

“Mmmflgr?”

“It’s 9AM. Why are you still sleeping?” the modified voice asked in the burner.

Nestra almost asked if it was Gorge before — miracle of miracles — her brain caught up with her mouth for once.

“I was busy. What’s up?”

“What do you mean, what’s up? You asked me to call you.”

“Ah yes. Wasn’t sure if using keywords in a text was a good idea or not.”

“Our conversations are encrypted. Only Central could decode it and then we’d be fucked anyway. What do you have?”

“An artifact.”

Nestra heard a noise, something like a clatter. It took two seconds for Gorge to reply.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. D-class, obviously. A spear. Looks cursed.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“Yes for fuck’s sake I’m absolutely sure.”

“It’s just... Wow. Look, selling lizard skins to students was a thing but an artifact? This is big league stuff.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No. I know a guy. And you shouldn’t help. Can’t risk it.”

Nestra sat up on her bed and called to the demon skin. Yesterday, she’d experimented a bit with it. It turned out that the skin was a sort of symbiote who, if she understood it correctly, fed off her body heat and a little bit of blood. It was barely smarter than the average dog and spent most of its time sleeping. She nudged it and received the mental equivalent of an annoyed groan but the symbiote complied. A tough substance covered her arms, looking like a nylon sleeve. She could thicken it a bit but for now, there was simply not enough of the creature to achieve more than a rather skimpy skin suit. The distraction gave her the courage to ask the question burning her mind right now. She wasn’t scared of Gorge. She just wanted to avoid the verbal shitstorm he could unleash if he felt offended.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were kind of, you know, law-abiding...”

Nestra struggled to articulate her thought,

“You wanna know why I’m doing illegal shit?”

“Yeah. I mean fencing low grade crystals is a thing. An artifact...”

“Look, scale is not the thing here. At least not for me. If you steal an egg or a fucking car, you’re still a thief to me. It’s about who we’re stealing from. And here, we’re stealing from corpos. Did I ever tell you what I thought about corpos?”

“In lengthy, rude detail.”

“Well then I’ll have you know that within limit, I’m happy fucking them over even if it means pairing up with a highborn reject like you. And before you foam at the mouth, you’re not so bad for a silver spoon cunt.”

“Nice compliment. Much obliged.”

“I’ll take ownership of the goods then.”

The call cut and Nestra used this opportunity to measure herself, which required her some creativity because her measuring apps glitched when looking at her. In the end, she flash ordered some measuring ribbons from a fancy tailor supplier then sent the results to Gorge. Her demon form was now 1.86 meters tall, eight centimeters more than her mortal form. That meant she was still growing quickly! Nestra celebrated by stuffing her face with the remaining popcorn and mana fruits before ordering a large salad. After polishing off enough food for a family of four, she was ready to face the day.

First, some more training.

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The first step was to test her new ability. Wielding her sword, she simply called to it. It was just like flexing a muscle she never knew she had. A link formed in her mind between the warehouse’s training dummy and the tip of her sword. A single strike and the two met, her blade finding its target with uncanny precision. Even without coating, the dummy was heavily damaged. It was not a magical magnet effect so much as her mind working overtime to make sure her muscles would follow. Although dangerous, the ability was physically and mentally tiring. She would have to be careful. Next was another necessary exercise.

In the past week, Nestra had obtained more abilities and benefits than most raiders did over six months. Her rate of progress was astonishing, a probable sign it wouldn’t last. It also brought with it a series of problems. Mostly, she’d outgrown her technique.

Nestra had spent over a decade refining her swordsmanship until she was certain she was at the top of the baseline world, but now she was no longer a baseline, and so her new physique made her movements a little more awkward. There were times when she believed she could hit much harder, or faster, than her muscle memory allowed. The most defining issue was movement and positioning.

While before, she was confident in how long it would take her to reach a point, now between her speed and the traversal ability brought by momentum, her understanding of the battlefield was no longer valid. The first test was to understand exactly how momentum worked. She practiced in her warehouse, simply moving from one side to another. The first discovery should have been obvious, in retrospect. The distance traveled depended on her speed when casting, so the faster she was running and the farther she would go. An hour of practice later, she was confident she could at least land where she meant to land in a straight line.

As for combining both abilities, her head hurt before she could even start.

She decided to pause the ability training because she was getting tired. She went through her forms instead and stopped in the early afternoon. There would be another raid tonight. She couldn't afford to exhaust herself.

