

Angel at Sea

The Corrupted Cycle
Extract 4

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Author A.A.
Subjects Narianel Azranhai

Foreword

Narianel Azranhai, the Goddess of Nothing, is a being of fierce will and unfettered power. I will speak in the next extract why I believe that using present tense for her is correct, but for now we will continue the novelisation of her life.

The last extract left off with her ascension to godhood. She defeated Egil and crafted him on the spot into the Divine Blade known as Nocturne, a blade capable of devouring the souls of those it cuts.

When the narrative picks up, nearly two years have passed and things have changed. The Order has continued to recruit and train, and the Cult of Nothing is in its infancy and not yet known by that name. Narianel is 39 years old, but doesn't look a day over 21 due to her power.

We will start in the days before the Legion Break, when the dreaded demon once more escapes its prison, and will continue through to her having nearly all the blades. The end point for this extract, I hope, is fitting even if she doesn't have the last blades she'll need. The next extract will be the final one and there's a lot to be said of the final blades and the song. And on the final battle.

For now, let us continue...

Divinity doesn't need to be the absence of humanity...

...but it often is.

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Part I

God of Nothing

In which divine fury becomes evident

Narianel walked the streets of Seremont with Royan and Chas in tow, and she was noticing that more people this week wore the two-toned shakai that marked her beliefs. One vibrant and one like blood, the two shades of her soul. Her core and her inherited scar. They bowed to her and murmured wishes for Azael's defeat, for their problems solved, for the power to keep going after all they'd lost.

She knew where they were getting them. Valeska had been busy finding a new purpose. They both wanted Azael dead for the death of Adela, though Narianel wished she wasn't participating in this new religion. Valeska was her mother-in-law; she shouldn't be worshipping Narianel the way so many others had started to.

But Narianel couldn't take it away from her. To keep from going Hollow, immortals of all sorts find something to keep them busy. They find a purpose. Though Valeska was simply human, perhaps it was helping with the grief of losing her only daughter, as well as her husband, in that battle that damaged the city, both the structures and the people.

Narianel herself was wrapped in her own shakai. It was wound around her shoulders, covering her jaw, and also tight around her body to the hips and flowing loose around her legs. It was stuck there with magic as a simple fifteen foot long, two foot wide stretch of cloth wouldn't stay there on its own. Some people tried copying her, but were forced to use pins to keep it in place. No one copied the way she had it tied around her neck like a noose, however. They needed to breath.

As they walked Royan gave her reports as though she was still in charge of the Order of Blades and hadn't handed them over to him. They were a mercenary group but had ended up policing the city in their spare time, working with the royal guard to protect the people. Just a few weeks prior, King Marcus Hitch had even publicly applauded them. Royan was doing a fantastic job, but he still felt like she was in charge. She

hadn't given them any orders since returning from Av Ajir.

"We've seen a large amount of people trying to join the Order, recently," Royan said as they entered the King's Park at the centre of the city. It used to be the site of the Fort of Kings before the battle, and Marcus had chosen to split up the government buildings to avoid them being attacked all at once again in the future. "Most believe that you'll grant them favours if they join your army."

"You corrected them, I assume," said Narianel. She looked at the memorial that had been built for the fallen. Three strands of thread, cast in bronze, stood on a plinth at the centre of the park. Why people wanted to remember the most disgusting magic she'd ever seen in her life she couldn't understand.

"I tried my best," said Royan. He let out a chuckle and shrugged, and she believed him. The people were struggling and looking for hope, so they were choosing to believe anything and everything.

News had spread fast of her announcement of divinity at the battle in Av Ajir. Air mages could whisper in the winds and news groups and governments all had their sources that could do it. Upon returning to the city her status as a local celebrity had changed. She'd failed these people when the war against Azael came to the city, but they wanted to know how they could be a part of something greater. They wanted Azael as dead as their loved ones.

"I hear there's some of them trying to get a temple built to you, but the priests aren't having it," said Chas.

"Why would they bother building a temple?" asked Narianel. It was the first time she'd heard that. She normally got her rumours from Vedar and Tullis, but they were either keeping this from her or hadn't heard. Chas was usually the last to hear things. He was wrapped up in his training or spending time with his wife, Sarina.

"You can't announce yourself as a God and expect people not to build temples," said Chas.

“Gods don’t need worship,” said Narianel. “They just need to gather their power and focus on the job at hand. It’s a shame they’re all useless. They’ve forced me to take a stand.”

“See, it’s things like that the priests don’t like,” said Chas with a grin.

“The priests don’t matter either,” said Narianel. A few people turned and looked at her in shock at that, so she lowered her voice before continuing. “What’s the point in being a follower to someone, a god, who doesn’t actually *do* anything? They’re not fighting, they’re just leaving everyone else to deal with the mess they started.”

She’d told them what she knew of the so-called gods and their story. How they came to create what was now known as the universe. Many of them were just cowards. They were just a race of people like any other, no more special than humans or enlani or sklaara. Magically gifted, if nothing else. And Azael’s attempts at destruction were their fault.

She stopped in the street just outside the park and closed her eyes for a second. She centred herself, focussing on the flow of her soul. The rage was becoming so much harder to control and she needed to keep calm. It used to just be this thing bubbling beneath the surface that would come out as shouts and swings of a blade or two, but now it was something much more. As the Lunar Beast, her soul kept trying to burst outward and engulf the area around her in violence. She had to keep herself tame. At least until she went to war.

When she opened her eyes, Royan and Chas were both looking at her in concern. She nodded and they continued on. She didn’t breath and didn’t have a pulse, so the normal signs of anger didn’t appear with her. It was her need for these mini-meditations each day that showed how bad it was getting. She needed to find the other blades and break the curse on her soul sooner rather than later, she thought, so she could at least start to feel normal.

As they kept walking someone charged from the crowd and stabbed Narianel in the chest with a large knife. It wasn’t

even magically enhanced, so it couldn't hurt her. The man was screaming something about false gods and blasphemy, so she let him keep going until he wore himself out. He stabbed her three more times during the outburst and she just looked him in the face, entirely blank except for a tendril of rage trying to reach out. Royan and Chas just stood to the side whispering to each other.

When the man stepped back, exhausted and panting, she touched her shakai and it repaired. There was a crowd watching, including a few of the royal guards, unsure of what to do. Was assault on a god their duty to deal with; she could see their minds churning.

"Go home," she said to the man. "I've kept my cool this time, but I may not be able to for long if you do not get far away from me."

"You're a monster!" shouted the man.

"I am, now go, before I show you just how far from humanity I've come."

He looked at her and around at the crowd, then dropped the knife and left. He ran until he was out of sight, lost around a corner.

"If you're going to try and kill me, at least make it a credible threat!" she called to crowd, barely suppressing a growl that wanted to crawl from her throat. Some of the people laughed at this, and she thought they must have gone mad. The whole world was going mad.

When they reached Temple Street there was a large group of people gathered around the Temple of Chassuille. There was a new Hierophant and he was outside preaching. It was an unusual sight. He was in his twenties and clearly thought himself handsome and charismatic. He was overdoing it, in Narianel's opinion.

"We should hold up no false Gods!" he was shouting with a grim smile. He must have met his master and was imitating him. "Only those of truly divine blood, those that are known as Skraeðan, can be counted on as Gods! They are our

creators and our masters and we must ready ourself against Azael in their name!”

“Azael is Skraeðan!” Narianel shouted and the man went silent, as did his flock. She continued in her normal voice, but it carried amongst them as they parted for her to reach the steps of the temple. “Azael, the coming Destroyer, is one of them. How can we trust a people who’ve proven themselves more willing to play games than solve their own problems?”

“And here we have our false God!” shouted the new Hierophant. She was trying to remember his name, but he felt so unimportant that she’d never committed it to memory in the first place. Her ability to form memories seemed entirely hinged on interest, and this man provided little. “We are in the presence of someone whose ego is enormous enough to call themselves equal to the creators of this universe!”

“Only a step above yours then, right?” called Chas. He got a laugh from one or two, but they quickly backed down at the glares of the others.

“Can you prove you’re a God?” asked the Hierophant. His smirk made her want to punch him, break his nose and watch the blood stream down his chin. She closed her eyes for a second and unclenched her fists.

“I’ve inherited aether from three Gods, including your own, so how can I be less?”

With less than a thought the black, interlocking plates of corruption released her core from a prison of her own making. With the release of her inner light, her aura washed over the crowd and they fell to their knees, overwhelmed by the power and pure emotion pouring out of her. Her rage pushed them down, her divinity struck them with awe and terror. This was the strength of will of the Lunar Beast.

Royan and Chas both stayed on their feet due to her bond with them, but the Hierophant cowered at the top of the stairs, the temple guards looking to him for guidance. She ascended the steps towards the high priest and he backed into the large white doors. The guards didn’t dare approach her

despite having magically honed spears.

"You are pathetic and so is your master," she said as she reached the top step. "Chassuille is a coward. Instead of being the leader he was meant to be, he ran, and now we stand on the brink of eternal emptiness and you seek to bring us down to his level."

"That's not true," said the Hierophant. She thought his name might be Mark Something. Either way, he was almost crying, her soul washing over him, overwhelming him. He was mortal and disposable.

"It is," she said as she closed the corruption around her core again. She felt the congregation's collective souls grow, return to normal, as she withdrew from them. "You are up here simply to propagate the lie that the Skraeðan are helping us. They might have created us, but we owe them nothing. Now is the time to prepare for the fight ahead, the oncoming war with the creator of our creators. We cannot afford to be divided the way you would have us. Change your script to the truth and prepare the people, or abdicate your position. I've had respect for past Hierophants, but you've yet to earn it."

She turned from him and walked back down to Royan and Chas, and they continued back to her estate. She didn't meet anyone's eyes as they walked. She was lost in thought and wondering if even she was ready. She hadn't slept in such a long time that everything was crushing together and her soul kept trying to expand beyond her body and reality itself. It longed to be a moon to the universe, to grow and orbit reality and be seen by all. It's what she wanted, but she knew it was the corruption, she knew it was the curse of becoming a beast, and she wouldn't succumb.

She spent more than an hour training some of the newer students of the Order of Blades. She held back and let them figure out how to properly swing a weapon, but there was so much work to do. The training, however, was cut short when Tesni Armstrong arrived.

She was serpentine, descended from those who had

devoted themselves to the Sixteen Dragons during the end of most worlds within the universe. The Ruination. She had long horns that curved back from her forehead and then up at the tips, and a tail that doubled her length. Up her back and peeking out onto the sides of her neck and up her cheeks were deep black scales. Her lineage came from Argona, the Dragon of Darkness.

She wore the white uniform of the Eyes of Chassuille. A short shoulder cape with a hood she could never use because of her horns, a waist cape that reached above her stomach and below her knees cut at the back to allow her tail to be free. Her long-sleeved tunic barely hid her black claws and she wore a sturdy pair of knee-high boots with metal plates down the front. The entire ensemble was mistweave, a fabric that would protect her from enemy mages.

The Eyes were allowed free access to the estate and she often had at least one or two there helping to train recruits when they had nothing else to do. Today, however, it was clear that Tesni had other business. Her vertical pupils were narrow and the scowl on her face told a thousand words.

“Can we speak?” she asked as she approached Narianel with what was little more than a growl. “In private?”

Narianel gave a small nod and led Tesni into the house. In the early days of the Order her house had become a barrack of sorts, but now it was private again. The Order had their own quarters growing in the grounds where a neighbour used to be.

They passed through the courtyard at the centre of the house and it calmed Narianel just a little. The black roses her mother had grown and now she maintained were beautiful and filled the air with a subtle scent that few other than her kin, the Vanavolk, could detect. Tesni’s nose was sharp enough, however, and there was a lightening of her mood, the swirls in her soul smoothing out.

In the living room, which Narianel rarely used these days, she offered Tesni a seat, but the serpentine refused. They stood apart and Narianel waited while Tesni finalised the

speech she was giving in her mind, ready to be spat out into the world.

"You had no right to attack the Hierophant," she said. It was calmer than Narianel would have thought.

"It wasn't an attack. It was retaliation. He's too young for the job if he can't take opposition to the nonsense he was spewing. He was just angering his audience. It would have led to another battle in the streets."

"You're in your late thirties, you're not a child any more," said Tesni. "You can't resort to bullying when you hear things you don't like."

"I haven't been a child since before we ever met," said Narianel. She looked away from Tesni, remembering her teen years slaughtering thousands. "I was simply telling the truth of the situation. The Eyes and the various churches should be allies in the fight, not turning us all against each other."

Tesni sighed and hid her eyes in her hand. "He was just doing what he was told by the Grand Lord."

"All the good little soldiers..." Narianel immediately echoed, feeling the soul of Egil squirm within her.

"What?"

"Nothing." Narianel looked at Tesni again. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

"No, but I can see I'm not going to get anywhere. Why are you like this?"

"I'm broken," said Narianel before she could stop herself. Tesni lowered her hand and met Narianel's eyes. "The scar makes me want to destroy, the corruption makes me want to dominate, and the hole where Adela used to be makes me feel so empty, letting the anger and glory fill me until I'm nothing but the monster everyone thinks I am."

"Narianel..."

"My bond with Adela was the driving factor until war was brought to Seremont and now I only have the task at hand. I don't want to go Hollow, but I fear I already have. What do I have left but to sing the song that will destroy me while saving

everyone else? I need to defeat Azael and that means becoming the villain if I really have to.”

“Henan did you wrong, linking you to a mortal,” said Tesni. She then tightly closed her mouth, obviously worried that she’d stepped over a line that should never be crossed.

“The God of Love granting True Love through forced bonds on unborn children... Yes, it’s unfair. Lucifer was right. I’m going to end up just like him. Hollow and willing to do anything to recover that bond, but she’s been destroyed. She’s gone forever. There’s no way to resurrect her.”

They stood awkwardly for a minute. This was more open than Narianel had been in what felt like an eternity. She’d only spoken her worries with Adela and a few select others, but never with Tesni. Narianel was the once to break the silence.

“She knew she was going to die. She talked with my ancestor, Vala. Vala is a Seer and told her to prepare me for what she called an inevitability. All timelines converged on her death and my becoming the Lunar Beast.”

“How did you not lose yourself when you became a beast?” asked Tesni. “Your power over corruption?”

“Yes, but also preparation.” Narianel thought before continuing. “My power over corruption made the transition smoother and my acceptance of my fate long before the event made me ready for it.” Tesni cringed a little at the mention of fate, but Narianel wasn’t afraid of Mao. In fact, she was sure Mao liked her despite calling her a villain directly to her face. He understood the need for her to be this way. He’d seen the end more than anyone else.

“How... How does it feel? Beyond what you’ve already told me. How are you different? I don’t see it from the outside, except that your soul is arranged differently.”

“Honestly? The power feels good. I know I can take on Azael directly now. I’m not afraid of him. Yet, at the same time, it feels like I’m being crushed by my own soul. The shields I have around my core protect the world from a terrible madness I could unleash. We’ll see what happens when it’s

time to fight Legion. It should be any day now.”

“You don’t need to do this fight alone,” said Tesni. “I’m your friend. So is Gilbert. I’m sure Royan or some of your other high ranked Order members would consider themselves your friends. Your brother idolises you, from what I’ve seen. You can rely on us to be there.”

Narianel looked away again, turning her back. She didn’t want to see those eyes. Pity and the remnants of past adoration. Narianel closed her eyes and relaxed her hands, letting the anger go from a boil to a simmer.

“I understand, but I don’t agree,” she managed. “You can leave now.”

Then, unexpectedly, Tesni touched Narianel’s back, right between the shoulder blades.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” she said. And then she left. Narianel took a breath for once, letting the air coat her mouth and throat in cool seasonal frost, and she let it out as a roar that shook the room, amplified by the magical nature of her voice.

She felt Tesni’s soul leave the estate and waited a little while longer before returning to training the recruits. She let the stress wash away in the dance as she knocked down each man or woman who felt they were good enough to best her. She let the rhythm in her head and the beat of her steps enthrall her and before she knew it she was testing the strength of Royan and Tullis, Chas and Sarina, Vedar and so many more all at once. They saw it as a challenge to make her hit the floor even a single time but she let herself bounce and prance amongst them, delivering strikes to wind them rather than hurt them, frolicking in the dance that could easily end all their lives. She became the soul of the flow and the melody of combat, releasing all worries to the wind. In that moment she wasn’t the destruction she feared she was; she was the thrill of the fight, and it was enough.

Narianel launched from her roof, and when she was several dozen feet in the air she turned her gravity back down towards the ground and released a burst of aether. She streaked down at Sorley like a cannon shot and combat broke out quickly.

They dodged around each other deftly, she with Havoc and Malice and he with a new single-edged sword honed with magic and flames. They tested each other and danced back and forth, letting the other gain the edge before retaking it.

“Sharp as ever,” said Sorley. Her father was a strong man, tall and well built. He had a cursed scar running down the left side of his face, making him blind in that eye. He never hid it with a patch, and even cut his hair short so that others could see it. It was a memory of importance as much as a defect.

When they pulled away from each other, they bowed. Sorley’s smile was radiant, but it quickly faded. He had news, and Isaac was sat on the sidelines, fully armed and watching carefully.

“Is it time?” she asked. She had known and was waiting, wearing a light tunic and trousers, but no boots. They’d just get destroyed in the fighting, so she didn’t want to wear any mistweave this time. This wasn’t the kind of fight where it would help.

“It is,” said Sorley. “Legion is making his way from his prison. It’s time to get your Order together and go.”

“The Order isn’t going,” said Royan as he walked up. “Legion is beyond many of the gods, and so even as an elite warrior squad we’d be no match. We stay and prepare for the final battle against Azael.”

“You’ve discussed this, I see,” said Sorley. “Very well, are you ready?”

“I will be in a moment,” she said. She closed her eyes and focussed on the bond she had with the Order. They gave back all the blades they had been borrowing, letting her pull

them back into her soul. The soldiers knew the deal, and she was happy to not need to assert her dominance. "I am now ready."

"The Eyes are already informed and on their way, so let's go," said Sorley. At that, Isaac sprang up and ran over. He touched reality and a portal to the Aether Sea opened. He smiled when he saw Narianel's look of mixed confusion and approval. He'd grown fast. He was twenty-one now and his soul was almost ready to mature and show his true form.

Narianel walked through the portal and was followed by her father and brother, coming out the other side on a large island in the Aether Sea, the world between worlds. Rather than Avani's violet sky she saw a soft blue, and the vibrant green grass was gentle on her bare feet. And then there was the violent black crack in the sky with malevolent deep blue aether pouring from it. She'd seen this sort of thing before, but it had never felt so cruel, so ready to destroy.

Spread around in a miles-wide circle were angels of all sizes and shapes. Eldritch creatures and humanoid, side by side and ready for the battle. Chassuille's warrior servants weren't alone, however. There were reapers from Nareshilna and many other creatures she'd never seen before, each wearing the symbols of their gods. In the distance she even saw a force of elves, a true rarity.

"And here we are again," said Anđa, sauntering up and holding Sorley's arm. Narianel's mother was cursed with joy, and she was obviously excited for the battle.

"It *has* been a while," said Akenesa. She was tailed by Liara. The twin cousins of Narianel's grandmother, they were powerful in their own ways. Akenesa was an unparalleled mage and Liara's power was in beasthood. In the background Sasha and Azra-el, Narianel's grandparents through Anđa, were talking quietly.

"It's time to end this forever," said Vala. She was a distant ancestor, but immortal through stubbornness rather than nature or magical tricks like the rest of her family. She

had a look in her eyes, the eyes of a Seer who knew more than she let on, and Narianel could feel the certainty in her words.

Many people from Nerik were here to fight. The Vault Lords and the armies under Agata Akwaen. Every lucid beast that could be found and Sasha's elite police force.

They were all there to take on Legion and end the fight against the most powerful demon in the universe. It was time to deal with Legion, Metatron. It was time to save Prochorus.

It was a power she'd known about for a long time but only played with a little, away from people and only with the blades she trusted the most. Her blades couldn't hurt her, but if they pierced her soul's core the being within the blade could possess her body and use the full range of their powers. Egil had mentioned her being possessed by Abaddon, the demon within Fang, but that had never come to be. She'd changed that fate. Abaddon was loyal.

Prochorus had not been so lucky. The blade Voice had been run through his core by Egil and the destructive force of Metatron had taken over. Together they had become Legion, the universe's most dangerous foe aside from Azael. She knew she'd have a tough time bending Metatron into shape once she had the blade, but her priority was to take it first, to save her ancestor from his thousand year torment.

As she stared up at the crack Legion was trying to push through, Narianel thought of her few times attempting to use this power, up in the Salest mountains. Zepar had smiled at feeling the wind again and Kali had levelled a few rocks on the plateau. Lilith had cried. They had returned her body without issue, and she'd used Kali to attempt to reassert her will by force. Kali had managed to push her down but it was a struggle for her. The experience had only made her wonder how long Prochorus had struggled before Metatron had won and whether Narianel could have pushed her way out if given time and the right circumstances.

"Are you ready to do what you must?" asked Vala.

"I am," said Narianel. "This is the first step towards the

end, right? I have to win here today if I want to collect the rest of the blades and sing the song. Prochorus deserves to rest, and so do you.”

It really had all been building up to this. She wanted to do it right. All she had to do was reach Prochorus in the heart of the demon and pull out the blade. It was a task only she could do, she knew, having inherited Prochorus’s power. It was what all those that had gathered had been waiting for. So many fights just to push Legion back in his box and they were looking to her to end the struggle.

The crack blew open and tendrils of thick aether started to crawl out, crawling around in the sky and breaking open the prison even more. A lot of the army flinched, but she didn’t. She could feel the two souls above and determine which was which. That twilit soul that felt so familiar was Prochorus, but he was wrapped by an oppressive light that was Metatron.

Then a new portal opened nearby and out stepped a few figures she hadn’t expected to see. Skraeðan. Gods. They had an aura, an arrogance, that some claimed Narianel matched. She couldn’t disagree, looking at them. She saw what influence their blood had on her.

They were led by Chassuille, their leader that held an eternal and infuriating smile. To either side were Aia and Mao, Gods of Luck and Fate respectively. Aia had her focus on the crack in the sky, but Mao looked over and gave Narianel a grim smile, his eye sockets filled with darkness and stars. Then came Serk and Voria, Goddess of Time and God of Space. All five of them were in the Grand Circle, making them some of the most powerful mages in the universe, and certainly the most experienced. Together they maintained the universe they had created in those first days.

Behind them were Aramis, God of War, and his wife Ishal, Goddess of Duels. Their armies were the largest and cheered upon seeing them.

“Chassuille and Nareshilna have ceded their armies to Aramis for this battle,” said Vala. “Nareshilna will not be

attending, so the reapers work for Aramis. Chassuille never fights. He watches. The whole Grand Circle just watches.”

“Lazy,” said Narianel.

Another portal opened nearby and the Eyes came to the Aether Sea, but Narianel ignored them. She was more interested in Dasus. He walked out wearing a simple white, short-sleeved tunic, a pair of black trousers, and grey slippers. His skin was a solid grey and his hair was half-black, half-white. But it was the two-toned red and darker red shakai wrapped around his shoulders that struck her. A symbol of herself. He grinned at her.

“He knows what will happen here today,” said Vala. “He sought my counsel.”

“I don’t like it,” said Narianel. “He shouldn’t defer to me in that way.”

“He is your ancestor too, remember that. He’s not much of a fighter, but he is here to support you. He created Prochorus, who in turn created the blades. He wants to see his son again. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“I can.” She thought of Mira, back in Seremont.

There were several other gods that came through, most she didn’t recognise, though Vala pointed out the ones she’d seen before. A lot more came to watch than she’d have thought, though a few carried weapons and were ready to fight. At the end of the line were Horal and Vereen, Gods of Psionics and Magic. They were both close to joining the Grand Circle and were apparently in competition in that regard.

The sky broke even more and now a physical body was trying to poke through. It was disgusting, even at that distance. It was made of the corpses of millions, squashed together from all his victims over the years. Warriors who had pushed him back and his victims of the worlds he’s managed to squirm into before being stopped. It was good they were such a long way from Avani and Harelas.

The gods arranged themselves into smaller groups, but Dasus walked over to Narianel and Vala. He clasped Vala’s

hands and bowed his head to her, then turned to Narianel and forced her into a hug.

"You will succeed," he said as he released her. He then strutted off to greet Anđa and Isaac. Narianel saw him lean in and whisper something to Isaac that was magically muted so no one else could hear, and her brother seemed shocked and sad, but nodded.

"What's that about?" she asked.

"I cannot say," said Vala. "I promised."

"Alright," said Narianel. She didn't like that. It was too ominous, and today wasn't a day to be dealing in such things. She looked back to the sky as the crack widened a little more.

"Twelve minutes!" she heard a messenger angel call as it flew overhead and Fang sprang into her hand eagerly, appearing in a silver light.

"Not quite yet, Abaddon," she said and the blade faded away into silver light once more, hiding back within her soul.

"I still find it difficult to believe you've tamed that monster," said an angel as it approached. A green soul she'd never met before.

"And you are?" she asked.

"Barachiel," said the angel. He looked so much like Chassuile that she wanted to hurt him. He even had that smile and was wearing a white uniform not too dissimilar from the one worn by the Eyes. "It's a pleasure to meet you, High Lady Narianel. I am the Archangel of Air and Seraph Above. Allow me to welcome you, the Goddess of Nothing, on behalf of the seraphim."

He carefully spoke in diamonds, sealing away any magic his words might bring when he said her name and title. She didn't let it out, but wanted to smile at an angel speaking such a blasphemous word as *elium*, nothing.

"Will you be fighting today, or will you be guarding your Grand Lord?"

"It is the duty of the seraphim to guard the Grand Circle," he said. "I will only fight if needed. It is up to the

erelim, led by my brother Michael, to do all the fighting. I hear you look like him when you take on your nephilim form.”

“Last I checked he was must larger, but I’ve grown in power since I last compared,” said Narianel. “We shall see, shall we not?”

“I suppose we will,” said Barachiel. He bowed deeply and left, returning to a group of other seraphim guarding Chassuille.

“He likes you,” said Vala, a coy smile creeping across her face. It was a strange sight from her.

“I’m not interested,” said Narianel.

“I know where your interests lie, even if you deny it.” Vala’s eyes briefly flicked to the side and Narianel looked, seeing the Eyes of Chassuille being led by Tesni.

“No.”

“Perhaps you should take Adela’s advice,” said Vala. “Eternity could be awfully lonely.”

“This isn’t the time,” said Narianel. She walked away and heard Vala laugh, but didn’t look back to see it. She went to stand with her parents and brother while they made last minute preparations.

“What are those?” she asked. Anďa had a pouch full of vials of orange liquid.

“Rapid healing potions,” she said. “And before you ask, I hate to say that yes, we’ll need them all despite how many I have. I never think I bring enough. Not that you or Isaac will need them, but the rest of us might.”

“Three minutes!” called another messenger angel and Narianel looked up to see just how wide the hole had gotten. The limbs made of corpses were pushing it open and Legion’s aura of hatred was pushing down on everyone. She hadn’t even noticed it until she paid attention.

“Do you not feel that?” asked Akenesa. She’d walked up with silent steps, but there was nothing on her face. That was her part of the family’s curse.

“I didn’t until I looked,” said Narianel. “My blades have

no power over me, so I didn't feel Voice's power crying out until I looked." She could, of course, allow them to affect her if she chose. Havoc and Malice, Perception, Flameroot. She used their powers all the time. But she could cut them off at a moment's notice if she wanted to, and so she cut off Voice's call to her soul.

"Remember, Narianel," said Akenesa. "You have many armies backing you up. Legion is more dangerous than any you've faced until now. Don't charge ahead. Stay where we can help you. Prochorus and Metatron were both in the High Circle, and together they've entered the Pure Circle. We will need you in the finale of this battle, so don't go getting yourself destroyed. The threat is real here."

Narianel listened and nodded. She could see just how serious this battle would be. So many people were already weaving defensive spells, and even more were armoured in antimagic plates and mistweave.

Then the sky burst open and the chaos began. The tendrils of flesh turned into thick arms, thousands of them stretching in all directions, slamming down into various parts of the gathered armies. Some hit home but others were repelled. Then, from the gaping hole in the sky, emerged a mass of aether and corpses that made up the main body of Legion. It had a single eye that swept across the battlefield and then settled on Narianel. It knew what she was, and it knew it had to kill her.

She leapt into the sky and transformed, unleashing her wings for the first time since becoming a beast, and her form shocked even her a little. Her wings made of the angelic metal *chakosil* were no longer really wings. They had become thin sheets, sharper than ever, bladed feathers so thin they left streaks of white in the air as they cut reality. Curiously, they were now entirely white, but they cast a shadow on the universe, emanating darkness the way a fire glowed. Some of them shimmered silver and flames danced amongst them. She had tendrils of her own, entirely black now, and they curled

around nothing, using existence as a ladder to help her climb towards the hole in the sky.

At the centre of the wings she maintained her human-like form. She held Heart, empowered by all the blades within her, its shining silver blade of magic now the length of a standard sword. It would be much larger when she had them all. She could feel defensive wards and shields being woven around her by Akenesa and Anđa and many other mages she didn't recognise.

"Everyone keeps saying I don't have to do this alone, Iblis. I know that, but there are certain things only I can do. I hope you're ready for this." She felt a warmth coming from Heart that comforted her. "Let's do this."

She let out a burst of aether that caused the sky to ripple behind her as she sped towards Legion. He was pulling himself out of the hole and several of her shields broke as he slammed his arms into her. Despite her size she felt tiny. If she was a giant, what was Legion?

Despite how much attention Legion was giving her, she could see the battles raging all around her. Angels and reapers and so many others fighting and dying, attempting to cut off the arms and push them back. It was a massacre. There must have been millions of souls present.

An arm in front of her was severed and fell out from her path. Tesni zipped by on massive draconic wings, casting out black waves of aether, honed to incredible sharpness. She didn't stop to talk, but stayed nearby, orbiting and helping to cut the path. She was soon joined by several angels, each inhuman in shape, who were repairing Narianel's shields and keeping the arms away. She knew she was the distraction as much as the key to victory. She was happy to be that.

She got close to the fleshy mass taking up the sky and begun her attack, channelling Tail and sending out her blades to cut a hole into it. She needed to get inside, to find Prochorus, and pull the blade from his chest. There was no other way to end this.



“And who are you?” asked a voice that echoed all around her. She found herself in a white box of a room, surrounded by an oppressive air. The aura reeked of Azael and corruption. It was filled with a madness, pure beyond any other she’d experienced. Even Egil didn’t come close.

“Narianel Azranhai, High Lady of Nothing.” Reality cracked around her as she spoke her title. “I descend from Prochorus Zoraken and have inherited his power and duty.”

“Do you really think you can defeat me? I have been given power and knowledge by Pure Lord Azael, the True Creator, God of Gods, Bearer of the Divine Spark. I am the Metatron, Scribe of the Grand Lord Chassuille, Silent Speaker. You are nothing compared to Legion.”

“I am very much nothing,” said Narianel. The universe cracked again and she knew she’d been taken into a mindscape for this chat. She wasn’t sure if it was Metatron’s or Prochorus’s, but it certainly wasn’t hers. “I am the one that will survive after the end, and unfortunately for you, you’re coming with me, whether you want to or not.”



A thick arm of corpses slammed into her. She felt her wings shatter completely, her tendrils break apart revealing the silver chains within which were sundered into millions of tiny pieces before disappearing. She was crushed against an island which sunk into the Aether Sea. Legion pulled back the arm away from the pure aether and she lay there, broken.

Her healing kicked in quickly, bones rebuilding and popping them back into their proper joints. Her muscle and skin reknitted and her eyes remade entirely. She stood up whole, channelling Ballade to open an anti-magic barrier around herself to hold back the tide of pure aether that would

otherwise rip her apart again.

She floated back up as her wings came back, as they were before in their new form. The chains then reformed, springing from the base of each wing, and then were coated in liquid taint. Silver mist coated several of her wings and then they were all surrounded by flames.

The entire time she was healing she stared up at Legion, and she could feel him looking down on her with interest. That was the closest she'd come to actually dying in a long time, and it was only Legion's fear of pain if the Aether Sea had touched him that prevented him from holding her down and letting the aether destroy her. She could see it in the way he attacked the others.

She looked to Chassuille. The whole ocean of power was tied to his soul and he could send it up there if he chose to. He could have ended this years ago, carving up Legion and rescuing Prochorus. Awful man. Lazy fool.

She shot into the sky and re-established her assault. There was a twinge in her mind as Legion tried to draw her into the mindscape again but she repelled it. She wouldn't let herself be sucker punched again. She coasted along the length of one arm that tried to crush her, her blades appearing around her and cutting away all the hands trying to grab her. Most looked human, but she could see other species in there too. So many were dead to this creature.

She got close to the ball of meat in the sky again and this time she wasn't going to do this the slow way. She drew her blades back into her soul and funnelled their power through her own core. Within moments an intense beam of aether shot from her and tore through Legion, breaking off several arms as they tried to stop her. She was left tired, but there was now a hole clean through Legion and a path into his interior. She'd avoided where she could feel Legion's core, somewhere towards the centre of the massive body. She didn't want to hurt Prochorus.

Much to her surprise, Irvine Breen flew up to her and

pushed a potion into her hands before zooming off to an angel in the distance. The Eye of Chassuille who definitely hated her had given her condensed light aether in a bottle and was doing the job of supporting the angels who were running out of aether. She drank the potion and her limbs and wings tingled as she surged with new power.

Restored, at least a little, she set her sights on the hole she made. She pushed as hard as she could to cover the mile and a half gap between them as her blades swirled around her, occasionally being forced to use Needlepoint to dodge an arm. She didn't want to put too much stress on her blades this early in the fight. While they couldn't run out of power, their focus could waver and she would need them when claiming Voice at the end of this trial. She'd tested her plan on a small scale before, so she hoped she could do it when it counted.

Seeing that she was trying to get inside the hole she'd created, multiple angels swooped in to guard her advance. Michael, her great-grandfather, a swirling eye-strain of wings and beauty, led the charge. He was nearly as wide across his wingspan as Legion was and he cast shadows where Legion didn't. Shielded by the angels, she made it to the hole and slipped inside.

All aether from the outside was cut off from her senses as she landed on the squishy flesh. The last thing she remembered feeling from the fight beyond the walls of Legion's body was Dasus and Isaac's aether signatures working together. She hoped they were both alright and was glad she hadn't brought the Order.

"Welcome," she heard from deeper within. It echoed, but was muffled by the softness of the cavern walls. She started on the path towards it, and soon found a tunnel that was much smoother, less bloody, obviously created as a trap. Just to be safe she had all her blade spiral around her as a barrier of metal, floating rather than walking, cutting up the edges of the tunnel as she followed it. Her feet were stained with blood just from touching down briefly, but it didn't bother her. She'd

been in worse states.

She soon came upon a large chamber and the tunnel shut behind her. It was a perfectly spherical room with no exits, though she could clearly feel the direction she needed to go if she had to cut through the slick pink walls. It had a smell of corpses, sweet yet revolting.

“Here she comes,” said the voice. “Do you feel her?”

No response. Metatron—Legion—wasn’t speaking to her. He was speaking to Prochorus, trapped deep within his body. She wondered if Prochorus could sense her soul at all. Was he aware this entire time? She hoped he’d been sleeping, trapped completely, not seeing the death and destruction that Legion had wrought using his body as a conduit.

She started to cut her way through the wall when it opened a new tunnel. This made Narianel wonder whether Legion could feel physical pain, and by extension she worried about what was happening to Prochorus. It had always lingered in the back of her mind when she thought of Legion, when she had learned what he really was. What would be left of her ancestor when all this was done? Would he even survive the removal of Voice from his chest?

She followed the tunnel and noticed it curve away from Legion’s middle where she could feel his malevolent mind. She cut her own path, flaying away chunks and strips of meat until Legion opened a path on his own. He wasn’t going to escape a confrontation with such tricks.



Meanwhile, Isaac was actually having a lot of fun despite the dire circumstances. Aether flowed through his arms and out his hands as he quickly signed the symbols for fire, light, explosion, and then two quick shortcut symbols to set the distance. Bright blue flames detonated the limb of Legion, spilling corpses into the Aether Sea and causing the limb to retract into the sky.

Dasus had used Narianel's trick of bonding souls to share power with him and Isaac felt fantastic. He was holding far more aether within his core than he'd ever had before and noticed just how easily that transferred to his magic.

Two signs, fire and shield, then a wave of his hands to direct the flames allowed him to ward off a group of falling bodies that Legion had tried to dump on him and Dasus. He used the pressure of the heat to force them to the side and into the ocean of slightly-violet magic.

They stood on a platform of darkness made by Dasus, the Godly ancestor moving them around when needed. They were protecting the cannons, which were charging up for another shot at Legion, the demon blotting the sky like a red and pink mess.

"How are you doing?" asked Dasus when they had a moment. He had a determined look on his face, his eyes held narrow at the demon above, his three-pointed ears twitching in irritation. He had grey skin and long hair, half black and half white. The shakai he wore, in Narianel's colours, had lost some length in one of Legion's attacks, now more similar to the shawls that priests wore instead of letting it flow down his back like a cape.

Isaac signed the gesture for yes, left index finger up, thumb forward, each tip with just a dab of aether to make them stand out so Dasus didn't have to take his eyes from the battle and could just sense his soul.

"Good," said Dasus. "Warn me if you see anything that might actually cause us trouble. It looks like Legion is slowing down, though. I think Narianel is distracting him in there."

What Isaac signed next was sister-victory, but Dasus got his meaning and laughed.

"Yeah, she will. Don't worry."

Isaac went back to fighting. Fire, line, fifty steps. A beam of flame shot from his pointed finger and he directed it to of a limb that was about to crush a cannon. Legion withdrew the stump and the cut-off fell into the sea, bouncing off a piece

of the island where the cannons sat with a horrid red spray.

Still, it was hard to be down. In the distance he could see his father's flaming wings, and down where Legion had landed an attack on some lightspear shooters he could feel his mother's aether healing the survivors. And then up above was his sister and her soul was glorious. Even through the layers of flesh he could feel her intensity. She was going to free their ancestor, crafted son of Dasus, and there was nothing that could go wrong.



Narianel found another chamber that made her think she was inside some sort of giant heart. The walls expanded and then contracted in a deep bass rhythm that was sang to her. She could feel it in her soul and see it on those stretched red walls. She could see the bodies of Legion's victims more clearly here and they pulsed to the beat. She thought on it and realised what that movement was. It was Voice's part in the song. It was Legion singing, ready to be part of her choir. Each of her blades almost responded until she stopped them. She wasn't going to absorb any corruption here. Not yet.

Prochorus was directly above her, so she rose up through the heart and began to cut the walls when suddenly she was attacked by a pillar of flesh. It crashed into her blade barrier and soaked her head to toe in cold blood. It was thick and she scowled as she wiped it from her eyes.

"Go no farther." Legion's voice was all around her and in her head. "Prochorus has told me he doesn't want you dead. Don't make me upset him."

"You can't kill me," said Narianel.

"Oho?"

"You may have more raw power than me, your blade may amplify the words spoken in circles, but I am stronger than you. You are a demon and I am a God."

"A God? You? You are tiny and I cloud the sky! You are

a gnat that must be swatted!”

More pillar flew at her and she shrunk the sphere of spinning blades to protect herself better. There came a point where she was forced to turn her body to light and dismiss it from around her to shrink the sphere further, but the pillars slowed and she could hear Legion laughing. He was in for a bad surprise. He opened the tainted cage on her core.



Legion roared in pain, his voice shaking reality itself. Black seams appeared all around him in the blue sky, cracking out and down into the Aether Sea, tearing apart clouds and islands alike. But then Legion quieted and the islands came back together as the black lines disappeared. It didn't look like anyone was hurt, but Isaac wondered what could cause Legion to shriek like that.

“Narianel did something,” said Dasus. He was staring up towards where Narianel was and Isaac thought he sensed something in her.

He signed open, core, and corruption. She must have let out the bestial power within her. It was only faint at this distance, but the awe and horror and beauty were there.

“You should really sign in full sentences,” said Dasus, “but I get what you mean. She released that power. I can feel it, even from here.”

Isaac subtly signed sixteen, hands, one, word. Skrae sentences were too long to sign and people understood his shorthand. Or quickhand, as he'd taken to calling it in his head. He gently touched the cursed scar on his neck, which he did from time to time when he thought of Narianel. She'd heal him once she had all the blades. She'd break that curse and give him back his voice. He trusted her.

Isaac watched the vanguard take the opportunity and go on a full-on assault, cutting away the limbs that dangled and launching beams of light and flame and all sorts of other

magic into Legion's body. They were doing their best to do as much damage while Legion was stunned.

And then Legion jumped back to life and struck out.



Narianel spread her wings, cutting massive swathes of flesh from Legion. She spun her wings and plucked at the meat with her corrupted chains, her tendrils. He cried in pain as his mind fought back against Narianel's aura of radiance. She pushed out her blades and remade her body, this time staying aetherial and letting her shakai hang loose, tied to her neck as her only clothing.

"Metatron. I'm going to remove you from Prochorus's core and then trap you in mine. If you think you'll have this much freedom when I'm done with you, you can think again. I'll have you prostrating yourself on the ground, and you'll be happy when I push your face into the mud with my foot."

Legion thrashed wildly as she withdrew her wings and floated up. She carved tunnels as best she could, but they weren't straight. Not with Legion moving around like that. She wondered how the fight outside was going but she couldn't feel anything. She was sure Legion was deliberately trying to block out her senses.



Dasus and Isaac were separated as the platform shattered. Legion had gone from hundreds of arms to millions of thinner arms, and he was flailing them all over the place. Isaac flew and caught Dasus, then landed them on an empty island that had already taken a few hits. Narianel's power was growing by the second, her rage plain to see, even at this distance.

When Isaac took away his hands from Dasus, they were deep red and reeked of iron.



Narianel found Prochorus's chamber at the centre of Legion. He was preserved, looking no older than his mid-twenties. His hair was half-white and half-black, just like Dasus. In fact, despite looking like a human there was a lot of resemblance to his father. He was wearing a loose white robe that hung from his shoulders, but open enough for the shining black sword Voice to stick out from his chest.

On the wall behind Prochorus was a large form of flesh that looked like the torso and head of a skraeðan. Its features were delicate, but not gaunt with the curse. Legion opened his eyes to reveal a shining blue. Long white hair flowed from his head and framed Prochorus below him. His halo, despite being a heavy black metal ring, floated above his head.

"I won't let you have him. I won't let you remove me from his core."

"You don't have a choice."



"I'm not going to get to see Prochorus," said Dasus. There was a hole around core, revealing it to the world. It had severe cracks and Isaac thought about somehow getting him up to Narianel. She could fix this. She knew this kind of thing.

Go, up, fix. His signs were sloppy as his hands shook. But Dasus smiled and shook his head.

"I knew this would happen. I've talked with Vala at length. This is what I must do."

Dasus grabbed Isaac's hand and put it inside his chest, forcing Isaac to grab his core. It was warm, but its aether was surging in all directions at once, trying to break out. He was falling apart.

"As my sister Lunada gave to Galina, I now give to you. My power and strength and memories are yours. Your family's curse is the fault of my sister and her force of personality. It

broke Galina and it has trickled down to you and Narianel. So let's take it slowly. Absorb my strength a bit at a time. Let it become a part of you.

"I give Narianel my title as the God of Twilight and Balance. She needs it more than you. To you I confer upon you something far more important. You're going to know my secret and you're going to tell Narianel why she must carry the burden. I hope in death I can be forgiven because all this death is my fault."



Legion tried to crush her again, but Narianel was ready. She wrapped her wings around herself, and despite their thinness, their filmy and transparent appearance, they stopped more flesh pillars from hitting her.

Narianel floated up and looked Legion in the eyes. His face was as tall as she was, and through her wings she could see him frowning.

"It's time to sing," she said, then floated down to her ancestor while Legion launched more pillars at her. The world outside her cocoon had a red tint now. "Just a few minutes," she whispered, hoping Prochorus was still sane in there.

She opened her core to reality again, moving aside the plates of taint. Legion cried out in pain, but she ignored it. It was so loud that it shook her very being, but her focus was on another vibration. The loosed her wings, as Legion had stopped attacking, then turned her gravity towards Prochorus. She placed a foot either side of his chest then grabbed the hilt of Voice.

And then she began to sing with her blades.



The aether cannons fired and the gathered forces launched everything they had at Legion. He'd stopped regenerating and

stopped drawing up the corpses from the sea.

But Isaac was busy with Dasus and trying not to cry. He'd met Dasus a few times. He was like a weird uncle that really liked making swords. He was a God of Twilight and Balance. He couldn't die. That was absurd.

"Do you hear it?" Dasus asked.

Isaac looked up. Legion was singing the song that his sister was always humming when she wasn't focussed on anything. Then Narianel's voice broke through with the choir of her other blades. Her aura beat down on the armies and pulled out their corruption, cleansing their souls so she could take on their burden. A black streak flowed around Isaac's hand and up into the sky.

"I die pure. Don't cry for me Isaac. I'll always be with you now. I go with a smile on my face and the song I worked so hard on ringing in my ears. She'll do great, and so will you. When she breaks your curse, I want you to tell her I love her. I want you to tell Prochorus I'm sorry. And I want you to find your happiness when all this is over. Will you do that for me?"

With his free hand Isaac signed yes. His lips were tight and tears rolled down his face. The last of Dasus's core joined with his hand, passing up his arm and becoming one with his own. Isaac knew everything Dasus had known. History and magic and craft. And he knew the secret he'd taken to the grave. He had to tell Narianel and Prochorus. They deserved to know.

Dasus turned to dust, leaving behind only his clothes. Isaac put on his shakai.



Legion fell apart as she freed Voice from Prochorus's chest. The corpses weren't a part of his body and so fell apart, tumbling to the ocean of aether below. She had a flash of thought about how traumatic that was going to be for the people below, but it was gone when she was forced to swoop

and grab Prochorus from the air.

He was light, but intact. He opened his eyes and she saw the right eye was missing, replaced with a black gem covered in Skrae symbols. His left eye was brown, but she could see flickers of blue aether in there as he came around. When he was healthy she thought it would glow the ways her and Isaac's eyes glowed.

Isaac appeared, flying and shooing away falling bodies with bursts of aether and crafted flames. He was different and she could sense it immediately. Dasus was in there and Isaac was wearing his shakai.

"What happened?" she asked.

For once Isaac answered in full sentences. He told her that Dasus didn't make it, dying right at the end, and that he passed on his power and memories. And then he told her his secret. She noticed Prochorus's eyes grow wide as the signs appeared. "Dasus changed the plans of the Monochrome Alliance when making Prochorus's soul. He made him unable to complete the song. He had been forced to do this by Azael because Prochorus was never the one intended to sing." She nodded, but Prochorus's aether began to spasm. He was in a panic. Or maybe an existential crisis.

She made it to the ground, finding Vala waiting for them. Prochorus instantly fell to his knees. His hands shook and he couldn't seem to find his voice.

"Give him one year and twenty four days," said Vala. "I will talk to you both then. I expect to see you both in Nerik, on the Isle of Dusk, in the throne room of the Isle of Dawn. Don't be late."

Narianel and Isaac looked at each other than nodded to Vala. It had been a long day and she was too mentally taxed for an argument with someone who could perfectly predict everything she was about to say, but then she saw Chassuille watching her and she knew that she really could go for an argument right about now.

She marched over and Isaac tried to follow her but she

held out her hand to stop him. She could feel the worry in his soul, the fear pouring off him, but this was something she had to do. This couldn't be ignored. She stopped ten paces from him and met his eyes, trying to avoid looking at that false smile because it would only irritate her more.

"You could have stopped this when it happened!" she shouted. She now had the attention of every skraeðan at the battle and thousands of angels. Trillions of eyes pushed down on her, but she stood tall. "No one needed to die and you stood aside and did nothing!"

"We sealed Legio—"

"You prolonged the disaster! Metatron was afraid of the Aether Sea. You could have melted his body away and rescued Prochorus. No one needed to die. You could have acted but you're the worst god that mortals have. The other Grand Circle members are more useful than you when they don't interact, but you're actively harmful!"

"Careful. You are stepping close to making an enemy of me. You wouldn't want that."

"You may as well be on Azael's side for all the innocent lives you've wasted." This riled up the angels. She could feel them getting ready for battle. In the corner of her eye she saw Tesni and the other Eyes watching her. "Dasus is dead and so are many others who fought here today. How many angels were destroyed? How many reapers, or elves? How many have to die before you realise how stupid your actions have been? You are an unfit leader. You may have led the creation of this part of the universe, you may have created many souls directly, but we owe you no allegiance."

There was a rumbling above her and all around. The island felt so much smaller than it was when there were tens of thousands of powerful souls waiting for the command to destroy her. Curiously, she felt some of them waver. She didn't intend to convince any of them to fall, just shout at the idiot man for not doing enough, but there were a few that had been struck by her words, sharp as any blade.

“You’re a failure,” she continued, finding a little calm. “I denounce you as a god. You’ve wasted the faith and lives of countless people. All of this suffering is the result of your rebellion.”

“So...” Chassuille’s fixed smile vanished and his face went entirely blank. Soulless. She couldn’t read him at all, not even through the scent of his soul. He was truly empty. “It seems you’ve finally decided to join my father. Now that you have freed Prochorus from Legion, you are no longer needed.”

Chassuille raised his hand and the Aether Sea, all that liquid magic, that violet body of reality altering soulstuff, rose into the air above her. It poured into the sky and gathered in a ball, continually streaming in until he brought his arm down.



“Are you ready?” she asked. Every blade was in attendance, even those she normally kept chained below. There was a sort of disbelief in the air. “I asked if you were ready!”

And in unison, all fifty three of her blades shouted “Yes!” Some were more excited than others. Some were utterly terrified. Metatron stood, thin and only a little taller than her, demure and frail, and he nodded.



The first thing she did was use Elemental to overlay Purity’s elemental signature over herself temporarily instead of a more permanent change. If she was going to fight pure aether then she’d need to have some sort of basic defence against its corrosive touch. Next she called Mistedge to hand in a flash of silver and channelled Ballade to create a bubble of anti-magic around herself. Then she channelled a multitude of blades that could enhance her abilities. Havoc, Malice, Flameroot, Perception, Flight, Oracle, Gungnir, Fogbody, Opera, Dance. And then, when she used Voice for the first time, Metatron,

everything expanded within her. His was the power to enhance the words of others, and every blade she called on was singing louder and more clearly than ever before. This was the power that would spread her song across the entire universe.

All of that in the blink of an eye, Chassuille finished lowering his hand and the Aether Sea crashed down on her. It hit Ballade's barrier, which managed to hold with Voice's power backing it up. It wobbled around her, but she stood firm. Occasionally the stream would break and she'd make eye contact with Chassuille. She'd show no fear, and it helped that she had Ballet in her reserve.

Dance's power shook within her, the demon Nergal seeing the chance to strike at the Grand Lord. She soothed him in her mind. Patience. His power was similar to Fang's, causing her attacks to spread and deal more damage to whatever she struck, but unlike Fang's slicing of the universe, Dance's power caused collateral damage that didn't just slowly fix itself if left alone.

When the aether stopped flowing around her she saw that the angels and other forces had spread out, backing away from the fight. Even the other skraeðan had moved away from Chassuille. Was that fear in Mao's aura? If he perfectly knew the future, what did he have to be afraid of? Did he not see this coming?

"We are very different people," said Narianel. "I always confirm that my enemies are followers of Azael before I kill them. You just make things up as you go along. Pathetic. I can assure you that I'm no follower of Azael, not any more than you are. You just wish I was so you can justify your villainous behaviour."

"You speak in theatrics. You are the villain here." The Grand Lord's blank face was unnerving, but she held herself. "Do you intend to fight me here, today?"

"I intend only to defend myself," she said. She brought Mistedge back into herself, but didn't dare get rid of Ballade's barrier. "I just wanted you to know that you're a failure."

She was still covered in blood, her shakai hung heavy behind her, tugging on her neck and trailing on the floor, and she felt so small compared to everything that was around her. But she was a God that none of them could match. Balance and Nothing. Purity and Corruption and Divine Rage. But she would keep her cool this time. She wasn't going to attack unless she was forced to. She'd had so few moral victories in her life, but she was determined for this to be one of them.

She held her hands up to her chest, palms facing out towards Chassuille. She touched thumb to thumb, index to index, the other fingers straight and together. She framed her soul's core in the Empty Diamond, a blasphemy beyond any other.

"This is my symbol now. I think maybe it always has been and Azael was just holding it for me. I am the Goddess of Nothing. The destruction at the end of time. The Great Beyond calls to me as it does to Azael, but in the end he will not be the one holding my hilt. I am the Blade of the Infinite and I will strike him down."

She felt a stir in the souls of the angels. There was a lot of anger, a lot of confusion, a lot of sorrow. Mao and the rest of the Grand Circle tried to keep stony faces but their worry showed through as they looked back and forth between her and Chassuille.

"The time for gods is long gone, I think," she said. She didn't lower hands. "Gather what forces you can as mere kings and queens of Sonta, and we on the outside will do the same. I believe Azael will arrive when I've performed the song of the blades. He's waiting. It won't take long for me to gather them so you should be ready. Get your cannons fuelled by the souls of the dead ready. Get your followers armed and armoured. Get the Grand Gate defended because he's going to want a fitting entrance."

She opened the plates of corruption around her soul and continued, her intent pushed out and caused awe and dread amongst the army, her words carrying hard on the air

and weaving into their minds.

“I put a call out to all mortals.” Her voice carrying on her aura as it spread, enhanced by Voice, tearing open seams in the universe and creeping into Avani and Sonta. The whole of reality would hear her words. “You need not shackle yourselves to gods. You are free. The skraeðan have failed you. They have used you in their games, traded your souls as coin, and sent you to die needlessly. Those that still wish to stay faithful, I will not judge you, just know that you need not struggle. You need not be used. You can live for yourself and your family and your community.

“When the time comes to battle Azael, father of the Grand Lord Chassuille, we must be ready. We must stand together as a whole instead of letting ourselves be put under skraeðan rule. The end is coming, but we must be strong, not in chains. I reject the gods.

“Soon I will venture out to collect the divine blades, which will let me sing the song that will cure all illnesses. I ask your aid in this. If you hold one of my blades when I come for it, I request a peaceful surrender of it into my care. For the rest of you, just stay out of my way.

“The end is coming. Azael is almost ready. We must all fight or we will die.”

She closed the plates around her core and shuddered. She’d never held so much power at once. She looked around and it seemed only Chassuille was unmoved by her words. Everyone else was stunned or recovering. She finally dropped her arms to her sides.

“You bend reality well, but you have proven yourself an enemy. I must destroy you now before you cause problems in the future. All angels! Attack!”

But none of them acted. They were watching carefully. They didn’t know what to think and it was obvious in those trillions of eyes, wide and flicking between her and Chassuille.

“Do you all deny me too?” asked Chassuille.

“I don’t think they do,” said Narianel. “I think they

want to see you act. I have called you lazy and ineffective, and they want to know if you are worthy of their worship. You created them and you command them, but you neglect them just as much as you do the mortals. Do not blame them for doubt when you've yet to prove yourself. If you want me dead, you have to do it yourself."

"So be it," said Chassuille.

The Aether Sea rose and the angels swooped down to help the other gods leave the area. Chassuille didn't wait and almost struck down several of his own allies and followers as the mass of violet aether condensed and converged on Narianel. It struck Ballade's shield and she she readied herself. She was about to do something incredibly dangerous and it made her nervous.

"Lend me your power, but give me control," she said, her eyes closed as Ballet appeared in her hand. She felt a pulse of Berin's soul within the blade in ascent, so she felt it was safe to enact her fail-safe strategy. She knew Iblis would stop Berin if he tried for control. They'd practised forcing her into a position of power with Kali and Zepar, though Berin would likely cause more trouble if he turned on her.

She turned Ballet, a thin sword whose blade was a matte grey, so unlike her other black or white blades, and stuck it into her chest. In the brief moment before it entered her core she saw Chassuille's face through the stream, a blank mask on the coreless god.

She floated in the darkness, seeing Berin in front of her. Ballet had pierced her core, and in that moment they had become one. He was tall with broad shoulders. He'd shaved his head bald and his eyes were an empty black. He wore the uniform of the blades with her two-tone red shakai. He held out his hand and she took it.

Back in reality she felt all of her blades stop working on her and Ballade's barrier vanish. The force of the Aether Sea hit her but it was as if she were standing in a breezy day. It was nothing. All that power was wasted on her.

When it stopped and she stood facing Chassuille, she could see how damaged the island was. It would fall apart if Chassuille tried something like that again. She looked at her hands and everything felt so empty. Her aether wasn't flowing properly and she felt heavy.

She tried to speak and found that her voice didn't work. In fact, it felt as if her body was shutting down. She grabbed Ballet and pulled it from her chest, feeling aether rush back into her as Berin's influence left her. Becoming null like Berin was incompatible with her body, and as her aetheriad restarted in her chest and the light of the sky refilled her supply of aether she knew she'd have to save that only for emergencies. She found it hard to believe that being null for less than half a minute had nearly emptied her entirely.

All her channelled blades returned to her and she took the fight to Chassuille. She used her in-born ability to fly to make herself light then released a burst of aether behind her to launch at the Grand Lord, using Flight's power to make sure she was on target. She crashed into him and they both tumbled to the ground. She forced out Ballade's barrier again just in time to not be washed away by the Sea. They both stood, though he was sluggish and unprepared for a physical fight. He was more frail than she thought, seeing him get up like that. He must be barely able to stand.

