

Nestra walked in and breathed the sweet, nice scent of freshly baked pastry. It was warm and buttery and really, really inviting. Seth was behind the counter, tapping on a datasheet. He seemed old fashioned like that. Most coffee shops relied on drones but the man baked everything on site and he manned the counter himself. Nestra expected his unorthodox approach to spook off those who wanted to be left alone but, to her surprise, the place was packed on a weekday. Not just that. Delivery drones waited outside by the window.

The tall, gangly man smiled when he saw her. It lit up his whole face from thoughtful to genuinely happy. The unfettered emotion made Nestra's head spin.

"Hello hello! You are Nestra, I remember. My dessert pleased you enough to return, I see."

"You remember me?"

"Of course. I have a great memory for faces. Names, not so much. Ah, but what can I do for you today?"

"I was supposed to meet a friend..."

An old couple left hand in hand, freeing a spot near the back.

"Looks like you're in luck," Seth said. "Flat White?"

"Yes."

"I suggest my cardamome roll. There's a fresh batch coming up soon."

"Is this why the delivery drones are waiting?"

"Yes!" Seth replied with naked pride. "My creations are having a ton of success! The baking robots really make it easy to experiment with various ingredients, you know? I could spend HOURS in the kitchen just trying stuff."

"Nestra!" a voice said from behind.

She turned to see Stib walking in with a wan smile. The shorter girl had lost some weight and there were shadows under her eyes like fresh bruises, a weight on her shoulders that made her stoop a bit though the smile seemed genuine. Nestra returned it.

And then she faced Seth again.

It was like someone had opened the blinds and now she knew for sure that, the first time they'd met, Seth had not been flirting. It was like looking at the sun. Seth was transformed. He was sublimed. He was a romantic figure of a genius artist lounging casually against the counter, velvety brown eyes burning from an inner passion. He put the datasheet down and caressed his chin with an elegant finger. Stib blinked and her eyes followed the flexing muscles of his forearm. He caught her staring. She blushed.

“Why hello there, and welcome to the Sunflour. What can I do for you today?”

“Oh, uh, ah, I’m...”

“Should I leave you two alone?” Nestra asked half seriously.

“Oh no no no no sorry,” Stib protested.

Seth chuckled knowingly. Seth took their orders under Nestra’s vigilant glare, staying tame the whole time. The pair sat down in the recently freed spot to talk while they waited for their coffees.

“So... how have you been doing?” Stib awkwardly asked while Nestra was still considering her approach.

“Well enough. Been busy with training.”

“Oh? Really? Ah, hm, I wanted to apologize for cutting contact. I told you you should be more active and here I am, closing myself.”

“It’s fine,” Nestra dismissed with a wave of her hand. “Look, we both know I have trouble relating to people. It’s a problem when I’m trying to be social but the advantage is that the deaths of our people didn’t hurt me the way it hurt you. So, I get it. Did the Stibbons rally around their wayward daughter?”

“Yeah,” Stib chuckled. “They did it. I got the firm offer to work on drone support for the Blue River guild and... I’m gonna take it.”

“Good idea.”

“So... it’s really finished. MaxSec, I mean. Everything’s closed. After so long it feels really weird.”

Nestra shrugged. She was over it. Her main purpose for joining had always been to prove that she was worth it in her eyes, that nature had made a mistake in giving less than it had given her siblings. Now she had cool demon powers and a Nestracave and access to really delicious sesame jellyfish salad so the world was more in balance. And money. Of course, part of her serenity was due to a lack of interaction with hierarchical superiors and gleams in general but hey, she’d take it.

“It was just... such a long chapter of my life, you know? And I feel like it was closed without my consent. I wasn’t ready to move on...” Stib continued.

Nestra nodded to show her support.

“Sometimes I envy your mental resilience,” Stib finished with a bitter tone, though she dulled the barb with a wink.

"It's easy to accept unfairness when you believe life's been repeatedly unfair," Nestra wisely explained.

"I'm not sure this is a healthy approach."

"Like for you this is a violation of the reality of your life, all you believed has now collapsed and your life is in shambles but for me that's just a Monday."

"Holy shit, Nes."

"But don't worry! You can just roll with the punches. Like I was actually mentally readying myself to being crippled for life since, you know, I can't install augs without going crazy."

"Nestra..."

"Look, I even had a list of handicaps I could accept without killing myself. I was ok with losing a limb but not full paralysis, you see? It's all about... hmm... accepting that you're not in control and that life might just decide to fuck you over and the only thing you can control is your reactions to it."

Nestra peered into the face of mesmerized horror. A student by her side removed his visor.

"Jesus fucking Christ, lady."

"Not helping?" Nestra asked. "Damn, sorry, guess it doesn't work for everybody?"

