

Since the Elder was very deliberately ignoring Nestra, she used the opportunity to stare. It was only fair play. After all, the enclavers were doing the same to her, and without shame either. She wasn't sure if it was because of her clothes, her ethnicity, or her dreg status. Most of the attention felt neutral in a 'brand new BaiHua animal exhibition' kind of way, but some of the gray robes were openly hostile. A few spat when she walked by. The fact that the elder let it happen spoke volumes about their priorities.

Her path led her closer to the Sword King Enclave's living quarters. The smell of laundry and food soon covered that of wet earth. Some of the younger children squealed when she arrived, with other menial workers clearing the path in front of her after bowing to her guide. Nestra climbed down a set of stairs to a cooler part of the compound. She spotted rudimentary classrooms on the side through half-open doors. Those guys were still using blackboards and chalk.

Everywhere gave her the same feeling of concrete impersonality. The interior design favored one, and only one material: bare concrete. Efforts had been made to adorn them with well woven tapestries, stickers, the occasional paintings, but it all remained very barebone in a sad sort of way. Obvious cracks and smudges also gave the building an unfinished appearance. It smelled musty, dusty, with hints of cheap soap, and then there was the light.

Mana light, fed by a mana stone, inside of a cheap tin casing. One thousand two hundred creds of energy used as a fucking light bulb.

They didn't even use glass to make the light, well blue or whatever. Pretty. Instead it was the 'morgue corridor yellow' variety. Nestra shook her head. She wasn't sure what to think about it, but it was just miserable making one's lair so dry and functional. What was the fun in tearing through monsters if one didn't have a den to bring the meat back to? A safe place to collect trophies and other pretty things? It made her miss her Nestracave. It had a huge freezer, a kitchen robot, vines, a pile of pillows, and a naval gun. This marked her as an Aszhii woman of the world. What the enclavers had was just sad.

A furious glare from the elder reminded Nestra that she was surrounded by superhuman twats with short fuses who could easily hear her tsk. She had reached her destination anyway: a nondescript door with a label on top that her visor translated as 'The Archives'. The elder wordlessly turned and left.

It was always such a treat when assholes gave Nestra the silent treatment, as if it wasn't what she was hoping for all along.

Nestra knocked on the door because she was polite like that. No one replied so she went in anyway, only seeing a gleam woman with an expression of naked curiosity on her face.

"Oh, I was wondering who could be knocking," the woman said in perfect English.

She felt old but a bit weak, a common feature of civilian gleams with no raiding experience. Her eyes revealed an affinity with earth though, so she was trained. It made Nestra wonder what the woman was doing here until she realized her baggy blue dress was showing a distinct lack of left arm.

Noticing her gaze, the woman lifted a short stump.

“Welcome to the archives, Thresholder.”

“Thank you. My name is Nestra Palladian. I am here to learn about your legal system.”

“Pah! Legal system!”

The gleam chuckled, the sound warm and acid at the same time.

“Well, come on in then!”

“Thank you.”

“My, how polite. I should be the one thanking you for letting me practice my English. A dreg, eh? Oh, sorry, this is an insult, isn't it? The proper term is baseline right?”

“Yep.”

“I always get those two confused. I didn't mean to insult you.”

“No harm done. Some of our gleams use them interchangeably anyway. I didn't catch your name?”

“Oh, where are my manners? Call me Sa.”

Nestra surveyed the room as she entered. Dim light filtered in from cliffside windows, showing the outlines of a great many shelves filled with physical books of various sizes. The place smelled of something musty yet not together unpleasant — old paper, she realized. She'd read about the smell before, but it was her first time actually experiencing it. Many of the titles showed technical manuals and teaching books, but there were a few old fictions as well, like Moby Dick and 'Picked Wife' apparently a famous Vietnamese book she'd never read before. Many of the fictions referred to hardships and overwhelming odds. It had to be by design.

It didn't surprise Nestra that most of those were tragedies too. The most horrific of them, however, was what poor Sa had to work with.

It was a desktop computer. The archives had a bona fide, genuine desktop computer, its fan laboring in the dusty air with the roar of a jetliner. Shit, Nestra had never seen one in real life. It belonged in a museum.

“Ah, I can see judgment clearly painted on your face, dear guest.”

“Sorry, I had just never seen one of those work before.”

“They are very reliable! It is directly connected to our servers, so our knowledge is safe.”

The gleam gently patted her ancient beast's tower. Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

"So how can we two rejects keep each other entertained?" the woman added.

