

An air limo picked Nesta up near one of Threshold's rare hotels. When she stepped in, she realized there were more levels of luxuries in life than she'd been expected. This wasn't a fancy means of transportation designed to give corpo execs a sense of superiority for working ninety hours a week. No. Those were entirely too pedestrian. This was Shinran's personal car. It even had custom made interior design, athmo, rare leather upholstery... The works.

"Riel, is this Champagne?"

It was Champagne from the Champagne region of France. There was also caviar from the Black Sea. Shit, Nesta didn't even know they still made some! She had gobbled the small pot by the time the limo flew over the eastern district.

She remembered going there a few times as a kid, back when she was an up and coming striker prospect. The richest and most affluent gleams kept their compounds here, secluded from the hoi polloi and each other by tall hedges barded with enchantments and security cameras. It was a place of privilege, but mostly, it was a place of exclusivity. Those who stayed there valued their privacy at the cost of money. A ton of money. It wasn't a surprise that Shinran would have his own domain.

Damn, it was weird how he managed to keep his bonze persona with all the obscene luxury he had on display. Maybe he used the city's wealth? She could see the top of his manor from here: it looked like a multi-floor pagoda. Or a temple. Orange pillars emerged from the canopies of old ginkgo trees. Very nice.

This place didn't even have roads that she could see. Either you flew in or you were too poor, she guessed. Or too weak.

"I can jussst swim through the walls anyway," she grumbled.

The hover limo descended a separate spot near the main house, one of the few visible concessions to modernity. She spotted the steel cylinders she associated with hidden gun emplacements, which made sense. Shinran wasn't always here, and he was bound to have fancy guests. Also, it wouldn't look good if Threshold's protector couldn't even protect his own home, even when he was away.

Nesta nodded to herself. Obviously she was justified in having a naval gun at home. Even Shinran agreed with her. She stood when the limo landed without a sound, the door opening to the scent of osmanthus flowers. Incidentally, osmanthus syrup was delicious with alcohol.

Shinran was missing, then he was here, stepping outside of his temple den through a wooden panel.

"Welcome! Welcome. Come in, please."

The interior was much more sober than she expected with how deceptive appearances were with this man. Minimalist and zen furniture gave the large rooms a neat appearance. The

mood was contemplative. Shinran wasn't. He had ditched his usual monk regalia in favor of a sensible cargo shorts and shirt combo that showed the wiry build of fast raiders.

"Do you want something to eat before we begin?"

"No. I have waited for too long," Nestra replied eagerly. "Ssshow me."

"Then follow me. Technically, I could do this everywhere but I don't want people to learn."

The two stepped down several sets of stairs to a basement of concrete and electronics. This was the heart of the mansion, and also its safe haven given the thickness of the security doors. Shinran led her into a completely empty gray room.

"This is where I usually start."

He waved his hand, and a portal appeared in mid air. Nestra felt the world split in a violation of everything she knew about portal worlds. Reality didn't merge. Instead, a ... something... some kind of tool? Something dug a cylinder through the many worlds, splitting them without harming them. If she was an artist operating through osmosis, this was more of a highly precise surgery.

"Huh!"

As an Aszhii, Nestra saw the opening as a perfect circle shimmering with silvery mana. A human would see a pulsating flower, its edges thick and ebbing like the sea at low tide. Reddish light painted the naked room in bloody swathes. Nestra made to touch the magnificent yet horrid thing.

The amount of power required to keep that thing open...

"My personal portal," Shinran commented far too casually for having broken the rules of the world. "The power to open it appeared when I asked for ways to grow stronger. That was some time ago."

"Not a portal. Incision... A door. It is... you do not understand."

"I admit this is a rather unique look."

"You do not understand," Nestra said.

She changed back to her human form, but kept her mask on. The advanced ceramic thing didn't fit so she was forced to keep it up with her hand. She stepped through the portal with casual ease. Beyond was a short corridor made of some sort of metal, dimly lit by red lights. Her human eyes couldn't see much more than that.

"See?" she asked before changing back.

"Oh..."

The patient man waited for Nestra to elaborate, but she had nothing to add.

“I don’t know what it means, really. I just think... portals are natural occurrences and this... isn’t?”

“You are right, this opening is not natural, although there are still debates as to the origin of portals.”

Nestra wished she could have asked Seth but like with most information on other worlds, her goofy brother was surprisingly serious when it came to keeping those secrets. Nestra didn’t wait though, she stepped into the corridor, in her true form this time.

