

“I got something,” the young intern said.

He proudly lifted a small vial. In it, his superior spotted the cut head of a cotton swab. Thick congealed blood stained the white material.

“I knew the killer would have missed something.”

“Great job,” his superior said.

She picked the vial. It was properly labeled and everything.

“I found it on the ceiling. In a corner. It’s as you said, ma’am. The devil’s in the details.”

“And you have the focus required to notice them, though I’m not sure the boss will do anything about it.”

“What do you mean?” the intern asked, his joy melting away.

His superior had the grace to be embarrassed. Her intern was doing a great job, but he was still a little naive. Every high profile case was a political one.

“Look, it’s probably better if I let Mr. Ashjay tell you in person. I’m not good at this.”

She left the bare room behind. Her intern followed her with hesitant steps until they found Mr Ashjay on the ground floor. The man was not ecstatic for what had to be the biggest breakthrough since that Internal Affairs weirdo had found the first mausoleum. His gleam eyes looked up from a datasheet. The intern knew gleams couldn’t get implants but some old school folks didn’t even like visors.

“My young apprentice found some suspicious blood that hasn’t been wiped by bleach. Here,” the superior said.

Ashjay looked at the vial without a trace of triumph. He picked it up reluctantly.

“Sir? This could belong to the Raider Killer!” the intern argued.

“No. The Raider Killer is in the morgue right now. Both of them. We have confirmed... a variety of things. Things that could not have been planted. Banking records. Sealed safes.”

“What? The victims are our culprits? But then... what?”

Ashjay looked up. He seemed to consider the question for a while. The intern waited patiently for Ashjay’s wisdom. The B-class had been at it for a while and he was still there, which meant he was motivated.

“Would you say this crime scene is not two people killing each other?”

The intern hesitated.

Suddenly, he had a possibility to impress the boss. He wasn't prepared for it. Stress made his heart beat. Maybe that was the breakthrough that would land him a coveted job. Panic constricted his heart.

"I mean, this is a joke, right? This whole thing stinks to high heaven. Two bullet impacts but no bullets, non-consistent wounds on both bodies, unexplained lighting equipment with no ID numbers..."

"That last one could have been brought in by the victims," Ashjay corrected.

The intern sweated.

"But for the rest, you are entirely correct. We were given a semi-convenient scene that we could accept, knowing it's all bullshit. We were also given ample proof that those two were, together, the Raider Killer. Now who would have any interest in killing them?"

"Hm, err, more accomplices?"

"I believe those would have simply tried to make them disappear in a way that doesn't attract the attention, just in case the others had incriminatory evidence at their disposal."

A lightbulb lit in the intern's mind. Of course. There was a reason why this was a high profile case.

"The families of the victims?"

"Two powerful C-class gleams slain without the entire building blowing up? Or the entire street, for that matter? Either they were doing their best not to attract attention, or they were killed by someone who was significantly more powerful than they were."

"Like a B-class relative..."

"It doesn't really matter in the end," Ashjay said.

He hesitated. The intern knew he would receive more wisdom now that would change his outlook, or be thanked and dismissed for the afternoon.

In the end, Ashjay sighed, and the intern started to believe he'd be hired. Why else waste so much time on an aug like him?

"We can dig the little info we have, perhaps the blood, and fight an uphill battle against a tacit alliance of Houses who were seeking vengeance against those who'd killed their children. We can perhaps prosecute the guilty if by some miracle we find out who it was despite our inability to detect mana that doesn't belong to those two. Then, after a long and humiliating legal battle where our inability to find the killer will be explained at length, the guilty will be absolved of their crime by a jury of their peers."

His eyes wandered before returning to the intern.

“Or we can claim that the two killed each other and put an affair that has embarrassed the unit and the city to rest, thus moving on to more immediate concerns.”

The rational part of the intern knew what would happen. Riel, if it were him in charge, he'd probably take the easy way out but... there was something in him that felt like it was dying. A vague pain in his heart.

“I am sorry,” Ashjay said, and it sounded like he meant it. “It's probably not what you were hoping to hear.”

“No. I understand. I just hope... bah.”

“We will find another battle. There will always be more of those. That, I can promise.”

Ashjay raised the vial, then he hesitated.

The intern thought they could still save it as evidence, and maybe use it later? Just in case.

The room darkened.

There was immense pressure. Everything became tighter. It was very hard to breathe. It was important, very important, to keep breathing. He could see his shoes, covered in plastic, and the isolant suit over it. The shoes were very important.

