

Stib checked the electrical setup one last time. She was thorough, Nestra thought. Wait, no. She was nervous.

"I'll be fine," Nestra said.

"The Sight Killer murders powerful C-class like it's nothing, Nes. You might be a big scary demon girl but you're still low C-class. It won't be as easy as you think."

"If I thought it was easy, I wouldn't prepare so thoroughly."

Stib remained silent as every light on her datasheet turned green.

"You're just so bullheaded. And doing Ashjay's job."

Nestra growled.

"Ashjay is doing the city's job. I'm defending myself and my family. It's personal now, and besides, the less attention I get, the better."

Stib nodded after a while.

"Yeah. I'll... ask Seth to look after you, ok?"

"Not how it works. My hunt. If I die, I die."

"Dammit! You could have lied so I'd be less worried."

"If I do get killed, don't blame Seth. He's following the rules of our kind. We stand alone. This is our nature."

"You're standing with me."

"Yes, for the preparation. And I am very grateful."

Stib sighed, deeply.

"Just please don't get killed. I don't care about the rest."

"I promise to do my best."

"Right. Everything is ready on the technology end. I bow myself out and wish you murderhobos the best of times."

Miss Teneru did that little foot dance that nervous people do when they're not paying attention. For once, she'd forfeited her wide brimmed hat and sundress combo for a more sensible attire, though there was still a dress. She touched the hat that obscured her features.

“You’re sure there are no security cameras over there?”

“I swept the place first,” Nesta said, shaking the black box Gorge had sold her a long time ago. “There’s one at the corner of the street but I deactivated it. It will be fixed fast since this is a posh area, but we have a couple of hours at least.”

“Unless your family finds out you are gone.”

Nesta shook her head. Sereth was there, though Teneru didn’t know the specifics.

“Not until tomorrow morning at the earliest. We have the limelight tofor ourselves.”

“I just hope this isn’t a big mistake...” Teneru whispered.

It was dark, and Nesta’s sabotage couldn’t just be fixed with a cheap repair drone. She parked the car in a deserted building that was undergoing deep renovations, basically emptied of everything except its walls. Her rental car would still attract the attention of the monitoring AI but that was why it was registered under a false name. As a cop herself, she’d made sure nothing could be easily tracked back to her.

Nesta checked her gear one last time. For this op, she would be wearing technician overalls along with a heavy bag of tools. Only idiots dressed in all black to burglarize a city home. A ninja wasn’t inconspicuous. Janitors and maintenance people were inconspicuous.

“Remember, I only need you to get me through the wards.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Oh dear, this is all making me rather nervous.”

She chuckled.

“The baseline goes boldly into the lion’s den while the gleam remains behind. Ironic.”

“It will be fine.”

Teneru gave her a long glance, as if she was looking at her for the first time.

“You know, ever since I met you at your brother’s celebration, I knew you were wasted as a civilian. You belong in the portals, dear. Sorry you couldn’t do it.”

“It is what it is,” Nesta said, repeating her mother’s old adage.

“Right. Shall we? Before I lose my nerve.”

“No. We wait for Stonegrave to leave first.”

“Oh dear me, yes. That is quite important.”

The lure had been simple. The day after Nesta had stolen the Sight painting, Ji Ah was raiding and most of the other suspects were either away or busy themselves. There had been only one person who had the opportunity to commit the crime, one person who had no alibi: John Stonegrave. Her cameras had confirmed it.

That wouldn't hold in court, of course. Stonegrave frequently left his home office for the gym or to visit buildings. She needed something concrete. And she knew how to get it. As usual, the solution was crime. Specifically, burglary.

Stonegrave left his home at eight PM, sharp. Fortunately for Nestra, the entire street contained high-edge houses designed for privacy, so the chances of someone coming exactly at this moment were low. Teneru and her got to the garden gate in record time. Nestra checked once again that there were no surprise cameras — not here anyway. She used one of Stib's Max-Sec gizmos to open the lock without touching it. As far as the door was concerned, it was still closed.

