

---

# Death and Curses

The Corrupted Cycle  
Extract 3

Aphrah Ashe  
© 2025

---

Extract u82-9782-03

Author           A.A.  
Subjects        Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken  
                  Isaac Blair

#### Foreword

In this extract we follow Narianel throughout her adult life. We are roughly halfway through what I would want to explore within these extracts, and in this specific one we will cover several major events in her life.

The books are becoming harder to translate now, with the mental state of the primary subject in constant flux. The reason part 1 of this extract covers 12 years is that there are chunks that are unreadable, especially when she's out on mercenary missions or at war, which is often. She also begins spending a lot of time with family and learning about their powers, which cannot be turned into anything interesting without dragging this out for several hundred more pages.

Just know that there are long domestic, study, and combat sections that I am leaving out because they do not matter to the topic at hand.

*What is a God?*

*What did we create?*



Part I  
**Twelve Years**

*In which life goes on and often doesn't*

Beatrix had debated for a long time whether or not to confront her mother over Egil's claims about her name's meaning, but there she was, walking through the portal from Darizion to the Aether Sea and going to see her. She spread her wings and in short order she was standing in the village. Knocking on the door was difficult, and being met with that cheery smile was worse.

"Oh, my Naria! What brings you here?" said Anđa with a grin. She was always so happy and talking to her of serious topics was often a chore.

"I met Egil again," said Beatrix. "A while ago now. Just after I freed Michael."

"I know, you've told me." Anđa showed her inside and was giving her a quizzical look. The living room was tidy, but there were books covering every surface. "Has he contacted you again about that mission?"

"No, I just never told you the whole story." Beatrix sat on the chair she was offered by the hearth. She couldn't sense her father or brother so they were probably off somewhere. If she knew her father, and he was so like his own father, they were secretly training with real swords. "He told me the real meaning of my name."

Anđa slumped down into another chair and didn't make eye contact. It was rare to see her looking so defeated.

"At the Battle of the Grand Gate..." she said after a long wait. Beatrix was patient and didn't feel even a twinge of her usual anger. This was her blood, she couldn't be mad. "I met Azael in person. He was terrifying. So calm, yet so clearly mad and filled with evil intent. I was there when he pulled the core directly out of High Lord Densatsa's chest."

The old God of Honour, his name meaning *trust*. His death was written of from multiple perspectives and it seemed like a great loss amongst the pantheon of Sonta. Beatrix had only ever heard his name spoken in reverence before.

“He killed many powerful soldiers from across many worlds and with a wave of his hand we fell.” Anða had never actually spoken of her direct role in the Battle before. Just that she had been there. “I was gravely injured. Legless. One arm. Aether leaking from me. Then he knelt beside me and smiled. He offered me a deal. A name for my life, and I took it. I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t have to follow through on it,” said Beatrix.

“I did,” said Anða. “We spoke an Oath. If I had named you anything else I would have been destroyed. I was afraid for the longest time. Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” said Beatrix. She stood and gently pulled her mother up into a hug. “A name is a name is a name. It doesn’t matter where it came from. And I have something else to show you.”

She stepped back and summoned her newest blade to her hand, crafted the week before from the soul of Manford. A curved black dagger. Anða recognised the soul inside and let out a sigh of relief, as if a weight had finally been lifted from her shoulders. Her smile was beautiful.

“What did you name it?”

“Fugue.”



Beatrix left before her father and brother got back, though she stayed long enough to make sure her mother became her usual cheery self again. She went back through the portal and found herself once more in the Temple of the Aether in the city of Darizion, capital of Vin. She’d rarely visited the city, but it was helpful to have a stable portal to the Aether Sea.

The city was huge, with over a million people living in it, all surrounded by the Wall of Glory, a circular ruin from the old worlds that stretched a mile into the sky. It was a perfect wall; thick and near unbreakable, and inside it was filled with traps and ancient devices and strange creatures. The Guild of

Archivists had an ongoing project to explore it, but after forty years they'd barely managed a single percent, they'd said.

As she stepped out of the temple, making sure to thank the priests and their order for maintaining the portal for the last six centuries, she was met with a massive carriage. On the side was the symbol of the king and the door swung open to reveal the man himself.

"Look who we have here!" he said, waving his hand to invite her into the carriage. She did so reluctantly, though she wasn't sure what was worrying her about the man. She kept her rage in check and let him lead her towards the royal palace. "So what brings you to Darizion?"

"Visiting the temples," said Beatrix.

"Or the portal inside, I presume?" he asked. She hadn't wanted to say so in case he didn't already know about the portal, but she nodded. "Why go to the Aether Sea?"

"Visiting people I know for private conversations," she said with enough of a point that he didn't follow up. They rolled along for a while and she listened to the sounds of the wheels bumping against the cobbles of the road.

"You've come a long way," said Arthur. He'd gotten old but she didn't say it. "You're very different from the excited young girl I met a decade ago."

"I was a different girl the night after that first battle, King Hitch," said Beatrix.

The carriage pulled into the estate and Beatrix could hardly believe such a large garden could exist inside the wall. They stopped and she got out, and as she walked past the horses she noticed they were scared of her. They didn't run, but they stepped back with a look in their eyes and a shift in the scent of their aether. Animals were smarter than most people, but these needed better training.

"This is a nice mansion," she said as the king walked up beside her.

"Yes, my grandfather rebuilt it after a fire," said the king. "The pillars set into the walls were his idea, adding to the

architecture that was already there.”

“Why have you brought me here, is what I was really asking,” she said more bluntly.

“I didn’t expect the Slasher to be capable of subtlety.” He gave her a smile that made her want to remove his teeth one by one, but she controlled herself. “I wanted you to meet my son. He’s heard the stories of the Monochrome Knight and when my guards reported that you were in town I sought you out. He’ll be king when I’m gone, so it will be good for him to know his allies.”

“You freed me from your service,” said Beatrix. “I’m no longer one of your knights.”

“A Free Knight is still a knight, young Blackwood. He will be eager to meet you. And after all, I hear you are still unwed.”

“Ah, now I see why you brought me here,” said Beatrix. “I’m not interested. I have a partner, so I’m spoken for.”

“Father!” came a call from behind. They turned to see the approach of a man that looked a lot like the king, only much younger. She’d heard of Marcus before. He was a few years older than Beatrix, approaching thirty.

“Ah, there you are,” said Arthur. “Come, this is Dame Beatrix Blackwood, the Monochrome Knight.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” said Marcus, bowing and attempting to take her hand to kiss it, but she pulled it away.

“I’m sure,” she said. “I really must be going. I have a partner to get back to and a quest to complete.”

“A quest?” asked Marcus, eyes beaming. She was being deliberately over-dramatic, but apparently he had taken it earnestly. He was a sheltered puppy. She’d rather be a bride to Lucifer before this man-child.

“I’m collecting magical blades crafted by my ancestor,” she explained as she summoned Perception to her hand in a soft silver light. And when the power of the blade flowed into her eyes she saw the world for what it was and almost reacted.

Inside Arthur Hitch was something that had been so

well hidden she'd never noticed it before. Perhaps this was the source of her unease. This man had been touched by Azrael.

"Your eyes are glowing!" said Marcus with a smile and she looked into his core. A lower amount of corruption for a man his age, but not unexpected from the life he'd led. He'd not suffered any form of hardship.

"Yes, there's a lot of magic in her blood," said Arthur. As he shifted his weight the scent of darkness became more obvious. She dismissed Perception, but kept its power active, forcing her eyes to turn back to normal. "Speaking of, have you changed your body? You seem a lot more... glowy?"

"I no longer have a true physical body," said Beatrix. "I have to push back against the world to be able to interact with it. With each passing day I get better at it, and now I can walk around without worrying about gravity. I still can't properly touch people, however, and instead push on their soul directly as I pass through them."

"I'm not sure I entirely understand," said Arthur.

"I believe that the tutors talked about this before," said Marcus. "About how angels interact with the world."

"I'm a nephilim," said Beatrix. "So I'm nearly an angel. Anyway, I need to go."

"So soon?" asked Arthur. "I was hoping you would tell Marcus of the training you went through in the war!"

"Training?" she asked.

"Yes, how the war built you up for the challenges you have since faced. Tell my son your stories."

With a single motion Malice appeared in her hand and she swung it around the king's neck. She held the sickle still and saw the fear in his eyes. Marcus's aether flared as he fell back to the ground and screamed.

"Are you telling me that war was arranged by your master just to make me stronger?" she asked. "You and that steel monster killed how many just for me?"

The fear left the king's eyes and that malevolent power within him rose to the surface. With an unexpected speed he

ducked from Malice's crook and punched her in the stomach with such strength that she skipped across the ground.

"So you figured it out, eh?" he asked, returning to his usual state. "Guards! Execute her!"

She was quickly surrounded as she stood up. She felt bad for Marcus as he clearly had no idea what was going on. She replaced Malice with the spear Gungnir and to her left hand she called on her other newly forged blade. A sickle-like hook with a handle inside it, as if it were meant to be used for punching. This was Crescendo. She immediately started to fill it with her power. As soon as it was full, Arthur was going to get a face full of Marquis's power.

"I don't recognise that one," said Arthur. "Is that the shield, Spiritrush? Or is it something else?"

"It's your old golem conspirator," said Beatrix, and got to work. The guards did their best, but their weapons held no magic in them and so passed straight through her. Gungnir's power allowed her precision and with a single thrust of the spear's butt for each they were down. She made sure not to kill, only knock out. These were innocents, of a sort.

"You certainly are strong," said Arthur. A ring on his finger began to glow and into that hand dropped a long black blade. It wasn't one of hers, so she didn't feel the need to ask if it had a name. There was no soul within it, just directed words of power.

"I think I'll name the blade I make out of you Prelude," she said as she walked within striking distance. "You started all this, so you can have a fitting name."

As they began to exchange blows she channelled the powers of several of her blades. First was Oracle. She gained the early warning vision of strikes and made her moves to dodge them. The old man was surprisingly fast, no doubt due to the darkness of Azael within him. Then came Havoc and Malice, her two signature sickles, enhancing her strength and agility, allowing her to more easily keep pace with the king.

The next blade she activated was Alliance, directing its

power towards Marcus. The blade would make anyone agree with her, and she didn't want to abuse its power in daily life, but inserting the idea that good allies would move away from the fight was something she could stand. She didn't want him rushing in and getting hurt.

She exchanged Gungnir for Flameroot and began using bursts of flame to put space between them. She knew she'd have to make a show of it. She'd have to show the evil inside Arthur or else it would look like an assassination. There were more guards gathering. A small army had surrounded them and were protecting Marcus.

"What's going on!?" shouted a man with gilding on his armour. A Knight of Vin, no doubt, and captain of the guard.

"Your king has been overtaken by a monster named Azael," she replied. The black blade caught her arm and she dropped Flameroot, which she called back to into her soul. She dodged around and saw the knight was struggling with the information, especially since Arthur wasn't contradicting her. He just smiled madly and swinging that wicked blade.

And then Crescendo was full. She kicked back the king and held out the blade, readying the stored up power. The old king of Cor, Marquis, was a golem that could control the metal that made up his body and regenerate it. Beatrix hadn't been able to make the blade create metal as he was uncooperative, but controlling it was another story. She launched almost every one of her blades out her back and as they materialised Crescendo released its blast.

Helmets, plate, and mail were ripped from the guards all around them, and every bit of metal flew directly at Arthur. Her blades, the spears and swords of the guards, the armour and rings and coins and even a pendant Marcus was wearing. It was loud as it all slammed together, and as everything fell to the ground all that was left was a bloody mess.

And then Arthur kept moving, shaking back to life, his body repairing itself and his eyes fixing on Beatrix. He held the black blade towards her and screamed an ungodly scream, like

the banshees from the creepy stories her grandfather used to tell her when she was young.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re the king now, Marcus Hitch,” said Beatrix. “This creature before you is no longer your father, no matter how much it looks like him or talks like him. He’s been gone at least a decade.”

“Am I like that?” asked Marcus.

“No,” said Beatrix. “You are clean of such horror. Azael hasn’t touched you.”

“And you are sure of this monster you speak of?”

“You can request all knowledge of him from Nerik,” said Beatrix. “They openly teach of him and his actions. They speak of the destruction he has brought to the universe, the devastation he has brought to the Skraeðan. Azael is the source of the Ruination, master of both Dragons and demons. He corrupted your father just as he has done to so many other people. And you heard him. The war against Cor was simply to try and manipulate me, as Azael seeks to corrupt me into his service too, but I won’t let him.”

“Then kill him,” said Marcus. She felt the movement of his aether and the flow of his blood. He was putting on a brave face for his men but he wanted so much to cry and scream like a child that stubbed their toe.

Arthur had become a beast and his form mutated as he ran at her. New arms sprouted from his back and his tongue became long and forked. It didn’t phase her in the slightest. She’d seen worse. She *was* worse. With Gungnir’s power not only guiding her strikes but her steps, she danced around each of his flails and the swings of his blade and headbutted him so hard in the chest that her mouth reached his core. With a bite his form dissipated, and pulling back the body slumped to the floor.

“That was grotesque,” said the same knight as before. She healed her damaged right arm and then dismissed all her blades before taking the king’s core from her mouth. She was above eating it, even if she planned on attuning to it and taking

it into her soul.

“I’m keeping his soul,” she said. “Worshippers of Azael are to be destroyed or otherwise put to good use.”

“You suggested you’d turn him into another one of those blades of yours,” said Marcus.

“I will,” said Beatrix.

“Wait here,” said Marcus and walked towards the royal palace. He’d grown up a lot in the last five minutes. The look in his eyes was different. Perhaps she’d be able to at least respect him. She took the time to admire the gardens and felt bad for whoever had to clean up the cobblestone path they had fought on. Stones lay everywhere, broken and tossed around. She only then noticed that the horses had gone somewhere, probably scared off by the fighting. Some of the guards she’d knocked out were sat on the floor, staring in horror and wonder.

When Marcus returned he held a steel blade, though it had a noticeable eldrine core. A rarity amongst the mortals, but something she now easily had access to.

“This was my grandfather’s,” said Marcus. “He passed it down to me and said that when the time was right, I was to name it. I think Prelude is a wonderful name, and now that it’s over, my story as king begins.”

Beatrix flew through the night and approached Seremont on foot early in the morning. She walked the main road that led west from the city towards Darizion and took in the sights. She found she quite liked Chill now. Before it was just a rainy, drab season but now the trees had begun to shed their leaves, which were now in reds and oranges and browns. She was glad for Galina's actions.

In the distance she could see Seremont's towers and there were a lot more airships. Some were draped in Nerikan banners. Trade routes had really changed with the emergence of the long slumbering city.

And then on the path was a man walking towards her. His scent was familiar and his aura darker than any other. She stopped and watched him approach, his tangled hair barely moving with the wind and his broken-toothed grin stood out. He wore a grey shawl in the shape of a diamond down his front and back, and when he was close enough she could see his pupils shaking within his irises.

"You keep doing things ahead of schedule," he said.

"For a prophet you're not very accurate," she said with a grin of her own. She hated herself for it, but when Egil was calm she could imagine them being friends. There was an all-too natural banter between them that she'd noticed from their confrontations. She still wanted to kill him, but didn't mind leaving it for another day.

"The time has come, regardless," said Egil, taking on a theatrical tone. It was a side of him she'd never seen. He'd always been so serious before, but now he was posing. "The time to murder my two dear friends. Asara and Berin. A pair of blades will be your prize."

"My prize was to be my bone," said Beatrix.

"Ah, yes, the broken collar," said Egil, holding his chin and nodding. "I may have to change the deal on—"

Fang was inside his chest, gently touching his core. A

single surge of willpower and the demon inside would tear the visage apart. He smiled at her as she scowled.

“I won’t change the deal then, hm?”

“You won’t,” she said, letting Fang disappear into its silver light, shrinking into her palm, following her arm, and settling into its place orbiting her soul’s core. Fang’s energy was always disturbing when used. It was actively malicious instead of compliant like the other blades. It didn’t care if it broke her as it fell asleep again.

“I do have another task for you, however,” said Egil. “I have some other allies that will be on the move soon. I need you to make sure they lose their battle.”

“They don’t sound like allies if you’re willing that they fail,” said Beatrix. “Why do they have to lose?”

“So that the pieces can be in the right place,” said Egil. “I’ve almost convinced myself that your help won’t be needed. It never was before. But now things are different. You’ve got a new hobby as a soul forge.” He eyed Marcus’s sword at her hip that was the reason she’d been so slow to get back. “The Pure Lord is both pleased and disturbed by this. Things have been altered enough that you’ve become unpredictable.”

“Azael can go eat rocks for all I care,” said Beatrix. “But I’ll take any warning of attacks from his minions I can take.”

“Good,” said Egil.

“Now about these two with the strange names,” said Beatrix. “Asara and Berin, you said?”

“They wield Needlepoint and Key,” said Egil. “Names you should know, correct?” Beatrix nodded. “They will be on the Twilight Steppe in a week. I’ll encourage you not to let the fact they’re human disappoint you. Don’t underestimate them or you’ll be the one whose core is crushed.”

With that there was a swirl of black mist and he was gone. She stared at Seremont and began to plan.



“Nope, follow me,” she said to Lamis and Tesni as she walked past them. She was just entering the Temple of Chassuille and was glad the two Eyes she needed were already here. She felt their gaze, their curiosity, and then their obedience.

She bowed to the Hierophant, hopped up the short set of stairs, and she entered the doors at the back of the room. The stairs down were long and used to take ages to descend, but she just instead just let her body lose all substance and slipped through the floor. In under a minute she was back to her partial corporeality and entering the chamber of the Eyes.

She was surprised to see all the Eyes present, even Rosaire who had retired and was just visiting. They greeted her, some with surprise at her unusual method of entry, and then Beatrix waited for the two above to arrive.

“You have a look in your eyes,” said Aldo. “What is about to happen?”

“We’re going to kill two of Azael’s soldiers.”

“So you’ve heard back from Egil?” asked Vincent. “I’m ready for this.”

“When and where?” asked Helge, instantly mimicking his mentor’s enthusiasm. Large man, easy to please, but she could respect that.

“That was *so* rude!” shouted Tesni as she made it to the room. “You can’t just fall through the floor like that!”

“I mean, she *can*,” said Lamis, “and I’m having some ideas I’d never considered before.” He was attuned to the rare element of space aether and so he’d probably be attempting that himself at some point.

“We’re really doing this?” asked Irvine. She still didn’t like him and it was obvious he didn’t like her either, but she saw the look from Aldo and he raised his hands in compliance.

“In ten days a pair of his soldiers, Asara and Berin, will be on the Twilight Steppe,” said Beatrix. “They have two of my blades, Needlepoint and Key, and even if Needlepoint works I’m far more worried about what they’re planning to do there with Key.”

“Judging by the name it unlocks things, right?” asked Aldo. “That could be a problem. “What’s your plan to stop it?”

“Take off the hand,” said Beatrix. “We’ll need to kill the one with it as quickly as possible and take it. If we can make sure they’ve not wrapped their own aether around it I’ll be able to take it anyway from about thirty or so feet away.”

“Couldn’t you just sneak your wings in using folded space?” asked Lamis.

“It’s measured from the core, sadly,” said Beatrix. “I’ve already tested that over the last season. I would need to make direct contact and the wings aren’t accurate. I could probably kill them from a mile away using them, but the one with Needlepoint is probably like you.”

“A space mage?” asked Aldo.

“I think so,” said Beatrix. “Needlepoint’s the elemental booster for space aether and its other power is line of sight teleportation. I’m not sure if that’ll work on Avani, but there’s a chance it will.”

“If it folds space rather than actually teleports then it can,” said Lamis. “I’ve managed it before, but it cost a lot of aether and left me famished. If the blade reduces or negates that cost then it could be a valuable tool to anyone, not just people like me.”

“So what’s the problem with Key?” asked Helge, as if just catching up, but it was clear that he was just taking it all in. She didn’t think he was stupid, just thought carefully before speaking.

“Argona sleeps under the Twilight Steppe,” said Aldo. “She’s sealed and sleeping, and if Key can wake her up by removing the seal then she’ll burst from the ground and take the whole Semblan continent with her. She’s grand circle and most likely seeking destruction.”

“My worries exactly,” said Beatrix. “It’s why I want to bring Tesni with us.”

“That’s not a good idea,” said Maria.

“It’s not a good idea, but it should keep her distracted

long enough for us to make sure Key won't be an issue," said Beatrix.

"I don't like it," said Aldo.

"I'll do it," said Tesni. "I've always wanted to meet her and I'm willing to risk being controlled. You'll just need to get me away from there when the fighting's over, right?"

"Bringing weapons for the enemy to use is rarely a good idea," said Blodwen, finally speaking up even though she had been standing next to Beatrix since she entered the room. She was always so quiet and Beatrix looked up to her. "But I trust we'd be able to handle it with preparation."

"We're all familiar with Tesni's powers, but for the next few days we'll need to spend time sparring with her," said Aldo. "You going to be alright with that?"

"Yes," said Tesni, nodding.

"Rest the day before," said Beatrix. "I'll meet you on air day of next week at the airship dock at dusk. We'll fly through the night. I don't trust Egil's vague 'in one week' description so we'll need to be ready for battle at dawn."

"Sounds like a plan," said Aldo. "Alright. Tesni, Lamis, your missions can wait. Let's get prepared."



Beatrix opened her home to the Eyes so they could have space to spar, though she warned them not to ruin the roses. Out in the back garden which she used to just keep trimmed she had built a forge using instructions from Dasus. With a little will she removed the flowing material from her aetherial clothes, tightening everything so that she didn't catch herself on fire.

She tied her long hair back with a simple flick of the wrist and set to work. Along the tall garden wall she had set up thousands of tiny hooks and as she rolled out Arthur Hitch's soul she laid the thread along them, keeping it from tangling. With tweezers, needles, and scissors she spent as long as she needed repairing the ex-king. He hadn't sustained much

damage over his life, which Beatrix thought was odd, but then realised he spent most of his life protected, much like his son. The memories she'd seen when taking him in showed as much.

When she was done fixing him, she rolled up the king's soul and took it back inside her, then lit the forge with her own flame. It didn't take long to get to the right temperature and by injecting her own aether she turned it into a soulfire. She took Marcus's sword and began to heat it, keeping the flames at bay at first and then engulfing it to ensure that the eldrine core of the blade heated just right. With a little effort she pulled the magic from the metal and then called the king's soul to her hand, pushing it straight in.

There was some resistance. There always was. Arthur didn't want to be trapped inside the blade, but she pushed anyway, exerting just enough pressure to push him in without breaking everything. When it was done she slightly reshaped the edge of the blade to allow it to be sharper, and then she quenched the blade. Steam flew from the barrel of water and very soon she'd be sharpening her new blade, Prelude.

"It's an interesting process," said Gilbert, appearing from the shadows at her side.

"You could have been openly watching," said Beatrix. "Do you know how distracting it is to have a shadow creeping around?"

"Not many people have keen enough senses to detect me in the first place, so no," said Gilbert with a smile. He was getting far easier to see despite his skin being black as the old night. She was starting to see the lines and wrinkles and subtle features. He had so many little cuts along the right side of his face she'd never been able to see as a child. "So what does it do?"

"It's getting harder not to think of them as people," she said, calling Heart to her hand and seeing the blade form out of silver light, powered by the other blades. "I know all their original names, and while I still call them by their new names, there's a part of me that wants to call this Iblis. Then I see that

new blade in the barrel, Prelude, there's still a part of me thinking it's Arthur Hitch."

"Then what does *he* do?" asked Gilbert.

She took the blade from the barrel and checked it over quickly before standing apart from Gilbert and pointing it at him. She gently pulled on the power inside the blade and tried to see if she'd gotten her intent across in its creation.

"What was the first thing you ever said to Gregory Blair?" she asked, directing the power at Gilbert.

"And you are?" he said and then looked shocked.

"What was the first thing you ever said to Blodwen Parry?" she asked him.

"You really need to work on your diction," he said, trying and failing to resist.

"The blade's name is Prelude," said Beatrix. "It recalls the past and forces people to speak it."

"That's a very interesting tool," said Blodwen, coming out the house through the kitchens rather than the living area, which Beatrix thought would be odd if it wasn't for Blodwen's tea addiction. She gently sipped at her cup and then gave Gilbert a stern look. "And you never apologised for being so rude to me that day."

"If I'd apologised you'd never have been an Eye," said Gilbert. "Besides, you did need to. You were rolling together your T and S and it was hard to understand. You're much better now that you actively speak Skrae."

"Regardless, that will be a useful interrogation tool," said Blodwen. "If you ever leave anyone alive."

"It's usually difficult to do that," said Beatrix. It wasn't a lie or even an exaggeration. Killing was easy. Restraint was hard. She sat on a stool and got to sharpening the blade while Gilbert and Blodwen started to spar. She didn't mind the back garden being used so long as they stayed away from the forge.



It was almost dusk when she left her house. Some of the Eyes were still there but she left them to it. She walked the streets for a while until it was time and made sure to be waiting outside the Guild of Archivists when Adela came out from work.

“One week and I’ll have a body,” she said to her. She’d been leaning against a lamp post, concentrating on making it so she wasn’t falling through it, but as Adela approached she straightened up.

“You heard from him?” she asked with a smile.

“Yeah,” she said. They started walking towards Adela’s house. “I’ve been trying so hard to create a new body on my own, so it feels bad to be relying on him.”

“You’ve done well,” said Adela. “You’re still a lot more powerful than most people around, so you’ll get it eventually.”

“It’s not power that’s the problem, it’s skill. I’ve talked to Akenesa about it and her instruction has helped, but I’ve not been able to maintain the shape for more than a minute. The matter just doesn’t bond and falls apart.”

“Well, you shouldn’t see it as a loss,” said Adela. Her gentle smile always calmed Beatrix, who stopped burrowing into her own thoughts and relaxed. “See it as reclaiming what you should have had all along.”

“Do you think he took it on purpose?” Beatrix was just thinking about his status as a prophet and his constant talks of the future. “Did he take it knowing about Lucifer’s dying curse and what needed to be done to cure me?”

“Probably,” said Adela. “Their side must have seers, right? That’s probably where he’s getting his information.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Beatrix. “I’ve never been able to get a read on his element, and I think he might be attuned to time. It’s the second rarest element, but Azael has found that kind of person before.”

“Both sides are filled with rare elements,” said Adela with a giggle. “Light, dark, twilight, space. You’d think that just anyone walking down the street had these with the groups you

meet. I walk into your house and there's often a handful of people not much older than us with rare powers and at a skill level I'll never achieve."

"It's the training," said Beatrix. "You could get that much raw aether if you worked the way they did. But it's not for everyone. I've seen a couple of them burn out and need to rest for a few weeks."

"Well, I should start working on becoming a lich soon," said Adela. They turned down the street Adela's lived on and kept walking. "So maybe I should try some of their training."

"You can if you really want," said Beatrix, imagining Adela in an Eye uniform. "It would speed you along to the seventh circle so you could create the phylactery. They're at my house right now getting ready for next week, but maybe after that they'll help you. That or you could try Akenesa."

"There are definitely options," said Adela. "I'll need to think about it." They stopped in front of Adela's house and said their goodbyes. It was hard living without a body. They could barely hold hands, let alone kiss or more. But that pain would be over soon.

“So, teach me the shadow thing,” said Beatrix to Gilbert as they sat on the roof overlooking the courtyard, watching Tesni and Irvine spar. She had to admit that both of them were good, but she wasn’t threatened by either of them.

“The shadow thing?” he asked, taking a bite out of some pastry she didn’t recognise. It was around noon so he’d just gone out to buy food for everyone.

“The shadow thing, yeah,” said Beatrix. “Where you flatten into the ground and move really fast.”

“You spent too much time with Gregory,” said Gilbert, trying not choke from laughing. “When you’re relaxed you talk so much like him.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Beatrix.

“But yeah, I can teach you,” said Gilbert. “Words are simple, and since you’re attuned to darkness you should be able to make it instinctual like me. You didn’t get nauseous back on the Isle of Dusk when I dragged you into it, so you should be able to handle it.”

“I don’t have a stomach, so I’m not sure how I’d even be able to get nauseous.”

“That’s a fair point,” said Gilbert.

“It was disorienting, but that might be because I’d just never experienced it before,” she said. Irvine was knocked down and so took his place next to Aldo who gave him some advice. Next up was Vincent and he strode like he had no fear.

“Why do you want to learn it anyway?” asked Gilbert, finishing off his lunch.

“I don’t know, might be useful. When my grandfather died I hated myself for sealing away my power, knowing that with it he wouldn’t have died. Since then I’ve been expanding what I can do. Extra tools in the box, all shapes and sizes. I might not be the best healer, but I can do it, you know?”

“I get it,” said Gilbert. “I know a bunch of stuff I’m not very good at either, but it’s useful just in case. We can start this

evening.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Beatrix. “Tesni’s going to be the next leader of the Eyes, isn’t she?”

“If we went on pure combat ability, I would say so. It’s still between her and Irvine, though. Sadly, her species works against her as our leader needs to be able to negotiate, and a lot of people really don’t like serpentines. They don’t even like me and I’m a Host, but the wrong type of Host.”

“Your father was horrible,” said Beatrix.

“I’m not denying that,” said Gilbert, “but they don’t know that.”

“You’re literally so black you disappear in a dimly lit room. They know.”

“They could think I’m a descendant of Faret.”

“How many people know Faret looks like the Void?” asked Beatrix. “I didn’t know it until I met him, and I’d bet that the majority don’t know what the Gods actually look like. You can say ‘like angels’ all you want but my great grandfather is a circle of wings and I saw a woman with a goat head who was actually a man.”

“You met Baphomet?” asked Gilbert with a smile. She rolled her eyes. “But back on topic. Tesni also has a bit of a temper, which she’s come great strides in overcoming, but it’s something to consider.”

“Irvine doesn’t seem all that calm either,” said Beatrix.

“He has a history with not trusting those outside his found family,” said Gilbert. “Hate to say it, but to him you’re an outsider. A spoiled little rich kid who was allowed all the glory and continues to set our missions despite never joining us. He’s not entirely wrong either.”

“Yeah, sure, I get it,” said Beatrix. “I’m incredible, so it’s fine that he’s jealous.” Gilbert laughed at that.

“Definitely like your grandfather,” he said.

“Get down here!” shouted Tesni suddenly.

“Which one of us?” asked Gilbert.

“Either of you!” she shouted. “I can take you both!” She

took a swig of holy water, letting the infused aether refill her energy. The Eyes had brought a few barrels of water and Aldo blessed it as needed.

“That sounds like a challenge,” said Beatrix. “She said she can beat both of us.”

“It does indeed,” said Gilbert.

Gilbert vanished into the shadows between the roof tiles and Beatrix grew a pair of black wings and floated down. When she touched down she let out enough aether to distort the air and create wind. Tesni wasn't at all intimidated and just grinned.

“Let's go,” said Beatrix.

Tesni charged forward and slashed with her claws. Each hit tore away a chunk of aether but it reformed quickly and Beatrix didn't even try to dodge. She pressed on Tesni's head with her palm and let out a burst of aether, throwing her to the dirt and across the lawn. She slammed into the stairs up to the covered deck and broke through the wood.

“I thought you said you could take us both?” asked Beatrix. “One attack and you're already down.”

The little dragon burst from the wood and leapt on her, grabbing her, and with a deep breath she let out black directly into Beatrix's face. Her natural attunement protected Beatrix, but only so much. The grass beneath her feet turned black and the Nerikan roses bloomed before Beatrix could throw Tesni off. The claws dug in deep and the girl was tenacious.

Beatrix's wounds healed quickly and she knew she had to keep Tesni away so she called Gungir to her hands. She took on a defensive stance and Tesni charged again. With a few spins of the spear and a some careful steps she danced around the swings of the serpentine girl.

And then Gilbert burst from under Tesni and the pair exchanged blows before he vanished again. Beatrix had seen him approach and she would bet that Tesni had too. The three were all creatures of darkness and like could smell like.

She danced with the girl a little more, making the steps

look easy. Despite all her training—and she was clearly getting better with each passing week—she didn't seem to understand the way Beatrix was moving. She'd probably never sparred with Blodwen for any length of time. Every now and then Gilbert would pop up, take a few swipes with his innumerable daggers from his hidden pockets, and then disappear again.

"You look like you're getting frustrated," said Beatrix.

"This courtyard means I can't go all out," said Tesni.

"Neither can I," said Beatrix. "Work within limits and you'll appreciate your full power more."

"It's weird hearing you be positive," said Gilbert as he zipped down from the canopy, slashed downward diagonally, and vanished into the now entirely black grass. Beatrix knew she'd need to get it replaced so she decided to hold back less. She was already getting the deck fixed anyway.

"I've a lot of experience on the matter of self-imposed limits," said Beatrix, switching Gungnir for Malice when Tesni grabbed the spear.

"You have experience being an idiot, you mean," said Tesni far more aggressively than Beatrix had ever heard her be. Where was the shy little girl that hid behind Maria and Aldo? Had she been like this on the Isle of Dusk? She'd grown up and Beatrix hadn't noticed.

That was when the truly unexpected happened. Tesni grabbed Beatrix by the neck and with a torrent of black flames the shot into the sky. Beatrix had to tear apart her own neck to get free and looking down they were several hundred feet into the air. Beatrix stopped herself from falling but then Tesni landed on her back, digging in her sharp claws and pushing her down.

"Don't underestimate me!" shouted Tesni as Beatrix threw her off. Beatrix hung in the air and shook off the shock, summoning Havoc to pair Malice and even activated Flight within her so she didn't have to concentrate on it, realising the blade wasn't actually as useless to her as she thought it would be.

Tesni grew massive bat-like wings in a display of gore and horror. She flapped them furiously to stay in the air. Her tail lengthened and she seemed to get thinner, sleeker, and her horns grew and split like antlers. She looked a lot more like Argona now.

“How long have you been able to do this!?” asked Beatrix and Tesni flew up and then dove down on her.

“Are we not playing any more?” asked Gilbert. He had flown up on a stream of dark crystal that had grown from the ground. It split like a tree and Gilbert bounded as a streak of black on the noon sky from branch to branch.

“Since when could you do *that!*?” asked Beatrix. She landed on a branch and got an odd sensation. It felt like a soul, wound thread so tight and arranged that it became like crystal.

“You’re not the only one with dark and hidden depths,” said Gilbert. “I’ve never had the chance to show you my full strength, but Tesni’s power is fairly new.”

“Are you telling me you could’ve been more useful against your father, but you just chose not to?”

“I did say I wouldn’t help you kill him,” said Gilbert.

“Shut up already!” shouted Tesni. She had been taking swipes at the crystal tree but it had all grown back thicker. The aggression was noticeable, and was said to be common amongst serpentine people, but this was the first time Beatrix had seen it. They were creatures of the Ruination, but Tesni always seemed feisty rather than ferocious.

Beatrix walked the crystal tree, making a mental map of the branches as Gilbert fended off the now very draconic woman flying around. He’d created multiple new anchors to the ground and Beatrix noticed they were all on her property. More repairs to pay for, but she was starting to enjoy this, so she didn’t mind.

“What are you doing?” asked Gilbert, landing beside her for a second before bouncing off as a shadow again.

“Planning,” said Beatrix.

“Wow, both positivity and strategy. You’ve changed.”

She tried to punch him but he disappeared again.

With a tendril per blade, she had access to twenty-six extra arms. They spread out within folded space where Tesni couldn't see them, and she believed Gilbert couldn't either. Gilbert was firing off black crystals that pierced Tesni's wings, but the holes healed quickly. There was a reason her people were feared during all the destruction. Almost as deadly as the angels they fought.

With Gilbert taking care of the defence, she was free to do what she did best. She set up the attack and then unfolded the space around the tendrils. She saw the surprise in Tesni's aura as the black arms twisted and coiled around her, holding her in place and squeezing her. Beatrix had to hold herself back from pulling off her wings.

With the breath choked from her, Beatrix lowered her to the ground in the courtyard and Gilbert started dismantling his crystal work. Beatrix didn't wait to be let down gently and simply dropped. It was amazing to her how little fear she had for heights now and she landed smoothly.

"That was certainly something," said Aldo.

Tesni started awake and was still ready to fight, but her body gave out. She then started the process of pulling in the wings and tail, and Maria cut back her horns. It was only a semi-magical transformation, so the pieces had to fall apart so they could be regrown later. Beatrix could imagine her people spending their entire lives like that if they could get away with it. It was a sign of maturity in their kind, she'd read in tales of the Ruination.

"I'll get you next time," she said with a grin.

"I'm sure you think so, but I'm impressed."



"You lot are crazy," said Adela. They lay in bed together. It was well after dusk and Beatrix had been describing the fight earlier in the day. "Acker was about to send some of us out

until some of the mages pointed out your aether was at the centre of it.”

“I don’t mind worrying the old man a little.”

“Was this training for your fight next week, though?” asked Adela, turning onto her side to look at Beatrix.

“Not really,” said Beatrix. She decided to be honest. “It was most arrogance on all of our parts. Tesni said she could beat both of us, so we didn’t hold back all that much.”

“I like Tesni,” said Adela.

“Really?” asked Beatrix, looking at her. “I’ve seen the looks you give her.”

“I don’t give her looks,” said Adela, turning away. “She just gets too friendly with you.”

“Are you jealous of her?”

“No.”

“You’re a bad liar,” said Beatrix, laughing. “I’ve never been able to tell if she had a childish crush on me or actually feared me. Today when I fought her she seemed to be ready to rip my head off, so I’m not sure.”

“Are you serious?” asked Adela. “You saw my looks, but you didn’t see hers?”

“I ignored hers,” said Beatrix. Adela smiled at that and seemed satisfied. There was never any risk, but she needed it confirmed anyway.

“If I ever die...” said Adela.

“Why would you ever start a sentence like that?” asked Beatrix, getting agitated and remembering her mistake.

“No, listen,” said Adela. “I worry that I don’t have time to make a phylactery. I’m genuinely trying my best, alright? But if something terrible happens, you have my permission to move on. I want you to find happiness, and I’m alright if it’s with Tesni.”

“That’s not funny,” said Beatrix, staring at the ceiling and trying not to panic.

“I’m serious,” said Adela. She turned back to Beatrix and cuddled in close. “I don’t want to worry any more. I just

want to be secure.”

“I’ll remember,” said Beatrix. “I’m not happy with you saying this, but if it ever happens I’ll remember.”

“Good,” said Adela.

Beatrix sunk into the floor and flattened out and was happy with the speed she was able to maintain as she did laps around her entire property. She still wasn't as fast as Gilbert, either in moving or becoming a shadow, but that would come with practice.

As she popped up next to her forge she surprised a repairman who was waiting for her. He'd finished the deck and stairs Beatrix had destroyed with her hammer named Tesni, and had some recommendations for grass replacement people. He had both mundane and magical contacts, and she took his list with thanks. She made sure to pay well as she was beginning to appreciate there were things she couldn't do on her own, or would take too long.

She thought back to her grandfather Azra-el's words a little over half a season ago at the Divide. "The world is changing quickly." She had taken the words to heart and was trying to change with it. She needed to be sure of herself and not wavering all the time, but she also needed to learn to rely on others. She could spend her time cleaning the house top to bottom as she had done before or she could hire a maid and spend her time on important things, like tracking down her blades or bonding with Adela.

Just after noon she took Adela to lunch and then got back to practising. She wanted the transition to shadow to be smooth, even if she couldn't get up to the speeds that Gilbert could, so that was what she focused on. The Eyes were back to sparring in the courtyard since the repairs were done, but she noticed them taking extra care to not damage the stairs.

Beatrix stopped near dusk and felt the aether of all the Eyes gathered in the dining room, sharing a meal. It made her think about her future and she made a decision, but it would have to wait until after she got her body back.

Beatrix spent the morning going over healing techniques with Maria and Blodwen. Both were well versed in the matter and with their help she even managed to hold together a bone in her hand for a few hours. It eventually dissolved, and they reasoned that since she's not creating her entire body it's getting taken back into her soul.

Around lunch time Blodwen left to eat. This left Maria and Beatrix alone, sitting at a table in the back garden, and Beatrix couldn't remember the last time they'd just talked. Probably on that wagon, years ago.

"So how goes things with your partner?" she asked.

"They're going well," said Beatrix.

"You look like you already want this conversation to end," said Maria. She had a natural motherly aura to her and it was such a piercing question.

"She's worried she won't live long enough to become a lich," said Beatrix. "Saying things like I should move on if she dies and try to find new happiness."

"It's not unreasonable," said Maria, "but I do find it hard to believe you'd do it. The true love bond isn't one to break. Lady Henan is a cruel mistress, inflicting it on a mortal and immortal pair."

"I'm not sure the true love thing is real," said Beatrix. "My mother believed it, and I do feel this inexplicable bond with her, but I've done some stupid things that have hurt her."

"Well, the name of the bond is debatable, but it does exist," said Maria. She thought for a moment before speaking again. "In previous cases of the bond, it's usually between two mortals or two immortals. It's rare for there to be a death in the immortal pairs, and the mortal pairs don't usually have the problem of survivors. Though you've seen what happens to immortals."

"Lucifer," said Beatrix, nodding. "He was mad."

"It's something to consider," said Maria. "The amount

of corruption in you is staggering, so it could lead to a demon transformation.”

“Do nephilim really become demons?” asked Beatrix. She hadn’t read anything about it.

“I have no idea,” said Maria, shrugging. “It’s a problem to think about.”

“One minute,” said Beatrix, standing up. She went inside to the library and started looking through the books until she found the one she was looking for. She brought it back out to Maria and gave it to her, open to the page.

“Lunar Beast?” asked Maria. “What is this?”

“Vala Zoraken’s journal,” said Beatrix. “One of them. I think she’s trying to warn me of becoming a beast, even if it’s not a demon type transformation. She says here it can be controlled, which isn’t very helpful. Demons that have gone beyond their madness and can talk and think properly again are technically in control of themselves.”

“It’s not encouraging, no,” said Maria. “Especially from a Seer. Has Adela considered training with us to speed up her progress? From the few conversations I’ve had with her, her Skrae is quite good. I think she just needs capacity rather than skill now.”

“I mentioned it to her,” said Beatrix. “You or my family in Nerik. She’s considering it. She’s upper third circle now, but could be seventh in ten to fifteen years if she had the right training regime.”

“Sounds right,” said Maria. “I was thirty-five when I got to the seventh circle, though I was on an intense method from a little younger than you are now.”

“Speaking of magic circles,” said Blodwen, returning to the table with tea for her and Maria, “have you been able to determine Thomas Acker’s yet?”

“No,” said Maria, crossing her arms and leaning back on her chair. “I’m not sure what magic he’s using to hide his power. I have some things I want to try when we get back from the mission.”

“Why are you trying to work it out?” asked Beatrix.

“Chassuille is interested in the Arbiters and their level of power,” said Maria. “Apparently Mao doesn’t let out many secrets because it could effect their game.”

“How long have you all known about Mao?” asked Beatrix. “I still feel there are a lot of secrets being held from me, and it’s irritating.”

“I think you know everything now,” said Blodwen. “At least as much as I do.”

“The secrets we know as Eyes aren’t secret in Nerik,” said Maria. “I visited there a couple of weeks ago and bought a book from just some random book shop about the true history of the Gods and Azael, and it’s all accurate.”

“Akenesa told me that children are taught of Azael in school,” said Beatrix. “That the people there are raised to seek immortality so they can be strong for when the final battle comes. I think that’s a good idea and I’m a little annoyed my parents shielded me from it.”

“Different times,” said Maria. “I think it was Sorley’s choice in the end. Anða would’ve told you at three if she could, but your father wanted to give you at least a few happy years before being thrown into the mess we’re all in.”

“I would’ve rather been thrown in head first,” said Beatrix. “I could have been more helpful until now. Wouldn’t have spent time between the war and my failed ascension as a mercenary and I’d have been tracking down Azael’s minions, knowing the importance. Rather than just being an enemy of the Gods, I now know everything he’s responsible for and see why he needs to be stopped.”

“You’re an immortal at the age of twenty-four,” said Blodwen. “How much time have you really lost?”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Beatrix.

“Anyway, shall we get back to it?” asked Maria. And with that they returned to practising healing. Beatrix even got some practical experience after some rather hectic sparring between Irvine and Helge. Tesni was the most difficult to heal

as her biology was very different from the others. Lisette only took a slight cut to her cheek and a blow to her ribs all day, but being Blodwen's apprentice her fighting style was based around evasion and counter-attacks, so Beatrix understood.

Towards the end of the day Lamis and Gilbert went to the temple, and several of the others had run out of energy so it got quiet. Beatrix got the chance to spar with Blodwen and Aldo before everyone was ready to leave.

Most of the Eyes decided it was time to start resting for the mission, but Gilbert was around to spar with. They continued to practice changing into a shadow, trying to make it more and more natural. Beatrix was trying to her best, but it was difficult. She understood folded space, having more room than was normal, but flattening and reducing the space used was disorienting.

It was late afternoon before they stopped. The light was fading and their souls weren't being refilled by the sun as quickly.

"So, how much control over your tentacles do you have?" asked Gilbert. They were sitting in the dining room and Gilbert was helping himself to the food the Eyes had brought.

"Are they tentacles?" asked Beatrix. "I don't have any sensory organs in them, and they're not attached to my mouth or anything. I've been thinking of them as tendrils."

"Tendrils are on climbing plants, I think," said Gilbert. "It's all the same though. Call them what you want."

"Really, though, they're chains caked in corruption," said Beatrix, finally saying out loud something she hadn't wanted to admit. "I can grab with them, push and pull, but I'm not great at it. They're slow."

"Do they have to be that big?"

"I don't know," said Beatrix. "I've never tried making them small. They're an extension of my ability to control the blades."

"Try it now," said Gilbert with a mouth full of some kind of meat.

"In my house?" asked Beatrix.

"Sure."

She focused on her hidden pieces. The wings and the tendrils and her halo. They were just parts of her that normal people couldn't see. She understood smaller wings, she'd had them many times in her life.

“I just realised I haven’t tried becoming a Vanavolk since losing my body,” she said as it hit her.

“Try it now,” said Gilbert with a grin. She rolled her eyes, left him in the dining room and went outside to the courtyard. She stood at its centre and focused on the creature inside. And she couldn’t do it. It was tied to her physical body and lost in the noise of her soul. She could just about feel it, but couldn’t call it to the surface.

“Something wrong?” asked Aldo, exiting the library. She didn’t know he was in the building. He was holding a book on Nerikan history, and she remembered saying he could borrow it after he told her he was planning on visiting the city.

“The angel has become dominant,” said Beatrix. “The Vanavolk is too deep now that I don’t have a body.”

“That’ll change after tomorrow, right?” he asked.

“Sure, but I want to be able to do it without a body too. I don’t want physical matter to be a crutch. If I can survive without it, I should be able to *live* without it.”

“I’ll need to remember that for my next poem,” said Aldo. “You have a flair for the dramatic.”

“If I wasn’t a warrior I’d be an actress and a singer,” she said.

“But I understand where you’re coming from. You can leave your body at will, right? I think you could do that when you were younger. You probably still can, so just practice.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” said Beatrix, crossing her arms and nodding.

“Anyway, I’ve got to go back to the temple,” said Aldo. He held up the book and nodded his thanks before leaving.

“See you tomorrow evening,” she said and turned back to the original thought. She felt out the tendrils within her, the chains drowning in black taint. She thought back to when they were chains in the Castle of Dawn, attached to her blades. In that moment they were only ten or so feet long, some closer than others and then Havoc and Malice within arm’s reach.

She manifested just one of them and it sprouted from

her lower back. It was as long as she was tall and she could bend it around herself, though not with precision. She could get the general shape of it, and when she held up her hand she could bend the tendril to touch it. It coiled easily around her wrist, just as she'd been able to get it around Tesni, but it would never make a good sword arm.

"Now do multiple," said Gilbert, stalking out from the shadows. "How many do you have?"

"I have twenty-six," said Beatrix, dismissing it back into the gaps in reality. "One for each blade. I think that's enough for now. Go get some rest."

"Is that including the ones you made yourself?"

"It is. Go get some rest."

"So if you made a thousand more you'd have a thousand more tentacles?"

"Probably, and I still don't think they're tentacles. Are you going to leave?"

"One more question."

"Fine."

"Does your face ever hurt from scowling so much?"

"Goodbye, Gilbert."

The *Ezekiel* broke through the clouds as the sun came up. It was an odd sight, especially with the vast fields and hills of black grass below them. The Twilight Steppe with bright light was weird, but it had always been a strange place.

They'd taken off shortly after dusk and flown at a pace to reach the Steppe at dawn. Irvine and Helge were piloting while Lamis was on lookout. The rest gathered on the deck to make final preparations.

"Egil called these two human, though warned about their strength, implying I couldn't handle them on my own." Beatrix stood on the handrail looking over the crowd as she spoke. There were no nerves amongst them, just a quiet confidence of seasoned warriors ready for battle.

"They hold two divine blades crafted by Prochorus," she continued. "We've been assuming one each, though I had a thought recently that one may be holding both. The first is Needlepoint, which allows for teleportation. We're currently unsure if it's true teleportation or distorted space, so we don't know if it works. We need to be careful until we know and can counter-act it.

"The second blade is Key, capable of unlocking any lock or seal. We need to get this away from them as quickly as possible as if it's capable of waking Argona then the world is over and everyone dies. With all our power combined we'd probably not stand up to a Dragon, and if one wakes then they all could.

"Their names are Asara and Berin. I never found out which is which and we don't know their elements or any other tools at their disposal. This is almost an entirely blind fight and we just need to hope we have surprise on our side. And hope that this isn't a trap from Egil."

She jumped down and nodded to Aldo, who took over.

"Lamis is currently on watch for spacial distortions," he said. "We're going to split into two teams. I'll be taking both

Gilbert and Beatrix and we're going to form the distraction. Vincent, you're in charge of everyone else. Your job is to get Key away from whoever is holding it. Get the aether away from it, get it to Beatrix so she can pull it in and remove it as an issue."

"Sounds good," said Vincent. "Just wish Sorley were here. He's better at this stuff than me."

"If we're wishing people back onto the team then I vote for Norman," said Gilbert.

"Hasn't he been dead for like two hundred years?" asked Vincent.

"Sixty-five," said Gilbert. "Sixty-six? Still feels like two hundred, though."

"Back on mission, you two," said Aldo. "This has to be a serious one." The pair saluted him, but grinned at each other when they thought Aldo wasn't looking. "This pair are Azael's soldiers so we need to keep our eyes open. This is why our organisation was founded."

"By Norman," muttered Gilbert, but Beatrix's sharp ears caught it and she saw Vincent try his best not to giggle.

"We need to quickly identify which one has Key and separate him from the other." By the look on Aldo's face he had also heard Gilbert. "Beatrix and Gilbert need to show off their full strength to pull attention while I harry the one with Needlepoint. Tesni, you have the special job of making sure that the Dragon down there doesn't lend her power towards breaking the seal."

"I can already feel her, I think," she said. "There's a fiendish presence watching me."

"Keep it watching you," said Aldo. "When the battle's over you can leave the Steppe much faster than we can board the airship, so fly out and meet us in the air. Alright everyone, at the ready." With a slight flare of his aether as a signal, the pilots stopped in the air and began to descend.

Beatrix leaned on the rail, watching for folds in space just in case. She hoped that her wings weren't distracting

Lamis from his job, but that thought was cut short. There was a twitch in the air and next to her a sound that would sicken anyone. Pierced just above her core, directly through her heart, and pulled up to the left, through the collar bone and neck and out into the air. Maria hit the deck without a scream and Beatrix was covered in blood.

“One,” said a woman with long brown hair and bright blue eyes, perched on the handrail like some stalking creature. Her skin was a deep tan and she wore a black brigandine embroidered with the Empty Diamond. She held a stiletto, a long and thin black knife used primarily for stabbing rather than cutting. It was Needlepoint. She vanished as quickly as she appeared and Beatrix saw the folding and unfolding of space, with her tucked inside like a pocket, able to enter and exit wherever she wanted.

“Maria!” shouted Aldo. Seconds had passed but it felt like hours. He held her and the tears flowed, not just from him. Her soul had already gone to the Etherial Realm and was awaiting a reaper to take her to the pillars. An injury like that was beyond healing but Blodwen’s eyes said she wanted to try.

“Mao once called me a villain, so I may as well be the one to say it.” Beatrix placed her hand on Aldo’s shoulder. “We need to stay on mission.”

“I’m going to kill that woman,” said Aldo. He gently kissed Maria on the forehead and stood. He had a fire behind his eyes that Beatrix had never seen before.

“Let’s go kill her, then,” said Beatrix.

“Those of you who can, go ahead!” shouted Aldo. “Get down there, but leave that woman for me.”

Beatrix dove over the edge, quickly followed by Tesni, Gilbert, and Blodwen. As soon as they were out the airship’s shield Beatrix saw Lamis distort the space around it, causing a chaos that she couldn’t see through.

Beatrix unfurled her wings and set out to find the auras of the two they were hunting. She flew around and saw Tesni grow her own wings, then Blodwen let out a burst of air magic

to float down safely and Gilbert fell straight into the black grass as if he were a raindrop.

Beatrix saw space fold, then the woman appeared and grabbed at her core. She released a burst of aether so strong it shot a crater into the ground. The woman managed to avoid it with Needlepoint's power. Beatrix spread her tendrils out and tried to find the woman, but only saw her the moment she tried to use Needlepoint.

Beatrix folded her wings back into the hidden space around her and dropped to the ground. Gilbert began building his crystals again and Tesni flew around above.

"Can you sense them?" asked Blodwen, running up. It was the loudest she'd ever spoken. Almost a shout.

"I can see Needlepoint's power being used, but not the blade or the wielder."

"You're not as good as I expected," said the woman as she popped into existence right in front of them. "Egil's always talking about you, but here you are, not all that."

"You've gotten yourself a death sentence," said Beatrix, calling Havoc and Malice to her hands.

"Twenty extra years wasn't a bad run," said the woman as she swung around Needlepoint with no sense of skill or rhythm. "The Pure Lord healed me as a child and so I give my life to him. This extra time was his to spend. But I did miss. I was aiming for you. Oh well!"

"You're a horrible person," said Beatrix. "I'm looking forward to seeing Aldo cut you up."

Beatrix released a wing straight at the woman but she was adept with Needlepoint despite looking uncoordinated. She folded the wing back into a pocket in space and was ready for the woman when she popped back in front of her. She took Needlepoint through the palm and grabbed the woman's hand so she couldn't escape.

"You're such an idiot!" shouted the woman.

"And you don't pay attention," said Beatrix, tightening her grip on the woman's hand and hardening the aether to

make it harder to escape. Beatrix had seen the way Blodwen was moving and moved her leg so the dancer could come in and stab the woman in the knee. Her serrated rapier pushed straight through and when she pulled it back the woman cried in pain.

Beatrix twisted her wrist and for the first time felt Needlepoint's aether. Just as she was about to pull the blade into her the woman did something that left her shocked and confused. They zipped all around the Steppe, in and out of normal space, rebounding off Lamis's chaotic mess and eventually stopping in the sky.

"Why do you fight it!?" shouted the woman. A red line followed them towards the ground from her knee.

"Because it's always worth fighting tyrants and monsters. Your master is both." Beatrix didn't dare let go of Needlepoint, but the woman's scent had shrouded it again. The woman, however, was becoming more and more obvious. The physical contact was allowing Beatrix to get more and more from her. She could even see that she was fire and earth attuned. No sign of space aether, just the blade.

"The Pure Lord is not a tyrant or a monster!" shouted the woman. "He will be the one to free us all from perpetual torment!"

"Everyone being dead isn't a reasonable reaction to pain. He sounds like some whiny child from a bad play."

The woman screamed and they were all over the place again. When they appeared inside Lamis's barrier the woman lost control and Beatrix was able to take over, blasting away the aether around the blade and replacing it with her own. She used the blade to put them down safely on the deck of the airship as it landed, twisted it out of the woman's hand, and then kicked her in the stabbed knee.

"Your turn," she said to Aldo as she stepped back.

"Everyone, go!" shouted Aldo and the Eyes left the airship. Irvine, Helge, and Lamis left too, leaving Beatrix with Aldo and the woman. "You're not going?"

“I don’t trust this,” said Beatrix. “It was too easy. She seems unskilled, yet Egil warned me of her. Her aether even feels normal.”

“You shouldn’t trust it,” said the woman. She looked over at Maria’s body and laughed. Aldo stomped on the woman’s head with a brutality in his aura.

The woman’s aether erupted and changed. Fire and earth became pure aether, the rarest possible attunement. The airship started to tear apart just from contact with her aura and Beatrix grabbed Aldo, using Needlepoint to get away from there as quickly as possible.

“We need to stop that, right now!” shouted Vincent as they appeared next to the group.

“Find the one with Key,” said Aldo. “That woman is a living bomb. None of us can handle her. Just focus on the job you were given.”

No one argued and the others left.

“How do we deal with that?” asked Aldo when the others were out of earshot. “I have no idea.”

It was like the world was melting. The airship was gone and all that was left was a black void. But within that darkness Beatrix could see the light of the Great Beyond. The same light as when she spoke the word of destruction or used Fang’s power.

“She has no real skill, she’s just a reality bomb,” said Beatrix. “If someone were attuned to pure aether then she could be killed easily. I think you should do it.”

She summoned both Elemental and Purity to her hands and held them with handles pointed towards Aldo. He didn’t quite get it at first, but when he took them he felt their power and understood.

“We cremate to return the aether to the universe,” said Aldo. “The body becomes fuel for another mage’s magic. Maria is magic now, and so I’ll use that power to exact my revenge.”

Aldo’s aether changed from light to pure as he used the blades and gave them back to her. He ran into the growing

empty fog and in just a minute he emerged from the reality hole with a sour look on his face. He held out his hand and pushed the woman's soul into Beatrix's hand.

"Make a great blade out of that," said Aldo.

"I will." Beatrix hugged him, trying to hold back her own tears, but the moment was cut short by an explosion behind her. She pulled away and looked him in the eyes where there and emptiness. "I think they found the other one."

Beatrix turned to see Gilbert had created a massive cage and was raining down crystal spikes on someone inside it. She absorbed the woman's soul as well as Needlepoint, and with Aldo she ran to the battle. It took several minutes to get there, and that's when they saw what was really happening. Most of the Eyes were injured and Blodwen was doing her best to reattach Helge's arm. Beatrix ran over to help her as Vincent came over.

"He's a damned null," said Vincent, cradling a broken arm and flush with sweat.

"Nulls don't exist," said Aldo, approaching with pain and concern on his face. "What's really going on? How does he fight?"

"He slaps us and our arms come off," said Helge, trying his best not to cough up blood. Beatrix held the arm still while Blodwen worked on it.

"He's a null, Aldo," said Vincent. "Look at him!"

"What's a null?" asked Beatrix.

"A myth," said Aldo.

"Listen to me," said Vincent, getting in Aldo's face. "I can see you're not thinking straight right now, I sympathise, but look at our enemy and tell me I'm wrong."

Beatrix looked into the cage. At its centre was a man, standing there taking everything thrown at him. He held Key, a serrated knife, but he didn't even raise it. Gilbert continued his assault with crystal spears, Tesni was covering the area in black flames, and Lisette was unleashing a flurry of piercing strikes with her rapier. And the man didn't care. The crystals

and sword bounced off and the flames didn't bother him in the slightest.

"They can't even injure him," said Beatrix. "I can't feel his aether either. I see his soul in there, but it's like he's so far beyond death. He's empty."

"Null," said Vincent. "Nothing works on him."

The man sighed and backhanded Lisette who was sent flying, crashing through the crystal and rolling along the floor.

"Irvine! Check her!" shouted Blodwen. She then turned to Beatrix with stressed eyes. "Give me as much aether as you can. Feed my healing." Beatrix nodded, held Helge's arm with one hand and placed the other on Blodwen's shoulder. She concentrated and unleashed as much as she could, stoking her anger so she could build it more quickly.

"Broken jaw but alive!" shouted Irvine. "A few missing teeth and a torn cheek!"

Blodwen took a deep breath and forced out every drop of aether Beatrix sent her. Within a minute Helge's arm was fully reattached, though he could barely move it.

"Save the arm now, getting it working later," she said, patted him on the chest, and ran off to see Lisette. Beatrix followed her, keeping an eye on the man in the cage. He was watched her and looked ready to kill.

They healed Lisette quickly, and that was when Beatrix saw the nasty cut on Irvine's head, across his forehead and deep into his hair. It would probably scar pretty badly.

"While I'm glad we're taking these guys down now while we were prepared for battle and not being surprised by the them later, I worry we're not strong enough for this." His words were calm, but his scent gave away his panic.

"What do we do?" asked Lisette, sticking her finger in her mouth to check which teeth were missing and if they'd been regrown. Gilbert landed next to the group, surprising Lisette and Irvine.

"Send a message to Chassuille," he said to Beatrix. "He knows we're fighting today but there's no way to hurt this guy

and it's like he's waiting for something before he acts."

"Right," said Beatrix, sitting down cross-legged and beginning her meditation. She focussed on sending her mind to the Grand Lord.



Beatrix appeared in the court, hovering above its centre. The Grand Gods were all in session and stopped talking with the gathered crowds to look at her. This wasn't going to go over well, but it was her only choice.

"Why are you here?" asked Chassuille.

"We're losing and need reinforcements," she said as bluntly as she could.

"I thought you were only fighting two people today?" asked Mao, staring at her with those eye sockets filled with stars.

"One was a pure aether reality bomb that we luckily had the tools to deal with, but the other is a null."

"Nulls don't exist," said Chassuille, smiling that same fake smile as usual.

"Tell that Gilbert, Lucifer's son, who just exhausted himself and did no damage, or to Blodwen who is frantically healing everyone she can because Maria is dead and can't help us any more."

Chassuille stared at her and Mao looked up at nothing, though she could tell he was surveying the battlefield.

"This null has Key. If he manages to free Argona then you're looking at a second Ruination. We don't know if the blade is able to do it, but we don't want to die taking the chance. Send anyone you can."

"She's right," said Mao. "The game will have to be put on hold. Aramis, how soon can you get some warriors there?"

"Fifteen minutes or so if Low Lady Narianel flares her aether to let us know where on Avani she is," said Aramis, God of War. He had been in the front row and was already heading

to the door.

“I’ll send reapers too,” said Nareshilna. “If he can’t be killed normally then they might be able to remove his soul from his body and lock it.”

“Alright,” said Chassuille. “You have reinforcements. Expect angels quickly and then warriors and reapers after.”

“Thank you.” Beatrix closed her eyes and returned to her body.



The man kicked her in the face and she skipped across the ground like a flat stone on a lake. It was like he was waiting for her to come back to her body even though she was gone for about a minute at most. When she regained her senses she saw Gilbert, Lisette, and Blodwen were all trying to ward him off with their weapons. Each strike ricocheted.

She knew the man to be Berin, if Egil’s names were accurate, as she already held Asara within her. She just had to distract and delay him until help arrived. Berin had the build of a labourer and the face of a horse, and he was genuinely intimidating. She didn’t fear him, but it was the first time she had really considered what would happen if she lost, other than when she thought of Azael.

As she charged him she called on Havoc and Malice and brought them down on his shoulders. Even they couldn’t cut him and bounced, sending painful vibrations through her soul. He was almost naked, with only remnants of charred armour left. It looked like he was wearing the same sort of thing as Asara before the fighting began.

