

Nestra leaned back in her seat. The Sunflour was half full early in the afternoon, a testament to Seth's increasingly fancy baking. Nestra had a bite of coconut profiteroles and allowed the cool ice cream to contrast with the hot chocolate sauce through the breached puff pastry. That was not bad at all. And now she could eat pastries without fear of gaining weight since her body was exactly the same as it had been three weeks ago, when she'd awoken. Praise be.

It was weird because her weight should fluctuate according to exercise and diet, even over three weeks. But it didn't. Her human shell maintained identical and arguably excellent performance but it still took wounds and they still required serious healing. Everything else was normal too. It just... wasn't changing anymore. Meanwhile, it was too early to tell if her demon self could improve through training and weight lifting or just by killing stuff.

Nestra was procrastinating, filling her head with distractions to avoid facing reality. Her hand reached for her calf, eager to scratch at the itchy stabilizing bandage. That was a shit idea so she refrained. The truth was, she was scared. Scared of the news.

Her hands gripped the datasheet. It was time. The news flash blinked, ready for view, the letters forming 'raid on Gidung' flashing like an obnoxious bait. She pressed play.

An aerial shot of the entrance of the Gidung arcology filled the screen. Drone shot, probably. A convoy of black government hover cars rushed towards the entrance. No one blocked their access to the plaza expanding before the doors, but as soon as the agents came out with the white page of a warrant flapping in the wind like a battle standard, the gates of the fortress opened. A short man with a rolled up white shirt and long white hair came out. A large number of gleams followed him in matching business suits, their ties showing the pillar of Gidung in golden filigree. The camera zoomed on the old man, revealing powerful muscles and a light band around his iris. Sun, Gidung's founder and a light user. One of Threshold's most powerful gleams and on the cusp of A-rank.

But not quite there yet.

One of the government cars landed closeby, and from there walked a man in a monk robe. The late afternoon sun shone on a bald scalp. It was an extremely unassuming getup, and yet the oddity of the outfit only made him stand out that much more. This was Shinran.

The A-rank gleam walked to Gidung's founder amicably enough. Nestra understood. One didn't need to feel aggressive when one wasn't threatened, and there wasn't shit Sun could do to stop Shinran. A short conversation followed, then a tech team was allowed in. The video jumped to seven minutes later. The tech team returned with a struggling man in a suit pushed forward by members of Gidung's own private army. Nestra recognized him when the camera zoomed on an expression of utter shock. Watkins. Mayor Kim had moved fast.

The mix of terror and disbelief on the corpo's face was a thing to behold, and that said a lot. Despite leading a massive conspiracy with multiple points of failure and causing the death of thousands of people, he looked like he'd never considered there could be a price for that mistake, an effect to that cause. He'd believed himself untouchable, and now, he couldn't believe he wasn't. Probably couldn't believe his corp would throw him to the wolves either.

The rest of the video was boring. The city goons didn't get to enter the arcology so Gidung saved face. Gidung was forced to surrender Watkins and some evidence, so the city saved face as well. There would probably be a fine and a pound of flesh, and the corpos would feel the reminder not to go too far but the monoliths of the great institution that was Threshold would be left standing. She noticed what was painfully absent from the newsflash and the many speculations on the lips of excited anchormen and women: no one knew about the mana river. Nestra wasn't sure what the city intended to do with it beyond kicking Gidung out on their asses. At least, there was that.

The man who'd tried to kill her was on his way to the Red House. The slap on the cheek of the law had been answered in kind. Justice would kind of prevail, sorta, in a way. This was probably the best she could have hoped for, and she'd managed it in a week.

Nestra knew she should feel proud or at least, vindicated. Or maybe hollow in the typical way that came with the release of a long-held tension. She didn't. She merely felt anxious for tonight. That hunt, the one for Watkins, had not been hers. She'd been at the right place and the right time and merely guided the damning evidence Caine had gathered towards Gidung like one guided a spear in someone else's chest. Although the conclusion matched her hopes and values, demon Nestra couldn't relate. She was merely a tool in someone else's fight. And that was... fine. Her own hunt had concerned Cleaver.

Nestra shrugged and took another bite of profiteroles before the ice cream could melt. Enough of that. She should head back to get ready. Maybe try to catch a bit of shut eye since her family celebration would happen during her usual sleepy time. As she left, she was hailed by Seth who'd just finished buttering up an old couple.

