

The tarp at the top of the tent was kind of yellow. It was kind of old. Those tents were solid though. Or were they? She couldn't really remember.

"Retractors."

Nestra lifted her hand. It was kind of bloody, or rather, there was a layer of blood covering an entire side. It looked thin. Was she bleeding? Her arm didn't hurt. Only her head.

"I think I'm bleeding."

"That you are," a male voice said.

"Shouldn't she be asleep?" a female one replied.

"I'm not an anesthetist so this is safer. Cranial trauma. Calculating angles. Keep your eyes on the camera, Weiwei!"

"There's nothing out there, Derek. If they were coming after us..."

"Eyes on the camera."

Nestra's left eye was closed and she didn't feel like moving. Something was tugging on her forehead which was a bad sign because she couldn't feel anything there. She recognized the two people hovering around her. Derek and Weiwei, the expedition's augs. What were they doing here? Oh, right.

"I think I'm hurt. And bleeding."

"Yep."

"Can't be too bad though."

"You have a slit in your skull, Nestra. I can see your brain matter."

"Oh. This sounds bad."

"Only if I zoom. We'll get you sorted. Ok, the simulations says no piece of her skull is loose so it should make things much easier. Get me a potion, we'll apply it locally."

"Doesn't it work like shit on baselines?"

"She's pretty much a quirky. Just do it. It will work."

Nestra let them work. She was rather confused by the whole affair. There had been a trap, and she'd gotten hurt. Shit, she should have kept her helmet on, dammit. There was more movement.

"So, how are things going?" she asked.

“You are miraculously alive, and I do mean it. Half a centimeter down and you might have done. I don’t know. I’m not a neurosurgeon.”

“We can repair brain damage nowadays,” Weiwei mentioned.

“Sure, you and what operation theater?” Serek replied with a bit of snark.

Nestra frowned.

“Wait, weren't you hurt as well?”

“It’s nothing. My body armor blocked most of it.”

“Body armor?”

Someone sponged the left side of her head free of blood, including the eye. She was still feeling woozy and a little lost, so she decided not to move too much. That sounded reasonable.

“Wait, what were we talking about?”

“We were saying you were miraculously alive after a mincer trap planted in our fucking garden activated on us. Thank fuck you pointed at it or I might have missed it. Oh, that reminds me, I need to run a diagnosis. Optics glitched for a second there. Ugh, can I afford to do it now?”

Nestra carefully turned her head. Weiwei was on the side, holding a handgun with an oversized barrel. Derek had a full-on assault rifle and he was sitting in front of a console showing a series of screens, though he wasn’t looking at them right now. His eye augs flashed in the dim light.

“If anything was going to come after us, it would have already done so,” Weiwei replied.

“You mean, anyone. Somebody wanted us dead. Or at least, one of us. They might just be considering finishing the job. I’m keeping an eye out.”

“They have archers,” Nestra said. “Gleam archers.”

She considered explaining before changing her mind. Her thoughts were still a little jumbled. They’d probably get it anyway.

“One more reason to keep an eye out. Weiwei, you watch the cameras while I run that diagnostics. We can’t afford to take risks.”

“Should we build some sort of bombardment shelter? Pile furniture?” the woman asked.

“There isn’t anything in here that will stop a gleam archer’s charmed shot. Don’t think about the worst case scenario. Just look and hope for the best.”

“Alright, alright...”

Something occurred to Nestra as she watched the aug ‘pilot’ mumbling to himself, his augs clicking from here.

“You’re not just a pilot, are you?” she finally said.

Derek smiled.

“He’s not a pilot at all, though I guess he’s a decent copilot,” Weiwei replied.

“Hey, I can press a few buttons and the thing will fly itself!”

“Barely,” Weiwei grumbled. “He’s good on the cannons though.”

“Are you here to keep an eye on us?” Nestra asked.

“On you? Fuck no. For you.”

“Are you Intelligence?”

His smile was crooked and looked genuine, as far as she could tell.

“You understand that I won’t reply to this question, right? In fact, it would be best if you forgot our little discussion. Focus on remembering spotting the trap instead. There is going to be a debrief... and consequences.”

“Uh?”

“Attempted murder on a diplomatic envoy. That’s not grand theft, that’s an act of war. Shit’s going to get real when the expedition returns.”

