

Fox Mask! Fox Mask had made contact. Nestra couldn't wait. She would get to meet her again, and then they'd fight! Oh, this was going to be grand. Nestra was so looking forward to it. She unfolded the origami with a smile of barely contained excitement.

"Tomorrow 3AM, inside the Steel Realm. Sneak in.

C."

The note was in English, which was a nice note. Nestra wondered what the C. referred to though. According to her picture, Fox Mask was called T. Nguyen. Maybe the message was from someone else? No, that made no sense. The Steel Realm was the name the Sword King Enclave used for their most coveted portal: a world with rich sources of magical iron they used to forge their many weapons. It was valuable enough that Threshold was ready to buy their excess stock at a premium. Nobody else would know she could sneak into portal worlds since she had the appearance of a dreg. It was definitely Fox Mask, so C. was perhaps how they referred to themselves.

"So is Fox Mask a boy or a girl? Hmmm."

She still couldn't tell for sure. Maybe she'd just ask.

Nestra's enthusiasm bubbled for another good five minutes during which she resisted the urge to change into her true form, in case someone was keeping an eye on her. Arg! She wanted to get out of here so she could practice the Scornful Crescent on some unsuspecting monsters. Or enclavers. Either would do. Soon, however, her thoughts returned to the match. She was still a bit jittery from the excitement.

"Might use the opportunity to take a shower!"

It turned out that the Sword King Enclave did have running water to a degree. The flow was too small to take a proper shower. Instead, the bath was structured in a more Japanese fashion with a small rock tub and a large basin used for ablutions. It wasn't bad, and Nestra was happy enough to soap up and then let the mana-rich water drip over her body. Meanwhile her mind wandered.

So yes, the fight had been pretty cool, and she'd defended Threshold and her family's honor by thrashing the Sword King's champions... and that was good to a degree, but now that she thought about it, her heart filled with relief at not having lost rather than joy at having won, because it hadn't been a fair fight.

For her opponent, that is.

Nestra looked like a baseline, and she'd been representing them in that fight, but just like most of her existence, it was a lie. An illusion. She had the full circuit and enough passively-regenerating mana to match a low D-class raider in pure might, so she didn't have much of a disadvantage in combat. Truong had only been physically stronger. In the kind of match where everything ends with a single touch, it was of very little help. No, the reality was that they'd pitched a talented eighteen something against Nestra.

They'd thrown the poor girl to the dingos. Not to blow her own horn, but Nestra was really, really fucking good at fencing. It had been the only thing keeping her sane through the Dark Times. Even with the cravings, Nestra had kept in her heart that she was so good that she could be a CQC specialist in the city's most physically demanding police force when she was competing with quirks and augs. From her youth, Nestra had been a fencing genius, and she'd worked hard every damn day of her dog life to make sure she reached the top. Nestra wasn't excellent. She was world class, and experienced against human opponents.

And that wasn't even counting the Scornful Crescent.

And they'd sent someone seven years her junior against her. The poor fuckers. The sad thing was, Truong was pretty good, probably considered a promising prospect among the new generation of Sword King raiders. Her public humiliation after being picked as champion would hound her for the rest of her days while the instigator, that cunt Manh, would get away scot free. It was infuriating how the top players kept sacrificing pawns and then having tea shortly afterward.

Nestra sighed. There was the baseline lie as well.

The purpose of her existence here was to prove that being a baseline was not an indication of a lack of talent, only a lack of mana. To see baselines as inferior was not just despicable, it was false. Mana access didn't make one a demigod deserving of all honor.

Only, that was bullshit.

First, Truong had been D-class. Gleams kept improving so long as they worked hard, and the gap between them and baselines kept growing accordingly. There was a qualitative difference between a fifty-year old baseline with skill and experience, and a fifty-year old gleam who's reached C-class and can work sixteen hours per day six days a week for months at the top of their game in case of emergency. Just the ability to focus for longer periods of time made gleams better. That was the first lie. Nestra's victory didn't prove anything.

