

No Quarter

For the Status Shift Competition run by Xerox and Skies
Written by Kite/Akaiatana

Autumn rainstorms are the worst. The cold sucks the life right out of you. I back my into the door, my umbrella shielding me until the last moment. I collapse it and shut out the wet and wind of the outside. While the industrial-park lobby isn't the most inviting, it's warm and dry. I rid myself of raincoat and boots and shake off the wet from my knapsack. The latter I take with me in stocking feet.

I pass through an unassuming door into the arcade proper. Black light and blasting retro-synth-pop wash over me. The owners definitely knew what they were going for when they renovated the vacated commercial space. The place oozes eighties. My business-casual skirt and shirt are at odds with the aesthetic, but in this the period before morning rush hour. There are only a few other patrons working away at the machines, and in their own little world. I pay them no mind. A lanky, perpetually-shocked young guy stands twiddling his hands within his kiosk. I leave him be; It's at the far end of the large room and that's not where my quarry lay.

Unlike the era it replicates, the arcade's cabinets are cutting edge. They'd have to be in order to draw people in the year of our Keanu, twenty nineteen. 4K curved screens aside, each hosts an unusual physical setup. Booths with motion capture and game-specific objects make the cabinets more like a personal escape room than a video game.

I've been hooked since they opened a year ago, to the chagrin of my time and wallet. Some folk split their time between the games. The only game for me, though, is *Preytor of the Wilds*. The most physically demanding cabinet in the room, it looms like a batting cage next to its neighbours. It combines dancing rhythm games and decision making under pressure. To me, it's a heady adrenaline rush and decent workout.

I drop my bag and ferret out my sneakers. I unzip my skirt and rest it on the satchel, lacing up the shoes over the tights. *At least the cold weather lets me layer.* With a connection of my earbuds, I'm finally present and ready. I step into the booth and slap my money-grabbing RFID card against the receiver. The world springs to life around me. I pick up the motion controllers and start flicking through the option preferences. I look for the composite bow and then onwards to species and perks.

Preytor is a sci-fi hunting game, but to me it's always something new to explore. The premise revolves around stalking dangerous quarries in equally lethal environments. The procedural generation is, well, *wild*. After a year of daily playing, it always finds a way to be fresh.

The screens ask me to confirm the character selection, and warns me of the difficulty I've chosen. I flick it by without a second thought. The booth's paneling lights up. The three-by-three grid under my feet swaps out for the one with five to a side. The dossier for my target flashes on screen and I slash in the air to go over the info.

The terrain for this hunt is molten, so no standing still this morning. I glance at my watch, judging the time before I have to head to work. *At least it isn't quicksand. Wouldn't complete the run in time, otherwise.* The rest of the details are routine. *Wyvernoid in a distant cave, yada yada, bring its fiery heart.* The details only give you so much. The complications along the way make it interesting. I give the ready

signal.

Within moments, my feet are flying around the space as I make my character run with speed and safety. The lighting squares underfoot insidiously change between green and red while I shift my stance. The tiles can turn from speed boost to lava in fractions of a second. The brutal cost of mistakes hasn't changed since the quarter-munching machines of the eighties. I speed through the tiny room, parkouring to nowhere.

There are inbuilt flaws to the characters, and you make a lot of trade-offs in your loadout when you start a session. The deadliest problem out of the player's hands is weapon sway. Your accuracy wobbles, and it can become a timing challenge to make a perfect shot. When you're in a life or death fight, waiting for your crosshair to wind its way back to where you want it could cost you the game. It's a gripe that the internet communities I joined were quick and persistent to point out.

And that's where I come in. I moved to a tiny city for work, and certainly couldn't find a decent way to practice judo. This arcade opened up and changed everything. I quickly found out one can eliminate weapon sway through the options. Everything else gets switched to manual and turbo. Pretend acrobatics are swapped for real ones.

So, on a drizzly October morning, I am playing speed-Twister before work. I slam my elbow into that wall to rebound a jump. I press down with knee and foot to dodge attacks by flame-breathing salamanders. I kick my legs three times what the game typically requires in the name of points. Story-wise, the character Nahnja is some nature of six limbed alien, running with two sets of legs. What's more is she relies on arrows and knives instead of calibrated laser rifles. I flail my arms to nock a bow where other players press a button to fire a salvo.

I've had to redouble my effort recent months. The game cabinets are linked to their twins all over the planet. Word got out that the world top score was held by 'some olympic competitor or something.' Flattering, sure. My hunts' replays are now watched and imitated. Players can't watch my years of physical training, but they try.

