

Nestra stood in an empty apartment overlooking the headquarter of the Varang guild, a squat tower built on the edge of the Museum of Art's garden. Prime location for a prime guild. The structure was entirely opaque to Nestra's budding mana senses though, and that blindness left her feeling exposed. She wouldn't even be standing at all were it not for the presence of Sereth.

If Sereth stood, that meant nobody could see them. She felt a little giddy watching people leave late from work, hurrying under the blue street lights to the nearby metro station, completely oblivious to the fact she was doing a crime.

They were trespassing.

It made Nestra nervous and more than a little ashamed. This was clearly someone's place, not some corpo office. The owner had forgotten her orange juice on the table and it was all Nestra could do not to put it back in the fridge with the cap on. Six different handbags clogged the coat hanger. It smelled vaguely of vanilla with a hint of dirty dishes.

She was burglarizing. No, trespassing. They wouldn't steal anything. Still, this was a violation.

"You are bothered," Seth said.

"We are intruding."

"So we are," he agreed with a nod. "You are always intruding, Nestra, because you are not human."

"I know, I know."

"I respect your appreciation of other sapient beings', ah, boundaries. For their private places. But to actually respect them is not something you can afford just quite yet. You are still a little whelp, weak. Easily found out."

She hissed at him though her heart wasn't into it. Sereth's remarks had come without bite. He shook his head, ears bobbing in that weird manner that she couldn't yet interpret.

"I worry about you. Rules and courtesy are luxuries of the powerful. You may die if you do not understand that they are not. Your. Friends."

"Sorry, habit."

"It is the same with portal worlds."

Sereth's hands waved at the building in front of him.

"All of the portals you have access to nominally belong to the dominant species of the world, here, humans. You are parasitizing their resources just as they keep them from each other by building walls and vaults and whatever they see fit to hoard their wealth. This is just a

more visible proof of greed, but even what you get by following rules will be the subject of influences, politics, trade offs. We Azshii grow stronger by taking from the defeated. You must be cunning if you hope to succeed.”

“So get in, get through the portals, then get out.”

“In one piece,” Seth said with a pointed look. “I will wipe out your blood if you leave any, but if the Varang guild catches you, you had better run fast.”

Nestra had a plan if it came to that. She could shift through walls up and down. That would definitely help.

“Are you sure you cannot tell me more about what’s in the portal?”

“I will not.”

Nestra grumbled. D-class portals were mostly public domain when it came to content, but C-class portals and the guilds that owned them tended to be a bit more private.

“If you wish to prepare better, next time find the information on your own. I would add that when you travel to other worlds, you will also move through portal worlds with very little information. It would be better for you to train your ability to adapt rather than on your ability to research.”

“Alright, I get it!”

Sereth smiled apologetically.

“I am just... worried. The masked gleam thing does not help, though I believe your identity will be... contained.”

“Secret, you mean?”

“Enough talk, little Nezhra. Show me what you can do.”

Nestra nodded, then she headed to the apartment’s entrance. Sereth had assured her that they were facing the offices of the Varang headquarters. They would be mostly deserted at this time.

Varang was one of Threshold’s largest guilds, only second to Wellington’s Ngati in terms of numbers. They fell under the umbrella of Bright Security Inc. Nestra expected a ton of tech-based barriers to her progress. That would suit her ok. By comparison, BaiHua favored tamed beasts and that would be an absolute hell to infiltrate.

Well, that was fine. Nothing to it. In order to fully form a core, Nestra needed something that could only be found in C-class worlds, and all C-class worlds nearby were in tightly controlled, guarded locations. She’d suggested waiting for the army to give her a spot as a

masked gleam but Sereth had refused. So Nesta was out to explore and kill until she 'found what she needed', whatever that meant.

Bloody training.

Sereth smiled, then Nesta ran. She rushed forward to the window of the apartment.

At the last moment, she used *passe-muraille*, swimming through reality until she cleared the glass.

The temperature increased as the late summer air buffeted her. She smelled the scents of the night, heard the low hums of car engines. In front of her, the black panes that formed the building's outer layer drew closer. She was flying through the air from one trespass to another. Tonight would see a record-breaking number of felonies on her part.

Kind of exciting.

She used *passe-muraille* again, misjudged where the floor would be and found herself between two. Pressure built on her mind until she was forcefully propelled downward into an empty cubicle. She landed in a crouch.

