

Nestra called it in immediately. Shinoda picked up after two minutes. He sounded exhausted but determined.

“I will be there in forty minutes, Palladian-san. Do you need me to pick you up?”

“Nah, I’m on my way by car. Meet you at the parking deck.”

“Be careful. They might be watching, and if they see you alone...”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

There were only two saving graces in this absolute shitshow. One, they’d noticed now instead of showing up fresh-faced at 9AM like a bunch of amateurish nitwits. Two, Nestra had several more drones around, which meant that they could have caught something. She browsed through the recordings while her real car sped on towards Fifteen. It was getting close to 5AM now which meant she was tired, but at least she’d slept some during twilight. Adrenaline and rage made her human heart pulse with a rigid staccato.

What kind of fucking scum of humanity killed a nice street cook to send a message? What manner of skid mark on the nasty knickers of humanity’s most degenerate could come up with this sort of plan and say, yeah, let’s do this? Old Lin was a nice guy, a fucking food provider. An artist!

She was going to kill them.

Nay, she was going to make an example out of them just like they’d made an example out of him. It was just a matter of finding them. After a cursory search, she did find shapes moving through a passage near the utility tunnels, a place she’d not been to yet. There were four of them. Augs, and not the lower shelf civilian ones. She clipped the vid and shared it with Shinoda. He replied with a ‘seen’ emote. Probably busy. She did get a call on her visor almost immediately after.

“This is officer Kim,” the cold voice said. “I will join you with a team. Only a few people but this is the best I can do.”

“Is it wise for you to show yourself?”

“I have officially been detached to Fifteen as a, ah, coordinator. My cover story will suffice considering we civil servants are always short-staffed. Compared to our workload, that is.”

“Ok. See you there.”

Waiting in the underground parking for ten minutes felt like some of the longest ten minutes of her life and she’d had open fractures. Only when Shinoda roared in with the cruiser did she send her car back home. It might be vandalized if it stayed.

“Palladian-san. We should secure the crime scene.”

“Ok. Give me a moment.”

A quick drone activation revealed a few heat signatures, mostly residents observing them from behind their windows. The hab block was already waking up. Nestra checked and double checked that there were no snipers lying in ambush. After a while, she gave the all-clear. If there was a guy out there with advanced camo and a rifle, they were fucked anyway. The pair of cops walked to the trophy carefully. This time, nothing happened.

“Lin-ojisan. We failed you,” Shinoda lamented.

He was apologetic but reverent when he checked for traps, then when he removed the head. Nestra was just keeping an eye out which let her see the very obvious trail of blood leading up the stairs.

“Follow this?”

“Chotto matte ne? Give me a second, yes?”

Nestra wanted to hunt but Shinoda wanted to follow procedure and she had to admit... he was probably doing a better job. The old detective placed the head in a body bag, then cordoned the area with an ease that spoke of experience. Old Lin’s eyes were closed and the head was covered, which felt a bit like a ritual and made Nestra a little less furious. The ball of anger instead cooled to an arctic bite that gnawed at her, urging her on with controlled rage.

The pair followed the trail with great care to an apartment with the door ajar. Someone had used a morphpick, a special break-in tool that molded into the shape of the key once inserted into a lock provided the lock wasn’t too complicated, which it wasn’t. Really expensive shit to kill an old man. Lin’s body was splayed on the living room’s floor over a pool of congealed blood. The cut on his neck was really clean, the sort made with an extremely sharp blade. At least, he hadn’t suffered. A police hover van landed in the courtyard while they secured the place.

A team of specialists came down to secure the place led by Kim who wore a field vest that made her look cool and professional. She didn’t wait for more than a second before pinging them.

“Report?”

“He was killed in his home. The perpetrators came from a passage leading to the utility tunnels. Perhaps they can be tracked down? At least, we would know where they came from,” Shinoda said.

“Then I have bad news. The body temperature indicates he died about two hours ago. That’s long enough to cross half the district on foot. The utility tunnels are a warren that expands to every nearby hab block, with multiple shelters in case of emergency. Storage space too. And we have reports that more facilities have been... dug by the gangs. We will likely not find whoever did this.”

“There might be more cameras down there,” Nestra mentioned.

“The local residents do not like cameras very much.”

“Ah, Kim-san. I understand what she means. Flash may have installed some security measures. Maybe.”

“We can ask,” Nestra said.

“I have his address,” Shinoda said. “Let’s go, Palladian-san.”

Nestra kept drumming on the door for three minutes without tiring. She knew someone was on the other side. Her finer senses had picked up the beeps of some old systems, probably cameras aiming at the door.

“Open up, I know you’re here,” she repeated.

“Fuck off!” a man’s voice finally said.

It didn’t belong to the man they sought.

“We need to talk to Flash. It’s important.”

“I said fuck off... or else!”

