

Ragnarok clearly expected Nesta to act with a brain, so instead of showing up fresh-faced, Nesta called Valerian with her shiny new masked gleam phone. He actually ignored her three times before finally picking up.

“Finally. This is Cresscent.”

“Am I supposed to know you?”

Was he stupid?

“You didn’t get the note? I will accompany you on the raid tomorrow. Can we meet?”

“One moment please. I was reading the file.”

He left her on hold, which surprised Nesta quite a bit. This was far from the respectful, almost meek gleam she was used to. A part of her was pleased. His distant tone meant that he was not nice to everybody, just to the human her. And that was pretty cool. Even though she had to admit the feeling was rather childish.

“Yes, I found your name. My apologies — Crescent, was it?”

“Yess.”

“I was going over the profiles one by one and yours was the latest addition. You said you wanted to meet? Yes, given the circumstances, that’s probably a good idea. Hmm. You do not object to coming to the BaiHua arcology, surely? I am feeling a little... out of sorts at the moment.”

“Underssstandable. I will see you there, so long as you can guarantee my anonymity.”

“Naturally. BaiHua will follow the rules. We always do. In an hour? Unless you have something planned, of course.”

“No, that isss fine.”

“I will meet you in the lobby.”

Well, it was interesting to talk to public Valerian. He was spikier than she expected.

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Nesta ordered a limo this time since she had official money from her first raid and didn’t feel like taking the train. It was good to be semi-rich. Hover limos were essentially the taxis of gleams, and so long as one was registered with the city, the prices were heavily discounted. It was just one more barrier between gleams and baselines that she was experiencing from the other side. The limo dropped her at the entrance of the arcology at the VIP entrance. While the ground floor was designed for efficiency, with large spaces and long counters designed to accommodate the influx of people that came with job fairs and the like, the VIP

section was significantly smaller. It was a matter of seconds to go through the security check, and she was treated fairly well too.

BaiHua really showed its life-sciences knowledge with an abundance of enclosed gardens and aquariums, many of those completely self-sufficient. Glass and white stone gave the zen aesthetic the kind of cachet Nesta expected from one of Threshold's Big 6. She notified Valerian that she was here, then settled to wait in the many cafes catering to corp execs and their visitors. Nesta ordered immediately. The new improved mask had an opening for the mouth for biting reasons, so she could now even eat in public! It was also fairly easy to hide her teeth, though she preferred to eat without it.

Sadly, the durian cheesecake proved to be a major disappointment.

Valerian arrived in advance. He looked aloof and handsome in a well-tailored white suit with a flower on the vest, the emblem of BaiHua. The official garb upgraded him from scruffy raider to rich scion. Or was it downgraded? She wasn't sure.

Many of the patrons watched him enter though he didn't pay attention to them. Nesta observed that he was particularly of interest to the ladies.

He froze when he saw her, then his face formed an 'o' of surprise. She waved a little, but he was not out of his shock yet.

"Ah. Ah!"

He pointed, quite rudely. Now everyone's attention was on her. Very annoying. She made a hush sound just in case, which was what he needed to recover his composure.

He sat at her table with a half-smile.

"That caught me off-guard. Let's talk somewhere else. I suppose you won't object to the Seed of Prosperity? It's a pretty good restaurant that only uses BaiHua made ingredients."

"No no, no objections."

Valerian was chuckling to himself all the way to the VIP of VIP restaurants. It wasn't even advertised with signs or anything, so she assumed it was private. Rather, they had to walk through several unmarked doors.

The Seed had a thing for wood paneling and creeping vines so Nesta felt like she'd stepped into an inner garden. While they were immediately let in, the place was packed with actual BaiHua gleams and the reception was much more lukewarm than the cafe's had been. She was pretty sure Valerian was recognized, and that was with BaiHua being home to thousands of gleams. Maybe he was famous?

He probably was. Most healers were happy not acting as punching bags.

Only after they were seated in a private room did Nesta speak.

“Is this place sssecure? The mask is fine but...”

“There are no cameras and the staff will only come if summoned. Let me tell you, I was surprised to see you here, Nestra! I really thought you would, ah, hide?”

“Most people assume I am a strange gleam with transformation power.”

She shrugged.

“And my identity is secret, so...”

“Wait, it is? I thought you had been picked because we knew each other.”

“I was picked because I am the strongest masked gleam in all of Threshold. Probably.”

