

The next morning, Nestra walked into the Beacon's archives with a team of mooks and Stibbs who had been hired for the occasion. It felt good showing her temporary ID to a baffled worker.

"I will need unrestricted access to Internal Affairs' servers."

"What?"

"Now," Nestra insisted.

The office drone hesitated, undoubtedly because Nestra didn't fit the bill for high level management. Too many scars, not enough plastic surgery, and clothes that didn't cost eight thousand creds. That hesitation lasted only long enough for her credentials to appear in the man's implants.

"Ma'am, the Internal Affair network is fully isolated."

"Yes, which is why I need physical access. You will guide me."

"Right away."

Nestra led her goon convoy through austere alleys, passing several security gates with all the speed of a motivated social climber. The Internal Affair data access point was in a secure box, but Nestra's codes unlocked everything and Stibbs had no difficulty pulling the data.

"What do we need?" she asked in a subdued voice.

This was the holy sanctum for a born cop like her, even if she'd left the force.

"Everything Ito altered over the past 4 years. We'll also need all relevant files that belong to Kim. I also want the backups. There is a backup, right?"

"Several..." Stibbs said after a while. "Let me check the archived files as well."

It didn't take very long to get everything. Although Nestra had requested a ton of stuff, the size of the files wasn't that massive. It was mostly sheets and the occasional image. Understanding the data would be the real issue.

"I have everything," Stibbs said.

"Good, then we move to the security center."

Once again, Nestra marched through the bowels of the Beacon but this time, people stepped out of her way with the lowered gaze of people who knew someone was going to have a bad day and they didn't want to be splattered. The main security office issued her with a badge with unlimited access after a lot of triple-checking and, as far as she could tell, at least two phone calls. The second one was extremely brief and ended up with dozens of officers scrambling to get her what she wanted.

Ito arrived five minutes later with his secretary, so the first call might have been to Internal Affairs.

“YOU!” he bellowed.

Nestra barely spared him a glance. A concerned augged guard in an armored vest did his best to ignore him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Now and for the next five days, exactly as I please. Sergeant?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Captain Ito Junpei is hereby suspended. His access is revoked.”

“Fuzakeru na! This woman is mad!”

“I’m sorry sir. She has executive privileges over your division. Her word is law.”

“This is impossible. By whose order?”

The security guard gulped before answering in a subdued voice.

“General Ragnhild Lidstrom, sir. Countersigned by Shinran.”

It was as if the local temperature had suddenly dropped to freezing. A deathly silence spread throughout the office as those who knew they ought to obey but not why suddenly realized Nestra might as well have been sent by God almighty for what it implied for them and their careers.

“Escort Captain Ito out, please,” Nestra said in the ensuing silence, trying her best to be only mildly smug about it.

“Wait a moment. You said five days. Five days is all you have,” Ito said.

His aristocratic demeanor devolved into animalistic rage. He was barely in control.

“That is correct.”

“After five days, I’m coming for you. I will make you pay for this... this humiliation!”

“That sounds like a threat to a temporarily superior officer,” Nestra calmly stated. “Sergeant, lead Captain Ito out. He is not to return to his office.”

“You wouldn’t dare! Wait... wait, at least let me get my car keys.”

“I guess you’re taking the subway. Goodbye.”

Nestra had seldom watched someone being escorted out with this much satisfaction.

“Holy Riel, Nes, did you have to?” Stibbs whispered with a mix of terror and awe.

“Yeah I mean what kind of car can’t be opened with visor access? It was obviously a lie.”

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The mook group visited Ito’s office next. It was just as neat as Nestra remembered. She walked around, breathing slowly as she did.

Her true self was just there, beneath the surface. her instincts were muted but...

There, near a painting, fingerprints made of ink. Spilled, probably. Ito was so old school.

“There is a safe here,” she declared. “You,” she told Ito’s secretary. “Do you know how to open it?”

“No...”

“Get a safecracker here,” Nestra said, and one of her helpers left to make the call.

Nestra sat in Ito’s chair just because she knew the secretary would tell him she’d done it, and that would send him over the edge. She wasn’t above a bit of pettiness.

“Don’t you think you’re going... too far?” the secretary blurted with clear disbelief.

She was loyal to Ito. Interesting.

“Ito thinks he’s Riel’s gift to everyone else. It doesn’t matter what I do now. He will come after me with everything he has no matter what,” Nestra explained for Stibbs’ benefit.

“What about basic decency?” the secretary insisted.

