

Nestra's sprint quickly turned into a jog. She was too tired to sprint all the way there, in those shoes. It had been a long week and even her true self was tired, so the human mask was really not happy about it. The underground utility and evacuation tunnels lacked fresh coffee, unfortunately, so she grit her teeth and persevered.

It was quiet down here, for now. Dust and the scent of rot tickled her nose though the tunnels were holding well for their age. Threshold's bowels were dimly lit by sparse ceiling light that failed to dispel the shadows. Only Nestra's feet made a pitter patter on the concrete ground. Besides that, it was silent as a tomb.

Nestra slowed down to check her gun and make sure the ammo pouch was easily in reach. It gave her some time to think and decide what she would do, how far she was willing to go to defend others. Her shotgun would kill dokkaebi easily enough but that would only be the first, frantic wave. Even if portal monsters were weaker on earth, it would still take several twelve gauge to the face to stop a D-class threat. She didn't have her gear. She didn't even have her sword. If Shinoda's herd of idiots got caught up, she would have to fight at a fraction of her abilities.

That meant, people might die. She had to decide now if she was willing to let them die to protect her secret because although Gorge knew about her, he was actually an honorable asshole. He wouldn't talk. She was confident about that. A group of strangers? No. They would talk.

Risk her life for strangers?

Hmmm.

Probably not, but she would risk it for Shinoda. It was cruel but... it was them or her, and she wasn't willing to die for strangers. They were not entitled to her life.

Decision made, Nestra moved faster, doing her best to ignore the cold ball in her stomach. The one that said 'what if it's a kid?'. She hoped she wouldn't have to find out. Soon after, she reached a branch in the tunnel.

Where were they again? Shit, had she even asked? Both tunnels led to other places on Fifteen. Tragically, there were no directions she could recognize.

"Fuck, I need to call Flash."

The deafening sound of gunshot rang from the left tunnel. It reverberated and made her wince.

"Nevermind."

She sprinted this time. Screams and snarls joined the din and she chambered a shell in anticipation. The tunnel turned sharply. She scrambled to a stop before she could hit an old woman carrying a wailing child. Beyond, a group of maybe fifty people were fighting off a swarm of rat creatures.

Nestra took in the situation as she aimed. The group had not totally devolved into chaos yet but it was a close call, with monsters nipping at their heels and harrying the more isolated people. The refugees were an eclectic bunch. Only herd instinct and terror held them together.

A burly man pushed one of the creatures off a teenager. Manarattus Viridae. One of the weakest dokkaebi around. Lucky them. Time to help.

She pulled the trigger.

Boom. Recoil. Splattered meat. Turn and aim. Boom. Recoil. Decapitated rat. Turn and aim. Rinse and repeat. After eight shots, the gun clicked empty. She batted a rat mid-air then chambered more rounds, but eight victims in a short time turned the tide. The front of the swarm retreated, and prey nature took over. They fled back. They left behind many of their corpses as well as stunned human survivors, many sporting scratch marks. A woman was dying on the ground with her throat ripped out while a young man clutched her hand.

The group broke off then. Many of them raced ahead with a small thank you but others were left without direction. The air was thick with fear. They needed orders.

“Don’t wait here! Go, go!”

She reloaded while they rushed on. Face after face passed by and eventually, the back of the group came into view. Solid men and women, some armed with guns and others with knives, bats, rebar, whatever they could get their hands on. They were the most wounded of the lot and some were carried on the back of their companions. Even the dead ones.

Shinoda wasn’t there.

“The Japanese policeman, where is he?” she asked an old guy with a machete. He tried to brush her off but she turned him around using a pain point. The snarl on his face died when he noticed the muzzle of her shotgun.

“The Japanese policeman.”

“Shenme? Ah, yes. Yes. At the back, with the militia. They... I hope they’re alright. We got separated at the bend.”

She was off before he could finish his sentence. More dead mana rats, at the back. They must have been frenzied to keep going instead of eating their victims, and there were plenty of those. A teenage girl leaned against the wall, having tripped, maybe. Gone. A mother with her toddler, both dead. An old man with two stones. He’d killed three before bleeding out. The trail of dead rats grew wider then, and she realized she’d caught the very end of the battle. Images flooded her mind, angles, perspectives, dead monsters and dead persons. Checking her corners not to get blindsided by something only playing dead. All to forget what should be there but wasn’t. Finally a trio of rats jumped at her from behind a crate. Boom, boom, block the last one. Tiny clawed hand scrambled on the black metal of the barrel.

