

Nestra watched while Helena engaged in the time-honored tradition of divesting the dead of their belongings. Sadly, this was a relatively benign D-class world and the pickings seemed slim indeed.

That was a first world problem, to be fair. Primitive societies would love to recover the high purity metal contained in the fallen warriors' weapons and armor. In Threshold, they would be absolutely useless. The city mined its own minerals in special enclaves, recurring portals, and it recycled a lot as well. Nevertheless, Helena was consciously piling all the shinies in a single pile.

She finally hit something valuable.

"Gold!" she exclaimed.

The leader had a single, tiny bar of the precious metal engraved with a really stylistic depiction of a bird. Or maybe it was a really ugly leaf. Nestra couldn't tell.

"Yes! Gold. It's worth something, right?" Helena asked.

"Enchanters use it a lot, and gold found in portals often have some properties so... this is probably worth a couple hundred creds. The bar is just very small and the purity doesn't seem very high. You can give it to me and I'll sell it on the black market. Return the cash."

"No, I want to keep it. This is my first portal world. I'm clearing it with you, my sister, the gray demon, and that's the most wired thing ever. Yeah, I'll keep it as a souvenir. First trophy yay! I won't get in trouble, right?"

"Just hide it from mom and dad. You... can do that, right?"

"Yeah, obviously? They're afraid to step into my room."

"Yeah because it's a disgusting pigsty."

"I cleaned it! I cleaned it!"

"Did you discover new new species of fungus maybe? Name it after yourself?"

"Har har. Hmm so, what now? Is this a fae world?"

Nestra looked around, The distant sounds of battle were still present, though she wasn't too worried. This was a rather common portal type.

"Looks like a faerie conflict world, yeah. It will feel like we're at the edge of a battlefield. We'll come across patrols and scouts, or rather, they'll come across us."

"Are they really faeries, you think?"

“Nope. I think the first raiders just picked the name because the fighters were short individuals with exaggerated traits. And also, super cruel.”

“Your low-pitched voice is kinda relaxing. Can you keep it in human form?”

“Focus, Helena!”

“Sorry sorry sorry.”

“Anyway, D-class worlds don’t have royals. Those are much, much stronger than their foot soldiers. You must still pay attention to their war beasts. And watch your footing.”

“So... we’re going?”

“Yep.”

“No battle formation?”

Nestra crossed her arms.

“What formation? This is a void raid. You stand alone. I am only covering your back because it is the first time.”

“Okay! What about... them?”

She pointed at the menacing shadow of the void shark swimming through the air above like a sleek missile of smug voracity. And also duplicity. And also food theft.

“Dunno. Sashimi is absolutely useless, in my experience.”

She frowned at the shark, just to make sure they got the intent. Perhaps they did since they flicked their tail in a way that felt very much like a ‘fuck you’.

“Ok! Rely on myself. Got it. But hmmm. if there are plenty of enemies just like last time...”

“I’ll help you if you don’t stand a chance.”

“Works for me! Riel, this is exciting. The teachers at school don’t really trust me that much because, you know, I always have to hold back. But here I’m free to go all out! Ok! Raid on.”

Helena stepped out carefully, and Nestra followed at a distance with Sashimi providing, errr, overshark. Nestra wasn’t sure what the hell the void creature was up to. Maybe just garbage disposal. It wasn’t competing with her for the portal guardian, this time.

Helena followed a small trail forward, barely more than a beast trail snaking its way between the zebra-striped trunks of the crimson forest. The uneven ground meant that sometimes, she lost sight of Helena behind a sharp incline but that was fine. The autumn air and the smell of fallen leaves made the trek pleasant, a contrast to the sounds of battle. Sometimes

close, sometimes far, they were punctuated by great screams and the detonations of mighty spells. They still sounded off to Nestra. She almost expected to find tiny audio things cleverly hidden in trees but the sounds came from all around, probably directly generated at the edges of this temporary world. Whatever battle it emulated must have been massive and really, really bloody if the screams of the dying were any indication.