"Hey, hey! Nestra! Been a while."

"I was busy with work. How are you?"

"Good! Great! People here love my pastries. If I knew it could be so fun and rewarding I would have started a long time ago. Oh, and uh, did Siobhan say anything about me?"

Nestra frowned. Stib had sent her a couple of messages but besides that, nothing.

"Nope. Any reason why she should? What have you done?"

"Haha no pleaaaaase don't be the bad cop. I have done nothing bad. Just checking."

"Sorry. Really busy week."

Seth nodded as if he understood.

"No pressure. Hey, I'm glad you could come. Take care!"

"Thanks, Seth."

The baker was right. She felt like she'd been under a tremendous amount of pressure, but she was also on sick leave until at least Monday so... finally some time to relax. The benefactor had even canceled tonight's portal! Well, more like postponed. Things would be alright.

If she repeated that often enough she might even believe it.

Gravel crunched under the wheels of her car. It was a nostalgic sound that brought back a lot of memories of going home in her father's car, those last few seconds crossing the garden before she could move inside. Some of her best and worst memories were associated with that sound. Being held by her father. Returning home after failing to awaken a core.

If she'd still be family, she would have turned right here and driven through an alley of tall oaks to the main house's underground garage... but that time was long gone. She didn't even have the keys anymore. Instead, she turned left and parked on an empty space by the garden wall between a nondescript sedan and an honest-to-Riel pink Lamborghini. There were quite a few hover cars as well.

Nestra stepped out and checked herself one last time. Makeup? Still there, even the lipstick had survived her attempts to worry her lips. Dress? The same she'd worn when meeting with Aunt Claire: Gleam-made and tasteful without being too flashy. Gift for Ulysses: there, carefully wrapped. A cashmere scarf from a good baseline designer in the gray colors of the family. She simply couldn't afford a gleam-level gift. A last look at the glass confirmed she was her normal, slightly scarred, obviously bandaged, athletic and cold hostile self. And tired, obviously, since it was currently 7PM and her unofficial sleepy time. She stepped out and joined the short line waiting for admission.

Nestra didn't recognize any of the two guards providing security at the entrance tonight. They were low gleams, handsome and unctuous with muscular builds so basically high-end bouncers. Maybe hired for the occasion? They only gave most guests a cursory glance before politely letting them in. Not surprising given the amount of mana floating around. This was a raider's gathering, after all.

It was her turn very soon.

Nestra could tell immediately there was going to be a problem. The guard gleam's expression turned from pleasant to surprised when he spotted her drab face, then annoyed when he noticed her gleam dress.

"Staff entrance is that way, if that is what you're looking for. Otherwise, this is a private event."

"I'm a guest. Clytemnestra Palladian."

The gleam turned to his colleague with an expression Nestra could only translate as 'can you believe this shit?'

"The Palladian is a user family, miss," he said with a condescending tone. "You know what that means, don't you?"

Nestra knew at that moment she wouldn't get in without help but... she should still try.

"Perhaps you should check the guest list. Surely you have pictures of the attendees?"

"Listen, dreg. You can leave now or I can escort you out. And you won't like that."

Nestra took a step back, crossed her arms and waited. The gleam gave his partner yet another long-suffering glance.

"Guess you prefer the hard way."

"I'm just surprised you can't feel it."

The gleam took a step forward, provoked, but he stopped when a powerful mana signature washed over the three of them like the first gusts announcing the coming of a hurricane. Aunt Claire landed next to them an instant later with a grace and composure that belied the palpable rage twisting her mouth into a sneer. She wore an elegant cocktail dress that left her scarred shoulders bare. Aunt Claire enjoyed making statements. Right now, that statement was that she was not to be fucked as a B-class raider. Her presence absolutely smothered the guard to the point he was maintained in place not because of courage but because fear had stolen his legs. Nestra felt like standing in front of the oven of her aunt's wrath.

"I see you haven't even taken the time to check the guest list."

"I... I..."

"Get the fuck out of here before I lose my calm for good."

The guard stumbled away, Aunt Claire turning to Nestra an instant later. Her anger melted to reveal the guilt beneath.

