

Part 12

NA: Gigun replaced by Gidung which means pillar as was my original intent. Also NA: I have no attention to details. Also NA sorry this chapter short because of low brain juice amounts this week.

Nestra rang the bell for the third time and then slammed her fist on the door. It would not break easily. Reinforced hinges, frame possibly dug into the wall. Whoever owned this place had made some effort to keep it secure.

From the average junkie, that is. She was the police. The hammer of justice. Also, she had explosive charges in her breast pocket.

Something moved behind the door. Nestra wasn't sure how she knew, probably a sound at the edge of her hearing. A shoe against an umbrella holder? There was someone there.

"We have a warrant," she said. "That means we're coming in with the gate open or broken. You have thirty seconds. Your call," she said.

Ten seconds later, the gate opened. By her side, Shinoda gave her a curious look while a tired man in dirty coveralls leaned by the frame, jaw clenched in panic. He was of Arabic descent, a rarity in Threshold where the overwhelming majority of the population came from Asia and Oceania.

"We're here for the Gidung excavation equipment. We know you have it because you failed to deactivate the GPS. You will lead us there and open the garage door."

The man hesitated. He was scared. Nestra could see it in the way his eyes checked the deserted, filthy street behind her, the tension in his shoulders. She could almost smell it in his sweat, an acidic waft that marked him as a victim. Prey, not instigator. Weakling. Boring.

"Mr... Chaarani, was it? You are the owner of this place?" Shinoda asked in a softer voice.

Cahharani latched onto him like a dying man to a buoy. His posture changed though his eyes kept returning to Nestra. She waited there for Shinoda to work his magic. This little contest was already over.

"Yes? I mean... I am?"

"Not legally, of course, however the city has a record of permanent inhabitants. I know there are considerations made to transfer ownership to you in the near future. Hence why we have a warrant."

"Oh, really? This is great news? I think?"

"There is still the matter of illegally acquired equipment on your property," Shinoda continued with a smile.

“Stolen corpo machinery. Expensive machinery,” Nestra added with bared teeth. She was getting the hang of that bad cop routine.

“It would be a shame if you were found to be a fence, of course. But I am sure this gear was left in your care without your knowledge. Ne?”

“I mean...”

The man licked his lips. There it was. The little bit of spine before the end.

“You are making a mistake. Maybe the GPS is wrong?”

Nestra casually grabbed her handcuffs. Mr Chaarani’s eyes widened in alarm even as Shinoda slowly made to lower her wrist. She let him, of course. It was all a little game.

“Chotto matte. Sir, is that really how you want this to go?”

The canny detective looked like someone had just kicked his puppy. The spine melted.

“Ah, come on in. I, err, probably know which package you are referring to. I think?”

Nestra followed Chaarani in his den, wary of ambush. The entrance led into an empty corridor. A passage left led to living quarters with a little girl peeking near the edge. Ventilation carried the scent of spices. A tajine, maybe. The man led them to the right, however, and into a large open space. Well lit if dusty. The Gidung crates waited on pallets by the exit, logo clearly on display.

Nestra gave the man a glare he had the decency to wither under.

“The gate, please,” Shinoda ‘requested’.

“Oh. Of course. Hmm, was there anything else?”

“Not unless we are forced to come back,” Shinoda said.

“And that would be a terrible loss of our time,” Nestra added just because it was fun.

“Haha. No. Then, hm. Good day.”

The pair walked into the stench of one of Fifteen’s less reputable areas. The pallets wouldn’t go anywhere without transport equipment so they contacted Knightley. It was her request. Their job was done. As they left, a female voice screamed insults through the nearest wall.

“It appears Mrs. Chaarani does not approve of her partner’s choices.”

“It’s always a bad decision if one gets caught,” Nestra said before realizing it could also apply to her.

“It is so, is it not? Eeeeeto ne. Now, we should probably lie in wait.”

“You’re pretty devious, actually. I’ll grab the snacks.”

“I accept your compliment with grace.”

The man wasn’t smart, but he had good instincts. That’s why he knew something was wrong when he left the manhole cover with the boss and there was a woman waiting for them by the Arab’s warehouse. That wasn’t right. Nobody waited for them. They waited for other people and then they came out and the people got scared. That was normal. The girl was pretty and pale like those gleam trophy girls he saw on vids. She didn’t belong here. Too confident. That wasn’t normal.

She was wearing expensive corpo stuff that looked like armor. Like the top gangers used to own. That was even less normal.

She was finishing a bowl of soup.

That was fucked up. Nobody ate in front of the boss. That was so disrespectful. She was giving him some colors to see. And the boss’ face was very thin.

“Ah? Ni gan shaa, biaozi?”

The woman smiled. She had eyes the color of dirty snow, and just as cold. He didn’t like it.

