

Nestra reveled in the slaughter. She tore through soldier ants while they were stuck maneuvering to box her in. She knew how they fought. If the foe was fast, they would first try to position themselves better to come on from all directions. She knew it, and played with it, but they didn't. They couldn't learn. They lacked the reason that made fights with Fox Mask so fun. It was the second patrol now that didn't require her to use momentum because they were just that predictable. The next acid ant aborted its attack rather than hitting its comrade, which let Nestra close in for the kill. She dodged the charge of a bulldozer ant before striking its abdomen. Blueish lymph exploded from the wound.

She wasn't sure how to call those. They were the size of a minibus and armored at the front. Charger ants? Siege ants? Brute ants? Maybe charger ant was okay. She dodged its awkward mandible strike as she killed the last two warriors. Chargers really struggled with lateral attacks.

She dropped under another strike, then jumped on the beast's head. A downward execution destroyed its brain.

It fell dead with a loud thud. Once again, victory was hers. It wasn't a very good one but that was fine. Delayed gratification!

"Now where was that scout?"

The deep jungle of Varang guild's portal world buzzed with activity. The smells were all over the place, but at least the stifling heat didn't bother her at all anymore. She batted a large red wasp to focus on her quest.

She needed herself some of that stinky pheromone for her master plan.

The hive was under attack. The ants knew it because of the many trails carrying the scent of alarm. Scents were their speech, and the words carried by many trails spoke of death. Many deaths. A few subtle touches spoke of a bipedal intruder with a very sharp tooth, who wielded magic. Other details were scarce.

Like a single entity, the ants left their tunnels to wage war upon the invaders. They gathered in legions of warriors protecting squads of acid throwers, in turn supporting mighty chargers. Their paths carried them out of the dense forest and into the ancient section, where the sun could almost be seen above the giant boughs of ancient trees. The light gained a grayish quality. Sometimes, the bark of those titanic trunks bore deep claw marks.

Still, the stench of scout hemolymph nudged them forward. Eventually, they came across a strange shape covered in thick air. Snores made the ground vibrate. It was huge, several times as high as a large charger while still lying on its side. Humans knew that creature as Deathpaw, one of the city's deadliest sub-guardians.

The pheromones led here.

The ants attacked.

Nestra watched the battle unfold from her hiding spot far above ground. Chargers managed to catch the massive owl bear creature in the small of the back, and the cataclysmic shock made her think it might have been rendered paralyzed. It was not. The creature, though in pain, bounced to its feet. With a roar of fury that could be heard across the portal world, it lay into its attackers. Limbs flew. White ichor covered the ground as the creature carved a path of devastation across the open ground.

Nestra wasn't getting any energy despite being the instigator here. That was fine. She'd been maxed out after the fourth patrol anyway, though interestingly, each ant subspecies had brought something different. Awareness for the scouts, acid resistance for the acid ants, power and physical resistance for the chargers, all of the ants also provided some measure of toxin resistance as she'd been expecting. This part of the jungle had a lot of poisonous stuff in so she'd been hoping they were poison related. If not, she would have just looked for another species.

But not the whip scorpion. Fuck that thing. Ambushes were fine, but throwing its babies at her face? Gross. Rude. They weren't even cooked yet.

Speaking of sub-guardians, the owl bear was absolutely wrecking the ant army. Nestra judged it was a very weak B-class, yet even covered in foes and bleeding through its resilient fur, she knew it could just smush her down with a hand. She wasn't fast enough to reliably avoid it yet.

It was kind of exciting. She really wanted to kill it, though she was taking a big risk sneaking into portals nowadays. She would return here though, one day. Maybe even legally if the guild accepted. They tended to be very protective of their portals, but it was the second time in a row both of those sub guardians had been ignored. Maybe there was a possibility here.

Nestra turned and raced towards the nest. She already had her target for this raid.

Finding the nest wasn't that hard considering it was a massive earth mound in the middle of a gap in the forest, all the nearby trees having been reduced to dry, mangled trunks. The sky above was blue-gray. Its strong light had baked the packed earth into a cracked mountain covered in strange excretions. It was half a daunting, gothic citadel and half a huge pile of shit.