“That went out of the window the moment an innocent woman was sent to jail. I don’t abide people who do the nastiest shit before hiding back under ‘decorum’ and ‘prestige’ once the boomerang of consequences returns unlubed. Maybe don’t be a slimy piece of shit from the start and I won’t stoop to your level, right?”

Nestra let the secretary choke on her outrage. The safecracker arrived an instant later. It was a drone, actually, and it opened the safe with a beep.

“The safe came with the building, ma’am,” the mook explained. “Security can open them all.”

“Good to know. Now what is this?”

Nestra foraged through piles of paper and other mementos. There were medals and other shiny awards she set aside, some printed mails related to promotion and internal politics, but it was the contents of a red file that attracted her interest the most. There were printed copies of hotel reservations and a fundraiser voucher.

Now why would he keep this?

Nestra wished she could search Ito's apartment but the special warrant she had didn't cover this. An oversight, in her opinion, but whatever.

Still, this had to mean something.

"What next?" Stibbs asked.

"Now we start unpacking."

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The Beacon kindly provided Nestra with a crisis response suite. Those were temporary headquarters that could be activated in times of emergency so ad hoc teams could gather and have everything ready to proceed. They were fully equipped with computers, coms, the works. They'd been designed in case of major catastrophes so resources could be redirected from other departments in instants. Floods, breaches, earthquakes, if it existed, Threshold had a contingency for it.

While many city fortresses had associated enclaves that could absorb some dangers, Threshold was the lone true city on an otherwise wild subcontinent. Local enclaves were too small and sparsely spread out to matter. There was no strategic depth to the land. Monsters only had to cross fifty meters to find the nearest civilians, and things would go downhill from there. That was why such facilities existed.

It was just a shame it wasn't aired out more often.

"Smells like rank air and old coffee," Stibbs complained. "Someone spilled their java on the desk."

"Right. Let's just unpack, then I have to leave for the Red House."

"Nestra?" Stibbs asked as the helpful mooks spread out to get started. "What happens if you don't find what you need within five days?"

"Then I'll never work in Threshold legally ever again, and I'll possibly get a stint in jail depending on what Ito gets his hands on. Don't think about it. Think about what we can do. I need to get a better read on the situation."

"Nestra, you know I'm on your side but... this is foolish. Even for you."

"Oh you of little faith. Alright, what have we got?"

It turned out to be a lot. The specific files on Kim's case consisted of one legal brief and a ton of transactions validated by Kim. The team read through it and it was as Ito had warned: they didn't get it. The presentation was airtight, the laws that were broken were meticulously quoted, and the documents all appeared genuine. Checking them against backups showed no obvious alterations. It was completely beyond Nesta, but that was ok. She didn't need to prove Kim was innocent if she managed to show that Ito was guilty, and she was pretty sure he was.

Next came Ito's files. Nesta started by discarding all management, HR, and admin-related stuff but even then, they had gigabytes of data to work through. The financial stuff consisted of balance sheets, risk assessment analysis, bills of sales... the list was exhaustive. It wasn't difficult to understand what was done but it proved impossible to determine why. All of the notes pertaining to decision-making used shorthands and sometimes even just codes that didn't link back to anything Nesta or Stibbs were familiar with. Essentially, they could see when Ito sold something but not why, or why at that specific price. Or how things were valued.

"We expected that much. If there is any crime, it will probably be linked to real world money flow so get me a list of all actual transfers, for how much, and to whom if possible."

Next, Nesta did some research on the contents of the safe.

"Do you think it's important?" Stibbs asked.

"Ito is meticulous. He wouldn't just keep receipts for no reason."

"But a hotel? And a fundraiser?"

"I think it's not the event. It's who went there."

It only took an hour for Nesta to get access to security footage thanks to Threshold's complete disrespect for privacy. In both cases, Ito had gone alongside a beautiful woman wearing sunglasses and what looked like a wig.

"It's definitely Shinoda's widow," Nesta said.

"You can recognize her? She's wearing a lot of makeup."

"Run it through the AI. The gait and bone structure will match."

It did.

"It really is her. With a 99.7% accuracy rate."

"Yep. So she's involved, somehow, and Ito kept those to make sure she would be nailed if something happened to him... but how?"

“You should interrogate him.”

“I won’t get anywhere,” Nestra said. “He’s simply smoother and a better conversationalist than I am. And I don’t have anything on him. He’ll just send me packing. No, I think it’s time for me to see Kim. I’ll go alone. I don’t think I can get clearance for anybody else.”

