

Nestra aspired to some respite after having been cooked to medium-rare by the dungeon and its denizens, but that hope was soon shattered. Her visor screeched in alarm the moment her human self returned to the world. Sereth was more than happy to leave her frantically going through her notifications on her way home since he had things to bake.

Nestra walked into her living room in a state of panic. Seven different calls mostly from the same person using an Internal Affairs extension. And it wasn't Officer Kim. The only message he'd left was 'call me'. She still took ten minutes to check the news, her other messages, and her mailbox in case there was something she'd better find out on her own. There was just a speeding ticket. And two parking tickets.

"Riel dammit. My precious money."

Otherwise, some good news. Helena had sent her a copy of her school's newsletter. The doctor in charge had been suspended for medical malpractice. He was probably going to be fired after that. Helena also said her classmates had heard about her chronic pain. Since then, she had managed to slither into the good graces of one of the more raid-oriented groups.

"I was probably a bit spiky as well. It helps my mood not being constantly in pain, you know?"

Poor Helena.

"Also, is there any way for Sashimi to find me in portal worlds? I don't think I can feed her when I'm raiding with the school, but I'd love for her buoyancy to look after me."

"Absolutely the fuck not," Nestra typed back. "If you raid with a team and they're not void users, they're prey. Sashimi will just bite their arms off. That's what she tried to do to me!"

"Aw she's so precious!"

Nestra decided to ignore that.

With nothing about to explode, Nestra decided to bite the bullet. She sat down in her living room with a cup of coffee.

The person picked up in seconds. His voice was deep and soft.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Officer Clytemnestra Palladian, detached with IA. You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes. I'm Detective Baatar, also with the rat squad, haha. Is everything alright?"

"Yes yes, sorry, I had shit signal. Didn't get your call. What's the matter?"

"It's better if we talk face to face. It concerns your superior, Officer Kim."

“Officer Kim? What happened to her? Is she alright?” Nestra said with shock.

“She is safe, yes.”

“Oh, good. Then what is this about?”

“As I said, I would prefer it if we talked face to face. Could you come to our offices in Central? Otherwise, we can meet at your home. I was on my way to check on you, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh? I don’t mind my place.”

Nestra was tired and didn’t want to deal with rush hour.

“I will be there in ten. See you.”

Detective Baatar was a heavysset Asian man with the largest shoulders she’d ever seen on a quirkie. He wore a mustache and beard, and his hair long, a rather unusual choice for Internal Affairs. She wasn’t sure why but he just felt solid. The mana from his quirk hovered around his head. She wasn’t exactly sure what his speciality was, but it had to relate to his mind, somehow.

It could also be his sense of smell but then he’d probably work with customs.

“Hello. Thanks for having me,” he greeted her warmly.

His handshake was warm and firm, but not crushing. She let him in. He accepted coffee.

“It might be a long night.”

“Stop with the suspense. Tell me about Officer Kim,” Nestra demanded.

“After we’re seated. I don’t want us to be interrupted.”

“Fine.”

And it was a good thing too. As soon as they were settled, Detective Baatar revealed the real reason why he was here.

“As of today, Officer Kim Soo-Young has been arrested on charges of aggravated embezzlement.”

“What?”

“I am serious.”

Nestra shook her head.

“Nah, you’re joking. Not Kim. Definitely not her.”

He nodded.

“I thought you might believe that but, unfortunately, the proof is damning.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe it.”

Nestra frowned.

“So you are here to interrogate me.”

“As a potential witness. Incriminating documents go back over two years ago. You were not involved in any steps that we could identify, so I personally believe you are not involved...”

Nestra sipped her coffee. It was cold now.

Fuck.

So that was why Kim had been so quiet for a week or so. She’d been under suspicion and then arrested of all things. What to do? There was no way Nestra would be left alone after that, not with how unsavory her profile was. The existence of the ‘putasikleta’ was common knowledge, and it was justification enough to fire her. Kim had kept her because Nestra was skilful enough to justify the embarrassment. Whoever had gotten rid of her boss would have no such qualms. And besides, that wasn’t relevant.