"It looks like the Bell of Betrayal really took a toll on you," said Narianel. A wry grin crossed her face before she managed to control her features.

"You're funny," said Chassuille. "If I still had emotions I think I maybe would have laughed. It's been around twelve thousand, eight hundred years, but I remember what that felt like so clearly."

He pulled off his shawl and loose long-sleeved top, and what Narianel saw made her cringe a little inside. She'd made her own body lithe but powerful, but Chassuille was truly skeletal. It wasn't just his face that was gaunt, his whole body was skin stretched across bone. Her skeletal structure was

similar, and she could see his rib plates and bone cuffs at his wrists. His abdomen was empty, with almost no muscle and his spine almost visible from the front.

"This is what you'd side with?" he asked.

"I'm not siding with Azael just because I'm not siding with you. There will be a battle line and we will be allies then, but I refuse to treat you as special any longer. I will not place myself under you. You will submit or be destroyed. I do not trust you, and with Prochorus freed I no longer need you. You are too big a threat to be off your leash."

"Then as you said: so be it."

Chassuille waved his hand and the island was covered in tiny points of light. They were mines, as she discovered when she shifted and one exploded. She was thrown around, bouncing from explosion to explosion. When she finally stopped she was on the ground near the edge of the island, far away from Chassuille.

She knew he was aligned to light aether, so it was just a matter of predicting what he could do with the element. Despite being aligned to it herself, she had very little practice with it, having no one to teach her and having little interest in experimenting for herself.

Chassuille launched a spear made of light from the palm of her hand and she tried to dodge it, but it caught her in the shoulder and was as sharp as any blade. Solid light. That hadn't occurred to her. She was expecting energy that could be deflected or blocked with anti-magic, not something so physical it could cut her.

She pulled out the spear and charged in, dodging between new mines that were appearing in the air. She noticed them high above in case she tried to fly, so he succeeded in grounding her. She didn't want to be in the sky if they hit her. They were somehow getting past Ballade too, and that just showed how strong a mage she was fighting.

She set off and evaded the blasts of a few mines as she closed the distance, and as Havoc appeared in her hand and

she swung at him a barrier of solid light blocked her. As she rebounded the shield grew into a massive hexagon and pushed her back into several mines. The stung more than hurt and she thought they were only meant to distract her.

She was pushed straight off the island and over the Aether Sea, which shot upwards and hit Ballade's barrier, pushing her higher and higher. She managed to escape with a sideways aether burst and made her way back to Chassuille, doing her best to avoid the mines. More spears flew at her and she dodged, but each time closer and closer to the mines. One spear she could only dodge by tilting her head and letting it cut through her cheekbone and ear. She was forced to let her healing do its job and waste aether instead of being thrown around by the mines again and again.

When she reached him she had a different plan. She let Dance do its job and Nergal screamed with delight from within her. She punched a barrier of light as hard as she could. The force of Dance and her own aether blast shattered the barrier along with her right arm. It would heal. It didn't matter.

She struck Chassuille in the face with with her left and he vanished. An illusion? Another aspect of light magic she'd not considered, but then remembered her fight with Lucifer. Illusions that made use of both light and dark, those that existed in the twilight, were much more convincing and could be made almost real, tangible. But a trick of the light that would vanish quickly was entirely possible, as Chassuille had shown.

Thousands of Chassuilles appeared all around her, and what worried her most was how he was fooling her eyes. They all looked real. She could see folds in space, but not through this? She was learning much about her own failings and her weaknesses. Her arm was almost healed, and she got to work trying to figure out which one was real. The moment she activated Perception again she noticed they were all surrounded by an odd aura. These illusions were better than any that Lucifer had made. His had collapsed under the gaze of

Absel, but they had to have a weakness.

“Any ideas?” she muttered, and both Vera and Zezbeth answered. Truth and Deception combined their powers with Perceptions and her vision changed substantially. The world around her changed to three colours: black, white, and violet. Everything that was real was solid white, everything that was fake was solid black, and souls were highlighted in violet. It was jarring and everything looked flat and textureless. She couldn’t judge distance or the curve of the land below her, and she couldn’t tell the difference between the island and sea. But she *could* see Chassuille, standing off towards the edge of the island, staring up at her.

Her vision returned to normal and she shot down at Chassuille, but something caught her ear. In the distance she heard Prochorus singing the song that was eternally in her head. She stopped in the air, halting her movement with a burst of aether and some control over air and gravity, and she looked at him. He was sat cross-legged with Vala at his side, and he seemed far more aware now. His back was straight, his head was high, and his voice reached her.

Within her chest the blades he had made vibrated, but the ones she had forged herself were silent. Her soul softened and she lowered herself to the ground. Looking at her hands she realised she was still covered in Legions blood, so she willed it off her by swinging out her arms. The grass around her was stained red, but her form was white again, her hair was black.

The singing gave her a sense of peace. She didn’t know why it worked that way, but for once in her life there was no rage, no hatred, no feeling of impending danger. And she found that she was empty. There was nothing beyond the curse inherited from Galina. Her love for Adela and her family was still there, but it was muted. Her joy and fear and sorrow were all missing entirely. The rage of the Lunar Beast was who she was now.

She looked to Chassuille. He was waiting for her, the air

around him covered in mines and barriers and spears, all made of light and bright enough to wash out the green of the grass beneath him and the blue of the sky behind him. His face was as blank as her heart, his violet skin almost as pale as her form. He touched the missing tip of his left ear and she thought he was considering what she would do next.

And she knew what to do.

She disabled all her blades and let Prochorus's song engulf her. In a display of her own personal power, she advanced on Chassuille. The spears and mines began to fly but she was quick. She danced around each attack, each step in time with the music. She dodged with swoops and swirls, truly embracing her style of fighting.

Prochorus stopped singing and the rage returned, but she kept her peace as she continued singing in his place. She turned the song inwards, keeping the blades inside, feeling the vibration of her soul. She became faster, dipping under a spear and vaulting past a mine, using its explosion to propel herself past several others. She was running and leaping, prancing through every attack Chassuille could muster.

She drew back her fist, dashed past one final spear, and perfectly controlling her rage and power she punched Chassuille directly in the hole in his chest. It was the weakest punch she'd ever thrown. She didn't even release a burst of aether. She looked Chassuille in the eyes, pulled back her fist, stood up straight, and walked away.

"Is that it?" asked Chassuille to her back.

"I've proven my point."

She opened a portal to Avani, still a little unpractised and ending up several miles from Seremont. She took one last look back at Chassuille before stepping through. His false smile returned, but in the distance she saw the start of a new revolution. Angels were falling, their brilliant shining wings turning grey.

Back in Seremont she found people waiting for her in the streets, wearing the two-toned red and darker red shakai

and holding the Empty Diamond to her in the sky. She spread her wings for them and embraced her divinity.

The day after the battle with Legion, Narianel walked the streets of Seremont, hearing what the people had to say. Most of them were praising her too much to be useful, but those critical of her offered worthwhile insight. They thought her to be too egotistical, not a god at all. She listened, and they found that unnerving.

Of course, if she hadn't listened to them then she'd be no better than Chassuille. She stayed as calm as possible, let them finish and never attacked them. She wanted them to know that despite her divine status she was there for them, even if they thought she was their enemy. She was, at her very core, more aligned with mortals and their struggles than she was with playing games with other gods.

"Balance is the key to all things," she told one man when he asked her why she would bother with those who insulted her. "Only through balance of the soul can we find the right time to unleash the rage. I let them get it off their chests, and hopefully, in time, they begin to understand."

She learned through talking with Royan the previous night that everyone had been psychically shown her fight with Chassuille, and the people of Seremont she met confirmed how widespread it was. Many talked about Chassuille's cut ear and empty chest, asking so many questions that she answered honestly.

"He lost the tip of his ear in the Vampiric Rebellion," she would say. "My ancestor Vinsent Kewaen took part in that fight and was executed as a result. It seems we are similar at first, but I must admit that Vinsent's goals were destruction, not the building of a new hope in the battle to come."

She would also explain Chassuille's origin, and many people did not expect or accept the story she told. She'd learnt it long ago from Dasus, and she didn't think he'd lie to her.

"In the beginning there was a single word. It was *azael*. It means origin. From that word the universe came to be. Into

the universe appeared the first gods. They called themselves skraeðan, people of the word. The first of those gods was the one we now call Azael, who took the first word as his name.

“The gods then began to create, and many of them created a new generation of gods. They made their children directly, but gave them the ability to procreate without magic. These gods numbered in the millions, and many of them are the gods who live in Sonta today.

“Azael himself made five children. Chassuille was his first. Then came Miasal, who fought and died for Azael at the Battle of the Grand Gate. Then he made a duality of gods, the twins Seran and Nareshilna. And finally he made Aramis.

“To keep the new gods in control, Azael created the Bell of Betrayal. It would be rung if any of them turned against his rule, and they would be inflicted with a terrible curse. Its curse would ravage their body and take away their gifted ability to reproduce.

“When Chassuille wanted to create his own world, one that was in his control instead of his father’s, Azael denied him and destroyed his initial attempt. So, in secret, Chassuille raised a revolution, a rebellion, and his support grew wide. Then came the uprising, and the Bell was rung. The gods you see as gaunt and skeletal are that way because of the Bell, and the women who had been with child lost them in an instant.”

She thought of Aia when she told that part of the story. She and Chassuille had been in love, and she had been pregnant. Her body had hollowed out and she lost that child, and Narianel thought she’d forgive any mistreatment of herself by Aia. She’d been through a great pain that Narianel wasn’t sure she’d be able to cope with, if she had ever been able to carry a child in the first place.

“The gods you see who are not gaunt, like Nareshilna and Faret, joined the rebellion after seeing the effects of the Bell.” How could a man do that to a people, they would say. How can a father do that to his children? “But before the Bell could be rung again, everyone escaped.

“Chassuille and the other members of the Grand Circle created Sonta, and sealed it away behind the Grand Gate. From there they made the Void and the Aether Sea and all the various worlds that existed before the Ruination, and finally Avani where we live.”

“But what about the hole in Chassuille’s chest?” they would always ask her.

“After the Bell was rung, Chassuille fought Azael and lost, only escaping thanks to some more skraeðanee turning against Azael. During that battle, Azael tore out Chassuille’s core. The Grand Lord is now emotionless. A great mind with no empathy. He knows we are suffering but doesn’t care. He is driven only by the logic that Azael must be destroyed at any cost to save what he has created.”

People were dumbfounded by this. It contradicted the priests saying that Chassuille cares about his creation and everyone born within. It made his position as the leader of the gods questionable at best.

“My hope,” she would go on to say, “is that I can restore his soul with my song and that in the final battle we will have a strong ally. Possibly an actual leader. I don’t hate him, not really. I just hate how mismanaged his empire is, and how everyone goes along with it just because he’s the most powerful of the gods. The skraeðanee only respect power, it seems. Even though he had the power to end me in our fight, he lacked the skill and creativity with his magic, and he has no ability with hand-to-hand combat due to the Bell’s curse.”

That helped give the people hope. It turned what could have been an outright riot against the Temple of Chassuille into thoughtful contemplation. She didn’t want more blood on the streets of Seremont, she wanted people to actually think about those they follow. She wanted the truth. She wanted balance.



It was late in the day when Valeska Ogden arrived in the compound, led to Narianel's presence by Royan as if she were royalty. The Order often treated her that way, since the battle in the city. The members that had been around the longest had known Adela well. She'd given many of them tattoos. She'd brought them snacks when they trained with Narianel, and she'd trained some of them to fly. So, of course, Adela's mother was treated with a deal of reverence for their lost unofficial member.

Valeska had visibly aged since the battle. Or, perhaps, she'd stopped trying to hide her age. She was fifty-nine, having had Adela when she was twenty, getting married in her late teens after only a few months of courting from Drederick "Oggy" Ogden. Her hair had gone completely grey and it gave her an elegant look, and wrinkles were showing that hadn't been there before. There were potions and creams that could hide that sort of thing, and Narianel believed Valeska had been using them most of her life, but now that her husband and only daughter were gone she had given up.

She wore a modestly cut dress, which was also new. It was black and sleeveless, but she wore a white top under it. She also wore a two-toned shakai. She was wearing Narianel's colours.

"Sit," said Narianel, gesturing to an empty chair. They were in the library of her manor. It had a large table that was normally covered in maps, but right now it held dozens of books on theology and philosophy. Narianel was trying to catch up on decades of learning, not that she felt she'd reached the peak of her power without gathering more blades. Now was the time to round out the gaps in her knowledge and sharpen her mind instead of delving into military history and tactics, as was her wont.

"I'm ready to see it," said Valeska. She sat slowly. She probably had some sort of back pain. Her hands were shaking a little, and Narianel couldn't tell if that was a developing issue or just nerves. Valeska didn't meet her eyes, instead she

studied the room and the books Narianel had been reading.

“Are you sure?” Narianel put down a copy of *The Light Theocracy*, which was about the origin of the Temple of Eyes that was buried beneath Seremont. She looked at Valeska.

“I am.” Valeska finally looked at her. She clutched her shakai, as if embarrassed for wearing it and spreading them throughout the city. It was wrapped about her shoulders in the proper Nerikan way, so Valeska must have been studying Nerikan fashion and tradition, which wasn’t a surprise for the master seamstress.

Narianel turned her chair to face Valeska directly and held Valeska’s hands. She turned them palm-up, then held her own hands over them. There was a soft flash of silver light and Nocturne dropped into Valeska’s grasp. It was a straight-edged black metal sword so dark it didn’t reflect light at all. It had no crossguard and a round pommel with a chip in it. This was the blade made from Egil, the man that had killed Adela.

“What do you know of this man?” asked Valeska.

“I know everything,” said Narianel. “Most of my blades hold onto most of their memories, not showing me anything they want to keep secret. Egil shared everything with me. He was a broken man. Deeply damaged. Another time, another place, I think we would have been friends, but he choose to destroy. He chose to eat souls. He chose Azael over the rest of reality. But he didn’t have much choice. It was that or face destruction himself, and he was in such a bad state when Azael came to him that he felt it was his only way to be saved.”

“Start at the beginning,” said Valeska. Her fingers held Nocturne tight.

And so Narianel told Egil’s story to Valeska. She started with his origin as a foreign orphan abandoned in Nerik, being adopted as a playmate of Jela Gaimel, and then being lost in the Temporal Collapse of Nerik. Narianel spoke the secrets of the World Graveyard, though Valeska failed to understand what the place truly was, and she spoke of how Egil was trapped there until the end of time when Azael arrived to save

him. She told of Egil being given the power to travel through time and how he was given missions to adjust the flow of history. She told Valeska of her talks with Egil, and how she had sensed that he was a lost soul on a path he couldn't leave. And then, finally, she told the story of the Battle of Seremont and the battle on Av Ajir's border with Tor Hadiin.

At the end of her story Valeska was crying. Nocturne had returned to rest within Narianel, who was comforting the woman as best she could.

"I understand if you hate me for saying it, but I can't bring myself to hate Egil." Narianel's profound emptiness seemed to subside within her for a moment as tears fell from her eyes. "He's just like me. A broken soul on a path to the end of existence. He was just on the other side. Adela was just Azael's next target to harm me, and Egil was the weapon used to deal that blow. If it wasn't for me, Adela may have been alive right now."

"You can't blame yourself," said Valeska. She cleared her throat and found some strength for her voice. "Azael has been doing this to the universe since before we were born. You were not the first he's tried to use. Your loved ones are not the first to be killed by him and his forces. I think you're probably right about Egil, but I can't forgive him."

"Don't get me wrong," said Narianel. "I don't have it in me to hate him, but I also haven't forgiven him. In my mind he follows my every command. He is remorseful and broken so completely that he has become like a placid dog. I will make sure he works to correct the damage he's done, fight against Azael himself if it comes to it, until the disgust I feel for him turns to true pity. But right now, when I look at him all I can think of is Adela and how she died smiling, knowing that it was her time. I've already shouted at my ancestor Vala because of it. That conversation left me feeling bitter."

"Do you think I could speak to Vala?" asked Valeska.

"I'll write a letter and you can take it to Nerik when you are ready. She's currently taking care of Prochorus after the

defeat of Legion, so you may want to wait a while. She's been through a lot recently too."

"I understand. It's getting late. Thank you for talking with me, Narianel."

"I expected you to still call me Beatrix."

"From what I've seen, that name died with Adela, along with everything that made you human. Am I wrong?"

"Not at all." Narianel stood and helped Valeska stand.

"I am High Lady Narianel Azranhai, Goddess of Balance and Twilight, and Nothing. Beatrix Blackwood was returned to the sky with Adela's ashes."

"Are you going to stop Azael?" asked Valeska.

"I have a plan, and a backup plan," said Narianel. "I just hope that either of them work."



Reading deep into the night, Narianel thought on the end of the universe. Her first plan was for the final battle, how it would play out, and the pieces that would be in play. She just hoped it was enough, as her backup plan was so much worse. It would mean the end of reality altogether, just to stop Azael from doing something more than just end this world.

A strange vehicle arrived outside Seremont early in the morning, and Narianel sat on top of Adela's tower, looking north over the city to watch it. It was a massive balloon with propellers, the cabins and controls being under the balloon. It was a non-magical airship, and it made her think that maybe she should start looking more into science that isn't her own biology.

A large flag was tied to the side of the airship, across the balloon, that had a blue background with a gold and green gryphon at its centre. She'd never seen that flag before, and because it had come from the north she assumed it came from outside where the old Torrent barrier had been. The local kingdoms were more magically advanced than the outside, she knew that, but there was so much more to learn of those foreign countries they were only just getting to know, not just their grasp of technology.

From the shadows she watched as the newcomers walked through the town, led by some guards, towards the government buildings. They wore suits with long tails and strange conical hats. One of them was old and leaning on a cane, but she saw there was an enchanted blade hidden within it just by the shape of the aether she sensed. Several of them were armed with firearms that didn't seem like the flintlocks she'd seen before. They held little shells that that were loaded through the handle to be shot one at a time. Some of them also had rifled muskets that loaded in a similar way in the barrel. It was all so curious.

The man at the front of the group was obviously the most important. He had metal pins on the front of his coat, some of them depicting swords or flags which made her think they were military medals. He was older than her, maybe in his mid-fifties, and he had the hardened look that only came from a lifetime of war. And what attracted her eye the most was the sword on his back. It was one of hers.

She sat in the shadows outside the window of the government buildings once they arrived and listened to the conversations inside. Milton Hughes, the king's representative in Seremont, was talking using a translation crystal, and the leader of the foreign group had one too. This was common in diplomacy, so each would hear the other's intent in their own tongue. Milton was a small man with a snooty voice, and she'd thought about hitting him each time they'd met in the past. By using Tongue, Narianel understood them both.

"I have to warn you," Milton was saying, "that what you propose might get you killed. That's not a threat from me or this government, but that you'll be dealing with someone who is incredibly unstable."

"I am well aware," said the foreigner, "and I am ready. We take no issues with Vin, and our trade of knowledge with your nation has been profitable for us both, but Seremont is no longer Vinish territory, is it?"

"We like to believe that it is," said Milton. By his tone Narianel thought he didn't actually believe it. They had to be talking about her. Unstable, was she? That might be true, but she'd make him regret those words.

"Our intent is only peace," said the foreigner.

With that she slipped away. She knew what was coming. They were going to bribe her with the sword to keep her from their country. She waited at the memorial statue in the King's Park, until eventually she saw the party coming her way. She excused herself from the few people who had come to talk to her and approached the group of foreigners being led by government officials. Milton was with them, and he did his best to bow and smile, but she could feel the fear in his soul. Those who didn't love her feared her, and a few were confused by the whole situation. She liked that last group the most.

"High Lady Lifesong," said Milton. "This is Octavio Cortez, Lord General for King Flarius Han IV of Sara De Han. It's a nation far to the north of Vin, across the ocean and beyond the old Torrent boundary."

“I see you have one of my blades,” she said. Octavio wasn’t impressed, but rather frowned deeper than he already had been.

“You speak Hanean?” he asked.

She summoned Tongue to her hand and leaned on the handle with the tip of the long wavered blade touching the ground next to her foot. “I have many talents, but languages is not one of them, natively. This sword magically translates for me, both what I speak and what I hear. There are several blades made by my ancestor that should be in my collection but were scattered before and during the Ruination. So I say again: I see you have one of my blades.”

“I am here to deal with you on behalf of King Flarius Han IV, not to be talked to with disrespect.”

“I have no love of kings who won’t meet with me directly,” she said. “But I will deal with you.”

“Perhaps we can do it somewhere more private?” asked Octavio. She followed his gaze to the group of people that were watching. Several of them wore a shakai.

“I have nothing to hide,” she said. “Do you?”

Octavio stared at her in what should have been an uncomfortable silence, but she had patience for this sort of thing. She had stared down gods, so one stern man was easily handled. He broke first and sighed.

“I am to give you the blade if you agree to fight on our side in a war that is currently building on our border. We have heard that you and your Order of Blades have fought for Av Ajir and Itore Luca in recent years. We have hope that you would do the same for us.”

“That depends on why there is fighting,” said Narianel. “What did you do to provoke an attack? Or are you the ones attacking? In Av Ajir we fought against followers of Azael. In Itore Luca we quelled a group of rebels who had taken to burning people alive who disagreed with their methods and beliefs. Both times we fought for the innocent.”

“It’s not what we did, but what you did. Your spat with

the Grand Lord and declaration of freedom from the Gods has produced troubles. King Flarius Han IV spoke in favour of you, and stated that we should be free from the shackles of the Gods in Sonta. He said we should be preparing for war against Pure Lord Azael. Our neighbour to the west, Porvallis, took umbrage with this. They are devout to the Grand Lord.”

“So you blame me for your war?” she asked.

Octavio shook his head. “No, our people responded well to your message. Our king thinks you speak sense in the face of hard tradition. But he also feels our forces are wasted fighting Provallis when they could be used against the Pure Lord.”

“You keep calling him that. Why do you keep giving Azael respect?”

“Respect for an enemy is needed when facing them. It is to take him seriously, not because he is loved.”

“I don’t like it,” said Narianel. “That man deserves no respect. He has the power to nurture us all, but chooses to destroy. Many think me a monster, but at least I fight to protect, even when my methods are extreme.

“I will come to your aid, Octavio Cortez, but I don’t know if the Order will come with me. I don’t command them any more, though they do still heed my words the majority of the time.”

“I will await more information on my ships,” said Octavio. He took the sword from his back and presented it to her hilt-first. “I was told that if you said you would come to trust that you would and to give you this. It has been in the royal family since being found in the Ruination, given to our first king by a dying angel.”

She drew the blade and was pleased to see it was the fallen angel Hadraniel, the blade Nightstrike. It was the dark elemental blade, enhancing users of shadow magic. Despite fallen angels normally being turned into white blades, it seemed Prochorus had decided to make this one from a black metal. The sword had a longer blade that would need two hands to wield properly, and a single edge that came to a dual-

pronged point.

She pulled it into herself and took a brief trip into her mindscape to greet her new ally, then returned to reality as if nothing had happened in that split second and nodded to Ocatavio.

"I'll be with you when I can. Before the end of the day. I just need to speak with Commander Royan of the Order of Blades before I can say whether or not they'll be joining us."

She let out two of her wings, one white and one black. Previously she would have chosen both to be black, but she'd become the Goddess of Balance and Twilight. She had an image to maintain. They were so thin they were nearly transparent, her feathers wisps of film that distorted the air behind her. With one stroke of her wings she shot into the sky and made her way to her estate.

As she flew she thought about Nightstrike and her battle against Chassuille. Perhaps it was time to start learning to weave light and dark together to make twilight magic. She didn't even know much about light magic, but she thought she might be able to replicate what Chassuille had shown her, and then she could think on her battle with Lucifer to create realistic illusions.

She remembered when she had stayed with Dasus briefly that he'd shown her a white light that cast shadow instead of brightness. That felt like a lifetime ago, now. He had shown her a lot of little tricks like that, seemingly trying to impress her, but perhaps he'd instead been preparing her, showing her the basics that she could learn and practice when the time was right.

When she landed she quickly found Royan, who had been training some of the newer recruits. He liked to get dirty with the new warriors, help them get used to the training and show them how it's done. That day he was only dirty to the knees, so he probably hadn't been wrestling.

"Do you have any interest in joining a border war?" she asked. She manifested Nightstrike in her hands. "I've been

paid quite well to go myself, but I won't make demands of you and the Order."

"I can only pledge about ninety right now," said Royan. She handed him the blade and he gave it a few swings. "If you give me three days I can have all five hundred ready to be brought to battle through the portals."

"I can do that," said Narianel. "This situation is quite delicate, however, and I want to try diplomacy first." Royan gave her a look. Raised eyebrow, smirk, extremely still soul so she couldn't read him. "Don't do that. I can do peaceful."

"I believe you," said Royan, handing her back the blade. "Thousands wouldn't."

She let herself smile at that and he laughed. "I'm going to try. The enemy is group dedicated to Chassuille, so if I can bring them about peacefully, even in disagreement, I might be able to get them agree to fight Azael instead. It's not ideal, but I have to try it or else be a hypocrite."

"If they are devoted to Chassuille, maybe you could try talking to the Eyes," said Royan.

"We're not on the best of terms right now, I would think." Narianel hadn't spoken to any of them since the battle against Legion half a year ago. She didn't actually know where she stood with them. "I can go speak with Tesni."

They said their goodbyes and she left as Royan got to work readying his army. She strolled over to the Temple of Chassuille, hoping to delay her talk with Tesni for as long as possible. She felt like she was heading to a battle where she wouldn't be able to stab her opponent, a war of words, and she knew she wasn't good at that. She could forcefully state her beliefs, and somehow that moved people, but when it came to arguments she'd rather use her fists than talk it out. Still, this had to be done.

She reached the Temple of Chassuille shortly, and many people watched her enter, worried that she was going to cause trouble. She had no such intention, of course, but that sort of thing seemed to be out of her hands. Any interaction

could end up as a fight, in her experience.

The Hierophant approached her with a sour face and she held up her hand to stop him from talking. With a level glare passing between them she walked past him to the doors leading down to the Eyes of Chassuille. There were guards at the doors that had never been there before, but she used Fogbody to pass right by them as mist, crawling through the cracks to get to the stairs beyond.

She walked down. She didn't feel like practising her intangibility and was using the time to figure out what words she'd use. She stopped after a minute to calm herself. A little meditation to calm to boiling ocean of rage in her chest. When she opened her eyes and thought to continue down the steps, she realised Tesni was right in front of her, watching her with a curious grin and a cocked head.

"How often do you do that?" she asked. "I felt you stop walking as I was coming up to meet you."

"Too often," said Narianel. "I need to occasionally quell the rage. It feels like it's all that's left in me, some days. I've come to ask your help."

"Now there's the real surprise," said Tesni. She had her old playful smile again. "How can I help?"

"I didn't think it would be that easy." Narianel started to pay attention to the aether around her again, noting that there were more guards above now. "Turns out a war has started over my speech against the Grand Lord. A nation spoke in favour of me when neighboured by a country of Chassuille's most loyal followers. I'm going to stop the war, and I want to do it with as little bloodshed as possible."

"That doesn't sound like you at all," said Tesni. "Where is the fire and the lust for destruction?"

"I was speaking the truth when I said we should stand together against Azael. There is no point in wasting soldiers now, before it all begins."

"I know."

Narianel looked away from Tesni's eyes. Adela's voice

filled her mind, telling her to move on and find a new life, but she couldn't. The end was coming and she couldn't put herself through that all over again. Not when it would be destroyed just as easily as last time.

"Have you been to Sara De Han or Provallis? Those are the two nations involved." She couldn't say any more.

"I've been to Provallis, yes," said Tesni. She nodded as she talked and by her tone Narianel thought this was going to be more trouble than she'd originally thought. "The High Priest of Creation that rules them is quite the character. I can deal with him, however, if you can stop the fighting."

"I was hoping you would appear before the army to halt their advance. If we stood together then perhaps it could work."

"I agree, but it would be best if I went straight to the top." Tesni's tail flicked and she touched her chin. "I have confidence you could stop the fighting with your mere presence. Being dramatic is what you do best, after all, right?"

Narianel felt a little warmth in her chest and she snuffed it out. She didn't manage to stop herself from an awkward laugh and grin, but straightened her face right after.

"Will you make your own way there?" she said.

"I will gather the Eyes and depart as soon as I can," said Tesni. "We will take *Prishe*."

"I will go to Octavio now. He's the general that brought me a blade in exchange for ending the war." Narianel summoned Nightstrike and handed it to Tesni. "I was going to grab this first when I leave to collect them all, so it's quite convenient to get it now."

"You're planning to leave? Soon?"

"It will be a while yet," said Narianel. "I want to learn what I can from Prochorus first, and he won't be speaking for a while, according to Vala."

Tesni looked like she was about to say something, her soul's form rushing around her body, but then just nodded instead. Narianel looked her in the eyes and saw a sadness

there and her scent told of longing. She couldn't do it. She nodded in return and headed up the stairs, calling Nightstrike into her soul. She paid attention to the aether in the area, noticing Tesni staying on the stairs a long time before descending.

Outside the Temple of Chassuille, Narianel flew into the sky and was quickly at Octavio's airship. She instantly didn't like it, now that she was this close. The whole thing was enclosed below the balloon, so it would force her aetherial form to jump out if they were to be attacked in the sky.

As she looked at it, Octavio appeared in a doorway along with two guards. He invited her inside and she told him of the Order of Blades and the Eyes of Chassuille. She didn't want to leave him with any surprises and have a negative reaction during the battle.

The cabins were all lined with steel and decorated with wood panelling. This much steel could only have come from a factory, which she'd heard about and was interested in seeing. Mass production was a fascinating concept and she often thought about outfitting the Order for the final battle. If they could produce steel and mistweave on a large scale, then get all the steel enchanted in time...

"You seem to be admiring my ship," said Octavio, a wry smile crossing his face.

"Not the airship," she said. "I hate the airship. There's no deck to stand on and watch the world for danger. I was thinking about your science. Mass production. Machine-made objects. It has inspired me."

He didn't seem to like her answer, but he didn't say it. She could just smell it on him. She ignored him for most of the journey, choosing instead to explore the airship. She spent a lot of time looking at the engines that ran the propellers and using Perception to follow flows of lightning in the walls that turned on lights.

She was surprised to see most of the crewmen salute her with the Empty Diamond. They didn't wear shakai, but had

little metal and enamel badges pinned to their lapels. It was a ring that was half white and half black split vertically, and inside the ring was a flat disc that was the two red tones of her shakai split horizontally. She wondered who else out there had different interpretations of her colours and themes, and exactly what form that would take. One crewman gave her a gift that was one of these pins in a small box. She hid it in folded space to put on display in her house later.

They crossed the ocean and it took a surprisingly long time. They passed over Nerik by hour two and it wasn't until another six hours had past that they saw dry land. And what she saw in that land was shocking. Black roads sprawled across the countryside from town to town. Tall poles that held up what she was told were wires carrying information and lightning to everyone across the continent. Metal carriages driven without horses, running on engines that detonated refined pitch of some sort to create motion.

They passed factories that used machines to automate the production of goods. Using Perception she saw inside them, metal arms creating tiny parts no human hands could make alone. Not at that speed. She saw men standing in lines checking items on moving tabletops. In warehouses she saw perhaps hundreds of thousands of things in boxes made of the thickest paper she'd ever seen.

The airport had several very long paved areas she was told were called runways, but she didn't see any of the vehicles they called aeroplanes. They were much smaller than the airships, apparently, and they were mounted with firearms. Tools for war, it seemed.

The landing wasn't as smooth as she would have liked. Magic-fuelled airships were definitely the way to go, and as she was walked into the main building of the airport she saw an open hanger where people were building one. She wanted to warn them that they'd arranged the crystals in a way that would cause a feedback loop and dump the aether into the Ethereal Realm, but she didn't have time, so she mentioned it

to Octavio as they walked and hoped he'd warn them later.

The airport was packed with people in military attire, the vast majority of them wearing those badges. Octavio was talking to her about the history of the nation, but she'd rather get it from books made by other nations, friend and enemy alike. She never liked hearing only the cleanest possible story of a people, all the atrocities removed. And every nation had its atrocities, whether active or in its deep past.

When they got outside, one of those metal carriages were waiting for them. It was black and shiny. She really didn't want to go inside it, as it smelled of cigar smoke, so she hopped on top and sat cross-legged. This drew stares and made her happy to see some of the soldiers stifle a smile. Maybe there was hope for their souls.

"Get in," she told Octavio as she unfurled her shakai. Several people looked away and blushed, though others stared in curiosity or disbelief at her aetherial body. They'd soon see she'd given up on her sexuality and humanity for the cause. She was little more than a doll made of magic at the moment, smooth in places that shouldn't be.

"We have laws against nudity," he said. There was a fury beneath his guise of cheeriness. An outrage at her lack of tact. He'd get used to it.

"It's a good thing there are no genitals on display then, so can we go?"

He was intently staring at her face until he broke and got into the carriage. She gave a wide smile to the soldiers, who were doing their best not to break as the carriage drove off. She waved back to them as she went.

The road was smooth, and she realised it wasn't paved in the traditional sense. It looked like gritty stone melted together. There were lines and markings painted on it, and she thought they were to direct drivers to local laws or rulings. Occasionally a bump in the road sent her already waving shakai in a flutter behind her, trailing like a flag.

The buildings they passed were very utilitarian. They

lacked any overhangs and were built straight up. There were minimal decorations, only found around windows and doors. There were some older buildings with far more pomp to them, most of which looked like religious buildings or libraries that have been in use since the Ruination.

As they entered the city centre, which she didn't notice because there were no walls, she saw more and more people. Curiously, there were a lot of different skin tones. The natives were of moderate paleness, like Ocatavio, she thought, but there were people as dark as Kresimir and others were more of a moderate brown like Nur or Agni. She didn't know if these were the demographics because of the Ruination and the way Avani was made, or if it was from mixing with other nations, but she was interested to find out.

They stopped in front of a grand building at the centre of the city that looked quite old. It had helical columns out front that led the way to the door and some sort of guardian statue over the door. It was a lion with straight horns.

"What was the name of this city, again?" she asked Ocatavio as he got out of the carriage. He looked at her with cold eyes and flat mouth.

"This is Saraellin, capital city of Sara De Han. I told you about it on the airship."

"I'm sure you did," she said. She wondered which part of the airship she had been looking at when he had.

She walked ahead of him, up a set of stairs to a large set of double doors. The guards either side looked past her before opening the doors, and she entered a lobby that reminded her of the Guild of Archivists' guildhouse. There was a female secretary sat behind the desk, in a suit and a set of glasses that were much finer than those she'd seen in Vin. Maybe constructed by machines.

Narianel could smell the antimagic in the walls and it made her nervous. Already the light was dimmer and the sound was muffled, and she worried about whatever held it all in the walls breaking and killing her before she could react. But

that was an old fear. She could rely on her blades for protection, should it come to that. It was still a fatal weakness, but she had the tools to cope now.

She allowed Octavio to lead her down a hallway and into a metal box that moved up several floors using pulleys and lightning. She had to rewrap herself in her shakai so the door would close. Then, when it stopped moving, the doors opened to a huge open space.

"This is the King's High Office. Show respect." Octavio left the box and walked to stand by a desk with a practised march. Behind the desk sat a man in his middle ages. He also wore a suit, but in blue rather than black. He was greying at the temples and wore a gold crown.

When Narianel stepped out of the box there was a startling alarm. Lights flashed red above her and without a thought she had jumped back in the box with Havoc and Malice in her hands.

"Magic is not allowed in the presence of the King," said Octavio. "You will have to present the items you carry, like that scarf."

She narrowed her eyes and walked into the room. With as blank a stare as she could muster she dropped Havoc and Malice, then one by one she summoned each of her blades and dropped them. Perception, Tongue, Flameroot, Wraith. In the end there were fifty three blades on the floor and the man behind the desk was very much not impressed.

"I'd drop my body too, but it's mostly aetherial now and you wouldn't want the mess," she said, calling all her blades back into herself in a blinding flash of silver. "I am made of magic, so if it's illegal to be here, why did you bring me? Surely the blame falls on you, Octavio."

"I think that's quite enough," said the king before Octavio could retort. "It is good to meet you, even if I was unaware of your grim sense of humour, High Lady Narianel."

"I am here to stop a war," said Narianel. "That is all. I won't have people die in my name over something so pointless

as religion. Tell me what it is you would have me do.”

“First, let me introduce myself formally.” The king stood and bowed his head, keeping his arms rigid at his side. My name is Flarius Han IV, King of Sara De Han, Speaker of the Divine Oath.”

“And what Divine Oath is that?”

“It was spoken long ago to the now lost Father Dasus.” Flarius sat down and clasped his hands on his desk. He had a stern face and a serious aura. “I have heard your family history. You are not the only one descended from him, though you and your kin were the first. To answer your first question, what I would have you do first is sing for my people. Take as much of their corruption as you can without all of your blades. Heal them of their woes so that we may be strong together.”

“I will choose when and where I sing, Flarius, O cousin of mine. It seems coming here was a waste of time. I should have gone straight to the border.”

Both Flarius and Octavio gave her looks of disapproval that would have chilled her bones were she not so apathetic. She wouldn’t bow and scrape the way they expected of others. They needed to learn that she was above them.

“Now,” she continued, walking forward and putting both hands flat on the king’s desk. Octavio’s eye twitched and his soul confirmed his rage, but Flarius stayed firm. “Tell me again about this Divine Oath. What were the words?”

“I will obey you, Low Lord Dasus. I will aid your plans for reality. I will follow the God of Balance and Twilight to the end, and I pledge my descendants to do the same.”

Narianel narrowed her eyes and grinned, then Flarius sighed, each knowing what this meant to them both. Then the real discussions began.

Narianel was given a room for the night but she didn't use it. She explored the city, marvelling in its wonder. When she met people enjoying late night parties, they were happy to see her and wanted to take photographs with her, but there was no box nor long exposure. It was instant, using one of their little rectangles that everyone seemed to have. They showed her how it could store images. Some even moved and had voice recordings. She was shown how they were operated by touch rather than buttons or switches, and it was all so strange.

Just after dawn, as she was looking back on her night and how strange it was to see the moon with no stars because of all the light, she was standing in a public garden and was approached by a man in white. He was tall and handsome, and he had an aura of authority. He wanted to be taken seriously, and seemed proud to be walking with the symbols of light and creation on his cloak.

"My name is Ton Da," he said, as if that was supposed to impress her. "And you are High Lady Narianel."

"You are from across the border. Provallis." She didn't want to be anywhere near this man. There was something not right about him.

"You speak our language well," he said. "Or is it one of your blades?" She summoned Tongue to her hand and held it loosely. "Yes, that one, I see. I have come with an offer for you. It is from Hierophant Sontius Varallis, leader of Provallis."

"Go on." She looked him in the eyes and saw how cold they were, then her gaze was drawn to that fixed smile of his. He was just like Chassuille.

"He would like you to get King Flarius Han to submit to him. Surrender and these people will be saved."

"That's interesting." She made sure to catch his eyes as she said: "You think you can win."

The smile flickered. Unlike Chassuille, this idiot had emotions. She could use it against him.

“I have no doubt in my mind,” she continued, “that should this little tiff escalate to a full-blown war, I could destroy your nation in a day. I might come from a nation only just industrialising and discovering the very basics of what makes this continent powerful, but I can recognise a battle I can win when I see one.”

“And how would you win?” Ton Da asked, managed to barely keep himself from growling.

“Your people rely on lightning. I’ve seen what your factories and power fortresses look like, and I would destroy them first. Your country would collapse in the space of an hour. Then, I would destroy the major roads and strike the largest cities. The rest is just clean-up.”

“You cannot possibly be that powerful.”

“I could crack this world like an egg and release the Sixteen at a moment’s whim.”

She held his gaze and could feel the fear building in him. His anger was gone, replaced by a hopeless pit because he knew she wasn’t lying.

“Take a message back to your Hierophant.” She waved her hand in front of his face, making Tongue disappear just before it would have taken off his head. “I am not here to fight. I want this conflict stopped. Azael is the enemy, not me. We must fight side-by-side if we are to win. It doesn’t matter which god the people follow. It could be me or Chassuille or Seran or even Golain, God of Jokes. All that matters now is that Azael is defeated, not petty allegiances.”

She shooed him away and continued to look at the flowers, only looking over when she knew he was gone.



Instead of taking the royal carriage with Flarius to the battlefield, she jumped in what was being called a truck with several soldiers. She could feel the frustration of the king and his inner circle, but she cared more about the health of the

soldiers than some pompous nobles.

"This is my first conflict," said a young man. He had blonde hair and, like all people from this continent, it seemed, monolid brown eyes. Excitement was obvious in his face and scent, and that worried Narianel.

"You should take this seriously," she told him and the seven other men in the bed of the truck. "I remember my first fight. You have firearms, so it's unlikely you'll see that much blood unless the man next to you is killed, but my first time I returned to camp drenched in blood. I was praised for it, but in the night, as I bathed, I could only cry. I'm harder now, and that hardness came at a cost. It was the first time I lost a little of my humanity. It was my first step towards the twisted divinity I now embody. Take this seriously, because if I fail to talk down Provallis, people will die, and it won't just be a handful."

This got the men thinking, and once one asked about her experiences at war, it got the rest asking more. She talked openly about the death and pain she'd seen. The destruction she'd caused. As she told them of Egil she summoned him to her hand. Nocturne. As she talked about the Order of Light she summoned Purity, Lilith. She talked about losing her grandfather, and Maria, and Blodwen, and Dasus. By the end of the journey she had broken the men down and rebuilt them. They knew what was coming and were better prepared for it. They were stronger for the knowledge.

The truck stopped on the edge of a city after several hours of travel. It was past noon as Narianel jumped out and looked at the city a few miles away. There were pock marks all across the countryside where minor skirmishes had resulted in fireballs or lightning strikes. These people had firearms, but were not beyond using mages. There were fortifications in the area made of metal and surrounded by bags of sand, and the Hanean troops looked to have tunnels underground, judging by the dots of aether she was sensing.

On the other side, Provallis had built up temporary

walls of armoured vehicles and mage-made stone walls. There were trenches in the distance being made by an earth mage, his aura like a beacon. The flag being flown was of a golden eagle on a white background.

Both sides had around sixty thousand soldiers hiding in their various forts and bases, and thanks to the tunnels it looked like Provallis had the larger army, just by sight. This would give Sara De Han an advantage, but it was one she was hoping to avoid using.

“How do you like it?” asked Flarius as he walked up. All the soldiers instantly saluted, fist to the side of their head, some so hard she thought they might knock themselves out.

“Do your soldiers know?” she asked and from the look on the king’s face she knew they hadn’t been informed. “Tell them, Flarius.”

“High Lady Narianel has invoked the Divine Oath,” he said, and the soldiers looked at her, unsure. “As you should all know, I am promised to the God of Balance and Twilight. That title has been passed by Low Lord Dasus to High Lady Narianel, as per his final wishes. That means she is now the God of this nation. Her word is law, our souls are hers. I act on her behalf for our people, but she can overrule me.”

“I want this known to every soldier here by the end of the day,” she told the king. “If this results in battle I want loyal soldiers, not people who would question my orders.”

“Understood, my Lady,” said Flarius. He even bowed before he walked away towards one of the bases. He was surrounded by barrier mages and walked with a grace only afforded to those with practice.

“Now, soldiers, I have an odd request for you,” she said, turning to them. “Gather weapons of all the different types your army uses. I wish to be familiar with them.”

The next few hours were fun, but she wouldn’t say that aloud. She ended up with a crowd of around a hundred and fifty soldiers watching her learn how to dismantle and then reassemble their firearms, which they called guns, as well as

learning to shoot them. They set up a firing range behind one of the larger bases so they wouldn't be easily seen by Provallan spies, and she spent a long time just shooting at targets.

At first she wasn't very accurate, especially with the smaller weapons she was expected to be able to fire with a single hand as well as two. She'd never spent time learning to use firearms or magearms, so she had no skills to transfer over. But after an hour, and many shots fired, she began to adjust and was more or less on target each time, though the more seasoned soldiers were still better than her. Watching their stance while firing also helped her.

When she was out at the target looking at the damage she'd just done with a firearm that shot multiple bullets a second, there was a loud bang and something struck her in the side of the head. It dropped to the ground on the other side of her, slowed to a crawl by the density of her aether. She picked it up and looked towards the Provallan side.

"How did they hit me from this distance?" she asked.

"Your skull..." asked one of the soldiers. His name was Hadrian and he was one of the senior officers.

"Hm?" she asked, touching the wound. It was almost already healed. "Don't worry, they can't kill me without magic. Tell me, what gun fired this?"

She sniffed the bullet before holding it out for Hadrian to take. He didn't touch it, but he spoke confidently, telling one of the lower soldiers to go fetch a sniper rifle. It came in a box, and she watched him put it together with interest.

"We've had a few shots taken at us with guns like this," he said as he handed it to her in its completed form. "Most of us don't pop out unless we're sure there's a barrier up, or we have personal shields." He tapped a small orb attached to his belt. It was creating an anti-physical barrier on his skin, and she'd surprised him by poking his hand and passing right through its protection. "They likely thought this an opportune time to attack."

"Your people use magic, but I don't think you know

much about it," she said. "Or the anatomy of the soul. The fool shot me in the head, which he should have known wouldn't kill me. The bullet wasn't even enchanted. I'd need to be shot with magic in my core." She tapped the centre of her chest.

"You speak about your weakness so easily," said Jen.

"It's *everyone's* weakness, but I'd highly recommend you don't use it. Souls are valuable, so you shouldn't destroy them for no reason. They can be used once the life is gone from them. And besides, my real weakness is antimagic." She summoned Perception and propped it on her shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

She spread her wings and leapt into the sky, then went over to the Provallan side. She could see them all below. They were in a panic and rushing to arms when she dropped next to the sniper who had shot her.

"You dropped this," she said, holding out the bullet. They man was terrified, but took the bullet without looking at it. His hands shook hard.

When she was sure the man would remember the moment for the rest of his life, pressing the memory into his eyes, she shot back into the sky and went back to the soldiers at the firing range. A lot of them were peeking out with scopes to see what she had done.

"I didn't kill anyone, don't worry."

"You could get us in a lot of trouble with stunts like that," said Jen.

"It'll be fine," said Narianel. "They won't try anything if they don't think they can kill me, and they don't know enough to actually accomplish it." She dismissed Perception and hoped Tesni would be talking to the local Hierophant by then.

Eventually night came and the watch shift changed all along the area, but she stayed away from them. She stood out in the middle of the gulf between armies, looking at the moon. She thought she could feel eyes on her from both sides, but the waxing moon so high above held her. She wanted to transform and prance, but she held her shape. She thought of home, and

she thought of family. Mira's little Norman was born with a ruff of black down and she wanted to see him grow to be a Vanavolk. She hoped that Azael would wait that long.

A few days passed with no incident. She had told the Hanean army not to attack, and the Provallan side seemed too scared to do anything because of how open and freely she walked about. She didn't need protection, and no one dared fire at her again. When one man took aim, she stopped her stroll around the perimeter and looked at him, staring until he put down his weapon. Perception was a useful blade.

An hour after dawn she saw a large number of vehicles approaching from Provallis in the west. They were all heavily armoured and flying flags, eventually driving behind walls and into ditches made by earth mages to hide away. She felt a pulse of familiar aether and returned Tesni's flare with her own. It seemed the plan was going well.

Narianel had visited the Order just before dawn and told them of everything that had happened. They were excited for the new firearms and were already trying to figure out ways to circumvent them, from magnetic shields with metal magic to simple air walls. She told them to be ready to move, but also that she didn't expect to need them. Feeling Tesni's aether in that moment, she was confident about that.

She stepped out into the could-be battlefield and walked halfway to the enemy's front line. She waited, taking in the scents of the area. The people were scared, which she could have guessed. All of them knew who she was and the power she held. They knew she could have killed Chassuille, they knew she had fought Legion and won, they knew she was more than capable of killing them all without hassle. She hoped, however, that they were smart enough to not let that fear overcome them.

During the wait, one brave man from the other side decided to step out from the opposing side and walk towards her. She put her hands on her hips as she watched him come to her, a signal for her soldiers not to shoot. The man was young, perhaps not even twenty, and he reeked of nerves. She didn't

know enough about the peoples of this region, but she couldn't tell him apart from the Haneans behind her. Dark eyes and light hair, monolid, and tall. Their only difference was ideology as far as she could tell.

"Do you speak Provallian?" He didn't quite meet her eyes, constantly glancing back. She saw some people poking their heads out from where he'd emerged from the trenches.

"I have magic to let me communicate."

"Oh. If I may ask... Not to say you *should* do this, and I don't want to suggest you do, but... Why are you just standing there instead of killing everyone? From what we've learned, we don't stand a chance."

"I'm waiting to see what your Hierophant and Tesni say before I act. You're not my enemy. I'm not here to kill you. I'm only here to stop two forces going to war and wasting lives that could be spent when Azael rears his ugly head."

"Who is this Tesni?" asked the man. He was clean shaven but scratched at his chin. She looked at his uniform and noticed how similar it was to the Eyes of Chassuilles' uniform, with its waist cape and shawl. She did, however, notice the weapons and ammunition hidden under them, as well as the padding that the soldiers teaching her about guns called kevlar. She could also see patches on the chest that looked to be holding some sort of replaceable plate, likely a kind of bullet protection.

"Tesni Armstrong is the current Champion of Eyes, and she has spent the last couple of days talking to your leader. I consider her an ally despite her following your God. I don't even consider Chassuille an enemy. I just want to win a war with someone even worse."

"I know Azael wants to destroy everything, but did you really have to attack Chassuille? This could have been avoided altogether."

"That might be true," she said. Looking up at him and seeing the distress in his eyes, she couldn't help but pity the young man. He was fighting something far more powerful than

himself with very little hope of surviving. Azael was above even Chassuille, and she would have to try incredibly hard to stand a chance at winning, but the gap between Azael and humanity looked infinite from this man's position. "There are some things that need to be done, however negative the impact. If the outcome of this is two sets of people that hate each other, but that hate is pointed at Azael, then it is a win."

"Is that why you claim to be the Goddess of Nothing? Because you're willing to lose everything to kill Azael?"

Their eyes locked for a moment and he blinked before she did. Narianel thought how to word what she wanted to say before speaking.

"Nothing is a skraeðan concept that doesn't translate well into mortal tongues. You're right, in a way. I suppose the right word to use would be 'beginning.' When the gods speak of nothing, they mean the very start, before anything had been made. That open, empty reality that can be built in. It isn't about destroying everything the way Azael wants, it's about being able to build a future once the war is over. I want nothing more than to win, even if it costs everything, because as long as there is still a reality there will still be room to live and continue.

"Of course, this taboo word that tears apart reality seems to have become a signature of mine, so the title works in both meanings. I will indeed be attempting to reduce Azael to absolutely nothing in the mortal sense of the word. I am a destroyer trying to bring about a new world, and for that I need strength and allies."

"Very fitting." The man managed a half-hearted smile and a chuckle.

"You should return to your friends. They look like they don't know if you'll make it back alive or be torn apart."

"Just another quick question... How quickly could you kill everyone? There's a lot of people ready to fight here."

"It would take less than a minute, if I really wanted to. The only one to survive would be Tesni because of the powers

she's granted as an Eye. I won't tell you how, though." It was a simple matter of taking on her angelic form, flying up, and when everyone was looking at her she could activate her spike shield that all angels have. Her halo. She kept it slumbering, and often forgot she even had it because it was useless when fighting with mortal allies, but it was there and able to be used if she really needed it. "Now go."

He bowed his head to her in the same way that all of Chassuille's followers did, just a slight twist to the right and eyes meeting, then he ran off. When he was back in the trench she finally took her hands off her hips and looked to where Tesni was, feeling her soul through three feet of steel summoned by a metal mage. By Tesni's aura there was some last minute arguing going on.

A few minutes passed and the scent of hope started to spread out from where that man had re-entered the trenches. The man was speaking her words and they were beginning to realise that they'd all live and could go home so long as their Hierophant makes the right decision.

It was another hour before Tesni flared her soul again to announce that they were coming out. Narianel put her hands on her hips again then crossed her forearms in the air to signal a complete ceasefire. This wasn't just a "wait and see" like the previous time.

The Hierophant approached slowly with a sizeable entourage. Tesni was notably outside the circle of guards, which didn't bode well. He was an older man with white hair and a stern set of eyes, obviously weary from decades of rule. His robes were far more elaborate than those of Seremont's Hierophant, and she wondered if humans could see that white embroidery all over the pristine cloth.

When they stopped, the circle of guards opened to form two lines either side of the Hierophant. He looked her up and down, and in return she just tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. He wasn't impressed, by his scent, and she felt sorry for the uphill battle Tesni must have faced. When he spoke his

voice was deep and commanding, but Narianel wasn't swayed by his attempts at impressing her.

"I am the Hierophant of Provallis, Domain of the Grand Lord Chassuille. My name is Sontius Varallis, and you must be Narianel Lifesong, Goddess of Nothing." He went on before she could speak. She hadn't even opened her mouth. The man must love the sound of his voice. "You have a great deal of explaining to do if you wish to avoid this war. Champion Armstrong has failed to convince me that you are better for us alive than dead."

"I don't see how you'll kill me, but I'll still try to talk to you first." None of the guards had enchanted equipment, and while they were all mages, none of them were above the fifth circle and so likely couldn't create enough force to get through her the density of her soul. None were attuned to air, so she could just fly up and be fine.

"Let us talk openly," she continued. "I believe that the people you lead and oppose all deserve to hear what we both have to say. This should not be done in secret." She called Truth and Voice to her hands and stuck them in the ground to her left and right, activating them together. Truth forced all people within its aura to speak only the truth, and Voice had a minor effect of allowing the user to speak at a distance. Mixing these two powers together and letting them both push through her soul, she created a bubble that forced honesty and projected it to the armies, their audience. "Everything you say now cannot be a lie, and the gathered people will hear every single word. You wish to know my purpose, but there is one thing that I must ask you first: Are you in the employ of Azael?"

"Of course not!" shouted the Hierophant. She held up a hand to cut off anything else he might say.

"Neither am I, though he has tried to claim me," she said. "I will not let him turn me into his weapon, and my plan is to end his reign before it begins. We are on the same side of this war, whether you like it or not. In fact, it's perfectly fine

for you to hate me and everything I am. I won't judge you for that. I don't like you much, either.

"Soon you will see my directives to Flarius put into place, as god of his nation, and his military will become far more potent. I have no interest in how that power will be used once this war is over, but for now Sara De Han will be using a lot more magic and learning how to damage souls, all for the purpose of putting down Azael. That kind of knowledge can be yours too, if you ally with Nerik or Vin or anyone else on the Semblan Continent. Or you can stand with us.

"Your god made an error in judgement. It can happen to anyone. We are all just people. My own decisions have clearly made me enemies, lost lives, caused sorrow. But much like your god, I do what I must to achieve the goal. He does it because he is broken and only knows pragmatism. I do what I do because I see a great evil I must oppose. Our goals are aligned, even if our motivations are different.

"I work towards a new tomorrow, a Nothing on the other side of horror from which we can build a better future. Your god sees that now, I hope. I would think Tesni and the Eyes would have tried to assassinate me by now if Chassuille hadn't rethought his position on me, perhaps with the counsel of other skraeðan. It would be devastating for wherever we fought, but they are capable of killing me. They have the skill and the power.

"So, to sum up, I give you two options: You can either stand by my side or stand against me. Ally or enemy. Go home peacefully or very quickly choose your successor."

"You are an odious little creature," said the Hierophant with a scowl. "You make all these demands and expect people to play along as though you were the most important thing in the universe."

"I am," said Narianel. That threw off his building fervour and made him stammer. "There's a concept in soul theory that's been gaining popularity these last few years. It is called presence. Those with higher presence are naturally more

powerful, and those with less presence will struggle to grow their strength with magic. There are two people in this reality who seem to have presence beyond any other. Those are me and my younger brother. He has far greater potential than I ever will, but I cannot simply train for myself. I have to go out into the universe and take in as many people as I can for the coming final battle.”

“And how does presence work, exactly? Why is it that you’re so much more important than the rest of us?” He looked like he wanted to hit her, but was forcing himself to keep his hands at his sides.

“Azael created reality. He set the Nothing from which everything else grew. He’s made it clear to me over the years that he plans to turn me into a weapon he can use to destroy everything, but I resist him every step of the way. The fact that he created reality and that he wants me to be powerful is why my presence is so high. I have no idea what he wants with my brother, and that is a lost cause. Isaac is incorruptible.”

“How can we be sure you won’t join him in the end?”

If she could sigh naturally without forcing herself to breath, she would have. “Did you not pay attention while I was talking with your master? I have no intention of joining Azael, I will not join Azael, and I’m tired of saying it. I could have easily killed Chassuille and significantly weakened any resistance against Azael. But I didn’t. What will it take to convince you that all I want is peace amongst mortals so we can kill a god that actually deserves it?”

“A contest of champions,” he said abruptly. “You will choose someone who is not you, and I will choose someone to fight on my behalf. If your morality is true, it will come through in your disciples, will it not?”

“Fine, so long as you agree that it is not to the death,” said Narianel. “I will not waste a soldier.”

“Agreed.”

