

Fear slapped Nesta like a cold napkin. What the absolute fuck was wrong with Ilar? Why did he have to kick the hornet's nest when Nesta was the equivalent of a jam-slathered toddler? For a moment, she fully expected the assembled Elders to pile on, or for Ilar to pull a carefully hidden Shinran out of his hat because why else? Gleams were arrogant. Enclave gleams were even more arrogant. Now Ilar had gone and pissed a whole bunch off. He and what army?

Despite Nesta's expectations, violence didn't interrupt though the tension didn't let on. The Elders quickly returned to a sullen, tense silence thanks to their fast minds. Something complicated passed between Ilar and the Patriarch. Their dear host had this wounded look that spoke of betrayal, as if saying 'I opened my doors to you. How could you do this?'. Ilar didn't relent. He vaguely shook the datasheet in a way that replied 'Promoted state-sponsored grand theft, got caught, and now you're being a bitch'.

Nesta turned to watch the augs. Weiwei looked just as baffled as Nesta, but Derek seemed confident. There was something she was missing. Muttering bloomed among the Elders. To Nesta's surprise, the aggressivity was aimed at each other. It appeared not everyone had been aware of the patriarch's activities. Now, those pristine fingers that had been left out of the pie eagerly pointed at the guilty parties. Her visor couldn't follow the machine-gun fast Vietnamese, but she was willing to bet there were a lot of accusations being thrown around right now. It looked like the situation was going to devolve into an all out brawl, until the patriarch's mana spread like a mantle over the assembly.

For a moment, Nesta forgot how to breathe. The man's soft brown iris cracked, red light seeping into the world. It was like standing in front of a volcano. Fortunately, it subsided, and Nesta gasped for dear life.

"Fuck..." Derek whispered by her side.

Fuck indeed. The room was quiet now. With slow determination, Patriarch Nguyen addressed Ilar, in English.

"I assume you want to revisit the agreement."

"The agreement itself is fine. We separately want reparations for the offense, and all stolen goods returned."

"We have entered other agreements for some of those goods."

"And we would be happy to contact your clients," Ilar concluded.

The patriarch took a deep breath. For the first time, Nesta found that he seemed apprehensive.

"What do you want?"

Ilar removed something from his pocket. It looked like a mana crystal charged with strange energy, soft and warm, like sunlight in spring. The patriarch's eyes widened.

These kinds of aspected crystals could be worth up to twenty times their pure equivalents. Nestra eyed the thing with greed. If she could just touch it in her true form...

'How do you... nevermind.' the patriarch said.

"Surely you do not expect us to miss a repeating B-class world opening on our small Pacifica subcontinent?" Ilar pretended to ask.

A repeating B-class world? There were only a dozen around Threshold. They could make or break a megacorporation.

"We want 50% team allocation."

Gasps echoed the outrageous proposal. If Nestra understood right, it was half of the wealth and progress gathered from a newly opened, stable world on enclave territory. It was worth a fortune.

"... In perpetuity," Ilar concluded.

This time, the shouting resumed. Again, Nestra simply couldn't believe the patriarch hadn't tossed them out on their asses. What was going on? Did Ilar have something on him?

The patriarch remained silent while half the room whispered angrily, and the other looked like they'd swallowed an entire shipment of lemons. Nestra checked for the exit out of habit knowing full well that if it came to it, she was absolutely done for. Even her true form couldn't stop experienced B-class raiders. To her continued surprise, however, the patriarch relented.

"Very well, but I want a written agreement signed by the mayor."

"Agreed, but only after I get into the portal world to verify our readings."

Nestra's visor returned a flurry of protests from around half the council. Again, the patriarch's presence blanketed the area. He was clearly head and shoulders above the rest of his followers. It was enough to silence dissent, but not enough to eliminate it. She could see two sides forming around the room. She turned to Derek and made sign for evac, but he shook his head.

She didn't share his confidence.

"Very well."

The patriarch encased the two of them in a privacy bubble. The Elders spread in small groups, some of them leaving the dining hall entirely. Nestra and the others were left standing awkwardly around, with Chandra furiously hissing at a sheepish Watanabe.