It was made of some sort of steel. Sober writing on the wall, in white letters, looked like directions. They shifted from one script to another when she looked away. Some letters were vertical blobs, others were like a series of blade strikes. The red light came from bulbs placed near the ceiling. She could barely feel any mana and what she felt was weird, more complex. As if fire and light were ingredients and this was the cooked version. She shook her head.

“Forward. This place is safe,” Shinran said, his voice muffled. “You have no problem breathing rarefied air, yes?”

“I’m fine,” Nestra replied.

There was air here, it just wasn’t earth air. A slight draft cooled her back. The corridor led to a massive lobby, empty except for dust. Lines etched the metal. On the side, a strange contraption had burst from the ground like a desiccated flower with branches bearing tatters of fossilized fabric. Nestra realized it was a seat. A seat for a small creature with four arms.

“Damn. Is this the realm of another species?”

“Perhaps,” Shinran replied. “I have yet to really explore this place thoroughly.”

“Then...”

“Follow me.”

Other corridors led here, signs of other portal sites. The two walked to a gate that opened in complete silence. All was metal here, unadorned beyond white letters blinking from one shape to another. A wave of light covered her A-rank guide. Since he didn’t seem alarmed, Nestra stood still.

A series of harmonics filled the tubular platform they found themselves in. It sounded like AI-rendered voices and organ parts forming a complex melody. A moment later, Nestra felt movement. Metal sheets slid down: windows that revealed a narrow tunnel on both sides.

Nestra felt movement.

“A subway?”

Shinran shrugged.

“Or a train. It will lead us to the training center, and nowhere else. I never found any sort of control panel I could understand.”

He was right. There was nothing to interface with from either mundane or magical means. With the lightest hiss, energy fields flashed to life on the windows, just in time to show space.

Space, and kilometers upon kilometers of light gray metal extending to —

The tunnel again.

“What the fuck?” Nestra called.

“I still don’t know what this place is, only that it’s large. Very large.”

“You haven’t tried to find out more?”

“No,” Shinran said somberly. “I am... very concerned about security measures. This place looks entirely automated. When you see what they can do...”

Nestra thought that if an A-rank was concerned the security could dust him, she should probably refrain from moving through the walls. This place was weird in her space sight anyway. It felt too structured to be natural, as if realities had been layered here by design. It was scary to think about.

It took about ten minutes for the tram to arrive. Gauging the speed, she believed they might have traveled about 40 kilometers. The arrival lobby was as large as a delivery warehouse, though just like the previous spot, it was mostly empty.

“You can return by yourself, by the way. We tested it with a friend,” Shinran said in a low voice.

Nestra wasn’t sure why he whispered but she, too, didn’t feel like raising her voice in this place. His words drifted through her brain without impact anyway, because one of the walls was moving, or rather, a vid was playing on it. Nestra was sure it was one although it gave the perfect illusion of depth, but her sight told her it was wrong. An illusion. Writings in shimmering script flashed on a loop while the previous choir and organ mix played in the background. She got a feeling this wasn’t normal. Were all the walls supposed to be like this? It would explain why the surroundings were so plain. They weren’t supposed to be seen anyway.

“Some sort of error message?” she hazarded.

“What?”

“The writings here, some sort of error message?”

“I don’t know, Crescent. Looking at them makes my head hurt. The music as well, if I listen for too long.”

“It’s not music,” she objected. “It’s a language.”

She could almost feel it, but her mind was missing a key element. Strange meanings pulled on her Mask even as it was hidden in her dimensional shadow. Unfortunately, the mask was too basic for now. It didn’t understand. She didn’t understand.

“If you say so. Perhaps your species is more adapted to this place than I am.”

Another shape on the ground made her shake her head. Another floor panel was partly broken and inside, there were metal shapes and tattered fabric of another piece of furniture, this one much wider.

“No, this is a, errr, modular space. There were various scripts flickering in the corridor when we arrived, and see? There are seats for different sizes and physiognomies hidden under the floor. We’re in a facility designed for multiple species, and the choir song thing is the main language.”

Yes, Nesta was pretty sure she had it.

“Maybe some sort of training center?”

“A fully automated training center catering to different species? Sugoi desu ne... Hmm. So. I think you must be right. That said, where are the other people?”

