

Gorge parked his van by the empty dumpsters and walked out gingerly, like an old man in pain. Now that Nestra paid attention, he was already different compared to before the purge. The bald asshole used to have this strong fat build that said he could take a punch and deliver two, but now his loose shirt hung loose from narrower shoulder. His belt was tighter too. He looked softer. Like a civilian. The loose shirt also hid the colostomy bag and possibly a handgun too. His expression felt more guarded, more bitter. Nestra reassessed her opinion. He was down but not out and his unassuming appearance was just a shield. The retired captain expressed relief when Nestra walked out of the shadows. She'd made sure there were no cameras around, and the highway superstructure above them would block the sight of surveillance drones.

It wouldn't help if someone was actively keeping an eye on her but that was a risk she had to take.

"Palladian, by Riel did you ask me for fun goodies this time. What are you hunting? A war walker? A plane?"

"Heavily modified aug who attacked us during the purge. One of the survivors," she calmly replied.

His expression fell into one of shock.

"No shit, really?"

"Zapped his ass. I think he has a grudge."

"You still have the 'Window Maker', right?"

"Yep."

"Keep it because it's one of the only things that will worry a real borg."

"Slur."

"Oh for fuck sake. Fine! An aug. Ok, now I understand why you wanted the goodies. Got your foam here, really easy to use, just point and click. Fully mechanical so EMP won't stop it. Got the jamming cloud grenades here. Payload is super thick and stops both thermal and radar with heated aluminum-coated glass fiber. Just to be clear, you don't want to breathe that shit so make sure your mask is up or your lungs will be fucked all the way down, as in, you'll need replacements, got it?"

"Got it, I just need to make sure my partner has his stuff."

"Can get him a rebreather in an hour, don't sweat it. As for the weapon, I got a twelve millimeter modified submachine gun, Touhei design. It's... really at the upper limit of what a baseline can use in terms of recoil. Ammo is high-ex, as requested. You sure you can handle that? In your, you know..."

He made a short motion to refer to her human form.

“Should be fine, just wish I had the time to practice. Do you have the bills for those?”

“Yep! Everything above ground as requested. Can I just ask why?”

Nestra checked the invoice and filed them in the system. Kim would reimburse some of it and she wouldn't get into trouble for using military-grade weapons without declaring them first. Right now, it was important to be kind of legal because she expected some amount of scrutiny in the future, one way or another.

“I'll use those in my human form. I'm working for the rat squad right now. If our geeks find out I'm firing black market guns and this gets reported...”

“Yeah ok makes sense. Anyway, transferring the invoice. It's all good unless someone digs really deep, like asking how I came across the rights for crushed mana crystal without a gleam on staff.”

“Then it's your problem anyway,” Nestra replied with a smile.

“Fair enough. What do you got for me?”

“Five mana crystals.”

“Then you owe me seven thousand credits for the lot. Speaking of, your final order, although, I hope you didn't make a mistake...”

Nestra didn't reply while Gorge fetched a box containing her final prize. While the other containers had been utilitarian gray and black cases clearly designed to contain technology, this one was made of lacquered red cedar with engravings, giving it a luxurious appearance given the fact wood came at a premium. It spoke of hand-crafted perfection which was utter bullshit since the boxes were all machine-made. Nestra knew it because she'd visited the guild that made it when she was a kid, back when her dad had a new armor made. Locus Magica, the independent guild of crafters. They produced some of the best human-made artifacts on the planet. They also made a lot of shit too. You can't teach students and only get masterpieces, after all.

“A failed, discounted gauntlet made to resist fire. Its actual resistance progressively drops after it's activated instead of remaining stable,” Gorge explained. “It's still pretty good for a minute or two.”

“That will do nicely.”

“May I ask why?”

“It would be best not to.”

Gorge nodded. Nestra had told him about the Cleaver angle because he was a crafty asshole with twenty years of experience taking down augs and other threats. He had suggestions, and it wasn't technically illegal to work with him. Anyone looking into Nestra would find dodgy shit that could be explained and would get her slapped on the wrist, but hopefully the raiding aspect would stay hidden. Gorge knowing as little as possible would help. It wasn't perfect but it was safer.

"You're digging deep into your reserves, by the way. Some of that cash, it's from your savings right?" Gorge asked.