Another tool blurred the front camera without damaging it. It was Teneru's turn now. Nestra felt a pulse of earth mana when the nervous artist located the wards.

"I don't think I can do anything about the door. I am not an infiltrator. The walls should be fine, if you don't mind entering from the side?"

"I do not."

They skulked along a flowerbed towards the corner of the glass house where a large AC unit occupied part of the space, hidden from view.

"There is a weakness here. I can, ah, peel off the ward a little. If you can climb on this awful machinery..."

"Do it, then go. I'll take it from here."

Nestra's senses were dull in this coreless form, but she didn't feel anything when she sprayed the reinforced glass with foam, then cracked it in relative silence. MaxSec intrusion tools were still the best, courtesy of the city's military research. She crawled into a cramped laundry room that smelled pleasantly of soap.

The door was unlocked, as expected. Nestra stopped before she entered the corridor, resisting the urge to shift to her demon form and just use the easy mode. Patience. Patience would be rewarded here. A brief blackbox check confirmed that the entrance hall was under the surveillance of a movement detector. She scrambled it as well. Hopefully, this wouldn't be picked up too soon.

She walked out into a tastefully sober alley, her shoes leaving dirt tracks on the caramel wood flooring. Riel, this plan was the most complex she'd come up with. So many points of failure. She hoped it would be fine.

Her steps carried her next to an American-style kitchen complete with some of the most advanced coffee machines she'd ever seen. The house was messy but mostly clean and it smelled of Cologne and detergent. She moved up glass stairs in silence to reach the home office. A locked door barred her way, but it was a simple magnetic lock and she had it open in seconds. Inside, there was a computer and a large table with an integrated 3D display showing a rather ambitious 8-floor building. The fact it was unlocked was an unexpected boon. She quickly browsed through various files dating back to a few years ago when

Stonegrave had retired as a raider. A cursory search showed no dubious folders, and all the projects were for fancy homes, not mausoleums for serial killers.

Well, that was fine. Nesta checked the time. Only five minutes had passed.

If the architect had damning evidence, it would probably be stored separately, just in case someone touched the wrong key. She eyed a nearby computer. Possible, but...

Her eyes traveled to the room's only painting. It depicted a nature morte of the most boring variety, literally just a basket of flowers. All the other paintings had shown a preference for artistic depiction of historical architectural wonders.

Surely, it couldn't be that easy? Except, the demon intuition was seeping through the pores of its pocket dimension to whisper that yes, there was something there.

Nesta touched the painting with gloved fingers. It was sealed on. Her fingers traveled up and down to a hidden button, which she pressed.

The painting rotated to reveal a safe.

"How very old school of you," she whispered.

A summary inspection showed that it was an extremely old model with no shielding against imagery, probably more of a symbolic barrier than a real defense. Stonegrave probably didn't expect anyone to reach that point. Nesta's eyes dropped to the side where a light shimmer announced the presence of a small ward.

Perfect. She was wondering which alarm she ought to trigger and that was decidedly the best to provoke some urgency. And also a feeling of violation. She used another tool from her bag to open the safe, struggling more than she should have simply because she'd never done it before. The safe might have been old, but it required the associated lever to be pulled three times for some reason. She messed up the process twice before finally hearing that satisfactory click.

The ward broke when she opened the safe. She checked the time. Eight minutes since its owner had left.

Inside, there were documents and a gauntlet artifact, another tacky detail. She checked the papers. The first stack were bonds complete with QR codes. Probably about a hundred and fifty thousand credits worth of liquid assets. Not too shabby. The second stack showed pictures of two people she didn't know having rather passionate sex. She ignored it. Who kept blackmail material in paper format nowadays?

The third stack contained paper plans for the mausoleums. The actual blueprints.

Nesta froze in her tracks.

Holy shit, she hadn't actually expected to find them here, so easily, but it was perfect. Dear Stonegrave had to know he was deep in it if someone found those. He would drive back at full speed now.

