

No time to run. The membrane that was this portal world exploded, spilling its content where there was no space to spill them. Space bent in mind-defying geometries. Her mind reeled from the experience, but then she recovered almost immediately.

This was just space. She knew space. Well, not her mind, but her body, her instincts did. Synesthesia merged space and sight to present rivers of glass melding and splitting in a tightly packed whole. She was... not existing at the moment. Both her mask and true self folded together in the same personal space.

It was weird. And fascinating. She didn't have the time to enjoy it though. There was the rather important matter of preventing a trans-dimension apex predator from slaying earth's most powerful raider and dooming the city. Her city.

"Riel dammit, Sereth."

He wouldn't have endangered her. That meant that she was safe, or more likely, capable of saving herself. Through the depth of the worlds, she recognized each glass vein as a layer of existence. Small bubbles represented portals, stuck to their home dimensions like soap bubbles to the skin. The largest and most imposing of them all showed skyscrapers and a sky of red. it also... tasted... familiar. Others were more distant. She almost opened her cocoon now so she could exist in space again, but felt flung into the real world. Images blurred in front of her. She saw a jungle.

"That's not right."

She couldn't allow herself to reappear out there in the fucking boonies. Her mind focused, sharpening her instincts. She redirected her cocoon towards the shiniest beacon, the most mana-rich place of her native plane. There, again, the skyscrapers. She forced the bubble to close in with the glass vein. She merged both membranes. It was so easy. They wanted to merge.

Nestra stepped in front of Riel's Beacon: Threshold's official town hall. Air filled her lungs. Noise saturated her ears. She could see again, smell the asphalt and taste the ambient mana. She could feel their air on her skin.

Wait, fuck.

"My mask!"

Nestra put it on, but not before a strident scream rose behind her. She tapped her Skin.

"Quick! Make us inconspicuous!"

The symbiote growled with annoyance, but it complied. the veil-like shoulders and armor melted into a nondescript bodysuit.

"Please don't kill me!"

Nestra turned at the unusual request. There was a corpo drone in suit sitting in his ass, looking very scared.

“Crescent, with the army.”

Nestra waved her ID in front of the man’s face. It was really convenient to be able to store small items with her mask. Maybe one day she’d be able to store an entire fridge.

“Oh, sorry.”

Alarms blared in the background. There were shattered pieces of windows littering the ground at her feet. Threshold was on lockdown.

“Get to a shelter instead of asssking monsters not to kill you. They won’t listen.”

“Oh yeah. You were just on the way.”

Nestra glared, which was enough to get the corpo out of her hair. Things were bad. The streets were empty. Some of the concrete had cracked. Hover cars lay unattended, doors still open, and the light, the light was so red.

She looked up. The sky was bleeding. Angry, roiling clouds moved like waves over her head. Indigo bolts coursed the heavens with thundering booms that caused rows of windows to explode in crystal rains. A loud shock tore through the abused city, and the ground shook. She almost expected to see shockwaves and the mana signs of massive spells, but all she could see was army gunships and, a bit later, a trio of fighter jets roaring through the hellscape, and she understood.

Sereth and Shinran were not fighting here. This was merely a bleedthrough.

“Fuck.”

Where were they? She had to stop them. If she even could. It looked like just being around might be fatal. Quickly, she raced towards the closest B-class world she knew of: the one where she sparred with Sereth on occasion. The entrance wasn’t too far and it felt like a good candidate since Sereth liked the place.

The color of the sky didn’t match, though. She pushed back the fear of what could happen if she got it wrong. Her feet pushed against the shivering concrete. She ran faster. Sereth, what the fuck are you doing?

He just wanted to talk. It was clear as day. He wanted to talk, or she would have had her throat between his fingers!

The ground shook again. A patrol of gleams in techno armor moved past her. They immediately latched on her presence, but she shook her ID in front of them and it destabilized them enough for her to continue. The headquarter of the Tiger guild was in sight. She placed her hands in front of her. This was the B-class world. Heat. She felt heat.

