

Nobody bothered the truck as it made its way slow to Shangri-La, to Nesta's complete lack of surprise. Vassily was keeping an eye on the freed slaves who were still high on something, while Aunt Clecle kept chugging various medicines, half wrapped up in blankets. Nesta's paranoid nature kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. It didn't. The universe was vexing her by being on her side.

In the calm moment and with Aunt Claire within arm's reach, Nesta finally allowed herself to calm down, at least a little. The adrenaline fading from her vein made her tired. At least she wasn't hurt this time.

It also gave her time to think.

A gleam, huh. She'd waited for so long for that, and she'd also found her path. The true form. Having a proper gleam mask now would be...

It would be really fucking nice. But also it was so late in her life compared to everyone else. She would be hopelessly behind. She would also finally, finally be in the race.

There was no doubt that she would accept, of course. There was no question she would, not after the efforts aunt Clecle had gone through. The only thing that could stop her would be Sereth warning her it would lead to her discovery. If the operation failed, then that would be it, but what if it succeeded? Would she become like some of the people she despised? What would Stibbs think? What would it change about her life? Fuck, so many things to consider.

But she wanted, she really, really wanted it, because it meant her parents might love her again. Wait no, not like this, more... they would know how to show that love. How to treat her like their daughter with normal gleam bonding moments: the training, the first raids.

She wanted that.

She wanted that so bad. Please, let it be that it wasn't some sort of mistake. Or a scam. Let her have her hope.

Her hopeful reverie stopped alongside the truck. In front of them, the walled city of Shangri-La was a buzz of activity. Not one, but three helicopters were visible in its skies with one clearly being a military transport disgorging augmented soldiers on top of the town hall. Nesta frowned as she jumped down from the truck.

"What the fuck? Are they invading?"

"In a manner of—"

"Gah!" Nesta screamed when Winslow appeared next to her.

"In a manner of speaking," Winslow finished with a congenial smile.

He was back to being the kindly middle school student beloved by everyone. His face was, at least. The rest was still blood-stained combat suit.

“Don’t scare me like that.”

“Miss Palladian, I was standing right here.”

“You were hiding,” she reproached. “Steam and a minor in shadows for sure.”

Winslow appeared surprised, but the expression was so brief it might have been Nestra’s imagination.

“As I was saying, there is no way for the auction to have occurred without local help. There are few things a government dislikes more than citizens fearing criminals and not them, but officials bribed by foreign agents is in that list. I’m afraid the hammer is coming down, and it’s coming down hard.”

“Is it bad for us?”

“I would hope not, after we helped them.”

He didn’t seem too concerned though it was hard to read a spook. Here was a man who seemed to know what was going on though, and Nestra had questions.

“Look, can I ask you something? I’m still a bit worried.”

“If I can answer, I will,” he replied with a knowing smile.

“Ok, so didn’t the battle strike you as a bit too easy?”

Amusement and pity warred on the spooked face. It pissed her off a little.

“Miss Palladian. I will merely say this: Threshold stands at the forefront of the raiding world. The Palladians stand at the forefront of Threshold. There is a reason why your house received immediate and unconditional support in the recovery of your aunt, and it is not just kindness on our part.”

“We’re not one of Threshold’s top families,” Nestra said.

She knew this was true. House Palladian was mid-sized and unaffiliated. They were no heavy hitters. Well, not the heaviest hitters around in any case.

Winslow was not amused. He looked like an impatient educator now.

“Miss Palladian, your criteria for what constitutes ‘the top’ are far too restrictive to accurately represent reality. Perhaps you knowing them as your family has skewed your perception of reality. While you were obviously concerned, I am telling you, I was not.”

“Huh.”

Winslow closed the conversation with assurances that Nestra could relax and that she was safe now. And indeed, nothing bad happened. In fact, nothing happened at all. The truck stopped in an open plaza filled with temporary tents and crawling with soldiers. An army of paramedics took charge of the rescued captives with terrifying efficiency. The only catch happened with Ulysses' catch, so to speak. The woman he'd captured was still sullenly following him.

"We will be taking custody of her," Tian said, backed by a group of augs.