“This place looks mothballed. Or it’s functioning at basic level.”

“I shall leave this question to you. Now follow. We must grow stronger, Crescent. For mankind.”

Nesta shrugged. A training center? With this level of tech, it ought to be pretty solid. She couldn’t wait.

That left a ton of questions as she walked deeper into the complex, through corridors and hallways in the same gunmetal. Who had built this place? How did it power itself? Were they really in space, or in some weird sub planet thingie? That wouldn’t be surprising considering the only B-class world she’d visited moved around a black hole. Mostly, she was curious and concerned about the tech.

So far, all the worlds they’d visited showed very low levels of technology compared to mankind. That gave Nesta some hope, because Threshold and quite a few other major enclaves were in the process of melding magic and science to give human raiders an edge. In her mind, mankind had the advantage when it came to applying technology to raiding, but

a brief visit in this abandoned facility just proved her wrong. It wasn't just that it had made Shinran stronger, though that in itself had immense value.

It was doing it at scale. The multiple corridors, the cast waiting room. Technology was never about having one wunderwaffe. It was about mass production, logistics, systems and so on. One exo armor was ok. An army of raiders wearing exo armor? That would be something else.

This place was apparently meant to manufacture A-rank raiders like Shinran, and they'd only visited a small part of it. Forget the petty projects Threshold could manage as a single city state in a recovering world. Some civilizations could train a person to be the strongest of their race in a matter of years? And do huge batches as well?

She just prayed the Gray Demons were unique in the way they could travel between planes, but seeing as Shinran had casually punctured several dimensions to reach this place, she wasn't sure anymore.

What was the incursion, really? Could those lizard things that had almost taken over return? Now, Shinran's decision to include her made a lot more sense. If invaders attacked earth, what would she choose to do?

That wasn't even a question. She kind of liked humans. All her best friends were humans.

Invaders though?

Free range hunting. She licked her lips. Wait, no. An invasion would be bad.

Did Shinran know something she didn't? Nestra shook her head. She should stop seeing conspiracies everywhere.

"We're here."

While the path had been linear so far, now they entered a large atrium with several floors reaching to a well-lit ceiling. The gray was still present, but there were what looked like planters near the wall that might have contained living vegetation a very long time before. Only cracked earth remained now. Despite the abandoned and empty feeling of the whole place, Nestra still felt serenity in the slick lines, the pleasant lighting and the way the sounds of their footsteps echoed across the place. Whoever designed this place gave a subtle yet present attention to making it welcoming. It made Nestra wonder about the Spartan surroundings they had experienced so far. Something told her it wasn't supposed to look like this. It was as if she was seeing the back of a theater production, all cheap wood and paint and racks of disguises rather than the pleasant lie of the show itself. The thought comforted her. Although Shinran and his friends were (probably) the only humans to ever step foot there, it still bled humanity through its design choice. Not the species. The attitude.

"Over there," Shinran said. "That counter. I'll talk aloud and they will set up a course for you."

"They?" Nestra asked.

“I have to call the local AI something, yes? The first time I came here, the lights on the counter blinked after I aimlessly ambled for a minute. I believe we are being monitored. Hello! Sorry, I usually ask in Japanese but I think it works with every human language. Anyway. Hello, I would like to set a course for my friend here.”

A choir song answered. It didn't sound very positive.

“Yes, I would like to confirm that she is with me. Please set up the course.”

A wave of light washed over Nestra, who yelped from the intrusion. Suddenly, the lights in the lobby turned red. Alien songs turned into a low, dangerous hum.

“Wait, wait! She is with me! Yes, I know she's not human! Please?”

Fuck, if that place wanted Nestra dead...

BEEP.

The lights returned to normal. Nestra didn't allow herself a sigh of relief just yet. She was merely surprised to be still in one piece and, say, not evaporated by some mind-boggling security measure. Meanwhile, Shinran was arguing with an organ.

“I take responsibility for her. My species needs us to be strong. Please let her through.”

Behind the counter, a wall slid open to reveal a pedestal upon which an orb sat. It sounded like a yes to Nestra. To her relief.

“Good, good. Aaaaaah shimatta. I am sorry, Crescent-san. I think I may have made a mistake here. The machine has not reacted like this with anyone else so far!”

“Well, they were human.”

“In any case, ah, sorry, please go in. I will conduct my own practice, and be ready for when you return.”

