

Nestra woke up to a deep feeling of wrongness. Long ago, her dad glued fluorescent stars to the ceiling so she could fall asleep with a nice view — one of those awkward gestures he would do at random when he remembered he loved her. They were still there, almost twenty years after. Faded, but there. They shouldn't be. This wasn't her room anymore.

It was so weird she needed a few seconds to remember what had led her here. Shit.

Her parents had to have returned by now.

Nestra checked the time on her visor. Eight. She was back to human schedule, somehow, and that was so weird. The path to the bathroom was deserted. The room itself had those minor, uncanny changes that made it like a dream version of itself. They had a fancy new shower with a rainfall effect. Other elements were just like they'd always been. There was her mom's cup in which she kept her toothbrush, even if the toothbrush ought to be on a charger. An old habit. An old cup, so old it predated the incursion.

Once presentable, Nestra ran out of excuses not to confront her family. It wasn't even that bad, just a little awkward. Why was it so hard? She breathed deep. It was just her family. It would be fine.

After a last check that she was presentable, Nestra walked down the stairs past a cleaning robot. The clinks of cutlery echoed from the kitchen's open door.

It was quiet otherwise.

The thing she was only realizing now was how much effort high gleams spent acting like normal humans. There was absolutely no way anyone here would hit their plate hard enough with a fork to produce a sound, unless they absolutely meant to do so. Their control was simply too good for awkwardness. There was also no way they'd forget to close the door unless they meant to leave it open. Nestra couldn't sneeze in this house without at least three — no four now — four relatives being aware of it. This meant that the gleams were significantly more aware of you than you were of them. It also meant that they were waiting for her.

Nestra sighed one last time. She walked in with a confidence she didn't feel. It was... her fault. She'd left in a huff and now she was back with her tail between her legs, forcibly carried back by an overbearing aunt.

The kitchen had been renovated. Nice. Five pairs of eyes landed on her as soon as she walked in before returning to their plates or looking away with varying speed. Her dad's, gunmetal and worried. Her mom's, icy and even more worried. Her aunt's, apologetic. Helena was so giddy she was practically bouncing while Ulysses looked bored to tears.

Nestra sat down at her spot. Scrambled eggs with toast and a glass of orange juice waited for her, with sliced cucumbers on the side. One of the classics back when she was a teen.

"Well this is awkward. Thanks for the food," she said.

The three high gleams breathed a sigh of relief. The fourth... damn he was technically a high gleam now, wasn't he? Ulysses grabbed his empty plate.

"I'll be in the living room preparing for my regrowth session, if anyone needs me."

He left but without a huff which Nesta took as an indication of truce.

Nesta attacked the eggs. They were mana-charged, somehow, and definitely not from a hen.

"Hmm. Good."

"You are safe here," her father told her with a soothing voice.

Or at least a good try at it.

"You can always return," her mom said in a voice that felt incredibly brittle.

Nesta sighed. Claire studiously poked her radishes while Helena grabbed the table in a death grip, eyes pleading. And it was tempting.

There were a lot of unresolved conflicts between them. This was just a first step. This would be a first step. Except it was impossible. They wanted to turn back the clock on a situation that was more than half a decade old and it would never happen. Nesta was confident she could give their shared traumas a go. Talk. Reforge links in the familial chain. But she could never join them again because this wasn't about her starving pain anymore, or her place in society. Those issues, she'd worked through. It was about her being a lie.

That Nesta that grabbed the glass of orange juice was only the mask. Its bonds were deceitfully woven to give her the life of an impostor. The father who looked at her now, strong, stern, with a lost expression that said he expected things to work out and somehow they didn't, he was technically not her real father. She was an Aszhii and they were her human family and...

They didn't know. And she didn't know how to tell them without hurting them. She wasn't even sure they would let her live. High gleams of their generation were monster slayers to the bone. They'd seen their world die in a tide of teeth and claws. They had waded in an ocean of blood and guts to bring humanity back from the brink, fighting desperate odds again and again. They had grown into killers, traumatized killers, every last one of them. She was just another invader. The only difference was that she'd cheated her way into survival.

"I won't move in but... I'll come visit. How about it?" she asked with a wan smile.

"Oh, of course you are a grown girl, no, woman. You are a grown woman now. Yes," her father said.

Her mom nodded to herself.

