"Perps turned east, seven streets down. They're slowing down."

"Copy," Camus said.

Nestra had no idea how he could keep talking. All she could do was gulp cold night air and pump her tired legs on the warm asphalt, one foot after the other and again, hoping she would last. MaxSec armor had never been designed for running. Not like keeping up with mana users on foot was reasonable to begin with.

The squad had lost them some time ago when the two shapes disappeared behind a concrete corner of the tired hab block. Only the drones would keep up until they ran out of batteries or the users managed to find a hiding hole. Nestra looked up past the drab gray walls and the tired concrete, towards the shining arc of the outer highway and then the imposing black band of Threshold City's massive kaiju wall, like a collar of darkness. The sight allowed her to center herself. Distract her from the exhaustion.

"They've stopped near a closed portal gate. E6-105. Small one," Stib's voice whispered in her ears.

"Gate status," Camus asked.

The tall fucker didn't even sound winded. It was all Nestra could do not to collapse. Meanwhile, drone operator Stibbons must have been pulling files because she sounded distracted.

"Hmmm. Permanent portal gate, closed for now. Monster generation on a nine day cycle, three days of purge time before they escape. Not many resources listed, mostly mana crystals. It was pacified over a week ago by North Star Security, the owner. Oh. They're trying to wake it up."

"Can they survive in there?"

"Hmm. Portal nature and monsters class is classified information. By North Star. I don't have clearance."

Camus swore into his beard. Nestra thought it was stupid. It didn't matter if the two thief users could use it or not. They clearly thought they could or they wouldn't be feeding it mana to wake up early.

"Least," Bard croaked, "least they'll be tired."

Nobody stated the obvious. So would they. And mana users didn't leave baseline humans the opportunity to recover from a mistake. Nestra's grip tightened on her standard issue pacifier. If the users were low D-class, the squad could probably manage. If they were in the higher ranges then...

Had to die sometime. Might as well be tonight.

"Where are our fucking reinforcements?" Bard panted.

Camus signaled and everyone came to a halt. Nestra put her fist on her knees and breathed all she could and fuck the decorum. They already looked like a militia anyway with patched up gear and surplus shit. And it wasn't like the users would take them seriously anyway.

"Alright. Stib, they're really opening that gate?"

"Trying. Might take a while. Not sure why though."

Camus grunted in answer. Nestra sighed. It was obvious.

"They'll go through and find a place to hunker down since us baselines can't follow them in," she explained. "We'll have no choice but to wait around or have our own mana users go after them. They're hoping to leave in a day or so, after we're gone."

"That's just stupid," Bard replied. "Why not take us out now? Then they can disappear in the district before the augs show up."

His voice always felt so grating, always with the laid back surfer persona. Always whining about everything.

"TPD is overstretched. They know that. They don't know there's only the four of us on their trail right now though. Besides, it doesn't matter. They're charging the gate. Either we try stopping them, or we don't."

"Someone changed our orders while my back was turned?"

Camus' black gaze was fixed on Nestra. She shrugged. Only the faintest dark skin could be seen around the giant's bloodshot eyes. The rest was covered in nylon, kevlar, and ceramics. Probably older than he was. Nestra sustained the gaze. He was being a pissant.

"Any chance for borgs?" Park interrupted.

The last and most quiet member of the team deflated the tension as he often did.

"Call them augmented humans, or augs at least for Riel's sake. And not now. We're it. As I said earlier. Now, Stib, show us the map around that portal."

"Sure thing boss."

The squad used a diverse assortment of ancient helmet visors to read the 3D map. It was a standard abandoned hab bloc near the wall, population swallowed by one of the arcologies at least a decade before. The portal opened on a small courtyard surrounded by shuttered small businesses. Nestra was starting to agree with Bard. Those users were morons. Place was far too open. Any augs around would have spotted them from the sky while only baselines would miss the mana vomited by the open portal. Much better to run and hope for the best. "I got an ID on one of them. The one who removed his mask. Jason Wong, D-class, a record as long as my arm but only small stuff. Oh, and the item they stole is inert. Confirmed by the vics."

"You sure?"

"Lenses used in surgery robots. Not enchanted."

"Right, here is what we'll do. Bard and Nes take the front and wait for my signal. Park and I move to the side, then on my mark, you start apprehending. We move in while they look at you. Weapons free. Don't hesitate."

Nestra caressed the hilt of her stun 'baton'. The tool was custom-made, one of the gifts from her aunt Claire. The habit soothed her nerves. It wasn't dying that worried her. It was the pain.

She watched Park and Camus run to a side alley. Bard turned to her. She could see his amusement in the way his shoulder moved, as if he was containing a laugh.

"So, Palladian. Wanna be the negotiator? Every time I talk it seems to piss off the perps."

"For the last fucking time, use my call sign when we're on the field. And you piss off everybody, not just the perps. Because you're a cunt."

"How smooth, darling. You talk to them then."

"Stib here, goons," Nestra's earpiece said. "With the footage of our perps. Sending the feed now."

A window opened on Nestra's visor. It was placed on the upper right corner so as not to impede her vision. It showed a deserted hab square littered with junk. Boarded up businesses lined it on every side, dead neon signs hanging limply from rusting supports. Stairs led up to the living quarters in a uniform gray color of unpainted concrete. Typical of quick jobs from just after the gates opened and survival became the highest priority.

The only colors came from fading graffitis promoting long-dead gangs: two men standing before an empty arch, one facing it with arms extended while the other fiddled with a control panel linked to the arch by a pair of heavy duty cables. Nestra noted that the controls were ancient. Resilient stuff made at the beginning of the incursion. Rich guilds used holographic interfaces nowadays.

It was clear the one at the panel had no idea what he was doing. He had also discarded his face covering, a basic bandana, to reveal the handsome face of an Asian man with slick black hair and a frantic expression. His eyes shone with the inner light typical of low gleams. Jason Wong. By contrast, the other perp wore a plastic or ceramic white mask with fox features. His outfit was close-fitting, his boots made to run. As she watched, a blue light flickered in the center of the arch.

"Looks like the portal's activating," she said.

"Almost in position," Camus said. "Ok, in position. Start the approach."

"Ladies first," Bard said with a smile.

Nestra took the lead. Her heart did its best to escape her ribs with every step that brought her closer to the pair of users. She felt excitement as well, for a good fight. Envy. Mostly, she felt envy. It bit at her chest with the cold acid of what ifs.

Soon, she was in one of the narrow corridors leading to the portal space.

Wong faced them while Fox Mask ignored their presence.

"This is TPD. You are surrounded. Our users are on the way. Surrender now and do everyone a favor."

"I don't think so," Wong said. "You say gleam pigs are on the way. I say you're lying."

He sounded defiant and angry. A dangerous combination. Also meant he would be easier to distract. Fox Mask was an enigma though. He was still focused on the gate.

"Look, Wong, we've IDed you. It's over one way or the other. Right now you're just in for theft and fleeing and eluding. Nothing too serious. Just surrender, Jason, before it gets out of hand. Come on. You're a gleam. You'll get a slap on the wrist," she replied, pointing at the heavy case leaning against the console Wong had been fiddling with.

That was the stolen property, still intact apparently.

"Slap on the wrist? Easy for you to say. You won't be sent to a dangerous gate risking life and limb every day! And for what? To feed the corporations! We're just cogs in the machine, man. It's all about the opium of the masses and the profits of the few. But not me! And I'm not bowing to sheltered dogs of the government."

Nestra gripped her baton so hard it hurt. One of those. She hated his type with a burning passion. Had to keep it together though.

"Not feeling like a sheltered dog right now, Jason. I'm actually tired and in pain. Look, you are a gleam, ok? You can enter a portal and make five times as much as I do carrying minerals through mining gates three days a week. We're all cogs of society, you dolt. You wanna do something about it? Run raids for charities! Do politics, whatever. But here you are instead, committing theft, and not like, of food or anything vital."

Of course, Nestra's words set the gleam off. A part of her knew it would. She just didn't care anymore.

"Bullshit, you're so naive. It's all rigged at the top, don't you see? Corpos and the mayor working together to keep us all down, man, manufacturing content and everything! Just so we serve the masses instead of a worthy cause."

"Oh, you think you serve the masses? Really? You see those arcologies behind me? Owned by high gleams. Top scientists? Gleams! Traders? That's right, fuckface, no instant trading unless you got a mana signature. You are the least fucked out of all of us, and instead of doing something, you rant against the government while stealing fucking glasses like some bargain bin terrorist. Holy shit, I've never met a worse loser than you."

"Hmm, Palladian. Calm down?" Bard said.

The hypocrite was having fun and they both knew it. Nestra didn't give a shit. It felt good to let out the bottled anger, feel the poisoned relief course through her veins, knowing she might pay for it later. She pulled her lips back into a rictus only she could feel. Jason Wong's face was a fury-wracked scowl. It felt good to reach him like that.

"YOU BITCH!"

"Stop that," Fox Mask said, and to Nestra's surprise, that was a female voice.

"I'm not going to stand there while these dregs-"

"They're nobodies. TPD baselines without a single combat augment between themselves. They're baiting you. Come and help me," Fox Mask said, and there was a strain in her voice.

"You know what? You don't give me orders! I'm not anyone's tool."

Electricity crackled down Wong's hand, gathering in his fist.

"Wong's a buzzer," Nestra said.

Her anger fell down the drain while the cold grasp of fear settled in her stomach.

"Wasn't in the file," Stib grumbled.

Wong extended a finger towards Nestra, who brandished her baton. A bolt surged from there, much slower than true electricity. Moreover, it missed Nestra completely.

Bard received the bolt on a heavy gauntlet as it spiked towards him. Energy traveled along an inner circuit of his armor, then to the ground. There was a fizzle near his knee and he winced when the electric mana bit through tattered insulation. Piece of shit gear.

Wong charged.

Nestra received another bolt on her blade which she had planted on the ground, dissipating the mana. Bard opened fire on the thug but he moved quickly, escaping most shots. The

remaining bullets barely slowed him down though he grunted in pain. Nestra received a very obvious haymaker on her blade.

Strong.

She was pushed back and rolled to absorb the shock. Still felt it in her bones through the absorbing foam, the pain making her teeth click together. It was like being hit by a slow truck. She was back on her feet in an instant anyway.

Bard managed to land a hook on Wong while his back was turned, hitting the gut. Wong barely flinched. His riposte sent the much taller Bard smashing against the wall. Nestra was up. A turn of a button and her baton extended, becoming as long as a claymore. She caught Wong in the forehead with a perfect thrust. A hundred thousand volts made him scream and fall but he was up in the same second. Electrokinetic. Natural resistance. Nestra cursed her luck.

A flurry of strikes kept Wong at bay until she made the mistake of actually hitting him. His look of triumph when he realized she had no energy left sent a shiver down her spine. He caught her blade with ease and sent it tumbling but a barrage of bullets forced him back. Bard had recovered. Behind, Park and Camus were shooting at an unmoving Fox Mask. The bullets pinged on a shield.

Bard fell back, shooting short bursts. The bullets left black bruises on an increasingly annoyed Wong. Nestra wished they'd pack lethal stuff. Their foe charged and grabbed Nestra's baton once again.

It had finished cycling.

Wong screamed when the second thunderous discharge coursed his body from hand to toe. He fell to his knees. Nestra's perfect swing caught him right in the temple.

Wong fell ponderously. Bard was on him a moment later, putting manacles on.

"Riel almighty that was hard," Bard swore.

"Gotta help the others."

They looked up in time to see... no one.

"Huh?"

Park's body crashed against a nearby dumpster. His leg was at a bad angle. A very bad one.

"Officer down!" Stib yelled.

"Shit!"

"He's alive but Camus needs help. Left. Go, now!"

The pair raced forward. Stib's feed appeared on Nestra's visor, showing Camus calmly moving back while shooting the approaching form of Fox Mask. The user didn't seem worried. She was taking her time.

"Rubber bullets against users? Budget cuts are worse than I thought," she drily noted.

Nestra gritted her teeth. They wouldn't be on time. Fox Mask charged and disarmed Camus after a short exchange despite the tall man using a knife. Fox Mask had her own blade but she didn't use it, content to gut punch him with the hilt. Even through the MaxSec armor, the impact left the colossus prostrated. She really knew how to fight.

Definitely not a low D-class gleam.

A crawling dread cimbled up Nestra's spine when she finally realized that they didn't really have anything to take Fox Mask down.

They couldn't defeat her.

That was it, really.

It could only go one way from now on.

Bard was next to fall. Fox Mask ran him down and grabbed his gun, emptying the entire magazine against his armor then kicking him down the nearby steps. Nestra was left with her baton held in front of her. The portal flickered behind her. She felt more than heard it.

"Oh? A fellow practitioner? Well, of course then. Please."

Fox Mask saluted. Nestra retracted the blade and held her baton like a foil. Speed would matter.

They fought.

Fox Mask used her short blade like a saber. It was clear she was used to a longer blade. It was also clear that she was slowing herself down a lot. It didn't help.

"Reinforcements will be here soon, Nes! Hold on!" Stib said as if it would make a difference.

Holding on was all Nestra could do in the first place. Finally, her weapon finished cycling. She pressed the button as Fox Mask parried. The saber's surface crackled, electricity sliding over mana.

"I coated my blade, of course," Fox Mask said conversationally.

A jab caught Nestra in the ribs, stealing her breath through the armor. She couldn't scream. She could only gasp and gulp air in her abused lungs as fast as she could. Fox Mask still stood there, short blade resting on her shoulder. This hadn't even been a serious hit. There was no blood. Fox Mask had specifically used a coating to dull her weapon. She was doing her best not to hurt Nestra too much.

That stung more than the blow to her chest.

"Looks like it's time," Fox Mask whispered.

Something changed. Perfect cerulean light suddenly bathed the trash alley, then a low hum like a distant choir, the smell of the sea and fresh air fought off the drab reality, pushing off the stale gloom of the abandoned block. That wasn't the best part though.

The best part was the mana.

Nestra's pain faded. The constant aching in her bones dulled to a whisper. Energy washed away her exhaustion, flooding her limbs with renewed energy and a desire to move. To use that strength. More importantly, she felt complete.

At peace.

Whole.

The portal was open.

"I will be going now," Fox Mask said.

She deflected the casual blow meant to push her off, countered. Her blade danced and sang with speed. Fox Mask blocked and backpedaled.

"Wha—"

Nestra caught her off guard. Nestra pressed the advantage in a flurry of thrusts her foe deflected with some effort. Unfortunately, that was just stolen mana. Fox Mask... was the real deal. She parried and attacked in turn, ever faster. It was Nestra's turn to fall back.

A hand against her shoulder. She was airborne. She was on the ground. Her shoulder hit a brick.

"Oof."

Fox Mask stood just as calm as she had always been. Still taking it easy. Sirens blared in the distance. Fox Mask looked up, revealing a triangle of tan skin and a hint of black curls. She returned her gaze to Nestra. Dark iris like pits in the middle of that white ceramic fixed on the prone officer.

"Guess you can have it then. As a gesture of my appreciation."

Fox Mask walked through the portal's aperture without her stolen prize, disappearing as smoothly as through the surface of a lake. A ripple agitated the calm blue surface.

Nestra sat back up, winced, then decided to wait.

Flashing lights and cheap coffee. Groups of vigils milling around in groups of three, doing fuckall. Nestra took a sip of tea. Too strong. Tepid.

What little mana she'd absorbed was gone now, dissipated into the air. She felt cranky. Her forearm and ribs hurt like a bitch. The medic by her side finished waving an old piece of tech around her body. It beeped. She didn't know the guy. Not interested in small talk.

"Bruising, mostly. You'll be fine. Regen capsule and a pain killer."

"I got some at home."

"Good, then..."

"How's Park?"

The medic sighed and leaned back with his hands on his waist. Something cracked. He sighed, more relief than contentment.

"Fractured tibia and humerus. Bad. He's out for at least a month with healer care. Camus has a broken rib. You guys got it easy."

"What do you mean?"

Anxiety chased away the gloom.

"Beta squad got in a scrap with gangers. Hmm. Regis is dead. Sorry."

Fuck.

"And district fifteen is rioting. All our users are there right now. The unrest is bleeding through."

"Yeah, I know."

Nestra was fed up hearing about district fifteen, especially because a couple of high gleams could have solved the problem in ten minutes two months ago and now it was like a festering wound of crime and trafficking. She didn't know Regis very well but he'd always been tolerable. Polite, supportive. A great teammate. Why couldn't they have killed Gorge instead? There was no justice in this world.

Fuck.

The medic felt the mood and left, looking for someone else to help. Nestra just stayed there, not sure what to do. They'd given her a cover made of weird metal but she was still getting cold.

"Drive you home?"

Nestra looked up. Stib was offering a hand which she gratefully took. Stib was smiling but it was only skin deep. Brittle. Her eyes were red. She'd been crying.

The tiny woman hoisted Nestra to her feet. The darkness made her boyish with her sharp face and tiny frame, hair cut short under a cap. Despite that, her grip was firm.

"Thanks. You heard?" Nestra asked.

"Yeah, I... Yeah."

The two made it to the squad vehicle. It was meant to carry eight people, a blocky, armored transport designed to carry a squad in and out safely. It had been top of the line thirty years ago. Now, any mana-powered guilder left it in the dust, a C-class gleam could punch a hole through it, and a B-class could fold it like a fucking paper crane. Budget cuts meant they no longer had a dedicated driver, or a medic, or a dedicated mechanic for that matter. The squad had been cut from six to five and Lance was still in the hospital. Nestra slammed the passenger door shut. The hinges creaked ominously. Inside, it smelled of synth leather and old sweat. There were old blood stains on the upholstery that predated Nestra's entire career.

Stib pulled out. The engine roared like a chimera but the truck moved like a slime. The streets were empty save for transients roasting surprise meat over barrel fires, watching them pass by with the hollow eyes of tracked beasts. The ramp up the wall ring pushed their old rustbolt to its limits. Stib immediately stuck to the slow lane while corpo cars and convoys raced by.

"So, Nestra."

"Siobhan. Are we having the talk again?"

"Yeah. I guess we are. I mean, after tonight ... "

There was an awkward silence. Nestra didn't know how to handle it anymore. Siobhan Stibbons entered that rare category she considered as friend. It meant that when Siobhan talked, she listened. Even though they'd had the same conversation plenty of times. Except... this time it was different. The two remaining squads were mangled. Nestra knew they'd crossed a point of no return.

"Yeah," she finally whispered.

"You'll consider quitting then?"

"I mean. Not right away but... I don't think we'll have a choice. Short term. Tomorrow we'll get gleams and city admins on our asses and they'll ask questions and there'll be no good answers. It doesn't even make me mad anymore. It is what it is."

"Yeah. I've talked to my parents. They want me out too."

Nestra laughed at that.

"What? Old man Stibbons, the career copper?"

"Ha ha. Yeah. I guess mom has been working him to the bone. They want me to transfer to Blue River as a drone operator, earthside."

"A guild? Must be freezing in hell."

"Blue River is made of ex-cops. Their gleams exclusively raid while us 'crunchies' handle the day-to-day stuff. I'd be carrying crates of material from portals to warehouses and the like. Cozy job, few risks. They said I could even pilot a hovercraft."

"Must be nice."

"Look, once I'm there, maybe I can get a word in. You're not really family but you're close enough by now."

"Thanks."

"I mean it."

"I know but you know what they'll ask. I can't borg up."

Siobhan mechanically touched the silvery plate on her neck where the mind jack was installed. It was non-invasive as far as cybernetic augmentations went but it was still more than Nestra could handle. She felt like an asshole, never explaining to the shorter girl what the deal was. She was being a shit friend.

"Look I've not told you the exact deal before because it's, well, painful. Annoying."

"Guess you had to explain many times before, right?"

"Understatement of the decade."

"I get it. If you feel like sharing now... Otherwise..."

Nestra realized she didn't mind. The scar had fully formed now. She'd grieved enough for this life.

"Thank you. For being understanding. And it's fine. Look, thing is, I got almost all the pieces to make a proper user. I got a mana structure. I have high mana capacity though that doesn't even make sense. Riel, I probably even got affinities."

"Affinities plural?"

"Lightning for sure, ice maybe. From the advanced testing. That's the thing. People with mana structures become crazy if you borg them. That's a fact of life. Maybe quirkies can get away with it if they don't cut the body part that hosts the mana structure, but even D-class get bonkers, and I got the D-class package. It's just not working."

"Got it. I'll still ask. Maybe there is a way. Unless you got a project lined up?"

"My contract is due in seven months. If they don't shut us down before, I'll move then. The idea was, well, I can probably be an assistant. I'm not going to like it but at least they pay well. And I can get away with external systems instead of a mind jack like you have. My aunt Claire offered it."

"The one who gave you the apartment?"

"Yes. I'm forcing her to accept rent, or at least mortgage but..."

They stopped for a while to watch a long, train-like convoy race past them. It was entirely black and sported the TDF logo. Probably wall supplies and ammo.

"She's probably saving it all in a rainy day fund?" Siobhan continued.

"How do you know?"

"My grandma did the same. Anyway, she got you a job?"

"She offered. If she did, it means she'll find one. I won't enjoy being reminded of what I'm not and they won't like remembering that I can happen to their kids but...it's probably doable. And much better than becoming a barista. I wouldn't do well in the service industry. I don't have transferable skills."

"And you have a shit attitude."

Nestra chuckled. It was true.

"That too. And, you know, they don't ever get near portals."

At that, Siobhan fell silent. Nestra knew why. Some of her family had a history with alcoholism and Nestra's issue was too close for comfort.

"Yeah. About that. Is it like ... an addiction?"

Nestra chuckled once again. Little Siobhan was daring tonight.

"I don't know. I just know that if I haven't been near a portal in a while I feel like shit and as long as I get close, it's like... feeling alive again. Fully functional. If it's an addiction then I've had it since I was a young adult."

"What did Mazingwe say?"

"Same as before. My case is so rare that nobody cares about it. It's not profitable to fix it."

"You parents..."

"Got me to the best healers. Even Shinran."

"Wait. You met Threshold's Guardian? Our Shinran?"

"Yep. They all said the same thing. There is nothing wrong with me. I'm exactly what I was born to be."

"Well, shit."

"Indeed. Nothing to fix. I made a request to have weekly access to active portals. The answer must come soon. If the city government doesn't say yes then maybe a guild will. That's why a raider's personal assistant would be perfect. I mean, getting close to portals would be part of the job."

"Yeah. I hope it works."

Nestra didn't reply. It wouldn't work. It had gotten worse over the years. She needed more mana to fill the pit of hunger deep within her every time and every time, it lasted less time. Just like Siobhan said, just like an addiction, one that no one knew how to fix. Maybe some portal item... Maybe.

Had to keep hoping.

It was the same dream. Nestra watched from above the innocent, young version of herself. That one had white gold hair curled in great loops as was the fashion at that time, not the listless dark blonde mop. That one had lustrous skin, not a gaunt mask marked by tiny scars. That one had bright eyes, gray edging on silver as if on the cusp of awakening, the only thing the current Nestra had kept. That one wore a uniform from the prestigious Threshold Preparatory School at over twelve thousand credits a set. The current Nestra earned a fourth of that every month, hazard pay included. That one walked blithely to the analysis chair like the little shit full of hope she was. Positively vibrating. A kind-looking woman with a teal gleam in her eyes welcomed her with matronly attention.

"Miss Palladian, welcome. Are you ready?"

"Ready and eager, ma'am."

"Haha, feel free to call me Miss Daendra. Hop in!"

That Nestra climbed and closed her eyes. The room had no windows. It was all white tiles suffused with a warm glow. An observation deck overhead hid the complex machinery and control panel required to make it work. That Nestra studiously ignored it. She knew her mom was there. And a few teachers. She had to look cool about it.

Mana flooded her body. A pressure on her mind invited her deeper in. She followed it. It was like being submerged in water. Weightless, relaxed. That Nestra dove until she found herself in a luxurious, well-lit reception room. There were doors to the side but she knew without trying that those were locked tight.

"Right, we are about to send a mana burst to help you find your core representation. You might also see the affinity you have based on the color so keep your metaphorical eyes open!"

"I hope it's ice!"

"Hoho, well we have a betting pool about that. Sending the burst now. Follow it to your core."

Light filled the reception room. Great arcs of power traced through the air like aurorae. It was beautiful for as long as it lasted.

"Miss Palladian, are you in the room?" Dean Daendra asked in a more subdued voice.

