

Nestra changed in a nicely provided changing room that smelled of old sweat, under the baffled gaze of a couple of army gleams. Her Wellington suit was nice and familiar, even after some time out of it. She felt protected in it. Funny how the human Nestra loved armor but her Aszhii self disliked anything touching her skin that wasn't some eldritch symbiote out of hell. She next walked to the 'antechamber', a vast bunker with medical and storage facilities designed as an airlock between the base and the monster-infested wilds. There were plenty of auge and gleam soldiers here, most of them very young. They made no secrets about their curiosity.

She found Ilar near the gate arguing with a NCO, and by arguing, she meant that the NCO talked in a glacially polite tone and Ilar was quite obviously ignoring him. The old man still tried his best.

"And although the path you picked should not have C-class creatures, it does not mean there won't be C-class creatures. Those travel. I don't care how good your crunchie is, the odds just aren't good. Hell, I wouldn't send a full squad there without backup."

"Your objections are duly noted, sergeant. As I said before, you are absolved from any responsibility should a problem occur."

The sergeant's dark mustache bristled with anger. He found Nestra, focusing his attention on her with laser focus.

"You are putting yourself at major risk," he said.

"I know."

He glared. She shrugged.

"Dammit woman, you're not some green idiot. Don't do this."

"It is already decided," Ilar insisted.

"By you," the sergeant grumbled, but he gestured anyway. Large, enchanted steel door nearby opened with the slow clunk of heavy machinery.

"Please enter the airlock, check your gear one last time, then give the signal and we will let you out. Your goal is the nearby Zhongdian elevation, three and a half kilometers due north-west. You will travel here, enter your name in the computer at the base of the flag, then return before nightfall. Should you need extraction, just send a signal to... ah what the fuck am I saying? You'll be dead before we get a grav out of the base."

"Sergeant..." Ilar growled.

"Yeah yeah whatever. Good luck lady. You're going to need it. We'll monitor your progress by drone so if you're really hurt, we'll try to help. Just hold on, ok?"

Nestra nodded. She entered the antechamber's antechamber, as it were, to finish her prep.

Nestra pulled her suit's hood over her head. It sealed with a light hiss and a click. The entire front lit up until she had a perfect field of view. Temperature regulation cooled her stressed body while the ear protection cycled to her favorite mode: amplifying surrounding sounds while muffling gunshots. The smell of damp concrete filtered through the rebreather, unfiltered since it wasn't toxic. Wellington believed that the sense of smell was a good warning so their suits reflected that. She shivered when several of her senses were amplified.

The map overlay activated, showing her the distant peak through the wall. She tested thermal and night vision sights. No issue. A last check of the Windowmaker followed. Safety on, and into the holster. She attached her tactical shotgun to the suit-provided sling, then carefully loaded her mana shells. Six in the magazine, one in the chamber. The bolt slid back with a satisfying click. The holo-sight activated. Her Wellington had a shooting assist but she didn't like it.

Safety off.

"I'm ready."

The gates opened. Ilar whispered a last good luck, then she was through.

The first two minutes were just more of the pitted hellscape that surrounded Threshold's walls. Nestra assumed the military cleared the place regularly just so squads of green horns wouldn't get jumped the moment they stepped foot outside. She still checked all around, including up. There were flying things out there.

Just beyond that no-monster's-land, the jungle spread out like a green curtain, with the tiniest gaps where beast trails and infantry trails snaked into the vegetation. She picked one at random.

The forest closed around her like the jaws of a trap. Immediately, light dimmed to a semi-darkness punctuated by bright rays piercing through the dense canopy. It smelled very strongly of sap. Fresh tracks on the wet dirt showed a group had gone through there a mere few hours before. She paused at the entrance to let her helmet and eyes get accustomed to the strange light conditions. Demon Nestra didn't have to contend with this but whatever.