“Wait, you’re C-class now? Congratulations! Oh, you didn’t celebrate it yet? This is an important rite of passage.”

“Sssure let me tell just my family I’m actually not a human and see what happens. I expect a short celebration with plenty of fireworks. My parents are first gen, sssee?”

“Oh yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Ok. Well, in any case, I’m so glad you’re here. Riel dammit, what a mess.”

Valerian passed his hands over his face, groaning all the while.

“What a mess, what a mess. Wait, how much do you know about C-rank gleam, you know, life. You’re new to this right?”

“I am learning on the fly but yesss, this is all new to me. I only... woke up recently.”

“We actually never talked about your experience.”

“And we will not,” Nestra said with a pointed glance.

Sereth had been very clear she should stop oversharing with the few friends she had.

“Fair enough. I still can’t believe... Ah, whatever. Well, most D-class raiders will rotate teams for raids. We all have our favorite partners and some people are just inseparable, of course, so some teams form from the start. Powerful scions will also benefit from talented guardians trained from an early age, you know the deal.”

Nestra did. The Palladians didn’t have retainers per se, but the friends of her parents were also Ulysses’ raiding partners. Most of the time. He did move around a lot when he started though.

“But in general, people will want to rotate. This is especially true for D-rank raiders trying to earn experience, or trying to get noticed. I raided with allied guilds and took municipal contracts with people I’d never met before. I even raided with guilds associated with rival corpos since we healers are in short supply. We’re just accepted everywhere.”

Nestra nodded. Her eyes kept getting drawn to the menu. It was old-school printed on cardstock. Fancy.

“Oh right, let’s order.”

That took only a few moments with Valerian efficiently guiding her through the few options. Few options were usually a sign that chefs handled most of the preparation instead of robots. Truly, being a gleam came with a slew of unexpected benefits. Like profiteroles au chocolat with balls of homemade vanilla ice cream.

“Anyway, my point was that D-rank teams are flexible. By the time people reach B-class, they are in fixed teams that combine and merge only for specific worlds or when, well, people die. It happens. C-rank is somewhere in between. Stop me if I’m telling you something you already know, ok?”

“I...”

How to explain?

“I was out of the gleam life when I was sixteen. Everything that someone learns or experiences afterward... I cannot relate. Did not try to learn.”

“I see, alright, yeah. I will just explain stuff and you can interrupt me whenever. C-rank teams mix and match and in this case, I’m paired with people I didn’t know.”

He winced.

“And you, sorry. My family strongly disapproves of my attempts to experiment with combat life magic. They’ve also let it be known that people who, what was it they said?”

He took on a nasal, pompous voice.

“People who indulge Valerian’s life choices will be poorly regarded by House Nephrite and BaiHua as a whole.”

Nestra could feel his simmering resentment.

“Suddenly, nobody wanted to raid with me. Even the fact I’m a pretty good healer wasn’t enough. Guess BaiHua has a long reach, and I got some... feedback about my conditions for joining a raid.”

“Which are?”

"I often ask to take the role of a frontliner. I can hold reasonably well. I deaden my pain and just... keep fighting. Try different ways of buffing myself every time. I did say I could buff you, right?"

"You did help me in the tunnel. It was a great buff."

"Oh, right. Well, I can enhance other people reasonably well, but enhancing myself is just... not as impactful as enhancing others. I'm trying things to change that. Like that time I focused on muscle strength."

He winced.

"That one got really painful. Anyway, I'm seen as... disruptive. And people know that if I get killed, they'll get in trouble. I just ascended to C-rank so the stakes are even higher now, so I only pair up with people who, ah, there is no nice way to say it. People who are beneath BaiHua's notice anyway."

Nestra nodded. She wasn't exactly sure how guilds and employment worked for C-rank gleams, only that the large guilds only hired people with potential. Not every raider candidate would make it a career. Some gave up, Some retired to security or porter jobs. Some... died. Quite a few of them, actually. That was why raiders were really well paid, after all.

"Anyway, I'm telling you all of this so you know that I have never met those people and if we work together, and I really hope we do because I've seen you fight, we'll always be paired up with loners. People who don't want or can't belong to a guild."

"We don't have to," Nestra said.

"What?"

"Be paired up with otherssss."

"We... don't?"

"I have a sssolo raider license. If I say we two raid alone, we will."

"Oh! Oh... That's, wait so you'd be ok with bringing me with you?"