"Ye... yes."

"Could you please make contact with your core? We cannot seem to get a lock on it."

"I am in the room but I do not see the core. Mana just disperses in the air."

"No retention?" a voice said in a way that hinted she was not supposed to hear. "None at all? That can't be right. Children of users are always users. Look, no, the likelihood is less than one in a million and the few recorded cases lack her structure. That can't be it. Sorry, sweetie, we're just having some trouble. Hold on there, okay?"

"Okay."

That Nestra held on through the hours of testing, through the general consternation, the hasty meetings, right to the point when the car bringing her home left the school's garden through the small door. After that she cried a lot. The school reimbursed her tuition and the uniform with their apologies. It didn't help.

No core.

A freak anomaly.

1.2

Nestra woke up in her bed. Her back hurt. Her shoulder hurt. Her forearm hurt a lot more. Her mind felt groggy, starving in a way that food couldn't sate. Her stomach growled though she barely had an appetite. She used her visor to check her messages. This one was a light model that covered just one eye, rather cumbersome. Com contacts were better but Nestra couldn't stand them.

Summoned at 10AM by Mazingwe for a checkup, then the admin at 11. One day of respite was too much to ask. The bureaucracy demon demanded that ink be shed and pacts signed in triplicate. Well, electronic ink but whatever.

Nestra followed her usual morning routine. Stretch, shower, brush teeth, dress, gobble down two essence bars— 100% of your daily intake of everything in convenient packages! — drink coffee. Ignore the ghost of her mother's voice that told her she should brush her teeth after coffee. Climb on her old electric car and drive to work.

Her apartment was in a nicer district, not a wall one. That meant a forty minute drive through the remnants of the morning rush. That also meant a reduced risk of gang wars spilling over her favorite coffee shop. The weather was nice, clear, still cold from winter's weakening's grasp. A news feed blared info until something caught her attention. She turned the autopilot on and listened.

"A Threshold police officer lost his life in a clash with an unknown gang in district fifteen yesterday evening. Officer Regis was a baseline with over fifteen years of experience but he fell to a gang user. Opposition Councillor Schofield reacted to the news with a dire warning."

"Gang violence has increased by 21% over the last year in the outer district in general. In district fifteen, crime is so high that authorities have deserted it entirely! This is the direct and predictable result of the politics of abandonment Mayor Kim Soon-Jae has promoted over the last decade. Our population swarms in arcologies, leaving our outer shell disused and abandoned to marginalized groups ripe for induction by unscrupulous actors. If nothing is done, we will lose the entire outer ring to crime lords!"

"The mayor's office announced a plan to address the issue by giving police duties to guilds, compensating them with tax rebates. Opposition denounced the measure as unconscionable because it would leave state duties to private entities and force portal raiders to play a role they are not trained for. However, the mayor office's representative remarked that public safety must take into account new realities such as the rise in the number of criminal users. They noted that the proportion of users in the 16 to 18 age bracket has recently reached the historical amount of 20%. The process only seems to be accelerating, demanding a change in the way law enforcement functions. In other news, pop star singer Mizuha officially signed with —"

Nestra tuned it off. She changed channels to pre-incursion music and sat back as comfortably as her bruised back allowed. That was it, really. Always fun to learn about one's contract termination in the morning news.

The autopilot informed her she had arrived shortly after. She let the police compound take over her parking and exited the nice, modern local branch of the TPD to the shithole that was the MaxSec annex. The underground parking was mostly empty. She passed the biometric scan to find Ines serenaded by Mazingwe himself, two streaming cups of coffee waiting between them. The towering doctor turned and pretended to only notice Nestra now. The golden gleam of his iris contrasted nicely with a skin so dark it was almost blue. Mazingwe shaved entirely and the white scrubs he wore did nothing to conceal his lean muscles. Nestra still had no idea what the old gleam was doing here. She was pretty sure he was moonlighting or something.

"Miss Palladian! Just in time for your ten o'clock. Good morning to you!"

Mazingwe went for a handshake. He was old school like that. Nestra obliged.

"I bet you were Lion Nierere. He was a user from Tanzania, during the incursion."

"Once again I regret to say that even if you were right, I would not tell you," he replied with a smile.

"Miss Palladian, please," Ines said with terrible embarrassment. "Show some propriety! Mr. Mazingwe is—"

"A servant of our dear mother Threshold just like the rest of us," Nestra interrupted with a fake smile. "I'm sure he does not insist on honorifics."

"I know how to pick my battles, Nestra. Thank you lnes dear. I will see you later. Enjoy the coffee. Duty calls!"

Nestra followed the tall man but not before shrugging at Ines' judgemental look. The old lady was pale and rotund and fretful, always worried about appearances and Nestra's continued single status. She meant well. So Nestra didn't give her too hard a time. Mazingwe was fair game though, the old doctor's unflappable demeanor a challenge to her. She followed him to the medical room and waited while he fiddled around with a scanner. That one was quite nicer.

"While we proceed, I need to ascertain your identity. Are you —"

"Must we?" Nestra moaned.

"It is the protocol and as a doctor-"

"Yeah yeah fine. I am Clytemnestra Palladian, named by an idiot father with an ancient Greece fixation backed with no real knowledge and who didn't consider that sending a girl to school with a name that starts with 'clyt' was a shit idea. There you are. That's me."

"Clytemnestra was a powerful figure, the queen of Mycenae."

"Assassinated her husband in a fit of jealousy."

"I withdraw my remark and concede your point. Minor bruising but otherwise you are in remarkably good shape. Did you take a regen capsule?"

"Yesterday before bed. With a mild painkiller."

"Get another one tonight and you will be fine. Painkiller if you need it. No training until I have performed another exam tomorrow. And no mission. You're on the bench."

"Me and the others," Nestra grumbled.

And Regis. That poor fucker.

"I am sorry about what happened to your friend Regis. He was a good man. His loss leaves us all poorer and the world duller."

Nestra shrugged. She didn't do well with emotional stuff like that.

"There will be a service on Saturday, if you can attend. Regis was a Christian. We are going to church."

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

Mazingwe sighed.

"Look, you are still young and you can recover from trauma overnight but that will not last. Your dedication and skill with the sword are remarkable, to have landed a position in the alpha squad as their CQC expert, especially as a woman."

"That's sexist."

"Nestra, please. For baselines, reach and muscle mass matter a lot when it comes to close quarter combat. Technique will only carry you so far. My point was that you are burning the candle from both ends. You need to consider... another activity."

"Not you too."

"Danger is rising. Your numbers are dwindling."

"But that didn't stop you," Nestra replied with conviction.

Mazingwe flinched. That was the first time it happened.

"That was different."

"Hah! I knew it. You're a first-gen gleam."

Mazingwe tsked and his gaze hardened. Nestra felt immediately chastened. It was weird how quick he'd turned from cool doctor to, well, high gleam. What he really was. Oh, he had his mana under complete control but Nestra was no fool. Only old monsters could control themselves to that extent.

"Sorry."

"I cannot fathom what you see in pushing me to the limits of my patience. That drive is almost... but I digress and your psychological profile is not my prerogative. I suppose it is time to tell you about your inquiry."

"You got an answer?" Nestra replied, only for her hopes to die stillborn. Mazingwe wore the commiserating face that meant he was the bringer of bad news.

"It's a no, isn't it?"

"I am sorry. I swore on my honor as a practitioner that my observations were true. I gave them charts. Pictures. Cortisol levels. Everything. The final argument is that your case being unique, the city is unwilling to create an exception for you. They suggest, and I quote, that you pursue inquiries with private entities."

He raised his hands to forestall any protests.

"I am sorry and I agree that they are failing their obligation to provide medical care. There is just no guideline to handle your cases since all the other children of users who are not users themselves come from comparatively weak parents. However, I suspect something may be at play. Possibly a stubborn individual."

"Damn," Nestra whispered.

"Ah, I expected a lot of swearing."

"It's just..."

She shrugged.

"Everything."

"I get it. I am making enquiries with my contacts. And no, you may not know who it is or my super secret identity."

He wiggled his eyebrows in a way that felt comedic on such a serious face. Nestra chuckled. He was a good guy.

"Yeah. Guess that's one more closed door."

"Do not lose heart. You were next to an open portal yesterday, yes?"

"The power surge faded as soon as I left the area and the long-lasting relief was gone this morning."

"So…"

"It's getting worse."

"Perhaps you are merely accumulating a deficit. Let's not get carried away with the doomsaying, yes? I am on your side and I will try to help more. In the meanwhile, I believe I have taken enough of your time."

"Thanks, Mazingwe."

"Is your gratitude enough to finally get a 'doctor' before my name?"

"I don't know. Are you sure—"

"No you may not know my super secret identity. Off you go now, mtundu. You are trying this old man's heart."

"Ok ok!"

Nestra fled, trying to recall what he called her but realizing she didn't know how to spell the strange word. And that was cheating. Or was it not? In any case, he had successfully distracted her from her pain. She needed mana, and the city would not provide. What to do? Unfortunately, that lasted long enough for her to reach her cubicle. It was a safe haven with an actual lock on it. An ancient holographic display hummed alive. Someone knocked on the door behind her.

"Palladian."

"Chief."

Chief Ruben was a tired old woman in an equally tired suit. There were deep pockets under her eyes and a weight in them that told Nestra she'd given up, yet the flawless haircut and rigorously ironed outfit said she hadn't. Ruben's position was a punishment. For what, Nestra didn't know. Chief Ruben acquitted herself of her duties with grim determination. She'd also handled Gorge's second to internal affairs for being an absolute piece of shit. Nestra and her had a truce going. It was nice.

"We have a member of special affairs and a user from internal affairs here to see alpha squad, starting with you. Miss Kim and Ilar. No given last name. They're waiting for you in room 2."

There was a lot to unpack there, starting with the fact chief Ruben was not invited to the show. That was a slap to the face and not a small one. Nestra decided to dig a little more. The chief had not moved yet. That meant she wanted to talk. Or say something.

"I thought my appointment was at 11?"

"It is. Mr. Wilson was supposed to come at 10. He has not arrived yet."

"Bard left a gleam and the rat squad hanging?"

"Yes, he did. And they outrank us all. I am placing you in a difficult situation but, please, for once, use honorifics?"

It was a tired request made in a hopeless voice, yet Ruben's face betrayed only bored calm. Nestra found the dichotomy jarring. Shouldn't the chief look angry? A face should match a voice should match a poise, in her opinion.

"I'll be good, chief."

"You are very accommodating today, Palladian."

"Oh just realized that Regis is dead, both squads are down, and we're about to be shuttered so, compared to that, politeness is a very small thing."

"No defeatist speech here please. And as for the squads, we are merging alpha and beta. You and Mr. Wilson will be under Gorge unless I fire the little fucker. Off you go now."

"Riel fucking dammit."

Nestra huffed through the corridor, clad in her annoyance. Gorge was an asshole. A grumpy, sexist, abrasive twat who was unfortunately also highly competent — the combination remained common in Threshold. She'd have to hope he stuck to professionalism during their hopefully short collaboration. Her feet carried her through the tired corridors of the MaxSec building. It smelled of disuse and antiseptic. Some of the paint had peeled off on the ceiling, leaving the concrete bones exposed behind. Many of the rooms had been converted to storage space by other departments with Ruben unable to justify the space since their numbers had dwindled. Nestra knocked on room 2's door three times, loudly enough to be assertive but not loud enough to be aggressive. It took the people inside ten seconds to let out a reluctant come in. Short enough to assuage their impatience yet long enough to inform her they didn't give a shit about respect. This was entirely expected. Nestra walked in with perfect poise then stopped near the rickety chair at parade rest. She did her best to stare ahead while the pair inspected her like market cattle.

She would have been mad if she expected anything else.

The woman finally gave her permission to sit. The general impression she'd got crystallized as she took both of them in turn. Kim was a middle aged woman, most likely of Korean origin from the name. Her face made her look in her mid twenties but that was the result of an anti-aging treatment, as hinted by the old-school tailleur, navy blue with dull gold outlines. Nestra just knew how to spot the signs: always a little too smooth, too perfect. Kim's nails were tastefully manicured. There was not a hair out of place on her head. Minimalistic makeup enhanced a conventionally attractive face that screamed of plastic surgery, the

really high level one. Not a cheap nose fix. She was either from money or higher on the totem pole than she let on, possibly both. Her poise mirrored Nestra's own, rigid in her seat despite the dilapidated surroundings. Sometimes, internal affairs took out pens or similar old tech to have something in their hands but Kim had opted for immobility. Nestra knew with certainty that this woman could decide to throw her out of the force and that would be it.

By contrast, llar sat in a relaxed fashion, back resting against his chair. He wore casual streetwear that fit him too well to be mass produced. Understated wealth was always a sign of power but, well, he was a gleam. His iris pulsed softly with a green hue, turning from dull to distractingly bright on a two seconds cycle. He had black hair, combed back and slightly slanted eyes. Mixed blood, maybe. Just like Kim, llar was also picture perfect but he pulled it out effortlessly and that screamed high gleam to her. Definitely an active user from the muscle structure.

"Good morning, Miss Palladian. I am officer Kim from the internal affairs and this is user llar from the special affairs."

"Kim nim. Mr Ilar," Nestra greeted.

She finally got a fix on their perfumes. Amber for him, floral for her. Again, understated stuff but pleasant. More pleasant than dust and old coffee at least.

"We have some questions for you concerning the theft of medical grade mana lenses, but first, let me congratulate you on the arrest of Jason Wong and the successful recovery of the stolen item. Those are some impressive results."

Nestra nodded. In her experience, if a suit gave you a compliment, that meant they were pulling back for a haymaker.

"We have reviewed the footage from your helmet's camera. In your own opinion, what more could have been done to apprehend the other culprit?"

Ah so that was a good opening. Either Nestra admitted to her own fault or Kim got an admission that crunchies simply couldn't stop users and were therefore condemned to obsolescence.

Thing was, it wasn't a real hearing. Nestra knew the city had already decided to defund them. It was in the damn news. She still disliked Kim's maneuvering, not because it was disingenuous — that was part of the course for an interrogator — but because Kim underestimated her a little bit too blatantly.

"Class three ammunition would have been a big help. We landed solid hits on both users but the impact those made was negligible, depriving us of our stopping power. I believe two more officers would have made a significant difference, especially if at least one of them was augmented."

Nestra smiled at the barest hint of soreness in Kim's poker face. Translation: you took all our money so don't be surprised if we perform less well. It was an old argument. Class three

bullets were expensive. Augmented baselines were also expensive. Despite decades of innovation, most people were still extremely iffy about amputating themselves for a lifetime of maintenance bills. Good job or not. Mind jacks were ok. Maybe eye implants since those were made to be durable. But entire arms?

"Do you personally believe that would have been enough to disable the second user?" Kim continued.

"Fox Mask?"

"That descriptor is satisfactory."

"I do not have information to formulate an educated response to this question."

Nestra saw Kim's vest shift when she tightened her shoulders. It was unwise to piss off a rat queen, especially for no gains.

"So alpha squad cannot properly handle users at the current level of funding?"

Nestra was willing to let her have that one.

"I agree with the statement."

Kim would just turn it around and say it would cost too much to properly equip MaxSec to deal with users and that would be it.

"I have no more questions for you, officer Palladian. Your cam recording shows why you have a spotless record. You have performed extremely well in trying circumstances, even holding Fox Mask off for as long as you have. You are a credit to this unit and the Threshold Police Department. My only suggestion, and that is a suggestion, would be to make use of the department's therapists to manage your outburst of emotion. However, it did not affect your performance so this is in no way a demerit. I would also like to notify you that Officer Wilson will be disciplined for his repeated use of your family name during an operation. His pay will be docked. Should he break the rule again, his contract will be immediately terminated and all benefits canceled. This is my decision."

Nestra nodded. That was a way of saying that Nestra wasn't a snitch. The compliments were nice as well. Now for the haymaker.

"Now Mr Ilar has some questions for you as well."

It was Kim's turn to lean back while llar zeroed his spooky eyes on her while his smile retained neutrally pleasant.

"Miss Palladian, allow me to introduce myself more thoroughly. I work for the enclave management section of Threshold's special affairs. My team handles grand theft and terrorism."

llar waited for Nestra to process the information. She blinked, caught off guard.

"You think they wanted to offload the lenses outside the wall? To a user enclave?"

"Not Jason Wong. He was merely a stooge. We believe his presence might have been imposed on Fox Mask for one reason or another. What I am about to tell you is confidential so keep that in mind," he finished with a smile.

Kim's jaw clenched. Obviously, she disapproved. That made Nestra even more curious.

"Okay."

"Ahem," Kim interrupted.

"Okay, Mr Ilar."

"First, Fox Mask escaped the portal after completing the level. It happened very early this morning while we were negotiating with the North Star guild for access."

"Wow. Not bad."

"It was merely a low D-class portal, however I agree that the completion speed and the fact Fox Mask soloed it speak highly of their skill. Fox Mask might or might not be an agent who has stolen a few advanced systems in the past six months. We believe it is the same person due to the similarities in the stolen components, mostly advanced medical tools. However, the culprit — if they are the same person at all — always changes disguises. The only constant seems their efficacy, the use of bladed weapons, and... can you guess?"

"Telekinesis?"

"Manakinesis," Ilar corrected.

Nestra nodded. It took a lot of control to use pure mana as a shield. Fox Mask was no pushover.

"Explains how she bypasses safety measures if she can just mangle alarm systems."

"Correct. What I want now is your own take on that person. We have already seen the footage from your helmet's cam. I want impressions."

"Well... something in the way she walked was weird. But I don't know what exactly."

"We have our own theories about this. An astute observation. Do go on?"

"She was used to a longer blade. And the way she used thrusts made me think a saber was not her weapon of choice. Oh, and she could have just killed us all if she wanted but made great efforts not to do so. I know she could have broken my ribs at any time." "Hmm yes. To be fair, she did break Officer Camus' ribs, as well as Officer Park's leg. Can you guess why she took it easy on you?"

Nestra searched llar's expression for a hint of accusation. There were none. It felt more like a test than anything else.

"I think she respected my attempt to beat her with a sword. Well, a baton. Same difference."

"We agree. We believe she followed 'blade etiquette'. It is a much more common code in some enclaves. Are you familiar with it?"

Nestra shook her head. The outside of the wall was hostile to baselines such as herself. She'd never be sent out.

"Our Pacifica subcontinent rose from the sea floor during the incursion. The enclaves outside of this city harbor users from Japan, Korea, and northern China to the north. They have developed a code of chivalry that pervades their cultures. Which is why she beat you but not as hard as she could. Because you faced her with a blade in single combat."

"Ok."

"Please note that she would have been well within her right to grant you a clean death. In case you face a similar situation."

"I do not go out of my way to challenge users, I assure you."

llar smirked though Kim gave her a dark look. Not a smidgen of humor on that one.

"Very well. Anything else?"

"Well," Nestra hesitated, but she wasn't sure the camera had caught it. "She has dark skin and curly hair.

Ilar froze and Nestra suddenly got the impression she was a tiny mouse facing a snake. The user's malachite iris pulsed in hypnotic patterns. There was the combat gleam under the gloss of civility.

"Elaborate."

"I, huh, I saw it? When she turned to look at the crate, just before she went into the portal."

Ilar gestured for Nestra to use her eye piece. He waved and information was sent to her as a priority message, a zoomed in picture showing a corner of a face with the ear and a chin and not much else. The skin tone and curls matched perfectly.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Your camera didn't pick it up. Not enough details due to mana saturation. Interesting. And yet you saw it?"

Nestra had been caught in the excitement so that seemingly innocuous question caught her like a wet slap. She glared at llar. He'd broken the truce. That pissed her off something fierce.

"You read my file before this interview so you know very well how I saw it."

"Miss Palladian!" Kim chided.

"That is alright," llar said.

Kim swallowed her pride. She had been chastised by a gleam in front of a subordinate. That had to sting a bit, Nestra judged. She hadn't made a friend today.

"I should not have tested what was obviously a sore spot in the middle of a friendly talk, especially after you brought that detail to my attention. I blame it on, let us say, professional bias."

Nestra noted that he had not apologized.

"Moving on, was there anything else you can recall?"

She considered the question seriously. No need to let her annoyance get in the way of her professionalism.

"Not that I can think of."

"Very well. Was there anything else, Kim Hubae?"

"No, sir."

"Well, thank you for your time again, Miss Palladian. If you recall something else, please contact me. I'm sending you my contact details."

That was a nice dismissal so Nestra stood and went straight to the cafeteria for nice coffee. Bard was there. His messy blond hair and light blue eyes looked lost, well, more lost than usual. From afar, people could have taken the two of them for siblings. Bard was much taller and wider — he was a swimmer as well — but they shared the same lean muscles, dark blonde hair, and light eyes. Sometimes, Nestra thought they could have been olympians if Olympic games were still a thing.

"My pay got docked," he whined.

"Riel. Wonder how that happened," she deadpanned, glaring at him to let the dull fucker know she was well aware.

"That's not funny, Nes."

"See that's the thing. You're going to whine like it's my fault but you just used my call sign and you know what that means? It means you could always remember to use it. You just never gave a shit."

"Everybody knows you're protected anyway."

"Who told you that?" Nestra exploded. "I live alone, retard. Do you really think the mighty Palladians would keep their horrifying fuckup around? Fat good their terrible vengeance will do me when I'm pasted across my carpet."

"Riel, calm down."

Nestra took a few deep breaths. He was beyond salvation. Kept around because they had no replacements.

"I think the internal affairs want a word, by the way," she said sweetly. "Were you not supposed to meet them earlier?"

Bard hastily blinked, a sign he was using his contact lenses.

"Shit."

"Room 2. I'd hurry."

"Shit shit shit sh-"

1.3

Nestra tuned him out and returned to her office. She managed to finish all the paperwork in record time thanks to the fact no one was accusing her of anything. Bard showed up half an hour later looking frazzled.

"Chief says we should talk to Gorge then we get the rest of the day off."

Nestra checked the time. It was barely past eleven. Half a day off in exchange for talking to Gorge was a fair deal. She gestured to Bard to open the way and he did.

Beta squad's offices were across the aisle, separated from alpha by a tiny corridor and the staircase, yet it might just have been a canyon. Camus and Gorge hated each other. Nestra braced for the inevitable shitstorm as they found beta sitting around an open space with coffee that suspiciously smelled like cheap vodka. Gorge made an exaggerated turn at their coming as if he'd not heard the door open. He was a heavyset man with small, deep black eyes. He was entirely shaved and his face was covered in scars, the nose broken to an amorphous plum.

"And look who I got instead, the clown and the ice bitch. Fantastic."

"Nice to see you too," Nestra replied.

Gorge's teeth clenched so hard she could see every muscle tense under his skin.

"Look, we're sorry about-"

"Shut the fuck up. You say his name, I'll kick your teeth in."

"Guess that's it. We're leaving then."

"That's it, you fucking psycho. If you were a dyke, if you got pissed, if you screamed, I'd get it. I would. But you're just this cold dead frigid fish with nothing inside like you're an iceling wearing people's skin... What are you doing?"

Nestra finished putting on her eye piece.

"That's me giving you a nice warning that I'm recording each and every last one of our little talks. And I got HR on speed dial."

"See, this is exactly what I mean. You're worse than the fucking rat squad. At least they were scummy from the start."

"Nice to see the good old boy spirit alive and kicking. I'll be candid with you, as a thanks. I don't give a shit about fitting in or your squad or you or my career here because not only are you a rotten bastard, we're all on the fast track to unemployment. So we're going to be polite while we're working together or I'll make sure you're out on your ass with no severance package before you can say 'ethics committee'. We clear?"

Gorge bit back what he was trying to say. His dark glare bore into Nestra's. She'd had worse.

"See that's why no one likes you, clit hernia. You think you're trying to be us but you'll always look down on us because in the end, you're not a cop. You were never a cop. You're just a failed gleam cosplaying law enforcement. Keep toting that sword of yours because that's the closest you'll get to being a raider."

"Riel, Gorge, I am undone. Been taking profiler classes?"

Gorge sighed, deflating. That was weird. The man was like a bulldog. He never let go once he had his teeth in something.

"Why am I getting mad at you? You're a lost cause. Guess that's how it ends. Six cunts on a bench giving each other shit."

Nestra frowned. Besides Gorge, there was Nuts who was the close quarter specialist, Pudding, their gunner, and Preach, the last remaining medic. Nuts was insane thanks to his augments, Pudding out of shape though he was a quirkie, and Preach was too old. She suspected Preach had a death wish. They all lounged, listless. Beaten.