“So... there will be war?”

“No, well, I don’t think so, but old Nguyen is going to have to clean house... and we will be requesting proof.”

“It’s probably Manh,” Nestra said.

“How do you reckon?”

“He’s a nasty cunt.”

There was a pause, the other two digesting her brilliant insight.

“You know, for being so short, this sentence is so convincing and makes so much sense that I’m fully inclined to agree with you.”

“I am a good detective,” Nestra insisted.

It felt super important to say.

“So it would seem. And now, you should sleep.”

“Why are you here, though?”

“To keep our people alive against that kind of thing,” Derek replied curtly.

Nestra considered it.

“I think I died. Very close to it.”

She frowned. It was probably not a good idea to elaborate more. They didn’t know about her being an Aszhii and it would take far too long to explain. She wasn’t feeling like it.

“Please don’t move your face too much, you’re pulling on the stitches,” Derek said with a tired voice.

“Okay.”

“And yeah, sorry, I fucked up. I should have been more careful,” he said.

“Derek?” Weiwei softly asked.

“I was looking out, not down. She almost died. She was this close. I fucked up.”

“You could not have —”

“It doesn’t matter!” Derek interrupted, his voice a scream.

Weiwei sighed.

“Sorry, I should not be raising my voice. I’m stating the truth, though. It doesn’t matter that it was absurd of them to trap the garden. They did. I didn’t see it coming. She almost died, therefore, I failed. I should have checked the ground for recent movements. I can do it. Got a soil temperature module.”

He tapped his temple.

“It won’t happen again.”

“It’s okay,” Nestra said. “I wasn’t really in danger.”

It felt important to let him know that. He wasn't at fault. Derek was nice. She didn't want to see him sad.

"Alright, Palladian. Time for you to catch a little shut eye," he said.

"But..."

"I need you fresh so you can take the middle spot as night guard. Both Weiwei and I need some sleep as well, okay?"

"Oh, right."

That made a lot of sense.

"I want my bed though."

"Errrr."

Nestra stood up. There was indeed a bed in one of the sections of the tent. She found it. Weiwei helped her settle down.

"Should I remove my armor?" Nestra asked.

"Better keep it on, sweetie, just in case."

"Well it does temperature regulation. And other stuff. I should have kept the helmet on..."

"You'll know for next time. Now, sleep, okay?"

"Fine."

And she did.

Nestra woke up with a jolt. Panic filled her mind. Her head felt fuzzy. Unsticking her tongue from her palate took way too much energy. She was feeling like shit. Despite the urge to act, she stayed lying on the cot, breathing hard.

Any time.

Any time now.

Hmmm.

Despite her expectations, pain remained conspicuously absent. She remembered she had a camera on one of her gloves to scout without being seen. Switching to her side, she took a picture.

Fear paralyzed her, but it soon proved unwarranted. So ok, she was looking like shit, but more like, normal shit. A spectacular bruise had formed on her forehead where a thin line split it in half, vertically, from a bit above her eye to her hairline. It was bright red. She also had a bump. All in all, she'd had much worse during some of her training sessions. The rest of her felt fine.

She was alive. It was weird too, because Seth had told her the mask would fall when she received lethal damage. This wasn't lethal damage. It was near-lethal damage, certainly. Perhaps her mask was more fragile since it was that of a baseline. Or maybe her true form had instinctively judged that this wound was enough to kill her. It would have certainly sufficed in a primitive society with no access to any sort of medical help. It could also be because she was mostly human, and human Aszhii cared more about their masks. Well, enough assumptions. There was no way to test it anyway. Time to handle the real emergency.

Nestra grabbed the glass of water left on her bedside table. It was half a liter of tepid water that tasted too much like stone. She emptied it in less than ten seconds.

'Shit, I could eat an entire neo-pig from snout to tail.'

Nestra went to forage for food, feeling every bit the cave woman. Weiwei looked up from the monitors as soon as she appeared. Clint was asleep on the side with his hand gripping the handle of his rifle. At least the safety was on.

"You're already awake?"

"Hungry."

"You Palladians are something else. I got emergency rations. The Nguyens also left us prepared meals in the fridge, recently made. We checked them for toxins. They're clean."

"Talk about sending mixed messages," Nestra grumbled.

