

Nestra slipped into the world with great difficulty. The membrane resisted her efforts, pushing her away like a deep current. It felt like opening a door into a flooded room.

Once in, she sprawled over bare stone. Immediately, stark heat assaulted her senses. The ground was harsh and unyielding under her fingers, black basalt, pitted and full of shards. Acid air filled her lungs. Before panic set in, she realized she could breathe it.

After the heat, it was the mana that gave her vertigo. It was so incredibly thick here, cloying, like too much perfume. She struggled to her feet and shook her head. She was standing on a flat valley the color of onyx. Red and purple crystals jutted through the air like grasping fingers aimed at a sky of dark clouds crossed by the odd lightning bolt, and above it, a dark sky with no visible star. No sun. There was only a black dot.

It was the darkest thing Nestra had ever seen. It just... absorbed light completely. A gash in reality, and around it, like fire kissing an anvil, was a disc of luminous gold heat. It provided the only real source of light in that alien landscape.

A distance away, a massive rock floated lazily away. It was as dark as the ground she stood on while yellow crystals dotted the surface of its main body. It appeared to have a flat top as well.

She turned to the only person visible. He stood with his back to her, looking in the distance.

“Are we standing on a flying rock?” she asked in the tongue of the People.

“Yes,” Seth replied.

She noticed he was wearing an elaborate robe that hid his muscular form well and gave him a scholarly look. She didn't need a closer look to realize it was his Skin. The material flowed a little and the pattern over his left shoulder changed to give the design a more asymmetric look. It was a little weird but Nestra could see how a morphing, living piece of clothing could be a real banger for one's wardrobe.

“Ok? And am I breathing sulfuric acid or?”

Seth shrugged as he turned. He smiled at her.

“Water, carbon dioxide and, hmmm, hydrogen sulfide. Mostly. Your earth science has many answers. I love the internet.”

“Does that not kill people?”

“We are on a B-class world, little Nezhra. B-class humans won't let a little unbreathable atmosphere get in the way of their fun. As for us of the People, we are a little more resilient than that, although your fire resistance could use some work.”

“Hey, you're the one who picked the portal worlds!”

“Yes, and now that you are on the cusp of the second sphere, we can get started on some real diversification!”

“Wait a moment,” Nestra said, looking around.

There were very few floating islands around, at least that she could see though more could be hidden in nearby dark clouds.

“Won’t we be found here? Aren’t B-class worlds cleared as soon as they open?”

“The permanent ones, yes, but it takes the guilds some time and this place is out of the way. Besides, trust me when I tell you I would feel them come long before they spot us.”

“Oh, ok. So. C-class? Then sparring?”

“Practice then sparring, yes. But before, a little bit of theory. What humans call classes and we call spheres or circles, do you know about them?”

“I mean, I know what everyone knows. Dokkaebi are the lowest.”

“We make no distinction between dokkaebi and the first sphere, or D-class as you call them. Those are all creatures that are taking mana in and progressively increasing their... existence, for lack of a better term. The ability to influence the world around them beyond the constraints of what their bodies would allow them to otherwise. The second sphere, or C-class, covers the creation of a physical core to match the metaphysical one, a permanent source of mana. Thus the worlds expand with every breath until the creature perishes.”

“B-class is magical body, right?”

“Yes. The entity will slowly reforge themselves until the physical matches the spiritual. It can be a long process, especially if the entity was grievously wounded, or born with many imperfections. They will also develop their own... identity. Their own magic, if they have not yet done so.”

“Ok, and A-class?”

“Domain and concept. I could elaborate but it is hardly relevant to you, and will require a deeper understanding of what mana truly is before you can understand my explanation.”

“Is there a S-class?” she asked.

It was top secret but Seth probably didn’t know that.

“Naturally, the path continues. There are at least two more steps I know of.”

“WHAT? Wait, you mean... the People have... S plus members?”

“I believe humans will have to change their nomenclature if they survive that long. And yes. But that might be something I was not supposed to share, hmmm.”

“Riel! Wow. Do humans know?”

“To my knowledge, only Shinran has steadily advanced on the fourth circle and may have the certitude there is more beyond.”

“Ok ok, but wait, we have, hmmm, skills. Like *momentum*.”

“Space step?”

