

Dawn crested the kaiju wall. For those who'd barely slept, it offered no solace. The rays of the sun revealed cables snaking out of the van when there should be none. They dispelled the illusion of secrecy that comforted operatives everywhere. They reminded said operatives that they were late, that the delivery robots were dropping fresh muffins on the doorsteps of harried corpo slaves, and that the time of reckoning was upon them. Mostly they showed the contents of floor sixty-eight of the unfinished Pacific Dream tower, part of the Levant Project real estate disaster. It should have contained, to the exclusion of most other things, a 120mm single shot remote controlled-rifle. A walker killer as they were known in the military. Around that weapon, there should have been satchel charges designed to turn the entire floor into a pile of molten slag and powdered concrete.

That was not the case. The last intact camera showed a mess of exposed cables and the barrel lying on the ground, possibly still connected to the rest of the gun. Or perhaps not.

The team leader ignored the sweat pearling in his brow. Every assessment said this should be impossible. Cameras didn't glitch that way. This was either the work of a gleam, or a hostile jamming device not yet in the Gidung database.

His gut said it was a rogue element.

"We're packing."

"Wait," the runner said, interrupting him.

The team leader looked into her crimson eye implants. The false iris rotated, probably calculating his heartbeat and blood pressure and all the other tools runners used to 'convince' people they were not allowed to kill. She licked her lips. His eyes caught a crease near her scalp where the dermal implants were barely visible.

"I can do it. I can make the shot. Manually."

"Target on the move. ETA three minutes, sir," Condor said from her seat in the far corner of the van. He could see the convoy holding Watkins making its way towards the precinct, with hovercrafts providing oversight. Their window was closing fast.

Condor's voice had wavered. The team leader thought it was a lost cause and Condor didn't seem so hot either.

"Sir. Please let me."

The team leader assessed his chances.

Law enforcement would have already gone after the van. A rival corpo would have detonated the satchel charge since it was the easiest way to make the operation fail. And Gidung really needed a symbolic win. His career depended on it.

The stench of cigarette smoke and sweat joined forces with the wet heat and his own exhaustion to muddy his thoughts.

“I think it’s a trap.”

“Then let me trigger it. If it were the city, the place would already be swarming with cops. I can do it. Somebody’s fucking with us and I want to look them in the eye.”

“It smells of gleam to me.”

“And I can go toe to toe with a low C-class. Let me do it.”

“ETA two and a half.”

A feed showed the convoy carrying the witness on its way to Central. He would be out of range soon. The team leader had to choose now.

“Ok. Ok but you evac the moment you get cornered.”

The runner gave a carnivorous smirk. She turned and the swish of her black ponytail brushed the man’s face. He hoped for a floral touch from shampoo, perhaps vanilla, his favorite, but the synthetic hair was soaked with tobacco. It offered no succor. Neither did the sight of her armored form leaving the false safety of the van. The floor rose a little higher when she walked off just from the sheer weight of synth muscles and plating and against anything without mana, he would bet on her. She was more machine than person at this stage.

He suspected that wasn’t the case here.

The runner allowed her feed in his own implant and he accepted the connection. The runner was fast. She was through the deserted underground garage in seconds, then carefully, she looked up the empty elevator shaft. The team leader saw little but gray, bare concrete around the holographic sight of the woman’s short submachine gun, though the lack of light was no obstacle. She clasped a rope ascender around the naked cable and then she was off and up along the vertiginous well, her aim never wavering. The team leader waited for a trap to spring but there was nothing, no falling grenades or massive impact tearing down the rope. The runner still stopped a few meters away, lightly jumping to the nearby wall where her gloved fingers somehow adhered with enough strength to keep her attached. The entire endeavor had been perfectly silent.

She scaled the wall.

“ETA two.”

The team leader knew he should have brought a spare anti-walker rifle but those things were massive and there had been no time. He could only watch the runner deploy small drones to watch the room above her. To his surprise, they flew unimpeded.

The room was empty. It looked empty. Faster than the man could process, the cameras cycled through thermal, X-rays, infras, and then the woman was up and walking. He allowed himself to take in the devastation.

Someone, or something, had gone off on the rifle and its surrounding. Only the naked concrete pillars surrounding the remnants were still intact. Satchels lay haphazardly, some torn apart, some throw off at a greater distance. The rifle was a loss. Its barrel was still mostly intact but the stock was twisted out of shape, the supporting frame looked crumpled, and the connected machine smashed. It felt more like the result of a tantrum than a deliberate attempt at neutralizing equipment. A chill crawled up his spine.

