

Miss Teneru was more than eager to talk about the exhibit since she'd stayed there until it closed. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to learn that seemed relevant at the time. The rumors and gossip of the artistic gleam world hardly felt relevant, not when the suspect was an outsider who used the event as a way to show off. She still offered to accompany Nestra for a little bit after confirming she had a gleam protector.

"Unless you prefer to go with your bodyguard."

"I would rather not. She doesn't know what I'm doing, exactly. It would only worry her."

"Hiding things from a B-class?"

"B-class tend to make people scared. It's going to be difficult to fish for reactions on someone who is constantly afraid. I would rather keep the discussions casual so I can catch some reactions. Your presence might help, although I'm skirting so many rules..."

"Then what's one more!"

Nestra thought about it. She was already bullshitting her way through something she wasn't trained to do. At least, having two people including one gleam asking questions would look more natural than a single baseline going around looking for her own death.

Also, Nestra hadn't had a partner since Shinoda. Felt weird to go at it alone.

Damn it would have been much easier with the old bastard leading the dance.

Unfortunately, Nestra had to rely on her own wit and experience leading a police investigation. It wasn't looking too good. Having an extra pair of eyes might help.

"Alright. We'll go to see Stonegrave first."

"Oh, I know him! Cold, handsome, very quiet about his retirement. Who's the other one?"

"A raider called Ji-Ah."

"I haven't had the pleasure."

By then, they were at the car and Teneru laughed when she saw Nestra's mom.

"Your bodyguard is your mother? Now that is so precious."

Nestra felt like she was eight again.

John Stonegrave didn't have an office. Instead, he worked from his home, renting a meeting room in a nearby high rise if he needed to meet with customers. His home reflected his style of architecture: streamlined, aerial, minimalistic, with plenty of glass. It looked pleasant at

first glance, almost exposed, but the glass was mostly mirrors and the subtle touch of earth mana spoke of secrets and hidden protections. Nestra met him with Teneru, with her mom staying in the car. It was the safest pick.

Stonegrave had not answered a call, so Nestra showed up in person. He opened the door after some delay. He didn't look pleased.

John Stonegrave was a tall man with lean muscles he'd kept from his raiding days. With aristocratic features and graying temples, he bore an aura of sophisticated elegance reinforced by a cotton shirt and gray slacks. He frowned when he met Nestra's eyes. It was rare for a gleam like him to pay attention to the dreg while ignoring an obvious user, but he did.

"Who are you and to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I am Nestra Palladian, with Threshold's internal affairs. This is Miss Teneru, who's acting as a consultant for this case. Would you mind answering some questions?"

"What is this about?" he replied in a bored voice.

"Your presence at the Collective's event a couple of days ago. We could use your help with some questions. Won't take long."

A minute change came over Stonegrave's face, so fleeting Nestra might have missed it if she hadn't been looking for it. Surprise. Fear. She'd hit... something.

"Yes I would absolutely mind answering questions. Unless you are charging me with something, or bringing me in for questioning, then I have nothing to tell you. What did you say your name was again?"

"Clyetemnestra Palladian, Internal Affairs."

"What's Internal Affairs to do with an art event?" he asked with naked suspicion.

"I would love to tell you. May we come in?"

"No. No, no. I am very busy. If we must talk, go through my lawyer. Good day."

He pretty much slammed the door into their face.

"Well, that went well," Teneru chirped. "He didn't even acknowledge me."

"He's going to call around," Nestra complained. "Ugh, better get to Ji-Ah quickly."

"Yes. I'm having entirely too much fun, darling. I wouldn't want you getting disciplined get in the way of our investigation."

Nestra and Teneru caught Ji-Ah in front of her home as she was returning from a raid, courtesy of the police Database. It was a bit of a low blow and if the gleam's reaction was

any indication, she was tired and vulnerable. Ji-Ah was a short woman with clear muscles visible under a rather conservative dress that didn't fit her at all. It was white and a little baggy. Bandages currently covered her left cheek and most of her left forearm, leaving pale skin exposed. A bag hung from the gleam's shoulder.