“Yes, that thing. It’s not a skill, is it? Not our own magic?”

“Ah, I see what you mean. It is an ability of the People that stems from our own nature and affinity with void mana. You may see it as a, hmm, racial feature. Not all races are individually equal on the path to infinity. While humans learn fast, cooperate well, are very versatile and adaptive, we tend to be... individually stronger but also very self-centered, if I may. Humans do not have access to void mana, and thus cannot develop those skills.”

“Except Helena.”

Seth nodded.

“True, though it remains to see if she can use those skills as well. Void mana use might be very hard on her body.”

“Speaking of...”

Nestra stepped closer to Seth, who watched her come impassively. It felt stupid to be worried about asking. Seth was a good person. Well, good to her. Surely, he wouldn’t mind?

“So I was thinking. Helena, she, errr, might need some help training. How would you feel about training sessions together?”

Seth winced. He took a deep breath, but then his expression hardened and it was like he became a whole other person. On the weird hell space background, the unyielding horned warrior intimidated Nestra a little. It was not just the traditional Christian imagery of evil. He just matched the apocalyptic vista a little too well.

“I am sorry, little Nezhra. I must refuse. You are taking too many risks, opening yourself to too many people.”

“She’s my sister.”

“And she is a human, and you are of the People. By now, three separate host kin know of your existence as a Gray Demon, as they call us: Mazingwe, Helena, and Gorge since his two sons have not grasped the situation. Three is a lot, especially a month after your

awakening. You are taking their trust for granted, but we do not. My rules are clear. I am not here to help your family. They can and will betray you.”

Nestra noticed the hard edge and felt a pang of sympathy.

“It... happened to you?”

Seth flinched a little, then he chuckled. There was a bitter edge in the curl of his smile.

“Yes, well guessed.”

“I’m sorry it happened to you, Sereth, but I cannot abandon my sister. She believes in me.”

“And I will not get in the way but I will not help either.”

He sighed.

“Now might be the right time to explain the rules I am under. It will be easier to tell you what I can do. I can provide advice and training, perhaps even lend an ear since humans like to talk so much. I will intervene if the humans use their technology to track you. I will also intervene if something attacks you that you could not possibly have a chance of defeating, such as Mazingwe. The rest, I will not do.”

He looked away. The goofy, sometimes stooped demon brother disappeared and in its place was a threatening being with inhuman features and eyes like portals into the abyss. He stood like an immovable mountain and he felt very, very dangerous to her instincts.

“I will not save you from yourself or your failures. That is not our way, and I will not change them, not even for you. If you make a mistake in combat, you die. If you attack more than you can chew in the real world, you die. If you lose your temper and reveal your form in a room full of human users, you die. If you have to crawl on broken limbs back to an entrance portal because you overestimated yourself and succumbed to hubris, you crawl, or you die. If you must eat the dead with your skinned fingers because you are lost and starving, you eat, or you die. If any of your friends or relatives find themselves in danger and I could do something to save them, I will not. If Helena is in danger and you fail to save her, she will die. The same applies to Gorge.”

“What about Aunt Claire?”

“There is nothing that can take her down that you would stand a chance against.”

“What about Stibs?”

“Siobhan... is **MINE. HSSSS.**”

Fear. It hit her like a wave. Nestra had to take a step back before reason reasserted itself and she could remember this was Seth, and he would never hurt her on purpose.

“Siobhan concerns me, and I will act according to my own rules. The others are yours. Protect them, or fail to do so, or do not try. It is your decision and the burden of success or failure are yours to carry, but you will carry them. I will only stop what you had no way to predict. Do you understand?”

Nestra considered the question.

“If I stand against a corpo to protect a friend and they find me and send a heavy hitter after me, will you intervene?”

“Did you take enough precautions, and was your identity found due to superior technology you could not have predicted? Then yes? Do I believe you acted like a stupid whelp? Then you will never reach our dwelling. It is that simple.”

“Ok, got it. I think. I just... despite my misgivings, I really care about people. I was just too hurt to realize it. Too focused on my pain. I just hope my idealism will not kill me.”

“Then back it up with a measure of cold detachment. It is not your goal I am judging, but your methods.”

Something whispered at the back of Nestra’s mind.

“What if I just started killing people in secret to grow stronger? Would you stop me then?”