She made a play for Key but he pulled it away and as she dove for it he brought it down on her back. He was smart enough to know not to stab her with it but she didn’t expect him to make his next move. He punched down into her and grabbed a piece of her flow and pulled. It wasn’t painful but she quickly realised what was missing.

As Berin waved his arm to the side, bits of Beatrix's aether flew off to his side and behind him. Those specks of soul transformed and several of her blades bounded across the grass. She'd lost Flameroot, Oracle, and Venom, and more worryingly Fang and Encore. She tried to scramble up to get within range to call them but Berin grabbed her by the throat and began running in the opposite direction.

Then she heard him speak. His voice was deep and monotone, but the universe answered anyway.

"You will not take them back until I'm dead," he said and she felt the magic engulf her. It was a powerful command she couldn't ignore. The universe was compelling her and she tried to fight it, but couldn't.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, struggling to get out of his grasp. She realised he was sprinting towards the statue at the centre of the Steppe, near where she had fought the drake and Argona. That was likely the place Key could reach the seal. She had to slow him down.

He reached inside her again and threw away more blades. Elemental, Quake, Perception, Almut. She still had Havoc and Malice in her hands and was hacking away furiously at his face. Nothing made him flinch. There wasn't even the tiniest mark.

"The Pure Lord is too slow," he said eventually, still running. She could see the Eyes giving chase and felt strange disturbances in the sky. Her reinforcements were here. "He waits for something and will not tell us what. It isn't you. He says you're ready for the end. It's something else. We came here today to force the issue."

"Yeah, and he got Egil to tell us," said Beatrix. She then managed to force him to bend his elbow which lowered her enough for her to stick a foot between his legs, tripping him. They fell and Beatrix was released, and above there was a boom as the sky tore open and angels descended. Hundreds of them. "You upset his plan so he allied with us to kill you."

"You misunderstand him," said Berin, rising to his feet

and looking at the mass of wings and trumpets above. “He’ll never ally with anyone. We’re all his pawns.”

“From the way Egil acts I’m pretty sure he thinks I’m his queen.” Beatrix flew back from him and the Eyes formed a circle around him. Berin launched an attack, using Key to cut Gilbert’s left leg off and catching Aldo across the chest before finally running Blodwen through the heart.

“Blodwen!” shouted Beatrix, running to her, but Berin rushed forward and knocked her into the ground, loosening her aether enough to slide her into the dirt. She was lost for a moment but soon found her way back to the surface. But it was too late. Blodwen’s soul was gone and her body lay lifeless before her.

The angels swooped down and pulled Berin into the sky, lashing and restraining him with chains of silver and light so he couldn’t move. Many of them launched attacks on him, to no avail.

“Looks like we were a little late,” said Azra-el, her paternal grandfather as he flew down and landed softly next to her. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, but I want his soul when it’s pulled from his chest,” said Beatrix. She picked up Blodwen’s sword, knowing exactly how she’d empower it.

“We already have that order, at the request of Grand Lord Mao and Low Lord Dasus,” said Azra-el. He looked up and whistled a tune that called down some of the smaller angels that began healing the Eyes. “There’s not been a force like this gathered since the Ruination.”

“This was a serious threat,” said Aldo. The angel at his chest looked like a porcelain doll, but in the gaps between its pieces she could see flesh. These were putti, a type of angel not normally counted in the Choirs, but present nonetheless. They were little more than servants to the cherubim that guarded the private realms of the Gods and rarely seen, though it seemed the stories of them acting as healers during the Ruination were true.

“How are they going to kill him?” asked Gilbert. He was lying on the ground with three putti attending his leg.

“Aramis’s warriors and Nareshilna’s reapers are on the way,” said Beatrix. “This won’t be our victory. I should’ve gone for help the moment Maria was killed.” She was knelt next to Blodwen, absently stroking her soft blonde hair.

“Human,” said Irvine. “That bastard lied to us. This was a trap.”

“I don’t think it was,” said Beatrix. “Egil is nothing if not genuine. He’s malevolent and insane, but he’s honest. He said I’d need backup, but I underestimated just how much. Maria and Blodwen are my fault.”

“Don’t give me that,” said Aldo. “We prepared as best we could, but it wasn’t enough. Those we lost were because of the enemy, not because of anything you did. Calling on us was the correct decision, but it’s no one’s fault that it wasn’t enough.”

“I’ll try to believe you,” she said.

Around them appeared hundreds of portals and from them stepped tall human-shaped golems. The angels lowered Berin towards the ground and the warriors charged. After a few minutes one returned to Beatrix holding Key and offered it to her. She took it into her soul and wanted to go collect the others she’d dropped, but the man’s magic prevented her from acting on it. The golem ran off back to the attempt on Berin’s life, though it was looking as unsuccessful as what the Eyes had been doing. At least he was restrained by the angels.

One of the warriors walked over and removed its helmet to reveal that it was a tall, slender man, not a golem. He had long golden hair, soft skin, and a gentle smile, all of which were entirely unexpected of Aramis’s warriors. Then Beatrix noticed the sharp ears and the violet irises.

“Are you an elf?” she asked.

“I am, indeed,” he said. His voice was melodic and kind. “My name is Falvinarel, and I’ve been in my High Lord’s service for the last twelve-hundred years. I fought in the

Ruinaton, at the head of his armies, and I'm one of the few of my kind to survive, but we're not extinct. Not yet. Sadly my army lacks true flight for the bulk of our forces, so we were the ones fighting the imps and the serpentine. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

He bowed deeply and then shook Aldo's hand. They exchanged a few words before the elf turned to the group.

"I was instructed by High Lord Aramis to bring you a gift," said Falvinarel. "He asked Grand Lord Mao the status of your group, and in hearing you'd lost your primary airship, my High Lord has given me permission to give you one of ours." He waved his hand and chanted a few words, and a portal appeared.

An airship made of white wood and painted red and purple flew in and landed nearby. Its sails were made of magic and it was a sleek machine.

"Feel free to repaint it in your own colours instead of ours," said Falvinarel, "but I give to you one of our best. It's called *Prishe*, so treat her well. I know it will never make up for fallen comrades, especially in a small cell like yours where everyone is family, but it is my pleasure to give it to you."

"Thank you," said Aldo. "Call on us should you need our skills. It's a shame we meet at such a low point in our history."

"I lost six worlds in the Ruination," said Falvinarel. "Trust me when I say I've been in a worse position. Seeing loss in the eyes of my allies is something I've sadly grown used to. I think no less of you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few more weapons to test on that curious man over there." He bowed again and left.

"I wasn't aware elves still existed," said Beatrix.

"They basically don't," said Gilbert. "I've met another, many years ago. He works for Seran. I think there's a village somewhere on the Aether Sea where the remaining few have gathered and started repopulating. They apparently live about two thousand years old, so our new friend is on the older side,

even if he doesn't look it. He would've been in his prime during the Ruination."

In the distance the angels released Berin and retreated to the sky while the warriors formed a large circle around the man. Beatrix felt a dark aether begin to gather around Berin, and he raised his arms up and shouted something he was too distant to see. A black curtain of silk twisted up and around him and it took Beatrix a moment to realise that it was made up thousands of individuals.

"It's rare to see reapers in the Material Plane," said Aldo. "If they can't get his soul out of his body then no one can. Let's just hope."

"If he can't be killed then we'll be imprisoning him," said Azra-el. He'd sat down on the grass and seemed far more relaxed than anyone should be, but Beatrix had freed him from his duty not that long ago, so he was probably just enjoying not being on a barren island.

The black silken cloud fluttered to the ground and there was a roar. Beatrix could see someone holding an arm into the air and she thought she recognised him. He was the one that had collected her on the Isle of Dusk after the fight against Lucifer. The one that looked like a Skraeðan instead of a reaper. The reapers parted and he started walking over.

"Here we go," said Azra-el, standing up and sighing.

"Don't like him?" asked Beatrix.

"He's one of the dagari," said Azra-el. "Souls crafted by a God directly to act as their child. As Prochorus is to Dasus and Galina is to Lunada, Kela is to Nareshilna. He thinks far too highly of himself and I dislike working with him."

"I met him on the Isle of Dusk," said Aldo. "I have to say that your opinion is entirely valid."

They stopped talking as he approached and the armies of the various Gods started to depart, taking Berin's body with them. Kela stepped up with a swagger in his step that made him look like one of those noble do-nothings in Darizion she'd met after killing Arthur. He did look a lot like Nareshilna, now

that it had been mentioned.

“I first met you by taking a soul from your hands,” he said with a smirk, “but now I return one too you.”

He held out Berin’s soul and Beatrix took it. It didn’t feel like any other soul she’d touched. It had a strangely smooth texture, as if wrapped in such a way as to prevent the aether from flowing. She took it into herself and experienced the man’s memories, but she’d focus on that later. She hadn’t even noticed Asara’s memories because of the battle, but they were there.

“I know you were doing your duty, but thank you for taking me to Sonta.” She was just trying to say the right thing while trying to hide how much she disliked him. She could see exactly what her grandfather meant about him.

“Perhaps we’ll see each other again,” he said, “though I imagine it won’t be on good terms. I collect the souls of the Champions of the Gods, and so you should come to terms with your demise should you see me again.”

“I don’t plan on dying,” said Beatrix.

“No one does,” said Kela with a cruel stare. He turned to mist and she figured he must have dropped into the Ethereal Realm.

“I think it’s time to get out of here,” said Aldo. “I saw Tesni fly to the west when the angels appeared, so let’s go start up this new airship and collect her.”

Beatrix said her goodbyes to her grandfather and said she’d visit him in Nerik soon. She couldn’t believe how much she already missed that side of her family even though she’d known them for such a short time. Everyone boarded the *Prishe* and they took off.



Two pyres were built that evening, not far from Seremont. On one lay Blodwen, and the other was empty. The Eyes and many priests had gathered, including Rosaire and several Archivists.

The Eyes took turns speaking about Maria and Blodwen, telling stories of their glories and their most human moments.

Beatrice held hands with Adela, trying her best to be strong. She held Blodwen's sword, newly infused with the soul of her killer, and she hated Azael more than ever.

Beatrix sat outside the Temple of Chassuille on the rim of the blessed fountain. She was waiting for Egil to show up with her shard of bone, and it didn't take long before she saw him walking down the street. He had a specific walk, as if his legs didn't quite work right, and she hated it.

When he approached her with arms held wide in a way that was probably meant to show he was unarmed, she hit him as hard as she could and let out a burst of aether. As her fist struck his face the thunder hit the air and Egil bounced down the street like a wheel rolling down a bumpy hill. The passers by all looked shocked and a priest from one of the nearby temples made a prayer gesture, but they were soon on their way as Beatrix marched down the street towards where Egil lay.

"Your warning was inadequate," she said, kicking him in the stomach. She took a few more swings, feeling several ribs break with the last stomp, and then stepped back. Egil rose on unsteady legs, laughing and smirking.

"You didn't ask me to elaborate," he said. "But you did very well. Only two deaths on your side. A mere sample of what's to come. But you've earned your reward."

Egil held up a small triangle of bone and she snatched it from his fingers before he could pull it back. She pushed it inside her chest and could feel it was ready to grow a new body for her, but she didn't do it yet.

"Why the wait?" asked Egil. He straightened up and she heard a distinct pop as his chest was repaired by the power of the souls he'd eaten. He was full of them and she could hear their screams. The shaking of his pupils was their attempt at escape. Only the madman's strength of will kept them inside, to be eaten when he needs protection or healing.

"I don't need it yet," she said, not wanting to say the real answer. Her body wasn't for his eyes. She was waiting for that night with Adela.

“I have another mission for you, if you’re interested,” Egil said, his smile widening.

“Will you actually tell me what I’m fighting this time?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said with an exaggerated nod. “This’ll be in six years, however, as those you will fight are not quite ready. I’ll have the information for you by th—”

Egil was knocked down again and Beatrix stepped back to let Aldo do his worst. She’d felt him approach, probably lured by the sound of her aether burst, and deliberately stood so that Egil’s back would be to the Temple of Chassuille. The man needed to take his loss out on Egil, and she was more than willing to let him.

“You can’t kill me!” shouted Egil from the ground. He was laughing as he regenerated, though it sounded strange when Aldo punched him in the chin and broke his jaw. It was a gurgle more than anything, but the broken pieces were soon back, ready for Aldo to break them all over again.

“I don’t need to kill you!” said Aldo with such malice that Beatrix was taken aback. “I just need you to suffer! It’s your fault she was killed! You should have given us more to go on! You should have told us that blade would work! You say that Beatrix is your ally but you almost got every one of us killed! We lost two of our family because of your negligence!”

Aldo continued to punch Egil in the face, neck, and chest while pinning him down. When Egil raised his arms to protect himself Aldo pushed them aside, breaking the elbow or shoulder. He didn’t even draw his weapon. He just needed to get it all out. As a crowd gathered some guards approached but they didn’t even try to stop Aldo. They knew who he was and also looked to Beatrix for guidance. She just stood there watching so they held the crowd back instead.

After a short time Egil stopped laughing and started to fight back, but Aldo was a man with well-toned muscle and Egil was a twig. Egil began to scream in Skrae and she was glad the audience couldn’t understand what he was saying. He was

shouting about how Aldo would be eaten alive by demons or drakes or other monsters and how it was better that Maria wouldn't be alive to see it.

Eventually Aldo punched Egil so hard in the face that he caved in his face, and then he stood up. He nodded to her looking exhausted and without another word he walked back towards the temple. Egil lay there healing for several minutes, which was unusual for him, but when his face came back she could see why. He was furious but something was stopping him from actually trying to kill Aldo. Probably an order from Azael.

"Fun's over," said Beatrix to the crowd. "Go about your business, people." They dispersed at her command. Being a local legend had its perks, even if there were more downsides. The guards left too, many looking at Egil and wondering how he was still alive. Magic was common, but not that kind of powerful and quick healing. "So, you said six years?"

"That man is going to die," said Egil, standing and staring at the temple.

"He's human, so it's very likely. Another forty to fifty years if he's lucky. So, six years until this fight?"

"Yes..." Egil was talking in little more than a growl. She was finally seeing a side of him that wasn't a gibbering maniac and it was actually refreshing. It humanised him. "The Pure Lord is readying an assault. Seven of his most loyal soldiers will be present, as well as an army that will be raised between now and then. He wants you to participate. The side will be your choice."

"Who is he attacking?"

To that Egil held out his arms, gesturing to the people and buildings around them. She narrowed her eyes and began to plan. She'd need to talk to the new king again.

"If you value this life you have, then you'd best prepare for war. If not, then we'd gladly help you destroy this place."

"You should leave," said Beatrix. "Come back a few weeks before the battle to give me the number of soldiers and

who I'll be fighting. I don't want to see you again before that."

"Oh, we'll definitely meet again before that. There are a few events between now and then. The next time you meet me is in a year."

"Why do you sound so sure?" she asked.

"Ask the blade you failed to use on me at the Temple of Blades," said Egil. "Pierce your core and enforce your will, then you'll have all the answers you seek."

"Nice try," said Beatrix. "I'm not stupid enough to fall for that."

Egil shrugged and wandered off.



It was later that day, almost at dusk, and Beatrix sat on Adela's bed, waiting for her to come home. She was excited but did her best to keep her aether under control. She didn't want it to flare and give away her presence.

Getting inside the house was easy, despite the magical protection. The shields were enough for normal mages, but an angel without a body could still just walk through the walls. The hard part was getting the bone chip in. She had to open an upstairs window in the end.

As Adela walked in she almost dropped her book in surprise, but tilted her head and smiled. "What are you doing here? You don't normally pop around at random."

Beatrix reached inside her chest and pulled out the piece of bone. Adela's eyes lit up and within seconds Beatrix had a full body again. Before Beatrix could even open her eyes Adela had dropped her dress and was already on top of her. She hadn't bothered creating clothes, and as much as it was nice to lie there each night and just talk, she'd been looking forward to this. Something much more base. Something much more carnal. A kiss had never been so sweet, and a touch had never been so soft.

Beatrix rushed into the chamber beneath the temple and made an announcement to the Eyes.

“I just realised I’m an idiot.” She then pointed directly at Gilbert, who was hiding in the shadows and about speak up, as well as Vincent who was readying his own response. “Not a word. I have Encore, Aldo. We can redo the day.”

“I would think a Nerikan would be against time travel,” said Aldo. “Isn’t that blade’s soul the reason your people have banned the practice?”

“I can see you’re hesitant,” said Beatrix, walking up to him and grabbing his shoulders, locking him in an intense stare. “I am too, but we have a chance. I’ll have my body and we’ll have all the knowledge we need to win. I’ve been at it all morning. Thoughts and plans and regrets. I’m sure I can pull you all back through with me and we can do this right.”

He pushed her hands away and with a blinding light pouring from his eyes he grabbed her face.



The black ground was viscous, but somehow solid, and the sky was a bright white so pure it threatened to destroy her. Beatrix wasn’t sure where she was when a being of grey aether appeared above her and began to float around.

“It’s not just contact destruction.”

The voice echoed around her and she knew it instantly.

“Aldo? What’s happening?”

“I’ve invaded your soul. We’re in your mindscape.”

“Mindscape?” she asked. “What are you doing? Why did you bring us here?”

“Your soul has been touched directly by Azael. I thought you were just too close to his minions for too long, that they were simply trying to recruit you. But now I see.”



And then they were back in the temple and Aldo's eyes faded back to normal. She pulled away from him and was shaken at the intrusion.

“Go to sleep, Beatrix,” he said. “You need to still your mind before you make any other bad decisions. I miss Maria and Blodwen, but I won't break reality to get them back. Those are the tactics of our enemies. We only look forward. We are Eyes. We see the path and keep moving.”

“I was just trying to help,” said Beatrix.

“I know, and that's why it's so bad. You mean well, but you are willing to risk breaking everything to fix something so small. I love my wife, and Blodwen was a good friend and mentor, but are they worth destroying the universe for?”

“Why would Mao help me understand how to use the blade if it was so dangerous in the first place?” She managed to keep her volume in check, but her tone was filled with the rage she wanted to let out. “What was the point?”

“Perhaps to prevent mistakes?” Aldo had a stern look, but she could see the sorrow. He held back tears, and she could hear his heart beat slowly, calmly, like a storm that has just subsided.

“Maybe you're right,” said Beatrix. “But don't talk like I'm already on Azael's side. I never will be.”

“I know,” said Aldo. “But minimise the damage. Go to sleep. Do it regularly. Cleanse your soul as much as you can. Master your mindscape, while you're at it.”

Beatrix spent most of Chill in quiet contemplation and Frost had come before she knew it. She'd done as Aldo told her and he'd checked in several times, noting that her corruption had indeed shallowed.

But that wasn't her focus that day. She had told Adela her plan and it felt like a natural step now that word of Azael's threat had spread across Vin. On that day she walked around Seremont handing out fliers to anyone who looked vaguely interested. She'd even managed to borrow Vincent and Tesni as they had no missions to do.

At the end of the day they sat in Beatrix's home, and for once she felt a bit of contentment. She'd finally found a purpose beyond being a warrior and the last few weeks preparing her house for others to visit.

"Even if you're the Champion of Blades, are you sure you're *cut out* for this?" asked Tesni with a smirk.

"Was that a pun?" asked Vincent, his eyes lighting up. "I thought she was rather *sharp* for coming up with this."

"Please no," said Beatrix, setting down their cups of tea and taking a chair. "Please."

"What's wrong?" asked Tesni, grinning and wriggling in her chair far too excited. "There's an *edge* to your voice."

"You should be happy," said Vincent, smiling so wide that Beatrix couldn't help but smile wryly. "After all, you were *keen* enough to ask for help."

The emphasis on each word hurt her deeply, but this was what she deserved. Her father's best friend and the little gremlin. All she needed was Gilbert and she'd have the full complement of jesters.

Then the bell at the front of the house rang and she was thankful to leave the table. She walked through the courtyard into the southern wing of the house and out to the front door. When she opened the door there was a young man, maybe fifteen years old.

“I heard you were opening a school?” he asked. There was a stutter to his voice. She couldn’t yet decide if it was a normal thing or he simply lacked confidence.

“I am indeed,” she said. “Are you even out of school?”

“I will be this Heat,” said the boy.

“Then I should probably get permission from a parent. I can’t just teach you the blade when you’re still not an adult.”

“I’ll be back then!” said the boy, rushing off.

“Wow, I never took you for a responsible one,” said Tesni, trying to sneak up. She hadn’t concealed her aether at all and stood out. Vincent did a better job, but she could still catch his scent.

“I’ve heard that the mist mages can cancel out all sound within an area,” said Beatrix. “I might need to get one to teach me.”

“Where’s the fun in that, though?” asked Tesni.

Beatrix grabbed her by the horn, tossed her out onto the street, and slammed the door while she was trying to regain her balance.

“Rude!” came Tesni’s voice from the other side of the door. “I’m going home!”

“I should be going too,” said Vincent, “but before I do, I have something for you.” He presented a knife and handed it to her. It was a kukri and was etched with a language she’d never seen before. “Got this in the south. You’ll probably have a bunch of people coming to train here starting tomorrow, so go get some rest, Miss Local Legend.”

They bowed slightly and Vincent left, trotting off to catch up with Tesni. Before she could close the door she caught the eye of a small girl staring at her from the shadows across the street, trying to hide by a fence between two houses.

Beatrix crouched down and held out her hand, then in as gentle a show of power as possible she created a small cloud of light and flame in the palm of her hand. Even at this distance she could see the child’s eyes light up. She wasn’t even sure what she was doing. The child was clearly living on the

streets, just by the flow of her aether. It was something she'd grown accustomed to tuning out, but being confronted like this she wanted to help.

The girl slowly approached and Beatrix could smell the dirt before she'd fully crossed the road. Her hair was tangled and she reminded Beatrix of a little female Egil. She'd need a wash. A thorough one.

"Here," said the girl, holding out a piece of paper. It was one of the fliers advertising the opening of the school. She stared into the light, unblinking and awed.

"You want to learn the sword?" asked Beatrix, letting the light fade from her hand and taking the flier. The girl held Beatrix's gaze for a moment before looking away, as if she was ashamed. "You don't, do you? You just want a home?" The girl nodded. "Well, are you willing to work?"

The girl looked up, her eyes almost filled with tears. She nodded furiously, never breaking eye contact.

"I have a spare bed, but you'll need to clean yourself." Beatrix stood up and stepped to the side, letting the girl see through the gates to the gardens and building beyond. "While you get cleaned up I'll go buy some food. Tell me. What's your name?"

"Mira," said the girl, looking up at Beatrix.

"Go run yourself a bath, Mira."

Adela and her mother, Valeska, had rushed over first thing in the morning when they got Beatrix's message about Mira. They were in the main room of the northern wing and the girl was being put into a bright yellow dress.

"You're going to spoil her," said Beatrix as they doted on her. They'd brought a range of clothes in various sizes for her to try on and were giggling as they talked.

"Says the one who grew up in this house," said Adela.

"Alright, I get your point," said Beatrix with a sigh, "but she's going to get too used to luxury if you coddle her."

"But she needs some coddling," said Adela. "I can't believe you adopted a child."

"I didn't adopt her," said Beatrix. "I hired her."

"Careful you don't fall foul of the child labour laws," said Valeska with a smile.

"There's not a prison on this world that could hold me if I didn't want to be there." Beatrix caught a familiar scent on the air. "I'll be back in a minute."

She exited the north wing out to the courtyard and didn't bother heading through the south wing to go out to the front door. She just jumped through the air, using the magic of her wings to carry her, even though she didn't unfurl them. She was getting better at controlling her personal gravity and this was becoming a standard shortcut.

She landed on the pavement outside her wall, catching the boy from the previous day and an older man by surprise.

"You smell alike," she said. "Are you his father?"

"Smell alike?" asked the man. "Is that an insult?"

"No, it's... I have a magic nose," said Beatrix, hating that she felt like that was the best explanation. The man even accepted it quicker than she'd like.

"Well, my name's Morton," said the man. "This one is Chas, my son. Your blade school is the only thing that's gotten him excited in years. Never was good in school. Teachers say

he was bright but didn't apply himself."

She looked at Chas and examined his soul. Clean and determined. Earth attuned, still of the zeroth circle. He didn't look like he'd had any physical training in his whole life.

"Just one thing," said Morton. "Your flier don't list no price. How much's this gonna cost me?"

"I'm not charging," said Beatrix. "I'm looking for those that are willing and able to become the best fighters in the land. I assume you've heard the stories of Azael by now?"

"I have," said Morton. "They're saying a Ruination is coming. A new one, and worse."

"That's what we're preparing to stop. If you let me have him, I'll be putting Chas through a waking nightmare to turn the boy into a soldier, ready to fight the tides of evil. It won't be easy."

"I'm ready!" said Chas, standing up straight, trying to look like a soldier receiving orders from an officer.

"I was younger than you when I first went to war, and I was barely walking before I was fighting. My parents knew the danger, but they also knew my strengths and my limits. You're only human, but you'll need to push beyond that. And you, Morton, need to be prepared to lose him any time he goes out to fight. Part of the training will be mercenary work for proper field experience."

"If it's what you really want," said Morton, looking down at his son. The boy was still growing and only a little taller than Beatrix.

"It is!" said Chas.

"Then let's get to work," said Beatrix. She opened the gate and walked into her front garden. It had been turned into a sandlot with training dummies. The path up to the southern wing had been changed from light tiles to sturdy stone, though she knew she'd need to replace them when the real training broke them. "Oh, Morton. You are free to sit in on any sessions your son attends. I can't promise a gentle touch."

"Yes, I've heard of your brutality in the war."

She turned and Morton cringed. He probably thought he'd gone too far, but she'd slowly begun hearing criticism of her actions as time had gone on. The living legend status had passed and now people were being honest. They were scared of her.

"Don't fear," she said. "I've been sleeping lately, and it has made me surprisingly calm. I understand what people have been saying, but I know I'm fighting for the right side, even if my methods are bloody. I've been called a villain by a God, you know, but he still supported me. I might be a scary monster to all the little children, but I can be trusted. Isn't it better to be behind the destruction than in front of it?"

"You say all this like you've been thinking about it."

"Far too much." She looked at a training dummy and summoned Perception to her hand, letting the energy of its magic flow from her eyes. She pointed the blade at the wood and in a few seconds she was across the yard, in the final step spinning, and in the end slamming into the wall behind it feet first. She dropped to the floor and rose as the dummy fell apart.

"Wow!" said Chas, gripping onto his father's arm like a child. He'd need to grow considerably. The first field mission should do it.

"By the end of the training you'll be able to do that," said Beatrix. "The strike, not summoning the blade."

She dismissed Perception and lifted the upper half of the dummy back onto its lower half and then stepped back. The magic she'd paid for got to work and within a few seconds it was in one piece again. Buying one had been expensive, but she'd sunk a lot of money into a full set of them. She didn't need the money for anything else and the mercenary work she'd take her students on would pay for things like this.

"Why couldn't he learn to create the sword?" asked Morton as she walked back to them.

"It's an inherited power," said Beatrix as she cycled between blades in her hand. "I'll teach him everything else."

Subtle magic to increase strength and speed, the technique and skill needed for a clean cut, and how to follow through, to keep fighting.”

“He’s never held a sword before,” said Morton.

“And the fight won’t be tomorrow,” said Beatrix. “We can start with the spear. It’s simpler, has better reach, good beginner’s weapon. We’ll work our way up from there. Also, we have a good teacher on-hand.” She summoned Gungnir and pushed it into Chas’s hands. “This spear’s magic is made to build muscle memory and adjust your aim. I’ll teach you the theory and the basics, and Gungnir will help you become precise. Now go attack that mannequin and let me see what you think you’re meant to do without any training.”

Chas ran off and started swinging, which was entirely wrong. She just wanted to scream that it was a stabbing weapon but he was enthusiastic.

“I’m off,” said Morton. “How often do you want him?”

“As often as possible. Many hours a day.”

Morton nodded and strode off down the street.

Beatrix got Chas started on a basic stance and taught him the very beginnings of an attack plan. She then headed back into the house, through the courtyard, and into the northern wing where the girls were having tea and still trying different clothes on Mira.

“I have my first student,” said Beatrix.

“I’m your first student,” said Mira.

“I thought you didn’t want to learn to fight?”

“I thought you were gonna teach me anyway.”

Adela and Valeska were laughing and Mira had such a triumphant look on her face that Beatrix had to admit defeat.

“Then I guess I have my second student,” said Beatrix. “A boy named Chas. Fifteen. His father seems kind enough. The boy needs work though.”

“She talks like you when we were that age,” said Adela.

“I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not.”

“It definitely is,” said Adela. “She’s going to be a little

nightmare for you.”

“You could be more helpful,” said Beatrix.

“Are you asking me to move in and mother your new adopted child with you?” asked Adela with a cheeky grin, but Beatrix could see the flow of her aether and hear the beat of her heart, heightened at saying something so risky. It was in that moment that Beatrix knew what else she needed to do if she was really trying to give herself a better future than the one Azael planned for her.

It was halfway through the season and Beatrix was watching Mira and Chas spar. He was bigger and stronger than her, and about double her age. He was also clearly holding back, which was nice of him but wouldn't help her in the long run.

She'd picked up a few other students, but none were as dedicated as Chas. They were young men with jobs so came to train when they could. One had worked as a guard for a while and had never been taught how to hold a spear properly. The city as a whole needed to shape up.

When Mira had run out of stamina they stopped and Chas strolled up with a confident swagger. Beatrix was already planning to beat that out of him at some point.

"When do we learn magic?" he asked.

"Hold out your hand," said Beatrix. "Palm upwards." He did as she commanded. "Every person is attuned to an element. You are of earth as I am of fire. Focus on the middle of your palm and speak the word of earth in the language of the Gods. *Ad*."

"*Ad!*" he said after taking a moment to stare at his hand. Nothing happened. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, really," said Beatrix. "You just don't have power yet. You'll get it if you practice. Tell the universe you want to summon some earth attuned aether. Be forceful in your mind and voice. Teach reality that you are important enough to be obeyed. Focus, command, create."

"That's compli... What's the word?" asked Mira.

"Complicated," said Beatrix. "It sounds hard, but once you get the feel for it, then you'll be able to do anything. And Mira, in case you were wondering, are attuned to water. You may make a powerful healer one day if you practice. We'll need skills like that. Water is useful in many other situations. A blade of water can cut through stone and a fresh rain could quench an army. Your word, water in the language of Gods, is *ak*."

“Ak!” shouted Mira so loud it made Chas jump. Beatrix half expected something to happen from that outburst, but there was nothing. Her aether was running low from the sparring, but she had the commanding tone right.

And then it began to snow. Beatrix had been expecting it from the clouds for a few hours, but Mira began to laugh and seemed pleased with herself.

“I did that!” she shouted. Beatrix chuckled and Chas rolled his eyes.

It was then that Royan appeared at the main gate. He was her oldest student and only a year younger than she was. He’d gotten some magic training and had served some time in the Vinish army, so she considered him to be the best she had at the moment.

“Roy!” shouted Mira. “I made it snow!”

“That’s good, Mira,” he said with a smile. Beatrix could see he was dying inside from his eyes alone. He had a similar reaction to silliness as she did. “Dame Blackwood, did you know there’s a man waiting outside? He asked me to get you.”

“There is?” asked Beatrix. She walked to the gate and looked out into the street. Across the road was Egil, smiling and waving to her. She shut the door.

“Uhh, what?” asked Royan.

“If you see him, stab him in the face,” she said. “That’s one of the people we’ll eventually be fighting.”

“Is it safe to leave him out there?”

“This house has protections,” said Beatrix. “No one who isn’t let in by a member of my bloodline can enter. We’re safe from intruders.”

“Are you really just going to leave him out there, though? Isn’t he a danger to the city?”

“Yes and no,” said Beatrix. “If he decides to attack then yes, but if he’s just doing his usual nonsense then no. He’s their prophet, of sorts. Not a Seer but seems to know the future, or at least claims to. He’s a visage, which I’ll teach you about later. Oh, and he can teleport in a way that breaks all the

rules. Other than that, he's not much of a real threat. And I better go see what he wants... Follow me."

She was about to turn back to the turn when she saw Chas and Mira approach.

"You two go inside," she said. "Chas, you're to guard Mira with your life. Mira, you're to go the third room on the left and practice your magic."

"Why? What does—"

"Chas, no questions," said Beatrix. "Follow orders. This is part of your training." He thought for a second before nodding and they went to do as they were told.

"He's that strong?" asked Royan.

"It's more his personality," said Beatrix. "Let them be innocent a little longer. They'll eventually need to harden, but not this way."

She opened the gate and strode out across the street flanked by Royan. He carried his own spear but would likely die if a fight broke out. She just wanted him to see Egil.

"What do you want?" she asked as she stepped onto the pavement.

"I'm here to meet your students!" he said with a smile filled with broken teeth.

"When are you getting those fixed?" asked Beatrix. "It's hard to look at."

"When are you going to remove all the curses?" asked Egil. "Answer me and you'll answer yourself."

"What did you eat that not only broke your teeth but cursed them?"

"Now *that* is an interesting question," he said, tapping his chest, where his core was.

"*Who* did you eat?"

"An even better question! But in all seriousness, I have a job for you. A mission. A quest. Well not a quest. I'm not asking you to collect something for me. I am requesting an assassination."

"Who and why?" asked Beatrix, folding her arms.

“In the village of Kena, south-east of here, nearer to Port Banoc than here, there is a man named Guilford Morgan. He has been killing people. I want you to kill him.”

“Why? Isn’t he on your side?” asked Royan. Egil then looked at him as if he only just noticed he was there.

“Oh, it’s you!” said Egil, now dancing circles around them on the tips of his toes. “I wasn’t expecting to meet you again yet. We’ve yet to meet, haven’t we? Look at you! Where is your scar? Where is your wear and tear?”

“Enough,” said Beatrix, grabbing Egil by his collar. “Tell us why you really want him dead. Some murderer isn’t our problem. That’s for the local guards to sort out.”

“A future has been revealed to me,” said Egil. “If he is allowed to live then he will move to Seremont in a year and cause issues for you. Tell me, how is your daughter doing? You have her now, right? What was her name? Mira? Do you want her to suffer at his hands?”

Beatrix pushed him down and stormed back through the gates to her property. Royan looked down at Egil before he followed.

“What was that about?” he asked as he closed the gate behind him. “Do you believe him?”

“He’s never wrong, but he’s never been that specific before. A name, a time frame, what will happen.”

She called on Perception’s power and searched the city for the Eyes. They were all gone, as far as she could tell. She turned her attention to the Archivists, but she didn’t entirely trust them. Too motivated by treasure and secrets.

“We’re going to have to put Mira somewhere safe,” she said to Royan. “She’s too young to bring out on real missions but we’ll be bringing Chas.”

“I understand, but I have to ask... How long will we be gone? I need to tell my boss I’ll be off work.”

“Kena is a two-day ride away, so I would assume five days at most,” said Beatrix. “Tell your boss I’ll cover your pay so he can hire on someone for the week. And go collect Vedar

and Tullis and tell their bosses the same thing. They could use real experience too.”

“Right,” said Royan. It was then, when he turned to go, that Beatrix saw what he’d done. He was wearing a short shoulder cape and on the back was sewn the Skrae symbol for blade. *El*. She’d been wearing it herself for so long and hadn’t even considered having her students wear it.

He left on his task and Beatrix entered the house. She didn’t need to suppress her aura, but she did it anyway. She could hear Mira doing as instructed but Chas was leaning on the door. He would need to learn better and to hide his soul from prying eyes. She kicked open the door, toppling the boy and was on him within seconds. She slammed her fist into the ground next to his head and let out just a little crack of aether, making the floorboards ripple like a river struck by a stone.

“I thought I told you to stand guard,” said Beatrix, her voice little more than a guttural growl, her face an inch from his. She was hunched like a monster about to devour her prey and he had paled so much that he rivalled her own lack of true colour.

She stood and walked to Mira, who had stopped her chanting in shock. She patted the girl on the shoulder to snap her back to reality.

“I’ll be going on a mission,” said Beatrix. “I need to find someone to take care of you while I’m away.”

“You’re not taking me?” asked Mira.

“Not yet. You’re still too young, but there will be a day where I bring you along. You just need to be patient and keep practising, alright?”

“Alright...” Mira wasn’t happy, but she understood. She was a smart kid. “Are you taking me to Mama Adela?”

“Mama?” asked Beatrix. She squatted down to eye level with the girl. “Why are you calling her that?”

“She said that she’s your partner,” said Mira shyly, not meeting Beatrix’s eyes. “So she’s my mama too, right?”

Beatrix’s head fell as she had to repress a laugh. She

sighed and looked the girl in the eyes.

“You know I’m not your mother, right?”

“I know, but you’re the closest I have.” It was a pure sort of sincerity and it washed away the rage inside Beatrix.

“As long as you know,” said Beatrix. “I won’t object.”

Mira’s face lit up at that and Beatrix stood to look at Chas. He was still lying on the floor in shock.

“How are you going to cope in combat if that’s how you react to a monster in your face? When I was your age I’d taken down a wyvern, an encaser, and half a dozen other little things that haunt the shadows.”

“I just... wasn’t expecting that.”

“Stand up, I’m bringing you on a mission.” She kicked him gently in the side and left the room, trailed by Mira. She waited in the front training area for a while before he followed her out, and a little later Royan showed up with an unexpected, though not unwelcome, guest.

“Sir Dominic Carter,” said Beatrix, bowing her head for a moment. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been well,” said the Bull Knight. She’d fought alongside him in the war with Cor. Or rather, he’d controlled everything while she awoke as a warrior demon. She was glad he had a mind for administration and she hadn’t been left to do everything, but she had helped where she could. “I hear you’re taking two of my soldiers and will be paying for their time. Vedar and Tullis.”

“When did Tullis join the guard?”

“A couple of weeks ago,” said Dominic. He was a large man, and despite losing the lower half of his left leg he had maintained his physique. He had an aethertech prosthetic and was wearing a rather nice red brigandine and round helm. “He wasn’t enjoying being a janitor and wanted to use the training he was getting, and since I’d already seen how you’d improved Vedar I was happy to have him.”

“Vedar could hardly hold a spear, you know.”

“I’m aware,” said Dominic with a sigh. “I was off at Port

Swan and let one of my officers take over training. I think it's needless to say I've made him go through some retraining with the rest of the soldiers."

"Sounds like a good idea," said Beatrix. "But yes, I'm planning on taking them to Kena. I've gotten word of a man getting away with murder, so I'm going to go investigate."

"So you're taking soldiers when you can deal with it by yourself?" asked Dominic.

"I am," said Beatrix. "The point of a school is to give skills to those who wish to use them. I suspect the murderer to be very dangerous, and so I bring soldiers."

"I've been hearing about this Azael character," said Dominic. "This anything to do with him?"

"It is, yes." Beatrix thought before speaking again. She had to word this carefully. "I have an inside source that seems to speak only truth, but leaves out critical information. He says this man is of Azael and that he is a murderer, but he didn't say how dangerous he is. This could be a typical task for a mercenary group or a country shattering battle. They may be novices, but this will be their first test. They'll see what I'm up against and whether or not they can handle it."

"The new king has, in these last couple of weeks, put out orders to better train the soldiers," said Dominic. "It's been tough getting everyone up to standard. The teachings coming out of Nerik are disturbing too. A world doomed by time magic, their accounts of the Ruination. A lot of people are getting scared."

"It's why we have to keep fighting," said Beatrix. "I don't pay attention to the public, so I haven't noticed the fear, but I'm working towards their safety. We don't know when the final battle will be, but it feels like we have time to prepare, so that's what we have to do."

With that their conversation concluded. They quickly discussed payment and Beatrix collected the money from the safe she had built for her under the north wing. When she'd paid the Bull Knight and he'd left, she turned to her students.

“Alright. Royan, you’re my second on this. The Bull Knight will be sending Tullis and Vedar soon, so when they arrive you’re to take them and Chas and borrow some horses. Four. I won’t need one.” She handed him the money for the rental. “I’m taking Mira to a safe place. She’s not ready for field work.”

“Is Chas though?” asked Royan, looking over at the boy who was sulking near the door to the southern wing.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Beatrix looked at him. When he looked back at her there was a shiver and a waver in his soul. She’d been hard on him, but she hoped that it would be the right catalyst to harden him for the future. “Make sure everyone is fully equipped before leaving. Leave through the south gate but don’t wait for me. I’ll catch up.”

“Right,” said Royan rather formally, as if she were still in the military.

“Mira!” called Beatrix, startling the girl. She had sat off to the side and was still practising her magic. “We’re going now. Get enough for a few days away.”

Mira jumped up and ran off to her room.



An hour later Beatrix and Mira were at the Guild of Archivists. Adela was still at work, so Beatrix decided to drop Mira with her at the guildhouse. The guard in front of the building gave Mira a curious look, but let them through without issue.

Inside it seemed like the Archivists were gearing up for a mission of their own. They were gathering into squads and a lot of them were bustling back and forth carrying equipment. Thomas Acker was at the centre of it all calling out orders and a pair of clerks were at his side feeding him information and taking in reports from others.

“What’s going on?” Beatrix asked the guildmaster. She strolled up and noted the annoyance on the face of the female clerk. “Find a new ruin?”

“We did,” said Thomas with a smile. “North-east of Cor off the coast. We’ve gotten permission from the government to move in.”

“Is Cor stable?” she asked without thinking. She’d been avoiding any news about the country. She knew she’d gone too far when taking down Marquis.

“For the most part,” said Thomas. “They’ve got a king and council setup for now, but plan to go to a parliament when things settle. They’re not in a terrible state.”

“Good to hear.” It was a little weight off her soul. They were rebuilding from her visit as a living catastrophe and it sounded like they would be doing better than before. “Are you taking Adela? She was recently out at a ruin, right?”

“She was, so she’s out of rotation,” said Thomas. “You sound like you’re in a rush. Something wrong?”

“I have a job to do,” said Beatrix. “I need Adela to look after this one.” She gestured to Mira who was looking around at the fuss. Beatrix managed to hide a smile when she noticed that Mira was looking at the weapons rather than the people. She was mentally taking notes, just in case. It was one of the first things Beatrix had taught her. “She’s not ready to be in a real fight. Maybe in another seven or eight years.”

“By the looks of her that’ll make her older than when you went to war,” said Thomas.

“It will, but I’ve always been an exception.” Beatrix saw several Archivists she recognised cross the room and perform a final check of their equipment. One was carrying a large net. “If you find one of my blades I’ll be happy to buy it off you.”

“We don’t have any of them, as far as I’m aware, but that’s good to know.” He let out a hearty laugh and then went back to calling out orders, so Beatrix pulled Mira from the room, taking her towards Adela’s office.

The inside of the office had changed since Beatrix had last been there. Adela had a new chair that was mounted on a disc, allowing it to spin. Beatrix had never seen a chair like it before. There were also different runes drawn on paper pinned

to the walls. Some where incomplete but others were notably complete and dangerous.

“You sure you want to be using words like that?” she asked, making Adela jump in her chair and spin to see her. “I’ve used a few of these in actual combat.”

“They’re designed to be powerful,” said Adela. “We do have a lot of skilled mages in the guild. They can handle it. So what brings you here?”

“I got a lead on one of Azael’s followers, so I’ll be going out of town. I can’t take Mira with me so I was hopin—“

“Yes!” shouted Adela, leaping from her chair. “I’ll take her.” She knelt before Mira and hugged her with a smile.

“I’ve been teaching her to read both Vinrini and Skrae as well as how to use basic magic.”

“I packed my books,” said Mira, looking up at Beatrix.

“Good,” said Beatrix. “She’s close to being ready for her first fortification, so if it happens while I’m away it’s fine.”

“So what’s the mission?” asked Adela, looking a little more serious.

“Got a tip from Egil about a murderer,” said Beatrix. “He, of course, didn’t say anything about the guy’s power so I’m being careful. When Mira’s combat ready I won’t be leaving her behind like this. I’m barely sure that Chas can handle it, so this’ll be a test for him.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Adela, hugging her. “You’re strong enough that it’ll go well.”

They said their goodbyes and Beatrix left the guild. As she got outside she let out two of her wings, sized to fit. She flew into the air and across the city, riding space and altering gravity to suit her needs rather than using the wind. It felt far more natural to her than the way birds do it.

She passed the south gate after a few minutes and saw below a group of four horses, so she descended to the road, landing in front of them and folding in her wings, but keeping them visible. She hadn’t shown her students her less human forms much, and it was likely it would all come out in a fight.

She needed to acclimate them.

“You watch a lot of theatre productions, don’t ya?” asked Vedar with a grin. “The ones with the wires that make it look like the actors are flying.”

“I prefer the classics,” said Beatrix, straightening up. The group had come to a stop, but the horses hadn’t gotten scared. They looked used to strange situations. “Before we move any farther, I want to give you each a blade and a role.”

She then walked between the horses and gave each of them one of her blades. This is something she wanted to get the group used to as well. When on task for her she’ll lend a piece of her power to them.

“Royan, you get Venom. It was my father’s blade and I want you on the front lines. Its power is aggressive, but non-lethal. Use it to capture the man named Guilford Morgan.

“Vedar, I’ve given you Gungnir. Its power guides your hand to enable you to accomplish what you’re trying. You are to support Royan.

“Tullis, I’ve given you two blades. The first is Flight, which allows you to fly the way I do, and the second is known as Perception. I want you to scout once we reach Kena and report back anything you see.

“Chas, you’ll be in charge of the interrogation. I’ve given you Prelude. Using its power, a question you ask will be answered, but it has to be about the past. Ask questions that make him admit to his crimes. Once we prove his guilt, we can take him away and begin asking questions about Azael.”

“Not the plan I thought you’d come up with,” said Tullis. “You’ve been training us to kill and push ourselves to our limits. Now you’re having us do much less than that?”

“I think I’ve gotten a reputation as someone who just barrels into a fight without thinking and becomes a wild animal. I might not have bothered with secondary school, but I’ve learned so much from war beyond just fighting. You need to know your limits so you know not to go too far. You also need to know that your hardest push isn’t always required or

even all that useful.

“We capture Guilford Morgan because that’s in our best interests. The more we know about Azael, the better we’ll be able to fight back. But saying that, you’re all now equipped with magical weapons that never dull and are incredibly hard to break. If we can’t capture him, then there is always the option to kill.”

“Makes sense, I suppose,” said Tullis.

“Do you know the path to Kena?” asked Beatrix.

“I do,” said Vedar. “Used to live there as a kid.”

“Alright, you lead the way. I’ll follow from above. Take breaks when you need it.”

It was around midday when they arrived in Kena, after two days of travel. Her students seemed to enjoy camping, but she'd stayed in the air the entire night, keeping an eye out for danger.

Kena wasn't much of a town. Its population barely cracked two hundred and it was surrounded by large farms that fed the town and provided trade with Port Banoc and Seremont. It had a small river that seemed to have cleared up nicely since she had last visited. Defeating that encaser had done the place good.

The people stared at her, just as they had last time. The country folk never changed, even after wars and news about the end of the world. They were approached by some guards in decent armour, though their weapons had seen better days.

"Who are you and why are you here?" asked the leader of the small group.

"My name is Dame Beatrix Blackwood and I've had information about this town. People have gone missing?"

"They have, Dame Blackwood," said the leader. He took on a sudden reverence. He'd obviously heard her name before. "We're not sure what's been happening. Three in total. How did you hear about it?"

"A magical source warned me," said Beatrix. "We're here to help."

"Do you know who it is?" asked one of the guards. He was nervous and she thought she recognised him. He might have served in the war.

"We're going to investigate," said Beatrix. "These men are with me, so give them access to anything you know."

"The chief will want to talk to you first, but that won't be a problem. Follow me."

Beatrix told her students to look around and then she went with the guards to the village elder. She instantly knew him by the red scarf despite not remembering his face. He was

probably in his sixties and his clothes showed signs of his work on the farms.

“I know those eyes,” said the elder. “Dame Blackwood. I remember the day you were last here. You’ve grown quite a lot. I’ve heard all the stories of you during the war. It was hard to believe but now that I can see how hardened you are, I know it was all the truth.”

“I imagine there was some exaggeration in there,” said Beatrix.

“No ma’am, I ain’t never lied!” said the nervous guard from before.

“Which squad were you in?” she asked, looking him in the eyes, trying to remember. And then she got it. “Ah, the third scouts. I know you now.”

“Yes ma’am!” he said, saluting.

“No need for that. My military days are behind me. I’ve got my own mercenary group now.”

“And speaking of that,” said the elder, “how do you plan on dealing with our situation?”

“I’m going to use my innate magic to check the levels of corruption in your people,” she said. “Those that have committed great evils will easily stand out to me. And don’t worry, I’m practised in telling the difference between soldiers and murderers.”

The chief nodded and she set off about the town. She knew the name of the person she was looking for, but it was for the best that she didn’t reveal that. When she walked past Tullis she told him to use Flight and Perception to look for anyone trying to leave town.

“If you’re a soldier, why aren’t you wearing armour?” asked a little girl who ran up to her as she was walking around. She looked young enough to not have been born last time Beatrix was there.

“I’m unkillable,” said Beatrix. “Not by normal means, anyway. I don’t need armour.”

“When my brother died, my dad said that everyone dies

one day,” said the girl. “He said that even if it’s sad we have to keep going.”

“Your father is a wise man,” said Beatrix. She noticed a flicker of magic on the edge of her vision. It wasn’t enough to be a danger but she saw it. “Tell me, are there any mages in this town?”

“There’s old man Morgan,” said the girl. “He lives just over there. He’s the doctor.”

“Thank you,” said Beatrix, then walked away from the girl. She sent up a flare of magic and waited a few minutes while the students gathered.

“Find him, boss?” asked Vedar.

“I might have,” said Beatrix. “A doctor with the name Morgan who can use magic.”

“How do we handle this?” asked Royan.

“I felt his magic,” said Beatrix. “I’ve got his scent. He’s in his house. Chas is going with me into the building and I want you three to take up positions around the house. If he runs I don’t want him to escape.”

They got ready and Beatrix walked to the house with Chas in tow. Before knocking she turned to the boy.

“Use the blade’s power,” said Beatrix. “If we can talk before he runs then we can be sure we have the right person.”

Chas nodded, so Beatrix knocked on the door. There was a shuffle inside and a young man peered through a bit of glass above the door before Beatrix heard the creak of a chair across the ground and several locks opening. When he opened the door he was wearing a simple blue robe and wore the symbol of Seran, and he had spectacles that made his eyes look far larger than they really were. Peering into his soul she could see the corruption. This was him.

“Who are you? Do you need healing?” he asked. The voice was false. The way his throat tightened and his scent of deception revealed the lies. He was trying to seem harmless.

“We’re here to discuss your God of choice and hope to convert you to a brighter day,” said Beatrix with as soft a smile

as she could manage. It was a line she'd heard used by a priest of Chassuille once and since she was wearing mostly white she hoped he would fall for it.

"I'm quite happy with Seran, thank you," he said and tried to close the door, but Beatrix held it open and leaned in close.

"Oh, it seems you've made a mistake," said Beatrix. She held a wide smile that showed every fang and opened her eyes as much as possible to make sure he noticed her crescent pupils. "I've come to talk about Azael."

Guilford panicked, tripping on his robe as he tried to turn and flee. Beatrix stepped over him and was hit by a bolt of lightning in the face, but that didn't stop her. She stomped on his shoulder and as her face reformed she stared into his eyes. She pushed down as he grabbed her leg and she felt the bones crunch beneath her foot.

"Why did you join Azael?" asked Chas. It was good question, but not what she'd told him to ask first.

"He promised me power," said Guilford through gritted teeth. "And wealth!"

"Why did you kill those people?" asked Chas, getting to what he should have asked originally. Prelude's power was flowing into the area around him.

"Because I could!" shouted Guilford. "They all needed to be put in their place! I killed them because they were lazy and I've improved the town!"

"That's all I needed to hear," said the leader of the guards walking into the house.

"This man doesn't worship Seran," said Beatrix. "We're here to hunt followers of Azael, God of the End. This man's boss wants to bring about a Ruination larger than the last. We'll be taking him for interrogation and execution."

A twinge of aether. Beatrix jumped into action, letting instinct run its course. She spun and grabbed both Chas and the guard, sending them across the street by channelling Needlepoint. She spread her wings to block the attack and then

came the explosion.

It all happened in just a few seconds but it felt like the world was moving slowly. Her wings were torn from her back and pieces of her body were scattered all around. Her form was flung into the air, but she caught herself.

Looking back at the house, it was collapsing. The front half had been destroyed and so it was all caving in. She saw Guilford's aether vanish below the house, so she set down on the road and touched a splatter of blood. She took in the matter and remade her body and clothes, then with a wave of her hand the remaining gore vanished, her old body destroyed as a matter of fact.

"I can see him with Perception," said Tullis. He landed next to her, his sclerae black, his pupils and irises white. "There's some sort of interference though."

The house collapsed completely, sending dust into the air and deafening everyone for a moment. Beatrix walked up to the rubble and summoned Fang. The blade's magic made short work of the wood and stone, disintegrating it and letting her clear a path to the trapdoor.

"You were all glowy for bit there," said Vedar, carefully opening the trapdoor.

"That was a surprisingly powerful attack," said Beatrix. "We can't let our guard down. It was enough to remove me from my body."

"You really are an angel," said Chas, approaching with the guard and Royan.

"We can talk about what I am later," said Beatrix. She took Flight from Tullis because he wouldn't need it from there on out. She then swapped Prelude in Chas's hand for Quake. The boy was a little shocked at being given a hammer, but it would let him put all his force on a single, small point. It was a good choice for someone without much muscle like him. "We're ready. Time to give chase. Be careful."

She dropped into the trapdoor without using the ladder and summoned a few balls of flame to float around. She saw

that Guilford didn't even bother closing the hidden door at the back of the basement and there was a trail of blood leading into the darkness.

"He's up ahead," said Tullis, descending the ladder far more carefully than she had. "He's gone into a room, but the blade isn't letting me see in there. It's like it doesn't exist, but I can still sort of see it."

"There are phrases written to block powers like that of the blade," said Beatrix. "I'll keep you with the blade for now. It can still cut aether and might help deflect spells, but don't rely on its sight from here on out."

Royan, Vedar, and Chas came down to the basement and were soon followed by the guard.

"I'll report all this to the chief," he said, and Beatrix nodded to him. It would be best to get him out the way. He took a quick look around before climbing back up.

"I feel like we're slowing you down," said Vedar. "You'd have rushed in there by now and been fighting already if we weren't here, right?"

"If I were on my own, yes," said Beatrix. "There's no point in hiding that, but there's value in taking things slowly. I've seen that when working with the Eyes of Chassuille. I have a way of making my own path through the battlefield, but sometimes that's not the right way to do things. That's one of the reasons I decided to start teaching others. You may slow me down, but an anchor is something I often need."

"What can we expect in there?" asked Royan. "That kind of magical display is beyond our training and experience. Do you think we're ready?"

"Honestly, I don't think any of you are," said Beatrix. "But there's no better teacher than experience. There was no element behind his attack. It was a psychic burst of the same type that I use, but he used a lot more aether than I do. There was no restraint there. No attempt at conservation. It was an all-out attack so he could flee into the chamber beyond here.

"I smell blood, and not just his. It's possible we'll find

what's left of his victims when we follow him. I don't know if any of you have seen death before, but steel yourselves. It's not pretty."

She started down the roughly carved hallway and there were obvious streaks in the stone. The tunnel had been made by magic, the threads of reality tearing it from existence. She'd seen this sort of rough work by some of the guild mages during the war when they'd made temporary fortifications. There was enough room for two of them to stand side-by-side but she strode out in front while the others followed.

The tunnel sloped downwards and Beatrix made note of the blood. There was a lot dried into the floor and along the bottom of the walls. And then she stopped.

"I can't go farther," she said. Natural scents and light from her flames let her see deeper into the tunnel but there was no magic flow at all. She gently put her hand into the area ahead of her and felt her hand go numb so she pulled it back. "There's anti-magic here. Mist magic. You'll have to go on without me, but he shouldn't be able to fight back. He has no magic and a broken shoulder. He's lost blood from that injury too. The blades won't have their power, but their edges won't dull or break."

She stepped to the side to let the others pass and they just looked at her.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"Are we really being left to it?" asked Tullis.

"Of course," said Beatrix. "My body can't operate in an anti-magic area. I flop over and end up helpless. If you can remove the source of the mist, then I'll be able to come help you, but as it stands I'm stuck here."

"What about that other form?" asked Royan. "The one where you were glowing. Aren't you more powerful like that?"

"Angelic bodies are composed of pure aether," said Beatrix. "That aether is solidified by the core. Anti-magic is one of their biggest weaknesses and it's why Zamagliti, Dragon of the Mist, was the front line in the Ruination. She tore

through angels and reapers and there was little they could do about it, so they had to rely on mortal armies with regular, non-magical weapons. While she kept our side busy, the rest of the Dragons were off destroying worlds.”

“Didn’t expect a history lesson,” said Vedar, chuckling.

“It makes sense,” said Royan. “We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

They were gone less than a minute before Beatrix had an idea. She called on the power of Almut within her and it shunted her into the Ethereal Realm. It instantly filled the tunnel with a dense mist and everything felt like it was in monochrome. This was the world that connected Avani to the Aether Sea, a path where magic flowed, and sadly the barrier of anti-magic extended into this realm too, marked by a sudden cut-off in the aether fog.

“What were you expecting?” asked a voice behind her, standing in the tunnel. She didn’t need to turn to know it was Egil. She had been sensing him even in the Material Realm. His black soul was just that toxic.

“I was just checking. I could be more help if I could still get in there somehow. What are you doing here? I didn’t know you had access to the Ethereal Realm.”

“I go where I’m told,” he said, walking past her and into the anti-magic area. “Your students are fighting him well. You should probably have considered that he was a mist mage, however, as he’s putting bubbles of normal space around his spells, letting him cast within his own anti-magic field.”

“You’re right, I hadn’t considered that,” said Beatrix. “But their blades should keep them safe.”

“Perhaps,” said Egil.

“You’re different today,” said Beatrix. It was something in his gait and stance. He was more still. His eyes were clearer than she’d ever seen them. He seemed more melancholic than mad now.

“I’ve just come from the Dance of Nothing,” said Egil. “It’s an event of great importance. Always so excited, and yet

always so sad in the aftermath.”

“I’m starting to understand you,” said Beatrix. “You’re a time mage, aren’t you? You don’t teleport, you travel in time. Am I right?”

He smiled and tapped his chest, and then his pupils began shaking in his irises again.

“That’s why Encore didn’t work on you,” said Beatrix. “You’re not affected by the time magic of others. But if you’re travelling through time, and thus gaining knowledge and seeing things that have yet to happen, how are you not causing everything to change? Encore and Oracle let me change the future the way a Seer can, so why don’t you?”

“You’re not meant to figure that out,” said Egil, letting out what could only be described as a cackle. “Not yet.”

“You’ve been revealing your hand the entire time. How was it supposed to stay secret? Did you learn your magic from the Chronomage? When I absorbed his soul I saw his past. I saw him with you as a child.”

“You’ll get your answer when you eat my soul,” said Egil. “Twelve years is all you have to wait until we dance.”

“And that’s the Dance of Nothing? The day you die?”

“It’s the day Azael wins,” said Egil. “The world may not be destroyed just yet, but it’s the day the Pure Lord wins.”

She looked at him, not knowing what to think about that. The theory she’d been picking at in her mind since their encounter in the Temple of Blades had been confirmed, but was it really the truth? Could all the truth until now just be a trap so she’d believe him in this?

“Why aren’t you changing the future?” she asked again because it was the only piece that wasn’t falling into place. She wanted that answer. “What does it matter if I learn now instead of later? It’s likely nothing I can act on.”

“You’re right, you can’t change it,” said Egil. “But then think of this: No Seer has ever changed anything because I’ve already changed things and the timeline is now fixed. Their visions are what should have happened, but because they are

destined to interfere then those visions are always false unless they are meant to follow them.”

“You’ve already changed things?” asked Beatrix.

“I have witnessed things, made them happen in the exact way the Pure Lord wishes. Only interfering when needed so as to act as a pin, holding reality in place.”

“And if I were to remove the pin?” asked Beatrix. She gestured with Fang and Egil smiled.

“You almost did once before,” said Egil. “It’s in your past, but my future. On that day overlooking Seremont. I’ve already watched from the shadows how you burnt me. If Azael hadn’t triggered my power, I would be gone and everything would be in flux once more. The future would be uncertain. There is a specific time and a specific place. You can wait for twelve more years, right?”

The anti-magic area suddenly collapsed and the aether fog rushed in to fill the space. Egil cackled again.

“Raise your army, gather your allies. The day will come when we dance. We’ll meet again before then, don’t worry, but for now I have to go break your collarbone. That’s my next stop. Everything is as it should be.”

And then he vanished in a blink of an eye. It was as if he’d never stood there. She sighed and just walked down the tunnel until she found the room. In the Material Realm her students were bruised but otherwise healthy, and she turned her attention to the lingering soul in front of her. There were no reapers around to grab it, so she took it for herself.

His memories were incredibly mundane, except for that desire to kill. It wasn’t unlike her own. He’d killed many before coming to Kena and planned to keep going, targetting any he could get his hands on. She wondered what kind of blade she could make from him, not keen on the idea that there would be a source of anti-magic lurking inside her, ready to activate at any time.

She returned to the Material Realm using Almut’s power, startling her students. She noticed a rather nasty cut up

from Royan's eyebrow and she frowned.

"I'll do better, I swear," he said, holding some cloth up to the wound.

"No, everyone gets injured eventually," said Beatrix. "It's just that he was right again. That will scar." Royan took that in, his eyes narrowing before he looked at the ground. "You all did well here."

She looked down at Guilford. He had a clean cut on his arm and a hole through his gut. The room was a large circle and there were remnants of three people. She knew which ones were which by accessing Guilford's memories. They'd been tortured and torn apart while alive before being put into a neat pile in some sort of morbid shrine to his depravity.

"We didn't get to question him more," said Chas. He looked guilty about it, knowing it was his job.

"We got a lot more information today than you could imagine," said Beatrix. "Little things are important too. From what little I can see here, Gungnir struck Guilford's arm, and it was Venom that killed him."

"How can you tell?" asked Chas.

"The cut on the arm is smooth," said Beatrix. "Because Gungnir moves with the wielder's intent I would think that Vedar was trying to break a shield rather than kill. Gungnir would have hit the heart, lungs, or the core if the intent had been to kill. By not aiming for those, when the spear *did* hit by accident it cut cleanly.

"The gut stomach wound is much rougher, which shows the force that was used to twist and remove it. I believe it was Venom, and thus Royan, that got the kill for a few reasons. The first is that the wound is small. Venom is a long but thin blade, but Perception has some girth to it. Next, is the trail of blood across the room."

"There's a lot of blood in here," said Vedar.

"And I have the right nose to tell it all apart." Beatrix then pointed to three lots of blood. "The first is about four days old. Dry and set. It was from the last victim. The latter two

trails of blood are from Royan and Guilford. Royan's blood is light, it smells more metallic because it's purer. And then there's Guilford's blood, thick with corruption and hate. It smells like he's been long dead, and that scent is all over Venom, hidden by the black of the wooden blade."

"You talk a lot about how stuff smells," said Tullis. "Are we supposed to learn that too?"

"I don't think you'll be able to," said Beatrix. "There are other ways to sense aether, and I've already taught you the very basic idea. You just need practice now. The ability to distinguish different aether sources by smell is a Vanavolk ability. One I was born with. I don't think humans can do it, but there are other senses you can use to describe how the aether feels to you. For now, let's go back."



