

Obsidian Tails slept on the shores of the many islands like dark obelisks of serrated edges. There were a handful of them and they were rather large. From her vantage point, Nestra could see a meandering path edging their resting grounds as it snaked across the apocalyptic landscape. It disappeared near a forest of reddish crystals populated by bobbing ruby lights — probably some sort of environmental challenge.

One of the reasons old religions had survived the incursion was the overwhelming evidence of intelligent designs. Portal Worlds told a story. They were journeys, first basic ones, then increasingly complex challenges that taught the raiders how to adapt. They gave the local users a chance as well as at least one, and sometimes several ways forward. She could guess from the layout that the lesson today was that not all fights were wise, and that she was supposed to dodge the obsidian tails so she could reach the Guardian unscathed. Probably in a way that would ambush it. This was a valuable lesson for normal, human raiders.

There was a certain irony about the obsidian tail she'd killed outside lying in ambush for potential groups who were supposed to learn how to avoid it. Portals might be schools, but outside? C-class breach monsters would happily eat D-class trainees on their way to learn. That was why smaller enclaves struggled a lot with keeping casualties to a minimum.

So yeah, fuck that hidden trail. She wasn't here to learn how to be sneaky. She was here to kill shit.

Nestra frowned. In the distance, one of the giant lizards stood to allow its other flank to bask in the nourishing heat of the magma.

She was, in fact, also here to learn how to be sneaky. Sereth couldn't help her with shadow training because she was 'too weak and awkward for him to tell if she would be strong enough to fool a monster'.

That damn A-class asshole.

So yeah, trying her budding shadow powers on the closest Obsidian Tail would help her improve the most basic of abilities: cloaking. It was tricky to use because cloaking was a skill she had never trained before.

Nestra raised her hand, calling shadow forth. It pooled from her core alongside her limbs in large, oily strands. It was a far cry from the living darkness Teneru had managed. She knew the current issue, and forced the mana to cycle faster, more lightly. The shadows crawled over her wrist, then her fingers like wispy nimbus, but they left behind patches of unprotected Skin, like moonlight visible behind a thin cloud cover. Had to work on it more.

The issue was the flow.

Flow was an indication of the magical viscosity of various mana types, the term 'flow' itself chosen just because human languages didn't have words for that metaphysical concept, so as usual, people picked an approximate and rolled with it. Heavy flow mana types could manifest solid objects and were usually more defensive, like lava, or metal, while lighter

flows were faster and more precise which made them better for offensive styles. That was more a rule of thumb than anything, really. Her dad focused on heaviness for metal, leading to a steel juggernaut with regenerating armor while Ragnarok improved her flow's speed so she could be an ever-changing werewolf. Both were metal users, yet they had trained themselves to use completely different styles. Nestra... had not trained at all. Void and the electric facsimile were both instantaneous flows so there was never any issue with shaping. By comparison, shadow had a very light flow. It wasn't too different, but it was difficult enough that she struggled with it.

She just needed practice and experience.

Damn, she always needed more practice and experience, but there was always more to work on. She felt rushed all the time, and despite her misgivings, Sereth kept throwing her into the thick of it. Maybe it was just the Aszhii default method.

Alright, enough dallying. She just had to get to it. Testing her sneakiness on the nearest obsidian tail would be fine. After all, had she not already defeated one of them? And it was with them getting the jump on her. This time, it would be even easier and —

The searing memory of the lost core returned to cool her enthusiasm. This was hubris speaking.

She sat down heavily.

"I'm kind of an idiot."

Above, Sashimi flipped her tail in a way that felt like a condescendingly raised eyebrow. Damn fish. Nestra knew she wasn't really stupid, she was just... not all that smart compared to some people in her surroundings. Her dad had an engineering degree from a good uni, back when it hadn't been smashed by a kaiju. Camus, her old Max-Sec team leader, had a PhD in Philosophy of all things. Nestra had a high school degree. And the Police Academy, which was a bit of a joke. No prize for poor Nerstra. That didn't mean she had to face every danger like a bone-headed battle junkie. There had to be a way to do things smarter — somehow.