There was no way in hell that officer Kim was corrupt. Absolutely no way. It wasn’t just that Nestra trusted her. The obvious drive the woman had in hunting down signs of corpo corruption showed a mind dedicated to justice, or at the very least to a certain commitment. The amount of dissociation required to go after Gidung with the determination of a hound all while being mired in money crime just didn’t make any sense. It was possible, of course, just so damn unlikely.

No, Kim had to be innocent. She was so straight-laced it had caused her grief during Shinoda’s burial. She had to have enemies who had reasons to frame her.

Nestra had to help. She wouldn’t just drop Kim like a stone. It wouldn’t be right. That left her with exactly one, extremely annoying option.

“Holy shit. I’m going to have to do some detective work.”

The humanity. The Aszhiity, even. Could Nestra even manage? Probably not alone. Beyond just a matter of skill and training, Internal Affairs were known for compartmentalizing and

also for purging their members without mercy. Those who watched the watchers had no tolerance for compromised agents. Officer Kim would stay in the Red House for the next two decades unless Nestra managed to find irrefutable evidence of a mistake. To do so would require access to data only a select few people had clearance for, a precaution so that a rotten apple couldn't contaminate the whole basket. Riel, even Nestra wasn't sure what Kim was working on most of the time. She only knew that her focus was on financial crimes. It was just that Nestra had never been involved: she was only detached to the rat squad because of what happened in Fifteen.

Hmm.

"There has to be something we can do," she idly remarked.

"There is something you could do, I suppose. We can go to the Red House together. Talk to her."

Nestra frowned.

"That doesn't sound right. Would they even let me in? You don't have that sort of authority."

"I told you, you are not a suspect. I can certainly bring in a witness to see one of the prisoners if I can justify it, and I can. Officer Kim trusts you, and has trusted you for the District Fifteen case."

Nestra didn't really have to think about it. She wanted to see Kim. She needed to see Kim so she could get direction. She was about sixty percent sure the dear detective was lying out of his ass and Nestra was absolutely a suspect, but her secrets were of another nature, and she needed to find out more. Maybe she could help Kim, but certainly not by herself.

"When can we go?"

"Now, actually. If we hurry, we can probably get there before 5PM."

"When are the visiting hours?"

The detective gave her a look of pity.

"This is the Red House, Officer Palladian. There are no visiting hours."

"So, you're a quirkie?" Nestra asked once they were in the car.

Baatar smiled, though it wasn't a nice one.

"Yeah, visual with a focus on micro-displays of emotions. I can even catch some B-class raiders, sometimes. You?"

“Not really a quirkie since I lack the localized focus. I got a little bit of everything. Full circuit but no core.”

“Never heard of that one before.”

“It’s rare, apparently. So, is interrogation why you joined the rat squad?”

“Nope. You?”

“I was picked up when they shut down my unit. Max-Sec.”

“Yeah, I was picked up as well.”

Nestra gave him a moment. He seemed reluctant to continue, only opening up after some hesitation.

“I turned on my old squad. What else? They were using the database to racketeer the families of imprisoned perps.”

“Nasty. I turned on a teammate too. To be fair, he started it.”

That damn Bard.

“What did he do?”

“Kill two members of my squad. So I blew his chest off.”

“Wow. You Max-Sec cowboys don’t do things halfway.”

Nestra fought off a couple of bad memories. Damn, how did those all gleams manage? They had to have enough bad memories to traumatize a bus.

“You don’t seem surprised that I was Max-Sec,” she said after a while.

“It was in your file.”

“Or that I killed a teammate.”

“If he did betray you, he had it coming. And you would not lie about this..”

“You got my measure back in my home, right?”

“Yes. I established a baseline and ascertained that your reaction to the news of Kim’s arrest was genuine. You showed no fear, only outrage and disbelief.”