She was wearing heavy manacles of a make Nestra didn't recognize. She wasn't familiar with gleam restraints. She just knew there were several kinds and MaxSec used a mana-resistant basic model for the kind of gleams she might have faced.

"That's Seraphine Velion. There is a price on her head in Threshold. She was my upperclasswoman!"

"And now she is a captive here."

"My captive," Ulysses elaborated.

Things grew tense, with the Palladians giving them their attention. At a distance, augs stopped what they were doing to see if things would escalate.

"There is no extradition agreement between our nations," Tian said, very calmly.

"That is correct, young master Palladian," Winslow said, moving to the front. "I'm afraid our agreement does not cover Miss Velion here, and so I will respectfully ask you to surrender her to their custody."

"Wait," the woman said in a broken voice. "You can't do that. Do you know what they do to their gleams? Wait!"

Winslow replied in his ever-calm voice.

"Rest assured that your status and condition will be reported to the Threshold authority. We will be negotiating on your behalf for your safe return, of course."

Seraphine was on the verge of a panic attack. Nestra didn't feel much sympathy for a slaver.

"Please! Help."

"We will provide assistance, of course," Winslow said, and his gaze was quite cold. "But you understand that your... choice of profession, or the fact you escaped Threshold to avoid a prison sentence for murder will not work in your favor. Goodbye for now."

They dragged her away. Tian returned a moment later, much more confident than before.

“Right. Regretfully, I cannot guarantee you a return before tomorrow morning. In the meanwhile, I have taken the liberty to reserve you a suite in the town’s best hotel. It is normally reserved for government officials.”

“I could kill for a shower!” Aunt Clecle exclaimed.

Many eyes turned to her.

“Metaphorically of course. You guys need to chill.”

“Yeah, let’s all chill! Do they have hot spring things here?” Helena asked.

Tian escorted them to the hotel herself. The few guests present were being escorted out by armed guards and the staff was utterly terrified so they had stellar service. Nestra made sure to ask for her chocolate bar payment from Tian who delivered with a half smile. She also assured them that the service would be free for the night so Clecle rushed to the baths with a bottle of Japanese Umeshu, a very sweet plum liquor. The women caught up to her in the secluded place though Nestra was loath to leave her gear behind. It didn’t feel safe.

Aunt Clecle was showering and already lathered. The water at her feet was brown.

“Damn. That’s a lot of scars,” Nestra remarked.

On her mom too. Most of the scars were fading or faded, some on the verge of disappearing because B-rank had full control over their bodies, but still, the fact they even had those spoke of gruesome wounds inflicted with mana-charged attacks or spells. Attempts to kill that had failed but not by much. It made Nestra terrified for them.

“Speak for yourself young lady. Why do you even have stab wounds?” her mom asked.

“I got stabbed.”

Nestra shrugged.

“Hey, hey, I’m cool as well!” Helena said.

She pointed at one of her only scars. It was on her leg where a fae warrior had landed a successful hit the first time she and Nestra had raided together — the one when Sashimi had proven she could be useful.

Terror gripped Nestra’s heart.

“How did you get this? The school didn’t notify us.”

“I, uh, I was testing my coating.”

They didn’t buy it.

“With a knife...” Helena finished miserably.

The four women stood in a circle with Deborah Palladian made ready to deliver her judgment.

“I wanna drink,” Aunt Claire said.

“Oh very well, but Helena, we will be discussing experimentations later. This is clearly self-harm... if you’re telling me the truth. Don’t do this again.”

“Sorry mom.”

“Come on. This is a happy reunion!” Aunt Clecle said, flying to the rescue.

“Oh you’re right. Forget about it honey. Let’s just have a good time.”

“Cool! Can I get some of that booze as well?”

“In your wildest dreams, perhaps.”

“I was in a battle! I deserve it, no?”

“You are mercifully unharmed and so will your liver remain,” Mom concluded and there would be no argument.

“In the bath, the lot of you. You stink!” Clecle joked.

They didn’t jump into the bath. As Helena reminded them, the proper etiquette was to shower first. Sanae joined them soon though she went to a side room — she was very much a loner. Splashing sounds on the other side of a separation wall indicated that the menfolks were soaking as well. At least all entrances were covered, Nestra thought.

