

Nestra still struggled with wall slip going up. There was a trick to it, which was to jump and activate the skill with perfect timing. Unfortunately, she had not mastered it yet, and since face-planting then screaming obscenities in Aszhii wasn't conducive to stealth, she hauled her demon ass through the stairs like a pedestrian. Fortunately, the staff side had a dearth of cameras, and the patrolling gleam made no effort to hide his steps. She just followed in his wake at a careful distance and all went well.

Stibbs quietly guided her to the director's office, which was suitably nestled on the last floor, with windows overlooking the nearby streets. Nestra plugged the black box into its computer, then Stibbs booted the thing and basically copied the entire local hard drive on an isolated unit.

"Ok, I'm done. You can leave if you want, or stay in case there is something more we need to find."

Nestra's intuition told her there was something wrong about one of the paintings. A quick inspection confirmed there was a safe hidden there, but she didn't think there would be anything of interest to her specifically.

She decided to sit down on the comfortable couch nearby.

"Right. We can have a look at what we already have."

"Then let's start with the identity of the anonymous contestants. There's three, one for each anonymous work. Which one did you want to check?"

"I, errr."

Nestra didn't remember the name of the killer's painting.

"Fuck. Hsss, it has this big eye..."

"I can't see the painting on a damn spreadsheet, dumbass. What's its name?"

"I forgot."

"Ok, well, I have one by a certain Ivan Tennison? Name's 'leaves and returns'. If only I could check his file... I don't have access to the police database anymore. Maybe I can ask around."

"Use my ID? Hello? Still a cop?" Nestra said.

"Oooh yeah sorry. Sorry."

"Sending you now."

"Riiiiight. Ok. Tennison, wow, he has quite a few cases of petty theft. An art student from Central. Damn, he's good. Many prizes."

“Baseline?”

“Yes.”

“Unlikely.”

“Hmmm, you’re right. He’s not augeed either. Well, nothing beyond a smartlink. No current affiliation with a corp or anything either. Bit of a wild one. Looks like he’ll get the materials he wants by stealing them if he can’t afford them.”

“No. Next?”

“Ok, well, I got a Liu Moli. Also a baseline. Wow, she’s a janitor for the Museum of Modern Art! Over forty as well.”

Nestra considered it. It could be someone using her identity since a janitor was vulnerable yet had access to many places.

“Tell me more?”

“Oh, she’s taking night classes for sculpture.”

“Sculpture? Is her piece a sculpture?”

“Errr, the name is ‘etudes, bronze, steel, and jade’.”

“That’s a sssculpture. Last one?”

“The Sight by Carmelita Cortez. Hmmm.”

“That is definitely the one.”

Stibbs sighed. Nestra knew she’d found something but she waited a bit more.

“The real Carmelita died last year at the ripe age of 87.”

“Is everything in the profile fake?”

“Yep. Even the linked bank account to receive a cash prize is fake. Damn, the killer really doesn’t give a shit about money.”

“So, a bust.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe we can interrogate the Head of the Gallery?”

“Special Crime will do it. Demon Nestra will not. Too risky. If the fine Special Crime folks find sssomething valuable, then good for them. We don’t have the authority and I don’t want to resort to kidnapping.”

“You think Special Crime might succeed?” Stibbs asked.

She sounded genuinely curious.

“They could, but it will not be on time. I will need to.... lure it.”

“It?”

“Them. The prey. Hsss. Playing with my house. All my food stuck in freezerssss.”

“Errr okay. Well. I think we’re done here? I wouldn’t know what else to look for.”

Nestra had a good idea about something she could do here but first, there was the terminal where the login had been made. Unfortunately, that proved to be a bust. It was a free access terminal used by guests that didn’t keep any data between sessions. Nestra shrugged. It had been a long shot anyway.

“Ok, I will head back. We have the security camera footage to check out.”

“Hey, I’d like to help if possible.”

“This issss an illegal task force. Are you alright with it?”

