

The first thing a longer expedition would do was establish a base camp, so the raiders descended at the edge of the chasm to find a suitable spot. There was a relatively flat space on the right side, by a cliff, with a good view of the valley so that was the place they chose.

Led by the three TKers, the rest put down their tents. Nestra's own basic sleeping bag got a few pitying looks. They were really looking down on her.

As for Nestra, she was getting pissed off. It wasn't the others' reactions — she didn't care about them — it was all the fucking delay. This was a hunting ground, so hunt? No? She pushed a few pebbles with her foot in annoyance while Satoshi placed a proximity alarm enchantment at the center, next to a neatly dug firepit.

It was fine. She just had to look at it from another angle. From C-rank on, expeditions took a day at the minimum. Raiders lived and died on preparation. Humans conquered earth not through physical prowess but through tools and communication, and those took work. She couldn't simply get prissy because Sereth tossed her into portals with vague instructions as a 'learning experience'.

Besides, she was here to study her prey. And then kill them.

Nodding to herself, Nestra did a perimeter walk. No one stopped her so she assumed she was doing something right. Her thoughts wandered to her father as she inspected the cliffs for anomalies.

He'd briefly brushed upon camp preparations during training, but he'd left the details for later. For when she 'came of age' as he used to joke. Back when she had potential and Ulysses dicked around with his drunk friends.

That was a long time ago.

Nestra frowned at bird tracks near some thorny shrubbery. There would be avian fliers here. Had to keep an eye out because the briefing didn't mention them.

Her human dad really tried his best with her. It was just that he and mom were, well, not the most adjusted people out there. Even before the Incursion, her dad used to be a sound engineer for events and the impression she got was that he'd been highly competent but... not well-liked. He would still have tried to make sure she was prepared with everything before raiding while her demon side of the family preferred a much more free-range approach to spawn rearing. So now she looked like a clown, but was also deadlier than any single raider here.

Kind of weird how that worked.

Could she even get close to him again? He was a bit of an idiot but he'd still tried his damn best. But he wasn't even her real dad. Or was he? Her human form definitely took after him.

What a mess.

Nestra mechanically stabbed a snake — this one had been in the briefing. It was barely a meter long and venomous. A burst of energy went towards... a resistance. She felt it bubble in her veins so probably toxins. It was minor but everything helped.

She finished the round without further incident. As she did, she spotted a small swarm of fliers in the distance, moving as black dots over the orange sky. A patrol?

Satoshi was glaring at her when she returned, so she approached Valerian instead. Healers were usually secondary commanders because of their tendency to be the last ones standing in times of trouble. And also because they tended to be more patient and vindictive than the average alligator.

“Found thisss. Also, the guardian has flying patrols out.”

“Good to know. The brief said the snakes would only be out during the night so this is valuable information. Everyone, watch out if you’re going to the jacks!” he called.

Sheryl nodded, focused on some electronics. She looked at home in this dry world now that her helmet was off, with short dark hair and a tan skin around a pair of sad brown eyes. Nestra knew the others were listening but they didn’t show it.

“But, ah, Miss Crescent... why did you keep the snake?”

Why else?

“Sssoup.”

“Soup?”

“Hm.”

“Is... the snake not poisonous also?”

The brief didn’t mention it. She was poison resistant anyway. She shrugged.

“Probably not.”

“Well, ok.”

Nestra shoved the snake in an isolating bag while Satoshi gathered everyone. The base camp would act as a fallback position if things went to shit or people got separated. That was the first safety rule. The second came immediately as Sheryl handed everyone small gunmetal blobs: reinforced short-range radios.

“Right, you know the drill. Everyone tests theirs.”

A mess of ‘1 2’ and ‘hello’ followed. Nestra joined it to find that yes, her radio worked fine. Technological equipment functioned in Portal Worlds, but a user had to bring it themselves

and most military grade weapons wouldn't be worth the effort to bring them through most of the time. Surveillance equipment was very valuable though, especially in larger worlds. Again, something her parents had mentioned but that she'd never experienced herself. She caught Strix looking at her as she was daydreaming.