She sat down on a jutting piece of basalt.

It was really uncomfortable.

And that stupid seafood — wait that was it! A training partner at her level!

"Practice," she hissed at Sashimi.

No, she wouldn't get it.

"Play fighting?" she suggested. "Catch?"

Sashimi wiggled excitedly in what was probably the first expression of cooperation she'd ever expressed towards Nesta. Ok, great news. That section of the portal world was still kind of big, so there was plenty of space to move without attracting hostile attention. It was perfect.

Nestra sank low to the ground, losing sight of the shark. The game was on. Once she popped back up from behind a basalt fang jutting from the hot ash, the shark was gone.

She covered herself in shadows and stalked, moving very slowly, paying attention to her surroundings. The shark was nowhere to be found.

Nestra froze. She was hunting her prey now, and being hunted in return. The portal world turned quiet. As she focused on her surroundings, the shadows smoothed out on her skin. They merged and melded more harmoniously, like a sea, still resisting her control but much less so.

Of course. Shadows were one of the more volatile elements. She'd always heard her dad speak about bending steel to his will but that approach wouldn't work with such a fickle mana type. Interestingly, she had no trouble whatsoever with electricity. Maybe an issue of compatibility?

A shift in the world on her right. She pivoted, drawing her brand new claymore and striking where the shark was with the flat of the blade. Sashimi appeared, but her form blurred and suddenly, she was behind Nesta. A teleport!

Panic and outrage warred in the Aszhii's heart. That was her trick! Too late. The shark dove and bit. Pain radiated from Nesta's left buttcheek. She yelped. By the time she recovered, Sashimi was gone again.

Nestra touched her poor posterior. There were barely a few droplets of blood and she was already more sore than in pain. So, Sashimi really did understand the concept of a game. Good to know. Regrowing her ass would have been painful, and worse, humiliating.

"Right, you damn emergency ration. Let's dance."

Nestra lost a lot more than she won, though she was quick enough to anticipate Sashimi's next teleportation. It appeared the void soup stock was learning alongside Nesta. She ought to be with how much she was eating! In any case, Nesta realized that shadow mana worked best if she didn't think about it too much. It was as if it had a life of its own, and preferred to react to her subconscious, avoiding any deliberate attempt to direct it. Nesta was more than happy to let it do its thing.

Truly one of the weirder elements out there.

Nestra spent around three hours of portal time playing that game before hitting a ceiling that only experience could surpass. Satisfied, she decided to push her luck.

“Hey, see that thing over there?”

Sashimi swam away. Nestra sighed, and instead concentrated on sending images.

Obsidian tail resting on the shore of the magma lake.

Stalk, distract.

Kill.

Share the feast.

Sashimi sent back an extremely disorienting vision in a much larger field of view than what Nestra was used to, with what she understood were space lines where the shark could cross. The ghost of an intense heat on her skin let her understand the shark's meaning: her companion would approach from the sea of magma.

Nestra decided it was probably a smart option. With this decided, she finally moved back to the portal, then slowly made her way down the slope, clad in shadows. The nearest obsidian scale was in view.

Nestra took it really slowly. She remembered that the obsidian scale on the outside had been dangerous but more importantly, magma was a subset of earth. It would feel her feet hitting the ground if she were not careful. It would probably also feel her walk through the wall. She had to play it gingerly. Merge with the shadows to erase her presence.

What came next was a game of patience in the suffocating heat of this hellish world. Nestra approached the scaly dark mass, and to her mounting surprise, it seemed to be working. She spotted a slightly extended leg revealing the more tender flesh underneath, thickness sacrificed for flexibility. The beast was large.

Closer now.