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There was someone waiting by Nestra’s roadster. Several someones, in fact. The Shinoda widow leaned with a ghastly smile in an elegant blue cocktail dress alongside a pair of augged bodyguards who looked like a rental. Nestra barely slowed down because intimidating her was one thing, but what that bitch was doing was unconscionable.

“Unglue your ass from my passenger door right this instant,” she threatened.

When Shinoda smiled, Nestra used the remote parking AI to move the car forward by ten centimeters before stopping. It was enough to make the woman slip.

For one instant, her face turned into an expression of devilish rage, features twisted by a burning hatred too intense to make sense. She regained control so fast, anyone slower could have imagined it.

“Say what you want to say then sod off. I’m busy,” Nestra huffed.

She was ready to leave here and there, even if it meant driving over a bodyguard.

“I see that you managed to make yourself the empress for a limited time. Five days. That’s all you have to prove that Ito Junpei, your T+3, committed a fraud.”

She smiled. It wasn’t nice. Nestra was losing patience.

“Why are you really here? If it does concern you, it would be wiser for you to hide, no?”

“Because you imply you have a chance of changing something. I’m here for the satisfaction of telling you that you do not. There is a certain order of things that most people understand, yet you have repeatedly failed to do so. Kim also failed to do so. The rule is, when you are at the bottom, you ought to be quiet. If you are not quiet, then you ought to be backed by your better. If you are not the mouthpiece for a better, then you are the nail that sticks out, yes? I always find it entertaining when a nail is hammered down, and the nail next to it decides to stand out as well. It is as if people like you could not believe they could be slammed down as easily as the rest until it happens. It is like watching a herd of beasts fall off a cliff. You see the warning, yet your mind cannot grasp that the warning is for you, and so you are next. I have come to see you now just as you have begun to stand, and you somehow got a small window that will last only long enough for you to realize how large the world is. How full of bigger, better people. I have come to tell you good luck though it will make no difference. If you do not present proof of fraud in five days, you will be expelled and quite possibly sued. I will return then and see what you have accomplished. I honestly cannot wait.”

“See you there, then,” Nestra replied.

She wasn't willing to engage. Kim was waiting.

“I will come to find you. Goodbye.”

The woman left with a graceful step that didn't belong in an indoor parking lot but whatever. Nestra checked her car for bugs and explosives just in case. When nothing popped up, she sat on the driver's seat and replayed the meeting on her visor. She paused the recording just as Shinoda's face broke into an expression of unbidden fury. She leaned back into her seat.

“Am I attracting all the female nutcases of the city? Seriously, this is so statistically improbable.”

There weren't even that many female psychopaths. Maybe it was bad luck. Or her attitude. Probably bad luck.

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This time, Nestra was alone and this time, the Warden granted her access on the spot. His mask tilted to the side.

“You are a persistent person, Miss Palladian.”

“Thanks.”

He approached her in the receiving room while her gaze was drawn to the vending machine. She kind of wanted chocolate. It was only just 10AM.

“There is also something odd about you. I have a very, very good instinct for danger.”

She returned her attention to him, all thoughts of energy bars evaporating. He was suddenly standing very close. Space around her warped in her perception, and the pocket where her real body hid shifted like a ship bobbing on a wave. She could swear he was sniffing her from behind his elaborate mask.

“Something very curious indeed.”

“I'm definitely above baseline but I am confident I cannot beat you, if that's any comfort,” she joked.

And rightly so because he was a B-class, albeit a new one, not to mention he felt like a very experienced fighter to her instincts. His affinities and the home advantage meant she absolutely didn't stand a chance.

“And you believe it as well, it seems. Just a warning. Do not try to free Miss Kim.”

“I won’t, unless it’s done legally.”

“Because,” the man continued, “I will kill her myself before I let her escape.”

“Hey!” Nestra protested.

“Red House rule, my dear. No one escapes, one way or another. But enough unpleasantries. I will have one of my colleagues show you the way while I attend to other visitors. Please excuse my absence. Unfortunately, I have other guests — the temporary kind — and visiting raiders take priority.”

“Hmmm I don’t mind. Thanks for seeing me.”

He nodded. Nestra was left wondering if perhaps the Warden had something akin to space mana, and if yes, then perhaps he was sensing that something was wrong with her. A larger imprint than she should have, maybe? Riel couldn’t be the only human with a space affinity.