While waiting for her lunch, Nestra checked the news. There were a few promo pieces of fifteen in Gigun's media arm, mostly stating that Gigun would live true to its commitment to be a pillar of mankind etc etc with a shining image of the dashing Hong Wang at the forefront. Reading between the lines, they were basically saying they would build new heavy industry assembly lines they couldn't easily set up inside of their arcology. She suspected pollution, weight, or heat might be a factor. Gigun promised to 'develop the district and form its population' which probably meant a few hundred town-required 'jobs', mostly janitors and security screen watchers. Space was at a premium in Threshold so all in all, that would be a great operation for the asshole who'd come up with the plan. Nestra's jaw clenched when she finished the article. They still didn't say which specific branch would benefit most from the new territory. Knowing that would help her narrow down who was behind it all. She was about to turn off her visor when a headline caught her attention.

"Shinran is back in town..."

Nestra wasn't sure where the A-class healer disappeared off to when he wasn't healing incurable diseases. Maybe raiding. The interesting point was the timing.

The raider's vivid blue eyes seemed to stare at her from the screen with a disturbing intensity. Her benefactor had said they would be busy.

Could they be Shinran?

Or were they afraid of that powerful raider?

There was no real way for her to know, at least not yet. Even her family's influence wouldn't be enough to get her close to him right now. He was that famous. And busy. Only the greatest and the neediest could hope to fit in his busy schedule.

As the afternoon progressed, Nestra decided to take it easy with stretching and online de-escalation courses. It was then she received a message. It was from an unknown number.

"Hello, Miss Palladian. I am sorry for bothering you. I am Shinoda Yuuji, your future partner. I was hoping that we could meet before we start working together, if it pleases you. Please let me know if you are available."

He was being very polite despite being her elder. Nestra sent back a reply, making sure to use the appropriate honorifics. It was important to give a first great impression so she could later ruin it with quips and aggressive comebacks and still keep a modicum of goodwill. She called it the Nestra special. Once done, she prepared for the night with her usual twilight nap.

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This time, the portal was in an actual indoor swimming pool hidden away at the back of a bar closed for renovation. Nestra easily made her way inside by breaking an upper window, dodging a camera as she went. There were a couple of movement detectors but those didn't seem to pick up her presence. The pool was still full and clear when she arrived, the portal hovering at the back next to a pair of folding chairs. She breathed in the pleasant radiance before setting up. She would only wear the skin this time, no armor. Maybe the sale of the spear would allow her to purchase a shield, at least.

There was something inherently satisfying about her nightly routine. Explore an exotic location. Encounter new fauna. Kill it, then cook it. Oh, loot and sell some stuff, she guessed. It was simple, it was primal, and it was the sort of no nonsense rhythm she really needed in her life right now. For this reason, she fully expected something to go dokkaebi-shaped in the near future. For now, she would keep enjoying her life for the first time in almost a decade. Live rather than survive. She didn't need grand plans besides getting stronger and finding out who'd condemned her squad to death. How far she could progress would also dictate what she could eventually do anyway. Nestra was smart enough to realize her limits and her limits were that she wasn't too smart and she was socially an idiot. That really limited the extent of what she could do.

So yeah, just go with the flow for now.

With a happy sigh, she pushed her way through the portal.

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The sky was low, cloudy, and the acid green of a fresh lime. It smelled strongly of brine and water. A thick mist covered everything, limiting a visibility provided by whatever little light pierced through. Strange pillars as broad as redwood trunks surged from the rocky ground to

incredible heights. Mossy growth turned them into the grasping tendrils of some massive being, frozen in time as it reached for the heavens. Some may have found the vista oppressive but Nestra was loving it. This place was new and fresh and she was getting curious as to how the hell it all worked. The temperature was nice. Her naked feet sank into mud, a feeling that might have scared her normally, but it also felt very nice having the soft sand under her soles. The lukewarm water was just pleasant and without socks to get soaked, it just felt like bathing her feet after a day of walking. She stretched her toes, then arched her back. Falling droplets of water provided a pleasant background chime but otherwise, it was rather quiet here. She also didn't have to worry about pesky raiders disturbing her rightful enjoyment of their unfairly monopolized portal so she could just take her time.

Nestra walked around the pillars and basically explored the place. She was careful not to touch the moss or the strange fluorescent yellow flowers letting out a soft glow, just in case. Eventually, she reached the limits of the portal world when the next passage between two pillars could not be crossed no matter how many steps she took. Some exploration showed it was shaped as a tube, a normal setup for a portal world this size.