"Absolutely sorry about that, dearie. Damn. And I made a scene. Look, Helena is, hmmm, not doing so well right now. Why don't you head in and say hi? Errr, do your best. And I'll come help you if there is anything wrong again. Just don't mind the others from the Century guild."

What Nestra said was: "Alright."

What she wanted to say was: I fucking told you this was going to be a disaster. I'm not even through the damn door and everything has already gone to shit and you stand here with your baffled face and superpowers and lack of social acumen wondering where the fuck it all went

wrong when the reason why it's already gone off the rail like a radioactive disposal unit on fire is that it was essentially a shit idea, by nature a shit idea, irrevocably a shit idea, I don't want to be here, I don't want to see them like this, and I should never have agreed to it.

Nestra took a deep breath. She was here. She had to see this through or regret it for the rest of her life so she swallowed her anxiety in order to move on. The familiar house had not changed much. Someone had repainted the wood shutters and the small trees by the entrance had grown slightly taller. The hydrangea died at some point and had been replaced by a flower she wasn't familiar with. The hot evening air carried the sounds of laughter and the clinks of glasses. She walked on the familiar trail by a group of Asian people speaking in Mandarin. The Century Guild. They looked at her curiously until one of dad's companions came to greet her.

"Damn girl, are you ok? You look rough!"

Vassily was one of her dad's old teammates. He had always been and still was an absolute peach, a support raider despite his imposing size. Green irises reminded her of Valerian though he was a nature mana specialist. She mechanically told him she was just a little tired and another user came, this time a Japanese woman. Sanae, a pyromancer. Vadanak was next, a water-aligned fencer with a patient and calm personality. A few other old guards greeted her as she made her way in, doing small talk and Nestra appreciated it, and them, she really did. She just didn't enjoy the pity and concern she could see in their eyes.

"Oh darling, you are just perfect!" a strident voice said.

A gleam with a wide brimmed hat strutted to her before shoving a card in her hand. It read Ms. Teneru.

"I came here to congratulate your brother but oh am I glad I found you. Clytemnestra, was it? Such intensity, like a sharp broken doll! Why, give me a call if you want to model for me. I promise to make it worth your while. Ta-ta darling."

The weirdo left the scene and all the attention on Nestra's shoulders. That was the perfect representation of her situation, really. Close friends fussing over her nature, weirdos attracted by the uniqueness, and her left in the middle embarrassed and just as coreless as before. She wanted so much to have a witty thing to say to defuse the awkwardness but her mind drew a blank. She just wasn't good with crowds.

A part of her told her it was her fault. Her fault for leaving, for being difficult. She could still be part of the gleam world if she wouldn't be such a prideful bitch. Nestra shrugged the thought off. The gentle soul who could have worked for her family anyway, making the best out of a difficult situation and dispelling tension with a cheerful smile was a nice girl. She just wasn't Nestra.

Especially not demon Nestra.

While the old guard greeted her like friends, a lot of the junior members of the Palladian clan didn't know who she was and spared a curious glance at her only to be told who she was

and deciding this level of drama wasn't worth their time. In a way, their whispers and hidden glances felt more comfortable because she was so used to it by now. The main entrance was the heart of the party, filled with experienced C-ranks swapping raiding stories. Those people, she didn't know, and they were much more disdainful than the others. Her brother immediately spotted her. He detached himself from a group of friends to welcome her with a lopsided grin.

Ulysses looked good younger than his thirty years. In fact, he looked younger than her which was a fact of life she'd have to get used to. Now one of the youngest B-ranks in the world, his age and appearance would no longer match that of a baseline. It was still weird seeing him here clad in mana, his power radiating softly around him. He shared the same gray irises as their father but his also crackled with electricity, his second active affinity. Warm brown hair combed to the side and a handsome face gave him the appearance of a standard action hero. He also had the body to match, wrapped as it was under an elegant charcoal suit. He was also noticeably taller than her now. Yet another change.

He looked good. Among a court of equals, of promising raiders, he still walked like a princeling. This was the upcoming top of the world, the new generation of elite raiders. Some of earth's very best. They knew it, and they held themselves like it. Ulysses belonged there, and in a way she was happy for him. He looked like he was having a great time here. Generally, the mood was relaxed and friendly despite a few clear rivalries. A comfortable curtain of layered mana covered the room to form a pleasant background while Nestra waited at the edge of the group, clearly a stranger. Progressively, more eyes landed on her until Ulysses perceived the change and when he did, he whispered something in the ear of a young lady in a silver dress before making his way to her.

