge if he wanted to be at full strength for the third round. This time, the weak link bent more, but something in the armor gave way too, and Perry stopped. "Almost got it."

"He said he was from another world," said Helge. This was tentatively spoken, as if watching to see his reaction to that. "Are you too?"

"I have some bad news," said Perry as he healed the broken part. Spot healing was another of those things that had gotten better after two years of practice. It mostly involved venting energy to a specific place. "After he locked you up, he moved between worlds, and there's no way to get you back. And there's worse news, which I guess you might as well hear now — the planet you left had some kind of plague, unleashed by a lunatic."

"A plague?" asked Helge, hand going to her mouth but not quite covering it, a strange gasp that didn't make it out before being followed by another question. "Some kind of sickness?"

"He was light on the details," said Perry. He pulled on the chain one last time, straining hard, and the weak link broke. All at once, the glow went out of the whole thing, whatever magic was a part of it disabled or ruined.

"Thank you," said Helge. Her voice was soft. "Can you help me out of here?"

"There's a wrinkle with that," said Perry. "We're a long, long way from civilization, and I don't have a way to transport you, not unless you count this ring. It's going to have to be your ship, your cart." He had no idea how to talk to someone from her world, given he only had Jeff's stories to go on. Low-tech, Jeff had said, high magic.

"I don't want to spend another minute here," said Helge. She reached down to itch at the manacled leg. They would have to take some time to take it off later, but at least the chain was broken.

"There's really nothing," said Perry. "It's not a walkable distance."

"It has the stench of him," said Helge. She was trying to look him in the eyes, but he had the helmet on, so her eyes searched in vain for a place to focus on. "Please."

"We're only out for a bit," said Perry. "He's still out there, and I'm not going to be able to protect you if he comes back, even if I were able to beat him in a fight. We both have enough destructive power that bystanders aren't going to have a good time." It was as much of a compromise as he felt comfortable with. As soon as he'd taken possession of the ring, he'd assumed some responsibility for her.

They walked through the shelfspace, avoiding all the riches. There was more that Perry hadn't seen on his way in, including a collection of coins, cash, and what were almost certainly precious metals. There was enough gold that Perry almost stopped in place to count it, but in any world where gold was as valuable as on Earth, it would be enough to make him a rich man.

"He was a thief," said Helge. She wasn't looking at one of the things that had been collected with an expression of wonder. Instead, it was with mute horror. "He takes what he wants."

"This way," said Perry.

It took a moment to figure out how to use the ring to open up a path back to where he'd been in the real world, and the moment stretched for long enough that he was almost worried that he'd made some mistake and wouldn't be able to get back out. When reality was peeled back to show the planet, Helge bolted, moving with surprising speed to go stand in the open field, and Perry would have chased her, except once she was free of the shelfspace, she dropped to her knees and felt the plants below her with outstretched fingers.

Perry followed behind her and stood there, rubbing the ring on his finger. She was going to have to go back in. They were more than three hundred miles from anyone, but he would try to give her some time. He was hoping that she would go gently, but he had the feeling that she might flat-out refuse, and he didn't know what he would do then.

"March, no report from anyone?" asked Perry as he watched this strange woman touch grass.

"Re-establishing communication, sir," said Marchand. "No messages are waiting for us, no."

"Good, I guess," said Perry. "Send out contact pings, make sure they're still there."

"Will do, sir," said Marchand.

He looked at Helge, who was still on her knees. They would have to get shoes for her, and clothes that were more than just a shift, and ideally, some help with her mental health. The Natrix would surely take her in, even if it put them at a bit of risk, but it didn't seem like they would be at *more* risk from Jeff, particularly given that they hadn't actually given Perry any material help.

"It's so green," said Helge. They were among a variety of reeds, which were near the end of their natural lifespan, having grown tall and thick, basically a larger version of bamboo. The seeds had already been dispersed into the western wind, the life cycle complete, and most of

the surrounding area had been denuded by the enormous insects. The grass was a bit like moss, and grew in the shade of the reeds. He didn't know how it propagated, but it was already growing brown from the heat.

"We're going to need to move," said Perry. "Aside from Jeff, there are threats here, giant insects that no one would be safe from. I have my sword, which I can use to fly, but it's going to take some time either way."

She turned toward him. "Tell me about this world."

