

AN: Minor retcons. After valuable feedback from readers, I've decided to make Nestra's motivation more obvious in previous parts through small changes in conversations.

1 the benefactor agrees to tell her about her species after she reaches C-rank because she is more curious about her real nature and

2 Nestra makes it clear the world is fundamentally unfair and she can do little about it but she can go after the asshole(s) who turned district fifteen into a death trap and make them pay and that's going to be her first step.

Those are the two main drives that motivate her and that I failed to express.

Additionally, I wasn't sure if it was clear so portal worlds have stable entry portals. People can enter and exit as they wish.

"Wow."

Nestra had to admit, she was impressed. The hab housed an actual meat vat farm with slabs of cloned meat bobbing peacefully in nutrient juices. Helpers moved around the vats, checking indicators and adding powders to the mix. Much of the supplies were piled haphazardly across the room in piles. There was even mold in the corner. To Nestra's left, an open door led to some sort of biomass recycling thing if the acidic stench of rot wafting from there was any indication. What didn't look stolen had to be counterfeited and yet Nestra knew with absolute certainty that they still made it work.

Mostly because of the skewers she'd had.

"Welcome, welcome esteemed customers," an old lady with a turban and a dark gaze said.

Shinoda greeted the lady with respect, which she returned. The file said she was Miss Yadar, no known first name, and probably the hab bloc's richest denizen. The two discussed matters in a low voice while Nestra did her best not to scrunch her nose at the aggressive scents attacking her senses. Eventually, they left, though not before exchanging numbers so Nestra hoped this meant Yadar was taking them as serious potential partners. That or the lady wanted to bang Shinoda. She couldn't be sure. Seduction plays were hard to read for her, especially when they weren't aimed at her.

In any case, they got to visit the hab bloc's upper floors.

It was simply incredible what humanity could achieve with a complete disregard of work safety, intellectual property rights, worker rights, and taxation. Truly inspirational. There were fabricators spitting jailbroken or custom made appliances to be used all around fifteen! Rice cookers and mixers at prices that defied common sense were piled in thin metal boxes, ready to be sent down the stained elevators. At least, this specific part was healthy.

"No drug labs," Nestra observed.

Shinoda agreed in silence. There didn't seem to be many addicts either. It looked like they'd drawn the jackpot for assignments. So, that was nice.

"Hey, wait. I got something."

Nestra opened her feed. One of her drones was keeping an eye on her car. A figure was approaching it. She paid attention this time because the figure didn't fit. To her surprise, no one had pissed on the door handle, perhaps out of concern of getting their private parts zapped. There were a few young stone throwers but that was about it. The one who appeared was super suspicious. She shared the feed with Shinoda who watched it on his old datasheet.

"Oh, Palladian-san. Our friend seems lost."

The guy approaching the car had a cap and a face mask for anonymity, but he also wore brand new nondescript cargo pants, sneakers, and a hoodie in brown and blue shades. They looked fresh out of the fabricator. In police parlance this was called the 'undercover cops summer collection'. For the winter collection, just add a vest. This guy fit in like a zit on a gleam's ass. He looked left and right, then walked closer, barely pausing near the door. His hand moved with wired speed then he was off.

"Tracker?" Nestra asked.

"It seems that way. Listener as well, certainly. Our Gigun friends have made their first move. They should have used a drone."

"Perhaps they're afraid of Flash. He noticed my drones immediately."

"Hmmm. Then it is fortunate you two reached an agreement, ne?"

"You could call it that."

The pair rode the elevator down. It was getting close to 6PM so Nestra dropped her drones in slow mode at specific points across the block to keep an eye on things, expecting nights to be more animated. The pair climbed into their cruiser after unpeeling the tracker. Nestra tossed it at a garbage collector drone on the ride back.

"Today went very well, I think?" Nestra asked.

She didn't really have a frame of reference.

"Yes. We were only... accosted once, ne? And no violence. But there were no crimes today. None that we were called to solve. Tomorrow might change that. They will be testing our ability to solve problems without bringing in the hammer. You did well, Palladian-san."

"Not going to comment on the EMP threat?"

“Ah, I believe it pays to show a little teeth sometimes, ne? You can be bad cop.”

“Why thank you.”

To celebrate being a bad cop, Nesta ate her prepared snacks (spring rolls) before falling asleep in the car, only waking up long enough to transfer to her own car. She only woke up at midnight. It was time to raid again, and this time, she felt a certain sense of urgency along with the usual excitement.

It was only a matter of time before she was attacked for real. Every little bit of help would increase her chances of success. And soon, she would be using her demon form in the real world as well.

Tonight's portal world was inside of a tightly locked warehouse at the edge of the city, where smaller companies or artisans stored their stuff. Nesta found no way to get in without breaking in so she did the same as last time. She followed the pleasant energy until she was close enough to slip into the portal.

It was dark in there, and it smelled musty. Bricks spoke of an artificial structure made by tools but not as much as an actual panel with arrows for direction.

Nesta caressed the rust-colored stone, going over the symbols with mixed feelings of curiosity and regret. Those were not magical inscriptions or anything. Just chiseled, coarse runes designed for functionality with arrows pointing towards empty corridors, and yet they evoked a sense of wonder.

There were theories.

In the last days of the incursion, an army spilled from the largest portals and contrary to normal monsters, they were organized. Organized and deadly. Some of the rising hopes of mankind died in the spears of those feathered, bipedal lizards. For a moment, it seemed that all was lost. Mankind saw its doom and simply called them the Shetanis, the devils.

