

Wolves in Blood

The Corrupted Cycle
Extract 2

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Subjects Akenesa Talwaen
 Aleksashdra Talwaen
 Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken

Foreword

In the first extract in this series we looked at the early life of Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken and her descent into the darkness of her soul. She grew from a sweet, if feisty, child into a snarling ball of rage.

During the extract I mentioned her grandmother Aleksashdra, most often called Sasha, and her cousin Akenesa. While Sasha was never shown in person, there was a brief section where Akenesa appeared.

Her sudden arrival got me curious, and since I needed to set up the rather dramatic actions upon Narianel's return to Avani I found it to be a fitting story to tell.

Akenesa talked to Narianel about her plan to confront a man named Aleksashdra. This man shares a name with Sasha and is her uncle, though most people call him Alek. Before I can get to this encounter I will need to start much further back, and after that I will transition to Sasha before finally getting back to Narianel. Please be patient, as it is a necessary path in this tale.

As a note, I have made sure there is nothing in this extract that will be censored when released to the general public, this time. A lot of readers, especially those in academic and military circles, have contacted me directly to complain

about the actions of my superiors. Please be aware that it was not my choice and would have left it uncensored. I wrote it, after all, and I've had many a heated discussion about it since the release of the previous extract.

*A flower so dark it absorbs the light,
she destroys without a smile or a frown.*

*A vampire so depraved she would eat the world,
her perverse arousal in battle drives her endlessly.*

*A nephilim destined to corrupt the universe,
her rage burns all who oppose her.*

Part I

The Black Rose of Destruction

In which power is trapped and released

Akenesa walked through the dark halls of the Talwaen Estate. Sometimes she forgot that she had been living there for over a thousand years and it was like she had just moved in again. She remembered those days when she was ten years old and first meeting the matriarch.

Galina had intimidated her at first. She was a slight woman with pale, silky skin, but she had an aura about her. There was a darkness so deep it threatened to burst from her eye and engulf the world in horror. Akenesa recalled being uncomfortable for those first few moons.

But now there was nothing but admiration and love when she looked at Galina. Of course, she couldn't express it. It wasn't that she was scared to speak her heart, or that there was some social pressure for her to stay quiet. It was the scar on her soul. Everyone of Talwaen blood had that scar, just in slightly different positions on their crystalline cores which caused unique maladies. Akenesa's inability to be outwardly emotional could be a boon more than a curse, but she wanted to speak freely with Galina the way her sister and cousin did.

Akenesa entered Galina's room to see the matriarch struggling to brush her hair. It was so long it gently dusted the ground as she walked. Akenesa took the brush and got to work. She didn't have to, and her face was entirely neutral as she did so, but it was all she could do to show she cared.

"My sweet little rose," said Galina, taking the brush when it was done. "You have my complete trust."

"This is sudden," said Akenesa, still standing behind Galina, to her side, looking at her in the mirror.

"Have you heard the whispers?" asked Galina, covering her missing right eye with her hair once again. As far as Akenesa knew, she was the only one who regularly saw that empty socket.

"I have," said Akenesa. "I don't put much creed in the murmurs of the court."

“I have reason to believe that they are entirely false,” said Galina. “I think we’re being led into a war we don’t need to fight. I want you to investigate.”

“Who do you suspect?” asked Akenesa.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” Galina stood up and looked Akenesa in the eyes. “Investigate everyone. The only people I trust are those of my blood and Vala Zoraken.”

“You trust the Seer?” asked Akenesa. “For all we know she could be manipulating things to suit a future she prefers.”

“She is,” said Galina with a smirk. “That’s why I trust her. She’s honest and her goal is very clear. She’s biding her time until the defeat of Legion. Killing our best warriors in a pointless war won’t suit her plans.”

“I understand,” said Akenesa with a slightly bow. She was about to set off to work when Galina put a hand on her shoulder. There was madness in that eye.

“Whoever it is, you have my permission to crush their soul until it’s dust in the wind.”



Akenesa had never considered the profession of assassin, but she thought she would be quite good at it. The darkness of the night was at her command and she often moved in public as a shadow, avoiding the lower classes and priests of the other religions. It was also to avoid the solicitations of Kresimir Solash, who had taken a liking to her writings and reports and tried to hire her as his chief sage every chance he got.

