

It was dark in the Redwood forest. Outside of the main trail, light came from the odd lamp post dotting the secondary paths. Benches and picnic areas waited for the next day's visitors. A few cleaning bots picked empty cans, replaced trash bags, or otherwise ate the odd leaves fallen on varnished wood. Bio-engineered cicadas filled the night with a pleasant, muted chorus that accompanied Nestra with every nervous step. The odd traveler ignored her as she walked past. Most were corpo pawns or gleams on their way to somewhere important.

Nestra had to give it to them, BaiHua Biotech Solutions had the most pleasant arcologies of them all, both in terms of appearance and comfort. A massive greenhouse occupied the entire ground level and most of it was opened to visitors so that the masses may wonder at its many creations. It was said BaiHua's compound was entirely self-sufficient. It could survive another apocalypse almost indefinitely. It was also, unfortunately for Nestra, extremely secure. It meant she could reach it with her real identity without much concern, but she wouldn't have access to her gear tonight.

Just her demon self and the skin.

The benefactor's precise coordinates were enough to guide Nestra deeper into the forest, by which time she could feel the soothing pulse of power all portals seemed to share. She wondered how the many cleaning drones had not picked it up yet, until she reached a large specimen nestled between two artificial boulders and looked up.

The portal was in the air, hidden between two branches. Portals were never fully inaccessible, which meant that she'd have to climb to reach it but it would be fine. The presence of the portal confirmed a few things and Nestra didn't know what to think about it.

First, BaiHua didn't have the technology to detect a portal on its immediate territory. She wasn't surprised that outer district would rely on cheap cameras to manage the space, but the inside of an arcology was another matter entirely. Maybe detecting the strange radiation she enjoyed so much was more complicated than she thought.

Second, the benefactor didn't give a shit about corpos. They were confident enough to send her here with only a small warning about not bringing weapons. They were sure she would get away with it. That was.... terrifying. Corpos paired up with the most powerful guilds. Hell, most of the key actors were high gleams themselves. And the benefactor just didn't care.

That or they were a complete moron but somehow, she doubted that. They were only a mild moron, and a well-meaning one as well. Welp, nothing to it. Nestra moved out of the path then waited until she was absolutely sure there were no patrol drones around, then she pulled off her mask.

Climbing the redwood proved easy. With enhanced strength, she could hold her entire body weight with two fingers and the modified redwoods bore enough crevices on their bark for a comfortable climb. She felt the delicious power grow as she approached, and soon, a pale blue light shone on the nearby leaves.

And then she kept climbing.

A hissy curse word escaped Nestra's lips. The portal seemed perfectly positioned for maximum stealth, which was why it wasn't detected yet. That was how breaks usually occurred in Threshold despite the hundreds of thousands of cameras monitored by AIs. She could have slipped through but she wanted to confirm her suspicions first, and soon she had to sit down in annoyance.

She clicked her tongue to express her frustration. It sounded harsh and alien but she also felt better using it so she did it again. That fucking benefactor was out of his mind or something. There were plenty of portals popping all around Threshold all the time, most of them D-class. Breaks occurred once every two weeks at the very least. That meant there were plenty of portals to find that would match her level. This portal was on the upper middle size as far as D-class portals went, about four meters across. It was an indication of the opposition. She would mostly face D-class monsters inside.

That sucked, especially without her sword. Guess she had to use the Scornful Crescent in a new way. The philosophy still felt weird in her head. It was like a skill she was digesting, something she could control to an extent yet was still foreign to a degree. It felt like learning the sword all over again back when the gestures had not been automatic. And now she would have to get in there and fight with even less tools than normal, on a harder world than she'd ever faced.

Sucked to be her. Portals of that size usually took a team of four to five D-class raiders to safely clear. Oh well. She was probably just completely awesome so a lot was expected of her.

With one last sigh, Nestra slipped in and found herself on another tree overlooking an infinite sea of fog pierced by colossal trunks reaching so high their branches seemed to meld with the alien stars above. It was night. It was very wet. Screeches and clicks surrounded her in an overwhelming cacophony after the quiet of the arcology. A stifling heat made every surface bear condensation like crystal tiny beads, undisturbed near the portal yet bleeding in a nearby branch around the mark of a clawed feet. Nestra looked around and repressed the urge to whistle.