Nestra knew she was trying to build a rapport so she didn't take offense. Not to mention, there was a brittle edge in the woman's deprecating humor.

"How come you haven't regrown it yet?" she asked in return.

"Regrow! As if it were easy. No, I am still — what was it? — D-class. Fundamental realm as we call it here. Our healers are not capable of easily regrowing limbs from acid wounds."

She flinched, perhaps remembering the even. That had to have hurt a lot.

"And since I have withdrawn from raiding, my contribution points are too low for a solution. I prefer to use them to give my children a future. Ah, you thresholders must have it so easy. You pop into a clinic and, bam! The arm is back."

She sighed wistfully. It wasn't that easy, of course, but raiders were always at the top of the priority queue, even the bad ones. Valerian could probably heal the woman in a day of intensive efforts, despite the fact this wound looked so old. Another perk of having social security instead of predatory merit-based healing.

"Well, not me, but yes. If the deal goes through, you can probably receive medical treatment."

"My raiding days are behind me now," the woman lied.

So transparent. Her longing mirrored Nestra's own back when she hadn't awakened yet. It brought back ancient memories of envy and powerlessness, the difference being, this woman had a family to look after. Nestra's family didn't need her. Or at least that's what she'd thought at the time.

"Anyway, Miss Sa. The rules?"

"Ah yes. I'm surprised you haven't received them."

"A collection of judgements would be useful too. Case law is just as important as the regulations themselves."

The woman gave Nestra a guarded look. Neither of them were stupid. Laws tended to work horizontally and from the top down, and enclaves only accentuated that. Nestra doubted a single Elder had ever been disciplined for, say, maiming or abusing one of their subordinates.

"Of course. I can print the summaries. We do not keep detailed minutes here, only the conclusions."

Sa led her guest into a dark room occupied by an antique printer and enough reams of cheap papers to cover every wall in the compound. Precious ink cartridges were kept in a locked container next to the door. Someone had placed lucky charms on the dusty machine, possibly fearing it might break down and bring the entire enclave's bureaucracy to a grinding halt. Nestra retreated to a cheap table with a pen and a burgeoning headache. Her drip coffee pouches were still in her luggage. Curses.

Sa didn't offer her any tea. It would probably have been green anyway.

It took only an hour for Nestra to go over the entire book of law, mostly because they were basic and literally ripped off the Threshold and Hanoi Fortress cities codes. As expected, baselines and augs were outlaws in the truest sense of the word: they existed outside of its constraints, and so it didn't protect them. At best they might be considered 'unawakened' as a stretch though it was clear the term was meant for children who hadn't gleamed up yet.

Nestra made a note of it. The rest was fairly simple, essentially just noting that trade laws were anemic at best, and that many of the punishments were unconstitutional under Threshold's law.

Her dear city preferred its torture to be purely psychological.

The case summaries were depressing. The overwhelming majority related to bodily harm and whether or not that harm had been intentional or even real. The lack of sexual abuse accusations were also telling. She didn't believe for a single moment that horny teenage raiders growing up in a darwinist society would always behave. It just meant that violence to women was swept under the rug. In fact, women accusing men was barely — she checked — seven cases out of the one hundred and eighty-three trials over the past two years.

She stole a glance towards the archivist. The woman was playing a solitary card game instead of working. Maybe she just didn't have much to do with her day. In fact, nobody had come here since Nestra's arrival.

Maybe she should strike up a conversation.

"Miss Sa, Do you have a moment?"

The woman used well-practiced gestures to open a data software before turning to Nestra. She was good at covering her tracks.

"Yes?"

"I could use a short break. Would you care to tell me about your raiding days?"

"Oh, there isn't much to tell," the woman said.

And then she proceeded to tell Nestra about them for over twenty minutes

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Sa painted a bleak picture of childhood on the frontier. It wasn't so much that everything was shit — there were fleeting moments of happiness — but more that the entire enclave was dedicated to two things and two things only: raiding, and the blade. Even a battle maniac like Nestra would find the strictly regimented life choking. The enclave did care for the life of its members but only to a point. Strict expectations whittled the number of valued gleams by age and achievements, funneling the chosen few to the valued positions of Elders. Those who failed did... what they could. They weren't banned or exterminated. It was just that more menial jobs and outer bases needed guards and workers. Naturally, the pay reflected one's usefulness to the colony in the form of contribution points that acted as a currency that only the Sword Kings recognized. Saving for goods meant for the betters was strongly discouraged by way of expiration timers. Nestra subtly nudged Sa towards the topic of tournaments, which the Sword Kings obviously loved to bits. Sa proudly led Nestra to a back wall, where the winners of the previous seasons were immortalized as photographs. Sa's daughter was very good with a spear, which was considered a follower's weapon. It was good enough for Sa who just wanted her daughter to perform well, be noticed, and hopefully join the retinue of some scion.