“Of course not,” Seth replied, completely uncaring. “You would not be the first kin to, ah, jump start your growth that way.”

“I mean, it feels like I could just keep killing host kin and I would always get growth,” she remarked.

Maybe Gray Demons were threats to their host kin most of all. She wondered if more aware species had groups dedicated to rooting out and killing demons spawn before they could grow.

Seth was looking in the distance.

“What?”

“This is not a host kin specificity. We suspect this might be... a human specificity.”

“What? But, that means other—”

“This is neither here nor now.”

A chill crawled up Nestra’s spine despite the stifling heat.

Could the People be inquiring into... but no, they are hunters. They would never farm humans.

Sereth crossed his arms. It looked like he was done.

“Should we talk about cores next?” she asked.

“Yes. The possession of a physical core is the mark of a second sphere, ah, C-class entity.”

He was returning to his usual enthusiastic self. The dichotomy was making her head spin.

“Still can’t believe Aunt Claire has a solid ball inside her heart,” she remarked to dispel the last dregs of heavy mood.

“The idea of a core as a ball is inaccurate. It is portrayed like this in the media because of human expectations. In reality, the shape varies. As for its superimposition with the flesh, there are essays on space warping I will not share with you but suffice to say, it is not fully there.”

“Is it the same as... my human and my demon form? Sorry for the segue.”

“No it is alright. Both rely on space manipulation, however demon Masking is a void-based ability that superimposes two bodies in the same twinned space and...”

Seth sighed, though Nestra wasn’t sure why.

“There will be plenty of time to study this in the future. For now, we can put it like this. The other body always exists in a space... inside of your current one. The human body is tethered to the demon one, so it can be destroyed which will pull your demon body forward but if the demon body is destroyed, you die. The hidden body exists in animated suspension, meaning it is inactive but it will heal by drawing energy and nutrients from the active body. And, uh, you can choose to swap the items you are currently wearing. For you right now, it will only be a handful of items but mature demons can carry a lot. Especially the women.”

He suddenly frowned, as if realizing something.

“But then, why do they always have me carry the... ah, unimportant. Now that your curiosity is sated, can we continue talking about cores?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“You currently have a seed of a core as a demon on the cusp of the second sphere. A very fast progression, by the way, especially without direct help. This seed must be fed. Now, I did some research on human transition from first to second sphere...”

“You mean you spied on guilds,” Nestra guessed.

Seth shrugged.

“Yes? Is that not the best way?”

“Nevermind. Please do go on.”

“In humans the formation of a core requires meditation and the absorption of a lot of mana. It appears to be mostly instinctive. For us, it will require you to push your body to its current limit.”

Nestra frowned.

“Recently, it feels as if—”

“Your physical power and other attributes have stopped progressing.”

“Not the resistances though.”

“Yes, or the magical abilities, am I correct?”

“Yeah... how do you know? Do you have a mind palace as well?”

“Yes. Although, for me, it is a cave by the sea.”

His long ears twitched. He shuffled uneasily from foot to foot.

“I wasn’t supposed to know?” Nestra asked.

“It is less about imposed rules and more about intimacy. You are my sister, but you barely know me and I shared this personal piece of information with you without asking.”

“So, a People faux-pas?”

“Yes. We seldom talk about our years before we return to... to the fold. Not to people we barely know.”

“It’s ok. Your secret is safe with me and I, err, I appreciate your trust. I know you’re doing your best. I won’t forget it.”

“Ah, you are kind for one of us. Let me continue then. Your core will only fully form and then start growing once the magical abilities inside of you reach the top of the first sphere. This usually happens last because first sphere creatures rarely rely on magic to defend themselves since their reserves are mechanically rather weak. You could, of course, keep killing them and eventually the excess power will convert into magical progress. The other solution would be to kill a magical second sphere creature and thus do all the progress in one go.”

“I am intrigued.”

“Good, because I am not leaving you a choice. I will show you the way after we have trained a little, and I have helped develop your abilities to my satisfaction. The creature will be much stronger than you. It will not be easy.”

“Ok. Before we spar, there was another thing. I was considering becoming a dark horse, that is —”

“I know what a dark horse is. I watch vids.”

He was very proud about it too.

“Oh, what’s your favorite drama? I surprisingly enjoy some of the romance ones.”