The titanic trees on the horizon? Yeah, she was on one of them. A secondary canopy extended under her feet at distances that made her question her depth perception. It was like being on a plane and watching cities roll by, except that here it was a single organism.

A part of her wanted to jump and just... cross that distance. She would survive the landing with her resistances. Just let go like that, with the wind in her face, watching the green masses turn into village-sized hedges. She could just slip by the boundary and live there for a while.

Nah, definitely not worth it.

Nestra turned around. The entry portal was lodged against the gnarly trunk, with a branch wrapping around providing a way up. Below her, a distant blur and the lack of obvious paths marked the end of the portal world while above, a network of thin branches formed a

rudimentary revolving staircase for a colossus. That was her destination. Within one last sigh, Nesta took a step forward and something caught her left arm.

She was yanked to the side. Instincts and urgency made her grab the captive limb before her shoulder could dislocate. She twisted on herself to plant her feet, which slipped on the wet bark underneath.

She fell into the void. Whatever caught her dragged her forward, towards another branch. There was a long, tubular thing wrapped around her forearm, a tongue. A blurry shape pulled her body towards a gaping maw filled with teeth. Two black eyes were fixed on her. The blur grew more defined for an instant and she spotted her captor, a creature a little like a toad but also a chameleon.

Timing would be... complicated.

The tongue finished dragging her towards the branch. Stress and exhilaration made her sneer at those black eyes. She put one foot on the branch as the mouth opened wider to chomp.

Nesta bit down on the tongue.

Squishy, elastic. The blood was tangy and a little fishy but filled with mana. Her teeth sank through it like through butter. There was barely any resistance when she viciously tore off a good chunk of flesh, sending a spray of blood in a crimson wave around her. The toad croaked with enough strength to deafen a baseline but Nesta's sensory defenses were now slightly higher than this morning and she didn't flinch. The Scornful Crescent whispered in her mind. It told her to press her advantage, to push her victory. She was in danger. This was perfect moment. Nesta pushed mana into her fist as inertia carried her the rest of the way towards the screaming toad and punched it. Her fist impacted its skull just under the eye in a powerful blow, making it crack. The shock traveled all the way to her torso and she winced.

Pretty sure the crack wasn't her knuckles.

But not certain.

"Ow!"

Stupid. Should have used the precision ability but it was not an automatism yet, ugh. If only she had her sword! The toad didn't exactly recover but it lashed out anyway. She had to step back or risk being swallowed. Its legs tensed. She fell on her back.

The toad surged over her in a mighty jump. Displaced air cooled her skin. Dangerous. She flipped and used momentum just as it landed farther away on the branch. For a moment, she thought the creature would fall off because it was in such an awkward spot, partly on the side of the branch, but the feet latched on like vacuum cups. Her sprint forward finished with a slide under a tongue whip, then she punched the same eye again. Hard. Repeatedly. The creature tried to push her away. It reared up on its hind leg to throw her off, and Nesta let

go. Her toes dug into the wet bark, then she front kicked the standing creature in the chest as it was already out of balance.

For an instant, the toad teetered over the edge, the mass of its upper chest too large to allow it to recover immediately. Nesta saw that, felt the wide opening. She knew what to do. Kneel. See the mottled, shifting skin from close up. Smell the slightly acid scent of the beast. Open her mouth wide and chomp down.

Her black teeth shore through skin, muscles, bones, and ligaments with obscene ease. The creature pulled its leg away with a screech that left its entire weight holding on to one foot. Nesta turned, spitting gore. One leg to go. Aaaaaand the bark gave way.

The toad fell off the branch to the abyss below and the very, very, very long drop towards the next false canopy. She watched its form cross the threshold, then grow smaller until something with wings detached itself from the trunk and flew on a storm of wind, catching the toad mid-fall.

A sort of wyvern the size of a decent airliner.

A second later, a rush of power filled her and she fell back on her ass with toad blood dripping down her chin. Her awareness increased a little, especially her vision. There was also something else like a cooling sensation flooding her vein, though she couldn't identify it. All in all, an excellent haul, hehe.