Something really large came walking around but that was not as important as breathing, and breathing required focus. On the shoes. His eyes perceived a bone-clad armored foot, though his mind did not.

Then it was over.

“Hmmm.”

Ashjay blinked.

“Guess we can call it a day,” he said a little sullenly. “You've done really well. Let's just tie this up and go home for this afternoon. It's been a very long week.”

“Thanks chief.”

“You guys pack and go as soon as you're ready. I guess I'm having a word with the mayor's office to see how we can turn this around. See you guys at the office on Monday.”

The intern left. Too bad the vial would lead to nothing at all but that was fine. He'd been noticed for his hard work, and that mattered. He just hoped they would find the next culprit before something else got to them.

Sereth pocketed the vial. He would have it tested. Blood of the People tended to lose potency too quickly for most spells but those humans had DNA tests — how exciting! — and he wanted to know if it would lead them back to Nestra.

There was also a chance that this was Teneru's blood, but he wouldn't risk it.

Sereth sighed as he swam through another pocket, reappearing closer to his den. Younglings were so damn sloppy, sometimes.

He thought about his youth. Would an instigator call a bloodhound construct over a single drop of blood?

To track a vigilante?

Absolutely not.

Now that no one could see, he allowed his ears to twitch to relieve the stress. The rules of the covens were not very strict. He was supposed to let her fall if she did something 'stupid', but what was stupidity and what was merely carelessness born from inexperience? The girl was too hasty to kill... as were all younglings.

Aaaah, so complicated.

In the end, Sereth huffed. As far as he was concerned, she'd killed a much stronger, talented user. And got away with most of it. That was good enough for that little drakespawn. He would just scold her next time to remind her she could have done a better prep job. Personally, he would have killed them separately in a more secluded place but... that was experience talking. Hubris made the younglings impatient when they couldn't hunt for extended periods of time...

Maybe he could scold her AND bake her a celebratory cake. That would dull the edge of the criticism.

"Raaah!"

Human Nestra stabbed the target with all the strength her quirkie muscles could manage. Her blade sank an impressive centimeter before slipping from her tired fingers. It almost fell to the ground but she managed to grab the hilt through sheer annoyance. At herself, mostly. Letting a blade fall was disrespectful. And lazy. She'd been lazy enough, recently.

"Fuuuuuck."

Riel-accursed hubris. She'd left the scene happy as a clam, riding on the ecstasy of self-aggrandizement, only to realize as she lay in her small bed that she'd left Gravestone's core behind.

A C-class core of an experienced raider.

Delicious, delicious human core. Hers by right because she'd gotten power from his death so it meant she deserved it, even if it was by proxy. And she'd lost it. Lost it forever! It was enough to drive a girl mad. And hungry. So hungryyyyyy. She wanted to hunt so bad and yet even assuming she could do that, she wouldn't be able to because demon Nestra was currently bleeding pain through their connection in a way that told her that swapping out now would come with shrieks and more regrets.

She'd eaten two breakfasts worth of mana food. Running around last night drunk on power probably made things worse just through the blood loss. Stupidity upon foolishness upon bone-headed idiocy.

Nestra returned to her starting point at the edge of the family gym. It was usually deserted since it had become obsolete. Even Helena had outgrown it, requiring more space to practice her craft. That was why Nestra was surprised when she spotted her brother waiting by the entrance.

The two glared at each other. her brother, handsome and almost ethereal in his cotton shirt with short sleeves, lounging like the B-class apex predator he was.

Human Nestra, imperfect, sweaty, tired and grumpy. Sore as hell. Having worked hard for hours and supremely talented with a blade, yet incapable of bridging that gap between a baseline and a mana user. It didn't matter that she was at the Olympic level. Nobody gave a shit anymore. Not even reality.

He could just cross the distance between them faster than she could process and stab his hand through her brain.

Nestra caught her reflection. It wasn't just that. He looked younger than her. No, he looked out of time, a perfection that couldn't even be captured by a painting because it lacked the sheer presence he had. At his level, gleams might just as well be another species.

And here she was, looking the same age as her mother. If the mask wasn't frozen in time, as she thought it might be, she would grow gray hair while they remained hale and hearty. She would slow down too.

Nestra shook her head. The pain and distress were making her cranky. She just wanted out, but first the city needed to give the all clear. They were probably making sure the Sight Killer was really dead. It might even take a couple of days.

"I have news for you, great news," her brother finally said as he ran out of patience.

Nothing in his face betrayed any sign of joy though.

“It looks like they finally caught the killer. You can go home now.”