The second lie was that Nestra was simply not a baseline. She was an Aszhii in sheep's clothing. All of her victories were a travesty — to an extent. She'd won with quirky-level powers but she was, in essence, not a baseline human. She was only pretending to be one.

And that sucked.

"There goes my good mood," Nestra said, having successfully ruined her own enjoyment.

She rinsed herself then lamented the lack of a hair dryer in this Riel-forsaken hole on earth. If only she had Riel's teleportation magic, then she could use it to spend every evening eating ice cream in the shadow of her naval gun instead of being stuck here in toxic culture land watching her back. Nestra wrapped a towel around her head. Alas, her powerful grumbling and incendiary comments failed to dry her hair faster.

Since the mood was ruined, she might as well write her report.

Nestra spent most of the afternoon poring over her notes, then she used the data sheet in her luggage to write a report. With that, her official role in the mission would officially be complete and she'd be able to play offline games on her visor for the rest of the trip, guilt-free. She still did her best to give an accurate list of observations and recommendations. Her first and obvious one was that non-users ought to have equal rights. Obvious, but she had to spell it out. The common law stuff was brief, the only caveat being that Thresholders found guilty by Sword King authorities ought to be given the opportunity to choose imprisonment in Threshold instead of, say, being flogged fifteen times on the main plaza. That was kind of important. The trade law stuff was short as well since the enclave had almost zero laws for trading, so she recommended using Threshold's framework instead. She hesitated with the last of her recommendations, but eventually decided to include it in her report anyway. Fuck politics.

"Finally, I would recommend that specific attention be given to crimes committed by more privileged individuals against more vulnerable members of the community. Case law and recent records show a lack of upward accusations, such as from gray robes to Elders, or women to men. Rather than a clerical error or exemplary behavior in the enclave, I suspect that the discrepancy might be due to systemic elitism and corruption that makes standing against one's betters undesirable."

It was as direct as she could make it while using Threshold's civil servant bullshit lingo. Maybe she should add 'those cunts use the law as a tool of oppression and control' in the margin, but well, anyone who didn't already know that couldn't be smart enough to have reached a managerial position anyway.

Just to be sure, Nestra used her writing software's AI assistant to check for issues. She corrected a few typos, rephrased a few words, refrained from smashing the datasheet after the AI called her style 'verbose', and then she was done.

That left her with little to do. She rummaged through her room for supplies and found a tove and a few bags of tea — locally sourced by the look of it. There was a sort of barley infusion, probably less fancy than green tea. It was pretty good! She heard a knock on her door as she was finishing her cup.

Nestra focused on her mana sense. She didn't pick up anything from the other side, so it was either a master user or one of the augs. Either way, she carefully opened it. It was one of the two augs pilots, the man in this case. An anglo, with short black hair and two very obviously augged eyes. Most people preferred an imitation real ball in their sockets, but Derek had gone for the naked implant which gave him the appearance of a cyborg. The smile was genuine though, and so were the muscles visible under his pilot jumpsuit.

"Mr Clint. Hello," she greeted

"How about you call me Derek and I'll call you Nestra? It's the name you prefer, right?"

"Deal," she replied with a smile.

“Great. Weiwei is touring the compound’s production workshops with Chandra, so that leaves me with no choice but to bother you. I need a partner to cover my back while I return to the gunship — sorry, our ‘armored shuttle’. Ilar wants us to communicate more easily so I’m going to use the ship’s systems to give us a closed internet.”

“Neat. Does it link to the real internet?”

“Nope. I hope you downloaded your favorite vids in advance.”

Nestra shrugged. She had enough to entertain herself but she was hoping for more.

“Just wanted to make some enclave memes. It’s ok.”

Derek laughed, a pure sound of joy that boomed through the drab corridor.

“I don’t think that would be very diplomatic, but what do I know? Anyway, are you alright to go now? Or later? Or not at all? I can wait.”

“It’s fine, let’s leave.”