As the discussion petered out, Nestra moved to the left to check older pictures. The robes switched to a more basic design the farther back she traveled in time. Let's see, seven to eight years ago ought to do it. Patiently, she searched, going from portrait to portrait with casual attention. Eventually, she found what she was searching for.

Hello, Fox Mask.

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T. Nguyen. That was the name of Fox Mask. As for... their... gender, it was hard to say. Fox Mask possessed a certain androgynous grace that left the question unanswered with broad shoulders yet a thin build, soft wavy hair yet a square chin, full lips, and long lashes. They were clearly of mixed descent, likely Vietnamese and white if the Nguyen dynasty name was any indication. Without surprise, Fox Mask was present in multiple pictures. They had probably bested their seniors to win the competition year on year for three years straight — quite an achievement considering gleam powers increased quickly at first. The other contestants made a point to stay as far away from the victor as possible without it becoming outwardly rude.

Nestra wondered what had caused this pariah status. It was certainly not an issue of skill. Sa, who had been standing by her side, froze when she noticed where Nestra's attention had been going, so Nestra made a show of looking at the oldest pictures.

"That is a lot of tournaments in a very short time," she remarked.

"Yes," Sa said, relaxing ever so slightly.

Nestra's mind wandered while her host shuffled from foot to foot, unwilling to leave her unsupervised. Fox Mask was such a fun combatant. Maybe they could meet in some secluded portal world to fight it out, a blur of blades that would cut at each other and the

monsters in their path. Then Nestra would eat her core. No! No, that wouldn't be fun. Fox Mask had so much potential. They should meet again, and again, and again. Nestra wouldn't eat Fox Mask's core if they could become eternal rivals instead. That would be so much fun. She longed to remove her mask, don her true form, claw her way through the compound. Maybe choke the truth out of the fearful little raider by her side...

Patience! Patience... She wouldn't endanger the expedition for something that she believed she would eventually get.

Maybe Fox Mask would make contact. It was hard to say. They were clearly... a conflicted person.

"There are duels, team tournaments, support tournaments, dedicated tournaments for each secondary weapon — anything that isn't a sword. You have seen robes, yes? The gray ones are those who have yet to find their path... or have found none. The red are the swordsmen. I used to wear brown — like my husband. Defense specialists are an important part of any group."

She sounded a bit defensive.

"Absolutely, although, I imagine that it must be hard to get a proper shield around here."

"Yes, well, no, the workshops produce great weapons," Sa replied defensively.

Her right arm reached for her stump.

"Back in the days, we didn't have... enough of them yet. Now, specialists are encouraged to use spells instead."

That would imply that Sa's training had been rendered obsolete by a change of doctrine. That woman had some serious bad luck. Nestra felt a pang of sympathy before remembering that she wasn't supposed to fraternize.

"We have yellow robes as well. Archers, mostly. They play an important role."

Sa's voice faltered and for a moment, she was no longer an enclaver, or even a gleam, but simply a woman who'd gotten the short hand of fate's stick, and still defended her home clan because there was still hope for her child.

"Those pesky flyers, am I right?"

"Yes! And other important foes, of course."

She frowned.

"You seem well informed."

"My family has many raiders. I am the odd one out," Nestra allowed.

Sa might have continued the discussion, and someone smoother than Nesta might have extracted useful info. Unfortunately, the conversation was cut short by heavy footsteps. A thin man in a more elaborate blue dress entered the room. He didn't have an affinity, but he was C-class, a sign of someone who probably progressed through meditation. His acerbic voice came in fast bursts like the staccato of an automatic weapon.

"What are you doing with her?"

"We were looking at pictures," Sa replied with deference tinged with fear.

"You are to assist the guest in understanding our ways, and nothing more. You will receive a mark on your report for this transgression."

His dark gaze fell on Nesta. He had a pencil thin mustache, the only thing of interest on an austere face.

"Your presence is requested at the Training Hall," he informed her in clipped English.

His mouth twisted with disgust, but there was a hint of satisfaction there too.