From up close, Ji-Ah felt even more guarded than on picture. Her posture was tense despite the lack of obvious threats. Her iris shone a deep green, not the jade of Valerian but a deeper color, with shards of black sometimes pierced through it like thunderbolts on a cloudy background. Her file said she was shadow, but clearly another affinity had gained ascendancy.

"Hello Raider Ji-Ah. I am Nestra Palladian with Threshold's Internal Affairs, and this is Miss Teneru who acts as a consultant. Would you mind answering a few questions? It will only take a moment of your time," Nestra said with a winning smile.

During the conversation, Ji-Ah's tension had ballooned into pure panic though she was doing a good job of controlling herself. The reaction was so extreme that Nestra was tempted to reach for her gun, but that probably wouldn't be a good idea. Her mom was fast, but not that fast, and the dark-haired gleam would probably see it coming.

"What is this about?" the woman squeaked.

"Oh, you are not in trouble. We need your help getting some details straight regarding one of the events you attended. The Collective gala?"

Surprise. Confusion.

"The Collective... Ah, the art exhibition. In that gallery?"

"Correct."

"Oh. Fine."

Ji-Ah was clearly scared so Nestra took the initiative. Obviously, terror didn't fit the bill for a gleam killer, at least in Nestra's opinion, but there was no reason not to be thorough.

"May we come in?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

Ji-Ah's apartment turned out to be surprisingly small for someone who ought to be affluent: one floor, a balcony, and a large open space. Despite not having been aired in days, the room smelled amazing thanks to a vast collection of plants, brilliant colors clashing with an otherwise Spartan design. This confirmed Nestra's suspicions that Ji-Ah used nature magic with a minor affinity in shadow mana. Nature mana was an unusual type in Threshold though it was nowhere near rare. While not as flashy as fire or wind, nature mana was versatile and powerful in its own right. Nestra could think of several ways someone with that combination could approach a gleam undetected, then kill them with a trap. Nevertheless, it was difficult for Nestra to watch that stooped, cornered woman and acknowledge her as the killer.

“Hmm. Tea?”

“Oh no thank you, I just had one, but don’t mind me if you want one for yourself.”

“I’d love barley or jujube tea if you have some, darling,” Teneru asked.

“Yes.”

The would-be interrogators waited until the gleam placed a stone cup in front of Teneru. She was shaking a bit. In the distance, some of the apartment’s plants grew taller. Some of them were showing thorns.

“Raid went well?” Nestra asked.

“Yes. Well, I got hurt. Diamond scale lizard.”

Nestra asked a few more innocent questions. In theory, it was the part of the interview she was supposed to use to establish a baseline of behavior. Not that she was doing a real interrogation since she would have needed proof of guilt. The problem was that Ji-Ah was just terrified from the beginning to the end. At no point did she calm down, or exhibit any other emotions.

It was just weird.

“You are from Changang, correct?” Teneru eventually asked.

“Hmmm, yes. My family was. I moved here when I was young. We crossed into China when I was a child. My father...”

The rest was left unfinished. Crossing borders illegally had been a risky endeavor before the incursion. Now, it was pretty much suicide. She must have traveled during the fall of the last North Korean enclaves.

“It must have been very difficult, especially with other gleam children from well-established family,” Teneru continued.

Ji-Ah nodded, though she was still closed.

“I had some trouble as well. Skin problems that didn’t just disappear when I awakened. As a teenager, it was a little difficult but obviously nothing compared to what you must have been through.”

“It was alright. Really. It would have been much worse anywhere else. I am very grateful,” Ji-Ah quickly replied.

“And given your background, we understand that it might be difficult to trust the police.”

“Oh no, I do. I do,” Ji-Ah clearly lied.

Right, that was enough of that. Nestra took back the initiative.

“So before we begin, we were wondering why you attended the event? Don’t take this wrong of course, but you don’t seem very interested in art.”

The studio itself was bare besides plants and one single weird pot holding pens and sundries on a desk.

“Ah, hm. Interested in art. Recently.”