“Gear’s destroyed. Fall back.”

The runner paused but she didn’t listen. The team leader remained silent while she slowly, slowly took a step back. Inside of the empty space, only the howling wind came to break the silence.

Light from the rising sun crested the angle made by the floor, stretching the runner’s shadow towards the elevator shaft. She twitched.

It happened very fast.

Something clanged. The runner turned so fast it gave the man vertigo. A silent round blew something off, which exploded outwards towards the gaping great empty of District Twenty-Eight. She turned just as fast and then, the image twisted. Chaos melded pixels into each other in a pulsating, disturbing kaleidoscope of dark notes. Psychedelic mouths and claws assailed the cameras from every angle to the point that the man recoiled. The runner’s gun went off. A shower of debris rained down, merging with the fantasmagoria in a nauseating riot but the man was no longer watching. His gaze was glued to the display showing her vitals.

Catastrophic damage to the chest.

There was something holding her gun in place.

Catastrophic damage to the neck. Signal lost. Agent considered deceased.

The feed showed the camera falling on the ground. It landed her, and for the briefest of moments, the team leader saw it reflected in the glassy mirror of some broken casing. A foot. Naked. Strangely gray. Then it, too, was eaten by the glitchy nightmare.

“We pull the plug. Go,” the man said.

Every cable disconnected at the same time. The van hurled itself across the garage and towards the exit. As it surfaced into the light of dawn, the team leader expected something to stop them. Surely, it would. After all of that. Instead, they continued unimpeded to the outer middle ring and beyond.

In the distance, Watkins' convoy continued on its merry way, unaware of the danger it had escaped. It went to Central to seal Gidung's fall from grace and gleams watched it pass with curious eyes. It was not every day one could see a titan stumble.

"Tell me," the tall man said.

He did not turn to look at the team leader. White hair combed back over a white Hanbok, a traditional Korean garb. Tall shoulders. Gidung's founder was a man of short stature but he had this solidity earth users had, the one reflected in the name he had chose. Gidung. The pillar. Even now the corporation cracked at the seams, but the man didn't. His gaze was fixed on a small altar nestled in the corner of his presidential office. It showed a faded picture of a young woman smiling over the distant Busan Harbor.

"Someone came after us. They knew we would be here. Some shadow user. It felt... personal."

"I wonder who we might have offended to face such a reckoning."

That was not a comment that invited reply, and so the team leader didn't offer one.

"This ends now. The crisis management team will stand down."

"Sir, if I may..."

"You were let go as a courtesy," the founder said.

He turned, and the team leader saw a weathered face, marked by adversity. Deep brown eyes met his. They were not unkind.

"When courtesy is not repaid with respect, terrible events follow. That is particularly the case when we have not identified our opponent. We will just blame fate as we brave the storm. Gidung weathered many and it will weather more."

"Yes sir, I just..."

"Wish to know whose terrible gaze fell upon us?"

"Yes sir."

"So do I."

The harbinger of fate bit into a chestnut cream pie.

“Hmm! Thish ish good!”

No calorie impact on her mortal shell plus nepo power on the owner plus on a break meant that she was ravaging the Sunflour’s inventory with gusto. Four small plates were already piled on her table, forming a monument to hubris, a Babel tower of sugar and an affront to God. Nobody seemed to care but it made her feel positively sinful. An article on her datasheet spiced the pastries up with the sweet aroma of vindication.

“Gidung market cap in free fall. Emergency Board meeting in progress.”

Hurting where it mattered: wallet and reputation. Nesta turned her attention to Seth, somewhat hoping that gorging on his stuff might annoy him what with the ‘family discount’. Unfortunately, the goof was beaming with pride at the counter. He pointed at a verrine filled with white chocolate mousse and passion fruit puree, possibly his next offering.

It was really hard to piss off Seth for some reason. It was like he had no real ego. All her teasing were universally taken as gestures of attention. And he loved attention. From her. Maybe from Stibs as well, though the way he talked about her, he saw her in, well, a different way than what she thought was normal for partners. From her limited experience.

