

It was Wednesday, the third day of her new job.

It was ONLY Wednesday.

“When can I retire?” Nestra asked herself. Actually, forget retiring. She just wanted to get to the weekend so she could... ugh. See her family for some hurtful, pointless drama.

“When will it enndddddd?” she bemoaned.

“Patience, Palladian-san. We are next in queue.”

Nestra glared at the office desk behind which a gaggle of admins shared the same black business suits and annoyed scowls. The official town hall of Fifteen had been repaired and refitted in record time but the result was a sterile office in fresh bruise blue and healthy piss yellow (the hydrated kind). Even the flower pots looked like they’d rather be somewhere else.

There was some paint on the carpet. Really a rush job then.

“Number twenty-seven please,” a recorded voice said.

Nestra followed Shinoda past the desk and through a series of alleys lined by numbered offices, dodging workers and harried visitors on the way. A screen next to room two-oh-six displayed their names so Shinoda knocked and entered, finding a young blonde woman behind. She had deep pockets under her eyes though the tidy state of her desk showed she hadn’t given up yet. Her clothes were just a little frumpy. Many civil servants had to take a shuttle out of the district before they could even get to the subway so Nestra assumed they were overworked to hell.

“Good afternoon, Miss Knightley,” Shinoda greeted with his usual calm.

The woman blinked, her tired eyes inspecting them both with caution. Nestra said hello when it was her turn to be examined for flaws or whatever.

“Yes. Hello to you too. And, er, welcome to Fifteen’s center for...”

She yawned deeply.

“For administrative yadda yadda. Sorry. How can I help?”

“We represent law enforcement for hab block D-12, Miss Knightley. Sorry for bothering you, but we were supposed to receive a shipment of food and medical supplies this morning and they failed to arrive. We were directed here to find answers. Could you please tell us where they might be?”

“D-12, D-12. Gimme a moment.”

The woman's eyes glazed over. She had eye augments, Nestra realized. High-end ones. And a mind jack. Threshold hadn't brought its most useless people.

"Yes. I see. Yes, we have it in storage but we can't get them out because all outgoing convoys must be first approved by the security deputy. It's protocol."

To avoid wasting resources willy-nilly, Nestra surmised. Threshold was already spending a shitload of money trying to protect the place. Too many 'lost' supplies and they would feel the pinch, perhaps to a point of failure. It was an easy flaw for Gigun to exploit.

"And is there a problem?"

"Oh, no, not really. The, ah, the deputy, Mrs Fallstar. She is currently out of the district."

An uncomfortable silence filled the office. Nestra realized the light that came out of the window was fake. It was just a UV lamp hidden behind shutters so the office wouldn't be terminally depressing. It didn't seem to help, though, because she'd been wrong about Threshold sending their best.

It would take five seconds for Security Deputy Fallstar to receive the approval by mail and sign it electronically. So what the fuck was that woman waiting for? This was a gleam name, besides, so pretty hard to claim she didn't have the time. Gleams had more time than anyone else. They didn't need to sleep as much.

"Any particular reason why she would not be available for approval?" Shinoda asked softly while Knightley fumed in her chair.

"We have been informed that she was otherwise occupied."

"Would you happen to know when she would return?"

"I am not privy to this information."

Funny how such a powerful apparatus as the Threshold government could be bottlenecked by a single asshole.

"I see. Then perhaps, another deputy might sign in her stead?" Shinoda continued.

"I don't think so?"

"The supplies would go a long way to giving us legitimacy," Nestra added.

"I know that!" Knightley replied, lashing out.

She massaged her eyes. Nestra glanced at Shinoda who delivered the knockout punch.

"Then work with us. I am sure there is a way for protocol that can be technically followed despite the absence of Mrs Fallstar. We are willing to assist you however we can."

Knightley glanced at Nestra who nodded.

“We are on the same side here. Just want the people to get their supplies. Favor for a favor?”