Stibbs didn’t hesitate a single second.

“We’re going after a serial killer. I think I already made it clear I wasn’t a fan of procedures that got in the way of safety or justice.”

“Fair.”

Nestra headed out, then back the same way she’d come from, leaving her gear in the same spot she’d found it in. The tunnel through the false world was already closing, but she managed to push her way through anyway, slipping back into her room face first. She ended up nose to nose with her human male Nestra twin. It was as disturbing now as it had been the first time.

“I am jealous of you women, sometimes. How do you touch the fabric of the world with such ease?” Seth asked in a voice with familiar intonations.

“Stop it, you’re freaking me out.”

His form morphed in a mind-defying move that eventually left her facing Seth’s default human form.

“Ah, I apologize. It must be traumatic, and remind you of the possibility of having one’s identity stolen. I assume it would be worse if you were male.”

“Probably yeah. But hmmm. Thanks for the help tonight.”

“Your mother went by but she didn’t intrude, and she didn’t feel anything off. Her perception is amazing though! I pretended to wake up and she noticed through the door. Our fa — hmmm.”

“Our father chose well?” Nestra said, unamused.

She could imagine the ears of his true form drooping sadly.

“I apologize. It was callous of me.”

“Bah. Thanks for the help. You should leave now or Stibbs will complain.”

“Right! I hope you had fun. We can do this again if you need to get out.”

“Probably. I’ll let you know.”

Nestra yawned. It was getting quite late so she went to sleep, finally back to a demon schedule.

The kitchen was deserted and her eggs were cold but that was ok. Nestra ate, then it was time for the normal part of detective work she’d managed to avoid so far by virtue of being a bonehead (by vocation). Well not really, but MaxSec people were not the intellectual sort.

She had to find every last person who’d have access to the terminal used to watch her limo, and ID them. She settled in the office with a large cup of coffee then got to work with some nice background music to cover the swearing. Thankfully, there were softwares she could use to help her but it still took Stibbs and her the better part of the morning to sort through all of the footage. The issue was that she wasn’t the only one who could get through walls and locked doors. Only gleams who were visible on camera at the time of the attack could be reasonably cleared.

To Nestra’s relief, Miss Teneru was having an animated conversation with young baselines at the right moment. The gleam artist was busying herself with an improvised guided visit to the delight of excited socialites, which didn’t completely erase her as a suspect but... yeah probably unlikely. The Sight Killer was a bit of a voyeur, so she expected they would want to watch on the spot. And she couldn’t picture the bubbly Teneru killing people either.

There were quite a few potential suspects so Nestra narrowed the list further. There were no ways to check alibis since gleams had only one answer for private detectives who came to ask about their business and that answer was ‘fuck off’. She ended with a short list of people who were gleams, not on camera during the incident, not B-class since the Sight killer was

unlikely to hunt much weaker gleams, not low D-class since those couldn't have killed several experienced raiders, and of a matching affinity. The shortlist only had two names. Both were pretty promising.

The first one was a raider, a recently promoted C-class shadow gleam going by Ji-Ah. Nestra checked her profile: Korean, short black hair, guarded in every picture she was on. The police file mentioned she'd had a difficult childhood as a daughter of poor immigrants from ravaged Changang, bordering China. She might have something to prove. Nestra made a note.

The other culprit was an architect, John Stonegrave of the eponymous House. He'd started a promising career as a raider before converting to architecture. Nestra immediately checked his website, hoping for a gotcha moment, but Stonegrave favored the streamlined, minimalistic steel and glass structures that had remained the mainstream since the Incursion. The neo-classical grandeur of the mausoleum was the kind of shit even rich gleams tried to avoid. They preferred their wealth understated. He was still an interesting prospect.

"Ok, we got two good candidates. Now what?" Stibbons asked.

"Hmmm."

Nestra checked if Miss Teneru had any background in architecture — she didn't.

Well, Nestra needed an in. Teneru was looking less and less like a person of interest, and she clearly knew a ton about art, the people living from it, and also she was willing to talk to Nestra.