Weiwei laughed, her voice filled with relief. Nestra found plastic bowls filled with broth alongside tupperwares of fresh noodles, meatball, coriander, and sprouts. She gave it a sniff. Pho. There was a microwave. While the broth warmed up, she devoured a nice Banh Mi sandwich which was made with local ingredients shoved in an honest-to-Riel sliced baguette. The next thirty minutes were spent demolishing the local food store. The good news was that many of these ingredients were mana-rich and quite tasty. By the time she was done, her second can of mango sago dessert was polished. Mango and coconut milk was such a nice combination.

"I feel freshly resurrected," she announced.

"Wo de ma, Nestra, is there a portal in your stomach? Where is all the food going?"

"Blood reconstitution."

“This has to be the weirdest quirk I’ve ever heard about but okay. Hmm, anyway, I’m no nurse but I think you need more than seven hours of sleep to fully recover.”

Nestra checked the time. It was a bit past 9PM, which meant that they would stay locked in here for another couple of days if Derek decided it was safer. It was now clear he was outranking her in some way, and besides, whoever had failed with the trap might want to finish the job.

Human Nestra was going to spend the night in recovery.

Her Aszhii self had an appointment, one she wouldn’t miss. She was certain the tent was close enough to the portal that she could slip in. The question was if she should patrol the surroundings or not after she was done with Fox Mask.

Actually, she should ask herself if Fox Mask could have betrayed her? That would be a good question.

It just didn’t feel likely.

Nestra shrugged. She would simply ask. That left her with six hours with nothing to do. She would employ her time by... by...

She yawned.

By sleeping! Just set an alarm and go.

Nestra turned on her bed and aimed her shotgun at the opening in one smooth movement. The flashlight lit on. It was Derek, with his hands up.

“Hey,” Nestra greeted, lowering her weapon.

“Damn, Palladian. I see you recover quickly.”

“You gave me a potion?”

“Yep, a Baihua Premium.”

Nestra whistled. Those cost some money.

“The City is very much interested in keeping the members of this expedition alive.”

“Didn’t think they cared that much.”

“Oh, they don’t care about you as a person. They would just very much like to end this little lesson without bloodshed, and if we die here, there will be a lot of it. Mayor Kim can’t afford to look weak to an enclave only a couple months away from reelection.”

“Ah, that makes more sense.”

He shrugged.

“Well that’s it then. Sleep well. It doesn’t look like anyone wants to try us again. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night. And also thanks for jumping in front of me,” Nestra belatedly added.

Derek smiled. It was a nice one, honest and full of relief.

“Technically I pushed you to the side... and I was a bit late, but you’re welcome, Nestra.”

He closed the door. Nestra checked the time. It was 2AM.

Maybe she ought to go there early.

Fuck it, she’d been stuck in this mask so long it was starting to itch. The short earlier release only served to make it worse. She switched with a soft hiss of pleasure and felt for the portal’s energies, They were there, diffuse but present. It was a strong world. She would really struggle to complete it herself. Maybe there would be time for some hunting. Nestra placed her hands in front of her, pushed, then she was through.

This world was thick with mana. Nestra took a deep, liberating breath. It smelled of dust, of cold under a red sun that smoldered over the horizon, too distant to warm the soil. It also smelled of old blood, spilled not far from the entrance portal. The corpse of furry predators spread over a desert land peppered with thorny black plants. One of them looked like a mammoth, if mammoths had maws filled with jagged teeth. The cores had been harvested.

In the distance, she beheld large, crystalline trees made of shards glued together. A dull trail of mana emerged from the copse. Smiling, she made her way there. A path curved around the trees, through bushes and ferns as dark as coal. A lone figure sat on a stone, her hand on the handle of a wicked estoc. They turned when they spotted Nestra.

She stopped at a distance, then bowed politely. She appeared to be alone as far as Nestra could tell, and she had some pretty good senses. The fox mask was in place though it looked much worse for the wear. This time, the mysterious fencer wore an unmarked red robe, loose enough that Nestra wasn’t sure if the bumps were modest breasts or mere curves of the fabric. Their wavy black hair fell to their neck. The crimson light gave them a slightly ominous appearance.

“Hello, Fox Mask, or should I say T. Nguyen?” Nestra greeted with a chuckle.