For a moment, Nestra thought the stressed woman would refuse. Instead, she bit her lips. She was thinking of something. An instinct rose from the demon behind the mask. Expectation. The woman’s attitude was shifting. They were almost in.

“There is something. We got some missing excavation equipment.”

“Excavation equipment?” Nestra asked before she could control herself.

Shinoda gave her a warning sign but Knightley was supremely uninterested anyway. Nestra still ought to be careful showing too much interest in Gigun’s business.

“Yeah. Gigun is digging large facilities, which is also of interest to us because of the job offers. Anyway, one container has gone missing but whoever took it forgot to turn off the GPS. Maybe they’re too stupid.”

“It is likely the culprit is unfamiliar with corporate security protocols,” Shinoda suggested.

“Yeah, that. Anyway, could you go get it for me? If I get you the coordinates?”

Nestra deferred to Shinoda here. He replied after they exchanged another glance.

“Very likely, yes. Send them and we will get a warrant for it.”

“Ok, cool. Ok, that should work. I’ll send them then. Ok, now my part of the bargain. Shit, I hope it works.”

Knightley took a deep breath. Nestra picked a voice coming from near the other woman’s ear a moment later but it was too faint for her to follow.

“Sir, Mrs. Fallstar has not returned yet and I was wondering if — No sir. Yes, since Monday afternoon. I did. No replies. I can’t move the supplies — A security deputy must sign on them. Yes, the protocol leaflet says exactly that, not that it has to be my direct superior. Any deputy would —”

There was silence for a moment.

“Sir,” Knightley risked, “I have over four tons of food clogging the warehouse. You know— yes sir, right away.”

The woman’s expression shifted from tense to triumphant. Shinoda looked pleased as well.

“Finally, something is moving,” Knightley finished. “You’ll do your part then?”

“Of course. We will contact our superior for a warrant immediately.”

“Ok. Keep me up to date on your progress.”

“Of course, Miss Knightley.”

The two left the office after exchanging numbers. Knightley had an exact location for a stolen package, including drone pictures of the garage and of the idiots who visited it. As to why someone would steal from a corp and not even check for trackers, it was as Nestra’s old superior Camus used to say. ‘We only catch the stupid ones.’

It was only a matter of minutes for Kim to reply. She called them rather than send a text.

“Good initiative. We will need a little... flexibility to handle the situation properly. So long as you do not openly break the rules, we will be fine. As for Mrs Fallstar, I’m afraid I cannot do anything. She is well connected and... but it doesn’t matter. One last thing.”

Kim paused. Nestra picked a tapping sound, like someone using a datasheet.

“The data you’ve sent me confirms what Palladian guessed. Those are mana readings over time taken somewhere in the center of District Fifteen. I asked around and nobody knows why they’re important, though the readings are unusually high. They might have been taken near a portal for all we know. For now, we are not sure why they matter, only that they do. My superior believes the Cleaver will endeavor to recover them. As such, you will probably be targeted in the near future. I have arranged for a fast response team dedicated to you, one user I trust. He will be on overwatch while you work until Cleaver decides to make his move.”

“Er, won’t he assume we didn’t keep the drive with us?”

“The drive is copy-protected though we had no difficulty breaking that specific piece of encryption, so he will need it specifically. He has no choice. You are his best lead and so he will get to you. Preliminary psychological assessment indicates that he will single-mindedly pursue his goal through any means necessary. He is also arrogant, and might believe we are unable to understand the drive’s worth.”

“That is concerning,” Shinoda noted.

Nestra agreed. Cleaver had military-grade augs the last time they met. He’d also underestimated her and her sword’s electric discharge. It would be different this time, not to mention that tattered coat of his could hide even more cybernetics than before. Assuming the gleam arrived to save them in thirty seconds which was already wildly optimistic, they might be twenty-nine point seven seconds too late to save Nestra’s ass.