She locked the door out of habit. Derek was waiting for her so she saw his skull plates while his back was turned. Like most pilots, the majority of his implants were sensory-based. His steps were light enough.

“You got any combat implants besides the pilot suite?” she asked as they moved out of the guest quarters.

“Straight to the point huh? No. We’re discouraged from getting them since there can be interference. There’s also the theory that the more borged up you get, the more likely you are to end up with psychosis. It’s more or less an urban legend at this stage but... you know. And it costs money.”

“The army won’t spring for it?”

“You get the job-related surgery for free. The rest is out of your own pockets. Pilot pay is good but it’s not military-grade combat implants good.”

“Fair enough.”

Just as before, the gray robes were doing their best to ignore them, though a few still stole glances towards Derek’s shiny chrome. It looked like their day was over as they returned to various sheds to drop their tools. She checked the time. It was nearing five in the afternoon.

“Have they been at it since dawn?” Nestra whispered to herself.

"It's harvest season for some cereal crops so they work especially hard right now. Peasantry is seasonal. Don't you know?"

"I'm a city girl to the core."

"Hah. Well, I assume they train harder in the off months. They must have been at it since dawn."

It was that kind of place, Nestra had to agree. They soon arrived at the gunship, an anachronistic creature of sharp angles overlooking the compound like some steel beetle god, an intruder in many ways. The door opened to welcome the pair in without prompt. Nestra knew Derek must have just sent some signal but from the outside, it felt like being allowed into the sanctum of some forbidden cult. The interior still smelled faintly of sweat. Nestra winced.

"Yeah you should smell it after we've picked up tired raiders. It's like shoving your nose over a slaughterhouse's dumpster."

"No thanks."

"By the way, would you be okay with helping or would you prefer to wait outside?"

"Please show me the gunship's secrets, oh prophet of doom."

"With pleasure. Here, let me just get this out..."

A server rack popped out from behind the pilot's seats. It looked too small to achieve much, which meant it was probably some high tech stuff. Nestra suspected Derek didn't really need any help and was just acting nice by giving her something to do together. She plugged cables and pushed buttons whenever he asked.

"By the way, I regret not being here for the duel. Heard you gave them a good demonstration?"

"I won, yeah."

"Nice..." he replied with a vicious smile. "Not that I want to throw shade at our dear hosts, but I already heard borg half a dozen times and those fuckers don't even speak English."

"Yeah. To be fair, they had me face a kid. She was barely eighteen."

Derek gave her a measured look.

"You reckon they weren't being fair to her?"

"Well... Yeah."

"Heh."

Derek shook his head. Nestra frowned, not sure how to express her feelings on the matter.

"It's like this. I'm experienced and good at what I do partly because of my dad's training. I was born in a raider's family, you see? So it's like me using gleam tricks without really being a gleam, and I also have experience on my side," she finally said.

It wasn't all of the truth but it was close enough to convey how she was feeling.

"You want my opinion?" he asked.

'Yeah.'

"Press the green... there we go. So, yeah, there ain't anything like fair in this world. It's bullshit to expect fairness, no harm intended. They were trying to screw you over anyway."

"Maybe... but..."

He gave her a look she couldn't decipher. His augs seemed focused on her, giving him an uncanny appearance. He sounded dead serious too.

"Look, as I said, it's not about fairness. I can list half a dozen other reasons why it's not fair one way or the other and I wasn't even there to see the show. It's about what you represent. For them, the girl you faced was some kind of harbinger meant to give you, and us, a lesson. I'm not up to speed on gleam speciality but it must have looked like you had a chance but not really?"

"It could be interpreted like that, yeah."

"So she stood for giving you a lesson, and you stood for hard work, for Threshold, and for us... mana-challenged folks, yeah?"

"I guess."

"Your role could have been filled by some high-level security augs, the kind that can take down a C-class raider just with their speed and monofilament blades and whatnot. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we proved to those fuckers we're not out yet. It's not about fairness, see? It's about who you're protecting, whose honor you defended."

"Huh. Didn't see it like that."

"You didn't realize you were the city's champion there?"