"I can't tell if you need a hug, therapy, or all of the above," Stib forced out.

"Sorry. Anyway."

Seth took this moment to bring them their order along with a 'enjoy' as sweet as honey. Damn but could that bastard be suave when he wanted. That made Nestra extra suspicious so she glared at his back until he parried her silent accusation with a disarming shrug. She got the meaning.

So what?

"Tsk."

"This roll is so good!"

"It seems Seth is getting popular."

"Seth, huh? By the way, what did you decide in the end?"

Nestra explained her unchanged plan to assist with fifteen's resurrection. She still wanted to get at the assholes who had killed part of her team, though she didn't share this with Stib.

“No way, that’s too dangerous!”

“It is dangerous,” Nestra allowed.

“Not like that. The weapons and augs that the gangs had, they’re still there. Not all of it was destroyed because it never is. I bet they’ll resurface over the coming weeks in, well, hold ups and robberies. You’re going to come in fresh-faced with your light vest and catch depleted uranium.”

“Relax, we’re here to keep an ear to the ground, not to go after hardcore criminals.”

“If you come across an armed robbery, will you cower and wait?” Stib asked with a pointed look.

“You forget, fifteen is a fucking dumpster fire of a place. The only things worth robbing will be Gigun supply depots and those won’t be my problem. I doubt someone would pull out a walker weapon to steal from a food stand.”

“I’m just worried about your safety. In groups of two? Shit I wouldn’t walk in that cesspit in less than a squad of five with gleams on call. I hope you don’t get jumped on.”

“I can’t let it go, Stib.”

The short drone operator searched her expression. She passed a hand through her red hair and sighed. Nestra noticed that the nails were bitten, badly. She thought Stib had shaken off the habit. The past week must have been really trying.

“You mean... their death?”

“Just how callous it all is. I want to know who pulled the trigger on providing the gangs with weapons. Doesn’t matter if I’m not spearheading the investigation because that’s not my skill set anyway. I need to be there.”

“Just watch out for those civvies. You can’t trust them.”

Nestra chuckled.

“What?”

“My aunt and you, you’re really on opposite ends of the spectrum. She’s advised me to look into de-escalation.”

“Sure. Learn what you can to make sure things go smoothly. Just keep your hand on the handle. You got gear?”

“I made a requisition list and it seems it’s been accepted. I’ll have an electric disabler, pepper spray, a sedative needle gun...”

“Ok ok you can take down an entire street. What about surveillance?”

“Don’t think there are cameras.”

“You know what I mean. Drones. look, I’ll soup up something for you. You can’t just walk through two alleys and find yourself boxed in. I’ll set up a program so you have your eyes in the sky and it’s easy to operate. I can do it. I’ve had ideas... Not as good as a dedicated operator of course...”

“Honestly, Stib, I’ll take what you get me.”

“Alright. Yeah. Ok, so, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Do you... think I’m ready to date again? I mean, now?”

Nestra blinked at the non sequitur. Where the hell was this coming from?

“You want me, the aromantic person, to tell you if you should date? Sure as long as you feel good about it? Why?”

“The, hm, Seth, he left me his details.”

Stib waved her napkin, upon which that smarmy flirter had left a number. The rogue stood there selling a Victoria Sponge to a signified old lady with pointed questions, the very image of innocent competence.

“He’s kind of smooth...” Stib dreamily said.

“Well go for it, I can promise you I won’t compete.”

“Thanks Nestra, you’re a dear.”

Nestra was flush. Well not really, but on her way to be. The lizard skin was sold, as were the vials in record time. She was now over twelve thousand credits richer. Twelve. Thousand. Credits. In two nights. And that was just for risking her life doing something she loved anyway. She could buy anything, she thought, munching a piece of fruit marinated in honey. Like cream maybe. But more seriously, she had an issue.

Her armor no longer fit.

Her demon self was now taller than her human self by two whole centimeters. The difference shouldn’t have mattered but her armor set was such a tight, custom-made fit that she couldn’t properly operate in them. And that wasn’t the only issue. The demon’s arms were longer and a little thicker. Every piece of gear barely fit and they also limited her range of

movement. What she needed was something to wear. Something to protect her. Gorge had an answer for her.

Entry-level, standard issue armor for teenager D-class running their first gauntlets: five thousand creds.

Armor set suited for a woman her size?

Thirty-nine thousand.

It didn't even look good! Not to mention, it was likely she would keep growing for a while so her purchase would only be worth it for a little while. So far, Nestra had only drawn on her reserves once to buy Gorge's stuff. Right now, she knew she wasn't raising too many flags with HQ and the AIs they used to track suspicious behavior. Even if they did track her, all they would see would be her going to weird places on a whore bike in the dead of night, nothing too suspicious. Her Nestracave only had training equipment, some couches to chill and a freezer containing some monster meat. They would assume she was selling herself for money and using it to buy mana food. Her records would show she had a mana addiction of sorts, justifying everything. She had layers of protection between herself and the truth. Someone who kept digging would find enough to satisfy them at every level.

