

It was perhaps for the best that Shinran had other engagements the following day, or nobody could have dragged Nestra away from the other battle maniac's mansion. She wanted more. She was desperate for more. The missions were fun and interesting and more importantly, they were perfectly adjusted to her level. Well, maybe except for the social missions. Portal worlds were definitely more raw. Mostly, they told someone to go from point A to point B in a relatively smart way, and that was it. The one advantage they had was that they were real with real monsters, and as such her essence could eagerly swallow that of its monsters, which provided her with improvements and resistances.

Nestra found herself drawn in three different directions. She wanted to work with the city, because she was curious about Fox Mask and, well, she had a chip on her shoulders if she had to be honest. Another part of her wanted the carefully curated lessons offered by Shinran: a way to hone her techniques. It was something she had loved since she'd started to practice with a sword, that exhilarating feeling of making real progress. The third direction was purely Aszhii. This one wanted to raid, again and again, become so strong and resilient that an army couldn't stop her, feed off the cores of the vanquished. All three reflected various aspects of her personality. All three were within her grasp. She merely had to choose.

Time felt like her greatest enemy.

Ok so she had to choose but there was a schedule, so since Shinran was out, raiding and training it was. She spent half a day reviewing security protocol, then pulled the public files of the people who were going to be on the expedition. It wasn't complete because some of the candidates were still being picked. She still learned a lot. Ilar wasn't just bringing good negotiators. He was also bringing quite a few heavy hitters. If things got... complicated, there was a good chance the Threshold delegation could turn the entire mountain summit to slag before being taken down. The Enclavers would know it. They would understand the message behind it: we don't trust you and we're not impressed by you.

It was weird how this diplomatic meeting was set up to be as undiplomatic as humanly possible. Nestra wondered how much of Ragnarok's influence was at play here. Mayor Kim's party was pretty neutral, enclaves-wise. The government was focusing on resurrecting international trade at the moment. Old Steel She-Wolf though? She'd made her opinion of gleam mob bosses pretty clear.

Nestra wondered if her mask would survive the expedition unscathed. It made things pretty exciting, to be honest. She should still use the time she had to grow as strong as possible. As her Dad always said: Those who quote 'Fortune favors the bold' have the shortest life expectancy. Fortune favored the prepared mind, and the prepared body. Nestra might not be the sharpest broadsword in the arsenal, but she was pretty good at consistent efforts. It was time to put it to good use.

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Three months later.

The shadow core pulsed idly in the chamber of Nestra's mind palace, mirroring her improved control. She called power, the mana coiling around her arm like a snake. This shadow wasn't

the hungry beast Tenneru had wielded like a living thing. Nesta had no need for more offensive power. Instead, her shadows were a prowling, hungry thing. They envied. They hid. They stole.

She wondered what a therapist would have to say about that, not that she'd ever ask. What mattered was that her arcane training bore fruit. Shinran's training center had a weird way of making her practice. It placed her into the remembered consciousness of someone who'd mastered the spell, then had her repeat it to try and remember the sensation. It had worked surprisingly well considering she wasn't exactly a mage. Those shadows would serve her well during the expedition. After all, Crescent wasn't invited.

It would be really stupid to get caught in her true form.

Nestra inspected her Hall of Resistances next. She'd been focusing on her skin recently, with some good results. Her sensory and cold resistances lagged behind. This wasn't exactly a problem she could solve easily, simply because she hadn't been traveling.

In a way, portals reflected the reality outside of them. Nesta believed the pocket dimensions latched onto a related and similar stretch of reality. If she wanted to face cold beasts, Nesta would have to travel to a cold place. She had already gathered as much as she could from the handful of portal worlds connected to refrigerated warehouses. The life of an Aszhii was one of travels. She was merely... belaying her departure from the nest. It didn't help that only novelty provided benefits. She had tried doing the same dungeon twice but with different parameters, like using a spear or using only magic. It didn't work. She got raw progress from a kind of monster only once. After that, they were old news, and her essence rejected them.