Beady black eyes, filled with frenzy. Rage, so much rage. The teeth snapped at her when she twisted, then slammed the beast against the wall. Its spine cracked. She lifted her foot to crush its head before remembering she was wearing fucking pumps with the toes exposed. Soft soles.

“Balls.”

Nestra left the dying rodent behind. She chambered another two shells.

Ahead, something stepped out of the shadow.

The last surviving overhead lamp shone on green scales, then a wide crest that reached her throat. A stooped back. Claws. She recognized it from shows and warning videos. Neosaurian, Threshold version. The lowest carnivorous rung of a very long food chain.

D-class.

Nestra shot it. The beast seemed to merge with the shadows in a confusing mix of colors but she mostly got it. Blood sprayed on the ground when she hit something important, hit it again when it squealed. It was already halfway to her. She aimed for the head, got it in the crest. More blood sprayed and it stumbled. Another shot, this time, under the eye. She missed the sixth one. The seventh got it in the chest. It fell down with a piteous squeal, shivering from the pain. The eighth shot finished the beheading the others had started.

The gun clicked empty. Nestra's ears rang. She frantically reloaded, just in case, but there was nothing yet. This was it, really. This was the limit of what she could do with human tools and even then, the shotgun had massive stopping power and she'd relied on quirkie reflexes. Anything more and she was done for.

She knew what it meant but she still pressed on. Another corpse. A man with a machine gun, neck torn off by a lucky attack. A woman with a blood-soaked frying pan. Nestra heard the sound of mastication ahead.

It was a large room. The human defenders had used a line of crates as an improvised barricade. Several neosaurs lie dead, with more rats splattered all over the place. Typical horde scene since those monsters would normally kill each other, but kaijus always seemed to override their aggression to center it on humans. A couple of neosaurs fed on the young man Shinoda had almost dropped from the balcony on his first day here. They stopped to raise a muzzle when she walked in.

There were half a dozen dead fighters here, human baselines who'd made the ultimate sacrifice to cover the civilians' retreat. The hint of tan duster caught her attention. She looked down and to her right, near the entrance. Shinoda was here. He was, of course, dead. A neosaur had planted a clawed hand into his chest, which felt like an overkill really, though the old inspector had taken it out with him. The pistol Nestra's lent him had done good. Just...not good enough.

And shattering his chest felt like such a dick move. Completely unnecessary. He was probably out of breath the whole time too.

Nestra tossed the shotgun aside just as the neosaurs charged her. She was too late anyway.

There was really no more need to hold back.

Nestra surged out of her mask. She slapped the first neosaur's entire face away with a void-clawed hand. Got into his guard and hit the pathetic thing. She pushed the second one's extended arms to the side, grabbed it by the throat. Smashed it against the wall. Watched its slitted eyes.

"I have had... enough of you."

Cracked the neckbones and tossed it aside. More grunts and roars, more squeaks. Was it something in her conditioner that made all the monsters attack her so rabidly?

It didn't matter.

Neosaurs, one after the other. She danced aside as she carved, one swipe each. She struck as they did but their claws only found air because they were predictable and she wasn't. She moved forward, beyond the barricade to the mass of fur returning like a tide. It was enough to punch the mana rats to cave their little chests in or bash their fragile skulls, snap their brittle spines. *Celerity* from the neosaurs and *resilience* from the rats suffused her body, keeping her going past her exhaustion in a manic fashion. Excitement rushed through her veins like too many coffees. She had to keep going. The why stopped mattering. Why was she holding this place? Why was she facing the tide? It didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was this place. All that mattered was the horde she was going to kill. The mana rats bit at her but her Skin stopped most of it. Those that managed to draw a bit of blood were soon crushed. Too many though, she used *momentum* to step back. The mass grew confused but she killed the outliers and the dance continued. She was the Scornful Crescent now, untouchable, frustrating every strategy with an insufferable counter. She was always a step ahead of the storm of claws and nibbling teeth. She was fists and speed and they were chasing after a ghost. The horde died on her knuckles and under her heels. She was gore-drenched but smiling, always smiling, and after blood covered every free last piece of ground, the few survivors broke off to find easier prey. But more came.

The first was a charging turtle that must have smashed through something to get in, so thick it was. Top of D-class.