“So eager to see the back of me, ey?” Nestra replied before she could remember she was trying to avoid conflict.

His snarky tone was just getting on her nerves.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am.”

Nestra stopped. It was the first time he’d been anything but coldly cordial.

“Is it time for me to hear your many complaints?”

“Yeah. I thought you’d run back again with your tail between your legs, just like last time, but you stayed. I assume you did eventually grow some preservation instinct.”

“Just get to the point and spare me the whining.”

She grabbed a towel while Ulysses altered his posture. Little mana leaked, but he had a presence that could be felt by some animal instinct in her brain. She thought she could feel him now, even if she closed her eyes. Like a weight on her soul.

“When you left, everyone else wallowed in their misery for, what, a couple of years? I wish I were exaggerating but I’m not. The number of times I complained during training and I heard ‘Your sister this, your sister that’. Frustrating.”

“You could try—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Complaining less,” Nestra finished between clenched teeth.

Ulysses clicked his tongue, but he didn’t act. Nestra knew he wouldn’t. If he did, the rest of the family would not let that go and he wanted her gone, not vindicated. It would prove nothing either. Not with the world of difference between them.

“But that’s between me and dad, I guess. What concerns you is that you amputated yourself away from us, which might have been good for you but certainly not for everyone else, especially Helena and Mom. It was a painful and long recovery. Like you were dead. You could have visited, you know?”

“Then we would have had this discussion sooner?”

“And now that finally, things are somewhat good with even mom returning to her old self, who the fuck comes back with an awkward smile? You.”

“Still waiting for the point.”

“You’re just going to do it again. Come and leave and not just make us a toxic pit of pity, but also rip the bandage off every time we could have healed.”

“All I’m hearing is that the decision we have taken, and by we I mean everyone but you, are leaving you somewhat inconvenienced.”

“It was your decision to leave, Nestra.”

“And now that I’m back feeling like I’m no longer dying or need to prove myself, you’re being a prissy bitch. Is there any particular reason why you should care?”

“It was your decision to leave, Nestra!”

“And my decision to come back? How is that your fucking problem? Just avoid me like you’ve kept doing.”

“Like I can avoid someone in my own home?”

“It’s my own home too, unless you’ve forgotten.”

“You LEFT!”

“And I was invited back. What’s the real problem, Ulysses? Pissed because your precious connections might get ruined by my inferior genes?”

“That is not it. You’re just a toxic spikeball in a very delicate basket.”

“Please explain to me how you were all doing so well and I ruined everything. And your party doesn’t count.”

He threw his hands up. His anger was getting the best of him and mana now leaked from his core in furious pulses.

“You never ever cared about your own well-being, you selfish prick.”

“Says the lazy wanker.”

“FUCK YOU.”

Nestra was pushed backed by sheer anger. Mana buffeted her, and Ulysses was now only a handspan away. She met his eyes.

“Do it, if you dare.”

He pulled back without hesitation. He suddenly felt like he was far away.

“You’ll do what you want but you’ll feel awkward all the time, and it will get worse when you’ll come with crow feet and gray hair. But whatever. In the end, I won’t be the one to suffer.”

“Then don’t be the one to whinge. Just ignore me.”

“I’ll try.”

He left.

Nestra waited a full minute before smashing her practice sword into the nearest target.

The ride home was silent. Mom had insisted on coming even though she had a raid planned the next day. Nestra did her best to ignore the teasing voice in her head that said she ought to listen, that her brother was right. Her presence would only hurt them. Maybe not Helena, but at least her mom.

It wasn’t about her being a dreg. It was also about her being an Aszhii. She wasn’t even truly related to her dad. Only her mask was. And it was a lie.

It would only hurt them.

But if she left now, it would not just hurt them, they wouldn’t understand why. Her first flight had been a gesture of desperation. Like cutting off a limb to run away. This one would be an act of betrayal.

It was a betrayal either way. If she stayed, at least she could help Helena. Maybe not the others, but Helena.

Fuck, Helena. Was the void mana really hurting her? Nestra had to do something.

Something beeped in her visor. She put it on to read her messages, leaving the autopilot in charge.

“Dammit, really?” she blurted.

“What’s the matter, honey?”

“I’m asked to vacate my Nestra cave immediately. Those fuckers.”

“Nestra cave?” Mom asked with a knowing smile.

Nestra blushed, but only long enough for her anger to resurface.

“I rented a separate space for food and training. Storage space. Added a few benches. Anyway, it got searched by the Special Crime Division while I was away and the company didn’t like that. They’re evicting me.”

