

For their first meeting, Shinoda picked a classical izakaya nestled between two small office buildings deeper in the city. There was no place to park around so Nestra was forced to walk quite a bit through narrow streets dominated by electric bikes and the occasional heavy delivery drone. The Japanese influence in the district bled through the old-school neon signs advertising products from the homeland. The izakaya itself welcomed her with the smell of grilled meat and warm amber colors reflected in the ubiquitous wooden panels. At that time, the small restaurant was almost deserted, which made spotting Shinoda easy enough. He was currently sitting at the counter facing the kitchen, chopsticks picking at sliced cucumber.

Shinoda was a baseline, possibly in his fifties, which he was wearing quite well. Graying hair tempered the harsh lines of a face that spoke of an ascetic lifestyle, but there was something wrong with him, a certain gauntness of the cheeks and paleness evoking deeper trouble. He wore an antiquated trench coat over wide shoulders like some archaic movie detective. The stooped posture conflicted with the steely intensity with which he was reading a document on his datasheet. Truly a study in contrasts.

Nestra came to stand by his side and he turned with the smooth timing of someone who'd seen her come in. She bowed very slightly, which he returned. He gave her a welcoming smile.

"Ah, you must be Palladian-san. Please, sit, sit. Be welcome. Have you eaten yet? I recommend the tonkotsu ramen."

Shinoda's voice was deep and warm. Caring. A little at odds with his appearance.

"Yes. I'll have that and some gizzard."

Nestra ordered and survived through the obligatory 'hajimemashite' introductions, the small talk, and the careful questions about her qualifications. Shinoda was a soft-spoken man who interjected 'ne' and other Japanese particles in his English. His accent was quite strong, right to stressing the last syllable in a sentence.

"So you were a MaxSec officer. Support?"

"Close Quarter specialist."

"Hontou desu ka? Really? Ah, forgive me. I did not mean to question your skills."

"No harm done. Most people are surprised. How about you? Your file was rather sober with details."

"Hah," he replied with a smile. "I started in vice and made it to captain, then I joined the juvenile criminality department in district thirty-eight. I am technically retired but Officer Kim asked me to rejoin. As for why I came, I do not wish to bother you with too many details."

Polite translation: yes I admit I have a history. No, I won't tell you. Mind your own biz. Fine by Nestra.

“May I ask why you chose to accept this position?” he asked.

“Several MaxSec people died there and I don’t want their sacrifice to be for nothing. If I can help people while I do so, then so much the better.”

Shinoda’s expression was unreadable.

“Yes. Regarding the people we are meant to protect... I assume you have gone over the preparatory file?”

Nestra blinked.

“You... have not,” Shinoda said in a voice that carried wounded disappointment.

“I haven’t received anything yet. I’ll ask Kim. Maybe she forgot?”

“Oh? I see, I see. Then have you done any preparations?”

“I’ve almost completed the basic online course on de-escalation. I’ve also gathered non-lethal armament and some scouting capabilities.”

It was difficult to read Shinoda but Nestra was feeling judged. The fact he was twice her age didn’t help.

“Yes. The de-escalation course is an excellent initiative. Although, your profile is, how to say...”

“Not suitable for the mission?”

“Ah, that is not what I mean. My deep apologies, Palladian-san. You have clearly prepared.”

“To be honest, Kim said my job was to back you up and keep you alive, nothing more.”

Shinoda sustained her gaze and the facade of pleasant courtesy cracked to reveal the calculating mind underneath.

“Ah, Kim-san... I suppose it is best said now. I, right now, only retain around 40% of my lung’s capabilities.”

That... wasn’t enough for anything strenuous. Not at all. And yet he was here.

“Ah, and...”

“I cannot afford replacement lungs.”

Silence hung between the two of them. Everyone could afford replacement lungs provided they agreed to serve their new corpo overlords and someone with Shinoda’s profile would be sought after by any private security company that aimed at being more than just hired goons.

Someone who'd made captain could probably afford the upkeep off their own pockets as well. Once again, he was omitting quite a lot of stuff and once again, Nestra didn't push because it would be a terrible faux pas.

"You will have to be our running legs. As for the 'less-lethal' weapons, I hope we can resolve most issues without them."

"Sure," Nestra said with a shrug.

They exchanged a glance which conveyed that Shinoda knew Nestra would draw on a fucker if she thought there would be a problem and that Nestra didn't believe Shinoda could always calm things down.

"In any case, our mission is to, ah, the expression would be managing hearts and minds. Yes, that. We are to patrol a large hab block in fifteen and maintain a presence, as well as assist in counter-insurgency measures."

"Such as?"

"Gigun will install amenities so water and electricity are provided for free to anyone in the vicinity for a duration of one year, courtesy of the municipality. For supplies, eeeto ne, please look at this."