Her visor beeped, and she moved a shoulder carefully. The runner woman had clipped her shoulder and the wound on her real form still pained her. There were still non-gleams who could hurt her, not just that, but the woman couldn’t actually even see her and she still managed one clean hit. It was inspiring, in a way. Gleams would continue to increase in numbers, but perhaps technology would be integrated instead of discarded. It was just too damn potent.

With one last sigh, Nesta gave up on her thoughts of chocolate mousse. She nodded to Seth on her way out into the stifling heat of summer. The weather was just nice and there was something there that bothered her.

It should be raining, because today was Shinoda Yuuji’s burial, but of course that sort of serendipitous crying from the heavens happened only in movies. The world didn’t give a shit that Shinoda was dead, and neither did most of Threshold. That pissed her off, even though her grief was light since, well, they had not known each other for that long. It was just that Shinoda was one of the good ones, and he’d died a hero, and, just, there should be something, anything, to acknowledge that. But instead, mundane birds flew around to pick up insects.

Her partnership with Shinoda had lasted only two weeks but now, it was time to say goodbye. She readjusted her black suit then made her way out to the nearby elevated tram station since her car was totaled. It was mostly empty at this time of the day. Only a couple of students and older folks with grocery bags sat around, casting her curious glances since she was dressed to the nines in a morbid kind of way.

Outside, the cozy houses and low buildings of her district gave way to brick buildings, then to a park as the tram slowly made its way along the kaiju wall. The wind carried the distant scent of the Pacific Ocean when Nestra climbed off, not too far east. The park was open and wide with low, carefully cut grass. The few people leaving with her did so in a subdued mood and the usual flock of children was missing. Around her, tall columns dotted the ground in miniature stonehenges with people gathering in loose clumps of dark-colored garbs. Nestra made her way to the one Kim had referred to, close to a pond surrounded by zen sculptures. The susurrus of flowing water calmed her nerves.

There were quite a few more people than she expected.

At first, she hesitated a little since those looked at her with curiosity. Even in Threshold, there was an invisible wall formed by a group of mourners when they were obviously of the same ethnic or cultural group — in this case Japanese. The sight of a diverse group of cops in the distance confirmed that she was in the right place. She made her way up towards the mausoleum. Her stress faded as the groups didn't push her away and she finally spotted Kim atop some stairs.

If there was any doubt the two of them were closer than they let on, this dispelled it. Officer Kim wore a regal black kimono with her dark hair tied back with a white ribbon, a mark of respect to the deceased when she could have worn a hanbok though the ribbon was most likely a Korean thing, from the vids she watched. Nestra wasn't exactly sure about the etiquette here, but the rest of the mourners seemed to approve since no one was being hostile. Not like Nestra could do anything but learn from the diplomatic civil servant. More importantly, Kim carried the urn containing Shinoda's ashes. Cremation was compulsory for anyone buried within the walls of the city but the role of carrying them to the mausoleum usually fell with the widow if there was one. Kim stood above the crowd as if daring them to challenge her. Shinoda's ex-wife was notoriously absent.

She started the ceremony at 3PM sharp. By that time, the heat had turned slightly uncomfortable. Nestra only half-followed the proceedings. There was a Shinto priest, a very old gleam who looked at everyone with quiet benevolence. Nestra voided his gaze just because she was feeling pissy. Then came quite a few people saying how Shinoda had saved them, somehow.

Each story was short but it was clear he'd mattered.

Maybe that was better than rain.

It felt strange, getting to know someone better after they were dead. She would have liked to meet him in an izakaya for more beer and food if he'd lasted long enough, but he'd gone the way he'd lived, touching and saving more lives than was wise to. In a way, he had more hubris than she did but while hers was a thing she reined in, Shinoda had embraced it. And then, he'd fought to the end. And he'd died. With his finger on the trigger.

The ceremony didn't last for a very long time. More than a lack of things to say, Nestra felt it was the distance between the mourners that was to blame for the reserved silence. Shinoda had helped without reserve but his benefactors didn't actually know one another. The various

groups eyed their counterparts warily from an angle when they thought no one was looking. Nestra watched all of this from afar and wondered if they were jealous that someone else had been saved and made feel so special. Eventually, she watched Kim finally place the urn in an empty box of the mausoleum, then the place was sealed and the massive dark slab returned to being a monolith to the dead of the threshold city.

The mourners solemnly made their way to pay their respect. Many spoke to the shaman who offered words of comfort. Nestra and he exchanged a glance and he moved away, apparently accepting that she wasn't interested in talking.