Despite her misgivings, Nestra still entered the room. The door panel slid shut behind her. She placed her hand on the pedestal while feeling very silly.

Why had the facility not reacted to her before? She thought she knew why: it wasn't looking for her, and so it didn't see her. The Aszhii resistance to mechanical observation worked even on advanced systems, but it didn't work well enough to fool the machines: they'd still detected her when scanning her. It was a warning, but also an invitation. If she were smart... but no, no. It was far too soon for her to explore around. let them teach her first.

Runes appeared in the air in front of Nestra. Once again, she gasped. They were in Aszhii.

“Emergency sector commander override accepted.”

Invasive species training order accepted.

Subject: Monochrome Weaver.

Base capabilities assessment: ERROR, scanning inconclusive.

Please place a non-destructive appendage on the console.”

Nestra forced herself to exist more so she could give the base a read. It was probably fine. She didn't think an automated training AI counted as a dangerous leak. If it did, well, fuck it. She wanted to grow stronger.

A part of her was annoyed it understood Aszhii. This was the language of the People. Only the People may speak it. Blasphemy!

“Base capabilities assessment: ERROR, no reference.

Assessment required.

Building training course... built.

Please step in when ready.”

“Well, it's a good thing I brought my sword,” Nestra thought.

She stepped in. The world blurred around her.

Mana, lots of it. The scent of wet earth and exotic flowers. A garden of purple blooms shining in the dark warm night. Tall humanoids standing all around her, many taller than she was, with long thin ears bobbing in surprise. The sight made her mind blank for an instant, but not too long. Shriill cries erupted all around her. In front, a temple-like structure stood proud. Delicate statues adorned every pillar. Two spearmen turned at the commotion.

A voice shouted inside of her head. It was a song, half Aszhii, half delicate harmonics turned harsh and vicious.

KILL

Nestra was surging forward before the echoes could fade from her consciousness. Momentum carried her past the pointed tips and she struck, once, twice. Blood stained the flower bed. Crimson on court dresses. She was past the column. Other guards. D-class, trained.

She was feeling power. Was she killing real people? Was she? Fuck! But no, it couldn't be. The space hadn't twisted to send her to another dimension. It felt hazy, unclear around her, not real. probably. A spear tip brushed against her shoulder.

Ow. Real enough. But not... underserved murder.

KILL

Nestra tore through the guards. There was a room at the heart of the temple, with guards forming a spear line. She jumped through a wall instead. Inside, she saw other revelers. Three powerful ones, a woman and two men. The older one surged towards her with a long,

sharp sword. The younger took off a saber and the woman called for lightning. Nesta tried to bat the old one's blade aside but he flipped it to avoid contact. He wasn't too strong but he was good. Real good! She narrowed her attacks to force him to deflect, using less of her strength and her full speed. Crimson lifeforce stained the man's green doublet. He was pushed back.

A saber went for her head. She kicked the man instead. Electricity hit her, coursing through her body like a tickle. She pretended to be stunned.

The men went for her heart and head. Very clean. At the last second, Nesta parried the sword to her chest. Her armguard blocked the saber. It still hurt. Lots of power behind those swings.

She thrust her blade in the old man's chest. The other two screamed. Another saber slice. Block. Use her strength to unbalance. Move in. Kill. The woman screamed, all the mana in her budding spell turning into a wave of power that smashed chairs, scoured the ground. Her rage and grief hit Nesta like a slap. Two fingers pointed forward and Nesta managed to land a dot of potential on the woman's chest.

Void met undirected electricity. Void won. The woman's ribcage burst open.

The world faded around Nesta.

Good mana. Light, crisp, that of the morning. A blue sky painted through by rays of gold. A forest in the distance. Flat-topped pyramids forming a metropolis challenging the encroaching jungle. The smell of blood. The cry of a woman. Or... a female thing, in any case. She looked very very thin and short, almost malnourished with bat-like features. Gray skin. A coarse shift covered most of her body.

RUN

Nesta didn't wait. An alarm blared behind her, well, at least Nesta thought it might be one. Trills erupted as warriors emerged from everywhere, wearing red armor of woven leather strips. Javelins whistled past her ears. She jumped on a rope linking the ziggurat she was one with the next one, bypassing a group of spearmen who trilled with fury. Her balance was good enough to let her run, but soon her instincts screamed in alarm. She dove just in time to avoid a wave of projectiles. Something hit her arm though it failed to pierce the Skin.