Shinoda used his datasheet to show a rotation 3D view of their planned hunting grounds. Nestra followed his explanations while slurping her noodles. Basically, they would patrol and solve disputes over four large hab blocks centered around a central plaza that hosted a sort of low level trading hub, mostly a food market. A few warehouses would be repurposed by Gigun early in the operation.

"There's gotta be at least two thousand people living there. No way two of us would be enough."

"In truth, less than thirteen hundred. Many of the habs are empty or were converted into anything from workshops to greenhouses. Gigun will not interfere with their activities and there will be no taxation for a year. The city hopes to slowly convert the workforce to more legal activities. Also, our primary task is not policing. We are here to be seen and to listen. Additional security will be present when Gigun distributes supplies. A field hospital will also be built. We will have a pair of Gigun users on standby to assist in case of emergencies."

"So we're bait."

"Yes. There is no doubt the local toughs will test us but the real issue is the gangers. Neither Gigun nor the city has the resources to send enough troops to secure more than a few hab blocks."

That was bullshit. They were not willing to spare those resources. Nestra thought she should consider herself lucky that the entire district wasn't methodically emptied and its inhabitants dispersed across poor districts. Because the city could do that and no one would stop them,

especially with precious gleam time being wasted on low dregs. All those fight-capable gleams flying around were not instead raiding easy portals across the island for crystals and resources, a terrible cost of opportunity.

“... so they wish to lure them out of hiding. That is not something we can control, ne? If it happens, it happens. We will do our best to bring normalcy back to fifteen and make sure no one ‘redirects’ the city’s efforts.”

“Fine by me. You do the talking.”

“And I am in your care for the running.”

Officer Kim had not forgotten Nestra’s file. She was merely finishing it by adding additional data. Shinoda could take a look at one report and get the gist of it but Nestra had MaxSec training which meant she knew seven different ways to snap someone’s wrist and couldn’t tell how to secure a crime scene except by the old saying: ‘don’t touch nuthin’. She was never meant to do field investigations, so Kim had someone create a more complete image. It was pretty much what Shinoda had explained with more data on where the workshops were, the VIPs, and the troublemakers and so on. The overachieving administrator also included a collection of mugshots to upload to her visor since some of the known gangers had escaped.

Kim gave her until the end of the week before her starting date which was considered ‘rushed as hell’ in the industry. Sitting on her couch while munching on a homemade mana banana (or bamana, if you will) sundae, Nestra considered her situation.

There was nothing she could do that would help with being a better cop, not on that timeline. Much better to follow Shinoda around to learn the ropes. What she could do, however, was prepare for trouble.

Now, she wasn’t really scared of dying because her mask was just that, a mask. If her human form were to be destroyed, she was pretty sure she would revert back to her true self. Maybe with some damage. Now that was obviously still a huge problem in itself, but fortunately, she had a solution.

While demon Nestra was growing like mushrooms on a pile of politicians’ promises, human Nestra remained conveniently same-sized. Nestra knew that because she’d checked her human condition with great care in case it degenerated without food or exercise, and it didn’t. That meant that she could invest in gear that would fit her for more than two weeks! And she could even do it legally by drawing from her end-of-contract bonus, which would nicely separate demon black market Nestra from human law enforcement Nestra. Perfect.

“Ok, let me see the best of the best!” She announced to herself as she sat comfortably with her visor, ready to prowl the internet for some juicy stuff.

“Ok I need to scale down my expectations,” she added exactly thirty seconds later.

It took three hours and quite a few cross-checks to find the good offer she wanted. It was fine for Nesta. Like finding a cheap deal on nice shoes. She settled for a small treasure she found on a lost page selling Wellington military surplus to security companies. Her perfect find was a scout armor made for baselines to survive in the New Zealand wilderness for extended periods of time. Wellington equipped workers and researchers with it and it had quite a few nice features. The armor offered decent ballistic and excellent blade protection. It also had a helmet that looked like a cowl on the upper back until activated, then it would snugly cover the head. Even better, the helmet would protect against flashbang effects and gas which was what Nesta was most concerned about. Like all Wellington goods, it sported the corp's signature metal ink EMP shielding and minimum electronics to function. There were a few drawbacks like the weight but the most defining feature was the appearance. The model Nesta ordered just looked like an outdoorsy hiker set which would allow her to fit in more than riot armor. It even had cooling features! Nesta's only regret was the relatively ugly pair of combat boots but she guessed it would be okay.

From Gorge, she ordered a few more gizmos like EMP charges and door breaching explosives she could reasonably explain having, then she was ready.

Protective gear: set. Drone surveillance: delivered by Stib and operational. Non-lethal weapons: holstered and ready. Extra-lethal weapons: hidden around where they would hopefully stay unused. The only things missing were her thermos and snacks which she packed eagerly.

