

Nestra made it exactly three steps before the pain caught up to her, and she sat back down on the gray moss.

“Ow. Ow ow ow.”

Now that the fight was over, exhaustion caught up and her mouth, which she had sprayed with a basic healing gel, was now smarting something fierce. It made even witty quips too much to utter.

She picked up a mirror from her healing supplies, bringing it to her face to inspect the damage.

Damn, if it looked like that now, her teeth must have showed up before.

Nestra lounged. Conflicting sensations wracked her body. The core pulsed mana through her muscles, bones, filling them with a newfound power and unlocking their potential which the top of D-class had blocked. It was a delicious feeling, like stretching after a long time trapped in a small space. At the same time, the pain grew as the adrenaline faded and she could see the flesh of her flank slowly knitting itself back together from ‘crushed raspberries’ to ‘default Nestra’. Power coursed through her veins, but so did exhaustion. It was like being on uber espresso after a night and a morning of intense work.

Above her, Sashimi drew closer. She eyed the malevolent shark as its rotund nose tasted the air.

Very deliberately, she removed a bottle of soy sauce from her bag and placed it in front of her.

It was a thick variety. Slightly sweet because that’s how she preferred it.

“Try me,” she growled between clenched teeth.

The void shark swam slowly, never straying very far, but then there was a shuffle in the distance, like someone trampling leaves, and the beast was off like a thunderbolt.

But not without leaving a last, smug message.

Good bait.

“Screw you.”

Nestra ignored the scuffle she heard in the distance to focus on her own pain. Another careful application of spray helped, then because she was feeling ravenous, she gobbled all of her sandwiches. Chewing was especially painful.

Five minutes later, Sashimi returned with a closing gash on her flank, and an insectile leg in her maw. Nestra noticed her own bite mark on Sashimi’s fin, now scarred. Was there something in her teeth that made them impossible to regenerate from? Maybe. But she

wasn't going to go around biting people when they had swords and guns. Speaking of, she should move in case the local gleams heard the confrontation. With a slight wince, she stood and shook her shoulders.

Tired. Sore.

Nestra grumbled her way to the shiny loot thing. It was light blue, resting against a bark. It looked like an ethereal nest of silk, long since deserted. The silk looked strange in her sight, sometimes very clear and sometimes a mess of shapes that made her want to rub her eyes. Broken strands moved under an unseen current.

Her Skin woke up from its annoyed torpor. It was busy knitting itself back together using her blood as fuel, but the scent of something precious excited it. The symbiote asked for the silk. Tendrils of fabric crawled over her fingers, nudging her forward.

“Well, sure.”

That was going to be another ten thousand creds down the drain but maybe she wouldn't be barefoot anymore.

The Skin gently ate the silk in its usual space-warping fuckery hell-of-fangs and fractal barbs routine that was just getting tiresome at this point. Sashimi swam away, annoyed, while Nestra's armor shifted. Centered on her shoulders.

Long plumes of diaphanous material extended from her deltoids, covering her and part of her head in a gossamer embrace.

Still no shoes.

“Well thanks.”

When she looked down, the light bent around her figure and if she didn't move, it bent even more. Stealth! Nice! Hopefully it would help with people who relied on their eyes for detection. Between her glitching ability and this, successful infiltrations were assured!

Anyway, the core was definitely what Sereth wanted her to get so now she was heading home, thank you very much. Nestra picked up the pace on the way back, heading straight for the entrance portal or, rather, the direction she felt was right. She now had enough mana to coat her blade during entire battles and still fire several bolts and—

“Fuck. My sword.”

It was shattered.

Nestra sprinted back, then picked up the pieces of her blade from the damaged moss. She got most of it, but soon had to resolve herself to the tragic knowledge.

“It's broken for good.”

Aunt Claire's special gift. Gone. Devoured from the inside by too much void mana. Nesta didn't have the time to lament the loss of her trusty weapon, because Sashimi grew agitated, and when Nesta turned, she spotted the source of her unease.

A large flying drone.

"Shit."

Nesta ran in a perpendicular direction, but not without feeling a hit of the vacuum mana brushing against her. She sprinted to a nearby trunk, then climbed up. Fear needled her. If the Varang gleams found out about her now, she was deep in it.