The smoldering cave appears beyond the last hill, and I dash for the opening. I take a moment to catch my real breath, and it saves my virtual life. Strolling out of the cave comes the Tower, a robot hunter and player character. He hasn't spotted me, cradling a suspension case that looks for the world like it holds the macguffin of the session. I've played him before, and I know he can't be stabbed. My arsenal may as well be foam. But what is he doing as an enemy in the game?

Desperate to save the run, I use stealth as my only advantage. I charge him and perform a leg sweep. With the bullshit rules of the extra legs quirk, I have to duplicate the move with both legs. In the flesh, that means doing the splits while rotating. The game gives it to me just as I hear my tights rip down the center.

I watch Tower stumble and fall into the lava while I wave a controller to catch the prize. With it hovering in my possession, I flick through the options to skip the game's exfiltration cutscenes.

Stumbling to my feet, my thighs are sore and my tights sorry-er. I'd busted an inseam with the final move. My ego is only assuaged when the score screen comes up. I beat my old record by fourteen points. Problem is, the score was already six digits long. The progress wasn't worth it. I throw in my game handle, and the new score bumps down my old one, the portrait of the violet alien woman hanging beside it.

I discretely grab my skirt and use the booth as a change room to remove the torn garment. With plenty of time to get to work, I walk my way through the arcade barefoot, hoping to not draw attention. I fail.

The awkward teen clerk stands beside the lobby, bug-eyed as usual. He flags me down like he's waiting for me. I twinge at the idea there are security cameras in the booths.

"Uh, Miss, uh, Kate Durand, sir?" The kid stammers.

I flash him a smile even I know is unconvincing. "Yes, that's me," I try to finish my sentence with his name, but he doesn't have a hint of a name tag.

"You are, uh, invited to the one year anniversary party tonight. Here. Because of your score, I mean. It's just for the global top scorers of each game."

I tilt my head in confusion. *Is this a pickup line?* "The arcade has an outlet in hundreds of cities at this point, doesn't it? Wouldn't the local party be just me?"

"It's uh," he stares for a moment, looking for the word. "Teleconferenced. Not an issue. It's at midnight."

With that revelation I recoil. "A teleconference party at midnight. That sounds not fun."

The clerk clears his throat. "Yes, you'd be right, but the creators want to meet each of you. Some sort of promotion. And-and they are definitely not local." The dude glances at me conspiratorially to say something with his eyes, but all I get is his usual panic.

I take a deep breath to take it in. The game studios were a mystery, and I have my doubts the arcade runners make them. *But the proposition sounds interesting.* "To confirm, then, that the creators of *Preytor* want to meet me for a call at midnight because they are not local."

He swallows. "That's the message I had to deliver, yeah."

"Fine. I'll come." The arcades are all open twenty-four hours, so it's not some back alley deal.

"Cool," he says with abruptness. He wanders off in his dazed state.

Given where I thought the conversation would head, it didn't end up bad. With no more fanfare, I don my soggy rain gear and head for the office.

My workday can be summed up into one proper noun: Aiden. He wears an ill-fitting shirt and clip on tie that screams 'college undergraduate's first job.' Both elbows and a mug resting atop my cubicle wall, he blathers like a laundromat intercom radio. "And then, Janet. Oh man, on her lunch breaks, she actually -"

The hands on my keyboard crumple under the weight of my simmering rage. I keep my voice steady, but the feelings slip out. "Aiden. I do not care whether if Janet has a picnic on the lawn or if she opts to eat out your mom. You said you had Stephen's new Rumba build that fixes the server

drops. Do you?"

His pride wounded, Aiden forks over the flash stick. "C'mon, Kate. I'm doing you a favour here. Promotions are about office politics. D'you think the client really cares if we chat a while? I'm sure they don't."

"Thank you," I reply, reigning myself in. "I'm going to finish this up. See. You. Later."

"See'ya, I guess." He sips at his coffee and moseys back to his office, closing the door.

Thankful for the silence, I get back to work. Technically, he's my boss. Untechnically, he's a waste of space some board member installed six months back. From what I've observed, his qualifications for being at a software firm at all end at 'word processors and spreadsheets.' This week he's been running files between coworkers since the FTP servers are down. It's the most useful I've seen him be.

Not a minute and a half later, a wall-softened blast of trumpets comes from his office, dying down over a few seconds. Considering that no office computers come pre-installed with John Williams boot-up chimes, the twerp is watching movies again.