Slowly, they removed their mask, and Nestra found that she still had no idea about their gender. They still possessed an androgynous appearance caught between pretty and handsome, with a touch of exoticism brought by their mixed ethnicity, but the fragile pride of the archive's tournament picture had hardened into quiet despair. Black marks under their eyes spoke of sleepless nights, or a bone-deep fatigue that a night of sleep wouldn't cure.

It felt like they were baring themselves, so Nestra returned the favor.

"What a curious transformation power..." was the answer. "You know that those are rare?"

Nestra shrugged, so Fox mask continued.

"I read that transformation powers reflect the person's beliefs and personality. Do you see yourself as a demon?"

"Yes," Nestra replied with a smile. "A battle demon!"

She picked her claymore and waved it around a bit. That ought to illustrate her point well enough.

Fox Mask paused, and it was difficult to tell if she was waiting for more, speechless, or merely just bone-wary.

"I was given the name Truong at birth."

"I faced another Truong."

"It's a fairly common name here," they said with a dry voice. "I chose the name Camille for myself. I am Camille Nguyen."

"Camille?" Nestra asked. "What does it mean?"

Camille shifted their stance. Nestra didn't know why they were so defensive. It should be obvious she was just a big friendly demon who was only interested in battle, and thus, completely trustworthy. No shenanigans. Only glorious battle from Nestra, so long as the other didn't engage in shenanigans themselves or she could get weird.

After a while, Nestra tilted her head, which led Camille to relent.

"Camille is a gender neutral first name of French origin. Like me."

"One of your parents is French then?"

"My father. He joined the Sword King enclave as a blade master. He apparently had a strong interest in eastern sword style. He was badly hurt in a spar, or so my mother said."

Camille looked away.

“He was so into fencing and monster killing that he forgot to play the political game. My mom said the wound came as a surprise to him, like he couldn’t understand someone trying to hurt him while they were part of the same clan. He left soon after out of pure disgust, and a bit later, I was born. He doesn’t know I exist. If he still lives, that is.”

“Wait, you didn’t search for him?” Nestra asked, a little surprised.

She had been curious about her own origins. If Seth wasn’t secretive, she’d be even more so.

“He is an exile. A pariah. I was forbidden from looking into his origins and all records have been erased anyway. By the time I got access to Threshold where I could learn more... Mom wouldn’t even tell me his name.”

“Oh.”

“... before she died.”

“...Oh. That must be horrible to be out here as an orphan. I couldn’t imagine...”

And now Nestra was sad just thinking about not having a family.

“Do you have... any siblings? Half siblings, I mean,” she asked again.

“No. My mother could not marry again. No one would have her.”

Camille glared at Nestra, as if daring her to comment.

So she did.

“I’ll be honest, the more I hear about the Sword King enclave’s culture, the less I like it.”

Camille huffed. Nestra used the opening to ask a question that had been hounding her for a very long time in a desperate bid to change the subject.

“So, sorry if it’s a bit insensitive but... gotta ask. Are you a boy or a girl or something else?”

A gale of cold wind blasted the portal world, carrying gritty sand under the blood-colored radiance of its distant sun. The crystalline trees shivered, and their branches gave a melodious song of chimes clinking together.

“Serious, you’re asking me if I’m a boy or a girl?”

“It’s just that I’d like to know if I have to refer to you as he, she, or they in my head. Right now there is an ambiguity, so, if you wouldn’t mind...”

Again, Camille looked guarded, as if expecting some sort of jab. When it was clear Nestra was entirely serious, their expression went from defiant to baffled, and then, to just tired.

“As most people in the enclave know, I am a intersex. I was born with male and female parts.”

Nestra’s glance dipped unconsciously.

“Yes, I also grew breasts,” Camille added rather coldly.

“Sorry.”

“I am used to it. To answer your previous question, I prefer they, but since I have been... assigned female at birth, I also find ‘she’ acceptable.”

“They it is. Is being intersex the reason why you were sent to Threshold to steal?” Nestra asked.

Camille smirked. Nestra was glad to see a smile on the person’s face, even if it was brittle as hell.

“Now what gave you that idea?” they asked.

“The Sword King enclave doesn’t strike me as the kind of place that likes people who stand out. Even when they are supremely talented. Maybe,” Nestra added as an afterthought, “especially people who are supremely talented.”