Nestra shrugged.

"Sure. But you fight alone and I cover you or vice-versa. I'm not good at protecting people if I'm fighting myssself. Can't focus well. You keep the money and the meat of what YOU kill though. I'm not sharing. Especially crab."

Nestra hissed, remembering the tax Sereth had so odiously imposed upon her rightfully earned seafood. The lark.

"Ok, I'm even willing to, ah, let you have the meat from my kills."

“No no, your kills, your meat,” Nestra insisted.

It was only proper. And he was selling himself short.

“Have sssome pride as a hunter,” Nestra admonished. “You shouldn’t debase yourssself by forfeiting your prize.”

“Okay?”

“So you don’t know the others, is what you are saying.”

“Yes. The other five are made of three raiders who form a stable team, and two loners who have worked together before.”

“And who do you think has it in for you?”

Valerian leaned forward, giving her a serious look. His jade green eyes flared in the dim room.

“All of them.”

Nestra nodded. She’d come to the same conclusion. A Team Killer group would need to leave no witnesses.

“That seems likely. I don’t see anyone taking the risk of fighting an equal amount of raiders in a portal world. Even assuming they win, a death would be fine, but three? There would be questions. That remindsss me. Why would anyone want you taken out?” Nestra asked with no small amount of curiosity.

Valerian did feel harmless. Not in a bad way, of course.

He shrugged. There was definitely a sad bend to him now, more so than before. He was objectively handsome, obviously apolitical, and a healer. It made him likable as a person. She knew that was how it worked. She couldn’t think of a reason why anybody would want to kill him specifically.

“It’s probably not about me. BaiHua’s made a lot of enemies over the years, and not just within the walls. And my family’s on the board. We’ve sunk a few companies and harmed many enclaves by providing cheap, plentiful mana fruits and vegetables. And that’s just the gleam side. If it’s not vengeance then it could be someone wanting to send a message. I wouldn’t just be a relatively unimportant child killed by a rival family.”

Ouch.

Nestra’s face must have looked horrified because he reacted immediately.

“Hey I’m just being realistic here. Just don’t touch the heir but otherwise rich gleam families tend to have three or more kids, you know? Assassinations are more common than you seem to believe. Errrr, I don’t intend to die if that helps.”

That led to the next obvious question Nestra had planned on asking.

“Then... why spring the trap?”

Valerian’s jaw locked with that stubborn chin Helena did when her temper flared.

“Would you? I’m not hiding. I’m not going back with my tail between my legs so my family tells me ‘see, just heal and let the others protect you’ because if I do it once, just once, they’ll never let it go. So we’re going out there and if I die, then I die.”

He remembered himself, schooling his expression so smoothly, it was clear he was used to it.

“But it won’t come to that, right?”

“No.”

“Just so we’re clear, I can hold my own. I really can. I just don’t have offensive or defensive spells I can use to really make an impact on the battlefield. But I’m working on it.”

Nestra nodded, then helped herself to some water. Valerian cooled down a little.

“So what’s the problem? With life mana, I mean.”

“Do you mind me ranting?”

“Not at all or I would not have assked.”

“Right. So. It’s the characteristics of life mana. How should I put it? If you’re tossing fire, magical fire, it’s the fire and its mana aspect that burns people, right?”

“With you sssso far.”

“But life mana doesn’t naturally hurt people. It heals them, or at least boosts them. If I want to disable someone, I need to be extremely precise and attack specific functions, so it requires more concentration. I’m also fighting the host’s own mana without an offensive medium like a rock spike to carry the ah payload, and there are biological differences between species that require some fine-tuning. It’s, it’s...”

He sighed, very heavily this time, before resting his head on his closed fists.

“It’s an uphill battle. Oh, the food’s here.”

Nestra put on her mask, politely nodding to an intimidated baseline waiter who did his best to show detached professionalism. It was a bit early for dinner, but they both dug in as soon as the door was closed. Nestra had picked bacon-wrapped stuffed pineapple and a quinoa salad. It was really fancy, and required many more mana ingredients than what she could get her hands on. Gotta enjoy that rich boy's hospitality while she could.

Valerian was more than happy to keep talking while she demolished her plate.

"Thankfully, I know the human body well, so tomorrow I won't be defenseless. But yeah, it's difficult. I'm exploring several options. Oh, and I'm completely useless against golems and some exotic species, especially weird insects. Guess what's the most common enemy in the Threshold Portal biomes?"