To the side, one of the guards gave her a venomous glare as he loaded a bright-feathered dart into a blowpipe.

"Ffft!"

Nesta twisted midair. The shot went high. She hit the ground at a dead run. The blowpipe guy was C-rank, and not a pushover. She'd landed in the middle of the next pyramid. A dark entrance waited invitingly.

It was probably a maze inside that thing. Better not to try. She rushed up, past a yelping assembly of other creatures wearing feathered headbands. She sprinted across the flat top before loading herself with electricity. Her burst of speed came just in time to dodge another blow dart. More C-rank creatures were failing to keep pace with her but they had things to throw. Nestra was forced to veer unpredictably so she could dodge most of those. A javelin nicked her shoulder despite her high resistance. It stung.

RUN

She went over a third ziggurat. Beyond lie a small ring of smaller stone structures and a shanty. From the greatest pyramid, a horrible trill pierced through the morning air. It carried grief, rage, outrage, and pain without equal. Others echoed it. Nestra stole a glance back to see a tall creature holding above it the smaller form of a dead one, its blue blood dripping down muscular arms. The cry was so strong that for an instant, the city held its breath, and Nestra took a few triumphant steps towards the jungle and the haven it offered.

And then the city roared. Just as Nestra rushed down the last steps, all the creatures around her rushed her with fanatic rage. A mass of the beings surged from every doorsteps in a mass of clawing flesh eager to rush at her. Their warcries made the stone under her feet buzz. She dodged a mob of reaching creatures and dove through the walls of the first wood structure.

It smelled bad inside. She was in and out, but they found her. They were everywhere. She ran through alleys, over roofs where javelins followed, through a stone structure standing empty and into a group of people she bowled over. She used momentum to teleport past a group of soldiers, who shot at her back, hitting the civilians grabbing for her. Darts hit old people. A javelin skewered a woman who still grabbed at her with bloodied hands, a bloodied mouth, eyes full of murder. Nestra dodged and released electricity into the next group of soldiers to give herself a window. She moved right, she moved left. She walked through more walls into more squirming, grasping, biting hordes of maddened creatures. Some of the C-rank had managed to corner her now that she was slowing down. They came at her with knives, so she killed them with her sword. They came at her with spears next. She was almost there. It was... exhilarating. Standing alone against the world and *winning*.

A wall of soldiers made for her, with a second line behind for after she'd teleported.

Nestra released a burst of shadow-aspected mana. The void version was dark and hungry. It spread through the crowd like an angry cloud, scaring them for a second before fading under the vengeful sun. It was enough. She was past the first line. She was past the second line, then over a cesspit of stinking refuse and into the jungle.

The world faded again.

Strong mana. Heat. The smell of heated metal and beyond that, the pungent stench of giant insect blood. A creature in heavy black armor grabbed Nestra. It was squat and weird, with long limbs. Nestra spotted mandibles moving under the heavy helmet. An acrid smell assailed her nose. She didn't hear anything but click, but she could guess what it wanted.

She was surrounded by wounded creatures bearing the same dark armor. In front of her, a thick line of similar warriors fought a pitched battle against similar entities in red armor at the foot of some active volcano. Nesta wasn't a general but even she could tell the black armor dudes were fucked. They were cornered, outnumbered, and she could see a mage working behind enemy lines to heal wounded red warriors. The opposing force also boasted a powerful C-rank commander who killed soldiers on her side with methodical strikes of hooked hammer. She took it all in with a glance.

VANQUISH

Could she rally her side?

Absolutely the fuck not.

Nesta was a disruptor, not a commander, and she knew exactly what to do to win this. With powerful strides, she sprinted towards the thick of the battle. Soldiers on her side looked back with alarm.

She used momentum to bypass most of the frontlines. Red armor soldiers jumped her as she reappeared, but powerful strikes of her void-infused sword cleaved through their armor like butter. Yellow ichor sprayed her Skin, which complained a bit.

The wound in her shoulder stung. It wasn't closed yet. She was still... wait, she was still wounded? From the previous simulation?

VANQUISH

The mage noticed her. It raised a shield made of life mana, a very curious construct. She would mention it to Valerian. It was useless. Even as soldiers rushed her, and the commander fell back with a hiss, she charged herself with electricity. A bolt thundered on the shield but didn't pierce through. Wounded warriors formed a wall to block her.

