

"I think we need to find a better way to do this," Nestra said.

Sereth smiled that goofy smile that made her want to smack him over the head and remind him he was supposed to be older and wiser.

"I showed it to Siobhan by the way. She said if you were a man you'd be very hot!"

Nestra glared.

"I am sure you were not supposed to tell me that."

"Oh. Maybe you're right."

"Because she's my best friend."

"Is it really awkward even though you are both close and she knows you're not interested?"

Where was he getting this sort of idea?

"Look. In my experience, it's better to avoid saying what goes through your mind if it doesn't serve an immediate purpose."

Sereth nodded. It was freaky watching male Nestra appearing all thoughtful. Also, she had a resting bitch face but he did not. How did that even work?

"Of course, I know that! And if you say something weird it's better to look confident rather than apologize. That way, you're just eccentric! Well, I can do it because I'm handsome."

Damn that... damn that actually sounded like a good observation.

"Between the two of us, we'll soon be smooth butterflies fleeting through social encounters with grace and seduction," Sereth added dreamily.

"Ok Mr. Queen Bee. Now get out of the way, I got a lot of work to do tonight."

"May I ask why you're taking... this?" he said, pointing at her framed portrait of Valentina Vezzali, one of the best pre-incursion female fencers ever.

"Training," Nestra replied.

She just hoped she wouldn't break it.

Nestra crawled out of her bedroom through a semi-formed portal bubble that felt like it was at the bottom of a deep ocean, with fluorescent lights shining near the ground. The passage felt more stable but it was also longer, and at some point she thought it might break. It was a massive relief when she pushed her way into some deserted office.

There was a password stuck to the monitor in front of her. She shook her head. People didn't understand the point of security, dammit. A few wall shifts and she was out.

It took only a moment for her to orient herself. Her visor placed her in Five, one of the fanciest districts at the edge of the Touhei arcology. There, corpo execs and gleams could enjoy the best restaurants and private sports facilities the city could offer along with a good view of one of Touhei's many industrial parks. That meant that Nestra had to be extra careful not to get spotted.

Once she was back in safer waters, she checked her gear.

Her research had confirmed a few suspicions. It had been difficult to get the financials and personal files of gleams but Kim had signed on it, perhaps eager to put this whole affair to rest since the media were starting to catch on. Financials were always the sticking point. It was difficult to track monetary sums going from the crime upward, but if she already knew where to look, there were some signs that didn't lie. With Stib's help, Nestra had found what she was looking for.

Now she could have gone to Ashjay of Special Crimes with this, but there were three problems. One, he would probably tell her to fuck off. Two, if he didn't, he'd ask her how she got everything, and three, she wasn't going to let the Sight Killer face justice.

They may know too much. Sereth had made it clear he wouldn't cover for anything that was a result of what he believed to be stupidity. She couldn't afford to be careless.

So instead, she needed to kill them. But not via a simple assassination, oh no. The opposition was crafty so they probably had measures in place at least to help with their escape. Moreover, Nestra couldn't afford to miss or they might disappear, striking later at a terrible time. She wasn't even sure how capable they were.

No. She needed to outplay them. Get a sure kill.

Which led to reason four: it was going to be fun and exciting.

So ok, Sereth was right. She really, really, really needed to kill the killer herself. It wasn't just the absolute need to prove she was the best. She also needed to get their power. Yes. She felt that it was important. That it would match her. The killer could obviously sneak on people and Nestra needed to sneak better. It would open so many doors... or walls, whatever.

But first she needed a lure, and a trap. And that was what tonight was about.

For the first three hours, Nestra ran around the city doing reconnaissance and placing cameras in strategic places. The city and some corpos occasionally did sweeps with specialized drones to remove them but she only needed them for a day or two so it should be fine. Once she was done, she hung her framed picture on the wall of a demonstration room in some fancy office, and prepared for practice.

