

AN: This is the last part of Changeling that will be available for single tiers. The entire story is still subject to rewrites since I'm trying to find the proper voice for it. Enjoy!

Electricity arced between Nestra's fingers. It was gray and ominous, seemingly absorbing the surrounding light. Then, she put on her mask and tried again. She could feel the mana react and pushed harder, getting a single arc that tickled her index. She waved her hand around out of habit.

Needed to try something else.

She wasn't stupid enough to test what she guessed was poison resistance. There was, however, the armor, and she knew what it implied.

Nestra moved downstairs to a kitchen to grab the chef knife. It was a nice knife. It was also completely unneeded since she had a cooking robots like most people but she still did like to try new recipes on her own. It was sharp. Very sharp. She placed the tip against the skin of her arm and pushed gently. Pearling blood stopped her. It... didn't feel different.

She tore off her mask and tried again. Her gray skin resisted though there was a little pain. She pushed harder.

The blade bent.

She stopped immediately. Chef knives were expensive.

"Ok. Ok. That's good."

Her armor protected her for now but natural resilience was definitely what made raiders survive the incredible amounts of punishment monsters could dish out. Interestingly, there was no wound when she put the mask back on. Her scars were still there.

Idly, Nestra wondered what would happen if she just stayed like that for ten years. Would her human self become increasingly older while the gray version stayed the same? Idle thoughts for now. Maybe her mysterious benefactor would have better answers.

She was stalling.

With a sigh, Nestra picked up her visor and found Gorge's contact information. No matter how she looked at it, he was her best bet.

The fact he knew her presented a major security risk. Ideally, she would find a buyer anonymously then use a dead drop. The problem was that she didn't know of a way to find them safely. The net was filled with bait websites set up by TPD's AIs for suckers trying to dodge taxes thinking they were smart. If Nestra got caught trying to sell mana stones, a fine would be the least of her worries.

Gorge was safer. He was a known entity. He was an absolute rabid asshole but he was an asshole with a code, of that she was sure. It would have to be enough.

Sighing, she called him. It took maybe four rings for him to pick up.

“Are you butt dialing me now, Palladian?”

“Hope I’m not disturbing your beauty sleep. Look, I got two things to ask. First, can I get bullets for your revolver?”

“Sure. Four hundred a pop.”

“You’re fucking joking,” she blurted.

“Nope.”

“The fuck is it made with? Crushed mana stones?”

“Yes.”

Nestra swallowed her saliva.

“You’re not joking.”

“Look, there is a reason I got through corpo-grade combat augs. Those bullets? They’re hand crafted with enchanted material. You want some? You pay the price but I assure you, they’ll pierce through anything.”

“Anything?”

“Don’t try them on high gleams, you psycho bitch. You won’t even get to pull the trigger. Tell you what, buy the four complement of four and I’ll shave off a hundred. Fifteen hundred. A bargain.”

“Yeah thanks that’s just half of my monthly salary.”

“Safety has its price.”

“And uh, another question. Do you... also buy stuff? Like... raw material?”

Nestra could hear Gorge breathing on the other side as she bit her lip. Riel, that was so fucking awkward. She really wasn’t cut for the mafia life.

“You coming to the service?” Gorge finally asked.

“Yeah.”

“See you there, then.”

Right. That was clear enough. Nestra sighed and went to dress herself. The weather was nice today, spring well on its way. Meeting Kim meant she had to dress up the part. A strategic choice had to be made between a long dark top over jeans which was pretty much the female cop uniform, or a more civilian choice. It was a mask over her mask, which was funny in a weird sort of way. She decided to pick the civilian one because she had a nice dress gifted by Aunt Claire, some low gleam designer stuff. That would set her on an equal social footing with Kim while the cop persona placed her in the same hierarchy, though much lower. No matter what, she needed makeup.

Thus armed, and after taking her funeral suit with her, she was ready to go.

Kim was already there when Nestra showed up. The place she'd selected was a Sichuan food restaurant, a weird one a little off grid and that forwent advertisement. Dark limos dropped suits on and off as she went in, their eyes following her in her light blue dress. A waiter guided her to a decorated private room. Kim stood up when she arrived, an unexpected show of respect. Contrary to Nestra's expectations, Kim wore an embroidered gold dress and sunglasses, looking more like an affluent businesswoman on her day off than a rat squad mook. She even nodded at Nestra's garments.

"Good. Your mind is more flexible than I feared. This is a good pick."

"Good day. So, shall I call you Kim sunbae?"

"And to you too. Just Kim will do when we're in private. Sunbae is fine in any other settings. I appreciate you making the effort, by the way. Your file let me believe that our current meeting might be more... adversarial. Please, come and sit."

A robot dropped two bowls of rice and a variety of reddish dishes, including grilled bullfrog legs in pepper that emitted a small trace of mana.

"Monster meat?" Nestra asked.

"Surprised? This is a government restaurant. Sometimes, we get scraps off of the gleams' tables. It also gives us some privacy, which we will need. Eat while it's hot."

"Right to business?"

Kim didn't immediately reply. Instead, she picked a small dark square from a fancy handbag, placing it on her napkin. Nestra obliged and tried the monster dish. It tasted... fine. Pretty good. Not exactly filling.

Her thoughts wander while Kim's eyes glazed over, a sign she was interfacing with something. Her true teeth were black and serrated which implied a carnivorous diet... but she'd never eaten something without her mask and didn't feel particularly hungry. Just, never truly sated. Perhaps she ought to figure out what her diet was.

Please don't let it be cannibalism.

"Right. We are set. This is a jammer, just as a precaution. I will not use small talk because, let me be frank, your psychological profile shows it would be a waste of time."

"Well," Nestra replied, somewhat miffed, "I can appreciate it as a show of respect."

"But you would be wary of me buttering you up."

Kim's sustained Nestra's glare.

"What did the profile tell you besides that?"

"That you are an opinionated, persistent woman with strong principles and an instinctive distrust of those who have social power over you. That you have low interpersonal relationship skills due to emotional detachment leading to low cognitive empathy. You are, however, not cruel or mocking and you show respect to others provided they return it. Based off that, I am willing to be perfectly honest with you and I expect the same in return."

"Most people who say they're 'perfectly frank' use that cover to justify being assholes."

"I did not drag you here to be an asshole to you. That would be woefully unproductive."

"Riel. Thanks. I'm relieved."

"I dragged you here because someone, or a group of someones, have fucked the TPD and the mayor's office so incredibly hard the council voted unanimously to go after them. As one of the aforementioned fucked people, you may have an interest in seeing that justice be done."

"What? Ok, you're sending conflicting messages here. Someone from your office told me to shut the fuck up in my incident report."

"The Internal Affairs' first response has been and will always be to cover their own asses, especially when it exhibits the purple bruise of someone else's boot. That doesn't mean that we are happy about the whole situation."

"Not going to bow to the corpo overlords?"

"Hilarious, Miss Palladian. Contrary to what you seem to expect, we do our best to live in harmony with the various corporations and the guilds that form symbiotic relations with them, for the good of all mankind."

"Uhu?"

Kim smiled in the way a teacher would smile when dealing with a very slow child whose imbecility was slowing down the class. Not that Nestra was sore or anything.

“We need to give strong incentives to powerful raiders so they keep clearing portals instead of carving kingdoms like African warlords. That implies a certain amount of leeway, like the ability to carve a corporate kingdom so they can play kings without the city turning into a fucking warzone. Does that make sense, Miss Palladian?”

“Consider me schooled. Why are you telling me that?”

“I am telling you this because someone went and kicked the bullet ant hill. Now we have to retaliate or everyone else will get ‘ideas’ and we don’t want to bother Shinran with disciplining duties.”

Nestra frowned while Kim helped herself to some tea.

“I thought Shinran was a healer?”

“Shinran is A-class. It doesn’t matter what he was originally. Any A-class raider can and will take on a guild single-handedly. And you don’t want to bother him.”

Nestra remembered Shinran the one time they’d met. He was a bald Japanese man with strange, light blue eyes, and a pleasant smile. She didn’t figure him to be a violent person at all. He’d been very calm and empathetic when he’d told Nestra she was just as intended without a core. He was so kind she’d even felt a little better.

“You. Do. Not. Want. To. Bother. Shinran.”

“Alright. So. Retaliation?”

“You are wondering where you come in.”

“That’s what I implied, yes.”

“Have some tea. I was getting to it since it also answers one of your previous questions. The initiative to regain control of district fifteen will fall to Gigun and Hong Wang’s guild but while they are suited to fighting gleams and gangers, they are unwilling or unable to police baselines, especially baselines on baseline crime. For this, TPD will send newly formed groups of criminal investigators who will work in pairs. I am formally inviting you in.”