Nestra nodded to herself. She’d been profiled and interrogated after all.

“Most people get mad at this stage of the conversation,” Baatar chuckled.

“Oh no, I just assumed you’d do it at the prison.”

“I prefer to be prepared.”

Nestra smiled. A glance at Baatar showed that the man was markedly more relaxed now.

“So, tell me about the case?” she continued.

“Sure. What do you know of criminal forfeiture?”

“Errr, when people get arrested, the city seizes their belongings and if they are found guilty, the fine will be levied from the collected assets?”

“Yes, barring some accommodation for the family. Internal Affairs does the same thing with the belongings of our rotten colleagues, but the valuation is difficult because a lot of goods are illegal: drugs, outlawed augs, illegal weapons, contraband, the works. There is no real market, therefore they get valued according to, well, it’s complicated. That’s where Officer Kim comes in. Her specialty is financial crime. Criminal forfeiture asset valuation falls under her umbrella.”

“So, she, what, misrepresented their values?”

“Allegedly yes. Apparently, she also valued certain high-risk stocks and options at a fraction of their true values then pocketing the difference when the positions closed. This has been going on for a while.”

“Huh.”

“Illegal asset valuation is an insanely complicated topic that requires a deep understanding of both high-level finance and financial law. There are few people in Threshold who can manage it. It is no wonder that it took so long for her to be found out.”

“Allegedly,” Nestra grumbled.

Baatar conceded the point with a grunt. This one was virile speech for: okay sure. Nestra was very good at interpreting grunts. It was an efficient form of communication.

“What about monitoring AIs?”

“There is a limit to what they can achieve. If an agent marks a volatile asset portfolio as a full loss, the AI will accept it. There are no AIs capable of predicting market trends just yet.”

“I see.”

Nestra retreated to her bubble while she considered the problem. If the crime was so complicated that only a handful of people could even understand it, what chance did she have? She really needed to talk to Kim to get some direction.

Nestra felt her anxiety mounting as the detective's car drove up the inner ring towards the Red House.

The damn Red House. It was a legendary place, mentioned even in foreign vids as THE prison for dangerous gleams who had been taken alive. It was defended by some of the most sophisticated systems on earth. There were rumors that a gleam attempt to break in had ended up with the culprits choking to death under several tons of soil. It was the kind of place where the inmates could have made Teneru flinch. It was also the kind of place where trying anything would result in immediate termination. The Red House was not the worst option. The worst option was death. The Red House was the last humane barrier on the path to summary execution, and that mercy was the kind post-Incursion mankind could spare, which wasn't much. And now, Kim was stuck in there with the degenerates. And Nestra was going in voluntarily. Fuck!

The detective's car followed an off-ramp then turned right towards a circle of tall hedges dominated by the concrete dome of the House, painted red, naturally. It was encircled by a barren stone plaza. Nestra knew the city had left the buried turret emplacements visible just to give people ideas about the sheer size of the defenses — and how anything short of a main battle tank would get shredded in seconds. If there was a place that illustrated that even C-grade monsters were not immune to technology, that was it. An answer would be provided with buried mines and 1200 tungsten rounds a minute. It was all irrelevant to Nestra. She was constantly surrounded by people who could kill her with a slap, some of them were even nice, therefore this was just another session of 'I can die any moment and it's all outside of my control'.

Maybe she was turning into a Stoic.

"Always a sight," detective Baatar mumbled.

Nestra wasn't sure. The hedges prevented anything from being seen. It was there that they were stopped for the first time. The car went through a gate, then metal rods popped up in front and behind them to lock them in. They were scanned for a solid minute before a voice sounded from a machine next to the driver. Nestra hadn't spotted a single person yet. It was all just chrome, glass, and intimidation.

"Detective Baatar, Officer Palladian, please state the reason for your visit," a disembodied voice said.

Nestra let Baatar take the lead.