With that, Narianel spread her arms and behind her a tear in reality opened, joining Avani temporarily to the Aether

Sea, and then another appeared to connect back to Avani, far away in Vin. The Hierophant's eyes went wide as five hundred of the Order of Blades walked through as if it were nothing. They lined up behind her in neat rank and file, though Royan stood by her side.

"I have agreed to a contest of champions, but I'm not allowed to choose myself. Will you fight on my behalf?"

"If one fight ends a war," said Royan. His arms were crossed and he nodded with a smile.

"Your Highness, if I may," said an older man standing near the Hierophant. He was given a nod, so he continued. "Every single member of that army is as strong as I am with magic, and that man she's just chosen is in the seventh circle, a place I won't be able to reach until I'm ninety. The Order of Blades, as far as I'm aware, started around fifteen years ago, so for that man to go from a regular man off the street to the seventh circle in that time, High Lady Narianel must be very skilled as a teacher or using a growth method we don't have. I do not believe we have a champion who can stand up to him."

"I let you speak because I realised where you were going, and I disagree, my Magelord." The Hierophant then turned to Tesni, who he'd ignored until this point. "Lady Tesni Armstrong, Champion of Light. Will you fight for me?"

"It's not to the death, so I will," she said. "I have a lot of respect for Commander Royan. I've seen his skill as he works with others of his Order. State the rules for this fight."

"A circle will be created on the ground by our mages. The first to step foot outside the arena or surrender loses. Weapons are allowed, but outside help is not. If Royan of the Order of Blades wins, there will be no war, but should Lady Tesni wins, High Lady Narianel will hand control of Sara De Han to me."

"Which would you like?" Narianel asked Royan. He looked at Tesni, closed his eyes, and took a moment to decide.

"I'll take Ballade and Spiritrush," he said. They fell into his hands in a flash of silver light and he caught them with

practised hands. "Any advice?"

"She's a joker, but she's smart and powerful. Don't let her fool you into thinking she's any other girl. Make it quick, and don't let her get her wings out early or you'll lose."

She focussed, and then cut him off from the bond. His disappointment at the loss of the feeling was all over his face, but he nodded and turned to the fight. He didn't wait for the earth mages to make a platform, seeing how slowly they were building power, and by raising his palm he pulled up a large circle of stone. He stepped up onto it, ignoring the shock from the mages and the Hierophant, and Tesni joined him.

"I'm not going to hold back," she said. It was almost a whisper, too quiet for the Hierophant and his allies to hear, but Narianel's ears were sharp. "Though, I must say, I do hope Narhea taught you well." She then looked over and winked at Narianel.

Eternal love? She didn't appreciate being called that, especially not out in the open, and when they weren't even lovers. Tesni knew she could be heard too, and that grin was eating away at Narianel. They'd have words after this.

Royan and Tesni stood about ten steps apart at the centre of the arena. The Hierophant called to begin and they moved in a flash. Tesni immediately released her wings and strengthened her muscles using her serpentine powers. Royan, however, didn't need to power up and was upon her before she could react. He slammed Ballade into the ground in front of her, releasing its anti-magic aura, then punched her so hard in the face that she ended up on her back.

Then, in an act of history repeating itself, Royan put his boot down on Tesni's back-turned horns and released a blast of aether that forced them deep into the platform. Tesni screamed in anger and flexed her wings and tail, forcefully pushing herself out of the ground and sweeping around to face Royan.

"She's been telling stories, has she?" asked Tesni.

"Half of our training is telling each other stories so we

can grow and learn from each other. The experience of one Blade is the experience of all.”

Narianel nodded. There were three things innate to all peoples across the universe. Names, music, and stories. She gave all three to her followers, and Royan was living up to her ideals. He was well balanced. A leader, a warrior, a mage, a scholar. She would need to find out how to declare Champions just for him.

Tesni launched at Royan, spread her wings, and swiped with her claws. He kept up Spiritrush, carefully taking each and every strike as close to the centre as possible. Mara, the fallen angel in the blade-edged shield, had told Narianel that her power was strongest at the very middle of the round shield, focussed to a point, and Royan was using that expertly.

Tesni was clever, however, and just as Royan used the power of Spiritrush to unleash all the energy it had absorbed, she ducked under the shield and knocked it up with a flick of her tail. She touched Royan’s chest with both hands and a torrent of aether burst from her palms. She could obviously feel Ballade preventing her magic from the centre of the arena, but a burst of aether worked, even if it wasn’t a true Sarkal burst. Tesni had seen Narianel do it enough to pick up how to do it, but likely hadn’t practised it. It was more of a stream than a blast.

Royan caught himself in the air with a burst to stop his momentum and landed on the edge of the arena. He made subtle use of air magic to aid his landing without hurting himself, and had used earth magic to shield himself from Tesni’s full attack. He was still winded, but it looked like he got away with Tesni not realising Ballade only affected her. That should have been a benefit of the bond, but even without it, it looked to be working. Guilford was playing favourites, it seemed, and Narianel was pleased.

Tesni lunged again, trying to knock Royan out of the arena, but he dodged to the side. With a flap of her draconic wings, Tesni was into the air. This was what Narianel had been

worried about. Royan was aligned to air and fire, but he rarely practised flying. But perhaps he'd surprise her and Tesni both, as he was well trained in using unaligned elements to his advantage.

Tesni tested the anti-magic barrier with her breath, raining down green flames that disappeared against a clean, invisible shield. Royan walked back to the centre of the arena, retrieved Ballade and bided his time. He rested the thin sword on his shoulder and watched Tesni with a blank face. He normally had a gentle smile or a determined brow-furrow, but that face was his planning face.

Then Tesni did something unexpected. She started to chant. Royan wouldn't be able to hear it, but there was that brow-furrow to show that he saw what she was doing. Tesni was a brawler rather than a mage, so putting words to song or poetry was far from normal for her. Narianel didn't warn Royan of the words she was using, not wanting to break the rules, curious to see how he'd deal with it.

A small circle appeared in front of Tesni's mouth and she tapped it, saying one final word, and the Skrae symbol for that word appeared within it. Mist. Tesni took a deep breath, and when she exhaled her darkfire didn't appear, but instead she sprayed a stream of pink mist that cut through Ballade's anti-magic for a moment. The mist didn't touch Royan before the blade's barrier strengthened and resumed its suppression of Tesni's efforts.

"It was worth a try," muttered Tesni, narrowing her eyes at Royan. She then dove down to engage Royan again.

Narianel walked around the edge of the area, keeping an eye on the fight but her intent was to walk to the other side. As she approached, she saw that the gathered mages were attempting to figure out everything that was going on in the arena, but the Hierophant was staring at her instead.

"How does your man use elements he's not aligned to?" he asked. His tone was harsher than before, now that his voice wasn't being amplified.

“It’s not impossible to use other elements, it’s just more difficult. It usually costs more aether too, but Royan has studied well and that leak is mostly plugged. So many mages specialise too far, but Royan has done the opposite. He’s a generalist, which has allowed him to help so many of his subordinates grow. Your mage questioned how he got so powerful in just over a decade, and some of that is indeed some Nerikan training techniques that speed up the fortification process. But mostly it was his own determination. He found his balance, and that helped him on his path.”

“And what training techniques would those be?” asked the mage. He didn’t even try to mask his thirst for knowledge.

“Mostly it’s just a few breathing and emotion control techniques, though I also have them learn to sing and dance.”

“What does any of that have to do with magic?” asked the mage. These people really had abandoned magic in favour of technology.

“Everything,” said Narianel, then nodded towards the fight. The group followed her line of sight in short order.

Royan was easily stepping around each of Tesni’s palm thrusts, dipping and weaving around while she wore herself out. He’d lost Ballade. It was outside the arena as far as Tesni could have thrown it after she’d whipped it from his hand with her tail. Royan blocked a strike with Spiritrush that then let out a blast. Tesni was unhurt but forced to the ground, and Royan stood on her wing.

“Get off!” shouted Tesni. She tried to claw at his leg, but with a swift kick and stomp he pinned both a wrist and her other wing. She dug her other claw into his leg and hit his back with her tail, but he took it stoically.

Royan pointed his palms towards Tesni’s face and let out a large burst of aether. That would have killed a human, but Tesni had immediately raised black shields that shattered as they were struck. Tesni breathed out darkfire, the green flames engulfing Royan. When they subsided, Narianel had to smirk. He was perfectly fine.

“How?” asked the mage.

“Those were weak flames because Tesni is getting a touch desperate,” said Narianel. “She didn’t focus, but Royan held steady and made his own anti-magic barrier on his skin and equipment. Not very powerful, but enough.”

Tesni gripped Royan’s neck with her tail and managed to pull him from his feet. Both of them slowly got to their feet, feeling the fatigue. Royan’s shin glowed blue for a moment as he healed. Battlefield healing wasn’t the best, but what were a few more scars when you’d win the fight?

“Champion Armstrong is in the Low Circle, correct?” the Hierophant asked his mage, who nodded. “How is it that she is being matched by someone weaker than her?”

“Tesni is being forced to hold back to follow the rules forbidding killing, and Royan is using that to his advantage. If this were a real fight, she’d have already fully transformed into her draconic form and he’d be making use of more deadly, yet cost efficient words and phrases. But she’s being forced to hold back far more than he is, and he’s used to trying to capture opponents for bounty or ransom. He has the skill and technique needed for this, but she’s more used to higher power fights where she can unleash her full potential.”

“That is absurd,” said the Hierophant.

“Only in the mind of the uninformed.”

Narianel felt his stare but she watched Royan’s flow as he adjusted himself mentally. His soul ran smoothly, his aether reaching exactly where he meant it to be. He stored a fair amount in his left fist, which made Tesni’s eyes dart to it. It was a clever ploy. Tesni’s soul was ragged, like an inferno. She had little control in the heat of battle, but that was usually an advantage as she had so much energy to spend. Narianel wondered how hard it was for Tesni to hold back like that. Was it as difficult as stemming the flow of her own rage?

“How does he move like that?” asked the mage as Tesni and Royan met in close combat again. “He’s tall and muscular but moves with unnatural fitness.”

“Dancing,” said the Hierophant. “This is why you taught your followers to dance. To improve their ability to manage space around them in combat.”

“Exactly.” Narianel watched as Tesni’s claw caught Royan across his right cheek and she started to think the serpentine was taking it too seriously.

In the corner of her eye she could see the Hierophant getting impatient. His fists were clenched and she could hear his heart beating fast. He stepped forward with fire in his eyes.

“End this now!” he shouted at Tesni.

“Need I remind you *again* that I’m actually your superior!? Do not order me like your servant!” shouted Tesni back, turning from the fight and receiving a punch in the ear from Royan. A clap of thunder rang across the plains from the aether burst he released. Later, Narianel would find out that Tesni needed significant intricate healing inside her ear after that strike, and Royan paid for it in apology.

Narianel had been bounced off the ground several times in her life, often through walls, but she’d never really paid attention when it happened to others. Tesni hit the ground like a wool doll and flipped out of the arena, only just managing to catch herself with her wings and magic before hitting the ground. Blood trickled from her right ear and her slit pupils were so wide they made her eyes look entirely black.

“I am done with this,” muttered Tesni. She was only just in range of Narianel’s hearing. Thinking that it was getting too dangerous for a friendly match, Narianel decided to interfere, even though she knew she shouldn’t.

Narianel signed ‘three-five-two’ and Royan subtly nodded and signed ‘plan’ in return without looking at her. He was already working on what Narianel had suggested.

Tesni fully transformed in an explosion of dark mist, her body thinning and becoming completely covered in matte black scales. Her horns expanded and split like antlers, her tail elongated, her wings grew to massive proportions. She roared and green flames spun around her.

“How can the Grand Lord choose this creature to be his Champion?” asked one of the other people gathered around the Hierophant. Some noble, by the look of his clothes.

“Every light casts a shadow,” said Narianel. “He makes use of those who choose to serve him, no matter where you might believe their allegiance lays. Once you get past your prejudice, you will see she is dedicated to Chassuille’s cause, the defeat of Azael. More than you ever will be. She was raised well for this purpose. That’s all that matters.”

Narianel watched Royan rather than Tesni. He was using magic so silently, so gentle, that she wasn’t sure if anyone else had noticed. He’d tied a thin thread of air to Ballade and was waiting for the right moment, boosting his defences with earth magic and adjusting his weight with space magic. He’d even very slightly increased his reaction speed with time magic. It was all so precise. He be incredibly hungry later from the cost.

Tesni swooped down at the arena, breaking it apart as she landed then pushed off it, launching herself forward at Royan. This would have been a killing move in any other situation, but she was still holding back and he was prepared for her. With a twitch of his finger, Royan pulled Ballade to him. It moved with an unreal speed, passed him, and struck Tesni on the forehead, pommel first. This halted her attack and then he put his plan into action.

Royan’s aether surged as he started to sing Narianel’s song, his voice deep and booming. He used that aether to encircle Tesni in ropes made of air and fire, pulling them tight to bind her. She struggled against it, but was dazed from the strike. Royan approached her and the size difference in Tesni’s draconic form became more noticeable. She went from barely reaching his chin to reversing that. She was tall and sleek and putting everything into breaking free of those binds. But it was futile. That capturing spell had been designed by Narianel for her mercenary work but improved tenfold by Akenesa.

Royan tied more ropes around her, holding her tail and

wings. He grabbed her by the collar of her robes, which were hanging loose and not long enough for her current form. Narianel remembered when she'd used physical wings and how she'd torn through clothes to release them. Tesni's robes had near-invisible slits in the back, which was something that Gregory had realised Narianel would need too. Those days were gone now. She was no longer truly physical.

Then, much to the surprise of the gathered peoples, Royan dragged Tesni to the edge of the arena, and then jumped down with her. Plan three-five-two could be summed up as forcing a draw while showing dominance. It was exactly what she'd done to Chassuille.

Tesni looked at Royan as he released her. She then looked over to Narianel and narrowed her eyes. Royan walked to Narianel's side with a smirk on his face and a strut in his step. His smile became more genuine when she pulled him back into the bond and recalled her blades.

"What was that?" asked the Hierophant.

"We touched the ground at the same time, Your Highness," said Royan. "It was a draw."

"But you could have won," said the mage.

"I didn't need to win," said Royan. He looked over to Tesni, who had turned back to her normal self in a swirl of black fog. Vedar was handing her a healing potion. "All I needed to do was prove that High Lady Narianel meant what she said. We should not be fighting each other, we should be working together. The end is coming."

"I want a rematch," said Tesni, touching her ear. "But it will have to be later."

"Without the bond and the blades, my own power only stretches far enough to making you exhaust yourself for those binds to work. Now that you've seen that, any rematch would end in your victory due to an early transformation or a more careful conservation of your energy. I only managed what I did because the fight lasted so long. If I'd tried it at the start of the fight you would have broken free." He took a potion from

Vedar and downed the small phial in one gulp.

“How long do expect there to be before this final battle with Azael?” the Hierophant asked Narianel.

‘Five years, almost,’ whispered Egil in Narianel’s head. She’d hoped for longer.

“Almost five years,” said Narianel. “I expect the army of Sara De Han to be up to at least the fifth circle by then, with the Order of Blades up to Royan’s strength in general. We will be facing magical foes with the best weapons and armour that are available to them. His armies have already started to gather in various parts of the world to prepare. We need to be ready.

“I’ve already started work on Sara De Han, and I’m happy to share magical knowledge with Provallis too. I don’t like you and you don’t like me, but we need to trust each other. There needs to be an exchange of magic and technology so that we can both improve our chances of surviving when the Grand Gate opens again. We cannot sit here and bicker like fools over differences in ideology while our enemy pulls together a cohesive and well-equipped force. Speak with King Flarius and get this sorted. I’m going to take the Order home.”

She didn’t look back, and was trailed by Royan and Vedar back to the rest of the Order. There were cheers to go around, but they fell back into rank and file easily as Narianel opened the portals through the Aether Sea and back to Seremont. Tesni joined them and was surprised by several of the Order congratulating her on how well she fought. The Order were a family, and they welcomed her with a smile.

Over the next few days she received good news, as well as a few recruits from Sara De Han for the Order. She got shipments of various weapons and materials, and there were all sorts of useful tools. Technological and magical trade between the Semblan and Dorai continents began in earnest, leading to many innovations over the coming seasons.

Narianel sat in the Temple of Blades, meditating. She was in deep thought about what she'd say to Prochorus. She'd freed him from Legion, but he'd lost his father in the process. She'd usurped his duty. What was he going to say to her? Would he be proud of everything she'd done? Would he be ashamed to have a beast in his lineage? She just didn't know.

A portal from the Aether Sea opened and out stepped Isaac. He stood in front of her with a smile. He was twenty-two now, a young man with a pretty face, and just being near him she could feel the power lurking inside. His soul had fully matured the previous week, though she had missed the event because she was on a mission. He'd yet to show her his true angel form, but she looked forward to it. He'd reached the High Circle, but unlike her it had been natural and not a result of becoming a beast.

He wore no shirt, but his from his shoulders hung a white wrap trimmed with black and backed with a long cape, and on his arms were white sleeves that went from just above his elbow down to cover his hands. The symbol for balance sat on the back of his hands, and the sleeves were tied at the top with a red strip of cloth, two-toned like her shakai. Around his stomach was a sheet of mistweave, tied at the back. His boots and trousers were black.

On his forehead he'd painted their great-great-grandmother's personal stain. A crown of lines that was meant to represent a crow. His own stains around his eyes and little triangles to the side accentuated the blue glow of his irises. He wore a diamond hanging on his forehead, and another two on the back of his head on the same silver chain. His colourless skin was only marred by the cursed pink scar around the left half of his neck, from voice box to spine. He was thin, but well muscled, and obviously taking care of his hair, which reached the small of his back.

She looked him up and down and wondered when he

had become a man. The change had been so gradual that she just hadn't noticed before. She'd noticed a long time ago he'd gotten taller than her, but as she stood up she realised he was even taller than their father.

As they walked up to the Castle of Dawn, Isaac signed, telling her of happenings out in the Aether Sea. There were more demons than ever, and a new band of serpentine who were looking for more members. The elves had come out of hiding to support the gods, which was a surprise to her. And, most curiously of all, the large group of fallen angels who had sided with her were building a city of their own, not far from the portal to Avani. She'd visited them a few times to show her acceptance of them, but they hadn't built anything then.

People watched them as they passed by, but there was no bowing here. Nerik was refreshing, in that way. The people here respected her, but they didn't worship her. They didn't even truly worship the gods of the Great Houses. It was more of an appreciation of their philosophies. Gods and Champions were banned from the islands unless they were born of Nerikan blood like they were. Still, people looked. It wasn't every day that they'd get a chance to see two gods casually walking down the street, one filled with the power of Dasus and the other with a power of her own.

"I have a question," said Narianel as the conversation died down. They were in the grounds of the castle now, and it loomed above them. She still thought of her battle with Lucifer each time she visited. "Dasus made Prochorus and me his Champion of Blades. I didn't even notice there was a bond between us until after I'd studied bonds more. I didn't even feel the bond fade as he died because of the heat of the battle. How do the gods do it?"

"It's similar to your power sharing bond with the Order of Blades, but is tied into the universe itself," signed Isaac. He stopped in his tracks, concentrated, and then let out a black breath that formed a dark orb in his hand the size of a pea. He handed it to her before continuing. "Swallow that when you

have time. It's everything I know of bonds so far, including this."

He tapped his left cheek, where he'd painted some runes running down from his eye, ending in an empty circle to activate them. Reading the runes was difficult as they'd been changed so much to make them work in a specific way.

"You can see bonds with that?" she asked, realising what it would do. He nodded. "That could allow us to find Azael's followers far more easily. If we can recognise what that bond looks like, perhaps by examining what he's done to my own soul, we should be able to see it in others."

"Exactly," signed Isaac. "I've been working on these runes since gaining Dasus's memories. It was something he'd pondered over, but was afraid to use."

"Afraid?"

"He suspected several of the gods." Isaac started to walk again.

'Nareshilna, God of Death and Undeath. Arsenum, God of Technology. Mostoa, Goddess of Flight.' The voice echoed in her mind for a moment.

Egil's eerie whispers made Narianel hesitate before she followed her brother. He was normally so quiet, but recently he'd been answering her questions. He saw that she didn't hold Adela's death against him directly, even if she'd never forgive his part in it. Mostoa's name in that list was odd, but it was Nareshilna and Arsenum that concerned her. If the reapers turned on the people then it felt like a hopeless cause, but she'd fight on anyway.

Inside the castle they were met by attendants who took them down to the theatre in the basement. To Narianel's surprise, there were a lot of people in the seats, and all eyes were on the man on the stage. He was performing the third act monologue in *Harnan the Warrior* by Treant Morrow.

Vala waved them over and Isaac went to sit next to her, but Narianel continued down the aisle, walking around the edge of the stage and into the backstage area. She found the

actor playing Zeta the Sorceress and quickly discussed her plan with the woman.

“Yes! I must!” said Prochorus, his voice echoing across the theatre. “The Land of Tormel lies across the ocean, and I must go, for in that country of fantasy and myth, I will find the Bell of Trish the Doomed. I will find the bell and with it I can free my home from tyranny.”

“And if you go,” said Narianel, stepping onto the stage, “who will protect us? Must you abandon your duty to us just to see your father avenged?”

She was wearing a long skirt and a very thin tabard that exposed her breasts. She’d taken on a fully physical body just for this, which was the first time since Adela’s death. Normally she was at least part aetherial. Her hair was tied back in a wide black tail at her crown with a green ribbon so long it trailed the ground, though her hair almost did too.

“I would, Zeta,” said Prochorus, “for it is the right thing to do. It is what my father would want.”

“Your father was a coward, Harnan!”

“Lies!” shouted Prochorus, striking her across the face. She collapsed to her side, pushing herself up. “Lies and myth!” She had to suppress her own healing to keep the red mark on her cheek. The art of story was important.

“You know I speak true, O chief of the Nassa!”

“Go, I will hear no more from you. Send me your master. I would take him with me.”

Narianel pushed herself up to her knees and gave Prochorus a look of longing before dashing off the stage. She was met by Zeta’s actor, who was currently naked and cheering for her, and gave her back her costume. Her body dissolved back into her aetherial form, her shakai returning as a fold of unfurling flesh, changing colour to a bright and a dark red, split evenly in half.

She watched the rest of the play from backstage. It was another hour and a half, and Zeta’s actor got her chance to perform alongside Prochorus, including the final kiss as

Harnan dies, impaled on the Tyrant's Spear. Narianel pretended not to notice that slight rush of aether in Vala's soul as she watched the kiss, that subtle smile that said she wanted to see more than just the kiss.

After the play, once everyone else had left, Prochorus sat on the edge of the stage, with Vala and Isaac in the front row. Narianel emerged from backstage and sat next to her ancestor, taking in his scent. This was her personal hero, the man whose shoes she was trying to fill. It was exciting, and she had trouble containing her smile.

He looked her up and down, then touched her shakai. That appraising look worried her in a way that no enemy ever had. It wrapped her like a dress, tight in the torso and loose below the hips, but also wrapped around her neck and shoulders in a loose shawl.

"I understand why someone would wear a shakai," he said. "I wore a black and white one with my most loyal allies back before my fall. But Narianel, you have such a nice body, why would you hide it in this way? You take on a non-physical body and hide your womanhood as if you're ashamed."

"I don't hide it, my priorities have simply changed. I no longer need to be a woman. I need to be a slayer of gods."

"And to do that you would usurp me?"

"To do that I will take on the burdens of the universe itself for the power it will bring me. That is what I need to end Azael. That is all I need."

"That is no way to live," said Prochorus. "Where is the joy, young Narianel? I can see you aren't emotionless. I can see that you had fun performing that scene. I'm told the scar on your soul causes you rage issues, and yet you appear to be calm and controlled. You're not really living and feeling, you just seem to be surviving until the end."

"The anger within me is controlled because I let it out when I battle. I satiate it. It helps that I can smother it in all the corruption in the pit of my soul."

Narianel looked him in the eyes. His left eye was grey,

but his right eye was missing. The socket was filled with a black gem that allowed him to visualise sound. He was a handsome man, though she knew he'd crafted his body himself, so there was definitely some vanity in that.

"I am a warrior," she continued. "I might enjoy going to the theatre or reading nonfiction or singing and dancing, but those are not what I am. I have found my balance. I am calm because the rage does not outweigh duty. They work in tandem. In the end I will kill Azael, because I am the Goddess of Nothing."

Prochorus thought for a while, closing his eyes and leaning back on his hands. He kicked his legs idly like a child, though Narianel didn't judge as she was often accused of sitting like a man. Prochorus was still in costume, and his shoulder length black and white hair fell in waves.

"I hear you've lost your soul mate," he said. Narianel couldn't help but frown at Vala, who smiled and shrugged with one shoulder. "Tell me about her."

"Adela was such a good person," said Narianel. "She was a member of the Guild of Archivists, a runemage, a tattoo artist. She loved the theatre and art. My home is filled with her paintings, and I've yet to go into her studio and see what she had left unfinished. She didn't like showing off her art too early. 'Before it had a soul,' she said. I grew up knowing I'd marry her, and after I found Mira she became a loving mother to the girl in a way I couldn't be, even though I tried my best to give her a good life."

"Adela believed in me, and I made mistakes with her but she always forgave me. She listened to me practice my singing, encouraging me. She dragged me to festivals and street theatres, and she was so soft. Heart and body. She was growing in power steadily, close to becoming a lich, but then Egil brought ruin to Seremont."

Nocturne appeared in her hand and she held it out, pointing it up at a balcony at the back of the arena. The black blade felt like it was weeping. A deep regret for the hurt it

caused. His past haunted him as it haunted her.

"I won't be able to cleanse her soul and give her sweet dreams. She's gone forever. Beyond resurrection. All I have are the memories, the dregs of feelings and flashes of smiles. She was beautiful. She made me feel young when we were alone. As if I'd never gone to war. I'd tear down the universe myself if it meant getting her back, but I know that's not possible, so instead I will preserve reality as best I can, so that people can find love like I had."

She felt Prochorus attempt to take Nocturne with the power of the blades, but Egil refused. He was not one of the man's blades. He was hers.

"Interesting," said Prochorus. "Are they all so loyal to you now?"

"I should hope so," said Narianel. "Metatron doesn't like me much, and often refuses my call, but he will go to any of the Order without a fuss."

She felt another tug, this time on Voice. It was buried within her and her form blocked the attempt because her aether was just too dense. It was a weakness she'd had to overcome in the past, when taking blades from her enemies. With a thought she added Prochorus to the battle bond she shared with the Order, but it felt strange with him.

"Now that is curious," he said. Voice dropped into his hand with a flash of silver. "That bond you made between our souls. It feels like I'm looking in a mirror where the reflection is much more clear than reality. The power truly was meant for you, wasn't it?"

It was true. The oddness of feeling Prochorus through the bond was simply that his power felt somehow incomplete. He had all the same basic powers she did in regards to the divine blades and the song, and yet it all felt so dull. He was an unsharpened edge in comparison to her blade that could cleave the universe.

"There's a power I never wrote about in my journals, which I've been told you've read." He looked at her with a

knowing smile and she sighed. There were so many images and descriptions of Vala, not all of them something a child should read about her ancestors. "I wonder if you've found it. Have you discovered manifestation?"

The powers that Prochorus had written about were storage, calling, channelling, and possession. She'd mastered the first three and dabbled in the fourth, but she'd never thought of this new power.

"Manifestation..." she said. "The ability to give the blades back their bodies?"

"Correct," said Prochorus. "I managed it once, just before I fell to this man." He waggled Nocturne in the air as it replaced Voice in his hand. "The night he pierced my soul with Voice, I hadn't had the time to write down what I discovered. It took much of my energy to maintain, but looking at you, seeing your capacity and your ability to recharge with natural light and rage... I think you could handle it. It wouldn't leave you weakened like it did me."

He handed her a new journal, bound like the rest in leather that was black on the front cover and white on the back. She opened it and was immediately met with a graphic description of what he and Vala got up to after he'd regained his lucidity in the days following his freedom from Legion. The look she gave him could kill, but it made him laugh. Vala at least had the decency to blush when she realised which kind of laugh Prochorus was letting out.

Flipping through she found actually useful information about the nature of her powers. All the things Prochorus had never thought there was a need to write down. Most of it she'd figured out herself, but the book contained the actual words to the song that would cleanse the universe, as well as how each blade resonates with the rest. At the back of the book was the section on manifestation, and she was shocked to see how simple it actually was.

Prochorus had needed to create a body for the blade to inhabit and treated it as an expansion of the possession power.

Instead of possessing the user, it possessed this new body. But he left notes in regard to her own natural powers. She could create flesh from nothing, which she could use to make bodies for her blades and allow them to separate from her, if only for as long as she allowed it.

She pulled her legs up from dangling from the edge of the stage and crossed them, placing her hands in lap and forming a circle of control with her fingers. She meditated for a minute to gather the aether necessary and then got to work. She made a ball of flesh in the air in front of her. It was all porcelain skin, but she made it malleable so that the blade could take on their own form. Then she took up the energy needed for possession, combining a touch of her own aether with the power of the blade she chose to channel through that piece of her. A silver light containing the chosen blade moved from her soul to the ball of flesh and took hold of it.

And then it was done. The ball morphed to form a head and hands that was then shrouded in two-toned red robes. Space folded and the hands were hidden away, and the face took on the shape of a mask. Two eyeholes opened and grey streaks ran down from them, marring the perfect skin as it hardened to be more like bone. The robes contained a void and blue light shone from the eyeholes. Finally, a black ring appeared, piercing the robe and hanging as though it were a pendant. From the deep hood, behind the mask, Narianel felt a warmth. Trust and love and respect.

"It is wrong," said Iblis, the demon from inside Heart, her most loyal follower. "And yet... It feels good to be touched by the air again." His voice was deep and hung in the air.

"I had expected you to choose Zepar or Kali," said Prochorus. He looked to the demon, standing nine feet tall. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Iblis."

"It has been a long time, Prochorus," said Iblis. He bowed his head. His hands appeared and smoothed his robe before touching the black ring that used to be his halo and disappearing again. "I'm afraid to say that I've found a new

master, and I believe she'll go through with my purpose. The song needs to be sung."

"I failed, I know." Prochorus smiled despite his words. "I got more involved with my researched and found this power because I was afraid to take in that much corruption. Now I find out through young Isaac's memories and Vala's scouring of the past that I was *built* to be afraid to use the power. That I was never meant to fulfil what I thought was my destiny. That I worried for nothing."

"Do not blame yourself," said Iblis. "We've all been taken in by Azael, some more than others. It is time to end it. Once my brothers and sisters have been gathered and the song is sung, the end will come and we will fight."

That was another thing Egil had revealed. That Azael would wait until Narianel had performed her duty. He was waiting for her to be the keenest of edges, sharp beyond measure. It was an unsettling thought, especially since Egil believed she'd have all the blades within five years. She could probably delay it for as long as she required, but that would lead to more war and Azael's worshippers causing problems.

"You're as cheerful as always, Iblis," said Prochorus. He smiled through everything. Narianel didn't understand it. "Now, there's another thing I wish to teach you both. If my young descendants would join me up on stage."

Narianel stood and walked with Prochorus to the centre of the stage. Isaac hopped up and stood next to her.

"My powers as a Seer have been very foggy since I was released from Legion," said Prochorus. "It has made looking over what I missed quite difficult. I'm still not fully recovered, but I've watched you both fight quite extensively. I have to say that I'm impressed, but I'm also worried that neither of you use a very simple trick that was a core part of my own duelling style."

"Dance magic," said Narianel at the same time Isaac signed 'intent based gestures?'

"Yes to both of you," said Prochorus. "You, Isaac, use

the Skrae sign language as a substitute for spoken language, but you picked up on where I'm going with this, correct?"

Isaac nodded and smiled.

"And you, Narianel, have simplified my style too far by calling it that, to the point that you miss what I was actually doing. But, I've been looking at Sarkal, and as a practitioner of that martial art you've already figured out half of what I was attempting when I fought."

"I figured it out years ago since you wrote accounts of several of your major duels," said Narianel. "I don't feel I need this lesson."

"You don't, no?"

"You train the universe to interpret your movements as a command to perform a specific spell. By extending your finger you can shoot a beam of fire because you've spoken and then thought the words enough that the universe takes over when you need it to." Narianel shrugged. "It's similar enough how Sarkal bursts work, but it's unneeded for my style, even when I'm not using the blades. I dance like you, but I'm no mage, even if I *am* in the High Circle."

"All very well explained, but lacking in ambition," said Prochorus. From his resting position he pulled his left hand backwards and Narianel found herself falling towards him as invisible threads took her off-guard. He punched her in the face and instead of crashing into the ground, space warped and she fell from the ceiling, but she caught herself in the air. "The tricks can be big or small, Narianel. Knocking your opponent off balance or controlling the area around you. Now come down and learn the method. Whether or not you use it is up to you, but I want you to know how I teach the universe to obey me like a trained pet."

She rolled her eyes and then spent the next few hours practising Prochorus's methods. She set up the air pull he'd used on her, but didn't go much further. After that she'd sat talking to Vala while Isaac worked on his most commonly used techniques, which she was surprised at the complexity of.

Some of them needed thirty or forty words to create exact effects, and Isaac was whittling them down to single hand gestures or arm movements. He really was gifted. It made her want to fight him, test him, see if she even stood a chance.

Over the course of Isaac's training and her chat with Vala, Narianel took the time to manifest a few more of her blades to test her endurance. First came Zepar and Kali, Havoc and Malice. Zepar was about her height, but Kali was massive, over twenty feet tall, six-armed, and blue. She stood to the side of the room, excited about having a body again. Narianel warned her not to cause problems, but Kali looked ready to jump on Prochorus and Isaac anyway and enjoy a brawl.

Narianel was about to manifest Abaddon when Iblis recommended not doing that inside a building she wanted to keep standing, so she opted for Ipos instead. The fallen angel had such a complex body that Narianel felt the burden the moment she took root in the physical mass prepared for her. She brought out a few of the more humanoid blades after that, and found that the closer they were to her in shape and size, the easier they were to manifest. Ipos, Kali, and Iblis were big drains, but Zepar, Vera, and Mara were basically free, using less aether than she naturally generated.

Then she called on Garret, Asara, and Berin. As humans she felt much less drain than the angels, but Berin's status as a null made her unable to hold the manifestation long, the flesh disappearing as the soul left it, completely drained of aether. She could sense Berin back within her, and he wasn't happy about not being able to walk around again, but accepted it quickly. If she wanted to use him, she'd have to actively feed him aether to stop the body falling apart.

Eventually Gilbert appeared, no doubt drawn by the suddenly large amount of souls filling the room. He popped out the shadows in the chair next to Narianel with a grin.

"So he finally taught you that," he said. "Now do Egil so I can punch him."

'I deserve it,' came Egil's whispers.

"I'm not letting him out," said Narianel. "Not yet."

"Fair enough," said Gilbert. He was watching Isaac and Prochorus closely, obviously interested in what they were doing and actively learning.

Eventually she had to release the manifestations. There was a strain to it that became worse with every new person she added. She wondered if she could somehow convert corruption into aether and use it to cover the costs, but she didn't have the time to work on that. It felt like a task for Liara, if she had been stable, but perhaps she could get Akenesa to look into it.

Reaching the end of the day, as she was about to leave, she was glad that Prochorus had been like she imagined him. He had a perverted streak and a fascination with bodies which was no doubt due to the fact that he was a spirit puppeteering his own body, but he was also clever and playful and a joy to be around. It was inspiring, really.

Vala and Gilbert took Isaac to find a room for the night since he'd decided to stay, and that left Narianel alone with Prochorus. He was thoughtful as they walked the path up to the castle's entrance.

"I want you to do yourself a favour," he eventually said. He waved away attendants as they entered the great hall. Narianel's eyes idly wandered to the pillars where Raphael had been chained. The damage had been repaired.

"Not do you a favour?"

"No, this is entirely for you," said Prochorus. "You're too focused on the fight, and I can see that Adela's death still pains you."

"It's not been all that long," said Narianel.

"It's been almost four years," said Prochorus, his tone flat as if commanding her to not interrupt. "We are a nation of immortals, but that doesn't mean we have to operate on the scale of centuries. Vala has told me what Adela told you. To find someone else. To enjoy the rest of your life and not linger on what was lost."

"She told me to go someone specific," said Narianel.

“To a woman she barely knew.”

“Vala shared visions with her. Adela tried to find what would make you happiest. While you were recovering with Father, she was preparing for the future. She knew she was going to die and that it was near impossible to change that, so she sought out a way for you to be happy without her. What was the name of the girl? Tesni, I believe?”

“Yes.”

“Then this is the favour I ask you do for yourself. Go to Tesni and find a way to be truly happy again. Adela gave you express permission and her approval of Tesni, so there’s no need to feel guilty or struggle against it. There’s more to life than the coming battle. There has to be or you’ll drive yourself insane. Before it’s too late, take time away from your eternal cycle of training and battle.”

She looked at him. She only reached his shoulder so she looked up, into his one good eye.

“And you don’t need to keep yourself aetherial all the time. You are not the blade he wants you to be. You are a woman with hopes and dreams and loves, and they don’t need to be about the war. Consider this body your battle form. Now you need to adopt your life form. Don’t give up on living.”

She looked away. “I’ll consider it.”

Narianel manifested Iblis for the Order to see. It had only been a day but she was already faster at gathering the aether and flesh needed. In a way, it was very similar to creating clothes, and the familiar feeling of channelling and possession made it intuitive. In the light of day she could see Iblis taking in power and maintaining himself too, which eased the heavy burden the skill took. Sonta didn't have a sun, but it did have a sky like Avani used to have. A glass bubble that imitated night and day. She'd have to get Chassuille to lock it to day for the final battle just so she could make use of manifestations.

As she created a few more bodies, and as Iblis got to work showing the Order new magic, Royan approached her. He had a look in his eyes that said he was on the edge of snark. He looked her up and down and then spoke.

"So. Did something happen with Prochorus yesterday to enact this change?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Narianel.

She was in her physical body again, and was wearing a backless Nerikan dress. It was black silk, with embroidery of flying crows along the hem that came to just above her knees. Her ankles up to her knees were wrapped in red velvet, and so were her arms from wrist to elbow. She wore her shakai only around her shoulders, and her hair was in a single long braid, much the way her mother and brother wore theirs. She wore neither shift nor any other underclothes, so she was one gust of wind from baring herself before the Order, but she didn't care. She had no shame and nothing to hide.

Having a full physical body was a rarity, even when she'd been alone with Adela, but the fully grey irises gave it away. There was no red glow, not even a hint of a magical shine. This body, her normal state before her Separation, held back her power a lot, but she didn't mind. She was still strong and fast, and more than capable of defeating any of the Order. Her pure white skin lacked its usual glow too, which she

actually didn't like. She'd forgotten that she didn't used to shine in the dark and it would take some getting used to.

"Sure, I can play that game." Royan openly smirked as he stood beside her, arms crossed and watching the Order in their training. "The soldiers have just been wondering why you've changed your image."

"Tell me... What do the soldiers do when they're off duty? When they're here in the city with no orders."

"Well, I guess they spend time with their families, their friends... I know a lot of them have hobbies. Some of them have other jobs and train when they can, readying themselves for the final days, but are otherwise living normal lives. Why?"

"Because I don't need to always be ready to fight," said Narianel. She saw Iblis and Furtur teaching some of the soldiers to fold space, though they were having a hard time as the Order were mostly human and couldn't actually see the folds without channelling Perception. "I've been told that, perhaps, I've been a touch too focussed. That I've failed to take part in the life I'm trying to save."

"Not a bad thought," said Royan. "I might have to follow your lead and take a day off now and then."

"Besides, I can always transform back. My clothes are still made in the same way, even if now they act like silk."

"A message!" shouted a young man in a recruit uniform. He handed a letter to Narianel, which she always thought was odd. Royan was right there and he'd officially taken over as their leader, but they still gave her the mail.

"Where are we off to this time?" asked Royan.

She opened the letter to see it was from Marcus. There were apparently groups of Azazel's followers working in the forests near the capital that were evading the regular army.

"Darizion," she said, handing the letter to Royan. "But I need a favour from you. I want you to take all the blades and to empty out the grounds. I just want some time to be alone. Completely alone, just for a while."

"Are you alright?"

“It’s hard to say,” said Narianel. “I let myself sleep last night for the first time in years. I’d forgotten what it was like to dream.”



Narianel stood on the covered boardwalk surrounding the courtyard garden, looking down at the black rose bushes, lost in thought when she felt someone enter the grounds. She flared her aether just a touch to tell the visitor where she was, and soon Tesni opened the door from the southern wing.

“Royan came to the temple before he left and said there was something wrong with you,” she said. There was a look on her face that Narianel didn’t try to read as her eyes went down and then back up. “What are you wearing?”

“The latest in Nerikan fashion,” said Narianel, turning back to the black roses. She had copied several designs she’d seen around the city the previous days, weaving skin into silk customising to her preference.

“And the body?”

“A suggestion from Prochorus. He told me I should try to enjoy life. It’s not always about the battle, and I’m allowed my own time to relax.”

“So... To have fun you’re staring at flowers?”

Narianel looked at Tesni. Her smile said everything that needed to be said, that Narianel was a self-destructive fool who didn’t know how to have fun.

“It’s just that... There’s half a bond in me. Adela was this solid light within me, filling the gap left by my soul’s scar with a tingling, comfortable cold that kept my flames at bay. Since she died I’ve had to fight every second of every day to keep myself from bursting. I’m struggling to control it. Little spasms of anger make their way out of me.

“We both saw what this did to Lucifer. The man is mad and I have no idea why Chassuille would resurrect him. He was right and I hate it. Without Adela, without my Lilith, the drive

to throw myself into ever-increasing danger, not caring whether I live or die, is becoming intense. True Love is a curse, only evident when one half is removed.

“Other than talking with Prochorus, I can’t think of a time I actually enjoyed myself since she died. Not just moments of amusement, but actually had fun. I still go to the theatre, but it’s hollow now. She’s not there, and I hurt.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” asked Tesni. She hoisted herself onto the railing, carefully hovering her tail so that it didn’t dip into the thorns below. “You always have a plan, right?”

“Nothing can replace Adela in my heart and mind,” said Narianel, “but I’ve have a thought. It’s not really the loss of Adela that’s breaking me. I’ve faced death before, and I’ve accepted that she’s gone, no matter how much I want her back. The bond is the problem. So I have two choices: Give myself to Prochorus so he can edit my soul, or I can try to reignite the bond with someone else.”

Narianel glanced away from the roses to Tesni’s face. Her eyes were wide and she held her mouth tight.

“I won’t ask you to do it right now.” Narianel kept her voice steady. It was a lot to ask. “I have something I have to do in the next few days, so you have time.”

“Why?” Tesni’s voice was steady, but Narianel could smell her blood pumping harder than ever.

“Because it’s what Adela wanted. After speaking with Prochorus yesterday, I decided to brave Adela’s workshop for the first time since her death. Last night was painful, but I feel it has helped me move on. I expected to find everything in disarray, but it was neatly organised and there were runes in place to keep everything clean. She had been prepared to die.

“The first thing I looked at was her unfinished painting because I was curious about her process. She’d never allowed me to see anything before it was done. But on that easel was a rune. At first I thought it must have been a tattoo she had been planning, but once I parsed what the rune did, I... I will admit

that I cried. I don't do it often, that's not really me, but that moment was overwhelming.

"The rune does an insignificant amount of damage to a soul, then copies aether from that part of the caster's core and heals the target. It's useless, really. Hurt and then heal what is essentially the same as a scraped knee. But its true intent was clear. It's a way for me to attach Henan's aether to another person and gain a new True Love bond with them.

"But, like I said, it can wait. It's a heavy burden to bear and I have a duty to perform before I can relax. Something has been revealed to me that must be dealt with before Azael's forces rise for the final battle, so I must go to Sonta and speak with the Grand Circle."

"Is that why you sent away the Order?"

"They would follow me into this battle if they knew. I gave them all the blades, even Heart, so that they would assume that I'm going to spent time reading or going to the theatre. It's been a long time since I've felt this alone, but it must be done. They are stronger than every army I've ever seen despite how small their numbers are, but they aren't ready for the highest level of fighting just yet. There's still more for them to learn, and they're not fortified enough."

"What exactly are you planning to do?" Tesni's aether fluttered and showed her worry. It was a strange emotion to see in her.

"I can't reveal that. There's always the possibility that my words are heard by those who I don't wish to hear."

"When are you going?"

"Soon." Narianel stepped back from the railing and took in Tesni. She was pretty, the serpentine blood adding to the allure. Where Adela had been entirely human, thin and soft, buxom in a way that Narianel had found enjoyable to the touch, Tesni was sleek and made of sharp lines, except her horns which flowed back from her forehead and then up to a point. She looked like a weapon, in all the best ways. "As soon as this conversation is done."

“And when will you be back?” Tesni finally managed to control the flow of her aether, steadying it.

“Likely by nightfall, but I don’t need a decision as soon as I get back. And I don’t expect to come back from this in a good state, anyway. Not only will I have to negotiate with the Grand Circle, I’ll need to go through a high power battle with none of my blades, relying on my own power.”

“I’ll get back to you with my decision.” Tesni hopped down from the railing and left, not looking back. But Narianel caught the flicker when Tesni was off the property. Adela’s plan was coming to fruition.



Narianel stepped into Sonta through the portal she made into Dasus’s old home. It hadn’t been touched since his death, other than when she’d come to claim it as her own. The home of the God of Balance and Twilight. It had multiple floors made from wide and open spaces. Dasus had placed screens to section off the upper floors, but the lower two floors were kept open to receive guests.

She stepped into the streets of the massive, multi-layered city and started on the path to where the gods met. The council building wasn’t far, and closer now than it had been last time since she’d learned to fold space more effectively. The city was built in a way that no mortal would comprehend, where walking in a square around a building would lead to an entirely new street. She could see the overlapping paths and was able to jump between them, much in the same way the gods could.

The skraeðanee themselves were going about their days without much worry, as thought the end wasn’t coming. There were millions of them, every one of them at least in the ninth circle, each some sort of pastel colour in their skin and hair. Their fashions often involved either tight clothing that showed far too much or loose and flowing clothing that revealed

nothing at all. There was nothing in-between. Either they embraced the gaunt look of their curse or they hid from it. They looked just like any other people, with culture and trends and norms.

They seemed equally likely to look away from her in disdain as they did nod to her in respect. A few of them even greeted her and introduced themselves. Those people didn't have domains as gods, nor did they call themselves Lords and Ladies. They acted like many of the people she'd met back in Seremont, which she found refreshing. It was a reminder that she was fighting for these people too, and that the skraeðanee as a whole weren't the gods she was growing to detest.

The council chamber was like an arena, standing tall and dominating the street it was on, with a clear view of the Grand Gate in the distance. Inside were descending circles of chairs with a space at the bottom where all five of the Grand Circle stood, taking questions and discussing the state of the universe. Many of the gods watched her stride down the stairs to Dasus's seat, her seat, but Chassuille deliberately and very obviously ignored her.

She sat through the meeting with as much patience as she could muster. They were discussing a war on a part of Avani she'd never visited and had no stake in. They wanted their Champions to intervene and stop it. Curiously, Aramis wasn't in attendance, even though this was his speciality.

"What would you suggest, High Lady Narianel?" asked Mao. He stifled a smile when Chassuille looked at him. "You are an expert and a veteran of war."

"I don't know of these countries, but from what I've gathered from this conversation, Low Lady Savra and High Lord Dorum are the most revered of the gods in the regions. If it were me, I would go there directly, as I've recently done in Sara De Han and Provallis. Your non-interference rule might have been beneficial for the growth of the peoples of Avani, but now that Azael approaches, we shouldn't be losing soldiers. His forces are currently harassing Darizion and my Order is

dealing with them, so it's only a matter of time before there's a full scale war. We need every pair of hands and you have the power and authority to stop needless loss."

The room was silent for a time before small groups started to chatter. The Grand Circle was silent, though Serk and Voria subtly touched fingertips by their sides and Narianel saw the way their aether flowed. Contact based telepathy, perhaps. Aia and Mao shared a look, though it was hard to tell what Mao was thinking with those eyes filled with stars. Chassuille finally looked at her, letting go of his false smile to reveal the complete blank that he was inside.

"Why are you here?" he asked, everyone else was instantly silent as they looked at him.

"I have something important to ask of the Grand Circle, but it can wait until after the meeting. I was happy to be ignored until there was time to talk to you in private, as I knew my opinion would be controversial."

"Surely there's nothing you can say that couldn't be said in the open," said Voria.

"You would be wrong on that," said Narianel. She could see Nareshilna, Arsenum, and Mostoa in the room. "It will affect the next opening of the Grand Gate."

"I call the Grand Circle to vote on High Lady Narianel's suggestion that we abandon the non-interference rule," said Vereen, God of Magic.

"I agree," said Serk and Voria in unison.

"I disagree," said Chassuille.

"I disagree," said Aia, following Chassuille's lead.

Mao closed his eyes and thought for a moment. He was a Seer, but more than that he could feel the way the future and fate unfolded. Eventually he said "I agree," and the council was adjourned. Savra of the Sea and Dorum of Alloys were talking on the way out how they would appear before their worshippers and command the end to the war, Vereen looked pleased with himself, and the three followers of Azael made their way out separately.

When the doors were closed, Grand Lord Voria, God of Space, wove his magic around the chamber and trapped them in a bubble so that no one could spy on them. Narianel made her way down to the floor, and they stood in circle so they could all see each other clearly.

“When I take a soul into myself so I can turn them into a blade, I gain a portion of their memories and am able to talk with them in my mindscape. I’m here to discuss several bits of information given to me by Egil Krom.”

“That was a valuable piece you removed from the board,” said Aia.

“He’s a time traveller,” said Narianel, which caught Serk’s attention. “I don’t know how he did it, and I think that Azael was controlling his destinations, but it’s clear to me he has memories of the future. I’m sure we’ll be fighting him again in the final battle.”

“With Azael’s power, I’m sure he could bypass my senses for that,” said Serk. “I’ve caught many people trying to venture into the past, unaware that they’d be destroying time between the present and their destination. My inability to catch the Temporal Collapse of Nerik before it became too late for me to intervene is one of my greatest failings. How did Azael manage to avoid breaking time with Egil, then?”

“Egil was a child during the Temporal Collapse, and he was thought lost to it until he reappeared as an adult under Azael’s control. It’s likely that the event was practice.”

“What if the timeline has been heavily modified, over and over, until Egil always was?” asked Mao.

“That’s likely,” said Serk.

“It’s my theory,” said Narianel.

“Tell us what he has revealed to you,” said Aia.

“The final battle will be in under five years, but I believe Azael is waiting for me to sing my song. There’s too much evidence for it. He’s trying to make me into his Blade of the Infinite so that he can use me to his own ends, but he’s failed to convert me. I think the song was meant to break me under

the weight of the corruption, but judging by Egil's reaction to my defeat of him and the fact that Seers can no longer see my future, I believe the timeline is changing. I may be able to delay Azael's attack by not singing the song."

"Do you believe the song to be a work of Azael?" asked Chassuille. "I designed it myself."

"Azael set the rules of the magic we all use and live by," said Narianel. "I think that no matter what the song does, he's influenced it in some way. No matter how pure your intent, he is the one that decides what it actually does."

"And yet you still plan to sing it?" asked Voria. "That seems like madness."

"It's the only way to break your curse." Narianel met each of their eyes of as she talked. "It will free me of my anger, it will let my brother talk again, it will let you feel whole once more. I will not succumb to the corruption. I've spent time with Liara and I've sung less powerful versions of the song multiple times. I know what it feels like and I'm practising to control it. I believe it will be easier when my anger is gone and I can focus better."

"I have to say, you've definitely got your rage under control," said Mao. "I remember watching you on your way to Lucifer. I've seen you unleash yourself in battle. The fact that you had enough control to *not* kill Chassuille is astounding."

"It helps to have a duty," said Narianel. "Just under the surface is this boiling lake of molten eldrine, waiting to force its way out through my eyes. By giving it a way out, while I fight, it helps me in other times to keep it down. It's why I still go out with the Order. It's why I still put myself on the front lines of every battle I face... It's why I've come to tell you that there are three traitors I plan to kill."

"Traitors? Who?" asked Chassuille.

"Mostoa, Arsenum... and Nareshilna."

"I don't believe you," said Chassuille. "Perhaps the first two, but not my brother. He has spent the life of this universe gathering souls for our aether cannons so that we can end my

father once and for all.”

“And who is building those cannons?” asked Narianel. “Egil has told me they will fail because Arsenum will betray you at the last moment, revealing his lifetime’s intent. Egil has told me that your angels will lose their power to fly because Mostoa no longer wishes them to have it. Egil has told me that the reapers will turn on your armies and target the strongest fighters first, crippling any attempt to fight back.”

“And why should we believe you?” asked Chassuille. His tone was even, and so was his soul’s flow, but she could feel his hatred that didn’t exist.

“Because I don’t lie, and I’ve interrogated Egil with Vera’s truth power at full effect. I believe everything he said.” She held Chassuille’s eyes as she spoke, only breaking away to look at Mao when he spoke.

“As far as I can tell, she doesn’t lie.” He rolled his right wrist in a dismissive way, which was a skraeðanee equivalent of a shrug. “I’ve looked several times into her past and never been able to find one.”

“Everyone doubts me,” said Narianel.

“Do you blame them?” asked Serk. “You take a very harsh stance against those who oppose you, and Azael’s touch on your soul isn’t a secret. I believe you are sincere in your opposition to Azael, but I understand why people doubt you.”

Narianel nodded at this. “I understand, but it’s been an annoyance. Back on topic, I’ve come to you all in good faith. You all know me, whether you like me or not. I’m going to be killing three of your kin, one of them quite literally kin, and I want you to know why before I act. I’ll be going for Nareshilna first since I consider him to be the most dangerous, and I want your followers to deal with the reapers.”

“That can be arranged if you give us a couple of hours,” said Mao. He gave Chassuille a look that said not to argue.

“I’ll be waiting in my quarters, then,” she said.

“Before you go,” said Chassuille. “I feel nothing for my brother at this very moment, but I know that once the Bell’s

curse is broken I will regret not asking this. You will seek more proof before you kill him, right? You won't just ambush and slay him without giving him the chance to defend himself?"

"That was always my plan," said Narianel. "I saw them in the meeting but couldn't sense a bond with Azael, other than the familial scent I can smell in you too. I would hear them each talk, and I might invade each of their mindscapes just to have a look at their secrets."

"That is illegal by Sontan law," said Mao.

"Then it's good I only abide by my own sense of duty, rather than being told what to do by people who only have authority because they came first."

Mao shrugged and laughed at that, and the twins of space and time touched fingers subtly again. Aia narrowed her eyes and frowned before looking to Chassuille, who was as empty as ever.

"I'm here to kill three people, at the very minimum," continued Narianel. "so I'm not too worried about ending up in whatever prison you have here. I don't think it would hold me for long anyway."

"You speak as if you're more powerful than the five of us combined," said Chassuille. "You've come here in a physical body that limits your power and make boasts."

"I can't help it," said Narianel. She gave him a smirk. "There's a part of me that just wants to antagonise you. But really, I don't believe you're thinking this through. I'd be exempt through statute one-forty."

"So you do know the law," said Mao with a smile.

"Immunity to punishment when killing a follower of Azael only applies to Skraeðanee," said Aia.

"The law states 'Gods' if you'll check," said Narianel. "And I am a God now. If I hadn't earned it with my own inner divinity, Dasus ensured it by passing his titles to me."

"That can't be right," said Serk.

"It is," said Chassuille. "You've read all our laws, haven't you?"

“I have. I know for a fact that I didn’t need to consult you first, but I thought it was important to show that even if I don’t like you, we’re still on the same side. I’ll be going now.”

Voria reunited the council chamber with the space it was meant to touch, and Narianel walked back to Dasus’s old home. The walk was shorter this time, since the city twisted in different ways walking in opposite directions.

She sat on his sofa, directly on the seam of black and white, then stood. She hated doing nothing, and waiting without something to keep her occupied would drive her insane. Even when she had free time in Seremont or on the battlefield, she had books and practice to keep her mind of the tedium of time. She searched out Dasus’s books, but stopped when she found his library.

“You’re doing a lot with what I’ve given you.” A man dressed in a black suit sat on an armchair, an open book in his lap. He was skraeðan and his skin was charcoal black, the same as his hair and irises. “Sit. Let’s talk.”

Narianel slowly made her way to the chair opposite the man, sitting but ready to launch herself into battle.

“It has been a while, Azael,” she said. She hadn’t seen him since she’d invoked her name at the Divide of Creation. She managed to keep herself steady, but the beast that she was wanted to attack him, but there was that little voice telling her to flee. “How are you here?”

“I’m not,” said Azael. His smile was uncanny. He was so inviting, and yet he looked about as dangerous as she felt. “This body is an illusion. That’s the only way we’ve ever met, you know. I’m currently sitting with my back to the other side of the Grand Gate. Not that it would ever stop me.”

“What are you doing here?” She caught herself digging her fingers into the armrests, clawing at them, and forced herself to stop.

“Talking with you about what you’re about to do,” said Azael. His smile was charming, but she didn’t feel any sort of magical compulsion. She felt like she could like this man if he

wasn't so completely insane. "I've given you something so glorious and you've been using it in interesting ways, so I thought I'd check in on my most beloved blade."

"I'm not your blade. And what have you given me?"

"Free will."