The natural skills that came with her spheres were stupidly strong. She knew this. She just wasn't using them to their full potential yet. The fault mostly lied with her lack of time. She was overstretched and that was it. She'd only been awakened for a couple of months and nothing, absolutely nothing, replaced repetition and effort. Even for tall demon girls. In a way, practice was a welcome comfort. It was something she'd gotten used to and that was still with her now, as an Aszhii. It was also a constant among two of the two species she'd come

across. There might be some dangerous stuff out there, but everyone needed to work to use their abilities properly. So far.

Anyway. Had to nab something, and it would be easier if her wall crossing were a bit more... flexible. Sereth had hinted it was possible so she just needed to work at it really.

“I hope I don’t break that thing.”

Nestra placed her hands above the framed picture, breathed deeply, then willed herself to slip through the wall. She felt the solid frame against her fingers, almost felt it come with her, but then it bounced back and fell on the carpet with a dull thud while she stepped into the nearby office.

A failure.

Well, it was to be expected. Nestra grunted in annoyance anyway, grabbing something to place on the ground so the frame wouldn’t break. Then she was back at it.

In the next attempt, she messed up, ending on the floor below. She cursed and went to look for some stairs. This was going to be a long night.

With a couple of breaks in between, Nestra managed to snatch the frame and go through the wall with enough reliability that it would be ‘good enough’. The key was to go slowly. There was an opportunity to use *passe-muraille* in combat, in heavily cluttered terrain, but that would require more training.

It was interesting to see that *passe-muraille* was usually super easy but as long as she tried to get fancy, it became instantly more tiring. It wasn’t a question of mana or stamina but rather focus. So Mazingwe had been right after her trials. Mental fortitude was some sort of resource she hadn’t contemplated thus far. It meant that using many skills in quick succession would muddy her mind. It hadn’t happened yet but she needed to remember it was a possibility.

With her preparations complete, it was time for the next part of her plan.

The vigil resumed his patrol, the third one tonight. It was a boring and repetitive task but he accomplished it religiously. His salary was on the line.

Light swept over windows, doors, any access point that might have been breached. He checked each one with attention, both with mundane and mana senses. The full collection was estimated at over three hundred and fifty MILLION credits. The building was exposed. It would only take one insane —

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

“Yui?” he asked.

“Room four, go go! Initiating lockdown!”

The vigil ran ahead, turning into the Collective’s candidates exhibition. The outer shutters had already slammed in position as they would have on every opening leading outside. The glare of his torchlight bathed luminous statues and paintings. They remained unmoving, a complete immobility to echo the cacophony of the alarm’s blaring call.

There was no one here he could see. No mana he could feel.

“Window 6. The Sight, by Carmelita Cortez,” Yui whispered in his earpiece.

The vigil walked forward. Protocol dictated that the loss had to be confirmed by sight before calling in for reinforcement since that cost a lot of money, and nevermind that the vigil could be taken hostage or killed... He felt anxiety like a cold blade hovering over his back. A powerful shadow gleam would...

“Huh,” he said, losing focus.

“What?”

“It’s gone.”

“You’re shitting me. I got nothing on cams.”

“It’s gone.”

The case was empty. On the glass panel, a thin carving made with something very, very sharp mocked him. It represented a pair of closed eyes, as if asleep.

“I am very sure. Call it in.”

Fuck. There went his career.

Nestra chuckled a hissing laugh as she ran into the night, trophy in tow.

The bait was set.

Maybe she could stash the painting with Seth until things settled down a bit. Her Nestra cave was mostly empty now because it was compromised. Well, she still had three sirloin steaks, two smoked sausages (manaless), three stalks of celery, five bell peppers, white onions, mana flour, the legs of some magical fowl, and a bag of mana-infused basmati she hadn’t managed to pull out yet. But that... could be replaced. She would let the killer have it. It would only make her revenge sweeter.

“Your move now, hssss.”

Nestra headed home, almost expecting to find a new eye on her door or something, but nothing of the sort happened. After she woke up late again, a summary check of her belongings revealed nothing. That meant that either she was completely wrong — lots of assumptions in a row made it a possibility — or the Sight Killer was taking their time. In any case, there was little to do but wait. She ruminated on several points of failure as she did so, nursing a large mug of coffee in her socks like some discount villain. The house was empty. Well, it looked empty.