Nestra was the first to hear the two scouts shuffling in position. She approached, ready to help just in case as Helena progressed deeper into the forest. One of the scouts drew on a bow.

Helena couldn't see him from where she was. She also couldn't hear him with her low D-class ears, and yet, Nestra saw her react. As the arrow flew towards her head, Helena moved to the side and the projectile clanged uselessly against the training armor. Another shot pinged against a carefully angled pauldron. When the next arrow flew, Helena was already halfway up the slope with her axe in position. Nestra moved up to make sure she was close enough. She needn't have worried. Helena caught up with the first scout with decent speed and cut through the bow and the creature in a single void-infused strike. The other scout shot her in the back but once again, Helena moved just in time for the armor to take the blow, instead of her knee. She closed the distance with the last scout in moments using her speed and superior size. The scout screeched as it unsheathed a dagger. It didn't make any difference.

Helena was left standing over two gored corpses, unscathed.

She breathed hard and looked around, making sure she hadn't missed anybody. Nestra felt a pang of pride at the sight of her sister doing well and taking things seriously. A smile bloomed on her lips. She let it.

"Well done. You have great battle instincts! You could even tell they were there."

"I don't know for battle instincts but I knew they were there because..."

Helena pointed up. Sashimi was circling its next meal.

"The shark took off and started hovering over there so I figured..."

"Wow. I actually didn't notice that. You're damn smart."

"You didn't notice the large floating shark?"

"I try to ignore Sashimi so I'm not tempted to chase it and bite it again. I currently hold a grudge."

"Oh by the way, do you know if they're a he or a she?"

"I, uh, I don't know about void shark anatomy."

"Is it like normal shark anatomy?"

“Define normal? Actually, nevermind I can ask someone I know.”

“Wooooooh is it another Gray Demon?”

Curse her for being sharp.

“I can’t say. It’s confidential.”

“Oooh ok I won’t pry. So. Loot?”

“Yep. Your kill, your loot.”

“So you don’t object if I give the bodies to Sashimi?”

“Sashimi’s going to get fat.”

“But that would be so cute!”

Hmmm.

Nestra considered the question.

Could a fattened shark be even more delicious?

No harm in finding out.

Helena followed the void shark to two more patrols, then disposed of them with a merciless efficiency Nestra had never expected from her bubbly sister. They grow up so fast etc. Or maybe it was that teenagers tended to be psychopathic little assholes and this was just normal. In any case, the shark swept down to kill one of the scouts that had climbed up one of the trees, possibly because Helena had not brought ranged weaponry and the shark, somehow, recognized that. They didn’t find more gold but they did find obsidian shards and other trinkets that could be broken down and used in low-tier enchantments. It wasn’t too bad a haul.

“I’ll keep those as well. Truth is, I’m minoring in enchantments and I was thinking, maybe I can turn those into basic defensive tools. Like a bounce-back or something. Diversify a bit since void is not exactly versatile for me. Is that ok?”

“Yes, those are yours. You can do with them what you wish,” Nestra said,

It was obvious to her, to the point she felt weird about Helena asking. It was the girl’s hunt, her kills. It would be cruel and ridiculous of Nestra to tell the young hunter what to do with her first prizes.

Helena continued along the trail rather proud with herself and still vigilant of the careful walk was any indication. She didn't seem to suffer from too much hubris, but there was a savagery in the way she fought that Nestra wasn't sure was the normal human standard. Her technique was also more straightforward than Nestra's. Much more direct. She relied on her strength and the dangerous coating much more, assuming the enemy would never ignore it and... it was correct. So far. It was still very different from Nestra's own vicious disruptive technique.

Nestra paused when the trail passed by a strangely even patch of sand in the middle of a clearing. Contrary to the rest of the forest, the open ground had little vegetation. The sounds of battle were also dull around here.

Helena took a step forward, a little curious. Sashimi hovered above her.

Nothing happened. Helena took another careful step.