Ok so jumping would have been a Bad idea, but hey, she thought at the wyvern, thanks for the assist, homie. Nesta smiled to herself. That had been fun as hell. Dangerous, but fun. She was right though. That portal world was really dangerous. That toad had been D-class and not the weakest either. Got to be careful.

Nesta frowned. It wasn't uncommon for teams to retreat to fight another day. Most guilds actually encouraged it because no one wanted to lose raiders on stupid shit. What about her? Was she supposed to push herself to the brink or was retreat an acceptable option? The benefactor had said that hubris killed her kind. Maybe retreating would help her fight off that flaw. She wasn't sure.

She would retreat if she were seriously wounded before facing the portal's guardian. Nodding to herself, Nesta decided that it was probably the best way to handle hubris. Yep! Now to go up.

Nesta walked back towards the trunk. There was a sort of path there, or at least enough bulbous growths to make a sort of winding way up. After some experimentation, she realized it was easier to walk from branch to branch as it prevented her from having to crawl. A crawling Nesta was a slow target, and that would be a bad idea. As she slowly made her way up, Nesta used the opportunity to watch the wildlife since she had to look for other toads anyway. A vibrant ecosystem had developed around the titanic tree. There were white mushrooms with a yellow marbling that she surprisingly had a data on despite not knowing about this world. They happened to be edible as well. It would be the heights of carelessness to bring back any sort of loot now so she tried them on the spot. They were

nice and gorged with mana so she ate some more, lamenting her forlorn gear. This would have been amazing grilled in garlic butter! Curse BaiHua and their advanced security detectors.

Besides the edible ones, there were a couple of poisonous mushrooms that could have been sold on the black market, as well as colorful birds and small critters who merged into the bark when she looked at them. Strange insects flew lazily around the vegetation, the distant sun shining on their shells through heavy clouds. At last, she spotted strange liana ending in bright yellow stingers.

Hmm, that looked a bit like—

The liana tensed and Nestra dove to the side with a hiss. Yellow darts whistled through the air. Those were not lianas, those were back limbs for a small green creature with root-like feet. Its round form gave it a good ability to hide. The lianas tensed again and she readied herself.

As soon as the darts were in flight, she sprinted and used momentum to land right next to the creature, which hissed and jumped back.

The creature was now untethered from the bark, and that was a death sentence. Nestra smirked and used precision. She swung her naked foot and kicked with all the might of a soccer manga protagonist. The creature was unceremoniously punted into near orbit. It wailed miserably on its way down.

Praise Newton, Nestra thought.

The same wyvern creature grabbed the impromptu second serving. Nestra thought it was a little unfair that IT got to eat all that meat while she had to munch on raw fungus. Disgusting. Still, another victory and one that came from noticing her enemy in advance - granting her a rush of coolness in her veins — probably toxin tolerance — and mind speed somehow.. She kept going up at a sedate pace, taking her time to make sure she wouldn't be caught again. That allowed her to spot the next toad.

The beast's camouflage was near perfect, but there was one thing it couldn't do: make water disappear. A puff of wind blew condensation across the branches and gathered around a crouched form like an angelic, ephemeral halo. It was enough for Nestra to spot it. She stopped and considered her options.

It had probably seen her. She had no real way to hide here, in the camouflage-ruled world. She would have to kill it, but to do so, she had options.

The safest way to kill it would be by using a demon bolt, but the problem was she had only two in the tank before exhaustion set in, and she needed at least one for the guardian. There was also the issue of mana-infused attacks. She only had her fists and without some power behind her strikes, she might as well gently massage the monsters instead. How should she approach it?

Hmm.

She knew she could lure the tongue whip out. Monsters of this power were predictable, especially ambush predators. Then what?

Well, she had a tool.

If a princess kissed a frog in turned it back into a prince. What happened if a demon bit a toad? Would she turn back into a human?

Nothing to it. She had to try. Nestra walked as casually as she could towards the base of the toad's branch. A step. Another step. Another one. Come on, lick me.

A blur.

Nestra leaned back, watching the powerful muscle extend past her nose, and then, she grabbed it, and then she bit it. Her teeth tore a chunk of flesh half as wide as the tongue itself. Almost immediately, the toad pulled it back with a screech of pain. Blood pulsed out of the wound in great splurts but she wasn't done yet. The toad, however, was. Despite her best effort, she was pulled forward, her neck jolting painfully.