Now for an entry point. From her vantage point near a ruined branch, Nestra could spot several monumental entrances even now swarming with workers and various combat models. If the entrance portal was south west of this here and the exit far to the east, then the anthill's main entrance aimed south while the eastern gates saw the most activity, as that was the direction of the owl bear's lair.

Meanwhile, the north and western sides had much less traffic and Nestra knew why: that was where the boundaries of the world made foraging more difficult. Maybe. She wasn't sure about portal ant ecology. In any case, that was as good an entrance path as any.

Nestra cloaked herself in shadows, her Skin growing a diaphanous cloak to blur her form. It would help but not much. Ants relied too much on their sense of smell. According to manuals she'd found online, there were only two ways to assault a hive: the turtle mode with an earth mage as support, or the sudden strike option. That was practically Nestra's middle name. Nestra Sudden Strike Palladian, the top-level financial auditor and ant hunter extraordinaire.

Very pleased with herself, Nestra slowly moved across the clearing, making sure to stay high to avoid being spotted. She progressively moved lower across desolate branches. Fortunately, the ants didn't seem to have good eyes, or at least they didn't react to her presence. They lacked flying predators, for sure, or they'd be more careful.

Nestra found the entrance she wanted. Even though the traffic was as slow as it would get, there was still a regular stream of creatures heading in and out, carrying anything from fruit and carcasses to large leaves. This was it. As good a spot as any.

Nestra jumped. She hit the dirt at a dead run, pushing forward past the stream of workers. Most of them seemed to ignore her but she didn't stay to check. This world's sun beat on her back like a physical weight until she dove into the cavern. Immediately, darkness returned, and the air smelled of the pungent musk of ants rather than dry dust. The walls were wet dirt covered in secretions that adhered to it like glue, solidifying into an organic mortar. It was mildly disgusting. She didn't slow down. There were warriors in the next chamber, but she was past them before they could react, down a path that led down.

She just kept running. Eventually, there was some sort of alarm with workers scrambling here and there, but by then she'd found what she was looking for: an egg.

A large, bacille-shaped transparent orb as large as her arm. A shadow rested in its crystalline depths. It was carried by a worker emerging from a downward tunnel. This was it: the grand prize of her resistance-grinding expedition.

The path to the queen.

Nestra rushed ahead. The tunnel she was following descended in a slow spiral into the bowels of this world. It was narrow enough that she only came across workers and the odd surprised warrior, but soon a new problem emerged: a green mist that covered everything. It left a sour film on her tongue. Strangely, the shadows seem to grow deeper. Her stomach lurched.

Poison, for sure. She soon came across a chamber filled with workers waving their abdomen in the air. A greenish liquid emerged from a gland situated near the butt. What an interesting defense mechanism! Wouldn't help them, though, Nestra thought as she blitzed past the gathering and into the deeper tunnels. It was completely dark now, but that wasn't an issue for her. Narrow paths meant that larger specimens like the chargers couldn't get in. She only stopped when she came across a butt.

A large butt.

Technically on ants, it was called an abdomen but whatever. That butt was glowing and pointing in her direction. It was also so large it covered almost the entire tunnel. She ran back just as the thing lit up like a Christmas tree, all in greens and reds.

“Shit.”

With a massive pop, the ant sprayed the tunnel with incandescent goo for several meters. A wave of intense heat washed over Nestra, who rolled and stayed near the ground. The hot wind and an acid stench washed over her. Her eyes teared up.

Then she was back again. The heat was nothing, really, and her body actively fought the toxins. It made her a little nauseous though, so it was time to get this thing moving. Nestra jumped between puddles of foul-smelling liquid before using *momentum*, reappearing beyond the blockade.

The body of the ant was rather small. She killed it with one blow, feeling a fresh influx of power fill her. Toxin resistance and sensory resistance. A very nice haul. She kept going.