Good news was that they were fighting here. Bad news was that the spot she wanted to port into was probably destroyed, or damaged, at least. Nestra rushed along the street, feeling the world as she went. Something fell crashed against a nearby building: a spot of superheated basalt. The remnant of a red crystal were still embedded into it.

Better hurry.

Nestra pushed where she felt it was safe, hoping she wasn't making a mistake.

She appeared in the air over a massive chasm.

"Fuck."

Dangerous. Dangerous. Behind her, rock. A panicked momentum sent her against it. It was the bottom of a floating island. The basalt dug into her back when she hit it. Turning, she managed to grasp the rocks before she could fall.

Stupid. Stupid. But she had no choice. She HAD to stop them. Sereth couldn't be that serious or the fight would have ended earlier.

She crawled up until she reached the top of the floating island, or rather what was left of it. The low bowl of the island's natural shape was cut in half. Debris and shattered crystals were all that remained of the other half. In the distance, other islands were smashed to pieces. The skies were on fire, under the accretion disk of the distant black hole.

Literally. The world was on fire. The heat that fell onto Nestra was enough to make her uncomfortable. A monstrous shockwave thundered through this portal world, but it looked like it was strong enough to withstand the blow. Nestra caught two after-images rushing above. They were gone again before she could process them.

One, a colossus in blood-red armor and a mask reminding her of a demon, wielding a weapon she recognized as a naginata, a polearm with a save blade at the tip. The second was Sereth. Only the buddhist demon's armor showed cracks.

They appeared again, the buddhist demon flying.

"Hey!" Nestra screamed. "HEY! HEEEEEEY!"

It was like yelling at the clouds. How could they even hear her?

"One moment," Sereth whispered in her mind. "I'm almost done."

"Don't kill him!" Nestra yelled.

"Of course not. I am not stupid."

"Oh..."

It sure looked to Nesta like he was trying to kill the man. She huddled behind a rock while the apocalypse unfolded above her in a hell of falling fire striated by two dark shapes, each one monstrous in their own way. What she got from the fight, she saw it from afterimages because it never, ever slowed down. It would never slow down so long as Sereth was one of the combatants. She was aware of rank differences but she'd never realized how large it grew the higher one climbed. The A-rank raiders hurled themselves through the air, smashed islands apart with their strikes, and moved so fast she couldn't process it. The entire heavens around her were still burning for some reason. They were like adult fighters smashing through a toddler gaming room. On one side, Shinran in the demonic armor she'd first spotted. On the other, Sereth, in his bone-like plate. As the combat progressed and Nesta could somewhat pay attention, she noticed his armor was regenerating. It was a mixed blessing considering what Sereth was putting it, and its owner, through, for the titan was winning. There were no doubts of that. No, not winning, Sereth was crushing him. Every fragment of the fight she could see implied it.

Despite the cataclysmic battle unfolding, Nesta allowed herself to relax. Sereth wasn't going to kill Shinran. The rest was entirely out of her hands. That meant she could just watch the storm unfold. Two A-class raiders pummeling each other? This was a show like no others, and she was in the VIP lodge. It was just a shame that there wasn't much to see beyond pyrotechnics and the occasional shock. She could taste it though, at the tip of her tongue. Sereth's mana, void and space mimicking other hues as grisly imitations of the original, but there was also Shinran's solid presence.

Actually, he wasn't using any life mana, yet Nesta could tell he was healing very fast. And Shinran was not known to use any fire? What was going on? She would find it soon enough because the combat was ending.

Something told her it had lasted exceptionally long for an A-class confrontation, but as soon as Sereth landed on her half island, she knew why. He had taken his time.

The pile of meat the Aszhii dropped on the ground might have been a person once. Now, she had no idea how it could still live.

"You were foolish to come here," Sereth growled in Aszhii. "Either of us could have killed you by accident."

Nesta didn't believe it a single second. Sereth could feel space.

"I am serious. It was dangerous."

"I trusted you to be careful."