Now what was the walk again? High steps, then toes first to test the ground and push twigs aside, then slowly to the balls of her feet. Slowly at first, then with more ease as she grew used to that strange gait, Nestra moved deeper into the death trap. Visibility was terrible here since grass climbed above her shoulders on both sides. She had to rely more on her ears and nose. Fortunately, the Wellington visor helped with that. There was even a function to show her destination in the distance.

For now, Nestra followed the path, forcing herself to relax her shoulders. Her fingers still gripped the handguard of her shotgun. Maybe she wouldn't get to use it.

Oh, who was she kidding? Better be ready.

Spiders climbed on half-rotten trunks. Above, birds tweeted or chirped with every step she took. Nesta was forced to stop with every bush rustling in the distance just in case something tried to jump her. Her suit had already proved itself useful by pinging dangerous flora, including a leafy plant that sprayed the armor with a sap that created a powerful allergic reaction for up to seven days after contact. She'd avoided those. There were also a few suspiciously mana-rich growths that were not in the database. She had avoided those as well in case they tried to grab her with lianas or something. It happened.

Once again, the path was blocked by a fallen tree. It was the third time, but this one was very recent and she didn't see a path through that someone had already cut. With a sigh, Nesta let her shotgun hang from its sling while she cut a path with her combat knife. It was the emotional support knife from MaxSec, the one you held while a monster ate you if you ran out of bullets. At least, it was useful to cut branches. With one last muttered curse, Nesta pushed through, stopping immediately after.

There was movement in the distance. She heard it in her helmet. One thing. Two things, at least, far in front, left and right. She brought her shotgun up, moved to the balls of her feet. The holographic sight provided a red dot dancing across the foliage with the promise of crushed mana stones at muzzle velocity. She switched to thermal with a click of her tongue. Nothing. She waited.

A flash to her right, but the sound on the left was closer so she aimed there instead. There, a flash of heat.

In the city, MaxSec were forbidden from taking shots at hidden targets in case the exposed piece of flesh was a scared kid hiding under a desk. Here? Everything went.

If it was someone trying to ambush her, they had it coming anyway. Nesta tensed. She aligned the sight.

She pulled the trigger. The shotgun pushed against her chest. Thump! Something screeched. Loud. She relaxed, letting the gun return to firing position. Another shot. Missed?

Nothing moved.

Nesta reached for her side pocket which Wellington called a 'tactical pouch' which sounded better than 'integrated fanny pack'. She grabbed shells and pushed them into the magazine, keeping the gun ready. One in.

Movement. From every side. Her thermal caught the one on the left more clearly thanks to a wide streak of what had to be blood. She shot it, dropping the shells on the ground to grab the barrel. Another screech ending in a terrible gurgle. She swiveled to her right. Movement in front as well. Thump. Something concealed screeched again. Another thump and it fell in

a crash of breaking twigs. The one in front was racing ahead. She saw scales, a crest, mostly green mixed with a haze of other colors. Neosaurs, the same monsters who'd killed Shinoda. It dodged the first shot, but not the second, which almost tore its arm off. It kept going. She shot it again. Last shell. Movement on the right from the wounded creature. Noise at her back. Nestra dropped and rolled just as something crashed through the branches over her head. Claws scratched the edge of her armor. She rolled and dropped her gun, pulling her Window Maker in the same flowing gesture. The massive blast caught the neosaur in the back before it could recover from its jump. It fell, dead on the spot.

The last neosaur crawled from the underbrush with piteous cries. Fresh portal monsters then, or they would have retreated. She shot it in the head.

No more movement, but something up ahead. Something massive. She grabbed her shotgun back from the sling and reloaded as fast as she could. A creature emerged from the path at a distance. It looked like a cross between a tortoise and a dinosaur the size of a SUV, probably a powerful D-class creature. Dark beady eyes fell on her from within a scarred shell. Not good. She finished reloading without breaking eye contact.

Slowly, the creature grabbed the corpse of the farthest neosaur before retreating. Each of its steps echoed Nestra's thundering heart.