He grabbed the handle of his sword. His eyes narrowed. Nestra struggled against a powerful wave of annoyance. Her brain insisted he was a threat that needed to die but she also knew, intellectually, that he was just being a fucking jerk. Gobbet chuckled when he caught the scene.

Nestra really thought he looked like a weasel though that was her bias talking.

"Everyone good to go?" Satoshi said, "Then let's depart."

Led by Satoshi, the group moved into the chasm at a good pace. Nestra stayed at the rear, relaxed for now. She was confident the TKers would try to zero Valerian and her during a hard fight, not near the start. At least on the first try. The chasm descended rather sharply, and the dry, warm air soon turned cold and a bit damp. More vegetation appeared as green spots clinging to the walls. It was half thorns and half thick green leaves crawling between cracks. The stone here was old. Gravel and pebbles rolled down the slope under the metal boots of the front liners despite their enhanced grace. Nestra guessed they wouldn't take anyone off guard.

The first attack came rather fast. Both Strix, the striker, and Gobbet, the sniper, reacted at the same time. Nestra felt mana in the distance shortly after but it took another few seconds for her to pick up the buzz of insectile wings.

Nestra took a moment to appreciate the way the manatermitidae differed from the magical ants she'd already met. They were also large insects with six 'feet', mandibles and the likes, but while the ants were clearly specialized, the termites varied from one individual to the other. Their coats were yellow and those that came had wings but that was about it. Out of the dozens of monsters diving between the walls of the chasm, some were large, some small, some had powerful mandibles that could probably cut her limbs clean off, others had suspiciously glowing abdomens. The leader was the size of a car and sported an extra pair of scythe-like appendages on its back, like the limbs of a mantis.

Nestra took a second to look around while Satoshi babbled useless commands she didn't pay attention to. Obviously she had to make her role as artillerist believable if only because the others would assume she was weaker at point blank range.

Nestra pointed at the scythe termite. A dot of potential appeared on its torso at a great distance and after a short delay. Nestra frowned as she realized that monsters could potentially dodge it if they felt it coming. Fortunately, massive shredding insects were not arcane powerhouses as well.

A moment later, she unleashed her bolt. At this range, the energy consumption was massive but so was the explosion. The flight of termites did try to dodge, in vain. Once the dot had landed, Nestra's spell would hit. The only option was to seek cover.

Up in the air, there were none.

The void bolt detonated with a land bang, exploding the lead termite and two others that were simply caught by the blast. They fell and the rest spread out, shaken by the detonation. Energy filled her until her skin tingled though that was the nature of the boost. She felt a little stronger but also more resilient, though she wasn't sure to what yet.

Satoshi turned to her with a look of disbelief.

"I said to hold? No?"

Nestra shrugged.

"Optimal range."

"You should have told me."

"You should have asked?"

"Kisama wa... GAH! I don't have time for this. HOLD!"

Naomi brandished her staff to Nestra's left while Gobbet, to Nestra's right, nocked an arrow. They didn't seem too concerned even when a column of foot termites charged up from behind a ridge farther down. The attack was coordinated. That wasn't unexpected for eusocial monsters.

"Fire!"

Nestra targeted where the land termites were most concentrated, then cast again. Just like that, half of her reserves were gone, but now that she had her own core, those would replenish fairly fast. Another burst of energy filled her along with the same resistance, as to what it was, she now had a very strong inkling.

"Might want to target the large abdomen onesss," she said offhandedly.

"Shut the fuck up," Gobbet replied.

He still shot one of them which made Nestra smirk. Transparent liquid burst from the perforated membrane, drenching a nearby patch of greenery. Smoke immediately rose from it along with an acrid scent carried by the wind. Nestra could see the acid eating through the biomass with absolute accuracy. Yeah, nasty.

"Naomi!" Satoshi yelled.

The mage nodded. Flame arrows flew to the designated ants with unerring accuracy. Fortunately, their nature made them easier to defeat, especially when it turned out that the outside of the creatures were not impervious to acid. That left most of the remaining termite

without options except charging forward, which they did. There, the C-rank front liners showed their worth.

