

To call the testing facility 'state-of-the-art' would be an understatement. Everything was chrome, high-tech, and shiny. Nestra looked around with bemusement before returning her attention to Ragnarok.

So that's where MaxSec's funding had gone? Okay...

The stern gleam guided her to a secured exam computer — the kind used for university entrance tests.

"We will start with some theory, then we will be measuring several basic metrics to assess your capabilities. Finally, there will be some sparring involved," Ragnhild Lidstrom said.

She sounded a bit bored, although maybe that was just her normal voice. The B-rank gleam and Killroy waited while Nestra blitzed through the basic theory test. There was a multiple choice quiz on the law, which she felt very confident about, then an exercise to identify and describe several species of monsters culminating in a couple of C-rank beasts. Those she proved absolutely incapable of recognizing. Hopefully, her knowledge of the fauna around Threshold would compensate for that but it would probably be ok anyway. Theory was usually less important. The last part was a long series of questions on her mental health and possible addictions. All the things that one would definitely answer no to if one didn't want to end up on a list. Once finished, the pair of examiners led her to the nearby machines to begin the physical aptitudes test.

Nestra demonstrated how she could bench press a small car, how she could punch through a thin wall, and how she could run really fast. Those were the boring tests. The next one was more interesting: they led her to an empty padded room to face some sort of robot launcher that threw high-speed rubber balls at her in various patterns. It was like an upgraded dodgeball game, and that was really fun. She used *momentum* to escape the tightest cluster, and immovable to block what she couldn't safely dodge. Eventually, the flow petered out.

Ragnarok entered the room an instant later.

"We will stop the test here, thank you."

Nestra must have looked dejected because the gleam huffed gently.

"Sadly, the robot has run out of balls, Miss Crescent."

Nestra looked down. There were hundreds of the buggers spread across the floor. Those gleams should just build in some sort of gutter like in those ancient bowling alleys to keep the robot going, charge a hundred creds for ten minutes, and they were in business.

She didn't share her commercial insight with Ragnarok.

After those came mana detection tests. The old gleam led her into another room, and this time the place was pitch black.

“Miss Crescent, emitters hidden in the wall will leak mana. I need you to point a finger at the source as soon as you perceive the mana, then identify the nature if possible. Do you understand?”

Nestra turned to the camera she spotted on the ceiling, then glanced at a wall partition silently drifting up to expose a small core.

“You can perfectly see in the dark,” Ragnarok stated.

It was not a question.

“One moment, we will provide you with an infused band I will ask you to place in front of your eyes.”

It was a disconcerting experience. Nestra could tell that she was definitely not meant to have both her eyes and skin blocked. Her instincts warned her of danger, of blindness. It took a great amount of effort not to fidget. Fortunately, her horns were exposed so she was not completely in the metaphorical dark.

“Electricity,” she said, pointing vaguely up and to her right.

“Very good. Keep going.”

The test used thick flows of mana of the more common origins, like fire or acid, or even light, sometimes two at a time. Once, one of the sources was large while another at her back was much smaller. A decoy, of sorts. It was easy at first, but she eventually failed to identify some of the more exotic sources.

“Very good. Is there a spell you would like to show us?”

Nestra considered her options. She was rather sure she would pass, but... maybe it was fine to reveal a little bit more. She nodded. They led her to the most reinforced room she had seen so far, with targets at the far end. There were also circles of unknown purpose, and a few other pieces of equipment she could not identify.

“You may begin your demonstration at your leisure.”

Nestra pointed two fingers at a far target. The positive energy dot landed square on the bullseye. Potential grew. It begged to be released.

Nestra unleashed her void mana. A gray and black merged with the dot.

The light dimmed.

BOOM.

The target was obliterated, as well as a section of the wall behind it. Pieces of debris ran all around them, and the lights flickered overhead.

Killroy brushed dust off his impeccable uniform.

“An offensive spell,” Ragnarok drily commented. “Duly noted. The test is concluded. Thank you. We will do one last segment before the sparring begins.”

Nestra was led to a large room that contained a strange mix of computers and an obstacle course. Her lost expression must have been obvious.

“This part will focus on team management and measure your ability to lead a squad in challenging circumstances. We will begin with raid logistics questions, then move to a case study, and lastly, you will have to complete this obstacle course while solving three different Ng formula equations.”