Mom seemed shocked. That gave Nestra a bittersweet feeling. Her mom just wasn't aware of what being a high gleam entailed. Maybe she didn't remember her childhood? Or maybe she just thought things were different now.

"They can't do that? They have to give you advance notice."

Nestra just chuckled.

"That's a courtesy. By contract, they don't have to. They say I'm out, I got 24 hours to clear out. I'm not a House gleam, mom. I don't get preferential treatment."

"Oh..."

Nestra changed course on her GPS. She arrived at the storage space only to realize her pass had been canceled. The guard at the door let her in manually.

"Yes, I remember you. Sorry about that, by the way. Management's orders," the bearded man told her with an apologetic tone.

Nestra's simmering anger wasn't strong enough for her to scream at a minimum wage guy looking after himself. When she parked in front of her box, there were two employees piling her belongings on the pavement.

"I'm supposed to get a day of grace. What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she said, jumping out of her car.

They'd unplugged the damn freezer. She would have to eat everything quickly now. Ugh.

"Um. Sorry. Management's orders."

Someone was out to test her patience.

"Get the fuck out of here. I have one day. You are trespassing."

The two employees were looking at each other. It took them exactly half a second to decide it wasn't their problem and that they were not paid enough to deal with this shit. Nestra cursed as she pulled out her visor to call Gorge just as the pair left.

"Not so fast," her mom said.

Or rather, Deborah Palladian, B-class frost mage.

Nestra felt the wave of cold spread throughout the concrete lot as the two men stopped, turning in terror.

Gone was the patient mother. Nestra instinctively took a couple of step backs. This wasn't for show. Her mom was genuinely angry.

She approached Nestra's freezer, opened it, and the cold outside turned icy. Streaks of frost climbed up its sides like spiderwebs.

"There is something very cold in your sidebag, young man," Deborah said in a voice that could quench a star.

Seeing her mom like that smothered Nestra's anger. Why be angry? There were demigods walking among them wearing a human mask. One of them was supposed to be her mother.

What was a little frustration compared to this?

Nestra had never felt so lonely.

One of the men cried as he reached for his side, pulling one of Nestra's beef tomahawk out of a small bag. Nestra was almost amazed it had fit in there. The fucking food thief.

"Sorry... I'm sorry."

The tomahawk was pulled out of his hands. He hissed as he pulled back, fingertips singed.

"Leave," Deborah ordered.

A moment later, all of Nestra's belongings danced a blinding fast waltz, held aloft by crystalline blue globes. They ended up piled in a neat square. Mom was nothing if not good at packing.

"You should call a mover, darling. I don't think your roadster can handle this. Unless you want me to... convince the owners to give you another chance?"

"No no, it's ok."

The value of the Nestra cave was that it was out of sight. Now that she had the spotlight on her, as well as Seth's help, it no longer had a reason to exist. Gorge had replied. He was busy but promised to send his boys. As Nestra settled to wait, her mom leaned against her car.

"Say, if you want to complain for breach of contract, it's going to be hard, right?"

"I will send a mail to corporate. Sometimes, the execs who fucked up get a slap on the wrist because the directors don't like bad reviews. I don't have the time, resources, or energy to sue them for a few hundred creds worth of damage."

Her mom shrugged.

There was a sound of an exploding pipe. Water pipe, probably. A puddle formed under one of the nearby shutters.

“Oops.”

“Or they could accidentally get five thousand creds of plumber fees plus insurance markup. And someone will definitely get a slap on the wrist,” Nestra admitted.

The two women smiled. Nestra was left wondering if she should feel sorry for using her nepo baby superpowers to get revenge. In the end, she decided she didn’t give a shit.

Helena looked suspiciously from one person to another in Mazingwe’s deserted office. Nestra didn’t blame her sister for being circumspect.

“Is this some sort of intervention?”

“Look,” Nestra said, “the void mana is hurting you, right?”

“I mean, it’s hard on my body. But I’m managing. The school doctor gave me something for the pain.”

“But you’re still in pain,” Nestra insisted.

Helena looked annoyed. After a while, she averted her eyes before giving a noncommittal shrug.

“That means yes.”

Mazingwe shook his head. He offered a cup of hot chocolate which Helena took. A sip, and the girl was immediately hooked. Sneaky Mazingwe. Growing on people like that.

“Pain management is very often affected by bias,” he gently explained. “I cannot overstate how frequently practitioners underestimate chronic pain in women. This becomes even more pronounced for raiders who are expected to heal from damage. We will conduct a full scan of your body. Is there any specific place that hurts more?”

