

In order to become a masked gleam safely, Nestra deployed every last bit of paranoia she was capable of. Even searching the process was done via an antique burner phone. She did her application remotely using the maximum possible amount of loopholes, and the highest secrecy offered. Gleams could accelerate the process by linking their raider identity but Nestra would take the test to prove she was no joker. Gleams could link their financial info but Nestra would get an ad hoc bank account open for all her transactions, which would take more time. Gleams could bypass medical exams by, again, revealing their real identity to people sworn to secrecy but she would get basic body data recorded by an AI in a sealed chamber.

All of this meant that what could have been a one hour formality was going to be a day-long ordeal but that was fine. She was already cutting it damn close by having a handful of people know about the real her, so she ought to cling to every bit of discretion she could. There was also the fact that this would be the spotlight. Right now, nobody knew she was raiding, so no one was keeping track, but she was solo finishing what people carefully completed in squads of four.

It was during the last sparring that she realized she'd forgotten something important. Her counter was blocked, again, so she used her last mana reserves to blast Seth in the face at point blank range. The asshole simply leaned to the side and let the gray thunderbolt fluff his hair. He was too used to her style by now. She had her break, though.

"By the way, I forgot two things."

"Hmm?"

"First, how do I not set every camera around into a frenzy?"

"Oh! I almost forgot. You are wise to remind me of this detail, as it would be problematic if people linked this phenomenon to your gleam identity. The exercise is not very difficult. You merely need to look at a camera and tell yourself you exist very strongly."

Nestra took a few steps back and mulled this over.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The thought will ground you, and allow devices, magic and otherwise, to capture your presence. Let's just practice this for now and you will see that it is a mindset. Just remember not to be too distracted during the interviews and you will be fine."

"Oh, alright?"

It was, in fact, rather easy. Nestra tended to be aloof and disliked attention, but the mindset involved the demon's natural tendency to also show off and, for the lack of a better term, assert dominance. It was quite fun.

"One last question," she finally said.

“Yes?”

“Do you know what Sashimi’s gender is? Because I’m tired of referring to them as they without knowing if there is a more accurate descriptor.”

Seth’s mouth made that beached fish thing. He tilted his head, and his thin, pointed ears made that waving thing that showed he was thinking hard.

“For all intents and purposes, Sashimi is female.”

“That’s noncommittal.”

“Void shark anatomy involves sequential hermaphroditism, like some species of earth sharks. She is female now and will remain female for a while, but if she grows extremely large, she may become male depending on the territory she can claim and the current population balance. Void sharks are fascinating creatures! I have tried to tell the others but they are only interested in hunting...”

Seth frowned a little.

“I will have to tell the covens that Sashimi is not to be touched, though she is too small to be of interest to one of the People.”

“No touching my shark. Only I can bite her. I insist.”

“Of course. But truly, you bond with the strangest beings,” Seth said wisely.

“Uhu,” Nestra replied with a pointed look.

He missed the cue entirely.

“More sparring!”

Nestra didn’t have the time to reply. He just attacked again. She blocked the first blow and tried to punch him in the face. It didn’t work.

Nestra walked through the corridor of resistances, in her mind palace.

It remained kind of empty. So far, she had three sets of armor representing skin resistance, bone resistance, and sensory resistance that looked semi-decent but the shields that represented more elemental resistances were few, and they were kind of barebone. She had heat, toxins, acid, and cold shields in a spot that was clearly housed for many, many more pieces of armor. There were also many more ways for someone to get hurt. Interestingly, there was no electricity shield despite the fact she knew she was resistant. Maybe her mind considered it a different way. Inborn versus acquired, perhaps? In any case, her collection was still lacking but that was normal at D-rank, or so Seth had said.

He was excited to help improve her collection. Nesta was also excited about hunting more stuff but she surmised acid-resistant creatures tended to spray the stuff themselves and that couldn't be too fun to experience.

With a sigh, she returned to the central hallway, then to the core door. There, the fake electricity core still hovered. It had grown a little bit, but not much, and it felt more intrinsic than stolen like the rest. It remained the only fake core as well. She had hoped killing the corrupt cop gleams would have helped but clearly, she needed something more.

Her path to power remained a long one.

After sighing a second time, Nesta headed to the sphere room, this one representing her physical and magical attributes. The planetoids rotated over a deepening lake representing an increased mana pool, though it was only maybe six or seven times what she had started with. That wasn't actually much. All of the spheres positively vibrated with energy except the three representing mana intensity, control, and regeneration. Power radiated strength, celerity represented speed and precision, resilience was how long she could last and how much she could resist, awareness related to senses, and mind speed was how fast she could process information. They were as strong as they would get. All surplus energy would slide off of them to seep into the magical spheres from now on. Unless she could build a true physical core.