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you. I have a perfect partner in mind for you. Someone with a lot of experience but whose physical abilities have decreased over the years. Obviously, Gigun, sorry, I meant to say, whoever spent over fifty million credits in augs and weapons will want to control the land and the narrative. Your purpose will be to keep an ear to the ground and get me leads.”

“I’m sorry. Did you say fifty MILLION?”

Kim raised a hand. She took a bite of rice and bullfrog before continuing.

“Yes and no. Most of the corpo-grade equipment we found was unmarked and defective or obsolete in many ways. Set for replacement, probably. It was still worth a fair bit. It must also have cost quite a bit to erase all traces of origin, including in the softwares.”

“They were a little sluggish for augs,” Nestra agreed.

“And we are lucky it was the case. I didn’t want to do small talk because I did not wish to build a rapport before giving you the opportunity to fling that offer back into my face.”

“Riel. Is the file that judgemental?”

“No but my professional background leads me to always expect the worst.”

Nestra watched Kim, trying to gauge the woman as she took dainty bites of the dishes around them. Kim was not an enigma. Threshold was like one of the world cities of old, before the integration. It attracted the most talented scions of the fortress cities of the mainland like moths to the flame. Overachievers flocked to the banner, turning the mightiest raiders community in the world into a powerhouse of bureaucratic efficacy. There was a reason Nestra could live alone and safely, getting enough money for a balanced diet, fun, and a retirement plan. Threshold was a beacon of civilization in a torn world. The cradle of mankind’s future. Top achievers like Kim were both a dime a dozen and the best possible candidates at the top of the social hierarchy, at least when it came to the municipality and some corps. Guilds were another can of worm.

So the conclusion was obvious. Kim was serious in her offer because she believed the cost of helping Nestra was worth the investment. She believed it enough to possibly put her future on the line because this was probably the hottest project of the year and if Kim fucked it up, she would finish her career managing school bus scheduling.

That’s what Nestra got from the situation.

“What do you expect me to achieve on the ground? I’m not trained as a detective. I’ve never even set foot in fifteen except for that operation.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just by being present and reporting, you are creating an environment where Gigun doesn’t have full control. You might pick up a thing or two as well while you’re there. Wait, let me rephrase. I expect your partner to pick those details, and I expect you to watch his back while he does so, because let’s face it, you do not have the negotiation skills required for the job.”

“So I’m what, a bodyguard?”

“A partner, please. Shinoda is, well, let’s just say his life expectancy will be fairly short without assistance.”

“What’s stopping the hostiles from just putting a high caliber round between my eyes?”

“They’ve already won, Palladian. They don’t want to start another game just quite yet. They need to make money from security contracts, and that’s hard to do if you kill your employers’ agents. Of course, they’ll probably try to intimidate you. You’ll probably be attacked by low criminals as well. That’s why you will be cleared for your while gear, including your sword. Also, we will provide you with a, what was the term?”

“A ‘oh shit’ button?”

“Precisely. We will have users on standby to assist you. Go there, be visible. That’s all we ask.”

“Isn’t the place a death trap?”

“You were not in the hottest zone so it is difficult to express the bloodbath this operation turned into. The gangers were decimated. I am not exaggerating. We estimate that at least two in three died during the battle. The locals will see order return and they will be scared. I expect attempts on your lives but nothing systematic.”

“So it will be dangerous.”

“And that is why I requested you specifically. You have carte blanche on what sort of weapons you want to keep you safe. Just watch out for collateral damage.”

“Well...”

Nestra considered the question.

It was a risky job but, to be honest, she needed a cover. If she kept going around at night without an obvious source of income, maybe that would place her on a list. If she was a detective, however... They always kept weird hours.

Not to mention, she could learn a lot about who got her teammates killed. Who bought off Bard.

“Ok, I’m tempted. When would I start?”

“Next week for training, a bit longer before you actually go to fifteen. You keep the same salary. Consider this... hazard pay.”

“Fair enough.”

“And Palladian, don’t tell anyone about this meeting.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Libera me domine, de morte aeterna...”

There were seven coffins in total, set between the chairs and the pulpit in full view of the bereaved families. Seven officers dead during the attack and who would be mourned together. Bard's coffin was conspicuously absent, though if anyone else noticed, Nestra didn't know. She just let herself be carried by the nice music and the solemnity of it all. No one expected anything from her here beyond grim resolve. She was only supposed to be here for the others. It felt right to do so. They had been her comrades in arms. This was proper.

Nestra had never been to a Christian burial service before so she stole a glance at the church's tainted glass windows. They'd gone for sober and pseudo-ancient, understandable considering this sub-continent did not even exist sixty years before. Monotheist faiths had survived the incursion, surfing on a tidal wave of apocalyptic claims. They'd just never really taken root here.

The song finished and the audience sat down. Camus sighed by her side, then winced. Both he and Gorge sat in wheelchairs. Nestra expected no less from those hardasses.

She went with the flow of the ceremony.

"Finally done, aye?"

Gorge was waiting by her car in a gravel parking off the main road. He had a frowning young man with him. The family resemblance was striking though MacMillan junior still had his hair on.

"What can I say? It was probably important."

"Probably important?" Gorge said, then he shook his head in disapproval.

"Rufus. Give us a minute, will you?"

"Don't take too long, Pa. You know what the doctors said."

"I know. I know. Please?"

"Alright."

Junior left them for a nearby van. It was the shittiest vehicle she'd laid her eyes on. It was so old and rugged, she wouldn't be surprised if it ran on gas.

"Nestra, there's something wrong with you."

"Look who's talking."

"Not a barb. You're cold. You don't get loss, you don't really fit in. Hell, you don't even try."

“Are you going to refer me to a therapist?”

“Fuck no. Just wanted to say, you’re a freak but you got a code and you got a spine. So that’s good enough for me to do biz with you. Just don’t make me regret it, alright?”

He seemed nervous, Nestra could tell. Shifty. She wondered...

Nestra’s eyes tracked the van. The van that looked like it could be used to transport things off the radar. The van where his son was.

A family operation?

“Don’t go there, Palladian. You stay off my biz and I do the same. That way, the first who gets caught can’t say anything about the other except for the fact they do business. That’s the difference between a hefty fine and a long stay in a corpo black site. Got it?”

“Got it. We don’t know anything about each other.”

“That’s right. Let’s keep it this way. Now, what do you got for me?”

Nestra had to walk back to her car where the mana crystals were hidden. Gorge didn’t seem to mind the delay.

“At least you’re a little cautious. Not that it would have helped. Gleams can smell those things like fucking blood hounds. Anyways.”

He picked the two crystals, inspecting them solemnly. Nestra got the distinct impression this wasn’t his first stint.

“Four hundred for the cracked one. One point five for the full one.”

“What the fuck? D-class crystals go for two grand at any auctioneer!”

“That’s before the tax so really they go for one point six. There’s also our cut. So no, I’m not shafting you. And I’m giving you a great price on the cracked one.”

“Fuck.”

There went her dreams of an early retirement.

“You want bullets?”

“Yes, four.”

“What else do you need?”

"I need a way to have my house not record my comings and goings. I also need a device that warns me of the presence of cameras, a vehicle without a GPS tracker, a harvesting kit, a price list for monster parts, portal world MREs, and possibly armor replacement parts."

Gorge's expression fell off the longer she talked.

"Holy shit, Palladian. I. Wow. You don't do things halfway, I'll just say that. Ok, look. For your house, just change your security console's privacy settings. Wellington will delete the footage within the hour and it can't be retrieved."

"You sure?"

"They were subpoenaed for records and gave a blank page so yeah, I'm sure. For the MREs, don't bother. Normal bars do fine until B-class worlds. I don't suppose you or, hypothetically, any gleam you might be working with would be working at this level. Don't comment on that. I'll have the price list, harvesting kit, and the sniffer ready before tonight. The wheels will take longer. Oh, and that's seven grands for those. The list is free, obviously."

Nestra sighed. She had twenty-five in the bank for a rainy day so she could afford it, thanks to not having to pay a real rent. Still stung a little.

"Don't be like that. We're all getting a nice bonus for being, ya know, left to die."

"Easy to say when it's not your money. Fine. Transfer?"

"Fuck no, you leave the credits in a chit. Five point one if you leave the crystals with me. I'll collect the chit during delivery. For the armor, it's better if you just leave it with me and I'll return it patched up, charge you according to the damage."

"Fine."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Palladian."

"So do you."

"Yeah, because I'm helping you. Alright. Got to go. I'll get you a burner so we can continue our discussions, free of charge."

Nestra dropped the two crystals in Gorge's extended palm. He pocketed them with haste, then he was off to his weird van.

Nestra really, really hoped she wasn't making a mistake. Maybe her mysterious benefactor had plans for her loot and she could just stockpile it but she had no way to know so... might as well just get resources now before the portals increased in difficulty, as she was pretty sure they would.

This was the path of a raider.

