

Nestra was now facing an unexpected issue. In the past weeks, she'd been living her best life as her demon self, with human Nestra taking a backseat, only leaving the house for the occasional social outing. And pastries. She'd driven her pink roadster around but that was just to meet friends and family. Human Nestra was professionally on leave until the heat of the Gidung debacle died down. She hadn't contacted anybody. Well, not anybody new anyway.

A quick text to Claire confirmed that her aunt wasn't responsible for the offer.

"Is it a date? Is someone mistaken? It could also be work-related. ˘˘ (˘)˘˘."

Nestra rolled her eyes behind her visor. Of course it wasn't job related. Officer Kim wouldn't forget to send her a file, not with how anal she was about preparations, not to mention the invitation wasn't just any invitation. It was the VIP of all VIP invitations that came with a hover limo ride and even complimentary Champagne. Not bubbly. Champagne. From Riel-damned France. This was the kind of offer one sent out to guild officers of upper management from an actual megacorp, not some idiot failure working as a grunt for the police rat squad.

The only recent link she had with art was with the fucking serial killer.

Surely it wasn't that.

Out of ideas, Nestra called the fancy private art gallery where the exhibition was to take place. They confirmed the invitation.

"The Collective's yearly gala is such a great occasion. I am certain you will have a fantastic time," the mellifluous voice of the receptionist cooed in her ear. "Only Threshold's best artists convene for the occasion."

Damn.

Damn damn damn.

"What should I do? What should I dooooo?" she asked her ceiling.

Nestra's current life was perfect. She was having fun raiding with Helena, getting a ton of money by raiding as Crescent, eating, sparring, and just chilling overall. Why were people trying to complicate matters? Why disturb the perfect circle of life (fighting looting eating sleeping) with unnecessary garbage?

Another call to Seth yielded more questions than answers.

"It's not associated with any direct danger to your life that you could not fend off yourself," the man said.

"Oh, uh, okay."

“Please note that it means there could be danger, just none that you would be hopeless against.”

“TELL ME THE TRUTH ALREADY.”

“Nope! Attend or not, it’s your choice. Oh! My choux a la crème is ready. Bye!”

“Screw you, you sweet-toothed —”

He hung up.

“Arg!”

Nestra finally jumped into the shower, her pleasure now partly ruined by the recent development. Once she was in her clean, warm, safe bed, it was finally time to ask herself the real question.

Should she even attend?

“It’s going to be full of gleams.”

But they would have Champagne. She’d never had Champagne. Her dad thought it was a frivolous expenditure when Kiwi and Aussie vintages already pleased the palate well enough.

“I will be looked down upon and stared at.”

Finger food for gleams.

“It will be dangerous for sure.”

And exciting.

“I’m just too damn curious. GAH! Ok, fine, you got me.”

Had to prepare a bit though. She couldn’t let hubris get in the way of a good evening.

“You have done as I asked,” Ragnarok stated.

Nestra thought her habit of calling people to her office and facing the window with her hands clasped behind her back screamed ‘evil overlord’ in an annoying way. There was also the transit time. An hour and a half both ways for what could have been a call. She supposed the woman was old-fashioned like that.

“I have disciplined Alden, of course. That man presumed too much, though I applaud his enthusiasm. Issued warrants found correspondence and suspicious payments made to Satoshi, Naomi, and Strix. Just as I expected.”

It was so nice to be Crescent because she wasn't compelled to answer. She could just let people ramble. Very relaxing.

"The presence of the Kitsune came as a surprise. Have you ever heard of her?"

Well, technically, she had heard of Fox Mask. Not 'the Kitsune'. So it wasn't exactly a lie.

"No."

"Hm? Oh, right. The Kitsune is an operative we suspect is working for one or several enclaves. It would be... foolish for any enclave on the continent to dare abduct the scion of a megacorp, but it would not be inconceivable for them to be working for traffickers. You don't need to worry about her. She is purely a mercenary, though a slippery one. This is, in fact, the first time someone managed to fend her off."

"She leavessss witnesses often?"

"Yes. She only kills criminal elements. Or she has, so far. Otherwise the city would have dedicated more resources to stopping her. Are you interested in knowing more?"