It was interesting but not immediately relevant, so she followed a drone through thick corridors.

“Are you the warden’s colleague?” Nestra asked the drone as a joke.

To her surprise, a modulated voice emerged from the machine.

“Due to security reasons, we do not physically approach visitors, ma’am, but the Warden decided that a human guide would help answer relevant questions.”

“I’m honestly surprised it’s not all done by an AI.”

“It was decided during the creation of the Red House to mix human and AI elements, in case users ended up with mana affinities that could defeat programming, somehow. The redundancy allows us not to depend too much on a single type of defenses.”

“Ah, I see.”

“The Warden also believes that humanity should not be fully stripped out of a prison. Ah, here we are.”

They paused in front of a fortified door that could probably stop a combat walker.

“Prisoner Kim Soo-Young has been brought here. Since she is considered a low-risk asset, she will not be quarantined. You are not authorized to give her anything.”

“Oh shit I should have brought her a bagel or something,” Nestra belatedly realized.

The drone operator waited a few seconds before continuing.



“The meeting will last for up to thirty minutes. It will be fully recorded, and its contents can be used in a court of law should a request be made and accepted. Please be aware of safety blah blah blaaaaaah blablabla—”

Nestra barely paid attention to the long list of disclaimers designed to absolve the Red House of any legal responsibility should an eager journalist interrogate a cannibalistic serial killer and stay for dinner, as it were, for example. Nestra wasn't in any danger here. She was the cannibalistic monster for Riel's sake.

“Do you understand?” the drone finally repeated.

“Oh? Yeah yeah.”

“... Very well. I will open the door for you. Knock or just say you are done when you are ready to depart.”

“Thanks.”

Inside, she found a bare room with just a table and two stools designed for maximum discomfort. They were bolted to the ground. Kim was already sitting. She was looking frightful.

Gone was the confident elite civil servant. In her stead was a tired, broken woman with hunched shoulders and deep pockets under eyes reddened by tears and a deep, crushing despair. Even after seeing Nestra, her expression only went from despondent to surprised, ashamed, then desperate once again.

Honestly, it was a little bit annoying.

“Oh no. No no no tell me you didn't get involved in this.”

“Too late. I have five days to prove you're innocent, so let's get started.”

“Aaaaa. AAAAAAAAAAAAH.”

Kim gently bumped her head against the desk. She breathed hard.

“Palladian. Nestra. Nestra Nestra Nestra. You fool. Now we shall both end up here.”

Nestra didn't get it.

“I would really appreciate it if you spent less time treating me like I'm a fucking moron and more time on helping me solve the problem. We have a small window, so unless you fancy looking at paint fade for the next two decades...”

“Miss Palladian, this has been a very long week for me. Please give me some time.”

She gulped some water while Nestra checked for messages. Stibbs was moving forward with tracking money transfers. Ito's financials had also come and from the mook's analysis, the man was clean. Incredibly so. He even kept receipts for his coffee. His wealth came from a high income and some wise investments. He had been audited every year, apparently, and quite seriously too. That was perhaps why he was so trusted.

If Ito had stolen money, he'd either stashed it, or used it in a way that couldn't be detected. Of course, things wouldn't be that easy...

"Miss Palladian," Kim said. "The truth is that... I do not know what crime Ito is guilty of, exactly."

"What?" Nestra said, appalled. "I thought you were onto him and he threw you into the tide?"

"No, the real world is not a vid. I was not 'onto' him, though I did notice he was spending a lot of time out at prestigious functions. The condemnation fell like thunder from cloudless heavens. I was as surprised as you no doubt were."

"Wait... then what did he accuse you of? And why target you?"

"I'm accused of fraud. He claims I sold stocks and options at reduced costs and then, I pocketed the difference. It is a lie, of course, but he doesn't need to prove I have the money, only that I may have stolen it, and since he is the lead expert for this sort of crimes..."

"Hmm, then it's back to square one."

Nestra still shared what she'd found so far, including the connection to Shinoda's widow.

"That bitch..."

For the first time since seeing her again, something of the old Kim breathed back into the tired woman's demeanor. Her shoulders straightened. Her gaze, which had been full of hesitation, now burnt with a singular focus.

"Yes. Ok. I get it. So. Shinoda is a politician and like most politicians, she offers power and asks for money. That is our angle. It is also likely that Ito threw me under the bus for a dual purpose: to please Shinoda..."

"Is she really that spiteful?"