"We could not let you know, sorry," the bald warrior apologized. "It is not a matter of trust, it is a matter of operational security."

The elegant gleam had unkind words to say about that but, in the end, it was Ilar's operation. Nestra was left stabbing her spoon at the remains of her second mango sago, hoping they would be allowed to leave soon. Ilar separated from the patriarch to have a talk with his bodyguard. Nestra felt like a small child at a family event after two members of the family had exploded at each other.

It was awkward as fuck. And boring. Nestra checked her visor to see a blinking message. It was from Camille.

'I heard a commotion. What is going on?'

"Ilar just accused the patriarch of theft with photographic evidence of the warehouse. It looks like we need to hurry," she typed.

The answer was almost instantaneous.

"Has the patriarch replied?"

"He agreed to give Threshold access to a new high value portal. B-class."

"Really? I thought it was just a rumor."

"Apparently not."

"Then we need to act tonight. Such turmoil will not go unnoticed."

Nestra sent an agreement in response. Yeah, it was bad. Camille had also sent a plan of the complex so Nestra went over it, checking her options. She was interrupted by Watanabe's return.

"After discussing it with Ilar, we have decided that I would stay with you for the sake of security while Ilar goes to the portal world with the patriarch."

"Could you kindly explain what is going on?" Chandra angrily demanded. *"My reputation as a negotiator —"*

"— was not a concern. The agreement you draw will be respected. This was about the theft."

"I should have been informed you were going to pull a stunt!" she erupted.

Nestra didn't expect the gleam to be so vehement. She was almost scary, with her iris blazing with fury and barely controlled mana. Almost, but not quite. Her outrage slammed into the wall of control that was Watanabe. It failed to make a dent.

"The city does not have to explain itself to you, Negotiator Chandra Satya," Watanabe said, insisting on her title.

The poor woman swallowed her pride. Watanabe's tone may have been kind, but even Nesta could see the writing on the wall. Chandra was in no hierarchical position to make demands of Watanabe.

"As I said, some of the Elders' reactions show a more fragmented council than we expected. As such, we have reassessed the risk of independent actions. I will be guaranteeing your security tonight and tomorrow morning. We will now return to our quarters in good order and stay there until departure. You are not to deviate from that plan. Your lives are at risk. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes, sir," Nesta replied before her cortex could even process it.

Damn military force of habit. The augs showed the exact same reaction. It took a little bit longer for the diplomats to assent, but they did so without a fuss. They could probably feel it in the air, the tension, like a room full of fumes waiting for a spark.

The walk to the guest quarters wasn't fun. There were no gray robes out late practicing their forms this time. The place was eerily quiet. Even the usual sounds of cooking and washing had disappeared. The windows were closed, the doors locked.

"Oh, I don't like this at all," Nesta said.

In MaxSec, they used to call this the range setup. It meant the place had been secured so her team could safely get shot at. She wished she'd taken her guns. Nothing happened, though, at least, not right now.

"I will stay outside your rooms," Watanabe said as they approached. "I will ask you to sleep in your clothes with survival bags ready to go just in case. Leave the tailored suits behind."

"Is it really that serious?" one of the negotiators asked with a worried voice.

"It shouldn't be, but if it does get serious, it will be too late for packing."

Nesta didn't need to be told twice. She changed into her Wellington on the spot, then picked up her Window Maker and the shotgun just in case. Packing was a matter of minutes with one emergency bag on one side and the nice bag on the other. She'd be mad if she had to leave the nice bag behind. There was at least a thousand two hundred creds in dresses and makeup in that stuff. And her favorite cream. After that came the question of the expedition. She was, very obviously, under surveillance. Her plan to help Camille was totally compromised. Derek might have let her sleep and noticed nothing, but Watanabe would feel her change from behind the slim layer of wood that was her door. She was stuck here. Out of ideas, she offered to act as overwatch instead.

"Can you do it?" Camille asked. *"You can't even speak."*

"I'll ping and send messages. It's better than nothing, right?" Nesta typed back.

"Okay. I need to move now. If Manh is going to move, he will do so soon."