She had what she needed. Curiosity needled her, but she refrained from visiting more of the place. Nesta left and returned to the main hall, only to stop in wonder. The main ward on the gate was broken, and the ground was covered in a very thin layer of dark dust shimmering with mana. It would have been almost unnoticeable to someone who wasn't very good at feeling mana. Tracking powder, no doubt, a staple of earth mana users who worked in security. That would make things simpler.

She checked her visor. Ten minutes since he left. If she raced out now, she could be in the car before he returned... but that wouldn't do at all. She checked the cameras she'd placed at the end of the street. No signs of him yet.

Two minutes. She would give herself two minutes and then she'd leave. That would make it eight minutes to intrusion and then six minutes after that. The wait was agonizing. When the timer hit zero, she deliberately walked across the tracking powder then back out of the window even if the wards were already broken. Nesta's nervousness picked up every flower on the way, every blade of grass of this affluent but unused garden. This was the main point of failure. She expected Stonegrave to come at full speed, but what if he had accomplices? Or corrupt cops on his back and call? She hoped not, or at least that the timing would be too short for him to do anything but race home in the hopes of finding her before she was gone.

When she neared the renovated building, Stonegrave's SUV careened down the nearby street on her visor. He bounced on the curb with a sound of protesting dampers before screeching to a halt before his building.

Nesta ran to Teneru, waiting inside the building in an alcove that was barely more than a concrete bunker with two openings.

"I just felt a pulse, darling. I think we'd better leave."

They didn't take three steps before something broke through the nearby gate. C-class speed. Nesta pulled out her gun. If he just killed her human form here, things would be a little more complicated but... she expected him to want to find out what they knew.

It was going well so far.

A loud noise crashed above her. A window. A sweaty Teneru whispered in a panic.

"He's tracking us. I'm trying to muddle the mana but..."

And then the inevitable happened. Stonegrave must have peered over a parapet, somewhere, because his armored form smashed down in front of them by the obviously suspicious rented car. When he turned, Nesta got a good glance at the last sight many monsters had seen: glass and black stone melding into the geometrical shapes of an armor spell backlit by the city's ambient lights.

It spoke of practice and of focus, of a very tidy mind. The face above was anything but. A vicious sneer marred the man's aristocratic features while Nesta could see the white of his bare teeth. It was an absolutely savage expression, completely at odds with what she'd seen before.

“You! And you too?” he said, glaring at the two women. “You will regret messing with me!”

That was it. Now, Nestra only had to hope her assessment of the man was accurate enough.

“We need to defend ourselves!” Teneru screeched with panic.

Nestra raised the Window Maker. She made sure to convey panic, and her foe, blinded as he was by his fury, walked to it like a shark smelling blood.

She'd even prepared the perfect bait.

“Stop, or I'll shoot!” she bleated.

A ghost of doubt crossed her opponent's eyes but his certainty returned with a vengeance. She was a baseline. He was C-rank, with powerful defensive magic. She could not hope to defeat him no matter what. He wanted answers, and he wanted her terrified. Defenseless. So he kept going.

He still lifted a gauntlet up to intercept the bullet. That's the only thing that saved him.

Nestra adjusted her posture ever so slightly with the speed of a quirky. It was just fast enough that he didn't have the time to react. Then, she pulled the trigger.

The detonation was so loud that the windows shook. Her earplugs widened to dampen the effect but by her side, Teneru winced.

The Demon Slayer bullet pinged its way through the gleam's hand, and parts of his chest. The armor broke and blood poured from the ravaged tissue. Range turned to surprise, but it never reached pain. Stonegrave simply fell to one knee with his armor crumbling around him. A spike of earth darted from the ground towards his face just as he leaned forward. Like a coincidence. A perfect timing of a D-class piddling spell catching a C-class warrior off-guard. The spike dug into Stonegrave's mouth just as he opened it.

A lot of blood poured out. Power fed into Nestra soon after. Her mana expanded as her core drank the fleeing essence.

It felt really strange having the human form act as a conduit for the demon one.

Panting, Teneru stumbled to the side, her face a mask of horror.

“Shit, I... I think I—”

Nestra shot her too.

And missed.