She twisted her hands.

“Interested in art?”

“Hmm. Yeah.”

“What kind of art?”

“Hm. Painting. And sculpture. Mostly sculpture. For now.”

“And that’s why you attended the exhibition?”

“Hm. Yes.”

“Have you been taking any classes?”

All of the studio’s plants had thorns by now. Nestra subtly placed her hands near her visible holster.

“Hm. No. Not yet.”

Ji-Ah sort of melted into her couch. Nestra wasn’t sure what to make of it. As she was considering another approach, a beep came from the entrance behind Nestra. Someone who had the key.

“Ji-Aaaaaaaah,” a female voice happily said.

The change on the raider’s expression was remarkable. From stunted and terrified, she grew panicked yet ready to act. For the first time, Nestra was facing a raider, breath slow and controlled, eyes searching, hands by her side.

If Ji-Ah wanted to kill Nestra now, there was nothing she could do to stop it. Well, human Nestra in any case.

“Is something the matter? Who are you people?”

The voice was high-pitched yet confident. Nestra turned to see who it belonged to. The young auburn twig of a woman who replied strode decisively to the couch. She wore a stained coverall decorated with patches and clinky jewelry. Her large eyes were a deep blue Nestra had rarely seen in a baseline. They narrowed suspiciously.

“We’re with Threshold’s police. My name is Nestra —”

“Is that so? And what could you be doing here?” the newcomer said, lodging herself against Ji-Ah’s anxious form. A tiny white hand grabbed the raider’s calloused fingers.

“Raider Ji-Ah was kindly helping us with an investigation into events that happened during the Collective’s gala.”

Ji-Ah nodded mutely, face suddenly red as a tulip.

“But of course, Ji-Ah dear was here with me! All the time!”

That could be true. Nestra couldn’t remember. She hadn’t paid much attention to what people were doing, only checking if they were in view during the attack or not.

“And you are, darling?” Teneru asked with a pleasant smile.

“Allison Dale. I’m an art student and artist. My work was exposed on the first floor! Oh, I want to be collective too but I’m not there yet.”

“Oh, you have to tell me what you painted. Was it in the university collection?”

“Yes. I did an impressionist rendition of the last Kaiju attack — not very original, I know.”

“A deep bleeding green on a black and red background? Was that you?”

“Yes! Oh, you noticed?”

“Of course darling, I AM a member of the Collective.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize your name!”

Nestra let the two women rant for a good ten minutes, during which neither she nor Ji-Ah uttered a single word. The raider met her eyes, then she shrugged helplessly. At no point did she release the younger woman’s hand though. Her own grabbed it like a lifeline, and they refused to let go.

At this point, Nestra didn’t believe Ji-Ah was a culprit anymore. She still asked a few questions since they were here anyway. Did the gleam feel anyone use shadow mana? No, but some of the artifacts held traces. What about nature? The same thing. Where was she when the attack occurred? The two weren’t sure, but they’d gone to the lavatories and then outside to ‘have a quick talk’. Both blushed so Nestra assumed they’d been doing couple things. Whatever.

They left soon afterward. Teneru was laughing before they even hit the curb.

“Well, I think we can exonerate the lesbian couple?”

“Very likely yes. Stonegrave is a more serious prospect.”

“And since he’s being recalcitrant and you don’t seem to have the authority to bring him in, what are your plans?”

“I will let you know in a couple of days.”

“Oh so you do have a plan.”

“Yes.”

“And you can’t tell me because it’s illegal?”

“No comments. Come, I’ll drive you home.”

“So what’s next?” Mom asked.

Nestra stopped by a curb. She needed something before heading home.

“Wellll I need to rearm.”

The high gleam clearly didn’t expect that. She hummed softly under her breath.

“I can get Hector to join us.”

“Not like that, and you can’t always be by my side for the next eighty years. Look, I need my own weapons. The human ones.”

To her credit, mom didn’t object this time. Nestra smiled when she realized her need to exist was actually being taken seriously.

“Alright. You have an armory?”