"Where's Philipps?" Nestra asked.

"He quit this morning. Stib will be doing drone work for us now. Regis... his loss was too much."

One squad left. There were four of them when Nestra had started four years before. Things had gone downhill fast.

"I don't like it. We shouldn't be doing this but we got no choice. We have to run a couple of drills," Gorge muttered.

"No can do, I'm on the bench. Doctor's orders."

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Nope! And with this, I'm off."

"Training ground at 8AM sharp. I don't want to die because you two drag us down."

Nestra nodded. That was fine with her.

She and Bard left the place behind.

"Riel, Nes, you know how to make a friend."

"Gorge only respects those who obey and those who don't."

"What the fuck does that even mean?"

"Doesn't matter. Tomorrow. Don't be late because Kim chewed you out but Gorge will break a finger and claim it was an 'accident'."

"Yeah yeah."

Nestra took the stairs down. She was too annoyed for the lift and the small trip allowed her to cool down. Normally, she'd be going for lunch and then it would be training time, first the range, then today was muscle training. She knew better than to ignore Mazingwe though.

Stib was in the lower hangar, piecing together a light drone of unknown design.

"Hey Stib. New stuff?"

"Scout drone for out-of-wall operations. They got better thermals. It's a gift from Sector twelve."

"Nice."

"You, uh, about to head back? I won't have lunch. Don't feel like it."

"I understand."

"You're coming to the service?"

"Yes. Right, you're in the zone. I won't bother you anymore."

"Haha, thanks Nestra. See ya!"

There was only one last thing to do, something important. Nestra sneaked into Camus' office to take his box of favorite tea. It wasn't hard. The offices were deserted. She drove to the hospital and dropped it with him.

"Thanks, Nes. The swill they have here. Did you take my cup as well?"

Nestra winced.

Camus picked up a paper cup and sighed. It looked like a toy in his long fingers.

"Park got an offer for severance. He took it. Can't say I blame him."

"I didn't know. I was going to see him next."

"Double fracture of the tibia. The bone was shattered. Insurance will cover it but... he'll be out a very long time. It took two hours for the robot to pick every shard."

Nestra knew what was coming so she chose to forestall it.

"You're going to tell me to get out."

"This is serious, Nestra."

"What about you?"

Camus leaned back in his bed, crossing his arms over the medical corset healing his ribs.

"Not renewing my contract. Still coming back later to lead the unified squad though so hang in there."

After that, Nestra went to say hello to Park then she drove home. The only way to let the regen capsules work fast was to relax and stretch. She was in the middle of some very slow yoga when her eye piece beeped.

"Yeah?"

"Miss Palladian, this is chief Ruben. I am bypassing Doctor's Mazingwe's orders to summon you here. There's an infestation on the way at the edge of district 15. You are requested to join in with the extermination detail. Sending you the brief now."

So much for resting.

Nestra was forced to dress and leave in record time. It pissed her off. She was not supposed to be on call. Hell, she was not supposed to be working at all but unfortunately, Ruben had the authority to get her there. She set her car on autopilot and pulled the brief up on her visor. A grainy picture of a creature in a warehouse appeared on her feed, pulling behind it a sack of grains of some sort. It had four legs set around a lozenge body from which hung a bulbous sack of flesh. Nestra knew a lamprey mouth would open underneath to latch on whatever the creature could jump on. She knew it well. Manarenae Salticidae Purgamentum.

Trash spiders.

Dokkaebi class. That meant the lowest monsters in the list, below D-class. Bullets would be enough to take them down. There were problems, of course.

One, trash spiders reproduced extremely fast with enough biomass and this one was inside a fucking food warehouse.

Two, as a corollary of one, there was never one trash spider. They were a swarm species.

Three, she would be facing them under a man she'd never worked with before.

Nestra leaned into her seat and sighed. Their armor would stop a bite. Maybe two. The problem was, it was very hard to aim with a flailing, ten-kilogram creature trying to eat your face off. She just hoped that if she were to die, they would rip her throat out so at least it would be quick.

Nestra caught the tail of rush hour but she was at the office in record time. She put on her armor in the empty changing room, then picked up her gun from the armory.

"Cleaned it. Oiled it. Here is your ammo. Class one explosive rounds but I got you a magazine of class two," the chief told her with a pitying look. "Just in case."

"Thanks."

"Come back safe."

"I promise I'll try."

Beta squad was waiting for her by their van. Bard was already there, to her surprise. Gorge greeted her with a ghastly smile under his visor.

"And the princess arrives. If you had stayed to train we wouldn't be going in like fucking virgins."

"And I would have been wounded and tired. You're welcome.""

He breathed in, breathed out like he was ready to explode.

"I hope that keeps you happy while a spider gnaws your leg off," he growled.

"Feel free to complain to Mazingwe. If you got the balls."

Nestra watched her 'leader' bite back a comment about her hiding behind the gleams. He knew she didn't give a shit.

"You got a spine, Palladian. Hope you can aim as well."

They climbed in. Stib was driving again. She gave Nestra a nod in passing then they were off immediately. Gorge went into serious mode, which Nestra could tell because he was no longer sneering all the damn time. She checked her weapon, just in case. It was an old spitter, the same model that had been mass produced after the incursion for massive civilian distribution. Stubby, compact, easy to maintain, easy to print, it fired twenty 12.7 mm rounds before reload. It had never been improved since base firearms were mostly obsolete. No point in them when army augs and gleams carried most of the fight. A pair of D-class with enough training to coat their weapons could complete their mission right now, and they'd be cheaper too.

"Alright lads," Gorge said, then his eyes found Nestra and narrowed ever so slightly.

"Alright, folks. Fuck me that will take some getting used to. Have you read the briefing, Nes?"

"Yep."

"Well we got new info. Here is the sitch. Two warehouses connected by a passage. Sealed exits. No runners so far though we got people on coms checking cameras, just in case."

"Why would they leave?" Pudding said grimly. "They got everything they want."

Nestra frowned.

"Those are food warehouses, from enclave farms. High mana. The good stuff."

"Both of them?" Nestra asked with disbelief.

"Yes."

"Fuck. Then... that one they caught on cams was an expansion scout. That means..."

"They have a queen," Gorge said, his eyes keen. "My thoughts exactly. Which leads me to..."

Gorge turned in his seat to open a crate by his feet. Nestra watched him assemble a weapon with morbid curiosity. It had a tank and a mana crystal. Once it was completed, it looked like a top of the art flamer, the kind of stuff reserved for augs, maybe even combat walkers. Definitely not the kind of shit civilians should have access to. Gorge waited once he was done.

"Got it from me cousin."

"Right. Flames in a food warehouse?"

"I'm not a complete moron, Nes. This is a cryospitter. Surplus. That's not the fucking question. The fucking question is, what are you gonna do about it?"

Nestra blinked. The fuck was that ab— oooooh.

"You know we'll all be recorded, right?"

"Yeah yeah. And when Stib sends her report to the boss, she'll say everything was copacetic. And when the boss sends her report to the brass, after watching our little performance, she'll also say everything was copacetic. But if there is a, shall we say, discordant voice..."

"Stib?" Nestra asked with some curiosity.

The drone operator was a stickler for protocol. She always double checked everything, dammit.

"I just want you all alive," she replied.

Stib was in the driver's seat but Nestra still felt the edge in the woman's voice.

"I got no problem with personal guns," Nestra finally replied. "Just don't spray that shit on me and we're good."

"Don't you worry girl, I'm not wasting valuable fuel on your ass. Here is what we're gonna do. Breach the first warehouse, then move in all careful like. Standard CQC dokkaebi formation. I take point with my little friend. Pudding and Nuts will support me on the side. Preach takes the center. You two alpha grafts watch the side and back. Stib will provide oversight. Between her and Pudding, we should be able to see the bastards coming at us."

Gorge waited to see if Nestra would whine. She was a CQC specialist. She also didn't want to put her sword between a trash spider and a mana-cooled spray. She also understood wanting to have familiar people on one's side.

"Ok," Gorge continued. "Soon as we get aggroed, walk back immediately. Spread out if we reach the wall. Rinse and repeat till we get them all."

"Any cameras inside?" Nestra asked.

"See for yourself."

She got four feeds on her visor. Two showed locked doors. One showed gutted containers, the steel peeled back like wrappers. The last showed a fat lot of nothing.

"Gunked."

"At least we know where the nest is," Nestra said.

The next ten minutes were spent discussing options but the mission was straightforward. Trash spiders were dumb. All dokkaebi class threats were. They just had to make sure they wouldn't be overwhelmed.

"How the fuck did those trash spiders get in anyway?" Nuts complained.

"Probably a hatchling got mixed in a crate or something," Nestra explained. "Industrial mana scanners wouldn't pick it up among all that rich grain. They should have all been checked one by one but..."

She shrugged.

"Enclave people think they have better things to do, I suppose."

"What's more important than basic public safety?"

"Nuts you fucking donkey," Gorge replied.

He didn't even spare a glance at his subordinate. All his attention was devoted to the cryospitter, making sure everything was in place.

"All those enclave folks are uneducated gleams. The perfect combination of overinflated ego and dumbfuckery. You think they want to waste their mana sight on making sure us poor schmucks don't get our faces eaten off?"

"Why trade with us anyway? I thought them outwall gleams were all tough and stuff. The next evolution of mankind?"

"Because," Nestra enunciated, "they think they're the next Riel and spend months waddling through monster guts. Or they think Threshold taking 20% of portal stuff is state-sponsored robbery. Then they come back to their huts and eat unseasoned meat off fucking turtle shells while the mosquitoes turn their asses into braille books. They realize there are no baselines to clean their toilets, cook for them, roast their arabica, do their accounting, shoot their

dramas and maybe suck them off. Then, being Riel's not so glamorous anymore. So they trade for all of that and pretend they're better than city softies."

Gorge whistled, seemingly impressed.

"Holy shit Nes, you're like a documentarian or something. You blew my fucking mind. You should work for the news or something."

"Thanks for the career advice."

"We're almost there," Stib said, voice tense. "Got a crowd too,"

"Of fucking course," Gorge grumbled. "Right. Last gear check. Helmets on, visors on, and you all shut the fuck up."

Nestra climbed out of the van in full gear. The armor and helmet felt comforting, like a second skin that made her safe. She was no longer Nestra under that. Or rather, no one knew she was Nestra, with her mana cravings and the weight of envy on her shoulders. Stib was right. There was a crowd. Beat cops in the blue uniform of Threshold police held back a group of civilians behind holo barriers. A small-time freelancer was already talking excitedly in front of a small drone. Maybe hoping to sell the footage to a news channel. Cries to disperse went unheard. Behind that, a sniveling twat in a designer suit waited next to a tall, powerfully built thug in a cheap suit that screamed muscle. Eye augs were visible behind a pair of sunglasses, showing an ominous red glow.

Most people made way to let Gorge in. An idiot stayed, his complaints turning to a yelp when the old fucker bodied him out of the way. The suit made for Gorge the moment the squad split the cretin sea.

"Good evening. My name is Artemya-"

"I don't give a shit. What do you want?"

"My employer, User Tornas, would like you to keep warehouse damage to a minimum."

"Too late, mate."

"Listen. You don't seem to understand who you-"

"Shut the fuck up," Gorge interrupted.

The muscle took a step forward. Gorge flexed his gauntlet and an ominous whistle filled the air.

"Try me chrome boy."

The squad arranged themselves around Gorge like pissed off gargoyles without prompt. The muscle fell back.

"I thought so. We're going to clear the spiders then the city will send you the bill and you'll say yes, sir thank you sir, and file your insurance claim. We're here because you fucked up and you're here yapping like a chihuahua because your gleam boss ain't here, and he ain't here because he'd have to stay to the side while baselines enter a monster den. And that don't look too good now, does it? So shut up, fuck off, and don't get in my way cause I could punch you balls in and the worst thing I'll get is three days unpaid leave. We clear?"

"I will remember this."

"You do that, fuckface. You do that."

Gorge tapped the man's shoulder in a way that might have looked friendly to an outsider but left him wincing in severe pain. A minute later, they were at the door. It was sealed.

Stib's drone came to a rest over their head.

"Right. Breach."

The squad formed a line. Preach slowly slid the warehouse gate open, revealing a dimly lit interior. Containers waited on the left and right in tight ranks, piled to the ceiling in places. Many of them had been savaged and the contents spilled on the ground along with weird, white excretion. Trash spider gunk. An open path led to an open space on the right, and a covered passage to the second warehouse farther forward. Nestra could see more white gunk from where she was.

Stib's drone flew up and they got a feed. Nothing moved. Stib cycled to heat signature and revealed the unmoving forms of a few spiders hiding in wait near the ceiling. Nestra switched to night vision. The path became clear.

"Right," Gorge said. "Move in. Nestra. Lock it behind us."

"Copy that."

She did as ordered. The gate slid shut with a ging like a death knell. Gorge raised his fist and they formed up behind him. Nestra was left on the left of the formation.

The squad advanced in tight formation, weapons aimed out. No movement, still. Nestra checked Stib's feed and saw the red spots above them, hidden from them by layers of steel and half-eaten grain. Gorge must have signaled to stop because Nuts touched her elbow. The squad came to a halt.

Gorge shot his sidearm. A shriek of pain answered and a spider fell on the ground, half-pulverized. The three remaining legs contracted one last time. The light reflected strangely on the serrated ends of the limb.

Still no movement. The spiders might be stupid but they were still cunning. That meant ambush.

The squad went deeper. They were halfway down the building when Stib's voice finally broke the silence.

"Movement. Lots of it."

"Back up," Gorge said.

Pudding was the first to shoot. His quirk was eye-based, Nestra remembered. He could see mana through walls. His rifle easily penetrated the thick steel and the first shrieks joined detonations in the familiar song of battle.

The spiders threw themselves at the humans. Screeches, gunshots. The smell of monster blood, musky and thick filled the air in an overload of senses. Nuts' heavy gun spat death by her side. Nestra's world narrowed to a slice of warehouse and part of the roof. Line the sights. Pull the trigger. It barked and jumped in her hands. A spider fell with a geyser of yellow ichor. Another. She shot a third as it was making ready to jump on Priest. The corpse fell on someone who faltered but there was a blue woosh and more of the things died. Outside it was hell but inside of Nestra's head, the world reached a perfection of clarity. Her earplugs blocked most of the sound to protect her eardrums. She licked the air, tasting victory and death fencing on the edge of violence. The deaths of monsters vomited mana into the world. It tried to latch to her and failed but for a single, beautiful instant, she was so very alive.

"Back up, spread out," Gorge said.

Nestra turned with the rest. They were now a wing retreating calmly towards the door. She covered the sides and forward as well, so her eyes could feast on the destruction. Nuts had mowed down anything that came before them and the path forward was so littered with corpses, one could walk on dead flesh from one end to the other without ever touching the ground. Swaths of frozen ice covered swarms of smaller spiders, newly hatched, pale limbs still soft and tender. Weak. The warehouse was a scene of devastation while more spiders poured in from the passage to their nest, dying in droves. There were dozens of them.

Most of the spiders in the first warehouse had died so all Nestra had to do was to pick off what Nuts missed. Sometimes, Pudding aimed at a container and killed another hidden predator. Things were going well.

Nuts' gun fell silent.

"Reloading!"

Nestra shot her last four rounds in quick succession, then it was her turn to reload. Something long and sticky hit Nuts' gun. It jumped from his hands, clattering on the ground. A creature screeched loudly.

"Fuck. Queen. Queen!"

Gorge aimed his cryospitter, only to have the spray redirected by a highly pressurized string of goo. Nestra shot as fast as possible as the last of the swarm burst out of the passage as a single wave, led by a monster the size of a bear.

Nestra saw eight flexible legs over a bulbous body. Dark eyes on dark chitin. Spikes.

Everything happened at once.

Nestra switched to full auto. Nuts grabbed a sidearm. The humans shot everything they had at the incoming tide. A last blue wave froze part of the swarm rather than the queen, then they were overwhelmed.

Nestra dropped her empty gun and unsheathed her sword in the same movement. The baton's edge turned sharp at a press of a button, slicing a spider in half. She turned and put her hips into a swing that cut another. Priest was fighting off one biting into his arm guard. A thrust killed it.

The queen slammed into Nuts. Two legs found an auged arm, failing to pierce. Another found his flank. It pulled back to strike harder.

Nestra cut and the queen blocked with a limb. The blade bit into muscle like steel ropes.

Nestra pressed a button.

A hundred and fifty thousand volts coursed through the creature's flesh. It spasmed. Nestra cut a deep furrow on its body and got an eye. Another screech. The queen hurled itself back. Around Nestra, what was left of the swarm died on bullets, knives, and knuckles, their teeth stopped for long enough by steel plates to avoid death. The queen screeched and jumped up. Pudding missed her. Priest did not. A leg flew off. Dark yellow ichor followed the elusive shape in great globules.

The queen half-fell, half threw herself at Nestra. She lifted the blade above her and waited.

The queen could move with blinding speed, just not midair. The two struck at the same time. A limb hit Nestra's shoulder but her blade fell true, up to down, a perfect strike. Nestra's motion finished with the tip hitting concrete.

The queen wailed and contracted. Its limbs danced a pathetic jig while organs spilled from the grievous wound like quivering worms. Eyes moved around frantically. They zeroed on Nestra pulling the sword back. She struck down. The blade pierced through the creature's cephalothorax with a satisfying crunch, pulping the brain stem.

A wave of mana surged through Nestra's body, a wave of bliss, of relief. Triumph had never tasted so sweet.

And then it failed to find a host, to latch on a core.

Nestra's mood deflated almost as fast.

Silence returned to the warehouse. The battle was over. Nestra looked around as she picked her gun back up.

In death, the queen was a pathetic sight. The actual body was barely as large as a car tire. The flexible limbs now lie in discarded coils around the ground. It had felt larger than life and now it was just a corpse, not even a big one.

"Nes," Gorge said.

"Hm?"

"We're not done."

Nestra reloaded her gun, wiped gunk off the barrel then aimed. Sloppy. There could be more spiders. With enough time and food, any of them could eventually become a queen.

"Form up."

The warehouse was a scene of utter devastation. There were holes on the ceiling, in the walls, corpses everywhere. Spent casings littered the ground. Spider blood and goop layered every available surface. Limbs and guts hung off savaged containers vomiting their entrails of grain and greens, crates smashed and stained beyond salvation. It was nasty, stinky, and completely demolished. Nestra couldn't have fucked it up more if she had tried.

"You'll be fine," Priest said while spraying synth skin on Nuts' flank. The man winced a little. No one else seemed to be hurt.

"You good Nuts?"

"Yessir."

"Stib, anything still kicking?"

"Nope."

"Then move out."

The squad moved around the warehouse. Pudding found two stragglers playing dead, both wounded. After that, they had to clear some of the corpses to go through the passage.

The second warehouse was now a nest. A white substance covered shelves and crates in a massive cradle protecting blocks of eggs held together by sticky goo. A pile of refuse occupied the far end. No corpses in there, at least. Stib and Pudding did one last round but found nothing.

"Well, looks like we hit the jackpot," Gorge said. "I'll cryo this one. The others should fetch a nice bounty."

"Who'll buy that?" Bard asked.

"Schools for training, mostly," Nestra said.

"Some labs as well," Gorge added. "They don't research trash spiders anymore but they research beasts that eat them. Good money."

Nestra nodded. It was a decent haul. Tonight, they'd make almost as much as a raider and no one had died for it. All in all, good stuff.

"I notified the recovery division. They're bitching that their holidays are over."

"Our gleams are busy with gangs. Can't sell human parts. At least, not yet," Gorge chuckled. "Alright you fuckers, let's pack up."

The squad left the ravaged warehouse behind. They snickered when the manager walked past them, stopping with a dumbfounded look at the scene of pure mayhem they'd left behind. Gorge pointedly pushed the reporters aside on their way to the van. They climbed up and drove away.

"Nice job, Palladian. You're solid," Gorge admitted.

"Riel. Thanks."

"You're still a cunt though."

1.4

Nestra had a day off. She filed her report remotely, stretched, then she was a free woman. Aunt Claire was raiding and Siobhan Stibbons was going home so that left her with no one to go out with. She wasn't staying inside a minute more than necessary, though. That left her with one good option: visiting her favorite hole in the wall.

District twenty-three was a dorm district for well-to-do baselines. It meant two-story houses with an actual fence. It meant wide, clean curbs with sparse trees and the occasional park for the kids. Nestra walked over a few streets to the CBD though it was barely more than a gathering of designer studios, gyms, stylists, and restaurants. All of those had found refuge in a large glass structure reflecting the hope and creativity that came at the end of the incursion, before megacorps had snatched all the best skills to hoard them in their arcologies. The businesses still outside were left to survive on smaller contracts, a diverse ecology curated to produce an occasional genius to snap up. It was rather empty on a weekday, so Nestra was confident there would be a spot for her.

The Sunflour was a true bakery, not a chain that got their stuff drone-dropped every morning. Fabricators didn't work well with organics so they had small robots do the dough for them. It

was all very artisanal, very fresh. It was also quiet and the regulars knew to leave her alone. She got in and frowned immediately.

Inside, an old-style counter filled the right wall while the left of the room sprawled in a mess of tables and counters. Some old folks and the odd freelancers worked on slates, steaming cups of coffee by their side. The smell was right. The low hum of conversation was right. The minimalist dark wood background was the same as ever. There was only one anomaly: the man behind the counter.

Not someone she knew.

He was also... weird. For one, he was impossibly tall — at about one Mazingwe though thinner. He was the tallest baseline she'd ever seen in person. He also had frizzy hair and very deep, soft brown eyes that gave him a dreamer aspect, one reinforced by the most genuine smile she'd seen on a retail worker's face.

That immediately set off all kinds of alarms in Nestra's head. Who the fuck smiled like that? She shook her head. He was probably new and not yet used to the job's realities. She wouldn't be the one to pop his abuse cherry.

"Welcome!"

"Hello," Nestra replied, approaching like a scared deer and feeling silly about the whole affair. "Are you new?"

"Yes! I just bought the store."

"Oh, yes, Miss Yeung mentioned selling. I'm glad she found someone."

"Yes! And glad to have you for this... arvo tea?"

Nestra frowned.

"Where are you from?"

"Oh," the man replied with a cunning smile, "here and there. Would you care for my new dessert? It's on the house. I think Miss Yeung mentioned you. Flat white, yes?"

He pointed at tiny squares, brown with red marbling.

"Sure."

She leaned forward. It was a painful thing to do but she had to be sure. Better to have cold service than leaving any sort of ambiguity. She wasn't sure but he did feel a little too friendly. His eyes positively sparkled.

"Maybe Miss Yeung mentioned it... If you're coming onto me, I'm not interested in such things."

It was as if she'd accused him of bathing in the blood of puppies. He was absolutely horrified.

"Oh no, no! Look!"

Nestra turned and realized most people had either a small empty plate or a half-eaten cube. She felt stupid again.

"Sorry, shouldn't have assumed."

"All is forgiven," the man replied genially. "I'm Seth. Here is your dessert. Enjoy!"

Nestra got her cup and walked to her usual table at the back. It was blissfully empty. She placed her slate on the table and got a beep signaling it was charging, which meant it was time to waste time. She scrolled through the news. Star gleams getting married and filming new shows. Bio augs in development. Gidung group gaining market cap on the coattails of Hong Wang's meteoric rise to power, the star gleam raiding at record speed with the help of an absolutely impressive fire affinity. The article led her down a familiar rabbit hole. There was always a moment of fear before she pressed enter.

The Palladian group's page appeared in all its sober glory.

No new obituaries.

Nestra released a breath she didn't know she was holding. Her family was fine. Of course they were. Aunt Claire would have told her something, except she couldn't tell her anything while she was raiding herself. No news of her little sis. Her older brother Ulysses just made it to C-rank at a record age, passing the test with ease. They were all doing fine.

They were also very far away. It was better like this. She knew it was better like this. It had been proven true time and time again.

Nobody wanted to see a loved one fail. Nobody wanted to see success day after day, then face someone who was unable to share in. Nobody wanted to rejoice about a successful raid with the one who would never raid. Her father had recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday. He still looked like a man in his late thirties and would for a long time. That would never be the case for her.

It was what it was.