A thin robotic arm deployed from above the door. Someone had welded a low-intensity stun gun to the extremity, something Flash had done before and that Nestra had a strong opinion about.

“I’ll zap you!”

“Open. The. Damn. DOOR!”

The stun gun fired. Twin filaments hit Nestra’s military-grade Wellington insulated gear with nothing to show for it.

“So help me Riel I will tear off this thing and shove it up your flaccid—”

The door finally opened on a bare-chested youth displaying tattoos and abs. His thunderous brow glared downward — fucker was at least demon Nestra-sized.

“Lady, if you don’t piss off. Gun dan!”

“Old Man Lin is dead,” Shinoda said. “He was murdered. Mr Flash might be able to help us find who is responsible. I can see that you care for him, sir, but this is a decision he should make for himself,” Shinoda said in a soft voice.

The young man worried his lower lip as he considered the old detective’s request. Nestra took a step back and crossed her arms.

“Wait here. And you wait! No going in!”

He turned around into a cluttered hallway. A thick curtain blocked the access to the living room but not the sound, and Nestra picked up a pair of complaining female voices. Eventually, Flash whispered something. It took another minute for the strange man to approach, wearing his signature neon green apparel.

“What’s that about Old Lin. You’re shitting me?”

“He was murdered as an example,” Shinoda said.

“For talking to us.”

“Shit and you come here in the middle of the night? Wah seh you asshole don’t care I’m a gone-case.”

“You have cameras in the utility tunnels,” Nestra said.

“It would be of great help to us if you could tell us what they saw. Old Lin didn’t deserve this. We have to act now or the hab block will suffer.”

“You mean your face will suffer.”

“This is not about our reputation,” Shinoda said sternly.

At the back, the muscled man returned, bulging arms crossed. He was clearly backing Flash up.

“This is about justice. A man helped us and he was killed for it. He didn’t deserve this and you know it. You also know that it’s an attack on you, and an attack on your block, by someone who wants to prove we are all weak. Now, you must decide if you sulk back in the shadows or if you show us all a straight back. You do not even have to leave your house but you have to help us. Please. Point us in the right direction.”

Flash licked his lips, his eyes going from Shinoda to Nestra. He was sweating.

He turned his attention to her.

“Old Lin gave me food, good food too. When I get my hand on them they’ll wish they were outside the walls instead,” she said.

“Ok, look. Okay. There are cameras near important places like the shelter and some storage rooms. I’ll check the footage. Give me your numbers and I’ll send you what I have. I promise.”

“We’ll head there right away.”

“And uh, can I ask? Please don’t tell people I live in a polycule?”

“Your secret is safe with us,” Shinoda assured.

“As if people didn’t know already,” Nesta mocked. “You think you’re being slick? It’s a fucking hab block. Everyone and their grandma knows it already.”

Flash wilted under her verbal assault. Even the guy behind him piled on.

“Tell you already.”

“Yeah, and just like me, they possibly couldn’t give less of a shit. Get me those vids. I can’t fucking wait.”

Threshold was built on a maze of underground facilities. Between government-mandated shelters, arcologies, private storages and subways, there was enough below the surface to start a civilization, at least for a while, but District Fifteen had taken it a step further. Corridors expanded in every direction, some showing sheer rock instead of the ubiquitous concrete. Nesta was pretty sure they weren’t up to safety standards. The only concessions to common sense was that the support pillars were intact, and the lack of rooms large enough to host a portal, because portals did appear underground, and gangs didn’t have the means to stop a serious break. The result was an expanding labyrinth of small rooms and narrow passages only large enough for a single person at a time. Haphazardly placed lamps cast weak lights on rusty, pitted surfaces, those that were still working anyway. It would have been hell to navigate without her suit’s night vision and without a guide. Well, an audio guide.

“Passage left is a dead end. That place was dug by the XV gang, named because—”

“Of the roman numerals of Fifteen,” Nesta cut.

She checked the opening. Shinoda was left behind to cover the main corridor. He was still sulking after Nesta made it clear she would go first as the heavy hitter. So was Kim because Nesta had invited a civvie in the group call.

“Wah seh, you are such a wet blanket angmoh girl. You’ll never catch a boyfriend with that attitude.”

“Good.”

Nestra kept going. She didn't like it. Too many blind angles, too many straight rooms with zero cover. Her only comforts were her drones and Flash acting as Stibs normally would, except his cameras were static and he was a whiny blabbermouth. Sometimes, glass crunched under Shinoda's feet, making her wince.

"Camera ahead is deactivated," Flash warned them.

Nestra stopped in her tracks. Behind her, Shinoda checked his gun again. It was a nice pistol with a silvery sheen, and she gave it a good fifty fifty chance that the bullets in there could actually stop an aug.

"What do you mean, deactivated? Since when?"