"Hello, sis. Walk with me?"

It wasn't a request but Nestra was fine with it. She didn't want to be a show anymore than she was. She followed his broad back to a side corridor, the one that led to the library. Possibly the most deserted part of the house.

"What a curious occasion you've picked to return," he said, his smile still sticking to his mouth in a way that she found upsetting. It was both a mask and a weapon.

"Aunt Claire suggested it," she replied.

"Ah," he said as if it explained everything.

"Got you a present. Congratulations on reaching B-rank."

He grabbed the present from her hand with three fingers.

"Thank you. I'm sure it's lovely. I assume you are going to talk to the others as well?"

"Yes."

“Please do, Helena has been having a bad time. Come to think of it, mother too. They do tend to be overly emotional, unsurprisingly. I am sure they would appreciate your presence.”

“Okay?”

The smile was still there.

“You know, I think I’ve never thanked you for fizzling on us. I digested this over the years but... this is such a special occasion. I kind of want to take it off my chest. I’m sure you don’t mind.”

“...”

“Right. I know you were dad’s special girl and you did try very hard while I was... inadequate. A bit of a wanker. But after you proved to be special in an unexpected manner, father centered his effort on me and I felt... flattered. Like suddenly I was important and valued. It woke something in me, a confidence I didn’t know I could have. In a way, you saved me, sis. So thanks, your loss, my win. I don’t want you to suffer, of course. I actually think you should come more often. Soothe the scars you left by leaving and all that. Not that I’m blaming you, I’m sure it was very unpleasant. Anyway, it’s my day and my friends are waiting. I think mom is in the library for now. Between the two of us, she’s been treating it like her boudoir complete with the occasional bout of depression, kind of embarrassing. Go cheer her up for me, will you? Cheers.”

And he left.

“Wow,” Nestra whispered.

At least this had been done in private.

Nestra shook her head to chase off the emotions. This was a waste of her time. She was here for Helena, and possibly her mom. She should see her mom. Nestra knocked on the door and entered.

Her mother was sitting in a corner, near the window in a small recess hidden from the entrance by a thick bookshelf filled with old novels from before the Incursion. Nestra knew she was here in the way her familiar mana leaked, in the way her mother’s breath hitched in her chest. Slowly, Deborah Wilson-Palladian made her way across the dim room.

Nestra’s mom wore a dark blue dress with diamonds which would have made her stand out almost anywhere, especially since it complimented her ice blue irises. They too crackled with energy, but in the cozy library, she felt more like a blonde ice queen escaping from a fairy tale book than the resident. Mom had never looked soft but now she looked distant as well, the cold air between them acting like an impenetrable wall. She smiled gently when she saw her but it was brittle, and it never reached her haunted eyes.

“Nessy. Claire said you would come. I didn’t believe her...”

“Yeah. Not really sure it was a good idea.”

“It’s been a very long time. You should have come sooner. We, well, I shouldn’t talk for the others, but I missed you. Claire told me you were really doing a lot.”

“Yeah. And she told me you were going back to raiding.”

“I am. The call of the raid... Your father and I, we were never the power-hungry raiders at the front of the group. He’s too much of a perfectionist and I am too... controlled, but the need to grow stronger... It doesn’t matter. We are not here to talk about me. You... could return, you know?”

“No, actually, I don’t know. My presence doesn’t seem very missed right now.”

“Nestra. You shut us off. You left and cut contact.”

“I was FUCKING SEVENTEEN!”

Nestra gripped the back of a chair. What the— Why did it feel so raw? Maybe... maybe Ulysses had gotten to her more deeply than she thought.

And then anger tore through her. It overwhelmed her usually mature countenance like a tide and flooded her mind until everything turned red and very vivid. The pain in her mother’s eyes. The garden lamp shining through the half-shuttered window. Messy books. A pulpit. All the images assailed while she looked for — she didn’t know what she was looking for. A threat? A way to deal? The words escaped her through clenched teeth, even if she didn’t really want them to. But the anger had gripped her and there was not enough calm left in her to hold it back.