“Thank you for recognizing my talent. And... I think it might be a series of circumstances.”

Their gaze grew distant. They were now wide open, which Nestra took as a mark of trust, which in turn made her feel appreciated.

“I have given it a lot of thought over the years of isolation... It might be because I am the patriarch’s grandchild, talented yet unable to continue his dynasty since I cannot have children myself. Maybe it is this talent that makes me a challenge to any potential heir. Or perhaps it is because my father abandoned the enclave after being poorly treated, an uncomfortable reminder that we do not have to put up with that shit if we really don’t want to. Or it could be my mother’s death in a portal world, which shows weakness. Or perhaps it is merely sticking out while also having the mana control and skill necessary to infiltrate Threshold... Or it could be all of those at the same time.”

But then, Camille clammed up again.

“So they just exiled you? As a pariah?”

“Well...”

Camille hesitated, then they sort of gave up, their back arching as if under a great weight.

“Yeah. I guess I am. The Elders prefer when I’m either raiding and stealing, and for raiding, I tend to do it alone. And in whatever portal happens to be available even if they do not help push my skills. That way they don’t have to see me, I suppose.”

They deflated a bit. Nestra felt bad for Camille. She’d suffered through some difficult moments herself, but at least she’d always had Aunt Claire, and later Stibs.

“You know, since you have access to Threshold, you could always pick a gender,” Nestra suggested. “Up to you, of course, but between surgery and hormone therapy, you could absolutely lean towards one over the other. Just don’t ask Shinran for help because he’ll wave his hand and declare you’re exactly how the world meant you to be.”

“But I am exactly how I was meant to be,” Camille objected, and Nestra could tell it was a sore topic. “I don’t have a problem with my body or my appearance. It’s the others who get annoyed because they can’t put me in a box, and that’s somehow inconvenient. And for an heir, who cares if it’s my direct descent? How about picking the best leader instead for a change? And when I reforge my body according to my own image at B-class, all of that nice work will be undone anyway because I am what I am and I’m tired of making excuses.”

Nestra shrugged.

“Sure. Whatever you prefer.”

Camille glared like they expected Nestra to object or something. Nestra didn’t really care.

“Why are you interested anyway? Surely, you are not attracted to me, right?” Camille asked after a while.

“What? No, I do not sex,” Nestra stated with confidence.

“You... do not sex?” Camille repeated.

“I do not the sex. Tried it, it was nice but definitely not worth the hassle. Same for partners. My only love is for battle! The blade!” Nestra roared.

Camille looked lost as hell, so Nestra decided to tone it down.

“Ok, no, I also love my family, my friends, and obviously good food. Oh, and cooking. And... but you get the idea. My interest in you is blade related. You are an artist. A master of your craft. I’m here because of this. Here, with no one looking, you can finally show me all those techniques you were holding back in the previous portal.”

Camille chuckled. They grabbed the handle of their estoc, lifting it in a smooth gesture. It was still sheathed, though.

“Are you sure? last time, you had a bit of help. Here, though? It’s just you and me.”

“I’m stronger. I don’t need anyone to beat your ass.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Camille finally drew, and so did Nestra. Finally. Finally!

“Yes!” she exclaimed.

“No hidden bullshit, right? No politics? Just you and me in a test of skill?”

“Just you and me in a test of skill. Let our blades talk. We can continue exchanging words after.”

“Then...”

Camille saluted.

“En garde.”

With a scream of pure happiness, Nestra charged forward. She used *momentum* to close the distance with a lunge of power and speed, which was blocked by a series of transparent pane of mana. Nestra was pushed back. Meanwhile, Camille looked surprised by the shattered remains of their defenses. In the moment that followed, both combatants smiled, and then, then both attacked.

A whirlwind of precise strikes whistled through the empty airs and shattered branches that fell in a glassy snow. It was the deadly dance of two masters on their path to perfection. Nestra had reach and power on her side, but Camille had experience and precision, plus the many panes they manifested all around them. They were so many tumbling blocks, improvised shields, and all around nuisances that prevented Nestra from moving freely though she could somewhat predict where they appeared thanks to her mana senses. Camille was good, but they weren’t there yet. After Nestra smashed through yet another wall, something changed in Camille’s demeanor. Their estoc flashed with enchantments. Resilience, as far as Nestra could tell.