Humans really were the only exception.

She still wasn't sure what to think about that.

Shaking her imaginary head, Nesta checked the planetarium next. There were no new links to be made between her 'stats', but those had progressed nicely. Power and celerity dominated the false sky. She judged she was past the mid-range for C-rank Aszhii abilities. Resilience, awareness, and mind speed were decent but her magical stats lagged behind. This was due to a combination of monster availability and opportunity costs. Nesta's way of disposing of her enemies was to whack them with a sword, therefore she needed strength and speed. If her favored method was fireball to the head, she would have gone out of her way to improve mana control, power, and regeneration.

Satisfied with her progress, Nesta opened her eyes. The gloomy light of November greeted her from behind her den's windows. A light drizzle drummed pleasantly on the roof while the fresh scent of orange pulp tickled her nose from the kitchen area. It was a bit after ten, so an Aszhii early morning.

Today was going to be a busy day.

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“You’ve changed, Nestra.”

Aunt Claire seemed happy enough, but there was something guarded in her eyes when she poked a slice of mozzarella. Nestra didn’t like that. Not at all. Aunt Claire was never closed.

“What do you mean?” she asked, suddenly worried.

“Look, huh, I don’t know how to say it. Oh, don’t look at me with that puppy face, Nes. You’re just... more dangerous. Are you training for the diplomatic mission?”

“Yes,” Nestra replied, filling a chill up her spine. “Err, I’ve actually killed monsters in the jungle.”

“The Playground? That’s what we call the place where the army gleams go to experience real life.”

“Hmmm. Yeah. That. I bagged a couple neosaurs.”

Aunt Claire nodded appreciatively.

“I think I remember those are weak D-class right? I don’t remember for sure.”

“Claire, it’s in the basic test.”

“So what? I never had to take it.”

She shrugged.

“Your parents and I came here with the first cargo ships back when this place was just a monster-infested harbor. Neosaurs were never a threat to me. Only those big fucking pterodactyl thingies were a bother. Anyway, well done. It sounds very impressive. You, uh, is your core back? Since you are killing creatures?”

“What?” Nestra blinked. “No! The mana leaves my body after I kill something. Well, most of it does. You reckon my core could come back?”

“I suppose not. You just have more mana in your body, so I was wondering if it could somehow grow. Maybe it’s the food?”

“Probably...”

“Some sort of... raider adjacent mechanism. I wonder if it will affect... no, probably not. It can only be beneficial...”

The powerful raider muttered to herself like some deranged lunatic. She released her grip on her aura, and a scarred veteran a few tables away turned with a frown. He might have recognized Claire because he merely shook his head.

“Claire?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I was getting distracted.”

“What do you mean, beneficial?”

“Your health, dearie. I am a bit concerned. Your case is unique. It could affect you in many ways. I do not believe that finally having some mana in your system would be a bad thing. The quirks do it and they’re fine. Do you still have cravings?”

“Not so long as I eat properly.”

“Good. Great. Actually, killing monsters might help you further... Maybe I should help...”

Nestra felt a rush of excitement. It would be kind of fun to hunt monsters in the jungle alongside Aunt Claire, even with her own packed schedule.

“No wait, Debbie would freeze all my digits off if I dragged you off in the wilderness.”

“Aw, come on.”

“No, I will not be swayed. Wait, you are distracting me! Why do you need to kill Neosaurs for a goddamn diplomatic mission? Hmmm?”

“I, errr, safety training? Just to be sure. It’s all part of survival training in the jungles, just in case. I think it’s standard operation protocol for everyone who stays out of the walls for any extended period of time.”

“That is nonsense, dearie. Do you imagine those stuffy corpo drones trudging their ways through the mud before visiting the Bazaar? Come on. Where is that mission?”

“The Sword King Enclave.”

“Those cunts? They’re sending you out there? Who’s your superior?”

“Clecleeeeeee!”

