

Nestra felt very good with herself for all of five seconds, basking in the vindictive light of her pride. Hah! She sure showed them, etc etc. Then reality returned in the form of a light hunger, and it was time to get stock.

She was hunted in a C-class world filled with ambush monsters and a termite army made of acid-spitting creatures whose fortress hid the exit portal. Arguably, not an ideal setup. She needed a plan, but first things first.

The core.

It was taboo to use human cores in most societies, or at least, it was taboo to treat it as just another piece of loot. Gleam cores came from gleams who'd mostly died a violent death since you had to be C-grade to build it, therefore, they were objects of grief. A life cut short. Some weapons or home shields were powered by the core of deceased family members but normally, this was set up in a will.

But this was a human emotion. For once, Nestra had no difficulties discarding her qualms here. It was her hunt. Strix had tried to kill her and failed, therefore, all of his stuff was hers. HERS!

"Woe to the vanquished," she hissed in Aszhii.

Her hand formed void claws, ready to bury themselves in the headless torso, but then she reconsidered.

Why would she waste a perfectly valid chestplate?

"Wake up sleepyhead."

Her Skin symbiote stirred from its lethargy, sending a wave of annoyance up their link. It told her it was starved and therefore shouldn't be bothered.

"Well then fucking eat no?"

Nestra got the impression of someone's eyes going wide at finding a bag of credit chits on the ground. She placed her hand against the chestplate for easy access.

Space warped for teeth and spines, fractal ouroboros extending to infinity, coiled on themselves, yet not, short yet infinitely long. An endless night never broken by any star. Ravenous undoing.

Reality hiccupped again. When Nestra looked up, the chest piece was gone. Slowly, the padding on her shoulders grew thicker and just like the rest, it didn't impede her movement or perception in the slightest.

Really nice shit.

"Boots next?"

The Skin returned an emotion that was remotely associated with happiness, so Nestra went to town. She didn't care that this was tens of thousands of creds. The only function of money was to get her stuff to grow stronger so she could fight bigger things and then eat them. A part of her wondered if all gray demons were battle maniacs like her. Maybe for some, hubris was outsmarting somebody?

She shrugged. Not important now. She plunged her hand in Strix's exposed torso and found the core. It was tiny and yellow to mark the dead man's affinity with electricity.

It tasted sparkly with a citrus note. Her mana reserves improved again. It was very, very nice.

"Are you, ah, done eating Strix?" a voice said from above.

Oh.

"Oops, didn't mean to make a show out of it."

"Riel, Nes—, uh, Crescent. Seriously."

Valerian frowned from his perch, a dozen meters up. Her improved senses picked up his hesitation more than a true discomfort. He was being surprisingly tolerant, though she supposed that between outcasts, one had to be more open to strange differences.

"Do you need help to get down?" she offered as a gesture of apology.

"No, I can climb down on my own. Thank you," he replied a bit curtly.

Nestra frowned. Right. She had to remember not to question his abilities too much. It was clearly a sore point.

The memory of their earlier flight brought her back to the time she was wounded, and he princess-carried her to safety, back after she'd faced Cleaver. Valerian saw himself as a warrior trying to weaponize something that was meant to heal, so she had to be careful not to emasculate him, to use a term Aunt Claire had taught her. Image was super important for gleams.

So she watched him climb down the rocky cliff with only one functional hand, the other being in the process of regrowth. It was a bit awkward but she let him finish. He jumped the last half with grace.

"Right. I have to ask now, do we go after them?" he asked with affected disinterest.

"Yesss. Ragnarok was clear. They mussst die."

"Oh. I didn't know she cared."

Nestra didn't reply because she didn't think the old monster cared about him as much as she did about order and the rule of law.

"You think I'm stupid," he said.

"No no."

Gah. Without a mask, it was back to schooling her expressions.

"By the way and before we plan..." she said, distracting him.

"Oh, yeah. Shouldn't we run? They'll be after Strix quickly!"

"That may be true, but if they rush us now, I think I can beat them. Not to mention, run where? This is an unexplored branch. We could be engaged by monsters and have the TKers attack our backs at that moment. Let's stay there and talk. And besides, they have a better option."

"Which is?"

"They can camp the entrance portal."

Valerian was about to object to her point, but then he reconsidered.

"The portal worlds only has two exits and they assume we can't clear it by ourselves."