It was Riel who saved them all. Riel the savior. Riel the messiah. Possibly still the most powerful human to have ever lived even years after the fact. Hell, he might still be alive. No one knew his real name. All humans knew was that he was a space mage of considerable power who used portals to carry his elite force from battlefield to battlefield, defeating the enemy in detail. He'd disappeared in one of his own spells at the paroxysm of the conflict, taking the opposing leadership with him. Some said he might still be alive. Nesta thought he was finely minced atoms, but everyone needed their King Arthur ready to return from Avalon to save everyone once more.

Anyway, the main point was, there was intelligent life out there. Nesta was likely from out there and she was intelligent life as well, pretty sure. There were even theories that the Shetanis were meant to inherit the earth and that the portals they came from didn't lead to an artificial world but a real one. Nesta believed in it - the 'real worlds' theory, not the

inheriting part. All those creatures and landscapes were not taken from the void, They were real places, out there, being mimicked by whatever it was that did portals.

And just like this world, sometimes, the life was intelligent.

Maybe some aliens out there were chucking poison darts at magically cloned retail workers in some fried chicken franchise. Nestra imagined the enraged copies tossing boiling oil at the invaders from behind the fry stand. Glorious. May they spread the fear of mankind to all those species.

Nestra checked her hand for dust. So, apparently, she still felt somewhat human. Or at least on the human side. Even though she wasn't one. That was... weird? Or was it? She really needed to get the benefactor to talk to her soonish.

In any case, she was in a copy of a base inhabited by intelligent life. Intelligent enough to write directions.

It was unfortunate she had to kill them but the truth was that portal creatures were irredeemably aggressive. Nestra knew there had been attempts to communicate with them, even including drugs and some ethically questionable and extremely rare gleam powers that made people more... amenable. All those efforts had failed. Now, capturing intelligent creatures was prohibited in Threshold for ethical reasons, which really went to show the unspeakable things humans had done for vengeance or for fun. And that was just here in one of the bastions of civility. In some places like the Nairobi enclave, killing captive intelligent species was a spectator sport because they tended to be... entertainingly resourceful.

"Right. Enough of this."

Nestra was on a timer. The portals were growing increasingly complex which meant they took an increasingly longer time to clear. Maybe soon, they would start eating into her sleep time. Or her snack time. Awful. Better get on the way.

The portal world was clearly underground, in a complex of dark red, pitted bricks with spaced stones emitting a dull red light. The walls were rather high and the corridors were large enough for her to wield her sword comfortably. The directions on the wall pointed towards several corners. Besides them, there was nothing differentiating one path from the next and the place had obviously been designed to be confusing to navigate, with no corridor being straight for longer than twenty paces. Of course, that didn't mean anything for Nestra since she had a visor with her. The onboard software would create a map as she progressed.

Carefully, Nestra moved out. Corridors only led to more corridors and, sometimes, dead ends. She decided to record the directions on the wall and just follow one for a while. As she glanced past an intersection, she heard a dull explosion. The ground shook once under her feet while dust fell from the ceiling.

This was... a bunker? Interesting. A memory brushed her mind, from an eternity ago. A lesson from her father about the rare worlds and what could be found there. Hmmm. Red stone. Bunkers. Explosions. Could it be... the Infinite War? No, that would be too perfect.

After one more turn, Nestra finally found her first opponents. The corridor turned right towards a large gate guarded by two bipedal creatures wearing a full body suit of dark material, possibly leather. Cumbersome masks with four bulbous glasses for — she presumed — the eyes, covered all their features. They were stout and almost round, slightly shorter than human, and wielded pneumatic rifles with a bayonet fixed under the barrel.

It was the Infinite War! Amazing!

Staying low to the ground, she walked out, sticking to the deeper shadows between the light stones. She was only a few steps away when the closest creature let out a grunt of surprise. She used momentum to move forward.

The creatures were so surprised they fumbled their weapons. Her first cut decapitated the right one, then she thrust her blade into the chest of the second. It dropped its weapon but didn't die immediately. A coup-de-grace silenced it.

A rush of power filled her. It spoke of increased resilience, of the ability to endure. Well, not resilient enough to stop her anyway. A quick search revealed nothing specific. The creatures were fleshy but shared more in common with worms than mammals that she could tell. They were just weird. They didn't really wear armor but their uniforms were naturally protective. A quick shot with one of the pneumatic rifles sent a cone of steel lodging itself into the wall, not very deep but deep enough to hurt her. They did feel difficult to handle though, despite the lack of recoil.

So it really was Infinite War.

A rare world, Infinite War provided a bleak outlook of what positional battle could become if left to fester for too long. The creatures living there had dug themselves to standstill, with an unknown number of sides involved, all gathering a collection of creatures. The place wasn't well researched since it was so rare anyway, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the buffet of power provided to her. More diversity of prey meant more power ups since she had diminishing returns on creatures she'd hunted before.

Party time!

Giddy, Nestra found a key to the gate and opened it. Inside, she found... an armory.

Not a very big one though.

Much like the rest of the complex, the armory was bare-walled and devoid of any decoration. Crates and shelves lined the space in neat, well-organized stacks. There were cone ammo dumps, rifles, side arms that looked like extinguishers with handles, sabers, bayonets, helmets of various sizes, muzzles, and one thing that looked a bit like a flamethrower.

They were all shit.

That was the issue with many of the portal worlds, at least at her rank. What the natives were using was systematically inferior to human stuff. Ah, whatever. Going out, she selected another directional keyword and kept walking. Less than two corridors later, a noise alerted her.