"Better that way. It helps with the whole 'legal and above ground' aspect of buying the aug-hunting supplies. It's also an investment."

"Got a thing though, if you want to make some easy cash. Some old asshole club looking for mumbo jumbo rejuvenating treatment. They're ready to pay through the nose for virgin gleam blood, if you know what I mean."

There was no way in hell Nestra was giving out blood to anyone but Mazingwe. She also felt a little miffed by the bald fucker's happy face. She was sure he didn't mean virgin as an insult this time but the assumption still pissed her off. There was an opportunity to dispel some of Gorge's preconceptions. If she was going to work long term with the cunt, might as well educate him a bit.

"I'm not a virgin."

"What? But I thought..."

"I had a boyfriend at the academy. It was nice enough. I just ended it on a cordial note because it didn't mean the same to him as it did to me. I experimented. Tried to be happy, you know, the same way as everyone else. It was good but it wasn't enough. Just not who I was. The way I worked."

"Huh, that's weird. So you still fuck? Like sometimes?"

"Not appropriate to ask a colleague about her sex life, Gorge."

"You should send your complaint to smuggler HR and see what they have to say."

"Maybe I will. So will you stop calling me a frigid bitch now?"

Gorge's smile couldn't be any broader.

"Palladian, I don't insult people according to who they are. I do it according to what gets a rise out of them, get it?"

"You're such a cunt."

"You don't get it. Need more practice. And hey, I stopped, didn't I?"

“Since when?”

“Since you, you know...”

Saved his boy.

“Right, I’m getting all flustered by positive emotions. Fuck that shit. Good luck tomorrow and let me know if you need more stuff. Cheers.”

“See you later Gorge.”

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Nestra drove back to District Fifteen with a frown. Sharing something with Gorge, anything really, felt weird but that was where her life was headed right now. The person she’d despised the most had become a stern ally, sharing the belief that retribution would come only with a little bit of help. The other reason was that she was perhaps... more introspective than she should be. She checked her latest message from Officer Kim.

“Lots of chatter on captured devices. Something is about to happen. You are Cleaver’s priority target so watch yourselves.”

That was it. Cleaver was going to go after them, and specifically her. He was a heavily modified fucker with whatever gear he’d managed to find since the purge. Maybe she would be hit here and fail, her mask breaking from catastrophic damage. If that happened, her only option would be to flee and pray there would be no C-rank threats between herself and the kaiju wall, because if there were, she’d die. Her life would change once again just after finally having fun, and that was it, she was having fun. It was tiring and she needed more sleep but... she was good. It was the first time since walking in that test chamber in high school that she felt good. The first time in eight years.

That wasn’t fair at all.

The worse thing was, she didn’t feel she’d turned a corner or improved as a person. Younger Nestra had trained hard, worked harder, done her best to find a way out. She’d consulted with Mazingwe, who had a stellar reputation, over her cravings. She’d dated, partied, learned, tried her best to keep her head above the water and failed repeatedly until failure had become the norm. Fuck, thinking back, she hadn’t even been mad they’d refused to let her stay near portals to manage her cravings. She’d expected it. Any success would have been a surprise. Past Nestra had control over her job and the entire rest of her life had been a garbage truck crashing down a hill while on fire and surrounded by people screaming ‘just try something different you can do it!’. And now she was fine and the only difference was she’d a shived a gleam in the head when his back was turned. Talk about a great initiation quest.

If she’d known she’d have done it before. Fuck. The benefactor should have contacted her as a human, or at least given her a hint. Anything!

Bastard had left her hanging for most of her life.

And he'd stolen her Kero nuts.

The universe really owed her one on that.

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“Yes, I have a mask, Palladian-san, rebreather included as well as an oxygen supply of two minutes. By regulation, I must have it on me at all times. Even air that would not cause most people trouble can be painful to me. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, and I assume you fear Cleaver is on the move?”

Nestra looked out of the cruiser window. Most of the clutter on the streets had been removed, leaving behind damaged walls and cracked roads, their surface smoothed by hastily poured concrete. The debris might have been cleared but they were not yet replaced and now it looked like some giant creature had taken random bites off the landscape. More tellingly, people were missing. No souls gathered under the shade of old bridges to grill their catches over barrel fires, as was a common sight during lunch time. The inhabitants of Fifteen were a hardy lot with good instincts. They could feel something was wrong.