"Which they are wrong about," Nestra hissed, "but I would very much prefer to kill them first. They merely need to stop us from leaving to call for reinforcement. They would be near the base camp, and they could delay rescue teams simply by crossing over and saying there was a complication but everyone's fine. We would hypothetically starve unless we come to them. And the monsters tend to track intruders."

"Hmmm."

Nestra was making several assumptions here, but it was objectively the best solution for them if they assumed Nestra was working alone, and not for Ragnarok.

"They could be waiting for us by the lake as well," Valerian said, and Nestra nodded to mark her agreement. "But it's the same thing either way. We would have to fight them head on. In an hour would be best."

Nestra frowned, remembering something.

"You did say you'd left them a little gift. I assume it relates to the spell you used during our escape?"

"That spell was designed to mess with someone's inner ear. It fucks with their sense of balance, yes, and I'm really happy it worked. But that's not what I left them with."

Valerian smiled. It wasn't pretty. The golden boy sure had a dark side to him, which Nestra understood only too well. She, too, had been pushed far and for a long time.

"Well don't keep me hanging?"

"Yersinia Pestis Ulaanbataar."

He smirked. It took all of three seconds for Nestra's middle school education to kick in.

"Holy sssshit you gave them the MAGICAL BLACK PLAGUE?"

He shrugged.

"They're vaccinated so their immune system should eventually kick it out but it will take them a couple hours, at least."

"You... wait, the incubation period is too long."

"Oh no no no I infected them at the gate, earthside. When I shook their hands. I merely overloaded it once they attacked."

Nestra was tempted to take a step back. That man was vicious.

"Damn. What about me?"

"From our spars, I know bacteria have no effect on you. If there are pathogens that work on your people, I don't have access to them."

"Wow."

"Yea, scary right? There's just the fact it only works on humans, takes hours to set up and then they recover by themselves. But other people can just punch you in the face with a stalactite made of obsidian. No big deal."

"Hey, no need to ssssimmer in your anger. I was not impresssed by the disease, only by your... ruthlessness. It shall serve you well."

"You reckon?" he replied sarcastically but Nestra was paying close attention to his features and she knew he cared.

So she nodded aggressively.

"Right. Hmm. By the way, I got the bird you killed. You wanna eat it? It's in my bag."

"Later. For now, let's go search for our friends before they set up traps."

"And the plan is..."

“With the plague in their system and assuming they’re on the move, it’s better to catch them now. If we don’t find them immediately then we can reconsider.”

“Hmmm... battle formation?”

“I take point, you cover me. Buff me if you can, then we engage together. Let me get rid of the mage since I have transitional abilities.”

“I need a weapon.”

“Oh, yeah. You can have Strix’s sword.”

He glanced at the discarded weapon.

“You are... not going to eat it?”

“Nah.”

The scion of House Nephrite picked up the scabbard, removing the saber to check its condition. He scoffed. Nestra joined him but the edge seemed fine. There were Chinese characters engraved on the blade.

“Something funny?”

“It’s Mandarin. It reads: you are already dead.”

Valerian sighed.

“Can’t believe you got crippled by an edgelord,” Nestra chuckled.

“Please never mention this again. Oh, and since we’re there, I have another request.”

“Hmm?”

“When... If I die, don’t eat my core.”

He was dead serious.

“Of coursssse not. You’re my friend.”

“Oh. Oh, thank you... hey, first friendship between an alien and a human!”

“I had friends before I met you, Valerian.”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s go?”

They ran back this time. Nestra really believed they would stand a better chance engaging soon though someone like her old squad leader Camus might have come up with an out-of-the-box tactic but he wasn't here, and Nestra didn't have a lot of flexibility in her battle techniques.

Mostly she ran people through with her sword. It had proven surprisingly effective over the past few weeks.

Five minutes into the run, she slowed down when she felt a rush of power. This one went directly towards her resilience. Her bones flashed with heat for a second before settling again, and the pain was intense enough she could tell what had happened.

"The guardian just died."

"You felt it?" Valerian asked.

She nodded. If the guardian died now, there was a good chance.

"It was badly wounded but..."

"There is a chance they finished it off on the way back. Let's hurry."

Nestra sprinted, with Valerian hot on her heels. To his credit, he could move very fast for someone with no related skill, and it only improved as time went on. The path back felt unfamiliar. All those craggy canyons looked pretty much the same to Nestra, but the droplets of congealed blood from Valerian's mood confirmed this was indeed the path she'd taken. Soon, she could feel the cool, wet air that surrounded the lake, smell the slightly damp smell of its shores. They were almost there.