Beatrix explained things to the village chief. She spent over an hour answering all his questions. About Guilford, about Azael, and about her purpose in life. She told him about Egil and his attempts to turn her into a blade of destruction, but if she was going to be a blade, she'd be pointed directly at Azael's core.

It was late at night and the boys were all camping, laughing, and generally enjoying themselves. They'd brought a set of cards and were gathered at the fire playing a game. Beatrix couldn't fault them for it. She'd seen the soldiers all doing the same during the war. You had to pass the time and keep a little bit of sanity.

"I think it's time to discuss what I am," she said, sitting in their circle and observing their game. She was sat between Royan and Tullis, seeing that Royan had better cards but Tullis was better at bluffing.

"You mentioned a Vanavolk thing before, right?" asked Chas, looking between his hand and the cards in the middle of the circle.

"I did," said Beatrix, "but you'd better be careful about not calling us 'things' as we're more powerful than you'd think by a name that translates as 'crow-wolf' suggests. There are only seven of us, though there could have been nine, maybe more if they'd had other children."

"What exactly is a Vanavolk, then?" asked Royan. She had healed the face wound as best she could, but it would still leave a scar. She was thinking about calling in her mother to do a better job, or maybe the clerics in the Temple of Seran, but she'd have to ask Royan about it later.

"It would be easier to just show you," said Beatrix. "I believe that mixing the bloodline and living with humans has caused many of us to prefer living as you see me now, but we each have a true form. It's a shape that feels freeing, like a wild part of us that has to be retrained in society."

She stood up and stepped back from the fire. She gazed inward and found that part of herself and soon her body had broken and contorted before reforming as the Vanavolk. Fur and feathers, beak and fangs, wings and tail. It felt good.

"I live in the night," she said, her mind carrying that thought to the group. She could see clearly through the dark,

picking out details over a mile away. "This is as much a part of me as any other."

She then turned back into her more human shape and took her seat again.

"You were huge!" said Vedar.

"I ran with my grandmother and cousins not long ago, shortly before I opened the school," said Beatrix. "I only reach up to their shoulders. I think my blood is too diluted to be able to grow to their size in that form. I've yet to see the matriarch transform, but I'd bet she's even bigger still, being pure blood."

"The matriarch?" asked Tullis.

"Galina Talwaen," said Beatrix. "Black blood, but still beautiful. I'll take you to meet her one day, when I can feel like I've trained you right."

"What does black blood mean?" asked Chas.

"It means she's fully corrupt," said Royan. "I've heard that it turns you into a monster."

"You were raised by a priest of Seran, weren't you?" asked Beatrix. He chuckled at that. "It's true that corruption can do that to a person. It's the most likely outcome. But it affects people in different ways. Angels become demons, but each one is unique. Mortals can be influenced into vampires or imps or ash hounds. But you can recover from corruption too. You don't become yourself again, but instead you find a new version of yourself on the other side of madness. Galina has reached that point, and I believe Egil has as well. Any demon that can talk is at that point too."

"Who's Egil?" asked Chas.

"Our enemy. Egil Krom is a follower of Azael, and they call him a prophet. He's very often right about future events and seems to be very aware that he'll one day die. I don't think he's a threat, but we can't trust him either. You'll know him when you see him. Long, matted hair. Rough clothes. Wears a diamond shaped shawl. His pupils vibrate within his irises."

"Getting back to it," said Royan quickly, "you said that the Vanavolk is just a part of you. What else is there?"

“Some humans, some innate vampires, and two other things. The first is a being known as a twilight spirit. There was only ever one, crafted by Low Lord Dasus, God of Balance and Twilight. The spirit was known as Prochorus and he had several unique powers.” Beatrix put Perception in her hands, the silver flash of light illuminating the night for a moment. “He’s who I inherited these from. He’s the reason I’m trying to collect them. To fulfil his purpose.

“Prochorus was created to sing a song in resonance with the blades. He would absorb all corruption within the universe and break all curses. He would be a martyr on behalf of everyone else to ever exist. He couldn’t go through with it, the cost was too great, and his blades became scattered.”

“So our mission is to help you find these blades and fight Azael,” said Royan. She nodded to him. “How many do you have so far?”

“Twenty-four,” said Beatrix. “A little over a quarter. I’ve also been able to craft my own blades and store them within the same space as the ones made by Prochorus. When we get back I’ll be turning Guilford’s soul into a new one.”

“So what’s the second other thing?” asked Tullis “That you’re a Host?”

“I’m not a Host of the Heavenly Soul,” said Beatrix. “I have two angelic bloodlines in me rather than just one. Hosts inherit a little bit of power, have a longer life, some natural regeneration. I am, instead, a nephilim. The powers of those two angels clashed within me and created a new power.”

“I’ve heard of the nephilim,” said Vedar. “There’s one living in Vaga, right? Supposed to be super smart and have loads of power. That one collects books, my mum told me. She’s an Archivist, see.”

“I’ve heard of the Vantori Library before,” she said. “I’ve never heard of the nephilim still living there. It’s from before the Ruination, so I’m not sure he’ll be there still. It’s worth investigating though.”

“Are you actually suggesting a trip to Vaga?” asked

Royan. “The whole continent is covered in monsters. We’d be dead within hours.”

“Let me show you my reality,” said Beatrix. “Let me show you the nephilim, the angel, the blade. Once you’ve seen that you’ll change your mind. All it takes to fight a monster is one that’s higher up the food chain.”

She didn’t even stand up. She let her power rip apart her body and take her into the air, a shining red beacon in the sea of black. Her blades orbited her core, points of silver light, and then her wings unfurled from the hidden corners of space, alternating black and white and followed by a tendril made of the purest darkness or the brightest light. Two of her wings were missing from Guilford’s blast, but with a thought she regrew them. She hovered for a moment before reigning herself in, returning to her sitting spot as if nothing had even happened.

“I remember that over Seremont,” said Royan. His face was pale and he’d let his hand slip, Vedar not even trying to hide his prying eyes.

“Me too,” said Tullis.

“That was when my power matured,” said Beatrix. “It was my first transformation. I’ve gained control over it since then. In fact, the power seems to be evolving. The more blades I hold within myself the more wings I get and the stronger I become. For now, get some rest. I’m going ahead to Seremont and I’ll see you in a couple of days. Keep the blades you have until you return.”

She grew a pair of black wings and shot into the sky.

It was supposed to be the day of the Violet Dance, but a rush of snow covered all of Seremont. Beatrix hadn't participated since just after the war and she was looking forward to it, so when she looked at the sky it made her angrier than usual.

She was about to go down and clear the rose bushes of the white menace but then she felt a spark of aether outside her front gate. Then came the bell ringing and she rushed down to let in her cousins.

"Thank you for lending me this for the last few weeks," said Akenesa with a subtle bow of her head. She gave Beatrix Needlepoint, who quickly took it into her soul. Liara rushed past them both and began making a snowman in the training yard. "I've mastered its ability and can replicate it on my own. This world will soon get much smaller, with people able to teleport from town to town."

"That's all well and good but if we can't do anything about this weather then my day's still ruined," said Beatrix.

"And why is that?" asked Akenesa, walking into the training yard, gently waving her hand and causing the snow to turn in the air. Within moments a fully formed snowman was sitting right next to where Liara was working so hard on her own. Liara looked offended and pushed it over.

"No cheating!" she shouted.

Beatrix could see the beginnings of a smile on the face of her cousin, Akenesa's usual blank expression melting just a little. Beatrix knew she was working on a cure for the family curse, and it seemed like she was making progress. Beatrix knew she'd have a cure of her own when she'd collected the blades, but the weight of the task had stopped that song before so it was in the best interest of the family for Akenesa to keep at it.

"You know, Narianel," said Akenesa, looking at her. "You could just spread your aether across the city. Be the blowhole of the whale. Spout it into the sky and kill the snow

before it hits the ground. That's the simple way, though a carefully worded chant with the amount of aether you can generate would work too. Clear the weather with your words."

"I'm not much of a mage," said Beatrix.

"Do you really think that matters when you're in the upper half of the Low Circle?" asked Akenesa. "When I had the same raw potential you have now I stood against an army and slew them with a word. *Morta*."

The remnants of her snowman exploded in a cloud of white, startling Liara who then quickly made a snowball and throwing it at Akenesa, hitting her in the stomach. Akenesa didn't even flinch at that. She'd used the word for death on its own and shown its power. A much less destructive word than Beatrix's choice, and less taboo as well.

"Magic is more about intent than anything else," said Akenesa. "It can grow in power based on presence and the way you phrase your demands, but the intent and the emotion behind it is what gets the effect to happen. It's why magic works with sign language and dance. Believe you can clear the sky and it will happen. The universe listens to you."

Beatrix looked at the sky and furrowed her brow. Her intent was the stop it from snowing so the Violet Dance could be held. She wanted sun.

"Be careful there," said Akenesa. "Yes, I'm reading your mind. You're too open a book. Calling on the sun could bring on summer. Heat, as you call it. You'll mess with the farmers and cause people to starve if you do that. Just get rid of the snow."

Beatrix refocused. Clear weather, just for today and back to normal tomorrow. That was what she wanted, that was what had to happen. When she spoke it aloud it was as if nothing happened, but there was a touch of exhaustion as her aether vanished and she fell to her knees. Then the snow stopped and the clouds dispersed and the soft light hit her, reigniting that fire inside.



Beatrix and Akenesa quickly cleared the main roads, getting the help of any fire mages they met along the way. Akenesa was using magic, but Beatrix was simply running along the roads with a pair of wings out, letting her internal flame melt everything around her. Word quickly got out that the Violet Dance was back on and soon the streets were bustling with people trying to help out.

Beatrix ran from her house through the back streets to the north gate, then down Kingsway North, twice around the Fort of Kings to get everything, then down Kingsway South to the south gate. It was the path of the dance and she wanted to be absolutely sure it was clear.

Beatrix had spent the last week practising the dance and using the clothing magic she'd been taught to make the outfit she'd be wearing. The traditional robes were violet and purple, feeling more like an oversized tunic than a real robe. They had long sleeves that covered her hands and barely passed her knees. The dance was done without shoes, but around her wrists and ankles she wore rings of silver bells. Draped over her shoulder and tied about her waist and thighs were flowing silver veils.

As a child the clothes felt huge on her, the veils alone being longer than she was tall. As a fully grown adult they were comfortable. Others soon showed up, all dressed like her and they took their positions behind the south gate, readying for it to be opened and for the dance to begin. All of these people were Hosts of the Heavenly Soul, giving thanks to their ancestors for the gifts they've been given in their blood. Many saw this as a festival for followers of Chassuille, but it was more than that. They danced for the angels, not their master.

A group of the Hosts had instruments. Violins and flutes and drums. There were a few songs they'd play during the dance and Beatrix hadn't considered until then that she should learn to play them. But that would have to wait for

another day.

She tried to take a place in the middle of the pack but she was soon pushed to the front. Every one of the Hosts said the same thing as they moved her, a firm hand on her shoulder. “You go first. We came all this way to dance and you stopped it from being a disaster.” And so she took point. She didn’t want to force the attention onto herself, but quickly had no choice.

And just as the music was about to begin and she was raising a hand to signal the guards to open the gate, a hole opened in the sky and from it poured a wondrous sight. She saw Michael and hundreds of other angels enter the world and joy poured down from the sky. Many of the smaller angels took places above the town, sitting on rooftops and ready to watch. Michael, however, descended. He folded in his wings and took on a more human form and stood before the Hosts.

“Children,” he said in a deep and majestic voice. He was beautiful, a distant cry from the terrifying and inhuman look he’d apparently originally taken. He’d practised to look this good. “We have heard of this event for many years, but it was not until my curiosity that we have come to watch. Please, do go on as we embrace your gift.”

He stepped closer and cupped Beatrix’s hands in his. A smile and a gentle bow was all she got, but it was more than enough. This motion and the look in his eyes said everything. Appreciation for his freedom, forgiveness for her panic at that time, unconditional familial love. He then grew six pairs of massive white wings and floated into the sky above the Fort of Kings at the centre of the city. He didn’t return to his true form, the one which Beatrix looked most similar to, and he settled down to watch.

Beatrix looked back at the Hosts. They were truly in awe of the sight of those they descended from. She could feel synergies in the souls of the Hosts and specific angels that sat and watched. Every one of their ancestors had arrived. This was truly a display of their legacy. They all put on their Masks

of Light, those eyeless masks worn by worshippers of the Grand Lord, and were ready. Beatrix manifested her own and signalled the guards to open the gate. And so the dance began.

The motions were simple and in time to the music, each step moving the group forward. As they advanced up Kingsway South they saw thousands of people. They'd come out despite the unusual cold for this time of year. Even if they hadn't her efforts wouldn't have felt wasted thanks to the angels, but she was happy to feel their presence.

They rounded the Fort of Kings, Beatrix feeling the souls of the Eyes of Chassuille and the Order of Blades, her cousins and the angels. It was all so overwhelming. She hadn't even felt Azra-el until that moment, standing on a roof and radiating approval. He'd spent so long on that island that this would be his first time seeing the dance in person. Adela and Mira stood with him, cheering loudly as she approached.

They then proceeded up Kingsway North and towards the north gate. Beatrix felt the wildly varied souls of the Archivists and the mages of the city. This really wasn't just an event for the Hosts. Every year the entire city turned out to watch, some people renting out their windows and rooftops on the main streets so people can get a good view.

They passed through the north gate to cheers and when the gates closed behind them the music stopped and most of the Hosts fell to the ground, exhausted. The majority of them were in the fifth circle or higher and so started using their aether to heal themselves of the fatigue, and there was a general buzz of excitement. The dance took the better part of an hour, but the pain was worth it.

“There’s a creepy guy outside the compound,” said Chas as he strolled into the training yard and putting down his coat.

“Compound?” asked Vedar, stifling a laugh.

“This is a mansion, not a compound,” said Tullis. He smacked Vedar in the shin with a wooden practice blade while he wasn’t paying attention then the two got back to practising with renewed enthusiasm.

Beatrix sighed and motioned for them to follow her. She noticed them look at each other hesitantly but did as she asked anyway. They left behind their practice gear and when they’d gathered outside they got to see Egil for the first time.

He wasn’t wearing his normal outfit of rags covered by a grey poncho. He was dressed in a simple black shirt with deep grey trousers and formal shoes. At his side was a sword that Beatrix knew was one of her blades.

“You can dress nice but your teeth are still done and your hair’s a mess,” said Beatrix.

“Yes, my preparation for the big day was interrupted,” said Egil. “I was called here to give you another job. One that I didn’t expect.”

“Chas, stab him,” said Beatrix as she put Fang in his hand with her power.

“Uhhh...” said Chas.

“Interesting choice of blade,” said Egil. “You’ve got a sense of irony.”

“Stab him, Chas,” said Beatrix. Chas inched forward and Egil spread out his arms, accepting the attack. He even opened his shirt, revealing his surprisingly well-tone stomach. Chas took a breath and then forced Fang into Egil. He even managed to get the blade to use its power, blowing a hole through Egil’s back. Beatrix was sure that that was just Fang being itself. The blade was bloodthirsty.

“You follow orders well,” said Egil. He leaned in close and smiled at Chas, who managed to stand his ground despite

his obvious fear. “Tell me, boy... For all your training and all your obedience, could you kill her if you needed to? Kill your master?”

“He’d better be able to by the time I’m done with him,” said Beatrix. She put her hand on Egil’s shoulder and pushed him away from Chas. “If he’s able to have confidence in a fight against me then he’ll have no problem with you. But you said you had a job for me?”

“North across the sea from Nerik is an island,” said Egil. “On that island is a man of great power who is about to discover a form of magic he shouldn’t toy with, and he’s the exact kind of man to play with things like that.”

“So he’s going to develop a weapon that Azael doesn’t want to exist?” asked Beatrix. “Why should I stop that?”

“He doesn’t want you to stop it,” said Egil. His grin was horrible. “He wants you to learn from Argus. He wants you to become even more powerful than you already are. You are a fine warrior, but you need magic. You have the raw power but not the refined skill.”

“Argus, you say?” asked Beatrix. “I’ll be sure to tell Akenesa how to reach him, but I’m not going there myself. You can leave now.”

“He has two of your blades, you know,” said Egil. He had a sly smile that made Beatrix want to punch him more than usual.

“I hate you so much,” said Beatrix, letting some flame flow from her hand and setting him on fire. She walked back inside her house and prepared to travel north.



Beatrix had sent Vedar off to get Royan while she took the others deep into the Temple of Chassuille. She’d never shown them the base of the Eyes before, but it didn’t feel like a big deal. That was until Chas stood at the entrance in awe, staring at the magic weapons and armour just laying around, all while

Mira ran up to Vincent to demonstrate her knife skills. Tullis lurked by the entrance and just watched.

“What brings you here?” asked Aldo. Other than him and Vincent the only Eye that was there was Gilbert, though he was just laying in the shadows nearly invisible.

“I’d like to borrow the *Prishe*,” said Beatrix.

“Now there was some wording I never thought I’d hear from you,” said Aldo. “Friendly, polite, asking not telling.”

“Are you going to mock me for actually trying for once? Really?” Beatrix crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

“Why do you want the airship?” asked Aldo, holding back his smile.

“Egil has told me the location of Argus of the Lightning and he apparently has two of my blades,” said Beatrix. “This will be a peaceful mission... I hope.”

“He’s a revenant,” said Vincent. “You might need some backup if things go poorly.”

“It’s your airship if you’re offering,” said Beatrix. “I was going to stop in Nerik to grab my cousins, maybe my grandmother if she’s not busy.” She felt Royan and Vedar enter the temple above so she flared her aether as a signal to tell them to descend the stairs. Royan had gotten a hang of the basics rather quickly so it was nice to be able to use signals like she could with the Eyes.

“I’ll go,” said Gilbert, rising from a puddle of darkness next to Aldo. “I’ve always wanted to meet Argus. You’re not allowed in Nerik, Aldo, so I’ll be responsible and represent our order.”

“Tesni and Helge are in the Fort of Kings,” said Aldo, looking at Beatrix and ignoring Gilbert. “Take them to balance out this clown.”

“I’m the clown but we’ll be going to a place where the people paint thei—” Gilbert stopped at Beatrix’s glare and just smiled, knowing he’d stepped right up to the line. “And here I thought your cousin Akenesa was the terrifying one.”

“How can you be scared of a blank expression?” asked

Beatrix.

“It’s not the face that scares me,” said Gilbert. “It’s how I’ve seen her aether go from nothing to overflowing in her grand level soul in a split second. If she wasn’t on our side against Azael I’d probably give up and just go get drunk until the world ends.”

“You have an aetheriad,” said Beatrix. “You can’t get drunk.”

“I can try,” said Gilbert, elbowing Aldo and grinning.

“You’re the reason my parents didn’t realise I was a nephilim,” said Beatrix. “Without you around they might have been able to research what I was without bias.”

“Well, without you I’d still have a father,” said Gilbert. They stared at each other for a minute, Vincent just laughing in the background and Aldo wandered off to a table and started looking through some papers.

“Who’s his dad?” Chas asked Tullis, who shrugged.

“His father was Lucifer, the Twilit Archangel,” said Beatrix, breaking eye contact. “Aldo, can I have *Prishe*?”

“Yes, yes,” he said, sitting down with a book. “Make sure you get Tesni and Helge. Tell Tesni she’s in charge of the group.”

“I’m five hundred years old and I’m not in charge?” asked Gilbert.

“Tell me, Gilbert, are you planning to ask Argus what it’s like to be blown up by Akenesa?” Aldo looked at him with steely eyes.

“Not any more.” Gilbert shrugged and melted into the shadows, and Beatrix tracked his aether as he zoomed up the stairs and out of the temple, heading north toward the airship docks.

“He’s going to ask it anyway,” said Vincent.

“Probably,” said Beatrix. “Alright, let’s go.”

“We just climbed down all those stairs with perfect timing to hear you say that?” asked Vedar, mildly out of breath, as he and Royan entered the room.

“Yup,” said Tullis, walking past them and laughing.



It was around noon when they arrived at the Fort of Kings. It seemed Tesni and Helge were training some of the soldiers.

“Wait, is Tesni the scary serpentine lady in white?” asked Vedar. “They hired her a few days ago to start teaching anti-mage tactics. She single-handedly whipped the entire squad and I don’t think she was even using her full power.”

“You lost to Tesni?” asked Beatrix.

“Well, I mean, yeah,” said Vedar, looking away.

“Alright,” said Beatrix. “I’m about to show you how to defeat a serpentine every single time you fight them.”

She walked forward and caught Tesni’s attention. The girl stopped teaching the soldiers proper stances and got ready to fight as soon as Beatrix summoned Havoc and Malice to her hands.

“Helping me demonstrate?” asked Tesni. “Better not use any of your powers if you want to set a good example.”

Without answering back Beatrix rushed in, dodging three quick bolts of green flame. She dismissed her sickles and grabbed Tesni by horns. Beatrix pulled herself back, putting a foot on Tesni’s hip and in a moment the girl was flipped over Beatrix’s head, slamming into the ground. Beatrix then stomped on one of her horns, digging it into the ground. Tesni struggled for a moment before giving up.

“That’s just rude,” said Tesni. “Help me up.”

“But look at the soldiers,” said Beatrix, taking a bow as they cheered her on.

“I can’t turn my head! I’m looking at clouds!”

“Alright, people!” shouted Beatrix, calming the soldiers down. “That move only works on serpentine with horns that curve backwards. Tesni’s horns are perfect for the manoeuvre but against others you’ll need better tactics. Notice she didn’t attempt her breath weapon or her full transformation, even

though both would have stopped me getting right in her face like that. Both moves would have been destructive, so expect it from any real enemies you fight. This was just practice.”

“Yes, yes, you’re a natural leader, I get it,” said Tesni. “Now get me out of the ground before I transform and break the fort in the process!”

Beatrix pulled Tesni’s horns out of the ground and helped her up. Tesni then punched her in the arm, but Beatrix paid no attention to it.

“Where’s Helge?”

“Is that really all you have to say to me?” asked Tesni, still upset by that display.

“Aldo wants you two to come with me,” said Beatrix. “We’re going to meet Argus.”

“The Obliterater?” asked Tesni.

“That’s a very serpentine thing to call him. He has two of my blades according to Egil and I want them. We’ll be picking up a couple of people in Nerik before we go, and we’re taking *Prishe*.”

“Hmm, alright, I’ll go get him, he’s with the Bull Knight right now retraining the elites.” Tesni ran off towards the barracks.



It was the first time any of the Order of Blades had been in an airship. Tullis and Royan were near the prow taking in the sights while Vedar was looking at the engine below deck. Chas was nervously strapped into a seat but Mira and Beatrix were chatting in the cabin.

“So I get to meet more of our family?” asked Mira. She had a smile that Beatrix couldn’t deny.

“Yes, we’re going to land at the Isle of Dusk first. There you’ll meet Vala Zoraken. She’s a Seer, and she’ll be able to tell us your exact birthday.”

Mira was surprised by this but smiled and danced

around. Beatrix had meant to talk to Vala sooner, but she'd gotten so caught up in her work with training her students that she just didn't have the time.

"And you already met Akenesa and Liara during the Quiet," said Beatrix. "I hope they'll be coming with us to see Argus. I want to introduce you the matriarch too."

"The matriarch?" asked Mira.

"Galina." Beatrix touched the little fangs beneath her lips. "It's her black blood that stains my face. All her children carry her everywhere they go. I'll warn you now that she can be scary. She has a madness stemming from a scar on her soul, just like I do. I suffer anger, but she is a lunatic."

"I won't be scared," said Mira.

"Good," said Beatrix. "And try not to be afraid of my grandmother either. Her name is Aleksashdra, but most call her Sasha. Do you know what lust is?" Mira shook her head. "She's... Just ignore her words and don't let her touch you."

Beatrix had visited Nerik a few times since returning to Avani and she'd had some awkward encounters. Every taboo was an afterthought to Sasha, and she'd wanted to do more than just examine Beatrix's physique.

"We're approaching land," said Royan, entering the cabin. "Ten minutes at most."

"I'm going to head down early, then," said Beatrix.

"Can I come?" asked Mira. Beatrix nodded and they went outside. Beatrix waited for the airship to be over the docks and then took Mira in her arms and leapt from the railing, spreading her wings and flying down.



"So this is Mira," said Vala, crouching down and looking the girl in the eyes. She'd met Beatrix and Mira outside the Castle of Dawn, knowing when they were to arrive. "I've been waiting to meet you. By the Avani calender, you were born on the tenth day in the ninth week of Heat, in the year six hundred and

sixteen.”

“Almost ten,” said Beatrix.

“We’ll have to throw a party,” said Vala with a soft smile. It was a side of Vala that Beatrix could only remember seeing when Isaac was born. She had a love for children. “There’s another matter I wish to discuss with you while you are here.”

“What is it?”

“There are no more Chanzalee,” said Vala. “They were all lost to the Ruination. As such, I have decided to reunite the branches of the family. You would no longer be an Akenzal. You, your mother, your brother. You would all be Zorakenee.”

“Narianel Zoraken,” said Beatrix. “It’s much shorter. It would be an honour.”

“I’ll send a message to your mother,” said Vala. “And this one would be Mira Zoraken. It’s a good name.”

“I agree,” said Beatrix when Mira looked up at her. The girl’s face lit up. She hugged Beatrix about the waist and Beatrix put her hand on Mira’s head. Beatrix couldn’t really deny it any more. She had a daughter.

“Will you be visiting the forge?” asked Vala.

“I will, once my students get here,” said Beatrix. “I’ve never been down there and want to see it for myself.”

“Truth is down there,” said Vala.

“There are several blades in the city,” said Beatrix. “I can feel them. Maybe I’ll grab them while I’m here.”

“Lady Kewaen is unlikely to give up Thorn,” said Vala.

“I’ve already asked,” said Beatrix. “She said I’d have to beat her in a duel for it. I’m not sure that’s even possible with the way she doesn’t stay down. Regardless, I think I’ll actually pass on it for now. Knowing they’re here is enough for now, but I’ll take Truth.”

They waited a while, talking idly and catching up. When the Eyes and Beatrix’s students arrived they all went inside the castle. Vala gave the group a quick tour, though the Eyes already knew the ground floor.

“So am I an honorary Zoraken?” asked Gilbert.

“You were born here, so I don’t see why not,” said Vala and Beatrix stopped in her tracks.

“My sister!” said Gilbert, putting his arm around Beatrix and laughing.

“I am, of course, joking,” said Vala. The look on her face as she looked at Beatrix was infuriating. The Seer knew exactly what to say and what would happen, and her sense of humour was apparently vicious.

“I see you fixed the columns and the stained glass,” said Gilbert. “I’m sorry about any damage my father might have caused.”

“Don’t worry so much about it. The columns were Raphael and the window was Narianel,” said Vala. “But yes, we’ve had to restore the original decorations after your father put his own flair on everything.”

“Can I keep my room?” asked Gilbert.

“You may keep it,” said Vala. “You’re a being of the twilight, just like us. You’ll be welcome here. Perhaps there is room in the Zoraken household for a Second Family. Tell me, do you have a Skrae name, Gilbert Huff?”

“My mother had wanted to name me Akencha,” said Gilbert. “When she died in childbirth, my father named me for my grandfather.”

“Akencha,” said Vala. It meant *darklight* and was quite blunt, but Beatrix thought it suited him. He may have more of the dark in him, but he worked for the Eyes. “Akencha Zaeften. How does it sound?”

*Zaeften* and *Kenan*. Dusk and Seer.

“I’ve seen the forge,” he said, his aether rushing. If he wasn’t pitch black he’d have been blushing. He was certainly smiling. “I’ll go look at the temple. I’ll see you later.”

He disappeared into the shadows and the tour went on. They were shown the dining room and art collection before heading down a wide set of stairs. There was a theatre underground which got several comments from the group, but

Beatrix liked it. It was very fitting, as Prochorus had been known as the Black-Eyed Bard.

They went through the back of the theatre to reach the forge. The room was lined with little alcoves where materials were stored and a set of small jars filled with liquid aether made Beatrix pause. Each let off an individual scent and she knew many of them.

“These are where they were stored,” said Beatrix. She called Heart to her hand and looked through the hole in its crossguard at the jar. “In Prochorus’s journals he wrote that he could speak directly to the angels within the blades. How did he do it? I’ve not been able to figure it out. I can get feelings and intentions from them, especially blades like Fang which make it all clear, but I’ve yet to be able to actually speak with them.”

“It is simple,” said Vala. She stood at a desk to the side of the room and picked up Truth from it. The blade was a simple white sword with no adornment. Prochorus really went all-in on the theming of some blades. “Truth’s angel is called Vera. Galina named her second daughter after this angel, and she was the mother of Akenesa and Liara. The angel, however, is know for speaking only the truth.”

Vala stabbed the ground, but it didn’t damage the stone tile floors. A large circle appeared around the blade and expanded to fill the room.

“That’s pretty cool,” said Chas.

“Within the aura of Truth, only the truth may be spoken,” said Beatrix. “Be careful when opening your mouth.”

“I like that you know the blades so well,” said Vala. “Your mother taught you well.”

“Most of my research is my own interest,” said Beatrix. “My mother taught me many things, but I find the lives of my ancestors interesting. Now tell me how to talk with the angels. It’s one thing that I don’t know about my power.”

“You need a stronger will than them,” said Vala. “If you don’t then you’ll be taken over. I think you know what I’m

talking about.”

“I do,” said Beatrix. She closed her eyes and nodded, frowning. “I understand completely.” It was a power she had yet to tap into, and was afraid to try.

Vala removed the blade from the ground and walked to Beatrix, who took the sword into herself.

“A strong will,” said Vala.

“We’ll go to the Temple of Blades now,” said Beatrix. “I’m going to spend the night in the Talwaen Estate after that. We’ll head north tomorrow, so I hope we can talk more before I leave.”

Vala smiled and nodded.



The last time she was in the Temple of Blades she had met Egil for the first time in a decade and then been pulled from one continent to another as the temple was brought to Nerik. It was odd returning to it.

“There is a single hallway leading to the centre of the building,” said Beatrix. “It’s not really much of a temple. At the end of the hallway is a room containing an altar for each blade. The blades go into those altars and when the song is sung it is pushed through the universe.”

“And that song can heal corruption?” asked Royan.

“Not quite,” said Beatrix. “It pulls the corruption from those that hear it and draws it into the singer. From what we can tell corruption is indestructible and it needs a vessel.”

“That’s quite the burden,” said Tullis.

“It is, but it will be worth it,” said Beatrix. “Even if it means I’ll need to visit Liara regularly to keep it under control I’ll pay the price it takes to heal the universe.”

“Liara?” asked Vedar. “Who’s that again?”

“My cousin. She has the unique ability to suppress or expand corruption. The effects are temporary, but she could allow me brief moments of lucidity that could help me stay

sane in the long run.”

They reached the room at the end of the hallway and Beatrix demonstrated how each altar could be filled with her blades. Any time that many blades had been removed from her storage she felt rather empty. She'd grown accustomed to them, and even though she still held onto the blades she'd crafted herself, she knew she was becoming attached.

“You have more than I realised,” said Gilbert. He was sat on Purity's altar. It was probably intentional. Lilith was almost a step-mother to him, even though they'd never met.

“There's still a lot more to collect,” said Beatrix.

“Alright, we've seen this,” said Tesni. “Can we get out of here now? People keep staring at me.”

“We're staying the night,” said Beatrix.

“Why?” Tesni crossed her arms and pouted.

“Family matters, and it's best not to fly at night when we're heading towards an unknown entity. Besides, you're serpentine and these people are fresh from the Ruination, saved by being frozen for over six hundred and hidden away from the Dragons.”

“That's not my fault,” said Tesni.

“No, it's not,” said Beatrix, “but you'll need to just deal with the prejudice until we leave. The Synod is working on teaching people about Avani and the history of its people, so it's only a matter of time before your kind are more accepted here. You'll be safe as long as you're an ally of the Synod.”

“Fine, I'll just stick by you,” said Tesni. She had one of those grins that made Beatrix just want to look away in shame and disgust.

Then the unexpected happened. Mira stepped between Tesni and Beatrix with a fierce and protective aura. She wasn't looking at Tesni, but she latched on to Beatrix's sleeve.

“Just keep wearing symbols of Chassuille, or convert to one of the local Houses,” said Beatrix.

“I think I'd make a good member of House Talwaen,” said Tesni. Mira gripped tighter.

“Maybe Liara will adopt you as a pet,” said Beatrix. “She loves animals.”

Tesni laughed at that and just shrugged, and Mira seemed to relax.

“So how does this place work?” asked Chas, speaking up after obviously holding in the question during the banter.

“Pipes and magic,” said Gilbert.

“That doesn’t sound right,” said Chas. “How does it work, Lady Blackwood?”

“Pipes and magic,” said Beatrix with an exaggerated shrug. She didn’t actually know. “And don’t call me that. I’ve said before, but just call me Beatrix or Narianel. Either name works.”

“Nartrix,” said Gilbert. “Beanel.”

He was leaning his foot on Purity so she called it into herself, making him almost lose balance and fall. She pointed at him as a warning and he smirked.

“Alright,” said Beatrix. “Let’s go to the main island. We should take the ferry and leave *Prishe* where it is for the night. We’ll be back tomorrow.”



It was dusk and they could see the Isle of Dusk across the water, the crystals all over the roofs glowing in the evening light.

“Do you think they repaired the statue you destroyed?” asked Gilbert.

“Don’t bring that up,” said Beatrix. It was a moment of weakness. “But probably.”

They continued walking up the road along the edge of the Night District. The ferry had dropped them off at a small pier instead of the main docks in the Market District. It was a gravel path instead of the intricate cobblestone paths of the main city, but soon they found those paths and their way under the covered streets. The voice of the Lunatic Choir

echoed through the area in pipes and it was calming.

The white robes of the Eyes stood out, though Beatrix was given bows and curtsies. It was then that she realised she should get a uniform for the Order of Blades. It should be the monochrome designs of House Zoraken. It was appropriate.

They made their way to the Talwaen Estate and were greeted by the guards, and Beatrix noticed a servant run off to inform the family. The path was lined with familiar black roses and people were gathering out on the lawns, as they did every night. As the group approached the main building the doors opened.

“Welcome, dear child,” said Galina. It was apparently rare to see her outside as the people on the lawns gathered around with astounding speed.

“Matriarch,” said Beatrix, bowing her head for just a second. “I’ve come to see you, but also to request aid from Akenesa and Liara.”

“Akenesa is in her study and Liara shall be here shortly with her wolves,” said Sanja Talvara, leader of the Second Family. She had once been head servant, but she had taken to her new life well. “Your allies can stay and watch, if they wish, or they can wait in the lounge.”

“Will you participate?” asked Galina. “You are one of us and the people ask for you. They’ve yet to see your wild form, the shape of the night inside you.”

Beatrix looked around at the crowd and they were all smiling at her. It wasn’t in the same way as the people back in Seremont. She wasn’t a war hero or a knight here. She was a religious figure. It was odd, but this was genuine love coming from the crowd, but not because she earned it. It was a strange and uncomfortable birthright.

She walked out onto the lawn and the people parted for her. It was reverence, not respect. When she had space around her she called upon the nocturnal creature within her and in the early night she unleashed it. She knew she was much smaller than other Vanavolk, but the people still adored her.

She spread her wings and there were no cheers, just bowing and prayers.



Akenesa's study wasn't really a study any more. Since being freed from the magical chest prison she had gone into her research with renewed vigour and fervour. Every couple of weeks she'd have one of the Archivists here to assist in the research, the Seer named Walden that Beatrix had previously met, though she couldn't remember his last name.

There were books piled to the ceiling and a hard to navigate path to her desk. Beatrix had been told by Sanja that Akenesa had completely emptied her two other rooms of furniture and had imported science and magic research from all over the world, even outside the local continents. Beatrix still didn't know much about the outside world, but there were apparently six other continents and part of the world was an open chasm with a magic barrier a mile down running along its length. The Gods had run out of land to hold the Dragons down and had opted for the barrier instead.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I've got a proposition for you," said Beatrix, reaching her cousin after stepping over all the books and a caged animal of some sort.

"Careful with that," said Akenesa. "That's a scrowl I captured in Vaga."

"What's a scrowl?" asked Beatrix, looking at it a little more closely. It had the head of an owl but the body and tail of a squirrel. "Oh, I see. Subtle name."

"It was named by its creator," said Akenesa.

"Who is insane enough to do this?" asked Beatrix. "Why is it looking at me like that? Is that anti-magic in the bars of the cage?"

"Argus, it's deciding how easy you are to eat, and yes that's anti-magic." Akenesa turned from her work.

"Speaking of Argus, I'm going to meet him."

“You know where he is?” asked Akenesa.

“I do, would you like to come with us? It should be a peaceful mission, but if a fight breaks out I could use some backup.”

“Wait, are you planning on walking into the home of a grand circle mage with a small army of powerful warriors and mages, including a serpentine, a Host, and now a Vanavolk that rivals his own power? And you’re expecting it to *not* turn violent?”

There was no joy in her face or posture but the way her aether flowed in bounds and swirls was the same as when others laughed. She stood and then walked to the scrawl cage, picking it up and gently shaking it to anger the creature.

“I’ll join you,” she said. “And I’ll need another one of these little monsters after I throw this one at his ugly skull.”

“Oh, good, this was a good choice,” said Beatrix. She left the room exasperated at the sensible one being the one who was going to cause the fight.



It was nearing midnight when Galina called Beatrix to her room, with a message to bring Mira. The girl was barely awake when they entered the matriarch’s room, but she became alert the moment she saw Galina. It was an instinctual twinge of fear when prey saw predator.

“Come here, little one,” said Galina, holding out her hand to Mira. Her smile was intended to be gentle but she had a mouth full of fangs.

Mira approached slowly, looking back to Beatrix who urged her forward. She knew where this was going just from the bottle on Galina’s dresser.

“Tell me,” said Galina. “Tell me your name.”

“Mira Zoraken,” she said, looking like she wanted to run away.

“Fully integrated into the family,” said Galina, smiling

and nodding for approval. "But not quite. Not just yet." Galina held out her hand, gesturing to a stool, and Mira sat down. "In this family we decorate ourselves. I'm sure you've noted the marks around my Narianel's eyes and the fangs on her chin. Those stains are my blood. Now it is your turn."

"If you didn't know my name, how did you know about me?" asked Mira.

"There's no blood relation, but you carry the scent of Narianel. You've been living with her, your souls have touched and your scents mingled. Family is familiar. I remember my own daughters having a scent so close to my own, and their daughters smelled like them in turn. It doesn't matter that there's no blood. You smell like us now."

"But I'm not a Vanavolk."

"You could be," said Galina. Beatrix had expected the talk of painting, but not this.

"I'm not sure she's ready for that," said Beatrix. "Sanja was in the low circle when she took in the blood. It could be dangerous to one so young."

"I'll do it," said Mira. That fierce determination that Beatrix often felt herself was rising within Mira. Those eyes were stunning in their honesty and passion.

"Alright," said Beatrix. She had a gentle smile and she adored the girl's attitude. The readiness to do anything.

Mira looked at Galina with that power in the way she held herself. Galina picked up the bottle filled with her blood and poured a little into a glass. It was thick and a deep black, corrupted so completely by Galina's curse. She handed the glass to Mira, who downed it in one.

Mira curled over on the stool and Beatrix watched as her aether began to rage inside her. Her core unwound and then tightened over and over until it fell into a very familiar weave of darkness and night. And then it stopped, and Mira sat up, looking from Galina to Beatrix.

"I feel weird," she said.

"You're different now," said Beatrix. "Keep practising

your magic and I'll show you how to unlock the new creature inside you. You saw me change before, and you can be that too now. It may take some practice, but you can do it."

Beatrix looked into the girls eyes and smiled. She had the crescent shaped pupils, but not the fangs. Beatrix knew she'd have to teach Mira about the dangers of anti-magic but at least she wouldn't shut down, she'd only be blind in its influence. That could be circumvented by training her to use tremors and noise as primary inputs.

Mira looked at the mirror on the dresser and noticed her eyes. This made her smile and she looked excitedly at Galina and Beatrix. Then she did what felt like a taboo. She hugged Galina and ran off. Down the hall Beatrix heard Liara shout and Mira scream, their souls showcasing their joy and excitement at the addition to the brood.

"She reminds me of myself," said Galina. "Such energy. No scar. She'll go far."

"I'll do my best to raise her right," said Beatrix. "I'll go get her back so you can paint her eyes. She's very excitable."

Galina's laugh was beautiful.

Early in the morning the group was gathering in the gardens of the Estate. Beatrix hadn't slept and so waited patiently. Royan arrived not long after dawn, trailed by Vedar who had dark bags under his eyes. She could smell the remnants of alcohol and he was readily drinking from a bottle that was labelled as orange flavoured water.

Next up was Mira, who had more energy than Beatrix had ever seen, running up and dancing around. She had a smile on her face and she was scented with a perfume that Beatrix had only ever smelled on Galina. The girl later spoke of how she'd spent the morning with the matriarch.

Chas and Helge appeared from the house next, both seeming quite awake. Beatrix had never really spoken with Helge, but she'd seen him in battle and knew he was capable and well deserving of his place as an Eye. She made a mental note to spar with him some time, testing how his muscle fared against her speed.

Tesni then appeared with Liara talking her ear off. The look in Liara's eyes as she poked at the serpentine's horns and tail was pure curiosity, and Tesni was trying her very best to not get annoyed. When Akenesa popped out of the shadows Liara turned her attention to her sister instead, and even though Tesni looked relieved there was a look in her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to be angry, despite the multitude of personal questions.

"Who are we waiting for now?" asked Akenesa as Liara ran happy circles around her.

"That Tullis boy and Gilbert," said Tesni.

"I think Tullis is older than you," said Beatrix. Tesni gave a half-hearted shrug.

"Sasha wants to see you," said Akenesa. "She'll be here soon too. Work is keeping her distracted, which has been good for everyone."

It wasn't long before Tullis showed up. He had some

bread and some of the island-grown vegetables. Mustard wasn't available in Vin except through incredibly pricey foreign traders and so he'd bought several jars of the cheaper locally sourced stuff.

Most of the group was sat at the garden tables, some eating and others playing a tile game Beatrix was only vaguely familiar with from her youth. She stood off to the side talking with Akenesa and Tesni until she saw the red jackets at the gate. Several police officers marched up the path towards them, led by Sasha.

"The uniform suits you," said Beatrix. She motioned to Mira, who quickly played her hand and upsetting Vedar before rushing over.

"I hate it," said Sasha with a grim smile. She squatted down next to Mira and held out her hand. "It's good to meet you. Narianel has told me about you in her letters."

"She said not to let you touch me," said Mira without any tact, looking at Sasha's hand. Sasha just laughed and stood up.

"Well, you're raising her to be as blunt as you are, I see," said Sasha.

"What are you wearing?" asked Akenesa. She walked up to Sasha and stretched the elastic stockings on her legs. They were black with a diagonal red stipe along her thighs, and slightly transparent. Her uniform included boots and sturdy shorts, so the legs of the other officers were exposed. Sasha had been talking about reforming the usual dress since they were no longer in a tropical climate.

"Our trading ship came back from the continent to the north-west," said Sasha. "Vos-Kadar. They're industrialised and have invented fabrics we can't produce just yet. This is called nylon. Lord Solash says he's negotiating for information on how to produce many kinds of materials from them. Nylon amongst them, but also rubbers and metal alloys. They also have these strange boxes filled with lightning or something. Ask him about it, I don't know what they are."

Industrialisation was something the Synod had never felt the need to do to Nerik. They had mages that could create stone and metal from nothing, they had demiplanes people used for farming or personal storage, they had healers and physicians capable of creating entirely new uninjured bodies for people and gifting immortality. They were a stable society thanks to all this, but the Synod was aware they were missing many technologies from around the world.

Since Nerik's re-emergence it had been sending its airships all over the world in hopes of correcting its lack of technology. Vin and other Semblan continent countries had shared knowledge of more advanced aethertech and now the Synod were searching for nonmagical information. While Vin had some of it already, such as new steam engines and small lightning generators, the Synod wanted more.

Beatrix had been hearing rumours of overseas vehicles that ran on oil and lightning, of more advanced firearms, of airships that flew without magic, and of devices like the mirrors the Eyes used to send voices over long distances. She imagined that it wouldn't be too long before these things came to the Semblan continent and Nerik, and the world would change again. Sasha's clothing wasn't the only thing that would be a novelty in the coming year.

After an hour of waiting Beatrix was beginning to get impatient. She used the power of Perception to take a look around the island, searching for Gilbert. When she found him she used Needlepoint to jump straight to him.

"We've been waiting for you at the Estate," she said, looking around the pub he was drinking in. They were in the Daylight District, the area controlled by Kresimir Solash. Her sudden arrival had spooked some of the patrons, but they quickly settled down again when they realised who she was. Creatures of the night seemingly popping out of the shadows wasn't much of a priority in Nerik.

"Is it day already?" he asked with a grin.

"Why are you drinking this much?" she asked. He held

only one mug but she could tell it wasn't his first.

"It's been over a year since he died," said Gilbert. "And now the world is unrecognisable."

"What I learned from my grandfather's death is that the world keeps moving no matter how hard I try to make it stand still." She sat down beside him and slid his drink away from him. "I think it took his death to make me grow up. I've had my grief, I've had my tantrum, and now I'm preparing to fight Azael. I'm still a rage monster, I still feel that anger, but I've nurtured it more into a tranquil fury than the beast that lashes out at every opportunity. I'm not the same as I was a year ago on the Isle of Dusk."

"Are you telling me to grow up?" asked Gilbert.

"I'm saying that it's very obvious you've yet to have a tantrum of your own. Maybe after this mission we can go out to the wilds and just spar at full strength? Let it out. Break some mountains."

He suppressed a smile, but that was enough. Beatrix charged his drinks to House Zoraken and they left.



They took the ferry back to the Isle of Dusk and were met by Vala and a few of her servants. They walked back to the *Prishe* on foot, talking amongst themselves.

Something hung in the air as they made their way to the airship, and Beatrix had trouble pinning it down. A scent she couldn't quite recognise. It was in the way the Eyes talked with her Order, in the way Vala smiled at Mira, in the way that Akenesa hung back from the group but Liara was far ahead. She felt comfortable with it, and it was odd. There was a deep contentment, a purpose. But it was lacking one thing.

It was on that walk that Beatrix made a decision. Vala gave her a knowing look, a gentle smile and a nod that no one else saw. She then started to look forward to her return to Seremont. To Adela.



They had been flying for over an hour to the north before land came into view. Most were in awe at the thought as they were now beyond where the Torrent had been. They were in the new world.

The land ahead was just an island, but it had been obviously flattened by magic and at its centre was a massive tower, pushing outward as it ascended like a tree, each balcony stretching out farther than the last. Right at the top was a massive aether crystal that had to be synthetic. Natural growths never got so large their shine could be seen from miles away.

On the balconies, amongst the branches, were notable points of aether. Souls milling about. The tree was a city of sorts. They were ultrices, too, which was the strangest part about them. These folk had often washed up on northern beaches with no memory but keen minds, no history but a strong sense of destiny. They were attuned to lightning, so they stood out in a crowd, but were indistinguishable from humans to the naked eye. A closer look at them revealed their veins, when close to the surface, were shaped like flowering vines rather than straight lines, almost like the scars people get when struck by lightning.

Beatrix had met a few ultrices before. One served under her in the army, another was a merchant near to her home, and she'd seen some walking the streets, but she'd never have imagined a whole city of them.

When the airship approached the city they were quickly surrounded by small balls of metal with single large eyes that looked all over them. They were golems. Trapped elemental spirits. These ones were lightning too, just like the ultrices, and after they had examined the airship they lined up in front and led the *Prishe* to a dock.

They landed and a set of stairs was rolled up, and they

were greeted by a man in a long purple coat. His hood was up and his skin was pale, but to Beatrix's nose he was human. She figured he was likely albino, to be hiding from the sun. But he had a smile that was unsettling, and there was a red flicker behind his pale brown eyes.

"Argus," said Akenesa, walking forward, cage in hand.

"Grand Lady Akenesa," said the man. He used a very strong honorific for her in Skrae, greeting her as a god more than a woman. Before he could say anything else she had opened the cage and thrown the scowl at him. Beatrix had never seen someone go from standing in a power pose to being a mess on the ground quite so quickly. It was honestly rather impressive.

Then, by a building in the distance, Beatrix noticed a man in a black suit, wearing a bowler hat and holding a cane in front of him with both hands, leaning on it and watching with interest. His face looked like it had been sculpted to be as forgettable as possible and everything else about him was distracting him from it, deliberately worn and positioned so that anyone who saw him wouldn't take in his actual likeness.

"Is that thing eating his face!?" shouted Tesni. Beatrix looked at her and then back to the man in the suit, but he was gone.

"This man is a revenant," said Akenesa. "He'll be fine." She was just standing there watching the creature try its best to kill him.

When he finally managed to grab it by the scruff of its neck he spoke a word that Beatrix didn't hear despite how good her hearing was. It wasn't a whisper, but a word she just wasn't allowed to hear, as if the universe cut off the sound as it left his lips. The scowl went to sleep, hanging limp. He held it out for Akenesa to take.

"I wouldn't give it back to her," Helge whispered to Gilbert and both chuckled to themselves.

"What can I do for you?" asked Argus, looking at the group while his face regenerated. In the depths of a missing

eye Beatrix saw a pinprick of red light, and that explained the flicker earlier. This man was undead and he was wearing skin like clothes despite being a skeletal being.

“I’ve done what I came to do,” said Akenesa.

“I’ve been told that you have two Divine Blades of Prochorus,” said Beatrix, stepping forward. “I’m hear to take them back, to use them for their purpose.”

“Hmm, I thought you’d be here to steal my research,” said Argus. He adjusted his hood and wiped his chin with a gloved hand where the daylight had touched it.

“I’m aware you’ve been creating a weapon of some sort but I’m not interested in it, I just want the blades.”

“I have a rather large collection of magical weapons,” said Argus. “You’ll have to tell me which ones they are.”

“So you’ll give them to me?” asked Beatrix, a little shocked that it might be that easy.

“I want a favour first,” said Argus. “Follow me.” He walked off and the group followed with Beatrix walking up to beside Argus. She had some questions but Royan asked first.

“What is this place?” he asked as they passed a group of people. They were loading boxes onto a cart that was set to be pulled by an aethertech horse. The men had their shirts off and the exertion showed those flowered veins.

“I build weapons to be used by angels and reapers and gods,” said Argus. “Production ramped up before the Ruination then slowed down, only doing repairs for a long time, and now it’s all starting again. Those parts, however, are going to be used by the Worlders on the Aether Sea. New worlds will soon be born and I’ll be able to move away from Avani. I’ve never felt safe here.”

They then entered a small building and were soon descending flights of stairs. The mortals in the group were tired by the end, but Beatrix, Gilbert, and Akenesa were just fine. After a brief passage through a plain metal hallway they found a large room with many display cases on the walls and forming aisles. It was a spectacular sight.

The group split up and Beatrix walked the aisles with Mira and Royan. Beatrix noticed Tesni talk to Argus at the side of the room and hand him a communication mirror, but decided it wasn't her business. The Eyes were probably going to get new armour and weapons soon, but she didn't need to know the details.

"Do you know which two they are?" asked Royan.

"The aether in this room, in this whole city in fact, is dense. It's hard to make out the different scents. I'll know them when I see them, however, as I have the sketches." She took a small book out of her pocket and handed it to him. It was one of Prochorus's notebooks and had detailed drawings of each of his blades, so Royan looked through with interest and kept looking up at the weapon cases.

After walking about a hundred feet Beatrix found an open central area that revealed the room was cross-shaped. She sent Royan with Tullis and Vedar down one path, sent Akenesa down another path, and the Eyes down the third path. She stayed in the first part of the room and searched the central area with Mira.

"Your aether is very mixed, isn't it?" asked Argus as he wandered over to her. He'd taken off his coat and was wearing a black tunic and trousers, and a pair of black shoes with a purple symbol on the toes that she didn't recognise. "Very much like Akenesa but not quite. Lots of angel in you. Is she your mother?"

"My cousin," said Beatrix.

"Ah, you descend from the vampire then?"

She nodded. "Sasha is my grandmother. Why did you imprison them all?"

"To protect the future," said Argus. He scratched at his cheek and thought to himself. He looked like he wanted to say something but was unsure how to phrase it.

"Wouldn't they have been useful at the Battle of the Grand Gate? In the Ruination? It didn't really do much good to seal away such powerful people as my cousins and the Vault

Lords.”

“My apprentice had a vision of the future,” said Argus after taking in Beatrix’s words. He idly ran his hand over a display case. The dagger inside was labelled Hearthhollow. It wasn’t one of hers. “She said that if the Vault Lords weren’t stopped they would eventually roll over the whole continent, conquering for Nerik. That would cause an imbalance, the wrong Champions surviving, and result in a loss at the Grand Gate. She said to never release them, as the time would come when they would return without me, and that it was at the right time.”

“That’s pretty vague,” said Beatrix. She looked at a bladed disc in a case labelled Cinderswarm. It had elven scripts that Beatrix had never learned to read etched into it.

“It is, but Seers tend to be that way,” said Argus. “She told me not to fight Legion for the same reason. My power would be enough to tip the scales and it wouldn’t end at the right time.”

Beatrix met his eyes and he looked sad to say this. He knew what Legion was and wanted to end that suffering.

“I’ll be dealing with him at the next Break,” said Beatrix. “I’m not going to let it continue. You’re welcome to join the battle then.”

“I know what those blades are,” said Argus. “I’ve heard of them, but didn’t know I had collected two from the battlefields of the Ruination. It’s a heavy burden. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“I can,” said Beatrix, but before she could reassure him Akenesa whispered into her mind that she’d found one. They walked over to find Fogbody, the fallen angel Melhaia. She attempted to draw it into herself but it only shook in its case, struggling against the security that kept it there. Argus used a key to open the case and handed it to her.

“This is one of yours?” he asked.

“It is, I can already feel it.” She drew it into herself and used its power, becoming mist that could move freely. There

was a story about this sword that her mother had told her. It went that its user in the Ruination would use it to dodge through attacks, appearing behind enemies and striking them down. He would also use it to pass through the gaps in doors and windows to get into serpentine strongholds. It was sad to think that a man who had mastered a blade's ability had fallen in battle.

"I think I found the other one," said Royan walking up. "Need you to confirm it though." She wandered over and looked at the blade.

"This is it," said Beatrix to Argus, tapping the case that Royan showed her. A black scimitar named Deception. When she drew it into herself she suddenly felt odd. All her blades began to shiver. She ejected Deception from her soul and fell back, suddenly sore all over. The blade clattered along the floor and she felt a menace from it.

"What is wrong with that blade?" she asked, clutching at her core. Her aetheriad was in overdrive, her aether flowing fast and her body shaking.

Akenesa picked it up and looked it over. Her hands shook and her eyes narrowed just enough to notice and she dropped it.

"It's been cursed," she said. "I recognise the scent. It's Asmodeus. The soul of the blade is screaming and trying to used its power on anyone that touches it. I could hear the lies it whispered and saw the illusions, but they were weak and distorted because the curse is overwhelming it."

"How do we remove a curse on a blade?" asked Tullis.

"How did you even bring it here?" Royan asked Argus.

"In a bag," said Argus with a shrug. "Half the things in here are cursed."

"I'll ask Vala when we get back to Nerik to look into the event that cursed it," said Akenesa. "If she can find the words then we can reverse it, but it might take a while."

"That's fine," said Beatrix. "As long as we have it. Now what was the favour you wanted, Argus?"

“I wish to simply exchange current research with the Grand Lady here,” he said. He turned with a smile to Akenesa. “What are you working on? I’m currently developing what I’ve called soul switches, allowing the user to easily switch the aether their soul is aligned to.”

“I have a blade that does that,” said Beatrix. He looked at her like he was about to ask her to borrow it, but Akenesa spoke up.

“I’m working on the theory of presence. How different people get different effects out of the same words because the universe favours them. I’m willing to exchange notes, and I’ll include everything I know about Elemental, the blade that Narianel has mentioned. Many of the blades, including that one, have unique abilities. Being able to replicate it would be a boon to all in Nerik and peoples of the world.”

“You have proof of this presence?” asked Argus. He was sceptical and it showed on his face. Akenesa just pointed to Beatrix and Argus looked between them both. “You think the universe favours her over others?”

“I do,” said Akenesa. “I have detailed notes on it all. People like her, as well as you and me, have an easy time gaining power and producing the effects we want. Narianel is far more talented than us as a result of her presence, even if she lacks the refined skill we’ve honed over our years. Give her a few hundred years and she’ll catch up to us. Give her a thousand and she’ll pass into Pure territory. If she were interested in magic, anyway. She’s wasting her talent as a warrior.”

Argus chuckled and looked at Beatrix, then back to Akenesa. He then folded his arms and nodded to himself. “I’ll send an envoy to Nerik with my papers in the next few days.”

“And just so you know, when Azael is dead and the universe is safe... I’m going to kill you myself.” Akenesa gave him a look as if she were trying to stare him to death and then walked off and vanished into the shadows.

Beatrix felt it in both their souls. That resonance. These

were two people who belonged together, but their past caused a schism that couldn't be mended. They wanted to like each other but they could only exchange professionalism and formalities. It was depressing to see. They obviously deeply respected each other but it couldn't be.

It was then that Beatrix noticed Deception was gone, likely taken by Akenesa. It was so hard to tell with the aether in the city. Everything was moving and shifting and merging and splitting.

"Now, everyone, spend the night here," said Argus. "I'll show you around my factory and you can tell me of the places you come from and the battles you've fought. I don't get out much so it will all be interesting to me."



It was dusk and Beatrix sat on the edge of the city with Mira and Gilbert watching the sunset. They'd spent the rest of the day walking and talking and it was all rather exhausting. Argus had been nice enough to give them all lodgings and Beatrix couldn't figure out why he was so friendly. When she brought this up to Gilbert he had some thoughts on it.

"I think he's trying very hard not to go hollow." It was an alarming thing to say but it was probably right. "He spends all day, every day working to equip the armies of the gods and he's what? Three thousand years old when he was originally human? I'd be surprised if he remembers his early life any more. I'm only a sixth of that and my childhood is like fog. It's like a dream I can no longer grasp. The human mind isn't meant for eternity, and even with the help of being a Host doesn't help much.

"We never told you when you were a kid, but Gregory was going a bit mad in his old age. Six hundred years and anything in his earliest years was just gone. His memory was spotty at best, with his wife and family being the most clear. He held onto you and your father hard. Everything else faded

in and out, and honestly I can feel myself going the same way. I'm approaching the end of my natural life, I'm ageing, but it'll be alright because I'll die of old age or in battle.

"Argus though? He's a scholar who hasn't fought in a long time. I can see the madness brewing in him, just as I see it in Vala and Akenesa and others that are older than Avani. We're all breaking, holding on until the battle with Azael. We need that purpose to survive. When we lose that purpose, that's when we go hollow."

It all made a horrific sort of sense and was something she was determined to avoid. If Adela truly became a lich and they could spend eternity together, maybe that would be enough of a purpose. But there were new generations of students to train, new weapons to master, new places to visit as worlds were created by her parents and the rest of their team. It was a lot on top of the weight the blades would lay on her shoulders.

"Did you see the man in the suit?" she suddenly asked, thinking back on the day.

"No?" Gilbert looked confused. Mira shrugged.

"He was there when we arrived, but then disappeared. There's something else going on here. We'd best leave first thing in the morning before we're dragged into it. Whatever is happening is part of the plan to fight Azael and I don't want to know the dirty details."

"You think the gods are going to do something evil? Do you really trust them so little?"

"What is the afterlife for?" she asked, and Gilbert raised an eyebrow.

"It's so souls can rest after they've died," he said. "So they don't become ghosts and wraiths and torment the living."

"Then why is it so organised? Why are the gods neatly arranging all those potent aether crystals so they can be easily retrieved?" She stood up and turned to the massive glowing crystal above the city. "That thing is powering the factory that is this whole city. That crystal is pure and directed power."

“So the afterlife is a weapon?” asked Mira, her eyes wide as she considered the possibility.

“I don’t know,” said Beatrix. “But I have a bad feeling. Azael and Chassuille operate the same way.”

“I don’t disagree,” said Gilbert, “but I feel we’re on the right side here. Don’t you?”

“Yeah, probably,” said Beatrix, sitting back down, looking out at the horizon again. “This place and the whole situation is just getting to me.”



Beatrix left Mira in their rooms after she fell asleep and then decided to explore. The metallic tree city, a massive factory, was something she had never imagined. She walked the streets and saw that the ultrices worked through the night, though she was sure they were different from the ones she’d seen before. They had homes and families, so she thought they must only use half their workforce at a time so the others could rest.

She walked into an area with no light and she called on the eyes of her inner Vanavolk. Akenesa had taught her how to do it quite recently after noticing she couldn’t see in the dark like other Vanavolk. Too much angelic blood requiring light to see had changed her eyes, so she had to focus to call on the power lying dormant within her.

Everything was in shades of grey, for the eyes of the Vanavolk saw no colour in the dark. But it didn’t matter, she just needed to see. The aether in the area drenched the air and flowed in rigid lines through pipes in the walls. It was too much and she couldn’t focus when trying to just use the aether to see as she normally would in the dark.

Beatrix found a library before long, filled with books that were written before the Ruination in languages she couldn’t read. She recognised some of the alphabets, but the words were beyond her. This man was obsessed with the preservation of the old, which she could understand. Much of

this had been created within his lifetime, she imagined, and so he felt the need to protect it.

“Why can’t I sense you?” asked a new voice from behind her. Turning she saw the man in the suit sitting at a reading table in the middle of the room. She sat opposite and he repeated his question.

“I don’t know,” said Beatrix. “What are you trying to perceive? I’m not suppressing my aether right now.”

“You have no destiny,” said the man. His hands were clasped in front of his face as he leaned on the table with his elbows.

“Are you a Mister then?”

“I am. Mister Bartholomew. Why do you not have a fate? Why can’t I see it?”

“I don’t know, ask your boss.” Beatrix leaned back in the chair and began wondering if Bartholomew could see in the dark or if he was just using his powers to be where he needed to be to have this conversation.

“Grand Lord Mao has sent me to talk to you since he cannot sense your destiny either. You are a walking anomaly. He is counting on you because of that, but he wants to know you better. To understand you.”

“Azael has chosen to make me a weapon in his grand plan to destroy the universe,” said Beatrix. “Isn’t it possible he’s stopping you from seeing what he’s manipulating me into? I keep getting stuck in situations like coming here that were not my idea.”

“Are you saying Azael told you to come here?”

“In a way. Egil Krom suggested I come here to steal whatever weapon Argus is working on, or at least to learn from Argus. When I refused I was told that two of my blades were here, which is why I came instead. I’m leaving tomorrow now that I have the blades and I have no interest in whatever Argus is creating.”

“Hmm, so Azael knows about the new aether cutters.” This troubled Bartholomew, and for the first time he showed

some emotion. There was fear in his eyes and he let his aether show. Beatrix caught his scent and tried to memorise it while she had the chance.

“New blades like mine?” asked Beatrix when she was ready to move on. Hearing her voice Bartholomew caught himself and hid his aether expertly and quickly, just as she’d predicted.