Nesta finally managed to hide with a good view of the empty clearing. A few minutes later, an Asian woman in light armor emerged from the forest. Her sides were covered by a squad of warriors led by a stocky man in samurai-inspired armor. The squad fanned out carefully. One of them pointed at Sashimi, swimming away into the distance.

Nesta recognized the woman who had almost caught her in the changing room.

Well, if she was here...

Nesta dropped from the trunk and sprinted away, then she angled left, back towards the portal. Her fast pace turned to a jog and, as soon as the biome grew more lively, she climbed up to the branches. This time, she avoided the ants, and even ignored fruits that hung so invitingly from nearby branches. Her feet carried her to the portal, which was almost unguarded. Nevertheless, she still breached it from a distance.

Nesta popped back on earth inside of a deserted toilet. To her shame, it was that of the gents. A quick exit showed that she was in the visitor section of the Varang guild. Her pride pushed her to steal three bags of drip coffee and a cookie box on the way out. The only person who might have spotted her was a bored janitor blasting music and she didn't even look in Nesta's direction, making the stealth armor moot.

It would still be cool and useful one day for sure.

Sereth waved at her from a nearby bus stop. Nesta raced there, then he wordlessly helped her all the way back to his weird apartment.

"You could have used the core of any sufficiently strong C-class creature, you know? One of the big ants would have been enough. Or some of the carnivorous sloths on the other side of the starting area," Sereth said with clear amusement.

"If only, mfff! If only someone had warned me!" Nesta complained between two bites.

“The whip spider was technically a sub guardian. You were fortunate to be well-equipped to face it. That large mammal would have killed you.”

“You know I’m going to eat it, someday,” Nestra replied with anger.

Sereth gave her a knowing smile, then he applied more frosting on the cake. His hands moved with quiet competence, writing runes of congratulation on the thin meringue.

“That is your hubris speaking. I do not object, of course. It remains our most powerful motivator. You merely need to remember not to succumb to it.”

“Yeah yeah. What next?”

“Next, you legally raid by day, illegally by night, and you spend the money on defensive artifacts so the Skin can eat its fill. After that, I will personally guide you to places where you can improve your resistances. I also suspect your human handler will have tasks for you as well.”

“Hmmm.”

“You may want to take breaks on occasion.”

“Yeah. There is one thing I wanted to do as well. I should have done it sooner. We should have done it sooner.”

Seth’s mood plummeted. His ears drooped sadly, and the last of the cream was left in a nearby bowl.

“Ah, must we? Yes, I suppose we must.”

“What’s up, girlfriend? You’re acting a little weird.”

Nestra lured Stib inside of her house, then she locked the door.

“Not like you to invite people in,” Stib remarked.

“That’s because there isn’t much to do here, but anyway. I needed a place without a camera.”

“Uhu?”

Stib chewed on some bubble gum. She didn’t look amused.

“Look,” Nestra said. “I have something to tell you. A confession, if you will. You can leave at any time you want if you feel uncomfortable, ok? And I have something to show you as well.”

“It’s not a genital rash, is it?”

Nestra felt the conversation flounder like a dead fish.

“What?”

“No, because you’re ace so I wanted to be sure. Can’t think of anything else you’d be embarrassed to show me and that requires no camera.”

“What? I mean, no, I am not trying to show you my— arg! Stib! It’s not that, ok?”

“Ok good.”

“So, yeah. Hmm. Want some coffee?”

“Out with it already.”

“Alright, alright.”

They reached the living room and Nestra sat gingerly on her seat while Stib landed on the couch, frowning mightily.

“Ok, so, don’t take this the wrong way but... I discovered that Seth and I, well, more like he told me, but basically, we’re related.”

Stib just looked more confused. After a few seconds, she shrugged.

“So?”

“Ah, on my... father’s side. We, ah—”

“Waaaait a minute. That’s... that’s... impossible?”

“Not him. I mean, not daddy Palladian.”

“Now that is completely impossible because he’s your brother’s age.”

“He’s not. He’s much older. And, err, we’re not human.”

Stib leaned forward, clearly agitated but not calling Nestra out for lying. That was better than she feared.

“You’re serious.”

‘Absolutely serious. We are not human. I checked.’

“But your mom is your real mom?”

“Yes.”