Satoshi was a pillar of confident strikes, each attack of his massive saber cleaving through exoskeletons like they were made of paper. Strix charged in, cutting wings with brutal strikes of his sword which he tended to sheathe between assaults, perhaps for added speed. Sheryl and Valerian were also solid though clearly not as good as their partners, though at least Sheryl managed to send monsters flying with every hammer blow which gave her breathing room. Nesta had to agree with Satoshi on this. The team didn't need her. They would have managed just fine right until they killed her friend.

The mop up only took a few minutes during which Nesta paid attention around her. That was how she caught a flickering of mana behind her, slightly to her right.

There was something crawling on the cliff wall. It was getting closer slowly, patiently. Nesta looked in the direction and found yet another bug but this one was different. Its orange, mottled coat merged perfectly with the dirty ochre of the wall. An oblong thorax stayed flat against the sheer cliff while thick short legs carried it ever closer to the group with measured steps. Two antennae flickered on occasion but it was the thin spear-like thing where the moth ought to be that told Nesta what she needed to know. This was an assassin bug, and it was not supposed to show up so early in the portal world.

Nesta considered her options. Gobbet clearly focused in front of himself which was not his role but whatever. The assassin bug was going to off him first unless Nesta did something about it.

But it would be really convenient if, say, he were to die now.

Nesta frowned. In the end, she wasn't absolutely sure the archer was compromised, and besides, Ragnarok had told her not to strike first. She just had to see it as a, ah, additional constraint to make the experience more challenging.

Or was it hubris talking?

It was hubris talking, also perhaps idealism.

Nesta frowned.

Fuck her orders. Her priority wasn't a perfect mission. Her priority was Valerian, a friend who counted on her.

As the last of the termites died and the formation broke off to finish off the stragglers, the assassin bug struck. It was faster than Nesta expected. Its rostrum slammed into the archer's midsection with a dull thud. Gobbet let out a dull 'oof', not of pain, not yet, of surprise and because his lungs were being compressed.

His only saving grace was that since he'd been skewered from end to end, the poison ended up spraying on the ground in front of him. The assassin bug had overkilled the strike, funnily enough.

She tsked and struck with her sword, decapitating the beast instantly and gaining more poison resistance. Gobbet collapsed with a scream and a head stuck in his guts. The smell of offal hit her nose just as the screams assaulted her ears. The C-ranks didn't panic but it was clear this was unexpected.

Satoshi barked orders while the others returned, the last termites allowed to retreat. Nestra took a step back to watch out for more bugs though the brief said they were solitary hunters. Valerian was all over Gobbet in an instant.

"Get it out! Get it out!"

"That's the only thing keeping your innards in so no. Ugh, this is going to take some time. I'll start with some hemostasis."

"What the fuck happened?" Satoshi screamed in Nestra's ears.

It was lucky her senses were protected because the man was loud.

"He wasss attacked by an assassin bug. They're mentioned in the brief?"

"I can fucking see that!"

"Then what do you want me to sssay?"

Nestra shrugged. Satoshi turned to Naomi but the pyromancer couldn't have seen the bug coming. She seemed a little nervous.

"Asshole was supposed to watch our backs," the pyromancer grumbled.

"It hurts! Aaaaargh!" Gobbet complained.

"You're lucky the bug got you, Gobbet. You were our back watch. If that thing had hit Naomi instead I'd have killed you myself," Satoshi said, annoyed beyond reason.

And Nestra could guess why. Five minutes later, they moved back to the base camp and stayed there until after lunch for Valerian to finish healing the prick. He was offered the right to leave, but refused, and Nestra could tell why.

It would cost upward twenty-five thousand credits to get the insanely good treatment Valerian was giving him. That was without counting the BaiHua VIP hospital stay. In any case, she finished her soup, then they were off again after the false start with a still sore, weakened Gobbet.

Turned out that gut wounds were a mess to close and clean with only field gear. Who'd have thunk it? By the time they reached the scene of the attack again, all of the large corpses had been dragged away by scavengers.