I'm sure he would love to know that I spent my lunch break tuning up my resumé. The party can't come soon enough.

Staying professional, I napped the evening away to compensate for the party. Given the morning's faux-pas, I head off to the arcade in more practical attire. As predicted, I was the only one attending in the flesh. The venue is business as usual, with a few patrons gaming on their own.

I spot the same clerk as this morning ducking behind his counter. When we make eye contact, he stays crouched and points a finger toward the *Preytor* cabinet. The door of the booth hangs open, spilling out light from its innards. The clerk's face reads *Already Disturbed*, so I throw him a thumbs up and head for the booth.

What I find there is wrong. A mist hangs along the bottom of the player space, but it refuses to accept gravity and tumble the single step to the arcade floor. It remains inside as if held in by an aquarium wall. Dry ice and fog machines have their weaknesses, and this isn't one of them. When I climb inside, the cabinet isn't there. The booth isn't a booth.

Never one for willful ignorance, I allow myself to call my surroundings for what they are. It's night by a lake as imagined by a concept artist. Four moons of varying colours and sizes float scattered in the sky. The multitude of stars around them don't follow any pattern I know. The knee-high grass brushing my pants is blue, where the lake is a vibrant teal. The forest of shapes around my clearing are silhouetted black against the bright skybox, but whether they are trees or something else, I don't know. The one thing I'm certain of is the lack of doorway behind me. A breeze cuts through my sweater.

"Nahnja." The name booms over the lake in waves, carried by a set of voices speaking in unison. "The devout has come."

It's hard for me not to notice the halo of light surrounding each moon expands and shrinks with the spoken words. *Like a goddam speaker volume monitor. The hell?* "The fuck is this?" I shout back, uncertain where to

address my confusion. My voice echoes off the landscape like no game can reproduce.

"You have heard the call and answered. As have the other Prominents. Your period of trials is complete, and have pleased the Creators."

Glad for having had the foresight to come into this rested, I pick up what they're implying. The clerk had used the same word to describe the 'teleconference' this morning. "This is about fuckin' *Preytor of the Wilds*?" I toss my rapidly dampening resumé to the dew-laden grass. "About playing a game?"

"Nahnja, you have proven yourself to stand out amongst the faithful. Your devotion is clear. You are needed, Nahnja."

I give the sky an incredulous stare, mouth agape. "Why do you need me or anyone? You're either talking moons or talking through moons to a person you teleported somewhere. I'm not 'needed!'"

"We cannot create souls nor thinking things. You and your world have such bounty. We invite habitation to our worlds. We invite you to be highest among those on these planets. As are the other Prominents highest among the worlds their trials represented."

The moon logic is hard to follow at best. "So, what, you want me to lead a pilgrimage to other worlds because I'm good at a video game?"

"You are worthy and devout."

I point at the talking sky-things. "You keep saying that, but I'm not seeing it. What qualifications could I possibly have?"

"You performed all acts equal to the religious leaders of your world. You have dedicated your time. Your routine. Your effort. Your willingness to learn and to teach. Your attire. Your monetary savings. Your thought. Your hope. Your longing. You choose patience and understanding over power and ease. You will be given what you have strove toward."

Interrupting a moon is no easy feat. I wait until it is finished to butt in. "First, no one uses 'strove.' You'll lose people that way. Second, what 'will be given?'"

"You were Nahnja. You are Nahnja. You become Nahnja, you will be Nahnja, the High Score of Preytor."

Way to make the moment more tenses. Reviewing the facts and what my life has become of late, it's a tempting offer. "So what are your rules? There has to be a catch."

The moons pause a moment. "The rules are as they were. Hunt. Be the apex out of need, not of want. Spare with mercy. Move with grace. Lead the willing to the cabinet meetings."

I lean a hand and sit on the wet grass to think. *All of this is too reasonable. Yeah, I wanted a new job, but. But what?* For minutes I watch red fireflies buzz around the reeds of the lake. "What if I decide I don't like it?" I mutter to the sky.

"Then you are no longer devout. No longer High Score."

The grass feels cold under me. I pluck a larger blade, feel it crumple in my hand. Its juices glow with bioluminescence as they drip out of my

palm. "What do I have to do?"

"This is Nahnja's homeworld. Her arsenal lies scattered within the clearing. Seek and rise, High Score."