"Tonight. Checking footage aaaaaaand I don't see shit. One moment, all good, the next, lights out."

"What's there?"

"Intersection tunnel to other hab blocks and a side passage to barracks. Gang barracks. They ought to be empty."

"Okay."

Nestra turned a bend in the passage and her little black box beeped. It was the one demon Nestra used to detect cameras.

"You said you have no visuals, right?" Nestra asked again.

"Yeah yeah."

"Anyone else would have surveillance around?"

"No angmoh girl, this is our turf. XV left the barracks during the purge and we, ah, liberated their stuff. Nothing left."

Nestra finally reached the mentioned intersection. Two tunnels spread out to her left and right for dozens of meters, their surface completely clear. Steel tracks met in the middle, the defunct remains of the train system that let emergency services carry goods across the city. What tickled Nestra's interest was a large archway dug at an angle, a destroyed security door blocking the path half-heartedly. Someone had melted the lock. The sheer rock beyond was even more raw and uneven than before but Nestra spotted support beams and enough cables for a good installation. The lights were live and the air smelled faintly of oil and superheated metal. A recent smell. She suspected Shinoda might not be able to pick it up, but instead, he kneeled by the entrance and pointed at what Nestra thought was dust but turned out to be wet soil.

"Tracks. Hours old at most. Mud here, still not dried out."

“Looks like the barracks were revived,” Nestra muttered.

Kim spoke, and this time her voice carried more concern than mild disapproval.

“Right, there is a decent chance those are our culprits. I’m calling our user squad and putting an end to this operation. The purge left plenty of weapons caches and secondary bases intact, and many gangers escaped the net. Although Nestra’s images are not clear, I believe we may be facing heavily augmented opposition and this could be their base. You will stay put until reinforcements arrive.”

Nestra looked up to see a camera near the entrance, a recent one as well. It was a different model than the cheap shit Flash used. Just like the morphpick, the augs were using high end stuff typically only afforded to corpo security.

A part of her knew they were in way over their heads. When Nestra faced the gangs, she’d been with her team, wearing MaxSec armor and fighting from an entrenched position. This was her in discount gear and an aging detective with a solid aim (according to his file) and no tactical training to speak of. That part was the human side of Nestra understanding her situation from an outside perspective.

Demon Nestra wanted to get at it. She wanted to jump on the prey and tear them to pieces. Bring their heads back as an example. She would tear the chrome they were so proud off from their limbs and shove it in their tender bellies while their friends watched.

The last part of her wondered what the fuck the gangers were thinking. No smart criminal would commit a crime so close to their base without covering their tracks better. They’d smashed Flash’s camera and thought it was enough? What, they were expecting him to be terrified?

Actually, that made a lot of sense.

“Help!” a voice said from the entrance. Male. Panicked.

Nestra and Shinoda exchanged a glance, weapons raised.

“Heeeelp! Please, help!”

Nestra was pretty sure the opposition knew they were here.

It was most likely a trap.

“Don’t go,” Kim said. “It’s a ruse. Someone is trying to lure you in.”

“You know I cannot do that,” Shinoda said.

“Yuuji, that’s an order.”

“I’m sorry, Kim-san. You cannot call me Yuuji and pull rank in the same sentence.”

Kim let out a strange, strangled sound that made even a notoriously oblivious Nesta suspect there might be something between the two. Not that it mattered right now. Threshold police officers were sworn to help people in danger. Honor and legal consequences demanded that they intervened.

“Miss Palladian, please share your drone feedback with Mr Flash. Mr Flash, please kindly provide oversight. You will be rewarded for your time.”

“You two are going in? You siao lah! It’s a trap!”

Nesta ignored the complaints. She allowed Flash to take over ‘Nestraguard.exe’ despite her misgivings. Kim was right. She would need all her attention.

“Okay, listen up. The corridor turns left ahead and there are two doors. Right leads to storage. Left leads to living quarters and armory. Both doors are closed. Locked tight.”

Nesta moved carefully. The ground was dirty, though not overly cluttered. She winced when Shinoda’s foot hit a stone.

Something shone in her night vision. She lowered herself to find a proximity device of some sort. Laser-triggered. She pointed it at a paling Shinoda. The corridor ahead led to a wall with a door on either side.

“Angmoh, you got someone running fast towards you from the back! Shit, he’s sprinting. Oh fuck! I... I think it’s too late to run!”

The handle of the left door turned.

Trap: sprung.

Think fast.

Nesta grabbed two EMPs from her breast pocket. Using the shortest timer, she threw one at her back, towards the entrance and the second in front of her.

“Cover me,” she told Shinoda.

She didn’t check. She knew he had her back.

And she would have the front.