"You need your own space. We got your brother a small apartment in District Twenty-one. Near the sea. For... you know."

“Bringing girls home without everyone hearing?” Helena said with a scowl of disgust.

Guess she’d heard unfortunate things.

“Young adults need their personal spaces, and you will get yours as well. With the privilege of not having to save or borrow for it, I may add...” Mom said in her ‘listen young lady’ voice.

“I know, I knooooow. Can’t wait.”

“Provided you show me you can...”

Mom gave Nestra a concerned look. And there it was.

She was a stranger, and gleam etiquette was to never scold a fellow gleam in front of a baseline. Oh, nobody said it but Nestra knew it worked that way. Mom realized what she’d done, and shame marred her features. But Helena just bounced.

“Yeah yeah I cleaned my room yesterday. I can be very clean, right Nes?” Helena said with a winning smile.

On this though, Nestra had her mom’s back.

“Last time I entered your room it smelled like a skunk frat house.”

“TRAITOR! Aughhh. I’m off to class. Gotta catch the bus.”

“I could drive her,” Nestra offered, but three voices immediately put a stop to that.

“ — not safe yet — ”

“ — perimeter search before — “

“ — until we know mo — “

“Okay! Okay! Riel...”

“Sorry dear. It’s for your own safety,” her mom said.

Helena shrugged, then left. She didn’t seem too worried.

“I’m going to do that perimeter sweep now,” Aunt Claire said. “then I’ll go prepare. Raid starts at dusk.”

She was gone before Nestra could blink.

“Oh yes,” Nestra remembered. “I interrupted your raid, right?”

“Nothing to worry about, dear. We had House associates replace us.”

“A dangerous C-class raid to get your mother back in shape, so to speak,” her father said with a smile. “She was the damage dealer this time.”

"I still think I prefer a control role but I agree that this was a great experience. It had been a while since I last froze monsters solid. I will admit that I missed it. Oh, but I digress. Of course, we would return to protect our daughter. Better to interrupt training than risk you, and Aunt Claire has been raiding hard the past couple of years."

"Dangerous raids too. At this rate, she might overtake me. If she doesn't bite more than she can chew," her father said.

He seemed worried.

"Is there a reason for her drive?" Nestra asked.

"She is saving a lot of money and trading quite a bit. She might be looking into starting her own house. Of course, she still needs a... partner," her father answered.

"Love, you know that is not a prerequisite," her mom chided him.

That seemed like an old argument. As soon as Nestra expressed disinterest in the technicalities though, her parents immediately switched topic.

"Why don't you tell us more about your problem then?"

They gave her their undivided attention and Nestra knew she wasn't getting out of explaining what had happened for the, what, third time?

"Well, sure. So one day, I was doing police things when we came across a blood trail. A mana blood trail..."

Nestra explained the whole situation uninterrupted. Her parents listened quietly before admitting this wasn't their area of expertise. Not that it mattered. They were around for her safety. There were few creatures on the planet who could go through both of them without a major fight. After an awkward discussion, Nestra excused herself to the home's office where she could make calls unmonitored. It was a small place with actual paper files, which gave it a stuffy feeling. She liked the smell though, and it was insulated.

Right, time to get herself out of here.

The first call was to Ragnarok. Nestra used the embedded mask phone's voice modulator for that one since she didn't dare to pull the mask off. Her parents might perceive it, somehow. Ragnarok picked up and she sounded amused when Nestra expressed her problem, but the answer came quickly and without appeal.

"I cannot and will not provide you with stealth tools to escape your predicament. Those are proprietary designs of the military. As a contractor, you simply do not have the clearance to use them. You will need to find a way to leave by yourself."

"That might take some time," Nestra grumbled.

"Then it will. Good luck!"

So that was a bust. But she needed, absolutely, to find a way to leave the compound. She couldn't just stay put for weeks until they found the culprit, if they ever did.

Nestra had a sneaking suspicion the killer might try to bait her if they grew bored enough. That meant getting at Helena. or Stibbs. Well, maybe not those two, but certainly others.

Her next attempt was directed at Seth. He listened carefully.

"If it were not for technology, it would be easier for me to leave," Nestra argued.

"That is simply not true, little Nezhra. Someone as strong as your human family can hear your heartbeat. If I were to compare it with my own youth, it would be like me trying to leave the imperial palace after my carriage was intercepted by hired assassins. Technology is not the cause of your issues here. However... I am willing to help anyway."