"Ugh."

She rushed forward so as not to be pulled into the air. Her feet clambered on the wet bark as the toad desperately pulled the mangled appendage in. Couldn't get a grip. Fuck it. She lurched forward, dragged on the tongue and bit again where the wound extended. This time, the muscle spasmed and then, finally, she tore it off. The stump sprayed her with crimson liquid as she fell on the ground. Blinded! She used momentum to step back before realizing it was already over.

The toad creature screeched loudly as it bled out, which left Nestra wiping blood off her face. The rush of power came soon after ward.

Her neck still hurt a little.

So, yeah, had to refine her technique a little but at least she was having fun. Her gaze lingered on the creature's powerful hindlegs.

Maybe...

No no no no she could not sneak any meat out. She'd even forfeited getting a bag to mute the temptation. Enough of this, time to go on. She still had to visit Fifteen afterward.

The climb remained slow and controlled. Nestra dispatched another two vine creatures with ease now that her strategy was perfected, the only difference was that she grabbed one by the liana before tossing it out to its death like a bola. The portal was rather small for one of its power, though the creatures were strong and well-adapted to the environment. It made

her worried about the guardian. As she approached a large platform with great care, her suspicions were confirmed.

At first, it looked like a giant green leaf stuck to the bark but careful examination showed that the moss-like surface was, in fact, fur. The four corners of the leaf then revealed themselves to be limbs ending in claws, their white structure digging into the bark. The upper side was triangular and flattened against the tree, possibly the head.

This was it, the moment of truth. She had two bolts and the creature was lying in ambush. Nestra crouched on her branch, looking up towards her target. Should she aim for the head or center mass? Give how ridiculously potent the bolt was and her lack of experience with it, aiming for center mass might be safer. Focusing, Nestra brought—

Pain.

Sharp, overwhelmingly sharp pain. Back of her left arm. Something latched on it. Teeth raking her bones. She screamed and panicked. There was something there, black, shaped like a shark. About her size. Head like a catfish and a wolf mashed together, with two black beady eyes glaring at her with rabid fury. Wrong wrong wrong. Not the correct ecosystem. It wasn't here a moment before! She plunged the thumb of her right arm into the eye with all the strength she could muster, her blow backed by precision while her red blood pooled on the beast's mouth. Something crunched. The beast let out a muted scream that sounded inside of her damn head, not here, there. What the fuck? She hyperventilated. So painful.

The shark thing flopped away. It was swimming in the air and now Nestra got a better look at its powerful shape as it made to charge her again. It wasn't here before! She was sure it wasn't here before! That piece of shit was cheating! What the fuck! And the mana was wrong, not the right taste, not the right place of existence! It was an intruder!

Like her.

“Hssss!”

The shark thing swam around to attack her, its face still wet. Her left arm was a sea of pain. Blood dripped freely on the wet bark. She used momentum to close the distance while it was still winding up to attack. Precision guided her fist into the creature's bleeding eye socket. There was a crunch. The shark wailed and veered away, directly into the path of the falling guardian.

A horrified yet determined Nestra pulled the rest of the power towards the guardian, just as the creature's long arm extended towards her, just as its maw opened to reveal serrated teeth. The beast punted the shark, which blinked out of existence while Nestra extended her arm, furious because the guardian looked like a giant, carnivorous sloth.

And she was damned if she would let herself get smushed by a fucking sloth. The charge connected. The potential was made.

The world exploded in front of her.

With an ear-splitting crack, a ray of dark and gray crossed the distance and the creature's right chest exploded in a spray of blood and fuming gore. Deep crack splintered the bark and Nestra was left with just enough strength to jump out of the way. The sloth's severed arm still clipped her.

Her hand slipped uselessly on slipper wood, then she went over the branch and down.

"Fu—"

And towards another branch. Her body slammed painfully against the unyielding material, sending droplets all around her. The shock stole her breath and that was nothing compared to her arm. For a moment, all she could do was wail and clutch herself.

"Ah, hsssss."