"And it was a mistake. Never trust a hunting Aszhii, not even your own brother."

He hissed. He seemed... off. Pissed off. Nesta suddenly felt like she was walking on eggs.

"Errr, ok, sorry, I suppose I let my fear govern my actions."

“Nothing is worth more than your life. If you had died, Threshold would have paid the price so I could have fun before the covens skinned me alive.”

She was pretty sure he wasn't joking.

“Hssss. We shall stop here. I need a moment.”

He disappeared. A moment later, something huge and distant roared in pain.

Nestra returned her attention to the pile of meat. It was already looking more like a person. As she watched, several broken bones straightened with a strange, dull sound. One puffy eyes looked at her over a toothless jaw. It was hard to gauge his emotions with so few facial features left to express them, but he looked surprisingly calm. That, or his lid wasn't working anymore.

“Errr. Lookssss painful,” she commented.

Nevermind. He could still glare.

“Sorry.”

Damn, it was Shinran. Shinran! And now her silly goose of a brother had beaten the shit out of him. He was her boss' boss. She was going to get her holiday request canceled. Or worse. They might seize her freezers out of spite.

Damn.

“Errr, can I help?”

More bones snapped. The maxillary somehow reconnected to the jaw. Teeth reappeared. They didn't grow back, they reformed out of nothing.

“Right, you can't talk yet.”

“The —” Shinran began, then stopped. The healing focused on his face until he looked like himself again — albeit covered in blood.

“The physical pain does not measure with my shame. It was a poor display of skill.”

“Well, Sereth caught you off guard, I guess? Or did he? It sounds like he warned you.”

“Yes.”

A pause.

‘And I should have taken more care.’

“You wanted to talk?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I wanted to talk to you. ‘Do not approach her under any circumstances’ he said. I always assumed he meant to touch you or confront you, but it appears he meant approach.”

“You didn’t have to approach me, though.”

“I deemed it necessary.”

“No, ugh, I mean...”

She tapped her temple.

“A vid call? No? You could just have called me.”

He blustered, and Nestra thought she might have gone too far.

“I am sure calling and presenting myself as Shinran would be a good way to get hung up on considering my AI-imitated voice is the second most common scam approach in the city.”

“You don’t get robocalls on army phones and visors.”

She wanted to shake that idiot. And he was an idiot. His blush said everything.

“Hello?”

“I admit that my old-fashioned approach was counter-intuitive.”

“You just wanted to corner and impress me.”

“...Sou kamo ne?”

“How is it working out for you?” Nestra asked, irate now that she could see someone had almost ruined her life, and probably caused a fight that would cost tens of millions of credits of repairs and definitely some wounded people. And all for what? This could have been a fucking email.

“After our previous meeting, I trained very hard to face Sereth again. It was rather... optimistic of me.”

“You thought you could face Sereth after a couple of months of training?” Nestra asked with total disbelief.

“It was a very special and difficult training.”

“Yeah, well, he’s done the same for the past two centuries so... got to catch up first, huh?”

“There is no need to hammer the blow, Crescent. I am well aware of my failings,” he said, sitting up himself.

The ruins of his armor still clung to his mauled form. A glove of drying blood clung to it, so Nesta wasn't even sure if he was wearing anything.

“Crescent? You don't know my name?”

“That would have been a violation of your privacy. Our common friend, doctor Mazingwe, mentioned your existence along with Sereth's warning. He is very protective of his patients so I would have had to fight him to get your real name. That, or violate my word by accessing your private records. It would be dishonorable of me to treat a potential ally like this.”

“Potential ally? Wait, you're serious? You're not here to threaten me?”

“Most of the time, the fact that I'm still earth's most dangerous A-rank raider suffices.”

His gleam eyes, both of them by now, peered into her soul. Ok, so yeah. Even battered and bruised, that was still Shinran.

“Does this refer to the fact that the point under the Beacon is the most concentrated mana source on earth?” Viv asked, eager to dig now that she'd realized something weird was going on.

Shinran shook his head.