Nesta’s human mask might be... not the most adequate, but that was fine. Just another challenge, just another hunt. She would win against the augs and she would do it with her barely-above-baseline shell and that would prove she was simply better. Better trained, better prepared, better made. Adrenaline pumped in her veins. Excitement filled her chest. Her legs propelled her forward as the door finished opening. An aug arm wielding a Bright Tech 10mm sweeper with a datalink pointed its muzzle. The aug didn’t have to see her in

person. The embedded camera would feed her flushed face directly into his retina and he would merely have to pull the trigger, then Nestra would be Ex-stra.

Half a second.

The first EMP detonated. The aug gun shook, resetting. Three seconds to restart, give or take. Nestra sprinted by the door and landed in shooting position. The aug was cursing and tapping his gun. His optics glitched. He was a tall man with messy hair and a stubble under the helmet. She calmly lifted Gorge's hand cannon and lined it up center mass. A second aug behind the first swore.

"Move, you—"

Nestra pulled the trigger. Immense recoil pushed her back, despite her excellent posture. The mana infused bullet carved a hole in the aug's chest through layers of kevlar, and took the shoulder of the man behind him. She was rushing forward while he fell. Another shot took the second man's head off. Behind him, she saw cots and lockers, half open, and a third man. She picked up details as she moved forward. A sheathed blade on his right hip. A shotgun, not linked, in his left hand. Aimed at her.

The knife was a monoblade.

He was the one who'd decapitated Old Lin.

Nestra sprinted forward again. She picked up the second guy's falling body just as an impact shook his frame. Heavy. She could carry him for a step at most.

She let herself fall. Another explosion mangled the body, but she was ready. She shot... and missed. The aug had jumped to the side. Wired reflexes. Fast. There was an issue though, for him. It could only predict what the guy's optics picked up. As the second body fell on her, she shot through it.

Her last bullet could not be predicted by the guy's augments. It shredded the shotgun, the man's left arm, and parts of the wall behind. Pushing the body with her feet, she raced at the survivor just as it unsheathed his blade. Her sword met his knife in a clash of steel. She confirmed it was a monowire stiletto. Really, really sharp.

"Wo cao!"

Fifty thousand volts traveled up her blade and down the guy's implants. Something fried, but he wasn't done. She blocked a kick but was sent backward. Meanwhile, the guy was left staring at her mana blade.

"Mono won't cut that," she mocked. "Try skill."

He lunged forward, and Nestra was forced back by a lightning-fast jab. She had the reach and the technique, but the aug had pre-recorded movements he could just activate at will. This led to an uneven fight where her foe would in turn stumble like an amateur and strike

like a master with superhuman speed. Block left and right, counter. The man jumped back off balance.

“Gigun patterns, basic version.”

“I’ll carve you up, you dog.”

Another pattern she recognized. Step back and sweep a lunge, thrust. The shocks on her blade, it was like fighting a machine, and she was holding on. A smile bloomed on her lips.

The man interrupted the pattern and struck awkwardly. Her thrust pierced through his chest armor as his blade slid along her forearm, drawing blood. He withdrew with a curse. There was blood on her sword, but also on his blade.

“Got you bitch,” the man spat, and Nestra realized he didn’t notice his wound. A discarded inhaler on a nearby table confirmed her suspicions.

Guy was high as fuck.

“There is an interesting thing with prerecorded patterns,” Nestra teased.

A few steps forward, fast jabs, the aug retaliated in a similar manner.

“Can’t handle...”

Nestra lunged and then swept hard from right to left.

The damaged aug’s arm lifted to block while his knife arm pulled back for a devastating gut jab. Nestra’s sword flew through the space where his left hand would have been if he still had one.

Her sweep caught him in the temple with a ghastly crunch. He stopped moving.

The monoblade dropped from his spasming fingers. It dug into the concrete below like the world’s saddest Excalibur.

“... damage assessment.”

A surge of power, and of triumph, filled her with pleasure. The chaos of dust and the deafening gunshots coming from behind became more muted, or rather, she was able to hear them without them interfering with her hearing. Although, the Wellington helmet helped.

Wait, gunshots.

With a swear, Nestra sprinted back into the corridor. She slotted one bullet back in her gun. Shinoda was walking back into the corridor while applying covering fire. Nestra could see the muzzle of a linked gun around the corner leading back into the main path. Shinoda’s steady aim was forcing the person back but he was running out of ammo.

“DOWN!”

Shinoda did so without question. Nestra lined the shot.

She wondered if the handgun could shoot through walls.

Wait no, she wondered how far through the wall it could pierce.

She pulled the trigger. The damn thing buckled in her hands but it took the gun, parts of the wall, and an auged arm along with it. A female voice cursed in Vietnamese. Nestra reloaded then she approached the corner.

“She legged it, angmoh girl,” Flash said.

“Oh, good.”

“Next time you use EMP, warn a bother hor? Half your drones got fried.”

“Kind of busy down here?”

“But shit angmoh girl you’re a MACHINE. Waaaaah seh. Underground fights, can or not? I know a guy.”