A few hissing swear words escaped her lips. She wasn't even exactly sure what they mean but they sounded very rude. It took her maybe a minute to move again, but she did. She had to.

There had been no bursts of energy.

The guardian was still alive.

Using the tree as a wall, she climbed to her feet and checked for damage. Her chest felt sore. There was a half-moon of deep teeth mark around her entire right arm, still oozing blood.

She realized she didn't have time to handle it. Nestra ran up the branches as fast as she could, confident that at least she'd dealt with the threats on the way. She was leaving this place as soon as possible. She was also certain the guardian was bleeding out. The exit portal was going to open soon, and she would jump out before that fish thing came back to give her another wedgie. Pain made every movement difficult. The Scornful Crescent was of no use here, only the tolerance for pain she'd built over a decade of merciless training. Almost there. Almost there. Something crashed below her and she peered quickly over the edge. The sloth thing was climbing with one arm. A mossy structure covered the ruin of its chest. It should be dead. It was probably dead. It was not just ready to go alone. She could see it in the rage-filled malice of its beady eyes.

It was the perfect occasion.

The shark was a stealthy thing but she only had one chance at it. With one last glance around for an anomaly, she cast the lightning spell again. An extended finger pointed at the head of the sloth and the potential stretched the fabric of the portal world thin.

Another explosion. Around her, shaken condensation formed a cloud of sweltering heat. Nestra didn't wait to see the beast fall as a potent surge of energy filled her essence. Resilience, mostly. Good. She rushed ahead while looking around and found the altar

bearing her rewards, this time crystals and enchanted branches still gushing with life. She ignored them all as she jumped through the exit and crashed on redwood.

It was much colder here, dryer. More comfortable for her. There was an envelope in front of her, along with a red vial, greenish bandages, and a Kero nut. She reached for the message first because she wanted to know what the fuck happened.

“Little Nezhra!

A void shark! It must be lost. It’s got your scent now, so be careful when you go into portals and good luck!

I am working on a little something for you because you rely on your mana tool too much. In the meanwhile, have those supplies and the nut. It has been a long day!”

Into portals, the message said. She assumed it meant it wouldn’t attack her here. Good. Good. She sat down and applied the potion and bandages to her poor arm, hissing in pain the whole time. The wounds were closing very slowly and they stung something fierce. Even the skin had failed to grow over it to help her heal, something it usually did almost immediately. It was a hard place to treat as well so it took her two minutes to finish before she could sulkily wipe off her tears and chew on her Kero nut. Peace at last. Since she wasn’t sure what to do with the empty potion bottle, she left it there.

That was going to leave a mark. Maybe the void shark’s bite had something special going on. Pissed her off though. Next time she’d bite it. On the fin. And make fucking soup with it. Seriously, did other raiders have monsters cross the boundaries of reality to bite them in the ass MID HUNT? What the fuck kind of stupidity was that. Ugh.

Climbing down the tree wasn’t really pleasant but she managed.

Nestra pulled her mask on. The pain receded at the back of her mind, replaced by a dull ache. She would heal and it would all be fine, but for now, she had to get back to her house and then out to track some wounded aug. Ugh, not looking forward to this after all. She felt exhausted.

A grumbling Nestra retraced her steps towards the entrance of the arcology. There were trams and other means of transportation across the massive park but none near the edge where she was. That left her trudging along the carefully manicured trails in a foul mood until she caught a flash of mana on the main path, further along.

That was surprising. She didn’t hear or sense a battle but there was something fundamentally hostile about flashing mana, even though that one felt warm and caring. Gleams always kept it under control in public.

Should she head away?

No, a baseline like her wouldn’t notice. Better not to attract the attention. Nestra kept a steady pace that led her to the central path, and then the main avenue leading to BaiHua’s

lobby. It was mostly deserted past midnight except near the massive security gate leading outside, towards the parking access. Two gleams argued in slow voices near the long entrance. Nestra caught flashes of vivid green eyes she identified as life mana. One of the gleams, a woman, was clearly arguing, the sleeves of her white BaiHua outfit moving wildly like the wings of a silly bird. She was also quite red in the face. She shared her dirty blonde hair and facial features with the other gleam who wore a... armored white police user uniform? Wait, she knew that guy! He healed her the night of her transformation. What was his name again?