"You have no idea. She is infamous city-wide. Her reputation is such that few people dare to cross her outright."

"But that makes no sense," Nestra protested. "Why would Ito associate himself with a known snake? He seems risk averse, and a control freak to boot. I don't get it."

Kim's mouth opened and closed a few times before she finally managed to enunciate what was on her mind.

“She is... widely considered to be very attractive.”

Nestra blinked.

“So?”

“It is quite possible he has been seduced.”

“Ooooooooooh.”

Damn, those unfortunate allosexual people falling for the old honey pot. Sex affected their judgment, obviously, the poor things. Nestra had to shake her head here. Ito really wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

“Moving on, the second reason would be to muddy the waters for similar operations he would have conducted. I can't get out of here or access confidential information, but here is what you can do...”

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“Stibbs, is there a record of the times Ito overrode the monitoring AI?”

“Yes, overrode or reprogrammed. Actually, I can pull it rather easily. Hmmm, those are mostly volatile assets sold at less than the official market value. Why?”

Nestra clenched her fists. This felt like muddying the water.

“Have any of those sales been made to a third party, rather than on the stock market?”

“Let me check. Hmmm. Yes, quite a few. To various funds.”

“Alright, here is what we're going to do...”

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The rest of the day passed quickly. Shinoda's finances were surprisingly easy to access considering she was rich, however Threshold's citizens voted and they valued transparency, so most of it was public record. The rest wasn't large enough to bother. Like Ito, Shinoda was rich and didn't spend much thanks to the advantages that came with a public office. An agent of the Integrity Bureau that kept an eye on politicians confirmed she didn't have piles of money stashed away that they suspected. So if they really had stolen so much, where had it gone?

“Any info on those third party groups that purchased the volatile assets below market price?” Nestra asked.

“On it!”

By then, it was quite late but Nesta intended to work until midnight, for once. This would be a marathon.

Just then her visor beeped.

“Yes?”

“This is District Twenty-Three’s fire department, ma’am. I’m terribly sorry to inform you that there was a fire at your house.”

“Oh no they wouldn’t,” Nesta whispered.

“Ma’am? Are you alright?”

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Night had fallen over the city, and Nesta contemplated the melted hole where her kitchen used to be. She could see her living room’s couch through the gap of scorched, foam-covered furniture. Even her damn pots had melted.

Of the oven area, there was nothing left.

She felt numb.

“Miss, I gotta ask you something. Sorry, the timing is a bit iffy, but...”

She turned her attention to the firefighter, a tall anglo with an impressive eye aug.

“Yeah. Sorry, distracted.”

“Understandable. So, do you happen to have enemies?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Ok so don’t take it as a court-valid expert opinion, right? But you don’t get this sort of damage without an accelerant. Hell, we had the first drone here in less than a minute, and the truck in five so the damage was fairly contained...”

It really was. Nothing had been lost except the kitchen. It was just so... weird.

“But the way the fire blazed? Look, if it melted your cutlery to puddles like that, it had to be burning off something. I think someone may have started it. I already notified the police.”

“Damn.”

Shinoda was a real piece of work.

Oh, there was no way it wasn't her, though Nestra doubted they would find a definite proof. It was more a psychological attack than a real murder attempt anyway, something to distract her while also taking revenge for the slight. It would remind her she wasn't out of danger just because she was still within the grace phase. Nestra wondered what pushed someone to take so many risks just to be an extra asshole. It wasn't fear, that was for sure. Her arrogance oozed from every pore.

"Also, sorry to say but the house's structural integrity is compromised so I'm declaring it a hazardous location. You can't stay here. It might collapse."

"Okay."

"Will you be fine?"

"If you ask if I have a place to stay then yes. If you ask if I'm alright with someone trying to burn down my house, the answer is no. I mean, technically it belongs to my aunt..."

"Who should make a police report and insurance claim as soon as possible."

"I'll tell her. And I don't know. It's been my place for so long. I just don't know."

Nestra felt like she should feel furious, or violated, yet it was difficult to do so because the house was a lie.

She would need to deal with this later but damn, did the consequences of her choices come to roost at supersonic speeds.

She needed a place to stay. Who would she call now? If she tried her mom, Nestra was pretty sure it would lead to some sort of accident — like Shinda mysteriously falling on a frozen puddle onto a stack of sharpened metal stakes. With a sigh, she called Sereth.

That place wasn't getting burnt down any time soon.