"You owe me three fucking cores, asshole," Satoshi yelled at a fuming Gobbet.

The expedition was off to a great start.

Fortunately, the next termite assault ended very much like the first, Nestra having fully recovered her reserves by then. She and Naomi worked on thinning the herd for the frontliners to attack, with Gobbet sniping the occasional acid bug. Those had been in the briefing, of course, but they'd usually not been that far from the nest. Nestra wondered if her presence changed things. There were theories...

Gobbet spotted the next assassin bug without much issue. Nestra felt it first but she let him get the kill. She had to be patient. They couldn't know her senses were better than they thought.

As the team delved deeper, the termites changed strategy. Rather than sending heavy hitters to be obliterated, they flooded the chasm with a stream of transparent, weaker creatures. Their deaths seemed to attract more assassin bugs, so the backline was busy as well.

Nestra saw a worker aiming for her and decided she wouldn't waste that much mana on a single target. She unsheathed her blade. A basic downward strike was all it took to kill the worker.

She realized Gobbet was staring at her.

"Shouldn't you be covering usss?"

"Yeah yeah get off my ass, would you?"

The man was angry. Given the price of the average core and the fact he'd lost them at least a few by being careless, Nestra imagined he must have felt like a right idiot. She looked around, finding no termites. The few still alive were making a run for it.

Huh, even smart portal beings almost never made a run for it.

She looked down. Nothing.

To the sides. Only bare rock.

Up, to termites gathering with stones. Many were the acid-spitting version.

"Hostiles up!"

Nestra is already moving, keeping an eye on the acid sprayers. Clear liquid and darker stone fill the air above them. The team ran to the side.

What to do?

She stayed close to Valerian just in case. He was the slowest, with Satoshi grabbing Naomi under his muscular arm. For a moment, it looked like they would be hit but the man stomped the ground and earth covered them in a strange crust. Acid splashed on the shield with a hiss.

Some of the acid ended up on Nestra and Valerian. With a curse, she grabbed him out of the way though she got hit for her trouble.

It burnt.

It was really unpleasant.

The pain forced a hiss but no more. Soon, a refreshing feeling spread over her arm. Valerian's mana. She allowed it to spread and it did, covering her arms with new skin. Valerian strained from the effort.

He smiles at her. So full of trust, the idiot.

They were out.

Most of the team had made it out without much trouble. Gobbet shot the termites with abandon, not caring about wasting arrows he would have to replace. Naomi soon joined him until the last creature was either smashed on the ground or ash.

Satoshi swore in Japanese. Nestra refrained from commenting when the leader turned to Gobbet — again, and the archer withered under his gaze.

"It wasn't in the fucking brief, okay?"

"It's your fucking job!"

"And Strix's."

"Don't accuse others to cover your own failings."

"Will you cut that shit out?" Sheryl said. "The sniper's right. Strix is just as guilty as Gobbet but he's your buddy, yeah? I'm tired of your posturing. Keep it up and I'm out."

She glared. Nestra didn't know if she was in on it and it was a warning or if Sheryl was actually not a TKer. She decided to downgrade her in terms of threats, especially compared to Strix who might be able to deliver a devastating first strike.



“Right, it seems that things are a little tense today,” said the asshole who’d done his best to make things tense today. “We’ll challenge the lake sub guardian then go back to camp for the night, alright?”

The lake dweller, a supposedly easy guardian.

They might try it then.

Everyone agreed and Nestra felt the tension mount for her. This might be it. She studied the posture of the others.

Strix kept moving his shoulders, unlimbering them. He felt her gaze and turned, passing a hand over his handle again.

Yeah, definitely.

As they followed the path deeper into the chasm, the dampness intensified until condensation formed on the cliff walls, and the green mix of moss and shrubbery became ubiquitous. Things crawled in there, but they were mostly small. Not directly aggressive.

The termite attacks stopped. Slowly, split paths emerged, leading to crumbling deadends on either side of the canyon. They grew in numbers and depths until the group could no longer see their ends from the entrance. One of them ought to lead to a secondary guardian though it was deeper in.