This changed if she suddenly withdrew enough cash to buy a second car. There could be questions. She would bet money Kim had her under AI surveillance. The woman was far too professional to forget basic precautions, especially when Nestra was supposed to work against Gigun's interests. Corps' influence ran as deep as their pockets.

She would have to use different defensive measures. She picked her burner.

"Can you get me potions? The flesh-mending kind."

"Sure but only D-grade. Five hundred a vial. They're not great though."

"Nice to see you care. I'll take four and five bullets as well. And an antidote if you have any."

"I'll need some time to get a general purpose antidote. Don't have a price yet either. I'll take the fee off your balance. Want the rest on a chit?"

"Yes."

"Will do. And there was something else. Can I call?"

"Okay?"

Gorge usually disliked calling. For some reason, using voice chat made him less of an asshole because he didn't get into Nestra's face that much. He was still a raging bastard though.

"What's up?"

“Don’t what’s up me bitch. I’m your elder.”

“Whatever.”

“You and respect. Fuck, I can’t believe I’m saying this. Look, you’re more a less a gleam, right?”

“Less but I can manage.”

“But can you pass off as one?”

“No. Don’t even got the eyes.”

“More like a unique quirk then? Don’t tell me. Anyway, I don’t know where you’re raiding but if you want more choice and better prices, there is a solution. In fact, it might profit both of us.”

“Do tell?”

“You could go mask.”

Nestra slumped into her couch. In demon form, the leather texture felt strange against her skin. Too sticky. Just like Gorge’s proposal.

“You’re kidding right? This isn’t a vid.”

“No, I’m serious. This really happens. There are over two hundred masked gleams in Threshold right now.”

“Losers and idiots. There’s no good reason to go mask. It’s a shit assignment.”

“There are at least two C-tier masks operating right now.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. You go mask, you can get a license to purchase stuff from Threshold’s armory. You also get to sell your goodies on the open market. Hell, you could even raid legally on top of... what you’ve been doing so far.”

Nestra considered the proposal.

Masking was a way for individual gleams to register as raiders for the city council without revealing their identities. There were even provisions so that only AIs would know of their civilian identities, and it took extraordinary circumstances for law enforcement to demand to know who they really were. Usually, suspicions of felony. The purpose was to allow corpo gleams to contribute to the city and be compensated for it. Sometimes, individual gleams from rival factions would cooperate using that system to protect themselves from publicity.

The thing was, it was completely stupid. Most high-profile gleams could simply not disappear for days on end without their families learning of it. It meant that the only people who did it were idiots no one wanted to bring on a raid or schemers needing ad-hoc coverage for an operation or two. Popular vids dramatized masks to make them seem much cooler than they really were. Like anonymous dark horses stealing the show from powerful guilds. Romance ones were especially fond of the mask plus female protagonist trope. The reality was usually disappointing.

Gorge's proposition had merit, however.

"I don't have the abilities to pass the exam just yet."

The truth was that Nestra had, in fact, the abilities to pass a D-class exam if barely, except for mana reserves. Hers were simply too low for now.

D-class classification was simple enough. One first had to display superhuman capabilities in terms of speed, reflexes, endurance, and power. Then one had to prove a rudimentary control of mana, which Nestra didn't have enough juice to complete quite yet. The last one was combat. She was rather confident about that last part.

D-class gleams basically used mana to enhance themselves. That was the bare minimum to become a raider. She knew that other paths, like crafters, used different prerequisites. That wasn't relevant to her.

A C-class gleam could use at least one affinity and they formed the beginning of a physical core. Nestra wasn't too familiar with that since it had been far away when she'd left the gleam ecosystem. B-class gleams started with a complete core and at least one of their body parts was so infused with mana it became 'exotic material' even at rest.

Aunt Claire said that A-class completely reforged their bodies when they 'ascended'. They were rumored to be immortal. They were a select few so far. Ascensions were still reported in international news.

That was still very far away for Nestra, assuming she had the potential to grow that much.

"If you can't do it at all it's fine. If you can, though, we may be able to help. See, I'm sure you're a busy bee, yeah? And maybe not the best negotiator in town. And by that I mean you fucking suck."

"Look who's talking."

"I can be charming when I'm not dealing with a pissant brat. And I do business with my balls and my brains, kid, not my feelings. Anyway, if you can get masked, we can handle business for you at no fee provided you let us buy a thing or two in your name, if you know what I mean."

"Best way to get flagged, asshole."