Teneru didn't have the time to dodge. She'd been looking forward, but something, probably instincts, still let her react in time so as not to get her intestines unspooled like a long spaghetti. Her form became vaporous. It was one moment flesh and the next liquid mana. The enchanted bullet left a ripple behind it before punching into a cinder block.

Nestra followed a sinister laugh back into the renovating building, leaving the corpse in its puddle. The inside of the renovated building was dark for now. Teneru waited there as a silhouette as wispy as the night. Nestra couldn't even tell if it was the woman's mana or the very rare darkness of a city that feared it like the plague.

Her voice hadn't changed either.

"For a moment, I was afraid you'd just offered yourself to us but of course, my first instincts were right, darling. You wanted to kill us, didn't you? Hence the weird setup. Otherwise you could have just called for reinforcements, and then..."

She shrugged, then stepped forward and the light of a nearby window fell on her face, the same face, which Nestra found abhorrent. The Sight Killer was still wearing her mask.

"I would have fled. Or died! One or the other. Come on, before you show me what you've prepared. Tell me how you figured out it was me."

She touched her flank. The sensible dress had a hole in it now, but the wound Nestra could see through the opening was weird, more a second degree burn of the skin than an actual hole.

"I'm bleeding a bit and it won't close by itself. Surely, time is on your side? Come on. I am dying to know."

Nestra wanted to tell her because it felt like it would fit nicely with the cathartic death. The fact Teneru was weakening was only a distant concern. The Aszhii wanted to cherish the moment, make it memorable for eons if she lived that long. It was special, after all. Her first assassination. Technically. Teneru was the first person whose death was the absolute end goal, or so that was how she felt.

"The presence of powerful earth and shadow magic with a minor in blood hinted that there were at least two people involved, and that's how I approached the problem. Of course, it turned out I was wrong and it was all your doing but you did have an accomplice, at least to design your unique mausoleum."

"Not an architect, I'm afraid. Couldn't have all this work collapsing on itself."

"As to how I got convinced it was you, two things. You masked your money movements well on the mercenary side, but there were three rapid transfers from your bank to an overseas account labeled as 'art supplies' that amounted to the total of the advance the mercenaries received to kidnap me. Very obvious in retrospect. I want to ask though, before I continue. How did you convince Stonegrave to go along with your little outings?"

Teneru scoffed, as if that was obvious.

"He's a sociopath, darling. Well, was. He wanted to be part of the Collective's entourage for monetary reasons. I requested a little, shall we say, proof of ability. A nice resting place rather than the dreadfully cold designs he favored. He delivered, and I invited him to our little

after parties as my partner. Once he figured out the plans I asked of him were used as part of a series of murder, he didn't go to the police, as I expected. He tried to blackmail me instead. Naturally, I told him we would both end up in the Red House or worse should he talk since I could make a convincing case that we were accomplices, so he wisely decided to assist me instead. I had him retrieve the video of your kidnapping for my later, private enjoyment — or so I had hoped until you decided to play it smart. My turn now. You said you knew for two reasons. What's the second one?"

"Medical files."

Teneru stepped a little closer, the move fluid and predatory. A burst of mana revealed the power of a mighty C-class raider both in amount and control, but it also disappeared into thin air in the same moment rather than lingering as mana was wont to do. It was as if she'd swallowed back all of that energy.

"Ooooooh. Naughty naughty. Those are confidential!"

"You're not considered a priority, so the clearance level required was not all that high."

"Devious. Tell me what you found. I want to hear it from your mouth."

"You had mentioned having skin problems as a child and I checked them out. I recognized them. Heterochromia. Blaschko's lines. Swirls of skin affected by a darker pigmentation. Yours was especially heavy and affected even your face with a straight line heading down to your navel. You are a chimera."

Teneru's smile turned vicious and slightly lopsided. Gone was the goofy artist, or to be more precise, it was still there in half of her face like a crumbling mask while the shadow illusion that had made the rest poured down like smoky ink. It revealed white skin, unnaturally pale and iris as black as Nestra's own. The hair on that part of her scalp was straighter and darker as well. The swirls and stripes of mixed skin formed a hypnotic pattern that disappeared under the woman's clothes. In her medical file, Teneru was practically disfigured but gleam vitality had smoothed those angry lines into mere color differences, like permanent body paint. Even smoothed out, there were subtle differences between the various parts that lent her an asymmetrical appearance that made her exotic and uncanny in equal measure.

