

“Oh no oh no oh nononononono this must be a dream. That’s it. I’m tripping balls.”

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

“Riel dammit. Why.”

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

She only stopped when a tap sounded on her door.

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

There was a package on her porch.

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

Her paranoia spiked.

Because she knew she had to check it.

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

The fortress city had very strict rules when it came to suspicions of monster presence, and that rule was extermination. Oh, perhaps she could get away with being shipped to some lab for study but that was obviously a shit solution. So now she was pretty desperate and willing to open her door in the dead of night to check a suspicious package that might contain, for all she knew, a facehugger dipped in arcane batrachotoxin.

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

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

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

Just existing there.

Menacingly.

“Right. Right. Here goes.”

The bow came off what looked like a normal napkin, leaving behind a nondescript wooden box with a smiley drawn with some sort of pencil above the words ‘not a trap’.

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

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

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

“Congratulations on waking up, little Nezhra!

Your first quest is to rebuild your mask.

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

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

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

Nothing happened.

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

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

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

Nestra left the bathroom and sat on her bed.

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

And that would have been fine with her. Death.

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

But death was ok.

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

She wasn't like them.

And that was... an incredible relief.

Tears welled in her eyes, the human ones. Nestra made a gesture to rip and the mask fell off, the color dripping off her like cheap paint. The void-eyed Nestra cried tears of bitter joy and disbelief that finally, finally, after twenty-four fucking years of agony, she knew what was

wrong with her. And it was not being a shit person. It was being a not-a-person trying to fit in with people. That was why it had never worked.

What a fantastic realization.

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

“Quest reward: mask + Kero nut”

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

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

And then, it was gone.

“Aw. Just one?”

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

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

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

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

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

Tomorrow.

She returned to bed and crashed down hard.

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

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

Should she tell anyone?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She... didn't think so?

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

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

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

"Chief? It's Nestra."

"One moment please," a broken voice replied.

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

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

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

Nestra shrugged.

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

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

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

"This is bullshit."

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

"Then the department..."

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

"What about you?"

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

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

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

The chief waited, uncertain.

“Off the record.”

“Everything we say right now is off the record.”

“Ok. We were really betrayed. Bard turned on us.”

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

“That little wanker.”

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

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

“Hm?”

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

“Gigun? They’re the ones who stood to earn the most.”

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

“Am not stupid,” Nestra replied a little sulkily.

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

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

“I’ll be there. Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

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

What a fucking mess.

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

“Hey, Fon,” Nestra greeted.

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

“Ahem,” an older man said, though not unkindly.

“Sorry Mr. Ling.”

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

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

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

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

She frowned. Did she really want revenge?

Yes, she did.

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

“If you have any questions...” Ling said.

Actually, might as well dig a little.

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

Ling started to answer but he reconsidered.

“Ms Sonchai, would you give us a moment, please?”

“Okay...”

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

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

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

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

He gestured.

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

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

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

“Appreciate it.”

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

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

"Thanks, Fon."

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

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

Right. The sword was her personal property. She even had a license for that. She grabbed her personal effects and put them in a cardboard box. There wasn't much, merely a change of clothes and a couple of mementos. Nestra didn't consider her office as anything personal, more like a shelter and a personal spot here. Her house was her haven.

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

"Officer Palladian. Here for your sword?"

"Yeeees?"

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

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

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

"I get you."

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

"Uhm."

"Riiiiight?"

"Why yes, of course I do."

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

“Right. Thanks.”

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

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

“Yes?”

“Hello Officer Kim, this is Nestra Palladian.”

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

“Sure?”

“See you there,” Kim said, then she cut the call abruptly.

Maybe she was busy.

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

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

“Yes?” the exhausted nurse asked.

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

“Hm. Oh, yes, let me check.”

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

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

“Could you let him know Nesta is here. I have something of his.”

“I, errr, I’m not supposed to...”

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

“Oh, alright.”

The nurse pulled on a visor while Nesta waited patiently.

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

The nurse hung up.

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

“Not really. Why?”

“He asked if you looked like a frigid bitch.”

“Then he’s in a good mood. Thanks for the help.”

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

“Come on in!”

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

“Holy shit Palladian, the fuck are you doing here?”

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

“Brought you back your iron on account of its illegality.”