“I’m not talking about recreational drugs. More like antitoxins that work on dregs like yours truly. Lots of kids out there who can’t get them unless they suck up to gleam families. Ya know, the kind of deal that leaves them as retainers for life. There’s profit to be made and we can even be nice about it.”

“Sure. Whatever. That sounds good. I get the final call on what we buy.”

“Of course, we’ll need your ID to validate any deal in any case. Just keep it in mind.”

“Hmm.”

“Think about it. Legal raids. The market place. You can even attend conventions in a mask and look at those nice gleams frolicking and sucking each other’s dicks for social success. All good stuff, yeah? Delivery in progress. See ya next time and don’t fucking die on me you rabid golden goose.”

He hung up.

Was it too risky to go through testing in case they had secret ways to detect anomalies? Or was it too risky to go on without potions, defensive gear, knowledge and other resources? She needed data. More specifically, she needed to know how aware humanity was of her kind if indeed there was a kind. There was a specific way to do it.

The Pandora database.

While most guilds had their own knowledge base, including techniques and strategies, mankind had united enough to form a single, unified list of creatures. She knew the genus names of most dokkaebis she was facing because of extracts from Pandora. It was updated and managed by Gestalt, an Austrian A-class information broker for the good of all mankind.

It was also rather restricted.

Fortunately, she knew someone who had access to it. She had to try, but later. First, there was the question of tonight's raid. She had food preservation bags, a cooler. She was ready and eager.

Nestra looked down from her vantage point at the top of an office building. The nightly wind blew against her sports jacket.

She wasn’t ready. Not ready at all.

“That joker sent me to a guild portal?” she grumbled under her breath.

Pop up portals disappeared as soon as they were cleared and empty. Some portals, however, were permanent. They reappeared regularly with minor changes to their setups.

Perhaps the trails were not the same but the biome and enemies were. Guilds rented such spaces from the city who officially had the right to every portal on its territory. In theory. In practice, guilds could enjoy their portals in perpetuity unless they failed to contain them or went bankrupt. Those portals were harvested for materials and if there was one thing crafter gleams loved more than exotic material, it was a regular supply of the stuff.

That meant that gleams protected their permanent portals.

And that meant that she was going to infiltrate a secured compound.

Nestra watched the bunker below. It was a squat structure, more a glorified box than anything else. A high wall surrounded it on all sides and on that wall were the telltale signs of cameras and sensors. There was a single door, a reinforced, steel affair that weighed several tons.

Nestra noticed a logo by the entrance, as well as the name Homeshield Security. She used the burner to access their website and check their offers, just in case, and her curiosity was rewarded. There was a page on the type of security provided for gates and Nestra got an inkling of what she was dealing with. Homeshield Security was a provider of safe access to D-class gates, working with small guilds to protect the most numerous and least valuable type of portal available around Threshold. Their bunkers were structured simply with a main chamber, and an antechamber manned by two security guards at the end of every cycle right before the portal reopened. The website vaunted top-of-the-line security but Nestra could read between the lines. This was a budget option meant to provide a sort of lock to other gleams who might want to loot the portal under the nose of their competitors. It happened sometimes. The issue was, Nestra was not equipped to deal with a fucking locked bunker, even if most of the security features were just a formality.

She could perhaps slice the bunker gate open if she coated, but even if the cameras glitched in her presence, the security guards wouldn't. Not to mention, the HQ would get a notification that something had carved through a steel gate and the place would be covered in raiders in less than five minutes.

Perhaps she could lure a guard outside with a malfunction? And then what? The bunker was so small, the other guard would see a demon slip in.

There had to be another way. Yes, in fact, the benefactor had never sent her somewhere she couldn't get in. He'd even disabled a janitor to make sure she could raid without problem. Logically, he wouldn't have sent her somewhere she couldn't get in without telling her in advance there as something to prepare for.

Nodding to herself, Nestra decided to 'case the joint' as the criminals put it. Ah, who was she kidding? She was a criminal as well now. A lawbreaker. Nyahaha. Aunt Claire would be proud.

"Alright, let's see."

Nestra jumped down out of sight, then sprinted to the wall, confident the cameras would see her as a glitch. She used a nearby dumpster as a stepping stone for a jump and, at the apex of her trajectory, she triggered momentum.

The strange power propelled her even higher, and much faster. She landed on the concrete roof of the bunker which was mercifully devoid of captors. Her black box confirmed the presence of cameras all around. More importantly, she could feel the portal under her feet. It was there, pulsing quietly like a siren song, calling her to feast and pregnant with all things desirable. It was just ripe for the taking if she would just allow herself to be drawn in. The rays of succulent energy warmed and reinvigorated her body like a nice morning shower. It spoke of home, though what home she couldn't say.