"Ah? Why?"

"Because I need you out and about so we can seriously start on your resistance training. And because I am facilitating an interesting hunt. The covens would never object to this."

It made kind of sense to Nestra. The Aszhii clearly wanted her to grow fast, so they would allow some shortcuts so long as those put her in harm's way.

"We will do it tonight," Seth said.

"Ok."

"In your room, around midnight. See you there."

Nestra sat on a couch in the office. Now what? She checked her messages. Officer Kim had arranged access to evidence for her.

That woman sure worked fast.

Nestra drove her mom to the precinct in her own pink car, providing a light topic for conversation. That was when Nestra forgot she hadn't told her mom someone had tried to kill her via drone crash. She was forced to spend the rest of the trip calming the woman down.

Kim's appointment was in central, so Nestra fought through the morning rush to Threshold's trinity, specifically the colossal town hall this time. It was a beautiful early fall day. The sun shone, the cars honked. Nature was healing.

Nestra grumbled while they parked in one of the dedicated areas — ten credits an hour. A robbery! Her mother categorically refused to leave her side and the lines near the elevator were packed, so they used the stairs like savages. At the Special Crime level, the lobby let them through without issue. Her mom just had this calming, cool aura that set people at

ease. Only when they come across Officer Kim in the corridor did her mom relinquish the role of guardian. And that was because she couldn't go further without fighting guards.

"She will be safe here, near the heart of our government," Officer Kim insisted with a fake smile.

Mom settled to wait in a nearby seat. Meanwhile, the pair continued. The gazes changed as soon as Deborah Palladian was out of sight. This was a gleam den populated by people capable of taking on dangerous gleams, many of them retired raiders themselves. Nestra and Kim were clearly pencil pushers of the nosy variety. The change was drastic but in a way, it was back to business as usual for Nestra. Riel, she almost felt at home.

"It's over here, behind this door. By regulation, you are not to be left alone so I will stay with you..." Kim said apologetically.

"Alright."

The room itself was a cleared out storage space with no windows, only a single table with a datasheet set on it in 'read only' mode. Nestra picked it up. Time to see what the others had found out.

Nestra checked the interview transcripts first, confirming that the mercenaries had no idea who they were working for. Comms revealed nothing: all of the messages came through a VPN that didn't store any of the data it transferred. The trace was simply gone. Of course, this would have been too easy.

Financials were a bust too. The advance received by the mercenaries was not insignificant — fifty thousand credits — but it was delivered via an extra-territorial account from the Chinese mainland. The Shenzhen. They never cooperated with foreign law enforcement.

At least, whoever had set that up was rich and meticulous. Nestra could be sure of that.

This left the limo service login, and there she hit the jackpot. Not only had someone connected to the limo tracking from inside the gallery, but they'd also connected to parking cameras via the same unsecured connection. That one could be traced to a public use terminal situated inside of the gallery. There were apparently no cameras inside of the room where it had happened, but maybe there was something there. Credentials. She had to find that terminal.

The Special Crime division was currently in the process of obtaining a warrant for the gallery.

"What are the chances of that warrant succeeding?" Nestra asked Kim.

"I am not sure. The event attracted a lot of high gleams who will be displeased with interference. On the other hand, the gleam killer case attracts the attention of the media. It will be successful, however obtaining it might take some time."

Guess Nestra was burglarizing a museum tonight.

A part of her wondered if she could steal that nice living lamp she'd seen. Probably not the best idea.

In any case, the museum had her two best leads: traces of the person who'd followed the interception, and hints about the identity of the anonymous applicant who'd submitted the eye painting. She would need help, however. Nestra was confident as a field operative but she would need some heavy tech support on that one.

"I don't suppose I can get access to any data on the killer's other victims?"

"The department refused. I cannot justify it either. We should be grateful they even allowed us this much..." Kim said, trailing off into silence at the end.

"What?"

"I think they have ulterior motives."

"They want me to either betray that I know more than I let out, or I act as bait to a killer they are struggling to capture," Nestra said.

"Why, yes, exactly. You are more perceptive than I expected."

"Riel. Thanks."