Nestra used the relaxed mood to ask something that had been bothering her for some time now.

“So... Didn’t it feel a bit too easy?” she asked her mom.

Deborah Palladian opened a lazy eye. She was reclining against the stone wall of one of the hotter baths.

“You were severely outnumbered,” Nestra insisted. “Three B-class to seven. I know you are strong. Those are still long odds.”

“Darling, you are treating our opponents like a team while in reality they did not trust each other one bit. They were more interested in saving their skins than in cooperating to take us down. That’s one. Two, we have excellent teamwork forged over the years facing countless monsters as well as other teams: humanoid monsters but also humans.”

“You mean, like practice bouts?”

“That and... let’s just say the world was not a good place after Riel saved us all. Three, and I think you need to remember... we’re first gens, Nestra. We survived hell.”

“We really did,” Aunt Clecle added from her corner.

“We’re really, really hard to kill. You need to trust in us a little more, right?”

Nestra nodded. She wasn’t really convinced in her heart because she was just scared, but intellectually she could accept that her family was dangerous. It was just hard to reconcile this knowledge with her love for them. Or at least, it was difficult to do it while everyone was having a good time.

“Nestra. We got her. She’s safe. You need to wind down now.”

“I know, I just... this is our first time outside and my first time rescuing... sorry, helping with the rescue of a member of my family.”

Her mom put a hand over Nestra’s shoulder and drew her in for a side hug. She felt very solid.

“This is a trauma response, darling. You’re hypervigilant. We are safe. You will successfully become a gleam. Trust me.”

Nestra took a deep breath. A very deep breath.

“Ok, ok.”

She did her best to relax. It worked a bit.

“Did you know Aunt Claire was raiding for me?”

“No. She refused to tell me why she was working so hard,” mom replied.

“I didn’t want to tell anyone in case it didn’t work,” Clecle said with the bottle in her hand.

“Damn that thing is too sweet. Anyway it will work. We’re sure of it.”

“Okay...” Nestra said. “Okay.”

Exhaustion finally caught up to her. She yawned, completely worn out.

“Have a short nap on the bench, darling. We’ll wake you up for dinner.”

And since they knew what was good for them, they actually did.

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“It’s our greatest pleasure to offer you this commendation, as well as a well-deserved promotion to Senior agent,” the government official told Nestra with a thousand-megawatts smile that was probably whitened every five business days.

“Huh?” Nestra eloquently replied.

She was sitting in the ‘debrief room’ after a safe flight home. She was expecting some sort of sterile interrogation room out of sheer habit since that’s where she tended to end up, but this one was nice with actual coffee offered and everything. What a nice change. It still didn’t explain what the fuck were they talking about. Was Ragnarok pulling strings? Was it her nepo superpowers at work again?

The official was a sleek Pinoy in a navy suit. He had an assistant with him, a plain anglo woman in a pink ensemble who exuded confidence and the HR label.

“Surprised?” the man said. “As for us, this is a happy occurrence. At least, I prefer it very much to firing people.”

He chuckled. Nestra was a bit hesitant in her response.

“I’m just used to having disciplinary hearings and the likes. People tell me I have a problem with authority.”

“Well, none of those accusations have stuck... or they might not have been particularly egregious.”

He nodded to the HR woman. She swiped her datasheet with some amusement.

“Perhaps you spent too much time in MaxSec. Between the two of us, closing departments tend to be a bit toxic. Nevertheless, your track record speaks for itself. One of the youngest accepted candidates, the only female CQC expert ever to be granted accreditation. One hundred and twenty-eight combat operations with a close to perfect success rate. You have arrested users!”

“Not many...” Nestra mumbled.

Honestly only Jason Wong had been a trained fighter. The rest hadn’t offered much resistance since they correctly guessed they’d have a better chance in court.

“You have received stellar commendations from your superiors Lieutenant Camus and MacMillan.”

“Gorge gave me a compliment?”

“Rock solid and lethally competent, is what he said.”

“Wow.”

Nestra leaned back into her chair.