Nesta was now ready except for the whole 'completely unqualified for the job' part. She left on her first day at 8:30AM with a fresh, renewed hatred for a schedule that messed with her weird sleep cycle. There was a message on her doorstep with new coordinates written.

"There better be Kero nuts this damn time!" she protested.

The drive to fifteen was short and uneventful. She arrived at the newly rebuilt district precinct and passed through several thorough security checks. Shinoda was waiting for her by the coffee machine next to the huge meeting room where the weekly briefings would take place. Nesta usually enjoyed those because they were relaxing. She could drink her java in peace and pretend to pay attention, except the part where whoever spoke reminded everyone to be mindful of the social realities and then glared daggers at her specifically. The gathered officers were not what she was used to here. MaxSec had been a gathering of lean, fit men with an attitude, at least at first. Here, the group was eclectic as could be. There were a couple of quirks and quite a few augs, some old men with wrinkled scowls, some fat men with keen eyes, young women with guarded expressions, and young guys with hungry smiles. There were Malays, Pinays, Viets and Anglos, Koreans, Japanese and Chinese and even a lone black guy who looked old enough to have been here since the city's inception.

Nesta wasn't sure where the city had found all those people but they were not clearly picked at random, because if there was one thing they all displayed besides covert curiosity, it was distrust. Everyone stuck in pairs and looked around like they were five seconds away from a

massive shootout. Paranoia was the name of the game. It was the perfect crowd for this place and Nesta was now even more convinced Kim knew what she was doing.

The briefing was given by a prim lady in a uniform so flawless it looked drawn on. She was pretty much a Kim clone to the point Nesta wondered if they shared the same plastic surgeon. There was a mold to upper middle management and she fit to the last sheen of perfectly combed hair, a sign Threshold was sending their best. There were no pieces of information to be gleaned here that weren't already in her file, so she only listened with one ear. There would be events throughout the weeks, mostly convoys of humanitarian aids and mobile hospitals installations. The rest were reminders to behave and keep their eyes open which no one here really needed. After they were done, her visor pinged to show a message from Aunt Claire.

“Hey there Nes! The celebration is set for Sunday, so make sure you complete your revenge so you can ditch the pigs and come meet the family! ACAB babyyyyyyyy ;P”

Nesta flinched at the various emotes and gifs that followed. Aunt Clecle was just trying to get a rise out of her.

“Like that’s going to happen,” she sent back. “But I’ll be there. It’s my day off.”

“You’d better. If some bureaucrat asshole gives you overtime, I’ll smack them on the way to nab you. And you can quote me on that.”

This was concerning as Aunt Claire had two separate citations for smacking bureaucrats on her way to do something. That Nesta knew of. That woman was a menace.

Nesta’s relatively good mood lasted right until Shinoda and her reached the motor pool. All bait pairs were assigned a refurbished Touhei cruiser from ten years ago, which was actually a pretty good surprise considering they were some of the best cars ever designed according to her brother Ulysses. All she knew was that they were good all around as well as extremely reliable, with a grid covering the reinforced glass that could stop heavy machine gun fire. That was where the good news stopped, because leaning on their new rides were a trio of gleams in Gigun uniforms.

Shinoda stopped and tensed at a short distance which the assholes immediately picked up with knowing sneers. Nesta recognized their types immediately from the erratic mana pulsing through their bodies. Lack of discipline or lack of skill, often both, forced some raiders to the bottom of the totem pole. It was not enough to want to hurt and be ready to get hurt to be a good raider. One needed the brains to do so smartly, and the resilience to train every day. The portals didn’t suffer fools gladly and those guys had it painted all over their beings from messy hair to stubble to barely lit iris to frumpy uniforms to languid postures and everything in between. Nesta knew she had to take the initiative with a step forward and a bit of diplomacy.

“What are you corpo goons doing in our garage? Shouldn’t you be out working instead of playing tourist?”

The demeanor of the trio changed immediately. From mocking, they grew aggressive which would have happened no matter what when their demands would not be met. Now they looked like a pack of wolves and Nestra was a perfectly seared slice of medium-rare rib-eye steak with garlic green beans on the side aaaaaaand she was hungry again. Which made her bare her teeth... which incidentally gave the gleams pause. Now they were curious. One of them, a thick-set south east guy, leaned and whispered excitedly in the middle gleam's ear, a Korean guy with dark hair and a poorly chosen mustache. Meanwhile, Shinoda had also moved forward to be right by her side and he was doing something with an old-school cellphone he was hiding behind his back in one hand. Nestra picked their words easily with her slightly enhanced senses. They'd recognized her.

