

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Nestra complained.

Nestra brushed her leg, which smarted something fierce, but regen patch and good coffee were already helping her salvage her evening. Or at least it was trying.

She eyed the person sitting in front of her warily. It was the gleam who’d first interrogated her after she’d found the mausoleum, a gray-eyed woman with short dark hair. Her name was Ashjay. Perhaps she’d introduced herself the last time and Nestra had forgotten, or she hadn’t because she was being a bitch. Ashjay was with the Special Crime division. It was the one that dealt with users who’d gone bad. Really bad.

She was also a fairly strong C-rank metal mage, from her aura. Probably with raiding experience.

The last time they’d faced each other, the haughty gleam had complained she wasn’t showing enough respect, but for now the gleam was just being weirdly helpful. It set Nestra’s teeth on edge.

“I agree, it doesn’t make sense. Their chances of success were simply too low.”

“Right? Between the plethora of cameras and the vicinity of, what, three guild headquarters?”

“Only one around, actually. I agree with the logic, however. Even with their obvious preparations, a successful escape would have required the sort of gear and abilities only powerful users backed by technology could have achieved. When you managed to steer the limo away, they should have known their attempt would have been doomed. The fact they were pinched by your aunt... well, it was certainly more timely than the squad that was en-route, but it only accelerated the inevitable.”

“So rescue was already on the way, right?”

The gleam stared at her for a second, though Nestra wasn’t sure why. It felt like impatience.

“Yes, yes. Of course. Losing contact with a limo and several cameras on a beam trajectory is the sort of thing our monitoring AIs really dislike, and when TianWu Avionics reported an intrusion... well, let’s just say that our augmented squad was coming in hot and loaded. As you said, the attempt was doomed from the start.”

“Then why...”

The gleam rummaged in her bag, drawing an old-school tablet. The rigid kind. It looked really tough.

“Why even try, right? I was wondering the same thing. Look, you’re clearly tired so we can do this another day...”

The gleam looked up to give Nestra a moment to agree. When it was clear curiosity still had the upper hand over exhaustion, she shrugged.

“If not then please have a look at this.”

Four files were open on the tablet. Two she recognized — those were the kidnappers wearing balaclavas, sans the balaclava. She could easily recognize them from the eyes, mouth, and general shape of the face. The other two she didn't know.

“I didn't get to see those two, at least not from up close.”

“One sentry, one driver. Notice anything?”

Three men, one woman, South East Asian though that was the most she could say. They were all middle-aged with the deeply set eyes and gaunt faces she'd come to associate with burnt out veterans. They were also heavily augmented. Two had the sort of face alterations that people just avoided in general because it was basically disfigurement. One of the pictures was blurry and distant. She frowned.

“The one your aunt decapitated. We had to pick a UN database picture for that one. Do they look familiar?”

“Absolutely not. Who are they? Are they even local?”

Ashjay tapped on the glass. More details appeared, including parts of the perps' known profiles. They were drawn from a database Nestra had never heard about, so probably the UN thing previously mentioned. Those were far above Nestra's paygrade and access level.

“No, indeed not. Well spotted. Those are veterans of the Jakartan enclave.”

Nestra frowned. She'd heard about that one.

“Heavily augmented, right?”

“Yes. The Jakartan enclave has the highest ratio of augs to baselines anywhere on the planet. They print their own parts using stolen blueprints, like those you can see here. Most of them would be considered antiques but they are still deadly. The team that attacked you were enforcers for a local user warlord, whose faction just lost a turf war for a segment of the sunken city.”

Nestra frowned, confused.

“The partially flooded alluvial plain where the old Jakarta used to stand. They are exiles, a new mercenary team.”

“So what, they didn't know there are cameras everywhere here?”

“I suspect so, yet they were competent enough to track you down despite a rather inspired reaction on your part. Oh, you were cleared for using the requisition order, by the way. Your reasons were recognized as valid by the brass.”

“No shit. This doesn't explain why anyone would spend what must be a decent amount of money to, what, bring them here? Over the fucking ocean?”

“It is not so complicated. We keep a stable trade route with Jakarta. They have an abundance of mana food items that cannot be found anywhere else, while they rely on us for sophisticated manufactured products. Smuggling people in isn't that difficult considering the size of armored tankers and, well, corruption.”