That made it exciting. Maybe she could have a rematch? The only thing she couldn’t afford to do was getting caught off guard, but somehow she didn’t think it would be the case. The Cleaver had stopped for an instant when he’d landed in front of her back during the purge

because he wanted to savor her fear. He liked feeling in control. He might isolate them but he would make sure they saw death coming.

Demon Nestra was sure of it.

He was a cruel hunter. She felt neutral about his kind. Cruel hunters were confident because they were strong. She just didn't think he was justified in his belief. Proving him wrong would require some preparation but it would be, oh, so rewarding. Nothing quite like making the mighty fall.

Demon Nestra could win that battle easily. The ability to escape sensors was just the sort of game-changing skill that exemplified why military technology was growing increasingly obsolete. She could basically pop out of a wall and cleave Cleaver before he registered that the glitch was actually a mana-infused sword going for his head.

But that wouldn't be fun.

Nestra would beat the aug with her human form and her bag of tricks, then she would get the second half of the symbolon and find out what those readings meant exactly. Right now, she suspected they spiked somewhere and Gigun was digging, which would explain the excavation equipment. That was just a theory, though. She still had no idea how that data could be so precious and useful a ganger would value it. She was betting on blackmail material, and assuming the file had more than just readings.

They'd see.

"Are you worried, Palladian-san? This Cleaver person sounds like a dangerous opponent."

"No, just hoping the data is worth it. I still can't put a name on whoever screwed us over and I really want to."

"Patience, Palladian-san. This is a very big fish and we have a small net, ne?"

"As you say. Should we head back?"

"I was thinking that perhaps we should stop at the cafeteria for an afternoon break. You look famished."

Shinoda was such a good partner.

The pair was called to resolve an altercation immediately as they returned to the hab block. Nestra let Shinoda calm both sides down through kind words while she acted like a gargoyle by his side. The two folks causing a scene were merchants with the solid muscles of men who worked with their bodies, yet they remained apprehensive around her. Nestra knew of few strong men who would see an average-sized blonde and felt threatened. Those searching eyes, the orientation of their feet, those stank of fear. Physical, tangible fear.

Perhaps it was her reputation finally working, but a part of her wondered if those men could feel the demon underneath, somehow. Threat assessment was a survival skill for those who wanted to conduct biz in Fifteen. They sensed something was off.

Fortunately, the argument died down as soon as the promised supplies arrived. People formed orderly rows without much prompting. Shinoda walked up and down the lines to keep everyone calm. The mood turned festive. For the first time since she came here, Nestra saw people mellow. Someone even gifted her free porridge! It wasn't long until helpers gave out large crates, crossing names off a list as they went.

"What do they even contain?" she asked Shinoda.

"Fruits. Leafy greens. Baby formulas and supplements for new mothers. People here do not lack protein or sugar but their diet is poor in fresh vegetable products. The goal is to remedy that. Canned food will also be made available in the near future."

"That's good. The mood is already impro— what's that?"

Nestra spotted drones coming in close from the space above them. She made for her gun, ready to drag Shinoda to cover until she recognized their colors. The streamlined design marked them as Gigun drones, the advertisement kind. They stopped slowly over the muttering people and holographic projections soon popped above everyone's head, showing an elegant East Asian woman in a perfectly tailored dress.

"Hello everyone, and greetings live from the Gigun arcology! I am so glad to be here with you today, and I hope you enjoy the little gifts we've prepared for you!"

It... was paid by the city? Nestra smoldered in silence. The cheery tone left people grim and detached but it wouldn't last. Gigun's PR teams would turn the tide soon enough.

"As new members of the Gigun family — if you agree, of course! — we would have exciting new opportunities for you, great ways to improve the city, gain new skills, provide for your families and, of course, have some fun! But don't take my word for it. Let's go ask Mr Choi!"

The camera switched to a swarthy man with a tan and the protective hat of a construction worker. His sleeveless vest held an array of tools. She recognized the detector attached to his sleeve, a tool that warned its user if it detected anything harmful. The real deal then, though probably briefed. So the tactic was to position Gigun as a rich corpo, then show how it could lift people? Devious.