“He is on the move. Everyone is scared.”

“It may be so.”

“It should happen today.”

Shinoda slowed the car down. He started to look to the sides, just in case. Nestra didn't think they would be attacked here simply because the roads were under surveillance by security drones as the most important arteries of the block. Cleaver didn't just want to kill them. He wanted the storage drive, and he might not have the time to find it even if everything went well. Or he could accidentally destroy it. No, that wasn't it. That wasn't why Nestra was sure. Cleaver was not a person of strategy and reason. She remembered him towering over her during the purge after he'd jumped up the building, the way he looked at her to drink in her fear. He could have attacked as he landed, though he was off balance. He had not. Because he lived for the terror he ignited in others. He was a hunter who enjoyed the moment right before the kill, and Nestra had offended him. He would make it personal. He wanted to watch life fade from her gray eyes. Yes. Yesss.

“Palladian-san?”

“Hm?”

“Ah, it is nothing. You had a... peculiar expression.”

“I'm fine. Once we arrive, let's load up.”

“You have more experience in this domain so I will defer to you.”

Nestra gave her partner an assessing look. He was staring ahead and to the sides with clenched jaws. Shinoda wasn't a soldier, he was an investigator. She had to keep this in mind.

“Alright.”

The cruiser turned into the familiar derelict parking at the edge of their hab block. The sun disappeared behind them to be replaced by gloomy darkness. Shinoda deftly drove them across its empty surface, taking a slightly different path than usual. He was taking things seriously.

“I shall park near the inner courtyard entrance.”

“That would be best.”

Nestra deployed her drones. The coast was clear and so they climbed down. The moment her foot touched the asphalt, a monumental explosion made the ground vibrate.

She paused.

It was far away. Intense, but far away. Hushed whispers and cries of panic erupted from the market. She moved to the trunk to load up. The submachine gun looked really nice, at least. It was black and orange, sporting Touhei's cogged wheel on the side. She loaded it and shoved spare magazines in her breast pockets. Besides her, Shinoda put on heavy body armor and a helmet, closing a mask over his face. It looked futuristic. His voice wasn't even muffled.

“I am ready, Palladian-san.”

“Weapons check.”

“Oh, yes.”

Nestra closed her helmet as well though it was more of a cowl. It wouldn't stop a rifle round but it was excellent against sensory attacks. The two were ready by the time Kim's message arrived on their visors.

“Explosion in a warehouse by the admin center. Gleam patrols recalled. I exempted officer Nephrite. Placing all of you on high alert. Be careful.

- Kim.”

A diversion. Nestra agreed and a moment later, her doubts were confirmed. A second explosion rang in the distance, near the Kaiju wall.

“Palladian-san, if this is a diversion, then people have died to get at us.”

“Don’t think about it. Think about the now. Deep breaths, eyes open.”

“Hai.”

Nestra didn’t jump when she received a call. She’d been expecting it. Flash’s panicked voice rang through her years.

“Angmoh girl, waaaasseh! You know you asked—”

“Where, how many?”

“Four borgs, right at the entrance and moving fast! They came from—”

“Send me the feed. Now.”

Nestra accepted the link request. There was a video, seen above and from an angle. Four heavily augmented people rushing towards the parking entrance street-side.

They’d been waiting for Nestra to arrive. It was happening.

Her only saving grace was that they were limited by the speed of the slowest who barely moved faster than a human. They wore a variety of tactical gear and made no efforts to hide. Cleaver was at the head with a large riot shield and a shoulder-mounted machine gun. Another one hid behind a cloak and seemed more lightly armed though he had a thin rifle. A woman rushed with a variety of guns strapped to her back. As for the last one, all his limbs were modified and Nestra recognized the make: spider type. An infiltration tool that allowed the user to stick to virtually any surface. He had to die first. She couldn’t afford to get flanked.

All of them didn’t just have implants, they also sported the copper-colored coating typical of unpainted shield lattice. Her own EMP grenades wouldn’t really harm them, provided she could even throw that far. Nestra bit back a swear word. Cleaver wasn’t taking any chances. She immediately pressed her ‘oh shit’ button, signaling Valerian to come down. He’d be there very soon.

“Ok. Shinoda, take cover behind that pillar by the cruiser. Shoot when you have a clear shot. Flash, they’re gonna blast us so keep your drones at a distance.”