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

“Yeah?”

“What happened to my men?”

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

"Fuck."

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

"You're not going to like it."

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

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

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

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

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

"Blew his chest off with Nuts' sidearm."

"Okay. Good. Good."

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

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

"Yeah."

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

"I—"

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

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

"But you'll try something?"

Nestra sighed.

She didn't even like Gorge.

“I will try something.”

“Ok. Then you keep the gun.”

“What?”

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

“You’re leaving the force?”

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

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

“You can ask for a loan?”

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

“Holy shit.”

“What?”

“You have kids?”

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

“Divorced with two children. Why? Is that a problem?”

“Just can’t believe the same woman would let you fuck her twice.”

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

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

“You’re an angel.”

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

“Fuck. I don’t have bullets for the revolver.”

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

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

And that led her to a real issue.

Anonymity.

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

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

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

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

Maybe it would be fine.

"Well, nothing to it."

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

"I'm not even doing anything illegal. I have the right to carry all of this with me. I need to calm down."

The prep talk didn't work very well.

Nestra drove the car herself. A quick journey on the outer ring highway led her to a deserted offramp. Old traffic lights spread a bleary pale blue light on cracked tar. Some of the bulbs had died, not to be replaced. She drove past old warehouses and rent-a-space storages. The only light came from security booths and a single delivery pizzeria.

The rental spaces gave Nestra an idea. She could always rent one to use as a... transition spot. Ugh, this wasn't even technically illegal but she still felt terribly guilty. Here she was, joining the ranks of the

She stopped in an empty parking lot in front of a shuttered mattress company. No wonder since the mattress market was firmly cornered by BaiHua. No cameras there, at least. She grabbed her large bag containing everything and went for a walk.

The bag was heavy as hell.

Maxsec armor wasn't designed to be carried on the back. By the time she'd crossed the lot, Nestra was already sweating under her hoodie. The coordinates led her past a deserted street into an empty factory. The gate stood open, the chain broken. There was an arrow on the ground drawn in fluorescent paint. She stopped.

She was expected.

Nestra walked into a deserted lot. She spotted the spherical shapes of cameras near the roof. All of them were busted. Her perception picked up when she approached a breach in a nearby wall. She felt it before she could see it.

A portal.

In the middle of an empty building, it waited for her. It was a tiny one, the blue of its surface dim, the flow of mana coming to her pathetically weak. It was the sort of portals guilds would be paid to clear instead of having to purchase them. And even then, they would send a pair of D-class raiders as a punishment detail.

It was still the most beautiful thing Nestra had ever seen.

She shed her mask without thinking. Immediately, the night cleared and the bag on her back was not so heavy anymore. She took a deep breath of dusty air. Being near the portal was just so deeply pleasant. And now she had this one just for herself. It felt great. With a sigh, she opened the bag and retrieved her armor, changing in record time but leaving the visor interface off. She strapped her sword to her back. The revolver had no bullets and taking the gun felt... wrong. Her ammo was category one as well, just plain mundane. She left everything there.

There was only one thing left to do.

She hoped it would work.

Nestra placed her hand against the surface of the portal and felt a resistance. It was the first time she touched one. Even as a child back at the estate, children were kept well away from portals for security reasons. Her mom had described the sensation in detail. It was like being sucked in in a cold bath, apparently, a slightly unpleasant sensation Nestra braced against. Instead, there was the smallest amount of resistance and then she pushed in through the membrane.

She was in.

Excitement rose in her chest. She was in. She was in! Only users could enter portals! And she could! That meant... well, not much since she clearly wasn't a vanilla human. But still! A childhood wish, finally fulfilled after so many years. A stronger mana concentration made her breathe deeper. The portal world! It was... It was...

Well, it was a little bit underwhelming.

Nestra sighed. She was being silly again. This was a tiny portal, so obviously to a tiny world. A rocky tunnel extended in front of her before veering sharply to the left. There were no sources of light. The mana also didn't feel particularly good.

The sense of wonder she'd felt earlier evaporated. She'd waited for this for so long that, in truth, she'd given up on it. And now that she finally had it, it just didn't feel the same. Like a trophy delivered a year after a competition. The pleasure was gone as surely as the expectation.

She felt a little hollow but that didn't last long.