Kim called her around noon.

“The mayor’s office intervened in the case — they want it closed. Anything on your end?”

“Nothing new,” Nestra lied. “I’m just waiting at this point.”

“That is very unusual of you, Miss Palladian.”

Nestra huffed and sipped more coffee. Tried to. The mug was empty. Curses.

“It’s a C-class gleam killer. I got a better gun just in case but I don’t expect it will be of much use.”

“Miss Palladian, someone stole the Sight.”

Nestra paused. Should she say something?

“Killer recovered their belongings or...”

“It could be one of the many disgruntled parties. There were a total of six victims so far, most of them from good families. The city is under pressure... Officer Ashjay does not share your opinion on the painting, by the way. He now believes it to be an ineffective obsession.”

Nestra frowned.

“Didn’t an AI confirm it could be the same painter?”

“Could be, but eyes are more common in art than you might think, and the killer has left so many eyes in various styles that, well, essentially, everything can resemble their work. Instead, he believes that it could be an attempt at some ritual magic.”

“What? Like, summoning a demon?” Nestra blurted.

Ridiculous. Demons could be summoned with good food. She’d know.

“Perhaps. You laugh, but our understanding of magic is still very low in this domain, especially because human sacrifices are completely forbidden in Threshold. We queried other enclaves but those sort of things take time. Miss Palladian. Be careful.”

“You can call me Nestra when on call, you know?”

“I am currently in the Special Crime office, yes. As a liaison.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Very well. Stay safe, Miss Palladian.”

“Right.”

Shortly after hanging up, Nestra noticed a high priority message on her Crescent phone. It came from Ragnarok.

‘I have an urgent mission for you. It should only take three hours or so. I also have a way for you to escape your... current situation. I can dispatch a ‘solid state’ limo for your use. It is a special hover car that does not keep track of where it is going. It also comes with an optic camo and flying priority over the city. The mayor’s vehicle of choice.’

Damn. High gleams had the best stuff. No traffic if you’re important enough huh.

‘I can send you a one time activation code if you accept the mission. I will also send a summons from the army itself using your hidden identity. Don’t worry, it will be generated by an AI. No one else will know. Reply before 1PM.’

“What’s the mission?” Nestra typed, a little curious.

To her surprise, Ragnarok answered almost immediately. By calling. It spooked Nestra until she remembered the phone came with a scrambler that altered her voice. The masked gleams technicians thought of everything.

“Do you have a minute, Crescent?” Ragnarok asked, expecting the answer to be yes.

“Yes.”

Better not piss off the old monster.

“Good. I need you to chaperone two groups of raiders contesting for the electrum portal. Are you familiar with it?”

Nestra almost gasped. The electrum portal? That was the stuff of local legends! Well, used to be.

Sometimes, portal worlds brought a wealth of useless shit. For example, the infinite war raid she’d closed had enough steam guns and ammo to arm maybe two, three hundred fighters for a prolonged battle in the armory. That was great for smaller enclaves that needed some sort of gear for low gleams that would help them a bit. Or maybe less technologically advanced civilizations provided there were no high gleams around. Situationally, it was a cool portal but for Threshold? Absolutely pointless.

Then there was the electrum portal, a portal that regularly yielded entire shipments of magically active electrum alloy ready for processing, an alloy of perfect purity, optimal for enchanting. It used to be the most insanely profitable portal and it contributed to Touhei’s ascension to one of Threshold’s first megacorps. That was before others managed to

reproduce the mix. Now, the portal was only worth a fraction of what it used to, but it was still, what, fifty times more valuable than most worlds of its grade?

Problem was, the town hall had regained control of the portal six or seven years before — it was in the news — which meant that guilds could bid for it. That reduced the profitability further.

It was still worth fighting for.