“How does that work?”

“So our monster father took my dad’s form and he and my mom, well, you get the picture. And he did the same with Seth’s mom. And so we’re... like him. Like our monster dad, I mean.”

“And Helena and Achilles...”

“Are not. They’re normal people. He just... Yeah. He abused my mom. And we’re like... cuckoos or something.”

“Not cuckoos. Those kill the other chicks. So you, Nestra Palladian, my friend since you entered the squad, are telling me that you are not a human being. Did I get that right?”

“I mean, I just figured it out a bit over, well, actually almost two months ago. It’s new. I’m still me, promise. And I can prove it.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Hmm, no, I just grabbed in front of me and then I look like a monster.”

Stib barely hesitated.

“Hmmm. Ok, do it then?”

Nestra pulled her mask away. Stib studied her for a second. She looked shocked, but also in control of her emotions. Nestra latched on every gesture she could to guess her friend’s thoughts. Her feet were not angled away, so she wasn’t about to run for her life. Her eyes were not averted. Nestra couldn’t see any other signs of nervousness though there was tension in Stib’s shoulders and jaw. What was going to happen?

“Huh. And what are you called?”

“Hmm, gray demons, normally. There is a scientific term and we call ourselves the Azshii, but gray demon works fine.”

“And Seth is one as well?”

“Yeah. He wanted to talk—”

“I’ll handle the Seth part myself, thank you very much. Who else knows?”

“Hmm. Helena.”

“That’s cool.”

“And, hmm, he doesn’t know everything but... Gorge.”

“Uhu.”

“Errr.”

“You told Gorge before you told me?” Stibs said, volume increasing with her anger.

Nestra winced.

“It’s complicated.”

“Nestra, I’m your FRIEND! Your best friend, even! Your comrade in arms in this hostile shithole of a city! And you and your daft brother hold this from me for WEEKS?”

“Stib, you’re a human. I’m not. And Gorge’s son was kidnapped.”

“Oh so you had grand adventures with that cunt and you didn’t think to tell me? Great.”

“But I’m... a monster?”

Stib was close to admitting that mattered, but then her anger flared and the tiny redhead walked in Nestra’s face, getting uncomfortably far into her personal space, and Nestra didn’t have the heart to push her away.

“You said you were still the same! Has anything changed between when you found out and now that makes the situation any different? Or were you just procrastinating?”

“But... when we watched the Monster Infiltrator vids together...”

“Riel dammit Nestra this was a fucking horror movie. Are you really gonna use that to gauge my reaction?”

“You’re a... a defender of the rules?”

“Oh so it’s my duty to denounce you to Internal Affairs and the gleams right?” Stib said with a fake sweet smile and a falsetto voice. “Is that it?”

Somehow, replying yes was both the obvious answer and definitely a fucking bad idea.

“Errr.”

“You absolute moron! Did you really think the drones I gave you were reg? Have you never seen me bend the fucking rules?”

“Oh.”

“I’m loyal to you! You! To my friends! Not to the fucking city! They don’t give a shit about us! All of those fuckers will toss us under the damn bus first occasion they get and they did it! They fucking did it! Wrote off the entire department! And you were there for me, in that shitstorm, when you climbed the damn tower with a hole in your chest to save me from that gleam like the idiot you are, and obviously I’d be there for you! But no, you wait for almost two months to announce that you’re not human, let your bro date me.”

“I didn’t know until—”

“Shut the fuck up. You waited. You did.”

“I did...”

“And now you’re standing there like a tall fucking goof with the face of a smacked dog wondering what went wrong. You’re so damn clueless.”

“Errr. Sorry.”

“Yeah I bet you are. I’m getting out of here. Don’t follow me.”

“Ah. Ok.”

Stib turned back one more time, clad in her outrage.

“Did the drones at least help? In Fifteen. What happens if you die as a human? Do you die as a demon as well?”

“Hmm, I revert to demon form so if it happened in a public place like the hab block in Fifteen then yeah, done for.”

“Well at least there is that. I’m taking a moment to digest all that shit. Keep your goofy demon ass in here and don’t call me. I’ll call you. And what’s with the getup?”

“Errr, it’s my demon armor thing. It just, ah, needs more food.”

“You go to battle barefoot?”