“Later, Nestra. I have no objection to you becoming a dark horse provided you are extra careful. If I start having to plug leaks and kill people left and right, I will have to ask you to call it off.”

“Agreed, and do let me know when I make a mistake. I’m eager to learn how to be a proper infiltrator.”

“Very well, miss super secret spy. Now, sparring. First thing first, I will attack and defend a few times to assess your current level. Do not be alarmed.”

“Ok, where and when?”

“Here and now.”

It was exactly what Nestra expected, and she had her sword out before Seth was done talking. He walked forward with steps that made the ground shake. Nestra almost lost her footing.

Wait, he wasn’t serious, ri—

DEATH.

Pressure, immense. Nestra used *momentum* to move to the side. Seth landed where she had been an instant ago. His fist pulverized the ground, sending shards of obsidian flying through the air with a cataclysmic sound of shattered glass. Nestra let the shrapnel slide on their skin. She moved in. *Precision* guided her hand. Her sword sung through the air on their way to slash his eyes. She expected him to step back and was ready for a follow up, but he slapped the blade away, no, punched it, and then he was all in her face. She used *immovable* to block the next jab on the flat of her blade. Even gorged with void mana, the implement barely stopped him.

“Ooof.”

Her feet slid on the uneven ground.

Ok, couldn't face him head on. She used *momentum* to reposition mid slide and countered as he closed the distance again. She dodged and walked back, countering and feinting to stay one step ahead but he was an avalanche that never stopped, and she was making mistakes. A hook glanced off her shoulder and he smiled viciously, until her blade almost kissed his chin. He took a step back. Had to, it was a good counter.

Two fingers extended, she called her mana forth.

Her bolt's anchor connected with his fist, which he had placed in front of his damn face. Potential called for power.

Her spell triggered with a thunderous explosion but slabs like ice that never met a sun moved in the way. The mockery of stone exploded outward, showering her in shards. It was her turn to step back.

When she glanced up, Sereth was rubbing his fingers, expression distant.

"Not bad."

He punched her in the face. There a moment, here now. *Momentum*. Of course.

"But not enou—"

She used *momentum* as well, but at a shorter distance than ever before, just enough to step under his blow and attack at the same time. She used precision to aim for the mouth since he enjoyed flapping it around that much.

"Oooh," Seth said appreciatively.

He bit it.

He bit the damn sword. A version of *immovable* helped him hold on. So she kicked him in the nuts, or at least she tried, but must have missed and hit the inner thigh instead. He twisted away. The sudden move almost disarmed her, so she cast another bolt at his back and this time, it landed.

Seth's shoulders shook, and she realized he was laughing.

"You tried to kick me in the gonads. My fault for underestimating a Scornful Crescent. You folks are so annoying."

"So you follow another path?" she asked, a little curious despite her desire to bash his face in,

Wouldn't happen anyway.

"Yes. Scornful Crescents are rather rare, in fact, especially in our family. My path is that of the Unrelenting Stalker. It is much more... direct. Shall we?"

“Come at me, asshole,” she said, doing a flourish with her blade.

Just a damn shame she was already running dry on mana.

Seth smirked. His skin expanded from the cloth to morph into thick plate armor that left only teeth and eyes bare. The armor was almost insectile in nature, close to the aesthetic that the fae warriors had favored. It looked really fucking intimidating especially since the one wearing it had tanked a bolt that had demolished a C-rank monster in one go like it was just a friendly zap. Not even that.

The armored monster pushed his fists together. Heavy, spiky gauntlets covered them, ending in wicked claws.

“I will keep adapting to your speed and skill as I get to understand your style better. Where were we? Ah yes.”

Nestra flipped her sword and struck just as that bastard used *momentum* to catch her off guard just as she knew he would try. Sadly, her guess was off by a bit and the void-drenched blade slid against a pauldron. His own fist hit her leg and flipped her like a log. She twisted on herself and sliced at the same time. He blocked it on his vambrace.

Then he lightly punched her in the gut. Lightly because it only hurt a bit.

She was airborne and quite breathless.

Her cheek was still hurting.

This was going to be a long day.

“Look, it’s weird to say but... your style almost exactly matches the one Helena is developing.”

Seth sighed. He seemed really pained about it.