"Insects?"

"That's correct. Well, and arthropods and arachnids. But you got the idea. They still die if you hit them hard enough."

"Speaking of hitting, we should spar before tomorrow. Get used to each other. I will join as an artillerist, so you won't get to see the real me until the shit hitssss the fan,"

"Works for me. Dessert first?"

"Obviously."

After they were done eating, Valerian paid the bill which Nestra was grateful for. The VIP section of the arcology's entrance had sparring rooms which surprised Nestra a bit. Valerian explained that sparring was a common way for raiders to get to know each other or to let off steam, so there were suitable rooms a little bit everywhere, including a rather large one near the top of the pyramid where the board met. Valerian changed, then used the privacy setting before they fought. Nestra had to admit that he had trained very seriously. It was as he said though. As soon as she started using skills, he was overwhelmed. She did feel his mana trying to get a hold of her but her own was just impossible to penetrate, no matter how hard he tried.

"Wow you've got to be the most hostile and resilient lifeform I've ever faced. Uh, no offense."

"None taken. Again?"

"Sure."

Despite his assurance that he could recover from most wounds, she didn't hit him more than once to check how he would react. It felt pointless and cruel.

"You can hold you own," she admitted. "But your defensive abilities need you to be hurt and your offense is lacking."

"That's what I said," Valerian grumbled.

“How about draining life directly from the target?”

Valerian gave her a long measuring look. It was clear he'd thought about that.

“That's one of my three main avenues of research right now but when I started asking questions, I was shut down really quickly. I think the healers don't want to be associated with life absorption.”

“Would it be difficult?”

“There is no spell framework for it. Yet. But if I can work in a portal uninterrupted... Experiment a bit...”

Nestra smiled.

“Oh now I'm curious.”

The healbug and the gray demon made a few plans but a single evening was too short to really come up with something for every situation. Nestra also had other things to do, so she left after messaging Gorge. The old asshole was more than happy to receive the medicines she'd bought, which cost a few thousand creds and would hopefully not put her on a watchlist. The rest of the legal money was to go towards a sword, and when Nestra opened the catalog on her gleam phone, she realized there was a lot of choice.

It was mind-boggling how much stuff there was, actually.

She knew gleams changed and upgraded often, of course, but there was also a mana affinity element she'd not considered. A firespark would want a staff that carried fire mana better while a buzzer might want an armor that reacts well to electric mana for improved self-buffs. Those used portal ores that were of varying degree of rarity, and required different treatment. The prices varied wildly but mostly, they went up really fast. Nestra wasn't the same. There were no items meant to harness void mana. She only needed a big sword that would last a while before she wrecked it. She still had that dagger she'd found in an early portal world and never used, but daggers were weapons of assassination or desperation, not fighting. She needed a real thing.

Nestra wondered if she should pick an artillerist weapon to fit in, maybe a short sword or something easy to wield. That was, however, a shit idea. It was better to find a suitable blade and look a little bit suspicious rather than pick an inferior choice and find herself underequipped when they were inevitably attacked. There was that and also the fact she was an above two-meter tall, clearly muscular titan of a woman while in demon form, and picking a toothpick to defend herself wouldn't make her any less intimidating.

She settled for a large zwei-hander that was the same length to her demon body as Aunt Claire's sword used to be to her human body. The matching dimensions ought to make wielding the weapon easier. On a hunch, she also called Sereth. He picked up immediately.

“Hello brother mine, isn’t there a weapon that holds void mana you could possibly reward for a task?”

“Alas, no. You’ll need to come home with me and grow it yourself.”

“Maybe I’ll find something in a local portal world.”

“You will not. You may not know this, but rewards are tailored for the dominant local raiding species, little Nezhra. We are and will always be parasites. You will need to use your adoptive species’ tools until we head home.”

“Oh. Alright.”

Big sword it was.

To Nestra’s surprise, the gleam weapons could not be delivered by drone, and Threshold was a place where she’d gotten her car delivered to her. Probably a security concern. As such, she was forced to once again take a taxi to Central. By then, it was getting quite late.

If there were any concerns that the marketplace would close, they were immediately dashed the moment she returned to the gigantic lobby of the exchange. Artificial lights shone on a crowd perhaps even more active than they’d been during the day. The high ceiling really gave the impression of being in a cavern, and when she approached the long service desk, a baseline in a blue uniform brought her to a viewing room without questions or delay.