“I got an electronic warfare suit angmoh girl. Can help!”

“After they trigger it or you’ll get fried for nothing.”

“Is ok, I got many drones.”

“Right, I’m getting closer to get the first shot.”

Nestra activated the camouflage of her suit and moved forward. She would be very hard to detect by whatever sensor those buffons had, at least until she moved. She calculated her best fallback options and settled by an abandoned wreck.

“This is Valerian, I’ll be there in one minute.”

“I’m jamming their recon drones, angmoh girl! They’re not happy!”

Nestra locked her submachine gun against the wall and waited. Cleaver’s crew had not triggered their EMPs yet, probably hoping to find Nestra first before frying every drone in the vicinity, so she still had her feed. Spider aug was to her right and at the edge of their formation, slightly forward. He was sticking to the ceiling which wouldn’t be such a bad idea, normally. People tended not to look up. Only problem was, while the rest was laying low among the wrecks, spider idiot was clearly visible hopping along support beams like a degenerate monkey. He was still a bit far though, and Nestra wasn’t sure of her shot. She lined the visor and waited.

That guy would stop every two seconds to take a look towards the cruiser, its front visible from up close. She switched her gun to burst fire and waited. One. Two. Two and a half...

The spider aug stopped right above a rotting van and looked. Nestra pulled the trigger.

A muffled bang.

The recoil made the gun jolt in her hands but her strength was that of a quirkie now, and this was nothing to her. The spider’s head lurched back but it didn’t let go. Default safety measures, maybe? His loss. She switched to full auto and shot again, this time struggling to keep the bucking gun under control. The roar of the gun felt muted to her ears as she watched the aug die. Tungsten rounds shredded the lightly armored frame in moments. Puffs of blood and oil wafted through the air. A small rush of power told her she’d gained a modicum of speed.

Felt good.

Something rocked her. The Wellington armor overlay informed her she’d been attacked by a flashbang effect. They were trying to disable her. She fired on the woman trying to flank her and got her to hide behind her own pillar.

Less than two seconds later, the rest of the squad opened up on her hiding place, with real guns this time.

Most of the rounds pulverized the wreck by her side. Shrapnel flew through the air in a cloud of mangled pieces, thankfully angled away from her. She kneeled behind her pillar just as the reinforced concrete was torn piece by piece. She picked her first cloud grenade and launched it. At the same time, she lost control of her drones. Her visor went dead and the overlay on her helmet switched to safe mode. She lost her coms. Cleaver had triggered his EMP.



Her grenade detonated a moment later, silent in the terrible din of gunfire. Nesta retreated through the thick, silvery particle cloud. She kept her head low to avoid errant bullets. It looked like Cleaver didn't want to get her alive that hard, or perhaps they were ok with losing her and getting Shinoda. In any case, the bulk of the bullets strayed to her left while the pillar behind her stopped most of what remained. Some bullets still buzzed over her like angry wasps. They were shooting too high. Untrained hunters, not coordinating well. The smell of the helmet was frustratingly pungent while she longed to smell them, to hear them so she could hunt properly but that fragile human shell couldn't take it.

Nestra stopped by another pillar by the market entrance. The cruiser was to her right when facing the approaching augs, then Shinoda after that, himself kneeling behind debris. Bullets were hitting everything by now. The augs were confident in their ammo reserves, at least.

Nestra threw another cloud grenade to her left where the market opening was. Bullets soon zipped through it, searching for targets. She threw another one towards her back and let the cloud cover most of her and the cruiser.

She soon saw the first two approach, Cleaver with his riot shield up and the heavily armed woman, now having discarded a couple of weapons. They lay suppressive fire. Nesta waited until she had a good shot. She wanted to take out Cleaver's mounted gun just because it could shred through her pillar as it had done the wreck. She positioned herself to keep the pillar between the woman and lay down the sights. This would be a close call. She was already lucky they'd failed to spot her despite the reflective cloud and the EMP. Some advanced sights could have spotted her anyway but she guessed Gidung hadn't given the gangers their best softwares.