"Well if it's not the Palladian reject. You know, you kind of feel like you're on the verge of something. If you ask nicely, maybe I could give you some mana so you could experience what it feels to be a quirkie instead of a drab? At least for a little while?"

"But then we'd both be quirkees," Nestra deadpanned.

Oooh they didn't like that. Gleams like them knew they were shit gleams but a drab wasn't supposed to tell them they had so little mana they were on the verge of failing. The third guy, a tall anglo with a weasley look even took a step forward but the middle one held him back. There were cameras here, and the other officers were already gathering in quiet, judgmental clumps. They had witnesses. Probably what Shinoda was going for.

"Oh, feisty. Real shame you can't play nice since, you know, we're supposed to be your overwatch."

Tall anglo guy smirked in a gotcha moment, as if Nestra could count on those clowns to save anything if the situation hit the fan.

"We just wanted to get acquainted. Much better to know the person as it would... motivate us to perform better and all that."

So bribes.

"Oh that's great, we'll be sure to tell you if your assistance is required..." Nestra kept going.

She knew at this stage that pissing them off no longer served a purpose but she couldn't resist. Guarding cops in a shit district was as much a punishment detail as it was possible to get for a gleam. Past that was plain expulsion which few corpos were willing to risk on gleams. That meant those gleams already knew they were on someone's shit list and they either didn't care, or they were not smart enough to realize it. No matter what, they would be a pain.

"Hope you don't wait for too long," mustache gleam said, then he signaled and the trio left under the blank attention of almost all of the cops that were in the meeting room.

The assembled cops waited around like a bunch of gargoyles until they were sure things were settled, then they filed out with quiet nods. They had done their duty. It was time to return to normal paranoia.

Shinoda moved into the car without waiting for Nestra, directly in the driver seat. When she climbed in the passenger seat, his seatbelt was already fastened.

That was a breach of etiquette, and a grievous one at that. Seniority meant he would decide who drives in the pair but they were supposed to agree on it as a form of respect. He'd completely bypassed that, so Nestra gave him an unimpressed look. He misinterpreted it.

"You had them handled, Palladian-san. I was backing you as a partner."

"So is the car gene-locked or..."

"Sonna... Oh! I apologize. Oh, sorry. Please forgive me for this display."

Nestra chuckled at how bashful the grim detective suddenly was, all red and sputtering. It felt so weird it was a little embarrassing.

It also revealed what sort of partnership he thought they had under the veneer of politeness. That... was actually fair. He was an overqualified person twice her age while she... well, she was doing her best. And he was mostly respectful.

"It's ok, haha, it was a distracting experience."

"Yes. I admit, I have faced users in the past over certain allegations. It has been... difficult. Sometimes. In truth, I am impressed by your handling of the situation. Are you not concerned they will retaliate?"

"Oh, they will. Mostly, they won't come to help us. They might also let it be known. But those are bottom feeders. Scum. You don't want to get close to them because they stain everything they touch. Give them an inch and they'll ask for favors, the kind that ends up with them transferred elsewhere and you transferred in front of the rat squad."

"Is your experience with your family... helping you?"

Nestra shrugged. Of course he knew who she was.

"Yeah. And my experience as someone who thought I'd be one of them. And it doesn't hurt that they expect me to be connected. I mean, the Palladians don't officially support me but my parents and my aunt got a reputation. It's protected me a few times, I suppose. Anyway, enough about them. Gleams are like bad weather. Can't do anything about them but wait."

"Sou ka? Very well."

The cruiser left the brand new garage at good speed under the expert hands of Shinoda who, like quite a few people she knew, never fully trusted the car's AI. They drove deeper

into fifteen through narrow streets and crowded alleys, most of which had been avenues and wide roads before debris and sometimes even fallen buildings cluttered them into inaccessibility. The light of early morning exposed the place mercilessly as the shithole it was. Ugly concrete structures were the best one could hope for in the brutalist cityscape of post-incursion architecture but fifteen went a step further by being abjectly poor as well. The hab blocs stood yellowed and cracked like old teeth among an ocean of detritus piles. Shinoda expertly wove between the worst trash heaps while figures watched them cautiously, huddled around barrel fires for warmth. The mood was grim. People stepped away warily when they approached, only relaxing after they were gone. Nestra spotted at least five different armed guards though they looked more like local security than ganger muscle.

The place lacked the tattooed groups standing with affected confidence or jeering. Most of the gang signs were wiped away while crews, flying drone hives, and huge, automated machines cleared debris and the accumulated trash. In a way, fifteen was licking its wounds but the body was far from healthy.

“We should start showing ourselves at the market and move up from there. Listen to the people,” Shinoda said.

“Hope they talk to us.”

“Some of them will if only to show the others they are not afraid. Over a thousand people. Ronins will be plenty, probably.”