Nestra didn't hesitate. Her fingers extended and the *potential* bloomed on the creature's exposed throat. Gray light turned the tunnel monochrome, and the turtle's entire head disappeared in a flash. The resulting explosion shook the walls and took a chunk off Nestra's reserves, but she had a little bit more now.

Something crawled over the smoking shell. It was clearly insectile, and black. Nestra spotted a raising head and ducked, and not a moment too soon. A red thread covered the path she'd followed. Where it touched the concrete, it smoked and turned to glass. She used

momentum to close the distance and *precision* on a mana blade to catch the armored creature in the brain. Another high D-class, fortunately not too fast. This one's essence filled her bones and the heat coming off the ground didn't seem so intense anymore either. She sidestepped a massive jumping spider, then another. The first died from a foot blade through the thorax. Her mana control inexplicably improved, confirmed when she killed the second one just as it was pushing on her mind with... something.

She crushed more neosaurs until they no longer improved her, then a spine caught her in the arm though it barely penetrated. She found a quill-covered creature only as large as a small dog creeping on her. She made a slightly longer blade and it died as well. More spiders, still D-class. She was pushed back towards the barricade room. There were less monsters but they were stronger now, and she was still killing them as they came. They didn't work together. They were never meant to work together. Only the Kaiju's presence urged them on and it was a weakening thing. She slipped through the cracks of their chaos on tippy toes with a claw here and a blade there and they simply couldn't catch up. Errant strikes tore through the Skin but her blood and energy grew it back and it never did much damage. She was already beyond them. It wasn't a battle. It wasn't even a slaughter. It was... a buffet. Such variety, such interesting abilities to discover, tactics to learn and exploit. The spiders could harden their skin to resist magic if they saw an attack coming, a discovery that cost her a gash on her flank. A butterfly with a deafening sound attack came though she crushed it fast. An acid-spitting leech almost sprayed her, though she used one of the many corpses as an umbrella. Always on the move. *Momentum* and *precision* gave her the distance and executions she needed to catch a breath. She could always retreat through the wall but why stop? The Scornful Crescent had led her to such a feast.

Nestra killed and she grew. The spiders were no longer a threat if she slightly delayed her attacks. Neosaurs became a complete non issue. Another creature spitting lava died before it could strike. A snake tried to coil around her but it was too slow and its head, too exposed to her void blade. It was when she killed a strange, hairless creature without a head that she realized something peculiar.

She wasn't getting stronger anymore in one aspect. Her muscles were as powerful as they were going to get without... adding something. Instead, the mana swirled in her chest. It didn't dissipate as before, or at least, not as fast. There was just a very light pressure. Her *resilience* was next after crushing a blue salamander that spat water and made her more resistant to cold. She wiped its blood on her Skin and then... there was a lull. Shrieks still came but they were distant.

She became aware, fully aware of the mountain of corpses in front of her. At this point, it no longer looked like food. It was a charnel pit. The stench of blood and bowels turned her empty stomach. Her vision swam, just a little. So hungry but... so disgusted as well. She ignored the pain from several light wounds to turn around, returning to the barricade she had left behind at some point. She heard a clash. A screech of pain. She moved faster.

Standing above the body of Shinoda was a gleam. She blinked away the exhaustion, found the white uniform of the Threshold Police Users. He turned to her and gasped, his mouth opened. The heavy mace in his hand hit the ground with a thunk.

It was Valerian.

Of course it was. Shit. Instead of attacking immediately, the idiot lifted a shaking arm.

“Errrrr. Nestra?”

It was Nestra’s turn to blink. Some of her battle focus fell away. She became more aware of her surroundings outside of immediate danger. The squelching under her naked toes. The high temperature. The stench. Her throat obeyed her command, becoming more like her human self but with a lower pitch.

“Hmmm how could you tell it was me?”

“You have the exact same face? Hello?”

“Ooooh right. Right.”

The two stood around awkwardly. Nestra wasn’t sure what to do. She wasn’t exactly the most socially competent person around.

Well, might as well.

“Could you please keep this a secret?”

“Nevermind that, how are you a gleam? You have no core! Wait, it’s a camouflage thing? Does your family know? Damn, my mom told me I would never be attracted to a baseline — no offense — and here I was thinking I had proven her wrong and bam!”

“Hmmm, sorry but...”

“Oh I know I know you’re not interested, can’t help my heart though, can I?”

“You’ll move on,” she said more out of habit. “About me looking like that?”