She exited the Estate into the front gardens where the people were already congregating. It was still an hour before dusk but the devout were ready for the moon to grace the skies. They bowed to her as she passed. She was of Galina’s blood and so she was of Low Lady Lunada’s soul. The girls of House Talwaen, their name meaning *moon child*, were the descendants of the Goddess of Night and the Moon.

“Dark Lady,” they said to her, but she didn’t even look

at them. She couldn't bring herself to show them her empty eyes. This had granted her a reputation as an aloof noble, which wasn't unwarranted. She cared for those that loved the moon as she did, but she couldn't connect to them.

She walked the long road to the centre of Nerik and made sure she was wrapped in shadow when she stepped out from the covered roads of the Night District. She stood at the middle of the Central Star, looking down the four roads leading into the territories of the other major houses.

Just as she was about to consider likely targets, one crept from the Kewaen family's territory. Ana the Paranoid. Her true name was Ana Kegarath, *lily blood servant*, and she earned her title. Just as Akenesa shrouded herself in shadow, Ana was draped in mist.

Ana saw Akenesa and they considered each other for a moment. Ana tried to look away when their eyes met, but Akenesa was quick enough to point at the ground next to her. A servant could not disobey a noble house member, and while Akenesa held little sway over Kewaen servants, she would still be heard.

"Yes, Dark Lady?" asked Ana as she bowed. Servants would normally stand within reach as a sign of obedience, but Ana was still several paces away when she talked.

"Are you on the same task as me?" Their voices were like whispers on the wind, directed only at each other and silent to the passers by.

"I am," said Ana. She couldn't fool Akenesa so she had to be honest. The crows at Akenesa's command had caught Ana's trespassing several times, including that evening. They perched on the roofs and she saw through their eyes, and Ana always knew when she was caught.

"And what information do you have?" asked Akenesa.

"I don't believe it to be any noble," said Ana. "They all suspect each other to be warmongers, but also believe the rumours of the Grand Crystal. I cannot gauge the servants. Many are bound to secrecy and others I cannot get close to."

Akenesa's internal smirk at the final comment could have caused a man to die had it been unleashed. The crows were the only deterrent that could stop Ana. They were the only ones that could see her and that simple fact set off the problems of her mind.

"Who does your master trust?" asked Akenesa after a long pause.

"Only Lord Demyan," said Ana. "Though through his brother he is told that your family can be trusted, even if he does not feel so."

Aleksashdra Kewaen was a man who was known for his long term plans. After his mother's suicide disgraced his family he started investing in his followers and their lives and rebuilt his house's reputation. His former pariah status also left him distrusting of the nobility and so he employed Ana's skills to their fullest.

Demyan Kewaen, on the other hand, was married into the Talwaen household and a charming man. He was an uncle to Akenesa and had taught her to paint. Her art was bleak and scared those who looked at it, so she didn't often use the skill. Unlike his father and brother, he was a gentle soul. He could be trusted without hesitation.

"Tell Alek that I trust him," said Akenesa. "Our houses are aligned. I will talk to my servants and send him a report."



Her touch was subtle when she pried into the minds of those she passed. She didn't need to speak to the servants directly, just move through their wing of the Estate. Others she caught when she passed by the kitchens and some were taking care of the rooms.

But there was one servant she didn't go near. One she didn't dare touch. Manford Talgarath. He was dangerous and she suspected him, which made it all the worse what he was capable of.

Manford had been her tutor when she was a child, and had taught her a great many things. But he had implanted a cruel trigger in her mind. When he clicked his tongue, she had to obey. She had been ordered not to tell her family, and so she hadn't. She wanted to, but the words never formed. She didn't know how he did it. It wasn't a magic she was familiar with and she didn't know how to remove it.

He had done the same to her sister, Liara, and her cousin, Sasha. The three were his soldiers, ready to take their orders and commit atrocities for him. He had never used the power he held for much, but Akenesa could see his plan. He was building them up for something. Telling them to master certain skills, to learn certain pieces of knowledge.

She didn't know how much use he'd get out of Liara thanks to her scar, but Sasha was now the deadliest warrior in the world, and Akenesa was now a famed scholar, mage, and military strategist.

Akenesa stood looking at his door. She could feel his aether moving inside. He was reading, so the movement was subtle. A flick of the wrist to turn the page. A lick of the lips in concentration. He was oblivious to her presence, but he was only of moderate skill. She would have destroyed him long ago if it wasn't for his control over her.