"I did, I did."

"So take pride. You stood for us, and we're grateful. We're especially grateful because you won, haha. Oh, here it is. Should be fine now."

“Will you need to keep the gunship powered?” Nestra asked, not sure if she should change the topic just yet.

“Nah, minimum power is fine. It will also prevent the battery from draining too fast. We don’t want the gunship to look like it’s five seconds away from taking off because it might scare the bogans. They might shoot arrows at the propellers or something. Can’t risk it.”

“They probably know about gunships, Derek.”

“If they did, they’d be more scared. Anyway, shall we head back?”

“Sure and... thanks. I guess I was too focused on myself.”

“If it were me wrecking those arrogant twats, you couldn’t stop me from boasting for a year. At least!”

“I’m saving it for home,” Nestra joked.

“Very diplomatic, Miss Palladian.”

“Oi.”

Nestra smiled, feeling a bit better. She wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about the duel anymore, but at least the people on her side were happy so there was that, right? And there was something else: she had been placed in a difficult situation and managed to win. It wasn’t her decision setting a kid against her, so she had nothing to feel sorry about. Nodding resolutely, Nestra left the gunship behind Derek. He paused near the entrance. She stopped behind him.

“I’m plugged into the gunship’s sensors. Just making sure there isn’t anything suspicious waiting for us. Looks like we’re good.”

Just then, Nestra’s visor dinged. It was a message from Ilar.

“We now have a secure connection, people. I will still urge everyone not to post any confidential information. Please see me if you have any questions. Dinner will be served in the Edlers’ compound in fifteen minutes.”

Night was falling by then. The crimson light bathed the compound in colors until even the gray robes took on a red hue as they engaged in late practice, wooden swords striking targets with familiar clacks. The smell of food came from everywhere, and the smoke of cooking fires rose in a light fog over many of the buildings. Magical lantern came to life on the stairs and paths of the compound. Blue and yellow dominated, but there were also orange and purple streaks to provide a pleasant variety. With the dim light masking most of its flaws, the compound took on a new appearance that was almost dream-like. Now, history

was being resurrected in front of Nesta. She forgot about the stares as they approached the dining hall from where pleasant scents emerged. She found that the Sword King elders had gone all in on their hospitality. They had laid down a feast.

While the elders and other selected guests sat at round tables in raucous enjoyment, servants drifted from group to group to provide fresh dishes and drinks. It reminded Nesta of the Chinese party: for now, everyone stayed put but as the night went on, they would move from table to table with glasses of strong liquor to cheer each other up. A special table had been reserved for the Threshold guests. Most of the delegation was busy eating after a long day though Chandra and Ilar were already making the rounds. Nesta took her seat next to Weiwei, the other aug. She and Derek immediately went over security measures. Nesta decided to let them be, not like she could understand half of their jargon anyway.

The food was delicious though. It wasn't maybe as properly seasoned as what she'd get in Threshold, but that was nitpicking. The ingredients were mana-rich, fresh, and prepared to perfection. At last she'd found something else the enclaves were good at! She had another bowl of Pho just because the broth was so damn perfect.

"He's saying mana food is wasted on you," Derek abruptly said.

"Mpff?"

The aug discreetly pointed in the direction of a far table where Manh sat among a gathering of red robed raiders. He was glaring at her. Nesta hadn't noticed. She decided to reply after swallowing another sliced meatball.

"Sorry, it's against my religion to pay attention to idiots when I'm having good food."

"Riel. How do I convert?"

"Easy, just don't mind assholes. Anyway, thanks for letting me know. Not that there are manaless dishes here anyway. He's just being an ass."

"I will still report him as a security risk if that's ok with you."

"Sure. I just hope he doesn't send another teenager for me to crush."

"Good evening," a new voice said.

Ilar was standing behind her. Maybe she should start paying attention to her surroundings when she was eating.

Or maybe people should just get off her case or she'd start hitting them with a sword.

"Belated congratulations on your victory. You have demonstrated Threshold's discipline and skill beyond what I expected."