Only after a full minute of calm did she allow herself a moment of calm. That beast had probably been earth-born to act rationally instead of like a rabid idiot. Lucky.

Well, it looked like it was over. Time to pack up. She reloaded her Windowmaker before returning to the spot where she'd dropped her shells. At four hundred creds a pop, might as well recover them all. As she bent down, she caught a whiff of mana. Human this one. Too exotic to be a local monster.

It might have been Ilar. She wasn't sure. Maybe he was keeping an eye on her to make sure she didn't die? Whatever.

With one last disappointed sigh that she couldn't loot the neosaur for their skin, Nestra set off.

Nestra kept walking, eating a Seth-made energy bar to make up for the adrenaline dump. The fantastic taste buoyed her spirits, and she was almost whistling by the time she started climbing. A large predatory bird tried to dive at her but a shot turned it into a feathered red mist. Nothing else attacked her afterward. She proudly added her name to the long list of cadets who'd made it to Zhongdian summit. Maybe it was a rite of passage? The trip back was considerably easier because she found a trail that led right back to base. In total, it took her barely over four hours to complete the course.

The sergeant welcomed her back with a smile of relief.

“Well paint my ass blue and call me a grape, you made it. And you killed some neosaurs too. Not bad, crunchie, not bad at all.”

“Thanks, sarge,” Nestra replied before her brain could react.

“You military?”

“MaxSec. Retired.”

“Well you can always sign up if you get tired of trash spiders. Now get out of here, and don’t forget to go by the armory to clean up your shit. Some plants spray you with irritants. You don’t want your face to look like a three-days old scarlet balloon. Trust me.”

“Will do.”

“You did well. We are suitably impressed,” Ilar said.

He frowned. Nestra might have been a tad more impressive than what would be plausible for a mana-juiced baseline. Was she making a mistake by being too cool?

Well, it beat getting bitten.

“I will immediately request a transfer from AI to my division, although it will be months before we leave. Such things take time. You will be our first and only baseline field agent. You should be honored.”

“Before you do this, and because I know they will agree..”

“Indeed since you have been on leave for weeks,” Ilar noted with a pointed glance.

“There is one last thing I need to do as part of IA. My superior was wrongfully arrested and I intend to get her out of here.”

“This is not a negotiation,” Ilar stated.

Nestra stood up, so did Ilar. He wasn’t amused.

Slowly, she grabbed her ID.

“It definitely is.”

“I warned you of what would happen if you made things difficult.”

“Yeah, you’re blacklisting me for employment, right? Now look at me. Look at me well. Do you think I give a shit?”

Ilar stopped himself before he could say more. For the first time, Nestra could tell he was stopping and thinking.

“I don’t need the city to give me a job. Riel, I don’t even need a job. I’m loaded. My family is immensely more loaded and they won’t let me down, especially if some cunt’s trying to strong arm me into traveling to a fucking enclave.”

Ilar didn’t react, so Nestra waited.

“Perhaps your contribution isn’t required after all,” Ilar whispered in what might have been a dangerous tone.

“Good! Then I’m off. See you.”

“Hold!” he said as she turned. “I think you don’t quite realize the importance of our work, or the situation you risk putting yourself in if—”

“You don’t have leverage,” Nestra said, and she meant it. “I don’t need money, I don’t need influence, I don’t value my career and I don’t give a shit about your opinion. I don’t have kids who need to go to a good school. I don’t see gleams as all that superior. You have nothing on me.”

Well, there was physical violence but that was the thing with violence, it only lasted so long as you were the strongest.

Ilar wasn’t the strongest.

“I see. Hmm. I believe I owe you an apology for being cavalier. It is as you said. Perhaps spending too much time with users has led me to see baselines as too... accommodating.”

Ilar sat back but he wasn’t looking at Nestra. Curious, she sat as well. He was looking for words.

“Yes,” he finally admitted, “I am doing what I abhor the enclave for committing: considering people who are not users as lesser people.”