That struck her as odd. She'd learnt from Egil that Azael believed the universe to be cyclical, that everything will repeat, but she'd never have guessed he thought no one had free will. Seers saw futures that could be changed all the time, even if some things were largely fixed. People made choices every moment of every day. How was she the only one with free will when everyone was deciding what coat to wear that day, every day?

"I can see the confusion in your eyes, Vanja," said Azael. Before she could protest that he'd gotten her name wrong, he kept talking. "Everyone always does the same thing, over and over. Only the first of the cycles was unique, until now. I gave it to you and what have you done? Subtly influence others into working for you and stealing my servants for your own."

He seemed more amused than angry, as if she were a harlequin dancing about with bells and ribbons. She didn't know what to make of him.

"When did you give me free will, and why?" she asked.

"It was when you slept in this very house," said Azael. "After Dasus was done working on your repairs. I gave to you a chunk of my power, and with it came free will. As to why... It's because this is the final cycle. You will do as you're meant to, even with free will. I need you to have that piece of my power so that we can leave. Go beyond the Great Beyond. Does that not interest you, Vanja? Ending all this suffering and finding out where we truly belong?"

"My name isn't Vanja," said Narianel.

"Of course it is." Azael put the book on his lap on the floor and leaned on his knees. His shape morphed into the human she'd seen before. Pale skin and long black hair, deep

brown irises, and ears clipped twice each. He wore no shirt, revealing a scrawny body covered in scars. His trousers were thick and black, and he had on fur-lined boots. "Your name is Vanja because your soul came with me and I planted you here. I grew you anew. Your name is Vanja, just as my name isn't Azael."

"Then what is your name?"

"That would be telling. Try and remember." Azael leaned back, revealing a circular scar on his chest where Chassuille's hole was. "But let's talk about your use of free will. You've influenced so much without realising it. Dasus wasn't meant to teach you how to turn souls into weapons, but you now have eighteen powerful souls at your disposal. Of them, only Nergal the demon was not under my direct command. You have stripped my command structure quite effectively."

"Good. And soon I'll have three more."

"You're stepping into my Grand Opening years too early, Vanja. You're not meant to face them. Each is meant to fall to a different one of your allies, taking down many of yours before they fall. This act perverts the flow of time."

"I should hope so," said Narianel. "If it should throw you off-balance, then it's a win." She was feeling better now. Getting used to his presence took some effort, but she could fight back now. "You should just release me from your bond, because I'll never help you."

"We'll see." Azael clasped his hands in front of that circular scar. "But yes, I can release you from all bonds and there will be no consequence for you."

Narianel suddenly felt lighter, as if a hand had been taken off the top of her head and she could stand up from the mud. She could no longer feel his touch on her soul, only now realising she'd been feeling it the entire time.

"Just as a note," said Azael, "but if I'd done that in a previous cycle then you would be dead. It's only that you now have a piece of the Spirit of the Divine within you that you can survive without my magic flowing into you. You have your own

magic now.”

“My own magic?” she asked.

“Yes, and this should be entertaining.” Azael closed his eyes and the smugness of his smile was infuriating. “You are now a source of magic, through which people can draw their power. The source is infinite, and even if you have all your allies draw on you at the same time, you won’t feel even the slightest bit of drain. I fuel the entire universe, and I don’t feel it, after all.”

“A source,” Narianel muttered.

“Yes, Pure Lady Narianel,” said Azael. She looked at him and saw fondness in his eyes. His scent was that of a man looking at his favourite pet. “Vanja, I give this world to you to do with as you wish.” He stood up, revealing that he wasn’t very tall, only an inch or two taller than her. The thinness made him look much taller when sitting. “When you are ready to fight, sing the song. If you take too long I might attack anyway, but I can wait a few years. I’ve waited this long already.”

“Before you go...” she said quickly, sensing the illusion start to unravel. “Show me your true self. I don’t trust this form you’ve shown me.”

He laughed as his hair faded to white and a scar from the corner of his right eye ran down the side of his nose, as if someone had tried to gouge it out with a knife. His eyes turned a strange red and purple mix. He was albino.

“Until we meet again, Vanja.”

He vanished in the blink of an eye and there was no trace of his scent. But that feeling of power and freedom had stayed. There really was something inside her.

She walked outside, unsure how much time had passed until she saw the Grand Circle walking towards her. The people of Sonta looked at her, confused.

“What did you do?” asked Chassuille. “Why do you have so much power now?”

“Azael came to me,” she said. “He cut me off from his

bond and this is the result. He gave me power and called me Pure Lady Narianel, as well as Vanja.”

“Vanja?” asked Serk.

“I don’t know,” said Narianel. “He said that I’m reborn from a previous world. Or something. I was too busy trying not to die to take it seriously.”

“I can feel the power in you,” said Mao.

“And the bond really is gone,” said Chassuille. “He has released you.”

“No, not yet.” Narianel met his eyes. With this power there had to be something she could do for him. “He says he’ll wait to attack until I’ve completed my collection of blades. Until I sing. But he won’t wait long too. He’s put a clock on this struggle. Egil told me that it’s almost five years away, but now I’m worried it’ll be less than that. He’s physically sitting on the other side of the Grand Gate, but he’s able to project his form through to this side, go anywhere he wants without moving. I don’t think you’ll be able to stop him doing that, before you think about trying.”

“It was in my mind,” said Voria. He kept looking to where she knew the Gate to be.

“The battle will take place in Sonta, then,” said Mao. “I’d been hoping that we could push it into the Aether Sea.”

“We can always evacuate those who can’t fight there,” said Aia. Mao nodded at this, closing his eyes and thinking.

As they talked, a female skraeðan walked past without taking notice of the gathered gods, and Narianel saw something in the woman. There was no need to concentrate or look for weaknesses. Links to Azael were plainly visible now. Narianel moved as though she held Needlepoint, folding space around her and where she wanted to be, then unfolded it with her in that spot. She appeared in front of the woman.

“What is your name?” she asked.

That was all it took for the woman to attack, jumping from shock and unleashing lightning all around her. She attacked indiscriminately but the Grand Circle created barriers

to protect the people and buildings.

Narianel, however, saw the way forward differently. This wasn't a fight that needed fought. This could be stopped immediately with a firm heel to the throat. She could feel this woman drawing on the power of the universe through the piece of power Azael gave her, and so cut her off. The lightning instantly stopped.

"What? Why can't I use magic!?" the woman screamed at Narianel as she fell to her knees.

"I have decided to tell you no," said Narianel. There was a calmness to her voice that she rarely found. A complete lack of aggression that only made her words more powerful. "Your master has given control of the universe to me, and I've reduced your presence to near zero. Just enough to keep you alive. For now."

"How is this possible?" asked Chassuille.

"I'm not entirely sure," said Narianel. "Azael has a power within him that's so unlike the way we understand the words and intent we turn into magic. It's something I feel now and believe I have control over. He called it the Spirit of Divinity, but there's no consciousness to it. It's more like a solid aether crystal that I now have a tiny piece of. It is a weight within me, warm yet cold, pulsing yet still. Balanced."

"This is something we need to discuss," said Voria.

"I don't think so," said Narianel. With a thought she created a new layer to Sonta and forced herself and the Grand Circle onto it, away from the crowds. Then she used her new power to find every single skraeðan linked to Azael, including that woman, and they appeared in the space. She manifested a floor and chains, and brought them all to their knees.

At the front were the three they had discuss, and in a row behind them were seven other skraeðan that dared call themselves gods. Nareshilna, looking so much like Azael's false skraeðan form, stared up at her from his shackles with so much hate she wondered if he was trying to set her on fire. Arsenum had a tough appearance with grey skin and hair,

while Mostoa was a soft green with long and flowing hair.

"Each and every one is guilty," she said, turning to the Grand Circle. "I would suggest execution."

"What madness is this!?" shouted Nareshilna. "You had better release me now, you little monster!" He and many others were trying to draw power to perform whatever spells they thought would get them free of the chains. "The reapers will be on their way to free me as we speak!"

"No, they won't," said Narianel. She squatted down so she could stare him in the eyes. "I can see it. They felt your bond to them move to me and are unsure what to do."

"You stole the bond?" Nareshilna's eyes went wide. He looked to Chassuille then Serk then Mao. "You would allow this?"

"I didn't even feel it being done, but I see it now," said Mao. "This new strength of yours is curious, Pure Lady."

"Pure Lady?" asked Nareshilna. He locked eyes with Narianel and his panic started to rise. Just like her, the skraeðan had an aetheriad in their chests instead of heart and lungs. It controlled the flow of aether through their physical bodies, and in that moment Nareshilna's was operating in overdrive. She let him draw just a little more from her so that he didn't die from a thinned flow.

"Your father gave me some of his power," she said. "The Blade of the Infinite, as much as I hate that title, is his whole plan. You don't matter. You were going to betray your family for nothing, and you never had a choice."

She could feel her prisoners try even harder to gather aether, some of them screaming, some of them crying. Her words held a power that many of them had been avoiding for so many years. Truth.

"I see the bond in all of them, now that I'm looking for it," said Chassuille. His empty voice silenced the entire group. Hundreds of skraeðan watched him with fear in their eyes, their flows slowing as they reached that inevitable acceptance of the end.

“Before you make a decision,” said Narianel. She stood and turned to him. She walked to him, gathering aether in her fist and pushing intent through her new power. She reached out and touched his chest, and while he didn’t flinch, she could tell he didn’t want her touching him from the way his soul instantly hardened to block her power. She pushed through it with surprising ease and let her magic do its work.

When she stepped back, Chassuille clutched at his chest. There was emotion in his eyes. Shock, fear, joy, loss. She’d returned his heart to him, in more ways than one.

“I cannot undo the curse of the Bell,” she said. “I can see how it works now. I need to sing. I need to do exactly as he wishes, to beckon him to open the Grand Gate. But this I can give you. Your *anðeda*.”

Anðeda, soul/person aptitude, was a person’s ability to be a person. It was what humans called humanity. It marked the difference between a person and an animal. It was what Azael had stolen and turned Chassuille into that falsely smiling machine.

He dropped to his knees and cried. When Aia went to him, he clutched at her skirts like a child while she stroked his head. She looked at Narianel, tears in her own eyes, and there was a newfound respect there. She’d never truly believed that Narianel was on their side, but this is what she did with so much power. It was proof.

“Are there any of these souls you want?” asked Mao. There was a grim cast to his face, those endless eyes watching the followers of Azael with something that Narianel couldn’t quite describe. Judgement? Stern acceptance of a duty yet to be performed? Sorrow?

“Nareshilna, Arsenum, and Mostoa.” She looked at them. “Egil pointed them out to me. I believe he saw in them aspects that I am looking for within my collection.”

“And what is it you’re looking for?” asked Serk. She walked up next to Narianel and looked down on those she had trusted. There Narianel could see the hatred and betrayal as

plainly as if it had been written on her forehead.

"I'm expanding the song. I'm looking for the perfect harmony for the task ahead."

"I vote in favour of mass execution," said Mao.

"I agree," said Serk.

"I vote against," said Voria. "We can contain them here until after the battle with Azael. I imagine most of them could be re-introduced to society."

"You are soft," said Mao. "I respect it, but we cannot risk Azael undoing what the Pure Lady has done here and brining them to battle. As sad as it is, we must end them now."

"Nar-vitor," said Chassuille. He was on his feet, Aia holding his hand. Vitor meant brother, and the blending of name and station caused so much pain in Nareshilna's soul that Narianel almost cringed from just being able to sense it. "Were you always on his side? Was the plan always to betray us in the end?"

"It was," said Nareshilna, hanging his head and hiding his eyes behind his shoulder-length hair. "I am a faithful servant of our father. The reapers were created only to battle your angels, not that they knew that. They have innocently performed their usual duty all this time not knowing their true purpose."

Chassuille closed his eyes and his grip firmed in Aia's. He sighed. It was so genuine that Narianel had trouble believing it came from him. "I vote in favour of execution."

"I vote in favour," echoed Aia.

"Then so be it," said Mao. "Pure Lady, Goddess of Death, if you would."

"You can choose a new God of Death from among those you trust and I will pass the bond to that person," said Narianel. "Death is something I cause, not something I am."

With a little concentration she pulled the souls from the bodies of the skraeðan before her, locking them into the eternal sleep that mortals called death. They floated as tiny crystals of aether, smaller than her fist, dull from the lack of

life within them. She kept the three souls she'd claimed, using her powers to instantly forge them into weapons.

Nareshilna became Waltz, for the intricate dance with death that all mortals face. Arsenum became March, for the tune that's played for industry and advancement. Mostoa became Cabaret, for the playful and seductive freedom of the winds and sky.

"Contact me when you find a replacement for him," she said. "For now, I'm returning to Avani."



Narianel appeared in the forest to the east of Darizion, in the middle of a hidden camp sprawling out through the trees in a make-shift city in only the way a military force could make.

"High Lady?" asked a few of the Blades, startled at her sudden arrival.

"Pure Lady, now," she said. "Where is Royan?"

"The command tent is over there," said one. There were too many to remember names now. Albert, she thought.

She headed through the forest, following the path of the tents and cookpots to a guarded area. The two men on duty let her through with a smile and a nod, no questions asked, and she stepped into the tent. There was a table at the centre and she noticed a lack of chairs. That was a Royan thing. He claimed to think better on his feet. Instead, there were a few shelves and boxes with maps and materials.

Stood around the table, looking down at a map covered in miniatures representing the various camps of Azael's loyal minions, were Royan, Chas, and a few of the other higher ranking soldiers.

"I felt you arrive," said Royan. "Something wrong?"

"Many things, but one at a time," she said. Looking down at the map, she adjusted the miniatures to be more accurate, getting a look from Vance Mason, Royan's Master Scout. Then he tilted his head when she moved a camp ten

miles north-east. "They moved," she said.

Royan had Heart on his belt, which he did as a sign of authority amongst the Blades. It was likely why they still saw her as their leader, because the zeroth blade represented the idea of the Order as a whole. Unity.

She explained to the room what happened in Sonta and they took it in stride. Many of them saw it as a victory. Royan and Chas knew the game had just changed.

"So we're on a clock now," said Chas. Despite his large frame and muscles, he had a good head on his shoulders.

"I'm going to set out on the first day of next year," she said. "Until then I'm going to relax and get used to my new power. For now, however, I simply have a gift for you, Royan."

She stepped around the table, stopped to adjust yet another miniature, then looked Royan in the eye. She held out her hands, palms up, and with a confused look he placed his own hands on hers, palm down.

"I officially accept you as the third Champion of Blades from this moment forward," she said. "Prochorus is no longer needed for the song, and I'm not in the habit of worshipping myself as a god. You accept my leadership and follow my ideals, you fit as the leader of the Order of Blades. And so our souls are now bonded. You are my Champion."

The bond formed and she passed on everything she intended for him. His brow furrowed as he became aware of what she'd done.

"You now have access to your own blade well," she said. "Many gods give their Champions powers that fit their role, and that is my gift to you. You are linked into the blade bond, no matter how far away I am, and can add or remove links in that chain as you see fit. You are my second."

She stepped back and they bowed to each other. Then he took Heart in his hand and she watched it vanish in a familiar flash of silver. Heart rested in Royan's soul, and then slowly she felt the entire Order joining the blade bond at Royan's direction. Then more of the blades came to rest inside

the soul of her new Champion.

Then something curious happened. One by one, Havoc and Malice and Nocturne returned to her through the bond of their own volition. They were soon followed by Heart.

"One moment," she said, sitting on the floor. She let loose her flow and began to meditate.



"This is quite the situation," said Iblis. They stood in the arena and the seats were oddly empty. "You will need to teach the man how to shape his mindscape. The others are confused and curious, but it is clearly intentional that you allowed us into his soul. That *he* allows us into his soul."

"The plan is coming together," she said. Kali and Zepar sat in the seats of the arena, listening intently. Opposite them were the three skraeðan she'd taken, chained and resisting her. "The new song is nearly complete. Only a few more pieces and I'll be ready for the finale."

Iblis looked at Nareshilna and then she felt him touch the bond with the reapers. "I imagine this isn't quite what Egil planned for, however."

"Not at all," said Egil. He was so silent while standing at her side that she hardly noticed him most of the time. "They were at the Grand Opening. Will be. Were. I don't know. You're changing things."

"I have free will, according to Azael." She then took the time to tell the story again. "Spread the word to the others. Tell them of my power and to trust Royan as my Champion."

"As you wish," said Iblis, with a bow. There was joy and respect to his tone that overshadowed the fear in Egil's unsteady gaze.



"Royan," she said as she stood up, knowing full well that only a

second had passed outside her head and she had just sat down, but it didn't matter. "Iblis has asked that I teach you to mould your mindscape. Your training will begin when you return to Seremont. I'll meet you there."

With a thought she returned the blades to Royan's well. She turned to leave, adjusting one last miniature and smiling at Vance, and then in the longest spacial fold she'd done without Needlepoint, she put herself back home.

There is so much to say. As I type this, there is a political schism within the Divine Archive and whether or not you read this depends on which faction wins. The original leaders are attempting to cover up my work, as you've seen from the censorship in the past, while the Free Information movement is trying to inform the public.

If what I've translated is true, then it means that the u82 Creator has done the unprecedented and split the Divine Spark, sharing it was Narianel. There's discussion as to whether or not to call her the u82 Ascendant, but for now I will continue to call her by her name.

Splitting the Divine Spark creates a great many issues, and is possibly why the Reality Corruption happened. Many are now wondering what will happen when the two pieces are brought together again, which will be the 18th transfer from u81 to u82.

It should go without saying, really, that none of this day, from the talk with Tesni through to making Royan her Champion, happened in previous Cycles. This is the first truly unique Cycle since the original and I am flabbergasted at just how different it's turning out to be. What the u82 Creator said about Narianel gaining free will after Dasus healing her is likely correct, as that's where most of the major diversions start.

This is a long break from the narrative, but I feel this was important to put on paper, as much as we use paper these days. Going forward, I believe I can see the route Narianel will take to the Reality Corruption, but that's only assuming that she'll largely follow the path of the previous Cycles.

Narianel sat on the floor, building blocks with Norman. The little boy was her grandson, and Mira sat in a chair by the hearth watching them. Norman was two years old, and had been born with the ruff of feathers that all Vanavolk did. His father, Darren Fletcher, was still a member of the Order of Blades, but he didn't go out on missions. He stayed in the city and acted as a guard so he could be with his family.

Norman was the second male Vanavolk, after Isaac. He was already showing signs of a keen mind, and his eyes shone with curiosity, those crescent pupils showing he carried the blood of Galina. Mira was a human gifted the power of the Vanavolk, and that made Norman quarter blooded, but it could be argued he was a halfblood, like Akenesa and Liara.

Narianel did her best to spend two or three days each week with Mira and Norman. They might not be her direct blood, but they were her daughter and grandson, and she wanted to spend more time with them than she already did. She loved them deeply, and she knew Adela had loved Mira like a daughter too. Adela would have adored little Norman.

Darren showed up just after noon. Norman waddled over to his father with a smile, and Darren happily picked him up. But there was a look in the man's eyes.

"I have odd news," he said. "People are saying that Grand Lord Chassuille is in his temple. I asked around, and as far as I can tell, it's true."

Narianel stood and opened her mind again. She often blocked off her senses when with her family, just so she could focus on them and not be actively tracking the Order to see what they were up to. She felt Chassuille instantly, his aura standing larger and more intense than any other at the edges of her natural senses.

"You want to go see, don't you?" asked Mira. "You can go." Her giggle was so pure. Narianel was glad she was happy.

"I'll be back later," she said. She gave Norman a kiss on

his forehead on the way out, grabbing her coat too.

Narianel was dressed in Vinish fashion. While she would normally wear a tunic, as was normal in military uniforms, she was wearing a white shirt and a black skirt that fell below her knees. It wasn't as loose as a Nerikan dress, so it felt a little restrictive, but she did like how it looked. Her coat was black with a long tail, and the cuffs were embroidered in red swirls. On the back was the Skrae symbol for 'blade' and on her collar she had one of Adela's silver pins. It was shaped like a robin.

She was also wearing a pair of nice black shoes. She would normally wear heavy boots or just go barefoot, so it felt like she was back in school. She had on thick red stockings, which she noticed turned heads more than when she was practically naked in her aetherial form. People were weird.

When she reached the Court of Temples, there were over a thousand people crowding the front of the Temple of Chassuille. They were all trying to get a look inside the large double doors, which stood open. There were more guards out front than usual, and she could feel Gilbert lurking in the shadows.

The crowd parted for her as she approached the temple, which wasn't unusual these days. The guards didn't even move when she walked past them.

"...and I do appreciate your service," Chassuille was saying to the gathered priests. "I plan to install a new angel here, rather than relying on the Eyes. Ah, there you are." He turned and smiled at Narianel. It was a genuine smile.

He was flanked by Tesni and, shockingly, Lucifer. The angel had a very unbecoming smirk and she was about to wipe it off his face when Chassuille spoke again.

"I wish to thank you for my heart," he said. "I never got the chance before you left."

"There's no need," she said, not taking her eyes off Lucifer. "It was the least I could do, until I collect my blades."

"I've spent far too long away from my true personality,

being ungrateful and demanding. You were right, on many accounts, and I want to set things right between us. You even had the opportunity to destroy a whole nation of my followers and you didn't."

"It's fine."

"You might have overheard, but I'll be placing a new angel in this temple." Chassuille looked over his shoulder at the door leading down to the room the Eyes used as a base. "The incident with Haziël should have been corrected a long time ago."

"It's his fault." Narianel gestured towards Lucifer, who looked away from her.

"Yes." Chassuille looked at Lucifer, who was a little shorter than him. "I'm currently taking him on an apology tour of all the places he wronged."

"That won't bring back those he killed. It won't undo the pain he caused."

"You are free to not forgive him." Chassuille crossed his arms and closed his eyes, the smile fading in a much more natural way. There was remorse on his face, in the furrow of his brow and the tightness of his lips. "I didn't expect you or your family to do so. Michael and Azra-el have, but your mother didn't. I didn't bother speaking to your grandfather in the Theatre, as I don't think he'd be too happy to see Lucifer, either."

"He better not be the angel you're placing here," said Narianel. The oppressive emptiness was overtaken by the rage in her core and it showed on her face briefly before she fought it down again.

"No, I'll be choosing when I return to Sonta."

"Good. I'm leaving now. I was simply curious as to why you were here. It's good to see you taking my advice and letting your people see you. It will make a difference in their willingness to fight in the end."

She turned to go but she felt a shift in Lucifer. She looked back and he had his mouth open to say something.

“What?”

“Can I see her? I know you have her blade and I’ve heard about your power to give them bodies again.”

“I’ve given her to another to borrow for the time being and even if I had her in me now I wouldn’t let you see her after all the trouble you’ve caused.”

“That is needlessly cruel,” said Lucifer. She couldn’t believe the indignity on his face and the way his soul flared with emotion.

“Are you serious?” she asked, only just managing to stop herself from shouting. “You trapped Michael in the Divide. You chained up Raphael for centuries. You mind controlled Turul. You had my grandfather killed. Any kind of punishment you get is just, even simply being disallowed from seeing Lilith. Your bond broke when she died and she is coping with that far better than you are. You’re a pathetic wretch that didn’t deserve a second chance. I hope you’ve thanked Azra-el, because he’s the only reason I didn’t destroy you when I had you in my hands.”

Lucifer didn’t say anything and just looked away. She looked to Chassuille, who was carefully considering their conversation.

“Why did you resurrect him?” she asked.

“I spoke with him in the Theatre,” said Chassuille. “I was trying to see what I could learn about Azael and his view of the Ruination. He pledged himself to me once more, and I believed him. I still do. I made him fight his Relife on his own, and he came out victorious. The eldrite is stored away, and was going to be processed by Arsenum before the end into weapons to be used against my father.”

“Send me the eldrite and I’ll turn it into eldrine,” said Narianel. “I’ll pry the knowledge out of Arsenum, though in our brief conversations this past day he’s said that he likes me, so perhaps he’ll be useful. Only Nareshilna of the three is being stubborn. Several of your angels need new weapons after I’ve taken back my blades, so I’ll make replacements for them. We

should use every advantage we have.”

She left the temple and the crowd parted for her again. Some of them stepped back farther than necessary, likely sensing her annoyance. She went home and tended to the roses, which helped her stay calm. She wanted to return to Mira and Norman, but she avoided going to them in a bad mood as she wanted memories of them to be happy ones.



Dusk was approaching and Narianel sat on the roof of Adela’s tower, watching the sky and looking at the waning moon already visible. The air was crisp, and it looked like there would be rain in the next couple of days, from the clouds blowing in from the south.

Tesni landed on the roof, folding in her wings and looking up at the moon. She sat cross-legged, and Narianel noticed for the first time how awkward that tail must be to deal with on a daily basis. She’d seen Tesni sit on normal chairs by turning them around so the back was either to the side or in front of her.

“You’re getting much better at handling your rage,” said Tesni. “When we went to the Isle of Dusk, you were a very different person.”

“It’s still there, just under the surface.”

They sat for a while in silence, letting the night roll in and consume the city. Little lights bloomed, liked stars hiding in the streets, and the stirring of the city’s aether began to settle. It was a time of peace, and they savoured it together.

“Tell me about her,” Tesni said eventually.

“Adela?”

“Yeah.”

“Where to begin...”

Narianel and Tesni talked long into the night. Narianel talked about growing up with Adela and all the mischief they got up to as youths. She talked about her loneliness during the

Vin-Cor War and the time they spent together afterwards. She talked about her mistake and everything leading up to the Isle of Dusk and Lucifer, and how she came out of it changed. She talked about the years afterwards, finding Mira, getting married, being actually happy despite knowing that Azael was on his way to be nothing but pain. She talked about Adela's final moments.

Narianel thought a normal person would cry at that moment, when the tale was finished and the emotion was let loose. But she didn't cry. She felt hollow. Not in the same way as other immortals. She didn't want to end herself, and she was ready to keep fighting. But it was an emptiness nonetheless. There was the rage of her curse, pushed down and ready to spring up, and there were fleeting moments of joy or sorrow or irritation. Nothing seemed to last. Her suite of emotions were muted and ephemeral. It was an effort just to think of herself as a person.

And she told Tesni this, explaining everything that went through her mind. The loss and the rage and the divinity that she'd found as a beast. Tesni just listened and took it all in, only interjecting to ask questions.

"...and that's what happened," she said, finishing her story of meeting Azael after they'd last talked. "I think I've gained the trust of the Grand Circle now, but looking back I think Mao respected me the moment he felt the change in my power. It was strange, being called 'Pure Lady' so freely. My relationship with Mao has always been strange, though, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"I met him when I became the Champion of Light," said Tesni. "His eyes were beautiful, despite the way they are. He told me there was a beast I'd need to tame, and I think he might have meant you."

Narianel met Tesni's eyes then looked away. Tesni was smiling, but it wasn't in her usual 'I've just told a bad joke' way.

"There's something else I need to tell you." Narianel couldn't bare to break that smile, but she had to be honest.

“Before I marched to war, chasing Egil, Vala came to me and told me that Aldo would die. I didn’t warn him or try to change the future because Vala said it was a fixed point. There are people I’ve saved who had variable deaths, but Aldo I was told wouldn’t survive no matter what I tried.

“I did talk to him before the battle. I told him that I’d reveal my plans to him after the battle, knowing that he would die. I’ve felt terrible about it since I did it. I trusted him and I would have kept my word had he survived, but I knew I wouldn’t have to. Maybe if I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my campaign against Egil I might have tried, but I didn’t.”

“Well...” said Tesni. Without looking, Narianel knew that the smile was gone. “Not being able to stop deaths that are meant to happen is something we’ve always struggled with, right? I can’t say I like that you didn’t even warn him, and that was a time of pain for me, but I understand. I’m not happy, but I understand. And you were honest, which counts.”

“It’s the most unforgivable thing I’ve done.” Narianel had tried to ignore it. She’d been lost in her quest for Egil’s death. She hated that part of her life.

“Maybe. Speaking as the Champion of Light, I think I’m supposed to scold you and demand you tell me what you were going to tell Aldo. Speaking as the adopted child of Aldo and Maria, it does upset me to know that I couldn’t save him in that fight. But speaking as someone who knows you, who now very much understands you, I don’t hate you. There was nothing you could have done and it’s best to move on.”

They sat in silence for a little longer. There was a shift in Tesni’s aether, a contented happiness setting into her scent, and together they watched the moon. Narianel didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t quite forgiveness, but it was enough.

“I’ve decided to accept your offer,” said Tesni. She touched Narianel’s shoulder. “It’s what Adela wanted, once she knew what her fate was, and it’s what I want.”

“I’m glad,” said Narianel. “Follow me.”

Narianel jumped from the tower, landing softly in the

courtyard, surrounded by the black roses. With a thought, far too easily, she stained the grass black around her. First in a wide, open circle, then the details of Adela's rune. The Skrae symbols for target, for soul, for love.

Tesni landed and folded in her wings. She stepped into an empty circle in the rune and clasped her hands in front of her, still smiling. Narianel stepped into the other empty circle and then called out the three blades currently within her. She summoned them into the covered walkway around the garden so she was empty and they didn't interfere with the magic.

Narianel held out her hands and Tesni took them, then the magic began. The lines of the rune lit up, pouring white mist into the air around them. The mist turned violet as it filled with aether, and then pushed its way into their souls. Tesni shivered and her grip tightened, but it lasted only a moment. The light and mist faded, and they looked at each other for a silent moment.

"I don't feel any different," said Tesni. "I thought there would be a change in my emotions, but I still feel the same about you as I always did." She blushed as she said it, which made Narianel smile just a little.

"I feel different," said Narianel. Suddenly memories of how she felt about Adela rose within her. It was the same. That draw, that desire, that comfort. It floated there in the emptiness, not making her whole, not fixing her issues, but at the very least it helped.

Narianel stepped forward, pulling Tesni to her. She held Tesni's hips as she leaned in and kissed her.

"Adela knew your feelings and knew it wouldn't change you much, I think. The rune just let me feel for you as I did for her. It made it possible for me to love someone else."

They kissed again, Tesni grabbing Narianel's back as if she were going to suddenly disappear. After the kiss, Narianel held Tesni's hand and led her to the bedroom, where Tesni's fantasy of so many years came true.

Royan and the Order returned the previous night and her blades were returned to her in success. She had immediately entered her mindscape and discussed her divinity with Iblis in front of all the others. Then, returning to reality, she found it was much easier to give them bodies. As Narianel watched the Order relax after their mission against Azael's forces, several of the blades wandered amongst them.

She was on the roof overlooking the front of the house, watching a group learning to fight better from Raziel, and another group was listening to a story about her father from Stolas. Furtur was teaching those who had a talent with space magic to fold space, and some of those were starting to see her wings, hidden away behind her.

Iblis stood at her right shoulder, quiet and reserved. He seemed to have some sort of rivalry going with Royan for being her right hand, though she knew both wouldn't be upset when she chose Kali and Zepar, Havoc and Malice. On her left was Lilith, who Narianel had told about Lucifer. She was melancholic, but she understood. Narianel would let them be together again eventually.

Marquis had finally come to her side, and he sat with a few members of the Order talking about history. Asara and Berin were off in a corner in a private conversation, smiling and laughing. Berin was now fuelled by the Spirit of the Divine's infinite aether. Garret sat on the wall, watching people out in the street. For a time mage, he seemed to be in no hurry, but then he waved to Narianel that someone was approaching the gate.

She jumped from the roof and crossed the training yard. She was followed by Iblis and Lilith, both floating down more gracefully than she did. When she approached the gate, she stood back with the demons either side of her and nodded to the guards on duty. Garret quietly slipped behind her, then turned to silver light and hid within her soul. This was going to

be harder than needed, it seemed.

The gates opened to reveal the Synod of Nerik, led by Agata Akwaen. To her left was Jela Gaimel and Kresimir Solash. To her right was Galina and Prochorus. Behind them, with a guard of sixteen, was Sasha.

“We have come to hear the testimony of the man who caused the Temporal Collapse of Nerik, Garret Endarias, the Chronomage.” Agata was wearing a crisp military uniform and her voice was stern. Her aged face showed a rage she managed to keep from her voice, though barely.

“Follow me,” said Narianel. She took them into the meeting room set up in the Order’s section of her property. It was a large enough space to accommodate the entire party, and she even managed to pick up Royan and Chas along the way. Agata gave them a stare, but said nothing.

Instead of sitting at the head of the table, she stood behind the chair. There was a flash of silver and her hands fell on Garret’s shoulder. She forced the manifestation so he had no choice but to sit there.

“Garret Endarias,” said Agata. “We would like you to explain your view of the Temporal Collapse. Include how you came into the services of Azael, your motivation, and the exact powers you used. We know very little about you other than the name you gave when you entered the city, if that’s even your real name.” She eyed Lilith and Iblis, as if she wanted to launch another inquisition into the First Rebellion, but then she refocussed on Garret.

“Garret Endarias is my real name. I am from the world of Zemlja, just as several of you are, pre-Collapse. My country of origin is Sarcossa, born and raised in its capital city, Dellisa Sena. Egil Krom is also from Dellisa Sena, if you didn’t know. He was sold to the Gaimel family early in life, so he doesn’t remember it. I’ve asked.”

“Stay on topic, please,” said Jela.

“I was an enhancer mage in the Sarcossan army, and took part in the Battle of the Burning Glade.” Garret clasped

his hands under the table and his aether flow sped up. With her hands on his shoulders still, Narianel could hear his heart rate increase as well.

“That explains the motivation,” said Prochorus with a shrug. “Revenge, then?”

“I lost my father and brother in that battle,” said Garret, making sure to meet each of their eyes except Sasha, who he knew was born after the Collapse. “I had burns all over my body, given to me by Vinsent Kewaen himself. I’m aware his descendants are in this room, but I’m glad the man is long dead.” Narianel managed to not squeeze his shoulders, her practice at controlling her rage paying off, but Sasha looked ready to climb on the table.

“So, yes, revenge,” he continued. “I was dying and a man appeared and offered me a second chance. At the time I had never seen an ebon skraeðan before, and it was long before Hosts were a common thing, even those born from fallen angels and demons. So there was this man, this man made from darkness, and he offered me everything. I took his offer to attack Nerik, knowing it was suicide, but I had to.”

“You really didn’t,” said Kresimir. He shook his head and smiled.

“You’ve never been broken if you believe that I had any sort of choice. There are no other options when Azael gives you an offer. Not for us humans.” Garret took a breath. “I do regret it, though. How could I not? I killed thousands of innocents and didn’t manage to get a single one of my real targets. And that puppet of yours, Lady Talwaen. It killed me. It also ended up in the Graveyard with Egil, and that’s all I’ll say on that matter. It’s dead now. It sped up my plan by messing with time, but the Collapse was the goal. If Azael hadn’t sent in forces to help me, then I think I would have managed to do it without alerting anyone and you’d all be dead now.”

“I’ve talked with Garret before about this,” Narianel said. “Azael is a known manipulator, and I believe he sent in those soldiers on purpose to sabotage the Collapse. He’s been

trying to set the world up exactly as he wants so he can end it in his own way. He wants everything to go his way. There's a good chance he wanted Nerik to end up Terra instead of Zemlja, then set up the war with the Coral Kingdom to get the exact formation of opponents at the Battle of the Grand Gate and during the Ruination, which then led to an exact setup for me to exist as his Blade of the Infinite, and I'm sure it's leading into the final battle being the way he wants too. His plans are longer term than any of us realise, I believe."

"I think that's probably accurate," said Prochorus. "We have been pushed into a corner time and time again." He nodded to Garret, who rolled his eyes. "He could have ended the universe at any point. He has a goal and a plan that has to be performed at the right moment, with the right people."

"As a result of this, we banned the practice of time magic in Nerik," said Galina. Her focus was astounding. There was clarity in her eyes that Narianel had never seen. "What did you do exactly that should be avoided? If we know how it was done, we can deregulate things that are safer and will be useful in the war against Azael."

"It was a deliberately incorrect checkpoint recall loop," said Garret. "Normally, I can set a moment in time, which I call a checkpoint, and then I can return to that point at will, which is called recalling. It's how my power in blade-form works too. Except that what I did in Nerik had cracks and problems that I put in on purpose that damaged the flow of time. There are also a lot of Seers in Nerik, an unusually high amount for any one city-state, and I was trying to drive them insane at the same time."

"I could tell," said Prochrous. He looked like he was trying to be angry, yet was clearly suppressing a smile. Likely he'd just thought of another joke he'd chosen not to share.

"Are checkpoints and recalling actually safe to use?" asked Agata. "If they are, it could turn the tide of battle, since we could know what our enemy is planning."

"The more they're used in succession, the harder it is to

control,” said Garret. “You can start to be inaccurate with the recall. First a few seconds either way, then a few minutes. Once or twice a battle should be all you need, as long as your Seers are fine to go through the same things twice or three times, and it can make their visions more accurate if you don’t change much, since they’ve already lived it.”

“Will it work against Azael?” asked Kresimir.

“I doubt it,” said Garret. “He’s the source of all magic, so he probably has the same immunities as a Seer.”

“Source of all magic?” asked Agata.

“Azael controls what he calls the Spirit of the Divine,” said Narianel. “He has given me part of it, likely just to tease me with power until the final battle, and I can feel it when someone uses magic anywhere in reality. I can feel Akenesa working on an improvement to a rune. I can feel Liara playing with her hounds by levitating them. I can feel Argus crafting a set of magic armour.”

She nodded to Iblis, who walked around the table placing small books in front of each Synod member.

“These are my notes on everything that’s been going on with me over the last few days,” she continued. “My meeting in Dasus’s old home, my new power, everything I know about what we’re up against.”

“You’re not a Seer, but you knew to prepare this?” asked Kresimir, laughing openly.

“I’m not a Seer, but I *have* a Seer.” She flashed the silver ring she was wearing, the tiny spike barely visible. A wide grin spread across Prochorus’s face.

“Does this include your plan for the end?” asked Vala, who had just slipped into the room and stood behind her husband. She put her hand on Prochorus’s shoulder and he touched it lightly.

“My plan has yet to solidify,” said Narianel. She had to be careful with what she said around Vala. These were intelligent people, but Vala was a level beyond. “Nothing is certain with my course until I have the blades and sing, at

which point it will likely be too late to share anything. I give you everything I know that is fact, without speculation. My own plans are, by necessity, separate from the plans of those around me.”

“You’re hiding something,” said Kresimir. All smiles were gone at that point. Narianel let the chronomage flee back into her soul and she took his seat.

“I have theories, none can be verified.” She looked at Vala, then Prochorus. Both had the blank faces Seers took when talking about a future they didn’t want to reveal. “Ipos can’t see after I sing the song. I believe Azael is preventing it, so we can’t prepare for his exact plan. I don’t think any Seer can. It’s blank beyond that point, whether I do it tomorrow or in a thousands years in the journey through the possibilities.”

“That’s true,” said Prochorus. The rest of the Synod looked at him, various emotions crossing their faces. Only Galina didn’t look worried. She met Narianel’s eyes and her aura suggested trust.

“What is, for the sake of argument, the basis of your plan?” asked Agata. “You don’t want to reveal specifics, and I’d think the only people who know your plan are the blades you’ve stored inside you. I get that. Azael has eyes everywhere. But what is your goal?”

“I’m going to eat his soul.”

The words hung in the air as eyes widened and mouths opened and closed wordlessly.

“Mao once called me a villain,” said Narianel. “I may have been offended at the time, but he wasn’t wrong. Here I am, gathering the villains of the universe, using their power as my own.” She put Nocturne into her hand, the flash of silver briefly lighting the room. “My plan is to take his power as my own too. Whether I eat him, or make him a blade, it doesn’t matter so long as I can strip the rest of the Spirit of the Divine from him and take it for myself. I will become the lodestone of reality instead of him, and from there we can live a better tomorrow. One act of pure villainy for the greater good.”

Galina didn't move, but her eyes became approving and predatory. Kresimir and Agata gave each other looks that suggested confusion and disapproval. Jela's eyes were on Nocturne, her face carefully composed. Vala looked like she was about to say something, but Prochorus leaned forward and spoke first.

"Is there anything you would have us do?" he asked.

"Nothing more than you're already doing. Some of you have blades, and I require them, but soon I'll be going out to collect the others. That's my focus right now. You should all be focused on preparing Nerik's armies, not on the past, not on Garret or Egil or Metatron. I understand the desire, I still think of Adela each day, but the future is long and the past is left behind."

"Sometimes I doubt my armies will matter in the end," said Agata abruptly. "Most cannot stand up to the Gods, let alone Azael."

"Azael has a hidden world," said Narianel. "It's in the book I just gave you. He's powerful enough to keep it from the Grand Circle without effort. In that world, he has not only a town filled with worshippers, but an entire civilisation who believe that the end of the universe is the only way for there to be true peace. They've been indoctrinated since birth. I have plans for that place, they'll get their peace, but through Egil and Garret's memories and what they've told me, I know more than enough."

"Those soldiers we've been fighting that appear from nowhere," said Royan. "They're too pale, not albino but still far paler than even us Vinish. I've talked a little with Garret, and he told me that their world is cloaked in eternal night and it's always near freezing. When we captured some of them, they spoke in a dialect of Skrae that wasn't Neri, but was very similar in many ways, obviously being a simplification of the language so that it could be spoken quickly by mortals. We captured some texts and their writing looked like a different way to hand write Skrae text, translatable but not Neri."

“The world is known as the Graveyard,” said Narianel. “There are pieces of destroyed worlds there, floating freely. Some of old Nerik is there, after the Temporal Collapse, but at its centre is a massive city, larger than any on Avani. It’s called Sunset Metropolis, a rather beautiful name for a city filled with people awaiting the end.”

“So our armies will need to fight these people instead of going after Azael?” asked Kresimir.

“Correct,” said Narianel. “Your armies, and those of every nation on this world. Vin, Az Ajir, Sara De Han. They’re going to attack everywhere at once to distract us, according to Egil, who has seen the final battle. It’s in the book. They plan to keep us busy so that we don’t see what their mages are doing beneath the world’s surface. They’re going to wake the Dragons and destroy Avani, and then the Dragons will go on to destroy the Aether Sea, the Origin Worlds, the Void, the Sea of Pillars, and then joining Azael in Sonta.”

“What is your plan to stop that?” asked Prochorus. “I could see it in your eyes as you spoke. You don’t believe that will happen.”

“My plans are not yet solid, but should I fail then I have a backup. There is a weapon developed in Sara De Han that could easily destroy the planet if scaled up enough. I’m going to lure the Dragons into the Aether Sea since they’ll want to destroy Sonta sooner rather than later, and then we’ll use those weapons, shoving them down their throats if we really need to.”

“What kind of weapon could be that powerful?” asked Agata. There was a light in her eyes that would have been disconcerting if Narianel hadn’t expected it.

“They call it a missile, like an arrow or bolt, and they’ve tested it but not used it in actual combat.” Narianel chose her words carefully before explaining further. The Neri tongue lacked the words to explain the science. “When it lands, it’s like it releases the power of the sun. An explosion unlike any other. Huge and destructive. It could level Nerik in an instant and

leave the islands and surrounding waters uninhabitable for decades to come. There is a reason they've hidden away the technology and not used it. They're scared that others will attain that knowledge and the world will end. And so, I would highly recommend the Synod leave it alone, no matter how tempting it is."

"If the weapon is that powerful, and it's based purely in technology with no magical components that we'd know how to stop, I have to agree." Kresimir's strong tone was followed by a silence, then a quick vote. Only Agata voted to try and get the technology, but accepted being outnumbered.

"So where does that leave us?" asked Jela. "We simply prepare for a planet-scale war? Train soldiers and mages, get our heroes to their peak, build protections for our civilians?"

"It is exactly that," said Galina. Her eyes were losing their lustre. She would have to rest soon.

"I'd like you to make further trades with Sara De Han and that part of the world," said Narianel. "Their magic is still lagging behind despite what they've currently been given, and I won't be able to protect them during the fighting. I'll be off with the Dragons, and the Order of Blades will be spread all across the Semblan continent helping the various armies here. I'd like to request at least one hero of Nerik to travel to Sara De Han too."

"Who do you have in mind?" asked Prochorus.

"Liara."

Galina's eyes narrowed in an unfamiliar way. She was confused and a touch angry at the idea of putting Liara in danger. The others also looked confused, possibly because they doubted Liara's power. They all knew her as the mental child who just plays all day and often needs to be watched for her own safety. Vala and Sasha, however, nodded.

"Explain," said Galina in the coldest voice Narianel had ever heard her use.

"Liara is a genius and incredibly powerful." Narianel saw the shock in the faces around the table. "When her curse is

broken by the song, she will be a rival to the Grand Circle, above other Grand mages like Akenesa and Corwin Argus. She has been in a prison of her own emotion all her life, but she's seen everything around her, watched, learned. There is no one I'd bet on to beat her, other than myself or Azael."

"That can't be true," said Jela. "Liara Talwaen is an odd one, no offence to her family here, and I just cannot imagine her being what you say."

"It's true," said Sasha. To Narianel's surprise, she met Galina's eyes and didn't flinch. "She has moments of lucidity and the way she speaks is incredible. Sometimes I can't even understand what she says until Akenesa simplifies it for me. Liara *does* understand the world around her and what's going on, she's just unable to move past childish instinct the vast majority of the time."

"There was one time I remember, not that long before the war with the Coral Kingdom, where she told me she wants a husband. It wasn't a child playing pretend. She's genuinely lonely, but her mental and emotional state prevent her from falling in love, and we as a family protect her from romance and sex because she definitely couldn't handle it. I'm looking forward to seeing her lucid all the time, and to seeing her face on her wedding day."

There was a heavy silence. Galina's expression became soft and thoughtful.

"We should close this meeting," said Narianel. "I've made my points and requests, and I have another meeting this evening to prepare for."

When everyone was out the room other than Narianel, her blades, and Royan, she stood up and took a moment to calm herself. The entire meeting had put a small vein of rage spiralling out through her soul, so she needed to recentre herself.

"I'm glad they didn't push on your plans for dealing with the Dragons," said Royan when Narianel opened her eyes. "I'm still not sure it's a good one, but you're confident, so I

guess it's what we're trying."

"It's a risk," said Iblis, "but one worth taking."

"I don't disagree," said Royan. "I'm just worried about the cost if it goes wrong."

"We have to win on every battlefield," said Narianel. "During the end, if we lose even once, the cost will be great. The Dragons need to be brought to heel."



It was late in the day when Narianel stepped out of the portal to the Astral Sea. She was surrounded immediately by fallen angels looking to worship her. When Iblis and Lilith stepped through, however, they pulled back.

"Calm," she called, raising her hands. "I was sent a message from here about some demons on the horizon. Who is the leader amongst you?"

A cloud swarming with lightning descended from the host floating in the sky and became a man. He stood as tall as a sklaara, muscular with a curled grey beard. He had chosen tanned skin, as if he were naturally pale and had worked the fields for fifty years.

She knew this angel. Zeus had been at the Final Break and fought Legion. He was one of the first to fall when she had fought Chassuille. He had a stern face and was emitting an aura of power and arrogance.

"The demons say they wish to join you," said Zeus. The contempt in his voice could have toppled mountains.

"And you have a problem with that," said Narianel. "Of course you do."

"You would accept them into your service?" It was almost a shout, a demand.

Narianel simply gestured to Iblis and Lilith and walked past Zeus, down a path through the angels to where the demon horde could be seen in the distance, on a different island in the Sea.

“I recognise the signatures of both Ra and Grendel,” said Iblis. “They’re stronger than back during the Rebellion, but I rather enjoy the irony. They fought so hard to bring me down, but they eventually succumbed themselves.”

“They’ve made no moves since reaching that place,” said Zeus. Narianel didn’t turn to look at him. She was using Perception’s power to survey the area, looking for possible ambushes and traps. “They’ve only sent a single low class soldier with the message for you.”

“You stay here,” she said. “And if you don’t like what’s about to happen, I suggest you crawl back to Chassuille. You can spread that to the others too. I am the Goddess of Twilight and Balance, the Goddess of Nothing. I will bring the pure and the corrupted together under a single banner, the border between the light and the dark is my demesne.”

He said nothing else, but turned and started to spread the word. Iblis and Lilith returned to her soul, and she flew across the ocean to the demons.

At the head of the group were Ra and Grendel. They had moved from the centre of the host towards the edge when Narianel had set off, and were clearly the most powerful of the group. Below them, however, were still a lot of strong fallen angels and demons. There were hundreds of thousands of imps too, mortals who had been corrupted and transformed.

Ra was tall and thin, with the head of a falcon. He had been a Power, an angel who worked with the reapers, just like her grandfather. Grendel was some sort of large troll, with deep green skin and long, gangly arms. His body hair was grown out, which Narianel found disgusting, but she kept a smooth face. Demons ranged from the darkly beautiful to the utterly horrific, and she tried not to treat them any different.

When she landed before them, she expected the kind of arrogance displayed by Zeus, but the entire host knelt. Ra and Grendel going so far as to touch their heads to the ground in an unusual display.

“We were deceived,” announced Ra as he raised his

head. "Taken out of balance. Brought low by the one we had once fought against."

Narianel twisted the space in the area with a simple thought, far too easy with her new power, and so her voice carried when she spoke. She even included the fallen angels she had been with before, so they could know what was going to happen.

"Those of you who wish to remain demons, lower your aether as low as it will go. Those of you wish to return to the light, raise your aether as high as it will go. I accept you all. Azrael must fall."

There was a moment of confusion at her words, but they did as she said. She raised herself into the air so she could see them all, and then began to sing. She had brought with her all the blades she had that were made by Prochorus and the song had increased in power since the last time. The effect was nearly instant.

The demons that had made themselves more obvious, including Ra but not Grendel, suddenly convulsed as the song started to pull the corruption from them. As they had been fully corrupted and transformed, the process was painful and drawn out. She had needed to extend the song and wished she had more blades so it could have been easier.

In a massive flash of silver, she was surrounded by the fallen angels and demons that made up her collection. Their voices carried across the Aether Sea, beautiful and terrifying. A choir of her own. Even those she didn't think would cooperate, like Metatron, were singing with everything they had.

Then, millions of angels filled the sky. They could feel what she was trying to do, curious. She saw Michael; he always dominated the sky. Azra-el was there too, with a gentle smile on his face. She could feel their wonder, but she didn't let it distract her from this half-finished song.

Below, Ra screamed, and thick black corruption poured from his mouth and eyes. His skin pulled away and he shrank as his tainted aether flowed up and into Narianel. It was more

disgusting than normal, deep with hatred and sorrow and the most divine of spitefulness. Demonic. Each demon tasted just different enough to tell them apart, but they were of a kind, their corruption falling easily into her deeper well, reserved only for the pain of others.

When the black cloud had dissipated, she looked down on what were once demons. Fallen angels, humans, a few other races here and there amongst the imps, including a handful of elves and races she didn't recognise. She had done what was once thought impossible. She had brought beasts back from total corruption.

"I am not done," she announced as her song ended. She held out her hands and touched every fallen angel around her with her mind. She grasped their souls and formed the words, echoing, in a way, what Chassuille had once said.

The fallen angels burst into light. It wasn't the same as Chassuille's angels, however, and there was shock amongst them. It was a light that so many had doubted even existed, that only Narianel and a few others had ever seen before. It was the light of the Great Beyond. Light that took in light, light that made the bearer shine but the area around them darken, the same light that Narianel shone with so subtly that no one noticed.

She was approached by Ra and Zeus and Michael and she explained the light, much to their confusion. But it didn't matter. Azra-el held her hand and smiled, that beautiful smile only a grandfather could have.

"Those that shine with the light of the Great Beyond," she said, "will report to the front lines during the final days. Ra, Zeus, I am putting you two in charge. Divide your forces evenly. One will come to Avani, one will go to Sonta. You have until I sing the full song to prepare and organise. Those that don't glow, the humans and other peoples down there, they will come to Seremont. They will be evaluated and trained. Any demons that wish to join will be allowed, and if there are those that wish to return to the light, send them to me, though not

one at a time. Before the song is sung.

“Michael,” she said, turning to the angel who had now taken on his humanoid form. “I’d like you to deliver a message to Chassuille for me. I think it will carry more weight coming from you, if you agree to its contents.”

“Speak, child, and I shall consider,” said Michael. He had mastered the soft eyes and smiles, likely through a lot of practice when not on missions.

“I want the hunt of demons to stop, temporarily,” she said. “I want a message put out for them to gather here and wait for me. Those that do will be forgiven, and cleansed if they wish. Those that reject the message will be deemed followers of Azazel and destroyed.”

“After seeing what I’ve seen today, I can agree to that,” said Michael. He nodded, then turned to Chassuille’s angels. He held up a hand and they all vanished.

“One question,” said Zeus, looking at the blades still floating in a sphere around Narianel. “Why did none of them become angels again?”

“I talked to them before coming here and none of them thought it was a good idea. Changing them could alter the song and the powers they’re able to project through their blade forms. Maybe once this is all over some of them will change their minds, but for now this is best.”

“It was a unanimous decision,” said Iblis as he floated down to them. Zepar and Kali were right behind him. “We must not risk the song failing.

There was a look on Zeus’s face that Narianel couldn’t quite discern. Disgust, confusion, acceptance, even agreement. He would come around before the end.

“I have to go now, but send a messenger if there’s more that need healing.” She called all the blades back into herself, a silver flash announcing their disappearance from the space around her and their rest in her soul. She bowed to Zeus and Ra, then opened a portal from the Aether Sea to Avani.

Narianel and Isaac danced around each other, sparring, but perhaps taking it a little too seriously. He was finally old enough to make it a fair match and she was more than willing to give him a fight.

The Order of Blades had assembled in the training yard to see what they'd been talking about for the last week. Most of them had never seen Narianel actually fight, only use magic and miracles to overwhelm her foes. At best, many of them had only seen her practice or demonstrate how to move.

Isaac was in full routine and keeping her defensive. She was proud of him. He had a grace that only she and Prochorus could match. With each step, with each pirouette, he moved a living flame he had shaped as a mass of crows. He split them to attack from different directions and then brought them back in as a shield.

Their competition was simple and based in Nerikan arena combat rules. Neither would dare attack the other's core, so they were trying to destroy the other's body. The first to lose their physical form was the loser. It limited them both, but in a way, that was more fun.

Crows made of light burst from the flaming flock and Narianel tracked them in the back of their mind. They circled overhead and seemingly were doing nothing, but she knew better than to forget about them.

Isaac had wanted a challenge, so he'd told her to use all the blades. She currently had Rose in her right hand and was wearing Oracle on the middle finger of her left. The boosts given by Havoc, Malice, Gungnir, and Perception were flowing through her veins. If he wanted a challenge, he'd get one.

A pillar of fiery crows flew at her and she easily stepped to the side at Oracle's direction. She saw an opening and made as if to charge, which Isaac tried to block, but instead she used Needlepoint to warp behind him. With a flourish of Rose, she launched thousands of black petal at Isaac's back.

He turned into a shadow and flattened himself against the ground just in time, then popped up in front of her and brought Wishmaker down. Narianel summoned Spiritrush to her left hand and blocked, but the blow was hard. Her own muscles were stronger than a human's, more akin to an enlani in power, but Isaac was on another level. He was bigger than her and she would later learn that he'd studied sklaraan and yetri biology and adapted his muscles and bones to match.

Her knees almost buckled and her eyes widened. She had no idea how to react. She could feel that her heels had slightly sunk into what was meant to be properly packed dirt. It wasn't fear she felt, but admiration. This was her little brother, that kid that had been so shy, and now he was built like a volcano and ready to explode. She was still faster and far more experienced in actual combat, but he had the advantage of raw physical power. She'd copy his methods when she learned what he'd done, but in that moment her mind was reeling.

Narianel activated Spiritrush to blast him back. He was wearing mistweave under an enchanted breastplate and mail, so it only knocked him off-balance rather than evaporating him. It did manage to knock off his round helmet, though, by breaking the chin strap. He didn't catch himself fast enough so she planted her fist in his gut and released a burst of aether large enough to break open the mail and mistweave, leaving a light burn on his stomach that healed soon enough.

She charged before Isaac could get up and begin his dance again. He raised his hands and his flames returned and took shape, but she used Almut to duck into the Ethereal Realm before they could touch her. She switched Rose for Wraith and took aim. He was only visible thanks to Perception, and as she swung down diagonally, he managed to dodge. She missed his head, and managed to take his right hand, but it wasn't until she noticed those crows made of light that she understood.

Using Almut to jump back into the Material Realm, she

kicked him in the stomach and released another burst of aether, this one far more damaging thanks to his lack of protection.

"That was a nice trick," she said as he stood up. He was already regrowing the hand and fixing his abdomen. "Those crows being able to watch the Ethereal Realm for you.

"I remembered your stories," he signed clumsily, his right hand almost fully formed but not quite there yet.

"Of course," she muttered. She'd told him all about her fight with Lucifer, as well as her other exploits. He'd planned how to counter her as much as she had for him, and she'd thought she'd been clever trying that move.

"My turn," he signed and was surrounded by a tornado of fire. She felt his movement despite not being able to see him through all the flames and knew how he was directing his attacks. Dozens of tendrils of fire spread from the tornado and came at her from every direction at once.

As soon as she raised a flame shield to absorb Isaac's attacks, she saw she'd made a mistake. Isaac's flames turned green, imbued with dark aether, and pushed straight through the shield. She was hit twice before she should move; once grazing her left leg and once in her right shoulder, taking off the entire arm.