Well, Gorge and her were buddies now but the report must have been written shortly before MaxSec was liquidated — right before they went into business together. It was a surprise. He truly was the most soft-hearted cunt she'd ever come across.

“You are credited for single-handedly stopping two squads of gangers, both heavily augmented, saving the life of Officer Shinoda — may God rest his soul. You took down Cleaver who was considered a high D-class threat with no specialized gear.”

“Technically it was done by Valerian of House Nephrite.”

“Who mentioned sneaking behind the heavily wounded aug to deliver the coup-de-grace. Both Valerian Nephrite and Shinoda Yuuji-san also heaped praises upon you. You were instrumental in recovering and deciphering data that led to the uncovering of a massive criminal conspiracy, the arrest of ringleader Jenkins, and the fining of Gidung for a total of 780 million credits at the end. You received stellar accolades from Officer Baatar and freshly promoted Financial Crimes Captain Kim for the lead role on the arrest of Captain Ito in a landmark case that also led to the imprisonment of Mrs. Shinoda, a major political figure of the opposition. During the Sword King fiasco, you successfully prevented the death or capture of the diplomatic corps in a daring escape through gleam territory — I saw the footage. You are a *machine*, Miss Palladian. And I mean this as a compliment.”

“Thanks. Wow, Kim got promoted! I need to congratulate her.”

“Then you can congratulate each other. There are also redacted elements concerning a serial killer case and, I would wager, the recruitment of a very valuable user given the department involved and Ragnhild Lindstrom's personal stamp. You may have a problem with authority, Miss Palladian, but it certainly doesn't have problems with you. The commendation is for the Threshold's Order of Merit, with Valor. Recipients of this distinguished award get easy access to specific career paths I assume will be of little interest to you, however it also lifts restrictions to special high-government-only facilities such as recreation centers and... restaurants. I was informed you might be interested.”

“What kind of restaurant?” Nestra asked, stomach waking up with a gurgle.

“I will send you a list. You get a raise as well.”

Nestra was earning almost three and a half thousand credits a month after tax. It wasn't massive but it would have been pretty nice. Enough to buy a house with an okay mortgage and live comfortably. It showed how human Nestra and Aszhii Nestra just didn't live on the same planet either. A single C-class raid could earn her forty thousand credits in mined raw materials and monster parts, and that was without cores or rewards. She could do a C-class raid every night if she really wanted to — and had access to the portals.

It was simply insane.

Nestra pushed those thoughts back. Her life was good for now. No need to think about something she couldn't solve.

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There were two parties upon the Palladian's triumphant if secretive return. The first was a family one, and Nestra was super happy to attend after Clecle was discharged from the hospital. The city had cleared everything for them. It was a pleasant party, with a lot of gleam games of address and quite a bit of booze. Nobody mentioned Nestra going to Zurich. Maybe they didn't want to jinx it.

Ulysses sort of ignored her most of the evening in a quiet but not exactly subtle way. It was Nestra who sought him this time. She wanted to know if there was a chance for a truce no matter how obnoxious he was.

"So, any chance you'll stop the quiet game if I become a gleam?" she asked after they isolated themselves near a balcony.

"I don't despise you because you were a drab, though it didn't help. I despise you because you cut off and left. You're not a complete reject though. I can tell you worked hard, and kept working hard, but now you're just back because circumstances pushed you, not because you're any better of a person. And now you are going to leech off mom and Helena to catch up. I don't trust you. You were all high and mighty for our entire childhood until you fell and now it's just you returning to your normal self out of everyone else's expense. I know even dad is glad so I won't fuck with you but don't think I've forgotten. You keep to your side, I keep to mine, we stay courteous and that's it... unless you do a dick move, of course. In which case, the gloves come off. And remember, I'm at the top now."

"At least you're consistent," Nestra replied.

Ulysses turned away without replying. Nestra shrugged. She decided here and there to give up on the asshole. He would be someone she tolerated from now on and there was no need for her to make any efforts.

Nestra returned to the group. She had fun for the rest of the evening, but decided to go home early. She had another party the next day.

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"To us!"