There were, finally, the bounds. They shimmered in the semi-darkness of the grotto. Power and resilience gave her immovable. Power and celerity gave her momentum. Awareness and celerity had granted her precision, and awareness and magic control led to *passe-muraille*, the ability to slip through walls. Nesta felt dangerous enough as she was but what she needed was a better way to handle the unknown. She had been surprised too many times. In a C-class world, that would be death.

She needed a little more utility.

Slowly, Nesta linked awareness and mind speed. The spheres were more than ready to accept a new binding so the effort was minimal. After a small bit of resistance, the spheres rejoined the dance above her head. That was it.

She felt it lock into place. Intuition, she would call it, rather than danger sense though it felt more appropriate.

Now, if something came for her, she would get a bit of warning.

The fateful day happened a week later, at the end of summer. By then, Nesta felt much more in tune with her body and abilities. There was still a mountain between Seth and herself despite her smug brother 'lowering himself to her level', but that was not a gap that could be bridged in weeks, or years. She still felt much better adapting to her demon self. After fighting as baseline for so long, now she had to contend with a longer reach, a longer

stride, a higher center of gravity, a traversal ability and the Scornful Crescent style. There would be a learning curve until she fought at her best.

Some things just took time and practice. She was ok with that. It was just how training worked, and no amount of pillaged strength would change that.

Again, Nestra was forced to wake up before her biological clock agreed, but a hearty breakfast made it all better. She drove her flashy brand new pink car to an entertainment mall, parked there and then walked to a vast community center at the edge of the central district where the amount of cameras was low. There she removed her mask in a janitor's room and checked herself one last time.

Fancy mask that melded with her small horns so they looked like they were part of it: in place. Her horns let her feel mana better so they'd better stay exposed. Besides, they tickled.

Combat suit: in place. Her Skin left too much, well, natural skin exposed and that was a big no. This one had cost her a pretty penny but fuck it, she couldn't really afford to leave skin exposed yet the suit could not hamper her movement. No cheap stuff would do.

Security badge that showed her as an applicant, sent by drone to a remote location: pinned to her chest and visible. Very visible.

Wouldn't want anyone to get ideas.

That was it. She had a burner credit chit in a side pocket for the subway fare and maybe a snack or two and nothing else. No electronics.

This was going to be really weird.

Nestra focused on existing to the humans, then slid through a nearby wall into a service access corridor. She followed a path without cameras for a good five minutes before coming upon her first human. A short woman in a suit opened the door in front of her, had one look at the horned figure and screamed.

Nestra stopped.

The woman's face was an expression of deep terror. She grabbed her chest and swore, though her eyes had found the really visible ID badge, so at least she knew Nestra wasn't a monster.

'Nice thinking, Nestra!' Nestra thought to herself.

"CHOI! You scared me! Errr."

Nestra waited.

She wanted to go through the door. The woman was in the way. She wasn't particularly inclined to talk in demon form, at least not to strangers. Even talking with Helena was kind of a pain while she was her true self.

And Nesta realized she didn't have to.

She was a gleam, and though not technically in a public part of the community center, she wasn't trespassing either.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, still gripping the handle like a safety rope.

Nesta shook her head, then pointed at the door.

"Oh, sorry."

And that was it. Nesta moved on, and all of this without having to speak a single word to justify herself. Not having to talk felt strangely exhilarating. Liberating, in a way.

The woman let Nesta walk into the main hall of the community center, where at least a hundred people milled around or queued for activities. There were a lot of children here, during office hours. Many people stopped to stare but she walked confidently, like she belonged, and nothing happened. No one stopped her. No one recognized the Aszhii, the cacodaimon anthropomimesis in the midst of homo sapiens. Those she came across near the entrance did a double take but they quickly returned to their visors or data sheets because it was rude to stare. The feeling of existing to them grew stronger until she no longer really had to focus to let the cameras pick up on her presence. It was a short jaunt to the subway station, then she made to board the busy train towards Central.

Except, she could ride in the user compartment now. A bit curious, she moved to the front of the platform where a couple of gleams were waiting beyond a symbolic barrier. Most of them here were office folks in corpo slave uniforms, only fancier. They all wore something that was made from monster parts as a status symbol. A scarf. A hat. Sometimes, a necklace that shimmered in her sight. They had one glance at her before ignoring her presence.

She sat down on a bench to wait. Gleam fingers suddenly danced on sheets. Not ignoring her then. Maybe they were gossiping. Or looking for her profile? She knew famous gleams were listed on various websites.