Nestra stopped. She blinked, which only seemed to confuse the other two.

“Ng formula?”

Killory replied as drily as ever.

“The Ng formula, a comprehensive model that helps determine the strength and nature of the magical intensity required to pierce the defenses of resilient foes. It is a prerequisite of leaders who must identify which of their subordinates, if any, may disable the threats coming for them and possibly recommend spell use.”

Nestra didn't have to think for very long.

A case study on leadership?

Math she had never practiced?

Absolutely the fuck not.

“Can I just give up?” she asked.

“Of course, but bear in mind that you will not be authorized to lead a squad of other masked users until you have proven your leadership preparedness to our satisfaction.”

Nestra was pleased that the users took squad tactics seriously, however, it was her firm belief that she would rather be punted out of the building with a sledgehammer than lead a group of gleams.

“Very well. We may now begin with the sparring. We will lead you to a combat area while we wait outside. Your adversaries will be sparring robots.”

Nestra was interested.

Ragnhild climbed to the examination room at a speed that her augmented colleague matched without issue. She approached the monitors with purpose while her mind went over everything she had seen so far. Powerful users like her had minds that functioned quite fast, so it was convenient not to have to waste time on pretenses.

“Is there some sort of practical joke being played here?” her companion asked.

“No.”

“She is off the charts in almost every category.”

“I am well aware, and I assure you that she doesn’t have a physical core yet. Her body armor is not enchanted either. She is exactly what she claims.”

“Really?”

“I suspect it also bothers her. She keeps readjusting it.”

“Ragnhild, you’re getting off topic there. Are you really sure she’s early C-grade? What is happening? Did she transfer from some mysterious enclave? Where does she even come from?”

“I have no idea.”

She gave him her sternest look.

“Exciting, is it not?”

“This is not a joke.”

“And I am not jesting, but I have lived for over a hundred and twenty years and I shall savor every pleasant surprise that comes my way. God knows they are rare. Now, enough of this. The true test.”

Ragnhild’s fingers blurred on the display: activating models, selecting routines, conducting diagnostics. Normally, one puppet would be enough. They were fairly deadly opponents that could even give C-class raiders a run for their money provided there were no spells involved. Machines were just more precise, and those were remotely piloted by a combat AI hosted in the building, so even Ragnhild herself used them on occasion to study a new style. Little Crescent showed promise though, so three it was.

Below them, the candidate entered the arena. This one was a large rectangular room with steel panels and a few obstacles placed haphazardly to represent boulders on a field. There was an armory near the exit. Crescent almost jumped on a two-handed sword. She turned to the window as if asking for permission.

“You may use whichever weapon you wish for this exercise. Those are all low-level mana tools.”

Ragnhild was about to elaborate more, however it became clear that Crescent wasn't interested. She just gave the sword a whirl with basic stances that flowed into each other. Ragnhild didn't recognize the style at all. It was almost disturbing to look at, the movement seemingly erratic and nonsensical. Interestingly, Crescent used the massive blade as an arming sword.

Her strength could handle it.

Three puppets emerged from trapdoors in the ground. They walked on all four at first, a basic destabilizing method that played on the uncanny valley. It didn't appear to have any effect. Ragnhild took a moment to appreciate the craftsmanship that went into creating the dummies. The limbs were thin and basic, most of the power held in the central body, which was sort of bulbous. The head barely had anything but sensors in it, though the dummies were programmed to deactivate by default if it were destroyed. They were painted off white.

They reminded Ragnhild of puppets her sister used to collect, just as morbid but infinitely more dangerous. She activated the microphone.

“The exercise will now begin. You must disable the puppets to succeed. If I see that you would be grievously wounded, I will press an emergency key that will instantly disable the puppets, however, you will have failed.”

Crescent nodded, head bobbing, but looking away. Not interested in talking.

The puppets charged in a triangle formation, aiming to box her. She shifted forward and to her left using some sort of... shadow magic? No, something else. Rare then. The left puppet pivoted on itself, the torso rotating while the legs remained static. Crescent confidently struck at the same time. Her blade caught the puppet in the wrist. The limb was instantly severed.

“Hm,” Killroy mumbled appreciatively by her side.