Kill, get stronger, train, get better, pillage, get richer. The riches were reinvested in better equipment in a never-ending race to a summit that never got closer. Perhaps she wasn't a user but she was, most definitely, a raider.

That was probably her best option.

Nestra drove home and crashed down during nightfall, waking up again fresh and restored around midnight.

"I suppose this is my new sleeping schedule then."

It was a matter of minutes to find the specific setting that wouldn't save the recording of her home. She was warned several times that it would invalidate her insurance in case of burglary but she reasoned that, if anyone found the footage, the glitched image of her moving around would probably lead to more questions. After a few moments, she found a way to do the same with her car provided she didn't use the integrated map. A ring at the door distracted her just as she was getting ready to leave. It was a delivery drone. Gorge had come through.

Nestra opened the delivery box inside of her home. The first find was a leather bag rolled on itself. Opened, it unfolded to show a nightmarish collection of silvery tools. There were cutting implements, breaking implements, skinning implements, plastic bags, vials... It was the harvesting kit she'd requested. It looked like the cheapest entry-level set and that was sufficient for her needs. She didn't expect to face anything more than dokaebi-class monsters with the occasional low D-class monster like the acid ant. No need for more.

There were also four bullets in a neat casing.

The next find was a data chit she slotted in her visor with some apprehension. Slotting data sheets of unknown origin was the best way to find one's bank accounts suddenly drained. Fortunately, nothing happened. It contained a single file named 'Monster price list v5.3'. She opened it.

"Property of the White Banner guild. Authorized personnel only. If you are not—"

This made Nestra giddy. Her first corpo crime! The first municipal crime had been entering a portal without declaring it. How exciting.

The database was splendidly made. She could search by monster name, by part, by affinity... There were even small tutorials on how to properly harvest the stuff. It was pretty good. On a hunch, she kept it in the visor's offline storage, then downloaded a database of monsters from the city's website. Those were free access to allow civilians to give accurate reports in case of portal break provided they survived long enough to make a coherent call.

The next item was a small black box with an antenna and a LED. It looked like some retro tech from decades ago, cobbled together from post-incursion salvage.

The last item in the box rang soon after. Nestra picked up the burner phone.

“Yes?”

“It’s me,” a computer-modified voice said. “Don’t use names.”

“Is my voice modified as well?”

“Yes. One more precaution. Now listen. The device I gave you has two functions. The first will blink if it’s aimed at a camera hooked to the local bluetooth. It won’t work with a wired one.”

“People still use those?”

“Corpos do because they’re harder to mess with. The second button will jam the camera. Very hard on the battery so use sparingly. Any questions?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Then cough up the dough. I’ll all you back when I have a vehicle.”

Nestra sighed and went for a chit containing five thousand one hundred credits, almost two months of salary for her. It was an investment, she had to tell herself. Then, it was time to visit the coordinates.

Just like last time, she used a manual map but this time, she drove without GPS which was a confusing and slightly more complicated affair, if only because she’d never done it before. She also set her visor to offline mode. She got lost twice on the way and had to read the street names like she was a twentieth century driver. Ridiculous. Finally, she arrived at a small parking lot in a deserted spot at the back of a warehouse, near a canal.

Nestra frowned as she parked the car. She could feel it, very faintly. The mana of a portal. It came from the canal itself.

She changed inside, tore her mask, then skulked out. A quick inspection with her new gizmo revealed cameras aimed at the back doors but nothing surveying the parking itself. Besides a few dumpsters and empty pallets, it was empty anyway. She shouldered her bag and then she was off.

Canals were rare. Threshold’s water system was fully isolated from the outside world for obvious reasons. It took only a small egg floating downstream and three months later, you had armies of pallid, bloated fishmen stealing poodles off the street. Threshold only employed canals when the underground couldn’t be used for one reason or another, such was the case now. She found a large circular tunnel as expected. It was open, the barred door yawning open invitingly.

For a moment, Nestra took in her surroundings. A deep breath carried the scent of fresh water with a floral undertone. Long stalks decorated the shore in disheveled clumps. A few

lilies floated where the solid formed recesses. It was, perhaps, one of the wildest places in a hyper-controlled environment, a throwback to the days when a lone stroll outside didn't mean certain death for an unarmed baseline. Nearby lights cast selfish cones on the darkness that appeared as splashes of color to her night sight. She looked up, hoping to see stars. The light pollution reminded her of where she was.

Right.

Nestra walked to the entrance and peered inside. The black box remained quiet, the explanation obvious. A mostly dry tunnel continued on for hundreds of meters before angling to the sides. Near the entrance, a maintenance door stood open under a smashed camera, and next to that camera was a portal.

This one was large enough to occupy most of the space, though it still wasn't much. The unusual sight was that of a sanitation employee in a jumpsuit next to a disabled drone. He sat listless against the wall.

Nestra hesitated.

The law said she had to report the portal. That was fine, she didn't care anymore. The law and ethics said she should assist the guy since he was obviously in distress. That would come with its own list of troubles. She could call the emergency services with her burner; she just knew it was a terrible idea.

The man blinked.

Nestra sighed. It was probably ok. Just in case, she checked for a pulse and found a normal one.

There was a chance he would wake up but...

It felt sacrilegious to decamp now. There was the portal, there, in front of her, inviting her in with the sweet caress of mana, or zeta rays, she supposed. She licked her lips. Had to do it.

Nestra took her rifle, holstered the revolver, then hid the rest near the entrance. Had to do it now. She placed her hand against the surface and pushed in. Just like last time, the portal bent to her will.

She was in.

As before, mana was stronger inside. What didn't change was the humidity of the air. Nestra looked around.

A mangrove biome.

Under a heavy cobalt sky, the portal world extended in front of her in a dry snake path between mangrove trees. White lightning sometimes flashed silently in the distance. She looked up to rolling waves marked by pinpoint dots of light. The forest extended on a

kilometers wide strip while to her left, a lake extended until it merged and faded with the horizon. A deep fog covered the land to her right, masking it from sight.

She knew it was much smaller than it appeared on an intellectual level. Walking to the edges of the world, one would soon be stopped by a space anomaly that simply prevented people from advancing, no matter how fast they could fly, and yet the sensation of infinity grasped at Nestra's mind like an inebriating dream. This was a new world, another planet bound by different rules. It had long since finished drinking in the mana to transcend itself.

She frowned. Where did that thought come from? There were theories but they were just those, theories. No one knew why or how the incursion happened.

Right, mangroves.

Unfortunately, she knew what it meant.

Nestra made absolutely sure her armor set was airtight, double-checking indicators for a third time. She also pulled the monster compendium to cross reference 'mangrove' and 'D-class'. Sometimes, new creatures made their appearance. It paid to be prepared. Not this time though, and with a last sigh, she set her rifle to burst fire and left.

Nestra's boots sunk in the mud. A part of her wanted to remove the armor to feel the wet, warm soil between her toes. Not worth it. The land around her was mostly quiet except for a distant rush and the calls of unknown creatures. It would not last. Large insects with strange, circular bodies flew in flashes of ephemeral lights. The trees themselves were gnarled and bulbous, though not grotesquely so. Their trunk split into many limbs as they touched the water while heavy branches provided a thick cover. Growing fruits hung heavy, their white flesh turning green and red at the tip. It was spring here as well.

Soon, the path narrowed as the water on the sides of the path grew more shallow. Green reeds jutted from there in small bouquets. She paid close attention to those though it proved to be redundant. She perceived the ambush long before it could close on her.

The first hint was a change in the mana, a denser, different tone to the usual background. Reeds on either side of the path were yellow, the top shredded. Her night vision picked up unusual shapes clinging to the trees. She studied them as she slowed down.

Thick air covered the creature's squarish head, dropping down their naked back in thick rows plastered with mud and leaves. Short, thick humanoid limbs gripped the wood with great strength. She knew they had two fingers plus a thumb and a remarkable grip power that let them spend their days in trees, jumping from branch to branch without effort. It could also snap the spine of a baseline in an instant. They were manaprimates habilis arboricole, technically called mana monkeys. Another dokkaebi-class threat. Of course, there were several of them.

Nestra whipped out her rifle and landed three bullets at the base of a nearby dead reed. The water splashed, carrying dark red ichor. The reed surfaced as it proved to be nothing but a

rudimentary scuba. She shot another burst before the other reeds erupted into more monkeys. Backpedalling, she lined the creatures as they charged her.

Mana monkeys were ugly as sin. Bulging eyes and a flat nose accompanied a mouth so large it split their face in two, revealing misshapen rows of uneven teeth. They charged with shrill screams. They died with shrill screams. Nestra ducked in anticipation of darts but one still stuck her side, failing to penetrate. A fourth monkey died. The last one charged her from a farther point atop of lizard creature with shimmering scales. A party leader. She lined her shot and missed when a dart hit her hand.