"I hear someone coughing," Valerian warned.

Nestra accelerated.

There they were, near the shore, catching their breath after finishing off the giant crawfish. Its corpse waited by their side, still half submerged in water. Nestra's bolt had exposed its brain, and a precise strike had ended its life. The two looked up when they felt her approach, surprise marking their features.

They looked like shit.

Nestra had seen shocking photos from internet archives from the Mongolian plague back in the days, humanity's first encounter with magical bacteria. It had been a localized extinction event. Now, it was treatable and a vaccine existed, but the symptoms were still visible while the TKers' immune system struggled to fight off the aggression. They were sweating, with deep pockets under their eyes. Their breath came as wet rattles in the unnatural silence. Nestra's acute sight picked up buboes pushing against their neck pieces. It had to be quite uncomfortable. She slowed down, a little horrified despite herself. Valerian could be sweet and he was right in the sense that she could just stab someone he had to work to infect.

But shit, Riel, that was nasty.

Nestra discarded her horror as she charged them. Nasty or not, they had it coming. They killed Sheryl.

“What the—”

“You—”

Power filled her limbs when Valerian activated his buffs, the life mana eased into her body as she let it.

Armored, saber-wielding Satoshi in front. Earth aligned.

Robed, pyromancer Naomi at the back. Already casting.

Nestra charged forward, easily dodging firebolts aimed her way. Satoshi made to receive her, so she veered slightly to her right to force him to block her path to Naomi. Mana surged from the two.

Nestra stopped at the last moment rather than using *momentum*. Satoshi stomped the ground. Rocks erupted everywhere. Nestra used *immovable* at that moment.

A fiery wave tore the air all around Satoshi. They'd expected her to use *momentum*. She wasn't the only one who could learn from experience, obviously. Instead, she received the earthwave on her forearm, the impact cancelled by both her Skin, her defenses, and the strange skill. She parried Satoshi's follow up easily. He'd clearly not expected her to tank that. Instead, she used *passe-muraille* to move through the raised wall, catching him in an awkward position.

To his credit, he rotated quickly, giving Naomi a line of sight. Nestra stepped back to avoid the bolt... but now, she had Satoshi to her right and Naomi in front of her, defenseless.

If Strix had been here and alive, things would have been more complicated. But he was dead. And Nestra had Valerian.

And the team killers had the magical bubonic plague.

Nestra struck a vicious blow at Satoshi, forcing him back, then she sprinted towards Naomi. The Scornful Crescent guided her steps. Right, dodging the first bolt, then left, dodging the second. Bad balance forced her to let the third splash on her sword. Heat made her blink.

The fourth bolt glanced on her shoulders. Searing pain spoke of scorched nerve endings. Nestra grit her teeth. She was there, within striking range.

Naomi's aura exploded all around her, the fireblast melting the stone underneath her. Every piece of vegetation around was reduced to cinder. Nestra had expected it, of course. She

used *momentum* to step back, then *passe-muraille* to merge into the rock below long enough for the attack to pass over her. Unfortunately, she was spat back almost immediately and the place was hot. Hot enough to hurt her. She threw a bolt at Naomi who didn't try to evade. Instead, the fire mantle surrounding her coalesced and though it clearly took a lot out of her, she still managed to stop the spell from obliterating her.

That was fine with Nestra. It would have been better to cast at Satoshi's flank. Whatever.

Valerian engaged Satoshi immediately anyway, and Nestra was forced immediately back into the fray. The healer was already struggling one on one. If Naomi had the time to offer support, he would get disabled. She had to get in.

As much as she was loath to use an untested power in combat, the occasion was just too perfect. Nestra activated the electricity burst attack spell she stole from Strix. Immediately, her reserves dipped and her body felt... lighter. Faster. It felt great.

Almost natural.

She moved in faster than ever, Naomi's expression turning to shock and horror as Nestra went in. Satoshi roared, but Valerian was sticking to him too closely.

It was already over.

Nestra easily dodged the barrage of firebolts, then *momentum* on the other side of a heat blast, into Naomi's back. The mage coughed with pain as she attempted to turn. Nestra was so close, she could see every hair strand on her prey's neck.

The charge in her body destabilized. Hold onto it a little longer?