Large room, an office. Rows of cubicles. Clean ground. Few lights. Mostly silence, except for someone dictating a report a dozen meters deeper in. No mana. She waited in silence for a second.

"— would avoid further damage to mining equipment if Liu Zhen wasn't such a fucking dickhead. Ugh. Erase last sentence. We could avoid —"

Nestra moved deeper towards the center of the building, bypassing an angry woman doing her best to compose what sounded like the end of an accident report. She wasn't sure where the portal would be but probably somewhere near the middle and at street level, because that was where most portals spawned. She soon came across the end of the office, where a door waited, locked. She counted two cameras above her, one retinal scan and one flat rectangle that should be an RFID tag reader. Light security by Bright's standard. She walked a little bit away, then swam through the wall. No reason to leave too many glitches on record.

Behind was more of the same, but the smell of coffee ahead heralded the presence of a break room. Nesta walked there then waited until a sad man walked away with a coffee mug and a steaming cup of instant noodles. She eyed the vending machine on the way.

No, focus.

The break room was almost dead center according to her estimate, so she swam down to find an almost carbon copy of the upper break room. Only this one had a different microwave.

'I have demonstrated a loop,' Nesta chuckled to herself.

Thankfully, this one was empty but it might not be the case every time, so she angled to the side so she could land on top of the company fridge. There was barely enough room under the tall ceiling.

If it were up to her, she would have raided this place at 3 AM on Friday evening, the day most people worked from home. Unfortunately, guilds like Varang had B-class gleams under their command, and those, Nestra just couldn't handle. Period.

It so happened that tonight, most of the leadership was attending a charity ball organized by the mayor in favor of District Fifteen's victims. The fact that a mana vein had been recently found and that it was a perfect timing for the various power groups to sniff each other's asses for opportunities was purely coincidental. The last B-class gleam of Varang was currently inside of the portal world, very busy looking after a gaggle of underlings as they pillaged their ways through the world's riches. The building was empty of major threats.

Couldn't get better than this.

The three next floors going down were a break room, a janitor's closet, and another break room, all empty. Her next drop almost caused her a fright but she managed to push herself back instead of landing on a security guard resting on a chair, a visor blocking his view of the real world.

This was a security strongbox. The place was cramped, with three guards inspecting feeds from the safety of their shelters. A locked weapon locker occupied an entire side of the cubic space. Nestra resisted the urge to whistle at the enchantments protecting the door. Varang really wasn't fucking around.

Also, she was getting close.

In order to avoid any stupid mistake, Nestra sat on the ground to get a better feel for the mana round her. She got nothing from below and thus swam into an unlit corridor. A person was turning the corner so she swam again, this time right above a gleam.

She planted her hands and feet on the wall and stayed there, suspended like a big stupid spider. Ugh, the lack of visibility was really making her gamble, though she was decidedly being unlucky as well. Below her, the gleam in full armor was watching a cricket match on a large pad. The corridor they were in ended with stairs, blocked behind a security door that showed enchantments on top of the technological safeties. The passage led down. She was near the ground floor.

Nestra wall-walked to the side. She could feel the nice energy — the zeta radiation — of a portal but she was too far from it to break through. They were strong though. She almost dropped again but she could feel a strange mana emanating through the wall and that wasn't the portal. It felt... abstract. Not fire or electricity but something more exotic.

She swam horizontally and found herself in a sort of garden or lobby, almost empty but for two talking office workers in the distance. Nestra fell to her knees and crawled behind a bed of azaleas until the portal and weird mana faded. There, she went down.

Lockers. She was in a changing room. Dull mana from weapons and equipment radiated through the metal. The place was well-lit. A carefully-labeled sheet on the door in front of her read as such:

‘Jensen Yu, C-class striker, ID: 16423’

This was the raider changing room. She looked up, finding the door nearby. Like all the others at this level, it was enchanted, armored, and locked behind redundant layers of security.

Nestra felt the abstract mana approach. This close, she could almost taste it, the owner making no secret of its presence. It was a bit wane, almost like a blank. Not void, or emptiness. More like... a sticky vacuum.

It touched her.

“Shit,” she swore in Azshii.

The door unlocked with a beep. Nestra ran to the wall and waited, then as the door opened, she used the blind spot to swim through the wall.