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The work continued. Nestra mentioned the house incident to her colleagues but otherwise didn't dwell on it. The local criminal police had taken the case and that was it. Maybe she could let it go because it had never been her den at all, or perhaps it was associated with only one part of her. Nestra decided that after this was done, she would get herself a real cave. The priority was still to corner those two assholes before they put their filthy hands on any more of her belongings.

It was Stibbs who found the next piece of interest.

"Shinoda is running for mayor."

The group paused. Nestra could scarcely believe her eyes.

“Wait. Is she opposition?”

“She is. They’re running primaries in three weeks, and she is a strong contender.”

“This might be related. Politicians need a ton of money to run. That could be it.”

There was a knock on the door. Everyone looked up from their work towards Nestra. A quick check of the security camera revealed a familiar face. She opened it.

“Detective Baatar?”

The bearded man stood in the alley alongside a group of spooked detectives of various ages. They all looked extremely uncomfortable.

“Hello, Officer Palladian. Or do you have a temporary title as well?”

“Nope!”

“Well then... I’ll be brief. I heard about your house. I am sorry.”

He introduced the other detectives, who were all members of the Contraband and Property Damage Bureau which handled anything from illegal augs to arsons.

“This is nice but... what are you doing here?”

“On the public level, I went to them as a member of the rat squad to inform them that their case and yours might be linked. I think we both know you’re being targeted on purpose. Normally, I wouldn’t have the authority to act as a liaison but it so happens that my boss has been suspended for a couple of days and that gave me some leeway...”

He wiggled his brow.

“And on the personal level?” Nestra asked, a bit suspicious about the change of heart.

“On the personal level, I’ve been a coward and can’t stand myself. My wife also gave me an earful so it is with my family’s blessing that I shall sabotage my career in the name of justice.”

“He is exaggerating,” a no-nonsense man said nearby. “Should the good detective be fired for doing his job, we will gladly offer him a transfer. Please let us in and let’s work together, Officer Palladian. We of the CPB don’t like being taken for idiots.”

“It was really sloppy work!” a short woman with scarred hands added with a slightly concerning smile.

“I understand if you want me out,” Baatar added. “But at least work with the CPB. They mean business.”

“Are you kidding? Welcome aboard.”

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The CPB team worked fast. They fully agreed with Nestra’s opinion that Shinoda could have done it by proxy, and a brief search of the monitoring AI’s records pinged the suspicious death of a political militant, found with a broken neck and traces of accelerant on his fingers. It matched the molecule found in Nestra’s house. Then, it was merely a matter of minutes before the AI found the militant and Shinoda in the same general area, proving a meeting had taken place. It happened near a dingy mall complex really out of the way.

“Lots of folks think meeting in person is safer than using a phone because calls can be monitored but that’s not the case, especially in Threshold with all the cameras. You’d be surprised at the number of people who realize when someone doesn’t fit,” The CPB captain said.

“Some people don’t talk to the police though,” Nestra said.

“Not about locals, but corrupt rich women? That is a different story.”

“That’s still not enough to nail her.”

“Not by itself, but it’s enough to call the Bureau of Integrity.”

Nestra blinked. Was she going to collect more goons? Damn, this wasn’t a squad anymore. It was a TASK FORCE.

“Can you call me task force leader?”

“No.”

“Aw.”

“But I’ll call you boss for…” he checked his visor. “Three days, nineteen hours.”

“Yesss.”

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Over thirty people now labored in the overcrowded emergency response unit. Nestra’s main role was to talk to everybody to get updates and give her credentials when they needed access to someone special. It felt weird and fun to walk the cubicles with a cup of cappuccino while people kept her up to speed, and three days into the work, the finance section finally identified who owned the company that had bought the volatile assets at a steep discount.

A few hours later, the Bureau of Integrity recovered the dead militant’s phone record, and then it was time to decide.

“We have enough for a solid case, but I’m not confident we can pull it off,” the CPB representative said.

The other team leaders discussed the case for a little while. Most of it went above Nestra’s head since it wasn’t her specialty. It was mostly about case law, what judges had decided before. Unfortunately, Threshold was a recent city with a recent justice system and very few, if any, similar cases. This made the others nervous about their chances.

Nestra knew that anyone else would already be looking at an interrogation chair and three life sentences in this situation, but arresting an opposition politician was an extremely risky, high-profile decision with plenty of implications so she couldn’t blame them.

“How about offering Ito a deal?” she suggested.