"None of this between us, Palladian-hubae. I would defer to you if we were to breach a house or kill dokkaebis but from my experience, your diplomacy and politics could use some more work, no? Not to mention... I kept everyone's attention at bay because you are under me, but I didn't appreciate finding out about your little... secret outings."

Kim's eyes narrowed. Nestra shrugged. She really didn't want to talk about it too much.

"I'm not the best at people but I understand the hunt."

"So it would seem. Are we done here?"

"For now, yes."

"There is no 'for now' Miss Palladian. Once we leave this room, we will not return."

"For now as in I can't think of anything else right now, alright? I know my job," Nestra snapped, before hissing with displeasure.

At least they were in a private setting or Kim might have lost face. To Nestra's surprise, however, the older woman breathed to calm herself down.

"You are correct. You have proven yourself enough, and my earlier comment was... untimely. It is just that your... nightly sorties are reflecting badly upon me. Not that any of it is illegal but it certainly looks suspicious. You've not been doing hits or anything of the sort, right?"

"No," Nestra said decisively.

She knew what it looked like. A part of her wanted to let Kim believe what she wanted as it was safer, but she also didn't want to be seen as a prostitute. Or rather, an officer moonlighting as a prostitute which was significantly worse in terms of trust.

Kim sighed.

"You cannot do this anymore, Nestra. I'm sorry to tell you this since I have no legal or moral imperative to tell you how to live your life, but the world being as it is..."

"I know. I'm done," Nestra said.

And she was. Now that Crescent existed, she was much more mobile.

Riel, she should get herself a badass motorcycle with a slot for her sword. Maybe a fridge at the back.

"Good. Good. There might still be repercussions down the line, however..."

Nestra shrugged. As expected, people had jumped to conclusion in a way that advantaged her.

"Out of curiosity... I know you... I mean, this is being extremely unprofessional of me..."

It was clear the good officer was dying with curiosity.

"Food," Nestra replied.

"Oh. Oh! Of course, your medical file is sealed but your colleagues mentioned mana starvation. Is this how you afford to keep hunger at bay?"

Nestra nodded. Let it not be said she was incapable of deception. She was merely horrible at it. As such, nobody ever expected it from her.

Truly devious of Nestra.

Nestra pushed back the smile threatening to bloom on her lips. It wasn't a raid, but outplaying the competent always felt great to her, even if it was really nothing.

"Let's head back then. Your mother will be waiting."

By the time they found Deborah Palladian, the woman had collected three veteran gleams and a cup of cold brew. Nestra realized that she was on the verge of looking as old as her mom. That would be... weird when that happened. If that happened. She didn't think the mask aged anymore. She would have to see.

"Are you ready to head back, darling?"

The men's faces fell off when they realized Nestra was a drab. To their credit, they recovered pretty quickly, excusing themselves soon after.

The ride home was spent catching up.

“Stibs!”

“Nestra. Nice of you to call. I... I guess I should have called you earlier but... I felt guilty about leaving you to hang after you opened yourself to me. And after everything I said about loyalty.”

“Oh I figured you had moved on since you spent the night at my bro’s.”

Silence.

“Oh, hm, was it bad for me to point it out?”

“Way to ruin my heartfelt contrition, asshole. Ok, yeah. I guess you’re people. That’s what matters to me. You’re still who you are and Sereth is still Seth. And I was being an ass for holding your species against you. To be honest, I kind of feel dumb for not figuring Seth out. He’s like... the perfect prince from those cheesy romances, you know? Innocent in some ways, wise and badass beyond his age in others. And the sex! Out of this world. And he finds me special. And calls me his small Anaksi.”

“Err.. that means void flower.”

“Awwww.”

“Don’t ask me what it looks like, I know it’s a thing, I just don’t know what that thing is.”

“It’s probably rare and exquisite and it smells great all the time. But enough about me. What did you call me for?”

“I need your help to stop a serial killer that may be after me.”

There was a long pause, which was expected after all.

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope, the gleam killer. They left painted eyes on my front door.”

“Holy SHIT! Riel’s balls is that true?”

“Aunt Claire forcefully repatriated my ass to the family mansion so yes, very much true.”

“Do they know?”

“They do not and you know how old gleams are...”

“As a matter of fact, I do not.”

“They saw their families and friends get slaughtered by monsters during the incursion. They are also skilled killers with flash fuses.”