As she stopped, the two gleams somehow sensed her, the woman turning with fury and the man like he was drowning in a storm and she was a fat buoy with self-heating functions.

“Officer Palladian!” he yelled. “You, err, you’re finally here!”

Nestra felt caught in a storm as the woman’s furious mana invaded her personal space. A normal baseline would instinctively flinch though they wouldn’t exactly know why. The rude gesture annoyed her enough that she ignored it completely. Besides, the man had invoked the ancient rites of protection: always back up someone who claims you were going to meet in case they are being stalked.

“Valerian of... House Nephrite,” she greeted. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No no, I was just about to leave!”

“Val, you— AAAH! Hopeless! And you, do you really know him?” the woman demanded.

Interestingly, she wasn’t sneering. It wasn’t a disparaging remark. It was the question of someone fully expecting Valerian to be full of shit, which, arguably, he was.

So was Nestra.

“Of course, we met during the purge in Fifteen.”

“When he got his ass handed to him by a ganger instead of saving lives?” the woman spat.

This was getting into dangerous territories. Nestra was too busy to get caught in a gleam spat. Baselines never came up on top.

“Haha, miss Palladian volunteers in Fifteen to rebuild the peace, like I do!”

“Is that so?” the woman asked.

“I work with law enforcement.”

Valerian’s relative was about to ask more but she shook her head instead.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not over, Val. You know what you have to do for your own sake. Please. And you...” she said, returning her glare towards Nestra. “Don’t encourage him. You’d be making a mistake.”

With that last threat, she stomped away in a huff. Nestra waited until she was halfway to the lobby before turning to a sheepish Valerian. For a gleam, decorum was clearly not his forte.

She admitted to being a little curious. She also knew it was a shit idea to express it, so she made to leave.

“Wait! Ah, sorry, were you leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Let me walk you to your car as an apology. You brought it this time, right?”

Nestra believed the best apology would be to leave her the fuck alone. That said, no one stopped gleams for random inspections so...

And Valerian was kind of a good guy.

“Sure. Thanks.”

“You’re most welcome.”

The pair made their way to the security door and the many scanner preventing poor demon girls from smuggling out rightfully hunted frog legs of unusual proportions.

“So, yeah, sorry about that. It’s... an old argument. My family doesn’t really approve of my choices, you see?”

I don’t care I don’t care I don’t care.

“Joining the police?” Nestra asked to be polite and because Valerian looked like a kicked puppy.

“No, uh, fighting. For the people, not a guild. Trying at least. Life mana isn’t really good for offense.”

It was completely useless, yeah.

“My family... are mostly healers, you see. And biomancers I guess. They would rather have me join them than waste my time on battle.”

“Your family works for BaiHua?”

“The Nephrite are among the founding families, yeah. Grandpa is on the board.”

He blushed.

“Guess that makes me a child of nepotism trying to escape a life of privilege, ey? A bit stereotypical.”

“Then that makes two of us, only I absconded with a house.”

“Do you come here often, by the way? First time seeing you here. I like visiting at night. I’m also saying this because my cousin might give you issues if she sees you alone, just saying. Maybe. She’s good people, I swear.”

So nervous. By then, Nestra had walked to the elevator and waited for the lift down towards the massive outer parking garage of the arcology.

She had her cover story ready.

“No I, errr, today at work was... difficult.”

“The dead augs?”

“You heard?” Nestra asked, suddenly interested.

“Of course! Well done, dispatching them without reinforcements. Wish you didn’t have to do it though.”

He winced.

“Some of my comrades in arms are not exactly the cream of the crop.”

“Understatement of the century. And yes, I always wanted to see the redwoods since they were grown. I guess tonight felt like a really good time.”

“My uncle made them! They’re great, visually. We’re studying their fire resistance.”

They boarded the elevator, alone except for a short baseline woman in a suit who did her best to look inconspicuous. Valerian didn’t even notice her.

“So yes, anyway, I’m also working around Fifteen. We’ve had to break fights and capture a few augmented gangers causing trouble but otherwise it’s been calm. Yours was the largest group. Be careful, there is no guarantee this was the last of them.”