Something erupted from the center of the clearing. Nestra and Sashimi exploded into motion, Nestra grabbing Helena back while Sashimi dove, taking a bite out of a hurricane of claws and chitin. Twin mandibles snapped shut a meter away from Helena's face and even then, the whip-like crack sent shivers along even Nestra's spine. Gritty gravel flew through the air along with teal blood and then, everything returned to normal. Mostly.

In the center of the clearing, the sand bubbled. A spray of blue ichor traced an uneven line across the area. In Nestra's arms, Helena struggled. She climbed back to her feet and brushed off her armor with shaky hands.

"Hooly shit what was that?"

"Bobbit worm, hmmm."

She checked her visor and the database there.

"Eunice Manaphorditois. A really large specimen. Hm! Should we hunt it?"

"Hell no."

Ah, truly not a Gray Demon then, Maybe for the best. Helena was still young and inexperienced. She needed to be careful.

"Ok, that's a great answer actually. You don't really have the tools to safely defeat that threat on your own. Anyway! I'm going to kill it."

"Why? Are you sure?"

"The shell's apparently valuable and since it's so big, probably even more so. It can either be used in light armor or as magical dye according to my file. Also... it's edible. And delicious."

"You... are going to eat that stuff? Really?"

“Hey, think of it as, errr.”

Nestra considered her options.

“Land crustacean.”

“It’s a fucking insect.”

“No it’s not. It has more than six limbs. It’s probably an arthropod.”

“You are bringing semantics into gastronomy?”

“Look, you don’t have to touch it.”

“Maybe kill it first and then you can talk,” Helena said defiantly.

Nestra shrugged. Before she could do anything, Sashimi dove and slapped the ground with its tail. The bobbit worm rushed out once more, again finding only air as the shark mockingly swam away. Nestra was off before the worm even snapped its jaw shut. It perceived her but too late. Its segmented body ponderously swept to the side, hoping to crush Nestra with weight alone but it was futile. She deftly stepped on its back and stabbed down with a void claw, severing the central nerve. The beast shivered as it fell.

Nestra felt her bones grow slightly harder. She moved her shoulders a bit to get used to the sensation. Resistances were both rare and very nice.

“Wah,” Helena exclaimed while the dust settled.

Share.

Nestra grumbled but the shark had done half of the job so she didn’t have the moral high ground. It was a matter of minutes to cut the worm apart, piling the shell and mandibles on one side for later sales. Sashimi refused to eat unless Nestra threw the pieces of meat so the shark could snap them mid-air. The process annoyed Nestra to no end. Did the spare seafood banquet want to eat or not? What was its deal anyway? She grumbled as she packed the bobbit tail meat into her backpack since it was the best part. Well, second best part after the brain steam but she let Sashimi have it.

“What now? Also, ew.”

“You didn’t have to touch anything and I didn’t pierce their entrails so you have no right to complain. Ok, so we must be getting close to the guardian. I will handle the followers while you focus on them. According to my database, they should be a scout leader.”

“Oh! I know that, it was even in one of my exams. Enchanted weapons and good technique. I got it.”

It suddenly occurred to Nestra that Helena was attending a school she had personally dropped off, so technically, Helena was a better trained and more knowledgeable raider than she was.

“Huh. Ok then. One last thing because you may have forgotten. Remember that in a portal world, the local fauna is as dangerous as the main foes.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. I just don’t think that species is very common. I’ll be more careful!”

“You are doing really well. Ok, let’s go.”

Once again, Helena took point. The sounds of battle increased again to the point it sounded like the pair was heading straight towards it, even though it was probably long over in whatever world it had taken place in. They spotted a clearing very soon and a sound of alarm came from a scout standing at the edge of the trees. Helena didn’t seem disappointed. It was almost impossible for D-class raiders to take the fae scouts by surprise anyway. Despite their typical monster aggression, which tended to make them more reckless, ‘fae’ warriors remained on average much more skillful than humans who had to rely on their massive physical advantages to triumph. Nestra kept that in mind as she pushed ahead of Helena to engage them.