"I'm going to recruit some help."

Nestra did have Teneru's contact information, and the gleam sounded pleasantly surprised to have her on the visor.

"Why yes, darling. That is an exciting proposition. A killer hidden among the artists? How delightfully shocking."

"You believe me? Just like that?"

"You are making compelling arguments. I will also say that I heard from a little birdie that our dear Director Shizuna was under pressure. Now I know why. Poor dear must want to avoid getting the high ones splattered by the mud of this serial killer scandal. My oh my, but that will certainly make the winter season one to remember. Ah, but why are you asking me?"

"I am making inquiries on my end."

“On your end? On the down low? All sneaky like?” Teneru said with a distinct mirth in her voice.

“You got it. And I thought we could meet if you’re alright with it. I have many questions that only an insider like you could answer.”

“I am intrigued, of course, but first I want to ask: why are you looking for this dangerous person? It sounds incredibly foolish.”

“That person is likely the one who tried to have me captured, so now it’s personal. And they might try again.”

“Hmmm this makes a lot of sense, however, I will now lead to the next important question: why do you believe it would be a good idea for you to find them? My understanding is that they pick raiders as victims. Surely, that would mean they might kill you easily, no?”

“I will be carrying... countermeasures. A safety net, if you will.”

“Hmmm. Well, if anything, I can help you with the explaining part. And I want to hear everything, of course! I assume there is no secrecy around the ‘case’ if you are doing it... on the sly. Oh, darling, how exciting! I will send you my address. Come whenever you can!”

“Alright. One moment please.”

Nestra came down to find a parent, so she wouldn’t be stopped at the gate like a thief.

“MOOOOM!”

“Yes dear?”

“I need to go out.”

“I’ll ride with you!”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Nestra took off in her pink convertible with her mom in the passenger seat. The ice mage of the Palladians was fidgeting. Nestra let her stew in her anxiety for a couple of minutes before giving up.

“What?”

“You know, you could ask your father to accompany you, sometimes.”

“Oh I can already tell how it will go. You should do this. You should do that. You will now join our house as third wheel accountant so we can protect you from existence.”

“Clytemnestra.”

“Oops, I’m in trouble.”

Mom sighed. Deeply.

“Your father cares about you.”

“I know. He’s just not capable of listening.”

“People change. We have changed as well. Your departure left a painful wound that took a long time to stop hurting.”

“But it was necessary since you were desperately looking for the wrong answers to an unsolvable problem. And don’t tell me you were not relieved to see the back of me.”

“We just... had trouble accepting.”

“Poor you,” Nestra said, this time looking her mother in her eyes. In her gleam eyes. “Looks like Ulysses hasn’t accepted at all, yet.”

“He’s worked very hard.”

“I’m sure. As did absolutely everyone else. He just wasn’t used to it.”

“Clytemnestra please. Be kind.”

Nestra took off on the connective highway perhaps a little too fast.

The car remained quiet for almost five minutes before Mom gave it another go.

“You could work with us. It’s not so bad.”

“You still don’t get it,” Nestra spat. “I didn’t leave because you threw me out. I left because you were going to shelve me. I still want to fight and do things and exist as a person, not be a failed gleam in a family of real gleams where I’d be the freak show all my damn life. I wanted to be Nestra and not that misbegotten Palladian chick who can’t catch a break.”

“No one would dare say that in our House.”

Nestra was struck with disbelief.

“Surely you can’t be that naive?”

“Clytemnestra! Wait... Did you feel it?”

Mana surged in a wave, ebbing and flowing in a moment. It tasted raw and unfiltered, with a nauseating aftertaste like something burnt and rotten at the same time. Nestra had never felt

it herself from this close but she recognized it from documentaries. It could only be one thing.

A portal break. Left side. Now? Now of all damn times?

“Nestra!”

“Go! I’ll take the next exit and help with evacuation. Go!”

“You be careful!”