"It's a long story," said Perry. "There's a thin strip of habitable land, maybe two hundred miles wide, and to one side it's too hot for anything to live, and to the other, ice and snow that nothing can survive." He took a breath. "The habitable zone moves at maybe a mile a day, and everything has to move with it — the plants send off their seeds, the insects migrate, and the people have moving cities. It's one of those we're going to, to get you situated."

"Situated?" she asked.

"They're good people," said Perry. "I've been here for two years, they'll make sure that you're fed and clothed, that you have a place to sleep. It won't be what you're used to, not the life that a ballerina would be used to, but ... it's what I can offer right now."

Helge watched him for a moment. "I would do anything for you," she said. "Any possible way I could show my gratitude for saving me, you have to let me know."

"That's not necessary," said Perry. Something about her countenance had changed, and it might have been because she'd come to the realization that she was very dependent on him here, out among the wildness. "The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get you somewhere safe."

She looked out at a gap in the reeds and the whole forest of tall, alien bamboo and kudzu beyond it. It wasn't too far off from the Great Arc in some respects, though these plants grew much, much faster, and didn't propagate with shoots or rhizomes. From what Perry knew, they'd had nothing like it on her world, but then, Jeff had been sparse on what Perry considered to be the vital details like how people lived and worked. He supposed he would get answers soon enough.

"You didn't have nature on your world," said Perry after having given her as much time as he felt he could. There had been response pings from all his allies, indicating that they were fine, which was a relief. He wasn't sure how long that state of affairs was going to last.

Helge was slow to respond. "We had parks. Nothing like this." She turned to look at where the shelfspace had been, but Perry had closed it as soon as he'd stepped out. "Being chained up like that, no windows, no fresh air, that was one of my worst nightmares. He came in wounded, twice, screaming and gasping. That was you?"

"It was," said Perry. "Or ... I guess he captured you *before* his final fight on your world, so it's possible that the other thresholder he fought delivered a wound that made him retreat too."

"He fought someone else?" asked Helge. "A ... lunatic, you said?" Her face was soft. Her eyes had gone wide.

"He's been talking a lot," said Perry. "Does the name Marjut mean anything to you?"

"No," she replied. "It's a foreign name."

Perry frowned beneath the helmet. It would probably have been a good idea to take the helmet off, but he didn't know exactly when Jeff would be back, and getting caught without it wouldn't do. There was something he wasn't getting here, because it really didn't seem like Jeff's *style* to keep someone locked up in the shelfspace, and chaining her to the wall with some kind of magic seemed ... crude, he supposed. It also seemed like a lot of work, coming in with a chamber pot and leaving meals. Work didn't seem like Jeff's thing.

"Do you know ... is there a reason he didn't have a cell?" asked Perry.

"To hold me in?" she asked. "I don't know." She took a deep breath. "I'm ready to go back in now, I think. You won't leave me stranded in there, right?"

"No," said Perry. He waved the ring and opened the space up. It wasn't exactly a portal, it was more an overlapping of realities, though they also remained distinct from each other. He was going to have to figure out how to pull things out of the space on the fly, like Jeff had, and then also find out some way of safely cataloging everything inside. Jeff didn't use much for weapons though, which meant that the weapon rack probably wouldn't provide much use.

Helge stepped in and took another deep breath. "You'll let me back out?"

"I will," said Perry. "If it's the last thing I do with my dying breath, I'll let you out."

"Thank you," she said. "For everything."

Perry gave her a nod, then waved his hand and closed her off inside the shelfspace.

The choice was then a difficult one: where to go? The Natrix was large and familiar, and didn't have a deadly environment outside its doorstep, and it was relatively close to him, meaning that he'd have many hours by sword flight. The Kjarni were about the same distance away, and were wholly less welcoming, but Perry thought there was less cause for Jeff to cause collateral damage on purpose, which meant that it might be a good place for them to fight. And as an outside option, there was the Crypt, which was still making its way across the ice. Brigitta was there, which would make it a juicy target given how much Perry cared for her.

Eventually, Perry settled on the Natrix. It had the best defenses, though they weren't really designed for small human-shaped things that came flying in at hundreds of miles an hour. It also had the most people, and if it really came down to it, it was more important to defend than what was essentially a passenger train. His heart tore for Brigitta, and he wasn't sure he could forgive himself if she was killed, but the Natrix was the sensible option. It would be the place that Helge would probably find most easy to fit in with.