Helena hesitated. She gave Valerian a side glance.

“Are you really a Nephrite?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Wow. You know some bigwigs, sis.”

Valerian preened until Nestra gave him a glare.

“And you... you smell like a spearman,” Helena told Mazingwe.

“Axe girl brain.”

They both chuckled.

“It’s a meme,” Helena explained at Nestra’s look of incomprehension.

“Wait, the old gleam has a better grasp on meme culture than I do?”

Mazingwe gave Nestra a look of pity.

“You are so unwired,” he dared say.

“Alright. Enough, the both of you. Doctor, please fix my sister.”

They had the audacity to laugh at her for a bit longer, then Helena grew serious.

“Yeah, my arms hurt more,” she confirmed.

Mazingwe nodded.

“Additional channeling for close quarter combatants. Anymore and the pain would have spread to your torso. If you would follow me?”

The two stepped into a testing room. Left outside, Valerian tried some small talk with Nestra but she was too anxious. She did congratulate him on mastering his first major spell. They would have to test it in a raid soon.

Helena returned with a downward anxious expression with Mazingwe in tow. She was holding some scan images rather tightly.

“My patient has agreed to share the details with you so I will explain what is happening. Potential void mana is necrotizing tissue of the younger Miss Palladian. The damage extends to every organ on its path, and when the nerves are hit, that is when pain spikes occur. Helena’s natural regeneration struggles to keep up with the exposure.”

He sounded very calm.

“Damage seems to be more extensive than acid mage lesions. Unfortunately, some scarring has already occurred.”

All because the school doctor dismissed her.

“I’m going to kill that fucking fraud,” Nestra growled.

“I’ll handle it,” Helena said.

Her tone showed she wouldn’t listen to objections. Nestra backed down but... fuck!

“I’ll handle it. I got a report from Doctor Mazingwe here. I’ll send it to him alongside the board. I trusted him. Not letting that go.”

“If I may continue?” Mazingwe calmly asked.

The two sisters muttered quiet apologies.

“The scarring remains light and unlikely to hamper Helena Palladian in the long run. I recommend a regular intake of basic healing potions to help natural regeneration along during raids or periods of intense activity. You are starting to raid this semester, right?”

“Uh, yeah yeah.”

Mazingwe’s datasheet snapped in half. Both sisters studied the ceiling and a nearby potted plant with rare intensity.

“If I learned that you are massively increasing your power by raiding illegally without giving your body time to mature and adapt to your aggressive mana, I would be very annoyed.”

“It really helped me,” Helena said.

The snitch.

“Hmmm.”

Mazingwe tapped his chin with a long, thin finger.

“As a matter of fact, I seem to remember that regular use in a controlled environment helped cases of non raiders. Hm!”

The doctor moved away to his old-school desk. He recovered a data sheet from one of the top drawers. Nestra leaned forward. The drawer was filled with spare datasheets.

“Yes. Recent study from the University of Vancouver. I might recommend more regular activity then. In the meanwhile, if House Nephrite could assist?”

“I have a spell for deep fatigue and radioactive damage.”

“Wait, what? Radioactive?” Helena gasped.

“It repairs damage at the cellular level. It should work in your case, even if the origin of the damage is different. Here, let me try.”

Valerian placed his hand on Helena’s shoulder. His serene expression turned focused. Time went on. Helena sighed, choked, then sobbed. It took two minutes for him to finish and by the time he was done, he was noticeably paler.

“Next treatments should not take —”

“Oh my Riel. Thank you! Thank you!”

She was crying now. Nestra gave her a hug.

Mazingwe patted her shoulder as well. Valerian went to grab more chocolate.

“It’s been so long, so long. I forgot what it was like to live without it? How? It... doesn’t hurt anymore! Riel!”

“There there.”

“It’s temporary,” Valerian said as he offered the second cup, which Helena picked with trembling fingers. “We are treating the symptoms, not the cause, but if what you need is time then I’ll be happy to help you along.”

Helena nodded. She was in shock, in a way. Mazingwe eventually offered to talk to her in private, leaving Nestra alone with Valerian again.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it,” Nestra said honestly after the two had left the room.

“You’re welcome. I look after my friends.”

He clearly wanted to say something more so Nestra encouraged him.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Don’t take it the wrong way, but seeing you caring for your sister? it makes me feel like you’re much more, I don’t know, approachable? A person? You’re still that giant demoness with the huge sword that can trounce entire squads but you’re also Nestra, Helena’s sister. It suits you.”

“Yes. I feel like I am finding my place now. Not completely yet, but I think I’m getting there. It’s a pretty good feeling.”