The afternoon went on. Clouds gathered to provide some welcome shade. The wind picked up until the weather cooled to more pleasant temperatures. The mourners trickled away but Nestra waited, leaning against one of the slabs. She wasn't in a hurry.

Kim only sobbed when she thought she was alone.

Nestra stood by and waited. There was really no need to interrupt. And also no need to get physical. Kim really didn't give off any huggable vibes and Nestra had been tempted to jump on Sashimi just to feel what it would be like.

It was remarkable that she was the first to feel the intruder come. Nestra could tell from the straightening shoulders and the discreet application of tissue to her face, then she looked out herself and saw a woman approaching, a Japanese one in an impeccable suit. Handsome in a mature way. While Kim's 'touch ups' had turned her into a distant and efficient worker, this one exuded majesty. She meant to impress. An aug bodyguard strode after her though not too close. He wasn't enjoying himself. The ground was too open, maybe.

The woman addressed Kim in English. She had to know Kim's Japanese was perfect but she did it anyway.

"How comes I learn about my husband's death from social media?"

She spat the last two words. A few late visitors turned her way. Nestra put on her visor and started to film just in case.

Kim replied with all the dignity of the bereaved. Nestra didn't need a translator to guess Kim reminded the late comer she was the ex-wife. She did so in Japanese, again, a power move. The two women talked in a glacial tone. At some point, the bodyguard took a step forward and that was all the signal Nestra needed. She stepped up next to Kim, drawing the gaze of the two.

"I hope there isn't gonna be a problem," she said with a tight smile.

The bodyguard flexed his muscle under a too tight suit. They bulged, but Nestra could tell from the wandering gaze that he had concerns.

Her time to flex, she guessed. With a 'tut tut', she clasped her badge to her breast pocket. Now if the guy put a hand on her, that was two years in prison and his license revoked.

He reconsidered.

There was a certain hypocrisy in pulling ranks when she despised the gleams for doing the same. The difference was that she was not being an asshole. At least, in her own eyes.

"This does not concern you," the ex-wife finally told her.

"Oh, but it does. I was Shinoda's partner and you are making a scene. At a funeral, no less."

Nestra tapped her visor to indicate the woman was being recorded. If she was still a career politician, as Shinoda had mentioned, then this would not show her in a good light. The woman sneered at Kim one last time.

"Mada owatta wake de wa arimasen. This is not over yet."

They left, the woman striding with all the fury hell does not have and the bodyguard trudging after her. Kim remained unmoving as a statue for a long time, Nestra waiting by her side.

"Thank you, Palladian. You have made a difficult moment bearable."

"You seem to have it handled. I was merely providing support."

"I was ten seconds away from slapping the bitch."

"Oh."

They waited some more. In the distance, someone played the flute. It wasn't very good.

"We are done here," Kim finally said. "For now. Let us walk. Since you are here, I wanted to go over a few things before I retire for the day. I do believe I will take a short break after that so we might as well finish first."

The prim Officer picked up a small object from her kimono's inner pocket. It was a tiny jammer. She wasn't taking any chances.

The pair walked by the pond, then they made their way through an alley of tall sycamores. Kim appeared distracted. There was something about so much open ground that gave Nestra vertigo, made her feel unsafe rather than relaxed. Or perhaps it wasn't open ground per se but her fragile, imperfect human form who couldn't smell the enemy come and couldn't trick sensors.

"First things first, we just received word from Gidung. They have decided to settle for the murder attempt on you by drone. They will give up the idiot responsible for the operation under charges of reckless endangerment and provide you with a comfortable compensation of one point two million credits if you accept."

“Reckless endangerment? This was attempted assassination.”

“It is up to you to accept or refuse, of course, but my advice is to take the deal since Gidung will otherwise clam up and hide their idiot behind an army of lawyers. It would take years before you see money. This way, the culprit will spend three years behind bars at the Red House.”

Nestra thought about it.

“Did they say who it was?”

“They’re not cooperating until we sign. At least not on this.”

“And we know the will give up the right person... how?”

“Because we’ll have AIs go over their records, of course.”

If she accepted the deal she would have a name, and then kill the guy if she felt like it. Not to mention, she needed money for a new car. The insurance wasn’t covering more than a third of the price since the car itself had been pretty old.

“Yeah ok sure.”