“Water Dragon Dance.”

Nestra stopped herself from laughing. Who the fuck announced their attacks before —

“Oh sh —”

Parry, step back, parry, *momentum* away. Camille was a hurricane of strikes, each following Nestra where she was going. They were using those mana panels as springboards, Nestra realized. It was all she could do to stay ahead. So fast. Something bit into her leg. She felt pain on her forearm, but managed to push back yet another strike.

Camille went low, gathered her strength. Only Nestra's muscle memory saved her.

It was going to be a lunge.

Immovable increased Nestra's defense, but Camille's blade still pierced through her left palm. She gathered her hand in a fist around the cruel blade, gritting her teeth against the pain.

Nestra struck down with a roar. Her void-infused strike smashed through three walls and an improvised pauldron, biting into Camille's shoulder. The human disengaged to avoid the worst of it.

Nestra was left with an estoc in her hand. Quite literally.

"Hey pick it u—"

Camille made a sign. Their mana flared, and the estoc flew into their waiting fingers. They smirked.

"Or you can cheat, I guess."

"Sore loser. Show me that bolt of yours."

Nestra obliged. The dot connected with Camille's chest, then potential called for it to be connected. A black bolt exploded from Nestra's fingers. Thick layers of mana blocked it. They didn't block the wave of shadow that followed it. Suddenly, it was the darkest of nights.

'What the —'

Light blue mana dispersed Nestra spell, but her cleaving strikes still destroyed Camille's remaining defenses in a single blow, and Nestra kicked them while they were open. The low kick sent Camille tumbling on the ground.

That was going to leave a nice bruise. Nevertheless, Camille just stood back up and went for Nestra, who let them attack so she could use a series of vicious counters in. Camille was forced to slow down their attacks which gave Nestra the initiative again, but only shortly.

"Falling Arrow!"

"That's lame," Nestra commented between two blocks.

The two of them demolished the copse before moving on to open ground. Their attacks dug grooves on the ground, sent shards of shattered stones flying through the air in a reverse hail. Their dance of death was unceasing movement, each one a mirror to the other.

Only *momentum* and savvy bursts of shadow magic saved Nestra. At the apex of her assault, Camille pulled back for a finisher. Nestra used *precision* to strike at her opponent's elbow. She drew blood.

Camille's strike sent her crashing on the ground with a deep pain in her ribs. One of them might be cracked. There was some blood as well.

"I held back, but that would have skewered you," Camille said in the following moment of calm.

"Not with only one arm, it wouldn't have."

They smiled, in pain but happy.

"We should stop there since you're about to keel over from blood loss," Camille began.

"And you from mana exhaustion. You need to work on your stamina."

"Yeah, sure. Truce?"

"Truce. I'm hungry."

Finally, after several days of imprisonment, Nestra was feeling released.

Nestra wanted to rest but hunger came first. As it turned out, Camille agreed.

"I haven't eaten since this morning. Do you happen to have rations?"

"No. I only carry my cooking equipment. We could eat the local wildlife though."

Camille sighed heavily.

"Well... I'm desperate, so why not?"

The pair quickly found a tusked creature hiding in a crystal tree thicket. It was absolutely no match for them. Nestra cut off something that looked like the tenderloin off its flank, then they found some semi-frozen water in a nearby pond.

"It's safe to drink," Camille explained. "We tested it. The crystal trees burn well too."

"Marvelous," Nestra replied.

She was going to make a stew. Honestly, the meat looked too hard to be pleasantly edible right now. She boiled it first to remove the scum. While they waited, Camille guided her to a few edible tubers that would supplement Nestra's emergency reserves of mana-rich carrots and onions (two of each). Nestra used a flat piece of rock to prepare the vegetables.

In the following moments of quiet, Nestra decided that she might as well get closer to her rival so they would have a long term, sustainable stabby friendship.

“So, things have been tough with your people?” she asked after they settled.

Camille gave her a measuring look, but then her attention returned to Nestra’s quick knife movements. It was like watching a puppy getting all excited before remembering they’re supposed to growl. That, or maybe it was just natural that someone who’d spent more than two decades keeping their distance from other people wouldn’t magically open up in a single evening. Either or.