Cleaver came in sight as she breathed out. From here, he looked even more monstrous than before. There was little left of his flesh up to his face, where the remaining meat clung to metal plates centered around his auged eyes like angry, irritated slabs. He turned to spray the cloud near the entrance. Nesta could see the angry black maw of his gun, much smaller than she expected, and the chain of ammo linking it to Cleaver's back. Her helmet struggled to handle the blast as it was absolutely deafening in a closed space. When Cleaver fired, all other sounds grew muted. Demon Nesta would be able to hear and smell thanks to her resistances, jump and tear him in half because he wouldn't even be able to see her properly, but that wouldn't be fun. She aimed for the gun and shot. The explosive rounds hit the barrels but Cleaver's torso rotated so fast, she didn't see it.

Nestra saw her death in that maw, and if the gun had been intact, the return fire would have pulped her in an instant. But the gun fizzled and she recovered. She emptied her clip at Cleaver who advanced patiently towards her with metal feet stomping on the dusty ground. The bullets pinged uselessly against the riot shield, then something hit her pillar hard. The woman had located her and was laying suppressive fire. Dust peppered her armor though she didn't feel it. She was running out of options.

Abruptly, the shooting stopped. Nesta peered from behind the damaged pillar to see two things. The first was the woman watching in disbelief at the many holes in her armored chest, blood dripping from there in crimson rivulets that stained the powdery fragments. The second was Cleaver aiming a short tube towards their cruiser.

“Oh sh—”

The vehicle exploded in a ball of fire.

Nestra fell to the side as a wave went over her. Red error signals covered her overlay, showing damage. Her chest was constricted but when she caught herself, she realized she was unharmed.

Shinoda lay on the ground. There was some blood. No time to check. Cleaver was walking towards her again. She tossed her last grenade at the aug but she could see its large form walking through the cloud.

“CONNECTION RE ESTABLISHED. EXITING SAFE MODE.”

“Angmoh girl, you back! I’m jamming him but...”

Bullets peppered the shield. The local thugs Shinoda had faced the first day were firing their peashooters at the advancing colossus.

“This is Valerian. I’ve engaged the sniper. Delay Cleaver if you can!”

But the aug was already drawing a weapon from its back, this time some sort of shotgun. The system that helped him shoot those who shot him must have been malfunctioning or the street urchins would be sieves by now. Still, had to draw him away from them. Give Valerian time.

“Get them to stop firing and get Shinoda,” she ordered as she raced out of cover. The thugs hesitated and started looking around like headless chicken instead of taking cover. Idiots. Nestra dropped her submachine gun and drew the Window Maker. Her first three bullets carved deep dents into the shield. Sparks flew, and the shotgun swiveled in her general direction. There was a door in front of her. She crashed through it just as Cleaver carved a crater in the wall to her left. Better not to get hit once.

Behind her, one of the thugs exploded in a shower of gore.

“Fuck.”

That motivated the rest to seek cover. Heavy stomps confirmed Cleaver was going after her. Yes, he had to have her. She knew he could grab Shinoda and get out and he would accomplish an objective, but she also knew he couldn’t. That was twice now she stymied his efforts. He had to have her, and she would use it to drive him away from the others. He was delectably predictable.

Nestra rushed up some stairs. That was an abandoned part of the hab block, too exposed to the outside. Completely walled off and emptied. She knew it because she’d patrolled it once or twice. It was scrupulously kept free of trash to avoid a severe cockroach infestation. Not much light but that wasn’t a problem. She reloaded her window maker and considered her

next move. She just needed to delay Cleaver, really. She would use Valerian to deliver the last blow, and she had an idea. After all, augs had their drawbacks.

“Angmoh girl, he’s right behind you! I’ll keep jamming his shit but be careful lah.”

“No shit.”

Nestra angled right and raced, Cleaver stomping behind her. He was really fast in a straight line but she kept turning and turning. He also seemed to always know where she was.

“Scramble his optics?”

“All I can do is mess with the targeting. He has a LOT of shit running at the same time.”

“Palladian, Agent Nephrite has dealt with the sniper. Just hold on for a little longer,” Kim’s voice said.

Cleaver was gaining on her. She planted a foot on a nearby wall and turned into a room, then jumped, crossing it in one go. The heavy stomps rang in the corridor behind her. She aimed the window maker and shot through the wall, once, twice. She was hitting something.

Return fire.

Something clipped her calf. Hard. She fell as a lancing pain tore through it. Blood. She was hit, though the armor had stopped half of her leg from being torn off. Red signals on her display. It hurt like a bitch.