Given I was just in an arcade, this doesn't seem much of a gambit. Throwing off my hoodie, I'm pleasantly surprised at the warmth of the wind. *Nothing else to be done.* I begin to suss out the hunter-savenger hunt, not sure what to look for. My skill at the game came from reacting or noticing movement, not pixel-hunting.

The first artifact finds me before I, it. I catch the strapping of Nahnja's ornate quiver as I walk. Holding it in my hands, it hits home just how good it is to finally hold it. The silver and blue and green all shine. For a year I've been slapping my torso and back to mime it being with me.

I fumble with the buckle catches, but they slide clean all the same. Slinging it over my shoulder, I fasten it across the diagonal of my torso. A sensation of running water radiates from where it touches my shirt. I hurry to recall the character's appearance. Being a first person game, it hadn't been a focus of mine. The quiver doesn't mind, and runs its course regardless. My breastbone jumps out from my chest, slicing the buttons of my blouse. I stumble backward in shock and loss of balance. Fin-like, it strains the skin around it. My gut tents around it like I've swallowed a crowbar. I suck in air, expecting to hyperventilate. My lungs visibly puff like hot air balloons, and I exhale. Everything but the bone shrinks back. I try to trace the bone and realize how tall my torso became. My oversized, ripped blouse isn't more than a crop top.

After a few massive inhalations to calm my nerves, fibrous material springs armward from the bone under my skin. Where it grows, my skin shimmers. An iridescent violet replaces the brown. By the time I approach comfort with how long it takes me to fill my lungs, my chest's discarded its humanity. It reminds me instead of the domed roof of an airplane hangar. *Breasts are so last planet. I could breathe on Everest like this. What a rush.*

I take a step, and bark a well-fueled laugh. I'm taller to such a degree, I'm top heavy and could almost fall over from my own weight. The idea of me as some long-pipe-turtle that can't get up is reason enough to keep moving. I find Nahnja's blade-belt on the shore of the lake. Meant to carry throwing knives like a petticoat, it's a wide length of alien leather fitted to scabbard a dozen chuckables. I guffaw at the size of it.

The moon-gods must have a sense of humour. When I flatten it across my waist with downstretched arms, my legs spring in new length, both violetly and violently. The force of the growth spurt sends me flying a metre into the air. I manage to land on my back. Sitting up feels like my head is the payload to a catapult, neck straining to stay attached. My jeans are done with life, each pant-leg no more than an ankle scrunchy. When steadiness finds me, I can't help but smirk at my feet warping while free of my mass. My toes smush in into balled tips of a two pronged fork, if a fork were made of pure muscle.

Attempting a stand makes me shout a surprise curse. As I lift a leg, it flops in noodle fashion to the side. Wherever my leg bones have gone, they ran away in an awful hurry. I summon the muscle discipline I can to make them stay under me as I rise fast into the night air.

I struggle with my new shape as I find a new sport: human caber toss. From my rampantly heightened view, I can see glints of metallic shine scattered around the grassy area. The dozen daggers each lay separate. With

drunken balance, I wander to the closest one and reach for it - with all too short human arms.

My eyes widen at my predicament. I glance up to the moons. "OH FUCK RIGHT OFF." *The volume at which I can swear is an improvement, at least.* With no response, I do the obvious: I purpose-fall, allowing my T-Rex arms to gather the knives. In a bout of spite, I roll over on my stomach rather than stand between this item and the next.

Inchworming between ten more blades in as many minutes, I finally shove the last one into the belt. When I do, my elbows begin to rearrange. I grunt. *Of course, only after it all do they allow leeway.* Having played the game, I know what my hands will become. I use my last moments with middle fingers wisely, shooting the double-deuce at the constellation. "It was a shitty tutorial, by the way!"

My forearms and hands grows a seam, splitting mouthlike so that my third and fourth hands can wriggle free. Two fingers stay top, the other two become second-hand but yet-unused. In the end, each arms beyond the elbow is like a novelty snapping fly swatter. Two palms face each other in a pincer grip.

I do an experimental double golf clap, each arm an able noise maker on its own. I giggle at the absurdity. With my newly lengthened forearms and fourarms, I'm able to stand up with some fraction of grace. It's an exciting weirdness to see my hands in glittering purple. Further still, with the ability to both nock an arrow and pull the bowstring. Change that I longed for without ever imagining.

With the situation well in hand, I spot a quiver-worth of arrows jutting from a stone boulder. I teeter my way toward it, smiling at the size of them. Each has to be the length of one of my human legs or more. I go to yank them, but they're stuck fast. I lift a leg to brace against the boulder and pull hard. One comes free and I set myself for a fall, but it doesn't come. What does arrive is my other set of legs.