“I have a legal supplier. Old colleague. He’s a dealer in various goods now.”

“Clytemnestra, there better not be anything illegal going on.”

“I assure you he has all the licenses. And I’m allowed to purchase his goodies provided I keep them safely stored. Hell, mom, I can even use military gear, no worries. Let me give him a call.”

Gorge was exceptionally polite on the phone, even before learning Nestra’s mom would be around. This made Nestra suspicious. What had crawled up Gorge’s ass that he was suddenly acting like a decent human being? Something smelled fishy.

“Yeah, why don’t you show up to my legit workshop? Since we’re all above ground and so on now.”

“That sounds good.”

The retired twat gave her an address. Nestra and her mom caught a nice lunch first, then they drove to the edge of the city, one one of those semi-disaffected districts that saw little traffic now that so much of the population lived in arcologies. Gorge’s workshop was in a semi-closed inner courtyard between low walls. Nestra recognized old warehouses and

temporary barracks from the founding of the city, back before the tunnels had been finished. To her surprise, there was a small vegetable garden nestled between the concrete walls. The workshop itself occupied a hangar, with a widely opened loading bay harboring the grumpy ex-cop's antique truck. One of his sons was working on it.

"You should really buy yourself a new ride," Nesta said as way of greetings.

Her mom left the car, deciding to have a look at the garden instead. It would give her some privacy.

"I'll be around, sweetie. Just... looking at you handling weapons stresses me out. Don't mind me."

And Nesta tried not to mind Gorge's decidedly nervous expression. His fake smile creped her to fuck.

"Haha, well, I paid for new intestines so I need to save again."

Only then did Nesta realize that bald asshole looked good. Much better than last time to be sure. He was also toned again, some of the belly fat mysteriously reabsorbed. No colostomy bag in sight. With a shirt on, he almost looked respectable.

"Ok, enough. You're not fooling me. What the fuck is this about? Why are you so damn anxious?"

She could tell he considered lying.

"No bullshit. Riel!"

"Alright alright, don't get your knickers in a twist. Look. You know I won't tell about your transformation power, right? There is no need to... impress upon me... what will happen."

Nesta forced herself to keep her resting bitch face on. What the fuck was he on about?

He gave her mom an insistent look. She was now talking to his youngest son, who was bashfully replying.

"Gorge, you're cunt but you're solid. What the fuck caused this reaction?"

"I know what happened to Rangi. Just... I won't fuck with you. Not now, not ever."

What the hell was he talking about? Rangi? Oh, the triad guy she'd sold her first looted artifact to. The cursed spear. The one whose refund request she'd shoved up his ass. Strange. She'd not heard about him since then.

"I know, I know," she said.

"Ok good. Good. Just stating it, is all. Right! So, weapons. I got three major things and some nice accessories, including flashbangs. You're after a gleam, right?"

"Yep. I mean, I hope not. C-class."

Gorge clicked his tongue.

“Yeah, well, if you shoot first and so on, you can take one down but... Nestra, between their armor and your squishy innards, nothing I can sell you will save your life. I don't peddle battle walkers.”

“Hey I'm not asking for a miracle. Besides, I expect I'll need weapons sooner or later. Consider this an investment.”

“Right! Then first thing first, you still have the revolver, right?”

“The Window Maker.”

“Didn't take you for a pun person.”

“Never wanted to make you laugh.”

“Didn't take you for someone who named her gear either.”

“If it can tear through walls, it deserves some attention.”

“Fair enough. Well! I got ya some nice things. First, we need to manage recoil better.”

Nestra thought she was doing well but there was nothing wrong with better gear.

“To be honest, the Window Maker is performing well. It's other things I'm more interested in.”

“Patience, woman,” Gorge replied, suddenly much more energetic. “Stop whining and watch me improve upon a masterpiece. You're gonna need it if you want to stop anything close to C. Can't punch three levels up without a bit of help.”

The bald fucker dragged her to the inner part of his workshop. Shelves packed with rigorously labeled boxes overlooked several specialized machines. Gorge was apparently doing a lot of custom work from carefully labelled prototypes in the shelves. Some of it emitted faint mana.