She burst out of the clearing and used *momentum* in the same instant, taking her surroundings mid-step. This was a camp, less fortified than camouflaged though there were a few earthworks designed to stop mounts. A tall tree stood at the top of a small hill and a large tent hid under its boughs. Warriors stood in a loose formation around a spear-wielding captain with hound-like creatures baying at her, though they looked more like trackers than war beasts.

Arrows whistler behind her. She repositioned.

The leader and obvious guardian was only slightly taller than his subordinates but there was a difference in his features that gave her pause. They were refined and smooth where the others were bestial. Almond eyes, much larger than those of a human, followed her mid teleport. The being also wore an elaborate and elegant leather armor that shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. His hair fell down his back in an elegant silvery waterfall. For all his grace, there was something deeply disturbing in the blood dripping down his mouth. He was chewing on something and she wagered it wasn’t chicken.

The noble ordered his soldiers forward in a syllant tongue but Nestra was already in their midst. She tore through their ranks easily since they had preferred to give each other a wide berth. It was almost too easy. Her boredom pushed her to take special care in dodging the arrows rather than letting her thick skin block them. That was decent training at least, and the motivation helped her keep motivated.

Sashimi fell on the archers hiding among the branches above her. She killed but kept her attention on the noble, who ordered his men to close ranks around him while the hounds were left to fend for themselves. Those were still D-rank monsters, all of them. They stood

no chance against her, so Nestra merely disposed of them as efficiently as possible while still doing her best to dodge the arrows. And there was the power from the kills, even now pushing against her core though the boost felt rather inefficient.

Helena cut down two spearmen blocking her way, using her strength and non-infused attacks. The fae tried to deflect her strikes but there was just a lot of power behind each one and they fell, overwhelmed before they could bring their techniques to bear. The captain gave Nestra one last furious glance before charging down the slope towards the roaring axe girl challenging him. Nestra used the opportunity to finish her sweep, all the while following the duel as it progressed.

The noble fae deflected Helena's first assault with a flick of his spear. He was obviously proficient at fighting against a superior opponent but Helena was expecting it. Her strikes were precise enough to make every parry difficult. Nestra saw the pained fury on the captain's twisted features every time an attack made his lithe arms shudder. Helena wasn't using coating yet. She was saving mana for a finishing blow.

The result was that Helena's training axe was getting damaged. With every deflection, the fae's enchanted spear bit more into the axe's blade. Helena didn't care or maybe she didn't notice. Nestra believed the girl had a plan, and her patience was rewarded. With a savage blow, the noble managed to cut a piece off of Helena's axe.

Helena didn't stop. She flipped the axe and bashed the surprised noble with the haft, sending him crashing backward. She was on him in an instant. Her axe went up, then down, engulfed in void energy.

This was where the fae superiority shone. The noble dropped his spear and surged forward, blocking the blow with a vambrace. In the same, smooth movement, he managed to lodge the enchanted piece of armor exactly where Helena's axe showed damage. Gossamer energy fought against the fizzling void and still lost. Blood, crimson and vibrant, sprayed from the wound but the noble had gained breathing room. His hand went for a sheath hidden near his waist.

Nestra used *momentum* to jump forward just as Sashimi dove but she got there first. She managed to grab the noble's hand before the enchanted dagger could burrow itself in her sister's guts.

Then, Nestra hesitated.

And she let the arm go.

The enchanted blade dug into Helena's flank, now with much less momentum. It pierced the training armor like butter and when Helena moved back, blood dripped from the gash. Her sister roared and struck again, then again. The noble had gambled everything on the maneuver and failed to take her down. Helena gave him no chance to get the initiative back. She smashed through the chestplate on the third strike, and cleaved the head on the fourth.

The noble was dead. Nestra felt no energy but that was fine. She was just glad that Helena had triumphed, sweaty, breathing hard and obviously mana-starved but victorious nonetheless.

The noble's corpse was absolutely mangled though. Really, Helena was not afraid of getting her hands dirty.

"Woooooh that wasn't easy. Wow! I got him good though, right?"