Yes, the portal was calling and she could feel its fingers questing for someone to realize the mana trapped inside, free it onto the world to integrate it more, to awaken it sip by sip. And Nestra was the perfect key for that. She just had to... give in.

The world blurred. Colors merged into lines then into a gray kaleidoscopes that played with her sense of depth. She was floating in a void without direction and without gravity and that was perfect, just perfect.

And then she was standing in a clearing in a middle of a pine forest. Gray snow lightly fell upon her hair. Before her stood a fortress made of stone and hardened mud, brown walls covered in drab icicles and slabs of dirty ice. The blue light of the entry portal behind her confirmed what she'd suspected, its rays still comforting her.

A howl came from the fortress. A stocky creature with a long spiky mane and the face like a carnivorous horse stood on top of a battlement, a spear strapped to its back. The creature pointed at her and howled again. Yips answered it.

Nestra unsheathed her blade. Manaprimates Habilis Sonorus. Horlers. That was a rotten day to forfeit her armor.

Without waiting, Nestra sprinted towards the wall. Her feet beat on the frozen ground as she prepared to jump. Heads popped out from behind the crenelations, soon followed by the tip of arrows. She cried and used momentum again. The strange ability propelled her slightly above her target. She needed more practice.

Inertia carried her against a wood palissade. She bounced off and rammed into a horler with a spear, wounding it. The muscle mass made her attacks weak. Twirling, she cleaved down and carved her victim's chest before it could recover. More of the creatures appeared from everywhere as she took in her surroundings.

The fortress was built on a flank of the mountain, merging with it. There were tents of sorts, a couple of openings but most of the structures were layered walls linked together by stairs that didn't offer cover. Some of the horlers on the upper levels were already aiming their bows at her. Had to keep moving. She grabbed the dying horler and carried it forward like a shield, her strength barely enough to keep the surprisingly heavy creature up.

Most of the horlers carried bandoliers and belts over short furs that came in earthy tones, but there were a few larger specimens with gray hair including the one who'd spotted her. Her mind took in the way the enemy were arranged and then she charged.

A few of the foes hesitated but most peppered the body she was carrying with short arrows. She threw her improvised barrier at another enemy and sliced low, hamstringing it. Then she was among them.

Cut.

Do not.

Slash.

Get.

Thrust.

Swamped.

Flowing, brutal movements followed each other. Let a shortsword slide on her blade, step aside, cut down. Step forward and cut up. An arm flies. A loud howl. Dodge low and let a volley of arrows take the two horlers surrounding her. Their screeches were deafening but she persevered. Some were grouping above her. Dangerous. She beheaded a recoiling spearman then rushed up some stairs, killing a gray fighter with a slice of coated blade. Another howl. She used momentum and another volley of arrows clicked on the stone behind her. This time, she'd been a bit short and the pair of horler spearmen blocking her way braced. She tried to use momentum and failed. It was like trying to speak and realizing she was out of breath, not particularly painful but a little annoying.

Nestra coated her blade and sliced. The powerful swing severed both shafts and parts of the shield, leaving the horlers surprised. She kicked the first and only manage to push it back a little. A baseline would have been sent flying.

"Hah!"

A overhead strike split the other spearman's head in two, then she ducked under a third volley and she was off again.

Happiness and frustration welled in Nestra's heart in equal measure. Happiness at the dance. It was a good one. It was what she'd craved for so long. Time could not dull her excitement.

Frustration that she was such a bad dancer.

Too many tools, too little time to learn them. The Stalk of the Scornful Crescent was still a whispering voice guiding her but she was awkward and slow. The momentum ability was

extremely powerful but she had issues with the distance. She was a baby playing with a sword. Only one thing would fix that.

Practice.

Kill more.

A shrieking squad had gathered around an old horler wearing a headdress with jutting horns, its body thin and corded. The creature's chest expanded to grotesque proportions. A spellcaster. Sound shaman.

Run?

No run, move in. Continue the dance.

Nestra used momentum again. She was away from them, then she was among them. Her sword shredded the beast's lungs so that its mighty cry escaped as a gurgling squawk. She was moving still, with great sweeping attacks. She grabbed a gray horler's spear and slice his head off. The others kept fighting in disorder. They tried to pin her down but their bodies blocked their allies and she was still dancing among them with great, carving strikes. The three survivors ran and she charged ahead, towards the last large group at the top of the fortress. Archers. She ducked under a wall and arrows clattered behind her. She felt something touch her ass and the cold hand of fear grasped at her belly but it was just a rebound. She sprinted again. Another loud howl and she was down. More arrows.

The leader tsked and gave another order. The archers fired at will but she kept weaving ahead, sprinting with all she had. The dance guided her steps, making her unpredictable. The arrows failed to find her. There was one last set of stairs and then she would be among them.