"I'm in charge of case file EG13715, Kim Soo-Young. I would like to talk to the suspect. Officer Palladian is with me."

“Accreditation accepted. Weaponry detected: a class 2 restricted handgun on your person, a class 2 restricted shotgun in your trunk. You may not carry any weapon inside. Please deposit both weapons and their ammunition in the provided receptacle. They will be returned once you depart.”

“Uh, sure. I need to get out of the car to get the shotgun.”

“You may freely move within the boundary of the cage.”

“Very well.”

It didn't take too long for Baatar to comply. Just long enough for Nestra to spot the barrel pointed at her. It was coming from a semi-concealed turret above her head. There were also suspicious extensions that smelled faintly of electrical mana. Yeah, they weren't joking.

“I'm done,” Baatar said.

“Acknowledged. Before you are granted entry, please be notified that Officer Palladian rates as a D+ threat.”

Baatar gave her a shocked look.

“What? Why?” Nestra asked, but the voice ignored her.

“What do you mean?” Baatar asked.

There was a pause during which the two detectives exchanged a confused glance.

“I will clarify. Officer Palladian is considered a threat equal to that of a D-class raider.”

“I got that.”

“Any attempt at violence within the vicinity of the Red House will be met with immediate and maximal prejudice. We notify you of her status and remind you that she is here under your responsibility. Should you perish because of her actions, your next of kin may not pursue the Red House for negligence.”

“I understand.”

“This is merely a legal precaution. You may proceed. Follow the green arrows.”

The cage opened, freeing the vehicle. Baatar continued on though he was obviously flustered.

“I don't know if I should be flattered or annoyed,” Nestra commented.

“I think we should have come tomorrow instead to account for all the security bullshit. At least they haven't done any cavity search.”

He shivered.

‘Yet,’ Nestra added to make the detective squirm a little.

It worked. A sinking path led to an underground parking of modest size. It was mostly empty at the time. Interestingly, shutters covered the few occupied spots.

“More security?”

“It prevents visitors from identifying each other,” Baatar explained. “Is this your first time here?”

“Yeah. We were more on the arresting side and less on the interrogating side.”

“They are anal about security. You have no idea.”

They followed the green arrows to a parking spot, then back to yet another set of doors where they were, once again, scanned. So far, they hadn’t met a single living person.

“I expected more goons,” Nestra admitted.

“The vids love their muscle heads but the Red House is mostly automatized. More people means more fault points. Besides gleams, people here are mostly IT and medical. And they wear masks.”

“Masks? Real masks?”

“Yep. They don’t even know each other. Cerberus does though. It’s the local AI.”

Baatar was right. It wasn’t like in the vids, with heavily armed guards and mysterious high gleams. Instead, all she could see was slick steel and concrete barriers with the occasional piece of glass. It even smelled a bit stale. There were hidden turrets though, for a certain value of hidden. Traces of mana hinted at additional magical defenses. If anything, the Red House was designed to delay rather than kill.

Delay old monsters, that is. Even demon Nestra would get pasted here.

The fact all corrupt IA officers ended here was more a symbol than a necessity. This was a prison designed for gleams, by gleams. Hell, even implants could be deactivated and removed. But not gleam powers. This was a place for the most dangerous criminals, and for those who deserved to be in the same spot.

And Officer Kim, also. Nestra sighed after the first airlock, when finally they ended up in a spacious, square room furnished with designer seats, a vending machine, and a coffee machine. A short corridor on the side led to toilets.

This screamed: 'you'll be here for a while' which was a shame because Nestra was already getting hungry. And tired. Fate had other plans, fortunately.

A man in a mask entered the quiet room from the opposite side. He was slight, wearing a white suit and shirt combo that put him at odds with the sterile environment. His steps were that of a dancer, and his eyes, visible through the slits, were those of a gleam, a mesmerizing light blue and pure black mix that showed shadow and manakinesis mastery. He was B-class, maybe not as powerful as Nestra's mom, but close.