"Yes, and I am very impressed by the way you didn't panic when you got wounded. Many people would flinch and hesitate, but you—"

"I'm wounded?" Helena asked, face an expression of panicked bafflement.

"Hm."

"I'm wounded? Where? Aaaaah I'm bleeding! Well, it doesn't look so bad."

Helena put a finger in the gash of her armor, pulling it wet with her blood. She smudged it a bit on her glove.

"Huh. Ow. Owowowow. Ok, ok, I feel it now. It's not bad though, right?"

"Nope, and we have potions."

"Oh good."

She stood up, a bit hesitantly. She breathed deep a couple of times, then winced. The exit portal opened inside of the tent.

"So, we can go now?"

"Don't you want to loot first? Actually, don't you want to drink a potion first?"

"This is nothing. I got worse in training."

The sentence bounced around Nestra's brain three times before it suddenly clicked.

"What do you mean, you got worse in training?"

Helena blushed, caught.

"Helena?"

"Oh, you know, sparring can get a little rough."

Nestra knew very well that it didn't. Schools were very specific about keeping their students healthy if only because healing liquids were rather expensive and in limited supply, not to mention wounded students had to stop training for a little while. It was a big fat lie.

"Helena."

"I don't want to talk about it, ok? I just want to raid in peace. With you."

Nestra wanted to push a bit. Was Helena being bullied? Maybe? Her sister's mulish expression told her the girl had clammed up tight and it would be of no use to pressure her now.

"Sure, ok. Here, drink this. And you can talk to me whenever."

"Thanks. And it's nothing too bad, just kid rivalries. I'm fine."

Helena tried her best to sound dismissive but Nestra wasn't fooled. Her reaction was too intense for it not to be bothering her. It still wouldn't help to pressure her right now. Helena was already a boiling pot of emotions right now.

"Ok."

"I am! Really!" Helena exploded.

And here it was, Nestra thought. Her sister calmed down and took a deep breath immediately after, however. That therapist must have taught her how to do that. It was rather impressive.

"Sorry. Anyway, it was really fun. Damn, those potions taste like ass."

"Defective batch. They were supposed to taste like mint."

"Like mint? Damn I'm happy they taste like ass instead. Anyway, go back?"

"Loot first."

"Oh yessss!"

In the end, the harvest proved surprisingly good, including some special fruits and fae military rations humans could eat. The fruits were already cultivated and sold by the Baihua corp thanks to looted seeds, but those bastards charged an arm for a small basket so it was a good haul anyway. The spear was a minor artefact Helena intended to sell for a better, secret axe.

"Won't you get in trouble for damaging the equipment?" Nestra asked.

"You mean like I already destroyed seven axes fucking up the coating? I'll be fine. I'll just fix the armor myself. Oh, can we do anything with the fae armor? It's enchanted."

The multicolored piece of armor was an artefact, though it was extremely weak. It would fit a child if the kid was awakened and someone wanted to do a 'bring your kid to work' day in a portal world and repaired the massive damage first. Nestra told Helena as much.

"In other words, it's fucking useless, yea?"

"We can always sell it for research. Or to a collector. I guess. Or I could take it off your hands because I have a use for it."

"What kind of use? A little too small for cosplay, no?"

"My err, it's hard to explain but I'll try. You see my body suit?"

"You mean the skin suit that leaves your feet bare and sticks to your tits a bit indecently?"

"Oh I'm sorry for not being a paragon of fashionable modesty while I wade knees deep in monster guts. Anyway, yes, that, it's actually a symbiote. It eats armor to grow."

"You're shitting me."

"And it drinks some blood as well."

"You're either fucking with me or this is like the most wired thing ever. Show me."

"Sure."

Nestra grabbed the mangle piece, feeling her Skin shift and hunger like a waking snake. She brought it to her chest.

Darkness.

Ripples in the fabric of space. A hell of inward-facing teeth, extending to infinity. A tongue that peeled the soul, eyes like apertures into insanity. Slavering planetoids shoved through the eye of a needle. Cracks where a thousand maws closed. A sigh of contentment like thunder in a tiny bowl.

Reality reasserted itself.