Then a thought crossed her mind that wouldn't leave. *All my life I've learned faster than anyone else, able to think faster and in more detail, able to match even Akenesa in understanding with very little effort... Is Isaac more intelligent than me? Has he applied that nephilim mind in a way I never tried as just a warrior?*

She pushed out with her own dark flame, making sure to lace in regular flames just in case, the result being a chaotic mix of bright green and orange.

As the flames cleared she saw what Isaac was really up to. His fingers were moving fast in an incantation that she'd missed the first three quarters of, but what she did see didn't scare her. There were things he didn't know, after all.

She let Isaac finish his spell while she focussed on her missing arm. She noticed Isaac look at her curiously, seeing just how fast she could regrow her limbs. That had come with a lot of practice and familiarity with her own skin.

Isaac completed his spell and soulfire appeared around her, forming three concentric circles on the ground. Above her appeared a rune that would easily destroy her body, stripping flesh from soul, but she didn't need to stand there and let it charge. Much to Isaac's surprise, Narianel started to walk towards him.

"Don't!" signed Isaac, his eyes wide.

Soulfire caused an immense amount of pain to anyone it touched. If not put out immediately, it could devour a soul in less than a minute. It was used carefully in crafting magical weapons or in quickly expelling excess aether, and everyone was afraid of it. Except Narianel. She was immune.

She walked straight through the barriers that were meant to hold her in place, feeling the gentle warmth of the soulfire caress her thighs. Making her blades, she'd put her arms into the furnace many times. She didn't know why she was immune, and she could use it to smother her own aether if she chose, but it didn't hurt her. It was comfortable.

Isaac's rune dissipated in his surprise. She walked straight to him, put her hands on his shoulder, and smiled at him.

"There are many oddities in this reality," she said. "But there's one thing you need to remember: No matter how absurd it is, don't let yourself get stunned just by seeing what your opponent can do."

She pushed him and his physical body fell back, but he still stood in his aetherial form. It was getting far too easy to remove souls from bodies. She stepped back and Isaac made a show of a dramatic sigh, but she could smell his mirth. The crowd, which she'd completely forgotten about, were cheering and chanting.

"I guess I'll have to remember that," signed Isaac with a

huge grin. His aetherial body was beautiful. He had the same porcelain white outer-shell, but oddly lacked the markings of their ancestors. His face had a softness to it that left him that delicate noble look, and his eyes were a crisp, glowing blue unique to him, thanks to being incorruptible. Unlike her, his body didn't glow.

"Adaptation and learning are a nephilim's strength," she said. "We can notice and process things much faster than others, but we can get stuck in a loop where we think about things from every angle at once. But, saying that, I'm glad you're on my side."

Isaac's smile somehow got wider. His teeth were odd, too. Far more human-like, lacking the sharpness of the rest of the clan, taking far more from their father's side than their mother's.

"Speaking of that," he said. His hands were hesitant. How could this powerhouse of a man be nervous about telling her something? "When you go to collect your blades in the new year. I want to come with you."

"Why? I'm not even taking the Order," she said.

"I just wanted an adventure with my sister." He turned and re-entered his body so she couldn't see the look on his face, but he had an embarrassed scent. She found it cute, a return to the child she remembered.

"I'd be glad to have you along," she said, and he gave her a coy smile as he turned back. "Meet me here on the first day of next year. That is when I'll be setting out."

"I'll see you then."

Narianel had spent most of the season of Frost arguing with Royan. He insisted that the Order came with her to collect the blades, that it was one of their primary missions. She thought herself strong willed, but after eight weeks she finally gave in and now the Order were preparing to leave.

She could hear them outside. Ten more days and they'd be on the march across Avani and then out into the Aether Sea on a grand quest. They were checking armour and weapons, practising magic they might need on the road, having those last few moments of relaxation before the years long journey.

She sat up. She was in bed, Tesni sleeping next to her. Tesni was in and out of the city quite often, so whenever she was in Seremont they spent time together, getting to know each other. Narianel couldn't help but compare her to Adela, which made her feel guilty, but there were notable differences. Just about the only thing they had in common was being slightly shorter than her, but Tesni's horns made her seem taller.

Tesni was a very still sleeper, but Narianel supposed it was because of those horns. She had to pick a side and would have trouble turning over or sleeping on her back. Her scales ran down her entire back and had been surprisingly smooth, but then again, Argona had looked slick to the touch when they'd met all those years ago.

As she got up, Tesni stirred, her tail flicked out the side of the blanket, but she didn't wake. Narianel made her body aetherial, tied on her shakai, and headed outside.

It was only half an hour after dawn, but it looked like the entire Order was in or around the compound. Hundreds of people were crowding the training yard and barracks, and she could sense them in the streets beyond the walls. There was a buzz in the air, the scent was almost intoxicating. It was finally happening.

Isaac was already in the compound, talking with Royan

at the centre of a circle of the highest ranking officers. Issac's hands moved smoothly as he signed and Royan laughed. Tullis was talking to a new officer called Herman, Vedar was tending to his weapons, and Chas and Sarina were looking over a map of Vaga that Narianel had got copied from the Archivists.

Royan was holding most of the blades within him while the rest were roaming the crowds, checking over the warband's preparations. She had always insisted on complete privacy when she was with Adela or Tesni, and it used to be that she simply stored the blades in a different room until she gave Royan the ability to hold them. It wasn't long before she was flanked by Iblis and Lilith, as usual.

Narianel spent the day talking with the Order, being as present and visible as possible in their support. She knew the coming few years would be difficult, that not all of them would return, but she wanted to make sure they knew that she had memorised all their names and faces. That as much as they were a warband, they were a clan, a family, one of the Great Houses of all peoples. They were going to save the universe at all costs.

The steady work of the past week came to an end the night before and in the early light they gathered outside the city. They would make their way to the eastern coast, travelling the Southern Pass, through the Deepwood, and across Sorris. She'd arranged for a fleet to meet them in Almer, though she didn't look forward to that particular company.

Crowds of her followers had lined the city walls and crowded the fields either side of the neatly arrayed Order. Royan had sorted them into four Companies, led by Tullis, Vedar, Chas, and Sarina, each with two hundred soldiers. There were others of the Order that were arranged into a bodyguard unit for himself, a supply squad, and three scouting squads. Narianel had refused a bodyguard, even a ceremonial one.

"How long will you be gone?" asked Mira. She was wearing a black dress in the modest style of Vin. Narianel gave her a hug and then looked her in the eyes.

"It will be a few years. We have a long way to travel. First to Vaga, then a few places around Avani, then out to the Aether Sea. It will be difficult, but we will return."

"There is nothing to fear," said Darren. His smile was soft and sad, but confident. He was holding Norman in his arms. The little boy was bawling his eyes dry, holding his father's neck tight. "Our mission is important, and we'll bring back stories and gifts."

Darren managed to pass Norman to Mira, who held him and whispered gently soothing words. They said their goodbyes, Mira holding back tears while Norman let out another wave, and Narianel went to the front of the force. Darren made his way to the Second Scout, where he was assigned.

Narianel mounted a brown gelding, her black and white uniform crisp and her shakai wrapped around her shoulders. To her right were Isaac and Royan, who was looking regal in

his uniform and shakai, ready to take on the world. To her left were the Eyes of Chassuille, who would be going as far as Almer with them, Tesni at their head. They had also been expanding their ranks, training a new generation, but as an elite group they still numbered less than twenty.

“When you’re ready,” said Royan.

Narianel steadied herself. Excitement and rage and glory bounced around inside the emptiness, but she held them down. She expanded her senses and saw Mira holding Norman. In the crowd she saw Valeska leading a prayer and was hit with a wave of woe. They rarely talked any more and it made Narianel worry for her. Valeska had taken the deaths of Adela and Oggy to heart and thrown herself head-first into this new religion, but if it gave her comfort then Narianel would accept it. She couldn’t claim divinity and then refuse worship, no matter how uncomfortable the prayers made her.

“It’s time to gather the rest,” she heard Iblis say in her mind. “It’s time to sing the song.”

She kicked her horse into motion and set the course for the Southern Pass, a fitting road to take when she considered where it all began.

The Order was camped outside Almer two days early. She had expected the negotiations with the sylvans of the Deepwood to take a lot longer than they had, so she had some free time. She didn't like to be idle, so she'd taken to exploring the city while Royan dealt with the city officials.

It was noon and she sat at one of the outdoor tables of a café wearing a Nerikan dress instead of her uniform. The warmth of the sun was filling her with energy, which she was storing away for later, deep within her natural reserves. Vaga was a dangerous place and she'd need every drop of power she could muster at a moment's notice.

Tesni sat with her in a Sorosi dress. Shoulderless with thin straps and loose all the way through, except at the hips where, clashing with the look, Tesni had a thick white belt that held a knife. Her scales glittered in the sun, despite their darkness, and she'd wrapped her tail around her chair leg so she didn't trip anyone.

They talked about nothing for a while, but there was obviously something on Tesni's mind, so Narianel asked.

"This is where I was born," she said eventually, taking large bites of her filled breadroll and chewing slowly between thoughts. "This is where Aldo and Maria found me. Adopted me. Before that I was nothing more than a vagrant stealing purses and food. Looking back, I'm glad they found me, even if I was pretty scared at the time."

"I'm glad they found you too," said Narianel, but before Tesni's smile could fully form she added: "even if you did keep causing me problems for a long time."

They glared at each other, doing their best not to smile, but Narianel broke first and laughed. Tesni joined in and then continued to eat, not making eye contact and blushing a little.

Just after a nearby clocktower struck one o'clock, Royan approached their table with a weary waver in his soul, but his face remained solid.

“It’s your turn,” he said, pulling over a chair. “The city council has accepted the Order and their intent to leave via the port, and seem to have heard that our members are spending the last of their Vinish coins before they go to Vaga. They don’t mind the economic boost. One councillor called it tourism. They would like to see you now, Narianel.”

“I’ve not met the Almer council before, just a few of their counterparts in other cities.” Narianel stood and focussed on the government buildings on the other side of the city. “None of them are influenced, which is a good start.”

“Be nice to them,” said Tesni with an impish grin.

“I won’t,” said Narianel. She shrugged and walked off, hearing the other two laugh.

Her walk through the city didn’t take long. The crowds parted for her even though she didn’t make demands and didn’t unleash the glory in her core. People were just aware of her on an instinctual level and moved to her intent. She spotted a few wearing a shakai in her reds, which surprised her that it had spread this far from Nerik and Seremont.

She didn’t pay much attention to the government building as she walked in. It looked much the same as all the others she’d been in, trying to be impressive and intimidating, with portraits and statues of past kings and notable figures. The guards didn’t try to stop her, and she smelled their fear as she passed. She used wisps of reality to open the door ahead of her as she walked into the council chamber, and took her seat quietly. Then she waited for them to talk first.

Their leader as it would seem, the one with the fancy sash, spoke first. He was an older man with the usual tan Sorosi skin and brown hair. “Your cult has spread to this city. We would appreciate it if you made sure your followers stayed peaceful.”

“I’m not their master,” said Narianel flatly. “They are free to worship me however they wish or not at all, but I’ve never encouraged it. I suppose it makes me a hypocrite, not aiding them when I criticised Chassuille for his non-action, but

I see it differently. I'm going to sing the song that will cleanse their souls, and they don't need the direct help that the followers of other gods do. I'm helping in my own way, and I will fight for them until the end."

"You still claim godhood?" asked one of the councillors. He flinched when Narianel looked him in the eyes. She kept her expression calm, but there was a tiny spark of the old rage trying to surface. She remained empty.

"I do because it is undeniable," said Narianel. "I have half the Spirit of the Divine, and I am divine in my own right. I am the Goddess of Nothing, and inheritor of the domains of Balance and Twilight. I am new beginnings and transition, the dawn and the dusk, the beginning and the end. I could go on, but I won't. You understand, even if you don't want to admit it. I'm not asking you to worship me yourself, but you shouldn't deny my divinity."

"I think we're done here," said one of them, and Narianel rose and left without another word. She didn't need to justify herself to anyone.

The next two days went by quickly, and when Lord General Octavio Cortez's ships docked the Order of Blades embarked. Isaac had never been on a ship before, so there was a bounce in his step like he was still a little boy.

Narianel said one last goodbye to Tesni, knowing that far too long would pass before they saw each other again.

Part 2
Vaga

In which nephilim do battle...

Narianel could see Vaga in the distance. They'd make a landing in the morning and that was when the battle would begin. She could already feel the monsters amassing just beyond the shore and the malevolent energy radiating from the centre of the continent. She touched the pistol at her hip and felt the blades in her soul. She was ready.

She could see the dense forests around the edge of the continent, continuous for thousands of miles in a big circle, obviously grown and manicured to make landing inhospitable. That wouldn't matter. She was a being of fire, and Octavio brought her the new toys he'd written to her about.

Beyond that were vast plains covered in black pillars, and looking inside she could see they were factories, pulling metals from the ground. Many were no longer in operation, having fulfilled their purpose, but others were in full action. Those materials travelled on vehicles sitting on rails that Narianel had only just learned about called trains, going to a central massive structure made of black and grey stone. That would be the Vantori Library.

She felt her vision repelled when she tried to look in the library and didn't push it. She returned to seeing through her eyes and walked into the command office of the ship, where Royan and Octavio were playing a game, moving pieces on a chequered board. The game was recently invented in Sahvra, a country on the same northern continent as Sara De Han, and was quickly becoming popular amongst the noble class. Seeing the two military minds working their hardest was quite the show, as they each spent their time working out what would happen if they made specific moves.

She was wearing her uniform of black and white, and it was interesting to compare Royan and Octavio's. The Hanean dress uniform with its flair and gold trim and the Order's highly practical, breathable, and unobtrusive design for combat at any moment. Both she and Royan wore their shakais

but Octavio had a smaller cravat in her reds.

Narianel took the paper boxes of ammunition from the side-table and began to enchant the bullets. She had hours to kill and there were monsters to fight, so each shot that could shatter a core would be valuable. Octavio and his soldiers still couldn't see aether, but she'd made sure they knew to aim for the heart, where the core normally sat.

She spent the next few hours zoned out, just pouring tiny amounts of aether into each bullet and sealing it with a thought. She was only pulled out of it when an alarm blared all over the ship and the lights turned red. Octavio jumped up from his chair, dropping a book that Narianel hadn't noticed him reading. Royan wasn't in the room, and she found his scent on the bow of the ship.

"Looks like it's time to act," said Octavio. He held the door open for her, to which she shrugged and flew through the ceiling, heading through two more floors before exiting the ship and up into the sky.

There were huge monstrous birds in the distance, four wings and feathers made of metal and lightning. She counted twenty-four of them, but there was something off about it. She could feel Royan and Isaac signing in the distance, talking to each other quietly and swiftly, and they'd noticed it too.

"They're being hidden," signed Isaac, looking up at her. Each gesture accentuated with a tiny flare of aether in his fingertips. "The nephilim of Vaga. Can you feel him here?"

"I can," she signed back. "You push him away. I'll take out the birds."

Isaac got to work right away, showing his power in a way that Narianel had rarely seen. He pushed his hands towards the metal birds and the aether in the sky shifted. It was like seeing the sea drained, the sky emptying of all magic in a wave, revealing that there were three times as many birds as originally thought. Narianel could see it wasn't easy for Isaac, the sky's aether was trying to push back into place, the mind of the far off nephilim struggling against Isaac's will.

Narianel didn't waste time in sending out motes of aether at high speed, hitting each and every one of the birds. It wasn't enough to damage them, but it tagged them with her scent, just in case Isaac couldn't hold back their opponent.

The birds moved fast and had guns underneath the body and wings, and had what looked like fireworks under each wing too. She zipped forward, attempting to draw them in, and it worked for most of them. Some of them still went towards the ships, but the ship's guns and cannons were already being aimed, and the Order was readying their spells.

She noticed their weakness immediately. They had wide turning circles and she could easily outmanoeuvre them, stopping in place and moving at angles they couldn't match. The bullets were unenchanted, so she stopped trying to dodge them, and their fireworks had no magic in them, but she wondered if that was only the case because of Isaac's efforts.

When she finally started killing them, she noticed that there were seats inside a glass dome. But there were no people, just machines that were built in the shape of people. They had no souls, but there were electrical impulses inside them that mimicked the patterns she saw in the brains and bodies of people. Their hands and legs were directly attached to the birds they rode inside. Her immediate thought was mechanical life, and as much as that interested her they were her enemies.

Some of them she destroyed with explosions, others she cut to pieces with Havoc and Malice. She used Tail to spin her blades around her in spirals of destruction, cutting wings are sheering the mechanical beings in half. When she was done she saw that the Order had also taken to the air using Flight and that the fighting was drawing to a close. One of the ships had a large hole in its deck from a dropped explosive.

As Isaac released the sky, she felt the other nephilim's presence pull in around her. It tried to read her soul, push in and break her, but her will was strong and she was stubborn so it didn't get any information about her true power. It was watching her carefully as she let her blades form a long tail

behind her.

“The Seers I’ve consulted tell me you have one of my blades,” she said. A nasty smirk spread across her face and she could feel the anger in the aura. It was a weak anger, not like her own. “It would be better if you surrendered it to me as soon as possible.”

The presence retreated and she laughed. She could see and appreciate the power she was up against, and it was indeed powerful enough to provide a challenge, but she wasn’t afraid. How could she be? She and Isaac were going to win, and she wouldn’t even have to use her divinity.



Narianel had just returned from patrolling the skies in the dead of night when she overheard an engineer talking to Octavio in his office within the ship. She was going to ignore it when she heard words that she didn’t quite understand.

“The robotics are like something out of a sci-fi movie,” said engineer. “They’re centuries beyond what we’re capable of manufacturing now. The computer inside is indecipherable. We think they might have been sentient.”

“They didn’t have souls,” said Narianel, walking into the room. “How could they be sentient?” The engineer jumped and quickly saluted her.

“That’s quite a large topic,” said Octavio. “Regardless of whether or not they count as people, we’ll probably have to fight a lot more of them. Now that you know what they are, would you be able to scout the island for them? With that sight you described?”

“Our enemy has mastered illusions,” said Narianel. She sat on a chair across from Octavio and leaned her head back, speaking slowly to give herself time to think. “My sight is good and getting keener as I age, but he was still able to hide most of those birds from me, despite my experience with this sort of enemy. I have a blade, Perception, that will help me see, but I

have a feeling we'll be running into a lot more tricks before this is over."

She noticed the engineer giving her a curious look, so she looked directly at him.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Pure Lady," he said, bowing. "It's just... you called them birds."

"What are they if not birds?"

"They're called aeroplanes," said Octavio. "You only saw our airships when you visited, but their planes are not so different from what we're able to build. We would need to man them, however, instead of using whatever those robots are."

"I'm going to have to learn more about science and technology, when this is over." Narianel leaned on the desk, looking down at her hands. "I remember you mentioning aeroplanes. There's still a lot I'm yet to know."

"Just wait until you hear about the internet," said the engineer. "We've only been rolling it out over the last few years, but it's speeding up our rate of communication like you wouldn't believe."

"Let's just hope there's time for that, once it's all done," she said with a genuine smile.

The thundering of guns like a million hammers striking anvils started before they even made it to the shore. She landed amidst the hail of bullets tearing apart massive creatures that were waiting for her army in the shade of the trees. A few bullets she let pass straight through her, but the enchanted ones she warped the space around her to redirect them into the cores of the monsters.

She saw spliced creatures, mixes of wolf and lizard, bird and elephant, horse and snake. Some had mechanical parts deep inside, releasing fluids she didn't know the purpose of. But overall, she was disappointed. The stories of Vaga, the Continent of Monsters, were either vastly overblown or past adventurers and settlers were simply pathetic. She could sense thousands of these creatures, but even five hundred years ago during the dawn of Avani there were mages and warriors capable of dealing with this. There had to be more.

She hummed as she danced, each step and pirouette accompanied by an arc of crimson. Havoc in her left hand and Malice in her right, they had fallen into place without a single thought, extensions of her own arms. She danced into the forests just off the shore, taking down creature after creature, each one seemingly a hand-crafted abomination.

It was fifteen minutes before she heard the thud of the landing crafts' front doors on the stony beaches. She didn't look back, but up and down the shore the gunfire renewed and the flares of aether lit her senses afire. Magic and blade and bullet were bared against the forces of Vaga, and all the while she could feel her fellow nephilim watching her army and cursing their success. This continent was now accessible. They would see its interior. It wouldn't even be hard.

There was a moment, about an hour into the fighting, when she felt the presence again. She was about to push on it but then she noticed what it was doing. Motes of aether floated through the air and found their mark inside the creatures that

were still alive, and then those creatures retreated. Her target was calling back his forces.

She expanded her sight to view the island and saw that it was happening all over. The abominations of nature were gathering beyond the forest, massing for a stronger attack. Noting the distance she knew her force could be there in just a day, but some of the creatures would have to travel weeks to get there.

She left the battlefield, leaping into the air and soaring on folds in air and space until she landed next to Ocativio on his ship. He was watching from a distance and giving orders over what he had called a radio, which was just a less efficient calling mirror.

“They’re retreating,” he said, lowering his binoculars.

“They’re gathering,” said Narianel. “We need to begin our advance inland now. If we can reach the location they’re all travelling to, we can break through before the rest can come. If we take too long, we’ll be stuck in place for weeks as more and more waves of monsters arrive.”

“My men need rest after this,” said Octavio. “We have dead to bury.”

“Cremate them,” said Narianel, making several soldiers nearby wince. “Return their aether to the universe and prevent their bodies being eaten or raised by the enemy. We don’t need skeleton soldiers at our back.”

“That isn’t how we do things.” Octavio was firm when he said it, but she knew he would give the order.

“I’m going ahead to secure where the monsters are gathering.” She hopped up onto the railing of the ship. “Royan will lead you to me.”

With that she leapt into the sky again, expanding her sight and guiding Needlepoint to the exact location she needed to be. The dagger folded reality around her, the two locations overlapping, and when it unravelled she was thirty miles inland amidst the vile creatures that had been waiting in that place already.

She sent all her blades except Havoc and Malice to Royan. She wouldn't need any others for this. She hummed as she danced, letting the serene rage of her true nature wash over her.

It was late in the day when she felt her forces approach, Isaac's aura piercing her apathy like a cannonball. She had been fighting non-stop for the last twenty-nine hours, her mind almost entirely blank, just the song and the steps and the swings. Peace. It was a strange thing to feel when cutting down monster after monster, but it was true. She had been at peace.

She kicked aside an overgrown wolf with wings, letting loose a burst of aether that muted every other sound. She had caused a crater in the creature and it didn't bother getting back up when it stopped bouncing, the last echoes of its soul vanishing, its scent disappearing.

"Rest here," Narianel told Octavio and Royan as they walked to her. "I have more fight in me."

On the horizon were dozens of shapes sprinting towards her, monsters of every shape and size. She could make out a mutated ogre and several farm animals fully corrupted into beasts. Her opponent was a madman, it seemed.

"I'll raise a barrier," signed Isaac.

She nodded with a minute flair in aether so he'd see it and started towards the creatures in the distance. Feeling less like dancing now that the army had caught up, she switched Havoc and Malice for Fang, hearing the giggling glee of Abaddon in her mind.

"For someone so short, you sure do walk fast," said Tullis with a grin as he stepped up on her right. Vedar laughed from her left and she felt Chas and Sarina behind her.

"I didn't intend for anyone to join me," she said.

"We know," said Vedar. He pointed Impromptu at the oncoming enemy. "We're not gonna let you have all the fun."

"They're not going to stop, so when you get tired just go back to camp. The sun provides me infinite aether, but you don't have that luxury. Don't push yourself."

"Has Royan ever shown you his instructions for combat survival?" asked Chas. "Rule number one is to not try and keep

up with you.”

“The second rule is to stay out of your way,” said Vedar, making the group chuckle.

“Alright, alright,” she said. “Focus.”

“Rule number three!” called Tullis.

But there was no laugh that time. They fell into a proper stride and called on blades through Royan. Tullis took Flight and Venom, Chas took Perception and Deception, and Sarina took Gungnir. They were senior officers in the Order of Blades now, but they still took blades that complemented each other rather than defaulting to their personal favourites, other than Vedar with Impromptu resting on his shoulder, who she side-eyed.

It was a beautiful fight, the four working in tandem to clear her sides while she dove head-first at the biggest and strongest creatures they would face that evening. The battle bond felt like telepathy, but really it was practice and experience coalescing in a dance of blades and fury.

Narianel could see the other nephilim’s influence pushing and pulling at the minds of the monsters, directing them as if moving pieces on a board. She was quick to intercept anything that tried to turn to the others, so her target eventually focussed on her exclusively, which only played into the harrying tactics of her team.

As evening turned to night and the enemy was slain, they sat on the battlefield and rested for a moment. Narianel kept her senses external, surveying the land for more monsters, but she sat with the rest of them. Vedar and Tullis were quietly talking about the battle and comparing their kill counts and flourishes while Chas slept with his head in Sarina’s lap as she gently played with his hair. Royan joined them after a while to talk about the battle that lay ahead, but first sat silently with them for a while. They were an odd bunch, but this was why she fought. Peace and family. The purity of the universe.

The next week was exhausting. The army slowly crept through the Vagan countryside, stopping often to battle monsters as they came from all fronts. They had expected it to be bad, but it was non-stop worry and fighting.

On the fifth night, Isaac had told Narianel to rest in the camp. She had depleted most of her aether fighting nearly a thousand mountain trolls imbued with anti-magic powers. She could have used the Spirit of the Divine, waking up that power that slumbered deeply to restore her instantly, but she agreed with Isaac. The fighting was taking a toll on her mind, the scents of blood and magic intoxicating and wearying. Some of the blades have even stopped functioning from overuse and needed time to restore their aether, which wasn't something she had been aware could happen, aside from Wishmaker which Isaac carried.

On the sixth day, once the sun had restored her to her natural limit, a task which had once taken minutes and now took just over an hour, she took charge of the battle again. She got to fight alongside Isaac and Royan, the trio devastating the enemy army quickly and efficiently.

The days rolled on, but they kept fighting.

Narianel approached the black tower with Royan. She could see now it was iron, heavily rusted and caked in soot. The whole thing was on the verge of collapse. It was nearly two hundred feet tall and contained many different machines she didn't recognise, but she saw the runes in place, which controlled the flow of heat.

Beneath the structure was an incredibly deep mine. It almost touched the barrier holding in the Dragons, but there was a precise flatness to the lowest levels that suggested the nephilim was aware of the barrier and not trying to break it. Moving her sight through the mines she saw depleted iron veins that weren't worth scraping out on a scale this huge, but then she stopped, her eyes widening.

"What is it?" asked Royan. "I've never seen that look on your face before. What's in there?"

"Tell Octavio I need two days," she said. "He took most of what's in there, but there's enough for a sword or two."

"Two days for a couple of swords." She looked at him when she heard his bemusement. "What's in there? Mythril?"

She smiled and nodded, making his confusion turn to awe.



Knowing where it was allowed her to fall through the floor directly to it. She dropped through the ceiling before becoming physical again, then summoned Quake. She rarely used the hammer, but she could feel Archas proud in her hands. She adjusted her grip to use the spike on the back of the hammer head, and the demon readied to be as exact with his power as he could.

She swung and struck the wall. Pure instinct wanted to release a burst of aether, but she held it back and let Quake do its work, using the force of her swing to drive cracks deeper

into the stone than she could have done herself. After a few more swings and pulling out loose stone, she saw it. The blue-black stone that would become mythril. She kept going, gathering enough for her needs. The scent of the stone ran through the tunnel, telling her that there had been much more here once, and this was a remnant left behind.

When she had enough, she touched the rocks and set her mind to taking them all in. They vanished from the Material Realm and found their way into her mindscape. There was no silver flash; they simply disappeared. She had been experimenting with what could and could not be done with mindscapes for a while now, but this was the first time she'd taken anything into herself unbonded. There was a weight to it, and she instantly knew there had to be a limit, but she was also nowhere near it. She wondered if that was because of how developed her mindscape already was or if it was based on her Circle of power, but it would have to be saved for another day.

She flew up through the floor and made her way to the furnace. The thing was huge and dominated the room it was in, but there was a cloud of magic surrounding it that would suit her purpose. She touched the activation rune and watched the aether flow from rune to rune along finely crafted lined, and she made a point of memorising this for later use. She'd been creating her own fires each time she'd needed to smelt ore for the Order, but could now offload that to an assistant so she could focus.

Once the flames were going and the heat was being recycled back into the furnace to preserve it, she got to work. She released the ore from her mindscape and then fed it all into the machine. She adjusted the heat up to two thousand degrees, as much as was needed for eldrine and a third higher than iron needed.

And then something struck her in the chest and she leaned on the furnace before falling to her knees. There were tears in her eyes and she tried to repress it. She clenched her fists and pulled in her aether to protect herself. Her soul's

aether hardened, but this wasn't a threat she could shield herself from.



"My dream, Nareen," said Gregory, "is to one day work with mythril." They were sitting in Fye, in the lantern light just after night fell on the world like a thick blanket. The furnace still had a dim glow from her grandfather's work that day and she was covered in slowly healing scratches from her training.

"Mythril," he continued, "is highly receptive to magic. I want to forge the finest blade in the world and have the best enchanters fill it with so much power that the blade becomes legendary. I don't have many years left now, but I think I'm going to spend some of that money I've saved for years. All your inheritance on enough of the rarest metal on the planet to make that sword."

"I don't need more money," she said. "I'd rather see that sword."

"Trust me, Nareen. You will." Gregory let out a barking laugh that made him seem so much older than he looked. She couldn't tell where the laugh lines ended and the wrinkles of age began.



She took control of herself, feeling the shadowy touch of Abaddon on her soul, comforting her. The blades could sense her thoughts when she didn't keep her emotions in check, and it seemed the demon missed her grandfather too.

She summoned her tools, each carefully enchanted for working magical metals and stored neatly within her soul.

"Alright," she said. "Let's make the finest blade that Avani has ever seen. Let's make it legendary."

No one had been allowed inside the tower, but they'd heard the hammering all night and the air was electric with enchanting and shaping. It was dusk when Narianel emerged from the tower, holding something wrapped in her shakai. She saw there had been some fighting, but she'd been so into her work that she hadn't noticed. Chas was sporting a cut up his cheek he seemed to be proud of.

Hanean soldiers and the Order alike gathered around and she called Royan forward. When he was before her, she shifted her shakai to reveal a handle made of a blue-white metal, wrapped in her two reds, alternating dark and light. A smile crept across his face and he raised an eyebrow.

"Did you really not make it for yourself?" he asked.

"I have enough blades," she said. "Royan, I feel that my Champion of Blades should have a weapon of position. It will be bonded to the title, usable only by those of your stature. I have made it to the best of my ability, forged it from the secret mythril of Vaga, enchanted it with the song and my will for our success. A Champion of Blades needs the finest blade in the world. Take it and it will bond to you and you alone, until the day you pass your title to the soul of your choice, once this battle is over and you are old and grey, for together we shall not be defeated."

He touched the handle tenderly, then took ahold of it, its magic returning its grasp, connecting to his soul.

"In order to craft it to its fullest, I have forged a soul for it. A pseudosoul; no personality, no mind of its own, but carrying all the power a soul normally does. Don't laugh when I say this, but I named it Nareen, after a nickname I used to have. My grandfather... It doesn't matter. The blade itself is named Blair. It is a piece of myself, entrusted to you, my most loyal soldier."

Royan took the sword from her shakai and held it up in front of him. When the light hit the blade, it looked like any

other white metal, but in the shadows it was possible to see the soft blue tint, the telltale sign of mythril. It was a two-edged sword, three feet in length. Narianel was rather proud of the crossguard, which looked like four crow wings. She'd used magic to turn two white and two black. The pommel was shaped like Heart, an open circle with three spikes at ninety degree angles.

She'd given it a fuller down the centre of the blade and filled it with runic etchings. She got the help of many of her blades to achieve exactly what she wanted, and had been surprised when Legion, Metatron, had wanted to help. Despite his malevolence, there was a genuine interest in being actually helpful. Those runes did something that no other magic before had managed to accomplish.

"Nareen's power is elemental enhancement," she said as he was looking at the runes. "All sixteen elements at once. The sixteen of my blades that enhance individual elements are able to focus and do a better job, but they don't boast the pure versatility that Blair will provide you. And now, we do a quick experiment."

Narianel summoned Elemental to her hand. Andaras, the fallen angel within the blade, was ready and confident. She held the blade towards Royan hilt-first. He looked at Blair, and then to Elemental. He understood as he took Elemental and activated its power. Normally it would switch his attunement to the element of the other blade he held, but with a sword that was designed to have no element, it opened a whole new world of possibilities.

Elemental and Blair combined their power and the air crackled around Royan before settling. Narianel kept her eyes on Royan's core, watching his soul for both damage and success. But there was no damage. There was only victory. They had managed to detune his soul. He wasn't a Null, but instead his soul freely resonated with every element. He was the first Omnimage.

Royan dismissed the sword and resummoned it, testing

its reaction time and finding it faster than the divine blades. He seemed satisfied, and bowed to her, making the sign of the empty diamond on his chest, framing his core.

“Thank you for this honour,” he said. “I guess I’ll need to rethink my idea for my book.” He laughed as he said it, and she could feel the radiance within him.

“Book? You’ve never mentioned that before.”

“I was waiting until we found all the elemental blades,” he explained. “I was going to write about how to be a mage who actively changes their element. Being a generalist. This blade, however, is something special. It will need its own volume, I should think.”

His smile, so pure and genuine, made her happy. This was her brother without blood, and she knew he would survive this war and make a mark so deep on the world that his name would never be forgotten.

Narianel and Isaac danced around each other as they took on the creatures. They had so rarely fought alongside each other that she felt it was a good bonding experience. She very quickly noticed that Isaac fought to the rhythm of the song too, though he claimed not to hear it. It was good, however, as it allowed her to predict his movements and compliment them.

Across the battlefield she could feel a storm of aether. Royan unchained. He was achieving his full potential. Fans of flame and bolts of lightning and shards of ice, combinations of magic that could never so easily have flowed from a single person before now graced the plains of Vaga in a beautiful display.

The war, Isaac, Royan, even Octavio. She was enjoying this. This was where she belonged.

The fighting continued and their number fell by a few each day. The Hanean army's weaponry proved effective, the thunderous torrent of bullets taking down the creatures. It was the Order's job to take over if they got too close, using the blades and magic to cut down their foes. The two forces worked well together, covering each other's weaknesses, but there was a constant issue.

It was the evening and Narianel sat in the camp as Royan and Isaac fought some more monsters in the distance. She was incredibly bored, but her task was necessary. She was using her power to duplicate bullets. Each of them were small, but the construction was complicated, with multiple materials arranged in specific ways and shaped with purpose.

She didn't yet have Titan, the metal elemental blade, which would have made this much easier. She had considered asking Royan to do the task using Blair, but couldn't deny him the time to play with his new partner. At this point she had taken the time to learn the basics of each element, even those she didn't have the blades for, but creating each bullet only for ten to be shot each second felt like a losing battle.

A junior member of the Order named Stanley sat with her, taking each of the new bullets and putting them in boxes that would be handed out in the morning to the Haneans. It was a long process, but Stanley seemed happy to sit there in silence and fill the boxes.

"How long until we get there?" asked Octavio. There were noticeable bags under his eyes.

"We're making good progress," said Narianel. "I should imagine only a few more days. We're deep into the territory beyond the towers. Our opponent is making it difficult to judge distance with his magic, but we're close."

"Would it be best if we found a position we could fortify and you go on alone?" asked Octavio. "At this point, our enemy seems to want us dead, so you would be free to move."

“The reason we’re here is to support Narianel,” said Sarina. There was the lingering scent of healing magic on her and her uniform’s leg was stained with her own blood. “Even gods can die, and we can at least get her to the important fights instead of having to deal with everything herself. We will reach those doors and see her inside. That is our duty.”

“We are running low on resources. Food, water, and ammunition are now being supplied by magic. We have been marching farther and farther from civilisation and support. We have taken far too many losses.”

“Give me a moment,” said Narianel. She put aside the bullet she was using as a base and focussed her mind. Pushing her mind out, she felt the resistance that recently had been ever-present. She held it back with sheer willpower and surveyed the land.

They were surrounded by black towers, all of them in operation. The pillars were manned by strange creatures that Narianel had trouble describing. Square bodies with too many legs that they could use as arms, they moved about the forges with a careful and stiff pace. They were like the things flying those aeroplanes, metallic and soulless.

The nearest forge was to the north, and probably two days away. It was difficult to tell because her vision wavered the farther she pushed it. By comparison, she was able to tell that the city surrounding the Library was that distance and a half, so likely three days of travel.

The closer she pushed her mind to the Library, the more panicked the presence felt, the harder the pressure pushed back. She had no intention of looking inside yet, but she gave a small mental shove and felt the presence scramble to keep her out. Her opponent was either terrified of her or very good at bluffing, and she looked forward to see which it was.

“Alright,” she said, pulling her senses back into her body. She saw how Octavio and Sarina weren’t looking at each other and wondered if they had been arguing while she wasn’t

paying attention, but she chose to ignore it. "I've got a plan."

"Let's hear it," said Octavio.

"I'm going to send you north," she said to him. "You will come across one of the tower forges. I want you to cause as big of a distraction as possible. Disrupt the operations. I'll send the Order with you to keep you supplied and help in the fight. Royan will stand in for my authority."

"Isaac and I will continue east towards the target. We will be shielding our auras as much as possible to hide, with the hope that we can surprise the enemy. During our stealth, the enemy will likely continue to send monsters towards you, so it will be dangerous, but it means we can make swift progress towards the Library unimpeded. If we're ever caught we'll flare our souls to make ourselves even more obvious, hoping to panic the opponent."

"What do you hope that will achieve?" asked Octavio. "Why not make it obvious you're leaving from the start?"

"There are two possible outcomes, and I don't like either. The first is that he thinks you're entirely undefended and attempts to overwhelm you. The monsters are still coming in from across the continent, so we don't want them to rush. The second is that seeing Isaac and I on our own, he sends everything at us to slow us down. This would cause even more supply issues for you as it would take time to clear a path to the Library."

Narianel stood and stretched. She hated being so inactive. She remembered Adela scolding her a few times for messing up the bedsheets when reading by "spinning like a top." She forced the memory down.

"My real hope is to take the enemy by surprise. He is a nephilim, same as Isaac and me, and he's far older than us. He has already proven he has a lot of power. He may be Grand Circle as a mage, which is more than enough to crack the planet if we aren't careful. That said, I expect open fighting, and the closer we can get before he starts raining down magic on us from behind his fortifications, the better."

“There is also the issue of the Spirit of the Divine. It is a weapon that should be used sparingly. I don’t want to touch it if I don’t have to. The less that Azael gets to see my level of control over it, the more of an advantage I’ll have when the real battle comes.”

“How can you control it if you never practice with it?” asked Octavio. He had less of a frown on his face now. He just needed to know there was a plan, it seemed. He was a lot more like Royan than she’d originally thought.

“I do, just inwardly. If you ever think I’m sleeping, I’m not. I very rarely do that. Instead, I’m in a meditative state, mentally inside my mindscape, and I’m either learning what my blades can teach me or training in one way or the other. I feel that I’ve lived thrice as long as I truly have by spending so much time in there.”

“When are you leaving?” asked Octavio.

“As soon as the fighting starts in the morning. I can feel Royan and Isaac finishing up now and the next lot won’t be close enough to worry about for eight hours. Let Royan sleep, as he’ll be taking over my role here. I’m also linking you into the battle bond.”

“Battle bond?” asked Octavio. “I’ve never heard you mention such a thing.”

“It’s how we share our blades and keep an awareness of each other,” said Sarina. “It would be helpful to be able to keep track of you. Not everyone has the senses of Narianel. In battle, with the feeling of aether all around, whether it’s magic or souls, it can be challenging. The battle bond declutters a lot of that, sharing a small piece of ourselves with the group.”

“She’s right,” said Narianel. “Since you can’t sense aether on your own, I’m not sure how well you’ll be able to tell people apart, but take some time to feel out the officers of the Order. At least Royan and his four captains. You’ll be able to sense Isaac and me too. We should stand out as a step above everyone else, but we’ll disappear once the plan begins. When you feel us again, that will be your signal to go into a full

offensive and make as much trouble as you can. Pull our target's attention as much as possible."

"So you'll need a distraction?"

"No, I want him to split his attention until he's forced to focus only on us," said Narianel. She knew her smirk had an unnerving affect on most people, so it was no surprise to see Octavio shudder. She leaned a little closer and smiled wider, showing off every sharp tooth. "If he abandons his monsters and machines, you'll be able to do some real damage. The moment he's no longer looking, you're going to be stealing as much mythrill as you can get your hands on. If he sees you, he'll pivot back, so wait for Royan's signal. He's been noticing the presence and will be able to tell you when it's gone."

"Will you rest before then?" asked Octavio. He took a step back.

"Don't be dumb," said Narianel, sitting down again. "I have bullets to duplicate. Stanley, hand me that sample I was using. No sleep for the next seven hours."

Narianel and Isaac hid their aether and left the camp just as Royan met a new batch of enemies and the army started their move to the north. Royan had thoroughly approved of the plan and had expressed how he wanted the Order to really show what they can do in front of the Haneans. He was concerned, however, about her ability to hide her aether. It was such a massive amount to suppress, but Isaac confirmed he could only feel her through the battle bond now, so she was satisfied.

She hadn't brought any of her blades with her, feeling that her opponent may just be smart enough to look for their own unique soul signatures and track her. In fact, she'd made sure that someone would be using Havoc and Malice at all times in battle, just in case. Isaac hadn't been happy to leave behind Wishmaker, but when Royan promised he wouldn't let anyone use it, Isaac had reluctantly accepted. As much aether as Hecate stored to make her wishes come true, she would have been a beacon they couldn't afford to carry.

Instead of walking, they ran. The sun refilled them as they spent their energy, and they purposely kept themselves low, thinking that the less they had the easier it would be to hide. The exertion was enjoyable, but they kept conversation to a minimum. Isaac couldn't say anything without flaring his aether, even if it was just in his fingertips, so it became one-sided quickly.

Just after noon they had to duck behind some bushes until some monsters passed by them, but nothing else of interest happened until after nightfall. It was in the last remnants of dusk when she felt it in the distance for the first time. She had committed Vala's list to memory, so she knew what she would find, but there it was, calling out to her, trying to get away from this nephilim.

"I hear you, Gideon. A couple more days and then we'll show him who he's been messing with."

It was mid-afternoon when they made it to the edge of the city surrounding the massive block monolith that was the Vantori Library. That place was apparently filled with knowledge from worlds before the Ruination and put Argus's collection to shame. Thinking about it, Narianel drew parallels between the two. Ancient scholars who were vultures on the battlefields of ancient battles.

The city itself was impressive, and reminded her of the one she'd seen in Sara De Han. Tall structures with many glass windows, filled with steel beams to hold them up. It was a marvel of architecture, but she found herself missing the shorter buildings of Vin, with their eaves and trellises. There was something soulless about this city and its machine people that disturbed her. There was no art to it. The city didn't sing the way that Seremont did.

They used a brief bit of magic to change their clothes, adopting the local fashion. Black robes with red trim, almost like the ones worn by the Vault Lords in Nerik, but these had one feature that made Narianel furious. Azael's symbol was on the back. His name meant origin and used the same Skrae symbol for soul, and to be worn so openly like this on Avani made her want to start smashing these empty shells.

As they moved through the city they stuck to alleys and empty streets, passing by cars and other vehicles she didn't have names for. The behaviour of these robots, as Ocatavio and his engineers called them, was almost human-like, but she didn't like it. She couldn't smell them, and that made her uncomfortable. They were unpredictable.

As dusk came there was a siren, ringing at a frequency that hurt her ears. She even noticed Isaac's head dip beneath the hood, so he was feeling it too. They kept their heads down and moved quickly, and she noticed that the robots were all entering the buildings. The streets emptied quickly.

"We've either been spotted or there's a curfew," she

whispered, knowing that Isaac's sharp ears would pick up her words. "We need to get off the streets."

They moved from a wide street into an alley, taking several turns, and then peeked out the other side from as far down the alley as they could. Sure enough, a large vehicle passed the end of the alley. It had a cannon mounted to the top and thick armoured sides.

"That's military," she whispered and they pulled their heads back in. They heard the echo of the vehicle from the other end of the alley, which then faded away. "It's going to be difficult getting closer than this, I think. We'll stay here until morning, then I'll break cover while you get closer to the Library for an attack. I'll be the distraction."

Isaac shook his head and pointed at himself. "You just want a fight," he signed with a smile. There was no aether in his fingertips, so she had to watch carefully. He moved his hands fast.

"Alright, yes," she said, stifling a laugh. "You know me too well. Stop that. You be the distraction then. Do as much damage to the city as you can once you're well away from me so I can get as close to the Library as possible. I feel like he'll be expecting that once he sees you, but by then Royan and Ocatavio will be enacting their part of the plan."

Isaac nodded and settled down, letting himself fall asleep. Narianel had no idea how a grown man could do that, just sit down and doze like a cat. She decided to climb the wall and watch from a little higher up, sitting on some machine sticking out the black brick wall that was giving off heat. She kept her eyes on the corners turning into this part of the alley and waited for day.

It was an hour after dawn when Isaac unleashed a flame the size of which she'd never seen. It took her a moment to realise that it wasn't a flame. It was his entire essence. At the centre of the flame were revolving wheels upon wheels surrounded by white wings with eyes as black as the Void on each feather. He was terrifying and beautiful.

As he released his halo, so bright and wonderful, it released a shock wave that knocked the surrounding buildings down in moments. Everything near him was turning to sludge as he melted it just by existing.

That was good. She burst from the alley she'd been standing in and ran as fast as she could handle into the next. In the depths of the battle bond and through the Spirit of the Divine she could feel everything happening all at once. Isaac was excited to let loose, Royan was rallying the Order, Octavio had both terror and determination running off his soul.

She sprinted through a park, turning the heads of the robots, her disguise fully broken, but it didn't matter because she was less than a mile from the Library at the centre of the city. She could already touch it with her wings if she really wanted to.

As she left the park and was about to head into another alley, she saw several of those armoured vehicles with the cannons moving towards Isaac. She let them go, knowing they didn't stand a chance.

Beyond the next alley she found a street that lead straight to the Vantori Library on the other side of an open plaza lined with statues. She kept moving, but by sounds rumbling towards her she knew she'd attracted some of those vehicles of her own.

The presence noticed her, the nephilim of the Vantori Library, so she allowed herself to soak in the power of the sky and revealed herself. She took on her aetherial form, smooth, glowing, her black hair flowing behind her as if she were

underwater. She kicked off the ground and flew into the sky.

“Anyone home!?” she shouted at the sky, feeling the eyes of the nephilim trying its best to figure out what she was capable of. It would never manage a full analysis, not unless she took on her Vanavolk and nephilim forms. As long as she kept those back, she always had a surprise ready for him, though he *must* have seen her wings by now. Isaac could, so surely every nephilim could.

It was time to put all her practice to the test. Over the years she’d been slowly learning the powers of each of the blades and had been attempting to mimic them, aiding by the soul of each blade’s tutoring. Some she’d had a lot of success, but others she’d struggled with. The elemental enhancers were such advanced magic that they went beyond the scope of her interests, but Abaddon’s destructive potential had come so naturally that it might have worried others. Not her.

She activated World Sight, the power of Perception and the Eyes of Chassuille. The presence came into full and sharp relief. Her range matched that of Perception’s easily because of her experience of using her senses from outside herself. She then mimicked Flight, sharpening her natural ability to move through reality. It perhaps wasn’t necessary, as it was such a small boost for her, but she was going to eke out every single advantage she could get.

Then came the two that came so naturally that it felt strange to not have them as part of her. The havoc of Kali and the malice of Zepar, the red and blue auras of the magic enveloping her in flowing purple aether. These boosts in speed and strength gave her a significant edge, and her body accepted the magic readily and hungrily.

She landed on the wall of the Library, standing horizontally on its surface. She’d managed this trick before, but with Furtur’s training and experience with Needlepoint, it was becoming easier. She had to keep a tiny amount of her concentration on the effect, but Furtur had shown her just how innate it could become with more practice and she knew she’d

get there by the time she was facing Azael.

She looked at the presence and tracked where it was coming from. It stretched across the continent like a spiderweb and she would have thought it was connected to the artificial life, but it wasn't. How were they powered if not directly by his aether? It didn't matter for now. She followed the flow of magic to somewhere within the Library where it became cloaked by layer after layer of illusion.

She stamped her foot on the wall of the Library and released a burst of aether, the thunder of the strike causing the robots below to start firing weapons at her. She looked at them and didn't bother to dodge. The bullets weren't enchanted. How did her target overlook that? Surely he should have prepared for magical foes?

She shook her head in disappointment and stepped into the hole she'd created, falling sideways into the Library and then redirecting herself back to standing on the floor. She had a surprising talent for space magic, she'd noticed, and had plans to cultivate it and see how far she could push it. After Azael. Everything like that had to wait until he was defeated.

The inside of the Library was exactly what she expecting. A library. Thousands of books lined the shelves of a large room. It had a desk and a rolling ladder, but it didn't look like it had been used in a while. Everything was ornate, but it looked too sterile. Too clean. Everything was where it should be, except for the hole through the wall, which had knocked down a bookshelf. There wasn't any dust, but that was no real shock. Nothing living had been here in a long time, and nephilim didn't leave behind dust, something she'd noticed over her own life.

She opened the finely decorated wooden door and exited out into a space that reminded her of the Vault of the Endless's main room or the Archive below Seremont. It was a vast and open space that stretched the whole height of the tower, balconies after balconies connected by a maze of stairs, with doors into more rooms like the one she'd entered

through. The World Sight was pushing back the illusions and letting her see, but it was difficult beyond ten paces or so, with everything distorting and twisting and making it unclear what was empty space and what was solid.

The presence was coming from below, and so was the call of her blade. She was sure that her target was wielding it, but that wouldn't be a problem. She was getting hungry for some real combat after the warm-up of the previous days. She'd never call it that in front of Octavio or Royan, she didn't want to belittle their efforts and achievements, but they were just people and she was a God. Armies were just extra hands, and she'd use hers to protect the people who opposed Azael so she could focus on the actual fight.

She jumped over the edge and fell through the Library, adjusting her path to avoid staircases, and landed gently on her feet at the bottom, her hair and shakai flowing amongst the purple aura, making her appear larger than she really was. It was fitting, as she was a giant in her mind, standing above all those who would dare challenge her.

The illusions behind her shifted and she turned around in time to block an attack, but what she saw was far from what she'd had in mind. She was expecting this nephilim to look like her and Isaac, mixed with humans and other non-angels. But this was something else.

He had four muscular arms. They weren't attached to his body, instead floating near his shoulders. This was similar to the way her wings worked when she had more than a couple out, each finding space to exist in without interfering the others. The first one pulled back from the punch she'd blocked by hardening her aether and then the rain of blows began. Strike after strike, she dodged as many as she could while deflecting others.

Instead of legs he had tentacles. Long and slender with little pods on the end. There were thousands of them. He was using them to move around, grasping at the staircases above and to the side, pushing up from the ground and against small

invisible walls he placed in the air. With them he was able to get to any angle he wanted, and soon she was under a dome with him attacking from above.

He had three heads that could rotate on his neck. One of a Skraeðan, one of a lion, and one of a goat. She quickly noticed that his attack pattern changed depending on which head was looking at her, but he never gave her time to get used to any one pattern of punches, switching freely back and forth between the three heads. She knew she fought to the rhythm of the song in her mind, so made a mental note to go off-beat on occasion just so he wouldn't catch on to that particular weakness.

"What's your name?" she asked, dancing around several strikes. His hands were passing through her hair, but he never tried to grab it. He could probably sense the aether there and assuming it was a trap. He wasn't wrong. Lilith had taught her something nasty.

"You're here to kill me, so why should I answer?" his voice came from all three heads at once. His tone was soft, but it rang loud in her ears.

"I'm here for the sword, not you," said Narianel. She dodged a punch and then kicked that arm in the elbow, releasing a burst strong enough to rip the arm apart. The hand bounced to the side, but instead of screaming in pain he simply regretted the arm in an instant. "I see you've removed your ability to feel pain. Or were you born like that?"

"You talk too much," he said. "This is a library."

"Forget your library and give me the sword. It's a scimitar with a golden hilt. I see it behind your back."

With a grunt, the nephilim revealed four more arms that had been tucked away in space, in much the same way as she stored her wings. Another similarity. One of them was holding Volatility, but he never swung it at her, likely fearing to use its power inside the Library.

There were another pair of arms and even a set of legs he'd tucked away. They were about the same build as the rest

of his body, slender rather than muscular. This was likely what he normally used to interact with the world, and the way he was now was more similar to when she had her wings and chains and tendrils showing.

Seven arms came at her at once from different angles, but she was able to weave her way through them and punch the nephilim in the chest. She blew a hole clean through him and laughed at just how devious he was.

“You’re able to move your core?” She dance backwards and put herself about halfway between the man’s body and the wall of tentacles keeping her penned in. “Or is it simply not where I can see it thanks to your illusions?”

She blocked several more attacks, but that was when she took her first hit. A punch hit her knee and didn’t need a Sarkal burst to blow it off. She pulled her lips tight and turned her gravity directly upward, spinning and cutting through the tentacles with slashing of nothing, with Abaddon’s Claws as he had called the spell when teaching her.

Her escape as she fell up allowed her to rebuild her leg. She wasn’t as fast with it as her opponent was, and their age difference was clear. She was in the Pure Circle now with seemingly infinite aether, but this man in the Grand Circle had a much more automatic response than her, built with centuries or millennia more careful practice.

She felt him approach from below and so she shifted her gravity to the side, landing on a staircase using the wrong side of the steps.

“Now, that is a curious ability,” said the nephilim. “Teach me how you rent reality.”

“You’ll learn it, don’t worry,” she muttered. She didn’t know if his hearing was as heightened as hers.

He shattered the stairs below her and she launched off them, turning her gravity upwards again and free-falling rather than flying. Her flight was too fast for this enclosed area, even with how large it was.

She watched him following her and saw that his

illusions were weakening. Through the battle bond she could feel Royan and Isaac going all out, pulling aether from the Spirit of the Divine to fuel their magic. That meant his eyes were only on her. Good.

She reversed her gravity, now falling towards the ground after a sudden, dizzying stop in midair. Furtur had warned her not to do that too much, as even with an aetherial body she had a sense of up and down. Confusing that sense with reversals was a good way to lose track of everything.

She then started flying again, straight down, using the momentum to slam into her opponent. As soon as they made contact she released a burst behind her and forced them back to the floor where they first clashed in a split second.

She found herself falling through a deep chasm that she hadn't known was there. The illusion disguising it had been able to fool World Sight even though she'd been standing less than a foot above it when they were fighting. She could see the underside of the city and all the electrical infrastructure, but there was nothing below it, mined out so thoroughly there was just a pit, miles wide and deeper than she could see.

The nephilim had resorted to streams of flame to attack at range. She saw he couldn't fly, instead using the tentacles and small invisible platforms to move through the air. He couldn't match her speed or manoeuvrability. She kept her distance and watched him carefully, thinking about how to find his core and strike effectively.

She extended her sight down into the depths of Avani to try and find the bottom while avoiding attacks. She was caught off-guard by what she found as lightning sent her spinning. When she caught herself she ignored the nephilim and flew straight down.

"Where are you going!?" she heard him call, but she had time. He wouldn't be able to catch up to her, even by falling and pushing off those walls with his tentacles.

There was a rumbling as she touched the barrier that held the Sixteen Dragons down in the core of the planet. The

only protection the people of Avani had was this barrier, and if it broke the world would end. She had recently learned that there were three and a half billion people living on Avani, and all those people could die in an instant.

The barrier shimmered beneath her feet. Thousands of tiny clear triangles interlocked, turning purple from her aura when she touched them before becoming invisible again.

She knelt down and touched the barrier, then focussed. She could feel all Sixteen. Not quite asleep, but also not quite awake. The closest was Infernus, Dragon of Fire, and they were spaced out under the surface of the planet. She knew Argona was closest to the Twilight Steppe. She then put her face close to the barrier and whispered a message into the depths.

Unfortunately, what Narianel said has been blacked out in her Book of Fate. I am more convinced than ever that these sections are her obfuscating her own mind and memory to prevent people from knowing her plan. I've read snippets of the ending and know where this is going, so I believe I know what she said to the Dragons, but this portion here is unreadable.

There was a deep rumble as the Sixteen got her message and at once her mind was bombarded with sixteen shouts of "Yes!"

She grinned as her opponent landed and launched into another attack. She saw the panic in his soul, his aether fluctuating and rolling, as she used Abaddon's Claws again, scratching holes in reality and wide swathes of the light from Beyond became visible. She rather enjoyed how scared he was, deliberately swiping low with several attacks to watch his soul flutter.

"You're mad!" shouted the nephilim.

"Probably," she said, pouncing on him and cutting several arms in half with a pirouette and extended arms, scratching apart reality. "But this is my domain."

“What are you talking about?”

“I am Pure Lady Narianel Azranhai. I am the Goddess of Nothing and Divine Fury. The Light of the Great Beyond is mine, and you stand no chance against me.”

Three fists came towards her head, but she used a little trick that Garret, the Chronomage, taught her. It wasn't time reversal like with his blade, the first she made herself. It was a one second time stop. It was an expensive spell, but the light of the Great Beyond was as nourishing as the sky. If she had been aligned to the time element it would have been easier, but the only way to do that was the elemental enhancing blade Flux, or to use Blair. She couldn't do that to Royan, she didn't want to steal his fun by also aligning to every element at once. Not until Azael was dead, anyway.