“Of course. Got the beacon if I’m in trouble.”

Nestra swerved into the nearest off ramp, then she felt a pang of stress when her mom opened the door mid-ride. It was for nothing, of course. The High gleam stepped out of the speeding car like it was nothing. Right, focus on the road. But first...

“This is Officer Clytemnestra Palladian. Got a portal break in district Twenty-six, south of... Busan road and fifty-seventh. I repeat, breach breach breach.”

“Copy that. Mana echo confirmed. Alarm triggered. Sending you the coordinates of the nearest shelter. Nearest rescue team will be there in four minutes.”

Tires screeching, Nestra parked her car on the curb within view of the shelter. This place was a residential hub with plenty of small shops selling stuff anyone could get from drones anyway. No building taller than three floors. The quaint and peaceful aura was already broken as children and elderlies raced past, visors beeping insistently. Sirens were already blaring. She rushed to open her trunk.

Her fingers found the familiar handle of the Window Maker.

“Old buddy, it’s time to make new openings.”

Nestra pocketed four spare bullets and a standard issue ‘emotional support knife’, also called that because they wouldn’t save anyone. Bemoaning her choice of fashionable attire, she raced towards the breach, corralling civilians as she went. Fortunately, the educational video showing visceras aired in school did a great job convincing most people that a full break was no joke.

At least Nestra wasn’t wearing heels this time.

“Officer Palladian?” the operator asked in her visor.

“Yes?”

“Are you armed, willing and able?”

“Yes. To all three.”

“Then on a volunteer basis, you may assist with the evacuation of the Perry Center for Reeducation. Sending you the coordinates now. A team of junior raiders will join you in... two minutes.”

A new mana wave expanded, making Nestra’s world lurch. The pulse was very close now and Nestra judged it had to be fairly strong. A second later, a blue radiance emerged from a few blocks away. The temperature dropped a few degrees.

Her mom would slaughter anything that came through that opening. Unfortunately, the first wave of monsters was already out, and she doubted her mom had gotten them all. Nestra sprinted forward. The center was only a block away. The nearest alarm cut off to an audible hiss.

“That can’t be good.”

Nestra turned the street at a dead run, spooking a pair of nurses loading unconscious patients in an antique ambulance. Others, wearing scrubs, waited by the gates. The tallest nurse waved at her. He was doing his best to remain calm, but Nestra could see the tension in his shoulders.

“Police,” she summarily said.

“Oh thank Riel. We can’t take them all at once. Can you guard —”

“No, can’t split up. Never split up unless you’re already overwhelmed,” Nestra said.

This was the damn SOP for portal breaks. Did those people know nothing?

“Is that everyone?” Nestra asked.

“We’re still waiting on Doctor Phang. One of our patients needed immediate care...”

“Make sure everyone is ready.”

Another blue flash in the distance. A wave of ice mana brushed on her skin, so strong she could feel it as if it were just under her fingers. That meant her mom was really going wild now that most of the portal’s surroundings were either emptied or... emptied. Nestra checked to make sure the Window Maker’s safety was off. An old habit.

“I’m here!” a tiny old woman yelped.

She was pushing a wheelchair holding a barely conscious girl with a prosthetic leg. A mana tool was strapped to the back.

“Ok, start moving straight down the street while I cover our backs,” Nestra ordered.

“The shelter is this way?”

“We’ll need to turn right anyway, so first let’s get away from the portal and...”

Movement. Nestra felt sickly mana before she could clearly see it. Something was hanging from a nearby roof.

“Leg it,” she ordered.

“What the —”

Monster. Low D-class, she judged. More than enough to turn the entire staff to minced meat within the next six seconds if it wasn’t stopped. It was a bipedal creature with a thick torso, seemingly covered in kelp and shells. Black eyes lodged deep into its misshapen skull watched her without emotion. It clung to the wall with arm-long claws that dug into the fucking concrete like it was styrofoam. Its lamprey mouth contracted, teeth glistening in the morning sun. The creature howled. It was like an angry wind roaring through broken windows.