“Mr. Lang, I assume. My visor informs me you’re being fucking rude.”

The boss’ hands moved towards his vest. The man got scared. Either the boss would do his thing and there would be blood, and the man would have to clean up, or the laowai girl would do something and it would be even worse.

A voice sounded from behind and the boss froze. The man turned anyway. There was a police dog standing there in a ridiculous duster like he was from a hundred years ago, pulled from the screen like the gritty stars on his mother’s old TV.

“We were expecting you because we knew Mr Charani would want to report the loss of your prize. We know who you are and we know what you have done. Our profilers give it a 20% chance you will surrender peacefully. Nevertheless, we have to ask. You are under arrest, Mr Lang. You have the right to remain silent and the right to legal council should you—”

The boss sneered and the man took a step back. He knew what was going to happen. The boss was too angry to think straight.

There was a beep and the boss jerked.

The man could not help but stare at the little feathered metal thing digging into the boss' neck. The boss' face was scrunched like an old raisin. He fell to the side brutally, like furniture, not like a person. There was a nasty crack when his arm hit the curb.

It was very upsetting to see the boss fall like that.

The man looked back to the smiling face of the woman as the colorful gun thing in her hand, aimed at him. There was another beep.

“Have to calibrate it every time before shooting, otherwise the voltage could kill someone. Anyway, what will it be?”

The man didn't understand. All he could do was watch the boss fidget on the ground. Like a fish. Very weird.

“What my partner means is that you too must choose between peaceful surrender and what happened to Mr Lang.”

The man didn't have to look at the crying face of the boss. The man was a survivor. He had good instincts. It was not even a question of calibration or whatever that was. The woman was dangerous because... she just was. That was it.

“I surrender.”

“Excellent. Please place your hands in the air —”

The woman cuffed him. He wondered how mad his mom would be this time. At least, he didn't get shocked like the boss so it could have gone worse. Maybe the woman would let him have some of that soup. He asked. She stopped.

“You know what, it's not everyday I meet a fellow foodie in the weirdest circumstances. It's crab soup. You're gonna love it.”

“Ah, Palladian-san, now I see what it takes for you to break protocol.”

“There is something wrong.”

The cruiser was almost in view. By her side, Shinoda checked the nearby roofs for danger but there was nothing in the desolate alley, nothing but trash and cracked concrete. This area of Fifteen stood at the edge of one of the 'hot zones', one of the ex strongholds of the gangs. Now, it was a husk. The ring of businesses around the defunct hive only survived by virtue of a lack of alternatives. Nestra waved Shinoda off before he could reach for his gun. The drones showed no signs of activity.

“Not that, the scent. It's... so strong. Can't you smell it?”

Shinoda shook his head. He frowned, seemingly frustrated.

“It’s... from there.”

Nestra could almost taste it on the tip of her tongue. Blood. So strong, and something else. Mana? Strange mana. Mana that had a perfume. Something heady, intoxicating. Some high gleams made perfume out of monster parts when those monsters had hypnotizing skills. Maybe it was similar, though not as strong. It certainly didn’t belong here.

“Follow?” Nestra asked, distracted.

“Yes. I will call it in.”

Nestra was already off. That scent was so strange it made her giddy with excitement. To think she would come across such an anomaly here! The floating perfume led her deeper into the maze of abandoned warehouses and ruined production facilities and then through a broken fence to, unexpectedly, a field. Her swarm of drones flew above wild grass and stacked crates to give her a view of a small valley nestled between the backyards of several factories. Suspicious stone marked several spots, forming a familiar pattern.

“Is that... a graveyard?”

“An illegal one, then. This is supposed to be a landfill, Palladian-san. How curious.”

Nestra moved deeper into the overgrown maze of wild vegetation, her guard kept up. If there was one place where a breach could have occurred, it would be here where surveillance had failed in the recent weeks, but nothing came out to eat her. The ambient mana was barely perceptible except for that one compelling smell. They made their way to the only structure standing on the field. It might have started as a shed but now, strangely, it was a mausoleum.

“That’s impossible. Who would bring white stone here?”

Statues lined the white walls. Basic gargoyles and praying figures. It was all very medieval religious and completely out of place on a continent that did not exist sixty years before. Nestra approached the only gate, a monumental entrance made of two solid slabs. Coppery hinges showed no signs of wear and tear. Really, the only proof this place had existed for a while came from moss crawling over the rocky surface. It was all very weird.

“Nanda to?”

“Am I hallucinating?”

“Palladian-san, dispatch says this place didn’t register as anomalous by drone view because the roof is still made of metal.”

“No movements. Should we...”

“I suggest we wait for reinforcements.”