“Mr Xun, you will refrain from suggesting illegal activities to our agents, thank you very much. The footage of this incident is now classified and you WILL not distribute it or I will personally make sure you are sent to the Red House for the next ten years. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

“Yeah yeah. Calm down already.”

Nestra still checked the corner. No presence but... there was a tiny trail of blood.

Nice, an opening... for later.

Meanwhile Shinoda, reloaded. He looked unhurt.

“You in one piece, oji-san?”

“No need for sass Palladian-san. I regret to say that my adversary was too armored for a fair fight. Your EMP helped. It was enough to teach her caution, but not enough to neutralize her.”

“We’ll get you a better gun,” Nestra said, and she meant it.

“What’s that thing called anyway?” Flash asked. “Oh, is it the Wallfucker?”

“Why do you breeders always link everything back to sex?” Nestra grumbled.

But she had to admit she liked the wall idea.

“I’ll call it the Window Maker.”

“We are not done,” Shinoda said.

He was covering the corridor, more specifically the storage room which they had not secured yet. Nestra nodded as she finished reloading. Taking great care not to trigger the trap, they went to the last door. A quick camera check showed the place wasn’t booby-trapped. It also looked empty. Shinoda picked the lock under Nestra’s befuddled gaze then they got in. The storage space was mostly empty and quite dusty. No one had been there in a week.

“Clear. No hostage,” Nestra said.

“I had to make sure, although I suspect Kim-san was correct. We were baited by one of the gangers.”

“Yes.”

Nestra wondered if she should say something. Shinoda was standing there, waiting for her judgment. The truth was that if it had been any other cop instead of Nestra, this could have turned into a disaster. Flash had the right to it. Not everyone could just stop four augs without dying, even bottom of the barrels junkies like those guys. It was clear Kim expected Shinoda to pull some stupid shit like going in for honor in defiance of his screaming brain cells. It was also clear to Nestra that she wasn’t bound by the same suicidal tendencies.

But she didn’t really mind.

“Your, ah, Window Maker? It does not look like a regulation gun,” Shinoda observed.

“No.”

“And the grenades?”

“Also no.”

“Hmm. Omoshiroi.”

“Neither are the drones or my armor set.”

“Hmm. Your preparedness is impressive. I think I owe you my life, Palladian-san.”

“Hey, we are partners, right?”

“Aibo? Yes. You are the best bad cop I have ever worked with.”

“Ok good, enough of that you’ll give me diabetes. Let’s go.”

But they didn't go because they had to secure the scene and fill online reports and do a shitload of other procedure things normal cops had to do that MaxSec teams just left to their admins and in the name of all that was holy did Nesta miss those little scribblers. With the adrenaline leaving her, she was also crashing down hard and on top of that, she was getting hungry. And she was tired. It was getting close to six out there.

Ten minutes after the pair got in and while Kim's techs were busy loading the bodies, a trio of gleams finally strutted down the tunnel up in full gear. Compared to augs, gleam armor looked more medieval than modern but they were more resilient anyway. Nesta unfortunately recognized the assholes before they could even speak. Those were the twats who'd met them in the garage.

"It took you eight minutes to arrive," Kim mentioned in an arctic voice.

The gangly anglo gleam shrugged, vibrant iris twinkling with amusement.

"We were on the other side of the area of operation. All records will show that we moved immediately. It's just that..."

"Traffic," the thickset gleam said as he nodded to himself.

"This place was hard to find, ajumma," the Korean gleam added with a sly smile.
"underground, not on the map. You know how it is."

Officer Kim went very pale. Nesta wasn't too familiar with Korean culture but she was definitely sure the gleam had insulted her, somehow. She might be a baseline but she was also a civil servant and the gleam was a low level security personnel. Definitely lower status. They really didn't give a shit, huh?

"I see. The city appreciates your... efforts. I am sure you have done to the best of your abilities, although you were... inadequate to the task."

Tension rose between Kim and the trio to the extent that the techs stopped working to steal a glance. The barest hint of a sneer twisted Kim's perfectly neutral persona into one of profound disgust. If condescension could be bottled, that woman would be rich.

"You may leave, since we have seen the limits of your usefulness. Thank you," she dismissed them.

Rather than facing them off, Kim simply turned around to work on her report. Nesta followed suit, and the three gleams were left standing around with nothing to do. It still took them a few seconds to head off. By then, Kim was back to her business self. At least in appearance. Nesta didn't miss the tension on her shoulders. For most baselines, there was something unsettling about confronting gleams. Nesta didn't know if baselines just felt mana in their subconscious or if there was something in the brain that acknowledged that gleams were just that dangerous, even the weaker ones.

“The bodies are ready for transport,” one of the techs said. “Should we move the vehicle to a more secluded area?”