There was a patrol nearby. It consisted of three of the footmen she'd already killed along with a pair of hound things but white and misshapen, and a strange creature that looked like a medusa planted on a gorilla's body as its head. All of them were short and strong.

Even though she was in the shadows, the medusa turned directly to her. Nestra realized that the entire appendage was covered in eyes.

It was absolutely disgusting.

The creature screeched and Nestra charged forward. Momentum brought her among the group. The Scornful Crescent guided her steps when she pushed aside the barrels, when she slew the first two guards. A hound jumped and she stepped back, killing it mid-air. The other stumbled on its slain brethren and Nestra struck true. The last guard missed her with a rifle shot but she still rushed back when the medusa lit up like a Christmas tree. An azure shockwave spread through the corridor, banishing the darkness with a fizzle of spent electricity. Nestra was back in again before the rifleman finished reloading. She killed both.

The medusa's head was super mushy. It pretty much exploded when she sliced it.

"Ugh."

Power seeped into Nestra's essence. Resilience from the guards, awareness from the hound, but from the medusa came something new. She felt a font awaken in her, pulsing in rhythm with her breath. It was the last piece of the puzzle, the last element of a core: fast mana generation. It was what allowed casting users to stay in the fight even after they'd depleted their reserves.

"Oh I'm loving this place."

Nestra checked the patrol but found nothing worth taking, only mundane materials used on inferior technology. As for the meat of the hounds and medusa thing, it looked and smelled so vile, it might as well have been designed on purpose to induce nausea. That was ok.

A little later, Nestra encountered another, similar patrol. This time, she didn't make the mistake of letting the medusa live. Her first slice covered the helmets of two guards in enough gore to blind them, leaving her to dispose of the hounds with ease. It was a slaughter and the... sobriety of movement of that hunt sent shivers down her spine. Perhaps it was a little premature to search for perfection in execution when she knew so little about the world, but there was no shame in enjoying a bit of pride when she managed it.

Nestra's triumph was short-lived. A grunting call rang from all around as if from loudspeakers. The language was coarse and entirely guttural to the point that even differentiating between each curt, barked syllable proved impossible. A whoomp that sounded suspiciously like an alarm alternated with short sentences.

"Ah, oops?"

This was the second portal since the fort to be reactive as a whole and Nestra believed this was going to become the norm. Her training didn't cover that.

It was kind of exciting.

She kept following the same direction at a good pace until she heard feet stomping around a corner. She stopped. It sounded like more people this time. Reinforced patrols? Nice. As far as she knew, monster numbers were fixed inside of a portal world so that simply meant she would have to fight less encounters. Holding her breath, she waited until they approached. Just there, at the corner.

The first guards just turned the corner when she used momentum to appear before them. Masks, couldn't see their faces. A sideways slash imbued with mana, just to be sure. Gain the advantage. Two dead, cloven in two. Forward. She killed the next pair on two clean strikes while they were raising their rifles. Go with the flow. Every step is part of a whole, a perfection in motion designed to take down the opposition in the most elegant, flawless way possible. Art given form. Dive under a jumping hound. Stab another as it rushes her. Crush the medusa just as it charges. The timing must be perfect. She smashed through the patrol in a whirlwind of violence before they could recover, before they could bring their numbers to bear.

Lots of numbers.

This patrol was more than twice the previous one, with new variants. One of the creatures had four arms, each ending in a blade that seems grafted there. It twisted on itself to deliver four blows. Weak, all of them. Nestra took a step back then caught a wrist with a devastating blow, severing it. The dervish creature stumbled. The next blow killed it. Nestra felt power seeping into her again, more speed this time. She—

Pain.

A shock, a stumble forward. A spike hit her lower back. The projectile fell, not having penetrated deep enough to stick. Blood. Hers. She turned and killed a hound but the rifleman took a step back as he reloaded. Use momentum and kill it, then turn and stumble back. A second medusa creature unleashed a shockwave of electricity. The beasts near it were unaffected. Two guards raised their pneumatic guns.

Use momentum to rush forward. Errant indigo bolts danced on her arms, the remnants of the medusa spell. They tingled painfully and her arm spasmed but she endured. She brute-force smashed through the second dervish and killed the medusa with a single decapitating strike. Only a couple of guards left but she heard it. Rushing feet coming from, well.

Coming from everywhere.

The guards were running away, though it felt more like a tactic than real fear. She hesitated and that hesitation cost her. The Stalk of the Scornful Crescent stopped with her doubt. Continue or run in the other direction? To remain untouchable or to crush relentlessly.

She didn't know.

There were just too many parameters she couldn't understand. Maybe it would be best to continue a running battle. She had mapped enough of the place to avoid being cornered or escape. She turned, and that was when a sharp pain lanced through her left arm.

There was a needle in it. A long, very thin black needle. Through it. Her panicked eyes found a creature emerging from a puddle of darkness on the nearby wall, torso half exposed to reveal a black leather coat and a steel mask, bare except for two eye slits. The assassin carried a hand crossbow, now empty though it was already pulling back the string.

Nestra struck but the creature was already disappearing and the tip of her blade only tore pieces of rust-colored gravel. The alarm sound redoubled and new erupted words came with increasing urgency.

"Fuck."

Nestra ran away. The assassin was a level of magnitude faster than the others. Mid D-class, she'd say. About as fast as her. That could only mean one thing. Errant boss.