“Don’t Clecle me. Who’s bringing a bonehead like you to sweet talk a bunch of glorified gang bosses?”

“Me, a bone head? Pot? Meet kettle.”

“I know what I am. I don’t go on diplomatic missions. I get fined for hurling insults at important people during meetings. Why are they bringing you? I find this all very fishy, dearie.”

“Look, I’m here for reasons I can’t discuss. I’ll be safe.”

Aunt Claire didn't seem convinced. She interrogated Nesta in an indirect way by asking about her gear, a good attempt to learn more though Nesta was used to those tactics by now. Nesta couldn't chase a shadow of fear from crawling up her mind, infecting it with the seeds of hopelessness. Beyond the expedition business, Aunt Claire could tell something was unusual about Nesta. The bullshit excuses that she'd made up would serve to explain what was wrong, but it would only last for a time. Her true self was changing her human mask in subtle ways. Sereth was the same. Although his human mask was designed to be a drab, he possessed a natural magnetism that explained part of his commercial success and most of his dating success (before he met Stibbs). Sereth was just charming in a happy-go-lucky sort of way. Her true self was starting to seep through her mask, a phenomenon that would have been fine if she'd been an exceptional gleam raider. Unfortunately, she was not. People who knew her well would start to wonder what was going on. Especially her mom.

One day, they would find out. Helena was cool with it because she was young and 'wired'. Her parents, though? Nesta wasn't really sure. Maybe they would buy the transformation power lie. Maybe not. probably not.

Fuck.

Maybe one day it would be her dad's metal arm going through her chest.

"Are you alright, dearie?"

"I think I need some dessert."

"Yes, enjoy the moment while you can. Those Sword King assholes probably slice a mango and call it a delicacy. Not that there is anything wrong with mangoes, mind you..."

Nesta let Aunt Claire ramble on while she pushed down the feeling that those precious moments might one day be lost to her.

Could she even do anything about it? She didn't know. Mazingwe had been cool with it but he was a doctor...

Dammit.

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"Welcome to the last briefing."

A dozen people filed into the bland meeting room with all the enthusiasm of unpaid interns. It smelled of coffee and soap. Nesta recognized the cheap, ubiquitous 'Threshold chair' under her ass, that familiar wooden discomfort she'd been experiencing even at the police academy. Seventeen credits a pop. Delivered by Touhei drones in under one hour. She checked the corners out of habit. Yep. The floor area rugs didn't correctly stick to the walls.

Ah, Threshold contractors paid minimum wage, providing minimum service in return. Her heart went out to them.

It was in this familiar public service setting that an eclectic bunch of gleams and augs sat around, doing their best to ignore each other before the compulsory introduction. Nestra recognized them anyway. Derek Clint and Cai Weiwei, augs, their pilots and tech security specialist. Chandra Satya, the stunningly beautiful economic attache, a trade deal veteran. The stern Watanabe who had more scars than most gleams she knew, and was a renowned B-class duelist. She knew their profiles and that of their aides like the back of her hand. She'd been knowing them for quite some time now. This expedition had taken longer than planned to take off. Maybe the Sword Kings had preferred to clean house first.

Once everyone was uncomfortably seated, Ilar spoke with the ease of the experienced manager.

"Hello everyone. As I just said, this is the last briefing we will be holding before the start of the expedition proper. I have brought everyone up to speed on their respective roles, so the goal for today is just for you to meet and familiarize with each other. I will also be going over the overarching purposes of this expedition. The township is placing a lot of expectations on this trip. It's going to be a challenging task in a challenging environment, so keep that in mind during the proceedings. Now first thing first, let's introduce each other..."

Nestra turned her brain off while everyone 'said a few things about themselves', a dreadful task but also a familiar one. There were no bright eyed juniors here. Everyone had a rehearsed sentence for this sort of affair, and Nestra was no different. It was interesting to see how Chandra could be so convincing when she said she was excited to be here. It was a fat lie, of course, but Nestra respected the hustle. The ass sniffing part of meeting a new team used to be torture to her. Now, it was more like... like a bowel movement. Just a necessary part of government job life. And she was paid to do it anyway.