“Right. First the grip. Trust me, you'll need this.”

Gorge took a mold of her fingers, then used a printer to forge a rubber grip with indents where her digits ought to grab. A counterweight at the bottom of the handle gave the gun a sort of big butt. Made it heavier too. It fit snugly and she found it was much more comfortable.

“Not bad.”

“We're just getting started. Next: a muzzle brake. Fair warning, it will make the gun loud.”

“I'm not leaving home without dampeners nowadays.”

“Good because if you fire that thing without them, you won't need dampeners anymore.”

The muzzle brake Gorge picked as a short black tube that screwed itself at the end of the barrel. The Window Maker was now longer and heavier.

“That will affect my speed.”

“You’ll need to practice drawing, yes, but I’ll make it worth your while. Speaking of, I got you a custom holster. You won’t be able to hide the gun that easily. Just wear it on your hip.”

Nestra sighed. It was a tradeoff, but hopefully a good one.

“Ok. So the recoil was manageable before. Can you explain why I need to accessorize?”

“Bullets!” Gorge replied, suspiciously giddy. “Got you two models. Well, three, but the third one’s special.”

“Hmm?”

Gorge opened a locker, then ceremoniously picked a box. Nestra could feel hints of mana coming from inside.

“Come over here.”

Nestra found that they’d set up a range in a separate hangar. It was well done with multiple targets and a concrete wall at the back. Someone had painted a propaganda image of the mayor dead center. The head and chest parts were already chipped.

“Not a good look, Gorge.”

“My political affiliations are no secret, girl. I call this my cathartic moment.”

“And I call this ‘exhibit A’ in a criminal conspiracy case.”

“Damn, it’s like you were meant to be rat squad. A bitch all the way.”

Nestra rolled her eyes.

“Finally. You were being too nice; I was weirded out.”

“Right. Bullets! First, the bullets you’ve used so far are kinda shit.”

Nestra scoffed.

“What the fuck? You’ve been selling me garbage at half a brick per unit?”

“Hold on. That was the best I could do at the time. Here. This one is your new improved based bullet.”

Nestra picked one from the box. She recognized the flattish tip with a small depression in the middle.

“Hollow point?”

“With a crushed mana crystal layer. If you want to avoid overpenetration or just need some massive flesh damage on a large D-class, that thing will do wonders. Seven hundred a pop because I need to cast portal world lead and copper.”

“Damn inflation is robbing me dry.”

“Can’t put a price on life, Nestra. And here is the armor piercing version.”

Nestra picked it up. The tip was really pointy. And painted blue. It looked nasty.

“Portal-sourced tungsten carbide. Got a slightly deficient batch from the army and let me tell you, this will put a hole in a kaiju. Well, maybe not, but it will definitely skewer a golem like a roast pig.”

“Nice.”

“And finally, for all your C-class needs.”

With religious care, Gorge removed a single bullet from the edge of the box. This one was different, Nestra could tell. It contained so much mana that it might as well be a single-use artifact.

“This will stop a C-class gleam. Actually, no, it will kill them. The head is made of frangible magical lead with finely powdered mana crystals underneath, but that’s not the important part. The important part... is the powder.”

Gorge slotted the cartridge in the Window Maker’s cylinder, then clicked it back in. He handed the revolver back to a wary Nestra.

“Consistent burn pattern powder, made with the help of a pyromancer. It will provide a smooth combustion that will triple the power of the bullet. That means...”

“Nine times the kinetic energy.”

“Yep.”

“And nine times the recoil. What the hell will happen to my wrists?”

“Look, you’re clearly at quirkie level, power-wise. I think you should try. You got regen patches?”

“You know we’re not supposed to abuse those.”

“Just once. See if it works. Trust me, if you shoot this at a C-class they’ll feel it. And who knows? They might be underestimating you enough to try and block it.”

“They’ll feel the mana.”

Gorge gave her a condescending look.

“Nestra. Untransformed, you’re not a killer with an artifact. You’re dreg with a last resort mana tool. Got it?”