The creature stirred. Nestra lowered herself, the cloak of darkness flattening like the ears of a cat as it reacted to her fear. A serrated head rose but the eyes faced away from her, towards the expanse of magma. Nestra spotted a dark fin piercing the edge of the bubbling surface. It was now or never. She struck.

Her void-infused blade penetrated the leg, spearing it from end to end. The obsidian tail shrieked horribly. It reared up.

It was just too good an opening. Nestra extended two fingers and aimed. An instant later, a dark bolt crossed the shimmering air. Blood and stone exploded from the point of impact.

Nestra caught a tail in the ribs.

“Oof!”

Floor. Rock. Floor. The tumble came to a stop and she blinked back into focus. Rolling to her feet proved a necessary mistake.

“Ooow.”

Punished. She should have fired while moving. Stupid. Stupid! The monster turned but as it ripped its leg away from the planted blade, arterial blood flew in a molten geyser.

Nestra dodged the spray of fire aimed at her by rolling, then shifting forward with momentum. She kept her distance away from the severely wounded creature as she wondered if she should attack it, or if it was dead but didn't know it yet. Decisions decisions.

The beast screamed again. Nestra wasn't sure why, until a slick shape swam away with what looked like a piece of belly. Another opening. Nestra raced to her sword before shifting away from yet another fiery breath. Almost there now.

The beast stumbled. Nestra charged in. Momentum carried her to its wounded head, to the side, where it was blinded. She thrust into its open skull. It was hard, but not hard enough to withstand the void.

The beast fell.

Power rushed into her. It was almost as pleasurable as the first time. Rather than allowing herself to bask in the reward, Nestra looked around.

Clear.

Maybe just a little basking then. Once it was done and she felt very proud of herself, it was time to dig for the treasure. Sashimi waited patiently for her to crack open the ribs. Even with the creature dead, it took some effort, but eventually she held the gory trophy in her hands. A core. A crimson glowing core of, well, very modest size. But hey! A snack. Her dark teeth crunched on the thing with a satisfying crack. A refreshing burst of savory energy filled her soul and her stomach, dulling the pain from her tender ribs. So good. Just what she needed after a fight. Riel, she hoped it would never get old.

With Sashimi munching on weird organs, Nestra considered her next option.

There was another obsidian tail in the distance, on the next island, past a dune of scoriae.

Nestra wasn't here to close the portal. She was here to strip-mine it for all the power inside. The next step was obvious.

Nestra dodged the tail's desperate attempt to fend her off. Even grievously wounded, it was still pretty fast but she was used to its aggression by now. She deflected its next claw attack before countering, precision and the art of the Crescent guiding her hand. The pleasant

crunch of soft flesh told her she had succeeded, yet Nestra ducked the inevitable counter before moving to the side. She was used to the tails now. She knew them and their reaction. They were dancing her dance.

When she ate its core, the gains were much less significant, but that was fine. The loss of efficacy came with a side of satisfaction at having conquered an enemy. The first obsidian tail almost killed her. Now, she could defeat one without being hit provided she took it by surprise. It felt so nice. It wasn't raw strength either, but skill. Experience. She felt so chuffed! And there was the fire resistance, of course. What had been a stifling heat now only felt like a nice warm summer sun on her skin. She approached the magma and hovered her hand over the incandescent surface. It really was too thick to be like water, yet it wasn't solid either...

Nope, still felt like placing her hand over a stove. Oh well. At least, it would help.

Sashimi picked that moment to swim away ponderously, her lithe body now inflated until she was more of a tub, that glutton. The void shark still held a piece of lizard in her mouth, which probably meant that she couldn't swallow another gobbet without exploding. The outrageous creature disappeared with a light pop after some struggle to shift through space, leaving Nestra alone again.

She considered her options. There was one last sleeping drake at some distance, before the path led up to some sort of cavern. After that would be the guardian. It was a relatively small world, though Nestra knew the tails would have challenged a basic C-class team with its powerful attacks. It really paid off to have both mobility and resistance. Hmmm.