Ragnarok's expression remained carefully neutral. This, of course, made alarms ring in Nestra's mind.

"Great fighter," she replied noncommittally.

"I see. Well, you should take two days to rest, then I have another portal raid for you. Dismissed."

"I have a quesstion."

This time, Ragnarok sat in her chair. Nestra found her expression to be unreadable.

"What was it?"

"How did they plan to take Valerian of House Nephrite out?"

"Well, the original plan was to wait before facing the guardian so harvesters could get to work on this world, remember?"

Ragnarok gave Nestra a pointed look. It was true that by rushing to save Sheryl's remains, the two of them had sacrificed quite a bit of money. All of the money that came with clearing up a portal world but leaving the last guardian alive so the local resources could be harvested. It was a massive loss, especially since it would have been split two ways. But Nestra had no regrets. Killing the boss had made her much stronger and the task had felt... right. A good challenge for a noble cause.

"One of the harvesters was an accomplice of the fated trio. He would have picked Valerian's restrained body from a designated spot before hiding him in a crate, which would have been shipped immediately while the surviving raiders claimed young Nephrite had been dragged off by some monster. With no bodies to be found and Valerian's... known tendencies to put

himself at risk, no one would have found anything strange. The trio's subsequent departure from the city would have made perfect sense since BaiHua blacklists those who allow their scions to be killed. No one works with corpo pariahs unless they're really valuable."

"Well prepared," Nesta allowed.

"The Kitsune is nothing if not dedicated. Was there anything else?"

"No."

"Then go and rest. I will transfer a bonus to your account for service rendered. Oh, and your share of your victims' belongings, of course. Assassination and kidnapping attempt are class three felonies. We have confiscated everything."

Asset forfeiture was a bitch.

Since this was going to be a black tie event, and it was clearly advertised as such, Nesta needed a cocktail dress that didn't look like it came out of an outlet's bargain bin. That meant an actual fitting, and Claire was only too happy to drag her to a baseline shop she favored herself. Nesta ended up falling for a gray dress with a scale pattern that left her shoulders bare, revealing a few faint scars. It reminded her of the kind of high-tech mail armor fast gleams favored since it was flexible. It was a statement, as were her exposed muscles, and maybe people would stop assuming she was somebody's sidepiece. She raided on the day of the exhibition on Ragnarok's suggestion though it was a D-class world filled with ents and she barely got any benefit from it. A stylist did her hair in the afternoon, then she enjoyed the ride in a luxury hover limo.

Watching Threshold flash below her was a spectacle she couldn't get tired of. The walls and the hints of green behind them always added to the grandeur of the arrogant megapolis. The city didn't just thrive, it did so on the world's most hostile and monster-infested continent. The afternoon sun reflected on the steel and glass of towering skyscrapers and arcologies rising in defiance of the new reality of the planet, works of technology and cooperation powerful gleams could never hope to match alone. The smooth journey ended with a slow, downward slope towards a flat rooftop half-covered in greeneries. The limo doors opened without a sound. A pleasant chime confirmed she had arrived.

Nesta stood up ready for social battle. She walked out with grace, on flats she'd bought for the occasion and were specifically designed for comfort. A pair of gleams in tailored suits approached her at a sedate pace. D-class but well-trained, she judged. The left one was a manakinetic like Fox Mask which made her blink. He touched his visor and smiled at her.

"Good evening Miss Palladian. Please take the steps down, someone will be waiting for you."

"Oh, thank you."

The rooftop doors opened smoothly, white stairs leading down to a zen landing showing a single, breath-taking mural of massive proportions. The handmade painting depicted a

collection of towering trees dominating a colorful forest, each one a titan with its own structure, leaf pattern, and unique hue. The arrangement felt very familiar, and it took her only a few seconds to realize this was the Threshold cityscape as seen from the sea, with each arcology and major structure replaced by a colossal growth. The Baihua dome now spread as a willow bearing white flowers while the Gidung megastructure stood like the pillar it had chosen as a symbol. After watching the fascinating work for all of thirty seconds, Nestra's gaze finally moved to the side, where letters painted on the wall with reflective paint announced the name of the collection.