The others paused to look at her. They’d been focusing solely on Shinoda earlier, mostly because she was the big fish to catch, but Nestra was here for Ito and, by extension, for Kim.

“He might be confident about the financial stuff but if you add the arson, and considering it’s a conspiracy...”

“Then all participants would be considered guilty of all crimes. Yes, that’s a good idea. Let’s flip him.”

“Let’s” Nestra added with a smile.

She was so smart!

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It was the sixth day, and Nestra sat on a park bench below the imposing form of the Beacon waiting for the inevitable. The air smelled crisp and clean with a bit of the nearby Pacific Ocean spicing it with iodine. It was a beautiful, sunny day. The only thing missing was a good meal.

Shinoda approached her from a long winding path, mostly devoid of runners at this time. The nearby leaves had barely started to turn yellow. Her bodyguards arrayed themselves at some distance while the regally dressed woman sat next to Nestra — without invitation, of course.

“Here, I got you something for the trip... if you decide to leave the city, of course,” the elegant woman told Nestra in lieu of greetings.

It was a take away bag from one of Threshold’s most exclusive steak restaurants: the Burning House.

“Oh, thanks,” Nestra replied without anger



“It looks like five days have elapsed. You have failed to report a financial crime so I suppose this is it. Ito will be reinstated within minutes. It is all downhill from there, ne?”

Nestra savored the moment as she placed the bag at her feet. Shinoda was so confident. It was a little bit cute. The time had come, however, so Nestra served her her best condescending expression.

“You are correct that I did not fill out a financial crime report on time. That is because there was no need. You see, I know that Ito overrode the monitoring AI to sell confiscated volatile assets at a steep discount to third party shell companies controlled by you. Those companies then liquidated the assets and pocketed the difference, which they sent to your party. You may have used an intermediary to set them up but that intermediary needs to record the name of the person who authorized the transfer if it’s a donation to a Threshold political entity... like your party. An unfortunate oversight on your part.”

It was really hilarious to watch Shinoda go from cocksure to concerned, then to horrified.

“So Ito filled your electoral war chest in exchange for... your favor, and future benefits.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do, because he talked.”

Nestra let her smile fully bloom this time.

“And we have recordings of you going to the same fundraisers and hotels together, which corroborates his story. That would have been enough for the financial crime. Unfortunately for you, committing fraud related to elections in Threshold falls under the purview of the Integrity Bureau...”

The way her face fell meant Shinoda knew exactly how deep in it she was. the Integrity Bureau didn’t fuck around. Their usual fare was gleam-related power grabs. By comparison, dealing with Shinoda would be punching down.

“They were obviously very interested in knowing you donated yourself quite a few million credits in illegal funds, and that would have been it... except you asked someone to burn down my house... and may have had him assassinated later but that case is still ongoing. You were smart enough to contact him via a burner phone, but you see the issue is that his phone was not secured. Kind of pointless to take all those precautions when the other side does not, don’t you think? If you had waited for two weeks before being a petty bitch, then the call recordings would have been erased from the servers, but of course you had to get your revenge immediately. You used a voice modulator but you gave enough detail for him to identify you, and then we have the both of you at the same spot four days ago: in the Europe Spring mall. That means that the Contraband and Property damage Bureau is also involved... and that means you are the head of a conspiracy. Very ambitious of you.”

“You have nothing. You have nothing and you’re bluffing.”

“The funny thing is, if you’d simply laid low, I may not have had the time to find everything I needed before the deadline.”

“I am leaving and you are going to jail.”

Nestra signaled. Groups of men in police uniform including white-clad city gleams moved in from the nearby paths, blocking every access point. Shinoda snarled like a trapped tigress.

“You are going nowhere except the Red House, and you’re going there for a very, very long time. Don’t worry, Ito is already waiting for you. I suppose this is farewell, Miss Shinoda. I got to say, I really preferred your ex.”

Nestra thought she could use some popcorn to watch her nemesis fall from haughty lady to screaming victim. Her bodyguards hesitated, but not for long. Threshold’s law enforcement was notoriously short on patience, as Nestra knew very well, having been the person with no patience at all. She leaned back comfortably while Shinoda was dragged out.

“I’m the next mayor! You can’t do this! Help!”

The birds sang, the sun shone, and Nestra had concluded her hunt without even having to change into her true self. What a wonderful time to be alive. She stayed there a good twenty minutes, watching the screaming harridan get shoved into a hover truck, then studying the two despondent bodyguards moving around like lost dobbermans wondering what to do with their lives. After five minutes, she opened the food bag.