“Still a very expensive failure. And a predictable one. Were they paid first, then brought here?”

“We are still interrogating them for now, however it appears they came first of their own accord before being recruited. We are still working through the exact way they were compensated.”

“Hmm.”

“We will try to find out why they were after you specifically.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think it might be related to your relationship with the gleam killer?” the user calmly said.

Nestra blinked several times, then tilted her head to the side.

This was a trap. A classical one. Start a talk like a normal conversation, put the suspect at ease, then ask an incriminating question out of the blue to get an answer before the suspect could slow down and think.

This wasn't a debrief. It was an interrogation. Not an official one, of course, because even gleam cops wouldn't dare to cross Internal Affairs so easily, but still a test. Nestra's surprise was more directed at the fact they fucking dared than anything else, but confusion was a good answer to such questions. The fact she was also innocent definitely helped.

In a way, they were right. It was possible that the killer had somehow invited her to the party, then used the opportunity to send goons after her. Their painting was there and she couldn't think of anyone else. There were certainly ways to find where, approximately, the limo would fly, then it was only a matter of driving the van to a suitable spot to trigger the ambush. Again, she couldn't think of anyone but the killer. Her dear crafty colleague didn't know about the painting though. She'd only told Kim. She doubted Kim had hurried to share what were so far only AI-backed assumptions with a completely different branch. Ashjay, therefore, had no way of coming to that conclusion by himself.

“My relationship?” she asked, not hiding her confusion.

Ashjay waited for a moment. An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Nestra was the first to break it, this time. She was running out of patience.

“Would you mind explaining?”

The gleam chuckled. Once.

“Sorry, I had to be sure. I assume you’re not familiar with this then.”

The gleam placed the tablet between them again. This time, the screen showed something she’d never seen before. The background was a stone mausoleum of the same style as the one she’d found the first victim in. A tapestry of eyes looked down and center, towards a really nice, realistic portrait drawn free hand with a black pen. The portrait was Nestra’s.

“What the fuck?”

It was her, seen from profile, turning a little towards the painter but without seeing him. Sublime artistry left her no quarter in the way it depicted the small imperfections that made her human, or at least the mask human, down to the fading scar on her cheek. Whoever had drawn that, they’d rendered her resting bitch face to perfection. And yet, there was something magnetic in the presentation. Some sort of vivacious energy she couldn’t exactly describe. The monochrome hinted at her true nature without revealing anything concrete. It was teasing, not in a sexual way, or at least she didn’t think so, but in a more mysterious manner. Three letters drawn with wild strokes named the artwork.

‘HOW’

“How?” Nestra asked. “How what?”

The gleam shrugged.

“Perhaps it was because you found the first grave by chance while we had to resort to systematic AI roof searches to find more sites. Even our trackers admitted that your nose equaled theirs.”

“My nose isn’t even that good,” Nestra grumbled.

The gleam reclined in her seat, fingers tapping the armrests.

“Hm hm.”

“Damn,” Nestra said.

The killer routinely assassinated powerful C-class raiders. She gulped. Human Nestra was absolutely no match.

“Damn damn damn.”

There was only one way tonight was going to end.

“Do you have any idea why the killer might be interested in you?”

“No, and I believe you have taken enough liberties for tonight,” a cold voice said.

Officer Kim strutted into the room with all the disdainful grace her position afforded her. Aunt Claire walked behind her, a powerful raider in full armor. There it was. There it waaaaas.

“My subordinate has already collaborated with your inquiry without leave, a... favor I shall remember. Hm?”

“We were just having a pleasant discussion,” Ashjay said with a wan smile and eyes that spoke of instinctive anger. Gleams didn’t like being called out by baselines, especially not ones in a position of authority.

“But of course,” Kim said in a tone that said ‘bullshit’ but in a work-environment appropriate sort of way.

“We would need to make sure our witness is safe,” Ashjay continued, undeterred.

“That is why my subordinate will now retire and spend a few days with her family.”

Aunt Claire nodded energetically.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo” Nestra screamed in the privacy of her heart, but it was too late. Her fate was sealed.