Nestra lined the beast while it called for its brethren.

BOOM.

She winced. The monster fell, chest pulped clean through.

“Ow, my fucking ears.”

Riel dammit, being caught off guard like this. No muffler. No sword. Shit, she needed a human sword for human Nestra. Nest time she’d pack a fucking 10mm short rifle with explosive bullets. Might help with the traffic too.

“DAMMIT.”

The other monsters were definitely on their way now. Manahominid something. Crustaceus maybe. She turned around, finding the civvies stuck with their mouths open like a bunch of cardboard cutouts.

“What are you waiting for? The rest of the pack? FUCKING MOVE!”

They did, and quickly as well. The ambulance led the path at a serious walking speed while the nurses and doctors did their best to push the non-motorized wheelchairs forward. A patient with a brand new augmented arm was dragging another with bandaged eyes. To their credit, no one panicked. They stayed to help each other.

Nestra quickly replaced the spent cartridge just as a trio of monsters barreled in from a side street. One of them had bloodied claws with pieces of persons stuck in them. Another mana wave made Nestra wince but the blue radiance returned with a vengeance. This was a bad break, dammit. She thought those no longer happened.

The first monster veered towards her. They were as fast as cars, despite their lumbering gaits. Damn mana.

She lined them one by one. Center mass, no bullshit. Those creatures clearly had spines.

BOOM.

Wince, line again.

BOOM.

So fast. A screech but the creature fell. The last one was upon her. A wave of iodine and rot like the sea at low tide washed over her. The creature hissed or breathed audibly. Claws extended towards her.

BOOM.

Nestra blew its head off. She didn't wait, replacing the three spent cartridges and burning her fingertips.

"Aaaah," she complained to no one in particular.

Slow humans and medical mana tools. They had to smell like a damn open buffet to anything around.

Right. Four rounds left, then it was demon Nestra or bust.

"Coming in hot!" someone screamed from behind loud enough for Nestra to hear over her ringing ears.

Damn Mazingwe was going to do ear repair and testing for an entire morning.

Three gleams raced in from behind. Young ones. They still had the very light blue eyes of those who'd not yet unlocked any affinity. D-class but well-trained from their steady mana, they couldn't be a day over eighteen. One boy and two girls. The boy was a mage in armor while the girls both used spears. The lead girl approached with a frown, black ponytail swaying with every step.

"Civilians must stick together! Please rejoin the —"

Only then did she see the body. Nestra waved her ID in the gleam's nose.

"Nestra Palladian, with Internal Affairs."

"You should still return with the other baselines please. let us do our job without interference."

Another howl. Nestra heard heavy stomps. Something was coming.

“Need to screen for the civvies. I’ll cover you,” she said.

“I don’t need your cover, I need you to get out of my way.”

“Less talking more preparing. Here they are.”

Another four hominid things turned the street. Those all had bloody claws, so Nestra assumed they’d gone the other way and found prey, probably before her mom parked herself in front of the portal to flash freeze everything that came out. The stomping turned out to be some sort of half-stone colossus half again as tall as Nestra, its surface made of coral and mouths. This one she didn’t recognize, but the young gleams did.

“Shit, coral titan!”

“Where’s the core?” Nestra asked.

The smaller creatures stuck around the tall one in a loose formation, giving the defending forces a small window. Nestra thought mana concentrated in the titan’s chest, but the air was saturated by the waves, and her human senses were duller than the true ones. Better be sure.

“Monsters of this level don’t have a physical —”

“Torso, dead center. Slightly above the larger mouth,” the mage said, interrupting his leader.

“Right,” Nestra replied.

Said mouth opened wide as the escorting creatures accelerated. Nestra stepped to the side for a clear shot, making sure not to cross the mage’s line of fire.

BOOM.

An eruption of stone and viscera but no breakthrough. Damn, this had to be a seriously resilient D-class monster.