"Hello everyone, lay ho, sour s'dey, —"

The image fizzled. Though the drones remained stationary, something had gone wrong.

The entire hab block's population watched the ever eccentric Flash walk out from his shop with the frazzled look of someone nursing a terrible hangover. His fingers danced on a datasheet as he spoke.

“Aiyoh, so noisy, just diam la. Who’s the atas bitch anyway? Can explain or?”

“That’s your sponsor,” one of the workers unloading the truck said, though a smile lifted the corner of his lips.

“Fuck that. Who wants to listen to English Neo-Grunge instead?”

A collective groan rose from the queue. Nestra thought she could see those already holding their bags of goodies walk away just a little faster.

“You guys have no taste eh. Then at least keep quiet.”

He returned to his well-deserved rest. Nestra was pretty sure she could see why the community tolerated his antics now. She sure felt like doing the same.

“Ah, a terrible case of malfunction, Palladian-san,” Shinoda said.

“Shabby drones for sure. Bad connection maybe,” she added.

“I wish we could help, but we are poor detectives with no technological knowledge.”

“I’m not even a detective!”

“There is nothing we can do.”

“I am sure the masses were touched by the message of our benevolent corpo overlords for the twenty seconds it lasted.”

“Sou desu ne? It will have to suffice.”

With their duty fulfilled for the day, the two officers saw the distribution to the end and then went home.

It was night again, and Nestra was tired. Her demon teeth shore through a bag of mana carrots with vengeful fury. Their orange defenses didn’t stand a chance! Alas, that victory was short-lived, for Nestra had to raid again, and she didn’t want to.

Raiding was fun and all but she was so damn ready to take a break. It had been three days of non-stop work, battles, or preparation with every waking hours. She was mentally strained and sleep-deprived, and yet she would still fight tonight. The benefactor had said something was coming. Nestra needed power and she needed it fast. Even an incremental increase in speed would give her human mask just that little bit of edge that would make the difference between detonating an EMP in Cleaver’s face or catching a power fist with her jaw. She couldn’t afford to slow down.

It had also been several raids without good food. This had to stop!

The portal in front of her hid in the corners of an abandoned arcade, in a maze designed for laser tag games. If the tree portal in the BaiHua arcology could have been spotted by a passing gleam, this one was definitely a breach in waiting. The nearest cameras only caught the lockers.

“They should have knocked it down,” she hissed.

As before, her voice came out in that strange language she could speak by instinct.

“Nothing to it.”

Nestra slipped through the portal, sword out, and found herself in yet another dark corridor.

For a moment, she thought she was back in an infinite war scenario, but the bricks of the walls were different, the passage narrower. Light came from white-fire torches rather than dim reddish lamps. This could only mean one thing.

A trap world!

“Nooooooooo!”

Trap worlds had few strong ambush predators, but were otherwise rather empty. More importantly, they didn’t have vegetation. This was the worst for her! No food!

“Benefactor you big idiot, what am I even doing here?”

Pah.

Well, come to think of it, maybe she could improve her perception through training. It was possibly the most important skill for a lone raider like her. Not like she had a choice.

Ok, so this was a slightly below average D-class world, much smaller than the previous one so progress would likely be linear and trapped less viciously. Nestra only had a passing knowledge of those worlds because she was expected to be a frontline swordsman while traps and detection were more of a scout role. To be prosaic, scout raiders were selected for stealth, intelligence gathering, and heightened awareness while Nestra was training to cut things to ribbons. Those were different skill sets. Fortunately, she had several advantages, chief among them being her demon sight. She could see gravel at the end of the corridor even though it was darker than inside a darkling’s rectum and human raiders would have been waving torchlights by now. It was time to put those senses to good use. She merely needed to take it slow and stay focused which was absolutely what a hungry tired demoness with a shortening fuse and the creeping threat of hubris would be terrible at.

“It’s a stress test, isn’t it?” she asked the ceiling.