Nestra's mood was demolished. She took a bite of Seth's confection out of annoyance and realized it was pretty good - crispy almonds on top with almond paste mixed with raspberry jam in the middle. It was a little too sweet but it went surprisingly well with her coffee. Maybe Seth wasn't a complete wanker. Thus revitalized, she was in a good enough mood to open the urgent mail pinging at the side of her slate. It was, unsurprisingly, from Chief Ruben.

"Squad alpha and beta will be providing support for a larger operation tomorrow evening around district fifteen. Your tasks will be to hold a control point. Please prepare accordingly."

As usual, what mattered was what remained unsaid. Camus wasn't back so it would be the leftover together holding a choke point while someone else 'pacified' district fifteen. Possibly police gleams, maybe with reinforcement. Maybe the army. Hopefully, things would be easy. There were talks that district fifteen was the home of rogue gleams and she knew her side had been busy for the past few weeks. So tomorrow was the big push. Interesting.

Nestra pulled whatever files she could both from public domain and the TPD archives. The archive window glibly apologized that she didn't have clearance. The news were more generous. District fifteen had descended into lawlessness, the long-abandoned hab blocs now used as dens by several gangs. Patrols no longer went there while suspicions of smuggling rings abounded. Short version, a fat load of nothing. No numbers, no names. Nothing concrete.

"Huh."

A commotion distracted Nestra from her funk. Well, not exactly a commotion. The cozy hum of the cafe had grown unexpectedly silent. She saw them, then, standing by the door: a pair of gleams with their mana under control. She masked her surprise while she observed them much like the entire population of the cafe.

They were fairly young. One was a man with a bashful air and the brown glint of an earth elementalist. The girl was different, more guarded. Mildly disapproving. Her eyes shone brightly with a strange pink shade Nestra could not recognize. She'd opted for a more exotic designer clothes to the man's old school shirt and slacks. They were twenty if they were a day, and they didn't belong here at all.

"Sorry! I grew up around here. Don't mind me," the boy said, affable.

He went to the counter to order. Nestra wanted to leave but if she packed up now, they might take it as an insult and that could lead to unnecessarily unpleasantness. Even now, the woman scrutinized the room with silent disapproval while her companion made small talk. They settled far enough away, at least. The boy was probably a first gen returning to his roots with his love interest. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself though. Nestra shrugged. After enough time had passed, she left.

"Come back soon!" Seth cheered.

What a strange man.

"This is it. Central has had enough of the district fifteen debacle. They're sending four shuttles of auged grunts as well as three districts worth of police users, including someone from district one. They'll raise the inner walls for the duration of the purge. Our role is to lock

up the maintenance access to sixteen, sit on it, and make sure no one goes through. Alpha and beta will move and hold. For this operation, you will have access to lethal weapons."

Nestra frowned. That wasn't normal. They were supposed to take down perps in a non-lethal fashion.

"What's the deal, Ruben?" Gorge asked. "What are you not telling us?"

"You know all you need to know," Chief Ruben replied, pressing a key to show a holo rendition of fifteen.

The briefing room may have seen better days but the holo was as reliable as ever. Nestra called the image on her visor, moving it around but there was something about that huge 3D rendition that just worked better for her.

Gorge switched the display off.

Ruben's eyes grew sharp and dangerous but Gorge, to Nestra's surprise, raised his hands in surrender.

"Off the record? Please, chief."

Fearful silence filled the room. The chief was well within her rights to punish him for that, dearly so. Everyone waited to see what she would do. Gorge clearly wouldn't push the matter farther.

Eventually and to Nestra's surprise, she relented. That meant things were bad.

"I've had reports that the augmented companies expect fierce resistance including hostile users and heavy weapons. Corp weapons."

"What?" Nestra blurted out.

"Possibly augs."

Whispers of consternation shook the squads. No one liked the auged companies because they were brutes. If even they were worried...

"That is why, off the record, I am telling you this: be careful. You can use anything in the armory. You know why," she finished with a pointed look.

Translation: it would be destroyed and moved soon anyway.

"Guess we got to train a little more then."

The inner walls were designed to contain the hordes of beasts that came with a kaiju, if the outer wall of Threshold was ever breached. They wouldn't stop a monster the size of a kaiju but if one actually got through intact, the district was fucked anyway.

There were maintenance accesses in a raised wall just to make sure all the proper parts that raised and lowered it could be reached. Those were structural weaknesses with access to the outside. Since the door was up the wall, and since beasts were not too smart, it didn't matter in case of a breach. It did, however, matter when stopping humans.

Nestra watched the expanse of district 15 trailing in front of her to another wall several kilometers away, a field of old concrete flowered with fire blooms, flashpoints where the auged companies did what they did best. Hab blocs in various states of disrepair gave the entire hellscape a misshapen, bloated look that turned into the diseased skin of a titan far in the distance. A cacophony of gunshots and explosions animated the night air with a steady staccato. The augs' gunships hovered over the battlefields, plural. Sometimes, a hail of bullets turned the night bright and annihilated whatever poor fuckers had the misfortune of being targeted. The sound that came half a second later was like the largest raspberry blown and added a grotesque dimension to the massacre, because it was a massacre. The weirdest thing was that it was not already over.

Somehow, the gangs were fighting back. And that was bad. Real bad. Because the only rational reaction when the augs dropped was to run for your fucking life. If the gangs stood and fought, it didn't just mean they were hard targets. It meant they were ready.

They knew, or at least they expected someone to come.

Nestra grabbed her rifle tighter, well-aware that any goon with an unfettered fab could copy hundreds of them every day. The platform she was on was about two stories over the nearest roof and only a couple stories below the access itself, so about midway. She was the last line of defense before whoever came up reached the entrance and Stib. Gorge was here as well, checking his visor for the many feeds from security cameras and drones alike.

"Aight. Is the goodie ready?"

"Checking now," Stib replied.

Nestra checked the feed of the room two floors below, their main defense node. The rest of the squad was here behind barricades centered around a small, rotating turret, courtesy of Gorge's 'cousin'. They had enough weapons to start a small rebellion. Well, not really. Not compared to the fuckers outside. The small, improvised fort faced the only way up and down: wide stairs without railings.

A loud explosion distracted her and she returned her attention to outside, seeing a new plume of incandescent death joining the rest.

"What is going on..." she whispered to herself.

"Don't know," Gorge replied, voice heavy for the first time since Nestra'd first met him.

"Nothing good. Lots of com chatter. The augs aren't happy."

"What are they saying?"

Gorge scoffed.

"Nes, you daft cunt. I can't tap into mil-grade com systems with my homemade shit. Oh, look who's here."

A pair of gleams in the white armored uniform of the user police floated down from the wall, alighting on the platform with unearthly grace. Two men. One with a square jaw, a broody countenance reinforced by dark hair and the orange eyes of a firespark. The other had dirty blond hair and viridian eyes that could be jade or life, she wasn't sure. They didn't look happy.

"Well well," the firespark said. "It's the fossils."

"Ha-ha," Nestra mocked before her brain could catch up with her.

The gleam's features twisted with fury. His companion placed a hand over his shoulder, gently.

"Let it go," he said in a soothing voice.

Nestra's irritation flared in return. She'd been without mana for two days now and her temper was raw. A part of her wanted to tell the fucking gleam not to dish it out if he couldn't take it but a more rational part knew that the gleam could just punch her until she projectile vomited and she'd get a warning for insubordination on top of that. That was just how things went.

It also looked like the gleam wasn't going to let it go until something happened. Everyone turned when Gorge gasped.

The hissing noise of a missile launch heralded a light trail aiming for one of the gunships. It moved aside, shooting flares while a laser pulsed. Nestra almost breathed in relief when the blinded projectile missed its target but it was a trap. The gunship flew over one of the largest, highest hab blocs, and the moment it did, the jaws of the trap closed in on it.

Nestra counted at least five trails of white dumb fire rockets aimed with disturbing accuracy. Some sort of point defense took down three before they could hit but the other two hit with a loud boom that echoed against the wall.

Her previous missions hadn't prepared Nestra for war. It was very bright and so damn loud. The gunship hiccuped and flailed, its surviving rotors struggling to compensate for massive damage. With a strong whooping sound, it crashed into the side of another building, leaving behind a black tail of smoke. Immediately, the other gunships gained altitude but the damage was done. Nestra blinked.

They had missile launchers?

"We need to go," the viridian gleam said, and the pair flew off at speed.

Nestra was left staring at the carnage.

"Fuck, it's chaos down there," Stib said a minute later.

"What?" Gorge replied.

"I don't know what's going on! Folks coming out from around. They're augs. Something's happening!"

Nestra moved to the edge of the platform and watched the incoming tide in the distance. There were men and women and old and young, all wearing sturdy street wear, thick garments meant to keep the owner warm and protected. There were augs, an arm there, legs here. Helmets. Weapons. A lot of weapons. Armbands.

"Nuts. Open fire," Gorge ordered.

"Sir?"

That wasn't what their rules of engagement said.

"You heard me Riel dammit!"

A hole the size of an orange opened in the chest of a man carrying an actual machine gun. He toppled, falling to his death floors below. A woman who stood still to shoot soon joined him. Gorge raced to the edge of the platform and Nestra followed. Both of them deployed their weapons, barrel twisting to the side to allow them to shoot from cover. It was always weird, watching distant targets through her visor with a target reticle on them. Nuts' rifle spat again and pushed an aug back. He kept running, intestines following like a morbid snake.

Nestra's world narrowed. She was cold, hot, excited, scared, then focused. She took down a man hoisting an old RPG on his shoulder. The return fire from the approaching wave shredded the access way, blowing holes in concrete and showering her in dust and debris. She lined up an old man whose weapon had a scope and shot him, catching him in the neck. He fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

A part of Nestra reminded her that she'd killed a person for the first time since the beginning of her career. It was weird to do it like that. Casually. From afar. It was wrong. It was only fair. It was necessary. Nestra forced her mind to shut up. The gangers outside had found cover. Others moved to street level, making their way up that she could see from her feed. Gorge triggered one of the traps and a couple of young men fell, body pierced by a hundred ball bearings. They still clawed on the next step after that with their eyes clouded, teeth bared in a rictus. "Be advised, the perps are stimmed," Gorge said with a calm Nestra didn't feel.

She shot someone else and missed the first two bullets. Almost all the gangers had either gone to ground or—

Movement. Close. Nestra rolled to the side and something stomped where her head had been.

Man. Very close. Auged eyes. Auged chest. Auged legs visible under a tattered black waistcoat. She shot him point blank range and full auto but the bullets pinged against his chest.

He grinned, foam at the corner of his mouth. Nestra's heart bounced against her ribs in that one defining moment. She stood and unsheathed her baton in the same upward movement. The blade caught the aug in the arm and stopped.

The electricity didn't.

Enough juice to stun a horse seared the man's augs through the slice Nestra had left there. He fell down with a ponderous clang, sliding off the platform a moment later. Nestra turned just as another aug landed there, leg actuators whining from the effort.

A loud boom made Nestra jump through her ear protector, then another. Gorge had both hands firmly around some illegal hand cannon. Each shot pulled the barrel up with a monstrous kick. The auged guy had two gaping wounds spurting blood and still, he kept coming.

The last shot took the head off.

Nestra looked.

There was brain tissue on the cement just to her side. Blood everywhere, the stench cloying. It was suddenly much silent. She was hyperventilating.

"Nes."

What was that? Oh, yeah, her call sign.

"Nes!"

"WHAT?"

"Nes, stay with me."

"Yeah. Yeah. Sorry."

"We gotta keep shooting."

Nestra could see why. More augs and gangers ran up the stairs while others were approaching from the rooftop, trying to split the lower squad's attention. Nestra grabbed her gun. Reloaded. Crawled to the edge of the platform to resume firing so she could force the gangers to hunker down. One of them made the mistake of hiding behind an empty panel and died for it. Too thin. Line the sights on her visor. Shoot. Line. Shoot. Keep an eye on the various feeds. A man with a rocket launcher aiming up at the squad's location from a floor below.

"Shit. Explosives."

"Don't worry," Gorge said.

The entire access stairs shook from the detonation. They lost the feed.

"Place is designed to hold against monsters. It will take more than that. Focus on keeping them away. Stib, reinforcements?"

"No dice, sir. They didn't even give me an ETA."

Nestra didn't swear because she was a pro like that. She reloaded again. There was a lull in the battle. Below, the access stairs were a mess of body parts and entrails where the gangers had tried to storm their way in.

Stib threw up in her microphone. Nestra remembered that turrets needed to have a drone operator plugged in even on auto-fire for safety reasons. Yeah. Could not have been fun.

"They're pulling out?"

The feed — whatever cameras were left — showed no more people. Explosions had taken out some of them.

One more winked out as she watched.

She heard the slow clang of something heavy making their way forward.

"I'm losing the feeds. Jammer," Stib said.

"The turret's shielded. Focus on that," Gorge replied. "Nuts, you good?"

"Got the AMR ready. Concrete's too thick to get a reading but I think it's a walker."

"Got a visual!" Stib said.

She'd sent a flying drone at record speed. Pictures captured through the gaps in the stairs' structure showed the frame of some combat walker. Nestra didn't recognize it. It looked unmarked. Plain. Who the fuck could make homemade walkers? Those were military weapons for Riel's sake!

Gorge stayed calm.

"Looks like a makeshift Dilong Mk 3. Without the plating. Ok I need you to do exactly as I say. Bard, Preach, Pudding, toss grenades as it climbs, then shoot the limbs. Arms first, then legs. Shoot it to shit to confuse the pilot. Nuts, get the top weapons. Don't bother with the habitacle. And don't leave cover. You leave cover, you die. Stibs?"

"Reconfigured for point defense and disablement."

"What about us?" Nestra asked. "Should we get down?"

Gorge shook his head.

"We got nothing that can pierce this thing. Even if we did, the lads have steel barricades. We show our asses, we get pulped."

"That won't-"

"I know! Shut up. I'm thinking."

The clangs continued. Nestra was out of her depth. Her job was small monster extermination and taking down criminals, not waging a fucking war. She watched the feed of the main room. Her team huddled behind a thick pane of neosteel, weapons slid through ports. Not one inch of their body was exposed.

"Now," Pudding said.

The squad pulled pins and released the grenades almost immediately. The walker crested the edge of the stairs.

The feed went white. The building rumbled. Nestra's ear protections tried to stop the cataclysmic exchange but she could feel it in her bones. Her teeth clicked. She fell to one knee, balance lost for an instant. There were a few more exchanges. There were holes in the barrier.

The feed died and Stib screamed. Gorge and Nestra were running before she was gone.

"You get down and do what you can. I'll get her," Gorge ordered.

Nestra didn't want to listen. She wanted to protect Stib first. The others... but no. She nodded.

"If you hear the walker, run away."

"Yeah."

The stairs. The smell of spent powder and offal. A late gunshot.

Nestra arrived.

The barricade was savaged. One major hole, a series of smaller ones. Nuts was dead, cut in half, augs coated with blood. His ribs jutted out and the broken ivory caught her eye first. Preach was down but she couldn't see how bad it was. He was lying on his side. Very little was left of the walker except a steel sarcophagus shredded to ribbons, metal peeled like old paint, limbs bleeding oil and propellant.

The last thing that caught her eye forced her to a stop. It was Bard. He was holding a strange device that looked far too much like a spent EMP grenade to be real. That wouldn't make sense. Walkers were heavily shielded.

His other arm held his sidearm. He pointed it at Pudding and blew his head off.

1.5

Nestra's heart skipped a beat.

"What the-"

She charged, blade out, brain switched off from the fury. Her own gun wouldn't go through Bard's body armor.

"Ah," Bard said with a lazy drawl. "You were not supposed to-"

Bard pivoted and shot. It went wide, mostly because Nestra's thrown blade was planted in his shoulder.

"Fuck!"

She made contact. Her feet caught the gun but Bard's grip held. His hook got her in the chest just as she grabbed the handle of her sword. Most of the damage was blocked by her armor and yet the punch still winded her. His sidearm could pierce armor. No choice. She thrust and he failed to catch it on his vambrace. The blade dug in the same shoulder a second time, not deep. Deep enough.

Bard screamed in pain when electricity coursed through it but most of it was caught by the armor, dissipating harmlessly on the floor. She struck his side arm and it broke. He stared in disbelief. She made for the kill.

She was sent flying across the room.

Nestra's back hit a nearby pillar. Pain there. Pain in her shoulder. Pain in her chest. Shake her head. Get up. No, not get up. She stared dumbly at the piece of metal digging into her

torso, just below the rib. It hurt. It hurt quite a bit. She opened her mouth and gulped some air. More air. Breathing was pain but it was life also.

Agony filled her mind. There was nothing but the next breath and the ruby blood darkening her uniform. Only when a noise came did she remember she was one bullet away from death. Bard was still alive.

MAJOR WOUND DETECTED

PLEASE PROCEED TO A SAFE AREA

She turned off the notifications to watch the man who'd pushed her. He faced Bard but his gaze found her and his bitter smile turned into a sneer filled with hatred.

"Well. Never send dregs to do a gleam's job."

Only now did Nestra notice the unmarked armored vest made from mana-enhanced material, the silver armband. His eyes shone with the tell-tale yellow of an electric elementalist. A buzzer. Still D-class from the intensity, not that it would matter to her. Bard clearly feared the guy but not in the way one would see death. In the way one would see a pissed off boss.

What the fuck was going on?

"I did what you—"

"Shut up. You messed up the timing which cost us a walker. You shot your comrade with your personal weapon, which means the bullet could be traced. You know what? Fuck this, dreg. Your incompetence just baffles me. Kill the bitch with the gun of one of the dead borgs so at least ballistics doesn't get a clue. You can manage at least that much, right?"

The gleam's presence warped and he appeared again near the stairs with a crackling sound, then he was gone.

MEDIPEN REQUIRED.

With feverish hands, she grabbed the medicine-filled tube from a chest pocket and slotted it into the armor near her throat. Cold relief filled her vein but it only brought into more contrast the foreign presence digging in her chest. Piece of rebar or something. She grabbed it then stopped. Had to keep it there or she'd bleed out.

Bard found a suitable gun. He turned. Nestra lifted her own gun and fired at him. The bullets pinged uselessly against reinforced ceramics but he still felt the impact. She stood. Something liquid dripped down her bodysuit below the armor, soaking it. Bard finally had enough. He ducked behind the remnants of the barricade. Stupid. He could finish her off easily but he was sloppy. Always looking for the easier way out.

"What the hell's wrong with you!" Nestra roared, half to delay and half because she still couldn't believe it. It hurt to scream.

She made her way forward then to the side, to her salvation.

Her gun clicked empty. She dropped it and kneeled, her hand behind her back, palm on her salvation.

Bard stood up, still slow and almost bored.

"Sorry, Palladian. We're all on our way out. Just wanted a little retirement fund, see? I can't just be on the loser's side all the time."

"Fuck you."

"Yeah yeah."

The message she was waiting for finally pinged her, trumping the medical diagnostic in the notification priority queue.

USER RECOGNIZED.

She dove to the side and pulled Nuts' sidearm with her. Bard's first shot went over her head. The second pinged against her greave.

She shot through Bard's chest. For a brief instant, she saw concrete beyond before pressure filled the void with organs. Bard gasped behind the visor, surprised. Very surprised.

He fell like a puppet.

Something locked in place in Nestra's mind. Suddenly, it was as if a veil was lifted. Her confusion and fear evaporated to leave behind a center of tranquil focus from whence she could draw. Even her mana craving receded to become nothing more but a quiet whisper. Pain still called.

SIGNIFICANT BLOOD LOSS DETECTED.

PROCEED TO A SAFE AREA IMMEDIATELY.

"Fuck," Nestra said.

Had to save Stib.

Maybe.

No choice. There were still gangers below, she remembered, and she was in no state to face them. She had to go up, find Gorge and Stib if they were still alive. Lock the wall access. A tall order considering a gleam was after them.

There was only one thing that could improve her odds, even slightly.

She made her way to Preach. Found he was still alive but unconscious. Slotted a medipen. Her com system was off. She didn't know what else to do. There was a fast-acting clotting spray she could use to seal his wound so she did that. Then she found what she wanted. Combat stim. She dropped the empty medipen and slotted the stim instead. The rush was immediate.

"Much better."

The gangers would come or they wouldn't. They would find Preach and kill him or not. She was in no position to stop them. What she needed to do was go up. Carefully, she climbed the stairs, well aware of the metal still digging under her ribs shifting with every step. She was leaving bloody footprints behind her. It was probably super bad. Two floors went as quickly as she dared, then she heard a loud gunshot. Two. Gorge's special sidearm. She reached the access floor.

There were no platforms here, only an empty space surrounded by walls with openings overlooking the hab blocks below on every side. The maintenance access gate waited beyond, locked tight. Stib was supposed to be inside but she wasn't. She was on the ground, crying, holding a bleeding Gorge doing his best to hold his guts in. There was a lot of blood. His gun lay to the side, discarded. There were two impact holes on the otherwise pristine walls.

The gleam was here, because of course he was. Blood dripped from his hand, evidence he'd hit Gorge instead of simply frying him with a spell. He was playing with his food.

The gleam knew she was here. He was merely watching with utter disbelief.

"How the fuck did that dreg... Nevermind. All the better. That just gives me more material to work with. So, still going to be silent?"

"Nooo," Stib wailed.

Gorge coughed.

The gleam pointed a finger at her.

Nestra moved before he was done. Her mind was so clear. Everything made perfect sense. It wasn't the blood loss, or the stims. It was the absence of craving despite the lack of mana concentration in the air. She was not sated. She was just not hungry, the feeling turning into a cool wave settling in her bones.

Her blade hit the ground as a bolt hit her gauntlet, electricity traveling down her blade. It was mana electricity so a part of it couldn't be denied that easily and yet what coursed through her body fed her more than it harmed her. The rest dissipated harmlessly in the ground.

"Open the door," the gleam calmly ordered.

Then he saw Nestra still standing.

"What the hell?"

She felt him move to her side and pivoted to cut him but a sharp pain aborted the motion. Fingers like steel vises gripped her left shoulder. Her pauldron creaked from the pressure.

"How did you get your dreg fingers on a mana blade?"

Before she could respond, there was a gunshot.

The gleam made to sigh with annoyance. Nestra knew why. He had a mana vest.

However, his condescending gaze turned into a scowl of disbelief, then shock. He gasped painfully.

A second shot forced him to take a step forward.

"What? You dreg-"

Gorge's gun clicked empty. He grinned, sweat covering his brow and pain clouding his eyes but his bastard smile still showed the triumph that came with a last 'fuck you'. The gleam turned away from Nestra, rage distorting his features in a terrible rictus. Crackling energy coursed through his arm to deliver death. Nestra saw his back was hurt through the armor. He was distracted. Confused. He was still holding her, and she was still holding her blade. A detached part of her felt an intense feeling of satisfaction for having outsmarted such an arrogant hunter. The rest of her focused on the one thing she'd practiced for endlessly, spending thousands of hours repeating the motions until they became perfectly ingrained: that one necessary, perfect strike.

Nestra pushed back her pain. Feet planted, strike with the whole body. The sharp blade caught the gleam in the side of the head and bit deep. He spasmed. He fell to his knees. Nestra waited until he was done falling with her blade overhead, ready.

He stopped moving.

Up to down, two handed strike on the crown of his head. Her blade bit into bone with a pleasant crunch just as she was absolutely sure it would. He was dead before he hit the ground, sword still embedded. She knew he was dead. She felt him die.

Her head swam. She collapsed against a nearby wall. There was a puddle of blood under her feet. That was a lot of blood. Shit, that was a lot of blood.

"Ooooh that's a lot of blood."

A lot of blood.

"Nestra!"

"Uh?"

"Stabilize her, Riel dammit," a man said.

Nestra could see it coating the piece of metal in her torso. Mazingwe always said, save the brain, the heart, and enough blood to keep them working and I can fix anything else. But that was too much blood. Hands pushed hers away, gently laying her on the ground. Clotting spray on the wound, she thought. Her head swam a lot.

"Hey Stib."

Stib did not reply. Rude. There was someone else. There were two people. They'd just arrived. She didn't see them arrive.

One of them was the viridian eyes boy from earlier. The cop gleam. He wasn't doing too well but he was being held by another guy, this one in armor that looked like bone and long ivory dreads falling down his back. He had weird milky eyes. Her brain finally noticed the silver armband and the fact he was, in fact, holding the viridian guy like a beat up human shield.

"Oh."