Finally, at the bottom, the path flattened and split into two forks on either side of a lake filled with dark water, the surface as impenetrable as a mirror. It was strangely quiet down here. A little bit ahead, the path split into several secondary gorges. Most of those remained unexplored.

“Alright everyone, be ready,” Satoshi said in a tone that made Nestra’s hair stand on end. “I’ll get its attention. Crescent, use your spells when it rears back. The rest, you know what to do.”

His voice was loud. The water shivered, just a pulse at first. The raiders took formation behind Satoshi who had raised his saber.

“Steady…”

Something broke the surface near the shore. Nestra caught a glimpse of a dark brown shell. Spikes too. The lake sub guardian.

Water exploded in a geyser. For an instant, beast, brackish water, and vegetation merged in a great mix of colors on a dark background, a detonation in cold colors, but soon Nestra’s mind adjusted and she could see her foe for what it was: a crawfish the size of a small bus. Two thick antennae surged over a tiny mouth, the only weak points in slabs of hard, spike-covered shells. Large claws that could shear a car in half aimed straight for Satoshi

who was the most obvious target. As the beast left the water, it revealed muscular short legs designed for explosive speed.

Satoshi actually missed his attack. His sabre hit the claw at a bad angle which was barely enough to deflect it. The second claw closed around him. In a smooth movement, he slammed the blade down. Stones rose from the ground to cover his form which was enough to stop the attack. She still heard him grunt in pain.

Strix attacked the joint by unsheathing his blade with blinding speed with little result. It was Sheryl who managed to free Satoshi with a powerful blow that cracked the base of the claw, forcing the beast to fall back. Arrows and fire spells aimed for the head to distract the creature with some good results. Somehow, Naomi's fire lingered on the beast. It let out a hiss like a boiling kettle and retreated into the water, shell turning red in spot. This was Nestra's moment. She aimed for the head.

The dot connected.

The guardian raised its claw at the last instant, blocking some of the damage. The rest vaporized part of the shell. One of the antennae went flying. Blue blood splurged from the wound.

Something shifted in the group. Nestra felt it in the others' mana.

Strix turned on Valerian.

Naomi turned on Nestra. Fire coalesced into a dense cloak around the pyromancer until even at a distance, Nestra felt the heat like a physical wall between herself and the mage, and of course, they'd waited until she had to cycle mana to strike.

This was the strength of spells. If it were just physical abilities, Nestra would trounce Naomi like she'd trounced the people during the test, but here, this was the real world and in the real world, people used all their spells.

And now she realized her mistake. She was slightly too far from Valerian to reach him with a single *momentum*.

Nestra's mind went into overdrive. To her left, Naomi was lashing at her with red flame. To her right, Gobbet let an arrow loose at a very surprised Sheryl who was front and right. Front and left were Satoshi and Strix and directly ahead of her, there was Valerian.

Nestra sprinted forward, slashing Gobbet's thigh on her path. His arrows still struck Sheryl under the armpit at close range. Valerian turned and parried.

Naomi's aura exploded outward. Nestra felt it as a wave of heat torching her skin. Pain pushed her to use *momentum* a little early, before she could fully charge it. Surprise made her stumble.

Gobbet screamed, briefly.

Naomi had torched her ally without a second of hesitation.

Nestra reached Valerian just a moment too late. His arm flew, still holding a blade. She grabbed him and felt vertigo overtake her, lessened by her resistance. Strix and Satoshi stumbled with the small man moving back fast with a burst of electricity.

Fire rose again. Valerian was bleeding heavily in Nestra's arms. Sheryl gasped, then she made a run for it.

Nestra decided that saving Valerian was more important than killing right now. She ran as well. Still disoriented, Strix and Satoshi were just a little late, but Nestra was forced to dodge fire arrows in quick succession.

It was a pain running without momentum. Nestra also turned to see if Sheryl was following but to her dismay, the armored woman raced down another path. As for Gobbet, he was nothing but a charred corpse at the feet of a very angry woman.