Her new sword came inside a nice, fancy sheath. There was even a small dummy for her to try it on, and after doing so, the transaction ended without a hitch. They really valued serving raiders as efficiently as possible. The bows and honorifics felt a little weird, still, and she couldn’t quite get used to the gleam treatment.

The sword would definitely last for the duration of the raid, but she realized that getting through swords like Helena went through axes was going to be the norm.

“My money...”

Nestra used the rest of her cash to buy basic supplies, then went home. There, she found a package from Gorge with her newest faulty artifact, a chestplate for a, well, obese person. No wonder no one had bought it yet so she could get it heavily discounted. There were no unfit raiders who could afford such fine work.

Her Skin did that horrible reality warping thing before extending with a satisfied sigh.

Nestra now had shoes. Well, not really, but the skin of her feet was covers at least. The ‘fabric’ on her forearm felt fuller as well, and when she touched it, it felt like the beginning of an armguard.

Progress. And timely too.

It was just a shame it was all damn expensive.

She slept, pored over the file Ragnarok had given her, then slept again.

She was up a bit earlier than she'd liked but that was business as usual.

Time to meet new interesting people and then kill them.

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Nestra walked to the site of the portal, entering a cordoned off park after flashing her ID to a pair of beat cops. The place was mostly empty with only a few people bringing in mining gear that would be equipped later. This was a fairly small, relatively new world with the unfortunate distinction of being mostly linear, in rough terrain, and sporting piddling deposits of mana aluminum and base iron.

Those happened to be two of the most common elements that could be found everywhere, specifically in places that were much easier to mine than this one. The local fauna was also made of insects that were a pain to deal with and offered few rewards. All in all, it was a shitty C-rank world. The city only offered a reward for D-class world so the pay would be low. Only unaffiliated C-rank raiders would bother to clear it.

It was pretty telling that the park was still open. No guilds had claimed the place yet, so it was probably not worth it, but it had to be cleared anyway. Wouldn't want weird bugs chomping on the toddlers.

Nestra was the last to arrive, though she was still ten minutes early. That didn't stop the heavysset Asian man heading the formation from frowning at her with clear disapproval. He stood near some packs near a table showing a map while the rest of the crew milled around. She recognized him as Satoshi, a plate-wearing frontliner who used a large, thick saber. His two partners were a striker going by Strix, who had his hand on the handle of a sword, and a controller fire mage called Naomi, now standing at a distance with her arms crossed. The firespark user wielded a staff and wore no helmet over her short bob of black hair. Those were supposed to be the main combatants. A wood archer going by Gobbet and another, hammer-wielding frontliner named Sheryl completed the team, with a nervous Valerian standing at a distance. The mood wasn't very good, which shouldn't come at a surprise.

Nestra realized she was thoroughly underdressed compared to the rest. She only had a pack, her sword, and her combat bodysuit. By comparison, the rest of the group sported trinkets, magical boots, magical chest plates, magical navigation tools, lamps and so on. The works. They almost shone with leaking mana in Nestra's perception. There had to be several hundred thousands worth of cred in those people, dammit!

Satoshi made for her immediately. His hostile strut lost some effect when he arrived and realized Nestra was half a hand taller than he was, but he didn't let it deter him.

"And you must be Crescent. Are you aware that junior members of a raid are supposed to come in advance? This is basic respect for your seniors. You should try it sometimes. Tsk.

I'm Satoshi. Listen, I'll be blunt. We have a full team, a good team, and the last thing I need is an untested artilleryman throwing spells willy-nilly. I don't know you. You don't know me. We've never worked together. A C-rank portal isn't the place to learn how to work as a team, in case you didn't know, so whatever the city's paying you to join, I'll double it provided you stay at the entrance and don't get in my way. You should really take my offer."

Nestra waited three seconds before providing any sort of reply simply because she could. The mask hid her features except for her mouth and eyes. He also didn't have authority over her, or anything of the sort. By tradition he could give battlefield orders and she was supposed to follow, but that sort of request? He could fuck right off.

In those three seconds looking down at Satoshi's close-cropped hair and deep brown iris, she realized she didn't actually have to answer. Nestra gave him a condescending look, and by Riel did it feel good to be condescending to a gleam, then she simply walked by him.