Was probably pretty bad but that was no longer her problem because she was down here and down here was pretty comfortable and she was not moving, not with all this blood under her. Fuck, that was a lot of blood. Stib sobbed. That was bad. Stib was a friend. Nestra patted her shoulder. That was a gesture of comfort and affection, pretty sure. She didn't look comforted. Maybe Nestra just needed more practice.

The new gleam's eyes found the body of his ally.

Nestra was pretty sure she was about to die when, suddenly, something very bright exploded behind her.

The next moment, the gleam was gone.

Nestra looked outside the window to see the new gleam locked in a duel with a form clad in crimson armor. Or at least she assumed the ever-shifting form of flesh and bone was the milk-eyed gleam. They were far too fast for her to follow. She recognized the red shape from her newsfeed. That was Hong Wang, the red king. A proper guild star.

Someone touched her shoulder. It was the viridian guy, quickly healing from what she could see. He grabbed the piece of metal.

"This is going to hurt."

Green mana expanded from his free hand. Nestra's body gulped it down greedily, which caused the gleam to scowl but not to stop. A refreshing sensation spread as slowly and without more loss of blood, he extracted the foreign object.

Nestra was left staring at a pink piece of flesh where her wound used to be. It felt very tender.

"You didn't feel that?" viridian dude asked.

"Am drugged to the fucking gills."

"Ah, I should have guessed. And now if you will excuse me, I must attend to your friend."

Nestra wanted to tell viridian that Gorge wasn't her friend just as Stib was holding her hand very tightly. That was probably a bad thing.

"The others?" Stib sobbed.

Right. Coms were still down. Maybe it was the walker. Maybe it was the dead buzzer.

She didn't think it mattered.

"Uh, I think Preach was stable when I left him. You, uh ... "

The drone operator left in a rush.

"Might not want to see this," Nestra finished telling a block of concrete.

"Fuck."

She was going to see... Ah fuck, this was going to be hard for her.

Nestra felt a strange disconnect. She was both healed and weakened, really awake and also really out of her mind. Bard's inexplicable betrayal stabbed her heart like a prop knife. It was there. She knew it was there. It just didn't hurt, at least, not yet. Most of the squad was dead. It wasn't her squad. They should still count as her people but somehow, they didn't. It was as if a solid wall like an iceberg blocked the path between her sensations and herself, pushing away confusion and the craving that had been her constant companion for so long. It wasn't the combat stims. They weren't designed to do that. It was something insidious seeping under her skin and now it was doing something.

Waking up.

Waking up? That made no sense.

"Sorry, sir, I cannot heal that level of damage," viridian told Gorge.

"A polite gleam," Gorge replied with a bitterness that edged on insanity.

Nestra watched outside. Night was falling fast and now plumes of dark smoke rose to the heavens like monstrous pillars, carrying with them the stench of ash. Shapes flew around at great speeds while corpo gunships flew in low altitudes, disgorging armored goons on the fleeing gangers below. Hong Wang remained the master of the sky. He wasn't fighting anymore. He was just there, talking and gesturing a few hundred meters away.

Probably a promo shot.

To show what Gidung could do.

What a fucking disaster. At every possible level. The squad was dead, the gangers were dead, the traitor was dead, and the buzzer was dead. It was a fucking bloodbath and for what? For Gidung to swoop down and save the fucking day. Her mind replayed the elements of the evening and it became painfully, painfully obvious that it was very likely a set up. A set up to show the current police was not capable of handling the new threats of well-equipped gangers by creating that new threat to begin with. And Nestra's squad was just collateral damage, a delicate machine pushed to the edge then used for a role they were not meant to fill. The squad had still managed to hold against all odds. And it would mean fuck all. In the end, whoever wanted to make a point had made it.

Maybe it was Nestra's paranoia speaking. She didn't think so.

She stayed there until reinforcements came. It took a while.

1.6

"Retirement fund, he said?" the left gleam from internal affairs asked.

Nestra methodically removed her fingers from the cup of coffee the medic had given her. She was in her bodysuit with a rescue cover on. It was warm under her but still, she felt light-headed and a little feverish now that the stims had faded. She was also exhausted. On every level.

The space inside of the command tent felt stifling. The two rats were dressed like spooks complete with sunglasses inside the fucking tent at night.

"Yeah," she repeated with some hesitation.

The two checked notes, or maybe they were communicating, somehow. One of them tapped against the steel table they were sitting at.

"Are you certain this is what Mr Wilson said? You were wounded at that time, and suffering from heavy blood loss, right? The timing checks out."

What the?

Ah.

So, this was how it was going to be.

"Memory can be such a tricky thing," the right rat said.

Having the police compromised on paper would look bad for them, especially if they'd not seen it coming. It was also possible they wanted to keep things under wrap for a separate case. It was also possible that they were completely corrupt.

In the end, it didn't matter.

Nestra was tired. Bone-weary. Not just physically but morally as well. There was no point insisting on being right, even though she wanted to, and even if keeping quiet represented everything she hated about society. One person had to stand up first to start anything.

And that person would be the first to fall.

Nestra was not that person. Not today. She was tired, and she was going home to lick her wounds. This battle was tomorrow's Nestra's.

"It would be best not to include in your reports the elements you are not completely sure about."

"I may have misheard," Nestra conceded with a heart filled with the cold acid of guilt and self-loathing.

"That might be so."

"It's all I remember. Are we done?"

Should not have said that. The gleams stiffened.

"Please?" she added, this time a bit more politely.

"You're probably exhausted. Do go home to rest. We will be waiting for your complete report."

"Sure thing."

Nestra stepped out. Around her, the police camp was a hive of activity. The broken remnants of the assault teams occupied half of it, and the suited gleams whose job it was to distribute the blame took the rest. People glared and the mood was bleak. Nestra blessed her good luck that she was too insignificant to get axed as she made her way to the district exit.

"Hey," a voice said nearby.

It was the viridian cop gleam from earlier. He was sitting on a supply crate in a new, clean armored vest. None of the earlier wounds were still visible though he looked rugged and exhausted.

Nestra felt cornered. Gleams didn't talk to baselines unless they wanted something, in her experience.

Maybe it was recognition.

"Thanks for saving me earlier."

"Least I could do. And your teammate, Preach, will make it as well," he said.

"I know. I went to see them."

"I apologize for failing to save the others."

"Yeah, sure."

Not even Shinran could bring the dead back and he was Earth's most powerful healer.

"I assume you are heading back," he continued like a man grasping at straw, pushing a dead conversation past the proper burial time. Nestra just wanted to go home.

"Sorry, sir. Really tired."

"Of course. And I imagine you would not want to... to return to the precinct after everything. Let me call you an executive cab. I'll use my card."

"Eeeh."

She hoped he wasn't trying to go with her. Being alone with a gleam in a space they controlled was dangerous. She hoped he was just being nice but she couldn't take the chance.

"Please. Let me help. I just ... "

He extended his hands, light smile growing brittle.

"I just want to help."

"Ok," Nestra finally said, following her gut feeling.

They walked through the checkpoint, the gleam staying at a respectable distance. His uniform and shiny eyes made the process easy since no one stopped her for her ID. Outside of the camp, there were journalists waiting for their pittance of public statements but the gleam discouraged them with a shake of his head. A hover car was waiting by the curb, long,

sleek and black. Executive cab, the most high-end transportation network in Threshold. The gleam gestured and the door opened.

Nestra turned as she was going in. The gleam was still waiting at a respectful distance. It would be weird to leave like that. Dangerously disrespectful as well. He might perceive her as ungrateful and that was extremely dangerous. She decided to share her name not just because it was a sign of trust but because he most likely knew it anyway.

"Thanks. I'm Nestra."

"Valerian of House Nephrite. Sorry, I just ... "

He took a deep breath, seemingly coming to a decision.

"I know what it feels to be the odd one out. Anyway. Be safe."

Ah yes, it happened sometimes. Some people recognized her as that one weird anomaly. Huh. Nestra watched his receding back for a second before hopping in. A basic AI requested an address which she gave. The flight over the city gave her a wonderful view of district one, the tight clusters of gravity-defying skyscrapers still ruling over the encroaching arcologies. Their innumerable lights felt as majestic and distant as stars. They were also powered by mana crystals, the outrageous spending a testament to Threshold's affluence and power, the mightiest of fortress cities. It was all Nestra could do to watch those and remain conscious. She had to slap her cheeks a few times not to keel over even with strong coffee buzzing through her veins.

The cab dropped her on her front door, forcing her to rush out in her survival cover and bodysuit in the weirdest rendition of a walk of shame. Anyone looking out right now would assume she'd banged a high gleam and then been sent home in a nice ride. She rushed up the stairs to her bedroom and lasted long enough to remove her itchy body suit before she collapsed.

Then, she dreamt.

It started like a familiar dream. She stood in her mind palace, the elegant room as devoid of a core as ever, yet something had changed. The light was different. Where before, a golden glow shone on the neoclassical design like a fairytale cliche, now it bore a strange hue that seemed to absorb colors. All was gray, black or white, and yet the variations were both rich and deeply pleasant. More importantly, some doors had unlocked.

Nestra had always assumed that the doors were decorative in this highly symbolic place; it had never occurred to her that a door might lead to something else. Now three of them waited invitingly, half-open like whispered promises. She moved to the first and found herself in a cavern with soft, round stalactites covered in bioluminescent growths. Planetoids danced over a blue puddle, never touching. She extended a hand for the brightest one to come, and it did. It levitated over her open palm until she felt its nature. It tasted like a burst

of wind, a perfect step, an uncanny dodge that left her opponent dumbfounded. The light colors on its surface shifted in airy patterns. It was barely awake though, so Nestra released it to rejoin the eternal waltz while she called the next one.

That metallic planet tasted like one last rep and one more kilometer. It tasted like healing bruises and standing up again and again. Its surface was cratered by too many impacts to count and harder for it. It too, was barely waking up while the others remained dull. There was potential here but it would need more... it would need more...

More deaths.

Many more deaths.

The right deaths.

It made perfect sense to dream Nestra.

She was curious to see more. Leaving, she found that the next room was a castle corridor decorated by shields and suits of armor. Again, only two were active. One was an old middle-age plate suit, gray and battered. Serviceable, though it was nothing special and would certainly not stop a bullet. The other item was a kite shield hanging nearby. Its surface was a window into an ocean suffering the fury of a devastating storm. Bolts stabbed the mountainous waves every second with unceasing rage.

The rest remained inert. Waiting.

Nestra kept exploring. Even in the dream, a sense of excitement filled her. There was no core but there was something else and that something else, well, it was better than nothing. In fact, it looked like it could be much, much better than nothing. She knew it would take a lot of work to wake everything up, yet that failed to dampen her mood. She had been denied this opportunity for her whole life. She had begged for the chance to work at things. And now, it looked like she would finally get it, not in the way she hoped, and perhaps that was for the best.

The last room was the simplest one and also the most awake. It held a tiny core crackling with energy. She recognized the mana manipulation ability of an electrokinetic yet the colors were wrong. Everything was gray.

"Weird," Nestra said.

And then she woke up.

"Huh, what a strange dream."

Nestra placed a hand over her face, the skin inexplicably smooth this morning. Maybe the stims were not completely out of her system yet? She also realized she'd forgotten to switch off the light.

Although, come to think of it, everything was in black and white.

"Hm. Lights off?"

Nothing changed. Fear started to worm in her mind.

"Light on?"

The lights switched on and colors returned. But... how? And she was feeling great. Well rested. What was going on? Had she overslept?

She approached a shutter. Outside, the world was a black and white vista besides the distant shape of the Wellington arcology, its blue and red lights displaying advertisements. The contrast was really strange. Nestra touched her eyes. They felt normal. Maybe she was not fully awake and a cold shower would do her some good. She frowned harder and made her way to the bathroom where a demon greeted her in her sink mirror.

At least, the reflection was like a demon but it was also clearly Nestra. The face was the same, if a little sharper. The body shape was mostly the same though a little taller. Really, the only differences were the uniform gray skin, the white hair, the small nubs of horns forming at the top of her forehead, and the black eyes. They were as dark as the void. Pure pits of darkness. Nestra didn't panic because it was, quite obviously, her and this was, equally obviously, a dream.

"Huh."

She settled to wait until something dream-like happened. Maybe her high school teacher would break through the wall to inform her she was late for her presentation. After all, Nestra was already naked and so dressed for the role, so to speak. When nothing like that happened, she decided to go for a coffee instead.

She walked downstairs and made herself one on her expensive machine. It tasted nice. She almost cut her tongue on her teeth. They felt weird in her mouth.

Climbing back to the bathroom, she checked them and realized they were now all a nacreous black, tapering off to a serrated end.

She also realized she still had mana. And it was not fading away. Out of curiosity, she called it forth and for the first time, for the first damn time in her life after thousands of attempts... it worked.

An electric current coursed from one hand to the other with a sharp crack though she barely felt more than a small pinch.

That, however, confirmed that she was fully awake.

Only then did she scream.

"Oh no oh no oh nononononono this must be a dream. That's it. I'm tripping balls."

Nestra went over everything she'd done trying to determine if combat stims could lead to vivid hallucinations. The problem was, she would be sweaty and nauseous. Right now, she was feeling fantastic. Wide awake. Sound of mind if not of body.

"Riel dammit. Why."

She walked over her house, touching random stuff to make sure it was still there. Displays showing family pictures. Her teddybear called Mr Slump which she would not confess she had even under torture. Bananas. She took a bite of the banana. It tasted sweet and a little too ripe.

She only stopped when a tap sounded on her door.

It was a single sound, not intrusive and she would have doubted it were it not for the fact it was three fucking AM and the entire district was as active as an accountant's cadaver. No mana seeped under the entrance that she could tell and the first floor's shutters were all closed. Nestra regretted that she'd left her sword with the rest of her gear. The security display was near the kitchen so she went there and the camera activated, showing a piece of curb and a side of fences. The only anomaly was the package.

There was a package on her porch.

Not a standard delivery cardboard box either but a white, nice box with a little bow on top. It was deliciously, suspiciously antiquated. It was also suspicious as fuck. The timing was not bad, it was fated. So Nestra watched the damn box and... nothing. No noise, no movements, nothing. She checked other cameras around the perimeter: not a thing to be seen.

Her paranoia spiked. Panic flooded her vein like a cold poison.

She had to check it.

Nestra had no idea what was going on or if she was even a human anymore. She most certainly felt like herself and in control, no weird parasite or possession. She also knew that she had the appearance of something else and, in Threshold, that bore an immediate and strict consequence.

The fortress city had very strict rules when it came to suspicions of monster presence, and that rule was extermination. Oh, perhaps she could get away with being shipped to some lab for study but that was obviously a shit solution. So now she was pretty desperate and willing

to open her door in the dead of night to check a suspicious package that might contain, for all she knew, a facehugger dipped in arcane batrachotoxin.

Nestra unlocked the door, opening it a little bit. The night's cold air slapped her face. The dark night of the camera resolved into a bright, colorless landscape in her view. The package waited invitingly.

She grabbed it and pulled it like a gremlin. She shut the door as fast as she could. It slammed with a loud bang that scared her. Far in the distance, a dog barked.

Nestra rushed back to the security station. The cameras showed nothing at all. The package sat where she'd left it, on the kitchen table.

Just existing there.

Menacingly.

"Right. Right. Here goes."

The cute little bow on top of the box came off easily, leaving behind a nondescript wooden box with a smiley drawn with some sort of pencil above the words 'not a trap'. The bow itself was made of some cheap wrapping paper.

Nestra felt silly. She opened the thing before losing herself in conjectures.

It contained two items. The first was a message on an actual piece of paper. The second was a small ball rolled up in a wrinkled napkin. It smelled heavenly. She opened the paper first. Always read the manual before touching stuff.

Words danced in her mind. That was the best way to describe it. Strange, angular runes resolving in curves spoke their meaning directly into her psyche. The message was as weird as the means of delivery.

"Congratulations on waking up, little Nezhra!

Your first quest is to rebuild your Mask.

Go to a mirror and pour your image back over your head, just like water!"

There was more but Nestra didn't care just quite yet. She rushed to the bathroom and stopped, looking once again into the starless pit of her own gaze. The nubs of her horns still felt solid under her fingers. At least she didn't have claws. Yet.

Feeling ridiculous, she raised her hands over her head as if to contain liquid, then she poured.

Nothing happened.

Her instincts told her something ought to. She was just... doing it wrong. It didn't matter that it made no sense. What mattered was hiding. She was vulnerable right now. Exposed. She needed the Mask.

Doing the same movement, she pretended to pour lies on the gray creature in the mirror. She needed the old Nestra. The one she'd grown up to be.

As if sprinkling ink over a white and black picture, colors bloomed on her. The white hair returned to its usual dark blonde, the black eyes became gray again, and her skin lost its doll-like luster to return to its pinkish and slightly scarred self, with the small hair and beauty spots and all the tiny imperfections that made Nestra, Nestra. It felt strange now, not exactly stifling but certainly not as natural as it used to be. The real Nestra was the gray thing and the human was a trick. A honey pot. A disguise. A lie worn every day to survive.

Nestra sat on the bathroom floor.

It was cold.

All her adult life, she'd felt like a fraud, a failure. A stranger. She could not fit among the gleams because she wasn't one. She wasn't even a quirky, with part of a mana circuit that could at least make them useful in a mundane gleam job. No, she'd been a constant reminder of the possibility of downgrading, of having one's child hopelessly incapable of equaling the parent, of an evolutionary deadend because that's what baselines were, in a way. Dead ends unsuited to the new world. Nestra had left the family because she was a stranger in their mist. She had not fit among the baselines because she had a chip on her shoulder the size of a fucking boulder. There was a deep pain in her heart that had grown over the years, thorny tendrils reaching out to grab people to pull them in, anyone, any tribe that would say she belonged with them, any friend that would touch her shoulder and say hey, it's ok, you're good as you are with all your inadequacies. But that had never happened because Nestra was a ferocious bitch who'd picked a lethally dangerous job to prove something to herself. She'd bitten back and fought to prove to the world that it had been wrong to deny her her birthright. Because she was strong and hard-working. She'd battled every day to make a point and, of course, predictably, the world had not given a flying fuck. Her sword techniques plateaued. Then the mana cravings drove her forward in a race that could only end with her planted in some walls, face first. A race with no cheering crowd. Just her and the incoming bricks. Nestra realized that at some point, she'd given up. Oh, she'd made plans of course. Because just lying down and waiting to die meant the world won, that she did not deserve the gift of mana. That was unacceptable. But she'd given up on happiness. She'd just waited to die. Or rather, she'd just waited for something to kill her.

And that would have been fine with her. Death.

Really, the only problem was pain and not being eaten.

But death was ok.

And now she realized that all those years feeling like an impostor among her own, and her inability to fit in had, in fact, a very clear explanation.

She wasn't who she thought she was.

And that was... an incredible relief.

Tears welled in her eyes, the human ones. Nestra made a gesture to rip and the mask fell off, the color dripping off her like cheap paint. The void-eyed Nestra cried tears of bitter joy and disbelief that finally, finally, after twenty-four fucking years of agony, she knew what was wrong with her. And it was not being a shit person. It was being a not-a-person trying to fit in with people. That was why it had never worked.

What a fantastic realization.

Nestra returned to the box needled by curiosity though she was feeling sleepy again. The rest of the message was pretty short. As before, the glyphs danced in her mind like old companions even though she was positive she'd never seen them before. The word for her name, Nezhra, was wrong. A phonetic rendition of Nestra. It felt strange yet welcoming.

"Quest reward: mask + Kero nut"

The mask was necessary. The nut was probably a bonus. She removed the paper to reveal a strange spherical body shaped like a kidney bean. Just like the real her, it was gray and colorless, almost silvery under a certain angle. It also smelled delicious. She popped it in her mouth and bit down.

An explosion of taste drowned her spirit, washing away all her worries in a tidal wave of flavor. The crunchy bits cracked under her teeth with a pleasant pop. This was an apotheosis of a gustative experience. It elevated her mood and her spirit.

And then, it was gone.

"What the hell was that?"

The crumpled piece of paper didn't reply. She decided to finish the message, despondent.

"Your next quest will be at these coordinates tomorrow night. Bring your sword!"

An extremely precise set of GPS coordinates followed. Nestra could input this in her car and get close enough, though that would leave traces. Instead, she used a map on a random website to get the right spot within the proper block. It was an automated warehouse near the wall, in district eighteen. Maybe twenty minutes away on the outer ring with no traffic. Interesting.

Should she trust the mysterious messengers? Possibly. She remembered the rooms in her mind palace. They required more blood, more sacrifice. It was clear the messenger knew what she was so it was logical it knew what she needed.

Nestra knew she couldn't run away anymore. It had to be done.

Tomorrow.

She returned to bed and crashed down hard.

2.1

Nestra woke up after sleeping fitfully. The light of dawn filtered through her windows, chasing away the fog of her mind. She felt tired but too nervous to go back to sleep. Too shaken. Pudding and Nut were dead. She'd killed Bard. Fuck, she'd toasted him for his birthday only a couple of months ago during a truce because it was important for the team. He'd betrayed her first. He'd betrayed all of them and she'd killed him for it. Hollowed out his chest. She remembered gore pouring through the massive bullet wound. She'd done that.

She'd killed the gleam. His skull had crumpled under her blade. It had been far too easy but he'd really underestimated her.

It had felt good to kill them. Not just because they'd tried to kill her and failed, but also physically. It had given her something. She was feeling better now than any morning in the past seven years. No cravings. Even the pain and lack of sleep couldn't dull the relief and euphoria.

Deaths. Vengeance. Pain. No cravings. End of her career, also, she assumed.

And a new species.

Had to be honest, that was the one thing she'd been trying not to think about. Was it all a dream? She retreated to the bathroom, shut down the door, locked it. Darkness became almost complete. She couldn't see her fingers but she could see the tiny green dot of her charging toothbrush, hear her panicked breath.

Had to be sure.

She pinched a symbolic point above her head and pulled. The Mask disappeared into the recess of... she didn't know. She couldn't be sure. Maybe it was not disappearing so much as... going somewhere else? Immediately, her pain abated. The dark of the bathroom became a black and white canvas, clear as day. Her vision sharpened. Her nose picked up the scent of soap, humidity, her favorite shampoo which she'd spilled last morning and not cleaned yet. She felt strong. She was also slightly taller, and naked.

Had to find out more.

Nestra left the bathroom and picked a cotton pajama, which was a little tight in her demon form. She closed all shutters, switched off all cameras and all lights since she didn't need them. Followed a brief inspection.

Her teeth were sharp, incredibly so, to the point that she pierced her skin just by brushing them. Her blood was grey, then red as it spilled. The wound closed almost immediately.

Sucking on her thumb, she checked the nubs of her horns next. They felt very sensitive and the mana was somehow thicker around them. Not sure what else.

Her ears were a little longer and thinner but that was the last weird thing except for the color. Her hair felt normal. All her senses were better though.

Next, she headed to the basement and the gym there. Her flexibility hadn't changed though it was already good. She casually bench pressed twice her normal maximum next.

Ok, so stronger. Definitely stronger. Maybe a little faster as well, though she wasn't sure. There was also something else. She still felt... a little hollow, like an empty hearth waiting for a roaring fire. This was just the beginning. Or at least, that was how it felt.

Which led to the next question.

Why, and how?

Why was she not human, and how the fuck did that happen? Was she born like that? Had someone sacrificed her soul to the monochrome devil or something?

Her alarm rang. The surprise made her pull her Mask on before she realized it was just that. One thing was for sure, she could choose to transport her clothes from one form to the other as she changed. So at least there was that. Really weird, anyway.

Maybe the box sender would have more answers tonight. For now, she had to leave if she wanted to keep a normal life.

The car hummed in acceleration then hooked behind a convoy of corpo limos. Honestly, Nestra knew she should let the autopilot work all the time. Most traffic was directed by AI which tended to pile cars in a neat line that actually made traffic smoother for everyone. It just annoyed her to have her own expensive vehicle and then never use it.

All that thought of cars failed to distract her from the big question as she made her way to the station.

Should she tell anyone?

After all, figuring out you're actually a gray demon masquerading as a person was the sort of stuff she could use some advice on.

Stib was a risky proposal because as much as the girl was loyal, she was also loyal to the city. Right now, Nestra looked like a fucking monster.