Split second decision moment.

Nestra swore and grabbed her blade. As the lizard jumped, she lunged, coating her blade with mana at the last moment. Her horizontal sweep went through the creature from side to side. Its ride jumped on her.

“Oof!”

They used their momentum to swing on her back but she was ready. Her hand touched the leg on her shoulder just as two hands clamped on her neck. She called upon electric mana.

The monkey spasmed and fell. Nestra turned on herself and, in one smooth motion, cut down with a cry. The powerful strike fell like thunder.

She missed the head. Her sword cut an arm and part of a leg which was enough to debilitate the monkey. She finished it off a moment later then picked her gun off the ground. The blow dart monkeys had figured out her armor was too thick so they were swimming across the water to get at her.

For a moment, she watched them cross. The water made the mud slide off their bluish skin. Their faces were turned into rictus of pure hatred, eyes bloodshot and fangs bared. Nestra lined the shot, then reconsidered. It didn't feel right. She unsheathed her sword again instead.

Planting her feet on the ground, she received the first monkey with a windmill, a two-handed strike that formed a half-circle from behind her knee to the air in front of her. Each windmill caught the monkeys in the chest as they rose from the brackish waters, sending their tiny bodies flying with sprays of blood. As the last one died, she was left alone on the field.

Another victory.

First thing first, make sure she was safe. Fortunately, D-class worlds were fairly straightforward and the enemies, though cunning, would just fight until death. Next was checking for wounds and her gear. She swore when she saw that her rifle was covered in mud. It took her a minute but soon, the firearm was reloaded and the blade cleaned of blood.

The next step would be looting but first, there were the strange gains she got from her victim. This time, the change was more subtle. It took tracking the insects moving around to confirm it.

She could think faster.

That was one of the things that stumped biologists the most. Mana could accelerate thought. The effect was mild but it was there, and it meant whatever rules defined her progress considered that this was a good battle. The mana monkeys were a new foe so that condition was fulfilled, the question was the use of guns.

She'd used guns against gangers back in fifteen and it hadn't worked. She knew it hadn't worked, because it was killing the rogue user that had triggered her awakening. Was it because they were augs? Or because they were not users? Maybe... but she didn't think so. Shooting them felt wrong at that time. Impersonal. It was not a battle she chose and the same was true for them because, even more than her, they'd been victims of a power play. Shooting the mana monkeys here was a true contest. One she'd picked. It was her battle, after all.

Nestra dropped her backpack and reached for the skinning tool.

Of course, those were all conjectures based on her feelings. What mattered was that she was now getting stronger.

Mana monkeys held no valuable parts, or rather, they had been thoroughly researched over the years and now held little interest. The lizard skin was used in some midrange gleam clothes and bags though even Nestra thought it was tacky. She removed it, damaging the limbs a little despite the guide. She'd need some practice. The skin went into a special pouch while she kept the tail meat in another since, apparently, it was considered a delicacy. It did smell tempting which was little concerning on its own. A pleasant scent emanated from the raw, juicy piece of meat over the muddy background of the bog. She knew it would taste amazing once properly prepared.

Once she was done, it was time to move.

The next ambush happened ten minutes later. It was pathetic compared to the first with only five monkey, two of which died before the rest realized she had spotted them underwater. She benefitted again from an improvement but, clearly, the benefits were diminishing. She needed fresh prey. A third ambush went very much like the other two.

Slowly, the path became muddier and more difficult to traverse in her heavy suit of armor. Trails in the water hinted at the presence of some fauna, though they didn't engage. The path eventually led to a clearing surrounded on all sides by mangrove trees. A single altar rested in the middle, its flanks slimy with marshy growths. A pair of mana crystals rested there.

Nestra made her way to the suspicious tree standing next to the altar, one that emitted a little mana. Her hand rested on the handle of Gorge's revolver, its weight clear even through her glove.

No, that wouldn't be right.

But this would be.

Nestra lifted her rifle, flicked the indicator to full auto and emptied the entire magazine into the trunk in a thunderous display. The gun buckled in her hands, her improved strength the only reason she could keep control. She smiled as the creature moved towards her. *Manacanthecae Enttus Minor*. A mangrove ent, named after some old legend. A branch whipped and she unsheathed her blade, cutting as the limb whistled over her head.

The power behind the strike was enormous. The blade was almost torn from her hand but she managed to regain control at the last moment. Cursing, she jumped over another strike. Slowly, the creature was making its way towards her. A multitude of leg-like roots crawled over the ground.

Nestra wished she was a firespark. A firespark would have roasted the creature in two minutes. Instead, she cut with power as the next, predictable strike aimed at her midriff. It cut the branch neatly.

The cut part still slammed into her chest, making her lose her balance. She jumped over another strike. The next one fell short now that one of the two branches was damaged. In answer, a bulbous extension rotated on the trunk with a sickly groan and a new branch appeared from the back, ready to strike. This one went up, then down.

Nestra easily sidestepped, then she ran to the back of the tree. The water barely slowed her down. She felt too giddy. Another strike aimed at her midriff but it came from the shortened branch. She stopped behind the main trunk while all three branches were on the opposite side. The legs were still a concern so she lunged and planted the blade deep into the tree's bark.

Nothing much happened beyond some more groaning.

She pressed the button. There was some steam, some more groaning, and nothing else. Hard to say if she was actually doing something. Just then, the branches traveled over the surface of the trunk towards her.

Sticking close, Nestra smirked as she ran around her slow opponent. The ent was strong and against a formation, they could be a problem but she was alone and quick on her feet. Even a sudden gap in the clearing's mud failed to make her fall. It was, she realized, where the tree had been planted.

She circled the ent and hacked at each branch in turn until they were nothing but kindling. A gap in the trunk where the bullets had landed bled sap, so she stabbed there and waited.

The heavy, glistening liquid fell in great goops until, finally, the ent collapsed.

Nestra felt it die. Shortly after, she felt... more solid somehow while a portal opened near the altar. She saluted the fallen and immediately felt silly about it. That wiped the smile off her face. Right. This was a low D-class monster and it was not sentient. She would save the theatrics for larger targets.

She collected as much of the sap as she could in vials, then hacked for fifteen minutes to reveal the ent's heart wood. Heart wood was a single, pale, pear-shaped mass at the center of an ent. Intact, it could be used to make mana instruments. This one would be a low end tool but that meant there would be buyers. She managed to cut a piece of the trunk that definitely contained what she wanted and left it at that, unwilling to endanger her prize.

A good haul.

Nestra passed through the opening, walking over the supine form of the sanitation staff who was now sleeping on his side, head resting over a folded jumpsuit. He was snoring softly. A box waited by his side with 'For little Nezhra' written on it in that sharp, weird script. She opened it. The box contained a message and a book, and by book, she was being generous.

"Little Nezhra!

I hope you are having fun. Congratulations on getting stronger! As a reward, I have remembered something that will be of use to you: the first movement of the Stalk of the Scornful Crescent! Enjoy. Next coordinates below, tomorrow. Make sure you keep your mana close and coated.

Until next time!"

So... infuriating! Whoever wrote that treated her like she was a little girl, not an adult in her twenties. Well, it was fun and they were helping but still!

"I wish you'd just come out and talk it out!"

No reply.

"I know you're here somewhere!"

Still no reply. The sanitation employee started to snore. Nestra grumbled and checked the book.

It was clearly not a real book. It was a notebook bought from vintage paper mill company, she even recognized the logo from a past fad when it had become fashionable to send letters again. It did look well handled, its back a little wrinkled. Come to think of it, all her prizes were wrinkled.

She opened the first page.

A demon woman, advancing under a storm over a basalt landscape pitted by impacts. Great stone shapes animated by blue energy reached for her but she cut them away with contempt. Her movements were slow compared to the haphazard assault of the stone beings. She cut them down with efficient, merciless strikes. Each of her cut was perfection given form, just enough damage to take down the creature at just the right depth with just enough strength before she struck again, not a single instant wasted. Every attack was countered as it wound up. She was overwhelming them with a fraction of the movements they performed without really trying. Nestra knew the woman could go faster. She just elected not to.

There was no need.

The demon woman continued into the storm at a sedate pace until the torrential rains obscured her shape, leaving behind shattered remains. She—

Nestra slammed the book close.

Holy Riel that was some strong stuff. Her memory searched the image of the blade master and found diagrams, examples, exercises. It was the beginning of a book. Interestingly, most techniques integrated what she already knew, what her father had taught her on the fencing piste back when she'd still hoped...

Nestra's mood plummeted. Whatever. She grabbed the book and made for her car with the heavy bag on her back reminding her that her little excursion ended with a success. The trip home was annoying but, eventually, she made it back safely.

Her first order of business was to eat the lizard tail because it was a mana food, could not be kept safely, and she was hungry. And it was smelling rather nice. She baked it in her oven.