"The Metropolitan Gallery of Arts presents

Threshold: Between Two Worlds

A Collective exhibit"

Oscillating between green and gray through some low mana bullshit, the message shimmered in the air like a promise. It was, she had to admit, a very nice touch.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"AH!"

Nestra almost jumped out of her skin. She'd been so captivated by the work and its many intricacies down to the tiniest detail that she had failed to see that there was someone in the room. The short, black-haired anglo stood in Nestra's blind spot on her right, next to a door. The woman raised both hands to show she was harmless. Mostly, she was smiling very smugly, yet also quite warmly.

"I didn't mean to surprise you."

"Sorry, I... Sorry. Just not used to people managing to sneak up on me."

Goddamn stupid. Why worry about an elaborate trap? Someone could just put a nice painting and a bowl of stew on a chair and Nestra would just rush forward like a damn lemming.

"To my defense, I was just standing still. And I can hardly blame you! This amazing mural is a pivotal piece of this collection. I am delighted that it would speak to you like this. You are a visual appreciator, are you not?"

"I... guess?"

"Hahaha, well, allow me to offer you a belated welcome, Miss Palladian. My name is Lucille Harrington. I am the assistant curator for our gallery. It is my great pleasure to welcome you here tonight."

"Thank you. I apologize for the poor showing."

"No harm done and as I said, I am pleased that it would speak to you so, for is it not art's very purpose? Ah, I digress. Would you allow me to give you a quick tour?"

“I’d appreciate that, actually.”

The two moved through the glass door to a larger room of minimalist design. The subdued yet warm notes of white and brown allowed each work of art to shine. Lights centered on the exhibits and nothing else so that the rest of the room was plunged in semi-darkness. A gleam couple in exquisite matching clothes walked hand in hand. They both tasted of wood and growth. Nestra averted her eyes when the woman gave her a cold glance.

Nature and metal merged in the various works according to different visions, but Nestra had to admit that they looked great. She leaned in, seeing a price tag near a magnificent statue.

Ouch.

“Over here are the contributions of the Collective’s most prolific artist, such as this living lamp by Dolores Concepcion.”

A mana-altered bonzai grew fruits that shone in the penumbra. It was fancy as hell. Unfortunately, Nestra regularly failed to keep cacti alive.

“The third floor hosts the most unique exhibits. On the second floor, you will find the hall of the applicants where the finalists will battle for the right to call themselves members of the Collective. You will find our handpicked permanent collections on the first floor.”

“Actually, I had a question if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all!”

“Do you, I mean, is it possible to find out... who invited me?”

Curator Harrington blinked, clearly not expecting the question.

“Oh, you were not contacted? Hmm. I’m afraid I cannot tell you because the Collective handles their own free VIP invitations, however, if someone did invite you without revealing themselves, then perhaps they will contact you here?”

“Unfortunate.”

“I’m afraid the Collective counts many anonymous contributors. I simply cannot help you in this regard, but perhaps you would like some Champagne? As consolation.”

“Yes please.”

With a smile, the curator guided Nestra to a secluded room in a corner of the third floor. Groups of gleams watched her come in like a bunch of sharks but their mana didn’t even ripple. A smile from Harrington was enough to make them return to their conversations.

There were a few powerful raiders here, but mostly the mood was one of discussion and comments. The groups were tight and mobile, indicating that those people knew each other well. There were no baseline guests here. The room smelled of expensive cologne and exclusivity. Nestra felt a wall of indifference slam all around her.

That was probably better than hostility. And the best she could hope for.

A waiter approached, a baseline this time. He solemnly offered her a cup of fizzling alcohol. Nestra had a sip.

Sweet, a little bit acid. Very fruity. The bubbles tickled her nose. It was nice, but definitely not worth the pain of carrying it across Eurasia.

“Is this your first time attending such an event?” Curator Harrington nicely asked.

Obviously the canny woman knew the answer, but she still pulled Nestra to the side near a table filled with finger food. The woman happily talked about the collection for around fifteen minutes, dazzling Nestra with explanations peppered with funny anecdotes. It was clear the curator loved her job and her passion was communicative, so communicative that Nestra forgot to eat. Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end.