She had no idea what sort of stuff shadow and pure mana could achieve when combined but she wasn't eager to find out.

"Welcome," the man said. "I am the warden. I came to see you in person as a gesture of... respect given the circumstances."

Nestra frowned.

"Hmm, good evening. What do you mean?" Baatar asked.

"Your request to see prisoner Kim Soo-Young has been denied by your hierarchy."

"What?" Baatar sputtered. "But... I'm in charge of her case?"

The gleam tilted his head. Nestra felt his gaze on her, heavy, like a vise across her temples, even as he answered her colleague.

"It would be more accurate to say you are in charge of completing the investigation. Your hierarchy considered that there was enough evidence to imprison Miss Kim in anticipation of her trial. Nevertheless, I am not the one who decides who approves access, or rather, I can deny it out of security concerns, but that wasn't the case here. I'm afraid I cannot let you see her until your superiors agree to it."

He waited a bit, perhaps for their reaction. Nestra was just more and more confused. What was going on? Was it a cover up of some sort?

"I don't understand," Baatar stuttered.

"You are welcome to return after having obtained the proper clearance. Until then, I must regretfully ask you to leave, although you may linger here for up to an hour if you desire. Out of sympathy for your plight."

Nestra's stomach grumbled. She forced back a yawn.

"I think we should go," she told Baatar, who grunted in approval.

"If there is nothing else, I will depart. Have a good evening," the warden said.

"You too," Nestra mechanically replied.

What the fuck was going on?

"I think I want more details," Nestra said back in the car. "What is your role, exactly?"

Baatar grunted in annoyance. While Nestra was merely frustrated, Baatar was livid. She gave him a moment.

"Novsh min. That guy fucked me over."

"What?"

"This is my first case, Officer Palladian. I was just transferred."

Nestra calmed down because it sounded familiar.

"Who's your boss?"

"Our boss," Baatar corrected, "is Captain Ito. He is Kim's superior. Kim is our superior."

Nestra appreciated what went unsaid. She was a MaxSec officer, basically a grunt who had never been promoted mostly due to a lack of funds and open positions but also perhaps maybe possibly due to her personality. A mystery. Baatar was a detective. He was one rank above her on the food chain.

"Okay."

"As per protocol, internal inquiries must receive the stamp of approval of two different people. I am the second one."

"Who's the first?"

"That would be Ito himself, the same one who asked me to validate his findings."

"Uh oh."

"I still need to retrieve part of the case file from the archives in central. I need to show up in person."

He checked the time. It was almost seven.

"It will have to be tomorrow. Threshold never sleeps but I've been at this since 6AM."

Nestra yawned. She needed to sleep the raid off as well.

"Well, it's not a burning case. Can I come with you?"

"I don't think it will help."

"Detective."

"Just call me Baatar and I will call you Nestra? Your file said you preferred that."

"Do they also list my favorite food?" Nestra grumbled.

That would be amazing since a full list of the stuff she liked would need to be displayed on a spreadsheet.

"It is quite comprehensive, but your medical and psychological records are sealed. As for what you asked... yes, you can come, but I fear this would only lead to disappointment."

"I know, but I will go anyway.."

"Sure then."

Nestra woke up at 3AM, half rested and craving some of the ice plant salad with sesame sauce she had in the fridge. She was now eating a good amount of veggies, which showed she was definitely getting better. And also that she was an adult Aszhii with a balanced diet who ate her broccoli, provided it wasn't boiled. Boiled broccoli was a disgrace.

Also, she had a message. It had been sent at 11PM which counted as office closing time for the city's workaholics. It came from a certain Mr. Ilar

Nestra searched her memory. Ilar, Ilar. That name was familiar. Hmmm. He was with Special Affairs, Enclave Management Section.

"Wait, I remember him."