“No. Artificial souls imprinted with ideas. Far more effective at producing the powers desired than relying on the personalities and whims of the beings transformed by your ancestor.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” said Beatrix. “Not to my taste, though. I rather like that my blades have their own distinct personalities. Not many of them show it, but I can feel it. Fang is a beast on his own level, however.”

“Why do you like fallen angels and demons like those in your blades?” Bartholomew noticeably tilted his head. It was an exaggerated motion and irritated her.

“Why wouldn’t I grow to like those I share my soul with? Havoc and Malice, Kali and Zepar, have been my constant companions.”

“It just seems odd when they are all betrayers and monsters. Do you trust them?”

“I do. I trust them with my life in every battle I go into. And besides, they’ll be redeemed in the end.”

“You truly plan to sing their song?”

“Yes,” said Beatrix, leaning forward and spreading her hands on the table. “How can we fight Azael when Chassuille is broken and the people are suffering?”

“The Grand Lord Chassuille isn’t the only one that’s broken, is he?” Bartholomew let out a little smirk and she wanted to punch him. She said nothing but glared at him until he spoke again. “What was it that you said to the Host earlier? Something about the afterlife. What do you think it is?”

“Soul powered aether cannon,” said Beatrix bluntly. Bartholomew’s smirk faded and she knew she was right. If any

mortal knew it would be the Misters. “That much aether from trillions of souls is well beyond what a Pure Lord like Azael will have. It will overpower him. On top of that there’s the entire Aether Sea to be fed into it.”

“How did you know that?” he asked.

“Instinct,” she replied. They stared at each other for a time and he was obviously judging her carefully.

“Can you really be trusted?” His words were slow and deliberate.

“Can you?” Beatrix summoned Heart and placed it on the table between them. The light made Bartholomew squint, probably destroying his night vision. “This is proof of my dedication to the cause, I’d think, but for all I know you scammed your way into the graces of Mao.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Not at all,” she said, returning his smirk. “I’m sure you’ve proven your dedication time and again, but you need to stop doubting me. I’ve yet to pay with my soul, but I will.”

“You say that but you reek of Azael,” said Bartholomew with a sigh. “If it’s true he’s hiding you from our eyes and getting his most loyal minion to give you orders then I’m very worried about where it’s all going. Maybe he *wants* you to sing the song of the blades?”

“Don’t you dare tell me to stop,” said Beatrix. She stood and took in Heart, the silver light briefly lighting up the room. “It took a lot of deliberation to decide on it and there are other options for this task, but I’ll carry the burden. I have chosen this, not been told to by some crazed god.”

“I won’t ask you to give up on the song. Honestly, I think it’s a good thing you’re willing to sing it. Taking all the corruption of the universe upon yourself is noble, and not a decision that most people could make. But take care you’re not walking into a trap.”

Electric lights in the ceiling turned on and Argus walked into the room. He took a seat at the table and looked between Beatrix and Bartholomew. He took out a deck of cards

and began to shuffle them.

“No matter the outcome, we must all strive for a better tomorrow. Our only enemies are those who give in to Azael, not those who resist. We all resist, and we must keep at it.”

He dealt out the cards for four people and Akenesa popped out from the shadows. She took her seat and they played until dawn.

Days spent with Adela and Mira were becoming more and more common. Royan had taken on duties of arranging the Order's mercenary work and bounty hunting, and while Beatrix still took charge of their training she was entrusting blades to her students so they could complete their tasks.

Beatrix put thoughts of the Order out of her mind as she watched Adela teaching Mira a mage stance that allowed for better aether flow and easier casting. Since becoming a Vanavolk Mira had grown in power at an exponential rate. She was almost as powerful as Adela, who had been working hard for a decade to get where she was, and soon Mira would far surpass her.

It was one of those odd days for Beatrix when she wasn't wearing a uniform. A pair of sturdy trousers and boots, a black tunic with white arms and hood. In her pocket she had something important, and it was by far the most frightening thing she'd ever experienced. Just having it at the ready made her whole body quake.

She put her hand on it and thought through what she wanted to say. It was all so complicated and she had to fight through the smouldering rage that was welling up in her. Any time she felt strongly about anything her cursed scar reared its ugly head and turned it into anger, but she needed to keep calm as she talking this evening.

In her pocket was a pendant carved from bone hanging on a silver chain. In Nerik these pendants were made by the most powerful creature a man could hunt. Her grandfather had made one from an ether boar despite his sickly condition when he was young, and her great grandfather had made one from a wyvern. Beatrix had gone one step further and made her own from bones she'd grown herself using healing magic, snapping it from her body and carving it into shape.

When she had last visited Nerik, Beatrix asked to see the one Azra-el had made. Sasha took Beatrix to her rooms and

showed her a bust of herself, and on it hung the pendant. It was a delicate thing and Sasha kept it there instead of wearing it to protect it from getting destroyed in battle. Then Sasha took Beatrix to Anastasya's tomb and showed her the pendant made by Demyan, the one made from a wyvern. It was much rougher, a little larger, but the shape was still very beautiful and flowing.

Beatrix had spent the last four weeks carving her pendant in private, trying to make sure that it was perfect. She'd used a knife given to her by Galina for the purpose and had given it her full attention.

At dusk Mira ran off to start making her dinner, so Beatrix took her chance to talk to Adela alone. She was wearing a long sleeveless dress with a high collar, which was a new fashion that had come to the city since the start of the year. The dress was red and she wore a green sash around her waist. Her make-up was subtle and her hair was down, reaching her lower back.

"Hey, listen," said Beatrix. It made it harder that Adela looked so good. Beatrix set one hand on her hip and put the other in her pocket, clutching the pendant.

"What is it? You have a weird look on your face. Nothing good ever comes from that look." Adela was smiling as she said it.

"No, it's good, maybe. Uhh..."

"I've never seen you lost for words before," said Adela. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I've never been good at this sort of thing, so I guess I'll just be blunt about it." Beatrix took out the pendant and held it out to Adela. "This is a traditional Nerikan pendant that I carved into shape myself. I want you to take this."

"Wow, it's pretty!" said Adela, touching the pendant.

"I'm... I'm asking you to marry me, Adela."

Adela's eyes went wide and she launched into Beatrix's arms with such force they knocked heads and fell into a heap on the floor. Beatrix blinked as her vision spun and Adela

kissed her and screamed in joy.

“Yes! Absolutely!” cried Adela.

“What’s happening?” asked Mira, slamming open the door to the north wing and running out into the courtyard.

“We’re getting married!” shouted Adela. Mira let out a happy scream too and Beatrix began to lament the loss of her precious silence.



Beatrix and Adela lay in bed. It was shortly before dawn and they wore nothing, though Adela was wearing the pendant. Adela slept in Beatrix’s arms and it was so peaceful that she wished it would never end.

Evening had passed and Beatrix stood on the peak of a tower in the Castle of Dawn. They were in Nerik, beginning to make wedding plans, but there was something in the air bothering her. A familiar scent, but not one of her family. Vala and Adela were still talking in a sitting room deep within the castle, and Mira was napping before she'd be awake in the night.

But it was a lurking scent, and she couldn't place it. She jumped from the tower to follow it, and weaving through the town she ended up at the docks. The portal stone had been removed, she noticed, and she kept on the trail as it wove its way through the markets.

It was definitely disguised. Something inhuman that wants to be seen as human, and it was exploring the island, watching the people. She could smell its curiosity and a drive to find something.

She followed it down an alley. When a guard tried to ask her what she was doing in the cramped space she just shooed them away. The people of the island often thought she was strange, at least compared to other members of House Zoraken, and the guards just let her be.

In the alley she found a doorway that wasn't obvious from the street, and opening it the scent got stronger. She followed it inside and then down some stairs, curving back around in a tight helix. When she was around fifty feet under the town above she walked into a long open room.

At the end of the room sat a man on an old dining chair that was missing most of its back. There was nothing else in the room, but scrapes on the floor suggested there used to be furniture, as if it were a hideout for some gang. The man was draped in a white cloak with the hood up, hiding his face.

"I should have known you'd find me," he said. "I only got here today too. Didn't have time to look for her."

"You!" Her shout echoed above the burst of aether she pushed out of her back, hurling herself across the room,

Perception and Fang appearing in hands without a thought. She got Fang deep into his shoulder and Perception through his stomach, but he reversed the momentum and soon they were both flying up the stairs. He pushed her head against every step, leaving a long trail of deep red blood and splattering her against the alley wall before he flew into the air. Her skull and shoulders cracked back into place and she pushed off the ground as hard as she could.

In the sky he unfurled six wings of bright silver, tinted in the reds and purples of dawn. He set off around the castle and she chased him, opening several of her own monochrome wings. She didn't know why but the more she had in normal space the faster she could fly, and with nine she caught him quickly. She tackled him mid-air and they tumbled into the Black Forest, near the edge of the island.

"How are you here!?" she shouted. He hastily pulled his soulblade from his chest, a shining silver morning star style mace, its spikes red, and he knocked Perception from her hand as she attacked. She called it back into her soul and put Needlepoint in her empty hand.

"Do you not believe in redemption?" he asked, his hood slipping and showing his astoundingly beautiful face. The bright ring of energy and words circling his head marked his return to grace, and she couldn't stand it.

"Why would he give you another chance?" she asked, pointing Fang at his throat. "After everything you've done. The deaths you're responsible for."

"Still not over your grandfather?" It was said with a smirk that forced her hand. She lunged with Fang and broke through a tree as he dodged, the world around them breaking, the cracks filled with a white light.

"You don't get to say that!" As she moved, Fang started cutting reality. She didn't even need to invoke the power any longer. Abaddon was ready to destroy, just like she was. His presence was an offence to everything she had strived for.

"You need to stop," he said. He dropped his weapon

and held out his hands. "What you're doing is dangerous!"

"And coming back here wasn't, Lucifer?"

The angel smiled at her. Why would Chassuille bring a traitor back to life? It had only been a year since he was killed, yet here he was. It was infuriating. How could this man get away with ordering the death of the man she looked up to most and get away with it like this? Who had paid the cost of the resurrection?

"Don't you see the dark breaks? You'll destroy us both if you don't put that blade away! Abaddon will never be sated, believe me!"

She looked all around and saw the spiderweb of white lines in the air. Reality was crumbling around them.

"So you don't see the light of the Great Beyond either?" she asked.

"The only people that do are Azael's followers," said Lucifer. His soulblade disappeared, and he folded his wings between spaces. "I thought you'd be standing against him with the Eyes."

She dismissed Fang and Needlepoint and with pure force of will she sealed the rifts. The light vanished and she stared at Lucifer, letting her anger be apparent on her face instead of her normal blank fury.

"I stand against him. I do not falter."

"Your soul is darker than it was when we fought above this island. Listen, I'm just here to see if your ancestor has Lilith. I wasn't even going to steal it. I was trying to pick up its trail when you found me."

Beatrix held her hand to the side and summoned Purity. Lucifer's eyes lit up but he didn't dare approach her.

"Please—" he started but cut himself off when she dismissed it.

"Who resurrected you?"

"The Grand Lord himself."

"Why?"

"He's given me a chance at redemption. Absolution. I

will do my duty now. And I know where Lilith is now. I know she is safe. I can deal with that for now.”

“For now?” she asked. She tilted her head to look down her nose at him. He was much taller than her, so it wasn’t an easy task.

“When you’ve sung your song, I wish to have her.” His face was firm as he said it and he stood strong.

“No.” She turned to walk away, but he rushed in front of her, floating just above the ground and gliding to move.

“But you’ll be done with her!”

“I won’t be done until Azael is destroyed,” she said. By gliding he was now even higher above her, but she wasn’t the least bit intimidated despite his obvious confusion and anger, like a wild dog ready to strike. “Only then will I let her go. Until then, you just stay away from me. I gave you the chance to sleep in peace for your sins, but I’m feeling a lot less forgiving this time. You shouldn’t have been brought back.”

“Here, take this!” said Lucifer. He held out a leather bag and she could smell what it was without taking it or even opening it. This was what was disguising him earlier, messing with her ability to recognise him. Now that she could focus on it she realised what it was. “You can use that more than me.”

“I don’t need your corpse,” she said, knocking his hand away and walking past him. She just wanted to get back to the castle and curl up with Mira. She wanted to relax.

“You would refuse eldrite?”

“Refine it into eldrine, forge it into bars, and shove them where the sun doesn’t shine. I have more than I’ll need for my plan. I don’t need that.”

“You have a plan to defeat Azael?” asked Lucifer. His tone of voice suggested she was a fool.

“I do, and I’m sure it will work,” said Beatrix.

“And once it’s done you’ll give me Lilith?”

“Sure,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “Once it’s done.”

“Then let me help you,” said Lucifer. “I shall repent my past actions and prove to you I deserve her.”

“Now that you’re alive, maybe you will. Just stay out of my way. I never want to see you again.”

Just then some Dusk Guards burst through the forest wielding spears tipped with eldrine. They called to Beatrix asking if she was alright.

“This man is Lucifer, Archangel of Twilight, and the Morning Star,” said Beatrix. “He’s who commandeered this island while Nerik was sleeping. He is not welcome here.”

Without fear the dozen humans dressed in mistweave surrounded Lucifer and were ready to attack. These men had fought in the Ruination and stood brave despite the odds.

“I want to be your ally, to make up for the curse,” said Lucifer. “Let me help you, so that you can give Lilith to me as soon as possible.”

“You’re just going to have to be patient,” said Beatrix, locking eyes with him, letting her rage be known.

Lucifer walked away from the group and with a loop of his hand a portal appeared. Light poured through and Beatrix saw the Aether Sea beyond it. Seeing Lucifer create the portal awoke an idea within her. As a nephilim she should have access to all the standard angelic powers, but she’d never tried to create portals to the Aether Sea, Void, or even Sonta. She would have to try it later.

Lucifer took one final look back at her, his lips and brow tight, and then left.

I don't normally like to break the narrative, but it's worth noting here that Narianel's Books contain chunks of unreadable text at random points. They are notably around the times she is creating her divine blades. I believe that this has something to do with this plan she mentioned to Lucifer.

While I can say now her plan amounted to nothing and the ending of this story doesn't change from previous cycles other than the Reality Corruption, it could go a long way to explaining all the inconsistencies.

Perhaps it's a change in Azael's will that sparked all these changes amongst Narianel's thoughts. The connection from u81 to u82 is definitely frayed in a strange way, but I've already checked the books for u81's transition, and there was no change.

Narianel's plan is unreadable and I believe her to be encoding her own thoughts somehow so that not even Azael can tell what she's thinking. It would explain the strange sections of her Books. Nephilim are said to be incredibly intelligent, which we'll see later in the narrative, but Narianel herself rarely shows this quality. She can understand and learn things far quicker than others, but she doesn't put that mental effort into planning or puzzle solving unless it's directly about combat and fighting her enemies. Her actually using her great mind is somewhat of a shock, if I'm entirely honest.

I'm interested in how this will develop, and what it means for the 18th u81-u82 Transfer.

Beatrix had brought Mira to the Aether Sea using the portal in the Temple of the Aether in Darizion. They were staying with her parents for a few days to celebrate Isaac's birthday.

"I'm glad to see you still do this," called Sorley as he landed next to her on the roof of the house. He had a smile on his face and a chuckle on his breath. "I still don't understand why you always seem to be on a roof, but at least I don't have to worry about you falling any more."

He sat down and they watched Mira and Issac running through a field of flowers in the near distance. It was strange to think that he was technically her uncle, and yet he was younger, and they were acting more like close siblings. It was good to see them both so happy.

"I just like being up high, I think," she said after giving it some thought. "Maybe I was always just waiting for my wings to unfurl."

"Your mother said something very similar when you were young," said Sorley. "Just waiting to be able to touch the sky and roam free."

"I did touch the sky," said Beatrix. "It was cold, like glass in Frost."

"I did the same when I was your age," said Sorley. He let out a hearty laugh.

"What's that?" Beatrix asked. She stood up and turned to face away from the town. There was a presence moving just on the edge of her senses and she couldn't make it out. The scent was too weak for her to hold onto.

"The new world is attracting some unhealthy eyes," said Sorley. He looked in the direction she was facing without getting up. "Several demons have taken up residence over there, ready to try and infect the world as soon as it's ready. We've had some skirmishes, pushed them back a few islands, but there's a lot of them."

"Who leads them?"

“Nerog and Asmos,” said Sorley. They were the names given to Nergal and Asmodeus by those who didn’t want to attract their attention. Two powerful demons amongst the first to fall after the First Rebellion, the event that led to her divine blades. Their souls would make fine additions to her collection if she could kill them and turn them into weapons.

“Are they powerful?” she asked. “What can they do?”

“Are you planning on fighting them?”

“Of course.” She smiled at her father and he shrugged and laughed.

“Nerog was a Power, like Azra-el. He worked with the reapers in dealing with strong and dangerous spirits. They say he can pull souls directly out of bodies, but I’ve never seen him even try this in the few times I’ve fought him. He prefers to work with the undead these days.

“Asmos we don’t have much actual information on. He spreads curses, but we don’t even know which Choir he was in before his fall. Most think he was of the erelim, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he was a seraph.”

“A fallen seraph?” asked Beatrix. The only other one she could think of was Metatron. It was a horrifying prospect. “I recently found a blade that had been cursed by him. Akenesa is still working on breaking it. Deception felt wrong when I took it into myself.”

“He’s left a lot of people in a very bad way over the millennia. Your mother told me of a hospital that used to exist before the Ruination that was dedicated to his victims. Hundreds of thousands of people in various states of madness and pain. I wouldn’t recommend fighting him, Bea.”

“Isn’t it better to fight him now before he hurts others? We can save lives.”

“Come back with an army and you might have a chance of doing something.” Sorley stood and put his hand on her shoulder. “On that day you’ll have me and my sword, but he is definitely in the Grand Circle. It’ll take more than you have right now, more than *we* have right now, to take him down.

For now, the patrolling angels are holding back the imps and demons under him, and he seems content to sit there with Nerog until the new world is ready for them to pollute.”

“Why? If they’re so powerful couldn’t they finish the world without the people in this town?”

“Maybe, but you’re too young for your view of time to truly change yet.” He crossed his arms and thought for a minute. “The older you get, the longer your view becomes. You and your mother are immortal, whereas I’m simply long-lived. I might plan for things a hundred years in advance but your mother and those demons out there think a thousand years ahead. They have the time to wait. You’ll get that way too eventually. You’re still within the human scale and surrounded by mortals, but soon enough you’ll start planning on things for your Order’s fifth or tenth generation to do instead of what you’re doing in the next year.”

It all made sense to her, and she did notice she’d been thinking about what training she’d give her students a decade in advance after Royan had officially been promoted to her second, as she was considering.

Then they both turned to look at the children again as the air twisted. Beatrix let out a laugh as she saw Isaac trying to show off and fly. He was hovering just above the ground and looking so proud of himself.

“He’s going to be more powerful than me, isn’t he?” she asked.

“I think so,” said Sorley. “At least by his own volition. He’s missing that hint of twilight you have, so I don’t think he’ll have the control over the divine blades that you have, though maybe they’ll show him some favour due to his heritage. But he’s shown talent with his angelic heritage that you never did, and many of his words are magical. It’s been hard getting him to rein in his enthusiasm when speaking, and there’s been a few accidental fires and that flower garden didn’t used to be so large.”

“Born with the words in his mouth,” said Beatrix with a

soft smile.

“Very much so. He can maintain that hover for over two minutes before he runs dry and needs to eat. When your powers matured you jumped to the Low Circle, but I have a feeling he’ll be up on the High Circle with me without all the training and effort I went through. He’ll meet your mother and cousin in the Grand Circle before he’s twenty-five. Where you’ve become a warrior, he’ll be a mage, and no doubt that a duel between you two would be world rending.”

“I’m definitely looking forward to it. I can feel a certain radiance from him. Fire and light and darkness in perfect harmony. A real child of Dasus, a child of balance.”

“You put him on even terms with the Gods?”

“Look at him,” said Beatrix. “I can smell the divinity.”

“I don’t see it,” said Sorley, “but I can see the potential. He’s going to grow up strong.”

“Lunch time!” came Anða’s voice from below them and the kids came running, racing back to the house.

“You’re not worried about him being more powerful than yourself?” asked Sorley. “No jealousy?”

“Not at all.” Beatrix smiled at her father. “I want him to be strong. We’ll need all the allies we can get, and I’m as proud as a sister can be that he’s my blood. But I will say... Don’t let him go to war too young. I don’t regret my actions, but I don’t want him to lose his innocence like that. Seventeen or eighteen, minimum.”

Sorley hugged her and she felt the warmth of his soul. When he released her he had a soft look, as if he *did* regret letting her fight, but an accepting look all the same. He walked to the edge of the roof and dropped down to go get something to eat and she settled back down on the slate tiles. Her eyes drifted off towards the demons and she could feel a conflict between them and some angels.



In the afternoon Beatrix spent some time teaching Isaac and Mira some basic magic. They both picked it up quickly thanks to their magical blood. Beatrix saw what her father had meant as anything Isaac managed to do was far more powerful than she would expect for how much aether he fed it. She taught him to create fairy fire and the floating orbs were much larger than she'd seen before, a head instead of a fist, even though he'd put in as much aether as any other person.

Soon enough Sorley wandered over with wood practice swords and the kids were testing each other. Mira had more training and Beatrix could see her holding back, but Isaac had keen instincts. She suspected he saw the world the way she did, which she had taken a long time to understand was not the way even her parents did. The flow of space and the scents of aether and their interaction in the way people moved. She could see her own many wings when they were folded away, wrapped within the gaps and folds of reality that others didn't even imagine existed.

When they were taking a break, shortly before dinner time, she thought it was time to ask.

"Isaac," she said, and he looked at her with a smile. "Are you able to see my wings right now?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking up and around at and through her wings. "They're right there."

"You can see them?" asked Sorley. Isaac nodded.

"I thought so," said Beatrix.

"Am I not supposed to?" Isaac asked.

"I can't see them..." said Mira.

"I don't think most Vanavolk can, Mira," said Beatrix. "You are more like Galina and Sasha, but your angelic blood, Isaac, is what's letting you see them. A nephilim is different from other angels, and very different from Hosts like our parents."

"I wonder if it's something that could be learned," said Sorley. He was sat against a tree, with Isaac sitting next to him. "It would maybe need a fundamental change to the eyes

instead.”

“I was thinking the same,” said Beatrix. “It would be useful if you and Mira and all our other allies could see more of reality. We could maybe ask Lamis.”

“Is it a fighting thing?” asked Isaac.

“If I could see your wings, maybe I could hit them,” said Mira. There was a ferocity and excitement to the way she said it that made Sorley laugh. He told Beatrix later that Mira reminded him of herself when she was a child.

“It would allow you to fight demons and other space folders, yes,” said Beatrix.

“I can fight demons?” asked Isaac, bouncing to his feet in a way that made Beatrix narrow her eyes. There was aether to his movement. He’d used his flight to pull himself up instead of his muscles. It was a neat trick, but if it became habit his future movements on the battlefield could be very interesting.

“Not until you’re older,” said Sorley and Beatrix at the same time.

“You’ll get there eventually,” continued Beatrix. “In about ten years or so. Practice your magic and any weapon our parents choose to teach you, and maybe we’ll fight side by side one day. You’ll only need to wait about seven or eight years, Mira.”

“That’s so far away!” she said. She complained but then took on a sullen look. “Will I be strong enough?”

“I believe so,” said Beatrix, and Sorley nodded. “Even though Royan is only second circle and a pureblood human, I think he’s almost there. You have the advantage of your new Vanavolk blood and training from an earlier age. By the time you’re an adult you’ll be able to take on an army of imps without issue.”

“What’s an imp?” asked Isaac.

“Mortals turned into demons,” said Sorley. “People who gave into corruption and the temptation of demons. Not nice people.”

“I’ve never fought one, myself,” said Beatrix. She could feel the army in the far distance. Its malevolence. “It’ll come one day, though. We’ll all get our chance.”

It was the last day of Heat and the wedding was fully planned. Adela wanted it to be in Rain, so they'd be waiting almost a full year from the proposal, but knowing how happy she was made Beatrix smile. It suppressed the rage inside and let her feel just so normal.

On that day she was pushing Royan harder than she ever had before. She was teaching him Sarkal, the martial art she used. He was getting better and managed to knock her off-balance using a blast of aether through his fist as he struck her in the face.

She caught herself, her back foot leaving a trail in the dirt as she pushed down hard. He tried for another hit but her small frame and quick reflexes allowed her to circle around him. He stumbled a little as he turned but when he turned to face her he was smiling.

"Get her!" shouted Vedar and Tullis, both cheering for Royan. Several of the newer students were simply awestruck at the speed they were moving. Royan was handling it well and getting used to feeling the aether flowing in his veins.

She blocked a strike and took the full force of the blast, the thunder ringing in her ears and threatening to tear apart her forearm at the point of contact. Royan stepped back in astonishment.

"How did that not hurt you?" he asked, leaning on his knees and trying to catch his breath. He was running low on aether and it would be soon be time to eat.

"I hardened my aether just before the strike," said Beatrix. "This protects both the soul and the body. On top of that I'm made of sturdier stuff than humans. I'll teach you to harden your aether soon enough. You just need more than you have to be able to use it as a shield."

"You never mentioned that skill before when you were telling me about Sarkal."

"It's not part of the art, but I guess it fits in just fine. It's

something my grandfather was known for, and I learnt it through his journals.”

“Lady Blackwood!” shouted one of the newer students. His name was Happ and he was about Chas’s age and had apparently seen her return after the war when she had spread her wings for the public. “There’s a person outside the gate asking to meet you.”

“Go eat, Royan,” she said. “Everyone else, get to work cleaning and preparing this place. They’ll be back soon.”

Beatrix walked to the gate as her students did as they were told, setting up decorations for Mira’s surprise party. It was her birthday so she was out with Adela and the other students were the ones who wanted to treat her with a party. Beatrix was glad to see them all coming together in a strange sort of extended family. It reminded her of the Eyes.

“Not today,” said Beatrix when she opened the door and saw Egil. He was giving his usual smile, but there was something different about him. The crack on his core was missing, the one she’d inflicted on him years ago.

“I’ve just come to see you,” he said. His head tilted to his left and his matted hair hung limp. He had an odd odour to him, stuck to his clothes and hair. It was like stagnant aether and rot, yet somehow sweet. Where had he been? “And I have a warning.”

“Out with it then,” she said, Fang slipping into her hand and ready for action. Egil’s smile widened at the sight of the blade.

“In eight years one of your blades will be removed from reality. You should take it before then.”

“What do you mean?”

“It will vanish,” said Egil. He made a popping noise with his mouth and spread his hands around his face. “I don’t know what happens to it and no one else does either.”

“Which blade?” She narrowed her eyes. She knew he had yet to lie to her but there was just something so strange about this that she couldn’t trust it.

“The demon Concetto wanders out of the Pure Lord’s view and then we can’t find her,” said Egil.

“Beginnings,” said Beatrix. It was the only divine blade with no known power. Prochorus could never get her to do anything, but she was still required for the full song. She took a moment to think this over. She would talk to Vala the next time she was in Nerik to see about this. “You can go now.”

“As you command,” said Egil, bowing so deep his filthy hair brushed the floor while hanging knotted and tangled.

“You really need a hair cut,” she said and walked back inside. She could feel a spark of shock in his aether and then blocked him from her mind.



When Adela brought Mira into the training yard the whole Order cheered. Beatrix was standing ready and Mira ran into her arms. Mira then ran around thanking everyone and looking at the banners and the prepared food and pile of presents on a table near the house.

“She looks so happy,” said Adela, clinging to Beatrix’s arm. “You always pretend to be so hard, but there’s a soft centre to you.”

“Do you believe in free will?” Beatrix asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“There is a Skraeðan in charge of fate, but none in charge of choice. The Gods play their game to subtly influence us to do their bidding. There are Seers who seem to be able to change things, but what if their visions show them a future they’re meant to avoid?”

“Where is this going?” asked Adela, letting go and looking Beatrix in the eyes.

“A few years ago I visited Vala in Nerik while it was still in the Ethereal Realm. I went a few times to talk to her and learn as much as I could from her. One of those times she had been drinking, which she doesn’t normally do. It was as if she

knew I was coming to ask questions she didn't want to answer.

"During our conversation, which was about Legion and the song of the blades, she let something slip out of her mouth and then wouldn't answer any more of my questions. She said that it was important to keep my daughter safe from that battle because there was no way for her to be ready in time."

"And that's why you took Mira in?"

"I think I would have done it regardless," said Beatrix. She looked at Mira climbing onto Royan's back and forcing him to carry her to the presents. So much joy and laughter. "But I heard those words in the back of my head. At the time I wasn't planning to care for her long term. Maybe find an orphanage for her. But she wormed her way into my heart so quickly."

"Mum! It's a knife from that Eye guy!" shouted Mira, holding out a present she knew was from Vincent. Mira was smiling and Adela had a look of concern, but Beatrix laughed.

"Some things have no downsides," she said, and the pair walked to Mira to look at what else she was given. Today was their daughter's day.

It was midday and Beatrix was sitting in a room in the undercroft of the Castle of Dawn naked. She was past the theatre and the forge and sat in Prochorus's chair in his study. Mirrors had been brought in and there were servants moving all around, hurrying and preparing for the coming dusk.

Beatrix stared into the mirror in front of her while Sasha was doing her hair. Liara was painting her fingernails too, and doing a surprisingly good job. Black lacquer with a thin white line that seemed to blend into her skin. Akenesa sat to the side going over what Vala would be saying during the ceremony.

Mira was off with Adela and Vala in some other part of the castle. Beatrix was trying her best not to reach out and find them so as to not ruin the day. She knew they would be in Vala's rooms, but wanted to maintain the surprise.

When Galina walked in the servants stopped for just long enough to be noticeable and then ran off to do their duties, gathering up Beatrix's clothes to be washed and bringing in the make-up Liara was asking for.

"I have a gift for you," she said with a soft smile. She was keeping her madness in check and Beatrix hoped she would be lucid until after it was all done. A servant stepped out from behind her and presented Beatrix with a blade.

"Crow," said Beatrix. She took it by the hilt, the finger guard shaped like a black wing snugly fitting her hand, like it was made for her. It had a straight black blade whose sheen twisted the world it reflected. "Raum. I knew you had him, but I didn't think I'd be taking him just yet."

"It is your day," said Akenesa. "Did you not think there would be gifts?"

"I didn't think I would be the one receiving them," said Beatrix. The day and the people were pushing down the rage within her. The anger was so small it was almost gone. Instead there was a joy she had never experienced this intensely. Her

aetheriad surged in her chest, changing the way her aether flowed throughout her body. It was such an odd, yet good, feeling.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Galina. She touched Beatrix’s shoulder and pressed it firmly. Comfort washed through Beatrix. “Vala is taking care of her and I have already been to see her. Your chosen is doing well.”

Just then the door opened again and in walked Anđa, Sorley, and Isaac. Her father and brother were dressed in black Vinish suits with white shirts and polished shoes, and were looking quite sharp, while her mother was wearing a traditional Nerikan robe, tight in the chest and loose from the hips down, covering the shoulders with a very short cape attached at the collar, and with the arms exposed from the elbow. On the belt Anđa had pinned three silver brooches, each displaying the primary symbol of the Houses she belonged to. Moon and Seer and Blood.

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Beatrix.

“We wouldn’t miss it,” said Sorley. Anđa looked on the edge of tears.

“Hair is finished,” said Sasha, putting one final clasp the back to hold it in place. Beatrix looked at herself again. Her fringes had been turned into thin braids that were looped down and around to the back of her head, where they were held in place with silver clips. The rest of her hair was pulled back and straight, hanging down her back with three more silver clasps to keep it that way. Instead of her normal black studs, her piercings on the lobe and flat of her ears were silver studs with a fine eldrine chain between them. Along the tops of her ears were long cuffs that covered the ear and came to a point past the tip of her ear. They were heavier than she was used to, but not uncomfortable, and was happy to see that she suited some traditional vampiric jewellery.

“Nails too,” said Liara, pulling over a wheeled cart brought in by a servant. She started to mix some face paints, deepening the blacks with a pinch of some dust Beatrix didn’t

recognise and making sure the reds were just right. Sasha took some of the lipstick and made Beatrix hold up her head so it could be better applied. When it was done, she saw her bottom lip was black and her top lip was red.

“Your skin is too white, so we can’t quite get the Talwaen or Zoraken designs, so it’s Kewaen for your lips,” said Sasha. “We’ll be able to do more for the rest.” She then stepped back to let Liara get to work with several brushes of different thicknesses. Liara was making sure not to let anything go wrong, the look of concentration and determination as plain on her face as the sky was violet. Beatrix tried to listen to the small talk of her parents, grandmother, and cousin, but the brushes and how quickly the ink dried on her skin were a distraction. Liara moved around her like a blur as she worked, and did all but straddle her lap for all the strange angles she came at Beatrix from.

In the end Beatrix felt exhausted, but couldn’t explain it until several weeks later when she was talking with Sasha. At that time she was told the ink was touched with aether so it clung to the skin better and wouldn’t rub or wash off for half a day. That aether was probably drawing on Beatrix’s soul as she was a creature of magic rather than being truly physical, and that was where the fatigue came from and why it took two days to begin to fade and be washable.

Beatrix looked at herself again. Her jaw was lined with diamonds, half hidden under her chin. Her eyes were further accentuated with wavy lines above and below them, drawing attention to them. There were many tiny symbols and lines along her hairline, framing her face. These were an oath of love and loyalty. In the centre of her forehead was the symbol of House Zoraken, the symbol of the Seer.

The designs reached down and around her neck. These designs were all swirls and loops. On the front of her throat, where her vocal chords should have been, was the symbol of Kewaen, the symbol of Blood. All of this was in various shades of red. She was told there were seventeen shades but she could

only pick out about half of them, noting that it got brighter the closer to the Kewaen symbol she looked.

Then the ink was put on her shoulders, chest, and upper back. Now the designs were black feathers and sharp fang shapes like those below her lips or under Sasha's eyes. In the centre of her chest was the symbol for House Talwaen, the symbol of the moon. Akenesa pulled a second mirror behind her and Beatrix could see the black wings painted on her back, with a red circle at their centre. That circle had a dark crescent on its top, and she recognised it as an image of her own soul.

She had expected the ink on her arms and hands to not be related to one of her familial lines, but Liara had a different idea. On the back of each hand was the unrestrained symbol of the blade. It was Prochorus's symbol. *Her* symbol. Her thoughts briefly turned to the upcoming struggles before she forced her mind back to the day. Each arm from the wrist to the elbow had the symbols for the names of the fallen angels and demons of her blades. Closest to her right hand was Kali's name, and closest to her left was Zepar, but the others were arranged in numerical order from wrist to elbow. She looked at Metatron's symbol by her right elbow and again had to control her thoughts.

She leaned down and whispered to Liara when she saw all this and her cousin narrowed her eyes before nodding. Just above each elbow Liara then ringed her arm with twenty-six small circles, thirteen on each arm.

I dislike cutting into the narrative again, but here Narianel's thoughts clearly state the words "One day, my plan..." before drifting off back to this important day to her. This is clearly linked to her creation of blades beyond the original set made by Prochorus, and it seems she planned to make twenty-six extra total.

By this point she had made seven, meaning there are nineteen more from this point forward, though

I can confirm she doesn't manage this before the Reality Corruption. She makes quite a lot of them, but falls short. I still have no idea what her plan was, and I don't think it came to fruition.

With her make-up done, it was time for her to get dressed. It seemed that Isaac only realised she was naked when she stood up and the chair was taken away, and he turned away and blushed. Beatrix herself had no qualms with being nude as she was drifting further away from the norms of Vin and closer to those of Nerik. It was also because she had embraced her true self, a magical body with nothing biological to cover, shaped only for aesthetics and comfort and style. She wore a physical body like some people wore clothes, but more and more she was wanting to be free of it. On a day like today, however, she was happy to use it to allow her to wear the clothes and the jewellery and the paint.

She put on a set of small shorts called vaami in Nerik. They were tight at the hips and the upper thigh, but loose throughout and intended to stay in place while hiding the shape. It was one of the few modest pieces of Nerikan fashion. They were white and matched the stockings she pulled up over her knees. She then stepped into soft black slippers that didn't even come up to her ankle and were so very different from the combat boots she was used to wearing. On her ankles she wore small golden chains, which was a traditional Vinish custom. From the chains hung several small charms in shapes that represented her relationship, and a single copper coin, cut in half. Adela would be wearing the other half.

She then had help with the dress. It was lower cut than anything she had ever worn and clung to her with magic rather than lace. It revealed all the make-up on her chest and lower back, but was thick and tight in the parts it did cover of her upper body, mostly her sides and front. At the hips it flared out in swirls of black and white and red and magic allowed it to flow to the floor without brushing up and dirt or dust. It felt

like she was only clothed on her breasts and stomach, though the designer had chosen white for the upper half, making it blend into her skin and only noticeable by the stitching and seams. She enjoyed looking at herself in the mirror she couldn't imagine herself wearing anything so elegant.

"Stunning," said Anđa. She stood next to her and holding her arm. "I've been waiting for this day."

"Pretty," said Isaac, though his voice was muffled in Galina's dress. He was practically burying himself in the matriarch's clothes and she gently petted his head.

"Come," said Galina. "There is still the Meeting of the Gods to do before the ceremony."

Beatrix nodded and the whole group walked up through the castle. She held Isaac's hand as they walked and chatted with Akenesa and Sorley. It was strange seeing her cousin and father talk as they were very different people, but when the conversation turned to how the crystals lining the roofs of the Isle of Dusk worked she could see why they'd like each other. There was a shared interest in the way magic worked that she'd seen from both individually but never connected to each other.

As they left the castle there was a crowd waiting for them and the noise hurt Beatrix's ears. This was cheering beyond anything she'd ever experienced. The group was being called Godkin and there was chanting of her name. The streets were lined either side all the way to the Twilight Circle, a courtyard on the east side of the town. Curiously, however, there wasn't a single guard to be seen. The people stayed where they were and just cheered. As they made their way across the island there was a second wave of cheering behind them and Beatrix caught a sniff of Adela and Vala's souls before pulling back her reach.

At the Twilight Circle there were stands set up for people to sit, filled with important people of the city, the Order of Blades, and Adela's friends in the Archivists. There were some empty seats that would be filled with their families who were now approaching. Galina stood at the centre of the circle

and Beatrix took her place to her left.

When Adela and her party arrived Beatrix tried to contain her smile and tears. She was radiant. She wore a mix of traditions, both Vinish and Nerikan. Her dress was all white with lace around the neck and hiding her hands. It was tight around her upper body, revealing her sizeable bust when stood next to Vala, though not Valeska, her mother who was clasping her hand by her side. The skirts were long and flowing, held up by two women Beatrix recognised as Archivists but couldn't recall their names. Likely at the suggestion of Vala, the veils around her waist and in her hair were black, a symbolic gesture of joining House Zoraken. Beatrix noted the symbols of Houses Talwaen and Kewaen stitched into the shoulders of the dress.

She was joined by her parents, who were both wearing their best. Her father looked odd, not covered in dirt and sweat, his clothes clean, not smelling of the soldiers and Archivists he trained all day, every day. She could see why Valeska was attracted to him; when he tried to look good it suited him well. Adela's aunt and uncle and cousins who Beatrix hadn't met before a few days ago were in the group, and two women from Adela's art group were spreading flower petals before her as she walked.

The procession took their seats and Adela stood to Galina's right. She looked at Beatrix with an embarrassed smile and clasping her hands in front of her stomach. They weren't to talk to each other until the ceremony, which Beatrix hated in that moment. It was hard to not hold her hands and kiss her.

Vala stepped up to Galina and whispered something, and then Galina took her position on a platform at the edge of the circle. Vala stood where Galina had been and looked at Beatrix and Adela.

"Are you ready?" she asked. The both nodded. "Very well." Vala tapped her throat and suddenly lines sprung from her fingertip and formed a run on her vocal chords. She tapped

the rune and when she spoke her voice projected loud and clear for all to hear, and at the same time translating her words for those that didn't speak Skrae, like Adela's mother. Beatrix noticed Adela looking at the rune and noting the shape, which made her repress a laugh. Always a rune mage.

"People of Nerik, and guests from Vin too, we call upon the Gods today for a blessing for these two young women, now embarking on their journey as *hanasal* and *vorasal*."

These words didn't translate well and Beatrix had needed to spend time explaining the concepts to Adela. They literally translated to "noble spouse" and "climbing spouse" and were gender neutral terms. The *hanasal*, the noble spouse, was someone of highborn blood, while the *vorasal*, the climbing spouse, was lowborn and marrying into the House. Adela didn't like to be thought of as someone clinging to money or power, but Beatrix explained it was more of an acceptance into the House. It wasn't about gold digging but of being risen up in status to match the *hanasal*. Being brought to equal terms in the eyes of society.

"We break our own rules of non-intervention of the Gods," Vala continued, "to mark the importance of this day. We are, of course, always in the presence of Low Lady Lunada's power after her union with Grand Lady Galina, and she is more than overjoyed to bless one descended from her soul and the love that has been chosen. So now we call on Low Lord Dasus and the demon Sanar to visit with us on this momentous day!"

A shadow bulged from the ground next to Galina and then burst like a bubble. As the darkness fell, at its centre was Dasus. He was wearing a white suit with a black shirt and white tie. His cufflinks were silver and in his long half-black, half-white hair he wore eldrine chains. His face was gaunt and his rectangular eyes sunken, but he was smiling. He smoothed his hair behind his pointed ears and took a deep bow to Vala, which she returned. Beatrix had seen him in his home and thought him too casual, but he looked ready for the day and

happy to be there.

It took a moment for Sanar to arrive, as Beatrix had been warned. He was the demon who had first corrupted mortals into vampires and was thus the patron of House Kewaen, but he was also imprisoned in the Void and would have to be let out by his guards. He wasn't really worshipped in Nerik so much as respected for the strength he gave to the founders of the city when they were fleeing to new lands.

Sanar appeared from a fountain of blood that erupted from the other side of Galina to Dasus. He was tall and wearing only a pair of black breeches and a belt with a golden skull on it. Most of his skin was pale white, like most angels, but his hands and feet were thin black claws. He had bat-like wings, a mouth full of sharp fangs, and a black metal ring that used to be his halo tight around his upper left arm. His eyes glowed blue and his pointed ears had the flat points torn off, long black hair that was tied back, and he had a pair of short horns that curved back.

Sanar took a deep breath through his nose then looked directly at Sasha, then Anđa, then Isaac, and finally to Beatrix. He smiled, crossed his arms, then nodded. He then jumped down from the stage and spoke up.

"I see you, Narianel," he said with a smirk. He said her name in the same way Egil had, splitting the symbols wrong to make it mean Blade of the Infinite. "I know you for what you are. You are cloaked in the darkness of Azael in the same way I am boiling in the light of Chassuille. You are well within his power and yet you rebel and seek his destruction. It is because of this that I trust you.

"Today I do not return to my prison, but choose a new prison of my own. The seraphim can come for me, but I will be beyond their reach. You, Narianel, are to be my new prison. My blessing is not just some minor gift as it has been for all my past appearances, for Vinsent, for Demyan, for Aleksashdra. Today I choose to join your collection.

"I can smell my brothers and sisters within you. I see

their names on your arms. But I also see the followers of Azael you have captured and turned to your purposes. I fell because of Azael, in the wake of the First Rebellion that led to your blades, just like many others. Today I give you my soul just as your wife does, but you need not care for me. You must turn me into a divine blade.

“Dasus!” shouted Sanar, turning to the God on the stage. It was only now that Beatrix could take her eyes off the demon. Adela was looking with both fear and fascination. Vala and Galina had disapproving looks for this break in protocol. But Dasus, he was amused. “I task you with convincing your leader to give Narianel the black eldrite of Jesovah. Chassuille must give it to her to refine. My blade will be beautiful and glorious and I will only accept my brother.” He turned back to Beatrix. “Narianel, I will fight Azael by your side. I will drink the blood of your enemies. Take that rebellious spirit and be like the rest of your Nerikan family. Defy the Gods and protect your home. Add me to your collection.”

The blue glow of his eyes spread and covered his body in light. And then it all vanished. All that was left was a black orb giving off a faint blue light. It floated through the air and stopped in front of Beatrix. She took it in her hands.

“This is perhaps the strangest wedding gift anyone has ever been given,” she said. “Thank you, Sanar. I’ll be sure to put you to good use.” With that she pulled the demon’s soul into her own and received a flash of his memories. He was older than the others by many thousands of years and it took a moment for her to regain herself. “I saw Vinsent accepting his offer to turn,” she mumbled.

“Sanar will be a powerful ally,” said Vala, “but this was not the day for that. This was a change too far.” She turned back to Galina and Dasus. “And your blessings?” she asked, trying to keep the exasperation from her voice.

“Nothing quite so stunning as that,” said Dasus. He let out a chuckle and the tension in the audience seemed to ease just a little. “Narianel.” He pronounced her name that way she

liked it. “I will get that eldrite for you and Sanar. Jesovah was a demon that was resurrected about the time Nerik was founded. If you refine the eldrite into eldrine and make a blade from it to use as a host for Sanar, it will likely be your most powerful blade. I will make my arguments in favour of this before the court tomorrow.”

He gave her a quick nod and then turned to Adela.

“To you I have nothing quite so amazing, but this is a necklace made from sylvium. I had a small following of elves before the Ruination, and one of my dearest followers literally gave me her left hand as a gift. Humans used to say that elves rusted as they got older, and while it’s not accurate it’s similar enough that the elves rarely challenged it. I took that hand and turned it into this, wearing it whenever I visited her tribe. Those days are long gone, and so I present this to you. It is my own symbol of faith and friendship with the elves, and maybe it can mean something to you too.”

He jumped down from the stage and walked to Adela. He held out what looked like a simple copper necklace, patterned in overlapping swirls, but she could see its age and saw that it had never corroded. Adela took it and placed it around her neck, and it hung next to the bone pendant.

He leaned in and whispered something to her and she smiled and nodded. He then vanished into the shadows between the stone tiles of the circle.

“And now for my blessing,” said Galina and the crowd instantly grew tense again. Beatrix had been waiting for this too. It was rare to see Galina out of her more human form.

Galina became a shadow and then sprouted wings. Within moments she was growing to an enormous size, only just managing to fit on the stage. From paw to shoulder she was at least fifty feet tall, far bigger than even Akenesa and Sasha. This was a true Vanavolk, undiluted by other blood.

A mix of wolf and crow, Galina was beautiful. She was still missing her right eye, but it didn’t distract or detract from just how impressive she was. Galina spread her wings and the

rush of air pressed Beatrix's dress against her legs. Adela's long train barely held hers down.

Then, in their hair, each bride received a black feather, tucked behind the ear. Adela had previously expressed a worry that she wouldn't be accepted into the family, even though that was nonsense, and looking over at her Beatrix saw Adela touching the feather and holding back a tear. There was no chance Galina would reject her.

Galina disappeared, melting in a cloud of darkness and feathers. Beatrix felt the matriarch's mind waver, her soul fluttering in that tell-tale way. She was headed back to the Estate to rest in solitude. She'd done enough and Beatrix was still happy for everything she'd done.

"Now," said Vala, satisfied that Galina and Dasus had cleared up Sanar's mess. "We shall return to the Castle's throne room for the ceremony."

Adela was led away first by her procession, but this time Vala stayed behind. They watched Adela turn a corner and Beatrix's family get ready to move with her, but Vala held them a moment.

"Do you feel their eyes?" she asked Beatrix. Sasha and Anđa narrowed their eyes in question and Akenesa looked to the sky. Beatrix stopped repressing her power and let her senses flow out in the world around her.

"No," she said. "Who?"

"At least six erelim and a seraph," said Akenesa.

Beatrix looked where her cousin was looking and caught a faint shimmer in the air. She activated Perception within her and saw through the illusions they were throwing in front of them to confuse her senses. Seven angels hung in the sky, watching her.

"Sanar's wardens?" she asked.

"Yes, but I believe they won't come down to the city," said Vala. "It would be breaking our agreement with their master. They can only enter if we invite them. Be careful when returning to Seremont. They may try to take Sanar from you."

“I’m sure Dasus will convince Chassuille,” said Beatrix.

“Yes, I shouldn’t have said anything,” said Vala. “Push it from your mind. Now, to the castle.”

Beatrix forced herself to take a deep breath and pull in her senses, keep her soul and everything that she was contained within her body. She took one last look at Adela in the distance before dismissing Perception’s power.

As they marched through the streets the crowds were still present. Those close enough to see the blessing were in awe and everyone else was still ready to cheer. Dusk was fast approaching and the crystals on the island’s roofs were starting to glow. It was faint as they left the Twilight Circle but vibrant as they reached the Castle of Dawn. Each house seemed to have its own colour, tuned by the resident.

When they entered the castle there were dozens of servants lining the path the throne room at the far side of the main hall. Sanja stood at the fore of the Talwaen servants at her own insistence, even though Beatrix had asked her to be part of her party. Their relationship may not be deep, but they were family now. Ana Kegarath and Soshin Zoragarath held the doors to the throne room open.

There was a choir on the balcony above the throne room and their song washed through Beatrix’s soul as she entered the room. She recognised it but she’d never heard it before. Her eyes widened, her pupils narrowed, her heart softened. And then she knew what it was.

“My song,” she whispered. “Prochorus’s song.”

It had no magic behind it, but it was beautiful. A few hundred servants above singing the song that would save the universe, just for her and Adela. Blessing and purifying their souls not literally but emotionally, spiritually. The blades floating within her soul warmed and she could feel their recognition grow with her own. This was their song too.

“We must do this again when I have them all,” she said. “They deserve it.” She saw Vala nod in the corner of her eye and she was satisfied.

Her family filed into their seats as she walked to Adela. They stood in front of the throne and stared into each others' eyes, holding hands and smiling. Vala stood before the throne and began to talk to the gathered crowd.

"Today we bring together not just two Houses, but four," she said. "Three great Houses of Nerik, and one small family of Seremont, of Vin. Today we welcome Adela Ogden to the nobility of Nerik, as a peer and equal. She climbs to our status and we hold out our hands, welcoming her and her clan to prominence.

"I have been told, however, that neither will take the name of the other. Neither will join the House of the other. Instead they will forming a new house together. They will become House Azranhai, a name chosen together."

*Azran*, meaning life and continuation. *Haio*, meaning song. It had been Adela's suggestion to make it about the song and Beatrix knew it was the right move without a thought. As Vala said the words the choir soared and Beatrix could feel Adela's confidence in the name. There was no hints of any nervousness, and her hands remained fresh and smooth.

"And so, I ask you, Narianel Zoraken. Do you walk this path freely?"

"I do." Beatrix nodded.

"Do you take on all that is Adela Ogden?"

"I do."

"Do you promise your love to Adela Ogden for as long as you live?"

"I do."

"Now, Adela Ogden. I ask the same to you. Do you walk this path freely?"

"I do." Her smile widened.

"Do you take on all that is Narianel Zoraken?"

"I do." Her grasp on Beatrix's hands tightened.

"Do you promise your love to Narianel Zoraken for as long as you live?"

"I do." Her words were firm, her smile soft.

“Then I am pleased to announce the formation of a new Nerikan House,” said Vala. She was doing her best to look serious, but Beatrix kept catching a smile in the corner of her mouth being forced back into place. “I announce the Lady Narianel Azranhai, blood of Nerik. I announce Lady Adela Azranhai, raised from Seremont. I announce their union as *hanasal* and *vorasal*. They are now as one, blessed by the Gods, announced by the Synod, accepted by the people.

“Narianel, Adela. You are now betrothed in the eyes of Nerik and the Gods. May peace reign upon your souls and your futures be filled with joy. Now, be as one.”

They looked at each other and Beatrix could feel the heat of Adela’s body through her hands. They stepped closer and kissed, and the gathered people cheered. Beatrix pulled Adela closer by the hips and Adela wrapped her arms around Beatrix’s neck. This was a moment of bliss in its purest form. Something to be remembered clearly, to be cherished.



It was two hours later and Beatrix’s social energy was running low. She sat at a table at the head of the ballroom watching Adela dance with Mira while talking with various members of Nerik’s noble Houses. A song was being played on strings and piano and Beatrix was trying to lose herself in the music, but there was always someone else wanting to talk to her.

Around the table sat her father, Royan, and Sasha. Sorley had needed to sit after dancing for so long with Anða, who now co-opted Azra-el’s time as they spent some much needed father and daughter time together. Royan was looking pleased with himself and he smelled of a perfume Beatrix knew to be worn by the Akwaen servants. Sasha had her head in her arms, hiding her eyes from the light. She had mistakenly challenged Beatrix to a drinking contest, not knowing that Beatrix was unable to get drunk. Beatrix smirked a little, looking at her grandmother.

Aldo sat down at the table and started to talk with Sorley and Royan. As a Champion of a God, he normally wouldn't be allowed into the city, but Beatrix had fought to have him at her wedding. They disagreed at times, but she respected him and trusted him with her life.

"So," said Kresimir Solash as he suddenly appeared to her side. He'd somehow hidden himself from her nose and ears, and last she'd seen him he was on the other side of the room talking with Vala. He sat two seats away from Beatrix, avoiding Adela's chair as was custom, and gave her a friendly smile, his white teeth contrasting with his dark skin. He didn't have the Nerikan eyes, but he was important to the city's long history. "A new House will need its own Estate, correct? I have some nice plots of land for sale."

"I already have land," said Beatrix. She returned his friendly smile though her eyes turned it into a deadly smirk. "Vala has given me the Temple of Blades and the land beneath it, and I live on foreign soil. *Shogude*."

The last word is another that is hard to translate, but Kresimir knew what she meant. A word purely of the Neri dialect rather than Skrae, it was akin to saying "your logic won't help you" or "I am comfortable" to prevent the other person from continuing to argue. Kresimir laughed when she said it and shrugged.

"Your mother raised you well," he said. "You really do not speak Skrae at all, do you?"

"My parents spent many years together before I was born," said Beatrix. "My father picked up Neri from her, and I grew up in a fluent household. He still switches back to full Skrae when speaking to non-Nerikans, though." She gestured to Sorley and Aldo subtly and Kresimir listened for a moment and nodded. "I've also read many Neri books, mostly penned by my ancestors. I have read *The Arts of Souls and Coins*, though I must admit that it is really not to my interests."

"That explains why I can never sell anything to you," he said with a chuckle. "You've read my words and know my

tactics.”

“It’s more that I need very little.” Beatrix looked over at Adela and Mira. “Unless you have one of my blades, which I know you do, I have everything I need.”

“Yes, Sunblade was a gift from Prochorus.” Kresimir took a moment to think before he talked again, running his hand across his shaven head. “From Vala, after... You know, I’m sure.” She nodded.

“I’ll deal with that at the next opportunity.”

“Well, back to cheerier topics, if you ever wish to buy Sunblade I shall put it on the table at a single velt.”

Beatrix looked at him and narrowed her eyes, letting her smile drop. A velt was the highest form of Nerikan money. Nerikan coins were rings of metal with a small inner ring made of crystallised aether. A velt was made of eldrine and the crystal was filled with the aether of the spender. It was rarely used and rarely minted, so it had no real equivalent amount in hult, the standard set of coins.

“Why do you want my aether?” she asked.

“It’s not every day you get the chance to experiment with aether that absorbs light. Could be very useful for those that worship the sun, like myself.”

“You could just ask Azra-el.”

“He is an ascended angel, yes, but you were born into it. Your aether is different enough.”

“Why not ask my mother?”

“I did,” said Kresimir. He looked at her across the room. “She wanted twelve velt in return for one.”

Beatrix let out a laugh and a few people looked at her. She was rarely so loud and they seemed happy to see her that way. It made her a little uncomfortable when she realised.

“Exploit the exploiter,” said Beatrix. “An interesting strategy.” He simply shrugged and shook his head.

“I am afraid it’s my turn to occupy her time, Lord Solash,” said Agata Akwaen. She was a stern looking older woman. Her lower eyelids were prominent and Beatrix thought

her eyes looked like a stereotype of the Nerikan eyes. “I have some business to conduct with the new House.”

“Never waiting until the wedding is over, Lady Akwaen,” said Kresimir as he stood up. “You never change.”

“Neither do you,” she replied. He was laughing as he left and Beatrix watched him walk over to Akenesa, who was sat at the side of the room talking with Ana Kegarath.

“What business does the military have with me?”

“I was warned of your blunt tongue,” said Agata. She sat where Kresimir had been and gave a look to Beatrix to hold herself a little more formally with the Synod. It was a look Beatrix ignored. “I am concerned about your activities, living situation, your cult, and how all this will impact Nerik.”

“I don’t have a cult,” said Beatrix. “My Gods are my matriarch and Low Lord Dasus, and I’m not active within their churches.”

“Your Order of Blades is not dedicated to you?” asked Agata and suddenly Beatrix realised what she was saying.

“They are not my worshippers. I don’t plan on filling a role like Galina. The Order are my students and my soldiers.”

“Yes, and that’s where the other issue is. Is the Order of Blades going to be associated with Nerik and is their work on foreign soil going to have an impact on the state?”

“The Order of Blades is mercenary,” she said clearly and with a firm face. “We are not a branch of the Synod. Our goal is simply to gather the blades so I can sing their song, and then to destroy Azael. There is nothing beyond that. No Gods, no worship, no dogma. There is only the mission.”

Agata leaned back in her chair and scratched at a tiny, almost unseeable scar on her left cheek. She was considering Beatrix’s words and intent, weighing the consequences.

“I would rather you moved to Nerik, if this is truly the case,” she said after a few minutes. Beatrix had been watching the people enjoying themselves and nearly forgotten that she was talking with Agata.

“The people of Nerik are already militarily prepared for

Azael's upcoming destruction," said Beatrix. "The people of Seremont are not. With the world becoming more aware of the danger, they need people like me showing them how to prepare."

"I do not like it, but the Synod will accept this choice and support you if you need it," said Agata. She left without another word, and Beatrix watched her leave the party after talking with the other Synod members.

She was then approached by Jela Gaimel, the Eternal Child, yet another member of the Synod.

"I just wanted to say hello," she said. "Are you enjoying your party? Why aren't you dancing?"

This made Beatrix laugh again. The questions were very typical of her. Her House was in charge of the city's entertainment and she'd done most of the work. They chatted for a while about meaningless things and the intensity brought by the previous two evaporated.

Eventually the party wound down and people began to leave. It was almost midnight and Beatrix and Adela were having a final dance together. Isaac was asleep with his head on Akenesa's lap. Sasha had recovered and was whispering with Azra-el in the corner. Vala sat at the head table talking to Anđa, Sorley, and Sanja. Mira and Liara had pulled up chairs to the buffet table and were drawing while finishing off the food. It could not have been a better day.

Frost had rolled in hard and the snow was thick. Beatrix walked around on the roof to melt it all while she made the Order shovel everything towards a corner of the training yard so that the fire mages amongst them could practice their art. She now had a small army of two hundred, but they weren't all ready for real combat.

Her next-door neighbour had moved to Darizion so Beatrix bought the house, knocked down the walls between them, extended her home's magical protection, and turned the extra space into a place for the Order. It was beginning to look like a fort, especially with the small tower Adela had gotten built, attached to the north and east wings. She'd moved in and brought all her books and claimed tools from her various missions with the Archivists. Her tower also held an art studio and a space for her to tattoo others. She sold her house near the guildhouse and combined her money with Beatrix's.

Beatrix heard the bell at the gate being rung and before those below could react she gently flew over the wall and landed next to the young man trying to get her attention. He was an Archivist called Walden Morris and was sometimes at the Talwaen Estate, working with Akenesa for the guild. She'd met him a few times, and each time he seemed to gain another aethertech replacement for part of his body. Both arms and legs were now metal and magic interwoven. Some of his internal organs were too. This man was either doing it on purpose or he was terrible in a fight.

"Ah, Lady Lifesong," he said with a bow. Her new name had spread and been translated. The young King Marcus Hitch of Vin had even met with her and talked to his officials to update her name as a Free Knight during his last visit to the city the prior season. "I've come with a request. A mission, if you will."

He grew awkward and his shoulders slumped. He'd obviously practised what he was going to say, but wasn't all

that confident in saying it. Rather than ask she simply waited.

“There’s someone I want you to kill,” he said. It took him a while to say it and he stammered as he did.

“Who and why?”

“My mother,” he touched his right arm. “She’s is in the hands of Azael.”

“Come in,” she said. She opened the door and led him to the new meeting room in the Order’s building, the one that had previously been her neighbour’s. She told some of the lowered ranked members to fetch Royan, Vedar, and Tullis, and she picked up Chas and Sarina along the way.

When everyone was gathered and sat at the long table, Beatrix asked Walden to tell them everything.

“If you ask anyone from Ashford about my father or me, they’ll tell you how I used to be an active child and how my father was a bright and happy member of the community. And then it changed when my mother disappeared. They think we were struck by a depression and wondered why she ran away, but they’d never ask us for the real reason.

“What really happened is that she became a follower of Azael. My father came home to my mutilated body and her standing over me with a bloody cleaver.”

He removed his right arm with a loud set of clicks, sliding out his sleeve and placing it on the table, its false skin fading to reveal the aethertech inside. Several aether crystals for power, metal etched with runes so it could be controlled, and Beatrix noticed several odd pieces that were likely custom made instead of part of the base model. It had two slots that held magearm cartridges.

He then pulled back the fringes of his long black hair to reveal his hairline where there were several clips. He ran his fingers around his face to show there were more behind his ears and hidden under his jaw. He undid one of the ones in his hairline and pulled down the skin on his face just enough to show the red beneath before putting it back in place.

Beatrix could never imagine hurting a child like that.

Chopping off an arm and peeling off their face. It was nothing less than monstrous. She looked around the table and saw the horror on the faces of her students.

“At the time,” Walden continued, “I couldn’t really see what she was saying. It was all raving and lunacy. Ah, no offence.” Beatrix gestured to go on. She didn’t care about the word the way the rest of her family did. “I’ve looked back on that day many times now, and with what I’ve learned from the people of Nerik about Azael, I understand now.

“She said that it was all part of his plan. That she would go out into the world and find boxes of immense power so she could build an army and take down the Great Houses.”

“You’re talking about the Vault Lords, aren’t you?” asked Beatrix and Walden nodded. “Why would they turn against Nerik? There are already efforts to find them and bring them home.”

“I’ve told Akenesa they won’t find the Vault Lords,” said Walden. “They’re already free and coming home.”

“Will they turn against Nerik?”

“Only if we can’t kill my mother. They are loyal right now, but if we fail to kill her then her poison will seep into their minds and overturn Nerik.”

“How do you know that?” asked Chas.

“You can see aether now,” said Beatrix. “Tell me where Walden’s core is.”

Chas narrowed his eyes and looked at Walden, and then widened them with shock. “It’s between his eyes! What does that mean?”

“He’s a Seer, like Vala,” said Royan. He had his arms crossed and eyes closed, thinking things over.

“When I said I looked back on the day my mother hurt me I was being literal,” said Walden. The skin of his forehead shimmered to reveal the symbol of the Seer and his eyes let out a soft white light, then he went back to normal. “No, it cannot be learned.” He looked right at Vedar when he said that. “It must be something you are born into.”

“Does this mean you can do it?” Tullis asked Beatrix.