She needed to think, so she left the house, taking the path into the forest behind the Estate and letting the sound of the Lunatic Choir wash over her. They sang endlessly inside the Estate, their voice carried through the Talwaen territory in pipes enchanted to preserve clarity and volume. The pipes lined the buildings and were strategically placed in bushes throughout the forest.

She neared the Deep Pond and heard the ash hounds playing. Liara's gentle giggle mixed with their soft and joyful howls, so Akenesa entered the clearing. She stood beneath a tree and watched as her sister ran in circles and jumped with the massive wolves as though they were puppies. Her arms were covered in blood, though it was simply from the meat she

had brought to feed her pets.

“Aksa!” shouted Liara when she saw her. Liara’s scar left her childish and emotional. It wasn’t an insult, it was just simple fact. Liara was cursed with immaturity. A thousand years of life and she was just a five year old with extraordinary power. Most people mistook that unburdened spirit as a form of stupidity, but Akenesa always thought that Liara was more intelligent than anyone she had ever met. It’s what made her scar the worst of them all. A true curse.

“How are the hounds this evening?” Akenesa asked. The sun had already set and the stars shone above. The moon was obscured by the canopy.

“They’re being *very* silly today.” Liara suited her name. *Much Joy*. A smile and a hug and she was running again. She had ruined the bottom of her dress with mud and rips, and always seemed to be barefoot.

Akenesa watched her for a while. There was something calming about an innocent at play. It was an hour before she thought about moving, but it was only because her crows had spotted Ana again.

“I’m going back to the Estate, Liara,” said Akenesa.

“Bye-bye, Aksa!” shouted Liara, holding an ash hound in her arms that was at least twice as big as she was. The strength of a Vanavolk would have shocked anyone who didn’t already know.

Akenesa met Ana on the edge of the forest. The woman was pale and jittery, but that wasn’t unusual. What Akenesa noticed first, however, was the new cut leading down from her hairline. A quick look at her fingers revealed that it was self-inflicted. The girl had problems.

“Lord Aleksashdra has given you permission to access the Kewaen Estate to interrogate the servants. Have you talked to your own servants?”

“All except one,” said Akenesa.

“Why haven’t you talked to that one?” asked Ana. Her tone was insubordinate, but Akenesa wasn’t one to care about

the servants of other houses.

“I’m working on it, but we have vampires prowling our gardens,” said Akenesa, giving the girl as pointed a look as she could muster. Ana looked down and then away. “Tell Alek I’ll be over tonight and I’ll be quick as long as he allows me to read their souls.”

She had an idea about how to approach Manford, so it wasn’t a lie. As Ana stalked away there was a malevolent shift in the aether of the house. A mass of power stirred. It seemed that Sasha was finally awake.

Akenesa went into the house and up the stairs, then headed to Sasha’s room. Before she entered she made sure that Sasha was alone, because she didn’t want to walk in on anything untoward. The half-vampire’s personal scar cursed her with an unfathomable perverse lust beyond the casual attitude that most Nerikans held.

Akenesa knocked and was allowed inside. Sasha was dressed for a change and sat at her mirror applying her paint. The people of Nerik painted designs on their faces to show their allegiances and personality. Akenesa played into her reputation by only doing it on rare occasions.

Ana’s paint was always a mess, Liara’s was simple and easy to apply, but Galina’s was sublime in its intricacy. The Talwaen girls all had permanent tattoos made from Galina’s blood, each individualised, and Galina painted around her long black line from her left eye to collar in fascinating ways.

Sasha had two large fangs on her face, one under each eye, and as she painted her face she made sure to highlight them, using black and red paint to create swirls and outlines. She had obviously been learning from Galina.

“We need to push up the plan,” said Akenesa. Sasha didn’t stop painting but her eyes darted to look at Akenesa in the mirror. Deep grey with crescent shaped pupils, just like the other five Vanavolk.

“Why so bold?” asked Sasha.

“I think he’s the one spreading rumours of the Grand

Crystal in Cora,” said Akenesa. She wanted to sit down, but the only place was Sasha’s bed and was worried the crazed woman would see it as an invitation. She’d tried before.

“You think he’s finally moving?” asked Sasha. She finally put the brush down and turned to face Akenesa, who nodded. “Who do we get to act on him?”

“Alek. I’ve been talking to Ana today about the rumour and hinted that there’s a problem amongst our servants. I just need to figure out how to drop his name to her.”