Sometimes, the commander or most dangerous beast of a world didn't wait at the end but preferred to harass the invaders during the whole trip. That was the case here. She should have — aaarg. She wasn't taking this seriously enough! Portal Worlds killed raiders every day all across the planet and she'd seen it as a distraction because it had been too easy.

The weird benefactors had sent her here as a lesson.

Nestra pulled the spike. At least it wasn't poisoned or she would have felt it now. What a disaster.

Ok, calm down.

She would return to the entrance just in case she had to escape, but her goal would also be to take down patrols as fast as possible. The assassin was probably stalking her so she ought to watch out for that. Ahead of her, a spot of deeper darkness spread over a wall, at the exact half distance between two bleary light sources. She could only see it because her dark vision was perfect. It disappeared soon after. The assassin was biding its time but... perhaps she could lure it out. Ignoring the pain in her arm and back, Nestra decided to veer to the side where she heard a patrol, a smaller one this time. Not all of them had had the time to converge, it seemed. She charged forward using momentum to crash against the guards once more, their rifles unable to follow.

Fighting while keeping an eye out was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Tensions grasped her heart with its cold touch but she didn't relent. Open with the guards, kill the hounds next. She was already familiar with the perfect path. It had already become... less exciting. Too predictable. A dot on the wall there.

Another.

A part of Nesta's brain panicked but the rest focused, slicing at the head of the assassin as it appeared. It saw her. It tried to pull back. Nesta felt it strain against the mana, resisting it to hide back into the shadows but it was in vain. The assassin used the darkness as a tool. It didn't understand it enough to reverse the spell's course and so darkness pulled it forward just as it was originally meant to do. There was so much powerless rage in the assassin's gaze as it died that Nesta felt like she was looking at herself. Diving low, she hid behind the medusa and thrust up and through its brain just as a long dark spike embedded itself in its flaccid body. There was now a third pool of darkness emerging from a side wall. Three assassins. And this one would have a perfect vantage.

Desperate times, desperate measures.

Nesta called upon precision. The power guided her muscles for a perfect throw. The assassins' eyes widened in fright behind its mask when it saw her move but it was too late. With unerring accuracy, her blade flew through the air. It landed in the assassin's chest with a ghastly wet sound.

This left two guards, the second assassin who now had a clear path towards her, and a Nesta with a wounded left arm, a pistol on her left hip she couldn't properly reach, and not a shitload of options.

Had to try it.

She lacked training but... no choice. Sometimes, one had to use weapons they had not mastered yet.

She was going to cast a spell.

Nesta extended her fingers towards the assassin as it aimed, the two guards lifting their rifles to the side as well. She drew mana from her electric core like she did to coat her blade but this time, she pulled a lot of it. A lot. Almost half of her reserves were drained in a single instant as an unseen charge of power gathered around her extended digits. When she felt ready, she pushed.

Nesta knew how lightning worked but the way she perceived it was different. A terrible excess formed on the chest of the assassin, an abundance that warped the world around it while an equally dreadful longing remained at Nesta's fingertips. It was more than electrons, it was an imbalance in the mana of the world that absolutely must be corrected. At this precise instant, Nesta was no longer in control. The spell was cast. The imbalance was

here. Now, it would be corrected, and neither Nestra, nor any creature here, nor perhaps even Shinran could stop it from happening.

BOOM.

The two points linked and lightning was made. It was black at its core and gray in the shockwave of superheated air exploding outward. It was loud, deafeningly so, and it was powerful, unexpectedly so.

The gray spell obliterated the assassin, the guards, the walls, and Nestra's eardrums. It seared a memory in her cornea she would carry all her life, one of wonder and of vertigo before a force she guided rather than controlled. It also sent her careening against unyielding brick in a shower of debris and body parts.

"Ow!"

The bells of every church in threshold decided that now was a good time for a concerto. Nestra propped herself up and failed, then she tried again. No time to be distracted. Had made enough mistakes already. Couldn't let her guard down.

"Ow. Ok. Not in enclosed space. Noted."

Stumbling, she raced to grab her sword and a smattering of needles dropped by the dead assassin while she was at it. Had to make some distance. Bleeding now. Couldn't hear properly either.

Nestra shook her head and walked at a sedate pace, careful to check all her corners. There were no more pools of darkness which meant that the three assassins were probably it. Most likely. Her hearing returned after a minute or two and the bleeding slowed down as well but she still stopped in a corner to apply some basic potions.

It was good to be prepared.

With the bleeding stopped, Nestra took a look at the wounds. Gray skin closed over the vanishing gashes. They were already itching. Only her arm was still painful but it had been run through and a slow move proved it could work without issue. In front of her, stomping noises announced the coming of another patrol.

"Alright."

Nestra changed tactics. Rather than killing everything methodically, she went through the formation like a hot knife through butter, only reversing at the end for another pass. That way, there was always a guard between herself and other guards. It worked really well. She only wished she could spend more time killing the dervishes so she could study their movements. After that, her path led her to another section of the maze.

This one was a sort of barracks with narrow cots and lockers. Some rooms looked like charging stations with strange fluids leaking from unraveling cords while others were

kennels, some still hosting baying pale hounds she killed anyway. A mess occupied the center of the place with vats of bubbling food sitting against the wall. They smelled vile and didn't look much better so Nesta regrettably left them alone. The kitchen wasn't inspiring either. All the ingredients came in discolored bricks with solid parts frozen in them, some looking like maggots.

Disappointing.

Nesta hit the jackpot when she found three dervishes in a tiny training room.

"Aaaah, finally."