Nestra was curious. The demon in her just wanted to explore that curious place. Unfortunately, her human self was held back by her hierarchy and the natural squishiness of baselines. They waited in silence. Shinoda was nervous though he didn't show it much. There was a bit of sweat on his brow while his eyes searched around for threats despite Nestra sharing the feed of her drones. It took only thirty seconds for a gleam to actually fly down from the sky. Nestra recognized him immediately.

“Valerian?”

The life gleam passed a hand through his dark blond hair, looking a bit like a surfer as he did. By contrast, his armored white vest had enough scruffs to show he had seen action. It was just a shame that he'd been on the receiving end, if Nestra remembered correctly.

“Hello Nestra. Yeah, it's me. I'm covering you today!”

“You... know each other?” Shinoda asked in a low voice.

“Ah, but where are my manners? Valerian, this is Shinoda Yuuji, an experienced detective and my partner.”

“Hajimemashite,” Shinoda greeted with a small bow.

“Ah, no need for this Detective Shinoda. I am Valerian of House Nephrite. I am sure we will have more time later. For now, let me open that gate for you.”

“Is it safe?”

“We'll find out soon enough. Miss Palladian, I understand you have access to surveillance equipment?”

Nestra had to race back to the cruiser to retrieve her bag of tricks. A brief inspection revealed the gate was just that — a gate, but a camera under the frame only showed darkness. No obvious traps.

“There is a lot of blood mana here,” Valerian said.

He didn't seem too concerned.

“Darkness too,” Nestra added.

“You can tell? Hmmm. Yes, you're right. It's subtle. In any case, not enough of it for a major trap so I should survive. You two better step aside.”

“Shouldn't we call a team?” Shinoda said.

“Right now we have nothing except a suspicious scent and unnatural darkness. Could be a dokkaebi den from an old breach, in which case I’m enough to handle it. And there is a team on the way...”

Shinoda and Nestra exchanged a glance. They knew what team would show up. They walked back to the edge of the clearing and waited for Valerian to do his thing. The gleam pressed his hands against the gate’s panes. They rotated inward with a cavernous sound. For a supposed weakling, Valerian had a shit ton of upper body strength. Nestra was a little impressed.

A cloud of darkness dissipated harmlessly into the fetid air.

“Hooooooly shit,” Valerian said.

He froze.

Nestra raced forward with the Window Maker out, Shinoda right behind her. She stopped in front of the entrance and took in the interior, now revealed after the dark seal evaporated in the late morning air.

“Hooooooly shit,” she whispered.

Eyes carved on the stone surrounded the naked corpse of a woman, still fresh despite all odds. Ritual scarings covered most of her body while a mop of dark hair covered her face. The eyes themselves were painted a variety of colors and no two were the same. Reptilian pupils, feline gazes, wolfish stares, even a gleam iris all took in the morbid spectacle with emotionless attention. With the seal breached, the scent of blood mingled with that of magic rose from a subtle touch to a pungent stench. It was horrifying, and Nestra felt terror crawl up her back like a creepy stare. There was a hunter on the loose, and this one... was much more dangerous than she was. The meticulous attention given to the carvings and the scars spoke of patience and a complete lack of empathy. This was the work of hours of focused dedication from a very sick, very determined mind.

She was in waaayyyyy over her head.

“Ok let’s, errr, call it in now,” Viridian said.

Nestra turned to Shinoda to see if he had something to add, but all she could see was his hunched, retreating form. He was clearly in distress. She couldn’t blame him to be honest. At least, he sat at the edge of the clearing so she could keep an eye on him.

“Kim says the forensic team is on the way. She notified the TPD’s Special Crimes division. They say they’ll take it from here. We merely have to keep the location secure.”

“Sure.”

Yeah, that was no longer her problem. Nestra had her plate full without adding a psychopath gleam on the list, because whoever had done that had used at least three different kinds of magic: darkness, stone, and blood, and that was C-grade shit at the very least.

While D-class learned to infuse their bodies with mana and unlocked their affinities, C-class gleams were building their cores. That meant they were not just stronger, they also had much, much more mana to play with than D-class. The average C-class raider could take on Demon Nestra, Valerian, and the three gleam stooges with a single hand. The difference was that significant.

Nestra was hopelessly outclassed.

No matter how much she wanted to find that hunter, even her hubris couldn't push her to suicide like that. She wanted to go check on Shinoda instead but something stopped her. A small hover car landed close to them and from them, three familiar figures came out. Nestra did her best not to groan. Threshold's shittiest gleams had arrived.

The tall anglo whistled as soon as he spotted the slaughtered victim.

"Damn, Palladian. You're bad luck. Corpses everywhere you go."

"Wish I could say the same of you," Nestra replied without thinking.

They were weak and pathetic.