The trip took time, and Perry stayed in close contact with everyone, ready to turn at a moment's notice to arrive far too late to help, just in case Jeff attacked. He was too *fast*, that was the problem, and as a dragon, could probably do much more damage to the structures than as a person.

He called Brigitta while in flight.

"I might have a way to get you through to the next world," said Perry. "To get a significant number of people through, actually. He's proven that it's possible in principle."

There was a pause from the other end. "How many?" she asked.

"A hundred," said Perry. "Two hundred, maybe, though the fire marshall won't like it. And depending on how much time we have, it would be good for you to get in there, make sure that there's a self-contained system in place, toilets and food and microfusion reactors and whatever else you would need to allow them a place to stay in the long term. Because I'm pretty sure I could survive in a place with toxic gas, which means there's a chance that's where I would end up in the next world, so it might need to be a significant amount of time spent in that space."

"Slow down," said Brigitta.

"It's a way for me to take you with me," said Perry. "This is big."

"Would you want that?" asked Brigitta.

"Of course," said Perry. "That's why I'm saying we need to start making plans."

"And were you going to ask whether it was what I wanted?" asked Brigitta.

Perry was silent for a moment. "The work of generations is getting off this planet," said Perry.

"It's what I'm offering."

"It was always supposed to be temporary, you being here," said Brigitta.

Perry listened to her breathing through the audio connection. "You don't want to come with me?" he asked. Even speaking the question was painful, a tightness in his chest. He was awash with emotion from the fight, hormones racing back and forth, the aftershock of an extreme adrenaline rush and boatloads of pain. That made it all hit harder, feel worse.

"You make it sound so charming, being stuck in a room for years while you fight people outside it," said Brigitta. "And if you lost, what would happen to this artifact? If your plan had worked, if the bomb had been close enough, you would have destroyed that space without even knowing it was there. That would be our fate, always depending on you to win the next battle."

"We'll talk about it later," said Perry. "Think it over, and try to think about the technical problems." She was always easier to deal with when she was thinking about technical problems, and he knew that was one of the ways to get her on board with anything. Interesting problems to be solved were something she loved.

"I can promise to think, but I can't promise it will change my mind," said Brigitta.

"I'll be talking with the others," said Perry. "Trying to get a list of volunteers, people who want to go with us."

"Do that," said Brigitta with a sigh. "There's work that needs doing here. I love you."

"I love you too," said Perry.

She had first said it six months ago, muttered as she was falling asleep with one leg hooked over him, and he had replied back, which made her wake back up with a wide smile on her face. It had felt joyous then, like he had done something worthwhile just by saying it. Now there was resignation in her voice, and for his part, the words were just rote. Two weeks ago, when Jeff had come, he had been willing to throw their entire relationship away. How much did he love her, really? He cared for her, certainly, cared for her more than anyone else on the planet, and having her with him as he went through the worlds, seemed like it resolved everything between them. But of course there were the choices he'd made in the past, which cast doubt over a new future.

He tried not to think about it. Instead, he put his thoughts toward the coming battle, whatever shape or form it would take. Their scheduled match had started with Perry springing a trap and ended with Jeff fleeing. When and where they would meet again was up in the air. Perry was still hoping that the radiation might complete its grim task.

When he arrived at the Natrrix, he was relieved to see that it was still untouched. There were perhaps more bug corpses at the well-defended perimeter, next to a rust-red plateau this time, but there was no sign that Jeff had returned. He had stayed here for almost two full weeks, and from everything Perry had seen, it seemed like it was still business as usual. All the farming frames were out, drawing water through pumps that fed from a nearby lake.

"This is it?" asked Helge, stepping out of the shelfspace. She had found a thick coat from within, and armed herself with a knife as long as her forearm, which she was holding as though she intended to stab Jeff the very moment he reappeared.

"The Natrrix," said Perry. "It's one of only a few colonies on this planet."

She narrowed her eyes against the twilight sun and looked the Natrrix over. It was like a disemboweled beast at this stage in the cycle, with hoses and wires spilling out of the sides, the farms having spread out like a stomach split open.

"But there are other planets?" asked Helge. Her eyes were still on the Natrrix, and hadn't moved from it. Her knife was still held defensively in front of her.

"In theory," said Perry. "In practice ... they've been stranded here for hundreds of years, unable to build up the tech base necessary for, I guess, a ship large enough to take them all across the galaxy to their homeworld, if their homeworld still exists."