And as Ragnarok confirmed, that was exactly what had happened. Two competing guilds had equally valid claims on the raid. Sargon's Scimitar had won the bidding war and thus first rights for twenty raids, but Sargon himself had signed a contract to the Golden Seekers for a favor some months past, and now the seekers were coming for their due.

"Their contract leaves much to be desired, in terms of clarity. Our lawyers are split on the issue as there is no precedent, therefore I decided that the rights would go with the group that performs the most adequately in the raid, pending judgment... by you."

"How do you mean?"

"You will join the raid. The electrom portal is somewhere between D and C-class with the guardian being a solid C. The two groups will alternate fighting their way through the portal. At random, one of them will face the guardian while the other stops reinforcements from coming in. You are to keep an eye on them and ostensibly judge them. In reality, your presence will be a red herring for a highly sophisticated surveillance drone that will share its feed with a visor we will lend you. Keep an eye on them and record any breach of terms. Oh, yes, the terms. All loot will be placed into bags and shared at the end. No sabotage. No attacks."

"Sounds like a recipe for disaster," Nestra honestly said. "Too many egos in a fight for life."

"I'll be frank with you, Crescent. I don't give a shit. Sargon is an arrogant jerk who tried to use name dropping against me. The seekers are money-grubbing little bitches who care only for profit at any cost. If they die, it's no big loss for the city. I have already wasted enough time on those idiots. Your judgment will be definitive... if I like it. The raid should take all of three hours, maximum. Are you in? The pay's one hundred and fifty thousand creds."

Very nice sum for three hours of work. And Nestra was waiting for the killer to react anyway.

And she was feeling anxious, not having killed anything for so long.

"I can't kill monsters?"

"Not your role, but you can kill those that attack you, of course."

"Then yes, I am in, though one last thing..."

"Hurry. I have work."

"You are turning me into your attack dog," Nestra accused.

She was dead serious too. Ragnarok wasn't making any secret of it. Nestra was a bit curious as to how the old woman would react. What she hadn't expected was a chuckle.

"Yes. I am. We can't really reach the corpo elites. That's Shinran's job. But the small fry? I want them to remember that it's the common good of Threshold that takes precedence, not their own petty interests, and if I have to give that fear a mask they will remember, then so be it. Up to you, of course, but something tells me you dislike shifty raiders about as much as I do."

Nestra flinched. Did Ragnarok know something?

No, probably not. The mask system was solid. She was just being paranoid.

"Very well. If it is three hours..."

"If it lasts longer, feel free to finish the portal in their stead and then go home."

"We have a deal."

Sargon was a tall, swarthy man of indeterminate origin. He wore expensive and shiny scale armor while the three other members of his team brought second-hand and second-rate gear that didn't fit them. The youngest person was scout type East-Asian young man, and obviously low D-rank. He didn't belong here. It was too risky. The team felt so mismatched it might as well have been Sargon and his cheerleaders.

The Golden Seekers had brought a trio of women in dull matching armor with golden accents. Their leader was low C while the other two were on the verge of it. Those were decent teams for a raid like this.

If they cooperated.

From the way they sneered at each other, separated by five meters and a uniformed agent, this wasn't going to be the case. Nestra knew from the file each team had left some of their members at home, probably so they wouldn't have to pay them. This wasn't looking good.

Nestra sighed from her vantage point on top of a nearby building, then she just jumped down on the curb below. The electrum portal stood inside of a glass rotunda since it was a bit of a tourist spot. The glass structure was picked because that way, no one could sneak in. Well, no humans in any case. She walked confidently through the gate to the naked, immense relief of the government spook.

"You're late," Sargon spat.

Nestra checked her visor. She was, in fact, two minutes early. She tilted her head, then decided to ignore him. He bristled. One of the seekers chuckled.

"I am Cresssscent. You know the rules. I will now decide who goes first."

Nestra placed her massive sword vertical on the ground, then she lifted her finger. The sword vacillated. As it seemed that the tip would end up facing Sargon, a subtle burst of earth mana made it shiver ever so slightly.