Crescent lunged but the damaged bot retreated, leaving both of its companions to attack. Crescent reacted with a sweeping attack that the first robot tried to stop. Tried. The violence of the shock sent it crashing against its companion. Crescent was indeed freakishly strong.

This left the damaged robot open for an instant. Its offhand strike was simply dodged despite machine-like precision, then Crescent riposted.

Ragnhild watched the huge sword tear into the puppet's chest with amazement. The strike was incredibly precise, severing several core components perfectly. Crescent teleported again to dodge a strike at her back. Good instincts, or good ears? Ragnhild leaned forward.

Had to find out more.

Crescent crossed blade with the third puppet, then punched the chest. A mana coat covered her fingers at the moment of impact. Ragnhild didn't wait for the entire hand to disappear down the puppet's chest to intervene.

She pressed the emergency key.

An unpleasant buzz filled the room. Killroy turned to her, shocked, but it was Crescent that showed immediate outrage while the three puppets collapsed on themselves.

Ragnhild used the microphone again.

"I will just end the test and save the city sixty thousand credit in repairs, thank you. I have a better test for your abilities. If you will allow it."

Crescent shrugged, blade swishing as she twirled it. Frustrated. Ragnhild needed to see more first. She felt a deep need to understand.

She made the call.

"Henry, are any Fast Response teams training right now? Already in gear?" she asked.

By her side, Killroy blinked. Ragnhild waited to see if he would protest. He nodded instead. He understood.

"Yes, Team Five. They are undergoing evaluation."

"I am changing the program. Have them come down here in full gear."

"Now?"

"Yes," she hissed. "Now."

They didn't have to wait for long. Crescent tilted her head when a trio of heavily armed soldiers walked into the room.

Team Five wore the advanced bodysuits that would hopefully become the future of mankind: the union of advanced technology and magic. Portal material formed a heavy armor, with helmet displays using predictive algorithms to assist the wearer in understanding the battlefield. Polymer layers and high-density foam paddings alternated with mana-enhanced alloy plates to provide the best possible protection at the lowest cost, or at least, in the most mass-producible way.

The Incursion had brought a new question: what to do when a single user can defeat a trained squad backed by the might of industrialisation. What to do when the Leviathan of the State no longer dominates the individual.

This was the state's answer.

Team Five deployed in a loose formation, weapons exposed, from shoulder guns to the swords and spears they wielded as users themselves. They exuded cockiness. Ragnhild held back a smile.

Oh yes, this was going to be interesting.

She climbed down the stairs, then stood behind Team Five who saluted smartly.

“You will engage candidate Crescent and neutralize her.”

One of the soldiers scoffed in his mask. Ragnhild did her best not to react. Why punish someone when reality will do it in her stead? They needed a reminder that training and equipment could only carry them so far, and to never assume they could just defeat anybody.

“You may not use offensive spells, but you can use all your other weapons and go for lethal attacks. Candidate Crescent will be held by the same standards. Begin.”

Team Five was too slow to react, caught off guard while Crescent attacked them in the back immediately. She wasn't surprised at all. Hmmm. Perhaps trained by a twisted individual.

All three soldiers were C-class with well-formed cores and a vast raiding experience, however, and the attacked spear wielder activated his armor's shield.

The two-hander broke through the shield, the outer layers of the armor and only stopped at the pauldron the soldier rotated in front of the blow. Crescent disengaged, dodging a spear strike. The soldiers moved in to box her in with confidence. Shoulder-mounted guns opened, spitting rubber-tipped bullets. Those would still manage to disable a D-class raider but Crescent teleported to the side, behind the second spear wielder. Just inside of his guard. The other two lost line-of-sight.

Ragnhild listened to their surprise, but they communicated quickly to adapt. Crescent's blade struck the spear wielder's knee in the back, drawing blood through shield and armor. She blocked a sweep meant to push her away, then with an impossibly precise blow, severed the shoulder gun's magazine link. Meanwhile, the other two had repositioned. They opened fire as they drew near but Crescent ran away behind one of the obstacles. The bullets didn't seem to be doing anything at all.

Ragnhild added resistances to Crescent's quickly expanding list of skills.