Nestra expected something chewy given how hard it had been to prepare even with enhanced strength but her black teeth made short work of everything. On a hunch, she tried to bite a spoon and it worked. Note to self: spoons do not taste good.

She decided to have the lizard right away because hunger gnawed at her. She prepared it herself with a guide she found on the net, all the tail which was in theory enough to feed six. Despite that, she still felt like it wasn't... the best food despite the pleasant taste and the rejuvenating feeling it left on her after she was done. Not what her teeth were meant to bite. She really hoped it wouldn't be people. Riel, she really did.

At around 5 AM, she crashed hard and went to sleep.

A new sphere was active when Nestra entered the next grotto. This one spoke of games of wit, of fast memory. Cards and tricks. A stranger removing something from a holster. A door opening onto the maw of a gun. It returned to rotate among the others when she released it. She felt there was more to it but she was still weak, extremely weak. She would have to wait.

The armor and shield room was clearly a resistance room. She was sure of it now. Next to the armor, a new form was now active. It looked a bit like a metal skeleton and represented her internal fortitude. Or at least she thought so. It was hard to tell without punching herself in the gut.

So now she could, apparently, resist physical attacks, acid, and electricity better. For the electricity, her resistance to her own spells was proof of that. For the others, she couldn't be completely sure.

She wondered what would happen next.

Nestra had the rest of the tail for breakfast — it was pretty good! The teeth experiment made her want to test exactly how much she could bite so, still in her pajamas, she searched her garage for an errant piece of metal. There was a shelf part she couldn't use so she grabbed it then bit it.

Her teeth sank in the metal with ease. At least the first centimeter.

“Mffrngl!”

She was stuck.

“Pfffuck.”

It took a little bit of shaking but eventually, she was free. The shelf part still bore an imprint, each tooth leaving a neat furrow.

“Ok, note to self, sharp teeth does not equate jaw strength.”

Thus chastened, she finished her routine, then she realized she had little left to do until Officer Kim contacted her to start her new job. There was always the book of the Scornful Crescent she wanted to try and, after stretching, she read more. There was some meditation involved as well as slow motions to start off, which was all good, but then training asked for footwork and she realized she just didn't have enough space. A quick shower later and she made a decision.

It was time to build a lair. A sort of airlock between mundane everyday Nestra and the toothy one. Her own personal Nestracave where she could also train and receive suspicious packages without nosy neighbors wondering why those were unmarked. Biting the bullet, she spent an hour applying for and being approved for a storage space. She picked one in district thirteen which had the benefit of being between her dorm district, twenty-three, and fifteen where she would apparently be working. It was really cheap at six hundred a month for a respectable warehouse, unsurprisingly, since thirteen was kind of a dump. The only caveat was that she could not conduct a business out of it.

That was fine by her.

Nestra drove to her new possession, using a security chit delivered by drone to access an old automated facility. The only person she came across was a bored security vigil playing games on his visor. The warehouse was over a hundred and fifty square meters on the first floor and there was an elevator to carry heavy stuff. It suited her needs perfectly.

Next, she called Gorge.

“What do you got for me?” the modified voice said.

“Two D-class crystals, a damaged iridescent monitor skin, and a grove ent heart wood.”

“Hmmm.”

Nestra waited while Gorge conversed with someone. She couldn't pick up what was said despite her slightly increased senses because the phone just didn't pick it up correctly. A shame. She was feeling curious.

“Send me a picture of the heart wood. And the skin.”

Nestra did so quickly.

“Alright. Looks like you went the smart way. I'll give you four point five for the heart and three for the crystals. The skin I don't know. I can probably sell it as scraps to gleam art students. Care to leave it with me?”

“Guess I'll trust you. I also need my armor set repaired.”

“Show the damage.”

Another set of pictures followed. Mostly, it was acid ant spit and a few slashes.

“Listen to me. Look. Okay, first things first, I got a question.”

Something in Gorge's tone set alarm bells in Nestra's mind.

“It's you getting those materials. Thought you were working with a gleam but it's you. And an ent is serious business. Tell me it's recent. Tell me you couldn't save my men.”

So that was what it was all about.

“I swear on Riel's name, I did the best I could. I didn't hold back.”

“Ok. Alright. I believe you, you cold bitch.”

“Stop that. Stop throwing it in my face every time you get mad.”

“Alright. Fine. My bad, didn’t mean it that way. Fine. Looks like an easy patch up job. On the house. As an apology for... ya know.”

“You being you.”

“Don’t push it.”

“Wait, there is something else. I need the goods delivered to a new address. Here it is.”

“Fine then. I’ll do it. Oh, and I found you wheels that let you go to wherever you go with some room for loot. Real cheap too. Seven grands, second hand but cleaned up and all good.”

“Ug. Fine.”

“I’ll have it delivered to you soon as well as the five hundred I owe you. For the monitor skin, payment when I find buyers. Now fuck off and get me more goodies.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Nestra hung up. She ordered training equipment online, as well as a freezer just in case. On a hunch, she got a couch and a few other items to make her lair comfortable. The TPD settlement money had arrived. Gorge’s delivery arrived shortly after in the form of his son dumping her stuff from the back of his small van. He took the armor set from her unresponsive hands as she watched in horror the ‘wheels’ Gorge had gotten her.

It was a cruiser motorcycle with a large storage space at the back. Without an integrated GPS, it could not drive itself nor legally climb the ramp to the outer circle highway. Only a specific part of Threshold’s population used those and the Filipino diaspora had lovingly coined them putasikletas.

Whore bikes.

It was both genius on Gorge’s part and such a Gorge thing to do. The perfect cover for a fit woman to drive around at night without question. If she got pulled over by colleagues, they would immediately assume she was out to meet a ‘customer’ unless they checked her ID, then they would assume she was a vice plant, having recently be placed ‘on leave’. She fit the profile too.

“That malignant son of a gravid trash spider. I’ll.... UGH.”

She had to admit it was perfect.

Escort business was tolerated in Threshold, the bordellos heavily regulated to prevent pimps from abusing mainlanders who wanted to move to the city. But the ‘freelancers’ were mostly left to their own devices. Sighing, Nestra moved everything in.

“We’ll get you the armor sent by back drone. Here?”

“Here, before tonight.”

“Can do.”

Nestra checked her visor when a priority ping told her she'd received a message she'd been waiting for. It was just an address and an hour but she already knew she would be there without fail.

The Secret Door was a peculiarity in Threshold's culinary scene. Owned by a gleam, it was one of the only places where a baseline could sit down and order without getting thrown out on their asses, in theory. In reality, the mall it hosted had security at the door and the augged bouncers would throw anyone who didn't fit out on their asses. Thankfully, Nestra wore her best designer gleam dress which placed her at the top of the drab hierarchy. They let her through without problems. She soon sat at Claire's favorite spot, on the side and next to a small aquarium.

By her side, a small garden flourished under an enchanted skylight. A red-eyed gleam saw then dismissed her in the same glance. She was fashion-coded to fit in, after all. That didn't stop a younger gleam from observing her curiously from a few tables away.

As the minutes went by, her tension mounted.

Her instincts finally cried in alarm. She looked right, towards the garden. It was of course at the same moment that a hand gripped her left shoulder.

“Nyarg!”

“ACAB!” a voice roared, “ACAAAAAAB. Hahahaha.”

“Riel dammit Aunt Claire. Really? Every time?”

“Well you could quit being a pig.”

“Ugh.”

Despite her words, Aunt Claire squeezed Nestra's hand in a way that conveyed love and care without words. Nestra's aunt looked the same age as her, a perk of being a powerful B-class raider, some of Threshold's best. Motes of light danced in her amber eyes while her light brown hair escaped messily from a large-brim hat. She wore a sleeveless sundress that revealed bandages running all over right arm as well as a significant amount of scars on every patch of bare skin. There were ways to remove those and Aunt Claire could definitely afford them. She just didn't give a shit.

“Damn, did you shake hands with a woodchipper?”

“Ha ha. Nah. Flame breath from some wyrm thing. Damn creature could cover their own neck, if you can believe it. Anyways! We did it. We cleared the portal.”

“Was Ulysses with you?”

“Nah, only the old guard, top tier Bs and the likes. Too risky otherwise. We worked with the Century guild. It was your father’s decision.”

Claire frowned. Nestra knew the two of them only tolerated each other because of Nestra’s mother. Hector Palladian was a man who believed in a well-ordered world while Claire screamed all cops are bastards in nice restaurants and had a criminal record as long as her leg, mostly for beating the shit out of people. The two mixed like gasoline and an open flame.

“I’m just glad you’re alright. Wanna talk about it?”

“Nah it’s all good. It worked surprisingly well, actually. Barring the minor burns. I got a better question. How are you doing? I heard about the, well, the District Fifteen fiasco. You seem to be holding up but...”