Nestra wondered if she could still improve her resistances with D-class victims now. She assumed that yes, likely so, but there would be a qualitative difference with the gains she would get from C-class adversaries.

Either way she would have fun. There was probably an almost infinite variety of new creatures to discover, fight, kill, and eat all over the multiverse. Damn. She couldn't wait...

Then she thought about Seth and how he didn't seem to have an urge to raid. Actually, he would probably be bored hunting for weakling creatures. Huh. So maybe finding challenges and true novelty would eventually prove difficult.

Was Sereth channeling his frustration into white chocolate eclairs?

"Maybe I should stop thinking about dessert and finish this world instead."

Nestra managed to sneak on the last obsidian tail without Sashimi providing a bait-and-squall. The fight was easy but exciting, and Nestra caught herself cutting it a bit too close several times — another effect of Hubris that pushed her to fight the perfect fight. She took more risks towards the end by telling herself it was practice. Practice! Practice was important.

Now, finding herself at the edge of a foreboding tunnel leading into the abyssal depth of that infernal place, Nestra was faced with two choices. She could engage the guardian... or...

The hidden path called to her, not least because it could presumably give her a better approach to the final foe, but also because she was having fun so far and it was a pretty unique environment. Might as well explore it. Ah, but for best experience, she ought to start from the beginning!

Nestra ran back to the entrance to take the hidden path instead. It twisted up, giving her a commanding view of the magma lake, the islands' shores, and the rock bridges in between. Up ahead, crimson mineral growths clung to basalt land like shrubs. Strange lights bobbed between them.

Nestra approached. Her intuition screamed when a ledge crumbled under her feet. Curious, she stomped on it without much force.

The ledge collapsed entirely. Gravels and stones formed a local avalanche ending on the shore, with the roundest debris rolling to the feet of the obsidian tail's carcass. Interesting trap. The next hurdle proved to be the lights themselves.

Those were the strangest insects she'd ever seen, part stone and part locust, but with a fluorescent abdomen like a light bug. She got a good view when the swarm charged her like an angry cloud.

Nestra charged herself with electricity, then she rushed in the middle of the creature and detonated the charge. Black bolts formed a dome of destruction around her. The ensuing boom scattered the few survivors. The others fell, their light dying with them. Easy. She had been anticipating swarms for some time now.

She didn't get more than a trickle of power from it, unfortunately. The insects were probably too small. She guessed they might be edible in a weird way but... nah, her backpack was already full with lizard meat and she wasn't a fan of crunchy exoskeletons. That left her in the middle of the shimmering forest.

A brief inspection of the red crystals revealed nothing. Her database was useless at this point. Hell, they might be valuable and she wouldn't know it, but that was ok. She wasn't strapped for cash right now even when eating the most valuable loot, which was cores.

The path continued, always dangerous and always near the sleeping form of the obsidian tails — or it would have were it not for the fact Nestra had already minced the fuckers. Many of the traps were more environmental hazards than deliberate setups, yet the way they were arranged hinted at the hidden design behind the portal worlds' very nature. Knowing she had already defeated the main threats made Nestra more detached and removed most of the fun she would have derived from exploration. After the third crystal forest, things had grown a little repetitive, so it was with relief she found that the hidden path skirted the lower tunnel to lead her to a camouflaged entrance. She would have missed it without the obvious way the path led her there. At least, her intuition was getting a work out.

The secret entrance led to a platform overlooking an enormous cave in which a larger obsidian tail slept near a clutch of appetizing eggs. Heat rose from the cracked ground, hinting at the thin crust underneath. This was an arena that heavily favored the ruling champion. It was asleep for now.

Nestra studied the land and came to the conclusion that she could drop a massive stalactite on the creature's head. It probably wouldn't kill it but it would certainly leave a mark.

"Ah, whatever."

BOOM.