Raiding high C-class worlds was amazing! She wished she could bring Helena here so they could fight back to back against the horde, collecting power and possibly large cores as prize. Another bombardier ant met the same fate as the previous one, though this time, Nestra didn't wait for it to fire. She used *momentum* to move past it before delivering another swift death.. Her steps carried her deeper and deeper, past panicked workers carrying eggs to branching paths. She was on the right track! Excitement filled her chest. This was it. Many of the defenders had been driven away thanks to the lure, and now she was going to kill another powerful sub-guardian. A near or at B-class creature that would make her stronger. This was the life.

The tunnel widened so she slowed down and coated herself in shadows. It opened onto a massive, artificial cavern of packed earth. Bioluminescent mushrooms bathed the large space in a deep blue glow. Workers clung to the walls and ceiling, moving food in and carrying eggs out. The hatchery, finally.

The queen occupied a large section of the room. Her abdomen was a large, distended white sack of grotesque proportions plopped like a fat pillow but the thorax and head were more menacing. Tendrils emerged from the back of her skull, an indication of mental power. It was pretty rare around here. It was also useless against her. Truly a good matchup.

Unfortunately, the queen's compound eyes immediately landed on her. She wasn't fooled by the shadows. That was okay. Her bodyguards looked interesting. They were black, thin, and upright on their four hind legs with scythe-like extensions instead of forearms. There were three of them.

They charged her on the spot. They were pretty fast too.

“Hah! A challenge!” she said in Aszhii.

Nestra blocked the first one. The shock of the blades made her drift back in a shower of dirt. Strong! A wave of something crossed the cavern then. It felt like someone was screaming inside of her head. The bodyguard stopped moving.

Nestra beheaded it. The other creatures had stopped moving as well, if only for an instant. She'd most likely been targeted by a psychic attack. The queen screeched in rage. Did she expect Nestra to be debilitated by mind magic?

“If yes, you'll have to do better.”

She was catapulted against the wall by an invisible force.

“Ooof!”

Her back smashed against hardened earth with a resounding smack. The power was so intense it crushed her in. She couldn't breathe.

Then the queen's psychokinesis released her. She dropped down.

“Okay,” Nestra wheezed.

The two other bodyguards charged her. They relied on their speed to try and catch her in a hail of blades. She had to move back and counter with violent blows not to be caught by their speed. It was fun! Well, fun for a little while but it was clear they weren't really fencing with her. Instead, they were using one of three patterns they could perform very fast at random. It was a familiar technique for primitive creatures. Kinda boring.

The air shook in front of her. Nestra used *immovable* to dig in, and the wave of energy failed to pin her to the wall, this time. She pointed her fingers at an attacking guard, triggering a void bolt.

The dot of potential energy was swallowed, or rather, dispersed until it was nullified. Magic resistance? Huh. The air shook with another mental screech.

Nestra infused herself with void electricity. Her brief burst of speed let her back one of the bodyguards into a corner while the other made for her back. She released the electricity just as it tried to strike, paralyzing it. Not negation then, more an ability to avoid directed spells? The brief opening was all she needed to cut a second bodyguard in two. Not super resilient, those.

The third managed to slice her calf, using the strike as an opening. Nestra retreated with a hiss of pain. Smothering the bodyguard's head with shadows did nothing. Not reliant on sight? Interesting. Now that it was alone, though, she fought it fairly a little more. She was interested in the patterns. Blocking those ultra fast strikes by remembering them herself and countering afterward was thrilling. Soon, the last one's carapace showed several gashes

leaking blue hemolymph. As it started pattern three again, Nestra countered. In a magistral strike, she severed both forearms.

The thing tried to bite her. She punched it by reflex. Hah! A wide strike later, and it was cut in two. Just in time to be sent tumbling by another mental attack.

Nestra stood back up under the murderous glare of the queen.

“What next?” she goaded.

The sybillant Aszhii words resounded over the quiet cavern, and now Nestra could hear a deep rumble. It was coming from, well...

Everywhere.

“Uh oh.”