"Right, now that we're all introduced, let's get started. We have two goals and one condition for this trip. Our first goal, the official one, is to enter a business relationship with the Sword King Enclave, which will allow Threshold to extend its network of influence over the center of the subcontinent with minimal costs. This will be the role of the diplomatic team."

He nodded towards the neatly dressed folks who nodded in return. They didn't look like they expected it would be fun.

"Our second role is to inform the Sword King Enclave, in no uncertain terms, that we are not impressed by them, their values, or their relentless attempts to steal from us. This will be achieved by showing they are a medium-sized fish in a tiny pond. Some of you will support this goal with words, some with actions, and a few others by merely existing."

He spared a glance towards Nestra and the augs before continuing.

"The last thing I want to talk about is safety. The necessary condition for Threshold to succeed is that we all return alive. I will repeat in case this wasn't clear. We must all return alive and well. Do you understand?"

There were a few nods around the room. Nestra didn't react. She'd been to enough briefings to tell Ilar wasn't done.

"Even if you say you do, I'll remind you of the situation. We will no longer be in Threshold. That means no fast army support, no hospital, no advanced surveillance system, no food quality standards, no logistics, no transports, and the local law enforcement is not on your side. You will be overly cautious to the point of paranoia. If one of the fine ladies or gents of the enclave show a sudden and burning interest in you, congratulations, you have been deemed vulnerable to a honeypot scheme. They're here to get something out of you."

Luckily for Nestra, she was immune.

"If something looks too good to be true, it is. If a group of surprise friends invite you to go out and drink in the jungle, don't go. In fact, never go out alone. You will meet nice enclavers and you will be tempted to strike friendships. By all means, do, but remember something."

Ilar breathed in deep, and under the outward persona of a well-groomed gleam, Nestra saw something incredibly human, incredibly intense.

"I am not telling you this as your superior. I am telling you this as a student of history. The way you view the world and the way they view it is fundamentally different. Enclavers have reverted to feudalism and the rule of the strongest. The only reason... Let me repeat myself. The only reason why modern civilization has survived in fortress cities is because there have been enough powerful users who've agreed to hold themselves back for the sake of humanity. Shinran, the guild leaders, the Chaebol founding families, you might have strong opinions about them. I don't care. What you need to understand is that they all agreed to curtail their own power for the sake of a higher order, something the enclavers elected not to do. What makes modern civilization isn't hover cars, advanced armies, technology, none of it. The enclavers can procure them too. Those benefits are a consequence of a belief in a higher order, in a greater purpose. Our justice exists for its own sake, while their justice is an instrument of repression."

Nestra knew it wasn't exactly true but she got the point. Real justice was an ideal to strive for. In reality, poor people were always going to be shafted. The point was to be shafted less.

"Our governments works for the common good, not the continuation of its own existence. Our economy gives a chance to everyone, not just the select few," he continued with a burning passion.

It was clear his audience wasn't really buying it. Feeling it, the gleam decided to change gear.

"Those are ideals we strive for, of course, not realities. The difference is that enclaves will not even try. To them, who you know is more important than what you do. It is fine to steal from a stranger. It is wrong to punish an ally for a crime they inflicted upon another city. I am not telling you this just to discuss philosophy. I am telling you this because I need you to understand that Enclavers. Do. Not. See. The. World. Like. You. Do. They will never see

anything wrong with killing you if it benefits their clan, if they are sure they can get away with it. They have no higher cause than themselves and their tribe. They will see you as naive daydreamers for believing in ethics and the rule of law. The tribe is all, because the tribe is the only thing they can count on when shit hits the fan, so you will approach them accordingly. Do not trust them to act out of an ideal. They have none, and they will think you stupid for believing there are. Do you understand?”