"We heard about you from the grapevine," the stout one said. "They say you're a frigid bitch."

He sounded very matter of fact.

"I can tell you're trying to insult me and I can also tell you're not putting any effort into it."

The three men stopped approaching. Nestra felt very much like a fat deer eyed by a trio of wolves, except they were all in Threshold's tame enclosure and she was secretly a lioness with a hunkering for underachieving meat.

"You sound like someone who's never got the snot beaten out of them."

"Again, wish I could say the same to you."

"I'm sure it will happen sooner or later. Fifteen's a wild place," the mustachioed Korean said.

Nestra shrugged.

"Sure, we're all bottom of the barrel here. Difference is you have no excuse."

That concluded the discussion. The tall anglo physically dragged his two companions away from her. Nestra found herself wondering if she could take them on in human form, hold them back until reinforcements arrived. She probably could, if Valerian helped. He totally

would too. She allowed herself a sneer as they flew away. She knew they would be looking at her, the fucking losers.

So that was done. Now to check on Shinoda. Fuck she'd rather fight with those guys than watch him face whatever demons haunted him. Not an option though. He needed her. She made her way to his spot and sat on the side.

The detective didn't look up. He had this shell-shocked face she'd seen a couple of times, usually after bad portal breaks.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay? I mean, clearly no, but is there anything I can do to help?"

Shinoda smiled though it was very bitter.

"Ah, thank you for your care, Palladian-san. There is nothing to be done. Perhaps we could just stay here for a moment."

"Ah. Of course."

Nestra saw by his side, in silence. Shinoda's chest moved too much which should be expected given the circumstances. The exaggerated motions placed him at the edge of the uncanny valley and that was something Nestra found troubling. He didn't deserve that from her. He was just a wounded man doing his best. If there was one person who fit the uncanny valley, it was Nestra.

"It has been a long time, Palladian-san. A very long time. It still hurts me just as deeply."

Nestra waited. Shinoda would speak on his own time.

"My son was the same age as the victim when he died. He was stabbed in a gang war over a stupid argument. A jacket. I had no idea he was even in a gang."

Nestra didn't say she was sorry. That word was weak and insufficient to the task, in her mind.

"My wife said we should use his death for our PR campaign in the next election. That it was what he would have wanted. I think I broke at that moment, not at the death but when I heard that sentence, because it summarized everything I had become. That is why I am here, Palladian-san. I do not need to explain my motivations to you, I think."

Nestra shook her head. She understood atonement, at least.

"Every time I think I have made peace with myself, and every time, it all hurts like a salted wound. One more life cut short by someone else. I know I could not have saved her. She was dead a long time ago, and kept intact by enchantments. I have seen it done before. My heart does not know this. It will not listen."

Nestra nodded. She'd heard a similar tale.

“My mom said something like that. She said that even decades later, a face reflected in a dirty window would remind her of the fallen. She said it would never stop.”

Shinoda finally turned to look at her.

“Your mother is a first-gen, yes?”

“Yeah and not a weak one either but... Australia during the incursion was hell on earth. Only three of her group made it out of, I think eight? Anyway, she knows loss. She says grief is like a shipwreck in a storm. At first you're drowning then the sea calms down, and you think you're saved, but this is the sea. There are always more waves. Sometimes you see them coming and sometimes not, but they come. And you'll survive them too. You'll be drenched and blinded but you'll make it again so long as you don't let go. And maybe because you didn't let go, some other people won't be shipwrecked.”

Shinoda nodded. He did so very slowly.

“Ah, thank you. This is a good metaphor. A moment for me please?”

Nestra left his side to give him some space, just as gleams landed from the sky dressed in armor that marked them as heavy hitters. They completely ignored Nestra to focus on Valerian so after a couple of minutes standing there like a traffic cone, she moved to the cruiser. Shinoda joined her fifteen minutes later, following which Nestra recalled her drones. She had kept an eye on him just in case. Couldn't be too careful around here.

“Ah, Palladian-san. Are you perhaps a quirkie?” he asked as they took off.

“Don't know what I am, if I have to be honest,” she replied.

“You perceive things we baselines do not. The way you move is also... very confident. I do not know how else to explain this since you have no augments.”

“Not sure either. Could be though.”

“You could get tested. Quirkie employees of the state gain benefits and free training.”

“Actually I'm fed up with medical exams and I would prefer to be left alone.”

Shinoda laughed, which turned into a painful cough. A nasty one. He removed an inhaler from his pocket and took a deep breath. His voice sounded clearer afterward.

“Ah, I understand you very well. I dislike hospitals too, though for different reasons. Well, keep it in mind at least. There is no reason to let Threshold enjoy your unique skills without recovering some of that tax money.”

“Hear hear.”