Nestra ran. The side chasm she'd picked was long and rough with plenty of loose stone but that wasn't a problem for her. She would be much faster if she could use *momentum*. Even then, the others didn't pursue and she eventually slowed to a jog, wary of ambushes. Valerian's hard breathing rang in her ears. She dropped him down. He was fine right?

"The bleeding?"

"I'm ok," Valerian said, clearly not okay at all. He was sweating, pale. His traits were drawn and gaunt. Nestra must have looked worried even through the mask because Valeriane insisted.

"I'm serious. This is nothing."

He shook the stump of his arm. It was already regrowing through the mangled remains of his armbraces. The bone practically pushed from underneath the skin. At this speed, he would regrow the entire hand in an hour or less. Nestra didn't need to be a real gleam to understand how good little Valerian was.

"Impressssive."

"Yeah, well, can we find a place to hunker down?"

He winced.

"I'll need food as well."

"Not hunker down but..."

She looked up, certain she'd find something suitable. There, in the craggy wall. A sort of opening. She doubted there would be full caves but they just needed an alcove for a little while.

Nestra climbed the wall with a very confused Valerian on her shoulder. It was really easy finding footholds, and she finally reached a suitable spot after only a minute or two of effort. It was spacious enough for two people to lie down. Sadly, Nestra was no longer human-sized but she could at least sit down.

There was a nice green-colored bird there. It squawked noisily. Nestra realized it was building a nest.

Its beak glowed silver.

Nestra's hand struck like a snake, grabbing the creature's neck before smashing its skull against a nearby rock. She dropped Valerian near the pile of twigs in the same smooth motion.

"Hey, nice bird. Oh..."

"Focussss on healing."

"Ok."

"We can wait here."

"Right. Hmmm."

"Do you need a potion? I have one."

Valerian shook his head.

"No, the wound is already closed. It wouldn't help."

He suddenly looked very embarrassed.

"Look, regrowing flesh consumes a ton of calories, even with high efficiency and my affinity. I, errr, I had energy bars. I ate them while you were carrying me."

"You... did?"

"They're bite sized but very dense. It's just... an entire forearm is very large..."

Nestra could tell where this was going. She fidgeted.

Valerian was a friend. It was ok. And she could also cook the bird as a snack, after recovering those nice feathers. It would be fine, right? Oh, and there was the guardian as well though crawfish wasn't nearly as tasty as crab in her own humble opinion.

With a sigh of regret, she grabbed for her backpack, removing a neatly wrapped pastrami sandwich.

“You can have thissss.”

“If it’s too much of an issue...”

“I already ssssaid yes!” she grumbled.

Valerian wordlessly took her food, biting down on that delicious enclave beef brisket over artisanal cheese and mana-infused rye bread.

“Hmph. Wait. A La Tourelle delivery sandwich? They’re a hundred twenty a pop!”

“Sssso enjoy.”

“You’re bringing gourmet food into portals?”

“Hssss!”

“For which I am very grateful, but you were offering me a C-class potion freely though it’s clearly more valuable in a portal and also costs thirty times as much as a sandwich. Are you... alright? Food wise?”

Of course she was alright food wise. She had plenty of food. Stashed everywhere.

“Did you starve in your childhood?”

“Of coursssse not. My family took good care of me.”

And they did, the human ones that is... She was just...

She’d just been mana starved. For most of her adult life.

She’d cannibalized her human core for it.

Wait a minute. Waaaaaaait a minute.

Did she have PTSD?

“Sorry, not important right now. First, we should get rid of our radios. They could be tracking us.”

Nestra blinked. Food insecurity didn’t matter, haha. She was fine.

“Oh, right,” she said.

Immediate survival took precedence. She'd completely forgotten about the radios. Stupid stupid. It was so strange having them in true form, even after relying on those for her entire human career. Just as they were about to toss the things, they crackled with static.

"Help? Anyone? Help?" a timid voice came.

It was Sheryl.

"We're here Sheryl," Valerian replied immediately. "Are you okay?"

"No... No I'm not. Can't stop... the bleeding."