She was standing in a large, empty cavern made of layered metal panels. Floodlights completely saturated the place. The only thing of interest here was the portal.

It was blue and singularly massive. She had not actually seen the B-class portal Sereth had dragged her in. This C-class portal was as large as a small house. It radiated power and mana in a pleasant glow that made Nestra want to lounge, like sunbathing in summer. To her right, she spotted an armored butt, the owner looking into the room she had just left. a sword rested on the gleam’s side.

“Curious,” a timid voice said, “I could have sworn.”

Nestra didn’t wait. She placed her hand against the fabric of space, then pushed her way in.

The flooded, barren room disappeared. She was standing in a massive tropical forest next to a large tree whose roots were as thick as a car. Rich, cloying smells filled her nose, the air warm and wet after the air-conditioned insides of the Varang building. Strange birds let out ululating cries. Far in the distance, something died noisily. The entry portal hummed a few dozen meters away.

The mana here was even nicer than outside, and Nestra stretched her arms with delight. It was just a little too dark for baseline eyes with the canopies of titanic trees blocking most of the light coming from above. She could barely see tiny fragments of blue sky peeking from behind a thousand leaves. Lianas and moss turned the world around her green and crowded. There were just so many shapes here, from the rugged trunks to the twisted branches. Thick roots snaked on the ground like a safe path on a sea of shriveled ferns. Ripe fruits and lush flowers brought vivid colors to the blotted tapestry. Nestra took a deep

breath to calm down, her enjoyment of the rich mana already ruined. This was a little overwhelming but she would be fine, she just needed a little bit of time.

Breathe in, breathe out. her mind went over everything she was seeing, then she looked up. Should not forget the up. This world operated on several layers, with the ground being one and the first level of thick branches another.

Nestra approached a nearby fruit. It was large, orange, and shaped a bit like a gourd. She gave it a sniff. Vegetable, not fruit. She recognized it from advertisement, something pretentious like golden patisson. It was great in a gratin.

First piece of loot acquired!

She pocketed it and went to the next one, then slapped something jumping at her face. It was a big hair spider thing that scurried under a root.

She checked the fruit. it was half-hollow and filled with yellow, translucent eggs. And goop.

“Ew. You can have this one.”

After giving herself a second to think, she decided to move up rather than stay on the ground level. Humans tended to dislike climbing steep inclines if they could avoid it, especially those that wore heavy armor. It was also only a matter of time before the first recovery teams showed up to harvest the resources here. Picking the largest tree, and thus the flattest trunk, she began her ascent.

It was rather easy except for the red-tipped mosquito things trying to get a cup of fresh Nestra juice. A void-infused slap took care of those pesky things but they kept coming, which slowed her down a bit. Eventually, she reached the thick networks of branches forming improvised bridges over the dark loam below. The sky felt just as distant here. Nestra unsheathed her sword.

Sereth said that if she kept walking around, she would eventually find what she was looking for. Nestra shrugged, picked a random branch, and jumped to it.

Might as well explore.

The first five minutes went well. She found a small colorful snake lying in ambush that was possibly both poisonous and venomous but also potentially edible, a handful of small red fruits she also bagged just in case, and a bird that tried to scream very loud at her before pecking out her eyes. That one she didn't keep, but she did grab a few nice feathers. Those two creatures were high D-class, situationally dangerous but not exactly a threat to her. She knew it wouldn't last, and it didn't.

After jumping across a chasm, she found her first real target. It was... an ant. A brown ant. An anty ant. No weird color, or scribblings or anything. The only strange features were that the ant was human-sized, well, reclining human-sized, and looked quite thick. Chitinous plates also covered the top of its head and parts of its torso.

The ant's antennae twitched.

Nestra froze. She didn't move, hell, she didn't even breathe. Despite her efforts, the twitching intensified until the ant twisted on itself with surprising grace.

Now, it was looking straight at her with those multi-faceted eyes. Its head was unexpectedly flat and the chompers straight and sharp. Wait, no, mandibles. That was the proper term.

It charged her.

As Nestra moved to meet it, a dreaded fear wormed its way into her mind. She knew ants relied on pheromones to communicate, and that it involved antennae, somehow.

And the ant had detected her from behind while she was perfectly silent.

This could only mean one thing.