The three noticed as well. The wounded spearman took the rear of the formation while the other two advanced, switching to flashbangs. The launchers clicked in position.

From her position at the back of the room, Ragnhild realized that Crescent didn't react to the sound. Not hearing-based, then. Interesting. The flashbangs exploded, then the soldiers moved forward only for Crescent to teleport in their midst. Resistant to sensory attacks as well? Now that was useful. Ragnhild wondered how that worked.

Crescent redirected the thrust of the wounded spearman into the back of an ally, though the C-class soldier stopped it. A powerful sweep sent the two front soldiers staggering while the wounded spearman retreated, still catching a wound on each arm. She somersaulted over her victim, then kicked him forward into a would-be rescuer. This time, the two spearmen fell. The swordsman engaged her while the other two recovered. Her style was completely unpredictable and the rhythm was both frustrating and fascinating to observe, sometimes slowing, sometimes so fast, even the predictive algorithm could not follow. Ragnhild could tell the soldier couldn't match it. His style was serviceable but it was a means to an end. She was a prodigy. A counter, and the two hander slammed painfully in the man's plexus through the entire shielded armor.

One of the spearmen grabbed his hand cannon and shot, catching her in the shoulder. Real bullets in that one. Crescent seemed surprised but instead of moving, stood still. The second and third bullet smashed in her back but didn't affect her.

Ragnhild frowned. Crescent's skin, through the punctured fabric of her suit, had a strange hue. She was definitely using a body modification spell.

Crescent teleported again, hand lifted, then threw the sword at the wounded spearman's back, mana still lingering in the blade.

The sword whistled through the air. It slammed against the wounded spearman's neck. The armor there was extremely thick there so it blocked all of the damage, but the might of the blow sent the shocked soldier careening on the ground. Not a long-range specialist, then. More of a trick. Good one though. The other two tried something else: tear gas. Ragnhild sighed.

She hoped it wouldn't make her clothes stink.

The swordsman picked up Crescent's discarded weapon while she was already rushing through the cloud gas towards the weapons rack, grabbing another sword and a hammer.

Ragnhild had expressly told her she could use any weapons she wanted for the exercise.

Crescent teleported in again. It was now clear that the ability was extremely efficient. She kept hounding the trio and rather than allowing them to cover each other, their numbers played against them as they constantly struggled to reposition. She was individually stronger than them, and never let them bring their own numbers to bear. Worse, they completely failed to draw blood while she grounded them down with methodical delight. She was learning their patterns, while the algorithms completely failed to predict hers, and no wonder. Ragnarok couldn't have done it herself. It was too adaptive, and too vicious. Extremely offensive style designed for a lone striker. Sometimes, Crescent managed to dodge an attack she couldn't see but it didn't seem to be systematic. Hmmm.

Eventually, Ragnhild decided it was enough. She could wait no longer. Appearing in front of the bleeding swordsman, she blocked Crescent's sword with her hand.

Even hopelessly outclassed, the mana tried to devour them, and her, hungrily demanding to be released. It even started to sting a bit.

Crescent huffed in annoyance. It was twice now that her fun had been interrupted.

“That is enough, thank you. Team Five, you have performed adequately. Please make your way to the infirmary.”

They saluted and left. Ragnhild could feel the fury boiling in their mana, in their rigid steps. Crescent had intentionally spared one of the spearmen to focus on the others, and he was the most furious.

Ragnhild had used the term adequate for maximal humiliation. Those three would be less cocky, and more serious in their training from now on. She held back a smirk.

Now what?

She knew Crescent’s style, her potential role in a squad, her spells, most of her abilities, her mana sensitivity, and her reliance on sight and touch, though Crescent probably didn’t realize it herself. All highly unusual. There was only one thing Ragnhild didn’t know yet.

Technically, she didn’t have to find out. Except, Ragnhild was the boss, and she decided when the testing was finished.

She had to know.

“You are quite good, so in order to get a full grasp of your potential, I will add one last test.”

Crescent nodded, clearly eager to fight more.

It made her widening eyes even more delicious when metal covered Ragnhild’s skin.

This once, she allowed herself to smile.

Nestra felt a mix of fear and elation when the gleam’s aura smashed against her, that thick mana as domineering as that of Sereth. Not that they were an even match. She was just so far below them, it might as well have been irrelevant.