“Oh, another VIP is landing. I’m afraid I must take my leave, but please feel free to roam the grounds! Let me send you a data package I brought together so you can appreciate and understand each work. Or don’t use it and take the art in raw, as you prefer. Goodbye, Miss Palladian.”

“Thanks, Curator Harrington. Take care.”

The short woman departed with some pep in her step, a sure sign that she belonged to the rare subspecies of homo sapiens who enjoyed gleam parties and meeting a ton of new people. Somehow. Nestra could also read between the lines: she was an outsider here and would probably be enjoying her evening more if she let her visor guide her through the exhibition. She was about to do that when a bubbly voice drew her away from her funk.

“Miss Palladian, what a pleasant surprise to see you here! This is the last place I expected to meet you.”

The owner of the voice was a brown-eyed gleam in a colorful dress, her hair hidden under a wide-brimmed hat. Nestra knew she’d met her before but couldn’t place her for all of two seconds during which the woman strutted forward, lips twitching with amusement. She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Oh, we met at my brother’s party.”

“Yeeees! Well done, well done.”

“You are Miss. Teneru. An artist.”

“Good memory! Indeed, you have found me in my den.”

Of course it must have been her, not some serial killer thing. Just someone she’d met before trying to draw her out for... some reason or the other. Maybe she needed a favor. Or she was just being contrarian by inviting a reject to the cool kids haven.

“Sorry to ask but... are you the one who invited me here?”

“Meeee?” the woman replied with high-pitched, and what sounded genuine, surprise.

The boisterous interaction was gathering some attention, and what started as cold disinterest slowly turned into predatory curiosity. Nestra spotted a few people activating their visors. Possibly scanning her face to find out who she was. The lack of reaction told her little about what to expect.

“No, no! I gave my free spot to a nice Touhei fellow, against a box of Akamaru whiskey. Twelve years old. His loss! I was just thinking that whoever invited you made a good judgment. After all, you’re between two worlds as well...”

Shit shit shit Nestra thought, how does everybody know I’m an Aszhii?

“... Baseline and user, civilian and military, the poverty of the outskirts and the wealth of the Palladians.”

Nevermind. Also, the mystery was still complete as to who brought her here.

“Ah, but I digress. No. Are you sure they didn’t leave a message?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Hmm. Curious. But how could I judge my brethren for originality here, in this home of the muses?”

“I am just happy to be here, and grateful for the Champagne. I’ve only been on the third floor so far but I have to admit, it’s rather impressive.”

It made Nestra really tempted to steal.

“Oh yes, did you come in through the roof? You saw the Treescape?”

“The mural? It was fascinating. I really enjoyed the arcologies translated as trees.”

“I painted it!”

“Then you’re a damn genius,” Nestra admitted.

“Ah, genuine, truthful appreciation. How rare. How refreshing! Come, let’s get walk around a bit. Have you been to the second floor yet?”

“I just arrived.”

“As a gesture of welcome, please let me show you what our young candidates have brought for us in the hope of joining our hallowed ranks.”

The woman carefully grabbed Nestra’s elbow, guiding her to the door once it was clear Nestra was ok with being touched. She babbled all the way down to a much more crowded

second floor. There were also a lot more baselines. Security guards marked the third floor as exclusive without invitation.

“And over here is the globe as wood and steel intertwined.”

Teneru’s explanation fell on deaf ears. The only thing Nesta could do was watch a certain painting standing in a corner, gathering a lot of attention despite its unfavorable placement.

It was an eye surveying an oniric, sometimes nightmarish landscape made of scraps and bones. The wild color palette made the work a dizzying fantasmagoria, but it was truly the eye that drew Nesta’s attention. It was that of a human, plain, not even gleaming, yet it was the most vibrant part of the arrangement.

Nesta was absolutely certain she’d seen that style before. The same wild colors. The same focus on eyes.

In the mausoleum where she’d found the dead pyromancer. The serial killer’s first site.

It was them. Her instincts told her this was the killer’s work.

“Who... made this?”