“No,” Nestra interrupted. “We carry them back to the marketplace. Let people see.”

Kim hesitated until Shinoda intervened.

“Palladian-san is correct. We are working with a tribal structure. Let the people know that what we cannot protect, we can avenge. Those are the murderers of Old Lin. Let them see that... justice was rendered. Of a sort. This will show our goodwill more than any shipments of supplies ever will.”

“This is a harsh place,” Kim mumbled. “Very well. We will do as you say. There is not much to learn here anyway.”

It was a strange procession that left the utility tunnels, and a stranger one that received them still. Men, women and children of the hab block lined the path to the hover truck in solemn ranks, some dressed in finery and others wearing makeup and, in one instance, face paint. Lin’s body bag was covered in flowers and trinkets and no matter that there were no florists around. Someone had woven a wreath out of colorful ropes and cables and finished the work with carefully applied glass beads. Behind the mass of people, someone sang a mournful dirge.

An expectant mood moved the crowd while the tech loaded the bodies, and when they moved in themselves. Kim was the last one to climb in. Under the pale light of early dawn, she looked a little rough around the edges. The signs of mental exhaustion were plain, not in her flawless makeup or the perfect hairdo, but in the pockets under her eyes, the clenched jaw, the details that made her seem more human now, so far out of her element.

“Are you sure you want to stay? I’m giving you half a day off. By regulation, you should be out for three days at least while Internal Affairs goes over the details of the shooting.”

“We will probably head back early but... we need to hammer the steel while it is hot, ne? Thank you, Kim-san.”

“Please be careful,” she replied, then after a blink. “You too, Palladian. I... knew I could count on you.”

Nestra nodded. The hover truck left soon after, gliding over the morning air. It started to smell pretty good.

“We should walk around, Palladian-san.”

“Yes.”

“Hey, you! Police girl!” a woman said.

Nestra recognized her as the prim lady who'd refused her naan the day before on account of not doing business with pigs.

"Come eat my zhou."

"Oooh I love porridge."

For the next ten minutes, at least a dozen people brought Nestra food just for the disbelief that came with the realization that she would, in fact, eat it all. Skewers, naan, congee, fried dough, fruits, soup, all disappeared down her gullet. She choked midway through the amazing experience when a voice went through her visor.

"Ah, angmoh girl, thanks for ASMR but I close the connection now ok? I pick up your dead drones and repair, ok? Half price."

"Fine, now fuck off."

She hated being disturbed while she was eating.

"How are you, Yuuji?" the voice said in Japanese. "Really."

"Soo-Young, you worry too much."

"I worry because you charge into an obvious trap. You would have died there if not for the girl."

"Yes. I should not have risked her life, in retrospect. My commitment would have killed her. I have to ask you, what is she? A quirk?"

"Do not believe I do not see you changing the subject. You could have both died and I would have been sacrificed along with our entire investigation. There is much at stake here. You WILL pay attention and exert caution or Gigun will never be held accountable for what they have done. This is bigger than either of us, Yuuji."

"Aaah, sorry."

"You say sorry but you stay the same."

She tsked.

"As for Palladian, I am not sure why she can perform so well. I only know that my expectations have been surpassed. Her full medical file is sealed by the order of Dr Mazingwe and it would take more than what I can manage to get access. What I know is that she has made multiple requests to be exposed to mana, so I suspect she was mana-starved until recently."

“Is this not extremely unpleasant?”

“Yes, to users. She appears to have found a way to bypass that hurdle. I have my suspicions. Now, she is either the strongest quirkie or one of the weakest users on earth, yet she still registers as a baseline which benefits us as her foes tend to underestimate her.”

“This solution she found, does it... involve food?”

“Yes. Mana-rich food, I suspect. How did you know?”

“She, ah. She has eaten over a hundred and forty credits worth of street food over the past two days, as well as two bags of snacks. And she defeated a squad of augmented criminals in under fifteen seconds. Now, she is snoozing in the back of the car during working hours. I am very surprised.”

“I see. It doesn't matter. I didn't bring her here as a test subject but as an ally. What matters is results, and that you have each other's back.”

“I have only one worry. I fear she may enjoy killing, perhaps a little too much. I saw her expression when she pulled the trigger. It was... pride. And hunger.”

“She loves winning. It was in her file.”

“I am concerned about the type of victory she may pursue.”

“Then it will be up to you to guide her, as I mentioned before. We cannot do without a heavy hitter and the city will not spare a user to babysit you.”

“I will do my best, ne? Would you like to meet this weekend?”

“For a debrief?”

“No.”

“Then yes, I would love to.”

Nestra woke up feeling all fuzzy. This wasn't her bed. She needed her bed. She also needed a shower but sadly the police cruiser didn't come equipped with one. Those damn budget cuts.