He was the guy who'd debriefed her after her first, one-sided meeting with Fox Mask! Not like that other time when Nestra had shown her she wasn't a pushover. She remembered Ilar had an interest in grand theft committed by gleams and specifically, by suspected enclavers. What did he want with her? She checked the message's content.

She was summoned the next day at 2PM in the... that couldn't be right.

The zoo?

The zoo was a small patch of wilderness right outside the walls that was left unchecked for training purposes. All of the local portals were allowed to breach. Most of the walls' surroundings were flat terrain, especially with Threshold Army's preferred herbicide being white phosphorus. The zoo was designed for raiders who intended to operate beyond the wall, as well as the army. It was full of monsters.

It was also used to test foreign raiders who wanted to immigrate.

Aunt Claire had mentioned a lot of people had sex there, though Nestra wasn't sure what made a fenced off patch of forest with Spartan barracks a good place to engage in coitus.

The ways of the allosexuals remained a mystery.

"Maybe it's the stress?"

More importantly, even MaxSec hadn't trained there. Why did they want her? The message told her to grab her gear and weapons. It wasn't a request.

She double checked that it was addressed to Nestra's civilian identity and not a glitched message to Crescent. Nope. It was for human Nestra.

"Weird as hell but ok," she said while chewing on a crunchy leaf.

The archives occupied an underground section at the periphery of central. The building's atrium was the very definition of 'this should have been an email': gray and boring, with nary a decoration. It smelled like cheap coffee and bureaucracy. Nestra felt a headache just looking at the leaflets.

'How to make your data management system ISO-9001 compliant in seven easy steps: a guide'.

She would rather sit on a trash spider eggsack with her buttcheeks slathered in honey.

There were open terminals, displays showing how to connect to the database and only two bored employees at a desk in a maximum attempt to get people to do their business online. The young man at the desk still welcomed them with an open smile. Nestra deduced he could only be an intern since his enthusiasm hadn't been sucked out just yet.

"Hello! Welcome to the Threshold Archives. My name is Xun. How may I assist you today?"

"Good day to you as well," Baatar greeted. "I'm Detective Baatar and this is my colleague, Officer Palladian. We would like to get access to all files related to case EG13715. Here are my credentials."

"Oh, of course. I will retrieve everything and you can consult them on the secured terminal in that room over there. You said the number was EG..."

"One three seven one five."

"Alright. Here I am. Hmmm."

He frowned.

“Terribly sorry sir. You seem to have access to the register itself, but the files appear to be locked.”

Baatar sighed. It was as they had expected.

“I’m afraid I can’t do anything on this end.”

“Well, I think things couldn’t be more clear,” Baatar grunted. “Shall we?”

“Give me a minute,” Nestra said.

Baatar shrugged before making his way to the coffee machine for what would undoubtedly be some terrible arabica.

Nestra returned her full attention to Xun, who smiled awkwardly. She didn’t know how to charm people, but she sure as hell knew how to move an intern.

By making them believe they mattered, because their employers would never do that.

“Maybe you could help me out.”

“I really can’t let you access those files. I don’t even have clearance.”

“Oh, I know that, but what I’m interested in is who locked it. Could it possibly be found out?”

“I mean, it’s in the file’s metadata but... I can’t let you see that.”

“No, naturally. Actually, the case file is about a friend of mine who I believe is innocent, and now the cop in charge of the case is locked out of the case. Kind of weird, don’t you think?”

She could pretty much see the stars shining in the young man’s eyes. A worthy cause.

“Shame you can’t let me see the metadata you mentioned, because I’m pretty sure the person who locked those files has something to hide.”

“Sure, sure,” Xun replied with a smile. “I will just do a routine check of the files... yep, seems like they were all locked by the same person. No anomalies there. Whelp! I suddenly feel an urge to go to the lavatories. If you will excuse me?”

“But of course,” Nestra replied with a knowing smile.

The young man stretched, turned the monitor sideways, then left with a hum. The other employee gave him a curious smile before returning to her business. As soon as he was gone, Nestra leaned forward over the counter. The open window showed the properties of the locked file: date of creation, last modified etc. More importantly, there was the ID of the person who had encrypted it.