“No. Like all blood magic it can be inherited, but it can be dormant or active. I have actively inherited Prochorus’s power to control the blades, but I have dormant Seer blood, even though those powers come from the same person, and there is another Seer line in my lineage with Vala. My powers as a Vanavolk are obviously weaker than those of my grandmother or cousins, and it’s likely that it’s being bred out of my bloodline as time goes on, but as a nephilim my different sides have coalesced into something new. Blood magic is a long and complicated topic.”

“It is,” said Walden. “I have a Seer in my ancient history, one who was the apprentice of Corwin Argus. It is through her blood that I could free those trapped in the boxes he created. But it’s also the reason my mother can do it too.”

“I’ve heard that Argus’s apprentice was royalty,” said Vedar. “Does that make you a prince?”

“If you want to call me that I won’t stop you, but know that my kingdom was lost in the Ruination. I’m not really a prince at all. Just a scholar, aether-tech mechanic, Seer, and Archivist.”

“Back on topic,” said Beatrix, “have you told Akenesa all this? About your mother and the threat she poses?”

“Yes. She said that as a member of one of the Houses of the Synod she can’t take a stand against anyone the Vault Lords vouch for. But you have started your own House and you aren’t in the Synod. You can act.”

Beatrix leaned back in her chair and smiled. Trust Akenesa to find legal loopholes.

“I also approached Vala Zoraken. She said that visions aren’t proof because no one else can see them. She has looked into my history and seen what I’ve experienced, so she knows, but she says she can’t back my actions until we have other proof. She then spent about fifteen minutes questing, and said to come to you.”

“Questing? Like in the stories?” Chas laughed.

“It’s what Seers call sitting in a trance for extended periods of time, searching through the past, present, and possible futures for the answers they seek,” said Beatrix.

“Correct.” Walden shrugged off the shoulder of his coat and reattached his arm with another loud series of clicks as it was pushed into place. He wiggled the fingers and look satisfied with himself. “While Akenesa believes you’ll help me fight against a follower of Azael, Vala had a different look in her eyes. Her plans for the future involve you helping me.”

“Before we continue, let me ask.” She leaned forward again, putting her elbows on the table and clasping her hands. “Why don’t you kill her yourself?”

“In my own quests I have tried,” he said. “Close range combat, magearm from the shadows, long range from the top of a tower. I didn’t know it as a child, but I think she is a Seer too, or at least has the instincts of those with it in their blood.”

“My mother is like that,” said Beatrix. “Knows things and does things even when she’s not sure why, but it always works out in her favour. I’m not sure I inherited that either, at least not in the way she’s described it to me, or that I’ve read about. If your mother has those instincts then she will be hard to kill. Does she dodge your shots?”

“She does, but it’s always by a hair. Like she knows the exact path the strike will take and moves just enough to taunt me.”

“I think I can deal with that,” said Beatrix.

“What’s your plan?” asked Sarina. She was young and eager, growing up in the poorer districts of Seremont and in and out of her family home. Chas was smitten with her, as was obvious to everyone but her. She’d learned the job quickly and worked her way up the ranks of the students.

“I’m going to mess with her instincts.” Beatrix called Encore and put it on the table. Walden narrowed his eyes in disgust at the blade. He’d probably heard about it from Akenesa and figured out what she was planning because of it.

“How will that help?” asked Chas.

“We’re going to practice our single target routines,” said Beatrix. “We’re going to attack her head-on once we have a confession. Encore’s power allows me to travel back in time a few minutes, but it has a side-effect. Do you know the effects of time travel on Seers?”

“I’ve read about the Temporal Corruption of Nerik,” said Royan. “The books you have mention Vesna the Stoic losing her temper in public and crying, but nothing else.”

“Seers retain their memories when time reverses,” said Walden. “It confuses us, disorients us as the world shifts backwards. We remember everything but it didn’t happen, in a different way than our visions of possible futures. Do those with the instincts suffer the same effects?”

“I tried it with my mother when I was testing the blade. She let me check so long as I only went back a single time. She didn’t remember what had happened, but she said that her ability to feel out the future became a mess. Instead of her thoughts drifting in a single useful direction she found herself feeling several paths and the one that was strongest was the one that just happened, the one I just erased.”

“I want to be there when she dies,” said Walden. “If possible, I want to be the one to deal the final blow. This plan will effect me far more than her.”

“There is a distance Seers need to be within to see the effects. Outside that you’re effected just like everyone else and won’t remember. Encore has the range of a city, but I will talk with the man in the blade and figure out how to fine tune that distance. Ten paces, if possible. Just me, and her, and maybe anyone who wants to wear Oracle.”

She summoned the ring with the embedded needle and set it on the table. Walden looked at it with curiosity.

“What does Oracle do?” he asked.

“It allows for active sight,” said Beatrix.

“I’ve yet to attain that power. It is a difficult one to unlock, but as my power grows and matures I can feel it on the horizon.” Beatrix slid the ring across the table and he picked it

up. When he put it on the whites of his eyes turned black and his green irises became a patternless white.

“Why can’t I see the way you’re going to move?” he asked Beatrix after looking at the others.

“The running theory is that Azael is hiding my future so people won’t interfere with his plan to turn me into a living weapon under his control. Vala can see my future, even when Grand Lord Mao’s Mistfers can’t. It’s likely due to my blood ties with her. This is another reason my family sent you to me, I would imagine.”

“It is,” said Walden. “I don’t know if you are able to avoid a Seer’s sight when it is pure intuition, but Akenesa told me you may be able to. Seeing this strangeness of yours myself, I believe that if you can catch her by surprise then she may be killed before she has a chance to poison Nerik.”

“How long until she arrives in Nerik?” asked Royan. He was becoming hard, the longer he worked for her. She needed to make sure he took some time off after this battle. She didn’t want her students becoming too cold. It should be saved for the battlefield.

“A week and a day,” he said.

“Where will she reach Nerik? Which dock?” asked Beatrix.

“The main market dock.” Walden thought for a second. “It was the third pier. The one with the statue of the child.”

“Jela Gaimel,” said Beatrix, more as a matter of course than because she cared about teaching him the importance of the Eternal Child. “Where does she go from there?”

“The Central Star, and then on to the Kewaen District to the Vault of the Endless.”

“The best place to meet her would be the Central Star,” said Tullis. “The Vault Lords will want to be seen returning, right? They’re important to the city? If we can mingle with the crowds we can launch our attack the moment you give the word.” Beatrix nodded along to his words. He was starting to be a decent tactician.

“How heavily armed do we need to be?” asked Royan.

“A blade each should suffice,” said Beatrix. “I meet her face to face in the Central Star and get a confession. I call out the attack pattern we use. If we fail to kill after the initial wave I use Encore to reset and call out a different pattern. We keep going until we cripple her. Walden gets the final strike.”

“How many of us will there be?” asked Chas.

“Just us in the room,” said Beatrix. “We may bring others to watch, but not the youngest or inexperienced, just in case. Choose your blades so we can begin practice.”

“Oracle and Venom,” said Royan almost before she finished speaking. She made them appear on the table in front of him, the ring vanishing from Walden’s finger and his eyes returning to normal.

“Flight,” said Tullis, and she gave it to him.

“Claw,” said Chas just as Sarina said “Gungnir.” She agreed those weapons suited them. Chas was learning the intricacies of her dancing style and could weave the twin blades around him as he moved, and Sarina was fantastic with a spear, even when it didn’t have Gungnir’s power to guide.

Vedar sat thinking for a while and Beatrix waited patiently. Walden, however, was clearly getting antsy.

“There’s a word floating through his mind,” said the Seer. “Impromptu.” Beatrix raised an eyebrow and grinned.

“Perhaps a little too destructive for a battle in the city, but I’m curious why you’d want to wield Sanar, of all the demons in my collection.”

“Well, my first thought was that you’d be using Truth to get the confession,” said Vedar, but Walden cut in.

“His first thought was of learning to dual wield like you but with Impromptu and Fang.” Tullis and Chas laughed at that and Royan hid his face in his palm.

“Ok, yes, Sir Seer,” said Vedar, “but I do think I can control Impromptu. You’ve let me practice with it, I know how it works. Sanar wouldn’t hurt Nerikans, and would likely draw on you and me, no one else.”

“I’ll consider it for future battles,” said Beatrix. “You may be right about being ready, but I’m not sure I want to test that in a city setting.”

“Alright, I understand,” said Vedar, crossing his arms in a similar pose to Royan. “Ballade.” She put the antimagic blade made from Guilford Morgan on the table in front of him. “And I’m right about you using Truth?”

“I won’t if I can help it,” said Beatrix. “The Nerikanee know what it does and will trust the accuracy of the things she’s forced to say, but it will be more effective if I don’t have to rely on it. To get her to admit to being Azael’s follower without magic will make it feel all the more real, but Truth is ready as a last resort. Now, Walden Morris, I suggest you go ready yourself, or else train with us for the next few days. We go to Nerik in eight days, prepare through the ninth and tenth days, and then on the eleventh when she arrives we will take action.”

“I’ll stay and watch, as often as I can,” said Walden. “I’ve Archivist duties, but I can likely be here each day. I won’t need to train with you, just learn enough of how you fight to be able to quest out a solution.”

Beatrix nodded and stood. “Alright. Let’s get to work.”

Snow was falling on Nerik and a quarter of the population trailed steam as they took their positions. A ship flying the emblem of the Vault was seen approaching the market and so people lined the streets to welcome home those who had been missing for so long.

Akenesa and Liara stood at the fountain of the Central Star, and Sasha stood on its rim. Jela Gaimel, Agata Akwaen, and Galina all stood at the entrances to their Districts with a small group of high ranking servants and Second Family members.

Royan and Vedar hid in the crowd near the path to the Kewaen District, and Tullis squatted on a roof overlooking the Star. Chas and Sarina were flanking the path to the Solash District to cut off any escape back the way the target came.

Beatrix had spread out some of her other students amongst the crowd. Their job was simply to get the masses out of the way if needed. Mira was amongst them. She had protested not being able to fight, but Beatrix had insisted she wasn't old enough yet. She wasn't afraid for the girl's life, but she remembered the trauma the war inflicted on her own mind and didn't want that for her daughter.

Beatrix sat on the fountain in the Ethereal Realm and noticed just how many average Nerikanees could see her. They were all old, about the same age as her grandmother or older. Akenesa had watched her carefully before seeming to notice it was her. Likely a side effect of spending a thousand years trapped in the mists, she thought.

She had thought she could avoid stares and lacked true invisibility, and it turned out her experiment was a failure. It would have worked in Seremont, where the commoners were about thirty on average and second circle at most. She could hear the cheers in the distance, though she was sure that most couldn't, other than her grandmother who had stood on her tiptoes to look down the street just as the cheers began.

When the procession arrived they were carrying a new banner that Sasha narrowed her eyes at. It was a deep purple that was almost black and it had the symbol of the Vault on it. They were all dressed in a matching uniform of black and that same dark purple, a sleek military cut with a long coat and high collar.

At the head of the crowd was someone Beatrix had seen pictures of, Renatus the Invincible, and another she's only read descriptions of, Anton the Black. Between them was a small woman in a dark purple dress with long black hair that passed her hips. Her green eyes marked her as Trisha Morris, the day's target.

"Hail," said Sasha, fists on hips and standing tall in her city watch uniform. The Vault Lords stopped in their tracks, some of them looking her up and down.

"Hail, Aleksashdra," said Renatus. "Are you Lady Kewaen now?" Sasha nodded once. "I am saddened by the passing of the Lord, but as a close ally of House Kewaen I will continue to serve as your brother."

"I expect you on duty tomorrow," she replied. "Today is your glory and rest. Spend it well." The Vault Lords began to laugh and Sasha gave a fierce grin. Beatrix didn't get it, but she recognised military in-jokes when she saw them. Squads were like families without Houses.

"We bring to Nerik the woman who freed us," said Anton the Black. He got his name from the colour of his soul, though he liked to joke it was because of his skin. He was cousin to Kresimir Solash and so his body was a deep shade of brown, but his soul made it look like caramel. He used his corruption as a weapon, and Beatrix intended to learn all she could from him.

"It is a pleasure to meet you all," said Trisha, stepping forward and bowing. Her arm placement was immaculate. One with a tight fist behind her back and the other out to the side. It was practised. At this the Synod members walked forward to greet her, but Beatrix used Almut to return to the Material

Realm, startling the woman, but not the Vault Lords.

“*Soodershin*,” said Beatrix and the Vault Lords all stepped back, away from Trisha Morris. Beatrix saw a very brief flash of white in her eyes. She was a full Seer and trying to hide it. Her core showed signs of being forced down into her chest, her aether flow strained into a normal pattern instead of the vertical rivers of a Seer.

The word Beatrix had spoken was a code used by the Vault Lords that she’d found in a book Sasha had given her. Beatrix wondered if, before she had set up her school, Sasha had intended for Beatrix to become a Vault Lord. The word meant inquisition and was only used when someone was suspected of being a follower of Azael.

“Let your core loose,” said Beatrix. “There’s no use hiding that you’re a Seer.” The woman’s face tightened but her soul relaxed. There were many in the crowd muttering now, and a lot of eyes following the core as it rose from her chest into her head.

“Who are you?” asked Renatus.

“Narianel Azranhai,” she said, summoning Perception to her hand. “Child of Anða Akenzal, descendant of Zoraken and Talwaen and Akwaen, heir to Prochorus, Champion of Blades, born in Nerik while it was sealed in the Ethereal Realm after the Ruination.”

“I cannot imagine Anðeen being older than the five year old I saw left behind as we went to war,” said Anton. “She’s a thousand now, assuming she lives.”

“She does,” said Beatrix.

“You know the Vault tongue?” asked Renatus.

“Only pieces found in an old book,” said Beatrix. “My purpose is not the Vault. I hunt those of the *Elisasan*.” The word was used by Vault Lords for those that worshipped Azael. It came from *elium* and *asas*. Nothing and bring. Those that bring the end.

“You suspect?” asked Anton.

“I know,” she replied. She summoned Truth and

stabbed the sword into the ground to make her point.

At this Trisha's eyes changed to match those of active sight. But she looked at Beatrix with surprise.

"You are protected by Azael," she said.

"Azael chooses me, but I do not choose him," said Beatrix. "He tries to forge me into a sword but forgets the second edge. He smiths his own destruction."

"Is she to be trusted?" asked Renatus loud enough for the crowd to hear and the members of the Synod nodded to him, with Jela adding an "Absolutely!" louder than she probably meant to. "Good enough for me. Vault Lords! Return to the Vault. Lady Azranahi has this under control."

And with that they stalked away, some giving grins and waves to Sasha, others paying quick respects to the Synod. Anton lagged behind at the entrance of the Kewaen District, noticing Royan and Vedar and their uniforms, and chuckling to himself as he left.

"State your name," said Beatrix loudly, forcing all attention on herself.

"I do not answer to you," said Trisha.

"You face destruction," said Beatrix. Perception turned to silver light and was replaced with Fang. "You will answer my questions or you will be punished. State your name."

"Trisha Morris," said the woman. She clenched her fists and Beatrix, and the Synod and the entire crowd, could feel her gathering her energy.

"Trisha Morris," said Beatrix. "When was the last time you saw your son?" The woman jumped and realisation dawned on her face. She knew she wasn't getting out of the Central Star alive. Her eyes were filled with fury, but they couldn't match the cold, predatory stare Beatrix gave her as she circled the woman.

"Years ago," she said. "I don't know."

"What did you say to your son when you last saw him?" asked Beatrix. The Synod had questioning looks, but they knew Beatrix wouldn't put on such a public show without good

reason.

“I don’t recall,” said Trisha.

“The blade in the ground has the power to make you tell the truth, regardless of whether you want to or not. I have another that can compel you to speak, repeating an action you did in the past, including the words.” She summoned Prelude and stuck in the ground behind Trisha. “You will talk of your own volition or you will be made to tell this crowd everything you remember from birth until now.”

“You are vile,” said Trisha.

“The blade in my hand is made from a demon who loves to destroy. This blade is woven with a forbidden word, one you will know well.”

“Why wasn’t I warned of this?” she muttered. It was so quiet it wasn’t meant to be heard. Before Beatrix could speak, Sasha interrupted.

“You say you wonder why you weren’t warned of this encounter,” she said, standing taller on the rim of the fountain as she was now seeing the cracks. “Who would have warned you? And about what?”

“That damned Prophet! He was meant to make this easier!” shouted Trisha, staring daggers at Sasha. She spun to Beatrix and unleashed a blast of air that threatened to blow her off her feet. Beatrix blinked and the woman was already sprinting away. Chas and Sarina jumped from the crowd and blocked her path. She looked up and was about to fly when she saw Tullis hovering above her. Royan and Vedar ran up behind her to complete the trap. Her other students started to move the crowd back.

“Egil Krom is the Prophet,” said Beatrix. “She works for Azael.” The crowd gasped, and curiously some people let out squeals of excitement. Trisha was looking around wildly, her aether erratic, her heartbeat hard and fast. “This can’t wait for a trial.” She was looking at the Synod when she said that.

“I would prefer it did,” said Agata.

“Me too,” said Jela. “She has crimes to pay for.”

“I vote for execution,” said Sasha.

“I do, too,” said Galina. “It is time we show no mercy to those that follow Azael.”

“She intended to turn the Vault Lords against the city,” said Beatrix. “She brought them in uniform as if they were her own just because she released them.”

“Be that as it may,” said Agata, “she should stand trial. Why did you bring up her son? There are questions to be answered, and we can use Truth to get it.”

“She did this to me,” said Walden, stepping from the crowd, wrapped in a cloak. He held out his right arm, the false skin removed to show the aethertech. He then pulled down his hood to reveal he wasn’t wearing his fake face either. He was covered in burn scars with deep gashes along his cheekbones. “I was five.”

“Walden...” said Trisha, but he didn’t look at her.

“When she spoke, she told me of pleasing her master, of helping him carve out his plan for the future. She told me of Azael in his beautiful darkness, and the blinding light he had shown her outside reality.” He walked to her and met her eyes. His eyes changed to match hers, black surrounding white, his active sight awakening for the first time. Hers faded as she surrendered to her fate. He looked at Beatrix and she gave as subtle a nod as she could. “Goodbye, mother.”

He drew a loaded flintlock pistol from under his cloak, pushed it up under her chin, and fired. Several people jumped, likely their first time seeing a firearm. They were becoming common in Seremont, but not in Nerik. There was blood and Beatrix saw Sasha give a wistful sniff. The body fell to the floor unceremoniously.

“I vote in favour,” said Kresimir, appearing from the path to the docks. He had a coy smile. “I heard everything, and the boy has finally closed a book of his past. It was what was good, even if our laws would call it murder.”

“I’m not arresting him,” said Sasha. “We’ve had too many of these bastards infiltrate our city. No more mercy, as

my matriarch says.”

“*Soodershin*,” said Beatrix. “This is war. We need to clean out our basements. Scrub away the grime.”

“A harsh path,” said Jela. “I am hesitant to take it.”

“I fear they are right, you know,” said Agata. “I don’t trust Vanavolk or vampires to make good decisions when blood is involved, but Kresimir has convinced me. We are at war, as Lady Azranhai says.”

Beatrix used Almut to dip into the Ethereal Realm and grabbed Trisha Morris’s soul, taking it into herself. The memories in her were a lot less detailed than some of the others. A woman in her late forties, driven mad by Azael. She lingered for a minute, to let everything settle.

She returned to the Material Realm to find a riot had broken out, and was swiftly being put down by her Order.

“What happened?” she asked.

“At the announcement from Lady Akwaen that every House would need to test its members for links to Azael,” said Royan, clutching a cut on his shoulder, “some of the crowd admitted their links and attacked. Did you get the soul?”

“I did,” said Beatrix. “She’s the right fit for the plan.” She looked around at the souls that had just passed and the enemy laid bare before her. “None of them will. They lack enough presence.”

“Some escaped,” said Vedar. “Should we give chase?”

“No,” said Beatrix. “This is a job for the police.” She looked at Sasha, who was already on it. She was ordering guards both in person and through a magic mirror. “Get your wounds healed. We’re going back to Seremont in an hour.”

“How many times did you reverse time?” asked Tullis. He landed smoothly from his flight.

“I didn’t.” Beatrix looked inward at the soul of Trisha. “She saw what she was up against and caved. I’m not sure why. She didn’t seem that weak at first.”

“Lady Lifesong,” said Walden. His false skin was back in place and he was running a cloth over the firearm. “Thank

you for getting me this far. How much do I owe your mercenaries for their work?"

"I have your mother's soul and will turn her into a weapon of great power," said Beatrix. "That is payment enough. At any rate, this is why I formed the Order. We hunt the generals and captains of Azael's army and keep people safe. These are the kinds of battle we train for."

"I still feel that I owe you," said Walden. He looked at the sky and his eyes began to glow. After a minute or so he looked down again and smiled at Beatrix. "I'll replay you in about five years. Count on it."

It was pouring down and steam flowed from Beatrix as she sparred with Chas. He was letting out burst after burst of aether and she was barely managing to dodge. He was using Malice's power while she held Ballet, the blade made from the null man Berin. She caught one of Chas's blasts with her arming sword and with a spin sent it back at him, hitting him in the chest and knocking him into the mud.

Chas scrambled back up. He'd grown so much taller in the last few years, and wider across the chest. He was starting to give Royan a run for his money when it came to adoring looks from the young women amongst her students. He'd long since activated his elemental font. With the Inner Sustenance he didn't need to eat as much and resisted illness. It also seemed to give him a boost to stamina that let him get up time and again as Beatrix knocked him down.

Their match was interrupted by calls from the gate. Beatrix broke the rules of their fight by using magic, causing a gust of wind that knocked him down again when he wasn't expecting it. She gave him a grin and he laughed. Sarina helped him up, getting her own uniform covered in mud in the process. They were officially engaged now and were saving up their wages for a big wedding.

Beatrix exited the compound to see a carriage baring the Hitch family crest on its door. It opened and inside was Marcus Hitch. He gestured to the seat across from him and she got inside, telling the few students gawking to get back to work. She used a few words to clean her clothes and dry them completely before stepping inside.

"It is good to see you again, Dame Lifesong," he said. His voice showed the stress of rule. His hair was starting to grey despite only being in his mid-thirties. "The people of Seremont have brought several concerns to the people in the Fort. Of course, Sir Carter has dismissed the concerns. He fully believes in you and your cause."

“Can you not say the same?” she asked.

“I can, but I still must appear to question you.” He sipped at a glass of wine, looking out the small window opposite the door. “I have nightmares about my father. As long as you still follow the path in hunting those that have been destroyed by Azael, I will support you.”

“I do my best,” said Beatrix. “There is only one I have come across that I’ve let live, and that’s only because I can’t figure out how to kill him. He’s also proven himself useful, but I don’t trust him. I’ll get him eventually.”

The journey to the Fort of Kings was a short one, and she followed him into the keep. He led her to a room much like her own map room, with shelves filled with scrolls lining the walls and a floor to ceiling bookshelf filled with various books detailing the wildlife and plants of regions across the continent. She pretended not to see the section labelled Nerik.

At the table was Dominic Carter, the Bull Knight, as well as a few others she didn’t recognise. She sat at the table when the king said to and just as he was about to start speaking another man entered the room. She recognised him but didn’t know his name. A runemage in service to the crown, he was thin and looking much older than Beatrix remembered.

“Have you met?” asked Marcus.

“We’ve been in the same room,” said Beatrix.

“That is about the extent of our relationship,” said the man with a nod. He put down some papers and a book in front of the king and then adjusted his glasses. He had many more runic tattoos hidden under his robes now. “I do believe I’ve had my upper back worked on by her wife, however. Very good needlework.”

“This is Jeremy Staver,” said Marcus. “He has been of great service to me, and to my father before me.”

“I must say, I was wrong about you,” said Jeremy, sitting and bowing his head in respect. “I argued against your knighthood but you’ve grown into it wonderfully.”

“That choice was made to facilitate my grooming into

Azael's service," said Beatrix. "It's done me more harm than good, in my opinion. I would much rather renounce it but I don't think I should. You need this reign to be strong and need to stand against Azael, and so me giving up my position would weaken your standing amongst the nations as they try to show they will fight Azael too. I wouldn't want Seremont to be in any danger, so I will hold off my resignation until after Azael has been killed."

"You have a shrewd mind," said one of the people she didn't know. An older man, most likely an advisor.

"If she sets her mind to something it will be done," said Dominic. He gave her a grin. "Don't underestimate the woman who was once the girl that fought armies on her own."

"I haven't been in a mass battle since the war," said Beatrix. "I teach my students to work well with others because I know I can't." Dominic laughed at that, and smoothed his bald head.

"To get to today's topic," said Marcus. He was smiling, despite his tone. He was very bad at hiding his amusement at seeing old war buddies chat, and she hoped that he sent proxies on his behalf instead of negotiate in person. "The Garden of Dena has been taken by a band of ruffians and we want them gone. That is why I have brought you here, Dame Lifesong."

"There's at least a hundred of them," said Jeremy. "We wanted to send Dominic and his men, but he says the city is his jurisdiction. He suggested you."

"Is there a reason you can't use another force within your own military? Why resort to mercenaries?" She leaned on the table and looked at the map of Vin that was spread out. The Garden of Dena was a forest older than Avani itself, transplanted from an older world from before the Ruination. She'd been taken there by her father when she was very young, but she hardly remembered it. She did remember seeing wild strawberries though. It was about fifty miles to the west of Seremont, just north the road leading to Darizion.

“One of our scouts described a scene to me, of the bandits gathered around a rapier deep within the forest, stuck in a rock and being clutched by a skeleton. The description of the sword matched one on the list you gave me.” The king raised his eyebrows expectantly, as if he were about to receive praise.

“Which one?” she asked, keeping her tone level.

“Rose.”

Jeremy slid a drawing by the scout down the table to her. It did look like the drawings of Rose she’s seen before, but what drew her eye was the skeleton.

“This is a Nerikan,” she said.

“How can you tell?” asked Marcus.

“If this picture is accurate, the black marks on the skull are tainted blood.” She narrowed her eyes and held the picture closer. “That looks like the symbol for dawn inside the diamond on his forehead, and the diamond patterns on the jaw are a giveaway. This is an agent of House Zoraken.”

“I thought it was only House Talwaen that marked their own?” asked Jeremy, dipping his pen in ink and ready to take notes.

“House Talwaen mark the core members only, but House Zoraken marks their warriors.” Beatrix looked over the skeleton again. “If these cracks are accurate, this man broke a lot of bones in his life, healed again and again. It’s no surprise he had a divine blade. I can only imagine he died fighting in the Ruination. Not many of House Zoraken’s warriors survived that war, but I’ve met a few in recent years.”

She passed back the picture and Dominic took it to look it over. Jeremy was scribbling furiously.

“I was originally planning on presenting the sword to you myself,” said Marcus, “while heaping praise on Sir Carter and his soldiers, of course. But will the sword suffice as payment for your clearing of those woods?”

“We’ve been doing a lot of jobs recently,” said Beatrix. “Mostly monster hunting in the more wild areas around Vin,

Rinki, and Cor. My payment will be the sword, but you will need to pay my soldiers. The Order cannot survive on swords alone.”

“Shrewd indeed,” said Marcus. He arched his fingers in front of his mouth, but it didn’t hide his grin. This was the sort of thing he’d probably grown up dreaming of.

“How many will you be taking?” asked the same older man from before. “How much will it cost?”

“I’ll take four,” said Beatrix, causing Dominic to laugh again. “That’s all I’ll need. One captain, her lieutenant, and two other soldiers.”

“Only five of you to take down over a hundred men?” asked another of the advisors, speaking for the first time.

“Do not doubt,” said Dominic just as Jeremy said “I still remember that first battle against Cor.”

“I could do it myself, but my soldiers need experience.” She looked the man in the eyes until he buckled and looked away. “I’ll send a messenger with the costs when the job is done.” She stood and left with no further discussion.

Beatrix landed at the entrance to the Garden of Dena just as her students reached it. While they sorted their horses she used Perception to survey the forest. She didn't need to locate Rose, her range at feeling their presence had extended as she trained and she could feel it just over two miles away.

"Two hundred and thirteen," she said when Sarina walked up to her. "The amount was undersold. I'll be sure to squeeze a few extra coins out of Marcus Hitch for this."

"What's the plan of attack?" asked Sarina. She'd tied her hair back and was wearing a round helmet with wings etched in the side. A few of her students had those made for themselves. She also wore a white brigandine and pauldrons over a black gambeson. Many of her students had also started to trim their black or white clothes with red, the three colours of her heritage being mixed into a single coherent style. It was about time she updated the uniform of the Order.

"I'm letting you four go in and deal with the enemy," said Beatrix. She noticed the tightening in Sarina's face. Fear and shock. She'd need to be able to do this if she wanted to fight Arael. "I'm going to walk straight to Rose. I'll kill those that get in my way, but it's your job to lead your team in the eradication of the enemy. Have your team chosen their blades yet?"

"Yes," said Sarina. She nodded so hard her helmet shifted a little. Sarina took Venom, her lieutenant took Perception, and the two newer students took Gungnir and Akwaen. When the blades were handed out Beatrix gave some guidance towards the three main camps the bandits had set up in a triangle around the sword.

"Why haven't they taken the sword?" asked Martin, Sarina's lieutenant. He was looking at the areas Beatrix had pointed out using Perception.

"I think there's a shield around it," said Beatrix. "The rock has some chips so they might be taking a hammer to it,

trying to get the blade out, but it's probably stuck in with magic to avoid anyone but a highly skilled mage taking it. The soldier probably thought a Nerikan would find it before anyone else."

The group accepted that, but Beatrix couldn't be sure until she saw it up close. She summoned Havoc and Malice and then told Sarina to enter when she was ready, to not rush, and to be careful.

Beatrix walked for ten minutes before she encountered any of the bandits. They'd set up a watch platform in a tree and as it came into view she heard the sound of a horn. She'd seen it was there and walked towards it on purpose. This distraction should thin out the enemy herd and allow her students to perform better.

She kept walking, not bothering to stop as she was struck by crossbow bolts and bullets. Even ruffians were getting their hands on rifled muskets now, not just the armies of the world. A hole was blown clean through her skull by a man brave enough to run at her and point the firearm in her face. She slightly tilted her head and stared the man in the eyes as the hole closed. He tried to run and with a single swing his head was removed by Havoc.

She walked on, noting the bemused stares from the men in the trees and those who had gathered, but then she stopped. A new man with a blade of magic approached. He had on a longcoat and a tricorne hat over a red bandana, looking like some pirate from a theatre production. The blade was a scimitar, sharpened enough to actually hurt her.

"That's far enough," he said, brimming with enough confidence for ten.

"I'll give you twenty gold crowns for the sword," she said. The man's bandits looked around at him as if expecting him to take the offer but he just scrunched up his face.

"You've got some nerve walking into our land!" he shouted.

"Fancy yourself a king, do you?" she asked, imitating

his accent. He was from somewhere up near Port Swan, but not actually in the city, by the sound of it. Highs and lows in an alternating pattern. She grinned as he spluttered out a rough response. “And I thought I had anger issues.”

“Why are you here?” He gestured with the blade in what was probably supposed to be a threatening manner. She was more worried about the men with the muskets loading enchanted bullets. They only had so many shots, but if one of them was smart enough to fire at her core instead of her head and shoulders she’d be in trouble.

“I’m here for the blade in the stone,” said Beatrix. “It belong to me, inherited through family.”

“It can’t be removed, but you’re welcome to try,” said the leader with an awful grin. Half his teeth were brown. The other half were missing. He stepped aside and his men made a path for her.

She walked with confidence, carefully feeling out the aether in the area to keep track of the magical weapons. She was followed all the way to the sword and they circled around her. There was more of them now, and a few more swords and axes and spears that had been magically sharpened. If it came to it she could pull out her wings and end it quickly, but she found she wanted the challenge, mentally limiting herself to her more human form for the fun of it.

Before she went for the sword she examined the body more closely. Human originally, but the bones showed signs of age beyond normal limits. Not a lich, but perhaps some other kind of undead. Several ribs were broken, the sternum completely gone, and a hole in the side of the skull. Its hand rested on the rock. By the shape of the eye sockets this was a full blooded Nerikan and the hips showed it was a woman.

When she looked at the shield around the blade she could only smile. It was designed to only allow Prochorus to take the blade. It was of the eighth circle, and a good enough breaker mage could probably get through it after several weeks, but she didn’t need to.

Just as she was about to call the blade to her through the shield there was a shift in the air. A horrible scent. She looked up a nearby tree and the bandits were all shouting, pointing weapons at the man standing on the branches.

“They were about to hurt you,” said Egil. He had an insane smile and wide eyes. His pupils were shaking within his irises as the corruption and souls within him fought for dominion over the body, but he was thoroughly in control. “A vision came to me of you injured as an enchanted shot grazed your core. We cannot have your soul damaged now, can we?”

“Go home, Egil,” she said. “If you even have one. I don’t need your help.”

“You don’t need it, but this is the optimal route.” Egil jumped down from the tree and landed with a thud. Beatrix’s sharp ears heard a crack and then a grinding as the man’s ankle broke and repaired. He moved smooth enough that it didn’t look like he was hurt. She didn’t think he even felt pain.

“Just leave,” she said. She pulled Rose through the path in the barrier that had been left for Prochorus. She let it manifest in her hand and flourished it, then muttered to herself. “Blodwen would have loved this blade.”

“Alright, enough!” shouted the leader. “Give us the sword and we’ll let you live.”

“Not going to happen,” said Beatrix. “King Marcus Hitch has demanded your deaths. None of you are escaping here alive.”

“Acting as a blade,” she heard Egil say under his breath and when she glared at him he smiled wider.

And then the battle started. Shots were fired. Beatrix only dodged the magical ones, not bothering with the normal shots. They broke through her but they weren’t a problem. With a single wave of Rose she was surrounded by red and white and black petals, then with another those petals flew forward, cutting through dozens of men. Not all hits were fatal but even the grazes were deep.

Beatrix looked over to Egil and saw he was using Claw.

In wide sweeping arcs the twin blades cut through the bandits. She narrowed her eyes and continued the fight. She couldn't feel that version of Claw; the true blade rested within her.

The leader attacked Beatrix head-on with his magical sword. She switched Rose for Ballet and in a dance of strikes she broke the sword. The leader was in shock, probably at how much money she'd just wasted for him. He dropped the hilt of his sword and tried to lunge at her. He was taller than her and more muscular, but there wasn't a drop of aether flowing through those muscles. She switched to Havoc and Malice in response and in several twirls and a hundred cuts the man fell to pieces.

Beatrix felt rifles being raised, filled with enchanted shot, but didn't bother. Sarina and her team burst through the treeline behind them and the group dissolved quickly without firing at all. Beatrix saw Sarina stare at Egil and then give the order not to attack him. She was smart to not pick that fight.

The fight ended quickly after that. One of the newer students needed a little healing on his arm, but no one was injured other than that. She was proud of them, but the feeling faded when she had to turn on Egil.

"So, you *are* a time traveller." A statement of fact. He was leaning against a tree, his eyes darting left and right. She knew he was peering into the Ethereal Realm. He was hungry for the fallen souls.

"I cannot reveal that information," he said. He looked in her eyes and there was a very subtle nod.

"Why can't I feel that version of Claw?"

"It's wrapped in my aether," he said. It was true, she could see it, but it felt like it should have been more than that. He held it out hilt-first for her to take, but when she reached for it he pulled it away. "The first rule of time shenanigans is to not let two copies of the same soul touch. They explode and create a hole in reality leading to the Great Beyond. Don't want reality to be broken before it's time."

She looked closer at his soul. Through the dark mists of

the visage's collection she could see his core had no scar on it. His collection felt very similar to the first time she met him. And there it was, a shard of her bone held in a thick blanket of devoured souls. Then she began noticing other things about. His matted hair was damp and his clothes were mostly clean, as if he'd just changed. His scent was fresher than normal.

"You came here after breaking my collar," she said. "From the day of my Separation."

"Perhaps," said Egil. His smile cooled off and his face became more neutral, but there were signs he was trying his best to not keep smiling.

"How many times have I met you when were younger than this?" she asked.

"Once or twice," said Egil. "And a few more."

"We're leaving," Beatrix suddenly announced to Sarina and her team. The saluted and followed without question.

"Seven more years," said Egil loudly. "Enjoy your time. The Lunar Beast is coming!"

By the time she turned to look at him he was gone. His scent just vanished, his aether completely absent.

"What is happening in seven years?" asked Sarina.

"I'm not sure," said Beatrix. "But we need to prepare. We have a time frame now."

Half a year after Isaac's thirteenth birthday, Beatrix was in the Aether Sea to see him. She'd consulted Vala to know when this event was to happen and she wanted to be there for it. She'd brought Adela and Mira, and somehow Vala and Sasha had shown up too.

The year before, Aldo had requested she make a new gate to the Aether Sea in the lair of the Eyes, in the back of Haziel's old chamber. It had taken some effort and the help of a couple of mist mages from the Tower of Magic in Seremont, but she managed to awaken that power. Angels had so many tools and she wasn't sure she had every one of them available to her.

Harelas was a growing town. More and more followers of the gods had moved in and now there was an inn and several new shops. The blacksmith was a Sklaara and there were several races she didn't recognise. They'd begun to need a government because of the growing population and it seemed it was getting modelled on Nerik, no doubt under Anđa's influence. There were at least eight different gods being represented, however, and it could only grow. There would likely be problems in the future, but there was peace for now. The centre of the town was the portal to the new world, nearing completion. They were speaking in terms of months instead of years now.

Her parents' house was still on the edge of town, but she knew that soon enough they'd be surrounded on all sides, unless there was an effort to preserve the flower fields, perhaps turning them into a public park. It had a new room on its left side, away from town, and a small building in the back garden where her father was keeping several magical objects and weapons. He'd also taken up potion brewing and Anđa didn't want that in the house. Potions always smelled foul before they were flavoured and scented, and most people only saw the final results, like from the shop Adela used to live next to.

When they reached the house it was a surprise to see that Isaac was now as tall as her. She knew he'd be taller than her, but at thirteen she thought of him as just a child still. He was beginning to look a lot like Sorley if he had the Nerikan eyes and the Talwaen crescent pupils.

Mira was sixteen and a little taller than Beatrix, but that wasn't a surprise. Her Vanavolk blood came directly from Galina, who was a few inches taller than Beatrix, and she also had her original human blood in her still. She was growing well, but had yet to take on a Vanavolk form.

She thought back to her own Separation. It had come on suddenly. Her senses dimmed and she felt a disconnect from herself and the world around her. She had explained the feeling to Isaac, telling him what to expect. He was excited for the boost in power, but visibly nervous.

While they waited, Beatrix and Isaac were playing a two-player board game, where moving pieces on the board to capture certain locations was the goal. Sorley loved the game, but Anđa got impatient with it. Isaac, on the other hand, was showing a keen strategic mind. Sasha sat nearby, watching with interest while Adela, Vala, and Anđa talked in the backroom. Sorley was amazed at the plays being made.

"Why did you make that move?" Mira asked when it seemed that Beatrix fumbled an important piece. Isaac sat and stared at it for a while, not willing to act on it. Beatrix's face remained blank.

"If I take that piece," Isaac said after a solid minute and a half of thinking, "you win in three moves."

"And if you don't?" asked Beatrix.

"You win in five."

"Do you surrender?"

"No." Isaac looked her in the eyes and grinned. Maybe it was because of his closeness to Sorley, or maybe it was just sibling rivalry, but he'd gotten fiercely competitive in the last few years. "I'll do this instead."

He made a move that made everyone except Beatrix

confused. It wasn't just fumbling a piece on purpose like she had, it was completely opening up his defences. It looked like what someone would do if they were planning to lose the game on purpose. Isaac had either forgotten that she'd taught him that move on her last visit or he was baiting her. It would lead to a huge loss of momentum for her, so she wasn't going to fall for it. The move was designed to lead to half the board being removed with the goal of taking more than was lost. She had a counter.

Beatrix moved the piece she tried to sacrifice across the board into a strange position, but it got around his defensive wall completely on the next move and would lead to his defeat in a few moves. Isaac had to think about it for a time, and then he surrendered.

"I don't think it's possible to beat that," he said. "Not after opening myself up like that. What was I meant to do?"

Beatrix moved some pieces on the board and started to teach him some counters and when to use those kinds of all-or-nothing moves. Mira was doing her best to follow along, and Sorley gave up. He was an enforcer, a strong-arm, not a strategist.

After they were done everyone headed outside, but Adela went into town to get more vegetables. Sorley and Anđa started preparing food and while they waited Isaac and Mira decided to spar. Beatrix sat on the roof again, reading an old book on duelling that had somehow survived the Ruination. Sasha and Vala seemed to have very little in common, but they quietly talked politics and plans for a coming festival in Nerik.

When Beatrix looked up from her book she was a little shocked to see how fast Isaac and Mira were moving. They were both using different methods of pushing aether through their bodies to increase their speeds. Mira was using Sarkal, the Nerikan martial art she'd been learning for years now. This was a basic technique and she was using it fluently. Isaac however was the one doing something strange.

Inside her chest she could feel Heart's power active,

joining together the blades. She hadn't even noticed it, at first, it was so subtle. But there was Isaac, leeching power from her using Heart to access Havoc and Malice, making himself stronger and faster.

She didn't cut it off, she wanted to see how it played out. She wondered if he was doing it on purpose or if it was something he'd done instinctually. She then looked inwards for answers.



“Iblis,” she said. Her mindscape had become an arena and she stood in the sandpit. The circle of walls were fifty feet from the centre where she stood, and above them were thousands of seats. “Tell me what is happening.”

“The boy is on the same soul frequency as you and Prochorus, but he lacks the internal well to store use and the corruption we take.”

Iblis stood before her, nearly eight feet tall. He was a white porcelain mask wearing a shakai, a ceremonial scarf in two shades of red, one dark and one bright. The shakai's shawl was the dark half and he kept it up like a hood, with the bright half falling beneath to the floor. Piercing the shawl, dangling in front like a medallion, was his blackened halo. She knew that beneath the shakai there was nothing, though he sometimes created large white claws to gesture with.

She looked up at the porcelain mask. It was a pure white with two black upright ovals for eyes, and a light grey streak from each of those eyes to the bottom of the mask. The effect made it look like tears.

In her mind she was in her soul form, not her body, but she lacked the black stains. She also wore the shakai, but she wore it wrapped around her shoulders. The scarf was used in Nerikan tradition to represent a union in cause and belief. The first to don it was Sanar, and the rest soon followed, including herself. Sanar chose to the two-tone red because he felt Beatrix

lacked Kewaen representation in her appearance. She was too strongly associated with Talwaen and Zoraken, and so lacked a balance in her heritage. Black, white, and red soon became the official colours of House Azranhai. Her sigil was the symbol for blade, *el*, in the three colours.

“Is he tapping you intentionally?” she asked Iblis. She noticed a few others in the stands. Her mindscape was home to all the blades, even the new ones, and they were each carving out their own space like a continent divided. She rarely saw certain blades, but others were always near her core to see her when she was visiting. Kali and Zepar were never far, and Abaddon always loomed close at hand.

“He isn’t,” said Iblis. “I can stop it, but I can sense what you want to do. I think I can make that work, but there would need to be a strong resonance. A bond. Perhaps the higher members of your Order will work, but the newer the student the weaker the effect.”

Beatrix nodded. “Let’s try it.”

Iblis bowed, and if a mask could give a cheeky grin, she would have sworn he was doing it.



Sitting on the roof she watched as suddenly the power of Kali and Zepar, Havoc and Malice, surged in full force through both Isaac and Mira. Both of them stumbled at their newfound strength and agility, unable to properly control it, but they tried to keep going. They were using wooden practice swords, and those quickly splintered as they crashed into each other.

And then, right as they were in the middle of string of attacks and dodges and counterattacks, she cut them both off. They both lost their momentum and fell to the floor, out of breath in Mira’s case, confused in Isaac’s.

Sasha and Sorley were amused by the event but Anđa gave Beatrix that motherly stare that said she did something wrong by toying with the other children. Vala simply nodded.

She always knew what was coming.

It was then that Adela came back from the town with fresh vegetables and fruit, and Beatrix used the distraction to slip away from her mother. She talked with Sorley, Mira, and Isaac and started figuring out how to tune the power without consulting Iblis directly. By the end of their trials they could tap into any of the passive abilities she had within her. Havoc and Malice came easily, and Sorley managed to access both Perception and Flameroot without telling her first, meaning at-will access to her blades was possible, so long as they were attuned to Heart.

This needed more testing, but it could wait for another day. Could all of her students access a single blade at once? Could she fuel an army with Havoc and Malice, each using an elemental blade to enhance their magical potential?

Anđa called everyone over for food and they went to eat, but Beatrix stayed behind. She didn't have to eat, so she avoided it when she could. Isaac didn't need to eat, but he enjoyed it so he ate happily.

Beatrix found herself staring in the direction of the demons in the distance after a while. She didn't like them being so close and wanted to go kill them. She had Sasha here now, and could probably convince her to help.

Then her attention was diverted. She looked over at the long table and benches where everyone was eating and talking to see Isaac clutching his chest. She called attention to it and everyone moved away from him, ready for the event.

Isaac managed to stand and move away from the table before falling to his knees and then the floor, leaving behind his soul, floating above him. He was tall and lithe, his aetherial body solid white and his core the brightest blue she'd ever seen. He truly had no corruption. He didn't even have the black stains around his eyes or the tiny black tears he'd chosen as his personal mark.

Then, unlike Beatrix, from behind his head grew a ring of silver and gold, metal and smooth and radiating light. His

power grew quickly and Beatrix had to act quickly. She wrapped the ring within the hidden space she kept her wings and held it closed. It burned so hot that she could feel her wings melting.

“Isaac! You have a halo, you need to fold it away.” Her voice was strained. She fell to her knees and Adela rushed to her side. “This kind of power shouldn’t be accessible to you yet, not until your soul matures. Get it under control.”

“How do I do it?” he asked. He was afraid, so she steadied her voice as she explained. It was a complex topic but she was sure he was smart enough to understand it. She had to describe it using sensations rather than accurate magical theory, so she wasn’t sure the others understood, but she saw Isaac attempting to fold space within a few minutes.

“You’ve got it,” she said as the heat and overwhelming light subsided. Her wings were made of *chasokil*, she’d found out after talking with Michael. It was a metal forged from light aether and was inherent in many angels. She thought that perhaps the black wings were different, but they were the same metal, it turned out. It was said to be impossible to melt, and thus forge into weapons or armour for others, but Isaac had just proven that wrong. Her wings had been damaged before by those using the metal itself or antimagic, but this was the first time she’d felt them dying on such a fundamental level.

She released her hold on Isaac’s halo when she was sure he had tucked it away safely and tried to heal her wings, but her power had been drained. She looked at Isaac and saw that his elemental attunement had changed. He’d gone from fire and light to pure aether as his only element.

“True divinity,” she heard Vala say, though no one else seemed to hear it.

“Take back your body now,” Beatrix said to Isaac. He did so, and had a little trouble adjusting to being physical again. He’d grow to that height with time, just a little taller than their father. Gregory’s height.

“Do you have a halo?” he asked her.

“I don’t,” she said. “Not a real one, just the spike shield. I didn’t think nephilim could have them at all. Each one I’ve read about didn’t mention that they had manifested a halo. Isaac, do not release that halo from its prison within the space around you. Keep it safe, at least until you learn to control its power.”

“Michael could probably teach you,” said Sorley. “He would be glad to spend time with you too.”

“I can still feel it,” said Isaac. “It’s hot, but it’s not a bad kind of heat.”

“It will always be there, unless you alter yourself so you no longer have it,” said Narianel. “I have my wings and tendrils, and you have your halo. The only real difference is that my body is benign and yours radiates pure power.”

“I’ll start teaching you to heal properly,” said Anđa.

“Why?” asked Isaac.

“Healing will let you regrow your body,” said Narianel. “On purpose from nothing, at least. Having your body gives you a link to any other blood magic within you, such as the Vanavolk transformation, and from what I can tell it gives us more power. I think it’s having an aetheriad in our chests, overlapping our cores. Even when you abandon your body you’ll want physical substance for many reasons, and being able to rebuild yourself from nothing will be useful.”

“There’s also the fact that people who can’t see aether won’t be able to see you or interact with you when you leave your body,” said Adela. “I remember when Naria tried to show me it for the first time. She was completely invisible. Now that she’s stronger and her aether is more dense she’s visible to people, but in the beginning she really lacked that presence.”

Beatrix nodded along. She remembered that. From there she talked with him on tricks she’d learnt along the way. How to fly and how to create portals between worlds and visit Sonta. She wrote all of it down as she talked, and took notes from the others when she had trouble explaining things.

Everyone returned to eating and Beatrix sat at the table

making more notes, listening to the chatter. Isaac had become incredibly hungry and was eating his way through the leftovers when Sasha challenged him. She'd never sparred with him, and watching them Beatrix saw Isaac's own style begin to emerge. Evasion, magical traps, and Sarkal strikes. It was so unlike her own way of fighting, but she looked forward to facing a more mature version of the style when he'd grown.

Beatrix was sat with Mira, trying to teach her some military history, but the girl wasn't all that interested. Mira could recite dates and get anything she was asked correct, but she had no enthusiasm for the subject. But it was important to learn, so Beatrix kept on.

There was a knock at the door and Beatrix called in Millicent. She was a young but tough woman, with dark hair braided back over her uniform.

"Walden Morris for you, Lady Lifesong," she said.

"I'll be down shortly," Beatrix replied.

Millicent turned and left. Beatrix quickly finished up the section of the book she was going over with Mira, talking about the importance of the Strafford Pass in the civil war of Serverus, sixty years ago. She let Mira run off to do as she pleased, and as she headed out she watched as Mira headed towards Adela's tower.

A new central building had been added between the house and the barracks, on the old property line, that was used for strategy meetings and handing out jobs. She was nodded towards room three and as she entered Walden took her by surprise.

He was entirely aether-mechanical now. Not a trace of his human body remained. But his face and the way he moved were as if he were entirely human still. His skin was seamless and realistic, and his gestures were subtle and graceful.

"Figura," he said. "That's the word you're looking for. A soul placed inside a technological body. Or, rather, a body built around a soul."

"Quite a change, though without my aethersense I wouldn't have been able to tell." Beatrix sat in her usual seat. Walden was already sat across from her.

"I died, in truth," said Walden. "My body torn to shreds in the battle. But, I have returned with this gift for you, as I promised before."

He slid a wooden box across the table. It spun one and a half times and stopped as it faced her, perfectly aligned with and an inch from the edge of the table. Then she noticed his eyes. He had fully unlocked his powers.

Flipping the latch and opening the box she saw seven spherical wire meshes. And in each one was a fully corrupt soul. She picked one up and felt its intent. It wanted to do nothing but eat and devour.

“These souls were taken from figuras, like myself. I have one of those balls of wire in my head.” Walden tapped his forehead. “This body is of non-standard design, to allow my powers to be optimised. They’re normally in the chest.”

“Who were they?” she asked. She picked up another one and felt its lust. Pure carnal desire.

“Pre-Ruin, the High Lord Arsenum, God of the Forge, created seven pure souls and placed them in bodies of metal. He sought to create perfect protectors for a city state that worshipped him, aligned to his values.

“And then they were corrupted by the followers of Azael. They each took on an aspect of immorality. A deep and true failing at being pure. Self-righteousness, or destructive intent, or hopelessness. They laid waste to the city.

“In penance, Arsenum created Elpis, who you may have met. She’s my mechanic in the Guild. We found her in a ruin of her world in the Salest mountains not long after I joined the Guild. Elpis was created to destroy her older siblings and just recently she has managed it, with Guild help.

“We took those souls from those figuras, and now I give them to you to turn into weapons.”

In the box was also a notebook, giving the details of each soul. She flipped through it quickly, though didn’t take much of it in. She’d get more when she took them into her own soul to attune to them.

“You seem sure I can use them for my plan,” she said. She examined another and felt its rage, so like her own.

“I’ve seen you making them into blades of power,” he

said. “But I don’t know anything about your plan. Akenesa and Vala haven’t answered my questions. I cannot see beyond a certain point in the future, and that point moves closer or further away day by day. I hope your plan is for the best.”

“Me too,” she said.

“Care to share?” he asked. “I could help.”

“Locate Prochorus’s blades, as Vala is trying to do. That would help. There are still a few missing, lost to history and the Ruination. Vala has located some of them, but tracing them through history with visions is a long process.”

“Perhaps I will,” said Walden. He smiled, and got up to leave, but Beatrix spoke, halting him.

“What was it like to die,” she asked. He looked at her in a way she couldn’t understand. An expression that confused her and she just couldn’t read.

“I had predicted my death,” said Walden. “I knew it was coming so I was ready, and I helped Elpis prepare a device to keep me here, to put me in this new body. I wasn’t afraid. Not for that death. I knew Wrath would be my end. An end, I suppose.”

She nodded and closed her eyes, crossing her arms. He left quietly.

It was unusual for Beatrix to get a letter from Akenesa, so when she got one she stared at it for a moment before reading it. It was an invite to her study, which she'd been in multiple times, and it was definitely written in Akenesa's hand.

"I'm going to Nerik," she told Adela, handing her the letter. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Strange, but I'll see you soon."

Beatrix gave her a quick kiss and left the house. As she came out onto the yard she gave Royan and Chas some orders, then manifested Needlepoint. She'd practised with using it at long ranges a little, but hadn't managed the full trip to Nerik yet, no matter how well she focused on her destination. She considered talking to Furtur, the demon inside the blade, and trying to amplify his power. She didn't want to reforge the blade to do it, though, as it may disrupt the song.

It took her three jumps to reach the northern coast and another to cross the water to Nerik. Akenesa was right that such power could do a lot of work to shrinking the world. Less than five minutes after getting the letter she was stood on the grounds of the Talwaen Estate.

A mass of corruption hit her and she bounced along the ground before flipping to her feet and stopping at a slide. Liara had a wicked grin. It was a challenge Beatrix hadn't been expecting.

Liara leapt and bounded on all fours and pounced at Beatrix. Her corruption was complete, smothering her natural aether signature. She smelled like a beast, but she was in completely control. Beasts in Nerik got titles; Liara was often called The Willing Beast.

Beatrix caught her in the air and flipped her to the ground, but she sprung back up and was running around Beatrix in a large circle within moments. She was fast. As she watched Liara she felt eyes watching. Akenesa and Sanja. And one she couldn't recognise.

Liara leapt again and this time Beatrix deliberately collided with her in the air, tumbled to the ground with her, and forced herself on top. Then there was a change in Liara. Her corruption faded and she held up a finger. She poked Beatrix on the nose.

“Tag, you’re it!” she said with a smile, knocked Beatrix away with a blast of aether that radiated from her body and tore up the grass, and then fled inside the Estate.

Beatrix stood up and stared after Liara for a moment. She would never understand her. She looked up at the mansion and saw Sanja watching from the window, a faint smile on her face. Akenesa was standing in the shadows of the doorway. Where was the other one?

Akenesa walked to Beatrix, the blade Deception in her hand. That’s where it was. Zezebeth was trying to hide himself from her, and while he managed to hide the pull she felt, he’d just drawn her attention to himself instead. Akenesa held out the blade for her to take, and so she did. It rested within her soul without the strangeness she’d felt before.

“Sorry this took so long,” said Akenesa. “I’ve been busy these last few days so that’s why I sent the letter. I broke the curse on the blade last week, but haven’t had the time to visit in person. I’m on my way to see the Vault Lords now. They’re enhancing their security again. Every season since they got back they’ve had me go in and break everything they’ve been working on. Care to join me?”

“I have the time, I guess,” Beatrix replied. “My Order will still be working on what I set them to for hours, and Adela was about to go to work when I left.”

They walked through the city together, drawing eyes, but no one approached. The Vault of the Endless was in the Kewaen district and the place was far more orderly than the rest of the city. The roads were straight and there were no overhangs. Vinsent had a strong vision while he was still alive and his domain had conformed to him, not the other way around. The outlying streets had more curves, however, the

ones built under the hands of Senka and Demyan.

The Vault was a pyramid about three storeys high, but like the Archive it was much larger underground than it was above. Dozens of miles of corridors and thousands of rooms, all of it nearly identical to the untrained eye. Akenesa told Beatrix they used complex poetry to move everything every so often, rearranging the rooms and the hallways to confuse any that weren't them.

They climbed the steps to the highest room, which was the entrance. There they met Renatus the Invincible, who drew his sword instead of greeting them.

"As a part of the security test we need to first gain entry," said Akenesa. Beatrix nodded and pushed forward her palm, releasing a blast of aether. Renatus cut through it with a grin, and she gave him one of her own. His sword was big enough that he needed to use both hands, and it was filled with more magic than even her own blades. Reality crackled along its edges, cut just by moving the sword, and the flat of the blade was covered in a series of runes that glowed faintly with the light of the Great Beyond.

Renatus charged the pair of women with a roar and a swing of that sword. Akenesa melded into the shadows to dodge away but Beatrix just held out her hand. She caught the sword and grinned.

"How!?" asked Renatus, his eyes wide and his hands shaking as he pushed against her.

"I have a blade like that, almost," she said. She was channelling Fang's power, Abaddon's power, through her skin to counteract the destructive effects of the sword's edge. "I am *very* familiar with the words in your blade." With one finger of the hand holding the sword, she tapped the empty circle etched into the flat of the blade.

She didn't like using Fang like this, but she had been practising it. It would be necessary for her plan to become as intimately familiar with his power, to be able to use it without it tearing her apart. Even now it was slowly making her core

tremble and her flow fuzz at the edges. Her hand was numb and she could feel the nerves being severed along her arm.

She pushed the sword away with a blast of aether and released Fang's power, letting her healing take over. Her core settled quickly but it took a moment for her flow to return to solidity. She stretched her fingers as she dodged several more attacks.

"You move like silk," Renatus said. "Maybe after this we could go back to my home and you could show me more." He said this while trying to cut her down. It made her laugh.

"I'm Nerikan enough to appreciate the offer, and Vinish enough to pass." She touched the flat of his blade and sent a shockwave of aether through her fingers, knocking the sword to the side. As he stumbled she kicked him and let out another blast, kicking him clear off the top of the pyramid.

"Hurry," said Akenesa's voice from a shadow on the ground. Beatrix watched the dark puddle slip between the cracks in the floor. She didn't plan to be as subtle as her cousin. She punched the ground and a thunder clap forced the door open. It should have been a platform that floated down, but she fell and landed gracefully on her feet.

She'd fallen at least a hundred feet and was met with multiple directions she could go. She used Perception and followed the paths with her mind, seeing that three of them met dead ends with deadly traps. She went down the fourth path and soon found a doorway, standing on its own in the middle of a room.

"Odd," she said. She walked around it as Akenesa took on a human shape.

"Most of the Vault is inside this pocket world," said her cousin. "It's still the original that Nerik used for the Vault, from before the Temporal Corruption."

"Did you ever discover how Argus's apprentice got in and stole your phylactery, along with all the others she took?"

"Yes." Akenesa walked to the doorway and looked up at it. "She was apparently skilled in magic that manipulate the

mind. She got a guard to talk. That sort of thing is highly illegal, but so is theft of a soul, so I cannot fault her for the lesser part of her crimes.”

“And how do we get in?” asked Beatrix. The doorway was empty. Knowing it was a portal she should have been able to see the other side through it, even if it made no sense in real space. That sort of thing bothered normal people, but not her, not with living with her sight and wings.

“We need the password.” Akenesa touched a plate of metal on the doorway. “This responds to the right words. I can figure it out, given time. It’s all based on vibrations and rhythm. Keep Renatus off me.”

“Right.”

Beatrix put herself between the entrance and Akenesa and waited. She kept track of the man with Perception, seeing him ready himself to jump down and follow them. She summoned Havoc and Malice to her hands and as he hit the ground she was on him. He was a larger man but he moved with grace. Thousands of years of practice let him move with both fluidity and intent, regardless of being in a box for the last thousand.

“You dance just like him,” said Renatus, and then in a series of moves he outmanoeuvred Beatrix and knocked her to the ground. She scrambled up and was on him again quickly.

“Who?” she asked. She kept up her attack.

“Prochorus, of course.” Renatus dodged a series of sixteen quick swings that she’d once used to demonstrate her speed to some prospective students. “You use the exact same rhythm. Step step slash. Step slash slash.” She faltered because he spoke as she did those movements and he hit her in the gut with a punch, then used flows of air to send her to the wall. Her back and shoulders crunched, but they’d heal quick enough.

“I don’t understand,” she said. He was holding her there without any obvious effort, even though she was pushing back. Physical efforts were going to be wasted in this, so she

dismissed Havoc and Malice.

“I sparred with Prochorus regularly, back in the day,” said Renatus. He stood nonchalantly, clearly not worried she’d break out of his magic’s grasp. “He explained to me why he fought the way he did. That song of his, that song of yours, is constantly playing in your head, isn’t it? Everything you do, you do to that beat. I was there when he had that symphony play the song without magic. I know it well enough to keep up and defeat you.”

“Do you now?” she asked with a smirk. She channelled Ballade and was surrounded by a bubble of anti-magic, but within that bubble was a pocket where she stood, untouched by the effects. The path between Renatus and his magic was cut, dropping her from the wall and allowing to straighten out her spine, and pop one of her shoulders back into place.

“How did you do that? I thought you didn’t have Mistedge yet.” He pointed his sword at her and saw its power fade at the tip as it entered the bubble.

“I think you’re failing to take into account that I am not Prochorus. While I thank you pointing out a flaw in my fighting style, one that I will correct in time, please be aware that I have more tricks up my sleeve than just *his* blades.”

She dropped the bubble and channelled Crescendo, pulling Renatus’s sword from his hand. She caught it and twirled it with a smirk. She strutted as she started to circle him.

“Oh, those eyes and that smile.” Renatus let out a deep laugh. “I see Sasha in you too.”

“As much as I love my family, and do enjoy being compared to them, you’re doing it again. I am my own little creature of dusk and dawn, song and blood. There’s more to me than just inheritance.”

She threw him his sword and then summoned Ballet. He looked at the long, slender sword with confusion.

“That’s not one of his blades.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s one of mine.”

As her null blade struck his sword of destruction it felt like time froze. And then there was an explosion as Ballet rejected the magic flowing into it. The pyramid collapsed in on them but Beatrix protected herself and the doorway where Akenesa stood with her wings. When it settled she carefully moved the rock away from them.

“Excessive,” said Akenesa, the faintest of smiles on her lips. Beatrix shrugged and laughed.

Renatus pushed his way out of the rubble with a grunt, using air to lift the rocks and dump them to the side. He was still ready to fight, his sword still filled with magic.

“You’re really living up to that title,” said Beatrix. “My paternal grandfather was called that too, before he died.”

She listened to the beat in her head as they started their dance once more. She switched from Havoc and Malice to Perception to Flameroot to Almut, each attack in time. He dodged everything. And then, as she returned to her trusted sickles, she switched which song she was listening to. It went from the song of Prochorus to the Lunatic Choir. The songs of night and the moon.

“What?” asked Renatus as she cut him across the shoulder, deftly striking under his pauldron’s plates using the curve of Havoc to reach.

He caught on quick, and was obviously counting in his head at each step and strike. So she switched again. A song she’d heard her mother sing many times when she was young. Another Zoraken song, but not the song of the blades. It took him some time to catch on to that one too, letting her get in a few slashes and jabs. He was too heavily armoured to really hurt and he was healing as fast as she did. She knew she didn’t need to hold back here.