“Ah. I see how it could be a problem.”

“A very final problem, so let’s keep this between us. The Special Crime division is on it, but there are tools that only I can use.”

“Ooooh your special alien powers!”

“No, crime.”

There was another pregnant pause.

“Alright, I am intrigued. What are you suggesting?”

Nestra briefly explained her plan which wasn’t much of a plan at all. Use demon wall-striding bullshittery to barge in, find terminals and local data points while avoiding security systems, and finally use Stibs’ skills to get what she wanted.

“So basically I stay tuned in and do a little bit of piracy. You’re aware it’s actually super hard to find vulnerabilities, right?”

“I’m hoping the gallery will be a bit more lax with data safety than the average megacorp.”

“That might be true. Any chance I get some of that sweet gleam credit for it?”

Nestra didn’t have to hesitate.

“Sure, five thousand creds?”

“Holy Riel I am so in. Isn’t that too much?”

“I don’t know. The portal gig pays well and I don’t really spend that much. Might as well spread the love.”

“Well, whatever. We’ll get you what you’re looking for. Anything to catch that serial killer, honestly. Alright. I need to do some prep work. What about leaving home? You got a solution for that?”

“Hmm, Seth said he would assist.”

“Aw, that’s why he canceled for tonight. You’re lucky I like you.”

“You can reclaim your perfect demon prince if you help me with this horrible killer. Consider this your quest, young hero,” Nestra said with a solemn voice.

“Awesome. It’s like an old video game intro, except victory comes with a side of orgasm. I’m in. I assume you can’t really research stuff where you are?”

“This is my burner phone. All my coms must be monitored by Special Crime by now.”

“Right. Will send you all the details I got. Don’t research anything or they might get suspicious. I’ll prepare a package and give it to Seth. Would that work?”

“I knew I could count on you.”

Nestra spent the entire day working out, relaxing, and just generally avoiding the rest of the family. Only when Helena returned did she drag Nestra to a game of VI sword fighting which the younger girl won handily, simply because she was more familiar with the controls. Nestra vowed revenge and then joined everyone for an early dinner.

It was an awkward experience with Ulysses flatly refusing to engage. He didn't provoke her though, so Nestra was more than happy to let that dog lie.

A very early sleep meant she was up around midnight, sitting on her ass and wondering what Sereth planned to do. She didn't have to wait for long.

The air shimmered. Mana vibrated. Nestra looked on at the unfamiliar sight of an opening portal inside of the awfully familiar sight of her old room, alien light filtering in through the semi-darkness. Then there was a fist. A massive, obsidian-colored gauntlet punching through reality. Mana exploded, yet remained contained in a small sphere around Nestra. She felt the violation of space with her senses. She knew it was wrong. Too brutish. A complete lack of subtlety. She couldn't do better yet. Not enough power to initiate the breach but... it was there, coalescing in the chest of her true form.

The fist was soon replaced by a hand, as if unwrapping itself from the inside. The sight was alien and incomprehensible to her human eyes. It made her brain hiccup, made her want to watch it again until she got it. It was a mask coming out, she realized. Those long fingers were Seth's human shape.

They melded. The shape grew smoother, more refined. The skin changed to a paler tone. Some of the hair was reabsorbed. As Nestra watched, the hand settled into a stable form. It now belonged to a shorter person, from the angle.

The portal opened wider and a man stepped out, dressed in Seth's frequent shirt and cargo pants combo. He was...

“What the fuck?”

“Hello,” male Nestra replied in a slightly lower pitch than her own.

It was as if she had a near identical twin, only male. He was very androgynous with narrow hips and soft features, an effect reinforced by hair that reached to his shoulders. The blond and gray heavenly combo could have made Michaelangelo weep, but the effect was immediately ruined by a crooked smile — the Seth special. From angel to temptor in a heartbeat.

“Hello hello, little Nezhra! Sorry about this but this is the best way to fool your parents whenever they check up on you. Which they won't fail to do in less than five minutes so we gotta keep this short. There is another portal at the opposite end of this micro world. I left your gear at the exit, can't miss it!”

“Wait, you can just change your Mask like that?”

“Of course! I already told you. We males can adopt many forms while you are limited to your own and one per species.”

“One per species?”