Nestra nodded. She didn't think she could be friends with an Enclaver anyway, considering their opinions of drabs in general. Or quirks. More of the same, really.

“Alright. I suppose it's time for some refreshments. Miss Palladian, if I could have a moment of your time?”

Nestra waited while everyone else filed out, discussing between themselves in low voices. It was the first meeting for many of them. She wasn't surprised to see the augs stick together, ignored by the rest.

“Miss Palladian, I should share with you that there is a third goal to this expedition.”

“You want me to find Fox Mask?” Nestra asked.

Ilar gave her a considering look. In reality, there were probably a ton of secondary objectives he hadn't shared yet.

“I assume you'll also find out where the stolen goods ended?”

“It would be best if you didn't think about it too much, though I applaud your foresight. Yes, your role concerns Fox Mask, however I would recommend against actively seeking her. You are ill-suited to an infiltration role.”

Nestra agreed it was true enough as the lone anglo drab in this snake pit.

“Instead, I would like you to be... visible. I believe there is a non-zero chance Fox Mask will recognize you and attempt contact in her unmasked form, just to discover if you are here for her.”

Oh, she would know it for sure. Fox Mask knew Nestra was Crescent. Nestra was relatively sure the gleam hadn't betrayed her secret because she'd said she wouldn't. It was their dirty little fencer secret. Oh, they would cross blades again for sure. Nestra couldn't wait.

“Miss Palladian.”

“Hmm?”

“You are NOT to find or engage her. Do you understand?”

“Sure, sure. What would poor baseline me even do?”



“You will not walk around the compound with a loaded shotgun.”

“I promise.”

“Good, and one last thing. Please tell your aunt that I will be very careful.”

“How did she find out?” Nestra blurted.

“Do not underestimate her investigative skill when it comes to ruining someone’s day,” Ilar muttered.

“I didn’t know you knew each other.”

“Most police users have heard of her, Miss Palladian. She has a reputation. One cannot paint slurs on Touhei’s CEO’s hover car without repercussions, especially not mid-flight.”

“Is that why she’s forbidden from using the city’s airspace?”

“No, I believe it is due to the pickles incident.”

Damn. Maybe Aunt Claire was raiding so hard just to pay her fines.

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The gunship hummed around Nestra like a metal coffin. It was cold and uncomfortable because it had never been designed as a transport, but the jungle was the jungle, and Threshold wouldn’t send a limo. Nestra spared a glance towards the attache who even now wore safety helmets. There was a quiet tension in the air, but no fear. Nestra herself didn’t conduct a last check of her files because she was confident she hadn’t forgotten anything. Ilar met her gaze.

Nestra was bored. She turned the music on. They were almost here after three hours of low-altitude flight. She used her visor to sync with the gunship’s camera. The jungle turned into a forest of stone peaks emerging from dense thickets. She spotted the distant glow of an active portal at the top of a distant rock. Time stamps estimated that they were still twenty minutes away. This could be the edge of the Sword King territory. Most of the subcontinent’s western side was still like that: uncharted expanses of wilderness, with portals vomiting hordes of monsters and mana with every breach. She watched the ground pass by. Soon, the gunship crossed over a large river. A serpentine head breached the surface for a moment, quickly disappearing back into the murky depths. The overlay pointed it as *trần tinh*, or Python River, the same that flowed at the feet of the enclave. A little while later, the first signs of civilization appeared: an orchard, half overgrown and casually tended to. A watch tower on the top of a peak. A fortified village on the bend of the river with walls made of rusty containers tied together with chains.