She used momentum again. The electricity blast raged through the assembled warriors. The shield cracked. Using precision, she stabbed through the narrowest chink, perforating the healer from side to side. Void mana poisoned his innards. His healing magic failed to repel it.

The shield failed.

Nesta opened the armored healer like a can. Her blade hit the ground, then she was a whirlwind, cutting soldiers where they stood. Many of them were on the weaker side of C-rank but they were absolutely no match for her. Too bland and predictable. More power filled her. It was... weird power. Mostly undirected. But it was power nonetheless.

This told her the creatures were probably fake, but the mana wasn't. Her painful shoulder confirmed much of it was real.

The commander struck, a powerful overhead blow that she pushed to the side and down. Basalt shards rained on them both. He was very strong. Her counter ripped on the side of a

magically reinforced pauldron. A skill? probably a skill. She wished she could loot his corpse to feed the Skin but it didn't seem like it was an option.

Nestra grinned. That was fine. She was having fun. She was learning.

The commander tried to dig his weapon in her flank. She blocked, feet digging grooves in the black rock. She ducked under a second strike in the same spot, finding the edge of its shield. Her strike pushed him back but his armor held. He'd moved at the last moment.

Her abyssal eyes met his compound ones, deep under the helmet.

"Ah, I love defensive fighters. So fun to peel open!"

It spat a cloud of pheromones in her direction. It smelled like blood. Nestra didn't teleport, didn't use her spell.

She was going to carve it up the old fashioned way.

Weak mana. The familiar smell of charred meat and offal. A strange, animal sweat. Dim light. Gray sky visible through broken windows. Nestra was tired. The commander's fight had been long and tiring, and by the time she was done, her side had managed to claim victory by enduring the assault. A painful gash on her thigh was still knitting itself back together.

She was in a ruined building made of large bricks. Shapes squatted around her, stocky humanoids with bone ridges where the hair ought to be. They had almost flare faces. Padded armor clung to their muscular shapes. their eyes were flat, round, and worried. They were waiting on her. Helmets waited on the ground. They were sweating. It smelled of fear.

LEAD.

One of the strange creatures pointed at a nearby tower, out the gash that used to be a window. A flag was there.

Nestra looked at the quiet, resigned bunch. They were not real but... their model definitely was. There was something intense and desperate in the posture of people doomed to die, yet unable to avoid it. They gripped their weapons like lifelines. Those were repeater crossbow, really nice with pulleys and everything. She realized she had one as well. And a tower shield. And small metal pineapple. She had a pretty good idea about what those were.

"Let's try something."

Nestra signed for the squad to gather. They stood with varying degree of enthusiasm, fastening their helmets as they went. She signed she would take point. With natural ease, they gathered in a circle at her back. All their shields pointed towards the side where the tower was.

“Huh.”

How did those weird aliens know MaxSec signs? Probably part of the exercise. She led her merry band out into a devastated city. Smoke emerged from distant buildings. The retort of strange guns came and in the distance, there were flames.

There were corpses wearing her side's uniform among the debris of the nearest street. They taught her that the flimsy armor her allies wore was completely useless, and the helmet as well since the bodies had sprouted feather shafts. The shields looked like they could take a beating though. She studied the distant shape of the tower, searching a way through the ravaged urban hellscape.

There was a good path a little to the side that would give them cover for most of the approach. She assumed the tower's immediate surroundings were heavily populated.

Nestra moved again, only for her intuition to scream. She pivoted and lowered her shoulder at the same time. With a sound of breaking wood, something punched through her shield. It didn't manage to get through the skin underneath, fortunately.

Still stung a bit.

Nestra lifted her crossbow before the squad could react. She gauged where the quarrel had come from, and found a glint of metal in a nearby window. She shot before the next bolt could land. She missed. She was just a bit low.

Crossbows didn't have recoil, dammit!

Her squad reacted though. Together, they lodged enough quarrels through that opening to silence it. Nestra wasn't sure they'd gotten the unlucky sniper and she didn't overly care. With a gesture, her squad rushed towards a nearby building to take cover.

There were charred corpses inside. The other side, from the melted crossbows they held. They didn't wear a uniform.

Nestra didn't like that. She still led her soldiers farther in, past a demolished building and along the broad facade of a collapsed structure. It might have been a church, or a very large factory. She couldn't tell. Nothing was left of the architecture but rubble.