"Why wouldn't it?" asked Helge, finally breaking her view of the Natrrix to turn toward him.

"I mean, it probably *does* exist, but that doesn't mean there are people on it," said Perry. "It's been a long time without any kind of response or rescue. It's possible something happened. With advanced civilizations, there's always a chance of bringing about your own downfall."

"So these might be the only humans left?" asked Helge.

"One of approximately three groups, yeah," said Perry. "And it's a somewhat tentative existence for everyone."

"Such a small footprint," said Helge. "A million people, all told?"

"No," said Perry. "Far, far less. Maybe twenty thousand, if that."

Helge shook her head. "They're barely clinging on then."

"Depends on how you look at it," said Perry. "Come on, I'll set you up with someone who can get you some food and a hot shower."

Mette came out to meet them as they came up the gangway, but pulled up short when she saw that Helge was carrying a knife.

"Problem?" asked Mette.

"Helge, this is Mette, she's one of the leaders here, put the knife down, she's going to show you to your room," said Perry.

"I'm not putting the knife down," said Helge. "And I'm not leaving your side until he's dead."

"Well I like her," said Mette. "In spirit, if not in practice." She looked Helge up and down. "We don't know where the big gold idiot is, unfortunately, so it would be great if you could put the knife down, take a shower, get some medical attention, and then eat some food."

"He's not an idiot," said Helge. "He's a puffed-up braggart, but he's clever."

"He's not more clever than a nuclear bomb," said Perry.

"Odds that he just drops dead?" asked Mette, looking at Perry. "I've heard March's numbers, I want yours."

"March knows better than me," said Perry.

"March doesn't know magic," said Mette.

"Magic?" asked Helge, looking between the two of them. The knife hadn't yet left her hand, and while Perry was unconcerned and would be able to stop her if she took any unwise action with it, he really would have felt better if she dropped it.

"Your world had magic, right?" asked Perry. "Eight magics?"

Helge frowned. "You have those here?"

"No," said Perry. It was an odd question, and he lowered his opinion of her intelligence a bit. She'd said that Jeff had been talking to her, hadn't she? "Others, beyond those eight."

"Giant metal monstrosities, but also magic?" asked Helge.

"Set the knife down and I can read you in," said Mette. "You've come a long way, and seen all kinds of things that no one should see, and you're displaced from a world that, to hear Jeff tell it, was in its death throes from a plague some thresholder released."

"I think 'death throes' is putting it a bit strongly," said Perry. "It's possible they were going to find a cure." He looked at Helge. "Three weeks in that space, you said? You've never felt sick?"

"No," said Helge.

"Probably still a good idea to quarantine you," said Perry.

"The sickness had started when I went to be with him," said Helge. "It wasn't spread by people, it was spread by rats and insects."

"I don't want to put this poor woman in quarantine for another two days," said Mette. "Not even a *nice* quarantine, not after she'd been imprisoned. Jeff was feeding you, caring for you, over the past two weeks, right?"

"In his way," said Helge. "He brought in metal trays of things he knew I wouldn't like. He seemed to take some pleasure in seeing me eat things I didn't want to eat."

"Bastard," said Mette. She grit her teeth and looked at Perry. "You kill that fucker as quick as you can, won't you? Fucking rapist piece of shit."

"My virtue is intact," said Helge, speaking quickly to clarify. She looked at Perry as she said it.

"Is it?" asked Mette. "He didn't —"

"No," said Helge. "He said that he had no interest unless I was interested. I thought about it, so I could have a chance to stab him, but ..."

"But he takes a knife to the guts surprisingly well?" asked Mette.

"From what I've seen, yes," said Helge. "He's incredibly strong, unnaturally so."

"So what were you planning to do with that?" asked Mette.

"He has the heart of a dragon," said Helge. "It's a weak point. He told this to me, as a way of taunting me. His finger went to his breast, and he said that if I was able to drive my fork in there, it would be enough to end him. But it might not even be true."

"She has information then," said Leticia, who had walked up to join Mette.

"Letty," said Perry. "It's been a while."

"I don't get an 'it's been a while'?" asked Mette. She pouted slightly, which was perhaps fair. They had worked closely with each other, mostly on the magic stuff, and while it had always had undertones he thought were dangerous — of the 'let's sleep together' variety — they were still friends.

"Can we talk privately, Perry?" asked Leticia.