The creatures threw themselves at her, each one hampering the other by being in the way, so Nesta killed two using her superior strength before engaging the last one. She let the survivor charge her in a twisting hurricane of blades, pushing it back with measured slices. A momentum back led to the dervish rushing forward, closing the distance and leaving a shallow slice on her leg. She kicked it away and it charged back. Nesta countered with a thrust which the dervish failed to stop. The wound gave it pause, but only for an instant. It simply charged again.

The pattern repeated a couple of times. Nesta was disappointed to see that her foe was more programmed than trained. She killed it quickly after that. She also checked the blades. They looked pretty sharp to be able to cut into her skin so she recovered a few.

Her exploration continued. The patrols were growing rare now, and the corridors more familiar. Nesta was still careful, just in case there was another surprise, but the worst had passed. The next section opened on a large room with a table at its center. A tall, bipedal creature with a large head stood up from a large chair and shot at her. Momentum let her dive to the side and then she killed him before it could reload. It didn't offer much resistance but she still got a sizable portion of power from his body. Her mind felt keener, faster.

"Oh, you're the commander of the base."

She considered keeping the sidearm and eventually decided to do so as a trophy. Not like this place had been very fruitful food wise. Errrr, loot wise. She found the exit portal behind that room. It was already opened, with two crystals and some weird stones she recognized as exotic magnets. Not useful to her but they would fetch a nice price on the black market.

There was one section of the maze she'd not explored yet. She was tempted to do so. Very much tempted.

Fuck it, it would be lost when the world collapsed. Had to see it.

Nesta retraced her step and found a winding, circular set of stairs going up. It took a few minutes to reach the end, during which the explosions she'd first heard grew louder and more powerful. Finally, she found herself in what had to be an observation post doubling as a bunker.

It was also the end of the portal world, as told by the waves she felt in the fabric of reality. Come to think of it, they were a little like a portal.

The air smelled dry and rancid here. A warm wind carried an acidic stench she could not recognize under a roiling sky of sickly yellow clouds. Explosions sent plumes of smoke barely visible above a hazy cloud of dust, but sometimes their lights could be seen as ephemeral flashes in the grimy air. Distant shapes rushed away, sometimes small and humanoid and sometimes much, much larger, titans of flesh carrying weapons on their backs.

There was an uncountable amount of them. Nestra stayed for five minutes and the tide of flesh never ceased. It was a multitude sent to assault a force beyond what she could see and she knew in her heart this was a real place. This was really happening.

Placing her hand against the end of the portal world, she peered through the void to spot the opposite side and her fingers, very slowly, sank in.

She pulled back with a gasp.

That was how she went through portals. By pushing through. But then... But no, she couldn't try. What if she got stuck there in that hellscape with no way back? That was far too dangerous.

A little spooked, Nestra made her way back to the exit portal and back into the real world.

It was rare when she got to think that Threshold smelled pleasant. The warehouse apparently harbored a collection of antique pieces of furniture, probably pre-incursion. Plastic sheets wrapped around veneered panels in a protective gaze. The smell of old wood permeated the place. As usual, there was a letter and this time, it came with a fine prize.

"A kero nut!"

Whatever place this thing came from, the benefactor had clearly decided to return there. That was perhaps why they'd been absent for three days? She munched the treat with great gusto before unpacking the letter. Ah, kero nuts, a balm to her soul. What made them so tasty anyway?

"Little Nezhra!

Well done tonight. As you can see, the training wheels are off and the next worlds will be harder first sphere worlds, or D-class as the humans say. It is necessary to prepare you for the future. You are going to need strength soon.

Remember, when you reach the second sphere, I will tell you what you want to know. Until then, trust me when I say this is the safest option.

I am looking forward to seeing you face to face!"

There were two hastily written notes next to the main body that showed that the benefactor was somehow keeping an eye on her. To Nesta, it just reeked of a lack of preparation.

“Little Nezhra, it appears I need to talk about ‘hubris’ now rather than later. It is the drive to win perfectly. It is what pushes you to give yourself a handicap so you can experience the enemy fully rather than just win. I will not tell you not to explore and fight on your own terms. One cannot defy their nature. Just keep in mind that this is how we die.”

Huh. But it did make sense to fight the dervish one on one to see its limit in case there was something to learn, right? How else was she supposed to make progress?

That was normal, no?

Nestra frowned. She had some thinking to do. The last piece of text had very obviously been added at the last minute.

“Little Nezhra. DO NOT CROSS INTO OTHER WORDS NOW. DO NOT DO IT. You are not ready at all and I may not be able to follow you.”

Ah.

So, she could really cross into the other words. That brought its own host of questions but like most things, she was too weak for it to matter. The world was vast and Nesta was small. That was how things were, for now, but she would change that. First, going out would be a good idea.

Right, so, she was a prisoner here. She could break through but there was one power she knew she needed, had needed, and now there was an opportunity to get it. Nesta sat down on the ground and rested her back against a commode as old as her mom. She closed her eyes and focused. It was a familiar exercise, though she'd stopped practicing when it had become clear she didn't have a core.

Nestra sunk into herself. Soon, she was in her mind palace. A quick visit showed she'd gained toxin resistance but little else resilience wise. Possibly a secondary gift from the assassins. What interested her were the spheres orbiting over the still shallow pool of mana.