"Do... do I smell?"

Nestra stepped back at the last moment, just before she clashed with the ant. It was a trick that usually worked with stupid monsters. Fortunately, the ant was it. It twisted its head and bit down, missing her completely, but the jaws still closed on the bark beneath them.

With a dreadful clack, the mandibles snapped shut like a fucking bear trap. The shockwave sent shards and pieces of bark flying around while tiny leaves flew off nearby offshoots. It was like a small detonation, extremely localized but remarkably powerful.

Note to self: don't get caught.

Nestra moved in while the ant returned to its pre-strike position in one smooth move. Felt like a pattern to her. The mandibles were slowly opening again so there was a windup period after it bit down, good to know.

Weak point? The jaws looked strong, and the top of the head had plates but the arena around the eyes and antennae was lighter in color. Probably full of nerves. She swept to the side with an infused blade.

The sword carved through the head horizontally in one blow.

Power rushed into Nestra, though part of it was lost. This had been... really easy? Too easy. Probably a very weak C-class monster then. The beast collapsed, limbs contracting around the branch.

Nestra was left a little disappointed. Well, it was fine.

And then it hit her, an acrid smell, pungent and animal. She frowned and realized that without sensory protection, this would probably be a little bit debilitating. A few steps back and the air returned to its cloying, tepid self.

For a defense mechanism, it sure came rather late in the ant's life.

Shrugging, Nestra kept going. She knew ants were edible but the smell just didn't inspire her at all. She was rather confident she could find tastier specimens if she just kept walking around triggering ambushes. Speaking of, she decided to stop and have a good look. Maybe the smell would attract predators?

As soon as the thought hit her brain, her mouth hung open.

Strong smell. Pheromones.

"Oh shit, I'm an idiot."

She glanced down.

The forest was writhing with activity. Four armored ants the size of small cars were looking at her from the ground while other smaller specimens climbed the trunks at great speed. More were popping out from behind trunks as she watched.

"Oh."

The larger ant turned its butt towards her. She didn't wait to see what would happen. There were dozens of the buggers. It was time for cardio.

Nestra ran. A hiss behind her told her all she needed to know: acid sprays. An ant climbed from below the branch in front of her. Thankfully, it had its back turned so Nestra killed it as she raced by. One strike through the neck was all it took.

But that begged a question.

How did they even—

A snap. Broken bark. One of the ants nearby had slammed its mandibles against a tree with such strength that it was now flying through the air. Nestra slid under the wriggling mess of limbs and the ant missed her, but there were more snaps and now the air was filled with flying, grasping creatures. She struck the next one as it passed by, scoring a grievous wound but nothing immediately lethal since there was no energy. Worse, her hands throbbed from the impact.

Had to get out of here fast.

Nestra sped along a trunk. A spray of acid splashed on the bark, a few droplets hitting her skin. It immediately started to sting painfully. Another ant landed in front of her. She killed it quickly. More power rushed through her body when the monster died. *Momentum* carried her

past another two. She was forced to step back to kill a third, losing speed, and the carpet of ants gained density around her. Shit, there were a lot of them. Changing direction, she jumped to another, less crowded branch.

Below her, the three large ants twisted on themselves, immediately firing a wave of acid in her path. *Momentum* carried her to her destination. Acrid fumes from the vegetation filled her nostrils.

Dying swarmed to fuck probably wasn't what Seth had in mind. She was confident she could kill several dozen ants before falling but falling she would. Even her hubris held back. Standing and fighting would be just stupid. A fighting retreat though? That was challenging and a little fun.

Nestra ran faster. She was used to the way the smaller ants moved now. By using *momentum* sparingly and killing the more isolated ants, she was able to stay ahead but this wasn't a long term solution. Each kill sent her pursuers into more of a frenzy. The forest behind her cracked and groaned with each snap, with each light ant catapulting themselves after her. They were damn fast if not exactly aerodynamic.

The race continued. Nestra was getting used to the patterns now. The larger ants were also falling behind but they were still here and the small ones were keeping up because branches were not straight paths and she was wasting time following them. Go down? That didn't feel wise. Up here, the ants struggled to corner her as well. Up? She was too slow a climber. Needed a solution.

She found one slightly to her right, on the ground level. One of the trunks bore massive claw marks.

Might work. Would probably work.