As they walked along a low wall, Nestra saw movement on the tower side. She gestured for the squad to take cover just as the first bolts smashed into the wall and the raised shields.

“Move up,” she said.

Slowly, the squad crawled forward under a rain of projectiles, and this time, they were not very precise. The cover was excellent anyway. She stole a glance up.

A group of five or six creatures were pushing a stubby mortar thing towards them, above and to the side. A small railing provided cover to a group of fighters in drab cloaks. Nestra waited a bit, even as her squad moved up.

“On my mark, provide cover,” she said.

They put the mortar down. A young creature approached with a large ball in its strained arms.

“Mark.”

Nestra surged up and shot, soon followed by her soldiers. The foes yelped and panicked. The young one dropped the ball as he reached for his chest, which now sported a serrated quarrel.

Nestra pulled the pin on her alien grenade, throwing it immediately. The soldiers kept exchanging bolts even as the canon servants screeched in alarm. One of Nestra’s men fell dead with a bolt through the skull.

The grenade exploded. A fiery conflagration engulfed the canon and all those who had ignored the warning. Torched figures dancing a macabre waltz fell from the railings. Others died away.

The path was clear. Several soldiers kneeled by their fallen comrade. Even though this wasn’t real, there was something poignant about their quiet pain, something uncomfortably familiar.

“We can’t help. We got to keep going.”

They didn’t object, but one of them closed the eyes of the dead one. Maybe it was a universal gesture.

Again, her immersion in the sim was broken because it was just a little too realistic. It hit just a little too close to home.

She signed to move on. The squad followed her along desolate piles of rubble. They came across fresh corpses from both sides soon after. Nestra knew there was a war going, but the use of crossbows made the battlefield disturbingly quiet. Finally, they reached the edge of what appeared to be a fortified area. There were barricades on every street, and the fallen buildings were reinforced with stones when they threatened to open a gap. Nestra noticed sentries at the top of a nearby building, one of the more intact ones. It appeared quite solid. The creatures there looked the other way, towards the shortest route she could have picked, and where fires roared incessantly. The loud retort of mortars became more prevalent.

Nestra made the sign to wait. Clad in shadows, she sprinted across the open ground and to the base of the sentry building. Scaling the sheer walls was easy: damage offered all the footholds she needed.

There were three sentries on top. She dispatched them and then looked beyond to a fierce battle fought without words and without guns. Bolts whistled through the air as her side attempted to scale the high walls of the flag compound. Mortars and militia defended it with determination, peppering shield formations as they approached. It was a battle of attrition, bloody and merciless. Nestra found the access to the flag tower at the center of the main building pas a flight of stairs.

Now she just had to get her squad up. Fortunately, one of them had a rope he sent her using a hooked bolt. They slowly climbed with a wariness that told her they were exhausted. Finally, they gathered at the edge of the sentry tower's walls.

Nestra made the sign for grenades, then for aim, and then for ammo. They treated theirs with reverence and quite a bit of fear.

She signed to throw.

To her dismay, one of the grenades exploded mid-air. So that was why! The rest of them hit true though. Mortar shells stockpiles went up in flames in a great conflagration. Chaos spread through the militiamen. In the following screams, smoke, and confusion, Nestra led her squad through the enemy ranks and to the flag tower, shooting down anyone who came in their way.

The flag was only defended by a grizzled old creature with a knife. Nestra dispatched him easily. She touched the shaft.

The world faded.

Light. Good mana. Perfume, and lots of it. Nestra blinked. She was sitting in a tall chair, in a tent, facing an incredibly tall and thin humanoid with large liquid brown eyes. The creature was probably female. She wore exquisitely maid robes that covered her lithe shape in a long, flowing waterfall of pink fabric. A strangely shaped pot waited on a table between the both of them.

"And to what do I owe this visit?" the creature asked in a melodious voice that Nestra somehow understood.

MANIPULATE

Nestra needed to convince the creature to leave the tent with her.

"Hm. Hello?" she replied.

Something in Nestra's hesitant tone alarmed the creature. She reached for a bell.

"Ah, fuck it."

Nestra stood on the table, grabbed the creature by the throat and tossed her through the nearby fabric.

The world faded.

This time, there was nothing but gray space around Nestra, yet she was still standing. Space was bending in a weird way all around her though she wasn't alarmed. It had been doing so for the whole test.

Primary assessment complete.

Combat potential: immense.

Infiltration potential: immense.