They really looked like shit. She guessed that the outer villages must have some high casualty rate. Soon enough, the gunship approached the dominating lone mountain of the

Sword King Enclave. She'd read the description but she had to admit they didn't do the place justice. Sheer cliffs surrounded a lone entrance defended by a sturdy stone and brick rampart topped with blue tiles. Each of the three peaks displayed tightly packed structures harmoniously integrated with the environment, with narrow trails linking them together. One of them was the heliport where most of the modern structures stood but the largest one was dominated by a palace-like structure, or perhaps fortress-like was a better word: massive stones and arched doorways provided a stern basis for elaborate statues of dragon and phoenixes, roosters, foxes, and a garden that had to be beautiful in spring. The center of the valley covered several kilometers and the large majority of it consisted of fields: rice fields, barley, wheat but also green vegetables she couldn't identify from up high. Shapes in gray robes labored in the field, barely larger than ants for now. There were quite a few of them. As she watched, a convoy approached the gate with goods strapped to what looked like large buffaloes. The gunship approached the heliport at slow speed. The camera centered on the welcome delegation without prompt.

"No visible weapons," Ilar said. "Leave your own with the luggage, Watanabe."

"Hai."

Nestra had no idea if it was a good sign or not. The people waiting for them sure didn't look friendly despite the lack of visible weaponry. They were mostly men with tight black hats and long robes that stopped below their knees, all of them red and simple. The few women also wore red though their dresses were carefully embroidered. All of them were gleams, naturally, and a few of them shared enough features that they looked related. The grim assembly stood like statues while the gunship landed.

Ilar unbuckled and stood first. Nestra and the handful of other women readjusted their hair as soon as the helmets came off. The Thresholders formed up with quiet efficiency while the ramp lowered at the back of the cramped gunship. They walked off.

It was amazing how some of the members of the group transformed as soon as the light of the day hit them. Despite hours on the seat and the gloomy light of an early winter, Chandra Satya walked with the pep of a CEO entering a conference room. The Thresholders were pristine in their professional dress suits. Even Nestra looked great, she had to say so herself.

The man at the head of the delegation stepped forward to welcome them. Like the rest, he was clean-shaven with a pleasant appearance though the polite smile didn't reach his eyes. His quiet aura firmly placed him at the height of B-rank, possibly at the same level as some of Threshold's powerful guild leaders. A few others were also B-rank though much lower. She met the eye of a very new B-rank, who had to be only slightly older than she was. His mouth twisted in disgust.

Nestra had been consciously placed between the two aug pilots. She waited while her visor translated the B-class' opening speech.

"Xin Chào! Hello, and welcome to our guests from Threshold! I am Patriarch Nguyen, and I lead the Council of Elders of the Sword King Enclave. We are honored and happy to receive you today. May it be the beginning of a fruitful friendship."

“Thank you, Patriarch,” Ilar replied in fluent Vietnamese.

“I am eager to talk, of course, but this place is a little windy,” the Patriarch said over the dying roar of the gunship’s engines.

Nestra joined the polite chuckle, then the Council of Elders were the first to climb down the stairs of the heliport and then down into the valley.

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Nestra was grateful to her past self for being fit because the trek down was fucking hard on the calves. The Council of Elders wasn’t fond of waiting. They had raced down the steep stones like their asses were on fire. Only Ilar’s calm stride forced them to wait at every landing for the slow Thresholders to catch up. Nestra knew her own gleams would have no trouble following. They were deliberately slowing down to prevent Nestra and the two augs from getting distanced just like the Council of Elders was going quickly to make a point. At least, her augs were military and they had no trouble following either, even with the added weight of some of their augments. Nestra split her attention between where she was going and her surroundings.

It was both better and worse than she’d expected. The enclave possessed a genuine charm to it, with many carvings that only served to embellish the natural walls. Beautiful red flowers bloomed even in this weather to provide the visitors with a pastoral and perfumed experience. While the buildings they came across looked like they’d come out of a fairy tale, there were cracks in the visible concrete, splatters in the paint, and a host of other issues that proved that the efforts didn’t quite match the vision. This was what happened when the path of the sword was too highly regarded, and manual labor got left to wankers. As the group reached the base of the peak and the fields there, she realized that the gray-wearing figures were mostly children and teenagers.

“Our youth is hard at work forming their bodies for the training ahead!” the patriarch proudly boomed.