No, this was a perfect test. Nestra let go, and the electricity exploded outward in a wave of searing arcs. Naomi screamed in pain as the charge coursed through her body, even with her robe catching some of it. The heat pushing on Nestra's skin faded for a moment.

It was too perfect an opening.

Nestra lunged. Her void-infused sword stabbed through the woman's chest like a knife through butter. Nestra pulled back and stepped away.

Naomi tried to keep the blood and viscera in. She had blood on her face. She seemed surprised. Very surprised. Nestra caught that moment while the TKer died and felt... weird.

This was a sanctioned kill for mankind. But she wasn't human. But she felt like one of them... and murder was still taboo... except it wasn't. And they'd tried to kill her friend. And they'd killed Sheryl. But would Aunt Claire approve?

And then the human conflict was washed away with the pleasure of a good kill. Her magic abilities improved a bit with the power influx — Naomi was a good mage — but more importantly, she'd done it. That was two out of three.



Nestra shook her head. Her hubris was talking, but the fight wasn't over yet. Satoshi keened with emotional pain, a yell that was so full of pure grief that it scared even her. He charged, taking a wound to the leg from a reactive Valerian. A wave of earth collapsed on Nestra who used *passe-muraille* to dodge. Satoshi's blows were powerful, but badly directed and unfocused, made awkward by poorly undirected anger. Nestra enjoyed redirecting everything, then countering. This was his fault. He'd brought it on himself. And now, she'd already won.

So she stepped back and smiled at the furious, bereaved man, because there was going to be a pleasurable ending to this whole farce.

Satoshi swore at her in Japanese. Without her visor, she didn't understand what he said but it sounded like an oath. With a finger pointed in accusation, the man let his heart out. Nestra stood at a distance. She let him vent.

As he was about to finish, Sashimi bit his head off.

Nestra'd seen the shark emerge from the air above the battle, of course, and to his credit, Valerian had kept a perfect poker face during the whole approach. The void shark's black fangs sheared through the armor with no difficulties whatsoever. In an instant, the last of the trio was decapitated. Valerian was the last human standing in the portal world.

Nestra chuckled when the power of a C-rank kill filled her. Celerity and mind speed, this time. She was still at the low end of C-rank, and yet those human kills were so nourishing that it might not be the case for very long. As Satoshi's body fell, Nestra approached Naomi's corpse.

"Woe to the vanquished, again I guess."

She ate the core. This one felt less compatible, though her reserves increased anyway.

Sashimi was still munching on Satoshi's head under the horrified gaze of Valerian when she returned to the scene of the crime, so to speak. The healer didn't wait.

"So... you didn't react so I didn't either... Is this normal?"

"That's Sashimi, my hunting companion."

Not a pet and certainly not a friend. The void shark was eyeing the remaining human with naked curiosity. Nestra frowned.

Valerian didn't have void magic.

"Sashimi no! This one is mine!" she hissed in Aszhii.

But Sashimi wasn't hungry, or rather, she wasn't considering Valerian with just hunger. Nestra frowned. What was the seafood buffet on about this time?

“What?”

The beast swam closer, maw dropping Satoshi’s half-chewed head. Valerian turned his head away with disgust. Nestra, though, got a very conflicting message from the weird creature.

It was greed. Sashimi coveted Valerian.

“You can’t have him. What’s so special about him anyway?”

As an answer, the shark sort of squirmed, then made hacking noises. Valerian saw that and stepped back from the approaching squall, and not a minute too soon.

Sashimi projectile vomited its stomach. And that was not a metaphor either. Nestra saw its actual gut before the void shark swallowed it back up. What remained on the ground was gastric acid and a mangled arm with a ‘handful’ of half-digested fingers. For once in her goddamn life, Nestra was actually shocked.

‘What the?’

“Oh Riel. That’s... that’s my arm!” Valerian said!

Then to her surprise, he actually grabbed the ruined appendage to remove a watch from the wrist, attaching it to his newly regrown hand.

Nestra shook her head, speechless. Inside of her mind, Sashimi’s thoughts came like door-to-door missionaries. Extremely unwelcome.

*Infinite.*

*Regrowing.*

*Food.*

“No. For the last damn time, hunt your own shit you lazy main dish!”

Meanwhile Valerian was unlatching an expensive-looking watch from his discarded arm. It had to be really good to resist void shark stomach for more than a couple of minutes. The wiggling emergency snack moved away, but then she looked behind Nestra with wary curiosity before disappearing into the void.

Nestra turned on herself, expecting to find some assassin bug at a distance. Damn things interrupting her looting.