Nestra had to agree. The pot was stirred and, more importantly, the patriarch was gone to a portal. It was weird he'd agreed to do it now rather than wait, to be honest. Wait...

"If the patriarch is raiding, then who will stop the coup?"

"I can send proof to the council's loyalists. Although, some have already blocked me..."

This wasn't looking good. Nestra checked her guns one last time. Maybe Manh didn't have enough followers yet...

The next minutes were tense. Nestra followed Camille's progress first through their visor, which was hidden under the mask, then through the multiple cameras they placed on the walls. The common parts were mostly empty, with Camille easily hiding from red robes rushing to and fro. Nestra split her screen to follow the feeds from AI, the cameras and ping when she spotted people coming. It was clear Camille knew what they were doing when they bypassed several locked doors through the use of lockpicks.

"Absolutely criminal," Nestra muttered to herself.

Honestly it was kind of impressive. Nestra followed Camille's progress with bated breath. They were patient and very precise, a quality that showed in their style. Suddenly, Nestra started to see a lot of movement. Groups of red robes rushed throughout the corridors, baring unsheathed blades. Nestra pinged them.

Camille stopped.

"We're too late," they said. "Nestra. Get out of here."

There were blurs on the feed. C or B-class people moving at full speed. Far too many to be a patrol.

It was starting.

Shit. Nestra grabbed her shotgun. She heard the dry staccato of an automatic weapon discharge somewhere outside. Someone screamed, a female voice. The walls shook.

Nestra froze. Protocol was to... fuck protocol. She opened the door. There was blood on the ground, a splash of it on the concrete wall. Already. She leaned forward. To her left, blood on the floor. A red robed Elder clutching his chest, one arm cut. He was disabled. She turned right to see a fierce yet silent battle happening in the narrow corridor. Faster than her eyes could see, Watanabe was holding it against a small squad of heavily armed and armored Elders trying to overwhelm him but so far, the calm warrior deflected and blocked any attempt to go past him. The corridor itself was shaking under thunderous blows yet reforming almost at the same speed, and more strangely, the sounds were entirely muffled. Maybe some sort of enchantment? The next room was open. Nestra could see a large pool of blood and the extended hand of Weiwei, her pilot uniform drenched. A chill crawled down Nestra's spine.

They needed out. Watanabe wasn't going to hold. This entire place was a death trap. They needed to take the gunship.

A part of Nesta screamed that this was so fucking predictable and what the FUCK were people doing not listening to Camille or exercising basic common sense but she pushed it down because it was not helpful right now. On her visor, she sent Derek a request to get the ship up. Meanwhile, she sent another to the negotiators to come out. Derek overtook the chat to confirm that people had to follow Nesta. The doors timidly opened. Nesta aimed towards the free side of the corridor, for now mercifully empty. She moved forward so she could take point. Adrenaline flooded her veins. Her heart drummed against her ribs. This was so fucked up.

Something got her attention. She wasn't sure if it was mana, or instincts, or just a random thought that made her look back at that crucial moment when Watanabe, too, looked back. Their gaze met in that brief instant. His was extremely calm. Then, a grievous wound bloomed on his arm but he was pushing the elders deeper along the indestructible corridor.

Derek was cleared to join. He rushed forward, his face a pale mask, his hands covered in blood.

"Weiwei?" Nesta asked.

"She's gone. Go. Go!"

Nesta ran. Behind her, Derek pushed the panicked diplomats out. She had to cut a way to the gunship. Had to. Nobody in the corridor, Nobody on the stairs, up, or down. Someone spotted her getting down, but they slammed their doors closed once they saw the business end of her shotgun. She waited by the door until Chandra Satya got right next to her, dark skin clammy and eyes haunted.

Nesta was outside. There were red robes in the distance, three young fucks with their swords out. She moved forward.

"On the ground! Get on the fucking ground! Now!"

They saw the gun. They hesitated. Two of them took a step back. Now if she could just...

Five very loud clacks broke the silence and the kids fell, torsos ruined and organs on the ground. She turned, shocked.

"This isn't a fucking police operation!" Derek spat. "The priority is to get our people out!"

Nesta gulped. She was in human form. The human form followed protocol. What was the protocol here, even? Fuck. She could see their faces now. They were so damn young.