Nestra turned, the ants still following at a dead speed. She cleaved her way through a couple more to make up for the speed loss, then *momentum* ahead of an acid wave. The forest grew taller ahead. Large mushrooms decorated ancient roots and she could see ahead further. Tiny openings in the canopy revealed hints of rock ahead and, in the distance, the tracks she was hoping to see. This time, she did jump down.

A quick look back revealed a quiet stampede, a layer of chitin and mandibles rolling over roots and soil in a silent wave. Even at a dead run it was difficult to stay ahead, but that was fine. She had found her target.

A large, hairy back the size of a small house. A sound like a low rumble accompanied each lift of the enormous chest. The monster was asleep.

She'd heard about those. C-class worlds didn't have just one powerful foe. Several deadly creatures made their homes in those long-lasting portal worlds, and although only the true guardian had to be slain in order to prevent an eventual breach, killing the others could bring a wealth of body parts and combat experience. This was one such creature.

She sprinted past it, on the feet side just in case it tried to grab her. The frenzied mass of ants split into two confused groups behind her, some stopping, some racing after her, and the smaller third attacking the large monster's back. A foolish move that most of the ants avoided.

It only took one.

Nestra looked back, seeing jaws clamp on the large beast's big toe. It was built like a giant honey badger though the head was strange, almost bird-like with two long mustaches covered in thin tendrils.

The monster woke up with a sharp gasp. Liquid, slitted pupils found Nestra first, but then they immediately latched on the one ant clamped on its toe. A stomp, and the insect was pulped.

The monster roared as it sprang to its feet. A furious melee ensued, one Nestra was glad to run away from. A burst of power confirmed that even if she wasn't the one delivering the final blow, causing deaths was still a way to absorb strength.

Once she was at a safe distance, she observed the bear-thing. Ants jumped and bit it in waves, covering it in their multitude while a spray of well-timed acid splashed on its fur. A larger type of ants soon arrived, those the size of bus and lumbering yet really strong, if the way they pushed the bear was any indication.

It was all for nothing. All those attacks barely cut through the thick hide and whatever succeeded was promptly squashed by a relentless fury that only seemed to grow as time went on. The bear splattered with heavy steps, dismembered with powerful sweeps. It was fast, too. Nestra observed it punch three ants on the ground in quick succession, the blows several times more powerful than needed. They left massive fist imprints in the loam with quivering legs stuck at the edge. The bear absolutely demolished the horde and whatever tried to stand before it ended as fine paste. It didn't take long for the ants to disengage, and for most of the force to skitter back from whence they came, leaving the bear thing victorious. It grabbed the shell of one of the large ants then plucked the meat from inside with sharp claws. Nestra decided to make herself scarce.

No matter how she thought about it, the bear was not an adversary she could even hold back at this moment. *Momentum* would simply place her in the path of the second of several punches while *immovable* would get moved really quickly and rather painfully as well. She was confident she could at least make the beast bleed — void mana was really good at carving things up. She just wouldn't survive the experience.

That was fine. She was just getting started, and it was nice to have something to look forward to. Namely, bear stew.

One thing at a time.

A patch of mushrooms in the distance attracted her attention. There was a nest thing near it, and Nestra spotted eight black eyes peering above the ground towards her, just above ground level.

Spider legs tasted like prawns, right?

“Something’s sent the ants into a tizzy. They’re attacking Old Deathpaw,” the armored user said.

Yunlong tasted the air, sending disturbances far in the distance. It did feel like Deathpaw’s roars of anger. Even he couldn’t be sure since they were far back towards the gate and past the mountain.

“It happens sometimes. Some lesser monsters do not fear death.”

“Yes, and I would normally not tell you but... Xiao Yu called from the gate. She said she sensed something.”

“Is she still in range?”

“Yessir.”

The B-class user gathered his robes and his long halberd, making his way to the temporary command post. A sturdy radio waited near the entrance. He spoke in Chinese.

“Xiao Yu? What is the matter?”

“Didi, I felt something but when I went to look for it, it was gone!”

Yunlong sighed. Typical of big sister to be so unreliable.

“What do you mean? Something?”

“A shadow in the weave. Not a true one. A void. Different. It came close to the portal on the earth side and then, it vanished.”

“Let me talk to the sentry.”

“En.”

The man who replied did so in English. His voice was crisp. Professional.