“I know, you can’t tell her stuff.”

“I cannot teach a human, and besides... you are trusting your sister too much. At the risk of repeating myself...”

“She knows what I am and is cool with it.”

“Yes,” Seth struggled. “She is but... siblings... sometimes you count on them and they turn on you.”

Seth scratched his arm with a long nail, then frowned and stopped when he noticed Nestra's attention.

"I have spent too much time wearing a single mask in a civilization where facial expressions are not punished."

"I assume you had a difficult time among your host kin?"

"Yes. It was... ah, you know our father selects highly placed families. Some have a rather more stringent approach to education and siblings than yours do. Most of them, in fact. A matter of survival. My sister... I trusted her very much. You are very lucky."

"I'm sorry, Seth."

"I will not teach Helena."

That sounded definitive. Nestra considered the issue from another angle.

"Look, she is the first child with void magic, right? Or at least they are extremely rare among host kin?"

"Unique, as I said before," Seth replied, tilting his head to the side. His long ears twitched. At least, she got his attention.

"So maybe the covens would be interested in how she, uh, works with us? With our culture? Elements of it, maybe. If you are truly interested in humans, then would the covens not love the idea of a human who accepts a demon for who they are? And can be taught void skills? You said we're considered versatile. That's related to resourceful, right? And changing their mind could be of interest to you as well, Seth."

A low rumble shook his chest. It took her quite some time to realize he was laughing. It didn't sound very human.

"You are courageous to call upon the attention of the covens. Although, you are a woman of the People so I suppose you can allow yourself to be more daring. You speak the truth. The covens may have an interest in your sister's peculiar situation. I will ask them, but I will also abide by their decision, should they refuse."

"Are the covens that important, or are you just more aligned with them?"

Seth shrugged.

"I already told you. They create portals, impossible paths between distant places while the other species must follow existing worlds and hope for the best. You cannot comprehend the ramifications of such a power. Not yet. So yes, they have great power in our society."

"Sooooo when can I do that?"

Seth laughed. It was a little bit insulting.

“Not for a long, long time. Enough of this. You must be famished, let us head back.”

“Yes!”

The Sunflour was mostly empty at this time of the day. Seth delicately placed a plate of lemon biscuits on the table between Nestra and Stibs, looking like the world's most deceptive butler.

“Thank you love,” Stibs replied with a smile and a blush.

Huh, he had her completely under his power, the old monster. Actually, how old was he to begin with? Was it not, like, wrong for him to go after women under eighty or something? Nestra couldn't be sure and thus left the problem to future Nestra.

“So, how are you feeling now?” Stibs finally asked after availing herself to some biscuit.

“Good. Still a little sore.”

“You dolt, I meant your mood,” Stibs replied while rolling her eyes dramatically. “Almost dying? Losing your partner? Hello?”

“Ah, sorry. You know how it is. Almost dying no longer has the same impact it used to, and as for Shinoda, he was a pretty amazing guy but I didn't know him for long enough to be truly devastated. Still a bit sad though. It's hard to find people with such strong conviction that would put their life on the line every time,” Nestra said, perhaps a bit dreamily.

“The hell are you, Nestra? A neo-samurai? I thought you were eternally snarky and dismissive!”

“It's really easy to be more pleasant when you're not hurting all the time. Shocking, I know,” Nestra said with perhaps a little bite.

“Oh. Yeah. Anyway, Shinoda was actually a legend. Many more people wanted to show up at his funeral, you know? Including the entire Blue River guild. But Officer Kim told us to send representatives instead. She didn't want to make a scene.”

“Or more of a scene. His ex showed up.”

“Oh, nasty. Speaking of nasty, you're feeling better, right?”

“Yep. Eating mana food has been working wonders.”

“And... is it sustainable? You think?”

“As long as I have the money,” Nestra shrugged.

It was more about awakening but she was feeling cranky without mana food anyway so, might as well stick to this version.

“Speaking of, do you need a job? I could plug you with the Blue River. We’re looking for baseline enforcers for more delicate jobs that require infiltration and the likes.”

“I think Kim has something for me. That’s what she said anyway.”

“Not ready to throw off the yoke of the tyranny of government, Nestra?”

“Har har. Maybe one day but right now I’m on break.”