And then he did something clever. He forced a song into her head. He hummed Prochorus’s song and attacked in time, forcing her to defend to the beat and the rhythm. He put her into a song she was more comfortable fighting to and one he knew well, and thus made her more predictable. Each time

she tried to escape it he did it again, so she stopped dancing.

She let something primal take over and he took several hits in quick succession. She had to break from her dance, let the songs in her head die, and allow the rage to reform on the surface. Over the years she'd tamed herself, that scar on her soul that filled her with anger becoming almost dormant. But here she freed the beast within.

Her moves became quicker than he could keep up with and she sensed the air retreat from her, the world itself afraid to touch her, to hold her back, to slow even a single step. She didn't breathe heavier because she didn't breathe. She didn't feel her heart race because she didn't have one. Her aether sped up, her soul infused her body with magic before she did anything. She stopped thinking entirely, instinct and training and raw internal flames controlling her.

She forced him through a wall of rubble and then deep into a pile. Later she'd realise he was hardening his aether and powering his armour to protect himself, but in the moment she didn't notice. She didn't care. She was going to break him. She was going to push him to his limit.

She heard growls escape her throat, deeper than her voice, harsher than she'd ever sounded. This is what she'd become and it terrified her. Prochorus's song struck louder and louder. It called to her. It wanted to be sung. She needed the blades. She needed to be complete. She needed to sing and dance and drink in the corruption of the universe.

Renatus said something. She vaguely heard Akenesa. She struck so hard she felt the wall behind Renatus, felt her fist shatter and reform over and over in the space of a second. She hated this. She feared this. She *was* this. This was why she trained. This is what she fought to contain. This is who she truly was.

With a roar she pulled back and forced the aether from her body. She became the flame and everything around her wavered in the heat. The rage subsided, sated. She regained control over her mind and body. She shuddered and then

looked at the mess she'd made.

Renatus lay broken on the floor, laughing. Akenesa had already opened the door and was beyond it. She'd smashed the rubble of the pyramid into dust that floated in the air. She walked to Renatus and knelt next to his head.

"I don't rescind my offer, especially after seeing such passion," he coughed out. He had a grin. His vitals were failing. "Bring your wife along too. I've seen her. You make a beautiful pair I'd like to try."

She began to sing.

Prochorus's song filled the air, and his blades flashed into existence around her, connected to her lower back by silver chains. She'd spent some time figuring out how to push her own corruption into the well, to purify herself, just by playing with Liara enough over the years, slowly learning how to manipulate her own corruption and use it as she wished. Akenesa couldn't do it, and Beatrix likely only could because her own powers delved into the control of corruption.

The song pushed through the atmosphere and entered the zeitgeist, the soul of the community, and she pulled through the music. Corruption from all over the city flooded into her. Not as much as before, but she hadn't cleansed the Vault Lords, and she could feel some traders and travellers on the islands. She reached as far as the Isle of Dusk, covering both islands in her aether and pulling on each individual. She would have it all, now or eventually.

As Renatus died and his soul fled his body through the doorway seeking his phylactery, he looked astonished. She could take on something more normal, more human, less destructive. She could restrain herself when the scar on her core tried to rile her up, to make her end it all. The person that was Beatrix Lifesong was one bad day from become Narianel Azranhai, the Lunar Beast. She knew it, her family and friends knew it, her enemies knew it.

She marched into the doorway and caught up with Akenesa, who said nothing, though there was something about

her soul. Something she was trying to hide on purpose instead of her face being naturally blank. She was worried about the power Beatrix held, as most were. Beatrix could push well above her weight in both raw power and honed skill, and that scared a lot of people. Someone in the Low Circle shouldn't be able to do the things she did.

"Presence," she said to Akenesa. "I think you may be correct." They turned a corner and two more Vault Lords were waiting for them. Using Perception, Beatrix could see the path they were taking to the centre of the Vault, where the dolls containing the essences of the Synod were kept.

"They haven't fixed it," said Beatrix. Akenesa nodded and turned into shadow, zipping off down the hall. Akenesa had asked her to look to see if they'd managed to set up barriers that could stop her shadow step. "I don't even need to fight at this point."

The two Vault Lords shrugged, then stepped into a side room to continue their game of cards. An alarm went off and Akenesa returned a moment later holding a little black flag with the Vault Lord symbol on it in red. She looked over at the Vault Lords playing their game and rolled their eyes.

"Sasha and Renuus are the hardest to get past," she said, speaking loud enough for those in the room to hear. "They at least try."

"How do we stop you, then?" shouted one of them. "We've never figured out that movement of yours. Give us the information and we'll set it up. We could've stopped her, at least."

"She just killed Renuus," said Akenesa and that made the two look at Beatrix through their open doorway. She kept her face as blank as Akenesa. They ran out the room down the hall, likely to check on Renuus.

"I'm going home, then," said Beatrix.

They chatted on the way out, and after they said their goodbyes Beatrix used Needlepoint to warp away.

Beatrix was on the trail of Beginnings, and so she'd gone to Darizion at Vala's suggestion. It was due to disappear, or so Egil had said, and so she had travelled to its last known location. She'd left Royan back at the base to look after the students, but she'd brought her more experienced soldiers.

They walked through the city with wary eyes because of the looks they were getting. They wore an unfamiliar uniform in these parts and people were getting worried about Azael now. Over the monochrome uniform Beatrix wore a red shakai in two tones, just as she did in her mindscape. People gave them a wide berth and she was glad of it.

They stopped in an open-air market and Beatrix closed her eyes and concentrated. She'd done this at every other street corner as they walked, and she was reaching out to the blade, trying to find its resonance amongst the chaotic mess of the city's souls.

At first she felt her companions move away. Mira went north into the crowd and began chatting with the people. Chas and Sarina walked around the edge of the market, looking at the stalls as if they were just out on a walk together. Tullis went through an arch in the east to enter a nearby tavern so he could gather rumours. Vedar talked with a group of guards as they entered the square. Sybil stayed by her side, her newest squad captain unsure of her role in the growing group of elites despite her skills with the spear.

She pushed out her mind to several hundred paces, thousands more souls coming into view. She channelled Perception to bring them all into sharper focus. She felt Oracle sitting on Tullis's finger, but none of the others carried her blades. They didn't even carry weapons. They'd all become well versed in Sarkal now and could pull at the bond she'd formed with them to take the blades from her soul or channel their powers. She could cut them off from individual blades if she wanted, or cancel the bond altogether, but in that moment she

left it open.

She didn't feel Beginnings so she slowly rolled out her senses, keeping it manageable with Perception. Every few feet she crept out there were hundreds more people fighting for her attention. She didn't feel anything so she pushed out harder and in moments there were more than six thousand people she could see, not including her team and her blades.

Then she felt that resonant pulse that allowed her to tell if a blade was hers or not. She focused on it and pulled back in her awareness of the world, limiting herself to what is normal plus that point in the distance, about a quarter of a mile away.

She started to walk and Sybil fell in next to her. A gentle tug at the bond had the others catching up within a few minutes. Tullis was the last to arrive and began telling them of a few local tales of men in black robes and secret meetings where there was chanting and blood rituals.

"They've been watching too many plays," said Vedar. He'd gotten a scar on his chin recently and kept running his finger along it.

"So where is it?" asked Mira. She had a bounce in her step. She'd gotten in a few fights now but hadn't killed anyone yet. Beatrix hoped that she'd stay as happy after that fateful day.

"In a building, on an upper floor." She led them down a few streets until they stood in front of a tall building with four floors above the ground. "This is it."

A sign on the building said *Museum of the Old Worlds* and she knew this would be a problem. They'd probably want an extravagant price for Beginnings. She'd brought a little money, but not museum price money. If all else failed she'd just take it and there was nothing any of them could do about it. She hoped it wouldn't come to that.

They entered as a group and made their way upstairs. They found a display of ancient magical weapons, and on the right edge was Beginnings.

"Concetto," said Beatrix. She wanted to call her inside

immediately. But she held back. The single-edged sword was long but thin, with a slight curve at the tip. It was a sabre, which was a weapon type Beatrix had never practised with. She looked forward to working with it.

“Can I help you?” asked a short man with a balding head. He wore an official looking uniform.

“I’ve come to collect a sword that belongs to me,” said Beatrix, meeting his eyes. He visibly shook before steeling himself.

“These weapons were found in the aftermath of the Ruination, as the display card says.” He pointed and Beatrix looked. There was a brief history of the collection, but nothing that really mattered. “These weapons belong to the crown and are on display on the royal family’s behalf.”

“Vedar, go get Hitch,” she said, putting Flight in his hand. “Do your best to make it sound like a respectful summoning.”

“Right!” he said and rushed off.

“What is going on here?” said the man. He must have been the curator, or someone in power within the museum. She’d entered his domain and he wasn’t pleased.

“My name is Beatrix Lifesong,” she said. “I am the Monochrome Free Knight. That black sabre belongs to me. My ancestor created it and it is my inheritance. It is needed to fight Azael, and so I’ve come to claim it. We can wait for the king, if you wish.”

“We shall wait!” he said and stood his ground. If he’d been built like a warrior instead of a scholar she might have worried about him, but she could respect his courage.

They waited over an hour for Marcus Hitch to arrive, and when he did he was talking with Vedar like they were old friends. Vedar was talking about Hensam’s Treatise, a book about war and politics. She’d gotten them all reading what were considered the important works relating to the fight ahead, but she hadn’t realised at the time how much Vedar would enjoy the theory side of ruling and commanding.

“So, I hear you wish to take one of my swords,” said Marcus. He was flanked by four men that were far larger than Beatrix, all covered in magical arms and armour.

“I wish to retrieve one of my lost blades,” she said.

“Do you have proof it’s yours?” asked Marcus.

She held out her hand and Flameroot appeared in it with a flash of silver. She pointed to each of the weapons in the display case in turn.

“My blades are designed to resonate with each other. Notice that none of these react when I put another near it.” Then she pointed Flameroot at Beginnings and it vibrated in the case. Then she summoned more of her blades, letting them float in the air around her. As each of them began to vibrate it became clear that they were forming a song. Some held their notes while others pulsed and some made raising or lowering phrases. It was Prochorus’s song. It was her song. “Beginnings is part of this collection, but it is needed for my collection too.”

“What will you pay for it?” asked Marcus as Beatrix recalled her blades. All except Beginnings.

“The price is saving you and everyone else from Azael. Is that not enough?”

Marcus gave her a reserved look. He was thinking but didn’t appear to decide on giving her the blade. She turned her back on him and looked at Beginnings. She wasn’t sure why it would disappear from the sights of her enemy, but she wanted to know its power. She wanted to speak with Concetto and get her to work.

“I’ll give you the sword if you do me a favour.” She didn’t look back at him as he spoke. “Mardus, if you’ll leave us for a moment.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said the curator and he toddled off to a back room.

“You have the ability to sense Azael, correct?” asked the king.

“I do,” said Beatrix. “People can hide it with careful concentration, but Azael has a particular stench that lingers on

the soul. I can compare souls to the light touch he's put on mine, and from there I can judge whether or not to kill that person."

Over the last few years Azael's followers had been popping up more and more. No major combatants, but plenty of spies. Eyes in the shadows. Her Order had started finding and capturing them, then interrogating them and often having no choice but to execute them.

"I want you to come to a ball I'm having tomorrow. My six councillors will all be there. Examine them. The fact that I couldn't see that darkness in my own father has me paranoid and these last few years I've started looking at everyone else. I've been thinking of writing to you and asking you to do this for a while, but now that you're here and wanting something of me, I think this is the perfect opportunity."

"I'll do it," said Beatrix. "I'm taking Beginnings first." She called in the blade and looked at him. He was relieved. "Tell me the time and I'll be there."

Beatrix showed up at the castle six hours after noon, arriving by flight, her wings spread wide, one black and one white. As she landed on the steps of the ballroom for the king's palace the ribbons on her ankles came loose with a gentle tug of magic and let out her flowing skirts. She was wearing a dress cut to the Nerikan style, open back and arms, tight on the chest and hips, loose to the floor. Above the waist her dress was black and below was white.

Tied to her middle fingers were red ribbons that looped and spiralled up her arms, tied in bows at her shoulders. Around her neck she had replaced her shakai with a cravat in the same two shades. It was tied so tight that had she needed to breathe she would have long since suffocated, and lay flat at the front with a sharp divide between the lighter and darker reds. She wore no shoes or underwear, as was the current style in Nerik, and her legs were similarly tied with black ribbons, though no one would see those since she didn't plan on dancing.

As she walked inside, being announced, she let her wings disappear, leaving behind a mist that lingered only a moment. People commented on her make-up, also in the Nerikan style, with the symbol of the blades centred on her forehead and decorative diamonds and waves lining her jaw and cheeks. She also heard comments on how hairless her body was, her arms and underarms being completely bare. She didn't think that odd until she remembered human women had to shave to achieve her natural state.

She did her best to not fuss with her hair. She'd grown it longer than it ever had been before and tied it with more red ribbons, putting it in a complex but loose braid. Despite being tied back it dusted the floor as she walked. It was also tied to avoid catching on her earrings, which were different from her usual black studs. She had tiny silver rings in her upper ears and two larger silver rings in her lobe and flat piercings.

She immediately got to work. She subtly sniffed the air, making use of the fact that her chest didn't rise and fall to hide it, and sought out the aether signatures of everyone in the room. She made small talk with several nobles who were curious about her presence. When she said she was invited by the king himself they were especially impressed. But the talks let her get close enough to pinpoint signatures and begin to track these individuals as they moved through the room.

She didn't spot anything right away, but she hadn't really expected to. She'd have to talk to the six councillors directly, but they all seemed to be avoiding her. It was mostly lesser nobles that approached her. Some servants tried to offer her tiny foods or glasses of wine, but she politely declined, eventually explaining to them that she doesn't need to eat or drink so she didn't partake. She avoided the buffet tables for that reason too.

There was a stage at the back of the large room and a band was playing. The main part was played on piano, but it was supported by violins and trumpets and drums. It was an odd combination that Beatrix found herself just listening to, having to snap herself back to the task at hand.

The room was lined with columns, and between each pair there was a booth set up. In each booth were groups of people talking and drinking together, and all six councillors were in separate sections. She wasn't likely to get an invite to sit with them. When she looked to the one where the king was sitting, however, he waved her over.

"Quite the party," she said as she sat down.

"Where are the rest of your team? I was hoping to get to know them." Marcus was dressed in a fine, long-tailed suit. He had a blue bowtie and his coat was embroidered with gold thread.

"Scouting," she said simply and he understood. With her targets all in one room, now was the perfect time for her soldiers to have a look at their estates.

"These are Violette Dubois and Margot Blanc," said the

king, gesturing to two young women he was sitting with. Both wore dresses with lace cuffs and plunging necklines that exposed generous cleavage. The dresses seemed to be pushing the limits of the Vinish upper class but were very modest by Nerikan standards. They both had foreign names, perhaps from Bileen, but their Vinish was unaccented, so she couldn't place their origins.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," said Beatrix, putting on her best smile.

"Another suitor, Marcus?" asked Violette. She had a smirk on her face that made Beatrix want to smack her.

"I'm afraid I'm already married," said Beatrix. "My wife may be annoyed should I start chasing a man."

That got looks from the pair of women. They held their faces like stone but their aether swelled in approval. Beatrix suspected that both had eyes for the king and wouldn't want another rival pushing in on their territory.

"Anyway, how goes your task?" asked the king, trying to turn the conversation in a way that avoided any arguments. He couldn't tell they liked her because of how well they held their expressions.

"I've got their scents but I'd need to talk to them to be able to tell," she said. "Nothing unusual yet, but it could be hidden beneath the surface." She wanted to add 'like your father' but didn't.

"Do you want me to arrange a meeting with each?"

"No, it's fine," said Beatrix. "I may be a soldier but I'm not so unrefined that I can't sidle into a conversation if I need to. I do have a plan, though."

"Care to explain?"

She looked around before talking. "Something I've noticed Azael's followers doing is pushing on the taint he left in their soul to each other. They've stopped doing it now that they know I'm aware of it. It's similar to hiding your aether but instead of vanishing your soul takes on a weight. It becomes unsigned and like a lode on the universe. I've learnt

to do it, it doesn't take much skill at all, so I'm going to try and send out a signal. Anyone who approaches me because of it is likely a follower of Azael."

The explanation seemed to scare the girls but Marcus nodded along. Azael was becoming more of a taboo topic in Vinish society, now that people believed he was out there and coming to destroy everything. Speaking of him in such polite company was sure to offend, but it was necessary.

"Are you touched by Azael?" asked Margot.

"I am. He has tried to claim my soul, but I resist him in every way I can. I'm going to destroy him, if I have my way. I have that taint within me from the times I've spoken with him, but he doesn't control me."

"What was it you saw in... the previous king?" asked Violette. The last part was quiet and Marcus's face hardened at the mentioned, but he took a deep breath and relaxed.

"At the time I needed to use my blade Perception to see the darkness deep within the core of his soul, but these days I've grown used to looking for it on my own. It's different from dark aligned aether, the kind you could see on the Twilight Steppe or in other similar locations. It's signed. It has a unique aura that is far older than we knew the universe to be, and so if I can detect that then I can find his followers."

"I see," said Margot. She obviously didn't get it and Beatrix didn't feel like explaining again.

"If you'll excuse me," she said. She got up and walked around the room again, taking in the signatures of the six councillors again. There was definitely more corruption there than normal, but that was expected of politicians. They had to be ambitious and cut-throat to get where they were, and that cruelty was as corrupting as much as any other vile act.

She pushed on that piece of evil that Azael left inside her and watched them carefully. She looked for any sign of a response but didn't get it. So she pushed harder, and then saw the twitch of an eye. Steven Jones, a man from Port Swan. She didn't know much about the councillors, in truth, just a quick

rundown the king gave her the day before with equally fast descriptions.

Beatrix moved closer to him, slowly snaking her way through the room, chatting with those who stopped her. It was twenty minutes later when she finally made it next to his booth. She saw Marcus out on the dance floor with Violette and he gave her a questioning look, so she subtly nodded.

She channelled Perception and moved her point of view to look over her own shoulder at Steven, then once more pushed hard on the taint within her, making it pulse several times. While she talked with a lady who was admiring her 'exotic' look, she saw Steven look at her with hateful eyes. The moment his booth was empty except for him, she excused herself from the conversation and went to sit with him.

They stared at each other for a while. He was an older man with greying hair and deep brown eyes. He sipped at his wine and she waited for him to talk. She had eternity and this man was only human.

As she waited with a gentle, though admittedly forced, smile she noticed Marcus wander close so he could listen to their conversation. She was glad to see him willing to take risks to gather evidence, but it wasn't necessary. If it was needed she could use Prelude, the blade made from his father, to force Steven to repeat anything he said.

"That is a very interesting outfit," he said after what felt like hours, but was closer to five minutes. "I had thought you would be more conservative, considering your military ties. I hear you often wear a uniform instead of anything more comfortable."

"You could say I'm conservative, yes, but that is a very shallow understanding of what I'm trying to conserve."

"Yes, of course. Your insistence that you are Nerikan."

"It's more than that." She clasped her hands on the table. "I was born there. I was raised with the culture. I have been accepted there. Not to say I haven't been accepted in Vin or Seremont. I'm a local celebrity in the City of Towers. But I

feel at home in Nerik. It's something worth fighting for."

"And this is the fight against Azael you speak of?" The man waved down a waiter and got a new drink. He offered one to Beatrix but she declined. "Are you sure you can win?"

"Of course I can win," said Beatrix.

"What makes you so sure?" he asked. His eyes were narrowed just a fraction, but she caught it.

"Because my plan cannot be beaten."

"And what is your plan?"

"That would be telling," said Beatrix. "But I can reveal it involves *all* of my blades. Even the ones I don't have yet."

"I hear you have been making more blades." There it was. A slip that shouldn't have been made. A little proof. Her family and close allies knew of the blades she'd crafted herself, but she was content to let others think she was just gathering blades made by Prochorus.

"And where did you hear that?"

"I have been told about your little army and heard you run a forge on your property. So I assumed."

"And how do you suppose I'm making these blades? The ones from my ancestor required the soul of a fallen angel or demon to make. Do you think I go out hunting those who go against a God I don't even worship?"

"No, I just—"

She cut him off by pulsing Azael's influence within her. He became quiet and wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Now, tell me what you know. I have limited time here tonight, especially since you need to be handed off and likely executed. Tell me secrets."

"I don't know anything," said Steven. He spoke in a frantic whisper and was looking out at the crowd. Marcus had hidden himself just out of sight but Beatrix could still feel his soul nearby. "I just do as I'm told."

"And who tells you what to do?"

"The Prophet and the Guide." His eyes were darting around and he still wouldn't look at her.

“Tell me everything you know of this Guide.” She channelled Truth, forcing him to speak no lies. He knew right away what she was doing but talked anyway. He knew his life was over.

“She meets with other followers. She tells us our tasks. She has a different face every time but we can tell it’s her. Her voice doesn’t change.”

“Tell me her name, if you know it.”

“I don’t, I swear!” His pleading tone did nothing to sway Beatrix. “We only know her as the Guide.”

“Tell me who else is a follower of Azael.”

He proceeded to list off a bunch of other names. She didn’t know any of them, but she noticed a spike in Marcus’s aura when two or three were said. She asked later and was told they were key figures in the government. Those workers who weren’t public facing but still incredibly important to the way the country was run. One was apparently the Duke of Seremont, who Beatrix had never cared to meet, though she did recall getting letters inviting her to balls and dinners. She told Marcus she’d deal with him personally when she returned to Seremont.

“I think I’ve heard enough,” she told Steven. She stood and walked away from the table as Marcus moved in with guards and arrested him. It caused quite a lot of staring and over the next few minutes Marcus ordered the arrest of twelve other guests. While there was discussion for that time, soon enough the dancing began again and people were approaching her to find out what happened. She told them she was helping to cleanse the government, to protect them from Azael, to do what she’d dedicated her life to even if this was a lot less violent than she normally had to be. Somehow they were more interested in hearing about her various battles than her quieter victories.

The rest of the night went by in a flash and when testing for other followers of Azael she didn’t find anyone. She felt like she made a positive impact. Her soldiers didn’t find

too much of interest either, though Steven's house turned up some journals and other notes that later proved critical in his trial and execution.

It was just three days later when Beatrix approached the mansion of Tristan Alexander, Duke of Seremont. She hadn't been invited, but the guards didn't try to stop her. She wore her uniform and shakai, her face no longer painted.

She felt Azael's taint in every person she passed inside. Not just the guards posted outside and in, but also the maids she saw and several men and women sitting in a large room she passed. She walked up to Tristan's office without issue, and when she pushed open the door the man was waiting for her behind his desk. His smile was warm and welcoming, and he reeked of Azael.

"So, you've finally come to me," he said. "I've been trying to invite you in for years, but you've ignored me. Come, sit, we've got much to discuss."

She sat down and looked him over. He was an older man, likely in his sixties or seventies. It was hard to tell with humans. Their souls didn't age at the same rate as their bodies. He was entirely bald, though slight stubble on the sides of his head showed he'd opted to shave what was left and accept his fate. He had green eyes, as was common in Vin, and he had a neatly trimmed white beard.

"It's good you've finally decided to join us," he said with a smile.

"I'm not here to join you," she said. The man's smile faded, then a moment later his lips grew tight and his eyes widened just a little. "I'm here to kill you. Steven Jones was captured and will be put on trial soon. He named you, and in coming here I can see so many others than just you."

"Then why don't you get on with it?" he snapped. All his friendliness was gone and he spat with rage as he talked. It was nice to see him not even try to hide from her. He knew he was dead.

"As you said: we've got much to discuss. Now, I wish to know what you know of Azael and his followers. Those not

currently in your lovely home that I'm about to flatten."

"What's the point? You can struggle against the Pure Lord but you will never win. Everyone you love will die and all you fight for will be gone. This reality will be destroyed and a new world will be found and conquered! That is what you are for, so just come to terms with it already!"

He was turning red and he flailed his arms as he spoke. He looked like an amateur actor in his first performance. He had too much energy.

"You have about a minute to live, so at least make your final words interesting. I want to know about the Guide, if possible, or what you know of the future."

"The future?" he asked.

"Yes. I have a theory that Egil is a time traveller and that all the things he says will come to pass because he's seen them before. Is that not why you call him the Prophet despite him not being a Seer? If he's revealed anything to you, I would like to know."

"I'm not going to tell you anything. You've betrayed your purpose, so why should I?"

"I choose my own purpose, Tristan Alexander, and I have chosen to kill Azael. I'll let you in on a little secret before you die." She leaned over his desk and smiled. "It turns out that Seers can draw others into their visions, if they practice. I've seen the end of time with the help of my ancestor. I've studied it. I've understood it. I know what is going to happen so I've been working on a plan. It's still falling into place, but I think it's going to work."

She stood up and walked around the desk, putting her hands on Tristan's shoulders.

"You're right. I can't change the fate the universe. Not really. Some things are constant, but the parts with flex are the ones I play with. Tristan Alexander, I plan to slay a God. The Pure Lord will not stand against my might."

She spread her hundred wings, and in a tornado of metallic feathers she killed sixty three people and tore down

the mansion without harming the surrounding buildings in the city.

Beatrix entered her mindscape, greeted Iblis and Zepar and Kali, then headed to the outer edges of the parts she had crafted herself. She exited the arena to find the family shrines, and from there she passed through the library to what was once just mist and light on the edges of thought. Now there was a theatre.

Inside the theatre she found Arthur Hitch, sitting alone and watching Concetto dance on the stage. She ignored Arthur and walked the aisle to stand just before the stage for a moment, and then sat in the front row. The seat had a note on it saying that it was reserved for her, right next to a seat with the same for Prochorus.

Concetto was a strangely beautiful demon. She had four long legs that made the rest of her normally sized body seem diminutive. She had four arms that sprouted from her back instead of her shoulders and her face was upside down. As part of her dance she extended her snake-like tongue out several feet, and about halfway along it was her black halo, tight around it and no bigger than a finger ring. She moved with an unreal grace and flicked her six magnificent black wings in and out of folded space in waves.

Beatrix watched for what felt like a long time, but she knew that time passed differently in the mindscape after spending so much time within her own head. Adela and Mira were both asleep outside in the physical world, so she had plenty of free time. Concetto's dance was entrancing, and by the time she stopped Beatrix was surprised to see several of the others sitting in the seats behind her.

Lilith, as beautiful as ever, was softly applauding. Raziel and Raum sat whispering to each other, and Absel made a rare appearance just to watch. None of the seats were fitted for the angels and demons that had come in, though some like Lilith and Vera had more Skraeðan forms and could sit comfortably. Abaddon hung overhead on a balcony, though he

was always lurking and watching, no doubt ignoring the dance and staring at Beatrix instead.

Beatrix approached the stage and Concetto made a gesture to follow her backstage. Behind the curtains was a set for a play. A large wooden castle with stairs leading up to a window. Several flat wooden bushes were stacked and a single rock leaning against the back wall. Concetto went into another room further in the back and Beatrix followed.

Inside the room was large and white. Too white. The walls and floor were made of smooth stone and there didn't appear to be a ceiling of any sort. Light came from everywhere and nowhere all at once. In the middle of the room was a chair made of the same stone as the floor. Concetto gestured to sit, so Beatrix did.

"You've come to ask about my power," said the demon.

"I have. Prochorus's journals only mention that you suggested the name Beginnings yourself, but he could never get you to manifest a power."

"I've felt you attempting to use me." Concetto moved around the room in a new dance. Beatrix didn't twist to look at her, but she could feel the way the aether moved in her head. It was similar to how she saw the physical world using Perception, but inside her mindscape she could see it all at once. "Why did you not come to me first?"

"I was curious as to whether you would work for me. My thought was that there might have been something about Prochorus that you didn't like, and maybe I was different. It seems I was wrong."

"You like to explore your options before asking for help, do you?"

"I'm not afraid to ask for help," said Beatrix. "But if I can try something myself, why wouldn't I try?"

"A fair way to look at it, but the powers of your blades are our powers. We are free to give those powers to you or deny them. We often force those not of your blood to prove to us that they have earned the right to use us, do we not?"

“Not you.” Beatrix let herself smirk when Concetto’s upside-down face flipped the right way up, looking confused and disappointed at the comment. Her dance froze.

“Do you know why?” asked Concetto. Her head turned upside-down again and reset to a neutral expression. She started to dance once more.

“I’ll be honest, I don’t.”

“Because I don’t think you, or Prochorus, will ever sing the song. I refuse to give my power, the power to know the origin of things, to someone so weak.”

“My plan hinges on my singing the song,” said Beatrix. “But there’s an easier way to prove it.”

Ipos appeared at the door, responding to Beatrix’s want of her. She had the form of an infinitely unfolding web of threads, some thick and some thin. She formed a spiderweb across the top of the room. Concetto looked at the fallen angel with a knowing look. Ipos’s halo bounced from line to line, and her white body was almost invisible in the light.

“Tell us, Ipos. Do I sing the song?” Beatrix looked up at the centre of the fallen angel. Her core was black, but flecks of red light peeked through now and then.

“All I can see indicates that you do,” said Ipos. Her voice came from nowhere and echoed inside Beatrix’s skull. One thread reached down and spun itself around Beatrix’s right middle finger, mimicking the ring that she took in the physical world as Oracle.

“You would not lie to me, Ipos?” asked Concetto.

“Did I lie to you in the battle at Vellus? Or in the purge of Solcara? Trust me, my old friend, as many of us have grown to trust young Narianel. We’ve lost our freedom, but gained a purpose. We will sing.” A thread gently stroked Concetto’s face.

“Then so be it. Narianel, I will sing with you.”

Beatrix sat on a ridge above the clearing in the forest that her soldiers and allies had gathered. Egil had come to her and told her that demons were moving on the Aether Sea, seeking out one of her blades to try and take down Chassuille. While she didn't care about the Skraeðan's life, she did want the blade they sought, so she'd contacted a small army of elite warriors and they prepared for battle.

The Eyes of Chassuille hadn't been hard to convince. They'd already been watching this group of demons move and were trying to figure out what they doing when Beatrix went to them with the information. Aldo was starting to look old, the stress of losing Maria wearing him down, but he was more than willing to go fight some demons on behalf of his god.

The Synod of the Six had approved two thousand men, so Agata Akwaen was down in the clearing checking over her soldiers. She looked old but she moved with an aura of power. Sasha had also volunteered her services and brought along both Akenesa and Liara. Though Beatrix had asked, there were no Vault Lords.

Marcus had given her seventeen Mages of the Tower. Jeremy Staver led them and there was one other seventh circle or stronger mage for each of the elements. Beatrix had been surprised to see that the Tower had mages of the rarer elements, and she'd spent some time talking with the light and dark mages over the last few days, learning how they used their magic and wondering if she could implement any of it. She saw Aldo talking with the pure mage.

The army had stopped for the night, but they were due to meet the enemy in two days. One more day of travel and then a battle. As they set up the camp there were still scouts milling about and making sure the island was secure. The Aether Sea wasn't dangerous in and of itself, not compared to the army, but they'd had clashes with small groups of imps trying to harry them while they marched.

An hour passed when Sorley and Isaac arrived to the camp. They brought with them a few other people that Beatrix recognised from the village but didn't know the name of. They were greeted warmly by the Eyes and settled in, but Isaac came up to where Beatrix was and sat next to her.

"Scared?" she asked. He was fifteen now, only a little older than she had been when she'd gone to war, but he had been prepared for it by Sorley. Told of the horrors and the trauma, but he'd been as determined, just as she'd been too.

"I don't have to be," he said. "I have all of you with me. I can't lose this, can I?"

"Which of my blades do you want to use?" she asked.

"Purity, if you please." Isaac didn't hesitate. He knew what he wanted and went for it. She dropped the blade into his hand and he jumped at it appearing. With the sword in his hand she felt his aether grow a little, strengthening his inner glow.

It was then that she saw Royan return from his trip ahead on the path, only noticing when he dropped Perception back into her soul through the bond.

"Go rest, Isaac. Tomorrow will be a long day." She leapt from the ridge and landed on the ground fifty feet below. As she landed she hardened her aether, preventing injury that would only slow her down anyway. No one paid her any notice as this was probably the most strange group of people ever gathered. Power abounded, so she wasn't any more special than the rest of them. It was actually quite refreshing, and she hadn't realised how much she'd grown to hate being the centre of attention whenever she stepped outside her home.

"I've confirmed it's Mistedge they're headed towards," said Royan as she approached his squad. None of them stood to attention or saluted. They knew she hated that. She cared more about them following orders than shows of formality.

"I should have come for it years ago," she muttered in response. Then she spoke up. "Alright, people! Tomorrow I'm going ahead to sit by the blade. This plan comes from Agata

Akwaen, and while I'm not a fan of being so passive we are trying to lure the enemy into a battle they can't retreat from. The army will crash into the demon forces from the side while I take on the front. The Order of Blades is to stay with the army until you can link with me, at which point we'll circle around to the opposite side of the enemy and cage them in.

"One thing to watch for is that many of the stronger demons can teleport using the Phase beneath the Aether Sea. They may try to escape, but Akenesa has shown the Tower mages how to craft aether chains to hold them in one spot. Royan, you're strong enough with your magic that you can learn this technique, so I want you to spend some time with her tomorrow so she can teach you."

"Will do," said Royan.

"Also, we've talked about this but I need to restate it: the enemy imps used to be human, but even if I were to sing and steal its corruption it would remain an imp. I tried this a few seasons ago and it didn't save them. You cannot hold back against them. You cannot save them and if we do not kill them now then they will side with Azael on the final day and make that fight harder."

There were solemn nods and she left it at that. She had a quick chat with a few different soldiers as they all headed to the Order's part of the camp. They had a few questions about imps and demons in general, as well as the tactics they should use to defeat them. She was glad they felt comfortable enough to ask questions that she thought were obvious, because if they hid their inexperience they may have died. She went over how to pinpoint the soul's core and drawing on the power of her blades.

When they got back to the camp she checked over their equipment. Mistweave uniforms would protect them from magic for a while, and those that wouldn't be taking her blades had enchanted weapons of their own. It had all been so expensive and she'd spent many days in her forge, but it would be worth it to see they survive.



He looked at what they had brought with them. This ragtag group of fools was going to help him kill God and all they had was broken armour, chipped blades, and gusto. It would have to do. There was no more time. He'd collected everything he needed so he couldn't take the time to return to the city to find them anything better. Not when it was all in ruin.

Vanja stepped up to his side, her mask and red shawl hiding her expression. But he knew she was excited. The little steps she took from side to side, the twitching of her hands, the way her gaze was fixed on him. He empathised. He was ready too. This was the final step in becoming the new God.



Beatrix was on watch during the night, which wasn't unusual. She'd spent a lot of time during the war with Cor on watch because she didn't sleep, and now being able to use her eyes as a Vanavolk without fully transforming she could see in the dark, even if it was in monochrome.

There was activity in the north and she channelled Perception to watch the imps moving. They weren't going anywhere, especially not in the direction of Mistedge, but they were being odd. Odder, for demons. But she didn't think there was anything to worry about. They were just milling about in one spot, still over a day of travel to her blade's resting spot.

She could sense their leaders in the centre of the group and they loomed over the whole area. They weren't very large physically but their aura told her of their power. Both were in the High Circle, more powerful than many of the so-called gods. That shouldn't matter, though, as even without her own considerable skill she had many she would consider her equals or betters with her.

She kept watch on them, but turned her attention to the

camp. Mira was awake again, marching around the edge in a watch of her own. She'd been sleeping less and less lately. She didn't need it as much and so she'd become restless. Isaac on the other hand, despite needing no sleep at all, was out like the old sky at night.

She wondered if he was really asleep, however, as occasionally she sensed the aura that people gave off when exploring their mindscape. She'd been shown how to enter it by Aldo back when she first became aware of the practice, then later studied Akenesa's writings on the skill. Isaac was possibly dreaming, but he could also be exploring the folding of his own soul, creating a landscape in his head. She didn't know but had also never asked.

In the morning she gave her orders to the Order, talked with Agata and Aldo, then talked with her father, brother, and daughter. When she headed out she looked back, not wanting to leave Mira and Isaac, but she knew she was being too protective. They were both capable and surrounded by allies.

She flew close to the ground as she made her way through the forest. She didn't bring out her wings but used their power anyway, floating gracefully between the trees and avoiding branches. When she broke out over the other side she dipped down close to the Aether Sea itself, dodging waves and staying out of sight of the island tops.

She could feel the demons moving again, their eyes on her regardless of whether she was physically hidden or not. A small force broke off from the main group and began its sprint towards Mistedge, so she sped up. She flew up the side of a cliff and then over what was probably the largest island she'd seen in the Sea, at least three miles across.

In the distance she saw how the demons were crossing the Sea from island to island and it wasn't so different from her own side's methods. They had bridges made of conjured and solidified darkness. Her own side was using earth to create platforms that were moved across the gap when full.

The group moving ahead were flying, and at their head was Nergal. He had a Skraeðan shape and was deathly thin just like most of those gods. His black wings were bat like and full of holes, so if he needed to use them physically he wouldn't have been able to fly at all, but he flew the way she did, on waves of aether that moved her through the air.

"Nergal," she said aloud and felt his eyes trying to bore a hole into her skull. She grinned as she felt the panic in his aura. He sped up, heading towards Mistedge at speed she could match but not surpass.

The reason for them going for Mistedge was becoming more obvious. It was an anti-magic blade. She wouldn't be able

to heal easily from its cuts. She'd need to push a lot of aether through the wound deliberately to heal it, and even if she hardened her aether it could get through her defences. Even just a finger took her more energy than she'd be willing to spend in a fight. Sadly for them the blade wouldn't do that to her because of her bond with it, but it could hurt others who were as near-indestructible. She couldn't let them hurt the gods, even if she wanted to slap them around herself.

She let it look like she was losing the race, following behind Nergal and his minions and keeping track of him. It took her a while to realise that the figures in black cloaks weren't just dressed up imps, that they were wraiths. Those that weren't collected by the reapers would turn into ghosts and spend eternity mourning their death, but they were ultimately harmless and rarely seen outside the Ethereal Realm. Wraiths, on the other hand, were corrupted. Ghosts that were tortured by demons or lost in their own taint. They were malevolent and powerful, and seeing them out in the open during the day was a bad sign.

Mistedge came into view. She'd considered collecting it for a long time since it was just out in the open. It was much like Torrent, jammed in a rock with its power active. It had been dropped during the Ruination and she'd read about its effects. It sat at the bottom of the Aether Sea, at the centre of a massive whirlpool of aether, its magic destroying Chassuille's efforts to create as much aether as possible. She almost wanted to leave it there out of spite, but Nergal and Asmodeus wouldn't allow that any more. Not when they could have a weapon that could likely kill a god.

Nergal's group landed on one of the islands that overlooked the whirlpool, and Beatrix landed next to them a minute later. Nergal wasn't very attractive, which was unusual for a demon. They normally made themselves handsome or pretty to lure in victims. Nergal had an upturned flat nose that made him look like he had been hit by a shovel repeatedly. His halo was tight around his right thigh.

She walked towards him and he pointed a spear at her, his wraiths forming a circle around her. She met his eyes and smiled.

“So, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“Wh... what?” asked Nergal, his voice high-pitched and strained. “What is your plan?”

“Collect blades, kill a god,” she said flippantly. “You know, same as you.”

The demon was afraid of her. He stammered out an incoherent response and shuffled his feet. His hands shook in a subtle way, but the way the spear rocked was anything but.

“Why are you even here if you’re so afraid of me? You had to know I’d learn of this and give chase. This blade is mine by birthright.”

“We have to protect ourselves from Azael!” said Nergal and his wraiths echoed his words, like a whisper on the wind that filled with dread.

This was an interesting turn of events, so she took a risk. It was something she’d have to smooth over with her army afterwards, but it could pay off in the long run.

“Why don’t you join my side, then?” she asked. It really was a risk. Demons couldn’t be trusted, by most accounts.

“Are you asking me to allow you to do what Prochorus did to my friends? Turn me into one of your blades?”

“No, that will only happen if you don’t accept my offer. I’d just need to make sure not to destroy you completely.”

“I’m aware of the trick you used to defeat Lucifer,” he spat. “That won’t work here. There’s no Ethereal Realm on the Aether Sea. You’ll never take my soul!”

“Do you know how my powers work?” she asked, letting her smile widen just a bit, keeping her eyes calm. She didn’t wait for him to respond. “The souls within me aren’t asleep, they aren’t dead, even after being turned into a blade. I talk with them regularly within my mindscape. I’ve been able to adjust the power and focus of my blades, tuning them to not only be stronger, but more efficient with the song. You will get

to see your friends again if I defeat you, or you can stay in the waking world outside my head and help me fight Azael. The choice is yours.”

Nergal looked at her in complete confusion. This was a path she never thought she'd tread and she could see the demon's mind working. He was muttering to himself and not meeting her eyes.

“While you decide,” she said, “I'm going to go take my blade. Can't have it fall into the wrong hands. Charun is down there waiting for me to take him. I'll be back in a few minutes or so. Make your choice.”

She walked past him and leapt from the island. For once she actually needed to use Flight to guide herself down. There was no aether in the air for her wings to catch, but Flight held her up from within. She'd never considered the blade useful to herself, but now she was glad she had it. She'd need to thank Malfas later for what he brought to the team.

Landing on the smooth rock at the bottom she saw that Mistedge wasn't stuck in it as she thought, but instead floating point-down above it. The white sword was long enough that it should be a two-handed blade, but the handle was only big enough for one hand and it had no crossguard. When she took it she noticed how light it was, and with a few swings she saw it cut huge chasms in the whirlpool of aether around her.

“Impressive,” she said. She used Flight to get outside the whirlpool and saw it follow her up as it closed under her. She turned off the blade's power and then felt a rush as the aether returned to the air around her, crashing into her and filling her body. It was like a familiar tingle she hadn't noticed was missing.

She switched to flying under her own power and landed next to Nergal, who was staring at her. She pointed Mistedge at him as she landed and smiled again.

“Decided yet?”

“I will not ally myself with you,” said Nergal. “You are a pawn in his scheme for domination, just as the gods are.”

“So be it.” With a single horizontal slash she cut Nergal in half, cutting across and through his chest just below his core. Nergal looked shocked, but she wasn’t sure why. He had to know this was coming. She said it was. Two more diagonal slices cut the flesh away in a triangle and then she pushed herself forward on a burst of aether to grab his core, squeezing it to force the form to collapse and shaking off his remaining meat.

Her errant slashes had damaged some of the wraiths, who started to flee back towards the demon army. It was only then that she saw what had happened. The army had turned towards her own. Nergal was sacrificed as a distraction. Maybe they thought he stood a chance at the blade, but he was ultimately just a decoy.

“You sneaky bastard,” she whispered to the core in her hand, almost completely black but pieces of blue shining through. She pushed Nergal into her soul and felt a rush of memories and thoughts and emotions, but it didn’t last long. She was becoming used to the feeling.

“I hope you’re ready Furtur. I know you don’t like when I do this but I have greater need than just going to Nerik this time.” She dismissed Mistedge, feeling it settle into her soul, and called out Needlepoint. It took her three long-range jumps to reach the ongoing battle.

The moment she appeared the bond with her soldiers grew strong enough she felt half her blades being requested. She allowed them all and noticed an immediate flurry of magic from her more outwardly impressive blades. Waves of flame and water, rose petals and illusions. Her soldiers always left her with Havoc, Malice, and Fang, seeing them as her signature blades, though she had no problem sharing them. They always let her play with her newest blades first before asking for them, so she had Mistedge too.

She looked over the battlefield, channelling Perception even though it was in Tullis’s hands. There were some soldiers injured but no one had died yet. Battles between immortals

went that way sometimes. The Nerikan forces would all be liches and return to the Vault upon defeat, and she saw the Eyes working as a team to protect each other. The Order were using set tactics within their squads, each with at least one person who was focussed on magic to throw up barriers to stop, or at least slow, more powerful attacks. The Tower mages were creating walls and cracking apart the island to funnel the enemy, which Beatrix thought was likely suggested by Agata. It was a strategy from one of her books on war.

Beatrix gave one look at each of Mira and Isaac to make sure they were fine before cutting off Perception's sight and diving straight into the middle of the enemy forces. With a few quick swipes with Havoc and Malice she cleared a circle around herself, the imps falling easily. She broke their cores to stop them regenerating. They were already dead, so she felt no pain at doing so.

She started cutting her way towards Asmodeus and another demon she'd never sensed before. There were pains here, a kind of imp that had been transformed into something a bit more powerful. The pains slowed her down, but weren't a good challenge. She was confident that her better soldiers could defeat them, so she didn't worry about any that got past her.

She reached the new demon first. She looked like a woman with black wings, her halo around her upper-right arm. She wore a white skirt that covered her stomach and fell below her knees, held up by straps that crossed her bare chest. She had boots lined with fur and carried a long staff that held a flame within a sphere of aether.

Beatrix didn't wait for banter and rushed in, slashing her way forward. The demon used the staff to try and block the attacks, but Beatrix danced around her and cut her across the leg. The demon flew into the air and launched balls of flame down at the ground around Beatrix, likely knowing it would do nothing and going for a distraction. As she burst from the flames into the air she saw the demon fleeing towards the back

lines, towards Asmodeus.

Beatrix gave chase but when she reached the pair she saw them fall into the floor and their signatures disappeared. She'd never seen it before but knew teleportation was possible on the Aether Sea. Instead of worrying about them she slammed down in the middle of another group of imps and pains and began killing.

Two hours later the enemy army had broken, their leaders vanished. It was unclear why they fled when they had the numerical advantage, and small groups were out hunting the survivors.

Isaac bounced around Beatrix sporting a cut on his face and a joyous smile, telling her about the creatures he had fought and defeated. His reaction to battle was so unlike hers. She remembered frustration, crying, uneasy nights. He was going to be perfectly fine, and for reasons that worried her. There should have been corruption in his soul now, more than the average person who'd never killed, but he was still pure. The crescent scar on his core shone a brilliant blue.

Mira was a little more hardened than Isaac. She wasn't cold or upset, but she didn't feel the thrill of battle that Beatrix did. There was no bloodlust, just determination to do what was right. One thing Beatrix had set up with her soldiers was a free space where they could talk about their worries and fears and suffering. A space where they could relieve the stress and know that they weren't alone. Mira had resisted joining them, but Beatrix was going to give her another push towards it. It would help her and Beatrix wanted her to be as mentally fit going ahead as possible.

In an open meeting around a campfire where anyone could watch, much like the way the Nerikan Synod ran, Beatrix talked with the leaders of the other factions. Royan and Akenesa sat either side of her, with Aldo, Agata, and Jeremy sitting across the flame from her. Her father sat next to Aldo as they began. The leader of the mercenary group she'd hired had no interest so chose to spend the evening with his men.

Beatrix told the group of her interaction with Nergal and what he'd said. Aldo was unhappy about her offer, but he understood what she was trying after Sorley pointed out that they already had demons and fallen angels on their side thanks to the blades. Agata and Akenesa thought it had been a good move and could have significantly boosted the strength they could use against Azael if he'd joined them.

They also talked about Asmodeus and the other demon they'd seen. She was apparently called Vanth and had been seen supporting several former Powers like Nergal. A demon associated with death and reapers. She was sure to show up again in the future, but would unlikely be destroyed while on the Aether Sea thanks to her ability to teleport. They'd have to catch her on Avani somehow.



It was late at night when Aldo approached Beatrix, who had just forced Mira to go to bed. The girl was almost as restless as her and sleep would do her good. A fresh start each day. Aldo led Beatrix aside, away from the camp so they could talk in private.

"I haven't checked in a while," he said. "How are you holding up against Azael's influence?"

"Better than ever," she said with a grin. "I've found new purpose with my school. They are keeping me focussed. I'd never have given in, even if you don't believe that, but I have so much more to fight for now."

"I've worried, but never truly believed," he said. Age was really catching him, she noticed. Wrinkles around the eyes and mouth as he smiled were far more prominent than in any of her memories.

"I've expanded my mindscape," she said. "Ever since you made me realise it was possible to dive into my own soul and get a visual representation of everything going on in there, I've been working on it. My blades all have their own space

now.”

“You don’t restrain them?” asked Aldo. It was another look that said he disapproved. They’d never see eye to eye on how demons should be treated. He was too in love with the teachings of Chassuille to see they could be reformed and used against Azael.

“I’ll let you in if you promise to play nice with them,” she said. “I’ve learned a lot about the technique from my cousin and other Nerikan scholars. I know how to defend against the kind of invasion you first used on me and how to kick you out if you upset them.”

He held out his hand and she touched it.



She’d almost forgotten about Nergal, so when they stepped into the arena and saw him chained to the sky she looked at Aldo and saw his disgust.

“He’ll bend to my will soon enough,” she said.

In the stands sat most of her blades. It was odd to see so many at once. And over the next few minutes the rest trickled in. They were interested in the visitor.

“When do you plan to make his blade?” asked Iblis. He approached silently, his long shakai covering him completely so it looked like he floated.

“In a week or so. I’m still out with the army.”

“I’ll begin the preparations,” said Iblis, then left the arena. Aldo watched him with curiosity.

“You’ve read of them in books, but never seen them before,” she said. “They are tame, for the most part. Some more than others. You may want to steer clear of Sanar and Abaddon. They’re both insane.”

Abaddon started laughing and Beatrix glared at him. Aldo was clearly uncomfortable.

“Follow me,” she said quietly, then raised her voice. “Go about your business and don’t follow me. Looking at you,

Adriel. Charun, forgive me a moment. We'll get to know each other soon."

She led Aldo out from the arena into the streets that now surrounded it and through a park featuring the black and white trees of House Zoraken. They sat on a bench at a lake created by Rahab and Focalor.

"I never knew you treated them like this," said Aldo. He didn't look at her. "You treat them almost like children."

"Like family I have to live with and manage," she said.

"What are you wearing?"

"It's a shakai. You can't go to Nerik so you've never had a chance to see one before. They are a religious shawl used by groups to show they are a part of that group. The two tones of red are used to mark my soul and its scar. Three feet wide, fifteen feet long, and each sect wraps it about their bodies differently."

"Every demon... blade?... here is wearing one, except your new collections. I could see which was Charun just by the lack of the shawl." He finally met her eyes. There was no more judgement, but there was something else. Acceptance. He knew she was in control of the situation. "Are you truly ready to sacrifice yourself for the universe? To take all corruption on yourself and break all curses?"

"I'm going to do more than just that," she said. She sat forward and leaned on her knees. "I wish I could tell you everything. What Vala has seen. The plan we've made. The role I will play in the great performance that is the end of the universe. Aldo, I want no more secrets between us, but my plan cannot leave my head or Azael may take actions to stop me. I hope you can understand that."

It was the Day of Undeath and she was missing the festivities to be back out on the Aether Sea chasing another blade. Sorley, Isaac, and the Eyes were with her, but her soldiers were back home in Seremont, working on various small jobs or just relaxing. She didn't like to give them big jobs around the time of national holidays, so she let them stay behind.

It was over a year since she'd been to the Aether Sea, but when she got a letter from Vala saying that the most powerful of her blades was in danger, she had to move. She'd picked up the Eyes and her father at the bottom of the Temple of Chassuille when she was going to the portal, and then Isaac followed along with a cheery grin.

She stopped at the edge of an island to let the others catch up and used Perception to look into the distance where she felt a disturbance. Asmodeus and Vanth were hacking away at a barrier made of solid aether, its crystalline form resisting their attempts to crack it open.

Wishmaker was a blade she'd wanted to save for near the end of her journey to collect them all. Inside the blade was a fallen angel named Hecate, and she was in the Grand Circle. She'd pushed herself up from the High Circle within days of falling and was said to be able to alter reality to her desires. Beatrix knew that even the Grand Circle had to make effort to truly change reality, but Prochorus's tests with the blade were remarkable. His journals noted all sorts of things he'd been able to accomplish, making sure to do the tests in empty or dead worlds so as to not hurt anyone. Combined with Voice she would have the power of a true god, but that would mean getting Voice too.

She feared what she would become with that blade, when she could do so much more than she already could. She didn't want to become a monster, but the power was seductive and immense. She had a plan, however, and would tell Hecate not to let her use the blade's power until it was needed for the

song. It seemed the only reasonable measure against those dark temptations.

When the group caught up she described what she saw and they started to plan. Aldo took a step back, letting the others take over the conversation, which Beatrix found odd. As Tesni was talking he watched her with a sort of satisfaction and that was when it clicked. Aldo was preparing for her to take over as the Champion of Eyes. Beatrix looked to Vincent and Gilbert, who were also listening intently to her. It had been decided, and Beatrix wondered if Tesni knew. The younger eyes obviously didn't, as they questioned her and took a while to be convinced of her plan.

"So, the plan is, now that we're all in agreement," said Tesni, side-eyeing Helge and Gerald, "is for Beatrix to use Mistedge to let us travel across the bottom of the Aether Sea and for us all to jump out and surprise the enemy."

"It will take us about three hours to get there on foot, but the Sea and Mistedge will keep us hidden." Beatrix wasn't a fan of the plan. She'd rather just get there in a few minutes using Needlepoint and hitting them now.

"We aim for Vanus first, right?" asked Gilbert. "If she's in charge of teleporting then we need to make sure she's out of the picture."

"I agree," said Aldo.

"Let's just go," said Beatrix. She was already walking towards the liquid aether that made up the Sea. "Before they get my blade, please."

She dropped from the edge of the island but caught herself in the air just above the Sea, channelling Mistedge to create an aura of mist that pushed back the Sea. Some of the group could fly under their own power but others had to be helped down. When they were gathered they dropped to the ocean floor, which was around fifty feet below the surface. She thought it would be deeper, but considering the size of the Aether Sea she supposed there was still a lot of aether there.

The bottom was surprisingly smooth and they had an

easy time traversing it. Here and there were patches of ground that bubbled in rainbow colours, connections to the Phase where magic was said to be created. In truth, she knew magic was simply flowed through there, allowing mortals to use the words of power. No one really knew where magic came from, though Beatrix had some dark thoughts on the subject.

Along the way she talked with the others, though she stayed away from Irvine. She was sure he still hated her, even after all these years. Lisette, on the other hand, was always trying to learn from Beatrix. She had continued Blodwen's style of dance combat and was looking to integrate more of Beatrix's moves.

"How are you holding up?" she asked Isaac. He was his usual happy self, but it didn't hurt to ask.

"I'm good," he said. There was an excited bounce to his step. "I'm just happy you let me come along. Fighting demons last year was so fun!"

"That's one way to look at it," she said. He didn't seem to understand the weight of war despite participating. He was too pure. "Why did you really want to come, though? Not just to fight more demons?"

"Dad tells me of all the fights he's been in, and some of the ones you've been in too. I want stories like that. I can't wait until my soul matures so I can have all my power and be able to do the things both of you do."

Too innocent an answer. She didn't want him hurt trying to get her blades. She'd need to talk to him after this. She wanted to protect him more than she wanted the blade. He was watching the swirls of faint violet aether, almost white flows of liquid magic, as it crashed and pushed against the barrier Mistedge was creating. Just to be sure she channelled Ballade too, two antimagic blades working together to form a stronger sphere of influence.

About halfway to their destination Beatrix was talking with Tesni. It was nice seeing her not joking around for once and being somewhat respectable. They were talking about how

they each managed their physical transformations, sharing information and comparing notes on efficiency, when they were interrupted by Gilbert.

“Do you know what I’d like to know?” he asked. He had one of his cheeky grins that said he was about to say something stupid. “Why hasn’t Chassuille used all this aether to at least put down Legion yet?”

“Because he’s lazy and doesn’t care,” said Beatrix so bluntly that she earned a glare from Tesni. Aldo overheard and sighed at that, then turned back to his conversation with Vincent and Sorley.

“He’s not lazy,” said Tesni. “He does a lot, even if it’s not what you want to happen.”

“Sure,” said Beatrix. “Anyway, that would be a very good plan to disable Legion, but it doesn’t solve the problem at its core. It’s definitely something he should be doing to stop his followers dying each time Legion breaks free. I’m looking forward to ending Legion the next time he breaks free.”

“You think you can?” asked Gilbert.

“Of course,” she said, then noticed Isaac looking at her in awe. She immediately toned down the bravado. “I think I have the specific skillset needed to defeat him and resolve the problem.”

Gilbert glanced between her and Isaac, following her eyeline and nodding. “Of course,” he said. “Your power over the blades gives you a distinct advantage that no one else has. I look forward to sitting back with a bottle of fine wine and watching you work.”

“You’re lazier than Chassuille,” said Beatrix, earning a growl from Tesni she’d never shown before. Tesni then closed her mouth in a way that looked like she was hiding her fangs. “It’s fine to be yourself, you know.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“No need to hide your instincts just because none of the rest of us are serpentine. You don’t see Vincent hiding his sword fetish or Gilbert hiding the fact he’s missing half a

brain.”

“I heard that!” said Vincent through a laugh.

“You were meant to!” she replied loudly.

“I’ll have you know that all my plans are flawless,” said Gilbert. “Nothing ever went wrong.”

Then three others spoke all at the same time.

“What about that time you blessed that fountain in Sevria?” asked Vincent.

“What about that time you ate the knack-weasel and its eggs?” asked Sorley.

“What about that time you animated the statue of Solomon Hitch?” asked Aldo.

Gilbert was doing a bad job not smiling and laughing when he finally said “Absolutely flawless.” The group let out laughs that were contagious and Beatrix found herself chuckling along. She’d heard all those stories before.

Near the end of the journey she was approached by Lamis Darzi who kept looking at Isaac with a touch of fear.

“Am I seeing a halo in there?” he asked.

“You are. He’s got it contained and had managed to dim its power substantially, but yes, I can understand your concern.” She looked at Isaac who was talking with Tesni, asking about what it was like to have a tail and horns.

“Any worry about him letting it out?” asked Lamis.

“No, I’ve worked with him since he contained it and he knows what he’s doing.” She thought for a moment. “He’s got a lot of natural talent. More than me.”

“That’s saying a lot,” said Lamis. “I think the only person I know who could beat you is Aldo.”

That made her narrow her eyes at him. “I could beat Aldo in a fight,” she said.

“Sure,” he said, mimicking her tone from earlier. Then he laughed and she shook her head.

When they reached the island they gathered around and raised out the Sea, breaching the surface and landing within seconds, those that couldn’t fly being carried or on

floating platforms. The demons were still at it, trying to use antimagic though neither were skilled with it. When they noticed the Beatrix and the Eyes they shouted.

Aldo led the charge directly at the small army of imps that surrounded them. Beatrix took Gilbert and Tesni after Vanth, flying over the crowd and dodging thrown spears. Tesni's massive wings burst from her back through gaps in her uniform, and Gilbert dove into the shadows and followed under Beatrix.

As she reached Vanth, Beatrix called Almut to her hands, letting the weight of the massive scythe pull her into a spin and crashing into the demon as a tornado of death. She sliced through six imps as she landed and caught Vanth in the leg, and as she spun to a stop she glared at Asmodeus, who backed away from the barrier protecting Wishmaker.

Vanth flew up and was tackled by Tesni, who had taken on her full draconic form, scales completely covering her body, her horns extended, her wings made of solid darkness. They fell in a heap beyond the battle and Beatrix followed. Gilbert popped up next to them and spread shadow beneath them, the ground becoming a black so solid that he became practically invisible against it.

"I dare you to do this without your blades," said Gilbert as she touched down. Vanth grew in size and changed shape into something more monstrous. Skeletal, she was a fearsome beast and was trying her best to swing the flaming staff that had grown with her.

"If Tesni doesn't do this without us," said Beatrix. The large shapes of demon and dragon wrestling and thrashing was interesting to watch. "What would I win? What are we betting?"

"One crown," said Gilbert.

"No deal," said Beatrix.

"Ten crowns," said Gilbert.

"Still too low," said Beatrix.

They stood watching Tesni winning this fight without

them for a moment. "I won't make jokes for a year."

"Deal," said Beatrix, letting go of Havoc and Malice's power which she hadn't realised she'd begun channelling. It was instinctual now. She walked towards the massive forms of the two fighters as it looked like Vanth was breaking free and summoned spears of light around herself. She was careful with the words she pushed through the circle in her mind. She steadied the spears, aiming them at Vanth, and then launching them at high speed. They exploded in dazzling light at they hit, though a few missed. She wasn't nearly as practised with magic as she should be.

Vanth swung the staff and knocked Tesni off her then turned on Beatrix. Vanth swung down the staff, trying to crush Beatrix, but the dodge to the side was easy despite the staff's size. When Vanth tried a horizontal swing, kicking up tons of dirt and rock in the process, Beatrix folded herself entirely within the space with her wings and then returned to normal space when the threat was passed.

Vanth then looked at the ground and her aura swelled, but nothing happened. She looked around confused and was struck by more spears of light.

"No running!" taunted Gilbert. Beatrix thought about what just happened and then realised why Gilbert was sitting on the sidelines. The darkness he spread across the ground was preventing Vanth from diving into the Phase and it was taking all his concentration to maintain. Beatrix threw up a shield of light and flame around him and heard him laugh from beyond it.

Beatrix turned back to Vanth to see Tesni knock the staff loose from her grip. As it fell away it shrunk to its normal size, so Beatrix grabbed it and broke it with an aether-fuelled swing at the ground. Vanth screamed in rage and took another strike from Tesni across the top of her skull. Beatrix stepped up to support Tesni's assault, grabbing Vanth's arms and pulling them back with her black and white tendrils, bringing them out from folded space in a ring around Vanth.

There was a surge of aether behind her, back at the battle between the Eyes and Asmodeus, but Beatrix ignored it. She kept Vanth held down while Tesni's black claws tore into the chest of the demon. Beatrix tightened her grip with the tendrils and summoned more spears. She remembered her mother showing her how to create needles from aether and simply increased their power. Beatrix knew she wasn't good with magic, but this was good practice.

Tesni brought down a draconic fist and Vanth's chest caved in and her core was completely destroyed. While Beatrix had wanted to use her as a blade—she almost had enough for her plan—she accepted the loss. She folded her tendrils back in with her wings and turned back to the fight against Asmodeus.

She saw what the surge of aether she'd ignored was now. The barrier around Wishmaker was gone and so was the blade. She looked to the main fight to see Asmodeus as a giant slab of flesh raining fire and darkness down on everyone. Isaac was on his knees clutching his neck and he had the blade. Beatrix rushed to his side, sliding on her knees and putting her arm around him.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Isaac tried to speak but couldn't. There was fear in his eyes for the first time ever. Beatrix looked at the wound and it wasn't enough to kill. But there was a curse there.

“You can't speak?” she asked. He shook his head, ready to cry. It was the most upset she'd ever seen him. Probably the most upset he'd been in his life. “Do you know sign language?” She moved her fingers to signify the word for fire, the shortest work that came to mind she could do with one hand. Her other hand was busy gripping his shoulder firmly. He signed the word for fire, but it wasn't confident.

Beatrix touched Wishmaker and pulled the blade and Isaac into her mindscape.



“Hecate! Can you fix this?” shouted Beatrix, clutching her brother. He was on his knees and looking around in wonder, tears still in the edges of his eyes. The arena was filled with all sorts of demons and fallen angels, as it always was when she was in battle.

Hecate stood in front of them in a pre-Ruin dress of some origin only Concetto could have told her. It was loose around the shoulders and waist, a long and straight skirt, with a high, stiff neck and long sleeves. There was white lace all over it, contrasting the deep purple.

“No, I cannot, not without time. I am in the Grand Circle, but you’ve seen that even the Gods cannot break a curse made from pure intent. You will gather the rest of us long before I could break it.”