Nestra shook her head and refocused. This wasn't Threshold. She wasn't MaxSec anymore. This was the enclave, and the people outside were... were... Fuck. Was there a way to recognize those who were rebels? She wasn't a murderer.

Well, at least she wasn't so casual about it.

"I had them," she spat. "They were falling back."

"We don't have the luxury of—"

"Fuck you."

Nestra still raced towards the gunship on the only path they knew. It was too exposed, but they had no choice. Lights were turning up left and right. Sounds of fights spread throughout the compound. Five more minutes and the place might be crawling with hostiles. A brief public service announcement blared from a hidden sound system asking people to stay indoors. It was replaced by another one rambling about the time to rise against decrepit oppressors. After ten seconds of screams, it, too, fell silent. Explosions shook the training hall.

"It's not a coup. It's a fucking revolution," Nestra complained.

Up ahead, a group of red robes spotted them. They accelerated. Nestra stopped and aimed. Her first shot missed on purpose and splattered the first warriors with gravel. One of them threw a shield up. The others charged forward with mana abilities, roaring 'death to the freaks'. Right.

They were fast, but bullets were faster. Nestra moved forward on her feet and pushed the barrel down with a confident grip. Her shots were tight, precise. BOOM. The lead man fell. BOOM. The man who'd jumped from behind his shield stumbled, a hole where his heart used to be. BOOM. One of the side runners collapsed among the fields. Derek's weapon wasn't as effective. He probably had steel bullets, which didn't penetrate mana-coated armor and defenses that well. Fortunately, the survivors hesitated, then fled. Nestra let them go. She moved forward. No time to hesitate.

Chandra stopped and heaved. Vomit splashed on the cobblestones. Nestra turned with fear but it was just a reaction to the nearest corpse. The nearest corpse was a young woman, her hands gripping the gaping hole in her abdomen. Her dying expression was one of complete shock.

"Come on!" Nestra ordered.

Chandra nodded, uncertain. They were running but they weren't going fast enough. Derek was shooting behind them now. They had picked up a tail. Those were smarter though. They were using ditches and low walls for cover. With a curse, Nestra pushed fresh shells in the loading port. She shot at an enterprising swordsman who tried to slice her bullet midair. It didn't work.

Those people were insane. She was going to get stabbed by anachronistic assholes. Nestra trotted, covering the front, covering the side, covering the back when Derek reloaded. They were almost at the stairs but there was movement ahead. Red robes fighting other red robes.

“Fuck.”

“We hold here!” Derek said.

“What?”

This place couldn't be defended. Worse, some of the red robes ahead were already coming their way! Nestra pointed and shot, hitting one in the leg. She fell and the others sought cover. Nestra heard a hum. She looked up to a dark shape blotting the sky. The gunship. Derek was controlling it remotely.

Derek screamed in pain.

Nestra turned. He had an arrow in the flank. In the distance, Nestra spotted a yellow robe returning to cover. A group of red robes were moving forward under the cover of a large earth shield. She drew her Window Maker and shot, the handcannon bucking painfully under her fingers. She heard a cry of pain, and another of rage.

Truong was there. Her face was a mask of white hot rage. The angry woman lifted something over their head, then threw it in the middle of the group. Nestra didn't need to look to recognize what it was: Weiwei's severed head.

The others looked. Derek faltered. The diplomats screamed. Above them, the gunship stopped its descent. Nestra shot at the yellow robe but missed. A second arrow hit Derek while on the other side, the other group of red robes rushed from cover to cover, closing in. The diplomats were in the middle of a full-blown panic. Nestra's hand searched for more shells in her belt, finding none.

“Go,” Derek told her as he reloaded. “Go!”

Options.

No time to board the gunship before the Thresholders got overrun.

No way to hold the position.

No way up the slope.

“Through the fields!” Nestra roared. “To the gate! Run! Run!”

Nestra grabbed the diplomats one by one, sending them to the monumental gates which currently stood empty. She fired a few more times to keep the red robes at bay. Derek was

trying to stand up and failing. The arrow must have hit something important. She took a step towards him. His face turned grim.