"Hope I didn't ruin your plan with this little stunt," Nesta joked.

“Not at all! Not at all,” Ilar replied, and she spotted a hint of viciousness in his smile.

He waved his hand. The rapid fire of Vietnamese died down around them. Raiders talked fast. They could also do that while eavesdropping on everyone’s business, especially the B ranks, so she assumed Ilar wanted some privacy.

The enclaves would detect the mana barrier though. Nestra wondered if it breached etiquette. Ilar either knew, or he didn’t care.

“Let’s just consider this an appetizer of the messages to come. Considering Manh, that little twat is pushing the Council of Elders to reject us wholesale so yes, he is a security risk. It will have implications for the rest of the trip. We will travel out to the Steel Realm portal world tomorrow for an inspection. The purpose is to assess how much resources we can pull out of it with proper mining equipment.”

“Will we be taking the ship?” Derek interrupted.

“No, our guests will be guiding us on foot. It isn’t too far.”

Derek nodded before returning to his plate.

“Chandra and her team will be going in with us. Watanabe and the enclavers will clear the world and provide security. I have full confidence that we will be more than enough to make that place secure. Unfortunately, it means you three will be left out.”

Ah yes, none of them could get in.

“You will spend the night there. The Patriarch will make the rest tent available to you for the duration of your stay. You will use this opportunity to conduct a survey of the available equipment while you wait.”

So that was what Fox Mask’s message had been about. They must have known

“Wouldn’t it be safer for us to wait at the compound?” Derek asked.

Nestra had to agree.

“We will also slow you down,” she added.

“Yes, however Manh will be confined to the compound by order of the patriarch. He is being disciplined. You will be safer with us, not to mention the negotiation team isn’t that fast.”

He chuckled.

“They’re not raiders.”

“Alright.”

Ilar was being awfully polite by justifying his choices. Things had to be going well.

“It looks like Chandra could use some back up. Enjoy the meal and be sure to get some rest. We leave at dawn tomorrow.”

“Can we bring our weapons?” Nestra remembered to ask.

“Of course. Full gear. And by the way, be sure to return to your quarters together, just in case.”

He gave Nestra a lingering look like she was some kind of naughty rebel and not someone who had worked in one of Threshold’s most disciplined forces for years.

“That includes you, Miss Palladian.”

“I am not my aunt,” she reminded him.

“Yes, that is correct. I should have guessed from the professional report you’ve given me.”

He gave her an assessing look.

“We already had a team of legal experts weigh on the Sword King’s laws. Your opinion aligns with theirs, although they went into more details. Your statistical approach to case law does you credit. Well done. If you want a recommendation for cadre training, I would consider giving you a recommendation.”

“That sounds like it could lead to a desk job. I’m a stabby girl.”

“Hah! For now, but perhaps you will want a calmer environment... eventually.”

He meant when her body failed her as age set in.

“Well, enjoy the rest of your evening!”

He was gone. Nestra reluctantly refused one of the glasses of liquor despite their intriguing smell. She couldn’t risk it. Desserts were offered soon after while the various groups started to mingle. She was ready to go when, to her surprise, Patriarch Nguyen himself came to her with two elders staying at a respectable distance.

The mood shifted in the room. The susurrus of conversations lowered in a way even she noticed, which meant that everyone was trying to listen on. The patriarch wouldn’t have it though. With a wave of his hand, mana formed a blur around them, distorting sounds as if they were under water. It was a different technique from what Ilar had used.

“Good evening. You are... Miss Palladian, yes? You are the daughter of Hector Palladian.”

It didn't sound like a question. The patriarch gave her a polite smile which dulled the edge of his question. He was telling the entire room that this was a friendly meeting.

"Yes," she replied.

"Are you here representing your house?"

"Ah, no, I am here as my own person. I can get you in touch though."

"Oh? I assumed that you were close to your family despite your circumstances. Your style certainly matches his, although, he was always more direct."

"You know my father?"