She sighed.

“Sometimes I feel like it took me ten years to get to a point that others process in their teenage years. Like I lost a decade in limbo, and now I have to play catch up. And repair the damage. What can be repaired, at least.”

“Hey if it’s any comfort, some people never grow past their teenage years.”

Nestra chuckled.

“Not sure if I should measure myself to the lowest possible bar.”

Valerian patted her hand. It was a friendly gesture and it was okay.

“Half of Threshold’s population needs therapy and we’re one of the better enclaves on the planet, mental health wise. So take it easy.”

“The world has gone to shit and I need perspective, got it,” Nestra said with a smile to show she didn’t mean it.

“I think I know what you need. More raiding!”

“Absolutely,” Nestra replied. “But before... I need to find a way to help Helena.”

“Kero nuts.”

Nestra had never been more certain of anything in her life.

Sereth looked up from his simmering pot, brows furrowing. His ears did that little dance they did when he was thinking hard.

“Little Nezhra, the kero nut is the fruit of the — of back home. It is a void infused food staple that is anathema to all life that is not of the People.”

“But it is very nourishing!”

Nestra couldn’t contain her excitement.

“The fruit uses void as a nourishment. Helena is already using void so clearly her body has adapted to a degree, or any channel would kill her. What she needs is a little push.”

“For all you know, it might as well kill her.”

She pointed an accusatory finger.

“For all YOU know, mister kero thief, it might not. You said it yourself: it had never happened before. Helena is the first.”

He slowly nodded.

“Human technology is very impressive.”

“So maybe this is what she needs. It would definitely help her. Otherwise... I fear she might be on a timer.”

Sereth winced.

“That might be true. Unfortunately, I have run out.”

“So go seek more! You did it once.”

“It is not that simple.”

Satisfied with his preparations, Sereth closed the lid before reducing the fire. He grabbed a glass of red wine and sat next to Nestra, who was waiting by the couch. On the wall next to her, the Sight Killer’s last painting hung like a trophy.

Teneru did get what she wanted. Nestra would allow her to keep an eye out. But just the one.

“I told you that I cannot travel as female Aszhii do. I am old enough to breach through nearby portal or pseudo-portal worlds, and find my way back eventually. By the time I succeed, years, nay, decades will have passed for you. Last time, I had help from one of the wanderers, a precaution to report on your health immediately. This time, I will not have a way back until you have matured, little Nezhra. There are no more kero nuts to be found until you reach the third sphere.”

“NoOoOo.”

Sereth frowned.

“I thought they were for your sister?”

“Sorry, just... an emotional response.”

“If you want to hasten your progress, you could come with me tomorrow. It is high time you worked on your resistances. Resilience is one of the Aszhii’s strongest points, and you have yet to make much progress in this aspect.”

He tilted his head to the side.

“Though your technique and grasp of the Scornful Crescent remain very impressive.”

“So what, a day out?”

“Yes. If your work allows it. And by that I mean, quit if you have to.”

Nestra frowned. Officer Kim had been exceptionally quiet those past few days, besides a message to confirm the Sight Killer was dead. Technically, Nestra was still on indefinite paid leave pending the resolution of the District Fifteen fiasco. It had only been a few weeks.

“Sure. let’s go hunt some stuff.”

Nestra reached the top of the incline with gleam speed. A child-like curiosity needled her forward, and when the forest expanded like a green curtain below her, the view rewarded her anticipation.

“Wow,” she said.

Sereth came to stand by her side. There was sympathy in his expression as well as kindness mixed with a bit of pity.

The near forest was larger and thicker than any park she'd ever been to. It was also so messy. The air smelled of life, but also death and a thousand other perfumes she didn't recognize. Her eyes searched the chaos for traces of humanity and she did find them. Deep glassed craters formed circles of glittering reflection where Threshold's artillery had turned the horde into so much glass, and in the distance, of course, was the wall.

It was even more impressive from outside. Tall, pristine, unyielding, the battlements and towers bristling with weapons, the wall extended left and right in a continuous and unbroken line for kilometers, and beyond it, the three titanic skyscrapers that formed the trinity of Threshold's skyline stood proudly.

Beyond, still, was the shimmering sapphire of the Pacific Ocean. It was barely visible.

“I have seen pictures and movies, of course, but...”

“Is this really the first time you have left Threshold?” Sereth asked.

Nestra nodded. She was a little embarrassed.

“We were supposed to fly to Berlin for my eighteenth birthday, on air force transport. I wanted to attend the European fencing championship. That dream evaporated along with my damn core.”