“Yeah...”

That was a good moment to rant.

Over the next twenty minutes, Nestra recounted all that happened except for the demon part. Claire followed along with a focused, passionate expression. The table shook a little when Nestra relayed that some spooks had advised her to keep her mouth shut.

“Those fuckers.”

“Hold on. I’m not done.”

Nestra finished with Kim’s proposal. So far, Aunt Claire had shown nothing but concern and sympathy. This all changed when Nestra admitted she would accept the offer.

Silence grew between them, a loaded one filled with churning words. Nestra could tell her loving, ever-supporting aunt had major qualms and was currently in the process of articulating them in a way that wouldn’t hurt her. Dread rose in Nestra’s chest though it was tempered by the certainty that Claire loved her, and she was building up to a nice rebuttal because she cared not just about Nestra’s decisions but her feelings as well. Claire was nice, like that.

“Look. You know I always scream ACAB as a joke when we meet and I’ll be the first to admit that some pieces of shit need the hand of justice. How that hand works and when it works is where I’ve got a problem. I’ve never had issues with you being part of MaxSec. You guys aren’t sent, well, weren’t sent against protesters or pickpockets, you know? You were sent to take down dangerous folks and dokkaebis so... that’s fine by me. But now you’re going to be sent as a, what, enhanced beat cop?”

“Not clear yet but yes, we’re supposed to investigate crimes.”

“You’re going to strut around a region that’s been outside of the protection of the law for weeks, months maybe. The city wasn’t there when the civvies needed it. Fuck, sometimes I wish I could clone myself. Anyway, you’re going to be moving around traumatized, betrayed people in a state of deep poverty. All while corpo cunts fly around the block as their new overlords. You’re gonna need a skill you weren’t trained to use and that skill is de-escalation.”

“I can do diplomacy.”

“That’s not what de-escalation is. I’m talking about a specific set of techniques used to calm things down before a situation leads to violence. You. Are. Not. Trained. And you’ll be deployed without being trained. I’m sorry Nestra. You’re a competent soldier who’s faced life and death situations on many, many occasions. You’re still alive because you were faster. Sadly, faster will get people killed. If you’re with civvies, that’s a bad thing.”

“I’ll be paired up with an experienced officer.”

“Will you only ever shoot if he tells you to?” Claire challenged.

Nestra only saw patient concern in the woman’s expression. And sadness.

“Ok. How about... I get non-lethal weapons?”

“Those are often less lethal weapons.”

Nestra nodded.

“I think I can find a way. I’ll apply for online training and let my new partner do the talking. Don’t worry, I’m not here to purge the district, alright?”

“Yes, of course. I know. Look, this won’t be a powder keg. It will be a hundred powder kegs, several per day. You won’t have the emotional stamina to handle them.”

“I told you, I’ll let the other guy do the talking. His name is Shinoda. He’s supposed to be an experienced guy at the end of his career.”

“Alright, alright. Your mind is set, and I can tell you’re taking this seriously. That’s okay. Just... I don’t want you to get the wrong expectations. Fuck, wish I could keep an eye on you for a while but the guild won’t allow it.”

“It’s fine. As you say, I need to prepare more seriously.”

“Good. That’s all I can ask. Oh, and by the way, how are the mana cravings?”

That was it.

Nestra's tension spiked and Claire blinked because of course she would pick up on it. It said a lot about the older woman that she patiently waited for Nestra to talk instead of pressing her.

"If you don't wanna discuss..."

"No, it's not that. The cravings are, well, they're mostly gone."

Nestra scrutinized Aunt Claire with all the fibers of her human self. That was it, the moment of truth. The opening that could lead to revelations if Aunt Claire knew something.

And there was nothing. Mostly, the woman frowned.

"Huh. Well then yes that's, uh, great news, I think? You don't seem too happy."

"It strikes me as rather sudden."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Did you talk to Mazingwe?"

"No, not yet."

"You really really should. Just keep in mind, it could be just fine. Us gleams are not as perfect and monolithic as we appear, except me of course. Sorry, poor timing for a joke. What I mean is, some people are late bloomers. They need something to click. Happens all the time, especially around your age. Well-trained raiders linger at the bottom of D-class and then suddenly they unlock their affinities and skyrocket through the ranks. Just don't worry about it too much."

"Still haven't got a core though."

"Sorry dearie, I can't help with that."

"I know."

"Hey at least you have a heart. And me. You have me."

"I know. Thank you."

"Can you call me Clecle like when you were all small and cute?"

"No."

Nestra finally focused on the food in front of her, served at some point during her retelling of the ambush. It was a nice salad with some enclave vegetables which she ravenously finished, hungering for more.

"Your appetite isn't gone at least."

“Yes. Been feeling peckish lately.”

Nestra waited to see if Aunt Claire would react, say something. Anything. Even though she knew Claire was a high B-class, one who defied the rules of reality. If there was something her aunt truly meant to hide from her, Nestra would never learn of it.

That’s just how it was.

“Well that’s a really good sign. Maybe you’ll get taller than me! Until I finish infusing my body, that is. Then I’ll make sure I’m slightly taller than your dad just because.”

“When will you stop pissing each other off?”

“When he removes the titanium bar stuck up his ass.”

They kept going at it for a while. Aunt Claire had news about everyone, as usual. Nestra’s mom was training to start raiding again though she and Nestra’s dad disagreed on whether she should do it or not. Her brother Ulysses was doing amazingly well with a blossoming metal affinity while young Helena was being an absolute hellion, almost getting expelled from prep school due to disciplinary issues. Even Claire showed concern about her restraint which was saying a lot.

“I don’t know about her. I was angry against patriarchy when I was her age but she’s just angry about everything, including herself. Just a little ball of nerves. And her affinity...”

“What about it?”

“It’s... well it’s still being discovered but it appears to be extremely rare... and rather destructive. Can you talk to her at some point? Please?”

“Claire, she was seven when I left. Now I’m a self-exiled loser with no friends and no hobbies. Why the fuck would she want to talk to me?”

“She thinks we’ve abandoned you.”

Nestra waited to see if Claire would explain herself because she was lost.

“Ok, the family did when they let you go and cut ties, kind of. She also thinks you’ve abandoned her. She... really looked up to you, you know?”

“Yeah and then I went on and became the single biggest failure in the history of gleams by essentially failing to be one.”

“Nestra...”

“Look, I admit I’m still sore about it but that’s not the point here. The point is she’s sixteen and when I was her age, let’s just say who you hang out with and how cool you can get was... rather important. I’m not saying she’s exactly the same. I’m saying that trying to get

the rebellious teen to get closer to the living reminder that gleams might not be better from birth after all might not be the best solution.”

“It’s not like that. She’s not like that. Look, she needs help and we’re all burnt in her eyes. She barely trusts me because I sided with her mom once. Debbie is... well, you know your mother. She’s trying. It would just be nice if you tried as well. We’ll have a party at the manor to celebrate our recent victories as well as Ulysses’ ascension to B-rank. Could you please attend?”

For the first time in forever, Nestra look into Claire’s congenial face and felt annoyed.

“You want to get me to come during a party? Are you insane?”

“It will be symbolic. Helena always says that we’re hiding you, which pisses her off the most. I know your parents will want that. And Ulysses will have his friends. He won’t care. Please?”

“This is a recipe for disaster.”

“I just want us to be a family,” Claire said in a clipped, slightly vulnerable tone. “We gleams are spending more and more time in portal worlds for... reasons. Maybe it’s, well, maybe we won’t have that many chances to spend time together as time goes on. Helena is growing fast, Nestra. And not in the right direction. Please? For me?”

Nestra considered the question for a moment.

The problem was that she couldn’t refuse Aunt Claire. Not the way she looked, all hopeful and candid despite the fact she was much older than she looked and should know fucking better. Not after everything Claire had done for her. Nestra had to say yes. She wouldn’t be able to face herself otherwise.

“Ok fine. It’s your funeral if things go to shit.”

“Thank you, dear. By the way, you polished that salad well. Do you need something more?”

“I’d love what the people behind us is having.”

“The terrine? Of course.”

Nestra demolished another plate and the dessert as well since Aunt Claire was picking the bill. The raider watched Nestra eat with a smirk before announcing that she had a later appointment with a certain gentleman at the Tree of Seasons.

“You’re going to a hotel?”

“What can I say, I was invited to a nice setting.”

“You would rather engage in lewd activities than spend more time with your niece?” Nestra mock-complained.

“Without a single second of hesitation.”

Nestra left soon afterward. On her way back, she couldn't help but think back on one of the things she'd said. It came out naturally, but she had never really thought about it before.

She had no friends and no hobbies.

She looked outside of her car. Before her change, all her free time had been spent on training, sleeping, and distracting herself on popular shows. If she had to be honest, she'd been waiting to die. Now though, things were different. Maybe she should try living again.