"The Elders were informed you are, ah, trained with a sword? It appears they would like a demonstration."

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The path to the Training Hall was a long one. As far as Nesta understood from the briefing, the enclave rotated training groups to surrounding villages because it took a lot of space and standing stones to tank days upon days of flying spells and stone-shattering strikes. It also helped with fending off wandering monsters to keep them away from crops. The Training Hall was only used for demonstrations, tournaments, and advanced classes. Going there was a big deal.

Maybe they expected her to just go through forms. She could do that with no problem, and they would get familiar with Threshold's traditional school with a Palladian twist. It would be smarter than dueling her with a gleam. Either the gleam won and they would be seen as punching down, or she surprised them and broke their pride. It would be so stupid of them to do so.

Nah, what was she even thinking? Of course they would want to beat the shit out of her. Enclaves didn't care about fairness, or punching down. They would want to send a message: you brought baselines, and shit happened to them because they're weak. Nodding to herself, Nesta walked past rows of working gray robes. Those guys were not invited.

The Training Hall was the largest and nicest building in all of the compound, occupying the entire top of the largest mountain. Two wings and a main body encircled a vast, empty courtyard. The walls were made of thick stone with a green tinge while above, orange-tiled

roofs provided a much needed shadow. As Nesta approached, she realized the ambient mana shimmered over the structure. It was made entirely out of portal material.

Pretty neat, she had to admit. It would also be very reliant. A monster could claw at it for minutes before they could break in, buying defenders precious time. She watched as a few latecomers in basic red robes hurried ahead of her. She took her time climbing the stairs. No need to get winded before things could begin in earnest. Around her, the hall was the roughest and most ancient building and yet it also felt like the best. It was like stepping into living history. Here, humanity had been forced to build from the ground up.

The same female elder who had translated for her now stood waiting, her expression as unreadable as before.

“Welcome. Before we proceed, you will need to get changed. Please, follow me.”

Nesta didn't want to get separated but...whatever. The elder led her into a side room with wooden lockers. The air smelled of soap. The hanzi for 'ladies' was written on the door. There, a Threshold-made sports kimono waited on a simple table. It was colored white. Nesta wasn't sure what the symbolism was.

It was just a little too large for her but that was fine.

Once she was changed with her hair gathered in a tight ponytail, the elder led her into the quiet center room through a side door. Nesta was shocked at how silent the place was considering there were close to three hundred students of various ages sitting there, dressed in red, all waiting for her. She felt their attention like a physical weight. The Aszhii in her wanted to get out, but the human stood proud and indifferent.

Ilar sat on the side with the rest of the Threshold gleams, right next to the council itself. The central area had been left free. An elevated platform would act as a ring. Racks of training weapons covered the wall, displaying stuff as varied as chains ending in blades. The variety of swords was remarkable. All of those were blunt, yet well made training tools.

“This is Clytemnestra Palladian. She is trained in the Threshold Palladian style,” the Nguyen patriarch intoned.

Nesta stood at attention while the patriarch detailed her role. In front of her, the crowd of reb-robed warriors waited patiently. Some of them were clearly junior students who had never conducted a raid, but some were above twenty and clearly experienced. Most of the seniors were in front, quite a few of them C-class and scarred. The older ones were the most hostile.

“She will now offer a demonstration,” her visor translated.

Nesta spared a glance towards Ilar, who merely nodded. She just wished he'd cleared things with her in advance, but in a way he was also trusting her, and that was comforting in itself.



It wasn't the first time Nesta had demonstrated her mastery over the form in front of the crowd, and not the first time the crowd had half a dozen B-class raiders among their ranks. She grabbed a suitable arming form from the racks, saluted the elders, and then she was in her element.

The first form was simple, and also meant as a warmup. Muscle memory guided her smoothly from one stance to another, the blade wooshing through the air at a sedate pace. There was no need to rush. This was a familiar dance, one both her forms knew intimately. As her muscles warmed up, Nesta moved into the second sequence, then the third, which had the first flying attacks. Her first 'hah!' rang in the silent room. The fourth sequence followed. By then, she was striking as fast as humans could manage.