The only way for Aunt Claire to agree so readily to something said by a high-level police admin would be that it was her own idea to begin with.

Ashjay made to object, but the truth remained that the Palladians might not be the most influential clan around but they sure as shit knew how to fight, and good luck assassinating Hector Palladian. That was it.

Nestra subjected Aunt Claire to her best pleading eyes, but the goofy aunt was now a cerberus of scale and fury, a guardian undaunted, a fucking jailor, and Nestra might as well just argue with a wall at this point.

“Riel dammit.”

“It’s for your own safety.”

“At least let me go home first.”

“I’ll come with you,” Aunt Claire said in a voice that brooked no arguments.

Nestra nodded. That much was ok, especially with some weird killer suddenly interested in her.

“I want a quick debrief,” Officer Kim told Nestra as soon as they were out. “You can tell me while I drive us to your house so you can pick up stuff. If that is agreeable?” she added a bit belatedly.

Aunt Claire nodded. She was clearly distracted, her eyes searching the nearby high-rises. Nestra could feel Aunt Claire’s aura like howling wind shaking the mountains, the ground vibrating with each one of her steps. Even Kim was feeling it. It was as if the raider’s

presence had suddenly become larger than life. She was impossible to ignore and even averting her eyes could not force Nesta to ignore the quiet pressure.

It made the following conversation awkward. Officer Kim drove herself rather than letting the onboard AI pick a path. She randomly changed course on occasion. It didn't make her questions any less sharp. Once Nesta was done, Kim frowned at the sky.

"Strange and concerning. I find that killer awfully confident to so brazenly murder in one of the world's most secure cities. I agree with your aunt's assessment. You need to hide for a while."

"It would be nice to find the perp instead, no? I picked up a bit from what Ashjay was saying, or rather, not saying."

"And what would that be?"

"The money, and the money," Nesta said as they drove off the outer circle.

"Elaborate," Kim replied curtly.

"The mercs must have been paid in advance to afford their gear. Not the augmentations but at least the van and some of their gear. The credits are probably unmarked, but..."

"But at least we will know if they are foolish. Yes, I was already on it. Anything else?"

"Well, they had to know where I would be. And they did. They knew where the limo would land when scrambled. It's not difficult to do provided you have the exact path, and there is an easy way to get it. The limo company shows the trajectory of the hovercar in real time to anyone who ordered one provided they log in on their website. That's a spending that wasn't done by the mercs, or at least I don't think so because —"

"Jakartan enforcers wouldn't know that, or be familiar with the interface."

"I mean, it's a long shot, but..."

"No, I agree, not because determined mercs could not have done that, but because the killer's profile indicates a strong need to watch and be watched. Therefore, they must have been monitoring your progress. I will get a warrant for the company records. Good, fast thinking. Was there anything else?"

"Well, that's also a long shot but... if that person is interested in me, it's possible that they would have surveillance devices around my place. Or they moved around in person."

She doubted Sereth would have allowed someone to break and enter for obvious reasons, but he would have totally allowed some twat to install cameras around or roamed with a knife because it was 'a learning experience'. Ugh. Actually, maybe Sereth would have only intervened if the killer was on the verge of discovering her identity.

"Alright, I'll leave this task to our good friend Ashjay. Anything else?"

“Not at the moment.”

“Those were good ideas, Palladian. Maybe there is a brain under all that fencing obsession.”

“Hey! I got excellent grades at the police academy.”

The elite civil servant gave her a pitying look.

Aunt Claire gave her a pitying look.

“Ok fine, the bar isn’t that high but still! Oh, we’ve arrived.”

“I’ll go first,” aunt Claire said.

She stopped at the door.

“You didn’t leave your underwear on the ground again, right?”

“Look it’s my house, I do whatever I want. Also no. I’m not a savage.”

Well, not anymore.

The car smoothly parked in front of the entrance. Aunt Claire stepped out with confidence. She stopped as she neared the entrance.

Nestra knew something was wrong. She headed out and when no one stopped her, she approached her front door.

A pair of eyes were drawn on her door. She was sure they weren’t there when she’d left. The two eyes were very human, dark, and they conveyed a sense of confusion and annoyance that was so poignant that Nestra didn’t need the rest of the facial features to feel the emotions drawn there. Interestingly, the choice of the door was meaningful.