First order of business, she sent a message to Stib from her seat as her car sped up behind some corpo convoy. Second, she ordered some stuff for delivery.

If there was one hobby that was worth investing in right now, that was home cooking given how much food she was eating, Probably a perk of her weird constitution. She was salivating at the thought.

Later that night, she used her new system to drive to the announced location without a hitch. This time, the portal was hidden in a public park in district twenty-two, closed at night. Nestra had to infiltrate the place via the expedient means of climbing over a fence. The camera detector proved useful by identifying the only camera around which pointed at the entrance, a fortunate side effect of being at the periphery. A sensation of relief announced the presence of a portal, then she followed her instincts until she found the familiar blue radiance tucked inside what looked like an abandoned enclosure. It was closed to the public, possibly why it was still undetected.

Or was it?

Whoever directed her to these portals probably had a way to disable humans peacefully, like the janitor had been, but there were also no government employees around and those were the first to come once a portal had been declared. That meant that they were able to find portals that were hidden, matched the difficulty she could handle, and were dozens of kilometers apart from each other. That would require an ability to perceive portals that no humans could possess, at least to her knowledge. Between this and the book, it indicated what she'd suspected.

She wasn't alone. There were others like her. At least one.

“You sure you don't want to show up?” she asked the empty concrete. “I know you're watching me.”

Silence was the only answer.

“Oh fine.”

Nestra pushed her way through the portal.

Another cavern. Scintillating blue light shone from crystals dotting the ceiling, giving enough light that she could see the soft silvery note of the sheer rock. This place was deep, wet, and pure with a pleasant smell that complimented the richer mana. The only sound was the chime of falling condensation. Nestra readjusted her armor which felt a little tight.

“Hmmm.”

This biome was not immediately familiar. She pulled the database and found some references. Possibly stone creatures or mushrooms. Wasn't she still a little bit green for that? Obviously the portals were gaining in strength though they were still at the lower end of the D-class. Whatever. Her benefactor wouldn't send her here to die. Probably.

She set out, quickly arriving in a large cavern. Rather well lit. Stalactites hung from a high ceiling, and an instant later she found out where all that light was coming from: jellyfishes. Child-sized jellyfishes floating in the air with four tendrils dancing under a bulbous head. The first one drifted in her direction. An azure streak of lightning danced between its tentacles as they seemed to taste the air. She unsheathed her blade and waited.

This was a perfect opportunity to test the Stalk of the Scornful Crescent the book contained. There was something in the style that resonated with Nestra, not a series of movement but a philosophy of combat she thought might suit her. The issue was that it required experience and she didn't have much against monsters so... this was a good opportunity to start.

The jellyfish seemed to blur as it was only a dozen paces away. Nestra darted to the side as it was moving, dodging a grasping tendril. Her counter batted the limb away but failed to cut. Her target was simply too resilient and the limb, too light. She was not coating it in mana either as the effort was still too tiring. That was fine. Move in reaction. Never stand and wait. Always counter, always dominate and never give your opponent a moment of peace. That was the goal of the Scornful Crescent. For that, she needed to improve.

The jellyfish struck forward with two tendrils. She dodged left, then right under a back swing. She could see the tentacles, the way they wound up, the way the suckers at the end contracted ever so slightly before each strike. The jellyfish pushed her back and she let it. She felt for the flow. It was a slow, uncomplicated dance and she was learning quickly. She started batting the tentacles aside as the fight progressed and she moved back towards the cave's entrance. More jellyfishes were approaching, however. She didn't want to be overwhelmed.

The creature facing her blurred again. She collapsed on herself, seeing an actinine cloud pass overhead. Nestra stood and struck at the same time.

Her blade caught the tender, vulnerable bulb and sliced it in half. Strange organs and transparent blood fell and the jellyfish slowly collapsed on itself, the lights fading in dying embers. The next two jellyfishes were in range so they performed their little charge. Nestra dodged the first then hid behind it to stop the second. She kept her footwork tight and

efficient. Dodge, block, deflect attacks. Electricity shone on the blade but it absorbed everything and even if it didn't, the armor would.

A feeling of exhilaration slowly filled Nestra. This was it, the Scornful path. She could feel the meaning behind it albeit faintly. The benefactor was right. It really suited her. As a new jellyfish joined the fray, she stepped out of range of the second and closed on the first. It turned on itself, sending its tentacle in a side whip attack just as she knew it would. She blocked the first and ducked under the second.

Plant foot. Twist.

"Yaaar."

A powerful upward swing, perfectly timed. The blow splattered the jellyfish's innards over that of the newcomer and she felt its power fill her soul. A blur at her back and she dodged the first one. It stood in front of her, recovering. A thrust. Her blade easily found the tender flesh. A down strike. The jellyfish was gutted. Three opponents dead. Damn armor was stifling her though. Too tight. Blocked her sensation.

"Come on then."

She kind of wanted to bite them but... maybe poisonous.

With three opponents, the dance grew more frantic but now she had all the cavern for herself as those were the last foes. Dancing on the rock, she kept one always at a distance. The jellyfishes smelled strangely of brine. Their attacks were familiar to her now and she fell into a rhythm. Dodging and blocking became a patient exercise until she was sure she had them, understood them. Then, it was time to strike.

With a vicious smile, she sidestepped a lunge and charged. Her blow devastated the first enemy then she batted the next tentacle into the head of the third jellyfish.

Electricity coursed down the limb as it connected. She saw it as a blue fluorescence along the extended limb.

The head exploded.

It did so with a loud pop but the innards spraying her armor caught Nestra off guard and she jumped back in surprise. That was all it took.

Three tentacles latched on her arm and twisted. She heard the nylon give, and the plate underneath was peeled off like a torn tin can. A stinging jolt made her swear.

Urgency.

Nestra brought her sword close and sliced, imbuing the edge with mana. She cut through all three tentacles. The pressure decreased while the head now shone with frantic lights. With a

roar, she stepped forward and ravaged it with a furious downward strike. The beast was dead before it hit the ground.

“Shit shit shit.”

Colorful creatures were always either venomous or poisonous or both. A brief study of her arm in the faded light showed dark dots over the gray skin of her biceps. Some blood had pooled. The last of the crimson color turned gray as it formed scabs. That was... fast. Very fast. No D-class people matched this speed of regeneration. She waited anxiously for tingles, or signs or poison. Nothing so far, which was good because she had no appropriate antivenoms and general purpose antidotes were really, really expensive.

Calming down, she pulled her database. Jellyfishes, jellyfishes, jellyfishes, ah. Match. *Rhopilemana Azuridae Aeris*. Cave Jennies. The database said a contact with unprotected skin sent enough electricity to stun a D-class raider and they mangle a limb in a second. Those were real D-class monsters because of their dash, though on the lowest end. She was getting stronger! More importantly, they were edible. Wait no, bad Nestra. Money first.

Their cephalic serum can be harvested and used in high-end anti-aging beauty products. They could be sold at seven hundred credits a vial! Nestra looked at the liquid hopelessly splattered across the ground. She should have found the entry before deciding to go full destroyer. Gah. Oh, but their tentacles could be cooked at low temperatures and eaten as a salad! That was great. She cut half a dozen of them — all her backpack could contain — then looked around.

There were mushrooms on the wall.

“Jackpot.”

And they were edible too. Low level mana mushrooms according to the database. Nestra happily harvested several handfuls with images of garlic and parsley in her head. Once done, she looked around to make sure there wasn't anything she'd forgotten.

There was also the question of her armor set.

Mundane armor helped against monsters. There was no denying it. The actual question was, how much. The set strained against her skin and hampered her movements to a degree. Soon, it would be more trouble than it was worth. Perhaps even now. She had to replace it and soon but how? Material harvested in portals were considered 'exotic' because they broke the laws of physics. Raider gear used exotic material almost exclusively, which implied costly sourcing and handmade gleam craft. A new armor set would be stupidly expensive even before going to the black market. Getting high tech gear that could still hold its own meant getting jailbroken corpo stuff. That was one of the fastest way to get mysteriously 'disappeared'.

Fuck, maybe Gorge had a way to help but that would cost a load of credits, one she didn't have. Well, that was for later.

After some hesitation, Nestra decided to keep the armor on. For now.

A narrow alley continued, eventually leading to a smaller cavern containing three jellyfishes. This time, she cut their limbs at the base which made them slowly fall. That brought ten vials of brain juice she could sell. The third cavern posed as much of a challenge, but soon she approached the end of the portal world. This time, she had a good look around and found... nothing.

The cavern was large, larger even than the first. Small crystalline structures provided perfect visibility, even for human eyes. The blue radiance bounced on the walls to provide a diffuse background to a central boulder. A small altar at the back announced that this was the end of this portal world. Nestra could guess what this was about and it would not be easy. This time, she would be using her gun. One bullet should be enough.