Nestra grabbed the sword immediately before glaring at the seeker who'd tried to mess up the draw. Such a stupid thing to do. The woman had the decency of looking embarrassed, but the other two were clearly pissed off.

"Can't spend a minute without cheating?" Sargon growled.

"Enough," Nestra replied. "The Scimitars will go first. Don't try me again."

With a grumble, the scimitars took the lead, Sargon throwing a bag at the young scout.

"Decha. Make yourself useful."

Nestra recognized the official loot bag where everything would be collected for valuation by the town hall. The Scimitars used him as a dedicated porter? Such a waste of a raider. Why even bring him then?

The Scimitars were first through the gate, then it was Nestra's turn. In that short moment, she opened her bag to release the drone, grabbing a small reinforced datasheet as an excuse. It wasn't necessary. The Scimitars paid her no mind, having spread in a defensive formation with Sargon at the tip. A moment later, multiple feeds filled Nestra's visor, small until she glanced at them. One for each raider. Nestra resisted the urge to look up but damn, that was a powerful drone. She couldn't even hear it over the tweets and grunts of the local wildlife.

This world was a jungle mixed with plains, as if they stood at the edge of a forest. Smooth dark grass that looked almost blue alternated with bulbous trees, their rotund trunks sweating water in the bright light. The temperature was pleasantly warm and the air smelled of soil. Alien songs emerged from the canopies, hinting at unseen birds. It made Nestra a bit peckish since she hadn't eaten lunch.

Behind them, the Seekers arrived in tight formation.

"You may begin when ready," Nestra said.

Sargon was strutting ahead before Nestra was done talking. He followed a ruined stone path that led to a flat expanse of grass in the distance. His followers rushed after him with Nestra in the middle and the seekers behind.

They walked in the relative quiet of nature for a minute before the first incident occurred. Decha, the scout, pointed a finger towards a form rustling in the tall grass to the left of the formation.

"Hmm. Contact?"

Sargon's second threw his spear at the form. There was a small hiss of pain, then the raider pulled out a transparent snake with a shimmering skin. Nestra could see the organs underneath.

"Into the bag," the spearman said.

Decha shoved the dead thing in before rushing after Sargon. The man had barely slowed down. Shortly after, the stone path widened into a large clearing, revealing a flattened pyramid. Six statues guarded a sunken entrance, their armor shining brightly. That was the main source of pure electrum. Nestra noted that they had elephantine faces if elephants could be carnivorous with downward facing tusks. Nestra didn't feel any mana coming from them right now but she'd seen pictures, of course. Those were golems.

"Battle formation," Sargon announced, then without waiting, he charged ahead.

The golems activated when he accelerated. The mana was a little strange, with life, metal, and something more exotic surging from some construct in their torsos. Sargon smashed into the first one just as it removed a saber from its sheath. The C-class' attack cleaved through the creature's chest, hitting something important because it deactivated on the spot. Shards of electrum mixed with inner components clattered on the eroded stone. The other golems engaged, with the spearman and a mud mage providing cover for the whirling form of Sargon.

He was a wind user, a good one too. His mobility was excellent but his penetration powers were not ideal. Nestra watched him hack the D-class creatures apart rather than cutting efficiently through them. Maybe he needed to let off some steam. It was just dangerous for his people. As she watched, one of the golems made for Decha.

The seekers at her back made a move.

Nestra pivoted, making sure she was in position to help Decha if he got overwhelmed. The young man used a short bow to unleash arrow after arrow at the approaching golem with no result, even when he hit where the eyes ought to be. The mud user noticed it and slowed the golem down though Sargon yelled when two golems cornered him.

Behind Nestra, one of the seekers was picking pieces of golem from the ground at her back. The electrum armor fragments disappeared in pockets and bags with graceful sleights of hands that made it feel so natural, it couldn't have been their first time. Sargon reacted just as Nestra unsheathed her sword. The scimitar wielder flew through the air to stab the golem in the back, stopping it. With one last venomous glance at the scout, he was back to it.