“Wow, never thought you’d actually admit it.”

“In private, of course. If we were in public I would have had to send you to go through the disciplinary committee on your way out just to keep my image.”

“Charming.”

“Out of curiosity, tell me about this ‘wrongful imprisonment’ of yours?”

Finally, someone to bounce ideas off. Someone who was obviously savvy. Nestra had shared half a story before realizing Ilar might be looking for the leverage she said he didn’t

have, but it was too late by then. Instead of being coy, Ilar seemed... sympathetic. In a bad way.

“And I assume you will want to conduct a counter investigation? Contest the findings?”

“Yes.”

Ilar was speechless. Nestra felt a certain doubt in her ability, which pissed her off even more. Ok, she was out of her depth... but people should be helping instead of giving her the ‘oh you poor thing you’ll hurt your widdle head’ looks, dammit.

“Look, I want to give it a good try, at least. If it were you, would you not want a work friend to stand up for you?”

“In ‘work friends’, the operative term is ‘work’. Otherwise they would just be friends,” Ilar replied in a soft voice.

“Thanks for the nice quote, I’ll put it on my mug.”

“I see you have made up your mind,” Ilar sighed. “That is fine. I will be sure to keep an eye on things and contact you in two weeks, when things will have come to a head one way or another. As I said, it will take months before we are ready to depart due to red tape, ongoing negotiations, and the enclave’s tendency to go back on the deal just before signing. They do it every time to get one last concession.”

“Right. Was there anything else?”

“You may leave at your convenience.”

That meant now.

Nestra checked her messages on the way back. There was one by Baatar with a name and address alongside the expected warnings that all her endeavors were futile yadda yadda. Nestra didn’t care because, one, she had no other options at the moment and two, she’d gotten a ton of stuff by just being too obnoxious to ignore. It was much easier to throw her a bone than to argue with her for hours. Case in point: her incoming transfer to Special Affairs.

She hoped they would give her a raise. And a promotion! Being obnoxious made promotions impossible without some bullshit anyway.

Nestra hurried to the office of a certain Yun Sangah, someone so above her grade she might be a god. She was an Internal Affairs high officer on par with Deputy Chief Ito, though her domain was corruption. Nestra understood there was some overlap between the two departments which explained some friction. A brief check of IA’s organigram showed Yun’s department was significantly larger than Ito’s own. She wondered if it counted for something.

Nestra had no way to play this smart, mostly because she had zero cards in her hands right now. She needed to force it. Yun could take the bait or she could see it as Nestra reaching out far above her station, thus threatening hierarchy and order. Some people preferred peace over justice. Nestra had no way to know in advance and she didn't care that much anyway. Might as well go for it.

In person.

It was past seven when she arrived at the bottom of the Beacon, in central. The building was so massive she almost parked in the wrong parking, and the trip up to IA's floor took another ten minutes. Office hours had officially finished more than an hour before but that didn't mean shit in the beating heart of Threshold. The government was jam-packed with ambitious overachievers. There would be meetings running until 1AM every day. Nestra found the lobby empty, however, the secretary gone for the night. Her ID let her get in anyway.

"Should have stopped for dinner," Nestra grumbled. She was hungry. And angry. And hangry to boot. What a day.

Nestra almost erred making her way through the labyrinthine corridors but fortunately, she still had enough of a brain to pull out a map and find Yun Sangah's office. It was one floor above her. The Beacon was not just a maze, it was absolutely massive.

She came across quite a few people in the standard uniform of government drones in Threshold: black suits for the men, black tailleurs for the women, white shirts, makeup, plastic surgery. Nestra stood out like a sore thumb. It didn't help that East Asian people formed the overwhelming majority of the staff. Eventually, she found the proper corridor. It was obviously the right one because there was only one door. It was locked. No one answered her knocks.

"Shit."