“Oh yeah, I won’t tell. Obviously. You know you can count on me. Right?”

“I was hoping very hard. Truth is... this is very new.”

The gleam looked at the literal hill of savaged corpses she’d left behind.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

The shrieks were getting closer.

“Look, about what I said. I can boost you. I mean, it should work, most likely? Can I try?”

Nestra frowned. What was he... oh, the buffs. He did mention buffs.

Well.

Worst case scenario she could always escape. Valerian had been killing fast, comparatively weaker creatures according to the bodies around him so that side of the tunnel was still on the safer side. And she was really tired so the buffs would help.

“Yes please.”

“Ok, here we go!”

The sensation was one of soothing warmth. At first, her body resisted and Valerian winced, but his jade eyes soon widened. The spell was taking hold. Nestra’s exhaustion washed away as if she’d suddenly had a nice nap and a bowl of something tasty. Miso ramen, maybe.

“You are... exhausted. Strained too hard. You’re going to crash hard when the spell breaks.”

“No choice, unless we fall back.”

“The surface is worse and I’d rather not lead them to the shelter. They’re safe, by the way, And...”

They both turned to Shinoda, then to the other human bodies.

“I just don’t want us to be eaten. Call me crazy but it’s just... not right.”

“No, it’s not,” she agreed. “They deserve better. They deserve the last rites. It’s important,” she replied with conviction.

Valerian grunted, then he lifted his mace. It looked quite heavy.

“Look, I’ve seen you move from the back. Thought you were some sort of scout C-class in a mask, to be honest. I’ll cover you. Give them hell.”

“When reinforcements come...”

“Turn back to normal and I’ll just say it was like this when I arrived. Let’s focus on fighting, for now. I hope I’m not making a mistake by deciding to stay. You can turn back to normal, right? This isn’t permanent?”

“No no.”

“Ok, great. Here they come. Let’s get them here before they spread across the entire fucking district and we have to give chase.”

“Ok.”

Nestra was acting much more confident than she was feeling. Gorge knew and she was fine with it but Valerian? He was a damn gleam. But she couldn't murder him, it would be like killing a puppy. And especially not after losing Shinoda. And just... it was Valerian. Her... sort of friend.

Her demon self was immensely confused. He wasn't kin, but he was still brother in arms. Or something like that. Her mind struggled with the concepts just as the snarls and roars of the horde grew closer. She was too tired. Even the spell was already unraveling at the seams. She just had to keep going. It was too much of a good opportunity and the tunnel was a great chokepoint. Or maybe hubris was getting to her and they ought to be fleeing towards the nearest battle, hoping to catch the attention of a B-class raider. She spared a glance towards Valerian who was now standing with his back to her and his mace firmly held.

He was so confident she could do it.

The idiot.

His blind trust chased the anxiety away. She could still get away with secrecy if nobody looked too hard and they probably wouldn't. Here was a tide of varied and interesting foes to kill. She just had to lean into her nature and make it work.

The first were rats, again, and Nestra methodically crushed them. They no longer provided her with any essence at all. Next came a group of green insects the size of children, looking like large, compact mantis. They were almost as fast as her but they followed a basic pattern and after getting a single cut on her arm, Nestra was able to bait the first strike reliably. A massive wolf thing was next and she was forced to fall back to avoid being bitten. It just closed the distance and snapped at her, so she used *momentum* to get behind it and let the size of the tunnel prevent it from turning too quickly. Nestra clung to its black fur and stabbed, and stabbed again with a short void blade. It smashed her against the wall but she held on, though it stole her breath. Finally, she cleaved a long gash along its flank and it fled away. A yelp of pain showed it didn't go very far. The kaiju's influence was unraveling, with monsters fleeing or turning on each other. She just had to hold a little longer. She tried to catch her breath but a large, rock biped was next. It was slow, so she easily used its thunderous attacks to manage the next group of mantis, staying ahead of them. They still gave her essence but it fed into her chest now because she was as fast as she could get. Once the mantises were dead, she struck the golem in the chest with *precision* and the most concentrated void blade she could muster.

Its outer skin exploded.

Nestra used *immovable* at the last instant but the shrapnel still bit into her in many places. She was bleeding now. Her regeneration wasn't following anymore, and Valerian's spell only helped a little. Golem was dead though and her *resilience* increased yet again.

Fire hit her leg, and she dodged another as pain seared her mind. Fireball-tossing monkeys of all things. She used *momentum* to run into the troupe and crushed them, using their

bodies as shields, then she raced back with more mana in her pool to avoid the charge of a sort of... metal unicorn?