A torrent of flesh and chitin burst out from every tunnel. Workers. Warriors. Spitters. Chargers. Even those weird bombardiers. Every ant variant flooded the cavern, going straight for her. The tapestry of squirming flesh was so dense she couldn't even see the queen anymore.

“Right.”

Nestra legged it the way she'd come. A bolt killed a charger in the way, then she bounced from side to side to avoid others as they smashed across the cavern, uncaring of anything in their way. The carnage was absolutely wild.

Some of the workers tried to stop her by grabbing a limb and pulling to allow larger things to take a bite but it was easy to twist and send them crashing against other insects instead. Nestra used *momentum* to cross the last few meters and then it was a complex dance to carve through weak specimens while watching her back. Nestra fought like a whirlwind, each strike killing or maiming C-class monsters, leaving behind mangled corpses. Ahead, a bombardier killed a dozen workers to block her path. She dodged the initial spray then pushed through the acid-covered path. Her Skin let her know its displeasure by wriggling a bit.

She was where she wanted to be anyway. Nestra activated *pass-muraille*. Her body slipped through the walls of the tunnel down and back into the queen's chamber.

Right on top of the queen.

As before, the beast felt her. Nestra was smashed against the ceiling, but the furious attack also squished all the warriors and workers around her.

But that left the acid ants. Terror spiked in Nestra's mind when the dangerous liquid arched through the air. It, too, was subjected to gravity, however, and it immediately sprayed the

edges of the attack's area of effect, hissing against the carapaces of the trapped ants. A void bolt was dispersed as well. They were in a stalemate.

Nestra struggled against the queen's will. She peered into those beady compound eyes with delight. The queen would tire soon. She couldn't keep that sort of pressure forever, and then... even the mass of workers and warriors crawling over her form wouldn't save her.

Sashimi picked that moment to portal in and bite one of the queen's brain tendrils off.

"Sashimi!"

For once, Nestra was actually pleased to see the backup steak larder swimming through the eddies of reality. Good timing!

The queen's surprise and pain sent the ants into a frenzy. They started attacking everything, including each other and, curiously, the queen who seemed disabled by the unexpected attack. Nestra fell on top of the beast. It took only one strike to carve the head in two. Power filled her, that of a sub-guardian.

It was extraordinary. Nestra felt her mana control grow more refined from killing a magic-using monster. An excellent pick.

Now for the celebratory meal.

The ants turned on each other in an orgy of violence. Nestra enjoyed the following chaos, picking the most dangerous ones as targets while dodging the others. As for Sashimi, she hovered mid-air to take bites off the nutritious egg sacs. The glutton.

Soon, it was finished. Nestra returned to the queen's body, finding a core in its thorax. It tasted like nutty meat and 'having a good idea' which was a weird and exotic experience.

Sashimi floated away. She'd grown even more! She was definitely C-class now, and leaner than before. Nestra felt like being lean was her more natural shape but every time she returned back to the void, she was so full that it turned her predatory grace into a chonky waddle. Not that Nestra could blame her. It wasn't nice to waste food.

Nestra decided to pick a chunk of a bodyguard's back leg. Those would be nice cooked like crab, she was sure. She'd gotten food, improved speed and the resistance she wanted, as well as a few other benefits. All in all, an excellent raid. Now it was time to go back and celebrate.

Sashimi stayed. She was just getting started.

There were human patrols at the southern edge of the ant's territory, near the entrance portal. They were checking the corpses of the ants. Those, Nestra hadn't killed. They'd torn into each other with feral voracity.

Nestra didn't have her visor on her, so she wasn't sure what they were saying. Her Chinese was rudimentary at best. Maybe she should take language lessons instead of relying on translation softwares. She picked up the words for 'cannot be' and 'queen'. As she moved around them in the thick brambles of the deep jungle, she heard them call base.