The first order of business was contacting Shinoda who confirmed he was still just hanging around. The second was to check Flash's latest message. Unfortunately, he wasn't the bearer of good news.

“I can't fix your drones. The EMP fried them inside out. I can't replace them either because they're an ad hoc construct with custom parts, sorry. You have to contact the original creator. Good news is, half of them are still working fine. I left them in a box by your door.”

PS: you look much nicer when you're asleep."

That was only because she couldn't hear Flash talk. Nestra still had around ten drones left from the original swarm. Stib was going to kill her.

Had to call her though. She just couldn't do anything without eyes in the skies. Well, nothing to it. Stib picked up on the third ring.

"Nestra? Aren't you at work?"

"Yeah, well, we got ambushed and... sorry, I fried half of the drones. With an EMP."

"Are you hurt?" Stib replied.

She sounded really calm.

"No."

"Thought so or you would be grumpy. It's fine. I'll replace them, just..."

"What, really? I thought you were going to be mad, after all the efforts..."

"Look, drones are consumables. They exist so you get hurt less. Did you get hurt less thanks to them?"

"Yeah, we wouldn't have known we were going to be attacked from behind without them."

"Then they did what they were meant to do. There is a slight issue with the replacement though."

"Yeah?"

"I used Blue River's licenses for some parts. One time was fine because I was building their fleet but... if I do it again, I'll need to compensate them. Sorry. I just can't build more on the guild's dime. That wouldn't be correct."

"But if I pay you for your time?"

"I'll need six hundred creds a pop. It's already over five hundred just for the license and raw materials. Add a little for fabricator use and, yeah. It's already a friend's discount."

"I'll pay," Nestra said.

"Six thousand? Just like that?"

"Remember the check from the city? I'm rich as hell."

“Not like that, Nestra. You’ve always been concerned about money and now you just burn six grand without batting an eye? You got another source of money. Oh, is it your family?”

“No!” Nestra protested.

“Oh then, hmmm. Ok, we don’t have to talk about it now.”

“It’s fine.”

“Don’t do anything stupid please. Anyway, I’ll get them delivered to Fifteen’s precinct. Just please watch out for yourself.”

“No promises.”

“Ugh, then at least wait until I get you the replacements. You were attacked?”

“Ambushed by remnants of the gang. We’re not sure exactly why they came at us but they had white dream inhalers near their sleeping quarters.”

“Ugh, on the run and high as kites? Fucking idiots.”

“Yeah well those idiots almost killed me. Maybe they wanted to stick it to the man. It just feels so random...”

“There might be more attacks in the future. Lots of gangers died during the purge but many ran away, or managed to hide. They’re not the most stable people around. You know how dodgy augs fuck with people’s minds. Be really careful out there. Nestra, I know it’s not your style but... could you let the gleams handle it? For once?”

“If they bother showing up, sure.”

“Oh, before you go, there was something else. You remember Seth?”

The goofy baker’s smile invaded Nestra’s mind like some persistent weed.

“Yes? He gave you his num— oh no.”

“Hmm so yeah. We dated. You, ah, don’t have a problem? Right? You just seemed weird about it.”

“Stib, I am the last person who should give you relationship advice. As long as you’re staying safe.”

“Oh yeah, he’s a real gentleman. And funny too. And a great cook! Anyway, just wanted to let you know in case you went to his shop and he asked questions. It’s picking up, you know? His business. Ok, I should go. Go get them, tiger.”

Shinoda was gesturing so it did seem she was going to go get something.

Unfortunately that turned out to be human misery.

Sometimes, Nestra's life was exciting and filled with interesting foes and sometimes, it was both tragic and banal. The room up here stank of old socks, piss, and neglect, the kind that built up over months of just giving up. The room's inhabitant's sallow skin clung to his bones like old parchment. Discolored patches marked him as a meth user, probably, and the state of his teeth, dirty hair, and bloodshot eyes confirmed he was far gone. And yet there was still a spark of lucidity under that crushed shell of despair. It shone ominously while the man stared listlessly at the body of his wife. She bore the same stigma but what attracted the eye was more the pool of blood and the crushed skull. An old trophy lay on its side, still caked in congealed gore. He had made no effort to hide his crime.

"Dunno what took me," he said.

Drool fled from his chapped lips.

"Dunno, dunno. I'm sorry."

"You cannot stay here, you need to come with us," Shinoda said.

He remained calm but there was a distance here, a coldness in his voice Nestra had never heard before. It was still the most normal thing in this den of misery. A part of her wondered what would have happened if she'd joined another branch. Or the emergency services. Being submitted to scenes like this one day after day after day... Nestra had issues caring but even that would have ground her mental to a fine dust. Shinoda followed another approach. She wasn't sure how but it was as if he were wearing a mask and transmuting all that horror into... she didn't know what. Something else.

"You need help," Shinoda said.

"Help, yeah. I don't think I need help."