Nestra’s house wasn’t secure against gleam intrusions. Someone capable of building the mausoleum would be able to open her walls without difficulties. They didn’t even need to know she had turned off all cameras inside. It was common knowledge that people didn’t want to be filmed in their bedrooms or bathrooms out of a feeling of violation of privacy. It didn’t matter that only security AIs and cops with hard-to-get warrants would access the files. The fact they existed was enough to discourage any cameras. The intruder could have just snuck in from the upper wall to leave their drawing on her mirror, for example. That would have been deeply intrusive. A power move. And it wouldn’t have taken much more time.

Nestra stood in front of her door, considering the situation.

She wasn’t prey, not yet, not to the killer. She could feel it. She was more... an interrogation. Then the mercs were a test. And she’d failed that test in a way the killer hadn’t expected, hence the visible confusion.

“Are you ok?” Aunt Claire asked with clear worry.

The old raider was outraged.

“How dare they? On your own fucking door. Just wait until I get my hands on their grubby little fingers...”

Nestra didn't feel like her personal space had been violated. Well, not yet. Maybe she was getting ahead of herself.

“Let's get in.”

“I get in. You stay here.”

It took five minutes for Aunt Claire to finish checking everything, and that must have been thorough because a B-class could move and perceive at absurd speeds.

“No signs of, well, anything,” Claire reported.

She was still wearing her armor and she was still in full alert, but Nestra breathed a sigh of relief. If the killer had gone in, had touched her stuff, she would have never felt safe in this place anymore.

“Ok, I'll go pick stuff up.”

“Hurry.”

Nestra did hurry. When she walked down with a small suitcase, Aunt Claire was standing at the landing. Her eyes shone weirdly in the dim light. Nestra couldn't read her expressions very well. Worry, perhaps. Doubt.

“Nestra, you have... a lot of food. Mana food. Are you okay? Should I be worried?”

“Ah, it's fine. Mana food is how I got around my cravings. I just have to eat more than the average D-class.”

“Aaaand how do you... get it?”

Nestra hesitated. In the end, she decided to go for truthful but not exhaustive. It worked best with old monsters like her.

“I buy it, I swear. I can afford it, partly thanks to my severance pay and the Gidung thing. So, the guy I'm buying from might not be the most... on the level, but the quality is ok.”

“You buy smuggled food?!”

“Not smuggled, more like stored goods that should have been disposed of or are written off rather than sold. You'd be surprised about the amount of stuff people would waste. Even mana food isn't exempt. Discontinued items that didn't sell, raw material reserved for parties that ended up unused etc etc.”

“How very... illegal of you.”

“There's illegal and then there's unethical. Besides, I'm just buying. What do I know?” Nestra asked, shrugging.

That would be her legal position anyway.

“I have no valid reasons to doubt their credentials.”

“You are wilder than I expected, niece of mine. Alright, enough dallying, this open space is making me nervous.”

“Open space?”

“If it’s not fortified with brown mana, it’s an open space dearie. Let’s go.”

“Wait, I want to drive my own car.”

“Nuh huh. Absolutely not.”

Nestra groaned. Caught in the compound with no way to leave? Well, there were automated taxis but fuck that, she had a damn pink cool car.

“Then at least let me set it up so she follows us, ok?”

“She, hmmm? I already inspected your ride, Nestra. Fine then. I’m coming with you to the garage.”

It took only a minute for Nestra to find the right option in the AI menu, during which Aunt Claire kept complaining about Nestra’s color pick. She was still salty about the whole affair. Once this was done, they walked out in the comfortable night air and Nestra locked the entire house down.

Kim picked them up without issue. Nestra tried to ignore the car’s sway when Claire climbed in. Kim drove a large black spook SUV, probably given by her job. It still couldn’t handle the weight of Claire’s armor without tilting.

“To the Palladian compound,” Kim declared.

The ride was mostly silent but Nestra had to ask.

“Is there any way for me to get involved in the case? Get access to the information?”

“Only as a witness. You are Internal Affairs and on the bench after, arguably, an excellent performance. This is a high profile Special Crime Division case. You are neither qualified nor authorized to follow it.”