Power was still her strongest asset, closely followed by speed. She noticed that every sphere pulsed now. They were also slightly larger and higher in the sky, fed by the death energies of her victims. She counted seven in total. Each represented an attribute: power, celerity, resilience which covered regeneration apparently, awareness, mind speed, and two basic attributes of magic: control and generation. Interestingly, mana reserves were represented by the pool of water under her feet. It was fine, that was just an image in her mind. What interested her was the bond between them and the new one she felt was ready.

While binding power and celerity had led to momentum and celerity and awareness had led to precision, the ability she needed now the most was... traversal. It was an integral part of how she would survive in this walled city where locks and bars ruled to protect mankind. Or

what was left of it. With a smile, Nestra linked her awareness with mana control for what she knew was an inborn gray demon ability.

Nestra placed her hand against the wall. It was cold and unyielding, a concrete pillar holding the structure together. And then, it was not. Or rather, Nestra was no longer so unyielding, but swimming through a different substrate of reality.

And then she was outside. It was like pushing through a membrane.

She would call it *passe-muraille*. The walker-through-walls. Now she could avoid cameras and walls. Demon Nestra was going to get her first outing soon enough. The only thing she needed was a target.

She put on her mask and walked back to her bike and her burner phone, which had seventeen missed calls. From Gorge. The latest was from five minutes before.

He picked up before the phone could ring.

“Hey!”

“What’s going on?”

“Shit, you don’t owe me anything and all but... it’s about the spear you sold.”

“What about it?”

“The... the buyer. They want to talk to you. They have my son.”

“Ooh. Targets.”

“What?”

“When?”

“Right goddamn now. Look, you don’t have to come. But...”

“I’m coming. But I have conditions.”

“Anything.”

“Ok, here is what I need.”

Gorge was pale as a ghost. He wasn’t normally half as colorful as his language but this time, the white of his skin betrayed how absolutely terrified he was. His second son sat on the driver’s seat, anxious though he hid it well. The interior of the van smelled of old leather and fresh sweat, the scent titillating human Nestra’s nose in a curious way. A part of her

wondered if the benefactor would let her do it. Considering they'd not made their move yet, it seemed she would be allowed to reveal her dual nature to Gorge, at least.

She wondered what would happen if the benefactor just materialized out of thin air to kill them all but it wasn't like she could let Gorge's son die, and that was what was at stake here.

"Explain," she ordered.

"Look, the guy who bought the spear, his pit fighter went mad. He knew it might happen. He made a shit ton of money in the arena thanks to that artifact we sold, but he's also a cunt who always gets his way. So he got my son wanting to talk to you and... I imagine he wants compensation. Look, this guy, he's mundane like us. Like me, I mean, but he got gleams working for him. And borg muscle."

"Aug muscle."

"For fuck's sake. Fine. Aug muscle if you insist. Look, those guys..."

"Take and take. Meet in person with him?"

"Yeah. I'm to bring you."

"Mind if I, ah, make it clear I'm not to be contacted?"

Gorge gave her a measuring look.

"As I said, he's going to have muscle. If you think you can handle them, sure but... it's gleams, Nestra, and not the nerdy researchers kind, yeah?"

"Got it. Give me the gear."

"Here it is. Bodysuit as requested. It can expand too. But, ah, one meter ninety-five? You sure?"

"Mask?"

"Here. It will meld to your features the first time you wear it. Quite costly."

"Take it off my tab."

"Get my son out of this and it's free. And you'll have my gratitude as well."

Gorge turned serious. He was sweating.

"I'm serious, Palladian. I may be an old cunt but I respect the deal. You don't owe me shit. Save my boy and I'll be on your side till Riel himself crawls back from hell to finish off the dregs."

“I’ll do what I can. Need to get changed.”

“You, uh, change shape or something? Is that your quirk?”

Nestra smirked.

“The less you know...”

“The better. Off you go, we’re on a schedule.”

Nestra left the van, retreating inside of a deserted section of the abandoned parking lot Gorge had selected for the meeting. This was it. She pulled off her Mask. Her true form appeared.

The skin thing was good but it didn’t cover enough. Yet. Her forearms and calves were exposed, and though her body had proven resilient, her skin was too gray, too strange. Too inhuman. The bodysuit would cover every inch of skin while the mask would completely hide her features save for her eyes and hair. Even the horns would look like part of the design. She put everything on. It felt... stifling. Wrong. But also protective.

Thus anonymous, she walked back into the van.

“Got glitches on the—”

Gorge’s face made an ‘o’ of surprise. Nestra believed it was the first time she saw the man truly shocked.

“Palladian?”

True Nestra gave him a curt nod, then she sinuously pushed herself into the tiny vehicle. Well, it wasn’t tiny, but it certainly felt cramped now.

“Go on, start the van,” Gorge said without blinking, then after the old thing started moving, he leaned forward.

“Nestra? That really you?”

Was it? Being here, seeing Gorge looking up to her with terror in his eyes and the acrid stench of his sweat, she felt peculiar. Still Nestra, though, so his question was easy to answer. She nodded in assent.

“Holy shit, I can tell why you haven’t revealed yourself yet. Don’t think I’ve seen a gleam with black eyes before. Heard about them though. Shit’s terrifying.”

He breathed out, then had one last look at her. Seeing she hadn’t jumped to tear his throat off, he recovered his focus.

“Ok, alright. Here’s the thing. The client’s name’s Rangī. Islander type. We gonna meet at his dive, a bar he uses as legit business or whatever. It will be past operating time at least. Security-wise, he got a husher type with minor augs, a borged killer with wired reflexes, and two gleams. Don’t know much about them except one of them’s rumored to be a raider and he uses a wand as a weapon.”