“And they all want to be unequalled under the heavens?” Nestra drawled.

“Hahaha. So kamo ne. I will park over there.”

Shinoda drove under an arch into the integrated parking lot of their assigned hab bloc. It was a large open space under the main body where the view was only obstructed by support beams. Only carcasses of vehicles remained now, every useful part long since stripped. If people could afford a car, they wouldn't be living here. Shinoda stopped in a relatively uncluttered space in plain view, within a short distance of the market just in case they had to leg it. Nestra hoped they wouldn't because Shinoda couldn't leg anything for very long. And the cruiser wasn't very safe.

Actually, that wasn't entirely true. The cruiser was pretty good, hermetically sealed and it would probably be cleaned every night at the pool. She still fully anticipated every last wheel to smell like teenager piss by early afternoon. Those who tried to break stuff with stones would waste their time and those trying to trash it or steal stuff would get a very bad experience. Nestra came out cautiously, made sure she had everything strapped and released her small flock of drones made by Stib with the convenient activation of the visor command 'Nestraguard.exe'. A really simple prompt allowed her to assign a camera to the car, just in case someone tried to open a window with a walker warhead.

Stepping out of the shaded lot in the open was like playing a scene from an old western. The two vaqueros strode in the open air saloon while over a hundred and fifty people looked up

from whatever the fuck they were doing. Nestra only hoped it wouldn't end in 'exit scene, pursued by lynching mob'.

The open market was large and obviously also a social hub. The scent of spices and grilling meat covered the unpleasant background of neglect pretty well. In fact, the market area was rather clean. Food stands were old and settled with tarps and antique folding chairs, the paint peeling off in places. Other stands sold off-brand clothes made in fabricators using custom models. Some of them showed a unique style that spoke of true effort. As for the people, they were both widely different and yet similar in some ways.

Some of the older workers wore tainted coveralls as they ate a late breakfast. Some felt more like drifters, others like artists, others were broken people hard on their luck with dejected expressions. A certain equilibrium kept the groups balanced between each other, and with an idle herd of young adults with ridiculous baggy clothes. Nestra's instinct recognized them as a threat immediately. She would bet a Kero nut against a pistachio that they were packing heat. It was the only explanation as to why they would be caught outside wearing that.

"What are you pigs doing here?" a short-haired dark guy asked from a stall selling tech stuff. He wore a pretty distinctive acid green ensemble that made him noticeable. Nestra recognized him from the file. He was also known for repairing and repurposing equipment.

Fate hung in the balance etc, so Nestra let Shinoda handle it. Standing here with confidence in his old-fashioned clothes, the mature detective carried a disarming, fatherly aura. Nestra wondered what wisdom he would share.

"Pig stuff, of course," he genially replied.

A few people shook their heads, others returned to eating or grilling. There were a few low chuckles but though no rousing endorsement, it was enough for their purposes. Shinoda was in and the youth was declawed, though he didn't realize it yet.

"Where were you fuckers a month ago," he grumbled.

There were still a dozen people watching. Weirdly, Nestra felt like being the one to answer.

"Uh, we didn't want to get pasted," she helpfully replied.

The last of the tension bled out. Overhead, a squad of drones made a flyby to spew Gigun propaganda. No one gave a shit.

Shinoda walked to the nearest food stand and Nestra followed until a quick check revealed half of her drones were down. Their cameras were gray and an error message returned 'connection jammed'. She turned to see the sneering heckler, now waving a sort of remote control with an arguably deserved shit-eating grin.

"Lost something, ang moh bitch?"

Shinoda spotted the problem and he went back, which got a few glares. Nestra knew it would be easier to just let it go but her life might depend on those drones and besides, they were Stib's gifts. And that guy was being a prick. She approached his stall while Shinoda engaged with a nice, calming sentence. The place was filled with cobbled together stuff with wires exposed. There were drones, appliances, and quite a few things that looked like defensive systems missing just the weapon. A couple of them rose when she approached and she realized they had flechette guns on them. Enough to draw blood though they wouldn't pierce her armor.

"Nuh uh, ang moh. You don't want to hurt your pretty lips, uh?" the seller said with a smile, then he mimicked a blowjob.

He was getting a very small crowd but most people seemed not to care much for his bullshit overall which implied they were used to it. So Nestra turned to the side and revealed a small sphere which she rotated. There was a click and a countdown appeared on the sphere's surface.

10 9 8

The seller didn't fail to recognize a nice standard issue police EMP charge, the kind used to wipe out drones during operations. This would destroy Nestra's visors, her remaining drones, and that guy's entire livelihood.

"Yo bitch, what do you think you're doing?"

"Nice stall."

7 6 5

"Would be a real shame."

"You wouldn't dare you siao girl."

4 3 2

Nestra shrugged.