"We fought side by side in the first expedition," the patriarch replied with a smile, "and with Deborah, of course, back when parts of this island still steamed from the heat of magma. I know he is still raiding. I will be looking forward to his ascension to the next rank with great expectations. It cannot be too long now."

Nestra had no idea. A-rank raiders were still so few, at most a hundred individuals on the planet. She had no idea her dad was considered a strong contender to join their hallowed ranks soon.

"I'll let him know. I'm sure he will be glad to hear from you," Nestra said without much conviction.

"I hope so. You are a credit to him. It is a great shame that you are without a core, but perhaps we will find a way to correct this before you are gray of hair. After all, the rest of you works perfectly."

He chuckled, but Nestra didn't find this very funny. It would solve so many of her problems, including with her family... and yet she would also feel like a sellout, joining the ranks of the callous and the oppressors. It was... a weird feeling.

"I heard there is some research done since some of the more dangerous worlds host monsters capable of inflicting core damage," Nestra said without much conviction. "I guess we'll see."

"I certainly hope so. Extend your congratulations to your father. I would also like to get in touch with him, and your family, as you offered."

"I'll make it happen."

"Good. We can all grow stronger through proper cooperation."

After a few polite platitudes, the patriarch left Nestra surprised and confused. Talking to her with respect was... certainly a bold move. No wonder Manh was at odds with the patriarch's

decision. The older man was going against the elitist values they'd promoted for decades. Was he trying to usher his entire enclave into a golden age of not being complete cunts?

But then, why were his people fucking stealing from Threshold? That didn't sound like a very sensible strategy.

Nestra shrugged. Maybe it was a faction thing. She'd leave the sorting out to someone else.

"Everything ok?" Derek asked her.

"He's interested in making contact with my family. My parents are kind of a big deal."

"That's... good, I suppose?"

"Better than a blood feud for sure."

A shiver crawled up Nestra's spine. Did people here even have blood feuds? They might.

It felt good to be moving again, albeit in her human body. The Wellington suit cooled her while the group moved swiftly over a jungle trail, gleams leading the way with preternatural grace. Chandra Satya puffed by her side. Nestra cast the beautiful gleam a worried glance. She was clearly struggling.

"You ok there? Need help?" Nestra asked.

"How... how can you carry all that gear on your back... and not fall over?"

"Practice, and the suit has servos."

"Damn... I should have jogged more."

Chandra was the sort of D-class who only gets passively stronger from meditation. She was fit and would probably outdo most baselines on the planet, but she lacked the mana control required to properly infuse her body with mana. The pace set by the front gleams was intense. It was a miracle the two augs could follow.

"It won't be much longer now. I can carry one of your bags?" Nestra offered, but the sweaty negotiator refused with a shake of her head.

"The enclaves respect strength. I am no warrior, but I must still... still looks strong. Matter... matter of image."

"Alright. I got cold water if that helps."

"Fuck yes."

Nestra allowed herself a smirk. It paid to be prepared! She allowed herself a bite of chocolate energy bar as a treat when the path crested the incline they'd been climbing all morning. A dense fog made visibility difficult. She could see a mist-covered valley extending in front of her. By the side, the raiders were talking over a warming pot of boiling water. It must have been the equivalent of a slow stroll for them. She removed her hood. The cries of distant birds heralded the coming of a great roar. It was quite far. None of the gleams reacted.

She checked the safety of her gun just in case. One of the enclavers frowned at her, like she was insulting their ability to defend her or something. Well, maybe they were right. Nestra still wanted to be ready.

Despite her misgivings, there were no surprise attacks from hidden monsters. Only maddened creatures from freshly breached portals would be suicidal enough to try anyway. Fifteen minutes later, the group climbed down the hill. Chandra sighed in relief.

Nestra wanted to tell her not to be too happy since she'd be climbing it back up in a couple of days but the poor woman looked so happy. There was no need to piss on her parade.