“No! Too heavy.”

“The gleams —”

“For Riel’s sake, go! Before you catch an arrow!”

The yellow robe had disappeared for now but Derek was going to bleed out, and then...

She was going to lose another partner. And there was nothing she could do about it.

Nestra turned and ran. She couldn’t carry him and shoot and outrun the gleams. The dry retort of his gun covered her as she raced across the fields, after the gleams who’d finally taken off with all their Riel-damned mana powers. She had one last glance back to see red robes closing in on Derek from all sides, then the gun fell silent. Truong’s cry of triumph was strangely loud. Around the enclave, more battles erupted. One of the warehouses was blazing like a bonfire, bathing the fields in red light.

More people were running after her. Two bullets in the hand cannon, four shells in the shotgun. They were still keeping their distances, knowing it was only a matter of time before she ran dry. Three shells. Two.

One.

[THRESHOLD CITY SYSTEM OVERRIDE, TRANSFERRING CONTROL OF TAF
FIREHAWK 27-A]

“Fuck!”

Nestra jumped at the prompt popping up on her visor.

[TRANSFER AUTHORIZED BY USER: CWO. DEREK CLINT]
[COMBAT AI MISSION SET: EXTRACTION.]
[PLEASE IDENTIFY FRIENDLIES]

Nestra sprinted towards the gates because she knew what was coming. Behind her, she heard the shouts of the enclavers giving up on their covers now that she was legging it. Ahead, the diplomats managed to unbar the gates, slipping through out into the jungle. An overhead view filled one of her eyes. She looked at all the dots representing the Thresholders, then painted them green in the overlay.

[PLEASE IDENTIFY PURSUERS]

A prompt painted the red robes gaining on her. Shit, there were a lot of them.

“Hostiles! Hostiles!”

[ACKNOWLEDGED.]

[BEGINNING MISSION.]

What could uncharitably be called a very loud fart broke the relative quiet of the sword fights, drowning the battle in noise. The ground under Nestra's feet trembled. Dirt and gravel showered her armor and stuck to her hair. She sneezed. Something wet landed at her feet. She didn't look too closely. The gate was right ahead. Her muscles strained from the exertion, her breaths harsh, painful. Her head felt a bit light.

Nestra jumped through the small opening. The diplomats were out there, milling about, uncertain. Right. Gotta save the civvies.

"Set rendezvous point for pick up," she said.

"What?" Chandra blurted.

[ACKNOWLEDGED. LANDING LOCATION IDENTIFIED.]

Nestra checked her map just as she covered the entrance behind her. It was at the top of the trail they'd followed today, on a narrow resting point near a secondary warehouse. It might work.

"Ok, up the trail," she told Chandra. "To the open spot near the top."

"Are you... hurt?" Chandra asked with horror, looking down.

Nestra followed her gaze to a large splash of blood on her leg. There were pieces of something mixed with the dirt. She pulled her armor's hood up and the overlay gave her confirmation that her status was all green.

"It's not mine. Now go."

Perhaps it was fear, or just the numb tendency of scared people to follow those who looked like they knew what to do, but the diplomats climbed the trail with respectable speed. Nestra herself was struggling to keep up with her gear and the cumulated exhaustion. She had to look back every so often to see if they were being followed. About halfway up, she noticed a flash of yellow near a jungle tree. She had the armor replay the feed on her visor.

They were being followed.

A part of her wondered why she hadn't been shot yet. The Wellington armor was good but it couldn't stop a mana arrow. Maybe they wanted her alive? Maybe the gunship could flatten their location since they were following at a distance. Before she could find a way to command it, a burst of mana emerged from one of the peaks.

A pulse of air mana expanded like a bubble. Pressure forced Nestra's eyes away, even at this distance. This was the work of a powerful B-class raider for sure. Shit was really, really going down there if they were tossing ultimate attacks like that!

"Oof!"

Nestra fell, and so did the diplomats. An arc of pure white energy rushed up like a moon crescent, beautiful yet so very deadly. It tore through the air with a low, impossibly loud hum. Something exploded midair.

[CRITICAL DAMAGE TO AFT PROPULSORS DETECTED.]