“I mean.”

Stib glared dagger.

“Half barefoot?”

“I’m out of here.”

And she was. Out of here. Nestra was left standing here unsure as to how to take things. Her plan was to end with a plea not to tell the authorities if the meeting didn’t go well but after the loyalty speech, it seemed like a sure way to be kicked in the tibia so... that was

probably fine, right? Nestra wasn't sure how angry the diminutive drone operator was exactly.

Maybe Nestra could bake her a cake as a peace offering? Couldn't go wrong with cake.

Stib sent a message the same day telling her not to get into anything dangerous before she'd given it some thought. Nestra honestly replied that it wasn't up to her, which Stib answered by 'fair'. From Nestra's limited understanding of her friend, that didn't sound too bad.

The more she thought about it and the more Nestra believed her caution and, well, general fear had been warranted. Surely, everyone could tell that waking up as a monster in a society designed around the killing of monsters would be stress-inducing. Stib would understand, after she calmed down, or she would not. Nestra was sure she would, and then, Nestra would also apologize for not trusting her.

Her decision made, the gray demon decided to put this at the back of her mind seeing as she had no way of improving the situation right now. The cake was well-received, at least. Nestra decided to take it easy for another day seeing as the cut on her true cheek still felt tender. Aunt Claire was back in town, and she accepted an invitation.

Nestra happily came to pick her up in her brand new car in front of one of Threshold's best spas.

The gleam's expression of sheer bafflement was something Nestra would treasure for a long time. Finally, the old warrior spoke in a tone that betrayed horror and amazement in equal measure.

"An Alda model 4 convertible, and you picked the pink one?"

"No no no no. I had it specifically painted pink."

Nestra grinned until Aunt Claire finally laughed her ass off.

"Well, if anything, it's a bold statement. Should we go?"

They drove away. Nestra had fun pushing her new car to the maximum legal speed on the outer circle highway. The restaurant she'd picked was a bit farther, this time.

"Ok so you haven't said ACAB yet. What's going on?" Nestra eventually asked.

"It's the first time we properly have a girls day out since Detective Shinoda died. He was a good guy so I figured I'd pay my respects by not insulting the force. You got one day of truce, class traitor."

“Wow, much obliged. Speaking of class, I regret to say that the dress you got me was destroyed as well. I don’t suppose I could convince you to join me on a shopping spree?”

Nestra lowered her sunglasses to give her aunt her more convincing puppy eyes.

“Watch the road. What’s with the risk bonus?”

“I blew it all on the car,” Nestra shamelessly lied.

“Riiiiight. Ok, sure, it’s been a long time since I got myself something nice.”

“Yeah, you’ve been raiding hard recently. Is there a reason why?”

“I’m saving money for a big project.”

“Ooooh.”

“But I won’t tell you what it is just yet. Oh, and by the way, I remember you were involved in finding traces of that serial killer? The one that targets gleams?”

Nestra had almost forgotten about that. It showed how intense the last month had been.

“Yes. A... shrine of sorts.”

“Yeah, well, they have found others. You watch yourself, ok? If someone starts following you or something, you call the house immediately.”

Nestra winced.

“Claire, I’m not a gleam.”

“But you felt the mana. It might be enough.”

“This person killed a C-class pyromancer without getting spotted...”

“I know what I said. Anyway, enough of the gloomy shit. You want to tell me how Helena is doing?”

“Better. I think she just needed a break from school...”

“I think the others will suspect something if I get too good too fast,” Helena said, wiping blood off her training axe.

It was already corroded at the edge.

Nestra realized that she should have been smarter. Helena went through axes like Aunt Claire went through boyfriends. Of course, Nestra's own sword would eventually succumb to the void's deleterious energy. She had to ask Seth what the Aszhii used for weapons, sometime.

"Still mad about the sword?" Helena asked with a knowing smile.

"Ugh. And a replacement would cost so much. Where do you even get yours? They still conduct mana so they can't be cheap."

"I take them from the school and say I practice at home."

The teenager gave a 'no big deal' shrug.

"I know they have those forged from scrap. Doesn't bother me. They cut just as well."

It did bother her. Nestra could see it. The other students probably had high-quality, high-conductivity weapons tailored to their size while her little sister just grabbed whatever junk of the week they tossed her way. It pissed Nestra off but, at the same time, she understood the school. Mana weapons cost serious money.