In that single second she moved out of his attack's path and she saw it. His core was hidden in that rotating neck. All the illusions became transparent, and that core was clear. But there was something else she was only beginning to see and she couldn't quite pin it down yet.

He snapped back into motion and was confused by how she'd stepped back so far in an instant, but it didn't stop him from advancing again. She parried with blasts of aether, but she was only delaying while she thought about how best to attack.

Then came something that, at this point, she had thought wouldn't happen. The nephilim swung down Volatility directly at her head. She chose to freeze and let it happen. They stood staring at each other in silence as the rifts in space she'd caused finally closed, Volatility pushing against her hardened surface.

“You don't know who I am, do you?” she asked.

“Why should I!?” shouted her foe and swung the blade again and again. She let him slash her again and again, waiting for him to finally aim at her core. Volatility's long curved edge cut cleanly through her leaving trails of silver light, and she quickly became whole again.

"You're looking flustered," she said. Standing there, tilting her head slightly, her hair flowing as it moved.

"Why can't this blade destroy you!?"

"Gideon, the soul in the blade, does not wish to. You have been rejected because he knows what I am."

"And what are you?"

"Stab my core and you'll find out."

He took the bait.



Gideon looked like a Skraeðan, dressed in a plain black robe that was frayed at the hems. He had pale green skin and a shaved head, and there was a severe look in his violet eyes.

"I can feel the presence of the others," he said, as he gestured to the open arena. "Some of them. You seek to reunite us and sing the song?"

"I do," she said. She was dressed in a newer style of Nerikan dress that included loops for the arms just below the shoulders instead of being entirely armless, and she wasn't sure she liked it. The dress was black with white trim and decorated with the symbol for blade embroidered in red at knee height.

"I see it in your eyes," he said. "You have the strength and courage to do it." He smiled softly, but his eyes held a look of ferocity. "I had once thought Prochorus was a coward, living in fear of the burden all the corruption would put on him. But you, I see now, were the one meant to carry us, to lead us as we sing. He was only the smith. It's your voice I hear loud in the song that echoes in your mind, not his."

"I have so many titles now," she said. "Too many to list. But let me ask you this: What is Balance and Twilight if not the perfect unity between Purity and Corruption?"

Gideon laughed, loud and open.

"I like you," he said. "Shall I show you how I lead us to so many victories during the Rebellion? How I became known

as more destructive than Abaddon?”

“Let us dance, Gideon. You lead, and I’ll follow.”



Gideon took control of Narianel’s body and they became one. The song pounded in their ears and their wills aligned to win this fight. Gideon released a circular blast of flames that pushed their opponent back then posed like the hero in a play. Light formed around Narianel’s body, solidifying and finding its place, encasing her in porcelain armour, making her look more like a knight than she ever had before.

“I do not fear you,” said Gideon’s voice from her mouth. “You cannot defeat me.”

He launched them forward, instinctively making use of all the powers that Narianel had activated and tapping into her own elemental alignments. This demon was a warrior through and through, working with every resource he had. When he reached for the Spirit of the Divine, she stopped him. Without a word he didn’t reach for it again. Not just a warrior. A soldier who could follow orders. Very good.

Gideon met their opponent’s punches with punches of his own. Narianel’s arms went numb, but they were moving faster than they ever had, two meeting eight as if it were nothing. Her arms no longer resembled arms, their aether breaking apart and becoming streaks of white and red and black light.

And then Gideon pushed his own power.

Eight decisive strikes and each arm bubbled and then exploded, their form completely disrupted. Gideon jumped and grabbed at the opponent’s core, his touch able melt the nephilim’s neck. But he knew where to stop. Their hand firmly grasped the core, not harming it, then tore it free. The body of their opponent collapses and turned to mist.

Gideon pulled out his blade from Narianel’s core and she resumed control, but the armour remained. She’d seen

how he did it and knew she could replicate it if needed, but it didn't feel useful. But after a moment of thought, she realised it was perfect for the Order. She would teach it to Royan when they met again.

Then there was laughing. Not from below, but from above. The darkness of the cavern pulled back, revealing glowing crystals in the walls of this mile-wide space. At the very top of the dome was the hole she'd fallen through and there was a glowing blue light.

She looked at the aether crystal in her hand and saw it wasn't a soul's core, but just condensed aether. It wasn't a thread wound in on itself to form a sphere, but instead it was cut and polished and infused with the nephilim's aether to try and fool her. That was what she had been seeing. She had been fighting just another illusion.

The Dragons roared as she flew up, encouraging her and reinforcing what they'd agreed. She burst through the hole then landed gently, making the visor of her armour invisible so she could look her real foe in the eye.

"Fighting you is what fighting Lucifer should have been," she said. "He was so busy trying to get himself killed that he didn't show me many illusions, despite his apparent mastery."

"I appreciate the comparison," said the man sitting at the desk. "He is a hero of mine."

He was wearing a black suit with a black priest's shawl around his shoulders. It wasn't quite a shakai, but close, and it bore the symbol of Azael. He looked Skraeðan, but also like a black Host, his skin and hair and irises of the deepest darkness. A nephilim born of demons, not angels.

"He's an idiot," she said.

"I've heard the same said of you," he said, "but I very much disagree. I can see it in you. A full formed mindscape with multiple layers, but it's protected so thoroughly that I can only see its shape, not the details. You did fall for my illusions, but you were close to figuring it out when you managed to out-

manoeuvre my thinking. In combat and in your soul, you are incredible.”

He stood up, not defending himself at all. “That said, you are the Blade of the Infinite, and yet you fight us. We do what is correct, yet you are defiant. You should be at his right hand as his personal weapon. That is where you belong.”

“If you think killing innocents just to end all their suffering is correct, then you need to start rethinking your positions. You still haven’t told me your name.”

“I’ve dealt with you Nerikanee before. It was before the Chronomage destroyed your first world, but it seems you haven’t changed. You put too much importance on names and their meaning, dressing up and painting yourselves as if each one of you is a piece of art. So full of yourselves. But my name is Cassiel, if you must know it. You took part in the killing of my parents.”

“Did I?” asked Narianel. She couldn’t help the smirk. “No one ever mentioned you.”

“Asmodeus and Vanth.”

“Ah, yes, I did take part in that.” Narianel shrugged. “But I can give you some good news. I’m not going to kill you now. Isn’t that nice?”

“You’re not going to kill me?” asked Cassiel. He raised one black eyebrow that would have been indistinguishable from his skin by a most others. “I had heard that you have no mercy for us followers of Azael, and even though I’ve only been making his weapons and not fighting all this time, I was expecting brutality.”

“Vanth would have been perfect for a new song that I’m planning,” said Narianel. “A second song to be sung in the end. A song that will defeat Azael. And I can hear it, the sound of your soul. The resonance with the universe. You take after your mother strongly. Instead of fighting, you should join me. Become one of my blades. I already have the names picked out for the ones I still need.”

“You would have me betray the Pure Lord after I’ve

spent three thousand years hollowing planets for metals and crafting everything from armour to swords to bullets to robots? Just like that? Do you think I'm so disloyal?"

"Look at it this way: My brother who killed your father is outside right now razing your city and putting an end to all your hard work. I'm sure you can feel that. Inside, there is me, the one who will beat you into bloody submission and turn you into a blade whether you want it or not. If you join willingly, you will be given a place in my mindscape. A new home. If you resist then you'll end up in the gaol with the rest of those who do not wish to aid me."

"So my choice is between our creator and master of chaos or an authoritarian nightmare beast?"

"The 'master of chaos' will kill you too, you know. He desires the end in the most painful way. I'm your only chance to live on past that fight. You might be under my rule, but is that such a bad thing when I value the lives of the people around me?"

"I have a single question." He met her eyes and gave her a sad but firm stare. He'd known who she was this entire time and known it would end up like this. The questions were lies and illusions too. "What will happen to my books?"

"You've spent three millennia collecting them," said Narianel, "and I'm not in the business of destroying knowledge and collections. There's a reason I kept the fight away from the shelves, and I do apologise about my entry. I will promise you this: if you come with me willingly I will seal this place shut to preserve its contents, and then after Azael is defeated I will return and read all your books, storing them forever in my memory. Your other objects will be taken back to my home and put on display."

"I'd heard that you were a savage warrior, not a scholar or a negotiator."

"I'm what I need to be to win," she said. "I'm happy to make those concessions, and I do enjoy reading. I've read many scholarly works, mostly on history, magic, and biology,

but I've also read many plays and novels and craft manuals. Within my mindscape there is a library of every book I've ever read, open at your convenience."

He looked away from her. Hesitating. Royan was always telling her to try and be more diplomatic, so he had better appreciate this.

"What does he really offer you? He persuades only with coercion. He works with your fears, and if you're anything like me then there's no more horrifying idea than that of an ending. You cannot imagine just stopping. You know that you can live forever, read every book ever written, but that won't happen with him. The war must be fought. For the innocence of every child, and for the peace of every adult. You know it."

"You are so strong in your convictions that it is hard to disagree with you," said Cassiel. "But I get the feeling that you aren't telling me the entire story. I saw you speak to the Dragons through the barrier. What did you say?"

"You are correct. I'm not telling the entire story, and you won't hear it unless you join me. My plans go beyond the next opening of the Grand Gate."

"I may have confined myself to this Library," he said, "but that does not mean I wish to be confined to your soul too."

"You won't be," she said with confidence. She held out Volatility to her side and then in a silver light she Manifested Gideon, which seemed to surprise both of them. "You will be bonded to me, but not bound by me."

Gideon looked at his hands and then around. "Do you do this often?"

"I do not often do it intentionally these days," she said. "My blades may come and go as they please, so long as they are ready to be used at any time." She looked at Cassiel and caught his eyes again. "I am not a prison, I am a God preparing to end the life of another. You are not my slaves, you are my closest allies. Choose life and freedom over the end. March with me to war against the most evil man in existence."

Cassiel held his head back and closed his eyes. She let

him think and watched Gideon out the side of her eye, who didn't seem to be coping with idea of being free again.

"Not going to run?" she asked him softly.

"No," he said. "I don't think I will. I like being a sword. Prochorus made the right choice, and he made me beautiful." He pulled up the arm of his tattered black robe and she saw Gideon's dead halo, worn like a bangle. He turned to silver light and went gently to her, the black scimitar with the golden hilt resting once more in her hand.

"I'll join you," said Cassiel. She looked at him to see the decisiveness in his eyes.

"I've not been told this hurts, so I apologise if it does."

She walked to Casseil and dismissed Volatility into her soul. She placed her hand on his chest and he closed his eyes, then she pushed into him, reaching in and grabbing his core. His real core. Even before pulling it out she could feel the thread and found the end.

She tugged on the end and unthreaded Cassiel's core, his eyes growing wide before he turned to mist. Then she got to work, make the small repairs that were needed. There wasn't much as Cassiel had clearly taken care of himself.

She had already decided to make him a blade the moment she'd first felt the presence, feeling the same kind of resonance as Vanth, and so she had prepared. It was already keyed to her soul, so she summed a second mythril blade. There had only been enough for a shortsword, but that was fine. She had worked the hilt so it was hollow, and she would turn it into a glaive later when she could find the time to craft a shaft. She touched the end of Cassiel's thread to the sword and then worked the magic to fuse them.

She held it by the current hilt and called it into herself. She was incredibly happy with it.

"Welcome to the family, Rondo."

She then flew up and found where she had entered. The sounds of Isaac's rampage still going on, she took the time to neatly stack the books and tidy up the mess she'd made. When

she was done she floated out through the hole and focused.

“Protection,” she muttered as she pushed out her aether as a shield. The Vantori Library was sealed, accessible only to her.

The city was mostly gone, Isaac’s beautiful form making short work of it. She hadn’t been in the Library for more than twenty minutes, but Isaac had been putting in work. She stood on top of the Library and watched as he finished the job, appreciating just how powerful he was.

“You did surpass me,” she said. “If I hadn’t been given strength through the Spirit of the Divine, you would be above me.” She smiled.

It was the early hours of the next morning when Narianel and Isaac made it back to the army. They had spent the previous day and the night picking off monsters and robots and their vehicles in the area around the city.

She made Volatility appear in Vedar's hand and he got excited, realising he had a new highly destructive toy, and then she headed to Royan and Octavio inside the forge they'd managed to capture.

"How much mythril is there in here?" she asked.

"Only enough for a dagger," Royan said. "We think it's already been shipped out to wherever Azael is storing his equipment for the war."

"That's fine," said Narianel. "Octavio, I want you to return to Sara De Han and then return here with a bigger military and a mining crew. Get every drop of mythril out of the ground as you can. Use the iron and other resources you find if you can, but focus on the mythril. Had I known there was any here I would have been here years ago."

"And us?" asked Royan.

"Well, since you insist on coming with me, we're going to get dropped off at Argus's workshop. I've been exchanging letters with him and he should have some stuff ready to pick up. From there we're going to borrow his airships."

"And he agreed to that?" asked Royan. He was trying not to smile as if she'd strong-armed that arrangement.

"He offered," said Narianel. "We'll have eight of them, and they're large enough for more than one hundred soldiers and supplies for the journey. I have a funny feeling he's known for a long time I'd be travelling with an army. Anyway, pack up camp, we need to go as quickly as possible to maximise the time Sara De Han can be digging up the mythril before the big day."

"How are we meant to process the mythril?" asked Octavio, and that was something that hadn't occurred to her.

She took a moment to think before answering.

“Sara De Han is north-north-west of Nerik, and almost directly west of Argus’s workplace,” she said. “I’ll write you a letter, and you can bring it to the Talwaen Estate. Ask for Akenesa. I doubt she’ll help you directly, but may know who the best mages in Nerik for forging are.”

“I’ve met Akenesa Talwaen,” said Octavio. “She visited to help set up our mage schools last year. Your cousin, if I recall correctly?”

“Indeed,” said Narianel. “She’s the best mage I know, so she’ll put you on the right track. Now, both of you go get everyone prepared to move. It’s time to get off this horrible continent.”

Part 3

The Journey

In which she brings them back together...

Narianel noticed Royan redirect a few soldiers who were coming up to her with the reports she'd asked for the previous day. It was just on the edge of her senses, and it seemed Royan knew that and was lurking about, taking on the tasks she'd taken for herself. She didn't mind it. Not on that day. It was only lists of supplies and those who could use magic to create or duplicate them. It didn't really matter.

He did not, however, redirect Corwin Argus. They had arrived in his complex the night before and were already preparing the airships to take off, but Narianel was standing in one of his many libraries, looking at the displays.

"Your dejection is infecting the aura of this place," he said as he stood next to her. "Want to talk about it?"

"It's my late wife's birthday," she said simply.

They stood in silence for a long time. Argus seemed to be very comfortable with the quiet, and she wasn't bothered either. She had been looking at an array of enchanted spears and reading the plaques detailing their names and histories.

"I can tell what you're thinking," said Argus. "I'll be happy to loan these out when the time comes."

"It had crossed my mind," she said, "but it wasn't what I was thinking."

"And what were you thinking?" he asked.

"Evil things."

In the corner of her eye, she saw him look at her with curiosity, then look back to the spears.

"When I'm in battle," she continued, "I can let loose and enjoy the fighting, committing horrific acts with a smile. This is not exaggeration. But the urge to hurt is still there. A violence left behind by the rage that still lurks on the periphery of my almost empty heart."

"I haven't laid my hands on him since I turned him into a blade. He has been subservient and openly giving with his power. Nocturne, a blade that can devour souls, but at its most

careful can pull a soul from its body. It kills any mortal in a single strike, and while I've yet to use it against a being like myself, I imagine it will be useful. But I really want to hit him. Punish him. It takes everything in me to stay my hand on days like these. The thorns of rage around my heart only try to push me into action."

"I hate to prod you when you feel like this," said Argus, "but I watched your battle against Lucifer. I saw the raging monster that you could become, but also the beauty in the way you moved. You are a beast of two halves."

"Purity and corruption," she muttered.

"Indeed. I see the black shell around your core. That is no normal spell, so I can only conclude it is the result of a corruption-fuelled mutation. A demon nephilim. Now what kind of name could such a being suit?"

"There are plenty of other mythological beings from the Origin Worlds that Chassuille didn't pilfer from when naming things. Why don't you pick from one of those?" She tilted her head and caught his eye, giving him a wry smile. "Zondare, folai, sergerra... Or maybe stick with the Human Origin and take a name like oni or devil. I don't really care what you call me. I am what I am."

"You know a lot about mythology it seems." Argus gave her an open and genuine smile that twisted her gut. She wanted to hit him now too. "I wouldn't have thought that of you. I expect military history and magic, not ancient fancies."

"In truth, I've read only a few books from each Origin, just the ones that my parents left in the library when they gave me the house. Most of it concerns the Human Origin, and where the names of angels and demons came from, along with a few other myths and histories, but it wasn't in-depth. I haven't read a single thing about the Elf Origin."

"Then let's stick with the Human Origin," said Argus with gusto. "I shall name you a devil. I'll inform Chassuille of my choice on the morrow."

He kept up that smile as they stared at each other, and

eventually she broke and looked away with a sigh.

“I can’t see your face,” said Argus, “but I know there’s a smile in your heart.”

“Don’t you have worked to do?” she asked, walking over to a different display. “Go make some more ultrices or illegal aether cannons or whatever other scheme you’ve got going on. I don’t need this right now.”

“Alright,” he said. “Have fun moping. Your airships will be ready... On the morrow.”

She closed her eyes and pinched her nose after hearing that obnoxious smile in his voice. But he left, and she returned to her thoughts. It was not a day to concern herself.

Pity

The continent to the east of Argus's complex was known as Enardun, and there were ten blades there. The closest was the blade known as Pity, which made people sympathetic towards the user. This could be used socially, to rally people to a cause or get favours, but Narianel was more interested in its possible combat applications. Making people not want to hurt the user, making them lower their guard.

Royan commanded the airships on towards their next destination while she jumped from the sky with Isaac and Sarina. She carried Havoc, Malice, and Needlepoint within her, Isaac had Wishmaker, and Sarina had Flight and Perception stored precariously within her soul. Royan could hold them easily thanks to his bond as Champion, but it seemed that those with long exposure to the battle bond were beginning to adjust and be able to do it too, but it was only one or two blades at once. Sarina had to concentrate a little to carry both at once, but the training seemed to be working as it was getting easier by the day. She could even sleep with one of them in her soul, but not two yet.

This part of Enardun was hot, existing along the path of the sun. It was covered in thick jungle and was filled with all sorts of animals and insects that Narianel had never seen before. Large snakes and huge insects and tiny fish that ate flesh. She'd been so wrapped up in magic her entire life that she'd never even considered that the natural world could be so strange and deadly too.

They landed in the ruins they had been aiming for. Both Narianel and Isaac landed at speed, with only a little bend to their knees, which made Sarina shake her head and smile. She landed a lot more gently.

"I'm feeling it in the main pyramid," said Narianel.

There was no sign of habitation in the last six and a half hundred years since the Ruination and creation of Avani, so everything was overgrown. Intricately carved stone pillars and well constructed paths were laid to ruin by the march of time, the homes around the central step-pyramid falling apart, some with trees growing through them.

As they approached Isaac waved his hand from the ground until he was gesturing at the top of the stairs. Flames followed his motion and cleared the way of plants, scaring off a small furry creature that was some sort of ape with black and white alternating rings on its long tail. Narianel noticed Sarina smile at the thing. It was going to be a long journey, so she didn't mind the Order taking the time to enjoy it and gawk at cute animals they saw along the way. Avani was a big place, and they'd be moving slowly to not exhaust the soldiers, and then there was the issue of the Aether Sea.

Inside the pyramid was a stone altar and iconography relating to wars between tribes using spears and long shields. Sarina moved some vines to reveal a symbol that was almost the Skrae symbol for war.

"Worshippers of Aramis?" she asked.

"Possibly," said Narianel. "None of the etchings look like text, so we've only got vague pictures to go on. Considering the blade that's here, I kind of doubt it. Pity is deeper inside."

From that upper chamber they found the stairs down. Isaac created a light for them and they descended, taking care on the steps since they were crumbling. There was a large amount of air moving through the temple, but it didn't smell of magic.

They reached the lowest chamber and found a throne made of obsidian, which was impressive in the light of Isaac's magic. Narianel was a little distracted, however, by the howling in her ears. Tiny holes for ventilation were all over the walls, some of them clogged with plants.

She walked across the room to the throne, upon which lay Pity. She summoned it into herself and the silver flash lit

up the whole room briefly, but it was long enough for Narianel to notice the snake above her. It was massive, easily forty feet long, and covered in black and dark green scales.

It dropped around her and attempted to squeeze her, but she was already aetherial. Summoning Havoc and Malice cut it without her moving as they appeared inside it, and then she spun in place once, spraying the area with blood and dropping the snake in place. She stepped away from it before becoming physical again.

“Scary,” signed Isaac with a smile that suggested he wasn’t talking about the snake. She shrugged as she dismissed Havoc and Malice.

“Come on,” she said. “We got what we came for. Let’s walk back to the Order. I’d like to see some more animals that think they’re higher on the food chain than me.”

King

It took them six days to get out of the jungle, but they soon found their way through land that had been deforested and then onto open plains. At dawn of the next day they walked into the Order's camp near the edge of a large city with similar architecture to Av Ajir. Lots of flat roofs and white stone.

Entering the command tent, the gilded sword King was already laying on the table. She picked it up and called it into her soul, looking at the officers in the room.

"He won't tell us how he got it," said Vedar, nodding to Royan. "Just walks into the city to talk to whoever's in charge and walks out with the blade three hours later."

Narianel walked up to Royan, eyes narrowed. The others laughed and it was clear Royan was trying his best not to smile, but he wasn't masking his soul's flutter well. His eyes darted down from hers to her nose and then back up again as she gently sniffed.

The most vague hint of perfume and sweat, washed off in a hurry.

She maintained eye contact with him for a long time, until he looked away and laughed nervously. The rest of the group could only look on in confusion.

"Whatever," she said, giving him a gentle punch on the shoulder, which was awkward because he was so much taller than her. She left the tent saying: "Buy what we need in the city. We're in no rush before leaving."

Eclipse

They came across the next blade's effect long before they saw the blade itself. The sky was black and looked so much like the Twilight Steppe, but this wasn't the case of a broken sky. The twilight aether streamed upwards from the ground and polluted the sky. It was flowing erratically, so it was difficult to tell where it was coming from.

After flying for some time, the airships searching in formation, they eventually landed near the centre of the darkened area, but it still wasn't obvious where the blade was. Narianel heard its song all around her, its power resonating deep within her.

"This is like Torrent," she said to her officers when they had gathered. "As soon as you find the blade, call it into yourself and it should deactivate. We just need to find it."

"And you can't?" asked Tullis.

"No, it's too loud," she said. "I'm having trouble just thinking. It's the song. I always hear it, but it's loud. Shaks is singing, and it's making the other blades hum."

They split into search parties and spread across the darkened area. It was an area covered in forests and ruins, but these were of an entirely different kind to those where they found Pity. The ruins were the stone foundations of houses similar to the kind in Seremont. They would have been mostly wooden, likely with eaves, but that had long since rotted away and half-buried everything.

Narianel eventually sent the blades to Royan. It helped quiet the song a little, but it was still overwhelming. The song was a part of her, it was the rhythm of her soul, her very core. It was never going to leave her. She was fine with this, but she was also going to need to punch Shaks. Did he not feel her approach? Or was that why it felt like he was getting louder?

He was trying to be found and accidentally making it more difficult.

The search parties were checking the buildings and their basements, or what was left of them, but there was no real success. In the evening, the officers gathered to discuss their findings, but Narianel wandered to the edge of the dark area to get some quiet in her head.

The next day the search started again with the help of the manifested blades. World Sight and Perception's power were being distorted, and Narianel's senses were being pushed to their limits.

"It's some sort of illusion," offered Cassiel as he sat next to her. She had found a fallen pillar that had once held a statue on top to sit on, and the statue was rubble on the floor. "Both dark and light aether can be used to make illusions, and the best combine both. It may be that he's in plain sight, but we just cannot see him."

"You may be correct," said Narianel. "Did you tell that to Royan?"

"There is a disconnect in my mind between the blades made by your ancestor and the blades you made yourself. We will not be taking part in the song, and the role of the Champion of Blades has to do only with those who will."

"You're wrong," she said bluntly. "Royan, as Champion of Blades, has command over all blades, regardless of who made them and which plan they are a part of. You will sing for me, in the end, but not in the song that will heal this universe."

"Your full plan sounds insane," said Cassiel. "I can see why there are still those that resist you, trapped in those cells in your mindscape."

"I talk to them daily," said Narianel. "They will come around when they realise I'm correct. Now, go back to the search. Use your expertise in illusions to negate the one made by Eclipse, if you're so confident."

Cassiel stood and bowed to her, but he made his feelings known on his face. He still wasn't fully on board with

the plan, but he would comply. She didn't need bootlickers, she just needed the job done, so she would put up with him.

The next two days were much the same, but the Order had started digging. The earth mages amongst them were shifting dirt and stone, seeing how far down the effect of Eclipse went. Some of the groups were acting like Archivists and carefully dusting off discovered objects and gently placing them away from the digging.

It was at the end of the day when Royan approached her with an idea.

"You could sing the song," he said and it made a lot of sense. "If he's singing, then you may be able to force him out into the open."

"He's so loud," said Narianel. She had been using World Sight to follow the tunnels, but drew her attention back to Royan. "You look like you need sleep."

"I'll be fine," he said. There were bags under his eyes and his hair and beard were a mess.

"Once I have this blade, you're resting," she said. "I don't need you collapsing if we get into a fight."

She called to all the blades made by Prochorus and felt them drop into her soul, warm and ready. She flew into the sky and made them appear around her, tied to her by black tendrils and silver chains. She closed her eyes, focussed, and began to sing.

The range of the song was getting bigger and its effect was much stronger. What little corruption was in the Order, built since her last performance, was pulled from them, then beyond the forest and ruins she found villages and towns and reached the city where King had been. Black corruption streaked across the sky towards her and she took it in, feeling stronger for having it.

And in it all she found the voice of Shaks, the demon blade that could enhance twilight elemental magic. She pulled hard on it, using every drop of mental strength she had as the song took over and became all she was. It was automatic and

she was its instrument, and Shaks synchronised with her.

One more mighty pull revealed the blade, falling from the sky. They had been going in the wrong direction. Eclipse took its place around her, another tendril lashing out from her lower back, joining the others and the chains. She held the blade in that tendril and let the song finish, and when it was done, Shaks quieted with her and the sky became bright in the red dusk light.

Quiet

From one extreme to another, Narianel found herself in an area that completely negated any sound. It was unusual as the blades normally had no effect on her, but Quiet was attacking the air around her instead.

Two days prior, they had arrived in a city state known as Mefuun. The majority of the population was dark skinned, making the Order and especially Narianel and Isaac stand out. They had talked to the authorities and been directed to a man named Desurra, who appeared to be some sort of king and high priest of Faret. They called him “Lord Under Judgement” and he had tattooed his dark skin even darker to mimic his chosen god.

Under Mefuun was the Labyrinth of Judgement, a place of utter silence where souls would be tested. This culture had strong influence from Seran too, it seemed, as it was the mind and heart that would be tested, not combat skills. It turned out, too, that only two people were allowed in at a time.

Royan and Isaac had volunteered to stay behind. Royan wanted to make sure the Order didn’t run afoul of any local laws and Isaac wanted to explore the city, so the four major officers of the Order decided amongst themselves that it would be Tullis to accompany her into the Labyrinth.

It turned out to be a good choice. They communicated using sign language as they worked their way through the maze. She let him take the lead and saw why he was considered the scholar of the four.

He used chalk to mark the dull yellow walls and a charcoal pencil to draw a map. They had quickly noticed that the Labyrinth could tell when people tried to cheat it with World Sight and similar powers and would change its layout, so it was good that Tullis was prepared.

They hadn't been allowed to bring weapons inside, but both of them had been trained by Prufas over the years to mimic Tongue's power, so they were able to read the writing all over the walls. It seemed to be the stories of people who had starved down in the Labyrinth, people who had been punished for their crimes. It had bewildered Desurra when Narianel had wanted to go down willingly.

She had told him she was going to take the source of the silence, but had also promised to leave said silence intact. She had spent a full day working on the rune that would be able to do it, needing Isaac and Royan's help. As she made her way to the blade, she kept that rune fixed in her mind, drawing it in the sand of the arena.

Tullis signalled for them to stop, and gestured at the tiled floor. She saw it as soon as it was pointed out. There were some tiles raised very slightly.

"Why weren't you an Archivist?" she signed.

Tullis took a moment to think before replying. "History is interesting, but with you we make the future." He looked away, but his ears revealed his blush.

Narianel stepped over the raised tiles and was careful to look for more traps, of which there were a few. She used herself to block a large blade that swung down from the ceiling, stopping it and letting Tullis pass before becoming aetherial for a moment to escape it.

They stopped so Tullis could eat after about six hours of walking. She could feel the blade nearby, but the walls were filled with aether and protective spells to stop people passing through them. It wouldn't be hard to bypass those barriers, they were fourth circle at best, but she liked to play by the rules in situations like this.

It took another four hours of dodging traps and slowly taking notes before they reached the chamber with Quiet, stabbed into some kind of altar. She looked at Tullis's map and it looked like they had managed to find every dead end possible. While Tullis got to planning their path back, Narianel

used one of his charcoal pencils to sketch the rune around the blade.

Quiet was a short black knife with a single serrated edge. She recalled that Prochorus has once called it the “perfect assassin’s tool” in his notes, and she could see why. Once she’d completed the sketch and checked it over, she activated it as she pulled Quiet from its pedestal. The aura it was generating was caught by the rune and fixed in place.

She watched for a few minutes, checking the aether drain rate. It would hold for around three hundred years just off ambient aether, but she fed it enough to last for ten thousand years just to be sure.

“Ready?” she signed to Tullis.

He pointed at his map and nodded.

Unslicer

Of all the blades she had read about in Prochorus's journals, it was Unslicer that had fascinated her most. There were the blades she had grown up around and those with fantastical abilities, but they didn't quite confuse and astound her in quite the same way. Ripping things apart with Fang or the paralytic acid of Venom felt mundane in comparison.

Unslicer could undo damage. Very specifically damage and not just wear and age. It was even able to undo the effects of other blades, making it the only cure for the pain caused by Thorn, the blade waiting for in her grandmother's hands back in Nerik. She had a theory and a hope for this blade, something that was never tested by Prochorus.

From Mefuun they had travelled north to a city state called Toisia, and had almost been shot down when crossing the border between the two lands. Argus's airships had barriers that were able to ward off the attacks with ease, but she wondered if they would hold up in the final battle against far greater threats. She had jumped from the airship and turned into her angelic form, spreading her wings miles wide, scaring the men below into ceasing their attack. They knew who she was. They had seen her argument with Chassuille.

They were allowed to camp outside the city and had spent two weeks in bureaucracy and delays. She thought it was intentional, a tactic to show they had power over her knowing that she wouldn't just raze the city to the ground.

During that wait, she used their own laws against them. She saw that worshipping Azael was outlawed, so she went to the police force and gave every single officer she could find the ability to detect Azael's influence within people. She even let the Chief Constable and a retinue of officers wander through the Order's camp checking each of the soldiers. None were

infected, of course, as she'd have killed whoever had dared consort with him herself.

The next few days were glorious, with many arrests and complaints from government officials. They could moan, but she was helping them enforce their own laws so everything they said fell flat. Royan had maintained a solid front, speaking against the dangers of Azael and how the police were doing the right thing, even as he stood on the steps of their palace watching three maids and a chef get arrested. That chef in particular had reeked of Azael, and Royan had advised the Chief Constable that he was likely the ringleader in the city. In private, however, Royan and the other officers had thought it was amusing, and it was entirely in character for Narianel to undermine authority by using authority.

When the Order was finally given the ability to buy provisions from the city and walk about freely, though only in groups of three at most, they could finally get what they needed. Narianel and Royan had been the only ones allowed in before and hadn't been allowed to purchase anything, so they weren't able to make much headway, but they had opened up dialogue with a man named Votelp.

He was a dark skinned man, much like most of the people on Enardun, and he had long curly hair. It was black, but Narianel could smell whatever he was using as a dye, likely some sort of tree sap mixture. Other than the dye, he was an incredibly neat and clean man, standing as tall as Royan, even though he was well past his prime. His voice was deep, with a little rasp, and he spoke far too poetically, but he made himself clear. He wanted one of the airships in exchange for Unslicer.

The blade hung on his wall, a slender black sword with a slight curve to it. The actual edge was on the inside of the curve, and the cutting edge was dull. As Votelp talked, she could hear the demon in the blade, Jason, whispering the truth. Votelp claimed that his ancestor used Unslicer in his efforts in the Ruination; Jason said Votelp's ancestor stole him after a Nerikan healer was killed. Votelp claimed to have used

the blade to single-handedly defeat a demon when he was twenty; Jason said that Votelp dealt the seventh to last blow after the city militia had fought back after a vampire had invaded and had undone the damage the previous person had done, not knowing the blade's true power. Jason had nothing but exasperation in his whispers for the man.

They sat in plush chairs and in a finely decorated room, and Narianel was about done with the man. She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward on her knees, catching and keeping the man's eyes with her stare. He immediately stopped talking and stank of fear.

"We're not giving you an airship," she said. "We need it for the coming war against Azael. What will you accept instead of such a high price. I will accept no cost that will harm the defence against Azael."

"I will be blunt then," said Votelp. His scent shifted from terror at her predatory sitting position to determination. "When the war comes, I want to survive. I want the finest and greatest protection you can offer."

She stood and he noticeably cowered in his seat as if she were about to hit him. She held out her hand and there was a flash of silver, Unslicer appearing there, leaving is display empty.

"Seek Vala Zoraken on the Isle of Dusk," she said. "It's part of Nerik. She will shelter you from the war, so long as you mention exchanging this sword for protection. She is my kin, you can trust her."



There were few benefits to a city having been invaded by a vampire and their undead horde, but Narianel had found one. She dragged a lesser vampire, starving and unable to use its powers, kicking and screaming from its hiding place by the hair. This shocked the people of Toisia and caused the police to send a squad to follow her as she left the city and entered the

Order's camp.

The Order was ready with a set of shackles and a chain tied to a post, and they secured the malnourished woman. Denise got scratched and was worried about turning, but Narianel quickly calmed her down by explaining that it was the bite that they needed to be concerned with. Vinish superstition about the sharp fingers were untrue, but it did seem to worry a lot of them still.

With the shackle locked and the vampire tied to the post, Narianel took it upon herself to mark the beast. She took a knife that Royan had prepared for her and held the vampire by the hair again while she carved the Skrae symbol for light into its forehead. This was done to all uncontrolled beasts and marked them for Faret when he was organising the afterlife. This had been done to seven of the demons in her blades, but it had been stopped by Chassuille when his alliance had decided to make the blades.

Narianel summoned Unslicer and readied herself for disappointment. She swung the sword and its power activated, the blade becoming mist and following the arc it would have if solid. The mist passed through the vampire's core and Narianel waited, dismissing the blade. Nothing happened.

"Beasthood mutation doesn't count as damage," she said, hanging her head. "I will have to use the song to cure all the imps and demons."

"That wasn't what you were really testing, was it?" asked Royan. She looked at him and shook her head. "What were you hoping to see?"

"House Talwaen calls them scars on our souls," she said, "but they are inborn features. My rage is muted by my own beasthood, but it's still there. My mother's joy, my grandmother's lust, the emotional stunting of my twin cousins in their own unique ways... The only one I wouldn't cure of their scar is Isaac. His purity is a blessing. I made all these promises, especially about Liara, hoping this blade would be enough, but it's not. I'm not really sure what to do here."

“But that’s not all... I was hoping to cure myself of the need for True Love. I want to love not because of a magical bond, but because it’s right...”

“Could you not use a soul forge like yourself to do it?” asked Royan. “Use your own aether to fill the gap where Henan’s aether is?”

“I don’t trust anyone enough to do it at this point,” she said. “Some of the Order have started to learn it, but it’s too advanced. It will happen decades after the defeat of Azael, if at all.”

“Look,” signed Isaac behind her. She turned to see he had drawn a rune in the dirt. It looked very similar to the rune that Adela had left behind. “Not finished yet, but I’m working on it for you.”

“This is enough,” whispered Jason in her mind. “I know how to add this effect to the song.”

She looked at the sword in her hand. “You can change the song?” She manifested Jason and he took the form of a tall Skraeðan draped in robes of her two reds. She’d only had him half a day and he’d already adopted her colours. His skin was a pastel purple, much like Chassuille, but his eyes were a vibrant pink. His hair was cut short and pale green.

“You have used the song so far to absorb corruption, the others have told me as such, but you’ve not done any healing with it. That is my purpose in the song. I do not sing, like the others. I am the silence between the notes. I bring change to the body and soul of those the song reaches. When we find Abraham in the blade named Breaker, we will have all the components we need for the full effect of the song, but without all of us we will lack the power and reach.”

“Breaker only destroys barriers,” said Narianel.

“Not quite,” said Jason with a gentle smile. “You have power over corruption, something Prochorus never had and why he was unsuited to sing the song. I am able to heal, even if as a sword I am limited to actual damage. This day you have recruited a potent healer who can resurrect the dead and I

believe I can even get rid of that so-called scar. Then Abraham can break all things. Concepts. A breaker of bonds. His focus was narrowed to barriers in making his blade, but he is the one who will break all curses. We form the central trinity of the song.”

“So when we have Breaker, I can talk again?” signed Isaac. Jason nodded slowly once to him, his smile never moving, before turning back to Narianel.

“This rune is a good concept, and with my expertise I can use it to cure you of True Love, if you give me enough time to develop it and implement it into the song. I will even be able to remove the scars of you and your family at that time, should you wish it, and even exclude Isaac.”

Then she felt something that she couldn’t identify at first. Something she must not have felt in a long time, even before her emotions became dulled through beasthood and choice. It was hope.

Freedom

They crossed the equator going north and most of the Order found the heat unbearable. Those who could use ice magic were on double duty trying to keep the airships cool. Below them were dense jungles and ahead a large city could be seen, but they weren't going there. Flying above the jungle was their target.

It was a roc, a massive bird with a wingspan that was over a hundred feet wide. This one, according to rumours she'd heard in Mefuun and Toisia, had a temple on its back that it was carrying in a large circle around the jungle. Its nest was said to be at the centre of that circle.

On the roc's back, in actuality, was a memorial of a sort, strapped to it with massive ropes. They watched the roc for a couple of days to see its flight pattern and where it landed, wanting to disturb it as little as possible. It was able to take off the memorial to sleep, which was fascinating to watch, as there was a stand of sorts that magically attached and detached the ropes.

Narianel went down alone one night to collect the blade, excited to try it out and learn from Ariel, the fallen angel inside it. Freedom was another aura she could stack on herself, allowing her to avoid being grabbed but also decreasing air resistance. She had managed to create this kind of aura herself, but her method came with a horrific aether cost so she never used it. With Freedom she would be able to learn how to do it properly and truly enhance her dance-like fighting style. She would become even faster without the air holding her back.

The roc looked at her as she gently landed on the memorial, but it didn't attack her. It looked at her for a long time, judging her, but then went to sleep. Narianel then read the plaque on the memorial about a hero who died in the

Ruination, and she could feel the blade inside the monolith's base. She summoned it, storing it within her soul, not touching the memorial.

As she flew back up to the airships, she wondered how many more monoliths and statues there were going to be once Azael commenced his attack. He was waiting for her to sing the song, and he would force her hand if she delayed too long. A lot of people were going to die. She hoped that the world's governments were preparing properly. There should be as few of these memorials as possible.

Glacier

Much to the joy of the Order in the blistering heat, the next blade on the list was Glacier, the ice element enhancer. They had flown over a large desert and could see Glacier's impact from a long way away. A pillar of ice surrounded by baking sand.

"You're going to upset the locals by taking it," said Royan. They stood together on the bow of the airship, looking at the sparkling pillar in the distance. "Several nobles back in Mefuun and Toisia seemed to find it funny that the 'Desert Ice Spear' was one of the ones you were after. Seems like the nomads of the desert make use of it for water."

"The rune we used for Quiet should work here," said Narianel. "I've got Isaac and Tullis and all our best mages working on it anyway. But if it doesn't work then the locals will find a way. The people of the Everheat have lived in a desert for six hundred years and they manage it."

"I feel that's a little harsh," said Royan. "But it's not so unexpected."

"I don't intend to make any sacrifices," she said. Royan side-eyed her, implying the song was martyrdom in his intent. "At least not of the innocent. Nomads will move on if they have to. It would be different if I was destroying the farms of one of these cities or stopping the flow of electricity in Sara De Han."

"I suppose you're right," said Royan.

An hour later, Narianel projected the rune with light into the ice and used Tail's power to pull Glacier through it from a distance. The pillar was intact and she fed the rune more aether, then boarded the airship.

Bounty

Only a short flight away from Glacier's pillar, and while Narianel was still practising with the spear, watching the frost in the air with each swing and lunge, they arrived in Dokoria. That was what the people of Enardun called it, but its real name had likely been lost. It was a plateau in the desert with a city resting on top that was filled with sand.

This city had been a ruin long before the Ruination. Its walls and towers had collapsed from neglect and only the piles of sand blocking the wind had managed to preserve what was under it all. There seemed to be a central structure, which had likely been a palace.

There was no space to land on the plateau, so the airships landed nearby while those that could fly descended to the city. Narianel landed near the palace and her nose caught a scent she knew she'd smelled before, so she followed it. Soon she was getting all sorts of scents that she recognised, but they were mixed and indiscernible.

But then she found the blood stain, brown on a stone wall inside a building. She walked across the sand and touched it, then leaned in and sniffed deep.

"Lucifer," she said. She felt the air twist behind her. "That wasn't a summon. I was just thinking aloud."

She turned to see the angel, beautiful as ever, wearing white robes and bearing the symbols of light and creation on his cuffs. His long white hair was softly glowing. She could feel that his halo had been returned to its rightful place inside him.

"I knew you'd come to this place eventually," he said.

"What do you want?" she asked. She wasn't going to listen to this lecture. Just seeing him woke the sleeping rage within her.

"Your mother did that," he said, gesturing to the blood.

“This was the room where Samael was broken. The reason this city is as broken as it is was because of the battle here at the tail end of the Ruination. If you travel north from here, off the coast, you will find where the Isle of Dusk had been placed before your family moved it.”

The scents were beginning to unravel. The lingering aether of the battle more than six hundred years ago when Lucifer fell. She could smell Lucifer and her mother, but also Michael and Azra-el and Raphael.

“The fighting had started here,” he continued, “but it ended up in the place known as the Divide of Creation. It was twenty-nine years after the Ruination. Your mother was out exploring the world, as I recall, making use of Furtur to go long distances and through the Torrent. That blade would go missing during a Legion Break, but it seems you have it now. I can feel his presence.

“I approached to ask if she knew where Lilith was, but she denied knowing, even though I was sure she knew. I had seen her use the blade Purity during the Ruination, after all. That was when I fell. I attacked her, but she called your sires and her then-lover. It was a mess of a battle, moving from here to the Aether Sea, then through the Divide, where I trapped Michael and all his cohorts that he summoned to put me down. I lost your mother and Azra-el there, but Raphael continued to follow me, all the way to the Isle of Dusk.”

“I don’t need a history lesson,” said Narianel. “I’m only here for Bounty.”

“His name is Joseph.” Lucifer said it almost as a growl.

“I’m aware. Do you not like their names as divine blades? It’s who they are now.”

“You do not get to enforce a name on them! You have no right!”

“They have accepted their place as divine blades and the purpose they’ve been given. They respond to their names. You’re the one with no right. Everyone else moves on and has turned their focus to the battle ahead, but here you’re going on

and on about history that doesn't matter. Go home, Lucifer. Be Chassuille's lapdog like you were made to be or do us both the favour of killing yourself. Either way, I don't want to see you ever again."

She felt someone on the north side of the city call Bounty into their soul, connecting it to the battle bond, so she flew out through a hole in the ceiling, not looking back at Lucifer. But she did keep her mind on his soul until he left, just to be sure he wouldn't cause trouble.

Courage

On the north edge of Enardun there was a port city named Indar Sekatto and it contained two of her blades, both owned by powerful people. Narianel chose to go for Courage first, as it seemed like the less annoying of the two. It was owned by a merchant who was one of the richest people in town thanks to his fleet of ships allowing trade with other continents.

As she walked through the city towards the call of the blade, she had to admit the city's beauty. It was like Sara De Han with its roads and vehicles and electricity, but there was an art to everything. Each building was individually painted, some in solid colour and others in patterns. Many buildings had grotesques or statue displays on their roofs in different styles. She would have to return here and spend more time exploring when the war was over.

She got to the docks and saw the blade on the belt of a strong and tall man. He was dressed in finery, his forehead wrapped in a bright green silk cloth that hung down his back and decorated in local symbology with gold. He was calling to many men who were loading a ship using electric-powered pulleys and cranes.

He saw her approach, but it wasn't difficult. Glowing white in a sea of dark brown faces. He cupped his hands to his chest for a moment, which she knew to be a protective gesture used by worshippers of Low Lady Eshan, Goddess of Water. It made sense for a sailor.

"Greetings," she said, bowing her head slightly. "I have come a long way to collect a particular set of blades. That set includes the one you carry now." She motioned to Courage at his side.

"I'm afraid this sword is not for sale," said the merchant with a friendly grin, but his scent was wary. He hid

his true emotions from his face well, but likely had no magical training to hide his soul's aura. "You see, this sword has been passed down to me, and has been in my family since the Ruination. It is precious to me."

"My ancestor is the one who crafted that blade," said Narianel, playing the game. This man had a price, she just had to find out what it was. "The blades together have a magical purpose to heal a great many people, including yourself. It would benefit you to part with it."

He gave her a confident smile. He was about to say something outrageous. So she decided to cut him off.

"I would directly support Eshan too," she said. "I fight for her too. All the gods and all the mortals will benefit."

He narrowed his eyes at her and she smiled in the most friendly way she could, remembering to keep her lips closed so as to hide her razor sharp fangs. Being friendly was difficult, no matter what Royan said. Her instincts told her to rip and tear to get what she wanted, but she was always fighting it.

"Do you have the local currency?" he asked as his face dropped at such obvious manipulation. "I don't know what magic you're using to speak to me, but I can see your lips making words other than what I hear. You're not local."

"I have some." She had a pouch full of gold that was the equivalent of ten platinum crowns back in Vin tucked away in folded space. She'd start with half, but was willing to give it all. "Let's work out a deal."

Vanity

The last blade on Enardun was going to be challenging. To get access to Indar Sekatto's Palace of Lights, she had been told that she needed to wear local clothing, regardless of whether or not she was a god, so she had looked at what the noblewomen were wearing and purchased the same. She had also been told that she needed to bring in no weapons, to which she'd rolled her eyes and nodded along. Then she almost lost her temper when told that women at court need to be accompanied by a man. At least Nur Karimi had been willing to bend the customs of his people to accommodate a foreigner like herself, but King Vora Tello was a stickler for tradition.

Royan was wearing a white suit with two sashes, the one about his shoulders in her brighter red and the one around his waist darker. He wore no weapons, not that it mattered, and had a black round-topped hat that he was struggling to keep on his head in the day's wind.

"I understand your motives here," he said. "You've taken my advice and are doing your best to respect the local laws of the places we travel instead of asserting your godhood on people who try to place themselves above you. I appreciate you listening. But in this one case... I do hate this hat."

"It will be fine," said Narianel. "For Avani to survive, I need as many people fighting as possible, and that includes this city. Let him play his power games as all small men do. He isn't expecting me to comply and I look forward to seeing the look on his face."

The noblewomen of the court wore long skirts with a sash around their waist and that was it. They painted their upper bodies in their house colours, often in a checker pattern and with their coat of arms on their back. Narianel had been happy to comply. Her skirt was black, and she wore two thin

sashes in her reds in a way that looked like sword belts. She made use of her pure white skin to checker black and white up her torso and left arm, then painted her right arm and face in Nerikan designs. On her back, painted red, was the Skrae symbol for blade.

Tullis had to inform some of the newer Order members about her lack of nudity taboo when she left the command tent with breasts exposed, something Vora Tello was sure to also be surprised by. Vedar joked that if someone spent long enough in the Order they were sure to see her nude at some point, and then began to retell the story of a mission where someone had thrown oil on her and tried to set her ablaze. He had a crowd of fifty as he spoke, embellishing the story even further than ever before.

When they reached the richer part of town the stares of the average person became the appreciation of the nobility. They looked like they fit in, even if their choice of colours was foreign. Several women approached her and asked about the Nerikan patterns and seemed ready to plan a trip to the islands by the time she was done explaining. Some men complimented Royan's suit, but completely ignored her, which she supposed was better than the ogling she had expected.

They weren't stopped going into the palace as she had been before. The guards simply saw that they were dressed correctly and that they were unarmed so they stood aside. The Palace of Lights was impressive, making use of aether crystals and precise magic to create murals on the corridor walls. All throughout were art pieces. Portraits and statues and banners, all seemingly showing the history of Indar Sekatto.

Entering the throne room they saw the king on his throne, as well as dozens of men and women milling around and socialising. Vora Tello sat up straight and stared at her as she approached. His face was worth the effort. Incredulity.

"I believe you received our letter," said Royan. "We have come from the magical item called Vanity. As the letter said, it was crafted by Pure Lady Narianel's ancestor and is

needed to fight Azael, the God of the End. We request that you give it to us peacefully, for the sake of all reality.”

Vora looked at Royan with pure hatred, but it didn't break the illusion that Vanity projected. She could see through it, see the ugly man sitting on the throne, overweight and unmuscled from years of sloth, but the illusion told the nobles gathered here a different story. To them he was tall and strong and beautiful. That was what Vanity did, and none of them suspected that the mirror sitting on the arm of the throne was why he looked the way he did.

“I will not—” shouted Vora before Royan cut him off.

“You will or we will remove you from your position of power. If you are unwilling to give us the item, then you are a threat to all of Avani.”

The noblemen began whispering in a way where they were trying to be heard over all the others. The women were silent and Narianel felt the urge to spur them into action too. Northern Semblan having more egalitarian countries and her Nerikan roots had given her a dislike of cultures where one group of people are denied speech, and being targetted by that norm made her restless.

“You dare threaten me!?” shouted Vora. “I am the most powerful person on this world! It is thanks to my trade policy that my people are enriched. I am the powerful one here!”

“You're not even the most powerful person in this room,” said Royan, which stunned the noblemen into silence too. “I stand ten paces from you but could kill you from here in the blink of an eye. I lead an army that have never known defeat and will not. My soldiers are loyal not because of wealth or influence or even because our god stands by my side right now, but because what we are doing it right. We fight for all the people of Avani and beyond, so to stand in our way is to stand against the world.”

He held out his hand and summoned Vanity. It became a silver stream, jumping from throne to hand before reforming as the mirror. Its handle and back were made of solid gold and

the glass was pristine, but the rim around it didn't go all the way, leaving a long point of glass at the top. It was one of Prochorus's more whimsical ideas of what a blade could be, but Narianel thought it was grand.

"Preta," said Royan, "I request that you end the illusion on that man."

And with that the nobles gasped, seeing their king for what he was. The loud whispering began once more, but this time the women joined in, speaking openly with their husbands and brothers and fathers.

"No!" shouted Vora, jumping from his throne and charging Royan, only to stumble and fall as Royan stepped aside. He crashed to the floor in a way that made most of the room wince. They were as soft as Vora was. They'd need to change for the coming battle or their city would fall.

"I would recommend your city get a new king," said Royan coldly, looking down on the man. "They need someone strong who can carry them through the new Ruination that is on its way. Azael is coming and your city needs a proper army if it is to survive."

As Royan and Narianel walked past him, Vora grabbed Narianel's ankle. Instinct and rage took over and before she knew it she was holding King, the gold-hilted sword with the black blade. There was a gash through the floor and Vora was screaming and holding the stump where she'd cut off his hand. She kicked her foot and Vora's right hand bounced across the floor.

"Do not make such bad decisions," she said. Some of the men gasped as she spoke, but most were just staring in shock at Vora or his hand. "The end is coming, Vora Tello, and you either stand for chaos and destruction or you stand for the innocent and life. While you seek a healer to put your hand back on your arm, I would suggest you carefully consider where your loyalty lies. If you join Azael, then I will be coming back after I beat him, and it will be more than your hand I cut off."

She turned and left, dismissing King. Royan followed and she felt the amusement in his soul. She'd corrupted him. He used to be much less open to her grim tendencies. She waited until they were outside before talking.

"I was impressed by you," she said. "And isn't it fun to speak truth to royalty and authority?"

"The only thing that matters..." he said, taking off the hat and throwing it into the wind, watching it spin and tumble as it left sight, "is that I never have to wear that damned hat again."

Order

On an island, halfway to the next continent, the Order of Blades made camp as Narianel and Isaac went to look for the blade that was meant to be there. Its name was Order, with the power to create temporary 'laws' that must be followed by those within its reach. Prochorus had written that the range was about a hundred paces, but she was sure she could push the blade beyond that.

They soon found a tower that had been buried by the years, or possibly just by poor placement by the gods, like the Temple of Eyes. Entering through a window near its peak and then descending the stairs, they eventually found themselves in what appeared to be the keep of a castle.

There was a throne room, finely decorated but decayed. Across the arms of the throne, looking like a memorial, was the blade. She took it, making a mental note to hear Levi's story when she had time to sit and talk to the fallen angel within the white blade, but Heat was ending and she had more than thirty blades left to collect over the next four years.

"You seem sad," signed Isaac as she turned to leave.

"There are just too many stories," she said. "I can only hope that none of them are lost in the coming war. We have eternity and I want to preserve them all."

Barrier

Narianel let the Order go to the next continent without her and establish contact with the local governments. Unlike Enardun, this wasn't going to be sparse city states and open wilds. Vilda was a continent of high technology, and looking at a map she saw it was connected to Dorai, the continent with Sara De Han and Provalis on it. Both continents were fully claimed, with roads and rails and hard borders. Crossing them was going to be an issue, as they'd need to wait for permission from each government or be seen as invaders.

But for now Narianel flew on her own towards the ocean's edge, to the high rim around the hole in Avani's crust. She stopped to land on it, looking out over the barrier that kept in the Dragons. It shimmered in the sunlight, and she saw that the clouds were being stopped from passing over it. The hole itself was the size of a continent and would take weeks to cross on foot, but she could move much faster than that.

"Seek out the sound," whispered Furtur in her mind, and so she did. She sought the call of Daniel, the demon within Barrier, embedded in the stone at the centre of the hole, far over the horizon. "You have done this instinctually, when you made Royan your Champion. You used the Spirit of the Divine, but our powers combined allow for it too. Expand your senses as nephilim can, send them out, find his soul."

It took a few minutes, the space she had to cover was vast, far larger than Vaga, but she did find him. She focused, and with it in sight, she used Needlepoint to fold space, connecting her current location and that of the blade, then unfolded with her next to the blade. She pulled her senses back in and was surprised to see someone waiting for her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you again," said the man. He was wearing a suit with a split-tailed coat and a top hat,

carrying a walking stick she knew was some kind of morphyic weapon made by Argus. He stood next to Barrier, a black kite shield, its point stuck in the rock.

"Mister Bartholomew," she said. "What brings you out here to this desolate place?"

"Normally, I would stay hidden, but my master wished for me to witness and make you aware that this is dangerous."

The three Mistresses were the right hand of Grand Lord Mao, God of Fate. She had met Bartholomew only once, and was aware that Thomas Acker of the Guild of Archivists back in Seremont was one, but this was the first time she'd run into one in an official capacity.

"Are you here to make sure I don't release the Dragons? Am I still not trusted?"

"You are trusted," he said with a smile. "But should you start a new Ruination, by accident of course, I will be here to fight the Dragons by your side."

"I have already spoken to the Dragons," she said. "I came across a deep pit in Vaga and found myself standing on the barrier. They are not going to be an issue."

Mister Bartholomew looked over the edge of the rocky island where they stood at the barrier and frowned. He then looked back at her.

"They're no longer pushing on the barrier in their sleep. What did you say to them?"

"I must keep our pact secret for a time," she said. She summoned Needlepoint, the only blade she currently carried, and began to draw the rune in the rock to maintain the barrier. "It is luck, or perhaps fate, that my allies created this rune when they did. I've used it a few times now, to maintain the effect of the blades once I remove them from where they had been activated."

She kicked a rock and released a thunderous boom of aether to sent it flying away, then used some basic earth magic to flatten the ground so she could continue to draw the rune.

"The barrier will remain active so long as I keep the

rune fed," she said. "There is no chance of the Dragons fleeing their prison while the rune keeps the barrier in place, and it leaves me free to take the blade Barrier. Having the ability to create unbreakable plates of aether that I can shape in any way I need will be a valuable addition to my arsenal. The Order of the Blade will be well protected from here on out."

"You seem far too confident in this rune," said Mister Bartholomew, leaning on his stick. "What if someone were to come along and break it?"

"What if, in the last six hundred and forty years, one of Azael's fanatics had come along and pulled Barrier from its spot on this rock with nothing but the barrier for hundreds of miles all around?" She looked him in the eyes. "They are waiting for the final battle, obviously, and when that happens I will be here personally."