“Good choice. I will also take the liberty of flagging that imbecile in our system to make his life miserable from now on. Can I drive you back?”

They had arrived near a parking lot.

“Uh. Sure.”

They climbed in a nice hovercraft, black. The inside was perfectly clean and smelled vaguely of lavender. It was devoid of any trinkets, not even a loose wrapper, but there were three ports for charging electronics.

Once the doors were closed, Kim leaned forward.

“By the way, a janitorial team found a body and a demolished sniper rifle in the Levant Project Tower. How fortuitous. The dead might have made an attempt on Mr Watkins’ life otherwise.”

“Serendipitous indeed.”

Kim assessed Nestra for a moment. The secret demon didn’t react. There were already too many people knowing about her. Let Kim wonder a bit.

“We may have a job for someone of your peculiar skill, outside of the walls. There is a... developing situation in one of the enclaves. It will have to come later, however. Your

performance during the invasion has raised some questions. I have removed you from the active roster for the time being, and you will be replaced by peacekeepers trained specifically for the task. The end goal is to have District Fifteen law enforcement done by its own residents. You should go say goodbye at some point.”

“I will.”

“I believe some paid leave would do you good since there is a possibility you will be... involved in our inquiries. How does that sound?”

“Pretty good. I wanted to spend a bit more time with my family anyway.”

“Is that so?” Kim asked with some doubt.

“I have some catching up to do.”

Helena had this guarded expression Nestra recognized in pictures of her around the same age. A bit hopeful, but mostly expecting some bullshit. The young gleam clutched her training gear with a nervousness that her face tried very hard not to express. It didn't help that Nestra had brought her to a decrepit parking lot at the center of an abandoned hospital in the back of a rental van. If she wanted to give off psycho killer vibes, she couldn't have possibly done better.

“So... we're training here?” the young gleam asked with obvious disbelief.

“Yes, well, no. Around. But first we need to talk.”

Nestra stepped out. It took a while for Helena to join her on a bench overlooking an abandoned zen garden. The hospital extended in a square all around to form a vaguely oppressive prison.

Helena's mana was leaking. It tasted familiar to Nestra's dull senses but it also meant Helena was really, really nervous. Not good.

“Shit, I should have picked a better place.”

“Hmm damn right we should have. That's like the set of some horror story where the stupid teens get picked off by a shadow monster, or something.”

“Yeah it's my bad. It's just, at least here we won't be listened on.”

“By Riel Nestra have you, like, killed someone or something?”

Nestra blinked.

“Yeah but how does it relate?”

“Nestra! Killing people is bad! Oh shit you’re a cop. I always forget. You guys don’t really mind.”

“Damn it, Claire, get out of this body.”

“Hahaaaa! No but seriously what is this about?”

“Ok so, it’s a bit weird but it’s about me and... how it’s... Look, there is no good way to say this. You’re like that, with the weird attunement and the bursts of anger, because of me. It’s... not exactly my fault but it definitely happened because I existed and... I think you have a right to know. No, I believe you have a right to know.”

Helena immediately rolled her eyes.

“Oh my Riel Nestra not you too for fuck sake. I know the conversation by heart. I already got this shit from mom. Stop it. Stooooop it. You’re not helping, ok?”

“No, listen, I’m serious.”

“Yeah yeah I know the draft. ‘If only I have been here when you were a child’ and ‘I was too focused on my own boo boos’. Cut it. I want actions, not words. The sparring idea is good, though I really don’t see how this place is good for sparring...”

“There is a portal underneath. In the shelter.”

“There... Oh. Ooooooh. Wait, you’re fucking crazy.”

“And it’s my responsibility because I was born first and you got void as an affinity because of it.”

“Riiiiight.”

Nestra bore her gaze into Helena’s amused, yet still worried black orbs. She had normal sclera but the iris and pupil really were like her own. It was uncanny.

“Because I’m not human.”

“Riiight. Right. Wait, shit, you’re serious?”

“Dead serious. I was born non human, and mom’s body was... affected. And you got the void affinity and the anger as a result. Also our dad is not my real dad. I mean, not genetically. Probably. Whatever.”

Helena’s mouth hung open.

“I can prove it but you got to promise not to freak out.”

“You... are not human?”

“No.”

“And.... who knows about this?”

“Exactly five people. Three who shouldn't be, I had to help.”

“So, uh, ok? Are you going to... show me?”