What if Yun wasn't here tonight? That would be bloody stupid. On a hunch, she retreated to the nearest open office, easily finding several people working late on large monitors.

"Excuse me? I'm looking for Deputy Chief Yun Sangah. Would you happen to know if she will be around tonight?"

The employee went through several stages of disbelief, first checking her face, then her clothes, then her badge, before kind of doing a full reset. It was like she'd asked him to calculate a satellite's orbit.

"Hello?"

"Oh, ah, yes, Yun sunbae-nim. She might be here tonight? Who is asking?"

"Clytemnestra Palladian, with the Financial Crime Division. I am in need of... guidance."

He looked at another employee who eyed him with the measuring look of someone watching someone else make a mistake that would erase them from the rat race.

“I am not certain.”

“I see. I will wait a bit longer then.”

She returned to the office’s door. The drone would definitely phone his boss first thing, and Nestra would soon have her answer one way or another. People moved quickly here. The stone had successfully been tossed into the pond. Now she would see those ripples.

It didn’t take long.

“I’m afraid Yun Sunbae-nim is unavailable tonight. Could you leave your contact information please? She will call you as soon as she is available.”

Darn. That meant a soft no, at the very least. Nestra gave her number just in case, not that they needed it, and left, but there was someone waiting for her near the entrance.

“Miss Palladian?” a smooth woman asked with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Nestra noted the intentional omission of her title.

“Mr. Ito would like to see you.”

“Lead the way then,” Nestra said.

The woman walked, turning back several times to look at Nestra like she wasn’t believing what she was seeing. Or not. Maybe Nestra was projecting a little, and also running out of patience.

Nestra’s guide knocked and let Nestra in. She took a moment to look at her surroundings. Her nominal boss’ office was an oasis of serenity in a desert of office decorations provided by the lowest bidder. Blue light fell from the ceiling over mushroom terrariums — or whatever those were called. Some were fluorescent and came with faint traces of mana. Paintings on the wall depicted underground caverns and the likes. It was pretty nice, cozy even.

“Take a seat.”

Ito was a tall, lean man of middle age with an intelligent face. Graying hair at his temple gave him a look of respectability. His suit was deep blue and as spotless as the rest of his person. He looked thoroughly unamused. He leaned back in his seat with quiet annoyance on plain display. Nestra did so. It was a necessary step to get out of here.

He studied her in silence for a while. Nestra knew what he wanted to do. Most people hated silence, but she didn’t. She enjoyed silence very much. Especially when it was going to be filled with an annoying voice any time soon. There was an ephemeral beauty to silence.

Some of those mushrooms looked really weird.

“Officer Clytemnestra Palladian, officially attached to my unit, though we both know that is a convenience.”

Nestra returned her attention to the man, though she didn't reply. He hadn't asked questions yet. The way he talked was slow and deliberate to the point he was even marking the commas and periods with a small pause.

“You know why I have called you here.”

“I can hazard a guess,” Nestra replied.

Again, silence returned to the room.

Sometimes, she felt like there was a script to human interactions or human confrontations she was supposed to follow, like a sheet with directions everyone else had that let the conversation flow forward, and every time she talked, the person with the direction had to check again because they were lost. Sometimes it was annoying. Other times, there was some sort of vindication to it.

“You have come here out of sympathy for your superior Kim Soo-Young.”

Something in the way he watched her reaction told her he was fishing. He might have just learnt she was working against him. That meant that Baatar might not have thrown her to the wolves which was a good thing to know.

“You have never been truly punished for your conduct. You believe your family will protect you. That is why you came here to find someone to champion your efforts to overturn my judgment. You believe the worst you risk is to be fired.”

He glanced at his screen. It was short but enough for her to guess her file was displayed there. She really wondered what it said.

“You are wrong. There are many things a police officer in your position will do to secure an edge, especially in the challenging environment of District Fifteen. I am getting more and more curious as to what those measures were.”

He leaned forward, placing both hands on the desk. It felt like she had his full attention now.