Hmmm yeah, so obviously they would find out someone had killed the guardian soon enough. Fortunately, void mana dispersed very quickly so there shouldn't be signs that would identify her in person, but the wounds on the queen and its bodyguards would show the use of a blade, then it would only be a matter of time before someone came for her. Not good. Nestra was about to leg it to the portal when she spotted something weird: the wind had picked up. Air mana increased. Around her, the leaves fluttered.

Trees and branches creaked in the distance. She heard a faraway howl.

She remembered the leader of tonight's expedition: Varang guild's Yunlong, a B-class wind specialist.

Really not good.

Nestra threw all cautions to the metaphorical winds. Yunlong was a close quarter combat specialist, a striker. His style was close to hers. He was by no means a mage but he was a B-class and a B-class could do anything. Worse though, wind specialists often had fantastic perception. The wind somehow found her. It blew in her hair, whistled between her horns. She could hear it whisper in the air. Her intuition chimed in alarm. Something was looking for her, something diffuse yet unshakeable. Her speed redoubled. The light breeze intensified.

In the distance, wild animals screamed.

She couldn't get to the portal in time. The high gleam was tracking her and there was no way in hell she could outrun him. He couldn't find her yet, but if her memories were correct, wind specialists followed it to their targets. She had to hide, but where? The wind knew her now. It wouldn't let go. She had to trick it. *Passe-Muraille*? Maybe, but the wind covered a wide area. She needed a cavern. That might work. Maybe a burrow?

Nestra rushed. Thick leaves and shiny lightbugs didn't stop the wind hounding her. She crashed to ground level and kept going. She was getting away from the ant territory by now. Was it good? Was it bad? Fear needled her. If that B-class caught her, she was in a world of trouble. He might even just plain kill her! The longer this lasted and the closer he would get, and not even void mana's elusive nature would save her.

She stopped by the remains of an ant patrol. One of them had its entire carapace peeled off, revealing the flesh underneath. There was a very small spot between it and a dead charger.

She suddenly had an insane idea. If the wind could vaguely follow her shape and mana, then...

Insane but...

Nestra grabbed the carapace, set it as a door and then put her Mask on.

Human Nestra was in the portal world for the first time in her life. Warm, pungent air filled air lungs, making her want to gag. The stench was abominable. It was as hot as a damn sauna and nowhere near as pleasant. Sweat immediately covered her skin. Dirt stained her city clothes, and the sounds of the jungle turned into a warbled mess. She could see nothing but a tiny spot of tree beyond the carapace. Her hidey hole was a foreboding dark.

The wind died down. The leaves stopped shivering.

She stayed there.

Nothing moved. It was so damn hot but to be found now would be the end of her. At some point, she thought she might have heard footsteps, but that might have been her imagination.

She slapped a millipede away from her face. Damn it. The longer she stayed and the more likely scavengers would come for a feast. A portal world of this complexity definitely had a whole ecosystem. She had to stay put. The portal was far from being clear. The B-class would likely go back to completing it. How long would it take? She had no idea.

She stayed still. Soon, she was soaked in sweat. Thirsty too.

After what felt like hours, she switched back to her true form. The world returned to normal around her. She immediately cloaked herself in shadows before moving on, then up a tree. Higher she went, to the upper layer of the forest where the intense light made the animals rarer. Nothing seemed to be coming at her.

She made for the entrance portal. As soon as she was in range, she slipped back into the real world, appearing inside of a cubicle. It was deserted at this time.

She escaped the varang building soon after.

“Holy Riel, that was close, but hey, I think I lost a B-class!”

No more illegal expeditions for a while though. Not inside the walls, at least. This had been too close.

Nestra's elation lasted just long enough for her to check her messages. There were a few, starting with a very official one telling her to get a physical checkup before training could start. The five others were from a certain doctor Mazingwe.

He hated having to call twice.

Despite the late hour, Nesta called him. He picked up after three rings. If a powerful B-rank like Mazingwe didn't pick up quickly, it was definitely on purpose.

"Good evening doctor," Nesta said to placate him, "I see you called me several times. Sorry, I was, hmmm..."

"I can perfectly understand why you would be 'incommunicado', Miss Palladian," Mazingwe replied, his voice velvety smooth.