After another hour, the sinuous trail led to a pit. To Nestra's surprise, it looked natural, with natural cliffs falling to an expanse completely devoid of trees. Meager patches of grass surrounded an empty spot where the permanent portal would soon come to life. There was a sort of tent structure planted at the side. It looked like the sort of temporary structure Threshold used for relief effort. It wouldn't be much but there would be amenities. Interestingly, a patch of flowers extended from one of the sides like a well-tended garden. Patriarch Nguyen explained that it was his wife's pet project.

"Sometimes when I raid, she would wait for me here. She set up the garden so she would have something to do."

He looked at the colorful flowers with pride and fondness. Nestra made a note not to pick any while they waited.

She and the two augs stood to the side while the two groups made one last gear check. A briefing followed, mostly aimed at Chandra and her aides. The portal popped to life right on time. The sweet radiation invigorated Nestra, though she took great care not to show it.

"Do not wander outside of the crater," Patriarch Nguyen said as a last warning. "There are traps meant for monsters. My sentries will protect you but do not take any unnecessary risks please."

"Thanks."

Nestra watched them cross over with some more longing, until she remembered that she would infiltrate this den the very same night in her true form. She just had to be careful around the gleams. Giddy, Nestra entered the room. It took her exactly three seconds to figure out why the patriarch's wife — and shouldn't she be the matriarch? — had preferred

to spend time outside. The place stank of plastic and it was hot enough for a slow baked Nesta.

“Riel,” she swore.

“I’ll turn on the solar panel on the ceiling,” Weiwei laughed. “Just hold on. This is a standard issue relief tent. They have air conditioning.”

“Technology be blessed.”

“You two get started on the machine inventory. I’ll make this dump livable.”

Nesta was only too happy to accept. She unzipped the flap leading to the garden first. They could have a look on their way. It looked gorgeous enough from afar! She breathed in the floral perfume with relish, but soon, something attracted her gaze. Derek, too, had stopped. The earth had been disturbed a few paces in front of them. Something pulsed there.

“Hey, I feel ma—”

A shock. Nesta was pushed to the side. A dull explosion. An angry whistle. A sting on her forehead, more a shock than true pain.

She fell on her side. Suddenly, the world was a rich tapestry of colors, of mana. The jangled mess of smells turned into a precise tapestry with the sun-beaten dust as background, then the flowers, then just a tinge of human blood, soap, and fresh sweat. The weight on her chest, which had been overwhelming a moment before, now gave room to a very annoying lightweight thing with no right to touch her.

“Hsss.”

Powerful muscles answered her call. A hand like a vice closed on the dazed aug’s arm, encircling it almost entirely. That hand was gray.

Oh, shit.

Nesta’s Skin tasted the metal of the augs and found it utterly uninteresting. The sheath of her claymore dug into her back.

Oh, SHIT.

Ok focus focus focus can’t stay here like this need her human mask where is it where IS IT?

There, in the dimensional space. Bleeding. A gash on its forehead. It was... viable. Probably. She felt she could call it. She just wasn’t sure it was a good idea. Screw it, no choice. Worst case scenario, she’d just turn back and then make a run for it. With a barest effort of will, she reverted back to her human shape.

Never had she regretted a decision so quickly and so completely.

“Oooooooooow. FUCK.”

“Blood detected? Nestra? Nestra, are you okay?”

Blood fell on her left eye in thick rivulets. Her head rang like a cathedral bell bodied by a runaway train. She wanted to puke. And she wanted to lay there. She was going to lay there.

“Shit. Trap. Hold on, I’ll get Weiwei and the first aid kit. Don’t move!”

She gave him a thumb up, not trusting that the first thing going through her lips wouldn’t be her breakfast. Ow, that hurt. She resisted the urge to touch her forehead. Derek raced through the flap. Her mind swam but she was pretty sure he had to, errr, what was SoP? Check for foes? She was too stunned to remember. And then it hit her.

She’d died. Her human body had died, or at least it had been close enough that her psyche had been catapulted back into her true form. Probably before half her head got blown off. Shit, someone had technically killed her.

Oh, they were going to regret it.