The pseudo-combat woke her Aszhii instincts. She wanted out of the mask but not now. Now, there were too many eyes on her. The fifth sequence ended in a flurry of fast, precise strikes. The sixth sequence was the first truly modified Palladian variant of the more standard tradition Threshold school. It incorporated a few techniques meant to be used with heavy flow mana. There were whispers near the back, quickly shushed. The sixth was a purely defensive run which made her stop at the edge of the rack while the seventh pushed her to the side of the room after a series of lunges. The eighth was extremely technical and considered one of the most difficult sequences to perform flawlessly, which she did. The ninth was the apotheosis, all showy techniques including the skyward Wing Clipper, an extremely situational but nevertheless spectacular technique she had only ever used in her true form.

With perfect control, Nesta fell back on her feet. The real world returned into focus with a deafening quiet that belied the number of attendees. Nesta saluted the council whose faces were unreadable. Ilar didn't react either, but his bodyguard, the blade master Watanabe, gave her a firm nod.

"Thank you for this demonstration of one of Threshold's many styles," the Patriarch said. "I look forward to the exchange of ideas and techniques."

Silence returned to the room. For a solid second, nothing happened.

That... that was it? Nesta made for the rack with slow steps. It looked like she'd been badmouthing the enclavers, after all. Patriarch Nguyen didn't want to humiliate the delegation. Instead, he had used her to showcase Threshold's capabilities to his own people.

"The true test of a blade is battle."

Nesta's visor translated Manh Nguyen's cold voice as best as it could. Suddenly, it looked like everyone had frozen.

This was probably off script. Interesting. There were dynamics here that Nesta didn't get, mostly some political infighting within the enclave. Or maybe it was a bluff?Whatever. Let someone else figure it out. Nesta was here to stab people, and it looked like someone had thrown the gauntlet.

She waited, hand still holding the blade.

“Perhaps the Threshold dweller will show her skill in a friendly spar?” Manh added, voice dripping with venom.

Ilar glanced at Nestra. She shrugged. She was good to go, personally, but she’d belatedly remembered that this was supposed to be a diplomatic mission.

“I believe Miss Palladian has no objection. With that said, who would offer a proper demonstration? The use of mana would be a poor showcase of technique,” Threshold’s diplomat said.

Nestra agreed that getting skewered by an elder would not make for a good show.

“Then we need someone fairly new. A fundamental realm person, perhaps, with good technique. Truong?”

A short woman with black hair stood from one of the back ranks. All the other students around her suddenly glanced up like they were suddenly noticing a venomous snake in their midst. Some of them physically recoiled from the woman. Nestra’s gaze met the woman’s. Her gleam eyes showed no specific affinity yet, but there was a sheen in them that reminded her of Helena. Probably a rare strength affinity.

It was a nice setup. Nestra would face a much younger, apparently inexperienced fencer and get demolished, thus proving that threshold’s fencing is just pretty to look at but otherwise toothless. She was eager to see what the young gleam had in store for her, but otherwise, she found Manh’s plot a little insulting. He was clearly underestimating her.

Sure, D-class raiders had some advantages, like enhanced reaction speeds, but fencing at her level was also about strategy, precision, and muscle memory. A tight-lipped patriarch and unctuous Ilar organized the details: best of three, any hit counts. Watanabe and the elder responsible for training would act as the referees, stopping the match before either of the contestants got bloodied. It wouldn’t be difficult for those experienced B-class warriors.

Nestra waited for the short woman to face her. She was beautiful, like most gleams, but there was something detached about her that made Nestra’s skin crawl.

“Begin.”

Nestra lunged at the same time as her opponent, but her reach was longer and so Truong was forced to pull back. With tight footwork, Nestra followed with explosive speed before landing a very light tap on the woman’s arm, which she’d raised in defense.

Those were monster-killing and surviving techniques. Useful, but not immediately relevant. Nestra was fighting this like a sports match, which it was.

And she’d won the first bout.

“Touche,” Watanabe said, closing the first round.

The elder reluctantly nodded. Nestra returned to her starting position while Truong displayed the very first emotion Nestra had witnessed: it was outrage.

“What? It wasn’t even a real blow?”

“By the rules of the contest, she has won,” Watanabe said in heavily accented Thai.

Truong’s face took a distinctly red tinge. Rage made her shake. Nestra had her.

The second bout started with a furious attack, which Nestra tried to use with quick, conservative counters, but here the gleam’s speed came into play. Nestra was also forced to avoid crossing blades with the obviously stronger girl. She could hear the way her sword whistled when she used broad strikes. The back and forth was intense, patience and viciousness on one side, speed and ferocity on the other. Nestra’s quirk physiology helped her, and her Aszhii instincts whispered of Scornful Crescent moves her human body couldn’t follow, but it was enough, just enough, and she was pushing the girl back. All her power wasn’t enough to overwhelm Nestra because Nestra wasn’t there. There was no body to smash into, no defenses to swat away, only the wasp of Nestra’s sword tip dancing before her eyes.