Nestra had to admit, he was really good at conveying messages through posture. It was fascinating, really.

“There is a due process. A way of things. You are hitting your head against the walls, Miss Palladian. Your skull will crack first.”

“Just to clarify, the due process to look into Kim's imprisonment is to check with you?”

Ito remained silent.

“Because you sent her there, then you sealed all records so people couldn’t get a better look into things sooooo... that sounds like a waste of time.”

“You are hereby suspended pending disciplinary action. Leave your badge and your gun here. You should have known better than to test me.”

“You can have the badge but the gun’s mine. MaxSec license.”

“You are no longer MaxSec.”

“Still got the license though,” Nestra said, knowing this one was of the things he couldn’t touch. Gun licenses were extremely hard to revoke in Threshold.

“Here,” she said, leaving her ID on the table. “Was there anything else?”

“I do not want to waste another minute of my time talk—”

“You know there is one thing you didn’t even mention,” Nestra interrupted.

It was so obvious Ito hadn’t been cut off in a while, because anger prevented him from reacting.

“You never insisted Kim was guilty. Didn’t even cross your mind.”

“Get out.”

Nestra gave him one last look, but he wouldn’t be provoked further. Not like she could catch that snake incriminating himself even if she could record him without him knowing. None of this mattered in the grand scheme of things. It was all posturing, but there was one thing that she knew for sure now. Kim was innocent. Someone as angry as Ito would have been outraged that someone like her could question his methods of investigation. The fact he hadn’t even mentioned it was a sign, and she was under the impression he hadn’t tried to act innocent to throw her off because she was too insignificant to matter. Not worth the effort. She showed herself out. She seethed all the way to the parking lot, having to ask a guard to let her out on two occasions since her credentials were already revoked.

Just at the entrance, she came across a familiar figure. Well, it ought to be familiar but Nestra couldn’t quite place her. The East Asian woman strode past in a beautiful white kimono that would look at home in a gala. Strands of mana clung to it, making it shine from a ghostly inner light. She gave Nestra a knowing smirk.

Nestra blinked. That felt... no, it was personal. Her instincts told her it was on purpose. It was a message. A really weird one. What?

Nestra turned to the elevator as its doors closed, but the woman had her back turned.

Familiar but not too much. Who was that? Someone she'd met recently. Someone rich. Japanese, probably. A rich Japanese woman who could have something against her. There was only one who could fit the bill and even then...

"Oh."

Nestra gasped. She knew who this was. She remembered, though last time, the woman had been wearing black. This was.... Shinoda's widow.

The person who had a burning hatred of Kim. Nestra blinked. That sounded like a ridiculous conspiracy but... that timing, that smile... Holy shit. It couldn't be... could it?

Ito and Shinoda's widow working together to fuck up Kim's life?

Nestra breathed down on her anger. Sending someone to the Red House for two decades because you were shown up at funerals? Who the hell did this? No, it was simply too obvious. No one could be that ridiculously petty. No, she refused to believe it. This was just... too many assumptions in a row.

But then what was that bitch doing here? Nestra scratched her head. Better not to dwell on it too much.

"I'm going crazy, seeing schemes everywhere."

What if it were true, though? What if Shinoda's widow goaded Nestra because she knew Nestra was powerless to help Kim? The poisonous thought seeped into her mind, stoking her anger. Her heart raced until she was in her car and her visor rang to hopefully provide a distraction. Unknown number. Nestra picked up immediately.

"You have courage, child, I will grant you this. And integrity. But not much else," a mature woman said.

There was no visual. Nestra didn't need it though. She knew who she was talking to.

"Should I call you sunbae-nim even though I'm pretty much fired?" Nestra asked Deputy Director Yun.

"No need. This is an informal discussion. As I said, I am as impressed by your loyalty as I am by your lack of foresight."

"Look, I got nothing, ok?" Nestra snapped. "No proof, no lead, and the only person with access to everything also happens to be the culprit. You tell me what I'm supposed to do."