It didn't take too long for Sargon to dispatch the remaining golems. They were too slow to be a danger to him so long as he was able to pierce their armor. Golems never tired but they relied on their defenses a lot.

"And that's how it's done," Sargon said triumphantly as the last foe collapsed, defeated.

He frowned at the lack of cheers.

"Get to it," he told Decha, before surveying the entrance.

All three remaining scimitars picked the electrum pieces with as much speed as they could, the seekers deliberately not helping. Nestra pretended to look at her datasheet while the three women exchanged smirks on camera. One of them had the audacity to pocket one more chunk while Decha passed her by.

Nestra didn't say anything. It took some effort not to blow up in their face here and now, but she wanted to see how far they would dare to go.

At some point, the weight of the loot became too high. Decha patiently operated some interface and the bag inflated, gaining some hover element to accommodate the half ton of dense metal in its bulging innards. Nifty. The city had really kept the best toys.

"The Golden Seekers will now take point," she said once they were done.

The Seeker head woman advanced with a short hammer and tower shield combo, backed by a mage that smelled faintly of solid heat — lava maybe. The last one used a spear with a strange flat end.

They descended through the now open gate and into a mausoleum. With eerie coordination, all the human users activated lights and torches fixed on their armor so they could keep their hands free. The corridor inside was covered in eroded frescoes of abstract designs. It was barely enough for three people, certainly not if they had to fight, but the two Seekers just stood behind their leader in tight formation.

"Traps," the mage said. "I'll mark them."

Using the expedient means of spray paint, the obvious triggers were circled and crossed. Nestra only felt the barest hint of mana when she was close. Clearly the mage had come prepared. As she watched, she caught a reflection, just a little anomaly over her head where the surveillance drone was.

"Hold!"

The lead Seeker held her fist high. The two others prepared while Nestra and the others came to a stop. Clanking sounds came from the darkness ahead, like bells sounding a ghastly dirge. Ok, it wasn't dark to Nestra so she could clearly see the golems stepping out from alcoves, but the effect was rather cool.

Honestly the place would be better with hidden alcove setting golems on raider's backs but no one ever asked for her opinion on portal world design. The golems, walking two by two, charged the seekers with mechanical coordination.

The seekers were ready though. The golem's faultless formation was countered by three determined fighters. While the leader blocked blows and countered with heavy hammer blows, the lava mage coated the construct's articulations with thick, melting blobs of incandescent rocks. As for the spearwoman, every strike resonated against the armor, breaking it in shards. Soon, delicate articulations were exposed and demolished.

As soon as a golem fell, it was replaced by another. The strategy might have tired unprepared raiders but the seekers dispatched them too quickly for it to matter. It looked like the fight would be over in under a minute, then Nestra caught movement at her back.

Sargon brought his hand back as she watched, expression carefully neutral. Mana pulsed in the wall, then openings clicked at the back of the seekers.

No time.

Nestra used *momentum* to shift forward, pushing the lava mage out of the way. She pulled back just in time for the openings to belch fire. The spear wielder was on the way but as Nestra expected, the swift warrior managed to dodge forward. This still bundled the formation. The leader was forced to parry two blows while the lava mage recovered. Another golem stabbed down with a thick saber.

Nestra threw her sword, infused with void. The thick sword pinned the golem like a butterfly into the one behind, sending them both tumbling on the ground.

That was all the opening the Seekers needed. The remaining golems were dealt with, then once the flames faded, Nestra walked to recover her sword in an embarrassed silence. She'd barely gained anything from them. They were too weak. Only by killing all six would she have gained something.

"Sorry..." the spearwoman said, looking at her lava mage friend who merely shook his head. The leader's cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"I... I thought I had them all..."

In theory, Nestra wasn't here to judge if but rather how well they would do... but now things had changed. In their eyes.

Nestra was just wondering if she should call it in now. The portal needed to be cleared though. That was her job. So they would clear it.