“Oh, hmmm. I was perhaps not supposed to say it? Ah, no matter. We can switch shapes at will while you female Aszhii can only form... that is, you can only have one appearance per species you meld into. You will be able to create your own in a while, but you need to come across a member of the target species first.”

“And murder them?”

“Observation is required. Murder is not. Can still be fun though.”

“Sooooo you can only adopt male appearances?”

Seth winced, as if the very idea was painful.

“I can adopt a... female-adjacent body-shape. It is extremely uncomfortable, however, hence why I shall be your male mirror for now. Everything will be close enough to fool your parents' perception.”

“Right.”

“Stibbons has left some equipment for you. I will let you arrange your own transportation.”

“Thanks for the help, brother.”

“Aaaaah I am happy if you get to experience a good killer hunt. I always loved those.”

He looked around with naked curiosity.

“Your young den! I shall be respectful. Off you go now, maintaining the portal open is extremely draining.”

“How do I get back?”

“Just come to the same place. The tunnel should be mostly stable for a day.”

“Ok! See ya.”

Nestra shed her human mask, then stepped in.

The 'portal' didn't feel so much like a world as the antechamber of one, like seeing the back of a theater set with all its tethers and paraphernalia. The air smelled stale and the light was dim. Blurry shapes that looked like stunted trees emerged from the distance but Nestra knew

they were not here. This was more of a globule nestled between folds of reality than a structured world.

She found the exit right in front of her, only a few steps away. It looked as if Sereth had clawed a gap between worlds. A tear had formed, bleeding mana. She tsked.

Those males were so sloppy.

“Ugh, that’s not my thought.”

The Aszhii part of her brain wasn’t content to drop an entire language on her psyche, now she was getting the intrusive thoughts as well. It wasn’t right to criticize Sereth when she couldn’t open the way by herself. Nesta slipped through the tear into Threshold’s more pleasant air. She was now standing in some deserted streets in a rather nice part of the city, with small apartment buildings and a convenience store manned by a sleepy clerk.

There was a bag on a wall by her side. Stibbs’ goodies. Nesta didn’t feel anyone and her intuition was silent, so she took the opportunity given to her to take stock.

The bag contained a heavily altered pair of goggles, a datasheet, and a blocky box with an antenna. That was it. She moved to an alley and opened the datasheet first. There was only one file on it. She started with the ‘read me’.

‘Ok, here is what I found about the gallery, its layout, and its security system! Read it, then go there. Put the goggles on when you’re nearby to call me, I’ll guide you through everything.’

Nesta browsed through the rest. The gallery had a pretty complex layout with three floors that compartmentalized the exhibits and the private spaces rather tightly. An extensive basement for storage added to the mix. Stibbs had also found online that North Star Security claimed the gallery as one of its customers, meaning there could be a gleam guard on site.

“How do I even get to the gallery?” Nesta asked nobody in particular.

There was a bicycle left on the curb. It was locked.

Tempting, but she wouldn’t steal someone’s bike for the sake of convenience.

“Whelp. Running it is.”

Stretching her legs after being cooped up in her mask felt great. She kept to parks and roofs, places where cameras were fewer — no need to alarm a monitoring AI with a pattern of anomalies. Fortunately, Threshold was easy to navigate, the trinity always present as landmarks. It still took her twenty minutes at a good speed just to get there.

From the ground, the gallery looked more like a select retreat that mere mortals ought not dare visit. The welcoming roof almost felt like a distant memory. High hedges blocked the view of all entrances, leaving only the stern facade of a brutalist structure. Only the large windows gave a hint that this was not just a blockhouse.

This was it. Nestra put the goggles on. A few seconds later, a voice rang in her ears.

“Hello. It’s me, S. Do you copy?”

“The agile fox slips into the dragon’s den.”

“Damn glitchy thing. Hello? Nestra?”

Oh yeah, she had to focus on her voice or the thing wouldn’t pick it up.

“A shadow lurks in the murky darkness of Thressshold City, where dreams come to die...”

“Ha ha. So look, I don’t know what their security is like so you’ll have to be careful. First, let’s get you to the security room. You remember the layout?”

“You gave two security rooms.”

“So there are two possible options. I can’t tell you more without seeing the electrical layout, which we won’t, so you’ll have to check both.”

“Then it will be the one that’s underground.”

“If you say so. There should still be a lot of safeties in place, so be careful.”