Alas, there was no answer. Sighing, she first had a good look at the alley in front of her.

It went on for ten meters then sharply veered right.

She could already count two traps. One was a pressure-plate snare though she couldn't see what would happen if it were triggered. The other was a knee-high thread, almost invisible. Tiny openings on the ceiling matched her knowledge of poisoned darts.

Only a complete imbecile would assume that was it. Nestra decided to take it slow, testing the stones ahead of her for more pressure plates. Her eyes crossed and her vision blurred trying to find tiny wires across the way but there were none. After ten minutes of grueling efforts, she reached the end of the passage.

There had only been two traps. The pressure plate triggered spears hidden nearby thanks to a trick of perspective.

“Uuuuuugh I'm going to be here until 6 AM with NO FOOD!”

Wait, she shouldn't speak out loud. Nestra approached the side of the corridor and stabbed a spider-thing hiding on the ceiling in the middle of a pool of unnatural darkness. Completely useless against her. Her perception improved, which gave her the same feeling of satisfaction as ever. A new foe! This one wasn't much but there were bound to be more exciting creatures around.

The dying arachnid dissipated in a gust of malodorous gas.

Not edible then.

Nestra looked around the corner. Another passage extended for a dozen of meters. A mana ring at the end flared as she watched, the image of an open eye drawn in the middle. She pulled back.

A roaring ball of flame rushed past her face before splattering harmlessly against a nearby wall. The temperature increased a bit.

A sight-activated trap. Nasty! Maybe this world did present a challenge after all.

Progressing slowly, Nestra killed another shadow spider with the same result. This corridor had a large pitfall right before a very obvious thread crossing the corridor in its middle. Naturally, the obvious thread was a decoy and, naturally, it was trapped anyway. Nestra just skipped under it rather than trying fancy stuff like deactivating the trap to recover the components. This was a nerd activity for people with too much time on their hands. She was here to loot stuff and eat monsters and she was all out of both.

“This fucking place...”

The next alley annoyingly turned right again. It was also larger and the entire ground was made out of pressure plates spread out in squares. Mana lined the wall, though she wasn't good enough to say what would specifically try to ruin her day.

Nestra was annoyed because she could just use momentum to cross the entire grid but... that would be cheating.

Fine.

Those types of traps usually used some sort of writing to mark a safe path. It wasn't mana this time, so there was probably something that could only be seen by thermal or ultraviolet sights. She couldn't tell, but a deeper examination revealed a difference in a grain of the stone, almost imperceptible. Only the most observant of scouts could have found those! She painstakingly followed the markings, finally identifying a recurring rune forming a single path across the grid. She didn't know what that rune was because she had never studied them. Hell, she didn't even recognize the writing system. It should be ok, however.

Nestra took a deep breath and pushed the stone down with her exposed toe. Nothing happened.

She stepped more confidently.

The mana in the walls remained quiescent.

Encouraged by her success, Nestra moved on the path with determination, keeping her eyes peeled for...

There was an opening in the shape of a door set in a nearby wall.

Excitement filled her veins. Traps and enigmas sometimes had an easy, safe option and a subtler one. The runes of the grid could probably be followed to form a secret sentence that would open the nearby passage, an option closed to Nestra, except, she didn't need it, did she? A jump, and she slipped through the opening and into an unlit room.

There was a chest in the middle. It was locked. There was also something in the air she didn't like. Not exactly poison, more like a presence. A shift in the air. Nestra came closer to the chest and realized it was most likely trapped. She removed a small vial from her gear and poured half of it in the lock. It was a basic chest so this kind of measure might work. An acidic stench soon filled the room which helped Nestra realize the uncomfortable sensation wasn't smell, or magic. It was... space.

She unsheathed her blade. The fabric of the world shifted ever so slightly.

Breathe in, breathe out. Feel the ubiquitous pavement under her sole. It was a bare room. Would it help? She didn't know.

A shiver.