“No, that is a different matter. My offer relates to the peculiar nature of my mana. I believe a demonstration is in order, but I would rather wait for Sereth's return before pulling you away. I do not want to be beaten again.”

It suddenly occurred to Nesta that Shinran had no idea that his second-in-command had already hired her to kill him. Or learn how to, at least.

Damn. Would she have to pick sides? Well, it didn't matter for now. She was clearly out of her league, and would remain so for the next decade. At the very least.

While Shinran picked himself back up, quite literally, Nesta decided to get some confirmation.

“So, I'm honored that you would talk to me and so on. Do you really not know who I am? My civilian identity, that is.”

“From your tone and accent, I can tell that you are a Threshold citizen. Mazingwe hinted that you had grown as a human.”

He finally stood. The layer of congealed blood peeled off like a glove, leaving behind a fresh and expanding suit of armor. Nestra had seen healing before, and this wasn't it. At least not with life mana.

"What sort of magic is this?" she muttered, curious.

She wondered if she could absorb it.

"It is unique," Shinran said.

"Not so unique," Sereth replied, softly landing on the broken island.

His armor had resorbed until it was more full plate and less screwed-on battle walker armor. He still looked a bit grumpy. Nestra felt a pang of anxiety.

"Sereth? Are you alright?" she hissed in Aszhii.

His ears drooped down miserably.

"Do not mind me, little Nezhra. I am merely upset because it has been a long while since I had a worthy hunt. All I do here is hold back. And I have no one to blame but myself for this decision."

"And he provoked you by ignoring your warnings."

"I am usually happy when people ignore my warning. It means I can.... let go."

He turned away from her in the most obvious sign he was hiding something she'd ever seen outside of a school ground.

"Something else is bothering you."

"And also, perhaps, Siobhan and I are having an unresolved argument."

"You beat Threshold's best raider to an inch of his life because you're having a lover's quarrel?"

"It is more serious than that! She wants us to move in together. And I want that too! But I don't want to live in a human house!"

Nestra was speechless.

"Why don't you find two houses side by side, a human one and then one you can use as your den?"

"Have you any idea of the cost? The Sunflour is doing well but not that well. The real estate market..."

“Sereth,” she said with disbelief. “You’re a fucking Aszhii.”

“Contrary to you, I am staying undercover. That means avoiding the black market and anything else that might harm Siobhan Stibbons in the long run.”

“Damn, if only you had one of the planet’s richest man right here and owing you an apology.”

“I, errrr.”

His ears perked up.

“It wouldn’t break my cover to get a donation, right? Unless he uses it to harm Siobhan.”

“You just opened him and crumpled him like a can of peas. I think he will be reasonable.”

“Huh.”

Sereth turned to Shinran who was now meditating in orange robes again. It was as if the armored demon form had never existed.

“You, human. I require... compensation. I need to buy a house.”

“Where?”

“District Fourteen. It needs to be flat and at least three hundred square meters. And if you use my human identity to harm the people close to me, I will eat you.”

“Should I accept, will we be even?”

Sereth shook with excitement.

“Yes!”

“I agree.”

“Alright. Good. Excellent. You two have a good talk. I need to make a call. Don’t wait on me.”

And he was gone.

“I believe I have conducted the first successful high level human-alien negotiation! A round of applause.”

Shinran smiled, though it was not a warm one.

“Not quite.”

“Huh?”

“Congratulations are still due. Now, can I tell you why I wanted to contact you to begin with?”

“Uh, sure. Sorry. It’s just... you’re Shinran and you are there. I cannot believe we’re having a conversation. I mean, I can, but it’s still strange.”

He was kind of famous! The raider didn’t mind her babbles. With his shaven head and kind expression, he was back to the peaceful and popular person she’d grown used to seeing on vid. She’d met him before, once, but seeing him again now made her feel all fuzzy, even though he’d gotten his ass handed to him. It was Shinran!

“I am fairly approachable, just usually quite busy.”

“Raiding?”