"To answer your question, this is the time when the rich scions get help from junior family members. Most of them would be raiding family-owned D-rank portals by then."

"Dad said he was looking into it."

"Well then consider this an advance and a, ah, secret allowance from your sister."

Nestra felt very proud about herself.

"How is that an allowance?" Helena exploded. "I'm doing all the work!"

"And I'm providing access, safety, and training. You're welcome."

"This is bullshit!"

"And without me, you would never have met Sashimi."

Nestra looked up to the indifferent squall with a smirk of triumph. Finally, the chonky tube was proving herself useful. Nestra just had to steal all the credit.

Sashimi floated on in judgmental silence.

"Ok, fair. Fair!" Helena replied, calming down.

She kicked at a dead bird creature that had tried to pluck her eyes out before a broad-side axe swing had brought that ambition to an end.

“So what’s valuable in those things anyway?”

“The beaks.”

“And how do we get them out?”

Nestra smirked once again. She tossed a horrible tool that looked like a portable guillotine and her sister’s feet.

“We?”

“Riel dammit Nes!”

“You get all the money so you will also do all of the work.”

“I’m never eating chicken again.”

But the celebration dinner proved that was a lie.

Nestra sighed.

It was almost too easy. She used *momentum* to move forward and struck. A chameleon creature squirmed and died under her mana-coated hand, spine cleanly severed. At least, the skins would be mostly intact. She stepped back onto the path with one last grunt. Mud squelched under her exposed toes.

This D-class world was proving to be disappointing. Very disappointing. Even letting the chameleon strike first didn’t help. They were too slow and weak to provide any sort of challenge. The only positive was that they shored up her mana control, one of the three last aspects of her power that still lagged behind at D-class level.

Raiders with poor mana control would certainly struggle here as the ambush predators would demand constant vigilance, but Nestra was well-suited to counter those. It was just a walk in the park. Even the rich mana air felt thin after fighting in higher worlds. She wouldn’t be here if it were not for Ragnhild Lidstrom’s request.

Crescent was to solo clear a difficult D-class world, so that’s what she did. It was certainly one last test but it wasn’t a very fun one. Any C-class raider could do what she did without difficulty. Except the dedicated supporters, maybe.

Nestra disposed of the guardian in a single strike, then she returned to the entrance to put on her new, slightly less uncomfortable bodysuit. Leaving through the exit portal would destabilize and close the portal prematurely. She pretended to push through the aperture the way the humans did, finding the recovery team of D-class employees on the other side. A baseline in an impeccable suit walked up to her.

“Hello, user Crescent. Do you confirm that the guardian and most of the creatures were slain?”

“Yesss.”

“Very well. Please be advised that you will have to pay reparations should any of the employees be wounded. Sign here.”

Nestra shrugged. She was confident she'd gotten everything larger than a minnow, including some delicious-looking large frogs. The contract was to be between her, a school of art, the Threshold University of Applied Sciences, and Baiyan Furnitures. It looked exactly like what her human father mentioned in the past. Raiders would clear a portal world, then non-combatant gleams would get in with specialized equipment to clear up valuable wood essences, monsters parts, ore, the works. The material would be then sold to the contracted buyers on a bidding system, with the raider getting seventy percent of the profit after tax. There could be additional fees depending on the portal's owner, but all in all, it was a lucrative activity.

The money landed on her Crescent account later that day. She checked it.

Over thirty-seven thousand credits. A decent yearly salary.

“Not bad at all.”

There was another message from Ragnarok asking her to come visit her the next morning. Well, asking was a nice way of putting it. In any case, Nestra was eager to start with the real raiding. She had to get stronger if she wanted to accomplish her next goal.

To kill Varang's portal's bear thing, and then eat it.

If she wanted to accomplish this goal before Officer Kim found another task for her, she would have to hurry.

“Do you know what the great filter is?” Ragnarok asked, her arms crossed at her back.

The view from her office was breathtaking, Nestra had to admit. She could see the wall from here and even the jungle beyond, with the little gray patch near District Fifteen where the army had glassed the incoming horde. The other side of the building ought to be better though. The sea was there. Maybe Shinran had picked first since his office was right next door?