“I’d be surprised as well. Say, do you know if any of the gang gleams escaped?”

“No, they were the priority and there weren’t many of them anyway. I think Hong Wang got them all. He was... thorough.”

Nestra thought back to the Red King and his flames. Yeah that gleam wasn’t exactly subtle.

“However,” Valerian said, leaning conspiratorially towards Nestra in full view of another baseline. “Rumor says many lieutenants made it out. They’re probably far away by now but you never know.”

They left the lift and a traumatized secretary behind. Nestra paid the parking fee with her visor while they walked. Valerian was just so excited to talk to her. It felt weird.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to add him to the list of people she ought to care about. He was a disaster in waiting.

“I’ll keep an eye out,” she said.

“You do that. Strong augs will be a danger to you seeing as you’re, you didn’t...”

He gestured awkwardly.

“Riel I’m making a mess of things. You don’t have raider combat capabilities. There, I said it.”

He winced.

“To be fair, neither do I.”

“You’re just life, right?”

“Strong life. No other affinity though this one would be all I needed. It’s just...”

He sighed.

“It sounds selfish but... I want to fight. I know I’d be more useful as a pure healer and all, just...”

“Can life mana really not be turned around? Leeching spell maybe?”

Valerian shook his head.

“I can buff my allies really well, or I would if they let me. They mostly want me to save mana to heal them if things go south. If only they’d let me prove myself! And, errr, maybe if I did find an aggressive use, it wouldn’t change things. I would just be ‘perverting’ my gift. Not to mention I’d need three times the effort and twice the mana of a fire spell for half of the result. I fear there is no winning here.”

“Yet you still do it.”

“Yeah. I... look, I want to contribute on the frontline, not in a tent at the back. I don’t want everyone to tell me how to live!”

He bristled.

“But... I guess they're right. I'm being selfish. I could save many more lives doing what I was born to do rather than what I want to do.”

Nestra and him shared a tense silence. She'd reached her car by now, and waited by the front. For some reason, it felt wrong to cut the man off.

She thought she knew why.

“Am I being an ass?” he eventually said.

“Why do you ask me even though we barely know each other?”

“Because,” he replied with conviction, “you know what it's like to grow up with expectations and not meet them.”

“I didn't have a choice.”

“Sorry, it's just...”

“Yet I see what you mean. You don't really need my answer. You know what I'm doing. I could have a cozy office job using my network or even work for my parents' guild and yet here I am shooting augs in a concrete jungle. As for doing what you were born to do, nobody decided that.”

“I would help more people if I picked the path of the healer.”

“Fuck them,” Nestra suddenly said with feeling. “You may be expected to contribute but those folks sure as fuck don't get to tell you how. What do you owe them? Or are you expected to spend every waking hours shoving life mana into paper cuts? Nobody's explored life mana beyond the basics so far. We merely use it as a supplement to technology. Maybe you were born to change that. Who the fuck knows? Not me, and not your cousin. Nobody has the right to tell me to set myself on fire to warm others. Nobody is owed my sacrifice. Same for you.”

“Huh,” Valerian said.

“What?”

“You were on fire just now, but anyway I think I see your point. And I agree. I'm holding you back. Thanks. For the candid reply. I... think I needed to hear it from someone else. Maybe I'll become a healer eventually but... you are right. I want to explore what life mana can contribute on the battlefield. Maybe I'll fail. Maybe not. I just... don't want to live with regrets.”

“I understand.”

“Ok, then be careful out there and come back for a walk sometimes? I'm actually there almost every evening. Did I say that already? Oh! And, uh, not that it's my business but... you smell of blood. A little. Do you need any help? I can heal you for free, haha.”

Nestra did her best not to freeze like a deer in the headlights.

Human Nestra was intact.

Demon Nestra though...

"I'm fine. Unharmed, actually. Maybe it's something from the battle?"

"If you are sure," Valerian replied, dripping polite disbelief.

She climbed in and set up the autopilot. Valerian waved her goodbye and despite her better judgment, she returned it. She was also asleep by the time the car left the district. She only woke up two hours later in her seat and then only because she'd put the alarm. A string of slurs followed her return to the waking world.

"So tired..."

But she had to go and track that blood.

After a snack or two.