The crystalline spike fell on the confused mother obsidian tail as she woke up, dazed by the sudden noise. With unerring accuracy, the projectile slammed into the creature's neck, shattering on impact. Debris collapsed on the fragile clutch like the hand of god.

Splat.

Both Aszhii and monster screamed at the loss of their eggs. Nestra jumped down with the belated realization that she didn't need a geological feature to kill a monster when she was the deadliest projectile around. Her first strike hit the guardian's neck, then it was an all out battle. The matriarch was a hail of claws and fangs which forced Nestra to use everything she learned of the species' pattern. Sometimes, the large monster would stomp on the ground, and pillars of lava rose treacherously under her feet, or more stalactites fell from on high. Meanwhile, it kept getting warmer, and warmer, to the extent that even Nestra was suffering. It was not enough to stop her. The creature was hurt, half-blinded, and mad with pain. Nestra used this mercilessly with every strike adding more pain to the tally. Fury was helpless in front of her scorn. Before too long, she landed another decapitating strike.

As soon as the rush of victory faded, Nestra inspected the clutch to confirm that yes, indeed, they were done for. Smushed, as it were. She threw her hands up in frustration.

So annoying.

Well, one could not make an omelet etc etc. Nevertheless, it was yet another learning experience. The offered path wasn't necessarily the best one, even when the world was designed around a gimmick. She had to remember she was an Aszhii, an intruder on this planet. The portal world stories were not meant for her. They were for humans. She needed to think as an Aszhii for the sake of culinary salvation.

Well, at least she could get the core. It tasted like closing the obsidian tail chapter of her life. Her Skin devoured the prize — a pair of volcanic-themed gauntlets — before she could even inspect it. The armor over her knees and elbows grew as a result.

Nestra wondered what it would take to get a proper helmet. Surely, this was more important than protecting an elbow? She had two of those. But the Skin remained unfazed by her protests, and the exit portal beckoned.

“Oh well.”

Nestra returned to the much colder earth of air. The thin mana made her feel like she was choking before she got used to it again. She was already missing the comforting radiations of the portals but all desire to complain died on her lips when she saw a few Aszhii runes carved into a nearby rock. Her intuition screamed that something was wrong.

The writing said: ‘mask on’. Her brother had carved a smiling emote next to the dire warning, signifying she was not in mortal danger, and therefore completely on her own. She took her mask and sighed when the uncomfortable layer settled on her skin. Even that ergonomic, high-tech one felt like manacles. She didn’t like it. She liked the alternative even less.

Mostly, she knew what to expect. That was because of the smell. Her own sense of smell wasn’t that good but even with skill, she could tell if a sweaty person stood downhill.

Especially if they didn’t contain their mana very well.

She could always run, but to be honest, she was a little curious. And also a little frustrated.

“Come on out, or I ssseek you.”

Five men and women emerged from rocks and boulders, with a sixth staying hidden farther up the flank of the volcano, at Nestra’s back. Only two of them were C-class and they were clearly not the best. In fact, the entire squad had seen better days. Their leader, a rather beautiful woman with sharp traits, wore a ratty body armor with its patch stripped out. It looked like entry-level gear for a small guild. The rest wasn’t much better. Only the other C-class sported a mishmash of decent protection while their only archer stood in a fucking hoodie.

That could only mean one thing.

“Enclavers.”

“Oh, so you must be a Threshold corpo slave. A bit far from home, you are.”

The mix of black hair and red iris of a fire user gave her a slightly demonic appearance, one reinforced by a ghastly smile. She looked confident.

Nestra ignored her. She turned to the short-sword wielder at her back. The woman had been peeking over a ledge when she was caught, and the embarrassment turned her angry.

“How did you know we were here?” the second C-class asked.

Compared to the fire woman, this one had the green iris of a nature mage. He was calmer too, more composed.

“New rocksss,” Nestra explained. They hadn’t been here when she arrived. One of their users must have placed them because the slope was otherwise devoid of good hiding spots.