“So, first time.”

“Yeah.”

Sereth grabbed her shoulder. His hand was heavy, powerful, yet safe. Nestra was getting touched a lot recently, by people she loved. It was kind of nice. She'd been missing it.

“This is just the beginning! Portal worlds are false. You can feel it as well as I do... but the true worlds beyond? An infinity of possibility.”

He gave her an encouraging smile.

“A lot of it is edible!”

“I don't have a problem,” Nestra replied a little too quickly.

“No no no, of course not. In any case, should we go? The portal in question is a little farther.”

They ran through the forest, and fast too, with Sereth setting the speed at the upper limit of what Nestra could manage. She tripped a few times over slippery roots and exposed boulders. The forest here was a jungle, completely untamed and so dense her human self would have had to cut her way through with a machete. As it was, she just barreled on through bushes and brambles. The scent of loam and leaves was strong.

“You need to get used to it, city bird!” her brother mocked from ahead.

“Yeah yeah. Ouch!”

They ran for an hour before Nestra had to beg for a pause. Her Aszhii muscles were sore. It was the first time it happened without a fight. It left her to wonder.

“Can we grow stronger through training? Like humans?”

“Of course! In fact, techniques and instincts are honed through repetition.”

“No, I meant... muscles.”

He gave her a knowing smile that screamed ‘muscle head’.

“Ah, I see. Hmm. I suppose, yes, but combat itself is generally all the workout we Aszhii need after we have gone beyond the second sphere. Hmmm.”

He considered the question for a while.

“You are probably correct. I would just like to say that it is much more useful to punch a monster in a portal world than it is to lift iron. Are you ready to go? We are almost here.”

Nestra stretched a bit more. She felt a little tired, like after a good workout.

“I need to run more.”

“We will work on that as well.”

“Before we go, are you stopping monsters from hunting us right now? We haven’t seen anything so far.”

“Ah, no. The local monster population hasn’t recovered since the kaiju attack. The forest remains sadly empty.”

He shrugged.

“Less competition for the best fruits, I suppose. You also need to remember that monsters that escape a portal breach and their offspring eventually revert to animalistic instincts. That includes self-preservation.”

“Uh?”

“So two apex predators smashing their way through the undergrowth will only be intercepted by the most confident of local alphas, yes?”

“Oh.”

Nestra stretched one last time. She sniffed the air.

“Is it me or is the mana here thinner, somehow?”

“Yes,” Sereth replied, then he smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you not going to tell me why there is less mana here, in the wilderness, than in the deforested Threshold? How can it be?”

“You know why.”

“More portals? But... they are closed without breaking. I thought breaches led to the most mana infused in the local area. Wait, I think I remember that the number of portals inside of Threshold is pretty high.”

“So it is. Shall we?”

“You’re hiding something. You are smiling and your ears are twitching.”

“Of course I am, but I don’t want to ruin the surprise. The humans will probably show you at some point. Shall we?”

“I might torture the information out of you.”

“You wish. Less talking, more running.”

After two hours like this, Nestra judged they had to be more than a hundred kilometers away from the city, heading west towards the interior of the new continent. Life returned with strange birds she’d never seen watching them race from the sky. And insects. A lot of insects, but little else. Animal life was much more spread out there than in portal worlds.

It was the first time Nestra moved so much through wilderness without being attacked, or seeing anything to interact with, really. Just trees, trees, trees, rocks, grass, all in a big mess without any structure or any point really, and there was so much of it. The dead things mixed

with the living, rotten barks leaning against healthy ones. Very few trees seemed to be thriving. Not like they would in her family's garden.

Really felt weird, not getting attacked.

They had crossed two Thresholds worth of land without encountering anything of note beyond a couple of D-class portals. Even the fruits had been eaten by now.

It was all very disconcerting.

"You will need to learn how to orient and feed yourself, little Nezhra, but that is not a priority."

"I can just enter those portals and eat what's in there."

Sereth shook his head.

"If you are seriously wounded, even a D-class guardian can be a threat. An Aszhii stands alone. You must learn how to survive by yourself, eventually, for when things inevitably go bad. Ah, we are almost there."

Emerging from the treeline, Nestra found herself facing a colossal lone mountain erupting from the green cover. Naked patches of land revealed the stone underneath, like a rash on the fur of a sick animal. A thick column of black smoke emerged from its summit.

"Volcano," she whispered.

"Always an impressive sight. The second sphere portal is over there, halfway up the slope. It's the closest one I could find that matches your needs."