The trio of gleams valiantly engaged the four monsters. With the mage’s supporting bolts, they held on but one of the beasts still made it towards Nestra.

BOOM.

Damn waste of time. Aim for the colossus again.

BOOM.

It lurched and the shot went a bit too high, to the left. A massive flow of putrid blood spilled on the concrete.

BOOM.

Finally got the core. Nestra dropped the blisteringly hot Window Maker. The mage managed to take down one of the creatures attacking the lead girl while the second spearwoman pinned her monster to the ground, but the lead woman still fell on her back, shaft blocking eight ravenous claws. The lamprey mouth closed in. Another bolt slammed into the monster's shoulder, causing it to bleed a little.

As it reeled, Nestra threw the emotional support knife. The useless thing almost hit the eye but it failed to penetrate even the facial skin.

It still gave the lead girl the opening she needed. Bracing against the beast, she pushed with both feet and managed to send it stumbling with a cry. She rammed her spear in its mouth before it could recover.

The entire group was left breathing hard, bloody, yet victorious.

"Thank you," the leader whispered.

"WHAT?"

"I said, thank you," she repeated with a glare made heavy with hurt pride.

"OH SORRY. LET ME GRAB A REGEN PATCH."

"She's deafened," the mage explained.

"Oh."

Nestra sulked. She wasn't deaf. Just half deaf. The regen patches went on her neck and the pain in her drums lessened in moments. That wouldn't stop Mazingwe from nagging during her next checkup, of course.

"That's some nice gun you got there," the second girl said after checking that the civvies were ok.

"It's not the gun, it's the bullet. Crushed crystals. I just shot four thousand creds worth of ammo," Nestra grumbled.

"Ouch," the mage allowed.

"Cheaper than a memorial," the lead girl said.

Which was true enough.

Fortunately, that seemed to be all of it. There were no new mana pulses, which meant that either her mom or someone else had closed the portal.

“There’s going to be more of them! Do you have more bullets?” the lead girl asked.

Nestra waved the girl’s concerns away.

“My mo—”

Nestra hesitated. She didn’t have the patience or inclination to explain.

“I was driving with a gleam. She’s gone ahead. There could be stragglers but I think we’re good for large groups.”

“Are you sure?” the leader asked.

“Yes, I’m pretty fucking sure. The pulses stopped and it’s quiet. Surely you’ve felt the ice mana, right?”

“Yeah yeah, we did,” the lead girl said with annoyance.

They trotted back towards the shuffling column of nurses and patients.

“You can certainly defend yourself,” lead girl admitted in the awkward silence.

“Ex MaxSec.”

“What’s a max sex?” the male mage asked with a forced chuckle.

He blushed when nobody smiled.

“Maximum Security,” Nestra explained when it was clear the gleams didn’t know what she was talking about. “We used to be called against dangerous criminals, dokkaebi, terrorists. That sort of thing. We’re phased out now.”

“Damn you’re pretty young to be a fossil,” the mage said.

There was another awkward silence.

“Thanks. Oh, there’s the shelter.”

As per protocol and because she didn’t have anything left, Nestra accompanied the civilians into the shelter. A brief call with dispatch later, Nestra was left with Officer Kim on the line.

“Well, you certainly seem to find yourself at the wrong place and wrong time rather often,” the amused woman told her.

“First time I’m caught in a break in... forever. Unlucky, I guess. I just got the feeling they’re increasing in frequency.”

“They are,” a voice said from behind, and nevermind that the visor was almost quiet.

“Mom!”

Deborah Palladian walked down the steps to Nestra’s current spot near the control room with all the grace of a dancer. She didn’t have a scratch, of course, but there were a few crystals of frozen blood clinging to her designer shoes. A few people watched her go by with the sort of blank look reserved for unexpected high gleams.

“Threshold has the greatest concentration of portals on the planet. We have a great advanced warning system but alas, human error is often to blame for tragedies. This portal was in a temporarily closed building project. I don’t know why the cameras didn’t pick it up.”