Ragnarok. The steel beast.

“We are going to see your limits,” the voice said from a hellish mess of corded steel.

Where a woman had stood, now there was a werewolf-like creature with massive claws and a black face devoid of eyes. over a serrated maw. Nestra’s dad went for the juggernaut approach, but Ragnarok was the wolf that swallows the sun and moon. The monstrous being looked down at her, daring her to strike. Ragnarok’s savage aura blanketed the arena until

even the plastic racks took on a steely appearance. It reminded Nesta of fighting Sereth: a powerful being offering to teach her, except, Ragnarok was a human legend.

Nesta knew she couldn't defeat her. That didn't mean she couldn't win.

So she took the bait.

Precision guided her strike into the wolf's chest, where Ragnhild ought to be. The coated blade buried itself in the wolf's chest by a single centimeter. Nesta immediately used *momentum* to whirl away while two massive claws whistled through the air where she had been. She immediately charged in to strike a leg, just to be sure.

Yeah, no damage. Even if she did, metal users just rebuilt their armor quickly, and Ragnarok was famous for having her flow. The counter came.

She blocked, using *immovable*.

Weightless. Flying through the air.

Nesta smashed against a nearby wall. Her head banged painfully against the panel. Her arms shook from the impact, but she was standing and sidestepping in the same motion, just to see the monstrous form of Ragnarok crash against the place she had been in a thunderous clash of metal. She leaned back to avoid a claw sweep.

Hand, big, reaching for her. A grab. Lodge her blade against two phalanx and push, up, turning the momentum away.

Two fingers pointed.

Ragnarok leaned to the side but she was a nicer player than Sereth, and the spell hit. Nesta let the bolt connect and struck at the same time, but Ragnarok twisted, her wolfish face rebuilding the meager damage. Nesta had three more spells in her, and she could keep her bladed coated for a while. Had to try it.

Nesta stuck close to Ragnarok as they fought, though it was more Nesta dodging and Ragnarok making an effort to protect her 'core', her true body under the layer of metal protection. The old gleam was relentless and practically unstoppable but Nesta used all her focus to stay ahead just a little longer. Counting in her head.

5 4 3

Nesta's intuition screamed but too late. Ragnarok slapped her. Nesta's teeth clacked painfully, though she rolled with the blow. Counter. Lunge with *precision*. *Momentum* away.

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Nestra aimed two fingers center mass and landed her anchor, but this time the demon wolf blocked the blast. Pieces of metal went sent flying, charred and damaged. The wolf took a pretend step back. Ragnarok being a fair player.

Nestra counted down again.

12 11 10

The dance intensified. Nestra struggled to keep the wolf at bay because she could not manage to be dangerous enough. Ragnarok nipped her suit, then used the piece of cloth to shake her before it broke. Nestra resisted the urge to use her spell again, even as a leg swept her own, sending her rolling again. She pushed herself away from a stomping feet. She was almost at her limit. The pain in her bones grew with every strike. At least, Rangarok had not punctured skin.

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Nestra repositioned behind the wolf's back and unleashed her second to last bolt. It hit metal fur and failed to penetrate. Ragnarok contemptuously turned with a sweep.

Nestra dodged under it and aimed.

Ragnarok had been led to believe Nestra could only cast every twelve seconds. She had established a false pattern, and now she was going to use it. Hand extended, she gathered everything she had left.

BOOM.

The explosion was stronger this time. The wolf pretended to stagger, hurt. It was all Nestra needed. She charged forward, *precision* guiding her blade to the sternum.

"RAH!"

A large hand grabbed her own.

Nestra braced for pain, but it didn't come. A blink, and she was facing the old woman again.

Overhead, the lights flashed once.

The battle was over.

"A good attempt. I believe I have seen enough. Congratulations on passing the test. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will return to the observation platform to validate the results."

Nestra smiled.

Just like with Sereth, she couldn't win, but she could push them out of the parameters they'd selected for the spar.

That was fun in itself. And good practice.

"I have... concerns," Killroy said.

"I would have been surprised if you did not."

"Are you sure she is human?"