“You’re so unwilling to make waves.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

Stibs chuckled. She looked much better, so either the new job was much less mentally exhausting, or Seth was really helping her. Or both. Maybe it was also the sex thing. She was unwilling to ask.

Nestra relaxed on her couch at home, checking a catalog on her visor. Her plan for the next few days was settled. The settlement money from Gidung was in her account, making her significantly richer than her demon self for now. She was also on indefinite administrative leave that would last at least a month, and Doctor Mazingwe had doctored (haha) a note to say she was hurt from the battle against the beast tide.

That part was true though, and she was still hurt on account of Seth kicking her ass all across the B-class floating caldera. The tall fucker. It was thus time for human Nestra to take the back seat for a while, relax, enjoy her break, maybe have a spa day while true Nestra would come out and play. But first! She had one last thing to arrange.

The representative picked up after the first ring.

“Gidung company concession hello? Park Sun-jeo here. How may I help you?”

“Hello, my name is Nestra Palladian. I was told to call you to arrange my new car.”

“Ah yes, Palladian-nim. Thank you for calling me. My superior already informed me of the situation. I would like to once again extend our apology for this mishap.”

It wasn’t a fucking mishap, Nestra thought. Someone tried to zero her.

“Yeah, sure. So what can I get as a replacement?”

“Yes, that is the thing. As a mark of our appreciation, I have been authorized to offer you our latest Grebe brand of economical hover cars. An excellent product, if I might say, with an autonomy of over two hours.”

Nestra didn't have to think much. A hover car was super convenient but it was absolutely shit for her, because it was a gleam car. It ran on mana, at least for the antigrav mode. It wasn't even the questions she would get using that regularly. Her house didn't have a setup to handle hover cars. And they were expensive as fuck to maintain.

She wondered if this was a calculated insult and then wondered if it was the contrary, offering them their best class of product knowing she would probably refuse but still showing they were willing to go the extra mile. Gidung products couldn't be resold without their agreement, not without a ton of hassle, so she couldn't just take the money and run.

A shame because Gidung cars were streamlined designs, contrary to the main vehicle-focused corpo, Touhei. They definitely went for function over form.

“I'll have to decline.”

“We also have a wide selection of cars so long as the value remains below eighty thousand credits. The cost value, not the market value. Speaking of, we have just had a car returned to us after its owner decided that it was no longer the best option for him at the moment. It is an Alda model 4.”

Nestra's enthusiasm picked up. Aldas were legendary cars, even she knew that, though the model thing was beyond her meager knowledge. She used her visor to check what the sales guy had said.

It looked nice.

Really, really nice... and...

“Is it the roofless version?”

“Absolutely, Palladian-nim. The car is a convertible with memory upholstery. Would you like to come and give it a virtual spin in our AI-generated simulation?”

It took five minutes but she did so and by Riel this was a nice car. Sleek and retro with rounder shapes than modern sensibilities favored, but it was cute and felt nice. And she knew it was safe and comfortable as well. And fast. Not that it mattered much here.

“Ok, I like it. I'd like a two years insurance for that.”

“I will write you in for the whole after-sale package. Now there is only one last question to address. What color would you like the car?”

“Bright pink.”

There was a moment of hesitation on the other side of the call. Aldas were a little on the macho side of cars though it wasn't as pronounced as, say, a Wellington Stryker. You had to be so extra to drive one of those inside of town.

"Bonbon pink? As flashy as possible?"

"Exactly."

"Why certainly, Palladian-nim. I will have it arranged immediately. We will deliver the car at your home within the next three days. I will call you back when I have a time, if that is agreeable?"

"Sure thing. Bye."

"Have a great day, Palladian-nim."

Nestra chuckled. A pink Alda. Aunt Claire would blow a massive fuse. She couldn't wait.

And now for the last important step. She picked up her burner.

"Hey, this line is secure, right?"

"Yes," Gorge's modified voice said. "Why?"

"I'm ready to mask up. Let's go with the dark horse option. I'm gathering all the stuff I need and then I'll register."

"Finally, we enter the gleam zone. Lets' make a credit or two out of those fuckers. No insult intended."

"This time."

"You know it. Have you picked up a call name?"

Nestra wondered if Demon was a little too on the nose.

It was probably taken anyway.