Teneru blinked, caught off guard by the non sequitur. She moved past to peek at Nesta’s object of attention.

“Oh, that? Sorry darling, this one comes from an anonymous contender. How mysterious! How exciting, I know. The unknown artist only joined the list of candidates this year, I believe.”

“Are they not anonymous?”

“Darling, I can recognize someone by their style and this person? It’s the first time they have joined the race.”

Teneru’s eyes narrowed, though she was still smiling.

“Dreamy, but with something fundamentally disturbing. It’s the eye, I think. The baseline eye, separate from the magical chaos. Hmm. Do you like it?”

“I, errrr, dunno. It’s certainly remarkable. Are pictures okay?”

“Probably not, but as long as you don’t post them somewhere then it should be fine. Is something the matter?”

“I’m not sure.”

Nesta paused.

What the hell was she even doing? Her knowledge of art was so rudimentary, she had no reasons to be sure the painters were even the same. Ah, but then, who had invited her? Was it the killer? It would be unfathomably cheeky.

In the end, signaling the eerie similitudes was still easy. Let the brass decide what to do. Nestra selected a screenshot, wrote a short message to Kim and then left off. The worst that could happen would be her boss thinking she was too bored.

Teneru led Nestra through a few more rooms, but she found it difficult to focus. If the person who had invited her was indeed the killer, then she was deep in shit. Super deep in shit. The last thing she needed was the attention of a serial killer capable of taking out C-rank raiders. Why even target her at all? She wasn't a gleam! Was this about her finding the first body? Wait, no, maybe she was just imagining things, really, and just trying to find connections at all costs. She wasn't the universe's main character and everything didn't revolve around her. But then, who invited her? Aaaaargh!

She apologized before deciding to take an early leave. Anxiety was ruining her mood.

"I can tell you are spooked, friend. I understand," her new guide allowed.

"Can I ask you a question?" Nestra said on a hunch.

"Why, yes. Several even!"

"Why are you being nice to me?"

Teneru nodded, unsurprised.

"Aaaah but that is the thing. Am I being nice to you? Or can it not be expected, as an acquaintance of your clan, that I would welcome you here after seeing you arrive alone?"

"Ah, ehm, I had never considered the question."

"If you were a gleam like me there would not be a question, but you are not, and somehow everyone is making it a problem. It is not fair to you. It is also a stark reminder of the sort of society we live in. Discrimination and an increasingly rigid social structure, even among us gleams. I, as an artist, am weak. If I were not rich and famous, those people would not give me the time of the day. I am merely treating you how I would wish to be treated."

A part of Nestra cynically noted that they only knew each other because Nestra was from a rich family. The worst thing was, Teneru was still being nice and open compared to the others, just by being willing to be seen with her and by guiding her around. That was the state of things. Drabs ought to be grateful if treated as equals.

"Thanks," Nestra said half-heartedly.

"There is no need for gratitude. I hope you find your peace of mind soon."

They split then, Teneru moving to speak to a journalist who had hailed her earlier.

Nestra made her lonely way back to the third floor. The guards didn't stop her once more, and she was soon near the rooftop exit before remembering she had to call the limo before it could come pick her up. Curses. For the next fifteen minutes, she trawled through the collection.

The VIP social gathering had spread throughout the floor by then. High gleams and their entourage moved in small groups, exchanging words in hush whispers. They moved around Nestra like fishes swimming around a rock. For all intents and purposes, she didn't exist, except as a vague obstacle. They didn't even look at her. Now, the fancy gray dress felt like a silly and unnecessary expense because no amount of nice fabric would ever make her anything but a drab.

A beep in her visor grabbed her attention. It was Kim, with a one-line message.

"I ran the painting through a predictive AI. There is a plausible chance for a match. Be careful."

FUCK.

The last two minutes before the limo arrived were some of the longest of her life. Finally, she jumped into the hover car and only breathed a sigh of relief after the doors closed. No weird mana constructs around. No presence. She was fine, for now.

Maybe she needed some sort of protection detail?

The limo rose through the night air. It was dark now, and though human Nestra's night vision was decent for a human, the city was still an ocean of darkness dotted with tiny islands of light as the limo flew away from the center and towards the—

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Nestra's heart jumped against her ribcage. A screen lit in the flat pane in front of her.