She would most definitely dare.

"Ok, stop."

She pressed the button, leaving a red blinking 1 hanging between them.

"My partner would just like her belongings back," Shinoda said.

"They were made by a good friend so I don't get jumped," Nestra agreed. "So return them or I'm wiping us both. You got three seconds."

It took less than one to have her drones return to her control and for the seller to spread his arms around with a radiant smile.

“Heyyyyy no need to get angry lah, just playing around a little? Little hazing for you newcomers. So, we good anot?”

Nestra deactivated the charge.

“I still owe you for that dick joke.”

“Heeyyyyy come on ang moh, give Flash a break. Walao, you guys are sooo tense.”

“Please do not mind Flash, boss,” the food stand guy behind them said. “He’s just an idiot. Good guy though. Don’t buy his rice cookers.”

“It was just one time!”

With the crisis averted, Shinoda was left talking to Flash which left Nestra with a choice. She could play second fiddle in an exchange with someone who’d tried to nab her stuff. Or! She could ‘interrogate’ the other guy who happened to sell skewers of grilled meat and shiitake mushrooms drenched in chili oil with, if her nose was right, some cumin.

Obviously, they could split to cover more ground if they were just a few meters apart. The food seller was a short guy wearing an actual apron and a white hat. His nose flared, smelling a good deal with the same accuracy Nestra smelled diced garlic.

“Lay ho! Welcome to my stand. I am old Lin. Meat? My best stuff. Try one!”

Nestra grabbed the thin wood piece and chomped on the offered piece of meat. It was pork, very tender, unnaturally so. No mana but enough calories to achieve happiness.

“You like? Is my juiciest rat,” the guy said with a nice, wide, gotcha smirk.

“Oh good. And here I was afraid it might be vat-grown pig.”

“Hah! You have good tastebuds. Skewers? Four creds for meat. Two for mushrooms and one for momo bread. Crispy and nice.”

Nestra ended up with a nice spread for twenty creds, reduced from twenty-two because she was such a pretty gweilo and also because she made Flash shut up. That was apparently worth something here.

“So, why you are here Leng Lui? Racket? Please say no.”

“We’re just supposed to show ourselves and help when needed.”

“You and what army?” her cook replied with naked disbelief.

“No army unless we get jumped. I’ll let you on a secret,” she said, leaning forward.

“Really?”

“We don’t actually expect a lot of people to ask for our help.”

“Ooooh, very smart, very smart. Yes. Because you cops are useless?”

“I mean, we got to build some trust first. Anyway, I should leave. Nice food.”

Shinoda was done telling Flash he was impressive for breaking decent encryption that fast. The young asshole was positively preening. The two strangers in a semi-hostile land regrouped and moved on.

The trip through the market remained uneventful. Most people were not quite as welcoming as old Lin had been but they provided service, most of the time.

“That smells quite nice,” Nesta told a lady selling naan she stuck to the inside of a bell-shaped oven.

“Yeah but smelling is all you’ll do. I don’t do business with pigs,” the lady replied with a calm expression that said the only way Nesta would taste it would be theft and battery. Nesta shrugged. Not a surprise.

Except for that one incident, they were mostly just tolerated as they moved through a crowd that gave them a wide berth. Only the most confident people asked them questions.

“So you guys think you’re here to stay?”

“Are you going to try and tax us?”

“What are you going to do about trash collection?”

“When’s the hospital coming? We were told there would be one?”

Obviously no one trusted them farther than they believed they could throw them but at least there were no overt shows of hostility and they reached the end unmolested. Shinoda pointed to a set of wide stairs and the long trek up began. Long, because Shinoda was taking his time since he could not afford to run out of breath. And also because the place was a maze.

What reports failed to say was that many of the hab blocks’ corridors were obstructed by very deliberate blockades, not piles of trash but welded bars, corrugated steel amalgams and, in one case, an actual wall made of concrete blocks cemented in place with surprising professionalism. Some of the passages ended with locked doors and others with concerned guards who were more than eager to point the way up.

“There are elevators but they are limited to the manufacturing levels. They have jury-rigged security access. We will not take this path very often,” Shinoda explained as a way of apology though Nestra didn’t care.

The place was messy and fascinating and also some of the graffiti was frankly impressive. The ones without dicks, that is.

“They’ll let us use them?”

“I will ask politely. Please do not override anything unless in case of emergency.”

“Sure,” Nestra replied. “Not that I’d know how to do it. That’s Stibs’ domain.”

“The friend who gave you the drones?”

“Yes.”

“Her setup is very impressive. We are lucky she refused to join a corporation. Are they deployed now?”

“All the time, yeah.”

They reached a long corridor overlooking the central courtyard. Some of the railing was missing. Shinoda slowed down.