The train arrived smoothly, doors opening invitingly into a slightly forbidden space. The gleam carriage was the same as the others but it obviously had a ton more room. She managed to grab a seat. During peak hour! Well, at the end of peak hour. Also, it was far too low for her to be really comfortable.

Her head was brushing the roof otherwise, though.

The corpo gleams stole glances at her but mostly left her alone. She just sat back and relaxed. The ride would take thirty minutes, even with her driving a bit before, because Threshold was just that massive. There was nothing to do but wait.

She really believed there would be no issues at all, but ten minutes into the silent ride, the gates opened and in came the raiders.

There was something inherently different about raiders. D-class users who didn't want to fight could still grow stronger by basking in mana at regular intervals, though it was significantly slower, but they lacked a certain edge that raiders gave off regardless of power. A taste to their mana, as if it were more alive, even in the most polite of context. Here, there was nothing polite about the way the three raiders walked in. They stumbled in brazenly. One of them guffawed. The scent of powerful mana booze tickled Nestra's nostrils along with a smokier odor she didn't recognize. Drugs, maybe. She saw dilated pupils shining even in the well-lit carriage. Definitely drugs. Sweat and a tinge of blood hit her next. Recent raid. Celebratory party? Fancy clothes but rumpled, some of it stained. Her intuition woke up but it remained calm, as if warning her of trouble but not danger.

She didn't look away. The human reflexes that had served her for so long didn't really work on her demon form, so she stared, trying to learn more. Even if it invited attention.

They spotted her.

"Hey guys, check this out," the leader said.

He was a squat, powerfully built man with close-cropped dark hair and deep brown iris. Pinoy, she judged. Smiling but with cold eyes searching for amusement. He'd found her.

The second was a blond anglo with frizzy hair who looked completely out of it. Unfocused. Definitely more addled than the other to the point of incapacity. Yellow iris. Probably an electrokinetic. Striker build. The leader was clearly a frontliner, less mobile, stronger.

The last one was a woman, very similar to the leader. She looked fed up with his shit. Worry filled her features. Not sure what she was from the dull red iris, probably support and interdiction. Only the leader was a threat.

Wait, what was she thinking? This wasn't human Nestra here. Those were all mid-high D-class.

They didn't stand a chance.

"Hey bitch, what's with the getup? Is it Halloween already?"

The leader approached. He didn't check behind him for support, so the stoned guy just stayed listlessly where he was, though he was no longer smiling, and the woman grabbed her relative's shoulder in a gesture of restraint.

"Roel..."

In vain. He wouldn't be denied.

The lack of backing didn't affect the leader though it should have, just as the fact Nestra didn't leak mana all over the place like they did should have alerted him, but instead he took it as a sign of weakness. He wasn't himself.

Nestra watched him approach and considered what to do. She didn't need to beat them up or kill them, of course, but she also didn't need to cower. Or calm things down to avoid a hospital stay.

Behind this white mask, she was more free than she'd ever been.

"What the fuck are you cosplaying at? Hey, remove the mask. I wanna see if you're not a known criminal. Just checking, yeah?"

The leader chuckled. He was being an ass but she would still give him a way out.

"Unwise," she hissed.

Her voice was low and though Helena loved the pitch, she suspected the other humans might not agree. The woman held the man back with more strength, clearly not expecting it to work. He reached for her face.

"I said —"

Nestra grabbed him by the throat, then she was standing, all in the same move. The leader was left dangling with his feet in the air. Surprise led to fury. He grabbed her arm with two hands, braced his body, then kicked her chest. She rotated smoothly and let most of the blow glance off her torso. It would have been painful without the resistance she had accumulated. As it was, she barely felt it.

Another attempt failed.

Anger turned to fear. The woman wanted to do something but didn't dare to. The drugged one was only starting to realize something was wrong.

Nestra tightened her grip.

Fear turned to panic.

"Please wait," the woman said.

And Nestra released the man. He collapsed, legs buckling and hands flying to his throat like spooked birds. He gulped precious air with pure relief. Nestra waited for him to look at her. The cockyness was gone, as was the fun part of the intoxication. Adrenaline could do that.

He scrambled to his feet.

Nestra slowly, slowly bent forward until their faces were level. He didn't dare move. The huntress in her didn't care about those cubs playing around, but the human enjoyed this little bit of free schadenfreude.

"Unwise," she repeated.

"Yeah, I got it."