Nestra wished Sheryl had stayed with them but the women had no real reason to trust anyone after the surprise attack. Running alone wasn't bad but... the arrow was in her back. She, yeah, she probably couldn't even reach it.

Fucking Gobbet.

"Ok, I need you to calm down. Take deep breaths."

"What the FUCK is going on?"

Valerian licked his lips, then used his intact hand to wipe the sweat off his brow.

"I think they're here to kill me. And you got caught in it. Sorry."

"What the fuck..."

"But that's not important right now. Look, we saw which gorge you were headed in. Are you safe right now?"

"I... I found a small hiding hole."

"Ok, can you apply pressure to the wound?"

"No, no, I can't, it's in my back. I can't reach it. It hurts!"

"Ok Sheryl, stay with me," Valerian said in a calming voice. "What I need you to do is to raise the wounded area. Don't hesitate to lie on your flank, alright? I'll get to you very soon. Your raider constitution will help you. You just need to hold unt—"

"No, no, get away, get away. FUCK Y—"

The feed cut.

"Sheryl?" Valerian asked without much hope.

There was silence for a while. Nestra looked down towards the valley just in case. She saw movement.

“I’m afraid Sheryl is indisposed,” Satoshi’s voice came. It was calmer than before.

Valerian licked his lips. He breathed deeply, and for the first time, Nestra saw something really dark cross the man’s features. She’d always considered Valerian to be a good-natured person so this flash of... malice. That was a little unsettling.

“You’re gonna regret this.”

“You know, we weren’t even here to kill you. Just to capture you.”

“Right. Like that’s much better.”

“If you knew then you could have ran, but you decided to bring a bodyguard, and now, two more people have died.”

“Oh so it’s my fault now.”

Nestra could see him. Strix, advancing along the canyon. He was staring dead ahead with some sort of electronic device in his hand. Probably a tracker. Damn, they were really well prepared.

“Your choice, rather. I’d apologize but I don’t feel sorry. It’s just business. Nothing personal.”

“It’s always personal to the one who gets shafted but don’t worry. I left you a little gift. You’ll get the time to reconsider,” Valerian hissed.

Then he tossed the radio out.

Nestra watched it arc out into the air, then it fell with a loud click of metal on stone. Strix jumped in surprise, but then his eyes looked up, up.

Nestra leaned back before he could spot her. She signaled to Valerian that there was one hostile down on the ground. He nodded gravely.

He was in no position to fight. Nestra was though.

In fact, with no one to protect and a single opponent, she could really let go now. It wasn’t as if she was going to leave any witness anyway. She removed her mask, to Valerian’s surprise, then she unzipped her suit.

The poor man paled mightily, but he shook his head when he realized she wasn’t naked underneath. The Skin covered her from neck to toe now.

Ah yes.

The wind in her hair, the damp air on her skin, her horns fully exposed, she could feel so much. She was free now. Free. And more than a little pissed off.

She waved a baffled Valerian goodbye. He would be safe here for the two minutes this would take.

Strix was climbing towards them. She could feel his mana.

Nestra used *passe-muraille* to merge with the stone under her, traveling down until she could feel the buzzing presence of the team killer right in front of her. She released her hold on the technique. Angry, thick reality expelled her forward.

Nestra formed a fist as she came out, pushing a little bit of void mana into it though there wasn't much time.

She punched Strix in the face.

Really hard.

It was a wrathful blow, filled with much more rage than she'd expected. Strix exhaled with pain and surprise. Spilled blood flew in fat droplets through the canyon. Strix fell.

She could kill him here and now, she realized. A dot on the chest before he recovered and there would be no more Strix.

But that wouldn't be fun.

Something dark filled Nestra's heart. Her concern for Valerian took a backseat while a voice in her mind whispered he was fine, safe where he was. Satoshi went after Sheryl and he wouldn't leave Naomi unprotected so she obviously went with him. That meant that right now there was only Nestra, Strix, and the dry arena that was the canyon.

Just the two of them down here.

Nestra with a grudge and an entire day's worth of tension, and one of the assholes who'd caused it. Another swordsman. One who'd kept provoking her.