Nestra kept walking until she came across a tree with strange fruits. Portal worlds often had hidden goodies. They were just seldom worth the effort. For example, one might mine an underground portal and find ore but the required efforts meant that it was more profitable finding another one. She took the unknown fruits but didn't sample them. Couldn't risk it. Her steps led her back to the main path continuing alongside a deeper stretch of water. She glared at the pond. Ponds were never safe.

"Come on, you might as well —"

Something surged out of the waters. Nestra dodged to the side, avoiding a blue bubble. It exploded with a loud pop. Mana-compressed water. Her foe dove back into the water.

Nestra slowly blinked.

She had absolutely no idea what that thing was. It looked like a translucent, beagle-sized crustacean with diaphanous wings. A quick search confirmed that the database had nothing similar.

"I name thee: Shrimpus Floatus Wateribus."

Another creature — or perhaps it was the same — rose from the lake, flapping about with grace. Multiple black eyes glared at her while Nestra walked to the side. Suddenly, it cast a spell and Nestra was forced to sidestep it.

The creature floated around while Nestra glared. It was a stalemate. Or was it? She moved backward and dodged a third projectile. Those were pretty slow. Nestra backpedaled a little until the creature approached the edge of the pond... and then she used momentum to close the distance and slashed.

The creature dematerialized, teleporting a few paces away. It cast again which forced Nesta to collapse on herself. She watched the bubble pass overhead on a background of clouds. When she looked up, the creature was hovering over the pond just out of reach of her sword.

“Ok you are Shrimpus Floatus Annoyngis.”

The newly dubbed beast dove back into the pond. Nesta jumped to where it was gone, then she placed her blade in the water and pushed the button.

Normally, this was considered a bad move according to her training but how bad could it get?

Three of the shrimps rose from the pond, shaking from the jolt they'd received.

Ok so maybe it wasn't the best idea, however the Stalk of the Scorn Crescent whispered what to do next. She used momentum to rush to a shrimp before it could recover then sliced using coated mana. The blade decapitated the beast which fell at the edge of the water. She dodged two bubbles in quick succession as she sprinted towards the next. It teleported to her side as it cast. So Nesta used the precision ability.

She could see where it would reappear.

Her muscles screamed as she twisted on herself, catching the beast with the extreme tip of the blade. It severed enough back nerves that the beast fell, wings shivering and spell dispersing. The last creature hovered at the back of the pond with furious motions, sending bubbles as fast as it could. It dove back in and returned to shoot more which led Nesta to think that maybe they had some sort of reserve that refilled when they were immersed. In any case, she wasn't waddling through all that muck just to get at the last one.

“You know what? Fuck you.”

Nesta drew her gun and used accuracy again. It worked. The beast practically exploded mid-air.

Power infused her and she felt energy seep into her chest. A sensation like quenched thirst soon made her shiver in pleasure. The shrimps didn't reinforce any physical attributes. They were feeding her mana, and a lot of it.

Giddy, Nesta carefully used her sword to drag the two mostly intact shrimp to the edge of the pond. D-Class world seldom had intense environmental hazards but she didn't want to step on an urchin or something like that. Although, urchins were delicious as well. With the two shrimp carcasses firmly secured, she was ready to depart with the secret hope she could rename the creatures Shrimpus Floatus Deliciosa.

Maybe they were an undiscovered species. The odds were low but... maybe she could get a lot of money selling new specimens. The problem was that this would come with a lot of questions. No, it was much safer to eat them.

Nestra wiped off the drool off her face. There were definitely similar species she'd have to try. Garlic and lemon? A gumbo? Teriyaki?

"Ok, focus."

Nestra kept going, encountering another smaller pond. When a shrimp appeared, she used momentum to jump over the water, catching it off guard. Sadly, she couldn't recover that one without going into the water.

Weaker D-rank worlds were often like that, linear with a first major battle then a few skirmishes until a final conflict. Nestra took her time to explore more and found the first 'loot', red stones that burnt to the touch. Ever-fires. Those were really prized outside the walls as an endless source of heating but inside of the city, they were made redundant by multiple fusion reactors. She still pocketed one for later use.

The next pond saw another shrimp cut mid-air, but when it fell, the body was swallowed by some sort of salamander. The beast refused to resurface, even with electricity, and Nestra couldn't be arsed trying to lure it out so she let it be.

Less shrimp for poor Nestra.