Nestra sat back while he readjusted his collar, turning around with a huff to salvage what was left of his dignity. She glared a little at the woman, just because she was still in her personal space, and by personal space Nestra meant every part of the carriage she might reach if she stretched her legs really far. The gleam bowed before departing. Honestly, Nestra didn't blame her. She was probably tasked with wrangling a talented scion and it was clear her relative had a mean streak, not to mention he didn't listen.

The trio sat at the opposite side and mumbled quietly to themselves. During the whole incident, the other gleams had scrupulously kept to themselves.

Nestra relaxed again. Then it hit her.

She had bullied a gleam.

Riel dammit but that felt fucking nice. And all of this without maneuvering or pointless verbal sparring. Just good old strangulation. And she had uttered one word, twice during the entire exchange. From behind a mask. Didn't even have to school her facial expressions.

Life was grand.

Her next mask would need a mouth opening so she could just plain bite people. A magic one when she could afford it.

The ride went on without issues, the raiders leaving the train a little later. Nestra knew that technically, what she had done could be seen as assault, but the reality was that no raider would want to get the cops involved. Great families sending goons for the smallest slight was vid shit. It didn't happen in real life.

As she looked around, the train climbed a small slope and soon, they were in a tube suspended midair. The late summer morning sun hit Central just right, backlighting the colossal skyscrapers on a field of azure while wispy white clouds drifted in the distance. Flocks of drones flew all around to deliver parcels and late breakfasts while hover cars danced, delivering execs and guests to various platforms. There were even a few flying high gleams descending from the town hall tower in tight formation. Nestra wasn't sure but she thought they might be Tiger Den from the white, black-striped uniform. Not lightweights for sure.

The train slowly eased into the Beacon of Riel building where at least a dozen other tubes converged. It proved easy to weave her way through the crowded corridors of Central Station since people, even gleams, gave her a wide berth. And to think she hadn't even

picked up her sword. Mana was thick here, surprisingly so, and she just felt comfortable. The lack of visor forced her to stop and look at directions for the first time in forever instead of letting the map AI guide her in the most effective way possible. Thankfully, the Beacon was designed for streamlined traffic.

In order to reach the exam center, she had to transfer to the Guardian Tower which was the military heart of Threshold. An imposing gray slab, it was offered a sober counterpart to the glittery Beacon of Riel and the solemn Town Hall to form the trinity that was the city's heart. The three remained a miracle of engineering and architecture built at a time when mankind was more concerned with its immediate survival. Nesta rode a funicular up in the company of a group of augs in the blue uniform of the Threshold military. They didn't give her shit though she could tell they were ready to jump her. It was very optimistic of them.

The interior of the Guardian tower was surprisingly spacious. Or at least, this lobby was. She walked confidently to the slate-colored welcome booth, only to be accosted by a severe man in uniform. He carefully checked Nesta's ID badge before leading her deeper in at a brisk pace.

"Everything is ready to begin, if you will follow me. The testing facility is the one we use to assess the progress of military users and contractors. It is one of the most secure places on the planet."

Nesta didn't reply which didn't seem to faze her guide. He led her through neatly labeled doors and winding corridors, waving past checkpoints without stopping. The soldiers progressively switched from admin type to heavily augmented grunts though they were not in battle gear. They finally reached the testing level after taking an elevator. If asked, Nesta would be absolutely unable to tell which way was the nearest exit.

On the testing level, the dull thud of firearms could be heard even through reinforced windows. Nesta walked past ranges, gyms, and workshops where soldiers practiced under the vigilant glare of examiners. Clearly Threshold kept its fighters in tip top shape.

Her guide led her deeper still. Gleams soon became the norm. Nesta was intrigued by their gear, as many of them wore highly sophisticated exo-armor. Her senses picked up a lot of portal material in those and yet they were clearly high-tech, with sensors and other gizmos she couldn't identify. Those gleams gave her long hard looks which she didn't return. Talk to the mask was feeling more and more like a perfect strategy when dealing with unwanted social situations. Eventually, they reached a locked vault door.

It looked like it could withstand a cruise missile.

"This is where I leave you," her guide said.

She nodded her understanding. He saluted crisply, then left her to her fate. Two guards by the door checked her ID in excruciating detail, manually going over every entry. Nesta could spot the turret holes on the ceiling and resisted the urge to stop 'existing' so they couldn't target her.

“You are clear to go in. Engaging lock,” one of them said.

She walked past the titanic gate. It closed behind her with a ponderous clank. Inside was another such lock in front of her, a door to the right, and two people. One was an augmented black man built like a wardrobe on steroids. She wasn't familiar with military insignias, but the colors on his chest screamed 'I'm important'. As for the woman, she was stern, clearly Scandinavian and so tall even demon Nesta had to look up a little bit. From her posture to her hairstyle, to the lean muscles under her suit, not a single part of her could be called soft, but the hardest thing remained her gaze. It was steely in the most literal way, iris shining like freshly galvanized metal. They also radiated the tightly contained power of a high gleam. She didn't need introductions but she gave them anyway.