No cover.

The chief horler screeched something and the pack stopped firing. She raced, waiting, staring down the beady eyes of the enemy.

The creature flinched. For an instant, triumph filled Nestra's mind in a vicious tide but it was short-lived. The chief screeched and this time, it was different.

A bait?

Nestra made a gambit. It was a bait. It would lure her momentum and then strike. She held.

Half of the formation loosed.

"Fu—"

Nestra used the skill at the last moment. Terror crawled up her spine. She knew what would happen. As the skill finished, she was mid-air with her curled on herself and waiting for the pain. Another shriek, and it came with the rest of the volley.

She felt the impact first. The mind-searing flash of agony came immediately after when a half a dozen arrow mashed into her. Except it was... not so bad?

Nestra landed in the middle of the befuddled formation. She stood and sliced the nearest archer in a trance, waiting for debilitation. It never came. As she fought, part of her saw the state of her arm. There were cuts bleeding a flashy red liquid that quickly turned gray and then, the wounds scabbed over.

Another strike and the realization set in.

She... was fine?

She was fine!

The screeches of the dying horlers hurt her ear, needling her on. Strike and cut as they spread apart to give themselves space to fight. Do not let them corner. Keep moving as they do, attacking with merciless grace. Nestra followed the whispers of the Scornful Crescent as the principles guided her. She was faster and thus, the foes were obstacles to each other instead of help. Bodies blocked the trajectories of arrows. Furry torsos came in the way of sword strikes. The narrow battlements were now an obstacle instead of a help as the horlers bumped into it. Meanwhile, Nestra dove and side-stepped and used the chaos, each step a threat, each move flowing into the next one. Eventually, the chief managed to scream orders and four survivors formed a last barrier in front of him while she cut down the last of the disorganized soldiers.

The chief removed the spear from its back and Nes realized the blade was something close to wrought bronze with a shiny jewel in the middle, in the shape of an slitted eye. The horler's eyes bulged. Its muscles contracted with grisly cracks, veins visible even through the fur. Saliva foamed in its maw while its guardians stood, shivering in terror.

That was a portal artifact, a rarity. A mana tool crafted by unknown means. Many were extremely dangerous and, if the horlers were scared of it, that could only mean some sort of self-sacrifice or berzerker effect.

So Nestra took her gun from its sheath and line the sights. There was something almost comical in the chief's expression of sheer, hateful shock.

She pulled the trigger.

As before, the gun kicked like a mule even with her enhanced strength. The bullet smashed through two horlers before piercing through the chief's arm, causing the spear to jolt. The strange effect was interrupted.

Nestra charged forward. Her instincts told her the horlers were going to run until they were overtaken by the same drive that pushed all portal monsters to ceaselessly attack intruders even when defeat was certain. She deflected the spears and cut in the same movement, once, twice, then she coated her blade.

The chief horler charged her.

Nestra breathed in and out. The creature was maddened but still dangerous. It feinted its first thrust. Nestra stepped back to avoid the next attack, then slid into his guard by deflecting the third but he stepped back. Her overhead strike was stopped by the artifact. The horler used its weapon like a staff. She blocked the next attack at the last moment, her bones shaking from the strength of his blow then she parried the next thrust and countered with a series of fast jabs. The horler struggled to block them. Blood stained his fur.

He screamed.

Nestra accepted the pain in her ears as she struck, catching the beast off guard. Her attack cleaved it from shoulder to sternum. Just like the shaman, the chief's roar ended in a pained moan. The coup de grace cut it off and silence, once again returned to the fortress.

Nestra's ears whistled painfully. There were barely closed cuts on her arms and legs. She was out of breath and gulping air greedily. Blood covered her tattered clothes from head to toe, and none of this mattered because she was victorious once more. Power rushed into her. She felt her senses grow keener. Her ears popped as they healed and the sounds of the snowy forest returned in all their glory which was, admittedly, not that much. Just the groan of tree trunks.

"Nice."

Nestra surveyed the fortress. It was a scene of relentless carnage, just like she liked them. More importantly, there were a few canvas tents disseminated among the wooden stakes and palisades of the battlement. That meant... it was time to loot! But first thing first, she approached a patch of pristine snow and placed her hand against it. Cold. Crunchy. She gathered some of it and compacted it. Water dripped from her fingers. The packed snow now looked like a handle with small crystals attempting to escape from the imposed form. She gathered more of it into a ball. It felt so light, yet quite compact.

Snow.

It was the first time she experienced real snow.

Threshold was situated on a massive island off the coast of Japan. It was never cold enough for there to be snow, except at the top of Mount Dirge but no one went there. She'd never traveled abroad. Her father considered such trips as wasteful and extravagant frivolities, far from the Palladian's ideal steely resolve. This wasn't like mainland China where one could just travel to the Harbin or Altay enclaves. Here, one had to take a ship or a plane and those were always expensive and slightly risky propositions. So, yeah.