He pronounced incommunicado like it was a treasure he was sharing. Nesta liked it. She could understand collecting pretty things although for her that was just food for now.

"I admit that I expected you to be still working, but I soon realized you were... working instead. Please do not be alarmed by my attempts. As for why I called, I have received a rather peculiar request from Special Affairs."

"I am being transferred."

"And I will congratulate you on your promotion to special agent. Now, how about we meet tomorrow morning at 9AM? My office."

"On a Sunday again?"

"Miss Palladian, you know I prefer to have the building empty when we measure your metrics."

"Are you going to throw knives at me again?"

"Of course, but that will not be part of the more... mundane examination. Will I see you there?"

"There should be laws against Sunday morning appointments."

"Spoken like a true civil servant, Miss Palladian. A good evening to you."

Nesta's human examination didn't last very long considering her body was the same as it had been when she awakened, down to the scars. She was curious if she could get new ones. The leg wound she'd gotten from Cleaver had faded, but that could have been Valerian's fantastic healing. Despite her physical appearance remaining unchanged, her capabilities were growing.

"You are more or less at a low D-class level, Miss Palladian, and I would add that low D-class users usually focus on one or two abilities such as strength and reflexes, or perception, yet you are a bit of a generalist. If you had a core, you would be quite terrifying for your rank indeed."

That made Nesta curious.

“Could it ever be fixed?” she asked. “My human core, I mean. Apparently, it was there at some point. Maybe it’s easier to fix or replace than it is to turn a baseline into a user.”

“I have researched the question, and indeed, there might be a possibility.”

“Really?” Nesta asked, suddenly very interested.

“A specialized European hospital in the Zurich Fortress has been researching core repair. Some B-class monster can apparently damage them, and there has been a growing need to find a better solution than ‘just wait’. Unfortunately, replies to my inquiry have been inconclusive. You would need a core transfer. It would be prohibitively expensive just to research whether or not it can be done.”

“How much is prohibitive?”

“Miss Palladian, you are a unique case. Literally so, I’m afraid. I was given a figure of ten to twelve million credits.”

Nesta’s hopes were flung into a freezer.

“Ok yeah so nah.”

“Indeed. That said, if you work on your identity as Crescent for another decade, you may get started, at least. The estimate they gave me includes the ritual required to rekindle your core. It will apparently require a human core with a high compatibility. Very likely ice, or metal for you.”

“Wait, how do they know that?”

“By inferring from their core-repair research, I assume? In any case, it is a distant prospect. Now, let’s see how your Aszhii self is progressing.”

“By the way have you cooked with my brother?”

“Baked, and yes, and delaying the knife-throwing will not save you.”

“Aw.”

Mazingwe didn’t spar with Nesta since it would have devastated the building, but he did push her to her limits. Reflexes with knife throws, mana perception, repeated uses of her skill, bench pressing and arm wrestling, the tests lasted for an hour and by the end, Nesta felt ragged.

It was only okay because Mazingwe didn’t look like he was enjoying himself.

“Please... no more!”

“Perhaps a few more uses of precision? Try to hit my corneas.”

“No!”

“And here I had a maple syrup-glazed doughnut with real Canadian maple syrup.”

Hot damn.

“Three times and not one more,” Nestra offered.

“Agreed.”

She had her prize with some really nice coffee. Mazingwe served it with milk, cardamom, and cinnamon. He called in Qahwe. It was very nice.

“Normally, I would add sugar, however the light bitterness of the unsweetened Qahwe offers a better match to the glazed doughnut. In my own modest opinion, of course,” Mazingwe said.

“Hmph!” Nestra replied with much enthusiasm.

“I notice that you seem more comfortable in your demon form than in your human one. Have you grown more used to it?”

Nestra took a moment to reply since she didn't want to speak with a mouth full. Mazingwe was patient anyway.

“It is my true body. The human skin is nice, and I'm used to it, but it'ssss not me.”

“Your diction has improved a bit.”

“Yes. The teeth are very sharp. It took some getting used to.”