“Then I have one other wish,” said Beatrix, staring directly in Hecate’s eyes. They were also deep purple and very Skraeðan in shape, almost rectangular. “Teach Isaac Skrae sign language in its fullest. Make him fluent.”

“It shall be done,” said Hecate. She curtsied low with her eyes closed and a gentle smile on her face. Beatrix couldn’t take this blade’s power. She’d be too tempted to go straight after Azael. Hecate would do anything she said, even if Beatrix gave in to her own rage.



Isaac’s eyes glowed deep red for a moment before returning to their stunning bright blue. His hands moved quickly, but she was able to catch it all. In each fingertip he concentrated a small amount of aether when they reached the shape he wanted to use, making it easier to tell each sign apart.

“Thank you. I understand this now. I can still talk and do magic, even without my mouth. Thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me. Just wait until I get all the blades and heal you. I should have protected you better.” Then she did something she knew she had to do. She was too

corrupt to be trusted. The rage just under the surface waiting for her control to slip too dangerous. “Keep Wishmaker. The blade is yours until I have the rest. Use it well.”

“But why?” he signed, his eyes wide in shock.

“You’ve yet to see me at my worst, Isaac. You’ll see in a moment why I can’t be given that much power. Why I don’t study magic like you or Akenesa.”

She stood and walked towards the battle, giving Isaac’s care over to their father. Most of the imps and pains were dead or fleeing and it was just the Eyes against Asmodeus. The demon was holding his own, creating pillars of flesh and bone to block attacks. Tesni and Gilbert were pushing against a wall of gore that was trying to crush them into the ground. Aldo and Irvine were defending an injured Helge with a shield of light. Lisette and Lamis were dancing and folding space to avoid boiling hot sprays of blood. Vincent had hidden away from the battle with a wound in his side he was healing. Gerald was the only one on offence, cutting through a wall so the others could follow him towards Asmodeus’s core.

Beatrix burst into the sky, a flurry of wings and tendrils and taint. Bone spears flew up at her but she batted them away with a wave of a single wing. The sky darkened as she blocked out the light, miles wide, larger than ever, almost as large as Michael had been. She shifted her corruption back from her mass well into her personal well, corrupting herself almost to full capacity. She refrained from that final drop that would turn her into a beast, but to avenge her brother it was tempting. Her roar broke apart the island, but in her horrific anger and malevolence it was calculated, allowing the Eyes and her family to escape.

Beatrix called on her blades to empower her and most of them giving her strength. She pushed it all into a beam of light so intense that when it was over there was a hole straight down into the Phase. Her attack had pushed the fragments of the islands farther away as the Aether Sea shifted.

She pulled herself back into her compact form, tired

and straining against the rage she could barely contain. She forced her corruption back into other pit within her soul to purify herself, calming the rage and letting her get back in full control. She wrapped herself in a two-tone shakai and floated down to Isaac, only realising what she wore when she landed.

“That was amazing,” signed Isaac with a huge smile.

“Terrifying and spectacular,” said Sorley. The fact that his smile was approving when he said it made her feel a little better. She was worried that he’d fret over her unleashing her full power.

“Keep that blade away from me until I’m ready to sing the full song,” said Beatrix. “That’s what I can do when I really try, and I don’t want to add a Grand Circle mage’s power on top of that. Not until it’s needed.”

Sorley looked like he wanted to say something but Aldo and the Eyes arrived. Most of them looked concerned, but Gilbert was smiling like he’d just won a raffle. Tesni had her hands clasped in front of her and her tail swished back and forth as she worried.

“How long have you been able to unleash an attack that powerful?” Aldo asked. His face was a stone mask.

“A few years. The more blades I gain and the more corruption I steal... I grow all the time.”

“And why don’t you use it more often?” Aldo had his arms crossed and she felt like the wrong answer would cause trouble. He eyed the shakai, likely remembering his trip into her mindscape.

“I don’t want to destroy everything,” she said carefully. “I have enough power to crack Avani and release the Dragons if I really wanted to, but I’d like to prevent that. I restrain myself to this body because it stops me going too far, even when the rage takes over.”

“If you do anything to endanger—”

“I won’t.” It came out as a growl, making a few of the Eyes step back or put their hands on their weapons. “I might not be Grand Circle but I’m amongst the most powerful people

in the universe right now. I'll be in the High Circle by this time next year without even practising magic because my soul expands constantly with all the blades inside me and the corruption I hold pushing outwards. I am doing my best to not become the Lunar Beast I'm fated to become. I am going to be the one to destroy Azael. He will be my finest blade."

Aldo stared at her for a long time before nodding and leaving, taking the Eyes with him. A few of them looked back and gave her nods, convinced by her words, but she saw the shroud over Aldo's soul. He was hiding his true feelings, but she thought she knew them. He accepted her words and her intentions, but he didn't trust her. He thought she was a danger to reality. She wanted to prove him wrong.

It was the last day of Heat and Beatrix was visiting her family in Nerik. She sat on the roof of the Estate while down below in the gardens Galina was giving Isaac and Mira instruction on how to take on Vanavolk form. Akenesa, Sasha, and Sanja were sat nearby, talking quietly amongst themselves. It was nice to see Sanja becoming more comfortable in her role as a member of the family instead of a servant. Liara was running around in background with her ash hounds.

She didn't want to call the two children any more. It was Mira's twentieth birthday and Isaac was seventeen. They were old enough and smart enough to be making their own choices. Mira had even moved out, living with a friend she'd made amongst the other students. Well, Beatrix knew they were more than friends. She could smell the young man on her now and then, but she wasn't going to bring it up. It was Mira's business and she'd chosen a good man. They'd come to her when they were ready.

Isaac had fully adapted to being mute. His hands could move at lightning speeds, creating storms of magic without any real issue. She had asked him earlier in the day how he was doing, if he would rather she hurried and collected the blades so she could break the curse, but he said he could wait until she was ready, that even if he was different now that didn't mean he was in a worse state. He wore Wishmaker on his back, where it couldn't easily be drawn except with magic, and he'd become so tall.

Inside the Estate she could sense Adela and Anða working with the servants to set up the night's event. They were going to gather on the grass at the front of the Estate, the area would be covered in garlands of black roses and long tables with food for the public. Mira and Isaac would become Vanavolk for the first time in front of the worshippers of the night, a spectacle for all the public to see.

Evening was approaching so a lot of people were on the

grounds, getting ready to see the mass of Vanavolk. Sorley, Valeska, and Oggy were down there talking with some of the important nobles and Synod members. She knew she should probably be down there too, but she preferred to just watch Mira and Isaac below.

A lot of people, she could hear, were discussing the fact that there had never been a male Vanavolk. They were all wondering about how big he'd be and if he'd have the same plumage and fur patterns. Beatrix expected him to be larger than even Galina, the only full blooded Vanavolk in the group. He had so much natural power now that there was no way he'd be as small as she was despite having the same diluted blood.

As night fell the Vanavolk gathered out front. Even Liara was there, standing ready, her ash hounds sitting off to the side obediently. It was hard to get her to sit still, but she knew what was important. Beatrix dropped down next to her and took her place in the line between her mother and brother.

"Children of the night!" called Galina. The crowd was immediately quiet. "Today we welcome two more into the ranks of the crow and the wolf. Tonight, under the full moon, we will see the first transformations of Isaac Blair and Mira Azranhai. Though they are of different Houses, they are Vanavolk in blood and soul. They have been trained in the method we use to transform and have already been able to grow their wings, knowing that deep inside they are one of us. They are of the night as much as they are of anything else.

"First, we welcome Mira. She turns twenty years old today, so young in the scheme of things, but ready to take her place. Come, Mira, step forward and become the night."

They were all dressed in traditional Talwaen style and she was a beautiful girl in her black dress. It had long sleeves, an open back, and was tied at the waist and hips in long sashes that flowed behind her. She was barefoot under the dress, but as the skirts dusted the floor that wouldn't be seen. She stepped onto the grass and walked to an area that had been cleared for her. She took a deep breath and became her new

self.

Almost twenty feet tall from ground to shoulder, her wingspan massive and her fur and feathers sleek. Her dark eyes had a red tint to them and she was a fine example of a Vanavolk. She was a little bigger than Beatrix, which wasn't a surprise. She'd received her power from the source rather than down the generations.

She strutted in a circle, letting people touch her legs and wings. They were awed and Beatrix was happy to see that Mira was proud. She'd found another place she can fit. Another home she was welcome to join.

When she'd settled down it was Isaac's turn. Galina looked at him as he stepped into place with a smile. She then spoke up and the crowd quieted again. "Next, we welcome Isaac. He is the first male Vanavolk and many of you are as excited as I am to see what he becomes. Now, Isaac, become the night."

It didn't go quite as expected, this time. Isaac was so much larger than even Galina. Sixty feet from ground to shoulder with wings that covered the crowd. And most strange of all he was a brilliant white instead of dark. He stood like a full moon in the darkness, glowing in a way that suggested more light was just out of sight, beyond reach, and his eyes were pits of pure blue light. The crowd shifted back to give him room and many fell to their knees.

"Well," said Anđa, "that was unexpected." She stood to Beatrix's left and was rocking on her feet, a smile on her face, and her hands clutching her dress. She was trying to contain herself but her energy was palpable.

"A moon for our night," said Sasha, mirroring Beatrix's own thoughts.

"Places, girls," said Galina as she walked into the crowd towards where she was going to stand. The crowd parted for the aspect of Lunada as she held out her hands for them to touch gently, reverentially, as she passed.

The reaction to Beatrix was much the same, but she

noted a different kind of fervour in the eyes of those who were closest to her, standing in a wide enough circle for her once she'd transformed. They knew her goal and craved for her victory. They'd heard her song more than once as she'd stolen their corruption and they waited with patience and lunacy.

Then they all transformed. They became the night. Black feathers covered the area and it was then that Beatrix noticed their positioning. Galina must have known Isaac would be white. Maybe Vala had told her. They stood as the symbol of the moon trapped in its diamond. They were House Talwaen.

Galina

Isaac

Mira

Akenesa                      Sasha                      Anđa                      Beatrix

Liara                      Sanja

Part 2

# The Lunar Beast

*In which life ends and plans are revealed*

Returning from a short campaign in Itore Luca, Beatrix left the Southern Pass by blasting through the sky on a hundred wings towards Seremont. She'd left orders with Royan to rally the troops. They'd reach the city in an hour, if they rushed. Mira was charging ahead as a Vanavolk, trailed by the few soldiers they had with them that could fly.

Beatrix reached the city first and her panic and rage flew to the surface of her soul. They'd seen the smoke from a distance but she couldn't have imagined this. There was a war in the streets and people were running all directions. She landed by her home and saw that Chas was leading innocents inside.

"Who is attacking?" she asked quickly.

"The dead," said Chas. His face was totally serious. He patted Sarina on the shoulder and nodded as she led a group of injured women and children into the compound. Beatrix saw there were many more inside and Lisette was there healing people.

"What do you mean the dead?"

"Those things that Egil made at Crazan," said Chas. "I read about them in your journals. Instruments, was it?"

"Is he here?" she barely held back a shout and forced Perception to show her the whole city at once. She'd apologise to Absel later for the strain, but this was urgent. She couldn't see Egil but there was carnage everywhere.

"I've not seen him, but this is how you described Crazan and how I've seen other accounts. It's alright that we're bringing people in here, right?"

"Yes, protect the innocent, it's why the Order exists. I'll find Egil. If Royan comes by here then tell him everything." She darted off towards the Fort of Kings, leaping up to the rooftops so she could avoid the crowds. She saw the instruments with their dull grey skin and empty eyes. She'd missed fighting them back in Crazan, really, because of the

ogre and chasing Egil, but she jumped back down into the centre of a group and the dance began.

They circled around her and set up a shieldwall with spears pointed inwards. She knew they were smart, and this would have been effective if she was anyone else, but she let out her wings to push back the ones behind her while using the heavy blade of Almut to break through in front of her. She switched to Havoc and Malice and had her way with the enemy as she pivoted and spun her way down the street.

She kept pushing until she found a living commander. He wore full plate armour with the Empty Diamond painted on his breastplate. She slammed her foot on the ground and released a burst of aether, sending cobbles into the air from the force and cracking the ground. With a stretched out hand and another crack of aether she sent the cobbles at the man, buffeting him with rocks and debris. He swore and tried to swing his sword at her but she was too fast for him, cutting off his hand and kicking him to the ground.

“Where is he?” she asked in little more than a growl.

“Near the northern gate,” said the man. His accent was from Bileen. She summoned Gungnir and shattered the man’s core with a single strike. She flew into the air after striking down some more and then headed to the North Gate.

She landed with a crash and was dazed. Something was wrong. She was missing the time between being above the gate and hitting the ground. She couldn’t unfold her wings and she struggled to stand. Her entire body shook as she slowly regained control.

“I did warn you about this coming,” said Egil. He came into view around the rubble of a destroyed house. He was flanked by two people. One was a man with no eyes, tall and dark skinned, long black hair and the Empty Diamond tattooed on his forehead in bright white. He wore a thobe and loose trousers, with a wide sash around his waist and another around his neck. The other was a woman, she thought by the colour of her soul, with a body and face that couldn’t be

described. Constantly shifting from one person to the next. Her clothes were a simple tunic and skirt. Neither looked like they had ever slept.

“What did you do to me?” she asked the three while looking at Egil.

“That was me,” said the other man. He had a southern Semblan accent. Possibly from Av Ajir or Az Mareen. She’d never been there, but she’d met a few travellers from the area. “Mistcrawling.”

She’d heard of the technique before but never seen it. It was used for restraining demons for interrogation. Her mother had once told her how to break out of it, but she was having trouble remembering anything at all, never mind how to escape.

“It is time to forge the blade. The materials are here, gathered and ready, and now we just need to turn on the furnace.” Egil bounced towards her and she saw how deep the cut on his soul was. It had barely recovered since she’d hit him all those years ago. She’d seen him in better shape multiple times since then. This Egil was younger than the oldest she’d seen him, so she wouldn’t be able to kill him here.

“Why are you doing this? In plain speech and not your long-winded rambling.” She could feel the individual strips of mist aether worming its way through her soul, cutting off her attempts to create magic and even move her body. Her twitchy movements were the result of little bits, just enough, getting through.

“I like her,” said the woman. Itorean, judging by her accent. Her skin tone returning to pale more often than not and her clothing had placed her as northern Semblan, but it was her voice that pinned it down.

“Come find me again,” said Egil. “I have something to show you. Then you’ll have your answers.”



She woke up to the sound of an explosion south of her. The mistcrawlers were gone and she bounced to her feet. The Fort of Kings crumbled in the distance and there were these strange wires of magic stretching into the sky. Woven aether like souls, yet something entirely unholy. The sky was covered in darkness and she couldn't regain her aether from the light at all. She was drained and had to walk, trying to anger herself to let her emotions take over her aether creation needs, but it wasn't working. She felt crushed like an insect. She needed to figure out how to get around such a glaring weakness.

The instruments she saw down side streets didn't attack her. Some looked at her and then went the other way, ignoring her. That was likely their orders. Chaos, but to leave her alone now that she'd met with Egil and those other two. She thought the woman must be the Guide she'd heard of, but had no clue who the man was. He was either new or had been completely hidden until now. She felt he was more dangerous than even Egil, if he was skilled with anti-magic.

She reached one of the twined aether non-souls stretching up into the air. It was green, which wasn't a human soul colour, but there were other races like the sklaara and skraeðan who were like that. Unsexed and separate from the reproduction of their species.

She reached out to touch it and there was something very wrong with it so she stopped her hand. It felt like a soul. It registered to her senses as a person with a unique signature but it wasn't. Something was broken, taken away. This was a person who'd been unpersoned.

In the end she didn't touch it. It would have been wrong. This was the result of expert soulstitching taken to its cruellest extent. The more she looked at the threads the more she knew what had been done to them. What had been removed. She knew she could repeat it, but she could never do something so outright evil. She had been plenty brutal in the past, but this was beyond even her.

She reached the Fort of Kings with a little more energy

than she'd began her journey with, but it wouldn't be enough for a fight. She found the body of Dominic and it made her stop for a minute. He was too good a man for this.

She moved to the centre of the Fort where Aldo and Gilbert stood. Aldo was catching his breath and Gilbert was as empty as she was. They looked at her as she approached and Aldo handed her a vial of swirling violet liquid. Distilled aether. She took it, looking it over before downing it.

"You ran into the eyeless Hadiini too, I take it?" asked Gilbert. Beatrix felt a surge of aether from the drink and was instantly feeling better.

"How do you know he's from Tor Hadiin?" she asked.

"The sash," said Aldo. "The way he wore it."

She accepted the explanation with a nod. She knew very little of that region and the different countries. With a few stretches and a little self-hatred for her failures her aether was starting to build on itself again at a decent rate.

"Tesni is chasing Egil," said Aldo. She was off to the west, in the guild district where Beatrix could feel fighting. The mages were out in force and the city was collapsing.

"I can't find Adela," said Beatrix as she looked through the city, Absel working his hardest for her, sensing her panic. "She's not out of town right now. Or she shouldn't have been."

"Hate to say it, kid—" started Gilbert.

"Then don't," said Beatrix. It spiked her anger and then Gilbert smiled, sensing her power growing.

"Mira is in the south of the city," said Irvine. He skidded to a halt on the destroyed fort as he delivered his message to Aldo. "Vincent is on his way back to the city." He looked at Beatrix. "He was on the Aether Sea." She nodded at his explanation.

"Tell Helge and Gerald to go support Tesni," said Aldo and Irvine ran off. "You two ready? We need to kill Egil for this, no matter how good his information has been to you in the past."

"We can't," she said. "This is a younger Egil from just

after I injured him. He's definitely travelling through time. We can't kill this one without breaking reality. I think that's his security. We need to drive him off instead."

Gilbert and Aldo looked at each other before Gilbert shrugged and Aldo sighed.

"You're sure of this?" asked Aldo. "You've mentioned the theory before but now you have proof? The wound on his soul is fresher than you've seen it before?"

"Correct," said Beatrix. "I've seen him with it mostly healed. Badly rewoven, but definitely functional. This one is twitchy again. It's too dangerous to kill him now. We don't know what will happen because his older self has already interacted with the past. He's protected himself this way and it's one of the reasons I've yet to actually kill him. I've seen him without even the scar of the damage I did to him."

"But the other one is safe to kill?" asked Gilbert. "The Hadiini mistmage?"

"I think so. I've never seen him before, or even heard about him. There's a woman with them who I've heard of as the Guide. I think she just hands out missions. Her face and body were constantly shifting."

"Changeling," said Aldo. "Rare, but I've met two. Not a surprise there's one on Azael's side since they were created by him. Most of them are just trying to live normal lives after the Ruination, much like the serpentine."

"We should probably start expecting a few of them to go bad too," said Gilbert. "We can count on Tesni to stay with us but the rest of them are a risk."

"Says the child of the worst fallen angel," said Beatrix and Gilbert grinned.

"Let's go," said Aldo.

They made their way west towards the fighting and it was hard going. Instruments blocked their path, but let Beatrix through until she started trying to clear them out for Aldo and Gilbert to get through. She fought with as little aether as possible, so it was slow and she took a few strikes that would

have killed anyone else. Why hadn't Egil given at least a few of them magical weapons?

They split up when they found a crossroads. Gilbert went north to go support the mages, Aldo went south to find Tesni, and Beatrix went farther west to seek out the Archivists and Adela. She would have been at work when this started.

As she reached the guildhouse there was an explosion to the north and Baladeir Tower toppled, crashing down towards the centre of the city. It was no longer the tallest in the City of Towers, it seemed.

"Where's your boss?" she asked an injured Archivist. He pointed her north and ran as fast as she could, channelling both Havoc and Malice to keep her from using too much aether. She found a battle between over fifty archivists and a massive force of instruments pushing into them.

Beatrix climbed a building to get on a balcony then did a running jump to come down on the other side of the Archivists, throwing herself into the front lines. She found Thomas Acker who gave her a sharp nod and then turned back to the enemy. She summed Victory, the massive sword too big to be truly useful to her, and used it to clear a space around her. It looked like instruments could still feel fear, even if they were broken as people.

"Where's Adela?" she shouted back to Thomas, who was drinking a potion of some sort.

"Group three, protecting Vaskin Manor where we've put up a barrier. Giving civilians sanctuary there. Be careful."

She held her arms out towards the instruments and released a burst of aether. It wasn't as much as she could do but it knocked the front line of the enemy off-guard and gave the Archivists an advantage. She flew into the sky and zipped off towards the Vaskin Manor, home of a rich noble who hoarded his money instead of spending it. She didn't like the man and wondered if he'd offered his land or if it had been taken by the Archivists without his consent. She hoped the latter.

She saw the barrier clearly before she reached the grounds and landed outside it, near a group of Archivists who were fighting outside. Adela wasn't with them. There were several holes in the barrier where other small groups stood guard. Beatrix helped clear out the instruments before stopping to talk.

"Is Adela here?" she asked.

"No, she went with the groups out to the surrounding streets to gather the civilians." The leader of this group was a metal mage she'd met before. In the moment she didn't recall his name, but he was familiar. He was Thomas's right-hand man, bald and covered in tattoos.

"Do you know what way she went?" asked Beatrix. "I can't find her scent."

The metal mage gave her a look that suggested the worst, then pointed to a large group of those not-souls that stretched into the sky. She thanked him and ran off, cutting more instruments as she passed them but didn't stop to check if she landed a killing blow. She remembered the advice she'd been given in that regard. Destroy the head or the heart but not the soul, and now she understood it. In the afterlife they might be having nightmares because of the trauma and corruption, but her power would heal them.

She turned the corner and saw Egil down the street, standing on a mound of rubble. And there, next to him, was Adela, wrapped in a black rope from shoulder to ankle and dangling from a bent lamppost.

"Let her go!" she shouted as she charged down the street. Then there was an emptiness in the air to her right and she dodged as it shot out towards her. A bolt of mist aether flew past her and she shot the Hadiini with flames of her own. The man backed off, patting out her flames from his chest and arm. She turned her attention back to Egil and Adela and knew why she couldn't sense Adela now. The black rope was covered in mist aether, likely the Hadiini's doing.

"No closer, Narianel," said Egil with a grin. He pointed

a sword at Adela that Beatrix recognised as one of her own blades. The fallen angel Zagan. The blade Tail. One of the favourites of Prochorus and he was often depicted with it in his left hand, Voice in his right. It was capable of creating a tail of anything at hand that could be split and controlled. Prochorus used it as a way to physically move the blades, creating a storm of magically sharpened metal all around him.

“Why did it have to come to this?” she asked. She knew she was about to break time. There was no other option. She wouldn’t let Adela be harmed.

As she hung there Adela was crying, her mouth bound with a rope. Egil vaguely and threateningly waved Tail about, the white blade picking up bits of stone in the area, making them float a few inches off the floor, but not forming a true tail yet. Egil’s aether was wrapped around the blade so heavily she couldn’t take it, even though she’d been practising fighting against this tactic with Akenesa.

“It is time for the blade to be forged. You are ready. It starts with the end of your happiness. The violence of freedom from your emotional bond will turn you into the perfect killing machine that the Pure Lord desires.”

Beatrix used Needlepoint to fold the space around her and Egil, pulling them close in an instant. When she unfolded the space she tackled him away from Adela, but a mote of aether floated from his hand. She couldn’t stop herself falling away from Adela while the black light from Egil touched Adela on the forehead.

“It’s time to begin,” said Egil just before vanishing.

Beatrix cut Adela free and the ropes evaporated into nothing, and Beatrix could see what was happening to Adela in horror. It was slow and painless, but nothing could be done. A curse that destroyed the soul. She sensed the time aether in the curse, so she couldn’t even go back with Encore to undo it. What was the point of the blade if it was useless every single time?

“Don’t worry about me,” said Adela. Her voice was

weak and all colour had faded from her face. She was smiling. Why was she smiling? “I believe in your ability to do the right thing, my love.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.” Beatrix clasped Adela’s hand, all rage gone, replaced with a void that could never be filled. “I’m sorry I was weak.”

“You were never weak.” Her voice was cracking as she spoke, her aether signature falling apart. “I spoke with Vala a long time ago, while you were away. She told me everything that is going to happen. I know you’re going to do the right thing because I know you. You’re a good person, no matter the path you take. Even as the Lunar Beast you’ll do your best and in the end you’ll end the suffering of the whole universe.”

“I can’t do that without you,” said Beatrix. Her face was wet and her hands trembled. “I need you. You’re the other half of me.”

“I’ll always be with you, Narianel,” said Adela. “I love you and won’t disappear so long as you remember me. Defeat Azael. It won’t be without cost. It will all have to end. But you can do it. Stop him from making things worse for more people. I believe in you.”

“Adela... I love you more than anything else. I won’t forget you.” Beatrix leaned down and kissed Adela as the last of her soul disappeared. She thankfully didn’t become one of those green strings. She simply disappeared as if she’d never existed at all.

A week after what was being called the Battle of Seremont a mass funeral was held for all of those who fell. Most people who had survived had already gathered what they could and were heading to other towns and cities, but others stayed to pay their respects at the pyres. It had been a massacre.

Beatrix stood at Adela's pyre as it burned, holding Mira's hand. Next to it was another, but it contained the body of Drederick Ogden, Oggy, Adela's father. Beatrix let go of Mira's hand and went to Valeska, comforting her with a hug.

It was a long day and Beatrix saw to many of her soldiers, her students, who had died in the battle. It was so terrible to see, but this had been the first true battle with Azael. This had to be accepted and expected. Royan stared into the pyres for hours, taking it as hard as she did.

The Eyes and the priests of every god went about and gave comfort to the people who gathered. Aldo stood with Beatrix for a while, just looking at the fire and not talking. In the end he put a firm hand on her shoulder and left.



She stood there for three more days. Empty.

The city's reconstruction was underway, with every surviving earth mage using their talents to clear out the destruction and build small temporary homes. They were ugly little blocks but they would do until labourers could come in and make something more permanent.

Several nobles had offered the grounds of their estates for people to use, creating miniature tent cities within their fenced off areas. Others had taken to staying just outside the walls, or packing into now-abandoned homes, though that wasn't much of an option considering the damage to most of the houses in the city.

Beatrix's own home and grounds were filled with people, her soldiers making room for them and moving into small camps around the city. She was doing her best to help the relief effort, to make sure there was plenty healing and water for people to survive. She didn't want the fallout of the battle to be more death.

But in her heart, she knew she didn't care about these people. Her attention was shifting from building up an army to her personal journey. She was looking over the notes she'd gotten from Vala and Walden, the latter being out of the city during the attack, and was planning her route. She was going to leave, she was going to collect the blades, she was going to take as much corruption she could to increase her power.

And despite all this she'd spent a lot of time figuring out how to fix those broken souls, and then passing the duty off to the Tower once she'd shown them how. She couldn't leave those people like that. She had to fix them first so that when she sang the song of the blades they'd be cleansed of their traumas.

"You're sure about this?" asked Royan. They were in the meeting room, sat at a table with all her highest ranking officers. He'd readily accept the burden she was suggesting, but he had to ask anyway. "You really want to do this?"

“I do,” she said. “You are now the leader of the Order of Blades. I knew there would be a day I would hand over the reins, but I didn’t expect it to be under these circumstances. I need to go collect the blades and fulfil my duty, but first I’m going to hunt down and destroy Egil at all costs. I cannot drag you into that battle.”

“We all lost people we care about,” said Vedar. “We’re coming with you to kill him.” Everyone except Royan nodded at that.

“If I am truly the leader then I choose what fights we participate in,” said Royan. “I choose to fight Azael. That means we follow you into the darkness in pursuit of Egil. It’s not only the smart thing to do, but it’s the right thing to do.”

“I want to kill him too,” said Mira. Her fists were tight and her eyes were wide. She only relaxed, even if only a little, when Beatrix touched her hand.

“I’ll be going to Vala in Nerik soon,” said Beatrix. “Once I find out where I’ll next meet Egil, we’ll go. We have to destroy him. I have no choice, and I’ll be glad to have you all along. This is the beginning of the final war.”



Beatrix walked the city alone. It was the Day of Undeath but no one was celebrating, despite the popularity of the festival in the city. No one wanted to remember the instruments. Not this year, and maybe not ever. In the distance she felt the Tower working on someone else, the green string stretching into the sky wavering as it was reformed into a person, those missing parts reinserted and the frays rebound.

Beatrix stopped to help some priests who were filling jars with water. They looked so tired so she felt she had to. Using Torrent to create water and Akwaen to shape it, she filled the jars for them and left before they could thank her. The city was filled with despair, so she had to alleviate their pains while she could. Before she became a destroyer.

By evening she found herself on the city wall, above the North Gate, looking over the land. The airship port and farms were intact. She had no idea how Egil had gotten an army into the city. Everyone was saying they just appeared, pouring from random buildings. She should have expected this. Or something like this.

“Beatrix,” said Aldo as he landed next to her. He had a new scar running up his face from his chin.

“You know... I think I’m done with that name,” she said without turning around. “What link do I have left to my humanity? Mira is immortal now. A Vanavolk. There’s no one left to tie me to this world.”

“Narianel, then,” said Aldo. “Are you going to chase Egil and the other two?”

“I am,” she said.

“What if he’s not the oldest version of himself? The current one?” Aldo stepped around her to look her in the eyes. “You look... empty. Are you alright?” He put his hand on her shoulder. “You don’t need to do this alone. I had the Eyes to support me after Maria’s death.”

“I’ll be fine,” she lied. “My plan has just been pulled to the present. I kill Egil. I collect the blades. I cleanse the soul of everyone in the universe. It’s simple. It must be done.”

“You plan to sacrifice yourself for the universe,” said Aldo. It was the truth, she didn’t deny it. “In the past, you had a plan for support when you were corrupted, correct?” She nodded. “Do you still plan to go through with that? Do you plan to still get that help?”

She looked at him and then looked away. “I’m going to end Azael and sing my song. I’ll end the suffering.”

“What does that entail, exactly?”

“I’ve seen the Great Beyond. I know what is beyond the universe and it must be stopped. Azael plans to harness it for his own ends. He dreams of power for the sake of power. He’s entirely mad and has no purpose. I need to stop him, and to do that I have to do some terrible things, including to myself.”

“How many will you have to kill to achieve that end?” asked Aldo. He seemed to be trying to tower over her, make his tone intimidating, but it didn’t work. She was done caring.

“None. They’ll already be dead.”

With that she left him, dropping from the wall into the city. She didn’t need to explain anything to him. It wouldn’t matter in the end. He’d be long gone when her plan came to fruition. She just needed her blades.

Narianel opened the doors ahead of her with a burst of aether released from an out-stretched hand. They splintered, sending white and black wood all through the Castle of Dawn. Several startled servants scattered, though one ran off towards Vala's rooms on the upper floors.

She marched up the stairs and when two guards stood in her way, nervously looking at each other, she shunted them to the side with her tendrils. As they slammed into the walls they let out yelps, but she didn't do enough to cause any real damage. They'd survive the bruises.

Vala was waiting for her at a circular table in one of her rooms. It was sparsely decorated otherwise, except for a portrait of Prochorus. The window behind Vala overlooked the whitewood.

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Narianel, sitting across from Vala in the only other chair.

"You would have tried to stop it. Some things cannot be changed. Some things must happen so that time can flow."

"I doubt that." Narianel put her hands flat on the table. It was a Nerikan symbol that the conversation was to be honest in its entirety. Vala sighed and copied the gesture before they continued. "How does her death and my instability at losing her help us kill Azael?"

"It doesn't, not really," said Vala. "But every path I saw led to this conversation, right now. I've been dreading this for years. This is the event that leads to the Lunar Beast, and that is the power you must tame to be victorious."

"Tell me the end of what you see," said Narianel.

"I see you and Isaac standing together against Azael. Both of you are draped in twilight and Azael is made of the purest emptiness. He is Hollow. Ready to die. He will take everyone and everything down with him. Both of you will try to fight him alone, but it isn't until your powers unite that you will be able to defeat him.

“I see a battle in Sonta, at the Grand Gate. But I also see a second battle, in a library of sorts. You must touch Azael in the crucial moment in Sonta, but it will cause your defeat. But that touch will lead to your victory in the library. I’ve searched all over the universe for that library and I cannot find it, but I believe you’ll be there, and I’ve seen your victory. That is the end I’ve seen.”

Narianel thought on that for a time. She knew exactly what library Vala was talking about. There could be only one place. It meant her plan would be delayed, but it also meant that it would work. It would work, so all the suffering would end, but she didn’t feel it was worth losing Adela for it. To never hear her laugh or see her smile. To never touch her or smell the sweetness of her soul.

“I need a more detailed list of the blades. I still have the ones you and Walden have made, but I need to know the people who have them and the lands they lay. I need to know everything.”

“I can work on that while you do what you must,” said Vala. “Egil is in the south of Semblan. He and his allies have been manipulating the kings of the region. War will start soon and they will be behind it. If you don’t stop it, it will spread north. You will find Egil where there are the most souls to devour, at the centre of the storm.”

“Then that is where I’ll go.” Narianel stood to leave, but Vala spoke again.

“Visit Adrammelech before you go south. Your Itorean and Bileeni are passable, but you’ve never uttered a syllable of the southern languages.”

Narianel looked Vala in the eyes. The Seer was trying to lead her in the direction she was already going, so why did it feel so much like manipulation. She nodded and left.

It was almost the end of the year and the Order was passing through Itorean territory, but in its border regions. It was odd being back so soon, yet under circumstances that made the world feel different. Bleak. They approached a ruin that bore the symbols of Chassuille, an ancient temple from before the Ruination.

“Set up camp!” called Royan. It was late in the day, and they’d been marching a long time.

“You can all stay up here,” said Narianel. She’d been walking with them for the last hour rather than flying. She was more trying to stay close to Mira than anything else. With Adela’s death, she didn’t want a rift forming between them, despite how drained and empty she was feeling. Mira was her daughter, blood or no, and she wanted to maintain that relationship.

She entered the ruins and followed the path that went deeper, feeling out the aether of the angel lurking below. Each temple had a guardian angel, and Adrammelech was this one’s protector. Ever since Haziél’s betrayal, the temple in Seremont had no angel, though she’d heard a couple of the Eyes joke about how she was that angel.

She gave a brief glance at the walls and ceiling. They were covered in murals, but they were falling apart. There had been no attempt to restore the place, which was unusual for Chassuille’s temples. Other gods preferred new construction, but Chassuille was consistently restoring the ruins. It was an odd quirk for someone so dispassionate.

Descending the steps took a long time. She didn’t know how deep to go so her trick of turning insubstantial wasn’t going to work. She could have just slipped straight into the ground and become lost.

When she finally reached the bottom there was a room similar to the chamber the Eyes used, and there were signs that people had been there. She thought that maybe the Eyes

had been here on occasion but never made it a true base of operations. There were a few books stacked to the side of a table and a large portrait of a stern looking man on the wall labelled Norman Tesla, who she knew to be a founding member of the Eyes.

She opened the door at the back of the room leading to the angel's chamber and found that it was much larger than Haziél's room. Back in Seremont it was a small circular room that could barely fit the angel and the round table in the middle of the room, but here it was a vast open space.

In the middle of the room was a small figure, only as large as she was. It stood up, revealing that it had six arms and the head of a goat. In each hand he held a sword, and she saw Tongue amongst them, a blade that allowed the wielder to speak any language.

"So I hear you defeated Lucifer," said Adrammelech.

"I did, though the Grand Lord unwisely decided to bring him back to life. It's your blood in the Temple of Eyes beneath Seremont, correct? Is that why you have no wings?"

"That is true, yes," said Adrammelech. "Why are you here today?"

"I seek my blades and also revenge. Give me Tongue so I can be on my way to defeat Egil Krom, the Prophet of Azael."

"I get so few visitors and you only make demands?" The angel laughed, but it was the sort of laugh that suggested a deep sorrow that she sympathised with.

"I'm not much for socialising," said Narianel with as gentle a smile as she could manage. She didn't feel it. She was ready to just curl up in the corner and let the world pass her by, but she had a job to do, one she couldn't quit. She needed that purpose.

Adrammelech started to expertly juggle the six swords in his hand and with a flash of light they all looked like Tongue, long and slightly wavered with a fang design in the crossguard. He smiled at her in the way that only a goat could.

"If you can find the blade in the next minu—"

She called in the blade then made it reappear in her hands, silver light briefly filling the area. Adrammelech caught each of his blades and gave off an aura of disappointment.

“You cannot know how long I’ve practised that,” he said, chuckling to himself.

“Too long, is my guess,” said Narianel. “Thank you for keeping this out of the hands of the enemy for so long. I am sorry about your wings. When I sing my song the curse will leave you and you will soar again.”

He bowed to her as she left.

The Order reached Av Ajir after a few weeks of travel through multiple countries. They stopped near a small town in a strip of land that the country owned along the southern coast. The town was called En Hadil and she had to convince the people that they weren't an invading force, that they were chasing a criminal. She tried talking of Azael but people this far south didn't quite believe in him and news of the battle in Seremont hadn't spread here yet.

A local lord sent out a messenger with a request for her to visit his palace, which she reluctantly accepted. She took only Royan with her, and for once the white of their clothes didn't stand out. The guards and soldiers of this area all wore white, likely to keep off the heat rather than to represent the element of light. The black in Royan's uniform, however, did draw eyes. The red scarf was ignored.

"Greetings, warriors from the north," said Majid Karim with an extended bow before sitting on a massive white stone throne. He wore a long coat that didn't button at the front, but instead hung open, revealing a white silk thobe. He had brown skin and dark hair, as typical of the region, though his eyes were an icy blue that stood out amongst the rest of the people Narianel had met in the area. He also eyed the black in Royan's uniform, and then gave a curious look to the two-toned red shakai that she wore. It was the only thing she wore and covered her whole body except her head, though with a gap in the folds for her arms to be free, making it look like a strange dress.

She'd been altering her body for the last few weeks while travelling. She removed everything she'd no longer need and rearranged her muscles to be more efficient. She was now smooth like she was a doll. If she'd ever had body hair then she would have removed that too. She was lithe but physically stronger than she'd ever been, and was nowhere near done with honing her deadliness. With no more need for a body that

supported pleasure, she'd turned her mind to the pain she could cause.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," said Royan, bowing to Majid. He knew how to be formal, but Narianel didn't bother.

"Your Ajiri is excellent," said Majid. "Not something I've come to expect from northerners."

"I'm afraid we're using magic to accomplish it," said Royan. "We hold a weapon with the power bypass that barrier by reading the souls around it."

"Curious," said Majid. "You do not look armed."

"I'm always armed," said Narianel, earning a look from Majid that suggested she wasn't supposed to talk. This was one of the reasons she'd never wanted to come so far south on the continent. They'd have disapproved of her marriage too.

"Then perhaps you should show me what weapons you carry," said Majid. It wasn't a suggestion, but it make her smirk a little.

She revealed her silver chains, clean thanks to her placing all her corruption into the other pit in her soul, and attached to each was one of her blades. She thought back to Egil holding Tail and knew that the moment she got that blade she'd be able to release the blades of her chains and control them with more freedom.

Majid sat back in his throne and stared at her wide-eyed until she called them back inside her soul. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and his breathing was hard. He'd probably never been in the presence of someone more powerful than his guards before. At least he didn't know he had, considering how he was acting towards Royan.

"Who are you? What are you? Surely not any kind of normal Host of the Heavenly Soul?"

"My name is Narianel Azranhai, though you may know me under my older name, Beatrix Blackwood, Monochrome Free Knight of Vin."

"I've heard of you," said Majid. He took a deep breath to steady his voice. "You're the Kingkiller."

“I am,” said Narianel. She summoned Prelude and leaned on, tip scratching the floor but not sinking in. “Then I turned his soul into this blade. He was a worshipper of Azael and deserved it. And for the record, I’m a nephilim, not just a Host. I’m an angel without a leash.”

Majid shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Why are you in my domain?”

“We’re chasing another follower of Azael,” said Royan, pulling Majid’s attention back to him. Narianel put away Prelude and tried to fade from the conversation, just to make this go faster. “We believe he’s somewhere in these southern countries. No, ‘believe’ is the wrong word. We’ve consulted a Seer and know he’s down here, corrupting people in positions of power. We need to stop him before a war breaks out. He has two allies of note too, but we’re unsure if they are here. We suspect that they are.”

“And what do you expect of me?” asked Majid.

“Nothing,” said Royan. “We will simply pass through your territory and you need never think of us again, so long as we do not find him here. I must admit up front that there will be a battle if we do, a battle we are looking for. We seek to destroy him before anyone else has to suffer at his hands.”

“He is that dangerous?” asked Majid. He was looking sceptical, but slowly turning to their cause.

“He has the power to twist souls and can also destroy them,” said Royan. “He was last seen wielding a powerful blade that can destroy a soul without even needing his magic. He can also infect minds to control them, and he is a visage, a devourer of souls, which gives him a shield that is hard to cut through and will heal him when injured. He is the most dangerous man you’ll ever meet.”

Royan gave Narianel a side-glance. He had avoided saying person or woman, but it was obvious he thought she would defeat Egil. Without a human shield and the knowledge to avoid that Hadiini mist mage, she had a clear advantage. There was no more information to be gained from him. No

more hints and warnings to be analysed. It was time to end him forever.

“I should warn you, as well,” Royan continued. “If you choose to side with him, listen to his words, my mentor here will know. She can sense when people have been corrupted by Azael, and so you will not be able to hide from us.”

“He’s clean right now,” she said to Royan, though loud enough to be heard by Majid, making him clutch the arms of his throne.

“We’ll be out of your territory in a few days,” said Royan. “We don’t plan to stay long if we don’t sense anything. We hope that you stay clean, and not just for your own sake. You have a duty to the people of this land. We’ll take our leave now.” He gave a small bow, almost just a tilt of his head, and they left.

On their way out Narianel heard him ordering his guards to prepare the army, just in case, and he likely thought she wouldn’t have heard his hurried whispers. When they were outside she warned Royan of what Mijad had ordered and they prepared the camp accordingly.

There were clouds in the sky but the season was poorly named this far south, even across the sea from the Everheat. Narianel could still see the violet sky, which was odd when experience told her there should be nothing but white in an overcast sky at this time of the year.

“Reports state that three of the other local lords are combining their armies into one,” said Mira. “Should we check it out?”

“No, I’ll go,” said Narianel. “I’ll check out the leaders and be back shortly.”

“Unless Egil is there,” said Mira with a smirk.

“Unless Egil is there,” Narianel echoed. “Is Royan still talking with Majid?”

“He is,” said Mira. “The lord won’t budge. He keeps saying how he’ll stop us from leaving until he can get word from the king.”

“It’s not like he could stop us,” said Narianel. “Tell Royan where I’ve gone and not to follow.”

“Alright,” said Mira. Then, after a moment, as Narianel was about to leap into the sky, she continued. “Hey, mum. I’ve got something to tell you.”

“What is it?” asked Narianel. She half-turned while in a crouch, her body tensed.

“I’ve been thinking of leaving the Order,” said Mira. She wouldn’t meet Narianel’s eyes. “I just... After this chase, after Egil is gone, I want to return to Seremont. Maybe start a family of my own. I don’t think I can keep fighting the way you do.”

Narianel stood up and hugged Mira. “You don’t need to be ashamed of wanting to change how you live your life. Darren’s a good man and I can see he’s treating you well. If what you want is a family then you should go for it. You don’t need to follow in my footsteps. In fact, I’d rather you didn’t, considering the horrors my future holds. You be happy while

you can. You have my support.”

“Thank you,” said Mira. She was holding back tears as she gripped Narianel as if her life depended on it. When she pulled back she was smiling.

“I’ll be back shortly,” said Narianel. She took a few steps back and prepared to jump again. “I love you, Mira. I don’t say it enough. I’m glad that filthy little girl strolled into my life and grew into a woman that I’m proud of.”

She jumped, releasing several bursts of aether to get herself into the sky faster than she could normally fly. For a moment she hung in the air as her momentum faded and she looked over the camp and hundreds of square miles of Av Ajir’s dry plains and mountains. With Perception’s help she could make out the army to the south, and with another burst of aether she was flying towards it.

She let out a pair of wings and flew over the army in a circle, looking for their leaders. There was a lot of alarm at her appearance and when she started to descend towards what looked like the command tent she heard horns and saw people gathering weapons and hastily putting on armour. A stray arrow passed her and she eyed the archer, but didn’t do anything about it. Now was not the time to be petty against a scared mortal.

She saw the fancy armour of the commander and let herself drop the last fifty feet. She didn’t even use a burst of aether to reset her fall, just slamming into the ground, landing on her feet and standing from a crouch. She kept out her wings, seeing the looks they were getting.

“I’m here to test your souls to make sure you’re not tainted by Azael,” said Narianel. “Do not resist me and I will leave in peace when I’m done.”

“You presume much for a foreigner,” said the man in the gilded armour. He was draped with a bright orange sash and his cape matched. “You have no power in this land.”

“I have power wherever I go,” said Narianel. “I know that Hosts are not common this far south, but I am more than

you assume me to be. I am a nephilim, a god unto myself.”

“You have a large ego,” said the man. “It is shameful to you and your company.” He was staring at her with the purest contempt she’d ever seen.

“It’s not ego when it’s the truth,” she said. “I’ve done things you could never imagine.”

“You’re a monster,” said the man.

“Maybe I am,” she said. She had been scanning souls since she landed and hadn’t found any trace of Azael yet. But then, as she was thinking it would be fine to leave, she caught a glimpse of something on the outskirts of the camp.

“Where do you think you’re going!?” shouted the man as she turned from him and started to walk, so she stopped and looked at him, but kept her mind pinned to the soul she’d felt in the distance.

“Your army has been tainted. You either allow me to cleanse it or I’ll be back in a week for more than just one person. How long would I have to wait until it was you too?”

“Who is it?” asked the man. She gestured with a quick tilt of her head and then walked away. The crowd parted for her as she was seemingly being escorted by their commander. The man was emitting an aura of fear and anger and hatred, and it pressed on her mind in an uncomfortable way. Was she really becoming a monster? If she was, it was necessary. She knew the Lunar Beast was coming.

As they approached a man on the edge of the camp he ran, his soul flared and his scent was thick with fear and the taint of Azael. She pounced, leaping into flight at ground level, tackling him to the ground and holding his head on the floor. She was getting lighter by the day but still so much stronger.

“Talk,” she said calmly as she slammed Truth’s tip into the ground by his head. “What goal have you been given by Azael? Who is your contact?”

“I was reached out to by Egil Krom two weeks ago. I’ve been slowly working Ziyad around to the idea of joining him.”

“Who is Ziyad?” she asked the man in the gilded

armour. He was staring on with horror. "Is that you?" He blinked himself back to reality and nodded.

"That's my brother," he said. "He works for the enemy now? Why?"

"I've been shown the truth. That all of this is pointless and we're all doomed. Why not just end it faster? Be at peace all the sooner?"

"This is a lie. You are doing this to him, woman!"

"My blade is radiating an aura that causes people to only speak the truth. There can be no lies. I promise you that all he says is true. Try to lie to me and you'll understand."

Ziyad tried to talk but words wouldn't come out. He then muttered a few things to one of his men, who then came forward with some manacles. She stepped back and for a moment thought the man would be stupid enough to try and chain her, but he instead clamped the man's hands behind his back and hauled him away.

"I know that many think I am harsh, but I only bring justice to those who have aligned with the greatest evil in this world. If you suspect anyone else of falling to that darkness, call on me. I'll be at the camp I'm sure your people saw me come from. I do not want to fight you. Your sword will be an aid to me and all reality in the final battle."

She called back Truth and flew up before waiting for an answer, hoping her words would reach him. She had a hard time keeping her voice so steady when the rage was always threatening to boil over. The flow of corruption from her personal well to the mass well was near constant, and keeping it that way was difficult. She just wanted to let loose, but it would have to wait. She had to find Egil first.

“Happy birthday!” said Mira as Narianel approached the camp. She’d been out scouting since before the sun came up, which was still a foreign concept to her.

“I’d forgotten, honestly,” she said. Was she really only thirty-seven now? She felt so much older. There was some strain on her soul.

“You should take the day and relax,” said Mira. She was smiling and bouncing on her heels as she talked. “We’re moving out tomorrow, so you can calm yourself and it’ll be fine, you know?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I hate being stuck here, but I don’t want to leave you. We’ve lost seven days to Majid and his nonsense.”

“You mean the local laws,” said Royan. He approached with a stride that said he was in charge, and with Tullis in tow.

“It took too long for simple papers that say we can travel here. None of the other countries we passed through needed them. I just need to find Egil and get this over with. I need to find my peace with the situation.”

“We’ll find him soon enough,” said Mira. “No need to think about him today. Just find a book and relax. You stress yourself too much.”

Narianel stared into Mira’s eyes then sighed. The girl wouldn’t be persuaded. She nodded and let Mira lead her away to the tent that had been set up for her but she rarely used. There was a pile of blankets for a bed she’d never touched, a small table she’d never sat at, and three books she’d never read. She was pushed into a small chair and Mira smiled so brightly she couldn’t resist.

Two of the books were interesting takes on past wars, but one was a novel. She spent the next night reading it, but had no use for fiction. It was enjoyable enough, but not to her taste. At least it helped her forget Adela, if only for a moment.

After a week of travel they reached central Av Ajir, near the city of Tel Ania. Royan had gone on ahead with Vedar and Tullis to meet the local ruler, a sultan name Nur Karimi. Majid had sent a small force to escort the Order, and the other group led by Zariya had followed along. They knew there was going to be a battle and wanted to show they were on the right side, the side that saved the universe.

The city was large and walled, standing with slender watchtowers that even at this distance Narianel could see the lines of aether running through them. Wards and barriers. She saw it as a beautiful city, with well designed buildings all within the same theme, but she didn't take the time to admire it. She oversaw the camp, using Chas and Sarina as her seconds. Mira led the scouts making sure the area was safe and running messages between the armies.

"I've got another one," Mira said when she returned. She handed Narianel another letter. It was from Ramiz Abbas, the man in charge of Majid's army. He kept inviting her and Royan to eat with him. Royan had been to him twice, but she'd declined each time.

"What a waste of paper and ink," she said as she read it. "Why doesn't he give up?"

"Royan likes him," said Mira.

"Royan likes a lot of people," she said. She burnt away the letter and stalked through the camp to see to the rest of the soldiers. She did regular inspections for Azael's influence and hadn't found any. She thought maybe they were being ignored deliberately by Azael and Egil but it was too big a risk to not look for any taint.

It was late in the day when Royan returned from Tel Ania with the news that the Order was allowed into the city, but only in small groups. It made sense to her and she didn't protest it. The sultan had a country and a city to keep safe and they were a foreign warband.

“Another invite for you,” said Royan, “but this one is from a king. I don’t think you should refuse this one.”

“I wouldn’t dare, given the chance to inspect his soul for the influence.” She looked to Vedar and Tullis, who were quietly discussing the local food. “I felt the bond weaken when you two were on the other side of the city. Did you lose access to Tongue?”

“No, but it did feel different,” said Tullis.

“It took a moment to understand some things people were saying,” said Vedar. “That’s a good six miles on the range, though. It’s definitely getting bigger the more you keep using the bond.”

“Good to know,” she said. “When am I expected in his palace, Royan?”

“Tomorrow at noon,” he said. “He wants to meet you alone, without me or any other soldier. Your reputation as a fine warrior precedes you here. He’s also aware of you killing Arthur Hitch, which he asked many questions about. I warned him that you might be antagonistic, as you are with everyone you meet, but you won’t act so long as he is against Azael.”

“I’m not antagonistic,” she said. Royan had an amused look and Tullis chuckled. She looked to Mira who shook her hand in a non-committal gesture.

“You’re good at teaching how to fight, but you have no social tact, boss,” said Vedar, which got Royan to stifle a laugh and Tullis to lost it.

“In truth,” said Royan, “I’ve never heard you be polite to anyone. You’ve mentioned Thomas Acker to me a few times and never called him by his surname. It’s always ‘Thomas’ instead of ‘Acker’ like would be expected as a man of his station. You’re also very blunt and don’t use hand gestures, so it’s like you’re always ready to fight.”

“I may see your point,” she said, suddenly aware of how she was standing. Straight back, arms stiff at her sides, hands curled as though ready to drop a blade into them. She relaxed her shoulders a little and let herself frown instead of keeping

her face unreadable, which had been a reflex for a long time to hide the rage bubbling under her skin.

“Despite the way you act, the upper crust seem to like you,” said Royan. “I think they’re so surrounded with people who either have no thoughts of their own or are out to betray them that they find your honesty refreshing. You always stand for your own ideals, which many people admire even if they don’t like you as a person.”

“Who doesn’t like me?” she asked. Her tone and face were more accusatory than she’d wanted, which made her look at the ground with a furrowed brow.

“It takes a while to warm up to you,” said Tullis.

“Most people,” muttered Vedar at the same time, but she caught it and tried to not glare at him. He probably forgot how good her hearing was.

“Ignore them,” said Royan. “We’re behind you, that’s all that matters here. Tomorrow when you leave that palace we’ll have a new ally.”

Narianel decided to wear a formal Nerikan dress, keeping her shakai wrapped tightly around her shoulders and loosely around her face up to her nose. The dress was of a different style than she normally wore, usually reserved for religious ceremonies. It was full around her upper body instead of exposing her back, it had shoulders in a sharp cut and sleeves that came down to her wrists, its skirts were loose and straight and almost touched the floor. Her feet were bound in ribbons that went up to her knees, not that anyone would see it since she planned to be calm and not get into a fight.

She walked through the city with Royan, discussing what she was to expect and what was expected of her in return. Nur Karimi was apparently a worldly man and had visited the north often. He had a reputation of being liberal in person but still upholding the conservative values of his people, and had high opinions of foreign queens. She wasn't going to be talked down to for being a woman like she'd experienced with Majid. She hoped, at least.

As they walked she noticed the looks she was getting. Royan got looks as well, but even his pale northern skin was nothing in comparison to the literal white glow of hers. Hosts were rare in this part of the world, but usually welcome. It made her uncomfortable to see the awe in their eyes. It was different from back in Seremont where she'd proven herself. This was unearned. She wondered how they'd react to the revelation that she was a nephilim instead of a Host.

She reached the palace shortly before noon and Royan left her there. A servant came out dressed in a black robe that covered even her face in a veil. The veil and complete cover brought back uncomfortable memories from what she'd been thinking of as the years she wasted.

The palace was as finely decorated as she's expected, and made the city look ugly in comparison. It was sleek and sparse, giving off the aura of wealth that didn't need to be

shown to be known. There were other servants bustling about and she passed at least a hundred guards. She wondered if that was meant to be a subtle intimidation or was normal, but either way only the officers had magically enhanced weapons that could actually hurt her.

The throne room was as large as the main room in the Temple of Chassuille back in Seremont, with vaulted ceilings and a white rug running the length of the room to the throne up on its dais. There wasn't a speck of dirt anywhere and the rug was soft and clean, as if it were brand new.

Nur Karimi was almost her age but he looked much younger than he actually was. He could be mistaken for his late teens or early twenties, but his soul showed the wear and tear of leadership. He had long, dark hair and deep brown eyes, with a well groomed beard. His confident smile showed clean teeth. He was dressed in loose trousers, soft shoes, and a long coat with no shirt, showing off his muscled chest that she knew to be from exercise and not actual work or combat.

"Dame Beatrix Lifesong, is it?" he said. His voice was deep and she realised the chamber was designed to project his it to visitors. She stopped twenty paces from him because that was how far Royan had been allowed, but she noticed the raised eyebrow of one of the throne guards that stood at the base of the dais.

"I go by Narianel Azranhai," she said. "I no longer use my Vinish name, preferring to put forward my Nerikan heritage."

"Ah, yes, forgive me, Lady Azranhai," he said. "Now, I have been talking to young Lord Royan and he has explained the situation to me. So, of course, I welcome you to examine my soul and find me innocent."

"Royan isn't a Lord," she said. She'd been looking at his soul the entire time, not waiting for permission. She knew he wasn't in league with Azael, but she wasn't sure she could trust him. He was being too friendly. He wanted something.

"He isn't?" asked Nur, leaning back in his throne. "He

very much acted like one.”

“He is a well mannered man, and I gave him the Order of Blades for a reason. I trust him.”

“Those last words don’t come out your mouth easily, do they?” said Nur. He was trying to read her body language, she realised, and she tried not to hold herself to tightly.

“They do not,” she said. “Not any more. I have allies, but I do not seek friends. I am at war with a dark god, so I cannot afford attachments like that. My only softness is my family, and that is the way it will stay.”

“I see,” he said, sitting up. He looked her in the eyes and she did her best not to glare. It was a struggle to be nice when every instinct said to let the rage loose. “I’m curious. I’ve been told you carry many weapons within you. How does that work?”

“The weapons contain souls which resonate with and rest within my own soul,” she said.

“And who are these souls?” Nur asked.

“Demons and fallen angels from the first rebellion, as well as some of my enemies from the past few years. One of my ancestors made the first rebellion blades and I inherited the power to use them.”

“And your enemies from recent years?” he asked.

“Followers of Azael,” she said. “These include Arthur Hitch and Marquis of Cor, as well as several of his spies and soldiers.” At the mention of Arthur and Marquis Nur’s face stiffened. He would have dealt with them during the early years of his reign and known she’d killed them. “I don’t tell many that I turn my enemies into weapons, so please keep it quiet. This secret is given in offer of alliance.”

“I have received word from several of my barons and their soldiers,” said Nur. “You have already killed a few people that you’ve come across in the countryside, but made it clear you believe them to be followers of this Azael. What proof is there that it isn’t just random slaughter?”

“I cannot teach you to sense the presence of Azael in

the souls of others,” she said. “I don’t know if you can sense aether, which can take a year or more to learn in and of itself, but finding Azael’s influence takes a lot of talent and practice. Royan still can’t do it and he’s been reading my journals on the matter for years. The only person I know that can do it is Aldo Bello, leader of the Eyes of Chassuile, and he has been specifically trained for it. All I can ask is that you trust me as I am forced to trust those that are clean of Azael’s influence, like you.”

He took a moment to think before speaking again. “If this power is so rare, how did you come by it?”

“I have been tainted by Azael,” she said bluntly. “I can sense him because he is trying to turn me to his will. I refused him, of course, and I think I’ve proven my point in how many of his worshippers I’ve killed. I am currently on the hunt for at least two of his highest ranking followers, with a possible third. None of them seem to realise just how much I want them dead, so they keep feeding me information and trying to influence me. It hasn’t worked.”

“Who are the three?” he asked.

“Egil Krom, known as the Prophet. I suspect he has access to at least some time magic. He is a visage, a soul eater, and he’d incredibly dangerous. He is my main target.

“The second is known as the Guide, and I have no name for her. She is a changeling, a creature of many faces. I’m able to see through her illusions because of the way I see the world, but I hear that others just see whatever face she wants them to see. She is my secondary target because she is the one delivering tasks to Azael’s agents.

“My possible third target is a man from Tor Hadiin. He has no eyes and wields mist aether. He wore a sash around his waist and another around his neck in the Hadiini style, but could be from any of the countries this far south and just trying to fool us. I don’t know his rank or his title, but he is dangerous and so I will kill him if possible too.”

“There is so much to ask amongst that,” said Nur with

an amused smile. "I'll start with Egil Krom. Why is he your main target?"

She looked at the guards in the room before answering honestly. "He killed my wife. It was a betrayal. He was once useful to me, sharing information, but I think I trusted him too much. I should have killed him long ago."

A guard shifted uneasily and there were glares from many of the others. Two women loving each other was a sin in these parts, enough for an execution she'd heard, but Nur had his eyes closed and was nodding with a frown, showing at least some sympathy.

"And you say you see the world differently?" he asked, changing the topic. "How so?"

"There are things hidden in the gaps between two points in space, even when those points appear to be touching. Imagine a book. When you turn each page you think you see every one, but I am able to see the hidden pages between pages. Right now I have wings hidden in the folds of the space, and the Guide had faces hidden from view, ready to be used as she willed it."

"You have access to space magic?" he asked, suddenly very excited. "Can you show me?"

"I don't necessarily have the magic," she said. She unfolded a pair of wings, one white and one black, adjusted to an appropriate size. "I can use it on myself for my body, but haven't practised using it on anything else. I have a blade that lets me move long distances using it. I am more of a warrior than a mage, and any magic I use is to enhance that aspect."

"Guards, leave us," said Nur. A few of them hesitated for half a second but they left without complaint. When the room was empty Nur continued. "There is a treasure sealed in the vaults below the castle. Only my family knows of it. The barrier is complex and makes use of space magic. Do you think you could break it and get me the treasure? It is an old magical sword and crown from before the Ruination that can be traced back to Alealamia. They are over six thousands years old."

“Why was it sealed?” she asked. “Was it cursed?”

“Simply to protect it,” Nur said. “If you can get me the sword and crown I will let you look at my court and generals. I will join with you in the fight against Azael.”

“They must be powerful if you’re willing to ask for them,” said Narianel.

“They are, from what I’ve read,” said Nur.

“I would be handing you a weapon capable of harming me, should you ever betray me,” she said. “I dislike that, but I agree to your terms. Lead me to the vault.”

She was led into the backrooms of the palace, which were much more elaborately decorated. This was where the wealth was shown, but only to those Nur decided to bring to his inner sanctum. There were paintings and tapestries and busts lining the wide corridors. The door frames of all things were gilded, and the white stone walls were smooth and polished to a shine.

They passed no guards, but there were a few servants who bowed to them as they walked by. Nur didn’t even seem to see them. When they reached a large set of double doors Nur took a key from a pocket inside his loose longcoat and put it in the lock.

“None outside my family have ever been through these doors,” he said. “Not even the servants. It is an honour to be allowed here.”

“I will consider it a necessity,” she said, making Nur laugh. In the throne room he gave off an air of superiority, but since sending away the guards it was obvious that wasn’t who he was. He was excited to be getting this treasure. More and more he was reminding her of some of the Archivists she’d met over the years. He was a leader to his people, but perhaps what he wanted was adventure instead.

Nur unlocked the doors and then hid away the key inside his coat. He opened the doors, then stood to the side to let her in. Going from plastered wall to bare stonework, it was obvious that the place was ignored when cleaning. The air had

a stagnant odour and there were cobwebs along the ceiling. The doors opened straight onto stairs that led down into the darkness.

“Perhaps I should go get a torch,” said Nur, but before he could move Narianel created a ball of light that bobbed along behind her as she walked. He followed her with a spring in his step. “That could work too. I’ve seen some fire mages using what they called fairy fire to achieve the same effect, but never pure light.”

“Fire is my native element,” said Narianel as they descended the stairs. “I could do that instead if you wish.”

“No, this is wonderful,” said Nur. “But why would you use light if you’re not attuned to it?”

“I am attuned,” she said. “Fire then darkness then light are my elements. A rare triple attunement, though from what I’ve read it can happen easily when magical bloodlines are as mixed as mine. My little brother is the same, though his are in the reverse order I’ve noticed, and he radiates pure aether.”

“Oh, you have a brother?” asked Nur. “Is he as talented as you? I’ve never heard of him, unlike the large reputation you carry with you.”

“He’s more powerful than me,” she said and felt a peak of worry in Nur’s soul. “He lives a quiet life away from most of the fighting, though he killed the demon Asmodeus last year.”

“I’ve heard stories of that monster. It’s good he’s dead,” said Nur firmly.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and as Narianel was about to keep walking Nur stopped. She looked back at him and he was staring at her with a curious look.