Its horn shone.

Nestra jumped behind the golem corpse. Magical energy pierced through it like butter. She used *momentum* to roll under the beam, then punched up and with a blade using *precision*. The strike caught the unicorn under the jaw, killing it instantly. She got a lot of power from that one.

There were fighting sounds from Valerian's side but here, at the edge of the tunnel, silence was returning.

That... that was it? Maybe? Strange though, she could swear...

The only warning she had was a pool of darkness on her left, in the wall. She recognized it from the infinite war world. It was a standard maneuver for shadow users: teleport through darkness and strike from a blind spot. She twisted on herself to avoid snapping teeth but something caught her in the shoulder and sent her careening. *Momentum* saved her life. The creature was fast, much faster than her. It was all she could do to stay ahead. It merged with the darkness, a snarling mass of chitin-covered muscles and a head made only of teeth. Long claws on its digits. A horrifying shape halfway towards human but too elongated and far too muscular. She didn't know what the fuck it was but she decided, right there, to call it the Shadow Beast. Nestra fell back towards the barricade but the creature was fast, too fast and she couldn't shake it off. Dodging was all she could manage, even then it was a close call. The Stalk of the Scornful Crescent helped her stay just one step ahead but it couldn't last. In desperation, she turned and raised her left arm. She activated *immovable*. As the thing slapped her. Claws bit into her arm and shoulder but she was still standing. *Potential* bloomed on the creature and it... veered away.

A cataclysmic boom shook the entire tunnel. Parts of the wall in front of her exploded in a shower of dust. The beast screeched. It lashed out. Pain flared in her side when she was smacked into the barricade. Hurting all over, really all over. Valerian's spell was working overtime to keep her functional. She had maybe a few seconds more.

"Aaaaaah!"

Valerian jumped on the Shadow Beast, bloody mace raised high. The creature casually batted him away into a nearby wall.

"Oof!"

Nestra aimed her last bolt. Her ears picked up the sound of dying monsters. Cavalry was almost here. Just had to hold for a little longer. Using the time Valerian had granted her, she pushed potential in the Shadow Beast's face. The maddened creature opened its maw wide to bite on her.

She let it go.

Gray energy tore through her target, then a geyser of blood splattered her. Decapitated. A fantastic spike of energy flooded her, pushing her *awareness* and *resilience* to their limit. A diffuse warmth lingered in her chest but even the rush of power could not protect her anymore. She barely managed enough strength to reactivate her mask before Valerian's support finally fizzled. She was the most tired she'd ever been in her life. The last thing she saw was a pair of worried jade iris but the concrete was simply too comfortable. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

When Nestra came to, she was warm and lying on something soft. And that was weird. She was also starving and hurting all over which was much more within her expectations. Below her was a cot in some well-lit place but still underground, a sort of recess more than a room separated from the rest by a drawn curtain. The susurrus of conversations drifted from behind the symbolic line, as did the scent of tomato soup. It nicely covered the smell of blood, rust, and her own sweat. She was wearing her filthy cocktail dress, still. Her throat itched. Thirsty.

"Here, here," Valerian said as he shoved a straw in her mouth.

She gulped tepid water with relish, though moving her arm hurt terribly. Her true self must be really messed up if even her human body felt the aches. Moving around through, she realized the light didn't come from a lamp as she'd originally thought.

It came from a man. A gleam in golden plate armor. Their aura was so controlled she hadn't realized they were here. Her gaze drifted up from a pilum and a strange leaf-like shield to dark skin under a thick helmet and two soft golden eyes shining like the sun itself.

"Mazingwe?"

The calm doctor's face tilted to the side. It was a strange and terrifying expression in someone usually so warm. The gesture chilled her.

"Sorry, Doctor Mazingwe."

"I see your memory is intact, at least. Valerian, if you would give us a moment?"

"What? Oh, sure. Sir."

He left with a last worried glance and Nestra saw something there she didn't like at all. Pity.

"Oh no."

Mazingwe made a small black orb appear seemingly out of thin air. The sounds from outside grew immediately muted.

"Oh noooo."

“Do not blame him,” the doctor said in a guarded voice. “He was concerned after you could not be woken up and agreed to share more about your conditions under a seal of secrecy. My oath as a doctor means that your medical details are safe with me. Unfortunately, my oath as a defender of mankind supersedes it, so now I must ascertain, are you my Clytemnestra Palladian or are you a monster wearing her skin?”