“Do you often stay in your true form then?”

“When I am with you, on a lone raid, or when I am with Sereth or my sister.”

‘Hmmm. I see,’ Mazingwe said, making a note on his datasheet. “It appears your mental health has drastically improved following your awakening. We will keep monitoring it, of course. Raiders are typically under a significant amount of stress while the loss of friends always taxes the heart. It is no weakness to ask for help when it becomes too much. The battle of the mind is just as important as the battle of the bodies, yet it is often neglected. Your family and I are here for you.”

“Thanks Mazingwe, it means a lot coming from a first gen.”

The doctor nodded, swiping something on his datasheet.

“You may not be human, Miss Palladian, but you are my patient. Now that you are in a good mood, let me quickly go over your test results. You are at the very top of C-class... in every category according to human standards..”

“That’s good.”

“More than good, considering you are still in the early stages of C-class if I understand correctly. It makes your people truly terrifying. Most humans specialize but you won’t have to. You can play any role, even that of a tank.”

“Well there aren't a lot of us so I guess it offsets our abilities?”

Once again, Nazingwe nodded.

“I have the impression from Sereth that gray demons can be loners, however I have also noticed that you cooperate well with Valerian and your sister. It could imply that human-born gray demons conserve our species’ pack bonding tendencies..”

He leaned forward until Nestra felt the full weight of his attention on her.

“There might come a day when it matters, for both of your species. You are the only one for now, Miss Palladian.”

“Sereth also likes humanity.”

Mazingwe marked a pause, and Nestra got the impression he was searching for the correct words.

“Sereth is... not unlike a tourist. He likes mankind. He clearly holds great affection for his girlfriend, yet he remains... a very old warrior. You do realize he’s older than any human alive, right?”

“Oh...”

“Warriors like him can compartmentalize their emotions, and as sad as it would make him to leave in a rush or... other options, he would probably do it. He is here for you.”

“Yeah.”

“It might be up to you to represent mankind in the future. I am sorry for placing this burden upon your shoulders...”

“It’s ok. I like it here. All my friends are on this planet.”

“Thank you, and now for the second unpleasant thing...”

Nestra felt blindsided. Bad news? With my doughnut?

“As you may recall, I have full access to the Pandora database, the repository of all known monsters and all the information available on them.”

He hesitated.

“Except for the market rate or edibility of their body parts.”

“Bah. It’s fine. I’m always up for testing edibility.”

“Hmmm yes, perhaps you should improve your toxin resistance first. But I digress. The Pandora database records who accessed specific pages for the sake of helping team coordinate. For confidentiality reasons, the option to check it is left only to those with the highest levels of clearance. I am one such person.”

“I knew you were famous as Dawn Spear but not that famous.”

“I fought alongside Riel, Miss Palladian. In the evacuation of Mogadishu.”

“Damn...”

It was like talking to a living legend.

“If you will stop interrupting me... I wanted to inform you that another person recently consulted the ‘cacodaimon anthropomimesis’ page. Yours, of you recall.”

“Who?”

“Shinran.”

Nestra dropped her half-eaten doughnut. Thankfully, it landed on her plate.

“I must commend you for keeping your mask and full body suit on at all times, however I suspect Shinran has identified Crescent as a gray demon. My understanding is that Seth made the cost of messing with you quite clear, but I would strongly advise you to expect some form of interference. Keep an eye out and expect him to do something.”

“Damn.”

“Do not be alarmed. Shinran strictly respects his own rules...”

Mazingwe frowned, which pushed Nestra to ask the burning question that had been on her mind for a long time.

“Why are all high gleams so scared of Shinran when he’s a damn bonze that heals people for free?”

“Let us just say that while Shinran is a calm and contained person, nobody who ever saw him fight would believe that is all he is.”

“So he fights like a monster?”

Mazingwe flinched.

“His... brutality... is something to behold. Hopefully, you won't. Not for a very long time. That was all, Miss Palladian. Do not be afraid, but remain vigilant.”

“Okay...”