“Ok? And?”

“And what, Officer Palladian?” Kim asked, suddenly all business.

“What are the chances I could at least have access to evidences such as interview transcripts in case there are elements I had not recognized at that time that might —”

“Stop,” Kim said.

Nestra did. The officer sighed, then she turned a little abruptly. Nestra could practically hear her teeth grinding.

“I will get you a curated selection of evidence that you might have a valuable opinion on in a secure, confidential location, under the provision that they remain strictly confidential. You will not be able to take anything with you.”

“Works for me,” Nestra said,

The rest of the ride was quiet. The gravel creaked under their tires when the two cars turned into the Palladian compound, gates opening in silence. Mana blossomed on the walls after they crossed the boundaries. It carried the scent of winter on it, with arctic blue mana floating down like a pale veil.

“Mom’s work?” Nestra asked, though it wasn’t a question.

“Powerful these days. Deborah’s getting back into it,” Claire mumbled.

She sounded appreciative.

Nestra bid farewell to Kim who promised to arrange things ‘within a couple of days’. The person waiting for them was not who she expected. He stood aloof, wearing a nice polo. One of the sleeves was empty, however, and bandages covered half of his face.

“Ulysses? Riel, are you ok?” Nestra asked despite herself.

Her brother gave half a smirk. He didn’t seem to be in pain.

“It’s being regrown. Fei Alkan comes every day to fix it. She was my classmate, if you remember her.”

“It’s, errr, been a while,” Nestra replied.

Ulysses felt distant but not overtly hostile. More cold and calculating. But that might have just been her bias talking.

“I’ve activated the barrier. All our security systems are active. I’ll stay there, and we have a couple reliable folks coming over.”

“Have you contacted Debo and the old man?” Claire asked without warmth.

She was looking around again, clearly eager to go out and seek prey.

“Yes, of course. They are leaving the raid.”

“I don’t want to bother them,” Nestra sullenly replied.

“Maybe visit your mother more than once every decade?” Ulysses sweetly suggested.

“Not like they were eager to see me. There is no rush now,” Nestra replied defensively.

“Nestra, a gleam killer painted eyes on your fucking front door. Hector would have my molars on a platter if I didn’t warn him. Your mom would have been worse. Get in, settle in, and for the love of all that is holy, stay put or I’ll break a tibia,” Claire declared.

Then she was gone. Disappeared with the wind.

“Looks like I’m the guide now,” Ulysses said with a shrug.

“I know how to find my way, thank you very much. I lived here? Remember?”

“Oh so you know where you’re sleeping tonight?” Ulysses sweetly replied.

Nestra fumed in her shoes.

“Follow me. It happens to be your bedroom.”

Nestra shook her head while Ulysses walked on with a spry step despite his injuries. He only turned once to give her stern glare.

“Mom kept it mostly intact. Even changed the sheets herself, in case you returned.”

“Yeah ok I’m feeling like an asshole, thanks. The kidnapping attempt wasn’t enough for you?”

“Poor dear. I am more surprised that you would attract enough attention to make an actual enemy.”

“I seem to get under the skin of major assholes, somehow.”

The next glare told her she’d won that particular exchange. The duel was interrupted by an unexpected arbiter in the form of a squealing mass: Helena.

“You’re back! You’re back! Is it for good?”

“No I just have a serial killer on my ass. Maybe.”

The little sister blinked.

“That is soooooo wired.”

“Is your history essay wired as well?” Achilles warned.

“Bleh.”

“Back to your room. It’s due tomorrow. If mom and dad arrive before it’s done, your weekend is done for.”

“Traitor!” Helena bemoaned as she retreated to her room.

Nestra had a quick look. It seemed cleaner than last time. A good sign.

“You are back for a few minutes and already so popular,” Achilles noted. “Well, I need to patrol a bit seeing as tonight has suddenly become very interesting. There are leftovers in the freezer, if needed. Help yourself.”

He left. The last sentence almost sounded like concern.

Nestra walked in her room with a feeling of surrealism. It was almost like the way she'd left it but... wrong. It smelled disused. The colors of her posters had faded. Her old paper books had yellowed. The mass of electronics piled in the corner was probably dead for long, otherwise so out of date they would be unusable.