Nestra doubted the patriarch’s kid was among them. The few gray-wearing adults bowed like the rest of them once the council passed through. They had the beaten dog expression of those who no longer expected anything out of life, and quite a few scars to show they’d tried.

Nestra knew about the caste system, of course. The Sword King enclave wasn’t the only group that used color codes to enforce their specific brand of social Darwinism. Gray was the color of those who’d failed to prove themselves in any way. The way they were treated was supposed to push young adults into striving for better, which worked, except better only meant martial prowess here. The way they scrambled to bow made Nestra’s skin crawl.

After that, the veil was off and she could no longer enjoy the visit. Cheap plastic and poorly handled repairs jumped to her attention. The lingering smell of shit floated to her nostril from the various compost bins. This wasn’t an idyllic fortress built in defiance of monsters, but a besieged prison. Even as the gray robes bowed, their unlit eyes still followed her and the two

aug's with a mix of horror and disbelief. Yes, Nesta thought. Feast your eyes on the freaks still hiding behind Threshold's cyclopean walls in defiance of the laws of nature your masters so willingly promote.

Riel, tension was making her all melodramatic.

The trip ended near the base of the palace, in a sheltered villa built around a nice pond, a sort of receiving spot apparently. It still smelled unpleasantly of fresh paint. Their guests led them into a banquet hall so soberly decorated it was three drapes away from nudity. Only a few members of the council stayed, so there was ample room at the bottom of the table for Nesta and the aug's. They were quickly served fresh tea in nice white ceramic cups (imported resilient Touhei ceramics at seven creds a pop. Nesta recognized them from a recent shopping spree). It was green tea.

She hated green tea.

It was probably of high grade from the mana, at least. She forced the bitter infusion down with measured sips. She ignored most of the introduction except for the guy who was so visibly disgusted by her and who happened to be Patriarch Nguyen's nephew. He was named Manh. Manh the man, in Nesta's unfortunately wired brain. After the council was done presenting each member, their age, their roles, and their school of fencing, it was the Thresholders' turn to introduce themselves. They'd rehearsed, of course.

"I am Clytemnestra Palladian, an officer with Special Affairs. I am twenty-five years old."

Determining someone's age was super important in Vietnamese because the 'you' pronoun was age-dependent, as far as she understood. Not that the elder translating for her side seemed to care very much.

"My role is to compare our legal systems to find out if there are differences we need to address before we cooperate."

Technically, it wasn't illegal to be a baseline or an aug here because none were expected to ever show up. According to the Sword King credo, they were relics of the past or abominations that would be cleansed with the coming of a new world. That left a certain legal void that might lead to some regretful events, such as murder.

"Miss Palladian has a broad experience when it comes to law enforcement, specifically MaxSec, Vice, Internal Affairs, and Special Affairs."

Vice was a bit of a stretch since she'd been detached with Internal Affairs at the time, but she wasn't the one who'd decided to bullshit on her resume.

"She'd been instrumental in several high profile arrests, such as a dangerous gang, a corporate criminal, a corrupt officer, and a mana using serial killer."

"Is that so?" Manh said in English, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The room grew tense. Something told Nesta this wasn't planned.

"Well, for the Cleaver gang, I actually killed most of them," she confessed.

Ilar jumped on the occasion to propose a delicious bait.

"Our Clytemnestra is a close quarter specialist. She is quite the fencer."

The elder translated in a dispassionate voice.

"Is that so? Perhaps we will see what Threshold teaches its children then," Patriarch Nguyen replied with a benevolent smile.

Nesta accepted with a smile. The introduction of the two augs went swimmingly, mostly because the elders did their best to pretend they didn't exist. After a short discussion, the group split up for preparatory work with Nesta making her way to the 'archives', guided by one of the elders. She looked out at a group of gawping students in yellow robes, then farther, towards the distant peak they hadn't visited yet.

Fox Mask. Where are you?