"Fuck."

The gunship had been flying too low. Dammit. The Thresholders watched their escape plan spin in a trail of smoke before crashing out of sight.

"Keep going for now," Nestra said. "We need to lose them."

They climbed for another minute, but it was clear the diplomats were slowing down. Maybe they were tired. Maybe they didn't see a way out of this. Nestra wasn't exactly seeing one either. She just knew help would come, eventually. It wasn't going to arrive before the Elders did, though.

[SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE ABORTED. RETRIEVAL TEAM ARRIVAL: IMMINENT]

Nestra stopped in her tracks. The message was coming from the wreck. Gunships were hardy things so some of it must have survived the landing. The message though, it was weird... Arrival imminent? Could it be? She switched the emergency frequency and saw that it still relayed to the gunship's network.

"Hello? Anyone?"

No reply.

"Not so proud now that your precious technology has crashed and burnt, are you?" a female voice screamed in Vietnamese from behind.

It was filled with rage and malice, and a promise of personal violence. Nestra slowed down. The diplomats stopped.

"Go to the wreck. Find it from the smoke. Help is on the way," she told them.

"But..." Chandra objected.

"I need to hold her off. You go first. I don't intend to die here," Nestra replied.

The way Chandra almost broke down wasn't exactly a rousing endorsement of Nestra's chances. To be fair, the last two people who'd held off foes were probably dead, so yeah. Chandra still gathered her team for one last push. They moved up, needled by desperate energy. It was a bit painful to see that they could move much faster when she wasn't holding them back.

Time for round two.

Nestra hid behind a rock. The approach to the trail seemed empty with the enclave plunged in chaos behind, but Nestra wasn't fooled, of course. Yellow robe and Truong were closing in. Maybe more people besides. She took a deep breath.

True Nestra stirred beneath the surface.

She couldn't be let out, though.

Being caught here as an Aszhii would be a death sentence if an Elder noticed her. They would see her as a spy for the city at best, a monster at worst, and a priority target in both cases. On a fundamental level, her confusion and stress was receding now that it looked like the rest of the group was going to make it, or at least, she'd given them good chances. Weiwei and Derek were dead though, and Watanabe's status was uncertain. What was left behind was anger. Anger at Ilar for pulling that stunt when he could have just been more sly — he didn't have to humiliate them so thoroughly to make a point if he didn't intend to fight them immediately afterward. Anger at Manh for being a disloyal gleam supremacist cunt. Anger at Derek for dying a hero like Shinoda before him. Anger at the patriarch for ignoring Camille's warnings. Anger at herself for being so weak, and a coward, for not telling Ilar about what she'd learnt about the coup. She could have told him about an 'informer', maybe, or revealed her true form earlier to save Derek, but she didn't want to die, or to become an exile. Selfish.

"You dog-stupid bitch. I don't know how you cheated last time, but this time, I'm going to kill you! I'll gut you like a fish!"

Oh, and anger at Truong, of course. Quickly, she reloaded the Window Maker until she had four bullets. The shotgun only had the one shell left, sadly.

"Talking a lot of shit for someone who's hiding!" Nestra retorted.

"Can't wait to rip out your potato tongue, you fat whore."

Truong couldn't understand Nestra anyway since she didn't have a visor to translate. That meant it was probably a distraction. Fortunately, Wellington designed their armor sets precisely to survive stronger predators. Nestra activated her thermals, then side cameras. Nothing. There were sound options as well. She checked for footsteps and got a match to her left.

No visual. Nestra gripped her shotgun and waited. Truong threw more insults her way, but she was behind thick cover. Nestra was going to get flanked for sure.

A heat signature jumped from behind a tree. Nestra turned and felt something push her arm to the side, but she readjusted and shot. The yellow robe was another young woman with a confident smirk that immediately turned to shock. Blood splattered the trunk behind her. Nestra'd gotten her dead center.

The shotgun clicked empty. Nestra looked down to see an arrow skewering her left forearm. The shaft was red with her blood.

"Fuck."