Nestra was familiar with wands. Mana could be channeled through them, sending powerful bolts at the enemy. It was a useful sidearm for caster-types operating on low mana. Not sure how good a hired goon would perform though.

“Shouldn’t have anything else defense-wise but there will be cameras and everything. I can’t scramble them without him thinking, you know...”

Nestra dismissed his concerns with a wave.

“Ok, so we’ll be brought before him. Act as you see fit. Rangī’s a smart guy, he will probably cut and run if things get too dicey for him. He’s a businessman smelling an affair. Just, need a reminder. Having gleams at his beck and call might have given him delusions of grandeur so he thinks he can push people around. Dumbass is just asking for it.”

Nestra nodded. She agreed. This Rangī guy was pulling at a rope to see what would drop but it was a shit idea because if the rope provided artifacts, then what would drop would most likely be a pissed off gleam. Gleams did plenty of biz on the slide and a lot of it was picked up by monitoring AI but no one ever did anything. Smart people knew it wasn’t worth it, not unless it got really bad. Like human trafficking. Even then, you never dealt with the gleam. You dealt with their boss gleam and you hoped they applied discipline with a firm hand. That Rangī guy was, and she was sorry to say that, courting death. If not by her, by someone else.

It took twenty long minutes for the van to reach its destination. The bar was a nice place at the edge of a busy entertainment zone in twenty-five, a brick building she would have driven by without a care. The van parked at a good distance and Gorge made sure to deploy drones just in case someone decided to nab his other son. Nestra followed Gorge who nervously looked at her every ten steps. It was annoying. They moved around the corner until the back entrance came into view.

A colossal islander stood there with a taut suit that had to be a custom job. Tattoos covered his cheeks and chin, but when he spotted the pair, he made the same ‘o’ as Gorge had done before.

Nestra was starting to think maybe this was a mistake, that she couldn’t pass for human even without showing anything but her eyes and her hair, but she realized what was wrong when she got closer. Gorge had told her the husher was an aug, more specifically, his eyes were augments. He couldn’t see her well because they were glitching. She heard him bumble something into his ear piece, something about a scrambler.

Gorge stopped at a distance, waiting for the signal to go on. The bouncer waited for instructions with a confused frown, his optics searching around Nestra’s location. Eventually,

the signal to go in was given and Nestra followed Gorge up a flight of narrow stairs. Cameras followed their progress in the cramped back of the drinking hole. Cans of beer and bottles lined the wall but upstairs, the place was clean and austere. A large security door stood at the end of a hall. Nestra noticed a maglock, reinforced steel and even a manual slit in case electronics failed. The only thing missing was a gun port. It would be easier to go through the walls and she might just do that.

The door opened without a prompt. Gorge came first, then he slid to the side to let her through. There were five people waiting for her in a spacious, cozy office and lounge. A wired goon leaned at the back with his auged arms exposed. Nestra recognized a Brightcorp security construct. Man had a gun in there. There were also two gleams on either side of the main desk, one muscle-bound girl with no affinities yet, and the wand wielder sitting in a chair with his arms crossed, actinic blue eyes following her with morbid fascination. The second to last person was Gorge's son wearing a shock collar around his throat, near the back. Rangi himself throned at the magnificent desk like a king holding court. A nice pseudo-cashmere clung to his chiseled physique. He exuded a debonair aura that complimented his cool chin tattoo and the shock collar control resting next to his hand. Very smooth. Nestra immediately hated him.

Nestra's looted spear rested on a pedestal at the back of the room. Congealed blood still clung to its surface.

All five people displayed various degrees of unease, from concern in the gleams' eyes to stark terror for Gorge's kid. The boss was the first to react but Nestra barely heard him. She kept walking forward.

She wasn't here to negotiate.

"Ah, here you are. I have called here because of issues with your—"

Nestra kept on. Rangi faltered. The gleams moved first, not least because the aug was clearly running diagnostics.

Nestra used momentum to appear between the gleams as they were standing. She struck the muscle girl in the face with an open palm. Her nose crunched painfully. She went flying.

Nestra twisted and kicked the other gleam in the face as he reached for his wand. Electricity coursed through her leg but failed to affect her. He cried in pain and collapsed backward, chair and all. Meanwhile, the first gleam collided with the confused aug just as she'd planned. Nestra took no chances. In three steps she was next to the cyborg. She drew and struck with a mana-coated blade. His severed arm went flying. She momentumed her way back to the table, drew her gun, and gently shoved it against Rangi's forehead.

The aug and muscle gleam pair finished collapsing. The wand gleam landed on the carpet with a shriek of dismay. Rangi gasped, his hand stopping near the collar's remote.

Nestra leaned forward until the darkness of her eyes met Rangi's own. She was pretty sure the message was coming across loud and clear. He still didn't talk. A quick tongue wet his lip

while he searched for a solution, eyes darting to the sides. Slowly, his goons were picking themselves up. The muscle girl glared at Nestra but the effect was ruined by her blood-soaked face. They didn't dare to move. The situation was now a stalemate.

Perhaps Nestra should say something? Yes, but why was she so reluctant to do so?

And then it hit her.

For all her little phrases and exclamations of dismay in portal worlds, she'd never really been paying attention to her words. All this time, she hadn't been speaking English. She'd used that strange tongue the benefactor used to talk to her. And now, she had to use English in her demon form and it felt... wrong. A little demeaning. And besides, her mouth was larger, and not exactly the same shape, and her teeth were too sharp and her tongue too narrow, and this was just, ugh! Frustrating. Bah, had to force herself.