“Yes, in a way.”

“In a way?”

“It would be better to show you. My kind of mana is unique on earth, though it appears your Sereth has seen it before elsewhere. If I were to describe it, I would call it... divine mana.”

Nestra didn’t reply.

“I know it sounds pretentious. Seeker mana would work as well. It allows me to find what I need — within limit — and acquire conceptual powers that go beyond what normal mana have access to.”

“Like that fire rain?”

“Yes. I would not be able to cast firebolts, for example, but this specific spell is something I can cast without understanding it. I discovered how it could be used long after the incursion, sadly, or I would have helped more.”

His eyes grow dark.

“Perhaps saved Riel. I was not within his inner circle at the time but we did fight side by side. He was something.”

“What was he like?” Nestra asked.

“You must have seen the vids and studied the history of the incursion. When they say he was charismatic, that is an understatement. When he was around, we felt like... like we had a chance. He fought like a hero. The way he bent space to reflect blows, protect people, scatter the enemy. It was like... like watching an orchestra director at work.”

He paused.

“Things were grim then. We were losing a war. A war for subjugation.”

“Not extinction? That’s what the book say,” Nestra replied, confused.

Shinran waved her observation away.

“Either or. A slave cannot truly live, merely survive, and that is a crime almost as bad as murder. Enough reminiscing. My mana gives me access to a very specific, shall we say, service. And I would like you to use it as well.”

Nestra blinked.

“Excuse me?”

“It is a tool to perfect one’s craft. It would be better if I showed you.”

He stood there smiling as if he’d not offered her the perfect bait for an Aszhii. Well, besides good food.

“Why would you ever do that? I’m an alien.”

“Three reasons. One, I am a good judge of character.”

“That is not immediately obvious...”

“That does not mean I do not make mistakes. I do not think it is a mistake to think you will protect humans against monsters, is it?”

“No, I would protect people.”

Shinran nodded to himself.

“That is the second reason. Threshold needs more protectors, and you have much potential.”

“What about Ragnarok?”

“That is so. The third reason. Ragnarok has also used this... service. Right now, she is in the process of ascending... although she is taking her time, hm? She would prefer to clean house first. In any case, I have extended this offer to several promising warriors.”

Nestra suspected there was a lot left unsaid there. She was curious though.

“Okay. Can you show me then?”

“First, we must return to our plane. May I hold your shoulders?”

“I... guess?”

Nestra was now flying at the speed of a jet. The strange air of this world forced her to blink. She was above a fractured palace, a rotting ribcage of white pillar encircling the abominable form of a tentacled being nestling here like a fat rat sleeping inside of the carcass, except the fat rat was dying. Someone had ripped its tentacles and pulped its flesh. Now it breathed laboriously through a broken beak. White vitreous leaked from the ruins of its many eyes.

The next moment, the beast was dead. The next moment, Nestra was in a spacious bunker at the heart of the Tiger guild's headquarters. The next, she was outside under a mercifully blue sky. Shinran froze, aghast. The damage to faraway buildings was obvious, though thanks to Threshold's stringent building code, only windows had suffered. A patrol of gunships crossed the sky in front of Riel's Beacon.

"Nante koto da?"

"Your fight bled through," Nestra explained.

Shinran stepped away from her. A few C-rank guild guards gasped when they noticed the pair, but Shinran's familiar figure meant they stayed back.

"I... I am terribly sorry, Crescent-san. I must leave now. I must..."

"Sure," Nestra replied, and he was gone.

Which left her standing in the middle of the curb in front of a very alert and rather curious group of raiders, having come out of what was their territory without having been seen entering it. She decided to leave at a brisk pace, nodding at the nearest guard. He didn't return it. Thankfully, bureaucratic inertia was once again on her side. The guards didn't dare nab one of Shinran's pals. She was at the corner of the street before they could call their boss.

Nestra recovered her masked gleam phone just to see what was going on.

"EMERGENCY BROADCAST: Return to yellow alert. Please remain mindful of your surroundings. Avoid traveling unless strictly necessary."