“Yeah yeah. Alright, let’s give it a try.”

“Before you do, let me tell you something. This is my pride and joy.”

“Uhu?”

“I named it, the demon bullet.”

He waggled his eyebrows.

“Very subtle.”

“It costs three and a half thousand bucks per unit.”

“Motherfucker,” Nestra spat.

“Buuuut since this is a proof of concept and your first, experimental shot, you can fire one for free. By the way, we tested it in the lab. The gun will hold. The question is your wrist. Or wrists.”

Nestra grumbled but she did step forward. She lined up the shot. The dented form of Mayor Kim waved affably at her at the back of the range, which incidentally smelled of campaign promises. She frowned and changed for a nice shape about ten meters downrange. Impossible to miss with her training. Two hands grip. Stable posture.

BOOM.

Nestra almost fell on her ass but she managed to hold on by some miracle. The gun had buckled in her hand so hard, she’d almost dropped it. Only her index finger on the trigger still held the thing. The sound made her ears hurt through the sound dampener in her ears.

She’d missed. The bullet had veered slightly off course, leaving a fist-sized hole in the reinforced concrete. A blue glow shimmered from the deep point of impact.

“Holy shit. I think that might actually put a hole in a battle walker.”

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

The man removed earplugs with casual smugness, his smile reminiscent of a fat, happy cat.

“I am convinced. I’ll buy two.”

Gorge feigned outrage.

“What? After such a demonstration?”

“You want money, sell that shit to the military. My banker is already going to blow a gasket when he sees how much I’m spending on military-grade hardware.”

“Oh well. If you kill something fun, I’ll use it as an advertisement. Oh, I have a wrapped loader for the revolver ammo. It fits snugly in a pocket until you snap it. Now, what next?”

“I need a gun for when I’ve time to prepare.”

“How do you feel about a shotgun? It chambers the same bullets.”

“You just want me to bulk purchase your damn things.”

But she did purchase the damn thing and it was good. The shotgun was a semi-automatic, ancient design with a custom stock. Thus equipped, Nestra felt more like some movie bounty hunter than an actual officer, especially a rat squad spook. At least the holsters complimented her dress.

“You mentioned flashbangs?”

“You bet I did. I got small ones that fit in a pocket, courtesy of the Stockholm enclave design team.”

In the end, Nestra bought several of those as well as enough ammo for both weapons. The grand total neared twenty-thousand credits. There was another complication when her bank refused the transfer.

“I’m probably raising all kinds of flags right now.”

“It’s alright. All of my customers have the same problem. We’re not in the system properly just yet.”

“Right.”

Threshold’s AIs were nothing if not thorough. After a little while, a visor identity check let her pay the sum. It was a reminder of the kind of grip surveillance had over everything here.

As she walked towards the car, Nestra considered that she hadn’t bought any kind of passive defenses. In a way, her Wellington armored suit was still serviceable after repair but that was not the main point. The main point was, unless she caught the killer off guard or at a distance, she would get splattered before it mattered. Even Max-Sec armor would break like wet paper. C-class killers were not the same as augs like Cleaver who were still subject to the laws of physics. They were in a league of their own. Her only real hope was that the killer apparently liked to play.

Of that, she was pretty sure.

“Nestra dear? Are you done? Oh my, how much metal do you even need?”

Deborah Palladian walked back to the car while holding three freshly picked eggplants in her arms. Gorge’s child was left blushing on the field, waving a goodbye with his stupid face of lovestruck goon. Poor kid.

“Hey we can’t all have arctic magic. Alright, let’s go home.”

“Of course dear. Bye everyone!”

“Goodbye Miss Palladian. Come again.”

Nestra frowned. Almost nobody called her Miss Palladian unless she was in trouble. Not fair.

“Hello?”

“Little Nezhra! I am always happy to hear from you.”

“I, hmmm, listen. You remember that some assholes tried to get me to pay for a spear I had them fence for me? Rings any bells?”

“Oh, yes, your first true portal world artifact! I actually expected you to keep it for sentimental value. We had a tradition, back home...”