Nestra turned on herself and struck. Her blade landed on a set of dark teeth, not the same as hers but close. Beady dark eyes glared with utter malice. When the void shark passed by her, its power pushed her back and the raspy skin ground against hers like a peeler. She

twisted on herself and struck down but her attack was too hasty. It bounced against its muscular tail.

“I knew it! You little shit.”

Nestra dove to the side then struck up, drawing blood. The beast was fast, faster than her, but it could only move forward and with a lower range of lateral motion. Blood on her blade. Good.

The void shark screeched strangely. Nestra winced at the deafening, alien sound that twisted her mind like a physical presence. It stopped her from reacting on time to dodge the next lunge. No time. Place the blade in front.

The teeth closed on the manablade with a dreadful shriek. Very, very strong. She was pushed back painfully against the wall but managed to keep the creature at bay. Her arms screamed. So close, the beast's face gained a wolfish appearance that woke up ancestral instincts of panic in the human recesses of her mind. If those tenebrous jaws closed on her, she was finished.

She let go with her left arm. The blade's tip clanged against the wall, close to her throat but only for the moment it took to smash the shark on the eye, again. Her foe shrieked and swerved sharply. Nestra stared at her sword with disbelief while the creature sped away for another pass.

There were teeth marks on it!

“Oh that is IT!”

The shark disappeared behind a wall but she could feel it, swimming just under the fabric of reality. It thought it was smart. When it surged out again she was ready. She used momentum to place herself above the emerging creature as it swam in head first. Her arms grabbed its sandpaper skin with all the strength she could muster. Harsh. Cold. The shark struggled against the demon on its back.

She pushed herself forward, grabbed its fin. This was it. Revenge would be hers!

Despite the shark's best efforts, Nestra would not relent in her quest for justice. She grabbed the precious appendage and, with a supreme effort, bit down hard.

Her teeth pierced through skin and cartilage like butter. It... didn't taste very good. Too fishy, the mana too acid but... what power! It was very filling. Needled by the pain, the shark finally managed to push her off by slamming her against a nearby wall. Nestra gasped in pain as it retreated at the end of the room. Only her endurance allowed her to jump to the side on time to avoid a flying chest tossed at her by a furious tail swing.

She stared the maddened beast down while swallowing the unsavory lump of its flesh. A matter of principle. The half moon crescent of the fin's wound bled a silvery liquid. Her prey screeched mournfully from the atrocious pain but Nestra didn't care.

For a second, the two adversaries circled each other, then the shark relented. The last Nestra saw of it this time was the flash of malicious outrage on its predatory head.

“Serves you right,” she accused. “Bothering me while I’m hunting myself! I hope you get jumped by a pack of rabid void dolphins you nasty spoilsport.”

Nestra kept screaming at the brick wall for the better part of a minute. It was a necessary cathartic experience after that whole trap session. Her elation doubled when she realized the chest was now open. What the vial of acid had started was finished by the void shark’s mighty tail strike, and the contents had spilled from the spike-covered remains of the precious container.

Nestra was suddenly very glad she’d dodged the chest before its defenses could trigger.

As for the contents, well, there were two... but that was all she needed.

“Arm guards! It’s perfect!”

Her second artifact. Truly, raiding temporary portal worlds really yielded the best results. The armbands were a dull silver with serpentine patterns, clearly not designed by humans or, indeed, for them. Some of the shapes seemed distorted to accommodate a larger wrist. She had a good look at them for anomalies but contrary to the spear she’d found, there were no strange mana signatures to spoil her fun. Only reinforcement and size adjustment enchantments.

“Yessss!”

Nestra tried them on. Clasps encircled her forearm to adjust the size while the silvery sheen took on life of its own.

And then, the skin expanded, inky tendrils covering the artifact. Snaking lines spread over every piece of the defensive gear on both sides. Nestra just stared on, paralyzed with surprise.

“What?”

The metal bubbled ominously.

“What?”