She was wrong.

Walking down the incline at a leisurely pace was the last person Nestra would have imagined seeing now. Of average size, built like a fencer and striding with casual elegance

was an androgynous form in armor, face hidden by a ceramic mask in the shape of a fox. A long sword rested on her back, the elaborate handle long enough to accommodate two hands. Dark brown eyes peered out from the small holes with calm interest. More tellingly, Nestra tried to feel for mana and got... nothing. Even with her horns bare. The intruder was a blank, a perfectly composed silhouette that betrayed nothing except for predatory grace. Nestra knew from their previous encounter that Fox Mask was a manakinetic, but that level of control was insane.

And it was Fox Mask. She was absolutely sure of it. The very same thief she'd chased with her squad before she disappeared into the portal, the same thief Special Affairs was pursuing all over Threshold. Now that thief was here, in the flesh.

Nestra's only prayer was that Fox Mask would merely be a C-class. Any higher and they stood zero chance.

And what was she even doing here?

Valerians had long realized her unease and he was now standing at a distance, Strix' weapon bare.

Nestra slowly unsheathed her own blade but Fox Mask didn't care. She stopped at a distance with a light step and a complete lack of concern.

"Well, this is a major disappointment," she started with a flat voice.

Her gaze inspected the corpses of Satoshi, then Naomi with polite interest. Nestra now knew for sure who'd ordered the hit on Valerian. Well, she didn't know, but she knew it had to be an enclave. That's what that Special Operations guy had said anyway. Fox Mask's gaze briefly went to Valerian before settling on Nestra. At this point, she tilted her head to the side.

"Well well, and who, or rather what might you be?"

"Rude," Nestra deadpanned.

"Ah, a transformation power. Unusual. Now, time is of the essence so I believe I shall be direct. I take it that you object to me capturing the good Valerian of House Nephrite here? I promise you that he will be sedated, and that no harm will come to him."

"Robbing ssssomeone of their freedom is harmful," Nestra reproached. "Let us go."

"I cannot do that."

"There isss always a choice."

Fox Mask sighed.

"You know, dear Valerian, you could do a lot of good out there."

"I will not be taken as a slave to the mainland... or an enclave," the gleam replied with a knowing look.

Silence spread across the clearing. When it was clear neither Nestra nor Valerian wouldn't yield, Fox Mask nodded. Once.

"Well, I suppose this is it. I am not ready to burn the village down, so I will... have to insist, even though I stand on the wrong side."

She unsheathed the sword at her back. It was an old thing, an 'espada ropera' that predated the incursion, but the enchantments on its straight blade were definitely functional. The hilt was a delicate, fine work though dulled by age. Nestra felt a shiver crawl up her spine, her instincts screaming that this was dangerous, very dangerous. She remembered the way the woman fought, back when she'd faced her as a baseline. Clean, efficient when Nestra was more vicious and aggressive.

Then she'd been so fast, there had been no contest. Nestra could only hope this wouldn't be the case this time.

Mana warped around Fox Mask. It was the only warning Nestra got to strike as well, countering the first attack with the power of desperation. By some miracle, the blades clanged together. Fox Mask's alpha strike went wide. Nestra didn't wait to see what would happen. She struck with a roar. Fox Mask deflected the powerful strike with a precision that bordered on perfection... but she hadn't accounted for Nestra's strength, and so she was pushed back.

Only a little.

Nestra breathed hard as the two fencers faced each other. This... had been too damn close. Fox Mask was using mana to help herself move! But... Nestra was fast. Barely fast enough to hold on.

Valerian's buff filled her body with power. She felt rejuvenated.

"Oh? A fellow practitioner, I see. I apologize for the cavalier attitude."

The woman saluted. Nestra returned her own.

"Hmmm. How strange."

She attacked again.

Nestra rotated and struck. Her blade hit only air but Fox Mask's attack was aborted, so Nestra used *momentum* to close the distance. Her lunge was deflected. Not caught by surprise then. Nestra pressed on anyway, using her superior strength for a flurry of blows. The Scornful Crescent warned her not to give her foe time to develop attacks because, and it was sad to say, Fox Mask was simply better. Lunge, deflected in tierce. Three stabs deflected, the last leading to a counter that Nestra countered as well. Step back, overhand

blow that Fox Mask sidestepped easily. Too easily. Nestra pivoted and struck up immediately, pressing her muscles to the limit to reverse the motion. Fox Mask stepped back then countered immediately. Nestra was forced to retreat though she felt something hit her armguard. Just a glancing blow. It failed to penetrate her skin.