"Right. This is just the beginning."

And it was. Memories returned from all the classes she'd taken before she was sixteen, all the training she'd undergone back at the manor when she was heir apparent and dear brother Ulysses was still slacking off. This was the lowest class of portals in an underground biome, the most common. That meant either giant ants or mycoids. There were no spores, so, giant ants. Really a shit portal.

Nestra shook her head. She was lucky. This was perfect for getting started, and giant ants could still be dangerous, hence why D-class always went in pairs. She unsheathed her blades and made a few experimental low cuts, a technique that allowed for effective downward thrusts. Her body remembered the movements despite not having practiced those specific cuts for a long time. The tunnel would be too narrow for anything else anyways.

She should grab a knife as well. Better luck next time.

Right, she was ready.

Nestra moved forward, then turned with the tunnel. It smelled mustier now and she could hear grating sounds overhead as the tunnel snaked deeper in. She crept and turned until she came across a slightly larger caverns.

Three giant ants dug despondently, their backs turned to her. Giant ants were thin and a bit human-like in their silhouette but their heads were what one would expect complete with a powerful mandible that could cleave rock, though those specific specimens were struggling. Their brown body easily melted into the background. Nesta recognized drones because they lacked any sort of plating. She felt giddy.

That was it.

She rushed forward and lunged low, catching the first worker at the base of the neck. It let out a sharp hiss as it died and the other two reacted immediately. One stood up and turned just in time for Nesta's side strike to cut it in two. She barely felt resistance from the thin chitin. She braced for the last one's charge, her downward attack crushing its back. It died against her combat boots.

Nesta walked to the wounded beast, delivering the coup de grace as it moved away, trailing thin intestines.

Silence returned to the grotto. The entire fight had lasted less than three seconds.

She'd won. Handily. And she felt better. She had hunted and she had triumphed, and although the prey was weak, it was also... new. A pristine entry to her list of victims. She felt just a little bit better. Something changed as well. If she focused, she could hear more digging sounds from up ahead across the cave's only exit.

She kept going.

The giant ants were probably weakened by the lack of mana. Portal monsters were usually stronger than those found in the wild, the offspring of the first portal break escapees. This was clearly not the case here. They were too sluggish, as confirmed when she turned against and found more drones trying to dig a side tunnel. Two worked while one rested.

Nesta charged forward just as the resting one became more alert. She lacked space to swing her sword properly. She killed the first as it moved and the second in another lunge as it moved. The third locked its jaw on her blade and pushed, but she knew what to do. Giant ants were tremendously strong but also quite light so she turned on herself and slammed the creature against the nearest wall. Before it could recover, her handle strike cracked its skull, causing it to fall. She delivered the last strike while it was temporarily stunned.

Once again, the battle was over before it could begin and once again, she felt just a little bit more aware. There was something else though, something she wasn't sure about. She cleaned her blade of the ichor and turned around, eager to find more prey. Giant ants body parts held no value so she didn't consider harvesting anything.

What they were digging for, however...

Nestra careful picked up her prize from where the creatures were excavating. It was cracked and transparent, the lowest possible quality, only good enough to be crushed and used as fuel... and she didn't care.

It was a mana stone.

Her first treasure.

"Hell yes. Loot."

She picked it up and inspected it. The mana was there, at the tip of her finger, ready to be withdrawn. She had killed her first monsters and she'd stolen her first resources.

Amazing.

Just had to keep going.

Nestra moved on. This world was as basic as they came, pretty much a linear path to the end. In more complex worlds, raiders took supplies with them including food and automatic map-makers. Some biomes could get so large, it took powerful users like Aunt Claire a week to clear, if they survived. She would be more prepared for the next opportunity.

Nestra cleared another group, this one of four drones at the center of a cavern. The last one managed to pinch her leg but the MaxSec armor resisted well enough. She was on her knee, inspecting the light damage when a noise alerted her.

Nestra turned and blocked in the same motion, sword raised in front of her. Heavy mandibles clanged against the blade. She saw an armored head, more powerful limbs. Dark, insectile eyes. The creature was larger with a thicker shell. She immediately pressed the button.

Powerful current shook the warrior's body. Something hissed and popped in its thorax and it fell back, meaning she got a full view of the second warrior charging her. No time to wind up an attack. It was time to use mana.