"I don't deserve this. I killed the shrimp. Why am I being robbed of my justly deserved bounty by some bottom feeder that doesn't even really need it?" she asked the green heavens, but they ignored her. The world was cold and uncaring and shrimplless.

Fucking thief.

Maybe the salamander could be provoked...

"No, enough time wasted. I have to pick my battles."

Nestra walked some more, finding one last pond and one more crustacean to add to her growing collection.

It was clearly a world where range fighters would shine. It would also test their ability to shoot twice in quick succession which most raiders were trained to do anyway. Once more, Nestra wondered how she would compare with D-class raiders. She was not eager to try, however. She was still getting used to everything, including her abilities. She was having a good run. She had no reason to rush it right now.

Nestra stopped, her feet sinking in the muck.

She was just considering murder for the sake of progress. Well, not really murder. There were plenty of gleams who deserved to die but didn't because they were covered by their guilds. Immorality and impunity led to some pretty fucked up situations she'd heard of while in the force.

Maybe...

But no, at least not now. There was a step between selling illegally acquired artifacts and killing for power and she was unwilling to take it. Where would it stop? It's not because she looked like a demon she had to act like one.

Nestra shook her head. A portal world was no place for introspection. The lack of difficulty was making her complacent.

As she went on, the ground grew drier and rose at a gentle slope. The pillars grew wider and sparser. Larger growths formed tufts of dense vegetation between the rocks. The place was strangely deserted. A part of her felt like there should be life among the tall ferns but portal ecosystems were often stunted. Vines clung to the pillars, producing huge leaves that reduced the available light. A yellow bolt streaked through the cloud cover, followed by the powerful roar of thunder.

Something shifted in the distance.

Nestra frowned. There was a clearing ahead with the usual altar. This was it.

She looked up again.

Something was stalking her, she was sure of it. She walked to the center of the open ground with slow steps, making sure to keep her guard up.

It happened very fast.

Another bolt flashed over her. In that background of light was a dark shape falling towards her. She used momentum to get out of the way and an instant later, her foe dug four talons where she used to be.

Another flash. Humanoid shape, dark beady eyes. No neck. Long arms ending in twin curved talons. Short white fur. Powerful, lean muscles. It jumped and swung at her as she anticipated. She dove and struck, coated blade biting into a biceps. Despite the coating, it failed to sever the arm. The power sent her reeling but the creature's screeches gave her a moment. Fast, almost too fast for her. Very wide attacks. Lots of power but telegraphed motions. It charged again.

Nestra moved up then stepped back, avoiding the tip of claws trying to gut her by a few fingers. The next strike came as she predicted. The beast's attacks were relentless.

Using precision, she attacked the claws. Her blade slid between the talons and hit the bone of its hand, eliciting a crack but the tips still hit her side, the upper rib cage.

"Oof."

Winded. Lots of power. Shouldn't try to block head on. Deflect instead. Dance better.



The beast screamed again, revealing a wide maw covered in layers of inward-curving fangs. The sound was disturbingly close to human. She used momentum to close in which surprised it. Her blade slid against the thick fur of its chest and dug deep, much deeper than the cut on its arm. Red blood flowed and the creature did as expected. It kept swinging.

Nestra stepped into and under the attack, hitting the knee which cracked ominously. She jumped over the second attack and hit the shoulder, discharging electricity this time. The beast roared and did something she didn't expect. It grabbed her with its two arms.

Trapped. Two furry arms around her. No time to dodge. She lifted her blade above her head just as the appendices closed around her to crush her spine. She grabbed the blade with one hand, the handle with the other.

Precision guided her strike.

“Rah!”

Her sword's edge slammed into the beast's left eye, then she moved it to the side. The gray, coated surface sliced cleanly. Blood and vitreous spilled over Nestra. The creature dropped her, grabbing its wounded face. Nestra landed nimble on her feet and used one last coated attack for an upward strike.

This one was devastating and she finally understood what was going on. The simian being used mana like humans did, reinforcing its body. It was either running out of it or losing focus. In any case, the beast was wounded and covered in blood. It wailed and jumped away.

Nestra knew it would attack again because portal monsters only regrouped for long enough to resume their attack. She wasn't going to give it satisfaction. Using momentum, she jumped after it just as it reached the nearest pillar.

She felt the flesh give in under her. The sword pinned the simian creature against it like a butterfly, blade easily stabbing into flesh and the stone beneath it. More blood gushed from every wound. The creature shuddered one last time, then it collapsed, only kept upright by the blade slammed into its heart.