“I was a teen and hurting a lot. I was and still am a freak accident. What I said was that I needed to find my own path. What I needed was someone to hold me and help me find a purpose, any purpose, that didn’t make me feel like I was measured against impossible standards because I had no core. I know you guys are big on personal responsibility but you’re my fucking parents, no? Or do you think it stops if I reach my majority? I guess that’s what you believed, or maybe you were relieved to see the back of me.”

Her mother kept her gaze on the table by her side.

“Even then I would have loved if you had, you know, come and seen me. But you didn’t. Since finding where I live or my number was such a daunting fucking task, I don’t want to break the mystery. Think I’ll check on Helena now. Good luck on raiding.”

“Nessy.”

Nestra stepped away but her mother’s voice held her back.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You were both mature adults when we were born. You didn’t have us at 15.”

“Was I a bad mother?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

She slammed the door behind her. Right. Right. Find Helena and then sod right off. She knew where her sis’s room was so she climbed the stairs looking straight ahead and not paying attention to anything.

Helena’s door had a skull on it. And several knife marks. She knocked.

“What?” a voice yelled.

Damn.

It was Helena’s voice. A little lower-pitched and a little raspy but... it was her.

Nestra came in. The room was a mess with clothes everywhere, posters clustering the walls, and supplies strewn about like they’d just been thrown. It smelled of feet and sweat. It was also very dark here. Helena sat on her bed, back arched forward. Matted dark brown hair hung over her face so Nestra couldn’t really see much but the girl’s face appeared like a white sheet when she looked up, and Nestra found herself looking into twin abyssal pits.

The only difference between Helena’s eyes and her true own was that demon Nestra had no sclera. That was it. Otherwise, they were the same. The realization shocked Nestra. The others were their own, but Helena? She was like Nestra. Like true Nestra. Well, maybe more of a teen. Her face was too angular, not full yet, and she had acne. There was also something feral and raw there that Demon Nestra didn’t have, even at the worse of times. She recognized kin in more ways than one, and yet... it didn’t feel like a mask. Helena was still a human.

It shouldn’t be possible.

“Well, look who finally deigned to show up,” the teen spat.

The final barb woke Nestra up from her surprise.

“Aaaaaand I’m out of here.”

“No, no wait. Wait. Sorry. FUCK! Aaaaaah ok ok I take it back. Please come in.”

“Sure,” Nestra said.

The light of the corridor faded. Human Nestra couldn’t see in nearly pitch black but she could certainly smell and now that she was in an enclosed space, it was fucking terrible. Not rotten but more hormonal teen who needs to do laundry. It took five seconds of looking around in darkness before Helena switched her bedside light on her bedside table.

“Sorry, forgot you can’t see in the dark. Didn’t mean to…”

She gestured.

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Shit Nussy, it’s been, what, seven years?”

“Yeah.”

“And you return for Ulysses’ big day?”

“I’m here for you. Aunt Claire said — “

“What a nosy bitch. She really can’t let go, huh? Has to rescue all of us lost kittens or it’s the end of her world. Tch.”

“She’s trying, I guess.”

“She should try not to be a public disaster, that would help us as well. Not that either of us have a right to tell her, haha. So. Cop, huh? Actually, I don’t care. You’re here for me. Nice. Now, what the hell can you do?”

“I, uh, I thought I would listen. For a start.”

“Listen. Now. After seven FUCKING YEARS you return to lend me your ear. Fan Fucking Tastic. I’m not doing super well. I also have a therapist. Would you like me to repeat what I said to the therapist? Will that make you feel useful?”

“Helena, I already got shit from Ulysses.”

“Yeah it’s always been about your pain, right? Yours and only yours.”

“I’m sorry that leaving hurt you.”

“Damn right it hurt me. You were… you’re my sis and you left me just like that. Poof. Gone. I really really really kept wondering what I had fucked up as a sister to chase you away.”

“Not about you, pain blinded me.”

“It blinded you. To me?”

“Not saying I was right. I hurt you. Just saying I was your age and a little lost. That made me act stupid. I’m sorry I hurt you. I never meant to hurt you. Please accept that I never meant that. I just, I was choking, here, reminded of my failure. I just couldn’t accept that I would be left behind.”

“Yeah I, ah shit. I don’t know. I’m being a bitch again but just, I just can’t accept you left me, you know? Just, I was missing you and Mom was missing you and Dad stopped talking about family unity and everything and I was wondering what I did wrong, like, all the time.”