One thing about those private government restaurants: the food was absolutely amazing. Nestra's glass clinked against Kim's who looked really much better recently. The usually stuffy official was wearing a lovely hanbok, a traditional dress that really suited her nicely. Valerian was here as well as Mazingwe and a lot of Nestra's work friends, including her old superior Camus. Even Seth had come as Stibbs' plus one. It was a nice party to celebrate the double promotion.

“I can never thank you enough for sending my previous boss to the slammer,” Kim drawled.

“By the way, what happened to no longer dedicating your life to your career?”

“It appears the Threshold dating scene for my age bracket is dreadful, so I’m taking a short break. But don’t worry, I’ll find Mr. Perfect. Someone who will not pale when I mention being a high level law enforcement agent specialized in finance.”

“Maybe just date someone very poor so they don’t do tax evasion.”

“I will take this under advisement. In the meantime, let’s mingle.”

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Nestra used this opportunity to thank the tall and muscular Camus — who was now a philosophy professor of all things — and Gorge for their nice ratings.

“I only yelled at you to keep you in line, Palladian,” Camus assured her.

“I prefer to call you a twat to your face,” Gorge added. “It’s more sporting. I save the ass licking for the bureaucracy.”

“Well thanks for that.”

Only Valerian looked a bit upset. When Nestra pressed him, he readily opened up.

“Just some trouble with my family. They really don’t approve of some of the new spells I’ve submitted to the archives. We can discuss when we raid next time.”

Nestra assured him it would happen after a short break. He was doing ok after all, thankfully, but she’d have to keep an eye on him.

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“It was amazing. I didn’t know my family was so strong!” Nestra told Sereth.

She took a sip of weird mocktail. It was fruity but not too sweet, and also loaded with mana. Sereth was experimenting with different cuisines recently, eager to explore human tastes. Right now he was in a Bulgarian phase, and Nestra was eating white balls that tasted powerfully of cucumber, yogurt, and dill. Sereth was grilling a lot of meat as well.

It was just really nice to go to his place for food and conversation. She had to admit that it was no wonder Stibbs had fallen for him considering she didn’t know he was a Kero Nut thief.

“I was there,” Sereth mentioned.

“You were?”

“With Stibbs and you present? Of course. I was interested to see that your world is so far from being united. Back on my plane, the Celestial Throne dominates all continents.”

“Huh.”

“And I should keep quiet as I am not supposed to share this knowledge with you just yet. Did you ask to see me because you wanted to talk about the surgery?”

“Yes. A core, for me... I was hoping you could tell me I can go.”

“Yes I can ‘green light’ it,” Sereth said, translating the expression into Aszhii like he was savoring a rare dish. “Core wounds become more frequent once raiders are resilient enough to survive them. I know little about healing myself, only that it should work on you. Just do not change shape during the process, obviously.”

“What if... what if my body eats it?”

“Your human body cannot eat a core, and your Aszhii self no longer starves. In fact, your training should make the process easier. I am guessing they are trying for a core transplant.”

“It sounds that way.”

“They will ‘liquify’ it, then implant it into you. It means the physical core will disappear and its content will reform in your mind palace. Since it’s a B-class core, a lot of the material will be lost, but it also means that your newly awakened core will be as strong as it should have been if you hadn’t cannibalized it. It’s not a risky operation for a D-class. It’s just that normally, D-class users would not have survived the loss of their core.”

“Huh.”

“It will be fine, Nestra. You are going to make it.”

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So flying to Zurich wasn’t apparently as easy as showing up at the airport. First, the ticket cost fifteen thousand credits and she would have to wait for three days because that was the only time there was a plane actually going there. Second, Nestra needed an emergency passport made which was only possible because she was connected. Third, that emergency passport needed a visa, and then an additional validation because Threshold had classified her as a D-class equivalent threat — thank you very much you fuckers. That was a lot of headache, but at least it wouldn’t last very long. In order to relax, Nestra shipped her Crescent ass to the Beacon for another assignment so she could vent by turning monsters to fine paste.

Alas, Rangarok trapped her in the most vicious way possible.

“You can’t be sssserious,” Nestra said in her seat in the old woman’s office.

Anger was making her hissy.