"Yes, I believe the first person I killed was my dear sister in the womb! Ate the poor thing, I'm afraid. Or I was the one who got eaten. Hard to tell, isn't it?"

"You have two cores."

"Not quite. More of a... bicolored fused one with two prime affinities. But the distinction is academic. I simply am."

Teneru walked to the wall, passing stained fingers over the dry concrete. Her nails grated on the surface like metal screws.

“Is this the moment you ask me about my motives? Ooooh poor little Teneru, bullied as a kid.”

Nestra shook her head.

“Nope, you’re just a psycho.”

And Teneru chuckled, the familiar laugh now gaining a subtle edge.

“Yes! Yes, thank you. Finally. It’s always: ‘oh but why are you doing this? Is this about a magic ritual, or punishment? You can get help!’ But I don’t want to get help. I just want to kill gleams and take their wonderful eyes! So pretty and full of life until the moment I rip them out of their mighty skulls.”

As she spoke, the darkness of the room coalesced on her fingertips, forming uneven talons that changed with each one of her breaths.

“I don’t need a sociological or psychological or criminal or medical or educational explanation... or any other such bullshit. I just love to kill them when they feel invincible. That’s it. That’s all there is. Aaaaah so refreshing. Somehow, I knew you’d get it.”

“It doesn’t matter that I got it or not. You set us on a collision course. I was always going to go for you.”

She stretched her shoulders a bit, even though the human form would soon be subsumed. Habit.

“You’re getting in the way of my hunts.”

Teneru leaned lazily against a nearby wall. She was really enjoying the moment.

“And now, my turn to wonder what you have prepared. You went through a lot of pain to make our meeting secluded. Surely you have some plan that goes beyond dragging me to a place of stone and darkness just so I can mince you in peace, right?”

“I just wanted you to be as interested in me as I was in you. So one of us dies here.”

“Yes, yes, obviously. To be honest, you merely had to ask. Like you, I was just waiting for a good chance. Tonight, actually, ever since you said you didn’t have a chaperone. Well, I hope your plan to kill me is really good, otherwise, I’ll go after Helena next.”

For a moment, Teneru regained the mask of the socialite in the way she moved and talked, though the appearance of the chimera remained.

“Followed her a little bit that day just to see what she was up to. She’s a bit of a pariah, the poor dear. Can’t really spar well because she has trouble holding back. Not the most social bird around. Why, after the death of her sister, I might just try to get close to comfort her. She

seems to be a bit in pain at moments. I think that strange affinity is hurting her body, you see?”

Nestra paled, suddenly taken off guard.

Shit. Void ate through her sword. Would it eat through Helena’s marrow, her nerves? Her muscles? She was a human, not designed to withstand Aszhii mana.

“Hit a nerve? Well, don’t worry. I am confident she won’t die from mana erosion. Now show your hand or, you know...”

Two blades of pure darkness manifested in Teneru’s hands.

“Or just die. I don’t mind.”

Nestra pulled her mask. Immediately, the world became smaller and so did Teneru. The room, so far dim, returned in all its monochrome sobriety. Nestra used *immovable* to stop the first strike of Teneru’s blades but hissed when they still bit into her skin. The woman’s mana was aggressive. Ravenous, even. Nestra’s swordsmanship faced the torrent of shadow blades while the ground rebelled against her feet.

Nestra had thought that the Sight Killer had won by catching her prey off guard. She could have. She didn’t have to.

For the first time since Fox Mask, Nestra was losing. Completely losing. It wasn’t technique, really, or even battle instincts. Teneru was simply a genius at using both shadow and earth at the same time, and Nestra could not stand against her.

It was sobering, and as the blades found her meat but failed to find much purchase, she felt a tinge of fear peppered with excitement.