"You don't plan to face Azael at the Grand Gate?"

"I didn't say that," she said with a grin.

"What is your plan?" he asked. "I know you like your secrets. Your future is hidden well and your mind is impossible to read because of the noise and the song. Your allies seem to be protected from the same through your bond with them. No one knows what you are going to do."

"Reading minds is unethical, Mister Bartholomew," she said. "It is illegal in many countries, including in Sonta. It's villain behaviour, you know. You tell Mao that for me. Villain behaviour."

She dismissed Needlepoint and then held the handle of Barrier. She pushed aether down into the rune and it glowed bright red as she pulled Barrier up, the tip of the kite shield passing through the rune and passing on its power. Mister Bartholomew had flinched, but the barrier keeping the Dragons within the planet remained intact.

"You worry too much and rely too heavily on divination for your comfort," she said. "I wouldn't have taken this blade, *especially* this blade, without a plan. If I have collected every other blade and this was the last one, I'd be here with Akenesa

and Vala and Prochorus and every mage I could wrangle to try to figure it out. Mao gives me respect, and I appreciate that, but he needs to trust me more.”

Mister Bartholomew tipped his hat to her then turned to mist and vanished. Off to tell his master what had occurred, no doubt.

“You only put enough aether in the rune for four years,” whispered Furtur in her mind.

“I know. Let’s go back to Isaac and the Order.”

Judgement

Narianel learned the word “metropolitan” as a description of the cities she saw on Vilda. Unlike Semblan, which was mostly pale people in the north and medium brown in the south, or Enardun, which was mostly darker people, Vilda had a mix. It was the full spectrum of human tones on display. She even saw a few Hosts of both white and black skin to complete the range.

Another difference was the mix of races in the cities. In Enardun she had seen only humans, but here there were enlani and sklaara, living and working. Vilda was also home to small communities of tagra, a race she’d never seen before that looked like humans mixed with weasels, standing only about three feet tall. The universe used to be filled with untold numbers of races until the Ruination. So much was lost and it had been playing on her mind. She didn’t want to let it happen again. No more extinctions of sentient peoples.

In the country call Gad Ortha, a predominantly enlani nation, she noticed the stares she got as she walked towards the museum. They’d heard of the Vin-Cor war, no doubt, but she didn’t let it bother her. She’d come to terms with it, so they could too. The walking itself was bothering her more than the looks, as apparently it was illegal to fly in Gad Ortha without a license, and she’d need a different license for each country on Vilda so it wasn’t worth bothering with every half-week.

The buildings of the cities on Vilda were far taller than those she was used to, but she’d seen the like in Sara De Han. They called them “skyscrapers” because of their height, and before Avani got an open sky instead of the glass sphere she’d once touched, perhaps they did scrape it. They were mostly uniform, but she could see that there were distinct differences in the older buildings, as if there had been fashion trends amongst architects. They lined the edge of black roads that

were painted with symbols and lines for those driving their cars to follow.

The museum had a garden out front that had statues on display. One of them, featuring a pair of elven children, seemed to predate Avani. She walked up the stairs and saw there were a pair of guards, one enlani and one sklaara, but they didn't seem to pay her any attention. She'd sent word ahead that she'd be visiting.

Looking at the clock on the wall of the main hall, she saw that she still had an hour before her meeting. Normally she would try to arrive to appointments right on time, but this time she decided to browse the exhibits before then. There were statues and paintings, and everything was labelled with the artist and when they were made.

When she found the weapon and armour exhibits, she made directly for Judgement. It was in pristine condition, as could be expected of her blades. She raised an eyebrow at its label, however, as everything was correct. Credit was given to Prochorus and it even mentioned Abathar as the soul inside, listing his power accurately. Judgement was like Order, creating rules that had to be followed. Where they differed was that Order forced compliance by affecting the mind and Judgement punished those who disobeyed the rules with pain. Two very similar tools, yet usable for very different purposes.

Surrounding Judgement was a variety of Nerikan items that were used in the Ruination. A red breastplate with the Kewaen symbol painted boldly on the front in black, a gold-crowned helmet displaying the Solash symbol, a series of knives featuring the symbols of both the main houses and many minor ones.

"Nerik stood with every nation it could," said a voice at her side. She looked down at the aged enlani, his leathery skin lined with deep cracks, appearing softer than those she'd fought. "You will find a few displays like this across Vilda and Dorai. Here in Gad Ortha, we try to remember those that fought to save the innocent from the Dragons and their legions

of serpentine.”

“I am doing my best to emulate them now,” she said. “My earliest battles were not so just, I have committed my fair share of atrocities.”

“Cor worshipped Azael,” said the enlani. “Your methods may be brutal, but the results cannot be called unjust.”

“That sounds like you’re making excuses to get on my good side. I accept that there are people who hate me for good reasons. The people of Provalis still hate me, and my actions against Azael won’t change that.”

“Are you fine with being hated?” He had a curious smile spreading across his wide face.

“The only opinions I care about are from God and Family,” she said. “Only those closest to me matter. We’ve had our disagreements, but they know what I’m doing is what is needed, so I can shut out what everyone else thinks.”

“That covers your family, said the enlani. “What of your God? Who do you worship now?”

She let out a breath as an amused laugh. “I think I’m too deep in my own ideology to worry about other gods. There was a time where I would likely have said Dasus, but I have his titles now. His followers are mine now. I am my own god now, for better or worse.”

“You can take the blade,” said the enlani, gesturing to the black greatsword that was as long as she was tall. She looked down at him and he shrugged. “My name is Vork Talloa, the curator of this museum. When I heard you were here and looking around, I thought I would come talk to you. I’d heard you were a domineering and rage-filled monster, just as you seemed when you showed the world your argument with the Grand Lord. I’ve already heard of the incident in Indar Sekatto. Rumours spread quickly on this continent and we trade with Enardun. I see now that you’re more measured than you appeared. You walk this path with intent, not in madness. But please, tell me, do you still believe that the gods should be active in our lives?”

"I've given it a lot of thought since I fought Chassuille. Those that behave like gods should act like gods. If they are going to claim ownership of a people or an aspect of life, then they should attend to it properly. They should be providing what the people need.

"But, having said that, I do also see the value in being left alone. Do not get me wrong, I don't want them to be shoving their noses into the lives of the individual and ruining their privacy. It is fine for the average person to just live their life and make it better in their own way, so long as they're not harming others.

"It is a balance, something that I as the Goddess of Balance and Twilight should consider. I cannot be the petulant child I used to be any more. The right balance is somewhere in-between. Gods should provide, but not enforce. People should respect, not worship. Gods are leaders, not masters."

"A carefully thought out response," said Vork.

"It's something that's always on my mind," she said. "I've claimed the domain of Nothing, of that fresh start and a new beginning. Once this battle is done, I want things to be better than they are now, and if that means punching Chassuille until he's willing to feed his people instead of sitting back and letting them praise him, then that's what I'll do."

"It's a shame that your only public speech is in that duel with the Grand Lord." Vork laughed loudly, disturbing some of the others browsing the exhibits. "Come back when the war is over. I'll get you a timeslot on the television and we can hear the words of a victor."

"I'll consider it." She held out her hand and called the blade into herself, welcoming Abathar to the collection. "For now I must travel. There are more blades to collect."

Joy

In Balatoria, Narianel entered the House of Divine Pleasure and was the only one frowning. Perhaps it was Vinish modesty overtaking her Nerikan freedom for once, but she didn't like this place. She adjusted her own hearing, tuning out the rowdy shouting. Women dancing half-nude on a stage, singing a rude song, all while men cheered them on. The scent of beer and sweat was strong.

Caleb's power was active, the fallen angel's euphoria affecting all the people in the tavern. No doubt his current owner was using it to keep his customers paying. She'd put a stop to that now.

She crossed the room, weaving between the tables, her military uniform of the Order drawing eyes but not hands, smiles never leaving the faces of the men. As she approached the guard at the bottom of the stairs he moved aside, not daring to spoil his own mood by doing his job. When she made it up to the office, it reeked of tobacco smoke and the man behind the desk was obscured by a thick cloud of it.

"Ah, the Great Goddess herself," said the man as he leaned forward. He flicked the ash of his cigar into a glass dish. "What brings you to my humble business?"

"The dagger on your belt," she said. "But I think you already knew that."

"Tell you what," said the man. "This dagger is good for my business, so I'll only give it to you if you give me something in return." He stood up, and opened the buckle of his belt, only to stop when Quake dropped into Narianel's hands, briefly lighting the room in silver.

"If you try what you're thinking, I'll smash it."

The man sat down, wide-eyed and pale-faced.

"Here's how this is going to work," she continued. "You

are going to give me the dagger for free. You have insulted a god whose army can be here in under a minute, teleporting into the building if needed. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” muttered the man. He placed Joy on his desk. No more would people be manipulated into selling themselves or spending here.

“Good. Consider finding a local temple and praying to whatever god you choose, as if we meet again and you’re still like this... I’ll gut you.”

Spider

On the northern coast of Galcarn, Narianel sat with Isaac on a beach and was looking at the island on the horizon. Flying over it were at least a dozen drakes, each as large as a town.

“That’s where Toxin is?” asked Isaac, quickly signing. “Sure, I’ll go get it.”

“In your aetherial form, which I haven’t seen you use, you will be immune to the breaths of those drakes. The children of Eres, Dragon of Poison, can largely be ignored as a result. Take Needlepoint to get in and out quickly. I can’t imagine them trying to swim if you need to hide.”

“I don’t like my aetherial form,” signed Isaac. “It feels too light, as if I stop existing. But I will use it here, when it is useful.”

“I’ll see you when I get back,” said Narianel. She stood up and used some basic air magic to clean the sand from her clothes. Isaac set off, using Needlepoint to teleport.

She headed up the beach to the pier, then walked into the city. Torev was the capital of Galcarn and was currently decorated for a festival for some event from Avani’s early days. Chill had set in and the trees lining the streets were dropping their brown and red leaves, which dedicated workers were gathering for the celebration.

People were dressed in long shawls that reached their thighs and were wearing flat-topped hats. She asked a passing sklaara about it and was told that it is a mourning outfit from a pre-Avani world that has since become worn to celebrate the heroes of the past who died in battle. From the Ruination to more modern wars, this autumnal festival is to praise their efforts. She could get behind that.

She reached her destination just before noon. She had signed up for the competition and changed into a tightly fitted

costume. As she exited the changing tent, she noticed that there were at least a hundred of the Order here to watch her compete, including Chas and Sarina. They cheered her on as she approached the line.

The rules were simple. Without using magic, each competitor had to climb the side of a specific building. There were air mages on standby if someone fell. She was told that the building and prize changed each year, and this time they would be competing for a pair of magic claws. One of those claws was Spider and the other had been built to match it. Spider allowed the wearer to walk on walls and ceilings, and the extra claw enhanced the effect to prevent the wearer from being forcibly knocked off, made by a skilled mage just over three hundred years ago.

When she had approached the people running the contest the previous day, she'd had to go through some testing to confirm how her body worked. Mages had watched her run, jump, and climb so they could check her aether flow. She also had to wear a curious collar. It wasn't antimagic in the normal sense, so it didn't shut her body down, but it prevented her from building aether beyond a certain limit. After her tests, the mages had to adjust it to allow for more aether just because of how her body worked, but it still felt highly restrictive.

As soon as the bell sounded she sprinted at the wall and began the climb. She leapt from window sill to window sill, her hands and feet as precise as they were in battle. She had a natural advantage, not getting vertigo and not needing to breathe. She didn't get tired all the way to the top, where she pulled herself up and hit the button, sounding another bell. There were cheers below and she looked at the large screen to see her time. A little over twenty-seven seconds to climb three hundred feet.

"That is very impressive," said the facilitator as he wrote the results on some sort of handheld device. "I've never seen a woman climb so quickly. If you competed in the standard climbing competitions I'm sure you'd break all the

world records.”

“I notice the word woman there,” she said. “Did a man do it faster?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” said the facilitator. “Your time comes in second by another very impressive person I’ve never seen before. He beat you by half a second, probably due to his height advantage. His name was Isaac Blair. Didn’t say much, but bowed a lot.”

“That’s my brother” she said, letting her building anger out as a laugh. She couldn’t be mad at being beaten by Isaac. “When did he set his time?”

“He was the third to do the climb today, and first to make it to the top. That was around four hours ago. Anyway, times will be announced at the fifth hour past noon, so please return then to claim your prize. I doubt anyone will beat either of you, so second place is likely yours. You’ll get a cash prize.”

“Alright,” she said. She took off the collar and jumped from the building, landing seconds later. After the initial shock, the crowd clapped and cheered, so she gave them a dramatic bow.

Toxin

It was evening and Narianel danced with Spider and Toxin, claw and barbed knife. Isaac had returned from his adventure a few hours before and was now recounting his tale for a sixth time to another group of the Order. He was quite the popular figure and didn't feel like an outsider at all, which Narianel liked to see.

Royan approached and she danced around him while they talked, switching weapons to feel what fit nicely within the claws. They were camped in a field outside the city and her practice had stamped down a circle in the grass.

"We have permission to move through the next country now," he said. "The officials have also forwarded my request to where we're actually going, so hopefully we won't be stopped long this time."

"Good," she said. She swung at him with Perception, but Blair appeared at his back, floating with the power of Tail, and parried her attack. "Good."

"A lot of the food in these more scientifically advanced nations is packaged and designed to be cooked with their machines, making it difficult to restock since the airships don't have them." He was reading off a list of issues he kept in a book he'd brought with him, crossing out things as they no longer had relevance.

"Approach the ones supplying the raw ingredients to the factories," said Narianel. She circled Royan and he kept Blair floating between them.

"Most of them have exclusive contracts." Royan sighed at that. "Few are willing to sell to us, especially since we have mostly foreign coin. Most of these nations have no trade contact with Semblan, so the opportunity to exchange the currency is limited."

“Are the wood mages on duplicating the grain?”

“They are. The plan is to keep them that way until we reach Sara De Han where we’ll be able to get a proper restock. There are several stops before then.”

She lunged with Flameroot and Royan replaced Blair with Spiritrush and the reflected blast pushed her back ten feet, gouging tracks in the ground as she steadied herself.

“You already know your weakness of fighting to the beat of the song,” said Royan with a soft smile.

“I was testing you,” she said, matching his smile. “How loud is the song getting in your head? I can hear it in you.”

“It gets louder as each blade becomes part of the battle bond,” he said, closing his book and handing it to Gretel, who had been watching her dance. “It’s not unmanageable, and I can ignore with a little mental effort.”

“Let’s dance for a while,” she said. “I’ll show you how to go off-beat.”

Awemaker

This was a blade she had been fretting over, and sitting through meeting after meeting for days on end was driving her mad. She was doing her best to respect the laws of the places she visited, but the sheer bureaucracy in these more scientific nations was unreasonable. Everything needed twelve contracts and twice as many signatures. It was a relief when it was over.

A crowd had gathered to watch as she approached the statue with Isaac and the officers of the Order. Some help up signs and shouted in protest, held back by the local police, but on the other side of the public square were people cheering her. Narianel saw people in every window that looked down on the square.

Today her wore a Nerikan dress, open shoulders and back, tight on the front and flowing from her hips. It was white and trimmed with black. She wore red ribbons in her two shades on her arms and legs. Her face and arms were covered in Nerikan designs, and central on her forehead was the symbol of House Azranhai, the symbol of the blade.

It was clouding over and beginning to rain, so she made this a quick event. She stepped up to the statue and held out her hand, summoning Awemaker from its grip. This made the protesters shout louder, only for them to be silenced when she floated up to the statue, drawing a sword that hung from her waist. The magic in it simply made it durable and resistant to the weather, but it fit nicely in the statue's hand, replacing Awemaker.

She channelled her new blade's power, the ability to strike awe and wonder into those who heard the user speak. She had a message to deliver.

"This man was named Babao Solgarath," she called to the crowd. "Your records have him as the Hero of Nervane, an

unknown warrior who fought for your ancestors in the chaos of the Ruination. Today I claim Awemaker, the sword he used to defend you, as it is a symbol of House Zoraken of Nerik and needed to save the world. And today I also gift to Babao a sword from his master, High Lord Kresimir Solash of Nerik, in memory and respect to a servant who went above and beyond in a time of strife. This blade is named Sunbringer and bears the symbol of House Solash, the Skrae symbol for the Sun.

“High Lord Solash wishes you all to know about Babao, who he now names Babao Solan, a name that means Sunsoul. High Lord Solash names him thus as a Second Family of House Solash in honour of his deeds and bravery.

“With your libraries and government I have left books on House Solash, as well as a personal account of Babao by High Lord Solash. You should learn of your unknown hero. He was a fire mage of great power who was thought lost during the Sealing of the Dragons, but now we know he ended up here, fighting for you. He should be honoured.”

She raised her hands to the sky and willed the clouds away, bringing shining noon light down on the statue for a moment before expanding it to the entire sky.

Kiss

Something Narianel found interesting were the Wandering Clans of Vilda. They moved from place to place, travelling through different countries, putting on plays and sideshows. Some of them had a bad reputation for crime, but most of them were a joy to the people that visited their camps. She'd been to four of them so far on her own journey across Vilda and had seen new plays she'd never heard of before.

This fifth one, however, was one of those with a bad reputation. At first she couldn't see much of a difference. The banners and tents were a new colour, and the Clan emblem was different, but that was how they set themselves apart. But she did see how people carried themselves. There were less people overall, they were more guarded, and they kept a wide berth of the security.

But it was still a circus. Still a festival. People were playing the games set up in the stalls and in the bigger tents she could hear plays and performances. A juggler wandered by with a trail of kids cheering him on. There was general good cheer and plenty of laughter.

Narianel wound her way towards the song. Kiss called to her from somewhere amongst the tents and stalls. She soon found what she was searching for, but that was when chaos erupted.

She sensed them before they charged her, their souls dripping with Azael's influence. She didn't bother summoning any of the blades, instead using her speed and fists and aether bursts to obliterate her opponents. This Clan with the bad reputation were little more than bandits and thugs; not a challenge at all.

Then the man using Kiss ran at her and she allowed him to stab her. She saw the shock on his face moments before

she took control.



Narianel stood in the arena of her mindscape and was face to face with Lamia. The woman's lower half was a snake and she looked around in confusion.

"I cannot affect you," she said. "Your love is not from a natural source. I cannot make it bend."

"I am cursed with True Love," said Narianel. "Romantic love is barred to me, except for the one I am bonded to."

"You call such loyalty a curse?" Lamia smirked and her smile faded as she met Narianel's eyes.

"There is no free will in mandatory bonds. I did not choose to be like this. That is why it is a curse. And yet I am blessed. My late wife and my new partner are reasons that I fight. They are reasons I have to win. When I sing the song, I'll be freed of this curse, but my loyalty to my current partner will not waver. My love will be true but not forced. That is the way things should be. Even should you try when my soul is unbound, you will fail, Lamia."



Narianel pulled the dagger from her core and forced it into the eye of her attacker. Her flesh and clothes had healed before she turned to continue the fight with another. It wasn't long until she was surrounded by nothing but corpses.

When the police showed up she explained the situation, but they didn't seem satisfied with twenty-three dead people and writing them off as worshippers of an evil god. It wasn't until Royan showed up with the chief of police in tow that she was able to leave without causing problems.

"Azael wasn't even trying with that lot," Narianel said to Royan as they walked away. "Just brutes, no brains."

"Well, I think anyone with a brain wouldn't be trying to

kill you,” said Royan.

“And how would you deal with me?” she asked.

“Engage you in debate.” Narianel looked sideways at him, but he just shrugged at her. “When people see you, they might think you the sort to brood and stay quiet, but I have witnessed many times where you give monologues, standing centre-stage and reciting your thoughts to the audience.”

“What is your point?”

“That in the final battle, you will have to resist that against Azael. No matter how much you want to know his mind and history and plans, you must kill him and be satisfied with a lack of conversation.”

She stayed quiet at that. It was true, and she would have to take such an off-hand comment on her habits into account. Frost would be starting soon, and that meant there were less than four years left.

Wealth

The last blade on Avani was Wealth. It was in a country called Therance, not far north of Sara De Han, owned by the local king. He had handed it over in trade for an alliance with Sara De Han in the coming battle against Azael, to which Narianel easily agreed. She didn't say it, but she was already planning to prepare everywhere for the day.

The Order spent Frost in Sara De Han getting properly trained in firearms. Royan spent most of that time training the Hanean mages and directing them towards Nerikan books on the subject of magic. Narianel checked over the country's defences and plans.

During those long months, the officers of the Order and Narianel were invited to a theatre, but instead of a play they were shown an illusion on a flat wall. Narianel had needed to numb her hearing because of the noise. Overall it was an entertaining experience, but Narianel still preferred seeing the actors live on the stage.

As they were leaving, Royan went to ask to see the technology behind it. The rest of the officers discussed what they had just seen.

"The people who made it obviously didn't know how magic worked," said Sarina, "but it was still good."

"I don't understand why they shouted out the names of their abilities or took the time to explain it," said Tullis.

"I thought that was awesome," said Vedar.

"That's because you never grew up." Tullis smirked as Vedar lightly punched him in the arm.

"The Archivists already name all their spells," said Chas. "I could see them doing that exact same thing."

"We should do it," said Vedar. "There are several blade powers that are named like World Sight and Abaddon's Claws.

It would be amazing to just show up to a fight and start announcing ourselves. It would intimidate our opponents if we gave our powers scary names.”

“I forbid it,” said Narianel, shaking her head.
Vedar booed her and the others laughed.

Horormind

In the first days of Rain, Narianel brought the Order to the Divide of Creation. This was something she'd been planning since she got the Spirit of the Divine. The airships set down in the water surrounding the island and she looked at the spacial distortion as she landed from her dive.

The letters she had sent had clearly arrived, and she was glad to see so many familiar faces. The Eyes of Chassuille were there, and Tesni came to chat with Narianel as the Order disembarked. They had seen each other over Frost, but it was good to see her again. Sasha, Akenesa, and Liara had arrived first to set up the rune that had been painted precisely on the flat stone surface of the island. Prochorus and Vala stood to the side as witnesses rather than participants.

Curiously, Thomas Acker of the Guild of Archivists was there to watch, even though she hadn't told him about it. With him was Traugott Amsel, the tattooed metal mage, and he was starting to look old. Her earliest memory of him at the Southern Pass had him practically baby-faced, but now there were wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes. What a difference thirty years could make in a human. There were at least a dozen other Archivists, some of which she recognised.

Once the Order was ready, she walked to the centre of the rune and called on the Spirit of the Divine. Shock spread on the faces of most of those gathered. Only Mister Thomas and Royan remained straight-faced as her aether multiplied by the second.

She manifested Iblis, Furtur, and Eleazar, the blades Heart, Needlepoint, and Alliance. They took their places on the rune. Lamis Darzi, also starting to age despite not being that much older than Narianel, stepped forward to play his part as a space mage.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked. “We’d be opening an easy door to the planet for Azael’s soldiers.”

“Egil tells me they’ll be attacking through portals,” she said. “They’ll go directly to the cities. Some rock in the middle of the sea isn’t of much interest to them.”

That reassured him and he started to gather power. Eleazar and Iblis started to work, linking the hearts and minds of the mages together, giving Narianel access to the space aether of Lamis and Furtur.

Akenesa stepped forward to join the link, stepping onto the edge of the circle. Narianel had requested her presence because of her raw power, and there was an immediate boost as the Grand Circle mage was linked. Isaac stood next to her with a smile she couldn’t return.

Prochorus also stood on the edge of the rune, next to Royan who had just stepped in. Prochorus looked at the manifested blades with narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow, looking not at the two demons and one fallen angel, but at the two reds they wore. Iblis and Eleazar were in robes, and the large-antlered deer that was Furtur had Narianel’s shakai draped throughout its branches.

‘That’s right. They are mine now.’ It was a spiteful thought, but she needed to stay strong to be able to sing the song when the time came. She couldn’t possibly give in to Prochorus. Only she could handle the burden that was all too close at hand.

She began to sing. Not the song of the blades, but the song of the lunatic choir of Nerik. The song calmed her, and it encouraged her, and she felt the souls of her Talwaen family shift and resonate.

When she had gathered enough power, when her aether was causing reality itself to vibrate around her, she activated the rune. Immediately she felt the magic flow through her, using her body as a conduit. She directed the spell towards the Divide, towards the swirling mass of chaotic aether, and she imposed her law on it.

The rough circle of the Divide's edge became perfect and the tunnel solidified. Chaos was tamed and reality bent to her will. The Divide was finally completed after more than six hundred and forty years.

But before she could celebrate, the moment she released the spell and the rune deactivated there was a wave of magic that flowed through the Divide. The gathered people fell to their knees, their souls filled with fear and sorrow. The only ones standing were herself, Prochorus, Isaac, and Akenesa, so she knew that this wasn't natural. Akenesa could act only because of her curse preventing the physical effects of her emotions. She might be scared and sad, but she was still able to fight through it.

"It's a blade," said Royan, doing his best to fight it. He rose to his feet but could barely move, teeth gritted and tears in his eyes. Narianel held out her hand to stop him and he collapsed to his knees, nodding at her wordless insistence.

"It's two," said Prochorus. "Horormind and Sorrow. I can hear them."

"Let's go," said Narianel.

She released the manifestations and pushed all the blades made by Prochorus into his soul through the battle bond, then linked Akenesa into the bond too. She flew through the Divide, the first to travel the path safely, and saw the source of their problem.

Thousands had gathered, all dressed in pitch black. They were all armed and armoured, gathering power that could rival the Order's own. Within their mass she sensed not two blades, but three, though that one was silent while the others belted out their song.

As Prochorus, Isaac, and Akenesa flew up behind her, she pointed out the blades.

"Divide the army into thirds," she said. "I'll go directly to the blades." The four landed and Narianel saw Prochorus use Tail to summon all the blades at once as she ran into the crowd.

The entire army had the smell of Azael on them, and they fought well. They knew her fighting style and were able to keep up with her. Behind her she heard explosions, but there was an unnerving scent of antimagic in the air that put her on edge. This was an actual army trained to counter her, and she wondered what would happen if she took on her angelic form. Would that just make her a target?

She fought on, making use of aether blasts to clear her way forward, dodging between attacks and forcing her way to the first blade. She had no issue using Impromptu to detonate the blood anyone she touched or using Mass to incite them to attack each other, using Chant to increase their hatred and Litany to turn it into an obsession.

Channelling Sonata gave her the instincts of a Seer, warning her of attacks coming from behind, and Encore's altered power to slow time rather than reverse it let her move in unexpected ways. With Opera she spread clouds of pure aether with a swing causing reality to crackle and burn, using Ballet to remove the aether before it became a problem.

Despite the way she fought with ruthless efficiency, it wasn't until Nocturne appeared in her hand that her enemies began to fear. Their old ally's soul eating ability turned against them, Narianel held no pity for them. They sold their souls to Azael, and now they were forfeit. Egil, for the first time in a while, showed some emotion, excited to be fighting and devouring, the madness returning to him.

Narianel broke through the crowd and immediately parried an attack from an elf using Horrormind. The elf's skin was grey and his eyes were pure black, his white hair was long and straight and tied back. His sharp ears were pierced with spikes, half a dozen times in each.

"Why are you smirking?" he asked.

"I've never killed an elf before," she said, "let alone a dark elf. Of all the races I thought were extinct, yours were right at the top."

Their fight lasted three swings of Nocturne from there.

First, she parried an attack. Second, she swung to get some space, then called Horrormind into her soul, surprising the elf at being disarmed in such a way. Third she leapt in and dealt the finishing blow.

She turned her mind to Sorrow and set out across the battlefield once more.

Chaosedge

Narianel pushed off the shoulder of a stunned and kneeling opponent and over the next. She passed Prochorus who was dancing, the blades spiralling around him and following his movements. His movements were just as graceful as her own, and yet the way he used them was so different.

She moved on, continuing the fight. The army was mostly human, but there were the odd scattering of other races, some she'd never seen before. Her anticipation changed from getting the two remaining blades on the battlefield to who would be wielding them.

When someone tried to throw lightning at her, she used Ballade to raise an antimagic bubble around herself and then hit the man's soul with Prelude's power again and again, forcing him to repeat his spell uselessly until he was completely drained of aether. He collapsed in exhaustion and she moved on.

A group tried to create a shieldwall around her, but it only stalled her for a moment. Forcing out her will, laced with Impromptu's power, she created a bloody mess all around her. Then, as she refocused on Sorrow, she was forced to dodge.

She hadn't expected an imp, a human turned into a demon. His skin had turned bright red and he'd grown a pair of horns. He had tiny vestigial wings on his back. He was shirtless and muscled, but from the waist down he was heavily armoured. The look in his yellow cat-like eyes was pure madness, and she knew it to be the result of the long serrated sword in his hand. Chaosedge.

He attacked in a frenzy, wild and aggressive. It was only Sonata keeping her from getting hit, though she saw it more as a personal challenge to meet than a requirement. Chaosedge couldn't hurt her, so she evaded and parried for the thrill of the

fight. She could feel Choronzon in the blade calling out in joy at the duel's progression.

The imp was lost to the power of the blade, the power turned inward, becoming a force for pure chaos. She could hear his heart pounding and his steps left cracks in the ground. The island in the Aether Sea was massive, but she had a moment where she thought about smashing it and just dropping the army into the ocean of aether to be dissolved.

She fought on, parrying with Nocturne. She urged on the imp with Mass and Chant and Fugue, pushing their power through the air as an aura.

And then it happened, the thing she was curious about. The imp fell to his knees, dropping Chaosedge and clutching his chest. She called the blade into herself, and then felt Prochorus pull it and Horrormind to add to his storm of metal.

"So," she said, squatting down next to the imp as he struggled to breathe. The soldiers that had encircled their battle watched with both fear and curiosity. "It looks like there are limits how many aggression and rage boosting magics can be put into someone."

His heartbeat was irregular and fading quickly. His entire body was shaking and he was slick with sweat. She could smell the change in his aether as it seeped from every pore, his body no longer able to contain it. His soul was now corrosive because he had been pushed beyond his limits.

She recalled being pushed to her limit by her mother, so long ago. Back then she'd burnt off the excess aether with soulfire, a dangerous practice to everyone who tried it. Even though her soul didn't burn as easily as others and she often claimed to be immune, she could still willingly submit herself to the flame. This imp clearly didn't know how to create soulfire, and his aether continued to build as the power of the blades amplified his emotions.

Then he collapsed to the side and it was over.

Sorrow

Narianel released a circle of aether all around herself in a burst so loud that the enclosing army flew in all directions. Her mind was entirely on Sorrow's wielder now and his aura was so malevolent that she could feel it clearly amongst the sea of people. As she ran she dropped and slid under a beam of concentrated dark flame that Akenesa had burnt through fifty or more of the enemy with, then leapt over an ogre, throwing the dagger Minuet into its eye before continuing on.

On the edge of her senses she could feel others joining the battle. Tesni and a couple of the Eyes, Sasha, Liara, Royan and many if the Order. She was right to go for Horrormind first, it seemed, as fear in such overwhelming quantities was harder to fight through than the sadness brought by Sorrow.

She switched between weapons rapidly, each kill by a different blade. Silver flash after silver flash, each opponent didn't know what to expect. Impromptu's length or Laude's slender flexibility, or even the magnetic push and pull of Crescendo or the madness of Nocturne. She met a magic blade with Ballet's null properties and thrown fireballs with Ballade's anti-magic shield. She was one with her weapons, and had convinced them all to her side. All except Waltz. Nareshilna. He still resisted her, but she didn't need his power over death. She gave that to her foes in her own way.

Then she finally broke through and met Sorrow's user. He was tall and thin and dark skinned, though his greyness revealed his undeath. As he smiled at her his fangs were exposed and his deep black eyes had a dark blue sheen to them that suggested the aether flowing through them. He wore all black and kept his cloak's hood up to hide from the light of the sky. He was a full-blooded vampire, and brave to venture out in the light of day. If she pulled that hood off and could point

his eyes to the sky, he would combust.

To her surprise he threw down Sorrow, a kris knife. Unlike his dark elf companion, he obviously knew she could pull it from him. He drew a sword, heavily enchanted, and she summoned Sorrow to her soul, quieting the wailing of the demon Chemosh within it.

She summoned Impromptu. The sword was far too large and heavily for a human of her size, but the aether in her muscles and joints let her hold it firm. She could hear Sanar laughing at the idea of a vampire going against its god. Her opponent seemed to recognise the soul in the blade. His grin faded and his eyes hardened.

He charged her but she decided to not show him any decency. Why bother fighting someone who lost their confidence the moment the situation changed? She invoked Sanar's power and forced her will on the vampire's body, his blood exploding away from her, destroying his body and leaving little but a red mist in the air.

His blade clattered to the ground and she took it as she dismissed Impromptu. Sanar was satisfied. She swung the blade a few times and noticed its curious properties as it alternated between fire and ice and lightning in a pattern. The runes up the length of the sword were intricate and she took a moment to study them since no one was approaching her.

Then Sasha broke through the crowd in a bloody frenzy, the half-vampire and half-Vanavolk enjoying every moment of death and pain. Narianel held out the sword for Sasha to take and smiled.

"I'll trade you for Thorn," she said.

"Not a chance, dear grand-daughter," said Sasha. "You will have to pry Thorn from my defeated body. Once you are done with your journey, return to Nerik. This will be the final blade you claim."

She swung Thorn out and slashed a man's face with the hooked blade. Its curse took immediate effect and that tiny, insignificant scratch on his cheek suddenly became the most

painful thing he'd ever experienced. He dropped to his knees and held the wound, screaming and crying. Narianel walked up to him and stabbed him through the chest with the vampire's blade to end his suffering.

"How many other's have you left like that?" she asked as a sudden wave of swords and spears advanced on them both. "Suffering needlessly?"

"A few," said Sasha, laughing and bright-eyed like a girl being flirted with. Her fighting style was both brutal and subtle at the same time. Those she killed were hacked to pieces and those she left alive were on the floor from the tiniest scrapes.

"Our motives are at odds," said Narianel.

"I saw the look of disgust on your face as you killed that vampire," said Sasha. "Don't hold yourself higher than me. We both enjoy this, just in different ways." An enemy soldier was able to stab her in the gut and then ripped his sword out her side, only to be shocked when her body pulled itself back together. She punched him in the face and then released a Sarkal blast that erupted out the back of his head. Sasha licked the blood from her knuckles.

Narianel couldn't deny Sasha's words. She was enjoying the battle. But it was different. Hers was an elegant dance with death brought immediately and directly, not a brawl that revelled in the pain. But it didn't matter. Her grandmother was a force of nature that would be directed against Azael in the final battle, and these soldiers deserved no forgiveness for their role in supporting the God of the End.

Titan

Narianel sat on the battlefield while the Order picked through the weapons and armour that could be looted from the enemy. The presence of so many highly magical fighters had allowed there to be no losses on their side, but Narianel and Royan had discussed the possibility that this was a test of the enemy's forces before the real battle to come.

In the distance, she could see Prochorus still dancing, the blades spinning around him. It was a beautiful display, and he obviously missed the blades, but she would soon be taking them all back. He could play until she needed to leave.

"Looks like we missed all the fun."

Narianel looked around to see her father. Sorley had a grin on his face as he walked past a pile of weapons the Order had piled up nearby. Her thoughts turned to his scar that ran through his left eye, a cursed wound that would be healed by the song.

"I was aware of movement in this area," he said as he sat next to her, crossing his legs while standing and then just dropping into position. "A good chunk of the force was taken down by some angels in their patrol, but I hadn't heard about so many reaching here. Armies like this are becoming more of a common sight here on the Aether Sea."

"They weren't much of a challenge," said Narianel. She gestured toward Royan and the Order's officers, then toward the Eyes. "Most of our best were here to meet them. My grandmother and cousins have already returned to Nerik, and Vala is questing to make an updated list for me. There has been a lot of movement with the blades, it seems."

"Many of those on the Aether Sea were lost in the Ruination or are in the hands of the enemy." Sorley placed a blacksmith's hammer next to her, the top spiked to allow it to

still be called a blade. “Not this one, though.”

“I heard its song long before I felt your approach,” said Narianel. She took Titan into her soul, the metal elemental blade, and then a moment’s later there was a burst of silver light by Prochorus as the blade joined his dance. “The more I have, the louder it gets. Soon I will be lost in the song entirely.”

Sorley put his arm around her and pulled her closer. She leaned against her father and watched Prochorus for a while.

Striker

It was difficult to tell time on the Aether Sea. Days were highly variable, and while some matched the standard day on Avani, others were twice as long and some passed in an hour. She thought they had been flying for a month, but there had been at least seven extra days. She was losing count. It didn't help that she was spending more and more time her mindscape, where time didn't seem to matter at all.

Then the airships stopped and she opened her eyes. She could sense Striker below, hearing Muriel's singing.

"I don't think we need to join you for this one," said Royan. How long had he been standing next to her? "It's right below us in a ruin."

She stood up and stretched, then focussed. She looked over the edge and took in the sight of a ruined castle sitting on an island floating in a sea of magic.

"You seem down," said Royan. "Is there something wrong?"

"I've never spent this much time on the Aether Sea before and I think it's affecting me. My senses are muddled and it's hard to think. While I collect this blade, will you check on Isaac?"

"Much like you, he seems the kind to suffer on in silence until prompted," said Royan. "I'll check on him."

Narianel nodded and climbed over the railing, then dropped to the island below. As she fell her power was building higher and higher until she was forced to burn off some of it with soulfire. It was painless and she didn't ignite the way others would, but she kept it burning until she landed.

She thought about it as she entered the keep. The door fell off its rusted hinge and its slam echoed in the hall. She followed the path and stopped when she realised her mind was

clearing.

“There’s too much aether,” she muttered. The inside of this castle was empty of the almost invisible haze that soaked the rest of the Aether Sea. She had been unconsciously absorbing it all in ways that differed from taking in the light. She had to find a way to counteract it, but it could wait until she was back on the airship.

She soon found the blade. It was in the clutches of a skeleton wearing plate armour, the eye sockets revealing the Nerikan origin of the soldier. There was a hole in the side of the armour and a black stain under the body that could only be corrupted blood. She brushed the dirt and dust from the breastplate and saw the symbol of House Kewaen. This had been either a vampire or a familiar. She wondered if he died alone. Other soldiers would have taken the blade, knowing how important it was.

She took Striker into herself, and as if on cue the skeleton crumbled. She tapped the symbol on the breastplate and left the castle, summoning Striker to her hand along the way to give it a few swings. The blade was more of a rod with a point on the end, and its power was to amplify the strength of the blunt force damage when it struck something. She looked forward to trying it in battle and combining it with a Sarkal blast.

Back on the airship she was immediately approached by Isaac, who walked her through a simple barrier that he’d learned to keep active when he was a child. It was automatic for him now, but it took a little of her concentration during their journey on the Aether Sea, but it did help block out the ambient aether.

Vortex

The blade known as Vortex could enhance the rotational speed of anything. This made it a perfect pair for Torrent as well as Whirlwind, which she had yet to acquire. It could be used to spin magic, creating tornadoes of flame and poison fog. But Narianel had another plan for it.

She fought back to back with Isaac as the imps swarmed out of the distinctly spiral shaped cracks in the island. She saw Royan in the distance fighting a demon in the sky as they handled the seemingly endless waves of red and green skinned corrupted peoples.

They had come a long way to get here, almost a month on the airships, and she had been hoping for an easier time than this. Hopes and expectations were separate things, however, and she had very much expected some kind of trap the moment she'd felt the faint, hidden auras of the imps inside the island.

She released a burst of aether as a shout and quickly charged into the newly opened space as the imps tumbled away from her. She grabbed Vortex and pulled the spear from the ground. She spun it once above her head and felt the air move far more than it should, picking up her hair and shakai and edges of her uniform. She dismissed it and immediately set to work testing her theories.

With Havoc and Malice in hand, she fought the imps, then with each pirouette in her dance she activated Vortex for the briefest of moments. Each spin became faster than she could have imagined, and it was only with her decades of training that she stayed on her feet instead of spinning across the ground like a child's toy. She pulled back the effect and tried again and again until she found a speed she could comfortable control. She didn't have a lot of time to perfect

this technique, so in each battle moving forward she would have to let the speed creep up. The divine blades already cut cleanly through flesh, but with this she could break enchanted armour if she could control it.

It was another ten minutes before Royan joined them at the centre of the fight, and another half an hour until she saw any of the rest of the Order who had to fight their way in from the outside. It was a long fight, but at the end of the day they were victorious. There were a few losses, and Narianel took the time to let the Order mourn. There were still sixteen loose blades out there, uncontrolled by her, her family, or someone in Nerik, but she didn't need to rush.

Illusion

“Over there,” said Narianel, and the airships were directed to the island where she could feel the blade. This wasn’t in her notes. Things had moved again. Azael must be doing it on purpose, but to what end?

When they were over the island, she could feel two distinct souls, and it wasn’t long before she saw a woman holding a knife to the sky. She expanded her senses to get a better look at her and was rather surprised. An elf with olive skin and flowing, platinum blonde hair.

“Edreni,” whispered Egil in her mind. “One of the Five Great Generals of the End. She defects in all possible timelines, but this is different. She never brought you a blade before.”

This elf, Edreni, was easily in the Grand Circle of power and was wearing mistweave that had been dyed black. At her side appeared to be a sword in a black sheath.

“I sense your suspicion,” whispered Egil. “It is not a trap. Edreni saw the near-extinction of the elves in the Ruination, the deaths of her family and friends and lover. She waits for the end and then defects, no matter how I tried to skew history.”

She gestured to Royan to circle the airships and then leapt off the side, landing a minute later on her feet as if from a hop. She met Edreni’s eyes, her glowing red against the elf’s shining green, and then waited for her to speak first. It didn’t take long.

“You’re shorter than I imagined,” said Edreni with a very slight smile. The elf was a full head taller than her.

“I imagine a lot of people think that, but few would dare to say it. I am of average height for a Nerikan and Vinish woman and feel no shame in that. But, if we’re being truthful, we both know that I am so much larger than this tiny frame

would have people believe.”

“I was there at the Legion Break,” said Edreni with a smile. “I’m well aware of what you are.”

“Then tell me your purpose,” said Narianel sharply.

“Do you glare like that at everyone?” The elf looked up at the airships circling in the violet sky. There were no clouds in the sky and Narianel could hear the lapping of the liquid aether against the island, which gently shifted with each wave, though she was sure that humans wouldn’t be able to feel it on an island this size.

“Only those that have the scent of Azael on them,” said Narianel. “Intentionally, anyway.”

Edreni looked back to Narianel and laughed. She held out the knife handle-first. Its blade was made of an aether crystal refined into sharp glass. Narianel called it into herself. Illusion, a fine partner for the black scimitar Deception. One created powerful illusions and the other powerful lies, and together they would allow her to shift the truth as she pleased. She could create some basic illusions, thanks to training with Gideon, but she felt that this was beyond her preference. Some of the Order would like appreciate it, however.

“What do you gain by bringing me this?” she asked the elf, keeping watch of her soul for sudden shifts in aether.

“A show of good faith, so that when I say this next part, you will take me seriously.”

Vaudeville

“I want you to turn me into one of your blades,” said Edreni. “I even brought my own new body.”

The elf unclasped the sheath at her hip and held it out. Narianel drew the longsword and was immediately hit by a familiar scent. It was entirely black and made of *chasokil*, the angelic metal that made up her wings.

“Iblis,” she said.

“Yes,” said Edreni. “This blade was made from shards of his wings, torn from him in the First Rebellion by Raphael. I was there to witness it and I gathered the shards myself when the battle had moved on.”

Iblis manifested himself, standing taller than both of them. In the blink of an eye, a hand appeared and he held up the sword to the mask that was his face. He touched the blade and a wisp of aether flowed from where he tapped and swirled around him. Narianel felt the shift in his soul. Satisfaction. Suddenly six massive black wings appeared behind him then were folded into space the way she stored her own wings.

“Thank you for bringing this to me,” he said.

Edreni’s face was one of shock. What was this feeling the elf radiated? Admiration? Hero worship? Was this what she put out when looking at Prochorus?

“What did you do to earn this love?” asked Narianel.

“I believe this is the young girl I let live, right before Raphael found me in my rampage. I was trying to turn our forces towards Chassuille, not children.”

Iblis then released his body and returned to her soul. Edreni wouldn’t meet Narianel’s eyes. The sword floated back down to Narianel’s hand.

“Fine, Edreni, I will take you as a blade,” said Narianel. There was power that could be used

“I didn’t tell you my name,” said the elf in surprise.

“Egil did.” She summoned Nocturne to her other hand.

“My blades live on, so make sure you’re useful.” She dismissed Nocturne and got to work.

Flux

Narianel had known that the Aether Sea was huge, but she had not expected to still be travelling a month or more between each blade. She had thought the space between the portals to the Origin Worlds and Harelas where her parents lived was a long distance apart, but she had been wrong. As they flew, Isaac told her about the islands in what he called the Central Lands, which were centred on the Origin Worlds. There were two more towns like Harelas founded in the last few years, and the Central Lands were becoming more populated, but beyond that set of islands the Aether Sea stretched on forever. It would take months to get back to Avani after the journey if they didn't have two nephilim on board capable of opening portals to the worlds.

She was teaching some of the younger Order members to ballroom dance, many of them embarrassed to be touching their god, when she felt the pull of a blade. She went to the side of the airship and looked to what passed as a horizon on the Aether Sea, at the distant fog twenty miles away. There she saw something she hadn't expected.

It was a mountain that had landed in the Aether Sea, its base diagonal, revealing the rocky underside. Lines of aether crawled up it, like rivers flowing in reverse, glowing in a rainbow of colours.

"It must be stuck in the Phase to glow like that," said Sarina as she leaned over the side to see what Narianel was looking at, and Narianel agreed.

They were there in ten minutes, the airships hovering in place as Narianel and Isaac descended to the mountain. All over it were ruined buildings, and she could feel the presence of tunnels. They headed inside and they soon found an underground city, immense in scope and well-built enough to

be intact despite being abandoned for centuries.

“What is this place?” signed Isaac as he created fairy fire, sending the globes of fire out amongst the buildings and revealing just how big the hollow in the mountain was. It was a tiered city, built inside an irregular cylinder, all balconies and perfect angles.

“I think it’s a dwarven city,” said Narianel. “Probably the last that survived the Ruination.” But left unsaid that there was no sign of life within the mountain, other than the blade. The aether flowing through the tunnels to the outside was just the usual scent of the Aether Sea. No one had been here in a long time and no lingering scent remained.

They descended the city at its skewed angle, floating through the air as they moved toward the call of the blade. There were enough separate buildings around the cylinder to house tens of thousands, with stairs and bridges connecting everything in a complex network that would confuse anyone trying to walk it if they hadn’t live there their entire lives.

They soon found the building with the blade, and the day still had some surprises in store for them. They found two people standing on the floor, gravity not pulling them down. One was wearing black armour with the symbol of House Talwaen on his breastplate. His left arm was broken, hanging limply, and in his right hand he held Flux, ready to defend himself. His eyes were desperate and he was pale from blood loss. Next to him was a real dwarf, broad shouldered and stout, only as tall as Narianel’s chest. He was heavily armoured but bleeding from his scalp. His beard was singed and held a large two-handed axe as if ready to use it as a shield.

“They’re frozen in time,” signed Isaac. He was right. Flux, the long needle-like sword in the man’s hand, was putting out power. Isaac stood at the edge of the aura, adjusting his personal gravity, but didn’t touch it. “Doesn’t this blade only enhance time-based magic? I didn’t know it could freeze time.”

“The blades have a level of free will,” said Narianel. She

flew into the aura, immune to its touch. "You can call what their stated powers to be as their 'base power,' but it can stretched and changed beyond that. I've done it with a few times now, adjusting them to fit my needs at the time. We can do this because the blades are still alive and not simple enchantments. Murmur here, likely projected this aura to protect his wielder, but he's now been stuck this way since the Ruination."

"How sad," signed Isaac, leaving it at that.

"Furutr, adjust the gravity in this room towards the floor for me," she said, and Needlepoint's power flowed out. She landed gently and then mentally prepared herself to deal with the panic these two were about to go through. She grabbed the man's wrist so he couldn't swing Flux, and then forced her will upon the blade, turning it off.

The man's eyes went wide and he tried to pull away, but Narianel held him in place. He was human, unable to move her at all. He looked her in the eyes and immediately all his will to fight melted. He began to cry.

"Angels!" called the dwarf. "We're saved!" Narianel didn't know what language he was speaking, but Tongue translated it into Neri for her. He had a hoarse voice and she couldn't tell if it was his normal voice or just rough from shouting. "Wait... Why is it so quiet?"

"The war has been over for more than six hundred and forty years," said Narianel. "This blade froze you in time. I will be blunt. Dwarves are extinct. You are the last."

The dwarf's eyes went hollow and his soul was filled with doom. He sat on the ground and stared at nothing as he processed the news.

"Lady Talwaen," said the Nerikan man through his tears. "Your crescent pupils... I do not know your soul, but I see Lady Anđa in your soul. You two must be her children. I knew what you would say before you said it. Did we win?"

"My name is Narianel Azranhai," she said, letting go of his wrist. "This is my brother, Isaac Blair. We are Anđa's

children, correct. I have inherited the power of Prochorus Zoraken and now I travel to collect the blades that were scattered in the war you were fighting. We call that war the Ruination. Almost everything was destroyed until a final bid by the gods sealed away the Dragons.”

“The look on your face tells me there is more,” said the man. “The world is not at peace.”

“Correct,” said Narianel. “We are approaching a new war against Azael. We need the blades, and nations of the one world, Avani, are preparing for battle as we speak.”

“One world?” asked the dwarf, finally looking up. “And one I’ve never heard of? So it’s truly all gone...”

“I am sorry,” said Narianel. “I know it must be difficult to hear, but it’s the truth. Nerik barely survived, trapped in its own time bubble until it was unsealed recently. Most peoples and nations have no presence on Avani, which was created to save as many people as possible, and also to keep the Dragons trapped within. New worlds are beginning to be constructed, but the upcoming war is close at hand.”

“I will fight!” said the man.

“And so will I,” said the dwarf. “Just show me their faces and I’ll do everything I can to do my kin proud!”

“We will bring you along on our airships,” she said. “There are still fifteen blades to collect here on the Aether Sea, so you may be with us for more than a year as everything is spread out. Once we have those we will be returning to Nerik. First, though, I think we should get you both healed.”

“Thank you, Lady Azranhai.” The man bowed to her.

“Hold on to us as we leave,” said Narianel. “We will need to fly, and the city has been tilted when it was dropped into the Aether Sea. Come.”

Whirlwind

“Why is it always the blades with the nuisance abilities that remain active?” asked Chas as he looked to the horizon. The mists had pulled back, letting them see at least fifty miles, but the cost of that was a massive aether storm that was sucking it all in. They watched as an island was dragged into the sky and torn apart.

“Grand Lady Aia must hate the boss,” said Sarina.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Narianel. “But luck is on our side in one regard. Needlepoint is sense-based.”

The blade’s power carried her from the deck of the airship all the way to the storm, and before she could be carried away by the aether and the wind she activated Ballade. An anti-magic bubble appeared around her and she channelled Mistedge to strengthen it. Even then, it struggled as she was constantly buffeted by the storm, the clouds so thick they were beginning to crystallise.

She flew carefully, watching for the debris that used to be islands, moving toward the centre of the storm. She soon reached Whirlwind and watched it spin for a moment. It was a polearm with curved black blade and a spike on its reverse edge. She summoned it into herself and flew quickly from the clouds, catching sight of the airships before the native mist of the Aether Sea got in the way, and with Needlepoint she was back with the Order in a moment.

Drowning

“They call themselves the Voskra,” signed Isaac. They were looking out at a fleet of ships, literally sailors on the Aether Sea. “They return to the Central Lands every year or so, but sometimes go on longer expeditions. I think they’re heading back now, judging by their bearing. They are traders who go out to the ruins of the old worlds and return with lost treasures.”

“They have a blade,” said Narianel.

“Should I signal our approach?” asked Royan.

Narianel nodded. “It will be good for the Order to be able to socialise again for a while. And we do have some things we’ve found of our own that we can trade.”

Royan sent a scout to fly down to the ships and ordered the airships to turn and land on an island close to the ships. Within an hour, Narianel and the officers of the Order were meeting with the fleet’s admiral and a council of captains.

The admiral was an orc, a race of powerfully built people that stood taller than humans, with sharp eyes and tusks. His skin was a dark grey, but she saw that his palms were lighter, so she wondered if he was simply tanned. He wore a longcoat and tricorn hat.

Orcs were a race created by Azael that flooded in through the Grand Gate when it was opened, but most of them soon turned and ran in the face of the opposition. Some stuck to their warpath through the worlds and fought for Azael in the Ruination, but others sought a peaceful life of simple banditry and piracy. They had been absent for the interior of the Torrent, but she had seen a few in the last few years and during her travels. There was no doubt this admiral descended from those pirates.

“Pure Lady of Twilight,” said the orc with a bow. “My

name is Ogrum Takkar. It is an honour to make your acquaintance and to serve you on this fine day.”

“We have treasures to unload from various ruins we have found in our travels,” said Narianel. “My brother tells me that you are traders.”

“Ah, the Grand Lord Isaac,” said Ogrum. “I haven’t seen him in a while. He is aboard your airships? I fear I am no mage, so I cannot feel his presence as others might.”

“Do you know of the Divine Blades of Prochorus?”

“I am afraid I do not, my Lady.”

“One is in your holds,” said Narianel. “I am linked to them and can hear it singing to me. We have plenty to offer in exchange.”

“Ah, then let’s follow your ears to my hold and we shall deal.” The orc let out a loud laugh that drew eyes and made Narianel tune her hearing.



At the end of the day she held Drowning in her hands, the blade able to induce the feeling of drowning in its targets. She had also bought some enchanted dwarven armour for the Order’s newest member. Rugar the dwarf had almost been brought to tears while swinging an ancient weapon and telling its story to her.

Voyager

Narianel left her mindscape as the call of another blade came within range. She looked at the sky and stretched, noting that the sky was now green. The Aether Sea's sky had different colours in each region, and were named as such on the maps that Narianel had bought from Ogrum the previous month. This area was known as the Green Rockies for its sky and the quality of its islands.

They had been stopped there the last few days, as per Vala's notes on the list. Voyager was active, giving a telekinetic push to whatever it had been stuck in, apparently giving a wide orbit of the Origin Worlds and carrying with it any islands it had struck along the way. It came into view amongst the mists, a messy pile of islands ready to topple, yet moving at speed.

"You were practising, correct?" asked Royan. He landed lightly on the deck, flying in from one of the other airships. "I'll go get this one. No need to break your concentration."

He took off again, giving her no time to argue, so she decided to just follow, this time. She *had* been practising with Gideon and Ipos, trying to awaken any latent Seer blood within her. They had been at it a month, but had only managed to pull out the instincts, the same kind of notions her mother got from time to time. She wondered if Azael was stopping that power from awakening in her, but there was no way he would be able to get in her mind now. The blood was just resilient to being forced awake, despite her power.

She sat again and returned to her mindscape.

Blitz

Narianel watched from the airship as the Order fought a small force of Azael's soldiers. Their leader appeared to be a human, and he was wielding Blitz, the lightning elemental enhancer. Isaac sat on the prow of the airship, pushing his will upon the sky to stop the enemy leader's attempt to summon a storm. A skeleton crew ran around each airship, keeping them afloat and out of the battle.

The Order didn't need her in battles like this. They were outmatched only if counting the numbers, but their skill was far beyond what their opponents could hope to achieve. Their training had been based on Nerikan principles, and the battle bond allowed them access to many powerful magics that were beyond their current skill level at no real cost. The Order had become a force of nature.

The battle only lasted an hour, and she watched Royan walk across the battlefield to pick up Blitz. Their leader had been killed by Chas, but he'd quickly gotten surrounded and so hadn't thought to pick up the blade at the time. He'd come a long way from being that skinny little boy and had fought his way out with skill and confidence.

Sarina, Vedar, and Tullis had been equally impressive, and they had earned their positions as the highest officers under Royan. The more she watched them fight, the more the Order honed their edges... She knew they could handle themselves, and that meant she could proceed with her plans in full confidence.

Analysis

There was a commotion as the airships landed, but not from the Order. Narianel waited for the ramp to be lowered instead of jumping over the railing. This was a delicate situation and no time for actions that could be seen as aggressive. She wore a white Nerikan dress trimmed with black and her two-tone red shakai. For one of the few times in her life, she tied back her hair. She'd been told by Edreni that loose hair was for children amongst these people and she wanted to be taken seriously.

They had reached the village of the elves, Alessai, and the crowd of people waiting for her to approach were amongst the most beautiful she'd ever seen. Their town was equally amazing, built into massive trees that grew all over the islands they occupied. The islands were connected by bridges, and far above in the canopy were walkways leading from tree to tree.

"My name is Osorell," said one of them as he stepped forward. He wore a silver robe embroidered with green leaves. Judging by his soul, he was at least eleven thousand years old. Could he be one of the original elves, crafted directly from the genome procured from the Origin World of the elves? He looked in his early twenties, young and soft and beautiful, his long ears decorated with silver rings, his long blonde hair braided down his back, his pearly skin moon-like.

"Greetings," said Narianel, bowing her head. "My name is Narianel Azranhai."

"We are well aware of who you are." Osorell's eyes showed his trouble with the situation. Strangers should not have been able to pass through the illusions surrounding these islands. The combined forces of Perception and Deception had seen to that under Cassiel's guidance. "The question is why you are here."