Locked by order of Ito Junpei, captain.

She turned the monitor back.

Yep, no mystery here. Kim's own boss was the one who didn't want anyone looking into stuff. The thing was, why be so heavy-handed about it? She returned to Baatar.

He had the answer.

"You must be very, very new to high level office politics."

"I actually avoid office politics like the plague."

"How in the name of Riel did you manage until now?"

"By being competent in a dead end job where nobody gave a shit?" Nestra replied.

Baatar grunted. This one meant 'fair point'.

"Are you going to explain why the guy who put Kim in prison is also getting away with preventing anybody else from looking into it? Because that's just insane."

"Yes, I can. Let me explain. You are tier 1. That means, you're a mosquito. A cog. I am tier 2. That means I'm a slightly larger cog who can be trusted with other, smaller cogs such as patrollers or drone specialists or you. Kim Soo-Young is tier 3. That means she's in the game. If she needs a small ad hoc team, she can make a request and she'll get it. She can convoke small guild managers and they'd better listen. She matters in Threshold. Ito is tier 4. Tier 4s do politics, that means they're dealing with budget, development, workforce, the works. Most tier 4s in this administration handle 300 people or more. Ito is worse. He handles all of the aspects of the rat squad's finance division. That means he's the only person in Threshold who understands what he's doing."

"That doesn't authorize him to throw anyone he wants in the can."

"Who's going to stop him? Do you know how many people get purged from their positions every week because of something they might have no idea they've done?"

"So it's just another asshole abusing his power. And being really obvious about it."

"Of course, he's obvious about it," Baatar said,

He looked at his half-drunk cup, then dumped the rest in the trash bin.

"It's a polite way to tell me to drop it. He's being direct about it too."

"It's not right. AI is supposed to —"

“I KNOW!”

Baatar winced.

“I know. Sorry. I... I hoped things would be different in the rat squad, but it's not. Ito is entrenched. He's unassailable.”

“You could bypass him?”

The detective massaged the bridge of his nose, and Nestra understood she'd lost him. He had given up. It was over for him.

She wasn't even angry. She understood. She'd been at the business end of the administration before, and that was with her being sheltered and not really replaceable. For him who'd just be transferred, it would be a death warrant to go after Ito and fail.

“Ito's boss plays golf with the mayor. As far as we're concerned, he's the Emperor. I wouldn't get a foot in, then Ito would be notified and I'd spend the rest of my natural lifespan clearing fatbergs in the sewers. By hand. Look, let me explain.”

“I got it. We don't got shit. Ito is the only one who understands what Ito does. Kim is inconsequential and you are being offered a way out.”

“I have a wife. We're expecting our second.”

Baatar lowered his gaze.

“I'm no hero. I'm sorry. I'd say it's Kim or me but it wouldn't be accurate. If I speak up, it will be Kim AND me. I don't stand a choice.”

“I understand.”

He blinked.

“I really do,” she insisted

“But you're not giving up.”

“Not without trying a bit. Kim is innocent. If I don't try anything, she'll spend the next twenty years behind bars. I'm not leaving her to dry like that.”

“They're gonna come after you.”

“It's ok,” Nestra said. “I'm a nepo baby with a short-fused aunt. If anyone can stick their neck out, it's me.”

“Well, you're more courageous than me. Drive you back?”

“To my home, yeah.”

And by Riel was that an awkward ride.

It was back to square zero. Kim was fucked. Nestra had no obvious way to help her, no leads, and even if she did, no one to show it to. She needed advice. Advice from someone in IA, perhaps. A quick search of her hierarchy on the internal subnet showed that there were only half a dozen people at Ito's level. She gave Baatar a call. He picked up. His voice was slurred. He'd been drinking.

“Yeah?”

“Listen, there's one last thing you could do. Please?”

“I'm listening.”