Nestra shivered when power rushed into her, confirming her victory. Strength. A lot of it. Maybe something more.

Good.

Nestra quickly checked her only wound to find it sealed close. Even her 'skin' looked unharmed though she felt a little tender. It was as if she'd never been hurt.

Very useful, that.

It had been a great battle, really fun. And now for the loot. Nestra went over her database and found absolutely nothing, which didn't mean much. If Gorge gave it to her for free then it

was probably kind of shit, so there was still a high chance this type of world was well known and the guild that had produced the compendium just never had access to it.

Fortunately, there were always safe bets when it came to creatures like that. The first was talons. Those could be used in special gauntlets designed to help subclass of brawlers punch people in the face harder. The second was the skin which she did her best to remove correctly and failed miserably. The third were special organs.

Nestra basically emptied the creature only to find disappointingly mundane organs. Well, they were different of course but none felt like they were soaked with mana or shining or of a vivid color. It also smelled atrocious even though she was sure she hadn't pierced an intestine. Vile thing. She still decided to cut a haunch, just in case. Primates were a little... difficult to eat considering they looked a little human but this one was too weird to hurt her sensibilities. Thus loaded with food, Nestra approached the altar. On top of two crystals, she also found a bar of some sort of metal that was dark and cold to the touch. After that, she moved back.

Threshold's abandoned swimming pool welcomed her back. There were no packages this time, just as the benefactor had warned her. It felt a little disappointing but she'd live.

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Nestra shoved the garlic soy sauce strand of shrimp into her molars and bit down. Those were not molars anymore, of course, since all her teeth were serrated. The shrimps had turned out to have a real name and it was much less cool than Shrimpus Floatus Deliciosa so fuck those scientists. She frowned when her phone vibrated. It was Gorge.

"Sold your spear, your share's 63k."

Nestra shuffled in her couch.

That was an enormous sum for her. It was also pocket change for a good raider.

"It was worth three times that amount but I had to compromise for safety."

"What did it do?" Nestra typed back.

"Some sort of berzerker effect. Can't say more than that and can't tell you who bought it. I'll buy the crystals at the usual rate and I'll auction the new goodies. You want the chit?"

Nestra thought about it. Sitting on money could be useful. Spending that money was better. The problem was that she had no idea what she should get in terms of gear. She had potions, a ranged option, and a nice sword. Armor sets would only fit her for a little while. Survival gear wouldn't become relevant for a while. What should she get?

Wait, she knew exactly what she could get.

"Send me 30k in a chit and for the rest, I want food. Specifically, mana food."

There was a delay in the answer this time.

“Food? Are you serious?”

“Enclave goodies, fishery surplus, corpo special reserves. Whatever.”

There was a longer pause and this time, Nestra enjoyed a small miracle. After almost half a shrimp (and some rice), she had achieved a state of zen contentment.

She was full.

“Holy Riel I never thought the day would come again.”

A quick check revealed she'd grown by another centimeter. It was likely she was heavier as well but her scale had some issue when she stepped on it in demon form. Not that she cared. Just had to make sure her stairs wouldn't collapse by just stepping on them.

A girl was growing so a girl had to eat.

“I can get you food but it's 'fallen off the truck' as one of my cousins used to say. That means they ain't cheap. I can get you up to four dozen fresh oysters for two hundred credits each, ten mana squid tentacles for a hundred and twenty apiece, wagyu at six hundred a slide...”

The list went on.

Nestra's smile bloomed. She had the perfect answer.

“Yes.”

“Yes to what?”

“Yes.”

“You want everything?”

“Yes. Spread over the next three days. Do you have any veggies with that?”

“Veggies are cheap and even us dregs can buy them, why do you need me?”

“Because I'm going to order a lot and I'd love a discount.”

“Fine.”

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The puddle was a pond.

In the dream space, Nestra watched the shimmering surface with exultation. Mana was the power to make reality... flexible. It came with the gates. It infused everything. It changed wildlife and humans alike. It condemned those who could wield it to the crucible and those who could not to a reality of walls and the hanging doom of the hapless prey. Electric mana was better against single targets at lower levels, as well as self-buff. There was plenty for her to learn and now she had the tools to use it. She just needed some practice.

As expected, the strength sphere had increased in size again, and was for now the largest one around. The simian being had also yielded a bit of physical resistance, not much but enough to make a difference. She was getting stronger. And hungrier. Things were looking up. Satisfied, she returned to sleep.