Remarkably little had changed after Ragnhild Lindstrom's ascension to A-rank. She was still fulfilling the same role, and only raiding very occasionally. It appeared she still needed some time to stabilize her new powers. Nestra felt her presence all the time though, in ways that she didn't with Shinran. It just went to show the amount of control that fake monk had.

"Dr. Daniels petitioned the government for help. He has considerable pull among the American leadership, especially when it comes to research. A lot of cooperations between our universities could suffer if he is brushed off too aggressively."

"I don't give a shit. I'm not interested in research being conducted on myself!"

"There is no shame in being a transformation power gleam, Crescent," Ragnhild said.

"I know this. Do they?"

Ragnarok conceded the point with a tilt of her head.

"Crescent, North America has a much higher incidence of transformation power than we do. This trend has come with its own set of complications. Transformation users tend to be... more unstable. There are regular cases of loss of control. It's a serious issue."

"For them."

"For all of us," Ragnarok connected. "We are all humans trying to decipher a new world, with new rules. It has taken hundreds of thousands of years for homo sapiens to build the kind of civilization we lost during the Incursion, and even that was imperfect. It has only been sixty years since then. We need keys of understanding, and if you can help them out, I will ask that you at least talk to them in an interview."

"I'm not like the other transformers. They are close to regular or imaginary animals."

"For all we know they are real in... portals," Ragnarok said.

Nestra noticed the strange delay. Ragnarok probably believed there were other worlds out there, which was a common opinion. Why the hesitation?

Bah it didn't matter right now.

"And yes, you're a demon. The only humanoid one we know of. That is why your insight into your own power could be uniquely valuable."

"How do they even know I'm a transformation gleam, by the way? I never appeared without a mask."

"Crescent, your eyes are completely black, sclera included. Of course you are transforming to some degree."

“Gah. I’m stupid.”

“No, since you have never removed your mask and should never do so in public.”

Nestra needed to keep track of who knew what with a list. Here were the people who knew she was an Aszhii: Sereth, Helena, Stibbs, Mazingwe. Here were the people who knew she could change shape: Shinran, Ragnarok, Valerian, Gorge, and his spawn. Here were the people who didn’t know shit: the rest of the planet. The rest of the planet didn’t know shit.

Nestra amended that opinion. Her family was on that list. It wasn’t nice to them to say they didn’t know shit.

“You will at least hear Dr. Daniels. I notified him you were coming. He is in another room nearby so neither of you will have to wait long. Crescent, I can technically order you to attend the meeting, not as a masked user but as a citizen of Threshold. I will ask instead. Just hear him out. You might be helping people.”

Nestra sighed. She wouldn’t help people because she wasn’t a transformation gleam. Any data they’d get from her would taint the pool, so to speak.

“I can help him out. As an outlier, I’m just not sure how much help I can be.”

“Thank you. As an additional incentive, remember that I am helping your trip to Zurich by accelerating everything I can. Do it for me as a gesture of gratitude, if you won’t do it for mankind.”

“Ah, stop it. I’m already convinced.”

Nestra stood up. She had resigned herself to her fate.

“Oh, one last thing,” she said, grabbing for her backpack. “I got you a gift to congratulate you on your ascension... since I wasn’t invited to the party.”

She gave Ragnarok a bag of round pale biscuits with red, jam-filled ‘A’ carved in the middle.

“I used a robot to help with the letters. The flour is mana rich but I couldn’t get mana strawberry jam, sorry.”

Ragnarok picked the bag with great speed but also a surprising gentle touch. She soon had one between two wizened fingers.

“Halongrottor cookies. Homemade then?”

“As I said I also used my cooking robot.”

“Most people offered me rare metal ingots, which was also nice of course. Thank you dear. It was very thoughtful of you. I believe I will have some coffee now. Off you go, though. My secretary will guide you.”

Nestra left with a smile. Truly, food was almost always a good offering.

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“Thank you for agreeing to see me,” Dr. Daniels said with a kind voice.

He was tall but also muscular now that he was only wearing a simple shirt. His neat brown hair and golden eyes of a light user gave him some sort of corporate messiah feel she couldn't trust. He was also B-class and a strong one too. That was a concern, because it was clear he had no qualms about pulling strings. He had her cornered both socially and physically.