"Yes," Ragnarok replied without a second of hesitation. "You might think that users that dominate others on the field of battle to such an extent could not possibly happen, but you need to remember that the logic of baseline humans no longer applies. No single baseline can stand against ten others and win, barring a miracle, but I could neutralize a hundred experienced D-class raiders without breaking a sweat, and Riel could defeat armies with the flick of a finger simply by sending them... elsewhere. No, I am certain she is human. Not only human, but a Threshold-trained user."

The man considered her for a few moments in silence. Ragnarok used the opportunity to consult her sheet, her fingers dancing on the specifically-designed tool as fast as the connection would let. Databases flashed at speed no baseline humans could process.

The truth was that even though all the 'Dark Horses' were officially protected, Threshold's security knew who the important ones were with a 97% degree of accuracy. For example, how many Threshold-based, C-class, 1.78m, male pyromancers with light brown hair could only raid on Saturdays?

As it happened, just one. Naturally, Ragnhild didn't keep a record of it. She just inferred. And now she would do the same with Crescent.

"Alright, I'll bite. How do you know?"

"Perhaps alien infiltrators would have perfect forms for bench-pressing and deadlift. I can accept that. But the way she fights... There are plenty of unique moves I have never seen before, however the way she parried my claw, by striking it and then pushing it aside with a deliberate movement, that is a Palladian parry."

He frowned.

"From the metal clan?"

"Yes. Once formed, metal is slower to flow. The technique uses the weight of our own manifested metal against us by interrupting a strike before it is delivered, then pushing the limb out to destabilize the entire body. It turns our strength against us. She also jumped and

lashed out over a low sweep in the same motion, a technique we call an Azanagi volte. A very aggressive move. Those are both local clan techniques that mark a Threshold raider.”

Killroy didn't seem convinced.

“A monster could have stolen the body and memories of a raider.”

“But then you are a suspect, my dear, and so am I,” she retorted. “There needs to be a limit to your paranoia.”

He sighed. She gave him more time to think while she perused the list of all known and rare mana types that manifest as black or nearly black. Obsidian. No. Coal. No. Tar. No. Black acid... maybe? She shortlisted it. Nightmare. No, this was not a mind effect.

“It's just... her body isn't right. It doesn't move like a human does. Not quite.”

“Very observant, however, several mana types allow for body transformations including life, jade, earth, and...”

“Metal.”

“Correct.”

Ragnarok finished her list, then narrowed her search to Threshold-based users. Erin Semper, 'goo'. Material engineer specialized in viscosity. No. Helena Palladian, void.

Void?

Ragnarok clicked on a small video, which she then accelerated sixteen times because she was feeling giddy. A young woman with abyss-colored iris coating an axe. An awkward blow. Stress. Much strength though, and the way the mana danced on the blade was familiar, though far too unfocused. This was it, however. Void. The video dated back to six months before. No, could not be her. Too blunt. Too...candid. Someone else? Pull the Palladian clan database. Father Hector, relatives in Australia. Isolated. Unlikely. Mother, relatives in the United States. Estranged. Support class. Even more unlikely. She made a note anyway. Ulysses, brother. She checked his file. Electricity and metal-based close-quarter fighter. Gender was less relevant with a shape-shifting power. Possible. She clicked on the B-class exam recording.

Not the same style at all. Very patient and deliberate. Much less flow. Too rigid. Just like Ragnarok herself.

A file called for her attention. A third relative? Archived. Excitement bubbled in her chest. Today was the more fun she'd had since the last time she raided. She had to re-enter her credentials to unseal the file. Clytemnestra Palladian. Failed user. Oh yes, Ragnhild did remember something to this effect in the news. A decade ago. Concerns about the 'gleamification' of mankind not being as inevitable as previously believed. But that had led nowhere. Ragnarok selected the only recording available, a private school entrance spar.

Elation filled her mind. The sheet groaned under her fingers until she remembered to stay in control.

It was her.

Younger, more graceful, more hesitant. Fresh and hopeful. Less wary. But those moves... The precise counter-attacks, the controlled offense, the way she never stopped moving, never giving her opponent breathing room. The little edge of viciousness. Yes. That was her.

Ragnarok smiled.

Crescent was Clytemnestra Palladian. Somehow.

And then, she closed all the tabs and wiped the history of her search. The Threshold security AI confirmed that the data had been completely erased a moment later. Of the discovery, there would never be any trace.