She pulled a thread from her body and pushed it into the sword, the mana tool easily accepting it. Gray, alien energy coursed along the edge, crackling as it went. The warrior's mandible slammed against her weapon in its urge to clip her neck. The blade slid into the warrior's skull before she was even attacking.

With a roar, Nestra struck down. The blade sliced through the warrior's entire body like a knife through butter. Heavy limbs convulsed, barbed tips raking her armor without penetrating. It fell, dead. She turned and struck the first warrior just in case but the beast was slain, cooked alive by electricity.

Nestra breathed hard. Using mana took a lot of stamina.

"Now that's more like it."

Her voice rang hollow in the surrounding silence. She was talking aloud because she was... scared and alone. That was fine but she still ought to stop.

The warriors left her feeling marginally stronger but it was so weak, she might have been mistaken. She checked around for more mana crystals but found nothing. She did, however, find two recesses in the ceiling, sleeping spaces used by warriors to conserve energy. Normally, those would be in the central chamber but apparently not this time. Had to be more careful in the future.

Nestra kept going, coming across a couple more groups of drones who fell as easily as the first. Some light ahead warned her that she was approaching the end of the portal world. She moved up as quietly as she could, leaning against the wall to take a look around the corner.

There, in a large central chamber, a large creature waited. The insectile being was larger than Nestra and stood upright over a bulbous, fluorescent yellow sack. It faced the entrance with attention. Nestra recognized it as an acid ant.

Technically, the acid ant was not a combat member of a hive. They used their acid to smooth surfaces. That would make no difference to her skin.

Worse, it was actively expecting her.

She did her best to remember. Acid ants used pressurized glands, she remembered. They didn't have a great control over them and it took a long time for the glands to refill. Maybe she could bait out an attack.

She strode out, staying near the entrance. The acid ant attacked the moment it spotted her. It reared back and opened its mandibles wide. Nestra stepped back into cover.

A long, slimy string of transparent liquid splashed on the wall in front of her, as well as the ground, and pretty much everything in sight. The stench was atrocious.

The spray weakened quickly. She jumped over a puddle and out of cover and charged ahead.

Thankfully, the acid ant was alone. Her first strike was stopped by a limb, which was fine. She used her sword's battery again and the creature jumped back, twitching. She pursued, attacking with narrow, fast swings. It was taller than her. She blocked quick strikes from its upper limbs. The strength pushed her back despite her effort. Meanwhile, the creature's throat pumped noisily. She had a limited amount of time.

It was too strong for her, and just fast enough to fend her off. Nestra pulled more mana and shoved it into the blade. With a desperate cry, she pulled back and struck with a powerful overhang strike.

The sword cut through a limb and almost severed another. It finished lodged in the creature's shoulder, digging a deep furrow. It screamed. Acid spilled from the open mouth, splashing

over the ant. A few droplets landed on Nestra's armor. The beast convulsed and dislodged Nestra's grip.

The acid ant fell, crashing heavily. The two middle limb managed to grab her boots. Nestra was disarmed. Out of options, she slapped her hand against the creature's face then pushed all the mana she could.

Gray, crackling energy coursed through the ant's skull. An eye popped. The limbs retracted and she was free. She crawled away, exhausted.

She felt the ant die. It still twitched a few times but she knew it was gone. A deep feeling of satisfaction filled her body like a warm embrace. Things were not quite right but they were certainly better. It felt fulfilling, like a cold void fading away. Nestra let out a deep sigh.

Then she hurried to recover her sword and washed it. The ant was melting under the influence of its own acid and she didn't want her precious sword to suffer the same fate. Thankfully, the blade was intact. She wiped it just in case.

Behind her, a portal opened.

"Right. Okay. Good."

Things were good.

She'd cleared a world.

Nestra stood up, satisfied for now. The acid glands could probably be sold for something but she had no tools to harvest them and, if she had to be honest, no buyer. The sales of portal prizes was as heavily regulated as portal ownership. No drab like herself could just show up and offer monster parts without some serious questioning. Not unless she found a black market. Hmm. There was an idea.

More importantly, she'd cleared a portal world.

Like users did.