She felt trapped.

There was another male anglo gleam with short brown hair next to him, slightly more meek in appearance. He was C-class despite having no affinities locked which hinted at an older civilian. Perhaps a researcher. He had not introduced himself yet, and would not meet her eyes.

Nestra didn't reply because she hadn't agreed. She had complied. To her, there was a difference.

“I am Dr. Daniels, still with the Center of Magical Studies based in Austin. This is Dr. Nichols. We are experts in transformation powers —as far as as the term ‘expert’ can even be applied. I appreciate that you didn't initially want to talk to us and I wanted to thank you for agreeing anyway. We have crossed the ocean to see you, haha.”

Nestra didn't reply. She found it much easier to remain quiet as an Aszhii anyway. Maybe they weren't that big on talking, as a species.

Nah Sereth was a complete blabbermouth.

Maybe she should play nice. Ragnarok had asked and Nestra owed the old woman some help. She was a good person.

“Yesss?”

“Right. Let's not waste anymore of your time. We have a few questions if you don't mind.”

Nestra gestured that they may ask.

“Your power is very unusual. Many transformations lead to bipedal hybrids but you are the first and so far only pure, fully humanoid one. That makes you an interesting reference, a

halfway point should we say. Are you familiar with transformation powers? Beyond your own.”

“Not really. Basic research only.”

“Right. The first transformation is usually considered an extremely traumatic event by most participants. How would you describe your own?”

“Not very painful. Scary and confusing.”

“I see. And if I may ask, was there any collateral damage?”

“Damage?”

“For the first transformation. Most losses and damage normally occur during and immediately after the first transformation while the user’s control is at the lowest.”

He smiled a bit more.

“Users will be confused, we understand. In pain. It leads to poor judgment, a perfectly normal reaction of course.”

“No damage. I was home.”

“I see, I see. So you didn’t leave your home during the first transformation?”

“No.”

“Did you perhaps have any memory lapse? Moment where the world felt unreal or that the transformation was happening to someone else? Unexplained movements through the house while you didn’t remember how you got there?”

“No. I was conscious. Afraid and confused but conscious.”

“I see. Have you felt instincts that you would qualify as inhuman while in your transformed shape? Something that you wouldn’t do normally?”

“Eeh... Raw meat.”

“Eating raw meat?” Daniels asked with sudden interest.

Nichols shivered. His terror was so obvious Nestra could smell it. He was perspiring heavily as well.

“Yeah.”

“What sort of meat?”

“Monster.”

“Monster meat?”

“Yes. With tabasco.”

“With tabasco...” Daniels whispered, seemingly confused.

“Have you had any desire for human flesh?” Nichols asked with undisguised horror.

“What the fuck is that sort of question?”

“Sorry,” Daniels said. “What my colleague wanted to know is if some of your instincts push you to favor one particular kind of meat.”

“No. Variety. And not just protein. I mentioned raw meat because I normally dislike it. Upsets my stomach.”

Nestra didn't like where this was going. Those people... were they really researchers? What the hell were they researching? Those questions were so loaded.

“Changing topic,” Daniels continued. “What do demons evoke for you?”

That caught Nestra off guard.

“Pardon?”

“As you might know, transformation powers stem from a strong familiarity with mysticism, an obsession with mythology, or shamanic traditions. Most of those who transform were already intimately familiar with what we call a localized Jungian archetype, the local interpretation of a myth like the werewolf or the jaguar warrior. Hmmm.”

He drank a bit of coffee. He was carefully handling the flow of the conversation in a way that made Nestra suspicious.

Maybe he was just good at conducting interviews. Was she growing paranoid again? She resisted the urge to fidget. She could always jump back through the wall but light users were stupidly fast...

“So I was wondering if you had any ideas about what a demon is, according to any mythology? It is present in Japanese Shinto faith as Oni, or Chinese tradition as Mo. There is also the Christian faith, naturally...”

He waited for her reaction.