"Helge, I'm going to need that knife," said Perry. "You won't need it here. They have guns, which I guess you don't know about, and even those wouldn't be much of a threat. I'm pretty sure any weapon you have would just bounce off his chest."

Helge hesitated, but she handed over the knife, and Perry stepped away to talk to Leticia while Mette asked some questions. Perry used the ring to place the knife into shelfspace, which he didn't look half as cool doing.

"What's the timeline?" she asked. "Minutes, hours, days?"

"I don't know," said Perry.

"Is he coming back here?" asked Leticia.

"I don't know that either," said Perry. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to end it. He's fast. I'm here to protect you. Given that we were both going all out, that he lost one of his defensive powers, and that he's irradiated pretty bad ... I think this is going to be a win for me, for *us*. And I'm sorry about what you had to go through."

"It's what I volunteered for," said Leticia. Her lips were thin. "It's not the first time I slept with a man I didn't feel like sleeping with. It's a central aspect of the female experience."

"It doesn't have to be," said Perry. "It *shouldn't* be. If that's how it is here, that's something you should change." The gender politics of the Natrix were something he'd butted up against a few times. Women were just expected to have too many damned children, that was the root of it, but he'd never felt that his opinions were particularly valued. Leticia had probably slept with a number of men who were good matches but to whom she felt no particular attraction, was Perry's read of what she said. That was a lot different than sleeping with a psychopath as a stalling tactic.

"I don't want to talk about that," said Leticia. "I don't think you understand, and I think if you *did* understand, I wouldn't care about your perspective. I want to talk about what's best for this colony, and how we can keep from being destroyed."

"Sure," said Perry. "What we can do right now is let some weather balloons fly and hope that they give us more coverage, limit how much people are allowed away from the Natrix, and hope that he has trouble finding anything on the night side so that Brigitta is safe."

"That doesn't inspire confidence," said Leticia. "And we can't shut down excursions. They're gathering materials that we need, *food* that we need."

“He might stay clear of the Natrix after having been shot,” said Perry. “Esper said that he seemed to be avoiding the main guns, or at least hadn’t stood anywhere that would line him up. He wasn’t paranoid, but he was cautious. The mechs out in the field though? Those are juicy targets for retribution.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Leticia. “Coast on what we have in storage until we can barely remember the scent of dinner?”

“It’s an emergency,” said Perry. “So yes. The mechs are a weak point. He could be above us right now, and we’d have a hard time tracking him, while he’d have a pretty easy time seeing where the mechs were going. And that’s if he has normal human vision, which I’m guessing he —”

“You haven’t read the logs?” asked Leticia. “He’s bragged about his eyesight several times.”

“I read everything Marchand felt was relevant, and everything that you flagged,” said Perry. “Alright, so his eyesight is impeccable, which makes the whole problem worse. Bring the mechs in.”

“I believe it might be a bit late for that, sir,” said Marchand, piping the audio to the outside so Leticia could hear it. “We just had a call from one of the field teams. It appears to be Jeff’s voice, and he’s asking to speak with you.”

“Fuck,” said Perry. “*Fuck*, put him through.”

Leticia’s face had gone white as a sheet, but she hadn’t lost an ounce of determination. Her fingers had curled into fists.

“Perry,” said Jeff’s voice. “Oh Perry, what did you do to me?”

“It’s radiation poisoning,” said Perry.

“I’m *immune* to poison you fucking dick,” said Jeff. His voice sounded gravelly and wet, like he was on the verge of coughing. “I’m powering through it, but just tell me what it is, how to get rid of it.”

“There’s no cure,” said Perry. “At least, not that I know of, not from any world I’ve visited.”

“Look, you let me know how to stop this, how to get back in ship-shape, and I’ll spare them, okay?” he asked. He had all the charm of a used car salesman.

“I can’t tell you, because there’s no cure,” said Perry. “Let’s go find a field, and I can kick your ass there. A portal will open up, you’ll slink through, and maybe there’s something on the other end that can save you.” There was no way that Perry was going to follow through on that. He was going to crush Jeff’s skull if he had half the chance, or drive his sword right through the dragon heart in the bastard’s chest.