“Kaneda speaking.”

“Has anything gone through the portal?”

“No sir, not unless it was invisible, soundless, and intangible.”

“I see. Tell the recovery team that they will be delayed. The ants are acting strangely. Now let me talk to my sister again.”

“Understood.”

There was only the slightest delay.

“I do not feel anything here, but perhaps I should look?” Xiao Yu said.

“No. You are officially resting. I will not have you chase after a ghost. Just let me know immediately if you feel something similar.”

“Hao le.”

“And return to the safe side of the portal. I know what you are doing.”

“Hao le hao le, I’m going!”

Yunlong shook his head as he left the tent. This portal world could be hard on the nerves since there were so many threats outside of the true fights. He didn’t have the time to investigate every shadow, not while babysitting his C-class so they wouldn’t end up as wasp egg nests.

“Prepare to move out,” he announced to a chorus of complaints.

It was darker in this part of the woods. Silent too.

Rather than climbing towards the mountain, Nesta had turned left with her back to the portal. C-class worlds were still rather linear though there was a lot more freedom than in D-class worlds. That meant that the mountain was the next obstacle on the path to the guardian, and since the expedition had started the day before, there was a possibility they were still around. She didn’t want to come across their B-class gleam.

Also, Sereth expected her back before dawn, so what she was supposed to find was definitely close to the entrance. With a frown of distaste, she stepped away from a sickly-looking root covered in a patch of green bioluminescent mushrooms. Maybe coming here was a mistake. There were less creatures here, and they were sneakier. White translucent spiders crawling slowly, barely visible to her. Strange featherless birds. Skittish rodent creatures with bone snouts that looked more fur than anything else. She’d come across the corpse of an ant with white stalks growing out of its eye sockets a little bit before and that had been nasty. Just as she decided to leave, a strange radiance pulsed from behind a rotten trunk.

Nesta frowned.

This was either a hidden treasure, or a bait. Probably both. She took a step back, frowning. Her new intuition was telling her... something. She looked around herself. Nothing but gray moss, dying bark, ancient trunk shooting up and far away. No sounds. No movement.

Something was moving. She felt it on her skin. Up. She looked up. Towards the nearest trunk.

Nothing.

Nothing but...

Some light, shimmering like reflection on a stained glass. Like luminous static. Nestra frowned and used *momentum*. Back.

Between the moment she took a step back and right before the void pulled her away, something whistled.

Sharp impact in her jaw, cheek, left side. Like a strong slap.

A trail of gray blood, quickly turning red.

Agony hit her. She hissed between clenched teeth. It hurt. Something was stalking her but she couldn't see it, could only vaguely catch spasms in the colors of the trunk. Just a wrinkle here and there. She stepped back again, then used *momentum* to jump to the side.

Something caught her in the small of the back. The Skin absorbed some of the damage, and it was just a glancing blow but pain still told her she was hurt. Blood from her face reached her throat. Lateral failed. Forward? Or run away?

Forward, the Scornful Crescent whispered. Forward, and do the unexpected. She raced towards the tree and used *momentum* to close in. This time, the whistling missed her. It was above her. Close to the bark. She jumped up with a wide sweep to force some form of answer, and her blade hit a mirage. No, not a mirage. A thin limb. It deflected her blade upward but she was strong, very strong. Stronger than the creature from this angle. She roared and struck again, forward, down to up. Something touched her flank but her blade hit first. The monster let out a hiss of pain as transparent ichor sprayed the trunk, a mirror to Nestra's earlier wound.

Gravity took its hold so Nestra used *momentum* to hit the ground. An instant later, something whistled past her head. For a fragment of a second, the beast's camouflage failed, and she could see more of it.

Four thin legs grabbing the trunk. Two more extending like delicate whips, magic clinging to their delicate frame. Two front limbs, thicker, and long. So long. They ended in a hellish maze of grasping barbs, meant to shred even the hardest armor. Blood still dyed the right one. As for the main body it writhed still, and she could see no more.

The creature blinked out. She recognized it, or at least the general shape. It was an amblypygi. A whip spider.

She charged again. A part of her told her that if she failed to finish it off now, she wouldn't see it again until it was too late. If those pedipalps touched her throat, she was dead. She wasn't confident in hitting it with her bolt yet because of the camouflage. It wasn't just light, the way it moved and altered things, something wasn't right.