CONNECTION LOST. Emergency landing initiated.

She checked her visor.

'No signal'

Oh. Oh no.

She pressed on her 'oh shit' button on the spot, but she was mid-flight and knew help would take some time to come. Gah! She'd probably been hit by some sort of jammer, and whatever it was, it was not good.

Quick, think.

Ok, if a hovercar with no driver lost connection with Threshold's ground control for any reasons, it would always be forced to land for safety reasons. Midair collisions were often fatal, even to gleams. But someone wanted her down and the timing was suspicious. She needed time. Time and distance.

"Passenger request. I am requisitioning this vehicle as Nestra Palladian, Officer with the Threshold Police Internal Affairs."

CONNECTION LOST. Request logged. Opening control panel. Impersonation of a police officer is a class one felony.

The panel slid to reveal an extremely basic joystick control thing a child could use. A screen showed the ground and the front of the car in black and white because of the basic night vision. Her attempt to go up failed. She was restricted by both speed and altitude. The car was still steadily going to land, the only choice she had was where. Right now, the projected landing spot was in a small green spot in the middle of mid-sized office buildings.

There was an unmarked van parked there.

“Fuck that.”

Nestra smashed the buttons, managing to curve the trajectory. The only building she could reach was a vertical parking lot with big empty spaces where windows ought to be. It was mostly deserted now in the evening. Warnings and proximity alerts screeched in her ears but she managed to stop on the concrete roof without scratching the paint.

“Passenger request. Open the fucking door.”

Suggestion: stay until help

“NOW!”

The door obliged, and Nestra was out and sprinting in an instant. She ran parallel to green space, looking down to street level.

Four figures were running there under the pale blue light of the streetlamps. Augs from the speed and relative lack of grace.

What the fuck?

Nestra didn't even try the elevator. They would be here before she reached ground level. What to do? She raced along the edge of the roof, searching for solutions. Seconds ticked.

There, two floors below. A covered passage between this building and the next.

Nestra crashed against the nearest stairs thankfully open. She considered activating the fire alarm but it might lock stuff. Her visor went back online. She immediately shared her location and her feed.

Just needed to stay ahead. Riel, they might even give up. And who the hell were they anyway? She raced down, hearing the distant pangs of metal soles battering concrete. In front of her, the lift turned on.

No time.

Nestra breathed deep. Augs could climb very fast with the right tools. She didn't have the time to wait. Veering left, she approached the edge of the building. The thick windows in front of her were dark and foreboding. The evening air burnt in her lungs.

Nestra jumped, first on the ledge, then over the passage. Her feet landed heavily on the roof. She rolled to offset the shock, thanking past Nesta for buying good shoes. A maintenance access beckoned in the distance. She tried it.

Locked.

Nestra looked around for a solution. Rungs lodged in the outer walls of the passage allowed her to lower herself just as an aug raced along the slope of the parking building, back where she came from. She saw chrome shimmering from under a ratty hoodie. The leg model was familiar. Military grade but... ancient?

The aug disappeared out of sight. Nesta didn't wait. She lowered herself to the side of the passage and found an unlocked window, which she pushed open with her fingers and enough swear words to make a sailor blush. Inside, the temperature was colder. The next door led to the inside of the office building. Bright neon letters announced that this was the headquarters of TianWu Avionics. A huge drone took half of the lobby. There was no one behind the welcome desk.

Behind her, she heard a bang. Like a locked door being slammed open. An alarm started to ring.

How did they find her? Whatever, no time. She rushed towards the nearest door, finding it locked. Another one led to a back office filled with supplies. There was a fire extinguisher there, which she grabbed.

If only she'd taken her car, dammit! She could have stashed her Window Maker and shot the assholes. Another door, leading to stairs. Noise in the room she'd just left. She heard a click click she could recognize anywhere. A DNA tracker.

That shit cost at least forty thousand cred a unit. Someone really, really wanted her. She raced up, but she knew it would be over soon.