In less than ten seconds, her skin armor dissolved and digested the artifact until nothing was left. When the lines retreated, the skin could now cover up to her ankles. It had expanded.

“What? How can my fucking dress eat before me! Noooooo.”

Her precious artifact.

Gone.

Nestra bounced her head against the nearest wall, wailing in frustration at the unfairness of it all. Her horns got in the way of her broody display which ruined the moment. That led to another moment of frustration.

Nestra paused.

Nestra frowned.

It was weird to say so but the demon formed felt flightier and more easily annoyed than her human one. It also tired faster. She made a checklist.

Constantly hungry.

Constantly annoyed.

Sleepy at odd hours.

Outgrowing her clothes with annoying regularity.

Significant body changes.

Constantly confused.

The natural conclusion dawned on her

“Fuck. Am I a teenager?”

The only thing missing was constantly horny, except that had never been the case for her. Was she abnormal even for a demon? She wasn't sure. She couldn't be sure, in fact, since there was no one around to ask the fucking questions. The benefactor better had a lot of answers when she finally cornered them.

After 'coping and seething' for a while, as Aunt Claire tended to say, she decided it was time to finish that damn world. She slipped back through the wall.

Her feet depressed the tile directly below her.

Click

The trapped tile.

The tile she had specifically used momentum to avoid.

“Fu —”

Spears from the ceiling. Sidestep and move back. Whistling darts. Crouch and pass below. Another click. Spears, from the side. Grab one and twist, pushing her feet towards the wall. Jump forward after another rain of darts. Use momentum and land on a safe tile.

Click

“—ck.”

The room returned to normal.

Nestra massaged her horns, which were painful right now. Another mistake. Another *stupid* mistake. Had to do better.

“Ok, ok. Calm down and move on. Slowly.”

There was nothing else to do. Maybe it was exhaustion, maybe demon hormones or something. That wasn't important. What was important was playing the deck she'd been dealt and stop acting stupid.

With a refreshed hatred for life, Nestra faced the next bend in the path, which went left. This one went back to basics with the corridor being wider and crossed by the thinnest threads she'd seen yet. It was a maze of spider-like extensions. Magical traps lined the place, showing the common runes for sound and tension but fortunately, she was really quiet this time. Even the two ambushing spiders she killed next were dealt with quietly.

The symbols would have triggered if she had used something to sever the threads, perhaps like the pruners scouts were so fond of. It was a pretty nasty place for one supposedly so easy. The shadow spiders were probably the worst of it. If the portal had breached, those creatures would have spread and killed dozens of civilians before they were all found.

This was what the world looked like outside of the walls.

One last corridor remained. It led to a wide, open entrance beyond which a cave waited. This one had the entire floor trapped with only a dozen or so tiles safe for passage. The key was to watch for the tiles that were irregular, rather than split into geometric patterns. She crossed that one easily, then slaughtered the three spiders by the door. Her perception was visibly improving. It was an amazing change.

“I could have just finished this in five minutes by using momentum,” she bemoaned.

But that would have been lazy.

Now she was stronger and more experienced, she told herself as a coping mechanism. The last cave showed the expected treasure pedestal and nothing else at the ground level. Her gaze traveled up because that was almost always where the guardian hid, appearing from above like a cheap trope. And here it was. She beheld her final prey as it waited within a pool of unnatural darkness, and she weeped.

“Yes. Yeesssssss. Finally!”

It was a crab.

A very big crab with large pincers. Nestra couldn't wait, so she grabbed her gun and shot one of its fucking legs off so it would hurry down.

The creature screeched and fell in a thunderous crash that sent shards of stones raining on Nestra's uncaring body. The demon was already charging before the tremors could stop. She recognized her prey. Manastacea Cancer Irrotatus. It was well known across the city for its nature. In fact, it was considered to be...

A delicacy.

“You are MINE!”

She sought the thinner section behind the claw before the crab could recover. Nestra used precision to guide her strike to that weak spot. Infused steel carved through the shell in a cataclysmic shock before she retreated to avoid a side claw sweep.