“Hold on,” Officer Kim said.

Nestra patiently waited until the officer’s furious voice returned.

“The construction company declined to pay the electricity bill. I expect this error will cost them significantly more. Unacceptable,” she grumbled.

“I heard you saved a group of people,” Nestra’s mom said, grabbing her by the shoulder. “You did well.”

“Yeah. I like to do that. You know, win.”

“By your own merit,” Mom said.

“Yeah.”

Mom hummed softly.

“I always assumed that since you could not be a raider, then it would be better if you left the path of violence but... I suppose it was foolish. You may not have a core but that doesn’t change how you feel about fighting. I apologize for not seeing that.”

“I... Thanks, mom.”

“Maybe Hector and I are to blame. If we hadn’t pushed you so hard...”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything!” Nestra complained. “I love swords because I just do.”

“Right. Good.”

“I hate to interrupt,” Officer Kim said. “However, I would like to know if you believe this could be linked to our current case.”

Mom frowned.

"I don't see how it could be? Sometimes, there are just coincidences. I don't think even Central can predict the timing of a breach."

"I agree, but I wanted the opinion of an experienced raider as well. That was all I wanted to check. Miss Palladian, Doctor Phang and her staff reported that they owe you their lives, and Iris Dian of the Rising Stars Guild commended you for your actions during the crisis. You have done very well. I am pleased to say that it will reflect very positively on your report."

"Oh good."

Nestra stole a glance towards her oblivious mother. Better not let her know about her current little problems.

"And now I will let you get back to your day."

"We will, thanks."

Nestra hung up.

"Does your superior know you have taken the case?" Mom asked with a fake innocent smile that sent shivers down Nestra's spine.

Mom used to have the same smile when she asked who'd bought a concert ticket using her account.

"Errr."

"Clytemnestra Palladian."

"Pleaaaaaaase I just can't stay home twiddling my thumbs."

"We could practice together," her mom offered.

Exhilaration filled Nestra's chest, but she fell back a step immediately. Stilling her heart, she addressed the terrible temptress.

"You almost got me. And no, later. I want to ask questions and I can't rely on the cops to find out about the killer, ok? They've got nothing to show for their efforts so far."

"That you know of."

"If I get slapped on the wrist, I'll stop."

Mom sighed, but she knew she couldn't really stop Nestra.

It didn't take very long for Nestra to be let out. Technically, the shelter could force her to stay for up to a day for safety reasons, but her mom's presence just made everything easy. Deborah Palladian had single-handedly held the gate until a fast response team arrived, then she'd moved in while they watched the entrance, mowing down the opposition including the guardian in record time before flying around to hunt down errant monsters. She was the hero of the moment.

It must feel nice to be a high gleam, Nestra thought. But not as nice as having a Kero nut crunching under her teeth.

"What did you mean, the occurrence of breaks is increasing?" Nestra asked as they drove up the ramp.

Police officers removed the blockade to let them through. Truly, her mother's smile could open any gate.

"Oh it's just natural. The number of portals is increasing, as is the number of raiders. Threshold was built here for a reason. The danger is high, but the opportunities..."

There was something her mom wasn't telling her.

"What sort of opportunities?"

"All the wealth the portals contain, dear. Now enough of this. Focus on the road."

Nestra knew a redirection when she heard one, but further questions all hit the wall of smiles her mom used when she had decided it was enough. Nestra gave up. They were almost at Teneru's anyway.

Miss Teneru defied Nestra's expectation by not living in a manor with gargoyles and a room full of fancy hats. The painter's studio was sober and tastefully decorated, but also clearly lived in. Priceless paintings and statues shared the space with old handbags, dirty mugs, and an impressive collection of teas. Miss Teneru looked much less dramatic in a simple summer dress that made Nestra overdressed by comparison. She listened carefully to Nestra's explanation as to why she was late.

"That's perfectly acceptable darling, glad that you didn't get mangled. Now, shall we talk about murder?"