Teneru was going to kill her if she didn’t up her game. And then it would be Helena’s turn.

Nestra extended a finger and folded space, calling one of her human form’s weapons. A tiny capsule flew in the air, almost swallowed by the laughing vortex that was the killer. It exploded at the right moment. The flashbang turned the room white and the hail of blades pulled back, tendrils dispersed by the sudden light. Teneru yelped in pain, deafened for the second time. Nestra pulled electric mana and struck with everything she had. Void masquerading as a thunderbolt melted the naked concrete. Her sword broke through barbs of materialized shadows held as a shield. Blood spurted from somewhere. She’d gotten a hit in.

The room exploded in shadows. It was not an absence of light, this time, but darkness made manifest, a presence that stole air from her lungs. Nestra saw Teneru peer from her cloak of darkness. She used *momentum* to get away from that voracious smile.

“So enticing,” her voice whispered. “More?”

Blades filled the air. Nestra slipped through the nearest wall as it turned into a spike trap. She couldn't tell if Teneru was surprised but she didn't wait. She struck through the wall. Her sword smashed through the melting concrete, but found nothing.

"Hah!"

Teneru opened the wall like one pulls a curtain aside. She stepped in, regal. Nestra used a button prepared by Stibs.

The industrial power lights lodged at the corners of the room flooded the darkness with the presence of the sun. The contrast was enough for Nestra to land another good hit, though it felt more like hitting shadows and getting a glancing blow. Still, blood poured down her blade.

The counter-attack was immediate. The room itself smashed the lamps. Stones surged at Nestra from every direction, one hitting the back of her head despite her best efforts. Shadows bit into her armguards. Her instincts screamed at her. Get out. NOW. She slipped down to another room, activated another set of flood lights. Teneru was a blur of power and Nestra pointed, sending a void bolt into that pit of nothingness. No damage.

"Nice tricks, honey."

Nestra moved to a staircase. They fought here, up, floor by floor where the space was little and Nestra's experience helped. Teneru was adapting fast but it was clear she was lacking experience fighting someone as slippery as Nestra.

"You're a dancer, darling. Wait. hear that? Hush!"

Despite her misgivings, Nestra froze. She spared a quick look out of the nearest window, Teneru taking a few steps back as she did. Mana faded as Teneru settled.

"Your gunshots gathered some attention," Teneru idly remarked.

There were drones outside. Surveillance drone scanning the place. One of them found the damaged door where Stonegrave had a short-lived burst of anger. They loitered for a bit longer.

"A transformation power. Very unusual, but I do like the demonic aesthetics. The eyes are a nice touch, though I might be biased."

Teneru was back to her pleasant self, though Nestra could smell the acrid perfume or her sweat over the tangy taste of both of their bloods. Adrenaline, or at least the Aszhii equivalent, was keeping her upright for now but she was going to feel it in the morning, assuming she managed to survive. Teneru wasn't doing much better. Both of them were offensive types. The battle would be over soon.

It took a minute for the drones to leave, but it felt like much longer. Teneru was the first to move. She pulled darkness to herself, flooding the place in an instant. Again, Nestra used

momentum to teleport away from the cloud of impenetrable darkness. She dove down, near the entrance. Teneru rushed after her needed by fear that she might escape and Nestra scored one more hit on her, though as usual, this felt more like hitting water.

She just needed one good strike. Teneru couldn't remain vaporous and strike her with hardened magic all the time. It had to be mentally exhausting. Nestra appeared in a ground floor room and waited, lights on.

Teneru arrived through the wall, holding the corpse of Stonegrave in clawed hands, the darkness itself turned into a glove of spines and hooks without form. It didn't feel like a spell anymore, just raw intent and skill so deeply ingrained that they became free form, liberated from the stumbling steps of humanity's first foray into the arcane. Teneru was a natural. She was not a human thrown into the merciless hell this world had become, after the Incursion. She flourished from it. It was her playground.

Nestra breathed deep, pushing back the pain. This was the end. Blood pooled under the murderous gleam as it pooled under her, crimson and so very alive, for both of them, because they were still both living so very intensely, and in a minute, one of them wouldn't be.