Something burped.

The Skin extended to wrap around Nestra's feet's arches, leaving the toes and heel bare.

"Well, it's progress."

"What the FUCK?"

"Wired?"

“Ooooh wow. What a day.”

“Go back and have a picnic?”

“Sure. Do you have booze?”

“How old are you again?”

“I think I just saw space shit itself.”

“But not time so you’re still underage.”

“Riel dammit.”

The beat officer walked into the empty hospital, lured in by the salivating smell. Something was wrong. There should be no one in here, and in Threshold, unusual smells could be the only hints one would get before a hidden portal breached. It was probably hobos grilling sausages over a barrel fire but... better be sure. And besides, it smelled too good to be secret meat.

She called it in and took out her service weapon, just in case. If it was hobos, they would be a little scared. If it was a break, she could unload it into a dokkaebi and run.

If it was a D-class monster, the city would be safer for her sacrifice.

She gulped with some difficulty. Her steps carried her through an underground parking lot. Shadows crawled around her. Any moment now, claws would close around her neck. She felt much better when the ground rose towards a small, half-dry garden.

The smell came from a fire and she spotted its smoke in the inner courtyard. There was the top of a human head there as well, with blonde hair and a jacket.

A human.

The officer breathed a sigh of relief, then she stopped, unsure what to do with the scene.

A merry fire roared in the empty clearing, and two women sat around it. A blonde one with gray eyes slathered chili oil over chunks of juicy pale meat which she then laid on a grill while a younger, dark-haired girl chewed on a vibrantly green fruit.

It was the most bizarre sight she’d ever seen.

The two were obviously related. Also, the younger one was a gleam. She hadn’t noticed at first because her eyes were so dark but the shine was there. They were eating here of all

places? The amount of food piled to the side showed they had enough to feed a dozen people.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Eating.”

“Cooking.”

The delivery was matter of fact. The voices, eerily similar. There was nothing humorous about their tones. It was like entering a tiger enclosure and they watched you but didn't move yet. The younger one felt more rebellious while the older was uncaring, and though she wasn't a gleam, she somehow felt more dangerous. Too calm.

“You can't be here, you're trespassing.”

“Nope, this is state property and legally the hospital never fully closed so we are, in fact, not trespassing,” the blonde calmly replied.

“This is ridiculous. The hospital is clearly abandoned. I will ask you to leave.”

“What's your fucking problem?” the gleam erupted. “We're not doing anything wrong! Why don't you—”

“What my sister is trying to say,” the non gleam clearly interrupted.

Sister? Oh, some baseline parents were starting to have gleam kids. Made sense. Maybe they were hiding because of personal issues.

“Is that we are trying to have a family moment here and we are not bothering anyone. Could you please let us finish? We will clean after ourselves and not bother anyone.”

The gleam smoldered in her corner, vengefully biting on her fruit. She cast the officer a dark glare as if daring her to object. The blonde woman was still the very image of detached disinterest.

Well, it was weird but not worth anything except for a report at the station. Just in case.

“Can I ask to see some ID? Then I'll leave you alone.”

“Sure,” the blonde woman said, then she gave the officer a genuine police badge.

“The rat squad? Oh, sorry, didn't mean to—”

“That's ok, and I didn't want to show you before because I didn't want to pull rank.”

“I see. Well, I'll leave you to it then. Please don't litter.”

“I promise. Would you like a skewer?”

“Never during office hours. You take care now.”

The officer turned away, feeling a pair of gazes drilling into her back. She prided herself with her good instinct. Some people even said she was an intuition quirky, and perhaps they were right. It was still weird how the slightly scarred blonde woman still felt more threatening than the dark-eyed gleam girl. Probably because she was a cop. Yeah, that was it.

The officer cast one last glance back. She could swear the rat squad woman must have felt her gaze, because she looked up from the skewers and her iris were gray, not gunmetal, more like a total absence of color. For a moment, she could almost see something else.

Then the impression was gone.

Nah, it was probably the fact she was a cop. May have seen some action. That was it.