Truong had a pattern where she would try to swap the blade twice then lunge. Nestra waited, seeing it repeated again after a particularly fierce exchange. It happened again. She lunged, catching the girl squarely in the ribs.

Something stopped her hand. Not impact, something else. Watanabe’s rough hands on her kimono’s sleeve.

“Touche,” he laconically said.

Truong was on the verge of explosion. Nestra was tempted to tease her just for the psychological warfare element but her dad disapproved of this sort of thing. ‘Be remorseless on the piste and polite outside’ was more his ethos. Besides, it would be punching down. Nestra was almost twenty-six. The girl had to be eighteen. The gap in experience wasn’t something she could easily bridge, especially now that Nestra had gotten under her skin.

The third bout began with a hiss of fury. The girl’s skin was now dark with flushed blood, her rage bubbling beneath the surface. Shame. Disbelief. Terror. The heady cocktail made Nestra want to play with the thing a little more, but she was her human self, and it was... risky. Poking her defenses with lightning fast thrusts now caused exaggerated reactions. Nestra slowly cornered her like a beast, never taking any risks, and once the girl did the pattern again, she had her. Quick footwork, a lunge... and the impact of a blade swatted aside.

A mana burst.

Nestra struck out out of sheer instinct born from countless duels against her father, and Sereth as well. A ping spoke of metal hitting metal. The two referees appeared between them in a flash, the elder holding Truong back while Watanabe stood in front of Nestra.

“The use of mana is against the rule, Watanabe announced.”

“Perhaps it would be best to stop now,” Ilar added in a smooth transition. “A round of applause for our contestants!”

He clapped, the sound loud and awkward. The patriarch joined soon after, and the room erupted in voiceless congratulations. It was over. Nestra had won.

She was a bit annoyed, having faced a teen like that. Fox Mask would quench her thirst for a challenge. She just had to find the elusive genius.

Watanabe had Nestra stand on the side while Ilar and Patriarch Nguyen went with the pantomime of pretending this was a pleasant exchange, and not a power play Threshold had won by a landslide. The old Japanese master stood with placid attention while Nestra surveyed the room. The mood was somber and subdued, as befit people whose team just got thrashed in a surprise upset. Truong was on the verge of apoplexy. Her rage practically radiated through the room.

Yeah, Nestra would need to keep her eyes open. And that might be fun.

“Let me walk you back to your room, Palladian,” Watanabe said.

It didn’t sound like a suggestion. Nestra left the room, finally allowing herself a smirk.

It wasn’t just that she’d won by two victories and one disqualification. That last attack?

She’d parried it.

And all the stronger raiders would know.

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Nestra changed back in a hurry and with some amount of displeasure. the duel had left her sweaty despite the clement weather, and spending hours in a cramped helicopter was doing nothing for her fragrance. A shower would be nice.

She hoped they had running water. Surely they had running water for their guests.

Watanabe was waiting for her outside of the changing spot. He pointed at a small group of houses down the slope.

“This is where we will sleep. From now on, you will not travel alone for safety reasons. I will have one of our augs come with you at all times since they have... certain advantages to see danger coming.”

He probably meant they had surveillance equipment.

“You fight like a demon, Palladian. You are more subtle than Hector, yet you two share the same savagery. I would hate to cross blade with you.”

Nestra give him a glance, which he misinterpreted.

“I do not mean to mock your condition.”

“No, I’m just flattered that you would think that. You fought against my dad?”

“With him, side by side. It was some time ago.”

The stern warrior’s fingers caressed the handle of his own sword.

“We old ones know each other well, but I digress. It is truly a shame that you are not one of our kind. You may take pride in your skill and in your training, for I have rarely seen its match.”

“Thanks, I tried.”

Watanabe fell silent and Nestra used the respite to center herself. She was feeling uncomfortable by now, and she found herself missing her den, or at least a good raid. Long operations with other humans and such teasing encounters were hard on her true self. It wanted out. She wanted out. Eventually though, Watanabe left her in front of her door. Nestra’s room was simple but well furnished, reminiscent of old hab block units back in the old days. The only thing out of the ordinary was a gray origami carefully folded into the semblance of a fox head. It had been left on her bed.

“Well well well.”