Not many people have experienced exploding legs syndrome, but let me tell you: don't seek it out. Having your ass cheeks lightning-bolt into limbs can ruin your day. *Or night, or whatever time it is on this planet.* I can't even turn to see them, but putting my weight on them is akin to sitting down. I can only assume the toes face backward like the in-game model.

The remaining arrows are a cinch to pull out with the extra force having my back. Luckily, more legs don't come packaged with an additional lower torso. Centaur anatomy flame wars always go nowhere, and I have places to be.

Near where I entered this quasi-realm, my silver bow floats waiting. The moons are kind, for once. My stroll to it is awkward beyond credulity as I learn which of my feet and how many of them to pick up at a time. *No ankles to break, so no worries, right?*

Nahnja's composite bow is a work of art. Both fashion and function, its storage beautiful. Holding it in tender grip of four hands, I raise it to my forehead. It's the one part of this strange evening I can say I would have wanted before today. The bow's innate technology makes it both a weapon and a diadem. A hunter's crown.

As it touches home on my head, it begins to wrap around my temple. Of course, it creates more head as the rail is laid. My nose exits stage left as the bow works on my skull, leaving a shining purple facial ridge in its

wake. The stretching of my skull can only be described as therapeutic. No pesky hair, but a tulip-shaped brain that only with my new hands and arms could reach and appreciate.

When it's over, I smile wider than I ever could before. To my lovely new mind, a scheme occurs.

There is no hesitation when the door to the arcade opens up again. I shimmy through it, allowing two of my hands to wave toward the clerk as I leave into the night.

It takes me a while to 'rearrange' the corner office and order the food. As it turns out, the elevators in my company's building aren't accessible to someone of my stature.

When I hear Aiden arrive late to the office, I assume the planned pose.

He unlocks the door with gusto, but freezes when he beholds me lounging over the length of both couches laid end to end. The stunned gurgled gurgle of a scream dies in his throat while he looks between me and the rest of the room. Only half of his desk remains, and I use it to host the cake.

"Who the - what - fuck?" The yuppy stammers.

I remain as cool as a cucumber. "Oh, Aiden. So good of you to finally show up for work. I do hope you like what I've done with my space."

"My office!" He blurts, not sure where to look next.

I shake my head. "Mmm no, it's my office. Did you not get the memo?" With one set of hands, I draw a knife to cut a piece of cake and offer it to him. "It's an ice cream cake. You're not allergic to dairy, are you?"

He reaches out a hand in a polite stupor, brain cells attempting to fire. His eyes are fixated on the massive cake. It reads, in frosting cursive, *Congratulations on the promotion, Nahnja*. The joys of freelance labour companies and what they will do for a buck never ceases to amaze.

"Oh," I say, a hand to my mouth. "I guess it makes sense you wouldn't have heard, given your computer problems." My eyes trace the line of strung cables along the far wall to the floor to ceiling window. A window with no pane in it, to be exact. Otherwise, it would be hard to fit a desk through. "Oh, don't worry," I console him, beginning to cut my own piece of cake. "I had your computer, your chair, your blu-ray collection sent by parcel to the ground floor." I frown. "By the fastest. Shipping. Available."

It's enough to crack Aiden. Screaming, his breathing picks up. "What's going on?!"

I throw him a patronizing smile. "It's the oldest story in business, Aiden. Consider this a very hostile takeover. I'd say you've been made redundant, but you always have been."

"This is my job!" Aiden shrieks, backing against the wall.

Shaking my head, I say it clear as a bell: "Coat collar, right side." I give him a moment to respond, and he fails it. I throw a knife.

Aiden flinches, eyes shut. The sound of wobbling metal hangs in the air. When he musters the courage to look, he can only see that I'm right. A knife pins his right coat collar to the drywall.

In a resigned tone, I mutter, "As it's obvious, I'm calling the shots around here." I stare him down. "Would you like to be escorted to the lobby, or can you find your own way there?"

The young man scrambles out of his own jacket and speeds down the hall with an uneven gait.

I lean back and laugh. *Worth every penny.* I don't look forward to preaching to my newly former coworkers, but it's a task that has to be done. Considering the dozen or more other High Scores around the world, I'm sure to be only one of the odd people in the news today.

I wonder if the amount of followers we have will be our new competition?

It makes no difference in the moment. I have the corner office and ice cream cake. Why be greedy?