The train and buses were on lockdown for now so she guessed she would be jogging home. Her personal visor showed several messages from Mom, Helena, even one from dad. Stib and Gorge had also called. Damn. She needed to answer or she'd get an earful. Better do it now rather than later.

Nestra returned to her den to wait. A terrible shock was coursing through a city that had thought itself invincible for a long time, and although the material damage was minimal for something of this magnitude, the psychological effect was much greater. Riel, they were even making international news! Shinran took the front and center by admitting that the red skies were the consequence of one of his abilities used in a 'thin' portal world. Nestra

suspected Sereth's violence had weakened the membrane between that portal world and the home plane. He personally paid damage to everyone who'd been wounded in the event.

Nestra thought it was a foolish thing to do. He was setting a precedent where raiders had to pay for the damage incurred by battles. He was Shinran though, so she couldn't do anything. One of his messages said that he would contact her soon, so Nestra refocused on her next task while she waited: preparing for the Sword King Enclave visit. The next module would focus on history and culture.

It was saturated with warnings against being pretentious Threshold elitists. It pissed Nestra off. 'Oh sure, let me be open minded about people who say baselines have no places in the modern world!'

She got it. It was all for the sake of staying polite and respectful but... some of the things she'd heard... And she was being brought just to piss them off, which meant her very presence as a failed gleam was an insult to them.

Nestra didn't get into the course in a good mood, but soon her interest was rekindled. Enclaves were a gleam to gleam issue, only seen experienced by baselines like her via the lens of vids and their 'artistic license'. It was interesting seeing how they really worked in real life. The course explained how the Sword King Enclave had managed to be more successful than many other smaller groups. First, the ruling Nguyen clan boasted some of the deadliest duelists on the continent, a fact they were really proud and loud about. It led to silly decisions such as calling themselves Sword King, as well as a slew of other egregious choices that the course said 'reflected a tradition of chivalry inspired from the Song dynasty scholar warrior, Japanese Bushido, and the land-based tenacity of Dai Viet'. It was just a pretentious way of saying they were selective blade idiots who only valued martial prowess while being clever enough to scout very well. She just wanted to get there and smack every last of their D-class upstarts just to make their little heads melt. Fortunately, the next chapter was more interesting.

The Sword Kings had picked a perfect place to set up: a trio of sharp peaks surrounding a deep valley blessed with rich volcanic soil, with the tallest elevation overlooking a river. It provided a safe haven to harvest stuff without a neosaur chomping on your ass every time you bend to pick a tomato. The river meant small boats could trade with other enclaves, and they apparently just installed a heliport as well. The Sword King enclave was a success story, and many promising scions of nearby places tried to join. Nestra was pretty sure they were going to be immensely obnoxious.

The list of resources they controlled was impressive, including several rare types of ore they harvested from nearby mountain portals. They made their own weapons which they never hesitated to use. A rival enclave disputing a newly opened portal had been slaughtered seven years prior to set an example. It was gruesome. Exactly what one might expect from enclaves, Nestra thought.

The last part of the class covered the main factions vying for power within the Nguyen clan. Although it had started as an ethnic Vietnamese family, they had brought plenty of fresh

blood from the most gifted blade masters they came across, so now it was more of a melting pot. The current head was a powerful B-rank user.

Nestra wondered if Fox Mask would show herself. She hoped they would.

Nestra validated the course with no issues except for an essay that was graded B- on account of 'lacking the expected emotional detachment'. And here she hadn't called them cunts even once. This world was unfair.

Nestra spent the next day figuring out maintenance on her naval gun. Some nosy asshole had apparently launched an inquiry on whether or not she really needed that thing for home defense. A masked gleam cease and desist notice had barely been enough to fend off their uncalled for and totally abusive attempt to curtail her right to shoot tungsten rounds at unwanted visitors. The gall. Fortunately, that was that, and on the third day, Shinran sent her a message.

On her gleam phone. Progress! It was time to look into that training thing.