"We'll continue in this formation until the guardian chamber. The Golden Seekers will rush ahead to block reinforcements while the Scimitars engage the guardians as planned."

Sargon huffed and Nestra refrained from killing him. The group continued in awkward silence until they reached a barely lit hall overgrown with vines digging from an opening in the ceiling. Soft light bathed the tall statue of an elephantine warrior, its belly bulging forward. Precious metal covered the chest and arms.

Besides the statue, the room was empty save for an opening to the left.

"Go," Nestra whispered.

The Golden Seekers rushed for the opening with decent coordination. They stopped at the threshold. Nestra knew she could count on the drone to keep an eye out so she refocused on the trampling form of the awakening guardian, as it stepped down from its pedestal.

Sargon engaged immediately. His scimitar found the creature's knee and... failed to achieve anything of note. Nestra scowled.

This was a C-class monster. Not exactly the most dangerous one but it was famously resilient. Surely, Sargon had come with some sort of plan? She kept watching, and quickly came to the conclusion that no, he had not. Thirty seconds into the fight, the guardian blared something that sounded a bit like an audio amplifier thrown into a mixer. In response, golems tried to come from the opening to reinforce their master. The Golden Seekers answered with violence but the golems kept reconstructing. They were drawing mana from the guardian.

Fortunately, that seemed to weaken it enough that Sargon's scimitar was scoring some hits, but the battle was still an uneven one.

Also, the golem kept going for Nestra instead. She had to constantly sidestep it. Decha was kindly trying to distract it with shots which served no purposes as the golems didn't even register them. Eventually, the golem went for Sargon instead.

This was taking entirely too much time. The Golden Seekers were clearly tiring while Sargon was nowhere closer to taking that thing down. As for his helpers, they were mildly useful in slowing it down but just like Decha, they didn't have the gear to pierce through.

Tired, Sargon took some distance from the golem... behind Decha.

Nestra saw the golem step towards the scout. She used *momentum* to grab him and get him out of the way. The distraction allowed Sargon to finally land a perfect blow on the golem. Its knee articulation crumbled. The ground shook when it fell.

Without waiting for recovery, Sardanal attacked its elbows. It took much less time to split it open now that the golem had lost what little mobility it possessed. When Sargon finally lodged his blade into something important, all the golems deactivated at the same time.

The nearby altar now shone with a small pile of treasure. Very small, in fact. The lowest end of rewards for such a world. Decha wordlessly shoved them in the loot, well, coffer now, before picking up golem pieces. All the others soon joined with various degrees of annoyance. Except Sargon. Physical labor was apparently beneath him.

The two groups were left sweating and glaring at either end of the room.

Nestra checked the time. Two minutes thirty-seven to clear the guardian. An abysmal performance, and Sargon had to know it too, but cleared the world he had, and the Golden Seekers were none too happy about it.

"The Scimitars will cross the exit portal first. I'll follow. Do not keep me waiting."

Just as Nestra left, she caught a glint of yet another chunk of electrum disappearing in the Seeker's pockets.

Unbelievable.

Nestra was the second to leave, recovering the drone as she emerged from the cave while the Scimitars were not looking. She pulled two key recordings on her data sheet. Anger smoldered in her chest.

One of the town hall spooks in black suit approached her.

“Hmm. Miss Crescent?”

She looked. He paled.

“Commander Lidstrom would like you to call her to share your judgment as soon as you make it.”

“I have made it,” she hissed as the Seekers emerged behind her.

“Finally, let’s end this farce,” Sargon complained.

Ragnhild picked up as soon as Nestra made the call.

“Tell me,” she just said.

Nestra grabbed her datasheet.

“The Golden Seekers lose access to the portal.”

The spear wielder bowed her head in shame.

“For theft.”

Nestra showed a slow motion of the girls pocketing electrum. Several instances.

“You thieving whores,” Sargon spat.

“Quiet,” Nestra hissed.

She glared at the seekers, their expressions one of children caught red-handed. Morons.

“As a reminder, the loot was property of the township until equitably split. That means you’ve stolen from Threshold.”