“Yep. If that's ok, I mean.”

“And you brought me here becaaaaause?”

“The portal. If you were, I mean if you took it well, I thought we could have a bonding moment.”

“And not because you wanted to kill me and get rid of the body if I threatened anything?”

Nestra paled. Horror filled her chest.

“Wha — what? No! No, of course not I would never! Helena!”

“Ok ok ok ok sorry I shouldn't have. My bad.”

“I, shit I didn't think it would worry you so much I'm so sorry!”

“I know thinking's a bit hard for you but just listen to me! I'm fine, just show me non human Nestra!”

“Ok. Sure. Don't freak out.”

“You have tentacles?”

“No.”

“Horns?”

“... yes.”

“That's so wired! Come on, show me.”

Nestra sighed. It wasn't going the way she'd expected. Helena was just so exuberant but... maybe that was better? She pulled on her mask. Immediately, the world became more. She could hear the birds nesting on the second floor cafeteria. Her nose picked the dust and the rot and the wild flowers growing through the cracks. The wind caressed her skin. Mana pulsed wildly from her little sister, familiar yet strange on a human. Said little sister was

now standing but Nestra was still looking down at her in her best, most harmless impression of a meek demon.

“Wooooooow.”

“Yep, it’s me.”

“You’re so tall!”

“And ssstill growing.”

“And your voice is so low-pitched?”

“Also because I’m really tall.”

“Are those horns?”

“As I said, yesss.”

“Can I touch them?”

“No, please. Very sensitive.”

“ Holy shit what are you?”

“A Gray Demon.”

“Yeah I can see that but what is it called?”

“Hmm. Err. Gray Demon.”

“ .. ”

“Unless you want the latin name but please don’t address me by my genus and clade?”

“That’s so wireeeeeeeed. How long have you been, you know, that?”

“Hm. From birth. But I only figured it out recently.”

“So is this why you have no core? Is that part of the disguise?”

“Hm. No. My body needed a lot more mana to grow so... it cannibalized the human core.”

“WHAT REALLY?”

“Yes.”

“You nommed your own core? That’s so wired! Can you, like, regrow it?”

“Don’t think so. My true form has a core anyway. It’s... serviceable.”

“Nice. And can you use mana and everything?”

“Yes, void, same as you. Or rather, you are the same as me.”

“Riiiiight! Can you tell me more about who your dad is then? Are there more like you? Oh, are you infiltrating human society to overthrow it and control the government? Wait, you’re not going to do that, right?”

“No.”

“Aw.”

“I can’t tell you more about what I am, partly because it endangers you and partly because, well, I know very little myself. But we are hunters, not manipulators. At least, I think so.”

“Wait, you can have human shapes and you’re not evil manipulators bent on world domination?”

“I can’t talk for other Gray Demons I assume exist but as far as I am concerned, I absolutely and very definitely couldn’t possibly be arsed.”

“Damn. You show up with super infiltration power in human society and you stay for fun?”

“And gastronomy.”

Helena huffed though a smile tugged at her lips.

“That’s some high mindset here. I like it. Actually, you just asked me to bring my axe expecting me to, like, be okay about all of this?”

“I was certainly hoping for it, yeah.”

“And we just go into the portal and kill stuff? Wait, that means you’re registered as a gleam then?”

“No, at least not yet and... this portal isn’t registered yet.”

“ILLEGAL RAIDING?”

“Yeah.”

“What about the loot?”

“Black market.”

"This is so damn wiiiiirred. WAIT A MINUTE YOU ARE A COP IS THIS A STING OPERATION?"

"Human Nestra is a cop. Demon Nestra..."

Nestra shrugged.

"She is one hungry girl. And Threshold's gleams are not exactly tolerant of non-humans."

"Yeah, I mean. Oh. You would be killed on sight. At least by the old guard."

"Yep."

"I am part of a secretive criminal conspiracy. Ooooooh this is so wired. I wish I could tell someone, but I won't. Oooh this is so damn wired. Can we go now? Can we go?"

"Get in your training armor. I'll go grab my sword."

"Yes. YES! We were only scheduled to raid shit portals at the end of the semester, and even then only under guard. You... you'll cover my back, right?"

Nestra used *momentum*, to step really close. Helena jumped back with a yelp.

"WAH!"

"I'm actually quite strong. This is a D-class portal. We'll be fine."