Honestly, Nestra was stumped. Her parents had been so uncomfortable about faith growing up that their awkward ‘well of course you can believe whatever you want sweetie’ just led to a general sense of disinterest. That wasn't what the two assholes wanted to hear, though. If

she were really a human gleam, then she absolutely had to be familiar with demons to take the guise of one.

Nestra picked one of her favorite childhood cartoons, a twenty-years old story about angels coming to help a post-incursion mankind by binding with random children. In retrospect it had been a sort of coping story for kids who felt powerless in a hostile world.

“Hmm. Cartoons actually. I really liked Neressa from ‘Light as a Feather’.”

She’d been an ambiguous devil character who frequently helped the good side. She also used a sword and didn’t take shit from anybody. Definitely a good role model for Nestra.

“I see. A cartoon character. I see, I see.”

They didn’t look like they were buying it.

“Do the urges you feel while transformed also impact your human form?”

Another loaded question. One that implied urges to begin with.

“No strong urge while transformed. Better battle instincts though.”

“Do you ever feel a compulsion to, shall we say, transgress? Demons are often seen as creatures that oppose the laws of heaven, the status quo and fatherly authority. They are rebels, at least in the Christian tradition.”

Nestra shrugged. Those guys were just weird. What sort of question was that? Were they not interested in her powers or some such? It felt like being interrogated by an expert who was trying to build a case against her mental health.

“Not really, no. It’s about freedom and hunting monsters.”

“No urge to commit crimes for example?”

Nestra shook her head.

“Yet you were registered for the first time as C-class. Unless you were C-class to begin with, that means you were illegally raiding for an extended period of time, right?”

“That was a conscious decision to get the best anonymity protection as a masked gleam,” Nestra deadpanned. “And I was punished for it.”

“You made a conscious decision to break the law?”

“Yes. To avoid situations such as this one, but you would also know about my civilian identity,” Nestra finished.

“I see, I see.”

Nichols was furiously writing something on a freshly pulled datasheet. Nestra had a bad feeling about this.

“Tell me, how do you interpret the notion of sin?”

“I won’t answer theological questionssss,” Nestra said, losing patience.

“Please, it is important for our research. Indulge us?”

Nestra considered her options.

Fuck it, they weren’t going to advance the cause of science with her anyway.

“No.”

“Perhaps we should return to it later... or not at all! Our purpose is not to make you uncomfortable,” Daniels continued with his trademarked winning smile. “Would you mind talking about your monster hunting experience?”

It was a raider’s favorite topic, at least before the first big losses. Nestra wasn’t having it though.

“I don’t think your line of questioning aligns with any research I’d like to be a part of. I am leaving.”

“No please, we could also just listen to your experience. It’s valuable data.”

“No thanks.”

“Alright, one last thing before you leave. Your superior gave us authorization to get a few samples...”

Nichols grabbed a black bag from next to his seat, revealing syringes.

Hell no.

“No one can give that authorization but me. No.”

“Please, this is important.”

Nestra was done. She stood up, and so did Daniels. His mana flared.

His jaw locked in a sign of anger she’d seen before, as a cop. She turned to the side, offering her left flank. Void mana pooled in her hand.

Their eyes met.

Daniels relaxed so fast it was uncanny. He gave her one last smile.

“Regrettable, but I understand. Thank you for your help so far. Goodbye, Miss Crescent.”

Nestra left the room without turning her back. What the fuck had Ragnarok unleashed upon her. A ten minute dive in depths of the internet brought her an answer, and she sent Ragnarok a furious reply.

“You set me up with fundamentalists! Daniels works for a lobby that seeks to regulate transformation gleams. He wants to create ghettos!”

The answer was instant.

“Yes? I assumed you followed transformation-related news? What I said about him being influential was correct. I assumed you knew and that was why you were reluctant to talk to him.”

Fuck, it was Nestra’s problem for not working on her cover more a bit more.

“I don’t follow international news,” she sent back.

“That is not my problem. Your passport has been delivered to your house. You’re flying tomorrow. Good luck.”

So it was happening, and quickly too. She chased Daniels from her mind for now. He couldn’t do anything to her that she couldn’t agree to.

She was going to become a gleam.

If everything went well.