Snow.

Nestra felt giddy for all of two seconds, barely enough time to throw the snowball and watch it splatter against the cooling corpse of a horler. Right. Portal world. Had to focus.

The exit portal shone a little higher, at the top of the fortress but she ignored it for now. Pulling the horler entry, she went through the depressingly low list of prizes. The arrow tips were exotic material which would have gone through her armor but they were also of the lowest craftsmanship, which meant it was cheaper and more efficient just to mine exotic ore and have an apprentice forge some. Much like most dokkaebi, horler physiology was so familiar that specimens held no value. Nestra went through a few bandoliers finding little but teeth, poorly made thread, and small statuettes. All worthless. Sighing, she picked up the artifact.

Mana caressed her psyche, inviting her to take ownership of the tool. She refused. It was obviously cursed as fuck and not her style anyway.

Her mood improved. Artifacts were worth a lot of money to the right buyer, even the bad ones. Many research breakthroughs occurred because of enchantments found in those items. Once that was done, she searched the tents and found covers and other useless everyday items. They still carried the stench of their previous owners, though Nestra found herself surprisingly resilient to it. There was, however, a prize. In a large, ruddy bag, she found grains. A lot of grains. A quick search led to a bout of ecstatic laughter.

Dinner was going to be great.

Pleased with herself, Nestra approached the final portal. The reward this time was a measly two crystals but that was to be expected. Permanent gates were usually less profitable than unique ones. The trees were probably valuable so any guild clearing them could sell exotic wood to gleam crafter guilds that made the kind of bed Aunt Claire could comfortably bang on. Ugh. Had to remove that image from her mind. In any case, the artifact alone would be worth a ton if she could sell it. Happy with her loot this time, she crossed the portal.

She found herself in a dark, empty concrete room with no decoration. A lonely shelf stood against a nearby wall, filled with medical items like gauze and blood clotters. There was a camera in a corner so she was on a timer. More importantly, a single chair waited for her with a box on top of it. Rewards! She approached it and opened it. It contained a letter and as well as a nightmarish wound in the fabric of the universe with red beady eyes and an infinity of claws that writhed into and out of themselves in a mind-rending mangling of depth and the rules of physics. The insanity-inducing vista resolved itself when the fifth dimension millipede bit Nestra's hand. A black layer of silk spread over her fingers then her forearm before disappearing under her bloodstained, ravaged sleeves. She felt it spread on her being like a cold wave.

“AAAAAYAYAYARGARGETITOFFGETITOFF!” Said Nestra.

In less than a second, the Lovecraftian insect had turned into a sort of thin bodysuit.

The process had been entirely painless. The only casualties were Nestra's sanity and her pride.

The letter fell to the ground, opening as it did.

"Congratulations on getting your skin little Nezhra! It feeds off a liiiiittle bit of blood. Don't worry, they're completely tame. I'll be busy for the next three days so find the next coordinates below and then enjoy your time off!"

"Can I just get a Kero nut next time?"

Somehow, a sense of amusement filtered through her mind, then a pang of guilt.

That made Nestra suspicious.

"You ate the rest of them didn't you?"

The guilt turned to stark panic, then she got the sense of someone pointing in a direction then using the old smoke bomb escape trope, only the direction was the gate leading out.

"Did you hear something?" a voice said on the other side.

Nestra suddenly remembered her situation.

She was an armed tall demon woman with blood-crusting gear carrying pilfered loot next to a clearly deactivated portal world.

There were no words in English, Korean, or the demon tongue to express just how fucked she was. Nestra used momentum to ram herself against the wall by the gate just as it opened. She instinctively drew in everything she was— though she didn't reapply her mask, Praying to every god she could think of that they didn't see her.

A trio of gleams walked in. There was an archer, a close quarter fighter with a tower shield, and a mage with long staff. The mage's eyes were a dim orange which spoke of a nascent fire affinity. She directed the pair with a single flick of her hand.

"What's the meaning of this? Was somebody there?"

Nestra ducked and used momentum to propel herself in the other room, an antechamber of sorts. Two guards sat behind a reinforced glass panel, checking screens. There were no hiding spots there, only a concrete square devoid of anything save for the two gates leading to the portal and to the outside, and a door leading to the guard room. Both of the latter were tragically closed. Nestra landed squarely below the glass in full view of a camera but hidden from direct line of sight.

"There's a letter here, it— ah! Fire! Why is it on fire?" a male voice said behind her.

"Idiot! Don't touch anything. Guards, you'd better have a good explanation."