“So, are they telling you what I suspect?” the detective asked.

“Five of them. One’s running ahead to corner us.”

“The baggy clothes groups that followed us at the market?”

“Yes. I’m seeing weapons.”

“I wish to talk to them.”

“Sure.”

Shinoda resolutely walked to the end of the path, stopping right at the corner. He looked at Viv who gave him a countdown. At zero, a tall guy turned around, almost into Shinoda. He swung without thinking.

Nestra’s senses were a little enhanced in human form, which gave her all the time to appreciate the old detective’s flowing motion as he grabbed the extended arm with his own, twisted on himself, heaved the unbalanced ganger over his shoulder and sent him bodily crashing against the balustrade, which cracked ominously and then, broke.

Nestra grabbed the guy's arm before he could plummet down on a hat-seller stand. He glared at her with venomous intensity as if Nestra was enjoying herself pulling that sack of muscles up. The fall wouldn't kill him. She was half-tempted to pull the good old Mufasa.

"Give me your hand!" Shinoda yelled by her side.

His genuine concern shocked Nestra, and the ganger as well. He still hesitated halfway because apparently, his pride had short-circuited his higher brain functions.

"Kuso Gaki. Hand. Give. Now."

The two finally hoisted the idiot back up just as the rest of the group arrived behind them. Without hesitation, Shinoda released the idiot so he could join with his friends with bashful resentment. Nestra took position behind Shinoda while the two sides made their stand.

The local thugs were a sorry lot.

It was not just the cheap baggy clothes that only hid weapons from naive eyes and protected absolutely nothing. It was also the general lack of edge they were displaying, defiance without the training and mentality Nestra had seen in her colleagues over the years. Riel, even Pudding would have demolished these guys for breakfast and he used to eat three of them. And they were young. They were so damn young. The oldest guy was the leader and he was younger than Nestra. Nineteen or twenty. South East Asian. He was the only one who'd successfully grown facial hair and though he did have a certain magnetism, Nestra could see the tension in his shoulders. Interestingly, the security file didn't mention them.

"Guess the little piggies have eyes."

"It won't go like you think it will go," Shinoda stated.

"Hah," the leader scoffed.

He sounded more bitter than angry. Nestra noticed he kept his hand relaxed by his side, near the pocket of his baggy trousers. Probably had a piece there though she didn't know why he hadn't already drawn it like most of his friends. As for the other guys, their irons were fabricator-made junk made from blueprints designed to go around hard-coded safeties against gun proliferation. Basically, they'd manufactured each piece of the gun independently then assembled them. The results were boxy, unwieldy things that made even her antique service rifle look like shiny corp gear. The only people those fuckers could threaten were groups as pathetic as themselves. It was a little sad but she kept the observation to herself because Shinoda was taking them seriously. To be fair, even a garbo gun could still kill.

"You're gonna give me the speech about how if I off you, a hundred will replace you? Or some shit like that?" the leader continued.

"That won't happen."

The leader's smirk gained a steel edge.

"You knew I was coming but that does not mean you can stop me."

"Not this. We will not be replaced. Should you kill us, it will be over. But it will not serve your purpose."

"You don't know what my purpose is."

"Then tell me," Shinoda said with kindness and patience.

Nestra got a feeling the leader had just gotten trapped and he knew it as well. For a moment, she thought he was going to opt out and just get back to violence, but the rest of his squad was looking at him with curiosity. Maybe they also knew cops were bad but they'd not articulated exactly why. Riel, they really were so fucking young.

"I want to stop what's going to happen here. Seen it before. First you can't move around, then you can't have a gun. Can't sell food without a corpo permit. Can't sell local stuff cause it's not licensed. Drones everywhere. Just wait a bit and the entire kib is just a slum around a combini and a pawn shop. And we're all on the fucking dole waiting for corpo nutrient bars."

He pulled a stick from a pocket and lit it, sending a puff of smoke traveling towards Nestra with lazy defiance. It smelled like weed.

"So gonna make it costly. Maybe too costly. We won't kill you. Rough you up a bit. Won't even ask a little knob slob from the sow. But we'll send the message. And hey, maybe we get the fucking borgs dropped on us but at least we'll have fought back, yeah?"

"I see. You are protecting your... kib, was it?"

The thugs chuckled. They really thought it was funny watching the old timers use the local slang.

"We are not here for that. We are, ah, the canaries. In a mine. Do you understand?"

"Is this some old guy shit I'm supposed to get?"

"Old, yes. Pre-incursion. A long time ago, canaries were kept in mines to see if the air would go sour. Do you know how you can tell if the mine air is sour?"

"It's the canaries?"

"Yes. They are dead."