“Also, bad mana control.”

“I see.”

“Sorry to disturb you ladies but I think we’re getting off-track. See, there is a problem.”

The fire woman took a step forward. Nestra drew her blade. The fire woman stopped. The others drew as well, at least those who were not already holding them.

“Do tell,” Nestra said, tilting her head to the side.

“See, looks to me like you’ve been poaching on our territory. That nice portal behind you had a lot of magical obsidian in it, but now it’s closed, and it’s probably not a repeating one.”

She shrugged.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how much money we lost on this. Has to be two million credits at the very least.”

Nestra smelled the air. Nothing new there, and no abnormal mana signature either. Weird. She moved forward, only for one of the D-class flankers to try and follow. A pointed sword at his chest stopped him.

“You are bazaar. This is not the territory of the bazaar enclave.”

The fire woman took a step to the side. This started a little dance that Nestra found funny.

“You are a patrol. Come to check on the wild obsidian tail here, perhaps,” Nestra continued.

The gleams exchanged glances.

“No, come becausssse of the noise. Curious. Found it dead. Asssssumed portal presence. Stayed because... why?”

“You say it’s not bazaar territory. I say it is,” the red lady insisted.

She was not very wise.

“I think you will leave this bag here along with that nifty sword of yours and we will consider the offense repaid, otherwise, maybe you’ll come with us and we will see what the bazaar decides.”

“Sso you laid in ambush. Curious. You are too weak to take on the obsidian tail,” Nestra said with confidence, especially with a fire and nature C-class. Terrible matchups. “And now you try to extort the one that killed it.”

Behind her, the portal closed.

“And its mother.”

Nestra took another step. This time, only the fire gleam stood her ground.

“Enclave gleams look down upon Thersholderssss because we like lattes and not having to wipe our asses with leavesss, but you are not better at killing. Especially not you. I don’t see lone wolves here. I see jackals. Bottom feeders.”

She chuckled. The nature mage took another step back. Smart.

“You fucking bitch, I was trying to be nice and that’s how you want to do it?” the fire gleam spat.

Her aura pulsed erratically. Loss of control.

“Rosa. Don’t,” the nature mage whispered.

“Fuck off. And you, keep acting high and mighty and I’ll —”

“No. I give you one chance,” Nestra warned.

The fire gleam huffed. Her blade ignited.

Nestra grabbed it.

Even with her immensely boosted resistance, it still hurt her to do so, but watching the fire gleam’s expression of pure dismay as she pushed it to the side made it all worth it. The fire failed to sear her skin while the blade didn’t penetrate.

“Weakling.”

Nestra tossed the woman aside like a ragdoll. She recovered immediately but her aura didn’t. It burned like a blaze. Fire erupted from the gleam’s body, its many tongues burning holes in the shitty gambeson. The gleam growled. It did so in defiance. Nestra chuckled, eager to see what it would do. It was not understanding its position. It was no predator. Not to her. It had been warned. It still wanted to fight.

Nestra waited. The human thing lost its temper. Nestra saw the moment it snapped, disregarding warnings from others. It had emotions, so many emotions boiling over until it could not think. Such a brilliant light full of anger and nonsense, yet enough power to reach the second sphere. Curious. Arrogant. Mad.

Nestra snuffed that flame.

“You... you killed her!”

The nature mage whined while Nestra sheathed her claymore. It was already showing signs of damage. She would have to buy a new one. Fire gleam's head came to a stop on one of the boulders. Nestra wondered if someone would pick it up. So far, all her 'friends' could do was look in horror.

"You didn't have to kill her! You were strong enough to stop her without doing that. Dammit! Rosa had anger issues, but she didn't deserve to die, you insane bitch!"

"You were happy with the trap, and with the extortion, and with her striking first... but it's now that you're faced with consequences that the blaming commences," Nestra growled. "If I were weak, you would have seen no problem with what she would have done to me. You were not even willing to stop her. You just called her name half hoping she would calm down. When she did not..."