"Get that damn sword and let's goooooooooooooo!"

"Sooo what now?"

"Just like the textbooks say. You just need to push your hands into the portal after coating them with mana."

"Like that? WHA—

Nestra drifted through the hospital portal into a forest. Leaves covered the ground in patterns she didn't recognize. The trunks were smooth and striped like a zebra's hide. They were also red. Above her, a bluish sun cast late afternoon rays that provided little heat while Helena finished collapsing from the entrance portal.

"—AHT. Oh. Huh, it was easier than I expected."

"Might be the void element. Hss."

They stood in a clearing. The ground rose and fell in tiny mounds and deep recesses and the air smelled of mud and rotten leaves, altogether not unpleasant at all. The distant din of battle surrounded them on all sides though Nestra wasn't too concerned. It had a distant, fake quality she couldn't quite place. It was more a setting than a reality. That told her what sort of portal this would be.

Helena stood up, She looked a little ridiculous in her training gear since it was so bulky, but it would definitely help. Her axe sucked since it was a dull weapon but she knew how to coat and it was all she needed with void mana. And it was still a large piece of metal swung by a gleam so... not exactly harmless. And Nestra was here.

"A portal world! I'm inside a portal world! What do we do now, explore?"

"No. Battle."

"What?"

Nestra pointed. A short humanoid creature emerged from the treeline, clad in a gambeson with pieces of shiny metal strapped here and there. He looked surprisingly humanoid but his features were much more feral, his skin drawn, and the hair on top of his head was dark and thick like a horse's mane. He growled when he saw them, then picked a mace hanging by his side and charged. A dozen warriors followed quickly after him. Only their hair color and weapon truly differed, though the first had by far the most protection.

"Battle," Nestra said. "You take the leader."

"YAAAAAAAH!"

Nestra had been worried her sister might hesitate but the girl was meeting her foe head on with her axe held high. It was weird watching her be so fearless. She really trusted Nestra.

Speaking of.

Nestra used *momentum* to move to the first of two archers, dispatching him with a single punch. They were D-class. She was almost a step above. She was also twice their size and monstrously stronger. There was no context and yet, when his skull crumpled, she still felt her mind grow slightly faster.

She took out the next archer in the same breath. Helena made contact with the squad leader. She didn't coat, but her strength was alone to push him back. Her follow up was slightly too slow to land a solid blow, Nestra judged. The demon rushed to a spear wielder trying to flank Helena. A kick crushed his spine. She slew a sword fighter with a void blade an instant later.

The barrier between worlds shivered. Nestra tensed, knowing what it meant. She grabbed a shield beared before crushing his vertebrae. Helena fell back when another spear fighter

threatened her flank. Solid battle instinct. Not bad, but though the warriors were little dangers...

Sashimi swam into this world.

“Sashimi if you touch a hair off her head, I swear to... to...”

But the shark just hovered above them. Their dark gaze met Nestra’s own and in them, she felt a sort of baffled condescension, along with a feeling words could only express one way.

Cub.

That was it. Sashimi would not attack Helena because Helena was a cub.

“You leave her alone but you attacked me? What?”

Nestra used momentum to appear in the middle of the surviving fighters before they could surround Helena. Her strikes were precise and, to be frank, there wasn’t much challenge here. It would be a little boring without Helena. Maybe she could fight without any mana at all? No, that was hubris talking. When Helena was here, Nestra would take no risks.

Rival.

Not cub.

“REALLY?”

Her sister did a nifty maneuver and managed to strike the enemy across the chest. It didn’t break through the armor there but the blow was enough to send the leader on his back. Before he could recover, Helena stepped forward to bring her axe down. The blade erupted with a dark corona. Her void was a wild thing, hard to control yet oh so destructive.

The blade cleaved through an arm, the chest, and the loam below. A little bit of blood sprayed the armor.

Helena stepped back. She pressed her hand to her torso, then found her fingers sticky with her victim’s fluids. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Wow. Feels different when they’re humanoid. Wait, what is that thing? A pet? You have a pet shark?”

“I wouldn’t call Sashimi a pet, per se.”

“Can I touch it?”

The traitorous shark bumped Helena with their nose. They stole her victim’s severed arm before lazily floating away.

“It’s so glorious and buoyant!” Helena declared.

The damn emergency seafood banquet went for one of the dead spearmen.

Nestra was livid.

It was so unfair.