Nestra felt pressure. This was bad.

“I told you I hate that name,” she said.

“So you did, many times.”

“I am still me.”

“Your words speak in favor of this hypothesis. Were you always able to assume... another form?” he asked.

It felt like a very, very, very bad idea to lie to him.

“No.”

“No?”

“Really no. I only figured it out right after the purge.”

“Right after the purge?”

“Yes!”

He waited.

“I am under the impression you are hiding things from me.”

“Well yeah I was and I am, but the question here is: am I a monster and the answer is no.”

“The answer is no?”

“The answer is no.”

Another silence. His voice was low and soft but there was something in the intensity in his gaze that meant he would kill her in an instant.

“How would I know that you’re you, and not some skinchangers or some other creature?”

“Riel, doctor, how the fuck do you expect me to prove that? I don’t even know for sure. Maybe I woke up with the exact same souvenirs but since there were no corpses and it still

feels like me, I'm going to apply Occam's razor and say it's me, alright? It's me. Still mostly the same as far as I can tell."

"You are not human," he stated with absolute confidence.

"How the fuck would you know that?"

"You think you're still human?"

She froze. He got her there.

"Well, hmm."

"Yes?"

"I, uh, I don't —"

"You don't what?"

Nestra clenched her teeth. This was all going wrong. He'd found a crack and dug in and there was no amount of bullshit that could save her now. Still had to try.

"I am what I am. And who I am. Maybe I'm a weird human. How would you know?"

Mazingwe considered long and hard. Nestra was tempted to ask him if he was lagging or something. When he finally spoke, he was even more guarded than before.

"A long time ago, Vanquisher's alpha team came across a... strange being in a portal world."

Nestra blinked. Vanquisher was North America's top guild by a large margin. Their Alpha Team had to include stars like Cyrrhus and The Mangler.

"They were tested and they were beaten. Portal Worlds of their levels have entire groups of seemingly sentient entities, though they only have a semblance of civilization, so meeting one wasn't particularly a surprise. Being beaten was. Being spared after that confirmed they were not dealing with a maddened portal creature."

"What?"

"The stranger didn't kill any of them. Eventually, Shiloh managed to shoot him at point-blank range and then something surprising happened."

Nestra was almost hanging from her bed. This was... classified information.

"The stranger changed. He grew in size and revealed black horns, black eyes, sharper teeth. Gray skin. He congratulated the team for breaking his... mask. In English."

Nestra was so excited. Someone like her. Finally, knowledge!

“He told them they were not ripe yet before leaving them. The Vanquishers collected a sample of the little blood they’d managed to shed. I compared it to the one found on your dress. It seems your own... mask... was breached a little, whatever that means. I could obviously not check the highly classified Pandora database from here but many of its attributes were similar. Red then oxidized to gray. You are not human Nestra. You are a Cacodaimon Anthropomimesis. A gray demon, as your kind was dubbed.”

“Caco whatever,” she stubbornly replied. “It’s me. You know it’s me. Now, I know where this can go.”

“Yes,” Mazingwe said.

He seemed sad.

“They’ll kill me if you tell them. Or worse.”

“I will reveal your presence to Shinran and his team only. He’s not the kind of person to execute others for who they are, believe me. There is no need to spread it to the public, however he, as Threshold’s guardian, must know. I am sorry, Nestra. You will be coming with me.”

The room darkened.

Mazingwe’s magical tool splintered on the spot. Outside of the room, all conversations had instantly died. All that was left was a group of people breathing heavily. Even Mazingwe’s light felt dimmer. The high gleam himself was now standing in front of Nestra, to his credit defending her, facing the curtain opening.

Stomp stomp. Someone was coming. Slowly. They were taking their sweet time.

A stooped shape stopped in front of the flimsy fabric. It was absolutely fucking massive. More than three meters high, far above even the tallest human, and strong. A large white hand grabbed the curtain then pulled it apart. It revealed an angular, humanoid face with eyes as black as the void under twin forward-jutting curved horns. The being smiled a forest of abyssal needles. It was Seth. The fucking baker. His voice was low yet very soft, and comforting to her, somehow.

“Hello little sister,” he said in the strange hissing language.

His attention turned to Mazingwe. This time, his voice carried the promise of death. And he spoke in English.

“She won’t be coming with you.”