Nestra lowered herself to his face even as guilt replaced outrage.

"You let her go. And now, you know you do not stand a chance, so you are letting me go, too. That was the extent of your sense of justice. This is the extent of your loyalty. Willing to crush the weak so long as there are no repercussions, to fight for your ally so long as there are no risks. And now you whine like the dog you are. Get away from me."

Nestra left, even angrier than before.

"I'll report you to Threshold," he said at her back.

So Nestra laughed. Just laughed.

It was kind of funny.

"You can. You can even bring your allies as witnesses. Feel free to camp in front of the embassy, also, but no one will do anything because your friend had a minor guild gambesson with its patch stripped off. I assume her temper got the better of her at a bad time, hm? An exile. I know what the force says every time one of you enclavers come to complain: have you tried to rape and steal less? Report all you like. It will lead nowhere."

Nestra walked away at a sedate pace just to see if they would try anything, but they made no effort to do so. She was still walking ten minutes later when Sereth appeared at her side.

"Did the hunt go badly?"

"I wrecked the eggs by accident."

"Ah, I am sorry. And the murder?"

Nestra sighed. Maybe that had been a mistake.

"Bazaar assholes. I cannot stand them."

“It is unlike you to leave witnesses.”

“I didn’t need to kill them. There is nothing preventing Threshold gleams from raiding outside the walls so long as it’s in a controlled region. And they were going to rob me, I think. Not kill me. This does not carry the death penalty, in my own opinion.”

“In my world, any drifter who raised their hands against a scion of a noble family would face their death and that of their entire entourage. It was common sense. I find your culture disturbingly merciful.”

“It’s when the hand of justice serves itself and not the ruling class that a civilization can truly call itself just. Or so my old ethics professor used to say. And I was defending myself. Ugh, I fucking hate enclavers. They’ve completely reverted to tribalism. They have honor between themselves but anyone else is fair game. It’s like we’re not people.”

“You seem to despise those who abuse their powers to inflict pain upon those they see as inferior.”

“Duh.”

“But that is the norm everywhere, is it not?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

“It is the norm in most of the civilizations I have infiltrated.”

“Then I can hate all of them equally, each in their own special way. Was there anything else?”

Sereth remained silent for a while, and Nestra immediately felt like shit.

“Sorry.”

“You are angry. I understand and accept it. Most Aszhii your age would have fully given up on idealism, yet you have not. I cannot decide if it makes you driven, or a fool.”

“Guess it depends on whether or not I can back my beliefs with a sword.”

“Ah, I see. If your vision becomes the truth, then you were the wise one, yes? But let us change the subject. What is this bazaar enclave?”

“Oh you may have bought some of the stuff they sell us. Errr, how should I put it? Threshold heavily limits access to enclavers due to a variety of reasons. Most of those relate to the fact many enclavers don’t see baselines as people.”

“There are few non users outside of the wall?.”

“They are dead outside of the wall, Seth. Well, not here since this is a brand new continent, but elsewhere. Threshold has agreements with the most powerful enclaves but when smaller ones want to buy toothpaste, they can come to the bazaar. It filters everything. It also filters rejects and exiles. You have seen what kind of people they can be.”

“Ah, do I detect a hint of prejudice, little Nezhra?”

Nestra sniffed.

“Maybe.”

“By the way, little Nezhra, what took you so long?”

“Oh, yeah. I was playing hide and seek with Sashimi to practice my shadow cloaking. Very useful. I feel like I make faster progress when I am under pressure.”

“Yes, although that is a training game that you will never win.”

Nestra pouted.

“What a terrible lack of faith in your sibling. Of course I can beat that stupid fish.”

“I doubt it. A void shark that bites its prey marks it forever. Yours always knows where you are because she tasted your blood, so now she can track you down until either she or you die. Why, how did you think she could always find you by happenstance?”

“Gah! That cheating little...”