The toughs were now listening to Shinoda with grisly fascination, certain that they had the upper hand anyway so indulging in a little banter couldn't hurt. Shinoda grabbed that attention like a gleam on a dance floor.

“There are only two of us. We cannot be the law in this ‘kib’. Our role is to tell the town where to go with the help, and the hospitals, and the supplies. If the canaries die then the place is not a good place to help. It is simple. And there is something else.”

The youth waited.

“We are Threshold officers. We are not corporate private security. We are not even well paid.”

Nestra nodded before she could think, which made a few of the thugs shift with amusement. Her instincts kept telling her they were no danger and the Scornful Crescent whispered in her ear that she could take them all out and solve the situation immediately. Make them afraid of her. Gain dominance. But that wasn’t what she wanted.

“This is your one and last chance to get a better life, because the city will try a little and then it will give up and leave the district to Gigun. The truth is, no one believes in you. The city will offer training. It will give you access to healthcare and assistance for those who need it to get better. It will not close the fabricators or the vat farms. But most people do not expect much from it because they believe you are a lost cause. You can choose to stay here if you wish and perhaps Gigun will win. Or you can grab that chance and turn your luck around.”

Shinoda shrugged.

“You can change and make progress. I can even help you. It will not be easy because no one wants to make it easy for you, but it is possible. Or you can do the same thing you have always done and let the world crush you. It will take a while and maybe you will feel like you’re fighting a noble cause but in the end, it will not matter. You are warriors with homemade guns. They have power walkers and bored users. It is not a war you can win by fighting with the weapons you have now.”

“Sure, ok. Why would you even care?”

“I was part of the crushing force, a long time ago. Luck offered me a mark as a reminder.”

Slowly, the detective opened his vest and unbuttoned the shirt underneath. From her position at his back, Nestra couldn’t see what he showed but the way the thugs flinched told her enough. He had to be sporting the mother of all scars.

“I have carried this mark everywhere I go. I will no longer be part of those who crush, but I cannot help you escape the trap. Only you can do it. As I said, I can help you. I can show you the tools. You will see that I tell the truth. If at any point, you believe I lie...”

He approached the nearest ganger. With two delicate fingers, he picked the barrel of the homemade gun then slowly lifted it until the muzzle rested between his eyes.

“If that happens, you can kill me. I will not try to stop you.”

So that was why Kim had told Nesta to keep an eye on that fucker because, as far as Nesta could tell with her sharp senses, Shinoda was unafraid. His heartbeat was steady. There was no sweat on his skin. He was... truly indifferent to dying.

That felt wrong to Nesta until she realized that until two weeks ago, she'd shared the exact same mindset. But now life tasted sweet and she no longer wanted to let it go. It was a strange feeling realizing how much she wanted to keep existing now.

The thug pulled his gun away from Shinoda's forehead, breaking the spell. The dynamic of the situation had changed and the promise of violence was now a distant thing, faded into the background. That lasted until the leader realized there was a foreign piece inserted in this perfect scene like the black queen on the white side of a chessboard. Someone who was sticking out. Someone who didn't fit.

Nesta.

"How about you, pig girl? Why are you here?"

Shinoda stepped to the side and gave her a warm smile. That gesture was aimed at the others, to show them she had his blessing and trust rather than speaking over her to smooth things over. Fortunately, Nesta had actually given it some thought.

"I almost died fighting the gangers during the purge. They had corpo gear, unmarked, and I think we both know how they got it. I'm just here to make sure Gigun doesn't get free reign over the district."

"You think you grunts can do anything?"

"Yes, I do. So long as we're around, no one can just wipe the place and blame it on 'terrorist action'. I'm not joking by the way."

"Oh so now you're our shield against the corpo, eh?"

"Yeah because so long as we're here, they have to pretend to care."

Nesta knew she wasn't as convincing as Shinoda. The gang seemed divided over her statement. She knew she was making sense but it was clear she didn't really give a shit about them and the fact she was armed and on guard reflected that. They felt it too.

"Nice blade by the way. Can I see it?" the leader asked.

"That's a family gift, so no. But for the rest, feast your eyes."

Nesta pulled her vest open, revealing the Wellington body armor along with some of her gadgets and the hand cannon resting against her hip. A few loud whistles welcomed the reveal.

“Nice. Is that an EMP charge?” the leader asked, pointing at the gadget she’d used against Flash.

Nestra knew where this was going. She grabbed the grenade and threw it. The leader caught it in the air with ease. A slight of hand and it was gone. A toll. A symbol. Nestra could live with that.

“Ok. We’ll see if you mean it or you’re just talk, piggies. See you later.”

The thugs left in good order, leaving the law in control of the corridor and the situation. No bloodbath! They were off to such a good start.

“That went as well as I’d hoped,” Nestra said.

“It is so, ne? Let’s hope this lasts.”