“LACERATIONS DETECTED. FIRST AID IN PROGRESS.”

A cool flood dulled the pain as she rolled to the side just as the wall exploded. Cleaver came through in a shower of crushed plaster, a behemoth of metal behind a damaged riot shield. She’d also hit his flank. The colossus thundered towards her like the judgment of God himself.

It was too much for the old, tired floor. It broke down under him and sent him crashing down below. Nestra’s relief was short lived. The riot shield embedded itself through the damn ground right behind her, thrown with great strength. She grabbed for the foam just as what remained of the floor cracked and she fell down.

Cleaver was waiting for her at the bottom like a giant trapdoor spider. The dim light turned his heavy armor into an obsidian shell and his eyes shone with a malevolent red light. She aimed the foam dispenser just as his shotgun swiveled towards her. He didn’t shoot. He thought he had her. She did. Heavy, quickly expanding foam covered the entire right side of his body, including the gun arm. Hydraulics groaned under the strain but that foam wouldn’t peel off so easily. It was designed to disable walkers.

Nestra landed on her good leg and aimed center mass, but Cleaver’s left arm intercepted the shot with preternatural speed. It blew up to shards right to the elbow, yet the punch still

connected and the last shot went wide. The Window Maker slipped from her numb fingers. She grabbed her sword with both arms and drew, hitting the damaged arm and releasing an electric charge at the same time.

The damaged arm connected with her belly.

“Ooof!”

Even through the armor and even dulled, the blow hit her like a truck. She was sent crashing against a nearby wall. The entire armor was flashing red by now but her head was protected. Unfortunately, she fell on her wounded leg and collapsed. More blood. The smoking titan that was Cleaver reached for his namesake weapon hanging on his back and realized he no longer had the fingers to grip the hilt.

Nestra grinned at him through the pain. She picked herself up painfully. Bruised ribs, for sure.

“What’s funny?” a cold voice asked her, low and robotic.

The red glare was fixed on her as the wounded titan closed the distance between them, Nestra standing but not moving. She smiled even more broadly when Valerian landed right behind him, when Cleaver’s torso rotated on itself too fast for her to follow and when it didn’t make a difference. With shining green threads lighting his skin, the gleam pushed a large thing that looked like a cattle prod in Cleaver’s wounded flank and pressed a button. Shimmering purple bolts arced from the weapon into the aug who shook and collapsed soon after. Electric mana. That was an artifact, and not a shitty one either.

The titan fell on his side like a hunk of metal. Valerian turned to her.

“Nestra! Are you alright? That was so impressive!”

Power filled Nestra’s demonic self. Elation lifted her spirit above the pain and the stress to a state of felicity. Yes. YES! She’d won the hunt with the conditions she’d set, just the way it was meant to be because she was the fucking best! The best of the best! Riel dammit that felt so good. Victory. Full victory. She felt like laughing maniacally.

“Don’t worry, he won’t move for a while. This voltage should have disabled him for at least an hour.”

Nestra realized she’d been fixedly looking at the fallen aug. Valerian’s words finally registered, turning bliss into amusement.

“Eeeehm.”

“What?”

She pointed at a steam of steaming pink fluid dripping from the aug’s ears.

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s walking that off.”

“What? Oh! Ooooh... Oh no. Well, this is, but nevermind I need to see to your leg. Quickly.”

Nestra looked at her calf.

Yeah ok she wasn’t walking that one off either. Crushed raspberries on half of it. Thank fuck for the painkillers.

“Hmm. Yes please.”

“Not here, let me carry you out first to Shinoda. I still want to keep an eye on him.”

“One moment please,” Kim’s voice said in the comms. “Mr Flash, once again your support is greatly appreciated but I will ask you to leave this conversation as what follows is classified.”

“Yeah yeah, can don’t yaya papaya pull rank or not?”

“You will be compensated for your efforts. Good. Now please, approach the dearly departed Mr Cleaver.”

Nestra removed her mask and regretted it a little because it stank like hell in here. She waited while Kim essentially guided Valerian towards a secured compartment lodged in the aug’s upper back. As expected, it contained a drive.

“His psychological profile suggested that he wouldn’t trust subordinates with the drive, and would most likely keep it on himself. Please reconvene to the parking lot. I will be here shortly.”