An aug jumped on the landing she'd just left, tracker exposed. He was holding a stun baton in his other hand. Their eyes met. He was wearing an actual balaclava like it was 2030, dark skin visible in the holes. Military augments peeked from behind his clothes. Ancient Kang actuators and a Gidung mesh from two decades ago merged in some sort of unholy matrimony of intellectual property violations. Nesta pulled the pin and sprayed him with fire-retardant foam. He swore. She threw the extinguisher in his face for good measure, but his raised arm blocked most of the impact. A resounding bong reverberated in the narrow staircase. The man fell with a yelp.

Nestra raced up. A bang made her flinch. Firearm? No, not loud enough. Fluttering conversations in a language she didn't know fused. Her visor struggled, jammed once again.

Another bang. A hit in her leg, like being slapped. She fell to the side. Her eyes searched the wound with panic but there was only a bruise there. Soft rubber bullet then? They really wanted her alive, but why?

Two of the four augs stopped in front of her. They were short, she decided, and professional, but no used to kidnapping or they would know how ridiculous they were being.

“You guys are idiots.”

The left aug, the leader, grabbed her arm. He placed manacles on them.

“Shut up,” he replied in broken English.

They dragged her down.

“Took too long,” she said. “Now you won’t escape. You should have run when you could.”

“Quiet! You keep quiet. Or else.”

“Or else what. I hope you were well paid to get me. Do you even know who I am?”

“You are target, and you quiet or you die.”

They pushed her through the lobby. The alarm was still ringing. Not that the police would be there on time anyway.

“Nu-uh, you were told to capture me alive. Or else you wouldn’t have bothered.”

“You very expensive girl, but your legs not.”

The second man warned off the first and Nestra’s next barb didn’t get her an answer. Too bad because she was sure she could get some answers while they felt in control.

“You know I’m a Palladian, right? You know what it means? It means you’re already fucked.”

They were back in the passage. The man slapped her. Not too strongly. She still felt that sting very keenly, probably because no one had dared to do it in a decade.

Her demon self growled beneath the surface. Nestra kept herself in check with a reminder this was a game, and if she came out of this free with her Mask intact, then it was her victory.

“You’re gonna regret this in three seconds.”

“Shut up. You are jammed. You have no hope.”

But they had not jammed magic. And Nestra’s beacon, lit by her oh-shit button, that one was magic.

Mana rose. Earth mana, specifically. The end of the passage was right here.

Then it was not.

The wall folded like a flower and a woman in dragon-decorated scale armor stepped in through the petals. Magic like a wave crashed against the two augs like a hammer. It froze them in their tracks. Two orbs like boulder-tossing hurricanes found the poor fuckers. The high gleam breathed in, a hiss that promised violence. Her seething rage made Nestra gasp. It was so powerful, so raw and intense it was almost solid. There was now more mana in the enclosed space than human Nestra had ever experienced.

Aunt Claire punched the nearest aug's head clean off. One moment, she was standing there, the next there was a ghastly crunch and bits of brains on the wall. The B-class raider was already pulling the second aug's arms off their metal sockets before Nestra could even speak. The shriek of tortured metal drilled her ears.

"Claire. Aunt Clecle!"

"WHAT!"

"We need to interrogate them! We need them alive! Riel dammit."

The aug was babbling incoherently by now. Nestra checked her dress. No brain bits, at least, or the evening would have been ruined for good.

Claire snarled. She tossed the mangled, but still breathing, aug away. The body bounced on the ground once before coming to a rest.

"Did you get the others?" Nestra asked in a hurry.

"There are more?" Claire replied with the face of a child being promised a second Christmas.

"At least two. Please keep—"

A woosh and Claire was gone.

"Keep your temper in check," Nestra finished telling the wall. "Riel dammit, Clecle."

"I got them!"

"Ok great. Seriously though, what took you so long! You were just a minute away."

"I... got lost."

"Seriously?"

"Look, I'm not supposed to run through the damn walls in a straight line and my flying license is suspended due to... a certain incident. But whatever, you're ok. Oh, those brutes slapped you! I'm going to tear them apart."

"Noooo let my colleagues handle it, please?"

"Oh fine. My distrust of cops notwithstanding, I want answers just as much as you do."