“Just, hypothetically, who would be Ito's rivals?”

Baatar sighed. Nestra could guess what he thought about her idea.

“I'll ask around, but... I'll just ask around.”

“Thanks.”

“You should let it go.”

“Not until they fire my ass. Enjoy your day.”

Nestra had lunch, then she climbed in her pink roadster. It was time to see what Mr. Ilar wanted from her.

Threshold's gate was one of the oldest structures in the city, and that was fine, because three hundred tons of enchanted steel between what's trying to kill you and you would never be a bad idea. The queue to get out was short and by short, Nestra meant that it was one military convoy and that was it. The head guard at the gate — a grizzled aged sergeant — ogled her with complete disbelief when she presented her fresh pass.

“You're aware that the road outside isn't secure, right?”

Nestra was wearing her Wellington armor, but she was still a lone woman in a civvie car.

“I got a monster killing weapon and I know how to use it,” she replied, showing the Windowmaker. “Incidents are rare, right?”

“Yes, but... do you have anything more?”

“A shotgun in the trunk.”

The guard thought for a second.

“Go get it while I approve the transfer. Just keep in mind that you are on your own if something comes up. Don't stop for anything and keep the emergency line on fast dial.”

Nestra grabbed the shotgun, which got a huff of approval by the sergeant, then she was past the gate. The horizon opened in front of her. The plain, the forest, the mountains beyond, it was just so weird looking at all of that land with her human eyes and there wasn't a wall in view.

It was the first time she'd left the confines of the city as a human, second time as a demon if one didn't include the trans-dimensional escapades. It was... a little disappointing. Just an asphalt path heading out in a straight line through a cratered wasteland of cracked stones upon which yellow grass clung for dear life, the result of decades of bombardment. There was nothing to see but desolation for kilometers upon kilometers.

Reality seldom lived up to hopes.

Nestra accelerated. She wanted to be back by nightfall.

Base camp was a sad affair. It was the bare minimum, if that, and she would have spent two hours going through security if a mook in a suit hadn't come to pick her up. Even then, the gleam guard's condescending disbelief grated her nerves.

Ilar waited for her in a borrowed office. He greeted her warmly.

“Officer Palladian, please take a seat.”

She did so. He offered coffee which she accepted. It sucked.

“You must be curious as to what you're doing here,” he finally said.

“Yes.”

“Straight to it then. I intend to test your physical fitness in anticipation of a possible trip to the Sword King Enclave.”

Nestra almost spit her coffee.

“What?”

“I am very serious.”

“The poster enclave for aggressive eugenics? The super arrogant enclave that embodies gleam supremacy? The hardcore isolationists? Those sword saints?”

“Yes.”

He sat with his fingers interlocked.

“May I ask why?” she insisted.

“The Sword King enclave is requesting a trade agreement. A delegation will go meet them, and it was decided that you would take part.”

“Why me specifically? I’m not a diplomat.”

“Three reasons. One, their lands are extremely dangerous, and it was established that you were the baseline with the highest chance of survival. Or close to a baseline, in any case.”

“But why? They hate non-gleams.”

“Precisely because they hate non gleams and we want to rub it in their faces.”

Nestra waited to see if the man was joking. He was not.

“You specifically want to piss them off?”

“We specifically want to humiliate them and remind them of our mutual standings during the negotiations. We are confident your behavior will help us in this regard.”

“You are sending me because I’m a rabid bitch?”

“Your words, not mine, and that would count as the second reason.”

“And if I refuse? Because it will be dangerous as hell.”

“Threshold will blacklist you like every law enforcement agent who refuses an assignment.”

Fuck.

“And the third reason?”

“We are counting on you to identify the person of interest whom we have recently located there. I believe you were referring to her as Fox Mask.”

“Oh so that’s why you’re out for blood.”

“Indeed, they’ve been robbing us for months. We are.... rather displeased.”

And Nesta knew what happened when Threshold got 'displeased'.