Mazingwe was out for another reason. Anyone who'd survived through the incursion hated the monsters with a burning hatred, no exception. She'd seen footage of her father going through some bipedal lizards in a portal world, once. It was hard to reconcile her stoic yet friendly parent with the armored avenger ripping through ranks with methodical fury, crushing skulls with a brutality that went beyond mere efficacy. So no, Mazingwe was out. And so was her family, she realized.

There was a chance someone in her family was also a monster. After all, one didn't just magically turn into something else out of nowhere, and yet, if one or both of her parents were just like her, surely they would have mentioned it? Or at least given a hint, something like 'oh if you feel weird and something massive changes about you, don't worry, call us'? That would have been the very least. It had not happened.

So no, she couldn't tell anyone. At least not anyone who wasn't the strange benefactor leaving her the package.

Her mind naturally turned to their identity. Obviously, Nestra was under surveillance or she wouldn't have gotten the package when she had. It would also be wise to guess who kept an eye on her.

Her mind went over the possibilities. It could be her Aunt Claire, who had substituted herself as a parent for most of Nestra's adult life. It could be Mazingwe since he'd volunteered to be the squads' doctor for no discernible reason. Hell, it could even be that goofy Seth because he was just weird, though the timing was a little short for that. The problem was that she couldn't just sit down and ask them: hey, are you the one who left a package in front of my door teaching me how to blend in with the humans? Because that would be weird and a little intimate.

Best keep things to herself, for now. Follow the trail of 'quests' if there were more. Maybe sweep her house for spy devices even though finding any implied a long scream and burning down the entire building to exorcize that horrible violation.

The next serious question was... did it change anything in how she saw the others?

She... didn't think so?

Her friend was still her friend. Her family was still her family, good and bad. Things might change in the future, especially if they learned what she was. That was up to them.

By the time the car turned into the precinct, Nestra was calm. She sent a message to Stib, possibly still in the hospital but received no immediate response.

Her building was empty. Truly empty. The first sounds of life came when Nestra reached the office floor and heard banging things in the chief's office. A knock on her door interrupted the movements.

"Chief? It's Nestra."

"One moment please," a broken voice replied.

It took a good fifteen seconds for Chief Ruben to compose herself. The door opened into a mess. The chief pretended she hadn't been crying and Nestra ignored the red, puffy eyes and the occasional sniffle.

"You didn't have to come today," the chief chided. "You should be resting."

"Just didn't want to be home alone with everything..."

Nestra shrugged.

"You know. In the air. So..."

A heavy silence hung between them while Nestra looked at the piles of belongings on a cardboard box. Mostly rewards and certificates. A few ancient books made of actual papers. A couple of medals.

"You didn't expect that after yesterday, I'd still be around, Palladian? Some heads have to roll."

"This is bullshit."

"Yes! Nice of you to say that," the chief said without malice. "But the squads were under my responsibility and... you're the only one left standing."

"Then the department..."

"Is closed as of now. I'll let HR know you've swung around. They'll sort you out. Don't worry, you're too low on the pole to get axed so easily."

"What about you?"

The chief looked at Nestra, the cold underneath returning into her features. The chief never liked it when people poked into her business but Nestra figured it didn't matter right now.

"There will be an inquiry. I'll be transferred to some cushier position if all goes as I expect it since the TPD can't afford to throw talent away right now. If the call for blood is too strong, my head will roll and I'll be fired, no matter whose fault it is. It depends."

"There was something I wanted to tell you, actually," Nestra said, her mind made.

The chief waited, uncertain.

"Off the record."

"Everything we say right now is off the record."

"Ok. We were really betrayed. Bard turned on us."

The chief clenched her jaw. She grabbed the edge of her table then leaned on it, face reddening.

"That little wanker."

"The rat squad mooks made it very clear I shouldn't put it in my report unless I was 'very sure'. Look, I won't poke the fuckers but..."

"But I could look into it. Yes. You did well. They would have just declared you unfit to testify. Then you'd have to pass a psych eval just to get a job back. Alright. Let me be honest in return."

"Hm?"

"Internal affairs highly suspects that the gangers received weapons and augs from a corpo supplier. A unique corpo supplier. And by suspect, I mean they are absolutely sure. They just need proof. Not an easy thing to acquire."

"Gidung? They're the ones who stood to earn the most."

"And the timing of their rescue was... just a little too perfect. Yes. Look, don't be stupid. You can't just go after them. Even your family will not protect you if you do."

"I'm not stupid," Nestra replied a little sulkily.

And she really was not that stupid. She was weak and isolated. For now. It might change though, the weak part, not the isolated one. Maybe. Then they would see.

"Good. Oh, HR is there. Go talk to them then pack your things. Will you attend the service? We are... we are burying everyone at the same time. With Regis. The families agreed."

"I'll be there. Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Nestra left in an awkward silence. She was just... not very good with grief and expressing sympathy. Some of her attempts had not gone very well in the past. Aunt Claire had even recommended some online classes on how to express empathy but... they felt hollow. She did feel sorry for the chief, who had lost the people in her charge. But what would be the best answers? A hand on the shoulder? A word that she'd tried her best? Just supportive silence? Nestra knew she was supposed to be devastated as well. How would that translate?

What a fucking mess.

The HR team was settling down in the same meeting room the rat squad had used a few days and an eternity ago. Nestra exchanged hushed greetings. She recognized one of the girls from the main office, the same who usually confirmed her holidays were approved. She was an energetic, mousy tan girl. The man wasn't familiar. He was older, with an impeccable navy suit and the kind of exact hairstyle that required discipline and a frequent visit to the stylist.

"Hey, Fon," Nestra greeted.

"Nestra! Thank Riel you're ok. You're ok, right? Of course not, what am I saying?"

"Ahem," an older man said, though not unkindly.

"Sorry Mr. Ling."

"Not to worry, I just wouldn't want to overwhelm our friend. Business first, if you would allow. I am commissioner Ling. I handle staffing for this district. I'm sorry, there is no other way to say this. Your unit is dissolved as of now."

Nestra nodded. There was no unit left so... she already knew that.

"In recognition of your services and the emotional trauma associated with your loss, we are providing you with the following compensation as well as three months of leave you may take at any time you wish within the rest of your employment. If you decide to leave the force, which we would understand, the precinct will issue a letter of recommendation at your convenience."

Ling gestured and Nestra put on and turned on her visor. A sort of contract arrived in her mailbox. It was exactly what Ling said in addition to the cozy sum of forty thousand credits, untaxed, which represented a year of income. There were no demands in return which meant it was a bribe. The large amount of money was here to make sure she wouldn't raise a stink out of fear of losing the benefits. That was fine by Nestra. She didn't think she would get her revenge going the normal way.

She frowned. Did she really want revenge?

Yes, she did.

It was a distant sort of anger, more a principle than an emotional drive to get even. Someone had callously written her off as an acceptable loss in their grand plan and they would get their comeuppance. It was as simple as that.

"If you have any questions..." Ling said.

Actually, might as well dig a little.

"Those are generous terms. Let me be honest. Is there a catch?"

Ling started to answer but he reconsidered.

"Ms Sonchai, would you give us a moment, please?"

"Okay..."

Fon looked worried and Nestra felt herself tense, however the commissioner's neutral expression lacked the affected sympathy that usually heralded bad news.

"Alright. There is no catch. You get that no matter what. There is something we would like you to do, however, or to be more precise, something Internal Affairs would like you to do. Again, this is not a binding agreement, Miss Palladian. We merely believe that you would have a vested interest in the proposal."

A free lunch AND a commissioner using honorifics on her? They really wanted her something bad.

"Officer Kim would like a word with you. You met her a couple of days ago. I'm sending you her coordinates right now."

He gestured.

"Please call her before you make a decision. Now sign the paper and get your break. Remember. We look after our own."

Nestra glared at the utter bullshit of it. Once again, her obvious disbelief grated on her superior's nerves. Ling seethed but he took a deep breath before he could go off, which meant Nestra had gotten away without pissing off yet another member of her hierarchy.

"Let me rephrase. We look after our own within the limits imposed upon us by central."

"Appreciate it."

Nestra signed. She said goodbye to Fon on her way out.

"If you need help picking a new job, let me know!" the shorter woman told her. "I have compatibility tests, offers, the works. Just let me know and I'll clear a slot for you. Don't just disappear on us."

"Thanks, Fon."

Nestra walked back to her office. There was another message for her, from the chief.

"Palladian. Before you go, please go by the armory to retrieve your sword. Thank you."

Right. The sword was her personal property. She even had a license for that. She grabbed her personal effects and put them in a cardboard box. There wasn't much, merely a change

of clothes and a couple of mementos. Nestra didn't consider her office as anything personal, more like a shelter than a personal spot here. Her house was her haven.

In the main building, many officers whispered as she passed by. Some of them gave her nods of sympathy. Nobody seemed angry at her, or disappointed, which was nice. The quartermaster locked the door behind her when she came in. That instantly made her nervous.

"Officer Palladian. Here for your sword?"

"Yeeees?"

"I need a favor from you. You see, I was given this nice little piece belonging to Gorge."

He placed the revolver on the desk in front of him, shiny and clearly enchanted with mana stuff now that Nestra could look at it.

"The problem is that it's a mana tool, one that can only be owned by someone with a special license. Like you, Nes. So, I am going to assume that Gorge merely omitted to tell me he got that license after all and I will release it into your custody so you can return it to him and if I get inspected, everything's copacetic. You get me?"

"I get you."

"In return, let me give you your own stuff since it's going to be destroyed anyway. You got a weapon safe at home, right?"

"Uhm."

"Riiiiight?"

"Why yes, of course I do."

"Excellent. I patched up your armor. You got your submachine gun and, let's say, two boxes of rounds you used in training. Three spare magazines you lost yesterday. And your sword, of course."

"Right. Thanks."

"Think nothing of it. Let me walk you to your car."

Nestra set the autopilot to the hospital where Gorge was. It was a different one from Camus', possibly because ravaged intestines were harder to fix than cracked ribs. She used the opportunity to call Officer Kim.

"Yes?"

"Hello Officer Kim, this is Nestra Palladian."

"Ah, excellent. I was expecting your call. Do you have time for lunch tomorrow?"

"Sure?"

"See you there," Kim said after rattling off the name of a restaurant, then she cut the call abruptly.

Maybe she was busy.

Nestra wondered what the rat squad wanted with her. The mooks had been clear they wanted her to shut up about Bard's treachery but maybe that was not all there was to it. It was clear the TPD had been shafted badly in district 15, losing men, equipment, and face. She was sure they were itching for a comeback. Maybe there was a way to use official resources to go after the assholes who'd bought Bard. Maybe she could use both official and unofficial tools.

Nestra pulled into the hospital's parking lot. It was an older one, she noticed, poorer too. There wasn't a gleam in sight and her mana perception remained unequivocally inactive. She grabbed the revolver box and made her way to a cluttered reception room, joining a queue behind an old woman in a wheelchair and a panicked mother with a gaggle of stressed kids. Tense discussions filled the air along with the stench of sweat and cheap antiseptic. Somewhere to the side, someone was crying. Nestra hunched her shoulders. She didn't like hospitals. Only Aunt Claire came to visit.

"Yes?" the exhausted nurse asked.

"I am here to see Gorge, sorry, I mean. Aaron MacMillan?"

"Hm. Oh, yes, let me check."

The nurse frowned. She had a pad rather than a visor. When she looked up, there was hesitation in her voice.

"Hm, Mr McMillan will only receive family at this time?"

"Could you let him know Nestra is here. I have something of his."

"I, errr, I'm not supposed to..."

"Look," Nestra replied. "we're part of the same squad. I assume he wants our hierarchy off his back. Please just ask him? If he says no, I'll leave. Promise."

"Oh, alright."

The nurse pulled on a visor while Nestra waited patiently.

"Sir? There is a Nestra here to see you. Yes. Yes. No, I would not use that term as it is quite rude. Yes, I'll send her right away."

The nurse hung up.

"Room 576. Take the elevators on your right. And, uh, are you really friends?"

"Not really. Why?"

"He asked if you looked like a frigid bitch."

"Then he's in a good mood. Thanks for the help."

Nestra moved through the first floor. The hospital was clogged, with patient beds pushed against the wall. She decided to take the stairs when she realized how many people were waiting, some of them wearing patient gowns and dragging their own IV bags with them. The fifth floor was much calmer, which was a relief. She found 576 after a quick search. The hospital was big.

"Come on in!"

Gorge lounged in a large bed, his muscular arms grabbing an ancient pad.

"Holy shit Palladian, the fuck are you doing here?"

Nestra placed the case on a side table. Gorge's room was a single, tight yet cozy with a large screen and two wide windows. Personal effects lay scattered over the room as if Gorge had been there for a week.

"Brought you back your iron on account of its illegality."

"Covering for me? How nice. However, let me ask you something."

"Yeah?"

"What happened to my men?"

Gorge's face was raw. Raw and angry. She felt like walking through an alley only to find two groups of goons on either side and her in the middle. Gorge didn't know what happened. He couldn't. The coms were down when Nestra killed Bard.

"Fuck."

"I know only you and Preach made it. I know you saved him. Now tell me how the others died."

"You're not going to like it."

"Fuck no I'm not going to like it, you cunt. Tell me anyway."

"Off the record because the rats told me to shut up."

"Start talking or I'll use the revolver on you."

So Nestra shared her tale, leaving nothing back. She thought Gorge might blow a fuse when the truth about Bard came out.

"That fucking disgusting son of cock-gobbling shitstain sow. Tell me you killed him."

"Blew his chest off with Nuts' sidearm."

"Okay. Good. Good."

He breathed hard, his bald face was now in the boiled lobster shade of red.

"And the mooks told you to keep the betrayal to yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Those motherless skunk tampons. What are you gonna do about it?"

"I—"

Nestra hesitated. Gorge's intense gaze made her ill-at-ease.

"I don't know, okay? The fuck you want me to do, drive a demo truck into the Gidung arcology? I don't know."

"But you'll try something?"

Nestra sighed.

She didn't even like Gorge.

"I will try something."

"Ok. Then you keep the gun."

"What?"

"Shut the fuck up, okay? That's my gun. You can keep it for now. I got no more use for it."

"You're leaving the force?"

Gorge sighed. Then he lifted his cover. Nestra gasped at the sight of a mess of bandage and the very obvious colostomy bag attached to it.

"I lost half of my damn guts. There isn't going to be any running around in full gear for me. And before you ask, no I won't get an aug. I can't afford it. Not even with the nice bonus I got in the mail this morning."

"You can ask for a loan?"

"Listen you bitch. If I do take the loan, I'll be indebted for my whole fucking life unless I slave away for a chaebol and no way I'll ever go corpo. If I don't take the loan, I get insurance payment and my kids get to go to college loan-free."

"Holy shit."

"What?"

"You have kids?"

Gorge was so taken off guard, he actually calmed down.

"Divorced with two children. Why? Is that a problem?"

"Just can't believe the same woman would let you fuck her twice."

Gorge's large frame shook and for a moment, Nestra thought she'd gone too far. Fortunately, the shaking turned into a seismic laugh.

"Fuck you Palladian, don't make me laugh like that. That'll blow the stitches away. Take the gun and fuck off. And let me know what you find out. I can get you a lot of goodies you won't find anywhere else. Hell, I'll even give you a discount."

"You're an angel."

Nestra left still carrying the revolver in her hand. She had her own personal arsenal now, which was kind of cool. Only when she sat in her car did she realize the problem.

"Fuck. I don't have bullets for the revolver."

2.2

Midnight descended on the city. Nestra was wide awake after a deep nap in the late afternoon. A quick look outside her window confirmed that the city was mostly asleep. In her human shape, the night was clearer but not 'clear', not like in her true form.

She called electric mana to her hand. A trickle made it through, barely enough to light a bulb. It appeared the mask smothered her ability, which didn't surprise her. If a baseline started to manifest stuff around, people would ask questions.

And that led her to a real issue.

Anonymity.

Moving in secret around Threshold was not something baselines could manage, especially not affluent ones like Nestra. Her house recorded her ins and outs. Her car had an integrated GPS, every prompt relayed to, and recorded by, a central AI which sent her to her destinations via the least congested roads. She could not even visit the place mentioned in the quest without a data trail, and that was just the beginning of it. Even transients without IDs still showed up on security cameras, which Threshold was absolutely chock full of. That was a necessity when portals could open anywhere.

If Nestra went close to that place, her house would show her leaving, her car would show where she went, and every camera around would record her face in precise details, including the demon one.

Calling a taxi meant that a company would have her ID in storage, since she would have to pay with her account.

Nestra checked the map again. That part of the district was empty.

Maybe it would be fine.

"Well, nothing to it."

Nestra's car sat waiting for her in the underground garage. She'd bought it second hand from a taxi company renewing their fleet. It was dark gray and unassuming which was all she needed, really. When she packed her gear in the back, she realized it was the first time she would go out to do anything truly wild. It was weird. She'd stuck to the rules for so long, not least because she was under scrutiny as an odd case. Going out like that felt liberating in a way that gave her vertigo.

"I'm not even doing anything illegal. I have the right to carry all of this with me. I need to calm down."

The pep talk didn't work very well.

Nestra drove the car herself. A quick journey on the outer ring highway led her to a deserted offramp. Old traffic lights spread a bleary pale blue light on cracked tar. Some of the bulbs had died, not to be replaced. She drove past old warehouses and rent-a-space storages. The only light came from security booths and a single delivery pizzeria.

The rental spaces gave Nestra an idea. She could always rent one to use as a... transition spot. Ugh, this wasn't even technically illegal but she still felt terribly guilty. Here she was, joining the ranks of the illuminaughty.

She stopped in an empty parking lot in front of a shuttered mattress company. No wonder since the mattress market was firmly cornered by BaiHua. No cameras there, at least. She grabbed her large bag containing everything and went for a walk.

The bag was heavy as hell.

Maxsec armor wasn't designed to be carried on the back. By the time she'd crossed the lot, Nestra was already sweating under her hoodie. The coordinates led her past a deserted street into an empty factory. The gate stood open, the chain broken. There was an arrow on the ground drawn in fluorescent paint. She stopped.

She was expected.

Nestra walked into a deserted lot. She spotted the spherical shapes of cameras near the roof. All of them were busted. Her perception picked up when she approached a breach in a nearby wall. She felt it before she could see it.

A portal.

In the middle of an empty building, it waited for her. It was a tiny one, the blue of its surface dim, the flow of mana coming to her pathetically weak. It was the sort of portals guilds would be paid to clear instead of having to purchase them. And even then, they would send a pair of D-class raiders as a punishment detail.

It was still the most beautiful thing Nestra had ever seen.

She shed her mask without thinking. Immediately, the night cleared and the bag on her back was not so heavy anymore. She took a deep breath of dusty air. Being near the portal was just so deeply pleasant. And now she had this one just for herself. It felt great. With a sigh, she opened the bag and retrieved her armor, changing in record time but leaving the visor interface off. She strapped her sword to her back. The revolver had no bullets and taking the gun felt... wrong. Her ammo was category one as well, just plain mundane. She left everything there.

There was only one thing left to do.

She hoped it would work.

Nestra placed her hand against the surface of the portal and felt a resistance. It was the first time she touched one. Even as a child back at the estate, children were kept well away from portals for security reasons. Her mom had described the sensation in detail. It was like being sucked into a cold bath, apparently, a slightly unpleasant sensation Nestra braced against. Instead, there was the smallest amount of resistance and then she pushed in through the membrane.

She was in.

Excitement rose in her chest. She was in. She was in! Only users could enter portals! And she could! That meant... well, not much since she clearly wasn't a vanilla human. But still! A childhood wish, finally fulfilled after so many years. A stronger mana concentration made her breathe deeper. The portal world! It was... It was...

Well, it was a little bit underwhelming.

Nestra sighed. She was being silly again. This was a tiny portal, so obviously to a tiny world. A rocky tunnel extended in front of her before veering sharply to the left. There were no sources of light. The mana also didn't feel particularly good.

The sense of wonder she'd felt earlier evaporated. She'd waited for this for so long that, in truth, she'd given up on it. And now that she finally had it, it just didn't feel the same. Like a trophy delivered a year after a competition. The pleasure was gone as surely as the expectation.

She felt a little hollow but that didn't last long.

"Right. This is just the beginning."

And it was. Memories returned from all the classes she'd taken before she was sixteen, all the training she'd undergone back at the manor when she was heir apparent and dear brother Ulysses was still slacking off. This was the lowest class of portals in an underground biome, the most common. That meant either giant ants or mycoids. There were no spores, so, giant ants. Really a shit portal.

Nestra shook her head. She was lucky. This was perfect for getting started, and giant ants could still be dangerous, hence why D-class always went in pairs. She unsheathed her blade and made a few experimental low cuts, a technique that allowed for effective downward thrusts. Her body remembered the movements despite not having practiced those specific cuts for a long time. The tunnel would be too narrow for anything else anyways.

She should grab a knife as well. Better luck next time.

Right, she was ready.

Nestra moved forward, then turned with the tunnel. It smelled mustier now and she could hear grating sounds overhead as the tunnel snaked deeper in. She crept and turned until she came across a slightly larger cavern.

Three giant ants dug despondently, their backs turned to her. Giant ants were thin and a bit human-like in their silhouette but their heads were what one would expect complete with a powerful mandible that could cleave rock, though those specific specimens were struggling. Their brown bodies easily melted into the background. Nestra recognized drones because they lacked any sort of plating. She felt giddy.

That was it.

She rushed forward and lunged low, catching the first worker at the base of the neck. It let out a sharp hiss as it died and the other two reacted immediately. One stood up and turned just in time for Nestra's side strike to cut it in two. She barely felt resistance from the thin chitin. She braced for the last one's charge, her downward attack crushing its back. It died against her combat boots.

Nestra walked to the wounded beast, delivering the coup de grace as it moved away, trailing thin intestines.

Silence returned to the grotto. The entire fight had lasted less than three seconds.

She'd won. Handily. And she felt better. She had hunted and she had triumphed, and although the prey was weak, it was also... new. A pristine entry to her list of victims. She felt just a little bit better. Something changed as well. If she focused, she could hear more digging sounds from up ahead across the cave's only exit.

She kept going.

The giant ants were probably weakened by the lack of mana. Portal monsters were usually stronger than those found in the wild, the offspring of the first portal break escapees. This was clearly not the case here. They were too sluggish, as confirmed when she turned again and found more drones trying to dig a side tunnel. Two worked while one rested.

Nestra charged forward just as the resting one became more alert. She lacked space to swing her sword properly. She killed the first as it moved and the second in another lunge as it moved. The third locked its jaw on her blade and pushed, but she knew what to do. Giant ants were tremendously strong but also quite light so she turned on herself and slammed the creature against the nearest wall. Before it could recover, her handle strike cracked its skull, causing it to fall. She delivered the last strike while it was temporarily stunned.

Once again, the battle was over before it could begin and once again, she felt just a little bit more aware. There was something else though, something she wasn't sure about. She cleaned her blade of the ichor and turned around, eager to find more prey. Giant ants body parts held no value so she didn't consider harvesting anything.

What they were digging for, however...

Nestra carefully picked up her prize from where the creatures were excavating. It was cracked and transparent, the lowest possible quality, only good enough to be crushed and used as fuel... and she didn't care.

It was a mana stone.

Her first treasure.

"Hell yes. Loot."

She picked it up and inspected it. The mana was there, at the tip of her finger, ready to be withdrawn. She had killed her first monsters and she'd stolen her first resources.

Amazing.

Just had to keep going.

Nestra moved on. This world was as basic as they came, pretty much a linear path to the end. In more complex worlds, raiders took supplies with them including food and automatic map-makers. Some biomes could get so large, it took powerful users like Aunt Claire a week to clear, if they survived. She would be more prepared for the next opportunity.

Nestra cleared another group, this one of four drones at the center of a cavern. The last one managed to pinch her leg but the MaxSec armor resisted well enough. She was on her knee, inspecting the light damage when a noise alerted her.

Nestra turned and blocked in the same motion, sword raised in front of her. Heavy mandibles clanged against the blade. She saw an armored head, more powerful limbs. Dark, insectile eyes. The creature was larger with a thicker shell. She immediately pressed the button.

Powerful current shook the warrior's body. Something hissed and popped in its thorax and it fell back, meaning she got a full view of the second warrior charging her. No time to wind up an attack. It was time to use mana.

She pulled a thread from her body and pushed it into the sword, the mana tool easily accepting it. Gray, alien energy coursed along the edge. crackling as it went. The warrior's mandible slammed against her weapon in its urge to clip her neck. The blade slid into the warrior's skull before she was even attacking.