“Good morning. I am Threshold's head of User Military, Ragnhild Lidstrom.”

Ragnarok. The person testing her was Ragnarok. Threshold's deadliest B-rank raider. Shinran's right hand juggernaut and the undisputed boss of Threshold's soldier gleams. She had been old during the incursion, gray-haired and wrinkled even as she minced monsters in the Swedish hinterlands. Now, the old slayer stood in front of Nesta, a living legend. And a proctor, apparently.

It made sense, in a way. Nesta had filled herself as transitioning to C-rank with minimum information, and as part of the induction, she was to get into the sanctum of Threshold's military though obviously under surveillance. That must have triggered all sorts of red flags. No wonder they didn't take any chances. But damn, talk about overkill.

That was fine, though. Again, Nesta didn't have to do shit. She was here legitimately. As a perfectly valid candidate, she nodded a greeting to both Ragnarok and the man who had yet to present himself.

“I'm Commander Killroy, Threshold Intelligence Agency. I represent the administrative and confidential side of things while my partner here will assess your value as a masked user when we start testing.”

He nodded towards the side door, the one that didn't look like it was trying to stop a second Incursion.

“After you have registered of course. Now, I need to ask you a few questions as part of protocol. Are you Crescent?”

Nesta surreptitiously glanced down towards her badge. It said 'Crescent' in big bold letters, all caps, visible even in low light. The reason she'd picked it was simple. Sereth kept cursing her as a Scornful Crescent every time she almost succeeded in stabbing him in the groin, so she had internalized the term a little. Being called Crescent would be easy to remember, and it wasn't too bad because it sounded a bit like 'croissant' and she enjoyed pastries. It was also the name of her second favorite Lazpop group.

She nodded. Yes, she was indeed Crescent.

“I need a voice confirmation, if possible. You need to acknowledge your identity.”

“Yessss. I am Crescent.”

His eyes implants flashed a few times. He was really augged to the gill and it didn't look like cheap stuff either. She bet he would be even harder to take down than the Gidung operative she had decapitated, and that one had managed to hit her despite the glitches. Not that it mattered with Ragnarok herself in the room. Speaking of the tall woman, her eyes searched the room with a frown. Her aura fluctuated a bit. Nesta knew the rumors were that the old monster was on the verge of A rank, so perhaps she was taking a step back from raiding while the transition happened.

“Excellent, thank you. I would need voice confirmation that you consent to becoming a masked user for Threshold with all the risks it entails.”

“I do.”

“Are you aware of the confidentiality agreement between us to guarantee secrecy, including its limits? You will be given an opportunity to read the exception clauses while completing your application.”

“Yess.”

“Very well. Alright, it appears that everything is in order. Would you mind stepping in the containment room to finish the process? We will be waiting outside.”

Nesta nodded. The equally massive gate behind him opened into what looked like a high tech infirmary. Nesta moved in and it closed behind her with a smooth hiss.

“Hello,” a synthetic voice said, “I am Threshold's Secure AI. I will guide you through the final steps.”

The room was bare except for the medical side, which had a scanner and some sampling material, and a bare console with exposed circuitry and a flashing screen. The design appeared to be intentional, though she wasn't clear as to why.

As promised, the AI told her what to do like an exceedingly formal butler. Her first task was to bind her civilian identity with that of Crescent. To Nesta's surprise, there were absolutely no issues doing so even though it was technically illegal not to register as a gleam. There were even options to record herself as an illegal immigrant or a complete unknown though she assumed it came with complications. As for the clauses that would lead to her identity being unmasked, what mattered was that all of them must receive the approval of Shinran himself.

Considering what Kim had hinted at, just that step would force anyone trying to ID her to be really, really confident about their claim. It was weird trying to reconcile the affable persona of the monk with the reputation he seemed to have in private. In any case, she was probably as safe as she could be between him and Sereth guarding her secret.

The medical part of the exam was expedited quickly. She had to give a blood sample but she was ready, switching back to her human form for that part. The AI didn't comment so she figured it was fine. It only took an hour to go through the battery of tests and formalities. No drama, so far. She exited the room in demon form feeling a bit apprehensive. Ragnarok and Killroy waited outside for her like the world's most unlikely gargoyles. The woman nodded towards the testing center.

"Now that we have dealt with the tapes, time to show me what you can do."

Ah yes, Nestra thought. The fun part.