Fox Mask pulled back. Seeing her blade unsullied, she hummed.

The enchantments on the blade flared to life. Not good. Nestra aimed a bolt where she thought Fox Mask would strike.

The woman changed course mid charge and the dot went wild. For the first time ever, Nestra missed.

“Shit.”

“What a strange language,” the fencer said offhandedly, stabbing towards Nestra’s chest. Nestra somehow managed to slam the blade up so it bit in her shoulder instead. This time, her resistances were not enough to stop the sharp pain coming for her. She gritted her teeth and struck back. Horizontal slash.

Fox Mask was forced to block. The shorter woman was pushed back though the mana surrounding her prevented her from careening away. Nestra called for lightning and charged.

Had to use that opening.

She engaged her enemy in a flurry of furious blows. All of them were blocked but some energy leaked from the strike, and Fox Mask was forced back with a hiss. Finally, Nestra had her. As Fox Mask veered away with mana, Nestra followed with *momentum*.

She struck and released the electricity charge at the same time. Low to up. To the heart.

Fox Mask had no way of escaping.

And so she didn’t. A massive, transparent shield took the brunt of the electricity while a desperate parry pushed Nestra’s tip away from Fox Mask’s torso. Rather than countering, Fox Mask disengaged.

Nestra used the opportunity to check her wounded shoulder. It didn’t hurt yet but... Oh.

It was closed. The wound was closed. A quick glance back showed a very focused Valerian. He was healing her in real time.

Well, that changed things now didn’t it?

Nestra returned her attention to Fox Mask, who was now standing casually with her finger tapping the nose of the fox. It was so weird that Nestra stopped, wondering what was going on.

The index finger stopped tapping. It slowly pointed towards Nestra.

“I knew you were familiar. That style... Police girl.”

Cold terror crawled up Nestra’s spine.

“You look much better now.”

The fear in Nestra’s heart reached a paroxysm, that was, until she remembered a fact she had completely forgotten in the heat of the moment. It wasn’t just that she was an awakened Aszhii now. That just gave her a chance to fight back.

It was that she wasn’t the only Aszhii around.

If Sereth allowed Fox Mask to come in, that meant that Nestra had a reasonable chance to win. She wasn’t just being toyed with.

So long as Valerian kept healing her, Nestra could play the long game. Her recent growth might have made the Aszhii more awkward, but in terms of physical power and mana reserves, she was confident she could all her own.

“It would be unwissse to share this.”

“Oh, our secret is safe with me. I hope I didn’t share something I shouldn’t have?”

“I know who she is,” Valerian growled, “and by all means, try to share.”

“I understand your animosity, and will take your warning to heart. I know when I am outclassed. I know very well, in fact.”

She moved her blade through the air. It whistled.

“But I interrupted one of the best duels I’ve had in years for frivolous reasons. Do try to kill me please.”

“With pleassure!”

Nestra went back into the fray. She barely dodged one of Fox Mask’s stabs and felt a piercing pain under her ribs, but then her savage sweep crashed against the other fencer’s ribs, pushing her on the ground.

Nestra let Valerian’s magic work on her, too afraid to see how hurt she was. Fox Mask used the opportunity to pick herself up. By the time she was upright, Nestra’s bleeding had stopped.

She filled her limbs with electricity and attacked again.

The mana was hard on her nerves, but Valerian's efforts meant Nestra could just give it her all the entire time without pause. She leaned into the natural savagery that was her nature, tempered by the edge of the Scornful Crescent. Slowly, her onslaught pushed Fox Mask back until the woman's limbs shook with every strike. Nestra knew she couldn't win through skill alone. The other woman was older, better trained, more in control of her body. So Nestra used her superior strength to smash. Her. Down. Hit. After. Hit.

Thing was, Fox Mask didn't seem bothered at all. Nestra still kept her guard up, leaving a few openings unchallenged because they felt like traps. Maybe she could have won. Maybe not. She didn't need to take a risk there.

Nestra really thought she was winning, but Fox Mask took all of her remaining mana and blurred. Nestra's instincts screamed. She *momentum* back, feeling it was useless, then she used *immovable* and waited.