With a roar, Nestra struck down. The blade sliced through the warrior's entire body like a knife through butter. Heavy limbs convulsed, barbed tips raking her armor without penetrating. It fell, dead. She turned and struck the first warrior just in case but the beast was slain, cooked alive by electricity.

Nestra breathed hard. Using mana took a lot of stamina.

"Now that's more like it."

Her voice rang hollow in the surrounding silence. She was talking aloud because she was... scared and alone. That was fine but she still ought to stop.

The warriors left her feeling marginally stronger but it was so weak, she might have been mistaken. She checked around for more mana crystals but found nothing. She did, however, find two recesses in the ceiling, sleeping spaces used by warriors to conserve energy. Normally, those would be in the central chamber but apparently not this time. Had to be more careful in the future.

Nestra kept going, coming across a couple more groups of drones who fell as easily as the first. Some light ahead warned her that she was approaching the end of the portal world. She moved up as quietly as she could, leaning against the wall to take a look around the corner.

There, in a large central chamber, a large creature waited. The insectile being was larger than Nestra and stood upright over a bulbous, fluorescent yellow sack. It faced the entrance with attention. Nestra recognized it as an acid ant.

Technically, the acid ant was not a combat member of a hive. They used their acid to smooth surfaces. That would make no difference to her skin.

Worse, it was actively expecting her.

She did her best to remember. Acid ants used pressurized glands, she remembered. They didn't have great control over them and it took a long time for the glands to refill. Maybe she could bait out an attack.

She strode out, staying near the entrance. The acid ant attacked the moment it spotted her. It reared back and opened its mandibles wide. Nestra stepped back into cover.

A long, slimy string of transparent liquid splashed on the wall in front of her, as well as the ground, and pretty much everything in sight. The stench was atrocious.

The spray weakened quickly. She jumped over a puddle and out of cover and charged ahead.

Thankfully, the acid ant was alone. Her first strike was stopped by a limb, which was fine. She used her sword's battery again and the creature jumped back, twitching. She pursued, attacking with narrow, fast swings. It was taller than her. She blocked quick strikes from its upper limbs. The strength pushed her back despite her effort. Meanwhile, the creature's throat pumped noisily. She had a limited amount of time.

It was too strong for her, and just fast enough to fend her off. Nestra pulled more mana and shoved it into the blade. With a desperate cry, she pulled back and struck with a powerful overhand strike.

The sword cut through a limb and almost severed another. It finished lodged in the creature's shoulder, digging a deep furrow. It screamed. Acid spilled from the open mouth, splashing over the ant. A few droplets landed on Nestra's armor. The beast convulsed and dislodged Nestra's grip.

The acid ant fell, crashing heavily. The two middle limbs managed to grab her boots. Nestra was disarmed. Out of options, she slapped her hand against the creature's face then pushed all the mana she could.

Gray, crackling energy coursed through the ant's skull. An eye popped. The limbs retracted and she was free. She crawled away, exhausted.

She felt the ant die. It still twitched a few times but she knew it was gone. A deep feeling of satisfaction filled her body like a warm embrace. Things were not quite right but they were certainly better. It felt fulfilling, like a cold void fading away. Nestra let out a deep sigh.

Then she hurried to recover her sword and washed it. The ant was melting under the influence of its own acid and she didn't want her precious sword to suffer the same fate. Thankfully, the blade was intact. She wiped it just in case.

Behind her, a portal opened.

"Right. Okay. Good."

Things were good.

She'd cleared a world.

Nestra stood up, satisfied for now. The acid glands could probably be sold for something but she had no tools to harvest them and, if she had to be honest, no buyer. The sales of portal prizes was as heavily regulated as portal ownership. No drab like herself could just show up and offer monster parts without some serious questioning. Not unless she found a black market. Hmm. There was an idea.

More importantly, she'd cleared a portal world.

Like users did.

Ok so she wasn't a gleam, clearly. They were sucked in by portals while she pushed through. They got stronger by slowly absorbing mana, including the mana of creatures who died around them while, as far as she understood, she stole power from the entities she killed. And there was the whole demon thing. Nevertheless! Nevertheless, she was kind of like a user. No, users could manipulate mana. She was more than that. She was a raider like her parents and Aunt Claire and her brother Ulysses and some of the asshats who thought she was out of line for breathing in their general direction. That changed... everything.

All of those years, she'd been a victim defending her dignity and her little strip of self-esteem with the knowledge that it was the best she could ever achieve. That was over. Provided she could progress like raiders did, the heights of power were no longer closed off to her. She could become strong, as strong as her family. Maybe as strong as Shinran, given time.

Maybe as strong as Riel.

All that it would take would be to follow the crumbs left by the one who sent her message. Do that, and she could progress. Nestra didn't forget that power was only a means to an end, and fortunately, she had an easy end in sight.

The fuckers who'd almost killed her and gotten her allies killed so callously, the guys who thought themselves out of reach, having spent pawns to take other pawns so their plan could move forward, they were at the top of her shit list. Oh, she wouldn't fix Threshold and certainly not mankind in general, but those assholes? She would get them. They would pay for the rest. And who knows, with enough time, she could spread that lesson around.

She smiled.

Yes, that sounded like a good prospect. Get stronger for the sake of her growth and for the sake of justice.

Ok, enough distractions. Nestra moved to the exit portal. The shaky nature of this exit portal proved that this was a temporary world that would break away soon after she removed the final treasure, here a simple mana crystal of the lowest grade waiting on the ground. She picked it up. The blue light of the portals gave it a strange tone and if she looked closely, ephemeral rainbows danced over its surface. For a moment, Nestra enjoyed the pleasurable sensation of basking in the portal's radiance, then it was time to leave.

No one was really sure what happened when a portal world unterhered, or what happened to the unfortunate people left behind. She wasn't eager to find out so she pressed her hand against the membrane and pushed. It offered little resistance.

And she was back on earth.

2.3

"Shit."

The portal winked out behind Nestra as she took her blade out. Someone had been there. She looked around the empty factory. No one in sight. No sounds. Only her panicked breaths.

Near her bag, someone had placed a small chair with a rudimentary screen. A camera aimed at the portal entrance now only showed her. She approached the screen, curious.

The screen was glitching hard. It only showed panicked lozenges and streams of light where she was supposed to be, as if her very existence could not be captured. For a moment. she watched the kaleidoscope of strange shapes before placing her mask back on. As expected, her human face showed normally.

That could be useful.

There was another envelope on the chair. She opened it.

"Well done! Quest reward: grew a little stronger.

Next quest: grow even stronger!

Bring your gun."

Another set of coordinates followed. Nestra could guess where this was going and she didn't mind, although she hoped she would get more answers. The little game was getting tiring. She wasn't six.

"Hey, any chance you could show up?"

No response.

"Come on. I know you're out there somewhere. Can we just have a chat like responsible adults? I... I want to know what I am. And you must know what I am. Please? I want to know if I'm not alone."

Silence.

"No? Ugh. Nevermind then."

Nestra sighed and packed up. Her suit of armor was a little damaged and would need patching up where the acid had touched the outer layers. Otherwise, everything seemed fine. She had a look at the two mana stones. It was a good haul for a first assault. The worst ones went for six hundred credits and the other was D-class so probably around two grands depending on supply and demand. That was the lowest end for D-class portals. Most made ten to fifteen but she wouldn't complain. Now, she only needed to find a way to sell them as she had no use for them herself, at least not now. Mana stones were a fantastically efficient source of clean energy, not to mention only they could charge up advanced mana tools. It would be of no use to her so long as she couldn't afford even the most basic of items.

Nestra considered taking the screen with her but she reasoned that the person helping her probably wanted it back. With her mask in place, she just walked back to her car, fully aware that the bag felt just a little lighter on her shoulders.

Nestra checked her phone before she drove away. There was a message from Mazingwe of all people.

"Nestra. It pains me that you would not come to see me before leaving. I acknowledge that the circumstances were difficult, however I believe we need not part on such a tragic note. In fact, we need not part at all if you need a GP. Come and see me sometimes. On another note, I received an unofficial answer as to why your request to be near portals was consistently refused. Although they do produce mana, portals also emit powerful radiation of an unknown nature called, for lack of a better word, zeta radiation. Prolonged exposure kills baselines more surely than gamma rays do. Even users are advised not to linger. I would recommend pursuing alternate ways of satisfying your mana cravings.

Yours in friendship.

Dr Mazingwe."

"Huh."

Nestra was dreaming.

The core chamber stood as empty as before but she knew there were two spots to check. Her steps first led her to the rotating planetoid room, the small spheres hovering over the deep blue puddle. Two others had activated though they remained fairly weak. The first tasted of strength, of domination. It was the push of a hand, the grab of a collar, breaking free, crushing. The second was taste, smell, a movement at the edge of one's vision. It spoke of attention and careful listening. It spoke of vigilance. She liked both but they were still budding. Weak.

Her steps next led her to the armor corridor. A new shield had activated, this one made of glass covered in a translucent substance she recognized as acid. It had the right smell.

She closed her eyes, satisfied with her progress.

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 robot 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 Als 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 full 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, with early summer warmth. Meeting Kim meant she had to dress 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 setting. 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 wandered 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 anthropophagy.

"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 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 Gidung and Hong Wang's guild but while they are suited to fighting gleams and gangers, they are unwilling or unable to police baselines, especially baseline 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, Gidung, sorry, I meant to say, whoever spent over fifty million credits in unmarked 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 low-end and defective or obsolete in many ways. Set for replacement, probably. It was still worth a fair bit. It must also have cost resources 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 civil hierarchy, at least when it came to the municipality and some corps. Guilds were another can of worms.

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 schedules.

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 district fifteen except for that operation."

"It doesn't matter. Just by being present and reporting, you are creating an environment where Gidung 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 whole 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."

It looked like there was another path for justice, one that used the city's resources. Nestra didn't mind at all since her demon self had no way to find out exactly who was responsible. Afterward, well, she would see.

2.4

"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 stained 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, present against every possible doctor recommendation. 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 lot 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 grand 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 are 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 for now. 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 chits 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 call 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 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 in 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.

2.5

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 a inebriating dream. This was a new world, another planet bound by different rules. It had long since finished drinking in the mana to trascend 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 hair 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 snorkel. 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 a 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 rider 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 a 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 monkeys, 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 bucked 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! She wanted more, like knowing what the fuck she was and possibly also finding out if she had people like her, someone who could relate? Anyone?

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

No reply.

"I know you're here somewhere!"

Still no reply.

"I... I just want someone to tell me what I am. I don't want to be alone anymore. It's so tiring," she continued, voice lowering to a whisper.

"Just someone to show me where I belong. It's fine if it's just one person. Like you, whoever you are. That would be fine. Just one person explaining to me what the fuck is going on. It's not much, is it?"

The sanitation employee started to snore. There would be no answer here, at least not tonight. And no kero nuts to dull the pain. Nestra grumbled and checked the book since it was supposed to be some prize.

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 cuts 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.

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 of 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.

She eyed her fork.

She bit her fork.

Note to self, forks do not taste good. At least it was another item off the list of the things her teeth were designed to eat.

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.

2.6

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."

"Hmmmm."

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. Eight grand, 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 putasiklos.

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 been 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 back by 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 auged 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, "ACAAAAAB. 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 her 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 C-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 up 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.

2.7

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 movements 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 actininic 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 legs, 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 monocore 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 struck 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, 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 thrusted 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 later, shards showered her.

A cerulean radiance emerged from the shattered 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. No longer a foe, for 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 in 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 you 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 rotating 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.

2.8

The first thing Nestra did when she woke up was remove 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 needled 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.

Nestra walked in and breathed the sweet, nice scent of freshly baked pastry. It was warm and buttery and really, really inviting. Seth was behind the counter, tapping on a datasheet. He seemed old fashioned like that. Most coffee shops relied on drones but the man baked everything on site and he manned the counter himself. Nestra expected his unorthodox approach to spook off those who wanted to be left alone but, to her surprise, the place was packed on a weekday. Not just that. Delivery drones waited outside by the window.

The tall, gangly man smiled when he saw her. It lit up his whole face from thoughtful to genuinely happy. The unfettered emotion made Nestra's head spin.

"Hello hello! You are Nestra, I remember. My dessert pleased you enough to return, I see."

"You remember me?"

"Of course. I have a great memory for faces. Names, not so much. Ah, but what can I do for you today?"

"I was supposed to meet a friend..."

An old couple left hand in hand, freeing a spot near the back.

"Looks like you're in luck," Seth said. "Flat White?"

"Yes."

"I suggest my cardamom roll. There's a fresh batch coming up soon."

"Is this why the delivery drones are waiting?"

"Yes!" Seth replied with naked pride. "My creations are having a ton of success! The baking robots really make it easy to experiment with various ingredients, you know? I could spend HOURS in the kitchen just trying stuff."

"Nestra!" a voice said from behind.

She turned to see Stib walking in with a wan smile. The shorter girl had lost some weight and there were shadows under her eyes like fresh bruises, a weight on her shoulders that made her stoop a bit though the smile seemed genuine. Nestra returned it.

And then she faced Seth again.

It was like someone had opened the blinds and now she knew for sure that, the first time they'd met, Seth had not been flirting. It was like looking at the sun. Seth was transformed. He was sublimed. He was a romantic figure of a genius artist lounging casually against the counter, velvety brown eyes burning from an inner passion. He put the datasheet down and caressed his chin with an elegant finger. Stib blinked and her eyes followed the flexing muscles of his forearm. He caught her staring. She blushed.

"Why hello there, and welcome to the Sunflour. What can I do for you today?"

"Oh, uh, ah, l'm..."

"Should I leave you two alone?" Nestra asked half seriously.

"Oh no no no sorry," Stib protested.

Seth chuckled knowingly. Seth took their orders under Nestra's vigilant glare, staying tame the whole time. The pair sat down in the recently freed spot to talk while they waited for their coffees.

"So... how have you been doing?" Stib awkwardly asked while Nestra was still considering her approach.

"Well enough. Been busy with training."

"Oh? Really? Ah, hm, I wanted to apologize for cutting contact. I told you you should be more active and here I am, closing myself."

"It's fine," Nestra dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Look, we both know I have trouble relating to people. It's a problem when I'm trying to be social but the advantage is that the deaths of our people didn't hurt me the way it hurt you. So, I get it. Did the Stibbons rally around their wayward daughter?"

"Yeah," Stib chuckled. "They did it. I got a firm offer to work on drone support for the Blue River guild and... I'm gonna take it."

"Good idea."

"So... it's really finished. MaxSec, I mean. Everything's closed. After so long it feels really weird."

Nestra shrugged. She was over it. Her main purpose for joining had always been to prove that she was worth it in her eyes, that nature had made a mistake in giving less than it had given her siblings. Now she had cool demon powers and a Nestracave and access to really delicious sesame jellyfish salad so the world was more in balance. And money. Of course, part of her serenity was due to a lack of interaction with hierarchical superiors and gleams in general but hey, she'd take it.

"It was just... such a long chapter of my life, you know? And I feel like it was closed without my consent. I wasn't ready to move on..." Stib continued.

Nestra nodded to show her support.

"Sometimes I envy your mental resilience," Stib finished with a bitter tone, though she dulled the barb with a wink.

"It's easy to accept unfairness when you believe life's been repeatedly unfair," Nestra wisely explained.

"I'm not sure this is a healthy approach."

"Like for you this is a violation of the reality of your life, all you believed has now collapsed and your life is in shambles... but for me that's just a Monday."

"Holy shit, Nes."

"But don't worry! You can just roll with the punches. Like I was actually mentally readying myself to being crippled for life since, you know, I can't install augs without going crazy."

"Nestra ... "

"Look, I even had a list of handicaps I could accept without killing myself. I was ok with losing a limb but not full paralysis, you see? It's all about... hmm... accepting that you're not in control and that life might just decide to fuck you over and the only thing you can control is your reactions to it."

Stib's face was a mask of mesmerized horror. A student nearby removed his visor.

"Jesus fucking Christ, lady."

"Not helping?" Nestra asked. "Damn, sorry, guess it doesn't work for everybody?"

"I can't tell if you need a hug, therapy, or all of the above," Stib forced out.

"Sorry. Anyway."

Seth took this moment to bring them their order along with a 'enjoy' as sweet as honey. Damn but could that bastard be suave when he wanted. That made Nestra extra suspicious so she glared at his back until he parried her silent accusation with a disarming shrug. She got the meaning.

So what?

"Tsk."

"This roll is so good!"

"It seems Seth is getting popular."

"Seth, huh? By the way, what did you decide in the end?"

Nestra explained her unchanged plan to assist with fifteen's resurrection. She still wanted to get at the assholes who had killed part of her team, though she didn't share this with Stib.

"No way, that's too dangerous!"

"It is dangerous," Nestra allowed.

"Not like that. The weapons and augs that the gangs had, they're still there. Not all of it was destroyed because it never is. I bet they'll resurface over the coming weeks in, well, hold ups and robberies. You're going to come in fresh-faced with your light vest and catch depleted uranium."

"Relax, we're here to keep an ear to the ground, not to go after hardcore criminals."

"If you come across an armed robbery, will you cower and wait?" Stib asked with a pointed look.

"You forget, fifteen is a fucking dumpster fire of a place. The only things worth robbing will be Gidung supply depots and those won't be my problem. I doubt someone would pull out a walker weapon to steal from a food stand."

"I'm just worried about your safety. In groups of two? Shit I wouldn't walk in that cesspit in less than a squad of five with gleams on call. I hope you don't get jumped on."

"I can't let it go, Stib."

The short drone operator searched her expression. She passed a hand through her red hair and sighed. Nestra noticed that the nails were chewed to the nub. She thought Stib had shaken off the habit. The past week must have been really trying.

"You mean... their death?"

"Just how callous it all is. I want to know who pulled the trigger on providing the gangs with weapons. Doesn't matter if I'm not spearheading the investigation because that's not my skill set anyway. I need to be there."

"Just watch out for those civvies. You can't trust them."

Nestra chuckled.

"What?"

"My aunt and you, you're really on opposite ends of the spectrum. She's advised me to look into de-escalation."

"Sure. Learn what you can to make sure things go smoothly. Just keep your hand on the handle. You got gear?"

"I made a requisition list and it seems it's been accepted. I'll have an electric disabler, pepper spray, a sedative needle gun..."

"Ok ok you can take down an entire street. What about surveillance?"

"Don't think there are cameras."

"You know what I mean. Drones. look, I'll soup up something for you. You can't just walk through two alleys and find yourself boxed in. I'll set up a program so you have your eyes in the sky and it's easy to operate. I can do it. I've had ideas... Not as good as a dedicated operator of course..."

"Honestly, Stib, I'll take what you get me."

"Alright. Yeah. Ok, so, I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Do you... think I'm ready to date again? I mean, now?"

Nestra blinked at the non sequitur. Where the hell was this coming from?

"You want me, the aromantic person, to tell you if you should date? Sure as long as you feel good about it? Why?"

"The, hm, Seth, he left me his details."

Stib waved her napkin, upon which that smarmy flirter had left a number. The rogue stood there selling a Victoria Sponge to a dignified old lady with pointed questions, the very image of innocent competence.

"He's kind of smooth..." Stib dreamily said.

"Well go for it, I can promise you I won't compete."

"Thanks Nestra, you're a dear."

Nestra was flush. Well not really, but on her way to be. The lizard skin was sold, as were the vials in record time. She was now over twelve thousand credits richer. Twelve. Thousand. Credits. In two nights. And that was just for risking her life doing something she loved anyway. She could buy anything, she thought, munching a piece of fruit marinated in honey. Like cream maybe. But more seriously, she had an issue.

Her armor no longer fit.

Her demon self was now taller than her human self by two whole centimeters. The difference shouldn't have mattered but her armor set was such a tight, custom-made fit that she couldn't properly operate in them. And that wasn't the only issue. The demon's arms were longer and a little thicker. Every piece of gear barely fit and they also limited her range of movement. What she needed was something to wear. Something to protect her. Gorge had an answer for her.

Entry-level, standard issue armor for teenager D-class running their first gauntlets: five thousand creds.

Armor set suited for a woman her size?

Thirty-nine thousand.

It didn't even look good! Not to mention, it was likely she would keep growing for a while so her purchase would only be worth it for a little while. So far, Nestra had only drawn on her reserves once to buy Gorge's stuff. Right now, she knew she wasn't raising too many flags with HQ and the Als they used to track suspicious behavior. Even if they did track her, all they would see would be her going to weird places on a whore bike in the dead of night, nothing too suspicious. Her Nestracave only had training equipment, some couches to chill and a freezer containing some monster meat. They would assume she was selling herself for money and using it to buy mana food. Her records would show she had a mana addiction of sorts, justifying everything. She had layers of protection between herself and the truth. Someone who kept digging would find enough to satisfy them at every level.

This changed if she suddenly withdrew enough cash to buy a second car. There could be questions. She would bet money Kim had her under AI surveillance. The woman was far too professional to forget basic precautions, especially when Nestra was supposed to work against Gidung's interests. Corpos' influence ran as deep as their pockets.

She would have to use different defensive measures. She picked her burner.

"Can you get me potions? The flesh-mending kind."

"Sure but only D-grade. Five hundred a vial. They're not great though."

"Nice to see you care. I'll take four and five bullets as well. And an antidote if you have any."

"I'll need some time to get a general purpose antidote. Don't have a price yet either. I'll take the fee off your balance. Want the rest on a chit?"

"Yes."

"Will do. And there was something else. Can I call?"

"Okay?"

Gorge usually disliked calling. For some reason, using voice chat made him less of an asshole because he didn't get into Nestra's face that much. He was still a raging bastard though.

"What's up?"

"Don't what's up me bitch. I'm your elder."

"Whatever."

"You and respect. Fuck, I can't believe I'm saying this. Look, you're more or less a gleam, right?"

"Less but I can manage."

"But can you pass off as one?"

"No. Don't even got the eyes."

"More like a unique quirk then? Don't tell me. Anyway, I don't know where you're raiding but if you want more choice and better prices, there is a solution. In fact, it might profit both of us."

"Do tell?"

"You could go dark horse."

Nestra slumped into her couch. In demon form, the leather texture felt strange against her skin. Too sticky. Just like Gorge's proposal. Dark horses, or masked anonymous gleams, were more a thing in spicy fiction but they did exist in real life as well.

"You're kidding right? This isn't a vid."

"No, I'm serious. This really happens. There are over two hundred masked gleams in Threshold right now."

"Losers and idiots. There's no good reason to go dark horse. It's a shit assignment."

"There are at least two C-tier masked operatives right now."

"You can't be serious."

"I am. You go mask, you can get a license to purchase stuff from Threshold's armory. You also get to sell your goodies on the open market. Hell, you could even raid legally on top of... what you've been doing so far."

Nestra considered the proposal.

Masking was a way for individual gleams to register as raiders for the city council without revealing their identities. There were even provisions so that only AIs would know of their civilian identities, and it took extraordinary circumstances for law enforcement to demand to know who they really were. Usually, suspicions of felony. The purpose was to allow corpo gleams to contribute to the city and be compensated for it. Sometimes, individual gleams from rival factions would cooperate using that system to protect themselves from publicity.

The thing was, it was completely stupid. Most high-profile gleams could simply not disappear for days on end without their families learning of it. It meant that the only people who did it were idiots no one wanted to bring on a raid or schemers needing ad-hoc coverage for an operation or two. Popular vids dramatized masks to make them seem much cooler than they really were. Like anonymous dark horses stealing the show from powerful guilds. Romance ones were especially fond of the mask plus female protagonist trope. The reality was usually disappointing.

Gorge's proposition had merit, however.

"I don't have the abilities to pass the exam just yet."

The truth was that Nestra had, in fact, the abilities to pass a D-class exam if barely, except for mana reserves. Hers were simply too low for now.

D-class classification was simple enough. One first had to display superhuman capabilities in terms of speed, reflexes, endurance, and power. Then one had to prove a rudimentary control of mana, which Nestra didn't have enough juice to complete quite yet. The last one was combat. She was rather confident about that last part.

D-class gleams basically used mana to enhance themselves. That was the bare minimum to become a raider. She knew that other paths, like crafters, used different prerequisites. That wasn't relevant to her.