She stepped towards the boulder and stopped when it shifted. With a rumble, cracks appeared on the black surface. Rocky limbs randomly detached from a massive torso, its surface cracked and pitted. The creature finished deploying itself with a low, rumbling growl. This one had three limbs, a chest and two arms leading to a cone that it would probably use as a hammer. After all, it was not technically alive.

Animana Lapis Unus. A monocoreshell stone golem. A real D-class threat.

That was it, the true test of mettle. Golems like this one came in many shapes, hence why she had waited to engage rather than catching a surprise attack from a mystery limb.

When she was young, her father had trained her to fight against those threats. Golems strung in wide, powerful swings that raiders could not easily block. Without a defense specialist, they could not block it at all. That was why golems made every fight harder. One could not stand their ground against this force of nature.

The creature turned to Nestra then moved forward ponderously. It was slightly slower than a running human. Not that it mattered. In a cavern, there was nowhere to hide, and a golem never tired.

Nestra faced the creature. It was as tall as her but much, much wider. As it approached, it raised one of its massive arms. There was no hand, only pure, solid stone.

Nestra felt very alive.

Walking into the attack, she struck at the exposed chest with a mana-infused blade. It was so thick. Like hitting a wall. She stepped to the side and slashed at a leg then dodged under a return swing, then she jumped over the next and sidestepped around another leg. The three legs made the golem rather quick but it had trouble rotating. Her next lunge bit into its powerful torso then she jumped back, avoiding a headbutt. As it passed by, she struck where the neck would be. She was already tiring from the constant drain of coating her blade, but that should be enough.

The cuts on the legs and arms were slowly healing but the one on its front torso was already closed, a darker shade of stone the only hint the creature had been damaged. That meant the core was there. The closer to the core and the faster the regeneration. She didn't dare make some distance. It would be useless. Had to finish fast. Already, her heart drummed against her chest and her breath grew more labored. She needed a coated blade.

Jumping over a low strike, Nestra thrust into the center of the chest. The golem shuddered and took a step back.

She could see it, a small bulge where the liver would be. Just at the right spot.

Nestra drew her gun and shot.

The thunderous blow almost deafened her. The revolver kicked like a mule on steroid, forcing her back even with her enhanced strength. Her forearm and elbow stung. A moment of later, shards showered her.

A cerulean radiance emerged from the shatter stone in the form of a dripping, thick liquid. The core.

The golem shook from the damage. Weakness. An opening. A grin erupted on her lips. This was so great.

A perfect lunge.

The tip of the sword crashed into the core, breaking it with a ghastly crack. The golem stopped moving. It didn't fall or collapse. From foe, the enemy was now a statue.

Victory once again.

"Hell yes. I'm the best!"

Nestra felt like whooping. She'd done it! A serious foe defeated by herself! That was well done, if she dared say so herself. The Stalk of the Scorn Crescent really helped her guide her style. And it was versatile too!

Nestra picked up golem crystal shards. The intact core could fetch a great price since they could be used to animate guardian constructs for wealthy houses. Sadly, the cores were excessively hard to harvest since, quite obviously, the golem objected. The shards would still fetch a decent price as a crafting material for heavy armor. Nestra hummed under her breath. Three mana crystals this time! She was rich. Well, not yet. But surely soon!

The portal back was uneventful and there was another package with a letter waiting for her by the primate enclosure entrance.

Nestra sighed and read.

“Little Nezhra!

You have done very well but you need to eat more! I have found this for you. Here are the coordinates of your last playing ground before we start on the real fun!

Quest: grow strong enough to use spells.

Reward: skin!”

“What the fuck?”

Her prize this time was a basket of fruits. And some nuts. But that wasn't the weird part. The weird part was that those were clearly outside world fruits. Wild ones. They were ripe too. Some of the nuts were still partially wrapped damaged green pods. Mana fruits were considered particularly nourishing and those found in the wilds, even more so. They also helped with growth, at least for humans. And they were delicious.

Nevertheless, Nestra felt treated like a child. Seriously, the benefactor was like a grandma. So far she'd seen them as a mysterious and powerful entity and clearly they were but... were they not also a little bit dumb? And since when were fruits an acceptable payment?

There were some tiny fruits that looked like tiger bananas with black spots. She picked one.

It was amazing.

“Mff!”

Had to have more. No, wait, she had to leave first. This place wasn't secure.

Nestra changed in record time then left the park at a brisk pace, carrying her 'liberated' new possessions like some sort of loot goblin. She drooled all the way back to her secret lair then had the AI drive her home so she could sample the fruits. They were really amazing. She only refrained from finishing everything because she had the jellyfish as well. Once home, she saw Stib had left her a message asking to meet and apologizing for going off grid. She would reply the next day. First, food!

It took a long time for the jellyfish to be ready. She used her cooking robot to shred it and cook it at low temperature, but when it was done, she had it in sesame and soy sauce. It was crunchy and delicious. She cooked the mushrooms herself as a fricassee and felt very proud of herself. It was absolutely scrumptious. Her great mood was interrupted when her fangs found a mushroom of a slightly different consistency. A bit more spongy. As she bit down, a strange, leathery taste filled her palate. She immediately spat out her mouthful.

“What?”

One of the mushrooms was different. It looked like a morel. She hadn't noticed.

“I hope aaaawawa. Wa?”

Nestra was super sleepy. Also, the room was now a bright yellow and the walls were leaking mustard. Her fork extended into infinity while the mushrooms danced themselves into an intricate, fractal pattern.

“Guh?”

Nestra’s mouth felt weird, paralyzed. A shape drifted down from the ceiling wearing a bathrobe. It was, she realized, a kangaroo.

“Hey what’s cookin’?” the marsupial asked in a husky voice.

“Moh!”

Then, he pulled boxing gloves from a waist pocket, which was silly because they definitely couldn’t fit.

“I want to know that I take no pleasure in this,” the kangaroo said.

Nestra’s bowl grew in size until it covered the whole of creation. There were stars in there, an abyss that watched back with bloodshot eyes and asked her if she would make a run for tacos. She said hell no and laid down on the ground to contemplate the nature of her existence.

Nestra’s mind palace looked like someone had used a shotgun on paint canisters.

“Fuck.”

The walls twisted a little as she went by, checking the changes. There were no new resistances, however the storm core was just a little thicker and the interesting change came from the planet room.

As Nestra entered, she felt a potential in the slowly rotating spheres, but the newest change was from the puddle over which the sphere rotated. It felt deeper, not by much, but enough that the ground underneath wasn’t so clear anymore. She dipped a finger in and felt the caress of quiescent potential. The color of the puddle was gray, just like her spells.

“That’s my mana.”

Good to know that, just like every ability, it could be improved by killing things.

Approaching the cores, she tried something new. The strength core had grown again. She felt that it was strong enough to... attach, somehow? Link. It was strong enough to link. There was only one other core that was developed enough to matter, the one that dealt with speed and precision.

Nestra wasn't sure how she knew what to do, possibly inborn instinct. Those two could be joined, allowing for a new concept to travel between them. She wove that tether with hesitant fingers. The gestures were instinctive, yet also unfamiliar. She really wished the benefactor would just stop for a one hour discussion instead of playing hide and seek and letting her flounder like an idiot, but apparently they shared her social grace. By that point, Nestra was cursing under her non-existent breath. The work was difficult but as she progressed, she understood what was implied.

The power core was strength, the ability to push, to press, to beat, to pressure. The speed core was the ability to move and react, to be precise. Together, they became strength in motion. The tether was... she almost had it.

It was momentum.

With a last mental click, the tendril locked in place and the planets escaped, now rotation in harmony with each other. It didn't change anything for the others but they felt more... ordered, somehow. As if something had been completed and the chaos was lessened. It felt great.

And then Nestra woke up.

The first thing Nestra did when she woke up was removing a piece of mushroom from her nostril. The second was to realize she had a terrible migraine.

"Ow ow ow."

So damn stupid. She should have paid more attention to her prize instead of just plopping them on a pan and assume they were all the same species because they mostly looked the same. She'd been sloppy. She could have died! The anger at her own foolishness needed her as she stood in the living room to hunt the nearest glass of water. As she did so, she felt something new, something hard to describe.

Nestra knew how to use mana, though not well. Rich families like her own often let their children draw power from low quality mana stones just so that they could get used to manipulating it before they awakened. The Palladians were no exception. Coating her blade was the most effective use of her weak reserves for now, but in essence, it implied sending mana through her conduits and into a suitable blade, though stronger users could just use anything. The new ability she felt was different. It felt linked to her physical body, like the ability to know where her hands were at all times. Hesitantly, she called upon it before her dehydrated brain could catch up to her.

She was propelled forward at great speed. The sudden jump took her completely off guard and she smacked head first into her kitchen door before she could recover.