“We’re having glitches on our equipment ma’am. Running diagnostics.”

“Who did you let in?”

“Nobody, I swear!”

“Well SOMEONE was here. I have to report this.”

Meanwhile, Nesta’s mind was running three curse words on repeat. Could she take them? Probably not. Would it do anything? Also probably not. She needed out, now. Maybe cut through the gate? A coated blade and three slices ought to do it but... she would be noticed.

“Alright, we’re leaving for now. I want our boss to take a look at this,” the mage said. “Open the gate.”

That was it. Nesta was done for. The mage walked in her field of vision just as the other gate opened. Nesta had to make a run for it.

There was a pressure, like a brief idea brushing her psyche. The mage stopped in her tracks. Her breath hitched. Her face turned despondent. Nesta sprinted outside through the newly opened passage, then jumped over the nearest fence using momentum. She didn’t look behind but all she heard was silence.

Speed and momentum carried her through the deserted streets lined with locked factories and warehouses. The first rays of dawn barely touched the concrete under her feet. She stopped at her motorcycle and changed at record speed into a leather outfit that would match her ‘cover’. She was off in under a minute, with her mask on. There were no noises. No signs of pursuit.

The benefactor had intervened, there. She was sure of it. The only question was, if there was an inquiry, would they find her out? An AI with access to traffic cameras could at least point them in her direction, since traffic at the ass crack of dawn was rather limited. She’d parked far enough but she couldn’t be sure if a small guild wouldn’t have the right to access traffic cameras.

In the end, she decided not to worry about it too much. The benefactor’s purpose tonight was clearly to deliver the skin and teach her how to access portals from afar, not how to escape pursuit or they would have warned her. The situation also led her to wonder if she could, in fact, take raiders down. Not necessarily kill them but at least disable them.

Portals always led to the same world but at some point, the portal would no longer allow people through if too many were already inside. It was like trying to swim through an ever-increasing current, her father had once said. It meant that a few minutes later and the raiders would have arrived at the fort in full view of Nesta. They would have definitely tried to take her down. Even if they miraculously assumed she was using a weird disguise, stealing portal rights carried a heavy sentence in Threshold. The guild would have made an example.

So how would she compare to them?

She was confident about being as strong and fast as an average D-class raider which was pretty good for around a week of activity. Her swordsmanship was also top-notch. The issue was that raiders were a different breed, especially in Threshold where portals were both more common and more challenging. Raiders risked their lives with every expedition and there were always unlucky moments that carried a cost: an eye shot, an unexpected enemy, fingers slipping on blood. Raiders were wounded, sometimes killed. It took something special to make people raid day after day and that meant a high combat potential.

But Nestra's body was different. She clearly had a resilience that went beyond what could be expected at D-rank. Beginner users got stronger by infusing their bodies with mana, directing it to where it mattered. Nestra didn't have to do that. She just was strong and resilient without trying. At the same time, she barely had any mana to work with.

Clearly not even remotely human.

But then why mostly human-shaped?

It was just weird.

Nestra's mood improved after she parked in her secret Nestra lair and got the bag of food out. Oh, and the spear. She sent a quick message to Gorge then it was time to go home. Nothing could stop her from humming when she poured the grains into her cooking robot as well as a generous amount of butter and sugar. When the first pops rang in the quiet house, she could no longer contain her enthusiasm.

"Yessss. MAGICAL POPCORN!"

In the headquarter of the Gray Shield guild, a gleam tapped on his visor with barely contained annoyance.

"Yes. The chair flickered in at around four AM. The glitches were continuous afterward. Yes. No, nothing that we could see."

He kept silent when his interlocutor spoke in a sterner tone.

"Yes, I understand. We will transfer everything. Understood. The compensation is more than enough for us. Yes, you can count on our discretion. I will make sure my team understands the importance of their silence. We will comply, sir. Yes, I consider the matter close. Thank you for your time."

The gleam's annoyance turned to dread as the call ended. He delicately placed the visor on his desk, then massaged the bridge of his nose. When he opened his eyes again, the pulsating silvery radiance betrayed his distress.

“What the hell was that?”

In Nesta's mind palace, another rotating sphere had joined the more ordered dance. The puddle underneath had grown as well, just a little, but it was still barely enough to coat her blade a few times. The newly improved sphere was the one that dealt with awareness and keen senses. Nesta had one more bound to play with.

That meant she had to make a choice. Instinct told her that linking the sphere to strength would help her destabilize foes while linking it to speed would let her perform a very precise strike. The second choice was the more immediately useful, she felt. Maybe she was wrong. It was hard to say without knowing exactly what she would be against. Once the bond was formed, Nesta returned to sleep while promising herself not to try to throw her chef knife at her cutting board 'as an experiment'. She would do things right this time.