It was a salad.

“That bitch. Joke’s on you, I’ve started to eat more healthily.”

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The morning was bright. Nestra stopped her pink roadster in front of the Red House’s entrance with a smile. She made sure her leather jacket and sunglasses were in position to give her the perfect old-school road bandit look. She resisted the urge to grab her coffee.

The doors opened right on time.

Kim came out with a blank hoodie, hands clutching the plastic bag containing her meager belongings. She blinked owlishly in the bright light. Her hair was held in a tight ponytail that revealed her angular features.

As soon as she spotted Nestra, she hurried towards her.

“Welcome back from the slammer,” Nestra drawled in her best thug voice. “I got ya—”

Kim slammed into her. The shorter woman pushed her head against Nestra’s shoulders with muffled sobs. Nestra awkwardly patted her back for the minute it took for Kim to find her

voice again. Oh yeah, maybe the perspective of spending a lifetime behind bars had scared the poor girl so much she wouldn't appreciate Nestra's specific kind of humor. She should have guessed.

"Thank you."

Kim sniffed so Nestra handed a clean tissue.

"I really thought I was done for," Kim confessed. "I thought I was going to spend my life in prison for something I didn't commit, after everything I've done for the city. I thought my life was over. I looked back and I saw no real friends, no lovers, just work and the belief I had made a difference and then it had all turned to ash and... and..."

"Shh it's ok, I get it. I would have been terrified as well. Hey, let's not stay here. I got you coffee and a bagel. I assume you wanna go home?"

"Home? No. I'm alone there. I want to get out and drink."

"It's 9 AM."

"Soju. And barbecue."

"Aye now you're talking my language. Let's go!"

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"And you should have seen her face when the Integrity Bureau nabbed her!"

"Uhu."

"Like she couldn't believe I did it!"

"Uhu."

"Second best after Ito's resigned mug."

"Uhu. Pass me the sauce please."

"Here. I'm telling you—"

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"— people keep underestimating my intelligence but see? See? I got them anyway! Hah!"

"Way to show them!" Aunt Claire enthusiastically said through her bandages. "Stick it to the man."

“I’m not stupid. People assume I can’t do shit because I’m a muscle head. Well, who’s laughing now?”

“I always knew you could do it!”

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“Well of course I know I can do it, but do the others? No! It’s always Nestra’s too wild, she doesn’t show respect and so on yadda yadda like I can’t do it. I just can’t stand assholes, is all.”

“I’m aware, girl,” Stibbs insisted as she grabbed some more coffee. “I was there the whole time.”

“But you see what I mean? It’s not because I’m not the most social bird around that I’m dumb.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re a battle maniac with no interest in anything else except for food?”

“But it takes intelligence to be good at fighting! Well, a certain form of intelligence, anyway.”

“Should we order cake again?”

“Naturally. Anyway, they will remember the day—”

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“They thought they could underesssstimate me,” Crescent told Ragnarok.

The general was impassive in her chair.

“I am delighted that you triumphed. I admit that I thought you might have difficulties and I was ready to step in, but you have proven me, and everyone else, wrong. Congratulations.”

“Yessss!”

“And I am going to assume you have been absolutely insufferable over it?”

“...No?”

“Your inflated ego has not compelled you to proclaim your victory to absolutely everyone?”

“No!”

“Not even my secretary while you were waiting for me?”

“Errr.”

“Then if everything has returned to normal, I assume you are now free to compensate me for the favor I have provided.”

“Uggggggghh.”

“I will take this as a clear yes.”

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The Threshold Guild Fair took place in a large conference center where the new generation’s best and brightest found out which guild recruited and at what cost. The guilds, conversely, did their best to find high-potential sheep they could shear for years with dubious contracts. Even in this age of flowing information, everyone still preferred that personal touch of awkward handshakes in crowded booths. It was one of the few events where both sides of the recruiting table stressed out. As a result, the air smelled of rancid sweat, deodorant that failed to mask the rancid sweat, fear, shit coffee, and anxiety. There were moist armpits than empty coffee cups on display and that was saying something. Nestra pushed back the urge to scream.

Acting as a chaperone for young prospective raiders sucked.

“Booth 76,” a voice in her visor said. “Abusive contract. The Blue Dancers guild is trying to get two recruits into servitude via loans, according to the AI. You are clear to escort them out of the building.”

“On it,” she growled.

At last, she would make someone else suffer for her woes.