Fortunately, he didn't try to physically stop her or things would have gone poorly.

The portal lit the center of the park in that typical light blue radiance that Nestra now associated with the pleasant radiation that fed her body. Municipality spooks in dark suits stood at a distance, ostensibly making sure the raiders wouldn't be interfered with, but also guaranteeing there would be no brawls. Some raiders were also stars in their own right. None of them were here today.

Nestra stopped to look at the table. A nice flat screen showed a map of the interior as well as several battle formations, with Satoshi taking point, Shirley and Valerian covering his flanks, and Strix acting as an outrider. Naomi and Gobbet formed the backline.

Without a word, Nestra clicked a few options and added herself next to the archer.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Naomi said, scandalized. "That's not for you to decide!"

The firespark clenched her jaw, iris flaring with poorly controlled mana. The temperature increased a little bit.

Nestra shrugged, pulling back from the table. They could place her where they wanted provided it was at the back where artillerymen were meant to serve.

Satoshi arrived and Strix backed him up. Nestra was boxed in but she didn't really care because they wouldn't try anything here, not in view of the government mooks.

"I think I made our 'offer' quite clear," Satoshi growled.

If there were still any doubts those were the ringleaders, their insistence resolved that.

Nestra ignored them. Instead, she looked at the portal.

Definitely not as large as the Varang one.

‘What’s your fucking problem anyway? Why do you want to come so badly, huh?’

“Is there a problem?” one of the mooks asked from afar.

Nestra returned her attention to Satoshi and this time, she returned his glare.

“Isss there gonna be one?” she asked.

The trio exchanged glances before seemingly coming to a conclusion. Nestra had a good idea what that conclusion was. Wait until they were inside the portal world then fuck her up. The only question was whether or not they would wait.

They probably would, actually, otherwise they ran the risk of Valerian jumping back to denounce them.

“Will you three stop?” Valerian asked in a bored, imperious voice.

He was rather lightly armored compared to the other two, quite likely because his element didn’t give him any advantage in this regard, but his armor shone nicely, and the white flowers of his corp adorned the impeccable breastplate. He clearly wore the most expensive gear out of everyone.

“I heard you were professional but now I am having doubts. Is there any reason why you would refuse a free artillerist?”

Again, the three exchanged glances before Satoshi began to speak. He was much more polite, Nestra noticed.

“There is always a risk, with artillerists, that they would hit—”

“I am aware of friendly fire, Satoshi. The risk exists with every caster, including your girlfriend. Stop wasting your time or I will find another raiding group. I hope you packed enough potions?”

The value of healers was invaluable because they could save lives while potions were slower, expensive, they lost potency quickly, and raiders needed to actually drink it which was easier said than done with a giant wolf monster snapping at one’s face. Valerian acted like he knew that even though Nestra knew the would-be assassins could not afford to let their quarry go.

“No sir. Let’s start the briefing then.”

To his credit, Satoshi was serious about that part, possibly because he wanted Valerian and Nestra to be useful right to the point where he murdered them. He placed Nestra at the center of the backline, then went over several scenarios. The squad was supposed to spend the night inside of the portal world. It meant stopping for rest as well as fighting a variety of enemies as the squad progressed towards the guardian. Nestra paid attention though he was mostly rehashing what was in the file. She found his tactical advice sound, though she

had very little experience. Soon, the time came to get in. The squad assumed formation, with Satoshi crossing over first.

Nestra cast one last glance towards Threshold's sky then she went in.

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The squad spread out a little to secure the area, everyone making sure there were no surprises. Nestra was tasked with the rear. She used the opportunity to have a good look around.

The entrance portal was set against a cliffside, the yellow, cracked stone climbing quite high against a blue sky decorated with ochre, distant clouds. The dry air smelled of dust and a pungent scent she couldn't identify. In front of them, a canyon snaked between two sheer walls peppered with green patches of vegetation. The bottom of the chasm was so dark it was barely visible, but Nestra could see some water there. The farthest reach of the canyon was blocked by a bulbous dirt structure popping like a boil to deface the otherwise pleasant vista. Uneven towers dotted with openings crowned that cancerous growth, and even from here, Nestra could see distant flying shapes. This was the home of the guardian and just as Valerian had said, it was insectoid in nature.

"Everyone ready?" Satoshi asked.

Words of affirmation came from everyone. Nestra mechanically checked that her new sword moved nicely in its sheath, then they were out.