Valerian actually princess carried Nestra back, and though it implied Nestra hadn’t done the lion’s share of taking Cleaver out, she still appreciated it in a weird, intimate kind of way. It helped that Valerian was pleasing to look at, if nothing else. She was soon dropped in a prepared stretcher by a freshly landed hovercraft next to Shinoda. The poor detective was fine except for Kim fussing over him with the sort of angry concern some people had for reckless partners. Nestra had seen her mom do the same thing for her dad when he returned wounded from a raid. It distracted her from having to look at her mangled calf, especially at the beginning when Valerian extracted pieces of metal from the meat.

“I apologize for any discomfort,” he said with a winning smile.

“Think nothing of it. I’m so anesthetized down there you could stab me and I’d never know. I am thankful for your help, by the way. Both the killing and the healing.”

“Yes, well, the killing part was unintended,” he said with a wince. “I thought his brain cavity was more isolated.”

“What a shame.”

“Ok, all done, I will now proceed with the healing part of that’s alright with you, Officer Palladian.”

“Look, friend, you’re knuckles deep in my Gastrocnemius muscle so I think at this point you can call me Nestra. Besides you just did it two minutes ago.”

“I got carried away. And sorry for the attention you’re getting.”

Nestra looked back towards the market and the people she was meant to protect. They didn’t know Cleaver had been here for her, because of the trap she’d laid so they couldn’t be angry. Even the thugs who were crying for the death of one of their own still nodded when they met her eyes. Besides them, a horde of people and one of Flash’s drone surveyed the devastation with fearful eyes. Shredded pillars, pulverized wrecks and fallen debris punctuated an ashy landscape of cracked concrete with steel beams exposed like rotting bones. A long blood trail snaked down like a wound where the woman aug had fallen, torso pierced by Shinoda’s solid aim. The apocalyptic scene painted the tale of a desperate battle even though Nestra had felt in control, and the few glances aimed her way carried respect and even a little bit of admiration.

Kim briefly stopped by Nestra’s stretcher on her way to the techs. She leaned over Nestra with a very serious expression, though her eyes were a little puffy.

“Excellent performance, Officer Palladian. You truly were the right person for the job. And thank you... for protecting him.”

“He did well.”

“I wish I didn’t have to depend on just you two, and you, of course, Officer Nephrite.”

“Happy to help, ma’am.”

“Now let me see what’s on that drive. You can join me when you are done. I assume you are just as curious as I am to see if we found our grail.”

Nestra was, in fact, really curious but she knew better than to hurry Valerian. He was taking his time and she was really happy she couldn’t feel what he was doing. Slowly, the damaged fibers were fixed and reattached until, with a last flourish, skin smoothly closed over the wound, She wouldn’t even have a scar.

“Ok you got me, I’m impressed,” she admitted.

“What about my swordsmanship?”

“I’ll test your cattle prodmanship at a later date.”

“Thank you, Officer Palladian. I shall hold you to it.”

Valerian seemed super pleased for a moment and it gave his nice face and jade iris a sort of happy sheen like this man didn't live in the real world, the sweet summer baby. Nestra wished for him to never lose that naive hope as she sat, but Valerian wasn't done with her.

"No no, first we cover the lesion with a protective bandage. You can remove it in two days and not before."

He applied a rather expensive BaiHua product, something designed to solidify the healed tissue as they tended to break very easily in the first few days after a healing was done.

"You also can't walk for another half an hour so the new flesh can settle. Let me get you a wheelchair."

Valerian dutifully pushed Nestra towards a working station at the edge of the hovercraft's temporary base. Kim was already looking at the screen with a frown. A very long table was scrolling fast, filled with numbers. It followed the same pattern as the lone cached document they'd found on the first drive, but this time, there were a lot more data points.

"Millions of readings. Tens of millions, not just in District Fifteen but closer to central and directly outside of the walls as well. I have no idea what to do with this. Are thaums the main measurement?"

"Can you model it?" Kim asked.

"Yes, if we send it to central they can get an AI to render it in a couple of seconds but... what are you looking for?"

Nestra was starting to get a sneaking suspicion.

"Use a 3D modeling of the city with thaum levels over time as the Z axis. You can use a temperature model as the base."

"Yes, they are probably the main point of interest. I doubt pressure and altitude matter," Kim added.

The tech sent the file.