Her bed felt smaller, somehow. Too small. The worst was the smell. It wasn't bad per se, only slightly dusty but... it wasn't her. This was an old nest now, deserted for so long it had lost her imprint.

Nestra dropped her bag on the bed, then sat down heavily. She was ready to sleep but first, there was some planning required.

Now finally alone in the privacy of her old domain, she considered the three urgent tasks in front of her. It looked like her chill days of just raiding were over, and human Nestra was going to come out of retirement.

The first and most obvious task was to find the killer and eliminate them. The first thing she did was call Sereth, who took a long time to pick up. She had to be sure of a few things first.

“Sorry I was spending time with your friend Siobhan.”

“Wait, you're back together? I didn't know.”

“She only said she wanted some space, not that it was over between us. She's decided that she didn't care that I had horns so long as I was faithful. We have kissed while I was in my true form. It was a very novel experience!”

“I'm genuinely glad for you two,” Nestra said, and found she meant it. “So... am I bothering you right now?”

“Oh no, she's resting while I am preparing tomorrow's slow roast. What was it about?”

“Do you know the killer who's after me?”

There was a pause while Seth switched from goofy brother to ‘I will let you die if you do not perform’ brother. The compartmentalization was rather impressive.

“Yes, though the term is misleading.”

“Do they know what I am?”

“No.”

“But they might suspect?”

“They do not know.”

“Can you at least tell me if it’s one or several people?”

“I will not.”

“So I do have a chance against them?”

“Yes.”

“And if they figure out what I am...”

“As I told you before, my terms are clear. If I judge you were identified through your own carelessness, you will be forced to depart Threshold and lose your civilian identity. I will add that I am having a great time and I would love not to have to run as well, so you’d better not act in a manner unbecoming of an Aszhii. Yes?”

“Ok, fine. I’m on their case then.”

“Good luck, little Nezhra.”

Nestra dropped her visor on her bed. Ok, so she did stand a chance, so it really was up to her. She would have to either direct the police to the killer, or killers for that matter, or slay them herself.

The second option was looking quite attractive. What a good hunt that would be... Yes. Kim said she would keep her appraised so there was that. The rest would be up to demon detective Nestra. And demon detective Nestra could do things the police were not allowed to do, such as setting her human up as bait... an idea to explore. She could also try to interrogate Teneru. Nestra doubted the extravagant artist would be the culprit — she simply didn’t have the manners of a killer. The way she moved was also too meek, too free. She didn’t breathe danger at all. It remained that she had a stone affinity, and the mausoleums were works of an artistic stone gleam. Perhaps they were working together. If not, Teneru might at least be her way into finding out the true identity of anonymous artists vying for Collective membership. It was a good lead, at least, and one the cops wouldn’t be all over for, so it was worth pursuing.

So yeah, find the killer, kill them. Clear. Simple.

The second issue was that she needed to be out to do that. Right now, House Palladian was closed like a clam and Aunt Claire patrolled the grounds. Nestra needed a way to leave. The issue was that she didn’t even know the extent of Aunt Claire’s abilities, not to mention that her mom would be even more competent at detecting stuff. Nestra was a prisoner. That would have to change.

Perhaps Seth could help. Otherwise, she could wait a few days and try to get Ragnarok to help her. She knew masked gleams could get some goodies.

The alternative was being shut in with her family. The horror. She didn’t even have her own kitchen. Hell, she didn’t even have her own bathroom! Unacceptable.

The last issue was... actually it was maybe better if she stayed there for a while.

Ashjay was going to dig into her recent past, try to find where she'd been and so on. Camera records of Nestra riding all over the city on her putacycleta would emerge and that was going to be problematic. Kim... wasn't going to be happy.

But at least the plausible deniability she'd built would help her this time.

Yeah, her life was a mess now.

"Alright, Killer dear. You're between me and my fun."

Nestra shook herself in the confines of her human form. She felt the need to change back to her demon self like an itch crawling under her skin. There was a mirror near her old makeup table. It was still cracked after she'd smashed it the night she'd fled home. A pale face, split in two, glared back under a split gray eyes.

"You now have my full attention."