Strix landed in a roll, a pretty good one. He came to his knees and made to draw.

Nestra used *momentum* to appear in front of him, grabbing his fist with her hand because she knew where it was going to be. Strix was really predictable.

Her hand crushed his bones groaning against the metal of the handle. Her face was close to his and in his eyes, she saw the terror and realization that she was here, and very much... not an artilleryist.

"Well?" she hissed. "Draw?"



The man struggled in vain. His knuckles cracked under her grip. Again, she could kill him here and now but instead she let him go.

She wanted to win so badly right now.

“Sssshow me.”

“Shit. Crescent?!”

Nestra drew her sword, slowly. Strix breathed fast. He opened and closed his hands to lessen the pain.

“You could still get money for him, you know?” he said.

Nestra hissed her displeasure. Words. Disrespectful.

Electricity arced around Strix, showing his power but lack of control. Technique incoming. Better.

He charged faster than she could move. A trail of iridescent light followed his mad dash forward. He unsheathed his sword in the same fast movement as before, striking smoothly.

The Scornful Crescent guided Nestra’s instincts. Strix moved faster than his own mind could process, therefore, he decided where to attack beforehand. She didn’t need to match him. She merely needed to predict him. observe his stance. The way his right foot stomped, the orientation of his wrist. With minimum effort, she moved her blade right side, outward.

The blow was powerful. It landed on her blade with a resounding bang and she was forced back. The electricity coursing through Strix’s body exploded outward in a ravenous wave that scoured the rock, leaving glassy scars that bled smoke. Nestra felt it tear through her but the void grabbed that power and ate it. This was electricity. Her primary stolen power.

She twisted on herself. Strix stumbled, surprised, still recovering from his own assault.

Nestra’s blade kissed his neck in the same flowing motion.

Power, raw and familiar, filled her. Her mana pool expanded by a significant amount as it drank deep from Strix’s compatible essence. At the same time, the fake electricity core in her shifted to accommodate a new spell.

Ah, so that was how it was done. First flood the body with mana, guiding it to muscles and nerves until the blade hit, then release it all at once. Broadly. Of course, it was damaging to humans and would probably tire her but... this was a nice addition to her capabilities.

Her first spell since the change.

Nestra leaned back and laughed. Feeding the hubris felt so good. So damn good. Strix had deserved it so much that crushing him was just the cherry on top of a really nourishing cake. She chuckled and stretched.

“Strix?”

The radio. Not hers, but Strix’s. She recovered the device from a protected pocket, probably insulated to prevent the dead idiot from frying his own shit.

“Strix, do you copy?”

Kind of reckless to call an infiltrator mid operation on a common radio. They really didn’t think much of her. That made her next action that much more satisfying.

“I’m afraid Strix is indisposed,” she purred.

Satoshi didn’t reply but Nestra heard Naomi’s gasp of grief in the background. Ah, yes. Schadenfreude.

“I’m going to kill you,” the warrior enunciated with deceptive calm.

“Nothing perssonal. Just business.”

She gave him a moment to stew in his grief before applying a fresh layer.

“Oh, and you’re misstaken. I’m not a bodyguard.”

“Oh?”

“The decisions you made that led you here. Maybe it wassss for money. Maybe something else. I don’t care. You are team killerssss. At a time when humanity is cornered, you ssstill manage to backstab teammates.”

The memory of Bard shooting Pudding right before she awakened returned to her, unbidden. Ashholes like Gidung management could turn an entire district into a warzone to make a nice profit but it was the trigger pullers and sellouts like Satoshi, Naomi, Strix, Bard, and the rest who made it possible. Traitors. Even as an Aszhii herself, she still showed more deference to her parent race than them, who were fully human. She still respected her alliances.

They disgusted her.

Just like in Fifteen, she would get to the pawn, and then to the instigators. The world may be fucked, she didn’t know, but those who made things worse wouldn’t get to find out. So long as she was around.

“I am not here just to save Valerian. I’ve come here to kill you. Ssssee you very soon.”