What to say?

Oh, yes.

Nestra's voice came out with a much lower pitch yet still feminine. It was hers, but more hissy and a little guttural.

"No. Refund. Hssss."

There.

"I see," Rangji replied.

He looked around, calculating. Nestra shoved the barrel of her gun a little harder.

"No need! No need for things to go, ah, out of hand. It appears I have... erred in judgment. Forgive me, miss...?"

Nestra declined to introduce herself. She let him know by narrowing her eyes.

"Right. You have been... most clear, I say. I appreciate the show of restraint since you could have easily killed us, yes. I will now reach for the remote to free your friend, if that is alright?"

Nestra took a step back. Without looking, she pointed her sword at the electric gleam who was slowly reaching for his wand.

"Now now, Mr Blue, there is no need to alarm our guest!" Rangji said with a politician's smile.

"Let us just... put this whole thing behind us, yes? Good. Theeeeeere we go. All free."

"Come, boy. Come here," Gorge whispered.

His son didn't have to be asked twice. They left the room, though Nestra heard whispered words of assurance just behind the door. She knew she could get more money but that felt... like it would complicate matters. Better to leave now with the upper hand and her objectives accomplished. There was no need for her to utter more threats. Her appearance and manners spoke for themselves.

Actually, there was one last thing she wanted to try.

As she stepped back towards the entrance still facing the threat, she pointed two fingers towards her eyes, then two towards Rangi who raised his hands in surrender just as his muscles were picking themselves up.

"No need, you have been abundantly clear."

Nestra left. Gorge returned to serious mode all the way out, with the bouncer giving them a wide berth. They didn't talk when they climbed into the van, nor during the return trip. Gorge only let go of his son to grab a datasheet when they were parked.

"Right. Tracker check. Covering frequencies now."

They waited until Gorge was satisfied there were no secret gifts on either them or his kid, then tension left him. He deflated, collapsing against the side of the van with a loud thump. He picked a flask from a side pocket then reconsidered. Only then did his attention return to Nestra.

"Hooooly shit Palladian. I thought you could, I dunno, clear easy portals with a quirky trick but... Riel, you tossed those gleams like they were children. I've never seen anything like it. In real life, I mean."

Nestra didn't want to talk in demon form. She pointed at her mask, then outside. Gorge nodded and let her go.

It was the first time her human form felt better than the demon one. Truly, that bodysuit constrained her too much.

"Ok, I'm back."

"You did amazing out there. I owe you. I owe you big time. But I gotta ask. You're clearly... at gleam level or something. Why? Why not just return to your family and claim your legacy?"

Nestra lifted an eyebrow. Like Gorge couldn't see the problem?

"No, seriously. You wouldn't be the only weird gleam in existence. I read just yesterday they'd discovered a sort of void element gleam."

"Yeah, that's my sister."

“But still, I mean, that transformed appearance of yours is scary and no mistake but, you know? You could be who you always wanted to be.”

Nestra had actually not considered this.

If she were to go public, it would be clear that people would have questions and those questions would turn into invasive procedures whether she wanted to or not. It was also clear that some people would figure out she wasn't human and that would lead to her premature death, so there had never been a real question about coming out. That would be suicide. But what if it were not? What if she could just go back to her family and be welcomed as a weird yet powerful gleam, because Gorge was right, she was very powerful. Even if Rangi's men were garbage, at least one of them had unlocked an affinity and that took some work, and yet she'd broken them like toys. They hadn't stood a chance.

What if she could get in the Palladian manor through the grand entrance and be welcomed by her dad? Her mom would hug her and whisper she always believed in her. Ulysses and Helena would exchange barbs over morning bagels. It would be just like old times, before she went to high school, before she was revealed as a cripple. Wouldn't it be nice to be welcome like that?

No, not really, right? Because it would be tainted by all her memories of being swept under the carpet. Because she would be stopped at every gleam store entrance, glared at in every gleam exclusive restaurant. She'd have to justify her existence at every turn. There would be snide remarks and sideway comments. And she knew. She knew what people thought of the baseline her. The new Nestra wasn't working harder than the old one. In fact, new Nestra was sleeping quite a lot. No, her effort, personality, the skills she'd worked hard to obtain, none of them mattered as much as having shiny eyes. And even if she could reasonably get in, she wouldn't fit in.

And that sucked, and the world sucked as well.

“I'm who I've always been. That's it.”

“Well, not like it's any of my biz. Ok, Palladian. You're officially my favorite dead fish.”

“Couldn't hold it back for more than five minutes, huh?”

“I'll make it up to you. You'll see. Anyway, drop you off?”

“Nah, I'll take the whore bike back. Busy day tomorrow.”

“Let me know if you need more goodies for your crusade against Gigun. We can get real spicy if you want.”

“Oh, I will.”

Nestra wanted to leave the family to themselves and she was getting tired anyway. She drove to the Nestra cave as fast as she could. Only when she was back in her own car with

the autopilot on did she relax. Her visor had a few alerts so she went over those, with her priority being Stib's drones embedded in several strategic places of district fifteen's hab block. They'd detected movement, a lot of it.

Nestra frowned. It was a hab block. People moved at night, right? It was probably nothing? She selected the first link, the one aiming at the center courtyard and market. There was now a pole sitting in the middle of the deserted place. On that pole sat the decapitated head of chef Old Lin, and under that was a white board with the words 'Friend of pigs' written in angular letters.

"Motherfucker."