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t see that?” he asked.

She looked back at the hallway ahead and then noticed the wall. She’d stepped through folded space without realising and had phased partially through a wall. She stepped back, focussing her eyes on what others saw, taking in the wall. It was made of aether and looked like frosted glass, partially

transparent but solid looking. It made her wonder what else she missed that other people saw by default.

“This is the barrier?” she asked.

“It is,” said Nur.

“I’ve seen stronger barriers from people in the fifth circle,” she said. “Have you tried breaking it before?”

“I have, honestly. It’s designed to allow mist magic to pass right through it instead of touching it, so the breaker I hired had to give up after a week.”

“Interesting,” she said. She summoned Fang and touched the tip to the barrier. It didn’t react, letting the magic of the blade pass it. “Can you touch it?”

Nur stepped up and pushed against it with both hands. It was solid and she watched it actually form more space to the points he touched, as if to strengthen itself. Then a tiny amount of aether in Nur’s hands desynced from his body, passing through a tiny amount. Nur pulled back and shook his hands, mumbling about how it stung if he pushed too hard.

“Whoever built it didn’t think anyone without a physical body would ever pass through here,” she said. “It blocks only matter, not aether. That stinging was your soul managing to push through while leaving your body behind.”

“How will I pass then?” he asked, still rubbing his hands on his coat even though his soul was back in place. “How did *you* pass through it?”

“My body is complicated,” she said. “It’s physical but made of aether. It isn’t substantive in the same way. I thought it was because of my instinctual control over the space my body occupies at first, but it’s the barrier that’s odd. Why didn’t you just tunnel around it?”

“It’s a sphere,” said Nur. “An ancestor of mine from just after the Ruination tunnelled into it from above. He put a fountain on top of the hole when he couldn’t get into the chamber. Do you have a way in for me? I want to see the place the treasure lays, not just hold them in my hands.”

“Here,” she said, holding out her hand. She summoned

Needlepoint into her other hand and held it up. Nur blinked at the silver flash of the blade appearing and then took her hand. He had a firm grip and squeezed at the sensation of being moved, surprised as the world wrapped around them and then unfolded with them standing ten feet away on the other side of the barrier.

“That was... odd,” he said with a chuckle.

“You get used to it,” she said, letting go of his hand and dismissing Needlepoint. The ball of light flew through the barrier to follow them and they continued down the corridor.

They quickly reached a T-junction that then wrapped in on itself, essentially just being a wall in the middle of the corridor that they had to walk around. Adela once told her this sort of thing was common in ancient ruins to block line of sight and make it easier for traps to land, but there was nothing like that here.

The chamber was large and open, though small when compared to the throne room. At the centre was an altar with the sword and crown Nur had spoken of, but there were also mountains of gold and other treasures. The only aether in the room was in the blade and the crown, but that didn't mean there wasn't a mechanical trap of some kind.

“Careful,” she said.

“Why? Do you sense some magic?”

“No, but it could still be unsafe for a human. I'll take them from the altar and you stand by the entrance.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, stepping back.

Stepping up to the altar and looking closer, she could see a faint groove around the crown and sword. There was a weighted pressure plate. Using Perception and pushing her head through the altar she followed the path of the wires in her mind until she found what it triggered. Deeming it safe, she stood up straight and took the sword and crown, instantly being impaled by over a dozen spears shot from the walls and ceiling. She softened the aether of her body so the spears fell to the floor and she turned to Nur.

“You are absolutely terrifying,” he said with a grin that did nothing to hide the shock in his eyes.

“So I keep hearing,” she said, handling him the crown and sword, the treasures of his ancient ancestors. He took them eagerly, as if he doubted she’d hand them over if he waited any longer. She’d never do that, of course, as she knew what it was like to want such items. Knowing the kinds of people who had some of her blades made her thankful how easy she’d had it so far.

“Now, yes, let us ally against Azael,” said Nur. He put the crown on his head as he spoke and gave the sword a couple of test swings. It was a well-made sword, slender blade, single edge, gilded handle. The crown was just gaudy from all the gems.

“We can discuss it in the throne room,” said Narianel. Ipos was nagging in her mind, a bad omen if nothing else. She summoned Oracle to her finger, keeping the needle facing her palm, and sought a glimpse into the near future but didn’t see anything of alarm. Nur gave the ring a look but didn’t speak. He nodded and led the way back to the barrier.

Using Needlepoint and Perception Narianel folded them back to the throne room, surprising the guards that had returned. Nur bounded up the dais and sat on the throne, lying the sword across his lap.

“Would someone please fetch me a scribe?” he said to the room. “I have some decrees to announce.”

Almost a week later the Eyes arrived in Tel Ania, and the *Prishe* landed near Narianel and the Order's camp. But it wasn't just them. Sorley and Isaac arrived shortly before in the *Zoraee Vana*, making Narianel remember the time she'd taken Adela to Nerik in it. A few more airships showed up too, packed with supplies and Archivists. Thomas Acker led the group himself, and they were ready to avenge Seremont.

Nur Karimi, with a large guard escort, arrived on the scene in the afternoon to meet everyone. He'd met Aldo and Thomas before, but he seemed intrigued by Gilbert and Isaac. Narianel thought she'd have to look into local lore about Hosts and nephilim to figure out why he was so obsessed with angelic blood, but she wouldn't have time until after Egil was dead and forged.

Approaching dusk, the sultan gathered the leaders to talk about their plans in the palace. They sat around a large table that could easily fit another twenty people. Nur had a few of his people by his sides as he sat at the head of the table. Next to Narianel was Royan on her left, nearer to Nur, and Isaac on her right, with Sorley on the other side of him. Across from her was Aldo and on his left was Tesni. Next to her was Thomas, and he had a couple of Archivists with him.

A few others stood to the sides of the room. Nur had some of his higher ranking officers and advisors behind him, with the highest sat with him at the table. Irvine was the only other Eye in attendance, and there were five other Archivists. Mira and Vedar stood behind Narianel.

They talked for a long time, but Narianel didn't really listen. She kept up well enough, but her mind was set on the people in the room. She looked at their souls carefully and was worried about Azael's possible influence. Aldo caught her eye about an hour into the meeting and subtly nodded to the back of the room at a group of servants who had just entered, and one was suspicious. Looking at Aldo again, they agreed without

speaking and both stood.

The speaking stopped and the servant tried to flee. Narianel used Needlepoint to get into the doorway and Aldo tackled the man to the ground, then pulled him up, wrenching the man's arm up behind his back. Beatrix summoned Truth and activated its aura.

"What is your name?" asked Aldo. He spoke Ajiri with a surprising fluency and didn't need to borrow Tongue.

"Why should I tell you?" the man asked. His soul had the scent of Azael, but it was fresh. Too fresh.

"I'll leave this here," said Narianel, waving over Mira and giving her Truth. "Royan, with me. Vedar, return to camp. We need more hands. I want a search of the servants and their quarters. We're looking for someone more obviously under Azael's thumb." Then she spoke to Nur. "I apologise for the inconvenience."

"A rare apology," said Irvine, who she scowled at.

She used Needlepoint to reach the roof and used Perception to look around the palace and city. She was still wearing Oracle, but it didn't seem to be helping. She saw Vedar using Flight's power to follow her orders and Royan making his way up through the floors of the palace towards her, searching as he went. That was another thing about the bond they'd recently noticed. They could all intuit where she was even when she used Needlepoint to change places quickly.

She scoured the palace in her mind, seeing every room and hallway, seeing deep beneath the palace and around the gardens and walls. She managed to find the servant's trail, following it from where Aldo was still interrogating him back through the corridors, into different rooms, out of the palace and into the city.

"Need any help?" asked Tesni. She appeared from the shadows in the same way Gilbert usually did. Narianel looked at her and then away when she saw the look on the sharp eyes of the serpentine.

"In this task, yes." She still followed the trail through

the city while she talked.

“What does that mean?” asked Tesni.

“You look like you want to talk,” said Narianel. She turned her back on Tesni. “You look worried, not like you’re ready to hunt Azael. If you plan to try and comfort me, then I’d rather you didn’t bother.”

“You do need that kind of help, though.” Tesni stepped up to Narianel’s side and looked out over the city.

“Not from you, not when in recent years you’ve been looking at me the way Aldo does. The way anyone who first hears of me being tainted by Azael does.”

“I never—”

“You did. I noticed. I’m not Azael’s pet. I do what I do because it’s what I believe is right, even when that makes me seem like the villain. Right now I am on the hunt, so you can either help me with that or go back down and help Aldo. I don’t need to be treated like I’m broken.”

“You *are* broken, Narianel, but we all are in our own ways. The anger you have now is more than just your curse, isn’t it? I remember that from when my mother died.”

“Your mother?” Narianel still didn’t look at her. The trail seemed to end in a packed market, but she kept searching the area.

“Maria, dummy,” said Tesni.

“You really thought of her that way?” asked Narianel.

“Does Mira not think of you as her mother? It’s no different. Aldo is as much of a father as I’ve ever had. They took me in and raised me, nurtured my power and made me into the woman I am today.”

“I still think of you as a child,” said Narianel.

“I’m sure you do. You’re just rude.”

“I’m not looking to make friends.” She focused on a tiny thread of the scent and found its origin. A small building near the market that had a different scent that still lingered there. It wasn’t familiar other than the influence of Azael.

“I always thought of us as friends,” said Tesni.

“Why would I be friends with a cheeky brat?” She finally looked at Tesni, who was grinning at the comment.

“You’re one to talk.”

She felt Royan use Needlepoint and he appeared on the roof. He looked at Tesni and gave her a smile and nod, then looked to Narianel.

“The servants say he’s been acting strange all day,” he said. “The man’s name is Zawar and he’s a normal servant here, but has been very unusual since visiting the market this morning.”

“So it was recent,” said Narianel. “I found the market he went to, and there’s another presence there that reeks of Azael. Redirect Vedar to keep the palace secure and report the findings to Aldo.”

“Right,” said Royan. He used Needlepoint again and she sensed him appear near Aldo.

“The market is there,” she said pointing for Tesni. “Near the base of that tower.”

“Are you expecting me to follow you?” asked Tesni with a smile.

“You offered to help, so let’s go kill someone.” Narianel changed her clothes from a Nerikan dress to just the wrapped shakai with a thought, leapt from the palace roof and spread a pair of wings, flying towards the market and keeping an eye on that building. Tesni followed on black wings of her own.

They raced through the sky, weaving between towers and dipping under canopies as they sped along, much to the annoyance the folk beneath them. They passed over the market and Narianel felt the presence shift. It was aware it had been seen. It was hard to make out the soul’s colour when it was so drenched in Azael’s power, which made Narianel nervous. Was this going to be another ordeal like on the Twilight Steppe? This city was too densely packed to allow that to happen.

As they descended, the enemy left the building and found its way into a series of alleys. Narianel directed Tesni to block the far end while she dropped right onto the person. She

folded away her wings and fell at speeds that would kill anyone else on contact with the ground, but she had embraced her inhumanity now. This didn't scare her in the slightest as she hurtled towards the alley. She kept her eyes sharp and crashed down on her target, having to take a moment to pull her body back into shape.

Standing over the soul she saw it wasn't human. It was a sklaara, and it had survived her fall without a scratch. Its soul was green, meaning it was a worker ant, and she'd have to wait for it to speak through its leather collar with its translation gem to be able to figure out whether it had chosen to present as either male or female. The insectoid creature got up quickly and slammed her into a wall before stepping back and attempting to use its height, easily eight feet tall, to try intimidating her. Why did they always assume that they could scare her just by looking down on her, just because her more human shape was short? She never understood it. Surely they could see just how giant she truly was.

The sklaara had its lower set of arms missing, and the pattern on its shell had been painted black. It wore a pale yellow cloak with its hood up and wore a belt around its hips that held a pair of scimitars. And then Narianel noticed that it didn't actually have a translation collar, which was strange since it could only make odd guttural noises and click its mandibles. Prufas assured her in her head that his power could translate any language, so she activated Tongue and hoped the demon wasn't lying about his abilities.

"So, sneaking spies into a meeting? Doesn't seem very useful when Azael is supposedly so powerful. Surely he must just know everything that's going to happen, right?"

Narianel was struck three more times by the sklaara and then thrown down the alley. She just stood up, not bothering to even brush off the dirt and dust. She smiled at the sklaara, who took a step back and turned but stopped when it saw Tesni, who still had her wings out and had her claws ready.

“Tell us the plan and maybe we’ll make your death less painful,” said Narianel.

“How are you speaking my language?” asked the insect with a tone that could only be called hateful. “How are you making the clicks and tones?”

“Magic,” said Narianel. “Now that I’ve answered your questions, maybe you can answer mine.”

The sklaara rushed her again, picking her up and throwing her into the ground. She’d changed her body to not feel pain and didn’t react, but the sklaara kept at it, throwing her around the alley as if it would do anything. When it was done, the creature shook as it caught its breath through holes behind where its lower arms should have been. She stood up and looked up at its eyes, unharmed and outwardly calm despite wanting to pick the insect apart limb by limb. Answers came before rage.

“This would be less taxing on you if you just answered my questions,” she said. She saw Tesni giving her a curious look. A mixture of confusion and amusement. “Tell me your name and why you are here.”

“The Prophet always described you in flattering ways,” said the sklaara. “He’s very fond of you.”

“Well, any chance at friendship was lost when he killed my wife,” she said. “Why are you here? What is your name? At least tell me the name of your queen.”

“I ate my queen to get here!” shouted the sklaara, the clicks and coughs echoing so loudly it hurt her ears. She cut off the pain and stood as tall as she could. “I lost my arms in the fight! I have become the weapon the Pure Lord needs! I will destroy you and prove my worth!”

“Ah, so you’re jealous of me?” asked Narianel with a smirk and tilting her head, eyes locked with the sklaara.

“You have proven yourself useless! You do not obey him and you kill his followers! You have killed my allies and closest friends! You are a monster that needs to be put down!”

“I get it now,” said Narianel. “That man was just bait to

lure me here to fight. You actually think you can beat me. Even if you did stand even a tiny chance, you do realise I was surrounded by allies of my own at the time, right? What are you planning to do that could defeat me? You can't even use magic with that shell of yours."

"I was planning this," said the sklaara. He let out a wave of aether in a shout that was definitely weaker than most of her students could produce, but it didn't need power. It was a signal. Within moments there were explosions around the city. The tower near them started to collapse towards them and the sklaara bounced up to the rooftops and out of sight.

Suddenly Narianel could sense hundreds of people tainted by Azael dotted around the city, spreading out and causing trouble. She flew up and out of the way of the tower, followed by Tesni, and tried to find the sklaara. Its aura was faint and now she knew why. Its shell blocked aether.

"Has Aldo trained you to sense them yet?" she asked Tesni as they hung in the air. Tesni flapped her wings to stay aloft, but Narianel floated on magic.

"No, it's a trait of the Champion of Eyes," said Tesni. "It's a power that is inherited, but can't be taught. He's tried to teach a few of us, but as it's an instinct it's hard to describe."

"Alright, follow me then," said Narianel. "We'll go after the sklaara as it seems to be in charge, but we'll need to take some time cleaning up the city after this."

"You don't mean helping the injured, do you?" asked Tesni in a softer than usual voice.

"That is important too, but it's not my job."

Narianel dove and Tesni followed her. The sklaara dropped into a dense market and they kept track of it from above so as to avoid the crowds. They saw Gilbert pop out of nowhere and they pointed to the sklaara. They nodded and he became a shadow zipping along the ground.

Off in the other side of the city, near the palace, there were flashes of magic. Flame and lightning and ice. Narianel could feel her father and brother fighting. The military was on

the move too, gathering into squads around the city and attempting to figure out what was going on, though she could see messengers moving at speed using magic.

As the sklaara leapt up to the rooftops again Tesni knocked it out the air with a ball of green flame. It crashed hard into a roof and broke the tiles. Gilbert appeared near it and Narianel and Tesni landed around it, the three of them forming a triangle.

“Painting yourself black?” asked Gilbert, chuckling. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone do that before. Talk about trying to stand out.”

“It has an inferiority complex,” said Narianel. “It wants to be me. Says it wants to please Azael, but with a mouth like that I can’t imagine he’d enjoy it.”

“Be quiet,” said the sklaara, getting up.

“Oh, I understood that,” said Gilbert.

“I’m sharing the power of Tongue with both of you,” said Narianel.

“I figured that out back in the alley,” said Tesni. She smiled at Gilbert.

“How am I supposed to know what new powers this girl has?” Gilbert shrugged. “She gets a new one every week.”

“Be quiet!” shouted the sklaara. The squint on Gilbert’s face spoke of pain from the roar, so it wasn’t only her ears that were sensitive.

“You be quiet,” said Gilbert.

“Can we just kill it now?” asked Tesni.

“Not yet, I have more questions,” said Narianel. “We can tie it down though.”

Gilbert wove shadows out from the cracks and gaps in the tile roof and used them as ropes, pulling the sklaara tight. It struggled but couldn’t break the dark binds. There was a lot of noise as fighting broke out near them, which Tesni went to check on.

“You still haven’t told me your name,” said Narianel.

“Why is it so important to you?” asked the sklaara.

“Names carry meaning,” she said. She squatted down above the sklaara on the roof and leaned over it, meeting its eyes. Her hair fell around them, giving them their own little space to talk. “Tell me your name so I can understand you.”

There was a flash of darkness in the palace and she knew the scent. Without a word she stood, summoned Almut, and cut the sklaara’s core cleanly in half with a single downward swing of the massive scythe. She couldn’t create a blade from someone with no magic.

“Egil is in the palace,” she said.

“Then let’s go,” said Gilbert. He fell into the shadows of the tiles and she felt his aether fly off towards the palace. She followed from the sky with Tesni, though the group shortly split up to deal with different threats.

As she approached the palace she saw a full-scale battle had broken out on the roofs and balconies. The gardens were already overrun by men and women with empty eyes, wearing black and grey and the empty diamond. More and more across the city there was the stench of Azael, sickly sweet and enthralling, and she could see the fight escalating. They were seemingly teleporting in, and she was wondering about how they were doing it when she landed on the roof.

Those baring the empty diamond didn’t even resist when she killed them. They were ready to die. Egil had likely told them what he’d told her all those years ago, and instead of having the realisation that Azael must be stopped, they gave up. They hollowed on the spot and gave themselves to the cause of destruction. To the True Ascension of Azael.

She told the sultan’s soldiers to rest before following and she entered the palace. She could feel Egil in the throne room, but instead of heading straight to him through the floors and walls she walked. She had to kill any of Azael’s soldiers she came across before they hurt anyone else. Egil would wait for her.

Along the way she killed at least another hundred people, all of them resigned to the end. She wished they’d fight

back the way they fought the sultan's soldiers, but each and every one of them just stood in her way until she stabbed them. They must have had orders and she found it more unnerving than anything else in the situation.

When she made it to the ground floor she saw the Hadiini giving orders to a squad of soldiers. He didn't notice her at first and she thought about how being eyeless would affect his ability to sense aether. It wasn't even like she was trying to hide, he was just preoccupied.

"Find Nur Karimi! Now!" he was shouting. "He has to die before he joins with the Blade!"

"You're only driving him into my hands," said Narianel and the Hadiini jumped. Something about his eyes changed. The aether focussed in his head. She knew he could see her now. "Are you going to tell me your name? The sklaara kept its own secret until it died."

"Perhaps you'll know eventually," said the Hadiini, "but today I'll say nothing." He bowed and vanished, leaving the soldiers he'd been commanding just standing there ready to die. She tutted, killed them, and continued on to Egil.

He was sat on Nur's throne, and was dressed in new clothes. For a start, he was clean, his black tunic stitched with a crisp white empty diamond on the breast. His hair was long and brushed and tied back in a tail, his skin wasn't covered in dirt, his teeth had been magically repaired. She would have thought this was the youngest she'd seen him if not for the scar on his soul that had long since healed. The one she'd given him all those years ago.

As she walked to him he stood, grabbing Tail and another of her blades from the arms of the throne. He had Spiritrush, a blade-edged shield. It stored energy when struck and the wielder could release it at will, sort of similar to her Sarkal aether blasts. Just how many of her blades were in the hands of the enemy? This was the third in Egil's alone.

"How did you convince him?" asked Egil. "How did you bring Nur Karimi to your side? He's meant to reject you."

“Memories of the future?” asked Narianel. Fang was in her right hand.

“And they’re shifting,” said Egil. “That can’t happen. It’s impossible. How are you doing this? I was on my way to my final destination when I was diverted here. This is entirely new.”

“Then things can be changed,” said Narianel. Venom dropped into her left hand in a silver flash and she’d swung it before Egil could react. Paralytic ooze sprayed from the sword and coated the throne room in an arc in front of her. It was a sickly yellow and as she listened to the room she could hear it buzz very slightly in stammers and starts.

Egil’s body burst outward to expel the effects of the ooze and he jumped up on the throne, his black and twisted soul evident for all to see. This is what he was, she had to remind herself. A visage, a soul eater. His shroud of souls flowed beneath the surface of his form, thousands of faces screaming in turmoil within the inky blackness.

Narianel traded Venom for Flameroot and launched herself forward on an explosion of aether that caused a crater in the floor. A sombre calm washed over her instead of anger, and as she crashed through the throne there was nothing inside her at all. Egil appeared on the other side of the room in a black flash and she stared at him, totally empty. Tail and Spiritrush were gone, but she wasn’t worried about that. She’d collect them later.

“What has happened to you?” asked Egil. His black form was only in the vague shape of a body. He didn’t have lips or tongue or eyes but his voice was clear. “Where did all your anger go? It’s meant to push you to make the decisions we need you to make. What did you do?”

“I embraced the end, Egil, thanks to you.” She gently touched the two-tone red shakai. “I have to do what I have to do, and your actions have left me unfettered.

“I think that I believed you would eventually come around to my side. I’m not sure why, but I always had the

feeling that you were on my side, despite the evidence that you weren't. Perhaps if it had been anyone else to kill her, to destroy her soul, then we could have been friends. Could have been side by side against the Pure Lord. But not now. You have thoroughly disabused me of that notion. You are just his mental little puppet that deserves destruction in return."

She channelled Needlepoint and appeared in front of him, starting her lunge with Fang before moving herself closer. She cut into his form but didn't hit his core before he'd leapt to the side. The damage quickly healed, and from the wound she heard the screaming of the people he'd eaten.

He attempted to flee, blooming into dark flames that flowed out from the throne room and down the hall. She gave chase, mostly running but occasionally zipping forward using Needlepoint if he got too far. If he wasn't teleporting away, there was no reason to hurry. The damage was already done.

Outside the palace there was an ongoing battle that they simply passed through. Vincent and Lisette were fighting alongside palace guards against more of Azael's soldiers. She didn't stop to help, but felt a surge in their emotions as she passed them. Confidence and determination. They were on her side.

As she followed Egil up the side of a building, taking slashes at him whenever he was within reach, her shakai unfurled and people saw the extent of her body modification. She was too thin to be healthy, by human standards, but what was there was pure muscle. Her rib plates were obvious from how thin her skin was stretched. She'd shrunk her already small breasts and smoothed herself like a porcelain doll, so even though she was naked there was nothing to see. The shakai was once again tied so tight around her neck that it would have been impossible to breathe had she needed to. Her long black hair and shakai spread behind her in the wind, contrasting her snow white skin.

She moved with an unnatural grace, using brief stints of flight and adjusting how gravity affected her to leap about,

dancing up the building and along the rooftops after Egil. Each time one of her blades connected he healed, and she switched from sword to sickle as distance and flow of the dance directed.

Egil was moving in a straight line towards the centre of the city, so he obviously had a destination in mind. She kept herself blank so he couldn't read her, and the secret of how she did it was one she wasn't going to reveal. Not to him, at least.

Eleazar, the blade Alliance, was using his power to share emotions on her from within. It wouldn't work if he was in another's hands, but in her soul she could give him permission to work. He was sharing Ipos and Concetto's odd, inhuman mindset with her. She wasn't entirely empty, but was instead feeling emotions she wasn't built to feel. Egil couldn't sense in her what he couldn't understand himself, so she came across as numb.

It was, at least, suppressing her rage to the point where it was surreal for her. She'd never not been at least a little angry, and now she couldn't feel it at all. Instead it was replaced with something akin to a traumatic wonder. Wistfulness and terror and solemnity all mixed into a singular feeling she had no way to truly describe. A feeling known as *halashai* in Skrae that she'd heard of but couldn't wrap her mind around. The emotion Michael displayed when in his human form and radiated in his true form. The feeling of all angels in their glory and majesty and horror.

She tweaked her soul as she followed Egil, gently adjusting the twined crystal thread to open herself to the feeling. She wanted to truly feel it, not just receive a poor imitation of emotion. She'd read much of Akenesa's writings on curing the family curse, and her slow progress, but Narianel felt she could do better. Complete recovery would likely wait until she sang the song of the blades, but she'd examined enough souls now to be able to make other changes.

"What are you doing?" asked Egil as he dodged a strike from Almut that shifted to Flameroot and then to Perception.

“Are you unravelling your soul? Do you wish to die?”

“I’ll never die, only become stronger.” She tightened the bind on her core, reforming it into a perfect crystal sphere, and finally felt the emotion at its fullest. Egil’s eyes, dark blue points of light in his flaming back form, widened as the feeling pushed out of her. She directed Eleazar to share the emotion with Egil and it made him panic.

“What is this!?” he shouted as he bounded away from her, trying to escape the push from Alliance.

“Serenity in inhumanity. The other side of insanity.” Narianel caught up and, with a clean swing of Claw, she severed his legs. He fell to an alley below and she looked down on him, struggling to move as his legs regenerated.

She landed next to him with perfect grace, and then the onslaught began. Blade after blade, swing after swing, scream after scream his shroud of devoured souls was struck. Egil was screaming, but it didn’t matter. He was going to be subjected to as much pain as she could send his way.

“This isn’t how it ends! I wasn’t supposed to be here!” he screamed.

She stopped attacking, Crow and Rose in her hands. She dismissed them and picked him up by the back of the neck, hardening the aether in her hands to be able to grab his spectral form. With a quick flick of her wrist he landed on his back and she squatted down next to his face, her eyes wide and intent.

“You don’t control it, do you?” she asked with a grin. “Azael has trapped you here with me. He’s done with you, isn’t he? You’re no longer of use and have been abandoned. Why else would he let you feel so much pain without whisking you away?”

Egil stared back at her, for as much as those pinpricks of deep blue light could stare. Fear washed over his soul, his aura reeking of absolute terror. She smiled at him, letting the feeling of *halashai* fill her to the brim. It was hollow and solemn and beautiful. Horror and eternity and peace. When

she cured her curse of rage, this was what she wanted to feel at all times. She'd examine her blades closer, adjust her soul, and feel it on her own rather than rely on Concetto and Ipos. She'd become perfection.

"You can't kill me here or you'll never get the blades I have!" shouted Egil.

"I'll find them," she said quietly.

"Please, forgive me!" He formed a new body, his face a mask of sorrow and fear. "I was just doing what I was told! I have to die the way I was always intended!"

"All the good soldiers commit the atrocities their kings command, don't they?" Narianel stabbed Fang through his shoulder, pinning him to the ground. She held back Abaddon with a whisper of "Not yet, my friend," in her mind, and maintained eye contact with Egil. "I have plans for you, Prophet Egil Krom. I have plans for you. The most painful of plans."

She tapped Fang'sommel and white lines shot in all directions as the universe broke, tearing apart pieces of Egil, but she was sure not to kill him. As reality pulled itself back together, so did Egil. She saw tears in his eyes and he was trying to be silent despite a whimper.

"Why are you crying? Were you not prepared to die for Azael? Were you not afraid to break my heart and reap your rewards?"

"I'm sorry." His pupils shook within his irises again for just a moment before fixing themselves again. "I truly am."

"If you knew this is how you would feel... If you knew how much pain you were going to cause, then why not fight it? You gave in to him, so as a person you are worthless. But I'll tell you this: You'll find a new purpose when you pass through the barriers of pain. You'll know how it feels to truly mourn the loss of a soul."

She grabbed Fang's handle and swiped it across Egil's body, barely missing his core and rending free a few hundred souls. She switched to Gungnir, and just as she was about to

bring down the spear's point he vanished. It was like with Needlepoint, a blink and an instant, but she couldn't sense him any more. He was gone.

She cut off Eleazar and the rage flooded back, stronger than it had ever been. Her roar was heard around the city.

Narianel stood on the roof of the palace wearing only her shakai wrapped loosely to hide her form. She was seething and had snapped at several people who had come to talk to her. Nur had found it amusing and Aldo had shrugged and left, but the servants acted shocked. She didn't really care about that. They could be offended if they wanted.

She had kept her cool with Mira, however. She didn't want to hurt her. She still cared. She'd care beyond the end and regret any moments that weren't happy. They'd talked at length about the encounter with Azael's followers, the city-wide clean-up currently happening, and Narianel told a few stories of Adela.

Towards the end of the day Nur approached her again and this time she managed to stay calm and not shout at him about Egil and Azael. He seemed rather pleased with himself, apparently having gotten seven kills. She'd seen him after the battle and believed it, wide-eyed and covered in the blood and scented of others. The cuts on his left arm and face had been healed, and he acted as if he had been the hero of the day.

"So, the people we captured talked," he said with a huge grin. "We march on Tor Hadiin. It will take about two weeks to gather my lords and armies, and another two to get to the border. The Sultan Zaher Nejem is said to be under the influence of a strange northern woman, the eyeless man that was seen in the battle here also being seen advising Nejem."

"We needn't wait for armies. I'll take my family, the Order of Blades, and the Eyes of Chassuille. We'll be there in a week or less. I could be there tomorrow, in fact."

"I'd advise against that," said Nur. "There are reports of large barrier orbs being deployed in Tor Hadiin. Physical as well as anti-magic. From what I know of your weaknesses, you wouldn't make it alone."

"We're working on that weakness," said Narianel. It was almost a mumble and Nur looked at her with curiosity.

“Charun and Guilford. Mistedge and Ballade. The first is the sharpest blade in my collection, using mist to cut through even other mist magic. The second can raise a barrier of anti-magic around me while not harming me. We’ll work out a way to make me immune eventually.”

“Do you have your demons working on much?” asked Nur, his grin fading to a smirk.

“They’re not all demons, but they’re all useful.” She touched her index fingers together and then pulled them apart, creating a line of pure aether. The sixteenth element and easily the most potent. She let the power go and stared into Nur’s eyes. “Lilith taught me that, aided by a human woman named Asara. Pure aether is not easy to control by those not aligned to it. I could use Aglaea to change the elements I’m aligned to, so long as I have another blade I can copy from. I don’t have all the elemental blades yet, but I could cobble together most elements for my use if I needed.”

“I thought that using elements outside your alignment was impossible,” said Nur. He was a smart man and following along quite well. He just didn’t have all the information.

“Not impossible, just more difficult. A fire mage of the third circle will cast spells of water or air or earth as if he were of the first circle. The exact wording of the intent and a strong force of will are needed to make it work. Anyone not aligned to air should be able to fly if they reach the fifth circle, but few rarely bother to learn because it’s much more difficult than staying within their own element.”

“It does seem worth it,” said Nur. “Perhaps I shall learn some magic. You’ve piqued my interest.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” said Aldo as he reached the top of the stairs to the palace roof. He looked up at the clear sky and took in the cool wind before speaking again. “I want to talk to you both. I have worries about what you said Egil was saying. That the future was changing.”

“Yes, I was wondering about that myself,” said Nur.

“It’s just as I said.” Narianel didn’t want to have this

conversation and a bubble of rage rose in her throat before she squashed it. “Egil made it clear that he’d never known this experience was coming to him, even though he knows all about the rest of his future. He claims I’ll eat him, but I don’t plan on that.”

“You want him as a blade, correct?” asked Aldo.

“Of course. His soul devouring abilities could be useful in denying enemy assets. I can only imagine how many people Azael has resurrected over the years because he wasn’t done with them.”

“That’s a concerning thought,” said Nur. He turned to face the city, putting his hands on the railings and taking in the sights. “You’d really use a power so evil, even in the name of good?”

“I’d do anything to end Azael.” Narianel met Aldo’s eyes and his face tightened. “He has to be stopped, and Egil’s power could help us, even if it’s distasteful.”

“I dislike this plan, but I know it’s better to step aside than to fight you on this,” said Aldo.

“We’ve stood apart since the battle on the Twilight Steppe,” said Narianel. Aldo sighed and nodded. “All I want is what is best for reality.”

“I trust you, even if I worry we’d be enemies without the common problem of Azael,” said Aldo.

“I think you’re right,” said Narianel. “I’ve become more and more aware of how I stand apart from humanity and the other mortal races. I sometimes wonder what I would have been like if I didn’t have my family, my love, my heritage.” She didn’t say ‘my fate’ but it seemed she didn’t need to. Aldo’s face was grim and Nur was lost in thought. Allies, not friends, no matter how much she wanted otherwise. She couldn’t be as soft as they may want her to be. Not until Azael was defeated.

They had reached the border the day before, but Narianel didn't pay attention to the preparations. She stood at the edge of a river she didn't know the name of and stared at her reflection, imagining Adela on her arm. It was Adela's birthday, but she'd never get any older. In a few more years she could have become a lich and maybe the situation could have been avoided. Was that why the attack happened when it did? To stop her becoming immortal? To break that bond in the harshest way possible? To damage Narianel in the deepest parts of her soul?

That death had changed her. She was angrier than she had been in years, even when pushing her corruption to a place within her where it couldn't disrupt the flow of aether, creating the cleanest possible interpretation of herself. She wanted to destroy so much around her in a childish tantrum, but she held it in. She was better than that. She had to be. Until the end.

There would be a battle tomorrow. She'd heard that Zaher Najem was on the other side of the border with an army to match Nur's, and he was flying the Empty Diamond. Open support for Azael. Open desire for the destruction of all that will ever exist. He must be stupid.

Narianel climbed a tree overlooking the plains they'd be fighting in. It was largely flat and she could see the enemy camp a few miles away, and the river ran through the middle with two large bridges they'd need to control. She could destroy them all now, but Nur had asked for a chance at revenge. She could respect that, and would have done the same. His people deserved to be honoured, not ignored.

She planned to watch for assassins in the night, and had put aside some of the Order for the task too, led by Chas and all using the power of Perception. It was late afternoon, so those soldiers were sleeping, readying themselves for the long night.

Early in the morning, the soldiers awoke to four assassins burning in a pyre outside the camp. People this far south didn't cremate their dead, but Narianel felt the insult was earned. If they were going to be as rude as to attempt killing Nur, then they didn't deserve a burial. She could see some of the enemy gathering in their camp, watching the rising smoke with harsh faces.

Nur and his generals were rallying the troops. Ramiz and Zariya had their soldiers ready, in neat rank and file. Another general had a large force of riflemen, but she'd seen a group of similar size with the enemy. This was going to be a bloodbath, but that was fine so long as she got her chance at Egil and the others.

"I am honestly surprised you're so patient," said Tesni as she walked up. "I fully expected you to already be over there." Narianel looked at her and shrugged.

"Egil is over there, I can smell him. Today is the day. It has to be. I'm going to end this and there's no need to rush." Narianel looked out over the field again, and followed the scent of Egil using Perception. Her vision shifted quickly through the enemy camp until it stopped on the monster. He was talking with the Hadiini and the changeling, and then stopped. He looked directly at where she was viewing him from and then clicked his fingers, forcing her vision from the camp. She stood with her face up and her eyes closed. Had he always been able to do that? How much power was he hiding?

"The enemy has a significant amount of magical weapons," said Tesni. "I thought I should warn you, even if you've already seen. They must have been enchanting for years. All those rifle balls and spears and arrows. How do you plan on dealing with it?"

"I'm going to shadow walk into the enemy forces and find Egil. The army will be too busy fighting Nur's army to pay me any real attention. And if they do, they won't last long."

“Do you want Gilbert and me to accompany you?” asked Tesni. “We can follow you in and take on the other two.”

She looked at the serpentine girl for a moment and probably for the first time saw a woman. She was no longer making stupid jokes, no longer looking at her like a puppy who wants to be taken home. Narianel had spent so long with the Order that she'd neglected her relationship with the Eyes, in truth, and she hadn't noticed how many of them had grown and changed.

“Egil is mine alone,” she said and Tesni nodded, then turned away.

“You've already planned your future with your Seer allies, haven't you?” asked Tesni. Narianel noticed Tesni's tail didn't flick even a bit, a sign she was guarding her words carefully amongst her kind. Serpentine, from what she had read, were very physical talkers.

“I've spoken with Dasus and Vala,” said Narianel. “My plan is set, my future decided.”

“And what will you do after this battle?”

“Legion, collect the blades, sing until the end.”

Tesni looked back over her shoulder for a moment, her face mostly hidden by her long hair. Then she walked away, towards the small camp the Eyes were using. Narianel felt the unspoken words, remembered Adela's suggestion, and held it all in. There was no point. It would only end in another pain, another disaster.

She went to see Nur and discuss his strategy. Both armies were almost ready and soon the two sultans would go to talk in the middle. It was a tradition that she thought was just going to slow the battle down, but it was important to Nur and he wouldn't stay, despite her protest. He was wearing some fancy armour that was at least well-made, as well as the crown. The sword was in a sheathe at his side.

Aldo approached and took her aside, with apologies to Nur. Then he looked down on her with concern.

“Will this be like the Isle of Dusk?” he asked. “Are you

so consumed by hatred and revenge that you will be lead to your own pain? Are you on the path to evil?"

"There's no such thing as evil, Aldo." She looked up at him as calmly as she could manage. "There are evil acts, sure, but it's not a force of nature. I'd bet even Azael has a set of motivations we could understand if we sat and talked with him. If I'm going to stab him in the face, I want to at least know why, you know?"

"Do I have to worry about my people? About Nur's people? Are you a danger to us?"

"No, not in the slightest," said Narianel. "You should learn to trust me already. I know you find me disgusting, but I'm on your side."

"I don't find you disgusting," said Aldo but she talked over the rest of what he said.

"I have seen the way you look at me. I know you hate the darkness inside me. I know you think me needlessly cruel and expect me to join Azael, but I am the only one who can defeat him."

"How can you be so sure of that?" He was stoic on the outside, but the rage in him rivalled her own.

"Because every time I have a Seer look as far into the future as possible I see the same thing. No matter what we try, what we do, the end is the same. Over and over again."

"Your Seers have seen his defeat?" Aldo's anger was instantly replaced with shock and curiosity.

"No. I will be honest. The last thing they are capable of seeing is Isaac and me, standing together against him in front of the Grand Gate. It all goes dark after that."

"And what about other people? Where are they in that battle?"

She was about to give him the hard truth but was cut off by a trumpet signalling that Nur was ready to go meet his opposite. She started to turn to Nur but Aldo gripped her shoulder.

"Tell me," he said.

“I’ll tell you everything after the battle. I’ll be honest, not that I’ve ever lied to you. It can wait until Egil is defeated.”

“Alright. I’ll hold you to that.”

They walked their separate ways and she held in a pang of regret. That was the worst way to deal with that, but it had to be done.

Narianel stopped by the river and it was only a minute before Gilbert and Tesni appeared by her sides. They had on mistweave uniforms of shining white and she could feel their eagerness for the fight.

“So, do you want the Hadiini or the changeling?” asked Gilbert. “I just can’t decide.”

“I’ll take on the eyeless mage,” said Tesni. “I’ll live if I’m hit with anti-magic.”

“Good plan,” said Gilbert. Then he crouched down next to Narianel and tugged on her shakai just enough to get her to look at him. “Hey, Naria, kill him good.”

“I’m not going to kill him,” she said. “I’m going to make him into a blade.”

“Doesn’t that require a locked soul first?” asked Tesni.

Narianel looked at her, keeping her face smooth. “I’ve seen the aware souls swirling inside him. He’s not getting it easy. Not after all he’s done.”

“Aldo is right about you,” said Gilbert. “Let me see if I can get his words correct. ‘I can’t believe such an energetic and likeable young girl grew up to be the most necessary evil we’d ever need.’ Did I get it right?”

“More or less,” said Tesni with a smirk.

“How did I ever get stuck with you two as my usuals?” asked Narianel.

“Every straight man needs a comedian or two,” said Gilbert. “And I’ve never met more of a joke than us lot.”

“Ouch,” said Tesni, but there was a giggle. Narianel just sighed, a rarity since she needed to breathe to do it. Her voice had long since been only magical.

They watched Nur talking to Zaher Nejem, apparently

both of them boasting and making bold claims. No one could hear them at that distance, not even her, so what was even the point? They both held the banners of their countries and were waving them around as they shouted. It was a display only for their armies and the morale of their soldiers. Narianel had to admit that it worked, judging by the cries and cheers of the soldiers as the sultans returned to the lines.

Ten minutes passed before the trumpets called out to start the battle. There were charges and volleys of arrows and Narianel tuned out. It was a waiting game until the battle was underway, when she could get past the magical defences and weapons without worry. Tesni fidgeted with a dagger while Gilbert whistled *Then and Again*, a song from a comedic play about the horrors of war. She's once sung it with Adela.

Narianel watched the Order fighting, recognising their formations and squads. They were a good group, covering each other, and the healing squads were efficient. They rarely lost a member, and she hoped that it would be the same today.

"Ready?" she asked when the time was right.

"I was expecting you to rush ahead," said Gilbert.

"Yeah, me too," said Tesni with another giggle.

"Clowns," said Narianel and dipped down into the shadows between blades of grass with a few whispered words, then crossing the distance in moments. She moved under the battle, tailed by Gilbert and Tesni, and quickly found Egil and his allies. She burst from the ground and got to work.

The changeling and the Hadiini quickly separated from Egil and were followed by Gilbert and Tesni. Narianel struck at Egil with Fang and Venom, trying to force him out of his body again. He dodged the first few attacks with unnatural reflexes but then began reacting on the spot, his pre-planned moves running out.

"Why so quick to the end?" he asked. He was in that suit again, with a new long grey coat trimmed in scarlet. He'd cut his hair and it was now a shaggy mess instead of a single large disgusting tangle. He'd washed too, his natural scent

more obvious. He'd cleansed himself for his finale. That had to be it. This was it, in his mind. She had a nasty surprise for him, however.

She didn't respond. Eleazar was pushing that divine emotion upon her again. It spread through her soul, seeped into her bones, and brought a calmness filled with a spiritual dominance that radiated from her. This was what she sought so she could move on from mortal worries. She became a piece of the universe and the universe twisted to her will. There was no more need for anger or fear or sorrow.

She landed a strike with Fang on his hand, severing it instantly, then followed up with a lunge from Venom, its acid shooting out in a jet and covering Egil as he tried to retreat. Egil abandoned his body, becoming black flames in the vague shape of a man as his physical side turned to dust. Two deep blue pits where his eyes should be started to vibrate as Egil lost control over his demeanour.

"You were never ready," she said. "You put up an aura of confidence but you're just a broken man, committing sin after sin, hoping that the end would be peaceful. But it's time, Egil, and you're terrified. You've tried pleading, admitting the fault in your crimes against me, but you've seen how little forgiveness I have for you. Now you realise there's no way out, don't you? Azael won't save you this time. So show me the extent of your power. You have to kill me to escape. Can you do it, Egil? Can you survive?"

She untucked the end of her shakai, letting it unfurl around her, revealing her too-thin form of muscles and bone. She traded Fang and Venom for Havoc and Malice in a flash of silver that revealed for a moment the frown within the darkness of Egil's flickering face.

Egil raised his hand and two pillars burst from the ground, revealing Tail and Spiritrush. The two blades shot from the pillars towards Egil and Narianel pulled them into her soul without moving her hands before he could wrap his aether around them. She could see from his face that he hadn't

expected to cede them to her so easily. He had an idea in his head of how this was supposed to go and he was going to be sorely disappointed.

He looked lost, really, standing apart from her, looking around to see that his allies were locked in combat. He reeked of panic and terror. He kept his distance from her. Any time she moved towards him he stepped away. He was building power and her ears picked up a few words here and there of a long incantation, but she didn't know what he was doing. She let him work, curious about what he thought would get him out of the situation.

Egil shouted the last few words as the ground broke and, oddly, buildings rose. They were in various styles, mixed from all over. She spotted Nerikan and Vinish designs, some in the Itore Luca or Ajiri styles, and there were many others she didn't recognise at all. She found herself standing in a town where none had been before, in a courtyard across from Egil, the sounds of battle all around them muffled by the new structures in the way.



“Mara, Zagan,” Narianel said, standing in the arena in her mind. She was approached by a woman that looked Skraeðan and a large, slender creature with too-long arms and a tail at least five times the length of its body. Mara held her black halo daintily in front of her but Zagan wore it around his elongated neck. They glanced around, but their eyes kept returning to Narianel. “Things are different from the last time you were inside the soul of an eldiaran. We work together for the sake of all reality. I will discuss the plan with you later, but for now we’re defeating Egil. Are you with me?”

“You’re a curious creature,” said Mara.

“She’s a strange creature, you mean,” said Zagan, his voice coming out as a growl. “This word, eldiara, how did you form it?”

“*El* from blade, *ediar* from control, *an* from person.” Her explanation got a nod from Mara. “I have inherited the power from Prochorus, along with the duty of the song.”

“I’ll give you my power,” said Zagan. “Don’t waste it.”



Narianel channelled Tail’s power, Zagan’s power, and all of her blades appeared behind her as a thick tail. With a thought and a step she began a dance detailed in Prochorus’s journals, the dance of her ancestor, the dance of the duellist. Prochorus had a glorious sense of rhythm and timing, casting magic with each step, each pivot, the blades following along, splitting and reforming and spiralling in time with his movements. Narianel could replicate the dance but it felt incomplete. She knew the movements and hummed to the music in her head, but without all the blades she couldn’t feel she was doing it justice.

Egil knew the dance too, it seemed. She tried to hit him but he ran and dove in time, hiding in the buildings as a torrent of blades cut through the walls and furniture. She gave chase, but it was what he wanted. Traps sprung from corners and as she passed through doorways, magical scythes springing out and attempting to cut her. A few caught her, but in the storm of blades swirling around her she broke far more than were effective.

Back out in another courtyard, it was becoming obvious that the buildings were arranged as a labyrinth, a make-shift city of random rooms and traps, a series of twists and turns designed to give him an advantage in a close fight. He was counting on her making it personal and not taking on her angelic form. She was willing to play that game. Her plan relied on it, but for different reasons than his.

She brought down the blades on Egil, cutting away hundreds of souls at once, freeing them from their terrible screams. Several blades bounced off his core and he cried in pain but ultimately took no damage and she had to make a few

extra gestures to rein them back into the flow of metallic destruction.

Egil snatched at the blades as they came in for another pass and grabbed Fang. He released a flow magic to tear it from her telekinetic grasp and covered it in his aether to keep it from her, using it to deflect more attacks. He slammed it tip-first into the ground and the buildings around them exploded as white cracks in the universe ripped through the air around them. The lines touched Narianel but couldn't hurt her. Not when they came from one of her blades.

Oracle on her right middle finger, Spiritrush floating in circles around her, the rest cutting through obstacles, Narianel walked at Egil with a blank face and an empty soul. He looked like he wanted to fight, but his nerves were getting the better of him. He ran, and she walked on without a care or a worry.

With Needlepoint she caught Egil quickly, warping space so she appeared right in front of him. He stumbled and fell, his form of black flame flickering madly as his emotions ran out of control. As he rose he lunged with Fang, but it was caught by Spiritrush. He realised his mistake immediately as the blade-edged shield began to vibrate ferociously and then released all the stored energy it had absorbed from Fang. The explosion was heard across the battlefield and momentarily stopped the fighting.

Narianel channelled Zephyr, a blade she rarely used but was a favourite of certain Order members, and used its control over the air to clear the dust. None of her blades were harmed, of course, but she stood in a massive lop-sided crater that trailed away from her. At its deepest point, covered in rubble that somehow survived, was Egil.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be!" he shouted as he pushed his way up. His aether raged about him, more ragged and formless than ever before. "You shouldn't have this much control over Tail! Your blades shouldn't have their full power! You shouldn't be winning!"

"There are lots of things that shouldn't exist," said

Narianel. “You, for example. But this is the reality we live in. You took what was most dear to me, Egil Krom, and so now I need a new purpose. I’ve rededicated myself to the song and my training, and now I’ll show you just how much power I truly have. I hope you’re excited to see the consequences of your actions.”

She let out a scream and released her corruption, letting it soak into her core and overcome her. She shook as the power overwhelmed her. Her bones and blood became black while her skin glowed white. The red light of her soul in her eyes became like flames and her wings burst from her back unbidden. Her personal well and the mass well within her soul became one. She became the darkness and the light and the fire within. She became the corruption. She became the Lunar Beast.

At this point, Narianel’s book becomes entirely black, and it stays this way for most of the rest of her fight with Egil. As a result I’ve been forced to seek out another point of view. After much debate with my leadership, I’ve managed to secure the books of Isaac Blair. There was far too much red tape in my way of this, but as he was the closest and most relevant person to the upcoming events, I won the argument. The rest of this section through to the next page break will be from his point of view.

Isaac heard the explosion and the scream and finished his opponent quickly. There was no time to toy with the enemy when his sister was in trouble. With Wishmaker in his hand he looked to Father, who nodded. Isaac smiled and bounced away through the crowd, dancing almost in the way his sister did, he used the air and flames to clear his path, striking out with flashes of white light as needed.

He passed by most of the Eyes of Chassuille as they fought as a team. Isaac admired the way they worked together.

He took a moment to back up Vincent before tearing away, listening to the older man's cheers and thanks.

It was much the same when he passed through a squad of the Order of Blades. He bumped fists with Chas as they cleared a circle around the group. Chas quickly mentioned the bond wasn't working any more, and Isaac noticed he couldn't feel it either, so he gave a quick nod and rushed on.

He saw the serpentine woman Tesni kill the eyeless man, perching on his corpse with her massive wings spread tall and wide, roaring with green flames flowing from her mouth and all around her. She was a strong ally but Isaac had always been mildly afraid of her. There was just something about her that unsettled him any time she came near him.

When she scuttled over to Aldo and held his head in her lap, Isaac's heart sank a little. The Champion of Eyes had died in battle against the forces of Azael, so it's likely he died without regret, but it was still awful to see. Tesni's crying made that fear of her vanish, but he had to keep moving. He'd mourn Aldo, the man who was like an uncle to him, later.

He reached the area surrounding Narianel and Egil. He'd seen the city grow in the distance and wondered about it, and he looked on in wonder as he leapt from roof to roof. Then, at the centre of the city, was a hole in the ground bigger than the village back home on the Aether Sea.

Egil stood in fear. He reeked of it. And then there was Narianel. He couldn't quite describe the aura she gave off. He saw her retract her wings and simply stand there, looking up at the sky, as if she could see something he couldn't. She didn't look any different, other than her eyes which were much brighter than before, her soul overflowing the almost insubstantial physical body she maintained.

Then her soul unfurled and rebound itself so quick he wasn't sure he'd seen it right and suddenly her stored aether soared. She'd jumped in a moment from the Low Circle to the High Circle and her growth didn't seem to be stopping. The air around her shook and reality cracked as she held up her hand

and Fang was pulled to it from Egil's grasp, ripping apart the aether Egil had wrapped around it.

She was impressive, and as he slid down the side of the crater on wisps of wind he started to see so much more going on inside her. Corruption wasn't attached to her core, soaking in her core's shell, as it should be. It was floating free in her form, becoming plates and shields. It was like she was in control of it, not letting it touch her. She was pure yet fully corrupt. In a perfect balance of extremes.

Then he came close enough to touch the aura she was putting out. An emotion he couldn't describe washed over him. Glory and superiority and... divinity. She'd taken on something that he'd only felt in angels and Skraeðan before. She'd moved beyond her mortality now, and he found himself happy for her. She was approaching her true potential.

"What are you now?" asked Egil in disbelief as Isaac reached them. Narianel had her eyes on him, strangely blank, empty of her usual anger. She'd walked so calmly he'd have to call it serenity.

"Know me now. I am High Lady Narianel Azranhai, Goddess of Nothing, the Lunar Beast, the Empty God of Balance and Divine Fury. Do not be afraid." Her voice was poetry in motion.

The world shook at each word and she had a way of moving the suggested reality was subject to her, not the other way around. She touched Isaac's arm and gave a hollow smile before turning back to Egil.

"What are you going to do?" Isaac signed quickly. He filled each gesture with aether so she could read it without looking at him. He was getting better at that. The longer he was mute the faster his signs were getting. He could even cast magic with it, though he preferred to use pure intent.

"Just watch," she sang. Egil didn't move as she walked to him. He was completely frozen in fear and horror.

Narianel's blades swirled around the three of them. Isaac wanted to call their movements ominous. They were

watching, anticipating. Narianel walked slower than he'd ever seen her move, but when she forced her hand into Egil's chest, his dark flame form trying to push her away feebly.

"What are you doing? This can't be! You're meant to be overtaken by Abaddon. You're meant to eat my soul!" Egil's shouting was frantic, his voice echoing off nothing and wavering as his power started to fade. The souls he'd trapped within himself escaped him and left to the Ethereal Realm.

"Overtaken by Abaddon?" she asked. Her grin was smug. "That would never happen." She held out her hand and Fang floated down from her collection. Clutching it tight she swung it around and stabbed herself directly in her core.

The world broke around her as Abaddon's soul flowed out from the blade to inhabit her body. This was a power he'd never seen her use, though he knew that she was aware of it. How could she not be? It was called possession in Prochorus's journals and it allowed the souls within the blades to come out and take control. It was supposed to be a battle of wills, but that isn't what happened here.

"All hail the Goddess of Nothing," said a man's voice coming out of Narianel's mouth. It was deep and filled Isaac with awe and fear. Her hair turned grey and a hulking pair of arms appeared in the air floating behind her. Scars from the corner of her mouth to her ears appeared, giving her a manic smile despite her frown. Then a black stain appeared down her face from above her left eyebrow, across her eye, to under her chin. These were features Abaddon was known for.

Her eyes, however, were strange. They were a curious shade of unnatural purple, mixing Abaddon's blue and her own glowing red. It was a colour of soul that shouldn't exist, and yet there it was.

Then Abaddon, with Narianel's own hand, pulled Fang from her core and she reset. The scars vanished, her hair and eyes returned to normal, the massive arms disappeared.

"I'm not going to eat you, Egil, but you're going to become a part of me." Narianel smiled softly and his shining

blue dots for eyes grew wide. His form burst as she squeezed his core, her hand never having left his chest while Abaddon was in control, then with a flick of her thumb Isaac saw Egil's soul's thread come away from the wrap.

Narianel seized the thread and swung her arm, taking apart Egil's core, forcing it into a single long line of blue and black that snaked its way around them. Then she got to work. Like the conductor of an orchestra she waved her arms and danced as her blades drew in and followed her orders. She repaired Egil's soul on the spot, doing hours of work in minutes, humming a beautiful but haunting song. The blades cut him apart and she fixed the broken parts and pulled him back together.

Then the blades danced and sang to a different tune, some deep and bassy, some high and hypnotic. Narianel then sang in a way that he couldn't have thought of before. The morphic power of corruption had multiplied her voice. She sang the highs and lows at the same time the way a piano is played. Then a third voice came in, her natural voice, and she let out Prochorus's song.

Her voice covered the land around them and the battle stopped as she stole the corruption of the combatants. Isaac felt a pain in the left side of his neck, along the scar that silenced him. The song was trying to break the curse, but it wasn't quite there yet. She'd need more blades first, but as the pain faded and the song ended he was filled with hope. He'd speak again.

A thick black cloud of taint filled the sky and then fell into Narianel's open mouth as she blankly stared into the sky again. The black plates inside her shifted and a new one formed, and yet it seemed to take no more space within her than before. Then Isaac noticed Egil's soul. He was completely pure.

Narianel held out her arm and there was a sudden breach of her flesh. Black bone shot out and formed into the shape of a sword. It was chasokil, the same as her wings. An

angelic metal. She held the handle of the sword and it detached from her arm. The wound healed instantly. She reached out and took Egil and gently wrapped it around the blade of the perfectly straight sword, a blade made from pure imagination with no flaws. When she'd wound him around it tightly she sang again and Egil sunk into the blade, becoming one with it.

"You are now Nocturne, the soul drinking blade." She said, her voice harmonising with itself. Three voices in one. A high voice of light, a low voice of darkness, and her natural voice filled with the flame of glory and silent fury.

"What now?" signed Isaac.

"Now, sweet brother," she said, the other two voices fading away as she spoke, "now we go home. Now we find peace. Legion is due a break soon, so until then we rest, we rebuild, and then we prepare for the coming fight. There are demons to slay, blades to collect, and a song to sing."

He smiled. He saw in her a passion he hadn't seen since before Adela's death. He'd been worried she'd be lost in the fog of melancholia forever, but she was better. It was no longer time to mourn, and he wanted to be by her side as she continued the fight.

Narianel sat in her mindscape, watching Concetto dance. She truly understood its beauty now, and came back to watch often. In the theatre were many of her companions, resting for a time, steeling themselves for Legion.

Directly to her right sat Arthur Hitch. Before the dance began they'd been talking about Phillip Baum, a poet and playwright whose plays were now a hundred of years old. Arthur often tried to get in her good graces, obviously regretting his actions. She'd forgiven him, seeing his so-called training as necessary, but she couldn't tell him that and maintain her authority.

To her left was Egil Krom. He was meek now, staying quiet and following her around whenever she looked in on herself. He tried to make himself useful like an obedient little puppy. She hated him, but she didn't lash out at him. His eyes no longer shook and he kept himself clean. His confinement and immortality within the blade was penance enough.

When the dance was done, Narianel left the theatre with Egil in tow. She found the stairs down to under the street and worked her way through dark tunnels. The walls arched over her and, same as the floor, were completely smooth and black. She didn't need a light, and neither did Egil.

At the end of the tunnels was Iblis, sat in a simple chair made of blackwood, though the legs each had a band of inlaid whitewood. He stood upon seeing her and bowed his head slightly, then led her into the next chamber.

In the cells were those blades she'd created that she didn't trust to be free within her. She'd checked on them often over the years. Those that were still on the side of Azael, even if she could use their power freely. She was eldiaran and they couldn't refuse her.

"Have any of you turned to my side yet? Have any of you changed?"

Manford and Marquis. Trisha Morris. The seven figura

given to her by Walden. None of them looked at her. She'd made their prisons comfortable, given them books and food and all they'd need. But it was still a prison, and it seemed she'd go another season with them locked away, so she left.

She went to the park created by Aglaea and met with Garret Endarias, the Chronomage. Sitting on a bench across a fountain from them were Asara and Berin, relaxing and chatting about nothing in particular. She talked with Garret a short while before moving on, heading towards the central arena. It had become habit to leave her mindscape from there, even though she didn't need to.

In the arena she found Sanar waiting for her. Abaddon and Nergal were up in the stands talking loudly about the First Rebellion and how fun it had been, so she chose to ignore them. Sanar often made demands of Narianel, seeing himself as her highest ranking blade. She didn't tell him she considered Iblis, Kali, and Zepar to be her closest allies, the highest in status, but he probably knew. This time he was asking her to read more religious texts so that they could have those books within her mindscape. She agreed and he smiled at her with those sharp teeth so similar to her own.

The transition to reality was seamless now and she stood up back in Seremont. The Day of Undeath was in full swing, turned into a memorial for the Battle of Seremont. She could hear priests in the nearby streets leading choirs, singing about the eternal soul. She was on the roof of her home once more, and the Order were having a festival of their own in the training grounds.

She dropped down into the courtyard and tended to the black roses for a while, until Mira and her husband Darren arrived. Mira was four weeks pregnant and Narianel found a strange comfort in handing Mira's care to the man. He was good for her, and she for him. Narianel especially looked forward to meeting her grandchild. A new Vanavolk. A new child of the family.

And yet, despite this time of simple peace, when she

should be celebrating, she knew something was terribly wrong. There was a hole where Adela should be. There was another hole where her humanity should be. She knew that in the end she was going to do something terrible, but everything would already be gone by then. The end was coming. It could only get worse. Her actions, her plan, would have dire consequences.

## Afterword

There is still time to discuss Narianel, but we have begun the 18th Cycle. As you can see in the text, she changes name once more, to Narianel Azranhai, and this time it sticks. It has been quite difficult not to call her by this name in previous extracts.

She has also taken on the status of a God, which will have an impact on her relationships going forward. This naming of herself as divine happened earlier in Cycle 17 than it did in previous Cycles, which has made me come to a rather awkward conclusion.

I believe she has free will and the world is twisting around her to accommodate that. Not just her, however, but Vala Zoraken and possibly also Dasus nga Hara too, if not everyone. This is something that hasn't been seen since Cycle 1 when the Clock first started to tick. Perhaps it's the start of a new kind of Cycle, where the duration is 16 Cycles before things change. Perhaps this was Azael's plan all along, though I can't be sure of that.

At any rate, the changes are growing larger by the extract. Her planned battle against Legion and collecting the blades will at least be consistent with previous Cycles, but how different will those events be? I can only wonder while I wait for more Books to be translated and readable.

I must confess to being nervous. It's not just having so many guards within the Clock, but also that everyone is expecting something to happen when c18u81 transfers. There's something not right in the air. People wonder what will happen, and if

Azael's plan will work. I can only hope to survive whatever is coming. I can only hope that something as dire as the Clock breaking rather than the Divine Spark being freed from the chains of its current prison, uncontrolled and within someone as naturally evil as Azael.

[N]

[N] [N] [N] [N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N] [N] [N] [ ] [N] [N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N] [N] [ ] [N] [N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N] [N] [ ] [N] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [S] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [N] [ ] [ ]

[N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N] [N]

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 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 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 31 (25) Kalorini / Perception (Vista)  
Absel, Male Fallen Dominion  
See through illusions and with more accuracy

Blade 35 (29) Soshezega / Alliance (Join Me)  
Eleazar, Male Fallen Dominion  
Forces emotions on others

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)  
Prufilas, 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 001 (43)      Ken / Oracle (Seer)  
Ipos, Female Fallen Seraph  
Future sight

Blade 002 (44)      Kasan / Claw  
Adriel, Male Fallen Virtue  
Extendible blades

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 022 (56)      Tomos / Malice  
Zepar, Male Fallen Erel  
Variable amplification

Blade 030 (60)      Tanodi / Gungnir (Accuracy)  
Raziel, Male Fallen Seraph  
Guides physical action

Blade 034 (64)      Nagadin / Fogbody (Soft)  
Melchaiah, Male Demon Erel  
Turns body into mist and back again

Blade 051 (73) Nederat / Key  
Surgat, Male Demon Power  
Opens locks and breaks seals

Blade 055 (77) Anrav / Spiritrush (Soul Release)  
Mara, Female Fallen Dominion  
Stores and releases energy

Blade 103 (81) Zasad / Victory (Victory)  
Netzach, Male Fallen Erel  
Causes courage and determination

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  
Controls the undead

Blade 105 (83) Zithbao / Nocturne  
Egil Krom, Male Human Visage  
Devours souls

Looking at the names of the blades Narianel has created, it became obvious while doing the research into this topic that she is naming them using different styles of music. The word "zith" in Skrae means music, with the suffixes denoting the kind.

I perhaps should have seen that coming when she named her first "Nanana" which is the Nerikan equivalent of shouting for an encore.

I still do not know the purpose of these blades, but she has a plan that involves them. We can only wait and see.