"They'll need a moment. In the meanwhile, we can check the other files on the drive."

And they did. Kim was the first to gasp.

"Riel, this is... Cleaver could not have possibly gathered that much."

"It's signed by a user named Caine," the tech helpfully added.

"The most powerful ganger gleam. He should be in a Gidung corpo prison now... Hm."

The drive hosted a treasure trove of evidence with sources ranging from Gidung internal communications to ganger accounts and even videos of corpo cybernetics being shipped to Fifteen. It was more than damning. It was enough to send someone to the Red House until they died. Finally, Nestra managed to spot the face of the person responsible for her near death and the loss of the last standing MaxSec squad.

He was a man, handsome in a conventional way, nose remade by plastic surgery. A mixed blood, half anglo half Korean probably. His straight hair was combed to the side and his suit always impeccably wrapped around an athletic body. A man of average height. One of the many corpo clones climbing the ladder of upper management. His name was Watkins.

She had no fucking idea who he was.

The internal mail he signed spoke of unique opportunities, of bottom line, of investments. Nestra's lingering happiness at the victory melted when her gaze swept over the text there looking for anything, any hint that her would-be murderer had acted out of a grand vision to change or destroy the world, for vengeance or something but it all remained so very, very mundane. Meaningless. He had acted out of greed and ambition. She wasn't even factored in the whole calculation. Hell, the entire purge had been left to the cops. She was just a collateral casualty in a scheme to make unprecedented amounts of cash.

It was almost disappointed, how banal it was, Evil committed in a sanitized and distant manner, almost casually. She'd been personally hurt by actions taken in a boardroom months before the fact by people who were not even aware she would be there to bleed on their fucking project. She wasn't even a liability in their eyes. She was an externality.

But then her happiness returned. They were going to get fucked because of an externality.

They were going to get fucked, right?

"Riel, that is... hold on, let me send this to my supervisor," Kim whispered excitedly.

Kim left them behind, reaching to her ear. A second later, she spoke in rapid-fire Korean to someone out of sight. Nestra watched her hold for a while, then the quick speech resumed and lasted for a good fifteen minutes during which she acted increasingly agitated. Valerian and Nestra exchanged a glance, then shrugged. She had no idea if it was good or bad, and eavesdropping with a translation software would be very rude.

By the time Kim came back, her eyes were like saucers.

"Holy Riel. I just talked to the mayor."

"What?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. Let's keep it all under wrap for now but let me tell you, the stone is falling down the cliff."



“Ma’am, you may want to see this,” the tech interrupted.

The simulation was here. Nestra and the others gathered around the screen, watching a rendition of Threshold appear there in cold blue, then red, pulsating bars covered the overlay.

An angry red root spread over Fifteen and beyond to the wall. It was almost alive in the way it ebbed and flowed like a slumbering limb. The root burrowed through the rendition in complete disregard of man-made constructions. It was Nestra’s turn to gasp.

“Palladian? What am I looking at?”

“I know it was formulated as a hypothesis but... to see it here. This a telluric line or... I guess you call it dragon veins. It’s a mana river.”

“A what?”

“A mana river. Some places on earth have a higher mana concentration than others, and the ambient mana levels are increasing as well, which means that this river will only grow stronger over time, or at least it should. Gidung, well, Watkins was probably hoping for that.”

“And this is valuable how?”

“Whoever controls the space around a river can have their D-class recover faster, have better enchantments run on ambient mana, and I think they can even coalesce mana crystals from thin air with the proper arrays. I know it’s been tried in some of the largest portal worlds.”

Kim blinked and so did Valerian.

“You are surprisingly well-informed, Officer Palladian.”

“I was originally supposed to be my father’s heir. I may look like a muscle brain now because that was my best option but I’m not stupid,” Nestra replied, pride stung by the comment.

Kim actually gave her a short bow of apology, a sign the demon girl was in tremendously good favor.

“My apologies, Officer Palladian. I was condescending.”

“It’s ok. And yeah, this is... I don’t know how to explain it except to say that a mana river is literally a gold mine for the future of earth. And that branch is already in Threshold. All that’s left to do is...”

“Dig and build,” Kim replied.

“Gidung already brought a lot of construction equipment.”

“They’re planning to harvest the mana.”

“No,” Nestra replied. “They’ve already started.”