“I’m fighting through it,” said Jeff. “It’s going to take me a bit. But then I’m going to fuck this planet *up*. I’m going to kill everyone, dude. Lay waste to it all.” He coughed, and it was a wet

hacking cough that went on too long and seemed to end with him spitting something up. “I’m going to avoid you until everyone is dead. I’m so much faster than you, how would you even stop me? I’ll just be going from place to place. It takes you so fuckin’ long to get to the Natrix, how many people do you think I could kill before you even showed up? And you’d just see my trail as I fly the fuck away from you. That, over and over. So just tell me, tell me what the cure is. Because I’m supposed to be immune to poison, to disease, this wasn’t supposed to be how I go.”

“I don’t have an answer,” said Perry. “At best, you can get a blood transfusion.”

“What the fuck is that?” asked Jeff.

“It’s a complicated medical procedure,” said Perry. “And it won’t help your cells stop dying.”

“What the fuck is a cell?” asked Jeff. He coughed again, though shorter this time.

“The short version is that we take some good blood and put it into you,” said Perry. “Your blood is sick, your bones are sick, and you’re going to die unless being a golden boy or a dragon is going to save you. But you can’t just get a blood transfusion without doing tests to see if you’re compatible, and — look, we should just fight, then you can lose, go through a portal, find a world with a cure.”

“Shit,” said Jeff. “You want to win that bad? You’d sacrifice all these people to fight me at my lowest? I underestimated what a shitbag you are, and I’ve gotta be honest, I really thought you were a shitbag.”

“Don’t kill anyone,” said Perry, clenching his teeth. “There’s no good cure, the only cure is through a portal, you’re going to *die*.”

“Oh, I just killed like sixteen people to have this chat,” said Jeff. “Didn’t really have to, they probably would have given me the radio if I just asked, but it felt good to let some steam off.”

“March, pinpoint his — thanks,” said Perry as a rough location showed up on the HUD.

“Well look, I’m off,” said Jeff. “Not really feeling up for a fight right now, and I know better than to trust tech. You got the better of me, but it was the bomb more than anything. You know, I knew there was a bomb there? I won’t say *how*, but I had eyes on the place the whole time you moved the bomb in, and I was thinking to myself, man, does this guy think I’m dumb? I had no idea you’d be able to hit me from so far away. I mean, you hit *everything* from that far away, destroyed the whole thing, would have wiped a whole *city* off the face of the planet if it weren’t in the middle of the wilderness. I want that power, by the way.”

Perry was already running over. He was *running*, not flying, because he was faster on his feet, and though he was burning energy to do it, draining his vessels and the armor’s batteries, there was a chance he could catch up to Jeff.

“Sir, might I suggest an alternate course of action?” asked Marchand.

“Go for it,” said Perry, not slowing down as he took a huge hill at full speed, running up the side of it. It was five miles, that was it, he could cover that in a handful of minutes, depending on the terrain. And then it was either a trap or Jeff would fly away, and Perry would be left helpless.

“Instruct him on how to stay in radio contact, sir,” said Marchand. “Otherwise it seems he may kill again in order to have another of these taunting conversations.”

“Do it,” said Perry. “Instruct him.”

“And why’d you eat my fingers?” asked Jeff. “Pretty rude of you. How am I going to pick my nose now?”

Marchand began relaying the information to Jeff, and there was some silence on the other end, aside from some noises as Jeff was, presumably, following the instructions on how to detach the radio and its antenna. Marchand knew every inch of every mech the Natrix had, and radios were one of the things that mech pilots only rarely built on their own from scratch.

When Perry crested the hill, he saw ruined mechs and bodies that had been torn apart. It had been a brutal slaughter, and in the sky there was a golden light that was moving faster than his ability to catch up.

“Oh man, we get to talk forever now?” asked Jeff. “Just back and forth, you and me? See, that was good thinking on your part, now I don’t need to kill people to have a chat.” He coughed again. “I *am* pushing through it. Maybe I’ll be less pissed off in a day or so, when my eyes don’t feel like they’re about to fall out. Why don’t you take it slow, relax, lick your wounds, and digest your fingers. Your robot can record things, can’t he? Just check your messages in the morning.”

Perry growled, then closed his eyes and let out a long sigh that was intended to make him feel calm and at peace with the situation.

There was nothing that Perry could do except go back to the Natrix and protect it, but he couldn’t be everywhere at once, and it was easier to attack than defend.

He needed to talk to Helge and learn whether there was anything that Jeff had given away, true weaknesses beyond putting a stake through his heart, anything he’d let slip because it gave him pleasure to brag and gloat.

He was worried that Jeff was going to the Kjärni and that a second nuclear bomb would repay the first.