Stealing loot from Threshold carried a very heavy monetary penalty. For first time offenders. Second time offenders were rare. The leader knew this. She paled. This would set her back months, at the very least. And she deserved it.

A part of Nestra realized she was being hypocritical because she was stealing from Threshold too when she wasn’t raiding as Crescent. But that was different. She was a demon who would be killed on sight by high gleams if found. She was supposed to work in the shadows. This was more... her being an infiltrator currently working with a foreign government, in a way, while they were straight up thieves.

“We will be in touch.”

She turned to Sargon.

His victorious smile faded.

“Sargon’s Scimitars lose access to the portal.”

Sargon gasped in anger.

“What?”

“For attempted murder.”

A slow motion of Sargon smashing his fist in a trigger to activate the trap replayed.

“You ASSHOLE,” the spear wielder blurted.

“So what? It’s a raid! You’re supposed to be ready.”

“I’m going to kill you!”

The Seeker leader held back the spear girl. Nestra dropped the datasheet when Sargon reached for his scimitar.

It almost cleared the blade.

“I’d like to see you —”

Nestra appeared in front of him. Grabbed him by the collar. Lifted him. Smashed him against a steel pillar. It groaned. His anger melted like snow, replaced by sheer, utter terror. Her fingers dug into the small gorget of his armor. It groaned. The enchanted armor groaned under her strength. She was so angry.

“Miss Crescent, please,” someone said.

Sargon hyperventilated.

“Give. Me. One. Reassson.”

He did not. He just coughed until Nestra dropped him.

She was craving his core but... not here. Here, she was working with humans. She still liked humans. Just... not those.

Behind her, the entire room had frozen in horror. She walked to the datasheet and returned it to one of the spooks. He grabbed it between shaking hands.

“Holy shit,” the lava mage said. “Is she really C-class?”

In Nestra’s visor, Ragnarok chuckled.

“Excellent. I fully back your decision. You have performed to my complete satisfaction. You may leave whenever you want. Payment is on the way.”

“Take him in,” she ordered the spook.

Sargon didn't resist, but as she was about to leave, she realized there was one thing to salvage.

Nestra turned to Decha.

“You are wassted here.”

“You know what?” the scout replied. “You're absolutely right. I quit. Fuck this bullshit.”

Nestra returned home tired and annoyed. She dropped her bag on the counter with a sigh before landing her ass on the nearby couch. A quick visor search showed no intrusion at her house, no breach of the condemned Nestra cave. Nothing.

She was sure the killer was fast and also impulsive. So why had they done nothing? Maybe her assessment was wrong. Maybe she'd overlooked something...

“Hey...” Helena mumbled from the side.

“Hey yourself.”

Helena plopped herself on the larger seat. She breathed deep.

“Ok, what's going on? And don't nothing me please.”

“Nah, mom will tell everyone anyway. Probably. Got into trouble at school.”

“Oh? Hmmm. Anger?”

“No, not like that. I was doing better. Well, I think I am doing better. But you know I was always sort of... isolated. No one is actively bullying me, ya know? I just can feel the stares. And the group works are always a reminder that I don't really have a group of friends. I mean... some girls are nice. Fuck this is annoying.”

“Out with it.”

“So someone went rabid on my stuff. First time. They got into my sports locker and completely savaged it. Fucking asshole.”

Nestra breathed in and out, very slowly.

“I mean, it's nothing I even care about. Just a short, shoes, ya know. It's just.... fuuuuuck. I'm taking it hard.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“Not your fault. But seriously. Look at this shit.”

Helena transferred a picture of her locker on Nestra’s visor.

It was ravaged. Someone had cut her stuff to ribbons, and on the side, half hidden behind a cut up picture of her family, was an eye. Open.

Helena kept complaining but Nestra couldn’t hear her.

“Ooooh you’re sore fucking player”, she thought in the intimacy of her burning fury. “A sore fucking player. But that’s ok. I think I’m done with the little dance.”