“Before we get into this, can you tell me why you’re here? Why you’re really here?” they asked.

“I’m here to fight you and eat food?” Nestra asked, confused before remembering there was a world outside of the portal.

“Oh, you mean the expedition? As far as I can tell, Threshold wants to trade for your steel and accountability for the thefts.”

“They know it was me?” Camille asked with some fear.

“Yes, and they know you’re from the enclave. I expect some asset recovery will happen soonish. Are you going to warn your people?”

“Fuck no,” Camille replied.

“But it’s all your hard work. Hard thievery. Whatever.”

“Maybe I want to protect my fellow Sword Kings, but I certainly wouldn’t mind some of them taken down a notch or two.”

“Like Manh?”

“He’s certainly the worst of the lot. I saw him try to trap you in the combat pavilion. Giving that insane bitch Truong a thrashing was the highlight of my week.”

“I thought it would be our fight,” Nestra whispered, heartbroken.

“The highlight of my week at that time.”

Nestra was relieved. Camille shook their head.

“Thank you for telling me the reason of your coming. I appreciate your trust. I promise not to abuse it, hmm, unless you plan to murder the people I care about, obviously. To answer your previous question, yes, things have been difficult at home. Grandfather is trying to usher the enclave into the future and he believes it will take Threshold’s help to do so. He believes humanity should be united, and that our lives would be better with some machines to work the fields.”

“No shit,” Nestra grumbled.

“He means well!” Camille replied, suddenly defensive.

They blushed with embarrassment. Their next words felt more hesitant than the rest, a sharp contrast to the confident warrior who had backed Nestra into a corner.

“He’s trying. When he was younger, things got... bad on the mainland. The Sword King enclave was meant to be a bastion of strength for humanity, and to a degree, it worked, okay? It worked for a long time. But ông grew older and he could see that only relying on physical strength was, errr, he said it was like going into a small corridor and realizing all the doors were closed. He wants more for us. For the younger generations. Not all of the members of the enclave agree. Many of them think we’re betraying our principles. Tch! What principles? I’m the most talented genius and people won’t talk to me because I have breasts and a penis.”

Nestra patted their shoulder.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be casually talking about genitals like this. And you’re cooking too.”

“It’s ok. Did you know that when you eat urchin, you actually eat their genitals?”

Nestra smiled. This had to be a great icebreaker. Camille looked amused therefore it must have worked on them.

The meat was boiled by now. Nestra tossed the water, cleaned the pot, shredded the meat with her fingers, then set all the ingredients to simmer in a bit of clear water. She added some barley and closed the lid.

“Now what?” Camille asked.

“Now we wait for two hours!”

“You’re serious? Two hours?”

“We could wait longer. We have plenty of time to talk! Maybe fight again!”

Camille sat on a rock. Nestra wondered if she should scavenge for more stuff while the soup bubbled. Maybe she should slice a steak out of the beast’s neck? Poor Camille looked ravenous.

“By the way, Manh is the sort of person who would dare an assassination attempt against me, yes?”

“I doubt he would try. It would pretty much be a declaration of war.”

“Then who could have tried?”

Nestra saw the moment Camille did a double take. She'd forgotten to mention almost dying. Oops?

"I'm sorry. What?"

"Someone set up a monster trap in the tent garden. It cracked my mortal form's skull open."

"What the FUCK?"

"Yes, it was bad."

Camille stood in panic. She walked to and fro, muttering curses in Vietnamese. Nestra got the feeling this was worse than just political maneuvering. Come to think of it, she was probably taking the attempt on her life rather too lightly.

"Fuck. FUCK! Why didn't you say so before?"

"Errr, sorry. Monsters and people trying to kill me have become such a normal occurrence..."

"You don't get it. Manh could be attempting a coup."

"Against a B-class raider much more powerful than he is?" Nestra replied with her doubt on display.

"And that B-class raider is now in a portal for a couple of days, not to mention, if you'd been assassinated, what would Threshold's response would be?"

Nestra didn't need to be an expert diplomat to imagine the answer.

"It would involve gunships."

"Thus forcing the enclave to unite against a foreign element. I'm telling you, this is bad. I still care about the enclave, despite everything. We need to stop a war."

"We?" Nestra asked with a smile.

"Come on, police girl. Let's team up."