"Lie low?"

"Very funny. What is Kim looking at? Twenty years in the Red House? Thirty?"

The person on the other side sighed, a heavy sound filled with regret.

"It's not unusual for high management to clean house on occasion, though I agree, this seems rather... excessive."

"Really?" Nestra hissed. "Excessive? Ruining someone's retirement plan is excessive. This is destroying someone's life, dammit!"

"I got your point, Miss Palladian. It appears your reputation is well-deserved."

"I have a reputation?"

"One does not take Gidung down a peg without earning some attention. You also tend to be... loud. I shall cut to the chase then. I cannot help you in a meaningful amount of time."

"It is rotten."

"I have my suspicions, yes, but I cannot prove it in any significant manner. Now that Kim has been arrested, he might be able to pin everything on her."

"Wait, you're saying he actually stole stuff? I was assuming he'd drummed up false numbers just to get Kim arrested, but that it was false."

"No, he is rotten. Unfortunately, only he knows what he's doing and I suspect he merely skimmed off the top. His department is the only one that does not cost money to the taxpayer because he salvages and reemploys so much of what he seizes. As far as the director is concerned, he's an important asset."

"I see. Untouchable, is what you're saying?"

"You, as Clytemnestra Palladian, have no way to attack him."

"But you do."

"I will not jeopardize my career for such a slim chance of success. As I said, he has access to, and is the only one who understands, all the proofs. Your only chance of success is to go even higher."

"You just said that talking to you was a lack of foresight. The director is even higher. What am I supposed to do, crash down his gates and set myself on fire?"

"Your family, Miss Palladian. Your only hope is to find someone influential enough to make a request, as unlikely as it is. That would be just to get the case open, not even solving it. Your father is not popular but he is respected. He might have the ear of some of the more righteous members of the government. Who knows? I certainly don't see another way."

"I feel like I'm being thrown from desperate gambit to hopeless attempt."

“That is your doing, Miss Palladian. Most other people would have given up a long time ago. Should you fail, you will most likely be blacklisted and likely expelled from civil service, but I will continue to look into Ito’s wrongdoings and when I do, I will make sure Kim is freed.”

“When will that happen?”

“I do not know. People like him believe they are so smart and above the rest of mankind that nothing can ever affect them. He will keep committing crimes until he is caught.”

“I’m not waiting.”

“And I shall not stop you, Miss Palladian. As I said, if you want to free Kim now, you need the word of God. Good luck.”

She hung up. Nestra sat back into her seat, giving herself a minute so the anger would fade away.

She knew what she ought to do. It was time to choose but... was there really a choice? Seth was going to be so mad.

Fuck it.

“Crescent,” Ragnarok said.

As usual, the old woman faced the window away from Nestra. The light of dawn cast the city in a favorable light, but all Nestra could think about was corruption.

“Ragnarok,” Nestra hissed.

“I am curious as to what you want. My secretary mentioned a favor?”

“It relatesss... to my civilian identity.”

Ragnarok turned. Her cold eyes bore into Nestra’s own, a measuring look. Nestra hadn’t been sure but, for some reason, Seth had not objected to Ragnarok linking her demon and human self. That still expanded the list by one.

Ragnarok waved her hand. Shutters locked over the windows, then a background sound made Nestra’s ears buzz. A very high privacy screen then.

“You are aware that the many measures in place to protect your identity are of no use if you voluntarily share this information, right?”

“I know. Only you. Worth it.... I think.”

“What could possibly justify you lowering your mask?”

“There is an innocent in the Red House. I need help saving her.”

Ragnarok turned to full face Nestra. The old monster had to look up towards her large demon form, yet it was Nestra who felt judged.

“Does this relate to Kim Soo-Young?”

“How did you know?” Nestra gasped.

“It is my turn to be honest with you. I already guessed you were Clytemnestra Palladian.”

‘WHAT?’