Truong jumped on her from the trail. Nestra jumped back and raised her shotgun at the very last moment. The fencer's overhead strike smashed it from her hands. A face, frozen in a rictus of triumphant hatred. Nestra pulled her Window Maker while pain made stars dance before her eyes. She managed to shoot once as she cleared the holster. By some miracle, Truong caught it with her blade.

The blade exploded but so did Nestra's vision. She was sent up the air before heavily crashing down. A damage report showed she was... okay. The armor had blocked most of the blow.

Her hand fucking hurt though.

Truong had kicked her.

[TRAUMA DETECTED. INJECTING PAINKILLERS, STIMULANT]

Nestra's vision cleared. A new energy rushed through her tired limbs like a thunderbolt. In the meantime, Truong had turned to the side with a sadistic chuckle.

"Mai, I got her!"

The triumph was short-lived.

"Mai?"

Nestra grabbed a rock. It was just there. Just as Truong noticed her standing up, Nestra threw it with all her strength and an animalistic roar. It caught the young woman under the nose. Blood spurted. Nestra stood and put all her weight on her left foot, swung, and caught Truong's knee in a devastating low kick. She collapsed like a puppet. Nestra was on before she could recover, punching her face repeatedly with her right fist.

"You. Wanted. Your. Second. Round. Here. It. IS!"

Truong managed to punch her a few times, but mana couldn't make up for leverage, or armor. Somehow, the beaten gleam still managed to raise a knee against Nestra's chest to push her away. Nestra was up on her feet in seconds. Even the pain in her arm felt like just a distant concern. Holding her broken nose, Truong fumbled around for her sword.

Nestra socked her in the jaw with a very nice hook. The gleam fell like a sack and Nestra was on top of her again, punching down with her good arm. The armored glove fell once, twice, and Truong stopped struggling.

Nestra remembered she had the emotional support knife in a sheath at her side. She placed the blade under Truong's throat. The girl was knocked out, unable to resist.

"Stop," a voice said, softly.

Camille kneeled by Nestra's side.

"This isn't like you."

"Where were you?" Nestra growled.

Clarity returned. The negotiators had long since disappeared, at least, and Truong wasn't going anywhere. Nestra knew she should be in pain but the sensation just wasn't there. Camille seemed fine though. Their mouth was moving.

"Searching. I found your compatriots and assumed you were with them, but I was wrong. I raced back as fast as I could. Nestra, I'm sorry. Please let her live. She is also a victim."

"She cut Weiwei's head. They'll heal her, then she will come after me again."

"No. It will be over soon. We need to go now and wait for... the end. She will get her comeuppance, but not like this. Not in an execution. She's not a danger to you."

Nestra looked up to the mask. Camille's expression was unreadable. Nestra wanted to hiss. Who gave a shit about morals and protocol now? Bullshit!

And then Camille's words hit the right part of her brain.

"What do you mean, the end?"

"I planted a bug in the main com rooms in anticipation for tonight. Threshold gunships have been hovering at the edge of the enclave's airspace for the last two days."

Threshold gunships? Just two of them could stay hundreds of meters up and reduce the entire enclave to rubble.

Huh.

Talk about negotiations.

"Shit, is that why Ilar was so confident that the patriarch wouldn't fight?"

“This isn’t the time to wonder, police girl. We need to move. Manh will want hostages before they arrive to at least force some negotiations. His faction is almost in full control. We need to move or things will get very unpleasant for you.”

Only then did Nestra realize Fox Mask’s reason for coming.

“You are here to help me against the enclave.”

“Against Manh!” Camille protested. “I will not allow this talentless fraud to harm you. He’s already doing enough to harm the Sword Kings. We should... hmm, maybe I should remove that arrow from your arm first?”

“Yes please.”

Before Nestra could blink, Camille had cut two thirds of the arrow away. Nestra opened her mouth to tell Camille to slow down and screamed instead when the idiot unceremoniously pulled the shaft from her bleeding forearm.

“Ow ow ow hey!”

“It’s easier when it’s faster. Do you have a potion?”

Nestra was already imbibing it. Her armor had coagulation pens but she preferred her wounds closed rather than stable — thank you very much. She cast one last glance at Truong.

Was she going soft by sparing the girl?

“Nestra, please.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”