Nestra waited. Helena wasn’t done. She stood up and moved excitedly around the room. Nestra realized the teen was a little too thin as well, though it might just be a growth spurt. She lacked the natural grace of other gleams, instead being frantic and almost predatory in the way she moved. It was slightly disturbing and it was no wonder other awakened gleams would pick on it, and possibly her.

“I know my therapist said it wasn’t about me. But that’s not what pisses me off so much. You were always there for me, when I was angry and I didn’t get it and you got me and I knew I could count on you. and then you just... left! And there is all this... anger. I just can’t face it. It just takes over and I am SO FUCKING MAD. Yeah so I’m telling you because the therapist said it helped talking about emotions yeah? You don’t have to comment or anything.”

“Claire said you fought at school.”

“Yeah, got a secondary affinity, force, like dad. It triggers when I lose control and I can’t get the hang of it otherwise. Hurts the other assholes. They FUCKING deserve it,” she said, and her fists contracted painfully.

Nestra could see the muscle tensing under her too pale skin. A single tear rolled down Helena’s cheeks and for a moment, Nestra could see the same child she’d played with under the growing pains and the acne. The grown up Helena looked so lost. Guilt filled Nestra’s chest.

“I, shit. I didn’t know it was that bad,” she admitted.

“I just don’t understand...”

Nestra made the decision here and there. A secret shared with more people was a major risk, and there was no guarantee the benefactor wouldn’t... plug any leak. They’d made clear they valued the secrecy of her existence. It didn’t matter. This was her sister and she was hurting.

Nestra sat by Helena’s side and leaned forward.

“Look. When you’re angry... does it feel like a constant thing eating at you until it explodes then you’re being drowned in a wave of emotions and it’s still you but you can’t help yourself because the wave is just so damn strong?”

“Yes! YES! Yeah, I knew you’d get it. I mean, I kinda explained but with different words. Is fine. That’s it, you got it.”

“Okay. What about raiding? Done any?”

“Not until we’re 18 but the school purchases dokkaebi sometimes. Fucking useless, I can just kill them in one spell and then I’m just too tired.”

“Should use weapons.”

“Yeah I don’t know, I have trouble coating. It just... eats the practice sword.”

Must be using shit materials.

“I’m using an ax. Uncoated. Dad and mom disapprove but fuck them. I love axes,” Helena said, somewhat defensively though she tried to be aloof about it.

“Nothing wrong with axes. They’re also great for massive damage on armored opponents.”

“Yeah!”

“When you kill a dokkaebi, how does it feel?”

“I’m not a psycho!” Helena said, suddenly more guarded.

“No not what I’m asking. I just want to check something.”

Those big dark eyes bore into hers.

“Promise,” Nestra insisted.

“Ok, well, like shit actually. They’re just not that challenging. They never let us at something good enough to really push us. I mean, I’m strong as well. But there are rules. The others, they think I do too much. And they say I’m unstable.”

“You can only have a proper hunt if the enemy has a chance.”

“EXACTLY!”

“Look, what I do is I set myself limits. It’s ok to do it in a controlled environment.”

“What?”

“Give yourself constraints. Only use the ax, no magic. Only strike if you can kill in one blow. That sort of thing.”

This time, Nestra knew Helena wouldn’t just let it go.

“Alright sis, spill the beans. Underground fights?”

“No.”

“Are you murdering random hobos?”

“Fuck no how is that a challenge?”

Helena snorted, dark humor. Heh.

“Look, I’m guilty of doing the same thing I blamed mom for. I left you behind and found excuses for myself, here that I was in pain but... yeah. I abandoned you. I don’t need a long lecture or anything to realize that. It doesn’t matter that I’m not your mom or whatever. You were counting on me as my sis and I left you behind without much of an explanation. I don’t have a real justification but I have an excuse. I was hurting, really hurting, but I’m better now. And I don’t want to abandon you again. I want to help you. I think I can. I can find a way to do it. Can we meet in a couple of days? I gotta check something and I wanna show you something. But not here, too risky.”

“Can you tell me what it is?”

“Really not here. Trust me. Look, give me your number, I’ll contact you. I might be able to help or at least explain, ok? Just hold on until then.”

“So... does that mean you’re coming back?” Helena said with hope filling her voice though she was trying very hard to hide it.