The man reached for his pillow. Shinoda didn't move beyond taking a few steps forward but Nestra felt something was wrong, so she took out her neutralizer. It was her fastest non-lethal tool. It also looked like a small compact gun, except it was painted blue so people could tell the difference.

What was hidden under the pillow was, unsurprisingly, a gun. An old handgun from before the incursion, only meant to stop other humans. The junkie didn't aim it at anyone. He just cradled it between shaky fingers like a treasure, or a lifeline.

"I think I need to stop being a fuckup. There's only one cure."

"That is the easy way out," Shinoda said.

The man blinked. He had almost forgotten them.

"I... I guess it is. I just... I'm so tired."

"You can rest, get better, then atone. Come on. I'll see you out."

"Marge. She doesn't deserve to be left like that."

"My friends are on the way. They will take care of her. They are professional and respectful."

"Yeah, that's good. She doesn't deserve it. Being like that. Yeah."

Broken record.

The demon part of Nestra shifted. This man was a goner. He smelled like an accepted end. There was absolutely nothing left to hunt here, nothing at all.

Abruptly, the junkie grabbed his gun and pushed it into his mouth, or he tried to. Nestra lifted her neutralizer and pulled the trigger. The shot landed on the man's naked leg. He spasmed. Shinoda grabbed the gun from his hands just an instant later.

Oh, he would have gotten it without her help.

Had she interrupted a touching heart to heart moment?

"Ooops. Sorry. Bit fast on the trigger there," Nestra said.

Shinoda didn't reply. He spent a few seconds taking the gun apart but his expression remained vacant. Nestra let him place the unconscious man in a safe position before restraining him.

"No need to apologize, Palladian-san. We are new partners, yes? And besides, the culprit is alive and, well, he is alive. That is all we could hope to achieve here."

"The ambulance is on the way?"

"No ambulances here, however, the city has made hover vehicles available to us. We merely need to wait for their arrival."

"Are you.... ok?"

Shinoda flinched. For a moment, Nestra believed she'd been too direct, but it was ok to ask people how they were doing, right? It just meant she cared. It felt strange to care about new people.

"Ah. As fine as I will ever be, Palladian-san. Thank you for asking. The fallen, like him, they are like..."

He searched for an answer in the ceiling's discolored tiles.

"Like leaves through a spider web. The spider web is friends and institutions. When someone falls, the web holds them and sometimes, they pick themselves up. But sometimes, the web tires, or breaks, or it was never strong enough, and the person disappears. The web does not know it failed until..."

He gestured at the two wrecks, one dead, one wishing to be so.

"Until they die and then, they exist again. Briefly and painfully."

"Are we the web?"

"Yes, for this place, we are. Sadly, the web is never strong enough. And it always misses people. I know it. I tried. We cannot see how far some have fallen, even when we are so close to them. I still try, Palladian-san. Sometimes we even win."

"Maybe we should get some coffee. And then go home."

Shinoda chuckled. It was brittle yet genuine.

"Yes, perhaps we do. It will be up to psychiatrists to pick it up from here, I believe. To care more would leave us... drained. The web is only as strong as the spiders that live on it, ne?"

"I think you are pushing the metaphor a little far."

"So I am. I shall buy your coffee as an apology. And a donut."

"Deal!"

"You are a very sunny person, Palladian-san. I am glad you are here."

Sipping on a fresh cup of excellent BaiHua java, Nesta considered her next step. The situation was pretty clear so far. Some time ago, someone in Gigun made a plan to turn a profit in District Fifteen. This plan included arming gangs with military-grade rejects so as to justify Gigun's security presence and the juicy contact it would generate. There was undoubtedly more to it but that was the aspect of the plan that almost got Nesta killed. Now, Gigun was settling in their new domain while the city's civil servants sniffed around, looking for proof that they'd been bamboozled. That was the gist of it. There was, however, a complication for Gigun. The city reacted too fast for them to finish their purge as thoroughly as they'd hoped for. Now there were two competing, overextended groups paralyzed by each other's presence, and in the gap, gangers had survived. There were no doubts in Nesta's mind that Gigun had thoroughly erased everything they could get their hands on including most records and witnesses, and it was only a matter of time before the rest was found, but there were bound to be pieces of the puzzle still scattered around the district, and

it would be a race to get them before the opposition. Nestra had every intention to assist the city's inquiry, but there were things her human self could not readily do.

Her demon self could, however.

The first order of business would be to find more of those remnants, and she knew exactly where to start. The survivor of the ambush was bleeding, though Shinoda didn't seem to be aware of it. Nestra could call the techs and then request a team to follow, which could take some time... but there was another option.

It was time for demon Nestra to follow that dribble of blood back to another lair after tonight's portal world. There was a risk she would be tired but if what the benefactor said was right, she needed to become much stronger, much faster, because something was coming.