A C-class gleam could use at least one affinity and they formed the beginning of a physical core. Nestra wasn't too familiar with that since it had been far away when she'd left the gleam ecosystem. B-class gleams started with a complete core and at least one of their body parts was so infused with mana it became 'exotic material' even at rest.

Aunt Claire said that A-class completely reforged their bodies when they 'ascended'. They were rumored to be immortal. They were a select few so far. Ascensions were still reported in international news.

That was still very far away for Nestra, assuming she had the potential to grow that much.

"If you can't do it at all it's fine. If you can, though, we may be able to help. See, I'm sure you're a busy bee, yeah? And maybe not the best negotiator in town. And by that I mean you fucking suck."

"Look who's talking."

"I can be charming when I'm not dealing with a pissant brat. And I do business with my balls and my brains, kid, not my feelings. Anyway, if you can get masked, we can handle business for you at no fee provided you let us buy a thing or two in your name, if you know what I mean."

"Best way to get flagged, asshole."

"I'm not talking about recreational drugs. More like antitoxins that work on dregs like yours truly. Lots of kids out there who can't get them unless they suck up to gleam families. Ya know, the kind of deal that leaves them as retainers for life. There's profit to be made and we can even be nice about it."

"Sure. Whatever. That sounds good. I get the final call on what we buy."

"Of course, we'll need your ID to validate any deal in any case. Just keep it in mind."

"Hmm."

"Think about it. Legal raids. The marketplace. You can even attend conventions in a mask and look at those nice gleams frolicking and sucking each other's dicks for social success. All good stuff, yeah? Delivery in progress. See ya next time and don't fucking die on me you rabid golden goose."

He hung up.

Was it too risky to go through testing in case they had secret ways to detect anomalies? Or was it too risky to go on without potions, defensive gear, knowledge and other resources? She needed data. More specifically, she needed to know how aware humanity was of her kind if indeed there was a kind. There was a specific way to do it.

The Pandora database.

While most guilds had their own knowledge base, including techniques and strategies, mankind had united enough to form a single, unified list of creatures. She knew the genus names of most dokkaebis she was facing because of extracts from Pandora. It was updated and managed by Gestalt, an Austrian A-class information broker for the good of all mankind.

It was also rather restricted.

Fortunately, she knew someone who had access to it. She had to try, but later. First, there was the question of tonight's raid. She had food preservation bags, a cooler. She was ready and eager.

2.9

Nestra looked down from her vantage point at the top of an office building. The nightly wind blew against her sports jacket.

She wasn't ready. Not ready at all.

"That joker sent me to a guild portal?" she grumbled under her breath.

Pop up portals disappeared as soon as they were cleared and empty. Some portals, however, were permanent. They reappeared regularly with minor changes to their setups. Perhaps the trails were not the same but the biome and enemies were. Guilds rented such spaces from the city who officially had the right to every portal on its territory. In theory. In practice, guilds could enjoy their portals in perpetuity unless they failed to contain them or went bankrupt. Those portals were harvested for materials and if there was one thing crafter gleams loved more than exotic material, it was a regular supply of the stuff.

That meant that gleams protected their permanent portals.

And that meant that she was going to infiltrate a secured compound.

Nestra watched the bunker below. It was a squat structure, more a glorified box than anything else. A high wall surrounded it on all sides and on that wall were the telltale signs of cameras and sensors. There was a single door, a reinforced, steel affair that weighed several tons.

Nestra noticed a logo by the entrance, as well as the name Homeshield Security. She used the burner to access their website and check their offers, just in case, and her curiosity was rewarded. There was a page on the type of security provided for gates and Nestra got an inkling of what she was dealing with. Homeshield Security was a provider of safe access to D-class gates, working with small guilds to protect the most numerous and least valuable type of portal available around Threshold. Their bunkers were structured simply with a main chamber, and an antechamber manned by two security guards at the end of every cycle right before the portal reopened. The website vaunted top-of-the-line security but Nestra could read between the lines. This was a budget option meant to provide a sort of lock to other gleams who might want to loot the portal under the nose of their competitors. It happened sometimes. The issue was, Nestra was not equipped to deal with a fucking locked bunker, even if most of the security features were just a formality.

She could perhaps slice the bunker gate open if she coated, but even if the cameras glitched in her presence, the security guards wouldn't. Not to mention, the HQ would get a notification that something had carved through a steel gate and the place would be covered in raiders in less than five minutes.

Perhaps she could lure a guard outside with a malfunction? And then what? The bunker was so small, the other guard would see a demon slip in.

There had to be another way. Yes, in fact, the benefactor had never sent her somewhere she couldn't get in. They'd even disabled a janitor to make sure she could raid without problem. Logically, he wouldn't have sent her somewhere she couldn't get in without telling her in advance there was something to prepare for.

Nodding to herself, Nestra decided to 'case the joint' as the criminals put it. Ah, who was she kidding? She was a criminal as well now. A lawbreaker. Nyahaha. Aunt Claire would be proud.

"Alright, let's see."

Nestra jumped down out of sight, then sprinted to the wall, confident the cameras would see her as a glitch. She used a nearby dumpster as a stepping stone for a jump and, at the apex of her trajectory, she triggered momentum.

The strange power propelled her even higher, and much faster. She landed on the concrete roof of the bunker which was mercifully devoid of captors. Her black box confirmed the presence of cameras all around. More importantly, she could feel the portal under her feet. It was there, pulsing quietly like a siren song, calling her to feast and pregnant with all things desirable. It was just ripe for the taking if she would just allow herself to be drawn in. The rays of succulent energy warmed and reinvigorated her body like a nice morning shower. It spoke of home, though what home she couldn't say.

Yes, the portal was calling and she could feel its fingers questing for someone to release the mana trapped inside, free it onto the world to integrate it more, to awaken it sip by sip. And Nestra was the perfect key for that. She just had to... give in.

The world blurred. Colors merged into lines then into a gray kaleidoscope that played with her sense of depth. She was floating in a void without direction and without gravity and that was perfect, just perfect.

And then she was standing in a clearing in a middle of a pine forest. Gray snow lightly fell upon her hair. Before her stood a fortress made of stone and hardened mud, brown walls covered in drab icicles and slabs of dirty ice. The blue light of the entry portal behind her confirmed what she'd suspected, its rays still comforting her.

A howl came from the fortress. A stocky creature with a long spiky mane and the face like a carnivorous horse stood on top of a battlement, a spear strapped to its back. The creature pointed at her and howled again. Yips answered it.

Nestra unsheathed her blade. Manaprimates Habilis Sonorus. Horlers. That was a rotten day to forfeit her armor.

Without waiting, Nestra sprinted towards the wall. Her feet beat on the frozen ground as she prepared to jump. Heads popped out from behind the crenelations, soon followed by the tip of arrows. She cried and used momentum again. The strange ability propelled her slightly above her target. She needed more practice.

Inertia carried her against a wood palisade. She bounced off and rammed into a horler with a spear, wounding it. The muscle mass made her attacks weak. Twirling, she cleaved down and carved her victim's chest before it could recover. More of the creatures appeared from everywhere as she took in her surroundings.

The fortress was built on a flank of the mountain, merging with it. There were tents of sorts, a couple of openings but most of the structures were layered walls linked together by stairs that didn't offer cover. Some of the horlers on the upper levels were already aiming their bows at her. Had to keep moving. She grabbed the dying horler and carried it forward like a shield, her strength barely enough to keep the surprisingly heavy creature up.

Most of the horlers carried bandoliers and belts over short furs that came in earthy tones, but there were a few larger specimens with gray hair including the one who'd spotted her. Her mind took in the way the enemy were arranged and then she charged.

A few of the foes hesitated but most peppered the body she was carrying with short arrows. She threw her improvised barrier at another enemy and sliced low, hamstringing it. Then she was among them.

Cut.

Do not.

Slash.

Get.

Thrust.

Swamped.

Flowing, brutal movements followed each other. Let a shortsword slide on her blade, step aside, cut down. Step forward and cut up. An arm flies. A loud howl. Dodge low and let a volley of arrows take the two horlers surrounding her. Their screeches were deafening but she persevered. Some were grouping above her. Dangerous. She beheaded a recoiling spearman then rushed up some stairs, killing a gray fighter with a slice of coated blade. Another howl. She used momentum and another volley of arrows clicked on the stone behind her. This time, she'd been a bit short and the pair of horler spearmen blocking her way braced. She tried to use momentum and failed. It was like trying to speak and realizing she was out of breath, not particularly painful but a little annoying.

Nestra coated her blade and sliced. The powerful swing severed both shafts and parts of the shield, leaving the horlers surprised. She kicked the first and only managed to push it back a little. A baseline would have been sent flying.

"Hah!"

An overhead strike split the other spearman's head in two, then she ducked under a third volley and she was off again.

Happiness and frustration welled in Nestra's heart in equal measure. Happiness at the dance. It was a good one. It was what she'd craved for so long. Time could not dull her excitement.

Frustration that she was such a bad dancer.

Too many tools, too little time to learn them. The Stalk of the Scornful Crescent was still a whispering voice guiding her but she was awkward and slow. The momentum ability was

extremely powerful but she had issues with the distance. She was a baby playing with a sword. Only one thing would fix that.

Practice.

Kill more.

A shrieking squad had gathered around an old horler wearing a headdress with jutting horns, its body thin and corded. The creature's chest expanded to grotesque proportions. A spellcaster. Sound shaman.

Run?

Not run, move in. Continue the dance.

Nestra used momentum again. She was away from them, then she was among them. Her sword shredded the beast's lungs so that its mighty cry escaped as a gurgling squawk. She was moving still, with great sweeping attacks. She grabbed a gray horler's spear and sliced his head off. The others kept fighting in disorder. They tried to pin her down but their bodies blocked their allies and she was still dancing among them with great, carving strikes. The three survivors ran and she charged ahead, towards the last large group at the top of the fortress. Archers. She ducked under a wall and arrows clattered behind her. She felt something touch her ass and the cold hand of fear grasped at her belly but it was just a rebound. She sprinted again. Another loud howl and she was down. More arrows.

The leader tsked and gave another order. The archers fired at will but she kept weaving ahead, sprinting with all she had. The dance guided her steps, making her unpredictable. The arrows failed to find her. There was one last set of stairs and then she would be among them.

No cover.

The chief horler screeched something and the pack stopped firing. She raced, waiting, staring down the beady eyes of the enemy.

The creature flinched. For an instant, triumph filled Nestra's mind in a vicious tide but it was short-lived. The chief screeched and this time, it was different.

A bait?

Nestra made a gambit. It was a bait. It would lure her momentum and then strike. She held.

Half of the formation loosed.

"Fu—"

Nestra used the skill at the last moment. Terror crawled up her spine. She knew what would happen. As the skill finished, she was mid-air with her curled on herself and waiting for the pain. Another shriek, and it came with the rest of the volley.

She felt the impact first. The mind-searing flash of agony came immediately after when half a dozen arrows smashed into her. Except it was... not so bad?

Nestra landed in the middle of the befuddled formation. She stood and sliced the nearest archer in a trance, waiting for debilitation. It never came. As she fought, part of her saw the state of her arm. There were cuts bleeding a gray liquid that quickly turned red, and then, the wounds scabbed over.

Another strike and the realization set in.

She... was fine?

She was fine!

The screeches of the dying horlers hurt her ear, needling her on. Strike and cut as they spread apart to give themselves space to fight. Do not let them corner. Keep moving as they do, attacking with merciless grace. Nestra followed the whispers of the Scornful Crescent as the principles guided her. She was faster and thus, the foes were obstacles to each other instead of help. Bodies blocked the trajectories of arrows. Furry torsos came in the way of sword strikes. The narrow battlements were now an obstacle instead of a help as the horlers bumped into it. Meanwhile, Nestra dove and side-stepped and used the chaos, each step a threat, each move flowing into the next one. Eventually, the chief managed to scream orders and four survivors formed a last barrier in front of him while she cut down the last of the disorganized soldiers.

The chief removed the spear from its back and Nes realized the blade was something close to wrought bronze with a shiny jewel in the middle, in the shape of a slitted eye. The horler's eyes bulged. Its muscles contracted with grisly cracks, veins visible even through the fur. Saliva foamed in its maw while its guardians stood, shivering in terror.

That was a portal artifact, a rarity. A mana tool crafted by unknown means. Many were extremely dangerous and, if the horlers were scared of it, that could only mean some sort of self-sacrifice or berserker effect.

So Nestra took her gun from its sheath and lined up the sights. There was something almost comical in the chief's expression of sheer, hateful shock.

She pulled the trigger.

As before, the gun kicked like a mule even with her enhanced strength. The bullet smashed through two horlers before piercing through the chief's arm, causing the spear to jolt. The strange effect was interrupted.

Nestra charged forward. Her instincts told her the horlers were going to run until they were overtaken by the same drive that pushed all portal monsters to ceaselessly attack intruders even when defeat was certain. She deflected the spears and cut in the same movement, once, twice, then she coated her blade.

The chief horler charged her.

Nestra breathed in and out. The creature was maddened but still dangerous. It feinted its first thrust. Nestra stepped back to avoid the next attack, then slid into his guard by deflecting the third but he stepped back. Her overhead strike was stopped by the artifact. The horler used its weapon like a staff. She blocked the next attack at the last moment, her bones shaking from the strength of his blow then she parried the next thrust and countered with a series of fast jabs. The horler struggled to block them. Blood stained his fur.

He screamed.

Nestra accepted the pain in her ears as she struck, catching the beast off guard. Her attack cleaved it from shoulder to sternum. Just like the shaman, the chief's roar ended in a pained moan. The coup de grace cut it off and silence, once again returned to the fortress.

Nestra's ears whistled painfully. There were barely closed cuts on her arms and legs. She was out of breath and gulping air greedily. Blood covered her tattered clothes from head to toe, and none of this mattered because she was victorious once more. Power rushed into her. She felt her senses grow keener. Her ears popped as they healed and the sounds of the snowy forest returned in all their glory which was, admittedly, not that much. Just the groan of tree trunks.

"Nice."

Nestra surveyed the fortress. It was a scene of relentless carnage, just like she liked them. More importantly, there were a few canvas tents disseminated among the wooden stakes and palisades of the battlement. That meant... it was time to loot! But first thing first, she approached a patch of pristine snow and placed her hand against it. Cold. Crunchy. She gathered some of it and compacted it. Water dripped from her fingers. The packed snow now looked like a handle with small crystals attempting to escape from the imposed form. She gathered more of it into a ball. It felt so light, yet quite compact.

Snow.

It was the first time she experienced real snow.

Threshold was situated on a massive island off the coast of Japan. It was never cold enough for there to be snow, except at the top of Mount Dirge but no one went there. She'd never traveled abroad. Her father considered such trips as wasteful and extravagant frivolities, far from the Palladian's ideal steely resolve. This wasn't like mainland China where one could just travel to the Harbin or Altay enclaves. Here, one had to take a ship or a plane and those were always expensive and slightly risky propositions. So, yeah.

Snow.

Nestra felt giddy for all of two seconds, barely enough time to throw the snowball and watch it splatter against the cooling corpse of a horler. Right. Portal world. Had to focus.

The exit portal shone a little higher, at the top of the fortress but she ignored it for now. Pulling the horler entry, she went through the depressingly low list of prizes. The arrow tips were exotic material which would have gone through her armor but they were also of the lowest craftsmanship, which meant it was cheaper and more efficient just to mine exotic ore and have an apprentice forge some. Much like most dokkaebi, horler physiology was so familiar that specimens held no value. Nestra went through a few bandoliers finding little but teeth, poorly made thread, and small statuettes. All worthless. Sighing, she picked up the artifact.

Mana caressed her psyche, inviting her to take ownership of the tool. She refused. It was obviously cursed as fuck and not her style anyway.

Her mood improved though. Artifacts were worth a lot of money to the right buyer, even the bad ones. Many research breakthroughs occurred because of enchantments found in those items. Once that was done, she searched the tents and found covers and other useless everyday items. They still carried the stench of their previous owners, though Nestra found herself surprisingly resilient to it. There was, however, a prize. In a large, ruddy bag, she found grains. A lot of grains. A quick search led to a bout of ecstatic laughter.

Dinner was going to be great.

Pleased with herself, Nestra approached the final portal. The reward this time was a measly two crystals but that was to be expected. Permanent gates were usually less profitable than unique ones. The trees were probably valuable so any guild clearing them could sell exotic wood to gleam crafter guilds that made the kind of bed Aunt Claire could comfortably bang on. Ugh. Had to remove that image from her mind. In any case, the artifact alone would be worth a ton if she could sell it. Happy with her loot this time, she crossed the portal.

She found herself in a dark, empty concrete room with no decoration. A lonely shelf stood against a nearby wall, filled with medical items like gauze and blood clotters. There was a camera in a corner so she was on a timer. More importantly, a single chair waited for her with a box on top of it. Rewards! She approached it and opened it. It contained a letter and as well as a nightmarish wound in the fabric of the universe with red beady eyes and an infinity of claws that writhed into and out of themselves in a mind-rending mangling of depth and the rules of physics. The insanity-inducing vista resolved itself when the fifth dimension millipede bit Nestra's hand. A black layer of silk spread over her fingers then her forearm before disappearing under her bloodstained, ravaged sleeves. She felt it spread on her being like a cold wave.

"AAAAAAAYAYAYAYARGARGETITOFFGETITOFF!" Said Nestra.

In less than a second, the Lovecraftian insect had turned into a sort of thin bodysuit.

The process had been entirely painless. The only casualties were Nestra's sanity and her pride.

The letter fell to the ground, opening as it did.

"Congratulations on getting your Skin little Nezhra! It feeds off a liiiiittle bit of blood. Don't worry, they're completely tame. I have been thinking about what you said. I am sorry. I forgot humans are a very social species, after all. I cannot tell you much now because you are simply too weak to keep a secret if someone were to interrogate you. I also do not have the right to do so. It's complicated. What I can promise you is that we will meet when you reach C-rank and your powers have matured a bit and I will answer, well, not all of your questions, but at least the ones that matter. Grow and you will know and remember, you are not alone. I am watching over you.

Well, not all the time of course. I'll be busy for the next three days so find the next coordinates below and then enjoy your time off!"

"Can I just get a Kero nut next time?"

Somehow, a sense of amusement filtered through her mind, then a pang of guilt.

That made Nestra suspicious.

"You ate the rest of them didn't you?"

The guilt turned to stark panic, then she got the sense of someone pointing in a direction then using the old smoke bomb escape trope, only the direction was the gate leading out.

"Did you hear something?" a voice said on the other side.

Nestra suddenly remembered her situation.

She was an armed tall demon woman with blood-crusted runners gear carrying pilfered loot next to a clearly deactivated portal world.

There were no words in English, Korean, or the demon tongue to express just how fucked she was.

2.10

Nestra used momentum to ram herself against the wall by the gate just as it opened. She instinctively drew in everything she was— though she didn't reapply her mask, Praying to every god she could think of that they didn't see her.

A trio of gleams walked in. There was an archer, a close quarter fighter with a tower shield, and a mage with long staff. The mage's eyes were a dim orange which spoke of a nascent fire affinity. She directed the pair with a single flick of her hand. Fortunately, their eyes were on the portal, not her.

"What's the meaning of this? Was somebody there?"

Nestra ducked and used momentum to propel herself into the other room, an antechamber of sorts. Two guards sat behind a reinforced glass panel, checking screens. There were no hiding spots there, only a concrete square devoid of anything save for the two gates leading to the portal and to the outside, and a door leading to the guard room. Both of the latter were tragically closed. Nestra landed squarely below the glass in full view of a camera but hidden from direct line of sight.

"There's a letter here, it— ah! Fire! Why is it on fire?" a male voice said behind her.

"Idiot! Don't touch anything. Guards, you'd better have a good explanation."

"We're having glitches on our equipment ma'am. Running diagnostics."

"Who did you let in?"

"Nobody, I swear!"

"Well SOMEONE was here. I have to report this."

Meanwhile, Nestra's mind was running three curse words on repeat. Could she take them? Probably not. Would it do anything? Also probably not. She needed out, now. Maybe cut through the gate? A coated blade and three slices ought to do it but... she would be noticed.

"Alright, we're leaving for now. I want our boss to take a look at this," the mage said. "Open the gate."

That was it. Nestra was done for. The mage walked in her field of vision just as the other gate opened. Nestra had to make a run for it.

There was a pressure, like a brief idea brushing her psyche. The mage stopped in her tracks. Her breath hitched. Her face turned despondent. Nestra sprinted outside through the newly opened passage, then jumped over the nearest fence using momentum. She didn't look behind but all she heard was silence.

Speed and momentum carried her through the deserted streets lined with locked factories and warehouses. The first rays of dawn barely touched the concrete under her feet. She stopped at her motorcycle and changed at record speed into a leather outfit that would match her 'cover'. She was off in under a minute, with her mask on. There were no noises. No signs of pursuit.

The benefactor had intervened, there. She was sure of it. The only question was, if there was an inquiry, would they find her out? An AI with access to traffic cameras could at least point them in her direction, since traffic at the ass crack of dawn was rather limited. She'd parked far enough but she couldn't be sure if a small guild wouldn't have the right to access traffic cameras.

In the end, she decided not to worry about it too much. The benefactor's purpose tonight was clearly to deliver the skin and teach her how to access portals from afar, not how to escape pursuit or they would have warned her. The situation also led her to wonder if she could, in fact, take raiders down. Not necessarily kill them but at least disable them.

Portals always led to the same world but at some point, the portal would no longer allow people through if too many were already inside. It was like trying to swim through an ever-increasing current, her father had once said. It meant that a few minutes later and the raiders would have arrived at the fort in full view of Nestra. They would have definitely tried to take her down. Even if they miraculously assumed she was using a weird disguise, stealing portal rights carried a heavy sentence in Threshold. The guild would have made an example.

So how would she compare to them?

She was confident about being as strong and fast as an average D-class raider which was pretty good for around a week of activity. Her swordsmanship was also top-notch. The issue was that raiders were a different breed, especially in Threshold where portals were both more common and more challenging. Raiders risked their lives with every expedition and there were always unlucky moments that carried a cost: an eye shot, an unexpected enemy, fingers slipping on blood. Raiders were wounded, sometimes killed. It took something special to make people raid day after day and that meant a high combat potential.

But Nestra's body was different. She clearly had a resilience that went beyond what could be expected at D-rank. Beginner users got stronger by infusing their bodies with mana, directing it to where it mattered. Nestra didn't have to do that. She just was strong and resilient without trying. At the same time, she barely had any mana to work with.

Clearly not even remotely human.

But then why mostly human-shaped?

It was just weird.

Nestra's mood improved after she parked in her secret Nestra lair and got the bag of food out. Oh, and the spear. She sent a quick message to Gorge then it was time to go home. Nothing could stop her from humming when she poured the grains into her cooking robot as well as a generous amount of butter and sugar. When the first pops rang in the quiet house, she could no longer contain her enthusiasm.

This was smuggled good, untaxed, against all of Threshold's regulations.

This was food that the corpos wouldn't get.

She was finally taking her life back, one meal at a time.

"I'm going to eat this criminal magical popcorn with butter and nobody can fucking stop me."

In the headquarter of the Gray Shield guild, a gleam tapped on his visor with barely contained annoyance.

"Yes. The chair flickered in at around four AM. The glitches were continuous afterward. Yes. No, nothing that we could see."

He kept silent when his interlocutor spoke in a sterner tone.

"Yes, I understand. We will transfer everything. Understood. The compensation is more than enough for us. Yes, you can count on our discretion. I will make sure my team understands the importance of their silence. We will comply, sir. Yes, I consider the matter closed. Thank you for your time."

The gleam's annoyance turned to dread as the call ended. He delicately placed the visor on his desk, then massaged the bridge of his nose. When he opened his eyes again, the pulsating silvery radiance betrayed his distress.

"What the hell was that?"

In Nestra's mind palace, another rotating sphere had joined the more ordered dance. The puddle underneath had grown as well, just a little, but it was still barely enough to coat her blade a few times. The newly improved sphere was the one that dealt with awareness and keen senses. Nestra had one more bound to play with.

That meant she had to make a choice. Instinct told her that linking the sphere to strength would help her destabilize foes while linking it to speed would let her perform a very precise strike. The second choice was the more immediately useful, she felt. Maybe she was wrong. It was hard to say without knowing exactly what she would be up against. Once the bond was formed, Nestra returned to sleep while promising herself not to try to throw her chef knife at her cutting board 'as an experiment'. She would do things right this time.