“Oh yeah?”

Seth talking spontaneously about his childhood? Now she was curious.

“The first looted treasure would be paraded and exposed to society. Some claimed they were prophetic, the magic of the world bending to speak to the young raider. Ah, but those are distant times. Yes, I remember the people you mentioned. I remember them well...”

His tone shifted to a darker tone.

“My first human kills.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I expected they might become an issue so I bugged Rangi’s office! With technology!”

“Seth, focus please.”

“I am very proud. As for Rangi, he had the misfortune of seeing a picture of Crescent on his datasheet, in an article about team killers. The incident with Valerian.”

Nestra thought for a while.

“Wait. Someone wrote a piece on that?”

“You have been mentioned in several forums as well, as Crescent. There are speculations. Few of them are concerning, however Rangi recognized you and he was preparing to attempt blackmail.”

“Because I sold him stuff before I got legal?”

“And Threshold’s law on unauthorized raids can be quite stringent. I judged that giving Ragnhild a better understanding of what you were doing before you came here was

unwelcome. And he was starting to annoy me. And I am but one Aszhii. I cannot possibly keep track of the ever increasing amount of people who know too much about you.”

“So you killed him?”

“Him and all of his entourage.”

He was really calm about it. He sounded thoroughly uncaring.

“Sereth...”

“My duty is still to the covens. This scum did not appreciate the first favor you did him. I was disinclined to give him another opportunity to make my life more complicated. I am sorry if you are angry, little Nezhra, but in this case, I am tightening my grip.”

Nestra debated arguing over it. Instead, she chose a calmer approach. There was something hard in his voice she didn't quite like.

“You can't just kill people as an easy solution.”

“Life is not as sacred to me as it is to you, Nezhra. If it comforts you, consider this my decision. You had nothing to do with it.”

“I don't want you to kill someone I... appreciate... just because it's convenient.”

“You will notice that I left Mazingwe and Valerian alive. And Helena. And Stibbs. I am already... stretching the terms of my oath for the sake of your happiness. And mine, I suppose. I will not stretch them further.”

Nestra sighed. What could she do? Certainly not force him.

“Can you at least check with me before doing that? I might have easier solutions.”

“Hmmm, true. You could see them as prey. I agree. You may involve yourself in covering your own mistake next time.”

“Do you think this was a mistake? Helping Gorge, I mean.”

“If it were me, I would have gone to the meeting to kill them all. Including Gorge and his children.”

“Holy shit.”

Sereth sighed. She could almost see the long ears drooping.

“Your world is still kind, despite everything your people have gone through. I find the dedication of many users to the common good rather touching. Please be aware that it remains an exception, on earth, and everywhere else. For many, self-preservation and the ascension of their clan to the detriment of all else remains the norm. Ah, but listen to me ruining the mood, little Nezhra. How goes your hunt?”

Sereth's childhood sounded like a dog eat dog kind of thing.

"I found something. Doing research."

"Then what is next for you?"

"Baits and traps."

Sereth chuckled.

"Wonderful. I will be watching with attention. Do try not to die please."

"Sure."

"And one last thing. You do realize that hubris is guiding your actions right now. Yes?"

"What do you mean?" Nestra asked.

She was pretty sure she was playing it safe.

"You could let the human police deal with the killer by helping them. By sharing what you've found. I know anonymous tips are possible. Instead, you are doing your best to catch the prey first. This is as expected of an Aszhii, but it is not the safest path. You need to recognize the pull of our madness, little Nezhra, even if you do not act on it. You must realize when pride and the promise of a challenge affect your decisions, otherwise, one day you will take it too far and die. This is our curse."

"I will risk my identity but not my life."

"It does not matter what you are willing to sacrifice. What matters is that you develop a habit of taking a step back to consider your choices. Hubris is what kills us all in the end. The more aware you are of it, and the less grasp it will have on your soul. Do not forget it."

"I will not."

"I do not wish for you to die quickly, little Nezhra. There is much for you to see yet. Good luck."