"Is something the matter?" Killroy asked.

"Nothing specific besides the fact that we found one of the most talented C-class raiders in history. A detail you will keep to yourself since I have a use for her. As of now, her testing results are sealed."

The AI acknowledged her command with a message.

"Good. Now, if you will excuse me, I must talk to her."

"Of course."

She could be the one.

Ragnarok walked down to the waiting room. Crescent was waiting for her, those abyssal eyes lazily inspecting the place. The old gleam pushed down a smile when she heard the masked one's stomach gurgle. Hungry girl, ey? A few taps on her sheet, and the AI confirmed that all monitoring equipment around the room were disabled.

"Before we go, however, I have an offer."

Crescent tensed. Ragnarok could tell that the girl didn't want to be bound. She was distrustful of politics, and Ragnarok felt sympathy.

But one couldn't demolish almost every record ever made on an admission test without getting a little attention.

"I will bypass exclusivity contracts to offer special access to several C-class worlds around and outside the city. There are also special events you might be invited for."

She smiled.

“In return?” Crescent hissed back after a long delay.

It was funny how she avoided talking as much as possible. Being silent and capable of killing everyone in the room had worked wonders for Ragnarok across the years.

“I want you to climb fast so one day, you can kill Shinran.”

Ragnarok might have just told Nestra she wanted to strip naked and dance the polka. There was no question of staying impassive behind the mask, this time. Kill Shinran? Kill. Shinran? Was the woman completely fucking insane? Not only was Shinran so powerful he kept the more ambitious A-class gleams at bay from the pile of money that was Threshold by his mere presence, he was also, well Shinran? Guardian Shinran? A good guy who smoothed things over, gave everyone face, and healed people for free in his spare time?

Hello?

Ragnarok smiled in a predatory manner.

“I can tell the proposal hurts your Thresholder sensitivities. Do not pay my words any heed. It won't become relevant for a very, very long time.”

Hopefully went unsaid. Nestra wasn't willing to just let it go, however.

“What elssse? Depleted uranium on Sssanta's sled?”

“No need to be cross, Crescent. Shinran may be in control right now, but he has exhibited some concerning tendencies when angered.”

Nestra didn't speak. Shinran was a first gen high gleam. Of course, he'd be ultra dangerous when pissed. She'd witnessed her dad bitch slap someone with a sedan, once, though he'd apologized afterward. Unless Shinran was pulling baby arms out of their sockets, this didn't warrant a kill order.

“In any case, I have decided I will also grant you a solo operator license. I assume you would prefer to work alone,” Ragnarok continued, eyeing Nestra's body armor with condescension.

It was annoying how perceptive she was. At least, Nestra took comfort in the fact her identity was safe, protected behind redundant layers of administrative security. But apparently Ragnarok already believed Nestra was a Thresholder, and she was right.

“Solo operator?” she asked.

“It means you are exempt from minimum squad member requirements when entering portals. Ace users tend to have them, though it also comes with a rather high fatality rate.”

Nestra was happy to have it but... wasn't it counter-productive? To have gleams die like that?

Once again, Ragnarok read her like a book. Annoying.

"We set this up because the mavericks would bring a team of pushovers and have them wait by the entrance, picking up daisies and shiny stones. That way, we are not wasting more resources trying to police unruly battle maniacs."

Ragnarok gave Nestra another meaningful glance before turning away.

"Killroy will stay behind for now, as you will primarily be working under me. When you want, of course. Let me show you the facilities, then we will get you set up at the marketplace."

It was happening.

Ragnarok personally fast-tracked Nestra through the admin thingie. She was given an ID, credentials for raid applications, a market card, the whole thing. She could now literally walk in the city as a (masked) Azshii and no one would say anything. It was absolutely incredible. What surprised her a bit was that her results were not displayed, and it almost felt like Ragnarok was getting her in through the back door. It was fine by Nestra. She didn't want to attract too much attention anyway.

She was so excited that she almost raced back after she was done. Only paranoia held her back. Once she was home, she sent a message to Gorge since he had pressed her to apply.

"Ready to make a killing reselling medicine on the black market?" he asked.

"And buying food," he added after a delay.

Who was he taking her for?