Magic potential: great.

Leadership potential: average.

Social potential: none.

"Hey, someone said I have some leadership potential!"

It was the first time it happened! Nestra was so chuffed.

Recommendation: Assassin/Reaver training. Arcane training.

Limit testing assessment beginning.

Fire mana. A dusty plain swept by the winds under a merciless sun, bathing the world in a deathly embrace. A man, tall, thin, covered in bandages that dance like so many hair strands. Only his eyes were visible, and the pupils were slit like those of a cat. It removed two hand scythes from its back. They locked in front of him.

KILL

Nestra charged. She thrust with great power, but the twin scythes rose and locked the blade, stopping it clear.

Which was when Nestra stepped in, pivoted, and socked him in the ribs with an uppercut that sent him flying. The shock elicited a grunt of pain. Fire flew from his fingers, bathing Nestra who charged herself with electricity. She countered, and both combatants fell back, she, covered in flames, he, scoured by shadowy arcs.

"That tickled," Nestra said, and she used *momentum* to teleport behind him.

Nestra killed the mage first, then her blade found the throat of the assassin. She blasted the archer mid air while its arrow pinged on one of her horns.

“Ow! HEY!”

Those were really sensitive.

Nestra caught the knight’s blade, deflected it and used momentum to avoid a spear. A veil of shadow covered her retreat, then she went back in.

Squads of C-rank fighters were pretty easy. She needed... more. The lone duelists were the best. She was learning so much!.

Very high mana. A bedroom. A woman, waking up with a gasp, reaching for her sword. She was standing before Nestra could react.

KILL

Fencer. B-rank.

B-rank.

Nestra engaged her in a whirlwind of blows that devastated the chamber in moments. The female creature with long ears and a delicate frame battled her, grace and discipline versus power and unpredictability. Every feint, every trick Nestra knew flowed into each other in an unrelenting attack that prevented her foe from recovering. The air already cut at her exposed skin as they ravaged their ways throughout a luxurious mansion. Charged electricity kept the woman’s growing storm at bay but Nestra was falling behind. Time for a desperate gambit! Nestra rushed. She let the woman’s sword dig into her arm. She grit her teeth through the pain.

A blast at point blank range surprised the woman. Blood seeped from a deep wound in her torso, but it wasn’t enough to kill her. Damn B-rank resilience. Still, an opening! Nestra struck, batting the woman’s sword aside.

She thrust. The woman tried to parry, although it wouldn’t be enough. Nestra’s sword cut into throat.

And then, the sword burst in tiny, void-corrupted fragments.

The woman stabbed Nestra in the heart.

The world faded.

Test completed.

Calibration process suspended.

**Healing candidate.
Sending candidate back to the lobby.**

“No! Noooo! That piece of shit. Send me back! I’ll kill her!”

**Calibration interrupted by user: Emergency Sector Commander.
Test will resume once the candidate returns.**

“Crescent,” a polite voice said.

“Send me back, Shinran!”

He looked worried. Nestra realized she’d screamed at him in Aszhii. ARG! she was having so much fun but now she’d lost. LOST! Fucking shit gear that couldn’t take a fucking decent fight without falling to fucking pieces. This was bullshit.

“I cannot.”

“The fuck you can,” she replied in English, “you have clearance.”

“I do?”

“The machine says you do. It speaks my language.”

Shinran paused for a second, which was a really long time for an A-rank.

Please enter an identifier to create a user profile.

“NEZHRA!”

**Candidate ID entered: NEZHRA!
Identity accepted.
Unique user profile created.**

“Well, maybe you can have a conversation next time. For now, we must return,” Shinran said.

“But I’m not tired!”

“We have been here for over eight hours. Neither of us can afford to disappear for very long, Crescent.”

“Oh, right. Right. I can’t disappear or my family will have my ass. This place is amazing though!”

“We can raid again tomorrow, if you wish,” Shinran said with a smile.

He seemed very satisfied with the situation.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

“It was FANTASTIC! Even more fun than raiding.”

“Ah. I have been waiting for this for so long,” he said with obvious pleasure.

‘For what?’

His smile widened. It was not a nice one. The quiet bonze persona cracked and now, she spotted the red demon armor emerging from his skin under the casual shirt. There was a hint of madness in his gaze. Nestra realized he was a mirror of her, but she recognized something she didn’t particularly like: her own hubris.

“A kindred spirit,” he replied.