Ok so she wasn't a gleam, clearly. They were sucked in by portals while she pushed through. They got stronger by slowly absorbing mana, including the mana of creatures who died around them while, as far as she understood, she stole power from the entities she killed. And there was the whole demon thing. Nevertheless! Nevertheless, she was kind of like a user. No, users could manipulate mana. She was more than that. She was a raider like her parents and aunt Claire and brother Ulysses and some of the asshats who thought she was out of line for breathing in their general direction. That changed... everything.

She smiled.

Ok, enough distractions. Nestra moved to the exit portal. An exit portal proved that this was a temporary world that would break away soon after she removed the final treasure, here a

simple mana crystal of the lowest grade waiting on the ground. She picked it up. The blue light of the portals gave it a strange tone and if she looked closely, ephemeral rainbows danced over its surface. For a moment, Nestra enjoyed the pleasurable sensation of basking in the portal's radiance, then it was time to leave.

No one was really sure what happened when a portal world untethered, or what happened to the unfortunate people left behind. She wasn't eager to find out so she pressed her hand against the membrane and pushed. It offered little resistance.

And she was back on earth.

"Shit."

The portal winked out behind Nestra as she took her blade out. Someone had been there. She looked around the empty factory. No one in sight. No sounds. Only her panicked breaths.

Near her bag, someone had placed a small chair with a rudimentary screen. A camera aimed at the portal entrance now only showed her. She approached the screen, curious.

The screen was glitching hard. It only showed panicked lozenges and streams of light where she was supposed to be, as if her very existence could not be captured. For a moment, she watched the kaleidoscope of strange shapes before placing her mask back on. As expected, her human face showed normally.

That could be useful.

There was another envelope on the chair. She opened it.

"Well done! Quest reward: grew a little stronger.

Next quest: grow even stronger!

Bring your gun."

Another set of coordinates followed. Nestra could guess where this was going and she didn't mind, although she hoped she would get more answers. The little game was getting tiring. She wasn't six.

"Hey, any chance you could show up?"

No response.

"Come on. I know you're out there somewhere. Can we just have a chat like responsible adults?"

Silence.

“No? Ugh. Nevermind then.”

Nestra sighed and packed up. Her suit of armor was a little damaged and would need patching up where the acid had touched the outer layers. Otherwise, everything seemed fine. She had a look at the two mana stones. It was a good haul for a first assault. The worst ones went for six hundred credits and the other was D-class so probably around two grands depending on supply and demand. That was the lowest end for D-class portals. Most made ten to fifteen but she wouldn't complain. Now, she only needed to find a way to sell them as she had no use for them herself, at least not now. Mana stones were a fantastically efficient source of clean energy, not to mention only they could charge up advanced mana tools. It would be of no use to her so long as she couldn't afford even the most basic of items.

Nestra considered taking the screen with her but she reasoned that the person helping her probably wanted it back. With her mask in place, she just walked back to her car, fully aware that the bag felt just a little lighter on her shoulders.

Nestra checked her phone before she drove away. There was a message from Mazingwe of all people.

“Nestra. It pains me that you would not come to see me before leaving. I acknowledge that the circumstances were difficult, however I believe we need not part on such a tragic note. In fact, we need not part at all if you need a GP. Come and see me sometimes. On another note, I received an unofficial answer as to why your request to be near portals was consistently refused. Although they do produce mana, portals also emit powerful radiation of an unknown nature called, for lack of a better word, zeta radiation. Prolonged exposure kills baselines more surely than gamma rays do. Even users are advised not to linger. I would recommend pursuing alternate ways of satisfying your mana cravings.

Yours in friendship.

Dr Mazingwe.”

“Huh.”

Nestra was dreaming.

The core chamber stood as empty as before but she knew there were two spots to check. Her steps first led her to the rotating planetoid room, the small spheres hovering over the deep blue puddle. Two others had activated though they remained fairly weak. The first tasted of strength, of domination. It was the push of a hand, the grab of a collar, breaking free, crushing. The second was taste, smell, a movement at the edge of one's vision. It spoke of attention and careful listening. It spoke of vigilance. She liked both but they were still budding. Weak.

Her steps next led her to the armor corridor. A new shield had activated, this one made of glass covered in a translucent substance she recognized as acid. It had the right smell.

She closed her eyes, satisfied with her progress.