"Just need to make this moment special," Teneru said, still completely calm.

Her claws slithered organically on the dead man's face, pulling eyelids out of the way. His vivid brown iris were revealed as shiny beacons in the artificial glare of the industrial lamp.

"You know, the gleaming effect remains after death. The mana does not desert us. Not even if our soul does. A wonderful thing, don't you think?"

With a soft, wet squelch, the extended claws pulled the eyeballs from the dead man's skull. Part of the nerve stalk was still attached, a gory contrast to the enduring beauty of the shiny eyes. Teneru brought them to her uneven own.

"Gleam eyes. Such a powerful symbol, always watching, always judging whether their owner wants to or not. Biased. Imperfect, yet so very, very pretty. Hmmm, I don't think I can take yours. They don't seem to be quite fully there, but if you do manage to kill me, collect mine! Let me keep my eyes on you. Hehe."

She carefully placed the trophies on the ground. Nestra let her. She was catching her breath.

"Right. Where were we? Oh yes."

Teneru charged. Nestra placed her sword to the side for a sweep, That only made Teneru laugh, again. Wait for it...

A brick extended like a spike, crushing all the lamps at the same time. The room turned immediately dark.

Nestra took a step back while Teneru accelerated, her eyes searching the darkness for potential spots where Nestra would reappear.

Nestra didn't use *momentum*.

With a perfect gesture, the one she's rehearsed day after day after day all her life, she stepped forward and struck.

It was a very simple move. Pretty much part of all the training sequences in existence. Her body twisted with the blurry memories of a body that was not quite her demon self, but close enough for embers of that perfection to flash at this precise moment. Her sword sang through the air, and that simplicity turned the blade into a void cut of the finest precision.

The claymore caught a very surprised Teneru under the rib. Nestra barely felt resistance when the blade struck up to the extent that she thought she was dealing with some sort of decoy, but the sound? That was unmistakable. The sound of flesh tearing, of bones giving. Teneru gasped. She fell. She stopped falling. The blade was holding her in place... but not her blood. It left her body through the gaping ruin that used to be her torso. The wound was fatal.

"You... could see..."

"In the dark. Yesss," Nestra finished. "From the start. Human pattern recognition... sssuch a trap, sometimes."

"Heh. Vicious. Child."

She died.

Nestra felt her die. Power flooded into her core, the physical one warming in her chest. A ravenous need to ascertain her victory burnt inside of her mind. She had done it. That challenge was completed. She had overcome, and now she was reaping the fruits of her trap, of her superiority. Her fingers dug into the unresisting meat of Teneru's sternum, rooting for it. It was here. It called to her, still warm, still flush with all that potential that was now hers. She touched it. She grasped it. She bit down onto the core.

It tasted like triumph.

Nestra hissed with pleasure, breaking that core under her teeth. It was the perfect core for her. It was what she had wanted all along, the ability to find more without risk of being caught. In the confines of her mind palace, a second false orb lit up next to the electric one. This one was dark by nature.

She lifted a hand. Liquid black covered her blood-soaked fingers like a second, smoky skin.

She had done it.

It felt so, so good. So good. Fuck hubris. How could it be arrogance when she had done it? She was the best. The very best. She'd killed the killer. She'd outsmarted the canny thing. It was her moment.

"Aaaaaaah. YESSSS."

It took some time for her to stop enjoying the pure felicity that came with a good fight won at high cost. When she did, she placed the bodies in a way that indicated they might have killed each other. Once that was done, she returned to her unbattered human form to let the dull ache of her wounds fade in the background. It was a simple matter of seconds to place the mausoleum plans on the side. There. A quarrel between associates. She slowly, methodically picked up every piece of equipment she'd left including the two bullets she'd fired and were now embedded in the walls, then went after every place she'd bled with bleach.

That would be weird, but bleach in a renovating building wasn't unheard of. No officer worth their salt would think this was normal. That was fine. She only needed to give them a way out. A plausible explanation so they could officially close the case.

If they were smart, they'd take it.