Nestra danced towards the trunk again, moving haphazardly to make it harder for her foe to get her. The whip spider was trying to hit her from the side so she could make things harder by moving back and forth to prevent a proper grab. The whistle of barbs in her ear filled her chest with exhilaration. Now this was a fucking battle. As she reached the trunk again, wind on her skin told her that the thing had jumped. She finished the motion, planted her feet on the trunk, looked back. There. A shimmer near a patch of mushrooms. She jumped towards it, eager to close the distance. Another shimmer. Thing was walking like a crab.

The timing ought to be now.

She dove under the strike she knew was coming for her. The limb still managed to glance on her ass before leaving. More pain, but she had it. This time, her strike fell down and the blocking limbs failed to completely stop her. Another gash opened on a cephalothorax that just didn't seem to want to exist. Yes! So close, she was strong and it was weak. She foiled its ambush. She had it! A desperate limb tried to interpose itself but this time, Nestra overloaded her sword with void mana, infusing it beyond what the beast would manage. The blade, Claire's gift, flashed with the deleterious mana, and then, at the apex of Nestra's assent, it exploded.

The thud was dull for such a strong thing.

Nestra was catapulted back, on her wounded ass. A piece of shrapnel was stuck to her arm. Painful, she removed it. She couldn't hear. New wounds added agony to the one on her face, which had not closed yet.

She picked herself up, slowly. Her only saving grace was that the whip spider was even more hurt than she was. The creature was almost fully visible now, down to its straight abdomen, which it was shaking powerfully.

Nestra's confusion only lasted as long as it took to realize why that part was more shimmery than the rest, and why her instincts told her that a bolt to the body wouldn't work that well.

It was carrying its babies on its back.

Nestra figured it out when the first landed on her chest, drilling two small holes in her torso before she could grab it and squash it against the nearest root. A veritable hail of spiderlings fell all around her. Another landed on her leg. She kicked it.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

But the whip spider's head was stationary.

Two extended fingers. Dot placed on the eyes, still filled with maddened hunger. She released the void into the world, and it answered with a thunderous boom.

The head exploded as did half of the body, but something didn't. Something that rolled down as the amblypygi died, as the legs contracted, and as its spawn crawled away from the carnage. A sphere. She knew what it was. She had seen one — her father had shown her after a difficult hunt. He was so proud. And now, she was proud too. It was... a core.

A physical core. The mark of a true C-class monster. Not the tiny stones the ants would have been but a genuine core, one a skilled artisan could turn into a powerful weapon. The king of all prizes. It shone from an inner light with all colors of the rainbow. Nestra wanted it. She craved it.

It looked so tasty.

Letting her instincts take over, she let her fingers close on the sphere and lead it to her mouth. She bit down. Those teeth that went through steel like it was butter crunched the glassy surface, the core melting into her palate like liquid happiness. A synesthesia of sensations filled her, lights, sounds, taste, all mixed to evoke a strange experience of image-bending.

And then, it was gone.

“Ok, so this is what my teeth are designed to eat.”

In Nestra's chest, there was now a tiny, physical core. Her mind was forced into its palace, to the room of spheres. The small pond of mana was gone. Now, a small sun occupied the center of the room and the spheres representing her attributes revolved around it in a ceaseless dance. It was white and gray, and it radiated void mana.

Warmth filled her chest, sating a hunger she had forgotten was there. As the portal world reasserted itself around her, she smiled.

And then, annoyance filled her. Cores were supposed to be nigh indestructible but more importantly, they were thirty thousand a pop! At the very least! Aaaaah. As the elation faded, the pain returned with a vengeance.

Space, again, shivered above her. She looked up to see the slow, threatening shape of a certain void shark. The two eyed each other.

“Oh, now you show up,” Nestra complained.

Her unjust suspicion that Sashimi had come to chomp her while she was weak faded when the shark snagged those spiderlings that had stayed close to her. Maybe Sashimi could only feel her presence when she was bleeding heavily, like she was now.

Nestra grabbed her small backpack for her medical supplies which were inconveniently hidden under the food bags. She patched herself up while the shark swam around the forest like the weirdest guard dog ever. All the time, she eyed the radiance that had lured her so successfully.

Loot.

She hoped it would be good.