“Welllll not coming back home but I am definitely not leaving you again. Even if what I plan doesn’t work, I’ll be there. Somehow.”

“Okay! Okaayyyyyy it’s going to be great! Ok, secret secret I won’t tell anyone. Shit, this is great. I mean, it’s going to be great!”

“Alright I need to go before Ulysses throws me out on my ass. Keep your visor charged, yeah?”

“I don’t do that anymore. I don’t forget.”

Nestra gave her sister a long hard look.

“Almost never. I won’t this time!”

“Alright. Well, at least that went reasonably well. Sorry, gotta go now. Having so many gleams around is giving me conniptions.”

“Lies. You crave the mana.”

“But not the entitlement. Later alligator.”

Nestra left a groaning Helena and walked head first into the broad chest of Hector Palladian, patriarch of the clan and daddy dearest.

She took a step back and looked up at his imposing face. Dad had always been tall, even before the Incursion. Now he had filled in as well thanks to his gleam physiology to grow into a titan. It used to comfort Nestra. Now, not so much.

“Hello Nestra. It is... good to see you back.”

It felt more like an attempt to be pleasant than a genuine emotion. Dad was always like that. Exactingly precise and demanding, then randomly remembering to be nice and caring. It didn't even faze her anymore. It was his way of showing care.

“Are you staying?”

“No actually I was about to leave.”

“Ah. I see. I will say so since you returned, but know that our door is always open for you. We kept your old room empty, and I can have the maid ready it for you in an afternoon. You are not repudiated or exiled in any way, remember? In any case, did you talk to Ulysses yet? Your mother? I know she was missing you terribly.”

“Yes.”

“Then let me walk you back.”

Nestra glared. He was in a hurry to see her gone, huh?

“It's not that I want you away, Nestra. You were never barred from our home. It was your decision to leave to find your own path.”

But they'd let her go and turned their back at a moment she could have used some love, Nestra wanted to say, but she knew it wouldn't register. Her parents were technically right. It had been her decision. They hadn't exiled her. A part of her wanted to yell that she was in a crisis and just wanted to hear she was loved and that there would always be a place for her, but Dad would never understand. He was too big on taking responsibility for one's action to consider, sometimes people needed help. Including his daughter.

“I wish you'd returned at another time. Claire and her handfisted attempts at social maneuvering... if only she would grow up. Bypassing my authority with the guards as well, in full view of the Century guild. I do not blame you, of course. You are here for Helena, but between your return and her outburst at the gates, Ulysses must be rather upset. This was supposed to be his big day and taking the attention away from him in any way hurts his image, you understand.”

“Right. He made it quite clear too. Poor Ulysses.”

“It's his day, Nestra. He worked very hard for this moment. Skill does not suffice to reach that level. Hard work and a little bit of luck were required as well. Several prominent teams have showed up, perhaps thinking to recruit him for the raiding season.”

“Sure, I just didn’t imagine that showing up would be such a disaster for him. My bad I guess,” Nestra replied, this time making the sarcasm heavy.

Her father gave her a measuring look. Nestra shrugged.

“You have to understand him. You have made finding a long-term partner delicate for him. I believe he was recently refused because her family was concerned that their children would be born without a core.”

Nestra scoffed.

“Oh shit, should I apologize for existing again? Damn, now I’m potentially contagious as well? You really should have culled me earlier. Sorry for polluting your gene pool I guess.”

“It’s not like that, Nestra. Please don’t make it difficult. It’s not our fault either.”

“I think you can stop talking now.”

Father sighed but he didn’t complain. He merely walked by her side then stood at the corner of the parking spot when she stepped into her car, then when she drove away. He was still there when she turned the corner into the posh neighborhood’s street.

Once she was out of sight, Nestra slammed her head against the driving wheel.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.”

Nestra’s visor beeped as she recovered and let the car AI take over driving. It was an unusual sound. A sound she still recognized nonetheless. She had to double check to make sure it was what she thought it was, because her brain couldn’t accept she would be getting splattered by life twice in such a short interval, but here was the message and it was exactly what she expected.

“KAIJU ALERT. INCOMING ATTACK, ETA 3 HOURS. PLEASE CALMLY REPORT TO YOUR ASSIGNED STATION.”

Outside and in the city, sirens rose to call the citizens to their shelters.