In any case, the old huntress was a cloudy sky and three puffy chimneys away from the perfect evil leader trope. Her uniform was also maybe a tad too blue. Black would give better vibes.

Ragnarok turned and Nestra shrugged. She knew what the great filter was. She'd gone to school like everyone else and learned about the incursion, but Ragnarok was in a talkative mood and Nestra wasn't.

"It was the idea that extraterrestrial life could not be observed because there was a barrier of sort, something that drove technologically advanced species extinct before they could reach the stars. Many people believe we were almost filtered at the peak of the incursion, when those fucking lizards slew our champions left and right."

Nestra stood straighter. This was one of those other veteran moments that ought not to be interrupted. The sudden lack of decorum was catching her off guard though.

"It was Riel who saved us. I don't care about those people who said we were meant to be a client race. Slaves or dead, we would have been done for as a species. But Riel dove in the middle of their deadliest fighters and grabbed the space around them before hurling himself and them to parts unknown. You young ones learn about it in history textbooks so you can't understand, you can't feel the deep, desperate terror and doom lodged in your chest every second of your waking life because you can add two and two and realize you are fucked. No matter how hard you fight and how many people you gather, they have monsters you just can't stop, and you are absolutely, and irrevocably, fucked."

Ragnarok turned. Her anger was cold and palpable, something brewed over decades over the enduring flame of her hatred.

"We were almost filtered and still, instead of uniting, humanity is divided into tiny realms with bickering warlords fighting for scraps of power. I can't express how much that annoys me, but I don't have to. What I can do is to cull the worst of the lot so the rest can learn. You are going to help me."

It wasn't a request.

"And I will pay you for it. And before you worry, no, I will not send you after Shinran. That would be a more... long-term solution to a problem that might never manifest. Now, are you familiar with the law vacuum concept?"

Nestra nodded yes. Ragnarok huffed with frustration.

"Try using sentences for once."

"Portal worldsss are cut off. Only what people bring is there. Including camera... or ethicssss."

"Good. I have a TK situation."

Nestra blinked. She thought team killers were the stuff of vids and no one in their right mind would try to assassinate a fellow gleam while inside of a portal. Well, she assumed it happened sometimes, but the way Ragnarok said it, it didn't seem like a super rare occurrence.

“Right. I have a peculiar healbug on my arms that’s been making waves. Name is Valerian of Nephrite.”

Even though Nestra did her best to school her body language, she knew the old monster felt her react.

“Does the name ring a bell?” Ragnarok asked with a knowing smile.

“No,” Nestra lied.

“I see.”

She was clearly unconvinced.

“Dear Valerian is currently at odds with his hierarchy, which has made him a target. I like the kid. He’s trying to turn life mana into a weapon, and though it clearly has no good direct application, I’m sure you can see ways it could become a sophisticated weapon given enough time and research. More importantly, Valerian has done a lot of volunteer work for the city. And now I’ve got convincing AI predictions that say someone’s going after him. The thought of leaving him to the wolves gives me stomach cramps, so you’re going to accompany him on his next C-rank raid and make sure none of his partners shank him. Do you understand?”

“C-rank?” Nestra asked.

She was pretty sure he was still D-rank the last time they met. Well, pretty strong for a D-rank, actually. Maybe he was on the verge of ascending?

Ragnarok misunderstood her words.

“I am confident the two of you can fend off a C-rank raider. He’s great at self-healing. The only way to kill him would be with devastating damage. He also carried an all-purpose antidote as a backup plan. You only need to make sure no one decapitates him. Do you understand?”

Nestra nodded a yes.

“Good. For this operation, you’ve been designed as an artillerist. Make sure you behave accordingly. The raid is tomorrow. I’m sending you an information package right now, and before you complain, I only had the full details late last night.”

Nestra shrugged. What would she even be preparing?

“Ssso. One assassin?”

“It could be, or maybe a pair. The team will be six members strong total. Find the culprit as they strike, and make an example out of them. I’m not asking you to neutralize a C-class

gleam so they face trial, in case I was not abundantly clear. I want you. To kill them. Is that understood?"

"Yessss."

Nestra knew she was right. Why take the risk to murder gleams to gain more power? She could just let Ragnarok cover her instead.