"I am on a journey to collect blades created by my

ancestor. There are two in this village. Their names are Analysis and Branch. The first fills your mind with information about what you are looking at. The second enhances wood magic. Both were lost in the Ruination, but I feel their presence in this city."

"So you come to just take them?" said one of the elven maidens. She was young for an elf, only a few years older than Narianel herself, looking at her soul. The words that came to mind were 'haughty princess.'

"Still yourself, Asovia," said Osorell. "What I have been told of you makes me think you wish to trade, not conquer, Pure Lady of Balance and Twilight, but we do not trade with outsiders. You will need two of our kind to vouch for you before we may negotiate."

"Then count me as the first," said a voice. Then, fading into view as he stepped, a man in black armour appeared. He removed his helmet and smiled.

"Lord Falvinarel," said Osorell. "Why?"

"She saved us reapers from a terrible fate." Falvinarel's violet irises shone as Narianel was able to compare the souls of the two men. Falvinarel was at least six hundred years older, and the way Osorell's soul fluctuated spoke of reverence. "High Lord Nareshilna implanted a bond into all reapers that connected us to his will. Through this bond we gained power and direction in our tasks. What we didn't know is that he could control us through that bond, and had planned to turn us all into his mindless slaves in the final battle. We were never against the Gods, and she understood that.

"In fact, she is still my God. Grand Lord Chassuille has chosen not to appoint a new God of Death and Undeath, and so we reapers get our power from her. She carries High Lord Nareshilna's soul within her as a weapon, but our bond is with her. Through that bond I feel her will. I vouch for her and her Order of Blades. It is safe to let her be here."

"That still leaves one more," said Osorell. This felt more like childish defiance than a real objection, and he jumped

when there was a silver flash and Edreni manifested next to Narianel dressed in the uniform of the Order of Blades and wearing the shakai.

“I strayed from the path,” said Edreni. “I wanted what was best for our people and I failed to divert their attention elsewhere. I vouch for the Pure Lady and seek absolution.” She dropped to one knee and bowed her head to Osorell. “I submit myself to the Trial of the Tree.”

In their travels, Edreni had mentioned this, but would not explain what the Trial of the Tree was. Narianel chose not to pry into the secrets of the elves. They would explain if they chose to, and she didn’t want to pry into the memories and thoughts of her blades even if it was easy. It had been Edreni that told her the exact location of Alessai.

“All who submit themselves are permitted a chance at forgiveness,” said Falvinarel. “Even those who once worked for the God of the End. You cannot deny her.”

“I understand,” said Osorell. “Rise, Edreni. Ebellaif will take you to the Tree of Purification.”

An elf stepped forward and Narianel didn’t need to look into her soul to see that she was related to Edreni. Sisters, it would turn out when she asked later. Edreni looked back to Narianel and there was true repentance in her eyes. Sorrow and regret and the need to make it better. Narianel nodded her approval and Edreni was led away.

“We do offer trade for the blades,” said Narianel when Edreni was lost amongst the crowd. “We have enchanted weapons and armour on our vessels, and I am sure we can find some agreement. I would also ask that you let us stay a while. We have travelled the Aether Sea for at least a year. It is hard to keep track, and the Order is weary.”

“The Trial of the Tree takes sixteen days,” said Osorell. “With two vouching for you, I will let your people rest that long. If you will lend us your mages until you leave to create our own weapons and armour, we will grant you the blades.”

“Bring me Analysis now, and use Branch in your

crafts,” said Narianel. “Not many of the Order’s mages are trained in enchanting, but they are all talented enough to learn sharpening. I imagine you mostly use wood in your weapons, but if you have a forge, I will offer my services.”

“You are a smith?” asked Osorell.

“Eldithan,” said Narianel. The elf’s eyes widened and she felt some respect swirl in his soul. “I will show you the commander of the Order’s blade. I made it myself. It contains a pseudosoul, and its body is mythril. If you bring me your best unenchanted weapons and armour, regardless of material, I will do the same for you.”

Branch

Narianel had enjoyed her time in Alessai. Once the elves had seen her work, giving them new powerful weapons and armour for the fight against Azael, and asked her an exhausting number of questions, they mellowed and accepted her. She had been given a space to stay within the treetops, and Asovia was assigned to serve her. The girl obviously hated the task, but as the days passed and they spoke of their lives, Asovia's harsh demeanour melted. It was almost a shame to leave her behind, but the girl was no warrior or mage. She had no place on the battlefield. Still, she had been fun to talk to in her downtime between enchantments.

As they descended the tree, talking about nothing, they were slowly joined by members of the Order. Some were taking supplies down to the airships, and others were showing each other the trinkets they had bought. Rugar the dwarf was surprisingly popular, having a tail of maidens following him and laughing at his vulgar jokes, covering their faces and telling him to stop, and yet hanging on every word.

During her stay she had also talked at length with Falvinarel, who had refused her offer of becoming the new God of Death and Undeath. "After the war, perhaps," he had said, and explained that the reapers would need to draw on her power in the final battle. It made a sort of sense, but Narianel could feel the hesitation. If he refused when Azael was gone, she would at least give him the choice of master. She didn't want the reapers for herself.

At the airships, Osorell presented her with Branch, a nightwood spear with a white wood blade, crafted from the Zoraken groves. She took it into her soul and bowed to Osorell, whose smile was far warmer than his original greeting.

"The blades can still hear when people speak their

names,” she said. “Speak of Ronovoe within Branch if you need to call me. He will tell me what you have asked. This is a good place, and perhaps when new worlds are built you will be able to create more like it.”

“We are a long way from the Central Lands,” said Osorell. “Intentionally so. But perhaps you are right. If you win your fight and we survive, it may be time to reintegrate ourselves into the weave of peoples. Ah, here comes Edreni.”

From the crowd came Edreni, wearing a plain green robe. Her soul was a lot calmer and her corruption was expertly compressed. There was a purity to her, making her beautiful beyond words. She stood before Narianel and her clothes shifted to the uniform of the Order and the two-reds shakai.

“I am ready to fight Azael,” she said. There was solid determination in her eyes.

“Then let’s go,” said Narianel. There was a silver flash and Vaudeville appeared in her hand, its enchantment feeling all the more sharper for Edreni’s cleansing and resolve. She dismissed the blade.

“We will see each other again,” said Asovia, curtsying deeply, spreading her fine dress as she bowed her head.

“So long as we both survive,” said Narianel. She changed her own clothes for the uniform and shakai and then floated up onto the airship.

An aside for exploration

The Order had spread through a ruined town whose bedrock had split when it had been thrown from whatever world it had been built, creating a multi-tier effect as if it were built on a hill. There was a dwarven district that only Rugar could explore because of the low ceilings, though Isaac tagged along anyway using his aetherial form to pass through everything. The four officers each had their soldiers in a different quarter of the city, and Royan walked the halls of some noble's mansion with her.

The thing that bothered Narianel wasn't the fact that Ogrum's crew had obviously already picked the town clean of valuables, it was all the skeletons. Under the orange of the sky, they lay there in all sorts of positions as they were fleeing or fighting. Some had been moved and looted by Ogrum, but most lay where they had died and there was a thick scent of pure aether everywhere.

"What is your theory?" asked Royan as they passed a skeleton wearing a maid's dress, cowering under a window.

"Aetherius," she said. The Sixteenth Dragon, attuned to pure aether. His breath was said to rip a person's soul right out of their body.

"I was thinking the same," he said. There was a caution to his voice, as if he didn't want to think the same things she was. These people suffered, and their souls likely weren't in the afterlife. "Are you sure of this plan of yours?"

"Absolutely." She didn't say another word as they found their way into a large room with a long table. Around it sat twenty skeletons dressed in fine clothes. They had been moved, but she thought that seeing them slumped over the table was also how they had lain for a long time. The aether was still thick in them, keeping their bones together as if by

magnets.

They looked over the papers on the table, not touching them due to their fragility. Reports on a war spreading all over their world, men in black armour destroying everything they encountered from people to cities to mountains. They had been discussing the defence of their town, with predictions that the army would arrive in only a few days.

"It looks like they didn't predict the Dragons," muttered Royan, crossing his arms. "I imagine most worlds didn't know what was going on, thanks to the Gods not interfering."

"The longer I have the Spirit of the Divine, the more I realise how many people currently exist," said Narianel. "There were many more before the Ruinations. Millions of times more. Sometimes I think I was too hasty to judge them for not helping, but seeing this has affirmed my position. Even if they couldn't reach each individual person and ease their suffering, they should have at least made them aware. They could have passed down knowledge and given them the tools to help themselves. They could have had their agents travel these worlds and subtly protect them, even if they're trying not to influence their magical and scientific advancement."

"I can hear the Nerikan blood in you," said Royan. "You focus on the truth and believe that those in power should work for the benefit of the people they lead. I think those values are what drew me to your service in the first place. Is that part of your plan, for when the war is over? To make sure people are protected or have the knowledge to protect themselves?"

"Should my plan for the war go well, then that is what I will try to implement, yes." She saw Royan stifle a laugh and glared at him questioningly.

"I was just thinking about how much harder my job will get when the war is over and Azael is no longer in the picture," he said. "The Order will grow from eight hundred to eight million and work on all the worlds that are just now being created. I'll need to train my replacement for when I retire, and Blair will pass down the line to the next Champion of Blades

again and again.”

“It’s a wonderful dream,” said Narianel. “To imagine a glorious Order that protects the peace. So let’s go. We almost have them all and there’s a future to protect.”

Breaker

There was a sense of relief when she descended into the forest and found Breaker immediately. It was a rather large battleaxe decorated with silver. It looked more like a stage prop than a real weapon. It was the only thing capable of shattering the forcefields created by Barrier, but also the blade able to break curses with the correct application. She was worried about having to fight a warrior wielding this blade against her. Or, more specifically, against the Order. This could have ruined all those magical arms and armour she'd spent time creating. She didn't want to lose their souls either.

The blade was partially buried by overgrowth, and when digging it out she found a skeleton wearing the symbol of earth for House Gaimel. She would take this back to them. Isaac landed next to her and helped her uncover the soldier's remains, but then the thought came to her mind.

"We have Breaker now," she said. "Do you want to speak again now, or wait for the song?" He softly touched the cursed scar on his neck.

"I will wait for the song," signed Isaac. "I want to be restored at the same time as Galina and the rest of the family."

"Alright," she said, smiling.

Vengeance

It was late at night when they came upon the next blade. Looking at her list, she knew it would be Vengeance, with the power to inspire someone to recklessly seek to destroy those who wronged them. Used sparingly, it could be used to lower her target's guard just long enough for an opening to present itself, but she couldn't imagine using it on a large scale. That was why she appreciated members of the Order like Vedar, who *could* imagine the best way to use these stranger powers.

She chose to wait until morning before going down to the island below. She was tired, and while she had gotten used to having the shield that Isaac taught her constantly running and protecting her from the Aether Sea's intoxicating influence, she could feel it struggling in such a dense area. Even during the day it was hard to see more than a few hundred feet and everything was just violet cloud.

She sat with Zaemaka, the Nerikan that had been trapped in the time bubble by Flux. His name meant 'dusk cat' and he was embarrassed when some of the female Order members called it cute. He had gotten used to staying with the Order over these many months, but he still intended to rejoin the Talwaen forces.

With her were also Vedar, Stanley the Replicator as he had come to be known, and Mira's husband Darren. They were playing liar's dice, taking advantage of the fact that there was so much aether in the air that none of them could use sensory magic very well. Everything was like an illusion and difficult to parse with magic. Narianel and Isaac even had trouble with regular sight, as their eyes were innately magical. As she played, her crescent-shaped pupil in her left eye was mostly closed, effectively making her blind in that eye.

Then she felt Vengeance rising from the island below,

and a moment later Isaac was standing on the railing. He was holding a halberd with a black blade, its shaft made of nightwood.

“I hate it here,” he signed as he dismissed Vengeance into the battle bond. “We should go.”

“I don’t disagree,” said Narianel, and she called over some soldiers to send word to the other airships that they were to get out of these clouds as soon as possible.

Spite

Narianel spun and cut down a group of Azael's soldiers with Havoc and Malice, then turned her spin vertical and switched them for Almut, bringing the large scythe down on a heavily armoured serpentine commander, tearing through the metal and bright red scales, seeing the life vanish from the eyes tucked inside helmet.

She felt a mage attempting to summon the aether around him for a large spell, but cut him off, throwing Gungnir through his throat using Malice's enhanced strength. Some soldiers stood on top of a cliff, firing crossbows down into the Order, so she used Needlepoint to reach the cliff and then ran along its bottom, cutting into it with Volatility. The rocks bubble like boiling water and the whole cliff collapsed, bringing everything down on another group of Azael's soldiers she had teleported past.

Then she felt Spite appear in the battle bond and used Perception's power to find Royan. He stood on the belly of a dead giant who had been hanging the rapier on a necklace of gold, using its power to deflect damage against those who dared attack it. Royan was covered in wounds and there were three of the Order's healers actively working on him, but he stood tall and undeterred.

Quest

Narianel released a burst of aether at her back, propelling her through the air, but the bird turned and she missed. The thing looked like an ostrich but was enhanced by the magic of the Aether Sea, able to run at unbelievable speeds and even notice spacial folding, so teleporting to it with Needlepoint didn't work. It ran with the bladed staff Quest in its beak and she was sure it was intelligent enough to know what it was doing.

She used Barrier to cut off its path, but it turned back at a sharp angle and ducked under her attempted grab it. The Order had circled the area and were cheering for her, but she chose to ignore it. She could move faster if she became fully aetherial, but she refused to let this dumb bird beat her like that. She kicked off the forcefield and released enough aether to topple a castle, causing a huge crater as she flew like a missile straight at the bird.

It ducked again, but she was ready for it. The Seer's instincts she'd gotten used to over the last half-year told her how it would move. As soon as she was above it she released another burst, directly down, flattening herself into the ground. It had managed to dodge that too, but she was up and moving again within a second. She had become so much faster over the last fifteen years as she trained with the blades, but her body and the air resistance were slowing her down. She didn't think she could reach supersonic speeds like this, but that bird was straddling the line. She wouldn't be surprised if it released a sonic boom at any moment.

She heard someone on the edge of her hearing whisper, asking the soldier next to them why she didn't just summon the blade to her hands. That wasn't the point. This was a kind of training too. She had to push her limits, especially against an opponent that wouldn't hold back. This strange bird was a

welcome challenge.

Narianel was already using her ability to fly, air control, and the blades Flight and Freedom for every advantage she could muster. As much as Malice's power increased her reaction speed and the quickness of her steps, it wasn't helping much when she was mostly acting in the air.

Using Barrier she once again blocked its path, but she also blocked the two backward diagonals, forcing it at a right angle. She let the Seer's instincts take over and dove to the left just as it did. And so the struggle ended. Her teeth sank into the bird's long neck, her thighs and feet clinging to its body. She brought it down and Quest tumbled to the floor.

She stood victorious as there were cheers from the Order, and that night she ate for the first time in a long while.

Rainmaker

The blade known as Rainmaker was more powerful than its name would suggest. It didn't just conjure rain clouds. It could control the weather completely. In his notes, Prochorus wrote that using it too freely could have long-reaching, unforeseen consequences in the future. She didn't think there would ever be a real need for its full power, though maybe carving a path for the airships to travel through a storm would still be too much. She would have to learn about how the weather worked before she put it to use, but that would have to wait until after Azael was gone. Another thing to add to the list.

The blade had been dropped into the Aether Sea and she made use of Mistedge and Ballade to fly down into the depths safely. She wouldn't admit it to the others, but being surrounded by aether, that violet liquid that was trying to crash through her anti-magic bubble, was worrying. She had never quite gotten over the fear she felt when Egil had stuck her with those knives, no matter how casually she acted about it. She had a weakness and she could do everything she could to mitigate it, but it existed. This mass of aether was another weakness, though not the same. This was something all life should fear. It would intrude into any soul, rip apart its defences, and then overwhelm the core. Here, fear was a reasonable response.

She found the blade after a few minutes of searching, its song distorted as it made its way through the Sea. It was active like some of the other blades, but it was only generating enough wind to keep the Aether Sea off it. It was self-defence rather than a statement of power. She quickly called it into herself, greeted Fraer in her mindscape, then returned to the airships above.

Gifter

It wasn't her imagination. The farther they pushed into this part of the Aether Sea, the more of Azael's army they were finding. This had just been a small scouting force, but it was the fourth they'd found in as many days. This one, however, had Gifter, a blade that let the wielder share their blood magic. With this she could give everyone her healing properties, and while they wouldn't be able to recreate their body from nothing, she could make sure they didn't die.

"We must be close to their base," said Royan. He'd gathered quite a lot of the Order's officers, not just the top four like he usually did for meetings. They stood near the edge of an island, looking at the bright red sky.

"I was thinking the same thing," said Narianel. "We need to be careful."

"There's only two more blades to collect, right?" asked Chas. "Then it's just the ones carried by your family and a couple others in Nerik."

"Yes. I think it's time I send you all home. Isaac can create portals to Avani from anywhere. With his power they should be large enough for the airships. You should return to Seremont and begin preparations for the final battle."

"Why not wait until we have the last two?" asked Tullis.

"One is simply waiting for us, but the last will be deep in enemy territory," she said. "I'd rather not lose any of you right before the battle that matters. Azael won't let his soldiers kill me. I doubt they're even allowed to fight me as I come to claim the last blade they have. It would only be an unnecessary risk for you to come along."

"I dislike it, but I don't disagree," said Royan. "We'll ask Isaac to take us back."

Within half an hour the Order of the Blades was packed

and ready to return home. Narianel sat and watched them with Isaac, all the blades they had gathered nested safely within her soul.

“I’ll meet you back in Harelas,” said Narianel. “We will need to discuss my acquisition of Wishmaker.”

“You’ll have to fight me for her,” signed Isaac with a glorious smile.

“I have no doubt. Pick your battlefield and you can lead me there from Harelas when we meet again. I’m sure our parents will want to watch, maybe all of Nerik if they get the chance. We’ll make it a spectacle.”

“I won’t make it easy,” signed Isaac. “I’ve felt how much you’ve been holding back. I won’t hand over this blade without seeing your full strength.”

“I can’t guarantee my full strength,” she said. “I need to leave some surprises for Azael. But I promise to show you some of the strength I’ve hidden until now.”

“Good.” Isaac smiled once more, and they said their farewells. Narianel watched the airships leave through a hole in reality, smelling for the first time in what felt like an age the scents of Seremont.

Excalibur

The final elemental enhancement blade, Excalibur held the power of light. The Ruination had raged all across the Aether Sea in every direction, but it was so hard to imagine she would find evidence of it this far from the Central Lands. It would take years to get back without flight or teleportation.

Excalibur was stuck in the ground in the courtyard of a ruined castle. Its keep had long since crumbled. She pulled the blade from its resting place and took it into herself.

“Tell me where it is, Egil,” she said. “It’s time I visited the World Graveyard.”

“It isn’t far,” he whispered in her mind. “I had you order your list so that you would be close. Just a few days away if you follow the wind.”

She flew to the top of the castle walls and looked in the direction the wind was flowing. She could already sense it. There was something in the distance that reeked of space and time aether. Something broken. She flew in that direction.

Revival

The island on the Aether Sea was huge and covered in a forest with leaves like fire. Unnatural reds and oranges and yellows hung on black wood contrasting the deep purple sky. There wasn't as much aether in the air as other areas, but it was still higher than Avani, so Narianel maintained the shield as she followed Egil and Edreni along a narrow path between the trees. Asara and Berin manifested behind her, whispering of the nostalgia and returning home for the first time since their mission to test her.

They soon came upon a village under some of the larger trees, hidden from view from the sky. The way the aether flowed, Narianel could tell that most of the town was beneath their feet. There were no guards, but people went about their daily lives. It was mostly humans she saw, but there were a couple of dark elves and enlani. She recognised one of those enlani, whose face she'd seen in a drawing long ago. A general of Cor who had gone missing shortly after she defeated Marquis in single combat. She had thought him dead, but here he was with a new family, sitting around a crystal sphere radiating warmth. Or was this his original family? Were those left on Avani a decoy? It didn't matter.

Some people stared, but she noticed how relaxed they were. This was expected. Egil had told her that time was a river with rocks in it. The larger rocks couldn't be moved, but the pebbles could. In all his meddling, Narianel's approach to this town as the war draws to its disastrous climax was one of the biggest rocks. She had to come here for Revival, the scythe with the power of resurrection, and she had to see Azael's community and culture for herself.

Egil led her down a set of stairs to a wide chamber. People here were in black robes and there was a continuous

chanting that she found difficult to ignore despite its near-silence. It was in Skrae, and appeared to be a story, but she'd missed the context of the characters and so it sounded more like nonsense.

At the centre of the room was a large stone circle with a hollow middle framing the mural on the back wall. She knew exactly what it depicted, but didn't dare let it cross her mind. These people were aware of the Great Beyond and its light. That was dangerous to her plan.

"This is the portal," said Egil. The loudness of his normal speaking voice pushed the whispered chant into the back of her mind for a moment. "Once the password is spoken, you can go to the World Graveyard."

"Open it," she said. She stood before the circle, large enough for even an ogre to walk through, and Edreni, Asara, and Berin stood behind her as soldiers. She could feel their excitement and dread.

Egil stepped up next to her and said "Nar iana el," and there was a flash of white light, a brief glimpse into the Great Beyond, and then the circle was filled with violet mist, reflective like glass. She saw her reflection, saw how hard her eyes had become, and she wondered if she would have had a happy life without the curse of rage and Azael's existence. Once more, it didn't matter.

Egil touched the mist in the circle and it rippled like water, so she walked with conviction. As she stepped through the portal, her vision turned entirely white, blinded by the Great Beyond, by the light of unreality. When her foot hit the ground and she stepped out the other side, she saw something far more terrifying.

It was an endless black void with a large red star hanging high above. All around were scattered bits of worlds. Chunks of land, trees drifting in a continuous orbit, and various mismatched structures. She recognised some of the architecture from the ruins she'd seen, and what stuck out the most was a house that had the same murals as the Temple of

Eyes under Seremont.

Then there was movement amongst the ruins and lost remnants of worlds. Thousands of figures watched them as they walked across the white marble tiles in front of the portal. Every single one of them had the same scent. They were all versions of Egil at different times in his life. Some were almost identical to the oldest version that was her blade, but others reminded her of the Southern Pass, and others seemed far younger. But they were all mad and corrupted to beasthood.

"I've seen you here," muttered Egil. "Over and over he showed me. Between each mission I would come here to this moment. But it's different. You were never supposed to make blades of your own, and especially not one from me. You have broken time by doing things I do not remember. But that is small pebbles compared to this giant rock in the river."

"If he thinks he can intimidate me with this display, he had better think again." Narianel stepped ahead of the group, holding out her hand to stop them following. She invoked the Spirit of the Divine and set her mind to the task. All magic followed three simple steps: First, it must be imagined clearly. Second, it must be intended. Third, it must be forced to exist with sheer force of will. So she imagined time as it was in that moment, and then she let loose the killing intent inside her beastly heart, and finally she forced her will upon the universe.

She sung a song that had rested within her since becoming a devil. An angry song. A beautiful song. A song of horror and glory. *Halashai*. That divine emotion that no mortal could comprehend. She fixed reality in place as it threatened to pull apart and her wrath and rage was unchained. She destroyed the eyes that watched her, those travellers in time that would one day cause her to become what she is now. She held on to reality, not letting time itself be torn asunder by the damage she was doing. She became the light of the Great Beyond and tamed the universe.

"What has happened has happened," she said as her song came to a rest, her lyrical accent still rising and falling.

“Be not afraid of my might for the end has come for you, Azael. I am everything you manipulated me to be and more, but I will never bend the knee to an ender. This is my declaration of a new beginning. Of Nothing after the End from which all things will grow again. You are not prepared, you vainglorious bastard.”

Egil fell to his knees. His past was removed, but they both still remembered. He would never forget what he did to Adela, but this was a gift. He was given a fresh start and a chance to redeem himself. They would never be friends, she would never like him, but this act of destruction on a cataclysmic scale was a release of her pent up hatred and rage. She did need to come here. It was refreshing. It was Nothing.

She then turned her attention to the unending number of other souls she could sense all over the World Graveyard. From small encampments to sprawling cities taking up multiple landmasses, Azael’s followers were living their ordinary lives and preparing for war. She hadn’t released the power of the Spirit of the Divine and so she got to work, spreading her senses out farther and farther, encompassing everywhere there was life on this other plane of reality.

Then the fires began. Then the darkness came. Then the light of the Great Beyond poured in. She became an avatar of destruction, rending the World Graveyard. If Chassuille didn’t want to reassign the title of God of Death, perhaps it was fitting that she obliged. She could hear the screams of panic and terror. She could smell the burning corpses. She could taste the tears. Billions died in moments. No one would be spared. The elderly, the small children, the pregnant women. It didn’t matter. Each of them were tainted by Azael and committed to the end of reality. It was her duty to protect life itself, even at the expense of those that still live.

She felt Azael take action and there was fear in his scent. Portals opened and people fled, but she had no doubt wiped out more than fifty percent of his followers and made those cities an unusable nightmare. She made a mental grab at

his aether and tried to force her way into his mindscape, but his defences were too much to overcome and she was forcibly returned to her body. She had attacked as a feint, to make him build defences against a possible later assault during the real fight, but it seemed he was already prepared for that.

“Such an act is monstrous,” said Edreni. “But I do not judge you for it. In this game of war there are no winners. One side is destroyed utterly, or both. Azael will only destroy, so I must side with the one that will protect the elves, no matter how evil you are.”

“Evil done in the name of good,” said Narianel. “Their souls were shattered, the spirits of the survivors broken. They will fight for the end of reality when the time comes, so it is better to demoralise them and reduce their numbers now. Come, I can hear the call of Phoenix. As soon as I have the blade we can leave.”



As she landed in front of a grand cathedral dedicated to Low Lady Henan, Goddess of Love, she felt the waves of her actions finally settle. Reality had held firm and time had become stable. The past was now fixed in place and there were no more time travellers to worry about. She had been tempted to chase Azael's followers as he scattered them across the Aether Sea, but something had stayed her hand. A voice in her mind telling her that getting the blades would be necessary. It wasn't Azael's mental tricks and it wasn't the Seer's instinct. There was something more personal to it. She knew it was the voice of the Spirit of the Divine. It wanted to be whole again and thought that singing the song would increase its chance of a reunion in her control.

She could already feel his aura beyond the massive doors, so she set her mind and readied all her blade and powers. Revival's song was being choked by his aether, but she knew she could still pull it from his grasp. She was no longer

the stubborn child she had once been.

She opened the doors with a blast of aether, knocking them off their hinges. She walked in, staring at him coldly in the eyes. She could see his desperation. It was pathetic. But she understood now. She sat in the front row of pews, just within the great stained glass dome above in the ceiling that depicted the process of the curse that was True Love.

“Say your piece, Lucifer,” she said. The beautiful angel turned his head, beaten in their game of eyes. “Surely you felt what I did this last hour, so do not test me.”

“Phoenix, named for the legendary birds in the human Origin World, had the power of perfect resurrection,” he said. “He could bring people back without creating consequences, and even repair souls that were thought to be beyond all hope. If you will give me the blade... Purity...”

“I will not be allowing Lilith to be resurrected,” said Narianel before Lucifer could continue. He bristled his black wings in frustration and the scent of hostility consumed his aura. “In fact, if you do not take your hands off Revival, I will kill you. You have had your second chance and I have grown much since you were brought back. You have fallen again and you reek of Azrael. This time I cannot let you go and I don’t care to hear what promises he made to you. He’s more of a deceiver than you are.”

“I will fight you for her,” he said. His eyes turned back to her and were filled with hatred and rage.

She flicked her hand to the side and a rune was etched into the floor of the cathedral. Lucifer looked at it confused and slowly it dawned on him what he was seeing.

“This rune allows you to change the target of True Love’s curse,” she said before he could voice it himself. “Pick anyone who will have you and use my late wife’s final gift for yourself. Or you can wait until I have all my blades. Once I sing for all souls, their curses will be broken and you will be free to love as you will. Your dark obsession and that irresistible force within you shouting her name will vanish. You will be free.”

“I will not be insulted this way!” shouted Lucifer, and so the battle began. She defended herself against a bolt of lightning with Barrier and saw through his illusions with Perception as he tried to disappear. She thought it was rather disappointing that he hadn’t grown in all this time. She had him matched at the Isle of Dusk all those years ago, but now she was so much more and he had hardly changed.

He launched illusions of himself as if he were attacking her and she didn’t flinch. They passed through her harmlessly. Then she caught the twilight infused blade of one illusion, light made solid with darkness. The whole image shattered in her hand with a mere push of her willpower. Azael was watching, and she would use this to set the stage for their own fight. She would show that she couldn’t be beaten.

The air rippled around her, the cathedral bending in and out of itself as Lucifer worked his deceptions. Her blades whispered in her ears, telling her what was real and what wasn’t, and with that information she asserted her divinity and the world snapped back into shape. She would force him into a straightforward fight rather than play these games.

She stood there silently, perfectly still during his first assault, and then left the building. She made as if she were ignoring Lucifer, letting him believe that he was useless, and she felt his rage building in the air around her. He pushed his illusions harder. Great armies of undead assailed her, but only a few were solid. She dispatched them with a thought, spearing the magic that held together the wraiths and skeletons with her mind.

She could still feel Revival, but his song had stopped. Phoenix was watching with intent. The blade was ready to be joined with the others and the anticipation was firm in his aura. She could feel the fire there, the urge to act, not unlike her own.

Outside she walked the stone path to the edge of the asteroid, the chunk of land that held the cathedral as it floated in this world of the broken and lost. She stood with her toes

curled on the lip of the end of the tiles, breaking illusion after illusion. Lucifer was wasting his energy, but she let him. This was his funeral, so she wanted to hear him sing his last song.

Then the fallen angel's power surged and he shot a ball of light into the sky. It stopped a mile from them at the very centre of a ring of debris, then compressed in on itself, becoming heat and power. It popped and then expanded, the ball changing to iron and flame. It was a sun in miniature, no taller than herself, but she felt its influence on her. It was touching her angelic power to restore aether from light, and so it was empowering Lucifer too.

He became his true form: a serpent-like hydra, miles long with his heads watching her from all directions at once. He coiled around the pieces of world, crushing towns and the cathedral, crumbling a mountain. He was immense, and now she saw that his power had indeed grown since they fought, but it wouldn't be enough. She sighed at the tedium.

She expanded her senses and found the edges of the battlefield, then summoned Mistedge and Ballade to her hand. She created an anti-magic bubble around everything, then slowly began to shrink it. The moment it so much as grazed Lucifer's enormous body he shuddered and recoiled. She held the power here and he knew it.

The heads lunged for her and she danced around them in the air, a show of grace was all it took. She performed perfect looks and spirals, her control over the space around her at unmatched levels. The Spirit of the Divine had taught her so much in so little time. She let her body move instinctively, freeing her mind to ponder the future. If this was how she could move now, what would she be like in the final battle? Her smooth movements were already unmatched by mortals, she would never be surpassed, so what would time give to her through her practice and training?

She caught the lunging fang of one of the heads and wasn't moved as she enforced her will upon reality once more. This form of magic came instinctually, as if implanted directly

into her by the Spirit of the Divine. She told the universe what she wanted to happen and it did. There were no magic words or gestures for reality to interpret. She didn't need to chant or draw a rune to impart her meaning. She simply did. It was pure thought. She willed it and the universe obeyed.

Holding Lucifer by the enormous fang that dwarfed the towers of Seremont, she raised her other hand and thought once more with intent. She fired a beam of pure darkness, tearing a rupture through reality and a hole through the back of the snake's skull. Lucifer screamed and recoiled, his howl breaking apart the rocks and the cathedral.

She flew swiftly around Lucifer, dodging the remaining heads and soon reaching the point where the necks converged. She punched and released enough aether to destroy a city, breaking apart Lucifer's outer shell and giving her access to his inner space. There she found the tall and beautiful version of himself at his core. Last time she had been here she had spared him, but in her tranquil fury she knew that she couldn't do it again. He had to be punished. He had to be defeated.

She summoned Purity to her hand and saw Lucifer's face change. His ferocity and rage vanished in an instant, replaced by confusion and sorrow. She used the opportunity, invoking Needlepoint to warp space and close the distance. Before he could react her hand was in his chest clutching the core of his soul.

"Remember when the roles were reversed?" she asked. She squeezed and he screamed. The snake-like shell began to melt away, turning to white dust. "Your dying curse on me? Well, I have something far more planned for you."

She twisted and pulled his core from his chest, his body bursting into mist. His core pulsed in her hand as he tried to push out his aether and manifest a new body, but her will kept him in check.

"You have been a thorn in my palm," she said to him as Revival appeared in her hand with a silver flash. Phoenix's aura was calm and curious, ready to see what she had planned

for Lucifer. She dismissed the blade, feeling its warmth in her chest as it took its place amongst its brothers and sisters.

She turned Lucifer's core and found the end of his thread. His aura bloomed with horror. She smiled, her fangs showing in a way she tried to hide when with humans. Those teeth terrified them when they weren't expecting it, but she was willing to show them for this fool.

"Because of you I lost years with my grandfather," she said. "Because of you, I had to spend time being intangible."

She dug the tips of her fingers into the crystalline sphere, sinking her nails between the thread. If Lucifer could scream then he would have. His aether bristled with pain.

"This is the consequences of your actions."

She pulled on the end of the thread, undoing the crystal, unravelling his core. With a flick of her wrist, the fallen angel was completely undone, stretched across the empty space of the World Graveyard. Then she got to work.

She first absorbed every scrap of corruption into herself, humming the song as she examined the unwound soul. She cleaned up the madness and melancholia, knowing her own soul was much the same. With the corruption came the memories associated with it, the angel's lamentations and betrayals. She would examine those later, just in case, but they didn't matter to her work now.

She used her mastery of the purest magic and the knowledge she'd gained from Adela's rune to repair Lucifer. She could fix herself in the same way, remove the need for True Love, but she didn't want to risk unravelling herself. Not while Azael was snooping. She could wait until the song fixed her now. The time was soon at hand.

She worked slowly, gently singing, softly touching, weaving her intent through Lucifer's soul. When he woke up he would be perfect, but he would be far from his own desires.

"At least you will spend eternity with Lilith," she said as she began ravelling his soul in his own unique pattern until he was once more a smooth orb. He tried to awaken but she was

fast, taking a piece of the angelic metal chasokil from her own wing and shaping it into a sword with her mind.

In moments she had her new blade, imbued with the soul of Lucifer. Instead of being chained to Chassuille, he was now hers and there was no chance of freedom or rebellion.

Wishmaker

Narianel tapped into the Spirit of the Divine one last time before putting it to sleep, ready for the final battle. She used its power to push herself through reality, to teleport above Harelas. She looked down on the village, smiling gently at the fact of its growth with each visit. Her parents had raised Isaac in a country home that was now in danger of becoming suburban. The gods now interfering and recruiting active followers would want their hands in a new world. The physical portal to that new world had been finished, she saw, but it wasn't yet open and no one was working on it. She thought the plan was to wait until after Azael was dealt with, and she couldn't blame them.

She flew down to her parent's home and saw the door open at her approach. Out came Isaac, full of fire, Wishmaker at his hip. He was wearing a long-sleeved white tunic and trousers, as well as a waist cape, making him look like an Eye of Chassuille. She wore the uniform of the Order of Blades, her shakai flowing loosely behind her. He was followed by their parents, but surprisingly also Mira and Norman. She landed and her grandson rushed into her arms.

"You've gotten so big," she said. She'd completely lost track of time. How old was he now? Six? Seven? She spent so much time in her mindscape preparing her plans that it had become impossible to tell. The journey had taken so long.

She exchanged some idle chatter with her family as they walked, carrying Norman on her back. She tried not to ask for updates on the war, but she could see that Sorley wanted to talk about it as much as she did. Was there news? It could wait until after the duel.

They made their way to the edge of the island that contained Harelas and the portal. There Narianel saw a

smaller island that she knew had been at least a mile away was now almost touching the shore. She didn't have to ask. Isaac's scent was all over it.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"You're only just back," signed Isaac. "Are you sure that you're ready?"

"I am infinite," she said. She flew to the island, leaving her family behind. The island looked to only be about two hundred paces and was mostly circular, which was likely why Isaac had chosen it. Once she landed, Isaac crossed and drew Wishmaker. There was a curious look on his face. Anticipation and determination.

"We use Nerikan duel rules," she said loudly so that her voice carried to the others. "The first to lose their physical body loses the duel. You cannot become aetherial. There will be no destroying of souls. This island and the air above it will be our arena. Flying over the edge is not allowed. Breaking any rule will result in a loss. State your prize for victory."

"To keep Wishmaker after battle with Azael," signed Isaac. He locked eyes with her and gave her a confident smile.

"My prize will be Wishmaker too," she said. "Begin!"

Narianel launched forward, releasing a burst of aether that tore apart the turf that had been beneath her feat. She was upon Isaac in less than a second, but he had already raised Wishmaker to block her punch. A second Sarkal clap of thunder boomed from her fist, throwing Wishmaker from Isaac's grasp. He dodged her second punch, aimed at his chest, and countered with an open-palmed thrust of his own that sent her tumbling. Her ears were ringing from the noise of Isaac's own aether burst.

They came together in a flurry of punches and kicks, and Narianel knew she had the advantage. Not only was she naturally faster due to her much smaller frame, she was also far more experienced. And then there was that fighting style of his. Sorley had trained him, and she saw the influence of Prochorus. His style was direct, but his dodges were the dance

of the song. That wasn't so different from her own style, leaning from Gregory and Blodwen, but she moved far more fluidly. He had the Sarkal blasts and aether control, but didn't fully utilise it the way Anđa had taught her. Testing with a slash of her fingertips infused with aether, drawing blood on his forearm, she knew he didn't harden his aether either.

Isaac pushed away and quickly signed. "Probing for any weaknesses?" His forearm was already healed, his bright red blood filled with light staining his tunic with a glow.

"You can't match me as a warrior," she said. "Your blasts don't have enough power to tear apart my body."

She launched at him again and this time brought flames with her strikes. Isaac was able to push them away with as he deflected and dodged her punches. He was a skilled mage, not a warrior, and she wanted him to show it, not just play into her own game.

Then she saw how fast Isaac could sign, his fingers snapping into place at nearly thirty gestures a second. Narianel was surrounded by a rainbow of effects and was forced to retreat. She was chased by lightning and frost that turned the grass white. There was an invisible mist in the air that combusted moments later. She was forced to fly just above the ground as the dirt turned to mud. Wind and gravitational shifts needed to be counteracted to keep her where she wanted to be. By the time he stopped, only a few seconds later, he had cast seventeen different spells and put her on defence.

"Good," she said. "Now we really begin."

He created small hexagonal barriers made of six perfectly locked triangles that floated around him. Narianel solidified the air behind her and kicked off it, the shockwave cutting the ground beneath her. Her will overpowered his as she punched through one of the barriers, and as he began to sign again she used the aura of Malice to increase her speed, lacing her fingers into his, then she grabbed him with her other hand and got behind him. With the aura of Havoc and a generous infusion of aether into her muscles she pulled, back-

to-back with Isaac, and tore off his arm in its entirety, throwing it away from them.

She spun while Isaac was in shock, and a kick severed both his legs at the knees. She followed through with the spin, placing one hand on the ground and kicked again. She released another Sarkal blast, the strength of which utterly destroyed her own left leg. Isaac bounced and tumbled across the island, almost falling off the edge, but he managed to stop himself with a mix of magic and grabbing the ground.

Narianel flew just above the ground and slowly approached Isaac as they both regenerated. Her leg was healed very quickly, but Isaac took more than thirty seconds to fully heal. She wondered if it was possible to train regeneration and physical changes as the difference between them was stark. She spent a lot of time switching between physical and aetherial in fights, but Isaac rarely became aetherial. Was she really that used to having such a fluid shape that she now healed so much faster? But her healing had been fast since the Vin-Cor war, so was it a genetic difference? Another thing in a lost list that would have to wait. It was too long a list and getting annoying, but she had to prioritise.

Isaac stood with a disgruntled look. She had never seen him upset, not really, but this frustration was definitely new. His back was to the edge of the island, so they both knew that if she forced him back she would win. She could have done it while he was healing, but she wasn't so poor a sportsman. Not against her brother, at least.

Isaac began using movement-based magic next, knowing that she could counter his language-based casting just by grabbing his hand. This was what he really learned from Prochorus. It looked like a dance, but with each spreading of his arms and carefully placed step, the world shifted with him. It was as if Needlepoint's power had gone out of control, space folding and unfolding. One such fold caught her right arm and a split-second later it had been teleported off the island. Isaac smirked at that.

“Laugh it up,” she said and seconds later she was dancing with him, moving in and around him. The spacial folds were tight around him as a defence, leaving her little room to dodge or even attack. She didn’t bother regrowing her arm as she’d only lose it again.

Isaac moved away from the edge slowly and carefully, herding her with the spacial distortions. She took her time while dodging and weaving, planning what she would do, but then abandoned that plan at a thought. The Spirit of the Divine had proved that she could cast from willpower alone. She didn’t need to think the words or perform gestures for the Spirit to interpret. With the Spirit inside her, she had become magic itself. Reality was malleable. She named it as she had called it when humbling Lucifer: Pure Thought. It was a style of magic all her own. Grasping at reality itself with her mind, she showed what she was now capable of.

She thought about it and reality was smoothed. It stopped folding and unfolding, it stopped reacting to Isaac’s attempt to influence it. Holding onto reality without the Spirit of the Divine infusing her with infinite aether caused her internal reserves to drain at a startling rate, but she took advantage of it.

“What did you do?” signed Isaac, his surprise plain on his innocent face. He was almost the opposite of Akenesa’s stony demeanour. She tripped him and then slammed her palm into his chest, releasing reality from her thought and releasing a burst of aether she blew a pin-point hole through his chest just above his core, leaving a massive exit wound out his back. Any lower and she would have destroyed his core, and if he hadn’t been a nephilim he would have been dead.

She grabbed him by the collar and he grabbed her arm, but she swiftly brought herself down and heabuted him on the forehead, dazing him. She dragged him to the edge of the island and he fought to avoid it, but she threw him. He stopped himself in the air, flying just inside the border of their arena. She held out her palms facing him and gathered her aether.

“Surrender?” she asked.

“Never.” He signed it with a smile.

She released a kinetic blast that roared as it broke off the edge of the island, made waves in the aether ocean, and sent Isaac spinning through the air. He returned with a gracious smile and spiralled as he flew. She watched as he gently picked up Wishmaker and it was in that moment that she knew exactly why Isaac had been so secretive with the sword. She didn’t say it, but she felt it in the song of the blade. How long had Isaac and Hecate been a couple? He’d tell her when it was time. She’d give back the blade after Azael was dealt with.

They met at the middle of the island and she took the blade, dismissing into herself in a silver flash. In her mindscape, Hecate blushed and gave a coy smile, realising they had been caught. She was beautiful with long black hair and soft violet skin. Her purple dress was form-fitting, and she quickly adopted the shakai. The rest of the family approached, Norman running around excited.

“On to Nerik, then?” asked Anđa.

“Not yet,” said Narianel. “One week. I need the mental rest, I think. And in that time I can teach Isaac how to harden his aether.” She gave him a stern look. “We spent years travelling and you never told me you were missing key skills. I could have taught you a lot more than you know now.”

“I have faith in you,” signed Isaac. “I’ll learn what you want to teach me, but I know you’ll win even if I don’t.”

Narianel picked up Norman, noting the lack of a scar on his soul. Mira and Norman were the only Vanavolk who weren’t cursed with some mental disorder, but soon the rest would join them. Galina would be free of madness. Sasha would be free of lust. Akenesa would be able to express her emotions. Liara would be able to think clearly. Anđa would feel anything except relentless happiness. She would be free of the rage. All it would take is the last four blades. When she had the zero and eighty-two blades she could sing the song, she could

heal all souls, she could break all curses.

From there was the battle, and then she would put her own blades into actions. The second song. Time was counting down to that day. But first...

“You know,” she said. “I think I might actually sleep tonight. I will need the rest, the reset, before I sing the song.”

Afterword

We are now 51 transfers into the 18th Cycle as I finish this extract and type this. My guards carry some rather terrifying weapons, but we are 31 transfers away from seeing what will happen when the two halves of the Spirit of the Divine collide.

The more I read of Cycle 17's Narianel, the more scared I get, but I continue reading and translating for everyone to know. I will write the final extract in this series of documents before the end, I promise that, and if I survive then I will write my account of what happens too. I have been told that my extract and account will be given to the public, but what if there is no public left? What if everything is destroyed?

I have to be positive. Narianel and Azael are about even in power, and I do not believe that Narianel would harm the innocent. She will destroy those aligned with Azael, we have seen that atrocity, but I think we are safe from her. It all depends on Azael.

Last night I read through the claiming of Thorn, though I have yet to write anything down. The final extract should not take too long to complete. The events take place over a relatively short time, especially compared to this and previous extracts. Those events, however, are quite dense, as Narianel does a lot. There are the last four blades, the song, the final preparations, and the opening of the Grand Gate. The path ahead is as Narianel expects and has planned for, though perhaps not in the end.

The very end has the same conclusion, but the events around it could not have played out more

differently as Narianel exerts her free will, and the finale, once all is said and done, I have yet to parse. I am having to read from many Books, from many different people, just to see the basic shape of what happened. Narianel's Book of Fate is indecipherable in a lot of places, so I hope I can do it justice.

In the end it comes down to choice. To free will. What will she do with such a gift?

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Appendix I

Divine Blades of Prochorus and Narianel

Those which appear in this extract

Divine Blades of Prochorus

Blade 0 (0) Katsum / Heart (Emotion)
Iblis, Male Demon Erel
Grows stronger with each other blade collected

Blade 1 (1) Agala / Flameroot (Flame Source)
Yahoel, Male Fallen Erel
Fire Amplification

Blade 2 (2) Akwaen / Waterling (Water Child)
Focalor, Male Fallen Erel
Water Amplification

Blade 3 (3) Vershzae / Zephyr (West Wind)
Andas, Male Fallen Dominion
Air Amplification

Blade 4 (4) Gaidataim / Quake (Earthquake)
Archas, Male Demon Virtue
Earth Amplification

Blade 5 (5) Aethurel / Mistedge (Aether edge)
Charun, Male Fallen Erel
Mist Amplification

Blade 00 (6) Nyenye / Toxin (Not good)
Ose, Male Demon Virtue
Poison Amplification

Blade 01 (7) Zanma / Titan
Penemue, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Metal Amplification

Blade 02 (8) Darashep / Branch
Ronove, Male Demon Dominion
Wood Amplification

Blade 03 (9) Nedgada / Glacier
Nuriel, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Ice Amplification

Blade 04 (10) Kazadir / Blitz (Lightning)
Remiel, Male Demon Power
Lightning Amplification

Blade 05 (11) Chaan / Excalibur (Light soul)
Merlin, Male Fallen Angel Cherub
Light Amplification

Blade 10 (12) Soltal / Eclipse
Shaks, Male Demon Erel
Twilight Amplification

Blade 11 (13) Ozanpats / Nightstrike (Hidden)
Hadraniel, Male Fallen Angel Dominion
Dark Amplification

Blade 12 (14) Ashu / Flux (Forever)
Murmur, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Time Amplification

Blade 13 (15) Zad / Needlepoint (Space)
Furtur, Male Demon Erel
Space Amplification

Blade 14 (16) Zash / Purity (Divine)
Lilith, Female Demon Seraph
Divine Amplification

Blade 15 (17) Morta / Almut (Death)
Sama-el, Male Fallen Power
Transition between Material and Ethereal Realms

Blade 20 (18) Anmornam / Wraith
Bathory, Female Demon Dominion
Attack between Material and Ethereal Realms

Blade 21 (19) Baizan / Striker (Warrior)
Muriel, Female Demon Power
Enhances blunt force attacks

Blade 22 (20) Akara / Torrent (Water Explosion)
Rahab, Male Fallen Erel
Conjure stream of water

Blade 23 (21) Alala / Flight (Air Burst)
Malfas, Male Demon Erel
Allows user to fly without wings

Blade 25 (23) Aztun / Vanity
Preta, Female Fallen Angel Dominion
Changes appearance in eyes of others

Blade 30 (24) Rugnas / Spider
Zephon, Male Fallen Angel Virtue
Can walk on walls and ceilings

Blade 31 (25) Kalorini / Perception (Vista)
Absel, Male Fallen Dominion
See through illusions and with more accuracy

Blade 32 (26) Nyeskrae / Deception (Unword)
Zezbeth, Male Demon Dominion
Create intricate illusions

Blade 33 (27) Rooriran / Breaker
Abraham, Male Fallen Angel Cherub
Capable of breaking anything

Blade 34 (28) Jarak / Barrier (Shield)
Daniel, Male Demon Erel
Creates nearly indestructible barriers

Blade 35 (29) Soshezega / Alliance (Join Me)
Eleazar, Male Fallen Dominion
Forces emotions on others

Blade 40 (30) Awal / Vortex (Spin)
Sitri, Female Fallen Angel Virtue
Increases spin speed

Blade 41 (31) Nyerloth / Volatility (Unwhole)
Gideon, Male Demon Seraph
Causes instability

Blade 44 (34) Negakool / Analysis (Reveal)
Mozak, Male Fallen Angel Virtue
Reveals information

Blade 45 (35) Jaadi / Freedom
Ariel, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Reduces friction and increases flexibility

Blade 50 (36) Andaras / Elemental (Soul Switch)
Aglaea, Female Fallen Cherub
Change element of soul

Blade 51 (37) Zashor / Truth
Vera, Female Fallen Virtue
Forces people to only speak and write the truth

Blade 52 (38) Skraean / Tongue (Speaker)
Prufas, Male Demon Erel
Wielder can speak, read, and write any language

Blade 53 (39) Anshe / Tail (Follow)
Zagan, Male Fallen Erel
Telekinetic control of many small objects

Blade 54 (40) Siv / Venom
Stolas, Male Demon Power
Excrete paralytic ooze

Blade 55 (41) Waibim / Fang
Abaddon, Male Demon Erel
Reality destruction

Blade 000 (42) Mea / Kiss
Lamia, Female Demon Virtue
Force target to fall in love

Blade 001 (43) Ken / Oracle (Seer)
Ipos, Female Fallen Seraph
Future sight

Blade 002 (44) Kasan / Claw
Adriel, Male Fallen Virtue
Extendible blades

Blade 003 (45) Erlopadra / Bounty (Share Bond)
Jospeh, Male Demon Dominion
Creates aether sharing bond

Blade 004 (46) Nyekoto /Illusion
Naomi, Female Demon Power
Creates powerful illusions

Blade 005 (47) Eliur / Beginnings (New)
Concetto, Female Demon Erel
Grants knowledge on origins

Blade 010 (48) Lerishel / Chaosedge
Choronzon, Male Demon Erel
Incites madness

Blade 011 (49) Shoish / Order
Levi, Male Fallen Angel Seraph
Creates rules that must be followed

Blade 012 (50) Azenan / Pity (Sympathy)
Azubah, Female Fallen Angel Virtue
Forces target to feel to take mercy

Blade 013 (51) Nehea / Vengeance (Hate)
Rakul, Male Demon Power
Forces target to want revenge

Blade 014 (52) Thentan / King
Corson, Male Demon Seraph
Raises esteem in the eyes of others

Blade 015 (53) Lerish / Havoc (Chaos)
Kali, Female Fallen Erel
Variable amplification

Blade 020 (54) Ta-avera / Rage (High Anger)
Malik, Male Fallen Power
Muddles the mind of those it cuts

Blade 021 (55) Azkor / Spite
Agares, Male Demon Dominion
Target's actions more mentally difficult

Blade 022 (56) Tomos / Malice
Zepar, Male Fallen Erel
Variable amplification

Blade 023 (57) Azeo / Joy
Caleb, Male Fallen Angel Virtue
Makes target happy

Blade 024 (58) Vana / Crow
Raum, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Creates sharp feathers that swirl around wielder

Blade 0 (0) Azor / Sorrow
Chemosh, Male Demon Virtue
Fills target with woe

Blade 030 (60) Tanodi / Gungnir (Accuracy)
Raziel, Male Fallen Seraph
Guides physical action

Blade 031 (61) Nelooren / Drowning (Breathless)
Kraken, Male Demon Seraph
Makes target feel like they are drowning

Blade 032 (62) Nechetim / Unslicer (Uncut)
Jason, Male Demon Erel
Grows stronger with each other blade collected

Blade 033 (63) Aklasyool / Rainmaker
Fraer, Male Fallen Angel Erel
Controls the weather

Blade 034 (64) Nagadin / Fogbody (Soft)
Melchaiah, Male Demon Erel
Turns body into mist and back again

Blade 035 (65) Naskraeor / Quiet (Silence)
Turel, Male Demon Dominion
Creates an aura of silence

Blade 040 (66) Ken / Quest (Vision)
Sariel, Female Fallen Angel Erel
Allows Seers to more accurately tell the future

Blade 041 (67) Mofilan / Voyager (Traveller)
Vepar, Male Demon Power
Creates momentum

Blade 042 (68) Kepadra / Gifter (Blood bond)
Samson, Male Demon Dominion
Shares blood magic through bond

Blade 043 (69) Izetasyool / Wishmaker
Hecate, Female Fallen Angel Cherub
When fully charged, can release Grand Circle spell

Blade 044 (70) Esa / Rose
Agiel, Female Fallen Angel Virtue
Releases sharp rose petals as projectiles

Blade 050 (72) Alerish / Whirlwind
Tannin, Male Demon Erel
Creates storms

Blade 051 (73) Nederat / Key
Surgat, Male Demon Power
Opens locks and breaks seals

Blade 052 (74) Azazyool / Awemaker
Harut, Male Demon Erel
Fills target with awe

Blade 053 (75) Azthianaz / Horrormind
Wormwood, Male Demon Seraph
Fills target with dread

Blade 054 (76) Anastas / Revival (Resurrection)
Phoenix, Female Fallen Angel Cherub
Resurrection with no consequences

Blade 055 (77) Anrav / Spiritrush (Soul Release)
Mara, Female Fallen Dominion
Stores and releases energy

Blade 100 (78) Adingad / Wealth (Yellow Metal)
Mammon, Male Demon Power
Turns target into pyrite

Blade 101 (79) Azfa / Courage
Amon, Male Demon Virtue
Target becomes more courageous

Blade 102 (80) Krosfa / Judgement
Abathar, Male Demon Erel
Creates rules that cause pain if broken

Blade 103 (81) Zasak / Victory (Victory)
Netzach, Male Fallen Erel
Causes courage and determination

Blade 104 (82) Vont / Voice
Metatron, Male Demon Seraph
Increases the power of sound based magic

Missing are Moonblade, Sunblade, Thorn, and Blood Child. These are all located in Nerik, where Narianel travels in the next extract.

Divine Blades of Narianel

Blade 105 (83) Nanana / Encore
Garret Endarias, Male Human
Causes time to rewind

Blade 110 (84) Zithori / Crescendo
Marquis IX, Golem
Attracts and repels metal

Blade 111 (85) Zithami / Fugue
Manford Talgarath, Male Human
Sends those it touches into a berserk state

Blade 112 (86) Zithathi / Prelude
Arthur Hitch, Male Human
Causes people to repeat words and actions

Blade 113 (87) Zithtet / Opera
Asara, Female Human
Creates clouds of divine aether

Blade 114 (88) Zithma-a / Ballet
Berin, Male Human
Nullifies aether it touches

Blade 115 (89) Zithren / Ballade
Guilford Morgan, Male Human
Projects an antimagic bubble

Blade 105 (83) Zithru / Impromptu
Sanar, Male Demon Erel
Detonates blood it touches

Blade 105 (83) Zithmoa / Sonata
Trisha Morris, Female Human
Enables Seer instincts

Blade 105 (83) Zithshen / Giga
Gluttony, Male Figura
Causes hunger

Blade 105 (83) Zithpa / Minuet
Sloth, Male Figura
Causes lethargy

Blade 105 (83) Zithnana / Litany
Greed, Male Figura
Causes obsession

Blade 105 (83) Zithnor / Chant
Envy, Male Figura
Causes hatred

Blade 105 (83) Zithker / Laude
Pride, Male Figura
Causes over-confidence

Blade 105 (83) Zithshori / Burlesque
Lust, Male Figura
Causes desire

Blade 105 (83) Zithgan / Mass
Wrath, Male Figura
Causes fury and violence

Blade 105 (83) Zithtra / Dance
Nergal, Male Demon Power
Enhances concussive forces

Blade 105 (83) Zithbao / Nocturne
Egil Krom, Male Human Visage
Devours souls

Blade 135 (101) Zithet / Waltz
Nareshilna, Male Skraeðan
Removes soul from target's body

Blade 140 (102) Zithkro / March
Arsenum, Male Skraeðan
Wielder can control technology

Blade 141 (103) Zithsar / Cabaret
Mostoa, Female Skraeðan
Allows flight and aerial control

Blade 142 (104) Zithrag / Rondo
Cassiel, Male Nephilim
Greater control over illusions

Blade 143 (105) Zithfrek / Vaudeville
Edreni, Female Elf
Enhances sight and hearing

Blade 144 (106) Zithol / Serenade
Lucifer, Male Demon Erel
Allows angels to recharge from dark aether too