"Ok. Thank you."

"Off you go now," Sereth said with a wave. "I will be waiting here."

Nestra jogged up the slope, easily jumping from one rock to another to avoid the crumbly gravel. Soon, the telltale glow of a portal warmed her skin. C-class for sure. The radiation just welcomed her home even before she could spot the entrance.

Nestra considered slipping into the portal world here and there, however she glanced up and spotted something interesting. There, a little bit above her and to the side, was what looked like a lode of something black and shiny.

She'd heard of new resources sometimes being found out of portal worlds but those were rare and often quickly harvested. This place was isolated though, far away from any minor enclave. Maybe she'd get lucky.

She could sell this — or at least its location — and buy more armor to feed the Skin. A vague sense of heat emanated from the deposit. Lava mana, with some exotic form of stone as well. It might be worth a lot.

Nestra approached. She would need a sample.

The deposit moved.

Beady red eyes opened in the crystalline mass. Red flesh. No, a mouth, opening. A gland under a forked tongue. Red mana.

Nestra sidestepped with *momentum* just an instant too late. Blazing pain scoured her left arm up to the shoulder.

Agony.

The spray of fire followed her to the side. Nestra rolled low and aimed. A bolt touched the body of her foe but the heat and pain made her overshoot the eye. The bolt exploded in a spray of blood and broken scales.

“FUCK.”

Nestra rushed forward, blade brandished. Smoke made everything blurry but she saw more obsidian scales shifting to reveal saurian legs. She knew the damn species, a monitor-like beast that soaked in mana to build its shell. It was in every show as the creature that needed to be killed to forge a good armor, the rarest and most powerful being the ‘diamond tail’. That one was an obsidian tail, and it was angry. Nestra needed to kill it fast.

She charged in an arch and used *momentum*. Her speed placed her behind the beast. She jumped over the expected tail whip the movies always showed. She let the Crescent guide her hand. Her claymore smashed into the base of the tail between two scales thanks to *precision*. Black stone and blood flew.

The creature screeched. *Momentum* carried Nestra next to its head as it pivoted. Claws grasped for her. Her *intuition* screamed danger and she blocked. The strength was monstrous. She was pushed back.

Nestra gritted her teeth when her burnt arm flared with the shock. The creature attempted to bite her. It followed her down the slope in a torrent of chipped rock, talons, and rage. Her sword deflected every blow but the beast’s speed could not be underestimated. A counter finally cut off two of the creature’s fingers. It screeched and collapsed, unbalanced. It was all the opening she needed. Nestra hit the throat. The first strike cut a deep groove that silenced the creature’s cries. The second revealed the spine. The last one finished decapitating it.

Power flooded Nestra. Speed, but also something else. Something red and spicy infusing her skin. She looked at the damage.

Her left arm was covered in blisters seeping red blood, the burnt out skin crawling back like ink on a piece of paper. Of burnt paper.

With the furor of battle leaving her, the pain returned in all its glory. She grabbed a healing and cleaning spray she'd picked specifically for that. It was just a bit frustrating that she had to use it before even entering the portal world.

"Training against elements also means learning how to dodge them," Sereth remarked from afar.

"FUCK YOU!"

She didn't even tell him he could have warned her. He had been very clear, and she was being very stupid. Careless. This was an uncleared section near a portal that might be a repeating one. Of course, it could have some monsters around. She was just being so damn stupid. A city girl naively stepping out for the first time except she was past twenty with zero excuses.

"I'm so fucking stupid."

Ok, ok, it was fine. Fine! Just recover and... actually loot the damn thing? It had to be worth a lot. Too bad she couldn't bring most of it back.

She would collect the best meat and armor, wait for her arm to mend, and then work on that heat resistance.

Nestra breathed in sulfur and overheated gas. It smelled rather bad but her lungs processed all of that without issue. Her human self would be choking on her lungs right now.

The vista in front of her was a dreadful one. A painter asked to depict hell would not have done better. The floor was magma, literally, while basaltic islands jutted from that red, incandescent sea like so many mushrooms. The sky was a forest of serrated stalactites. Heat made the air hazy. A low rumble covered any other sounds.

She spotted a few more obsidian tails patrolling in the distance.

"Holy Riel, what manner of horrid creatures am I gonna find in this devilish pit?"

As if summoned, a form emerged from the nearest lake. First, the dorsal fin, then the maw, even now crunching on some sort of chitinous black snake that bled molten stone. Sashimi lazily finished her meal before hovering over Nestra to wait for the inevitable carnage snack bar.

"Of fucking course."