The rock crab gurgled and grabbed its useless flopping claw with the other one. Nestra closed the distance, intending to use the distraction.

The crab tore the wounded claw off and threw it at her. It was too late to use momentum. All she could do was block, but the beast's strength sent her rolling against the ground.

Guided by the Scornful Crescent, Nestra jumped to her feet just as the crab charged her sideways. She used momentum to slide out of the way of the charge which hit the nearest wall and sent tremor throughout the cavern. Stalactites fell, though Nestra managed to weave between them. A sword strike crushed a second leg just as the crab freed itself. She realized it was slow to turn.

Staying on the side with the missing claw, Nestra went to town on her victim. It tried to strike her but she managed to stay one step ahead. At some point, the crab stood on the remaining legs to spit something at her.

The spray wasn't even close and since it was stationary during the attack. she cut off its two remaining legs on that side. The crab collapsed, alive but disabled. All of the limbs on one side had been smashed.

It took her thirty seconds to safely cut off the other claw, then to execute it by stabbing through its mouth. A rush of power came to her, tasting like resilience and hardened skin which was always useful. She'd picked the safe option and it was fine, but other worlds may have hordes of those creatures and they would need to be killed quickly. She made a note of their weak point.

“Riiiiight.”

Nestra ignored the reward on the altar next to the exit portal. It was time.... to harvest! Sadly, the rock crab was male so there were no eggs to be found but she packed the legs and both claws before dragging them out. She pocketed the two mana crystals and the other reward which turned out to be magnetic stones useful for geomancers. They would fetch a decent price. Finally, she was out and back into the maze.

There was a congratulatory message along with a promise that the benefactor was working on something to help her soon. It was time for her to gamble.

“Look, I know you’re out there, so I have a request. I can’t take the claws with me since they’re too big, but since you seem to be able to move around freely, well, let’s just say that if I arrive at the Nestracave and the claws happened to be there, I’d be super grateful.”

With only a couple of cut legs with her, Nestra left for her motorcycle. The trip home was filled with anxiety but when she arrived at her base, there was a pile of crab parts waiting for her on the table.

She almost squealed until she realized... there was only one claw.

A message was stuck to the lone survivor. It just said: *50% taken as charge ;)*

“I will never need a sex life because taxes fuck me every day.”

Nestra watched the spheres of power gravitate around the deepening lake that was her mana pool, its waters a deep cobalt. While most had erred across the room as dead orbs when she’d first come here, now they formed a harmonious planetarium. The three radiant gray orbs representing her mana control, might, and regeneration lagged behind though they still felt unreasonably strong for D-class, much like the rest of her. Her awareness and mind speed rushed at the periphery as vigilant guardians. The mightiest remained pure strength, and now because of the rock crab, resilience, with celerity slightly lower. Resilience was also unbound and now it was time to use it.

Momentum came from binding power and celerity, precision from binding awareness and celerity. The wall slip came from awareness and magical control but now she felt she needed battle options more than utility. With a gesture, she bound power and resilience.

A new concept bloomed in her mind. At first, it struggled with the part of her that followed the Stalk of the Scornful Crescent. After all, that style relied on breaking the enemy’s rhythm and the new concept would, in theory, slow her down. It was wrong, however, and she saw it immediately.

She decided to name the new concept ‘immovable’. So long as she stood where she was, her presence would anchor her to her location, significantly increasing her resistance. The issue was that she couldn’t move away from her location but that was fine. Sometimes, breaking an enemy’s pace came more easily when a strike didn’t lead to the expected result. It would be fun to try, at least, and she knew she would get plenty of opportunities.

After that, Nestra visited the resistance room and stared painfully at the two missing shields lacking on the wall. Those were heat and cold. She still hadn't gained any resistance in those.

Riel, she hoped there wouldn't be a volcano world.

Anxiety hounded her until she reminded herself that not all could be bleak when there was crab leg for breakfast.