The blade missed her heart, but it plunged in her left shoulder to the bone. Pain made her scream. Grey blood flowed, oxidizing to crimson droplets as it fell. A second wave of pain followed the first. Fox Mask was trying to rip her sword off the wound but Nestra's resilient flesh still made it a little hard.

So Nestra leaned in. She let the blade bite deeper and struck at Fox Mask's wrist. The woman scrambled back, then she went for Valerian, but the scion of House Nephrite was ready. A subtle wave made Fox Mask stumble with perfect timing. Strix's blade pinged on a hastily raised shield.

Then Nestra rammed her. Blood flowed from a wound on Fox Mask's leg.

Nestra fell to the side, still bleeding heavily despite Valerian's effort. Fox Mask snapped her fingers, blade reappearing in her free hand. Her leg bled profusely on the ground.

Just as calmly as before, Fox Mask tilted her head. She seemed to be considering her options.

Nestra prepared a bolt, just in case, but she wasn't sure she could even land it. Not with Fox Mask's mana control getting in her way.

Seconds ticked on until the expert fencer apparently reached a conclusion.

"I don't think I can get you after all, not while you are supporting each other."

She shrugged.

"I made a real effort, and I even got wounded. I declare that this is enough."

She made to sheathe her blade.

"Unless, of course, you want to fight to the death? I would rather not."

Nestra shook her head.

She didn't want to kill Fox Mask. In fact, she wanted to face Fox Mask again after getting better. It wasn't that Fox Mask was the deadliest opponent she'd ever come across. She wasn't. She was, however, a blade master. Or mistress, whatever. And Nestra still had much to learn.

"Then I shall take my leave and report my failure. Now, if you will excuse me, I bid you a good day."

The woman made to turn, hesitating one last time.

"It's the second time you 'thwarted' my efforts, police girl. I hope we see each other again."

"Will do my damn best," Nestra panted.

She found she meant it. Without another word, Fox Mask left, slowly making her way up the slop back towards the entrance portal.

"You think they'll stop her?" Valerian asked.

"I'm actually pretty sssure they don't know she's here," Nestra replied with confidence.

"Hah."

They remained silent until Nestra was done healing, then before anything else could happen, they were forced to dispatch a small termite patrol.

It was a frustrating waste of time with minor gains but Nestra still took it.

"So, I wanted to ask. What was it about slaves?" she asked Valerian as they were cleaning their weapons.

He tsked. It was clearly not a happy thought.

"Enclaves and some mainland territories have a dearth of healers. It tends to be the case when one completely forfeits normal medicine because they're gleams and totally beyond mundane things."

"Such as running water."

"You understand. Healers are but one more commodity people with deadlier powers tend to peddle if they can afford it. I assume I'm worth quite a bit as a healer. I am, after all, pretty good at it. I assume Fox Mask was sent to make sure my capture was going without a hitch."

"I sssee," Nestra replied, then after a delay because Valerian was clearly feeling down, "I'm sorry. This is a shitty thing to do to people and I'm sssorry you were targeted."



“Why, thank you Nestra, I mean, Crescent. I shouldn’t get used to it or I’ll call you Nestra in public. I would like to ask though... what now?”

Nestra looked around her.

There were two human corpses, half a dozen termites, and a dead crawfish the size of a small bus.

Technically, they could leave now. They already finished their task, which was to respectively survive and eliminate the TKers. Except, there was one thing missing.

Nestra took Satoshi’s core and ate it. More mana regen, which was a nice change. With this, all her abilities were in the C-rank range.

“We need to recover Sheryl’s body.”

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking?”

“If something took her, we find it, we kill it, and we recover what we can. And then, we should try to finish the world.”

“What, just the two of us?”

“Of course! You wanted to experiment? Let’s experiment now. It shouldn’t take more than a day.”

“Oook, I guess.”

“But first, let’s eat! I’m starving.”

Valerian’s eyes lit up. He was obviously also in need of calories to offset all that healing. Freshly healed tissue tended to be more fragile as well so they ought to stop for a while.

“Oh, you have another sandwich?”

“No no no. Much better than that.”

Nestra pointed at the body of the guardian.

“I knew we would kill the giant crawfish thingie. I have brought all we need to make an étouffée, Cajun style. I even got us enclave Basmati rice!”

Somehow, her enthusiasm failed to reach Valerian though she wasn’t sure why.

“It’s going to be like this every time, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Let’s just say, I already miss showering.”

Nestra eyed the lake.

“Nevermind, I’ll help with mincing the onions.”