Nestra considered her options. Cameras wouldn’t pick her up but glitches got investigated. After a moment of consideration, she made her way to the employees entrance off to the side. There was a changing room next to the lobby according to the plan. Rushing forward, she slipped through the walls into a dark room.

Her intuition remained silent.

“Wow, that was trippy as hell,” Stibbs whispered.

“You got a feed?”

“Visual, yes. I wasn’t sure it would work with your weird alien aura. Alright, your approach makes sense. There’s probably much less security on the staff side of things.”

Nestra was now standing inside a locker room for safety and janitorial staff. It was fairly small. She slipped through the wall again, this time more slowly to look left and right. The wall didn’t immediately push her out.

She was getting better at this.

She should burglarize more places as practice.

“I’m just going to close my eyes from now on when you do that,” Stibbs said with a weak voice.

Right. Work first.

Nestra moved through a deserted corridor deeper into the gallery. She came across a few offices, a staff room, and a storage space. Her intuition faintly warned her of cameras of which there were only two. A faint smell of ice mana lingered in the air.

“Gleam passed here earlier,” she whispered.

“Probably a guard. They must have short rounds.”

“Right.”

Nestra finally found herself directly over the security room, or at least the place she assumed was a security room. There were two mana signatures below her: an icy one, and a light one. Those were serious gleams if they’d unlocked their affinities, but the overall weak power indicated they were probably just not very gifted. She sat down.

“Nestra?”

“Wait.”

They did, in silence. After five minutes or so, one of the mana signatures grew more distant.

Nestra passed her head through the floor, catching sight of a closing door and the beep of a lock. The security room was small and filled with servers around a comfortable double desk. Monitors covered one of the walls, a waste of space when visors were a thing but some people preferred it that way. The remaining gleam sat back in an ergonomic chair, fingers playing with a weird toy.

Nestra slipped through, with Stibbs providing commentaries.

“Shit, I didn’t think there would be two of them. I need you to connect the black box to the local computing unit. That’s... the one right in front of the guard.”

Nestra could see it too. The local unit was just a solid black rectangle in what looked like an EMP-resistant shell. Old but reliable. As Stibbs said, it sat in front of the guard, near his constantly moving right hand. No way he would miss something as obvious as a massive demon girl playing IT.

Nestra looked around. A can of steaming coffee stood dangerously close to the edge on the other gleam’s side of the desk. Nestra wordlessly approached until she was so close she could smell the guard’s shampoo under the uniform’s hat.

His head turned up and to the right to look at a distant screen. Quick as a snake, she poked the coffee cup. It fell with a clink, spilling foam all over the concrete floor.

“Riel fucking dammit.”

The man turned. Nestra plugged the thing in record time.

The gleam stood with a sigh, Nestra at his back. He leaned down to pick up the fallen cup.

“Oh shit! On it!” Stibbs said.

On the main screen, an installation bar opened. Several windows opened and shut, then a new program switched to full screen, showing the exact same camera feed as before. It had taken less than half a second. By then, the D-class gleam had finished wiping the foam, and was halfway to the trash bin.

“Remove the—”

Nestra unplugged the box. The gleam was turning.

She used momentum to teleport to his back.

He tilted his head, icy iris inspecting his seat. Nestra took a few step backs until her back was to the wall.

“Huh,” the gleam said. “No, it’s nothing. Just your cup falling on the ground you daft fucker. Yeah yeah.”

“Oh he’s talking to the other guard,” Stibbs said.

Nestra walked through the wall. She was in a brightly lit corridor with steps leading up. A locked security gate to her left led to the art storage if her map was accurate.

“Riel dammit Nestra you’re an artist. Never seen anything like that, even on vids! You have a bright career ahead of you, haha. Ok, I’m just getting admin rights aaaaaand we’re good. I have access to their feed. Damn, the exhibition rooms have lasers and motion sensors. Ok, first thing first, let me explore their systems a bit.”

Nestra moved up the stairs, dodging a camera and walking through two walls until she was in the staff room again. Interestingly, it didn’t have any cameras.

“Ok,” Stibbs said after a good twenty minutes. “I found the guest list, camera footage of the night of the exhibition, and information on the ‘anonymous donors’ who contributed their work. If you can, you need to head up to the director’s office because I can’t access her files from the security network.”

“Let’s get started then.”