

“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. MaxSec armor had never been designed for running for Riel’s sake. Not like keeping up with users on foot was easy to begin with.

“They’ve stopped near a closed gate. E6-105. Small one,” Dee said.

“Stib. Gate status,” Camus asked.

The tall fucker didn’t even sound winded. That pissed Nestra off. Meanwhile, drone operator Stibbons must have been pulling files. She sounded distracted.

“Hmmm. Closed. Monster generation on a permanent 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, they would achieve something. If they were in the higher ranges then...

Had to die sometimes. 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.

“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,” she explained. “We’ll have no choice but to wait around or have our own users go in. 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 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. Jonas 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 and 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. Jonas 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.

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.

“Come on. You’re a gleam. You’ll get a slap on the wrist at most,” 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.

“Sheltered? Us? Bullshit! Utter bullshit! You think you have it hard, you pretentious bastard? You can make five times as much as I do carrying minerals through mining gates! We’re all cogs, idiot. Big fucking news. But you still got it easier than anyone else. Those arcologies? 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?”

“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 mana tool 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. Piece of shit gear.

Wong charged.

Nestra received another bolt on her blade which she had planted on the ground, dissipating the energies. 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. 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.

Bard managed to land a hook on Wong while his back was turned, hitting the gut. Wong barely flinched. His riposte sent 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.

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

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!”

It 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.

That stung more than the blow to her chest.

And then 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.

"Oh, looks like it's time," 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 the prone officer.

"Guess you can have it then."

Fox Mask walked through the portal's aperture, 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 going down in flames. All our users are there. It's bleeding through."

"Yeah yeah."

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.

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 whole 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 likes. Cozy job, little risks. They said I could even pilot an antigrav.”

“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.”

“Riel. 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 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 all the pieces to make a proper beginner 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 quirks 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 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 Nesta 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 Nesta 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 Nesta 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.

Nesta 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 civilian com eye piece to check her messages.

This one was a light model that covered just one eye. Com contacts were better but Nesta 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.

Nesta 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 —"

Nesta 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 Nesta 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. Nesta 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. Nesta 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,” Nesta interrupted with a fake smile. “I’m sure he does not insist on honorifics.”

“I know how to pick my battles, Nesta. Thank you Ines 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 Nesta’s continued single status. She meant well. So Nesta 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?” Nesta 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 tailor, 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, Ilar 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, Ilar 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 Ilar 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 Jonas 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 Ilar 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.”

Ilar 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 Jonas 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 Ilar'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."

Ilar 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 Ilar. 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," Ilar 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—”

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 heavysset 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 iceliner wearing people 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 lunged, 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 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 in a week 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 below D-class and that 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 was to die, they would rip her throat off 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 caliber 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 get 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 scouts. 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— ooooooh.

“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 Nut 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 groumbled. “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 a ominous whistle filled the air.

“Try me chrome boy.”

The squad arranged themselves around Gorge like ominous 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 ding 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 augged 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 casing 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 parts on humans. 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."

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 Myss 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 B-rank at a record age, passing the exam 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 Nesta 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 elemental. The girl was different, more guarded. Mildly disapproving. Her eyes shone brightly with a strange pink shade Nesta 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. Nesta 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. Nesta 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.”

Nesta 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 augmented 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 augmented 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 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 reticule 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 stimed," 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 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 aug 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.

Nestra's heart skipped a beat.

"What the—"

Nestra 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 elemental. 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. You know what? Fuck this, dreg. Your incompetence just baffles me. Kill the bitch with the gun of one of the dead borgs so 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, 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.

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 Nesta'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,” Nesta 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 used it against Gorge instead of simply frying him. 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—”

The gun clicked empty. 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 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 slipping 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.

"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. She was tired, and she was going home.

“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 submissive.

“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."

"Eehh."

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 Nesta 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 cliché, 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 Nesta 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 Nesta.

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 eletrokinetic 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. The body shape was the same. Really, the only differences were the uniform gray

skin, 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. Nesta 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, Nesta was already naked 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, and all as 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.