“It’s a risky plan,” said Sasha. “But it should work. I trust Uncle Alek. He’ll get it done. He’s not directly connected to you, so if it seems you’re working against Manford then Uncle Alek won’t be suspected.”

“I’m going to see Alek tonight,” said Akenesa. “I’ll do my best to make it work. He thinks I’m going to interrogate his servants.”

“Make sure not to get seen,” said Sasha, pointing her brush at Akenesa. “We’ll need Alek to be a surprise if we’re going to murder him just right. What about his phylactery?”

“You’re a Vault Lord and you don’t know that?” asked Akenesa with a sigh. It was as dramatic as she could get. Sasha wasn’t unintelligent, just lazy with her mind. “You get into the Vault and steal it.”

“That would count as betraying him,” said Sasha. “We can’t do that.”

“Then we give him a reason to withdraw it.” Akenesa thought for a moment. “We hold an inspection.”

“It *has* been over three hundred years since the last,” said Sasha. “How do we get my mother on board with it?”

“Aunt Anastasya craves order, but running the house has allowed this to slip her mind. When Alek is ready to move we simply remind her and she’ll demand a quality check. The house needs to be maintained.”

The plan had always been a dream, and even if she was wrong about him spreading the rumours they’d finally be free of his tyranny.



Akenesa entered the Kewaen Estate as a wisp of darkness slipping under the door. Just as she was a *moon child*, they were named *blood child*. The main family only counted two: Aleksashdra and Demyan. The older brother Demyan married into the Talwaen family, leaving Alek as the house's Lord.

Akenesa had examined every servant she knew about by the time she reached Alek's office. He didn't notice her enter, but Ana was sat in the corner and jumped in surprise.

"Lord Aleksashdra," said Akenesa, removing her cloak of shadow and bowing. He jumped in his seat and nearly spilt ink on some documents.

"This is why I don't like you, Lady Akenesa," said Alek as he put down his quill.

"I recall you once proposed to me," she replied.

"I was drunk." He was enjoying the banter, and she did her best to reciprocate.

"How much did you drink? Vampires are supposedly resistant to the effects of alcohol. You must have some sort of problem."

"I would pay just to see you smile," said Alek. He stood up as if just to show off his fine suit, black and red with a shoulder cape.

"Would you kill for it?" asked Akenesa. A genuine hope phrased as a joke. "I have a man that needs removed."

"Name him and he shall be gone," said Alek. The look on his face was both charming and devilish. She had honestly considered his proposal. She enjoyed his company and the fun conversation, but she knew she couldn't give him what he deserved. It upset her, even if she couldn't cry, but she had mourned in her own way.

"I shouldn't, but your servants are in the clear," said Akenesa. "They know nothing of the rumours."

"And the one servant of yours that does?" asked Alek.

“I’m certainly not implying that you kill him.” Akenesa couldn’t ask that. The terror Manford had planted in her mind prevented it. To get what she desired she had to go the exact opposite direction. “And if there were to be an inspection where his phylactery was exposed, it would definitely not provide the perfect opportunity for his demise.”

“Sounds like this man could use protection,” said Alek with a knowing smile. Talking in circles and falsehoods was a game he enjoyed. He knew what she was doing, though he wouldn’t know why until she was free to speak.

And then they heard the explosion that would change everything.

A funeral was held for Akenesa's parents, aunt, and uncle. Four members of House Talwaen gone in an instant. All it had taken was a messenger delivering a box with a magical bomb.

Anastasya and Vera Talwaen were buried deep in the Black Forest on the Isle of Dusk, at the origin of the Vanavolk. Akenesa's father, Borin, was of common stock. He didn't even have a surname before marrying Vera. Their tale was one of love that could be found in the most saccharine of plays. They had worried about Galina's opinion of him and had eloped, but they hadn't needed to. The matriarch was accepting of all her children, as Akenesa knew very well. Vera and Borin were buried together, hand in hand for all eternity. Demyan, on the other hand, had been returned to Alek and cremated, as their House normally does.

Akenesa fell into a depression after the incident, hiding herself away in her section of the Estate. She accepted no guests and no meals. The only one allowed to enter was Liara, who needed just as much comforting as she did. Being an immortal she had never considered this could happen.

Then the wheels started to turn. Her father was a lich, so how had he died? She recreated her body and clothes in a flurry of magic to clean herself and then set out. She went to the Vault of the Endless, a massive underground pyramid under the government buildings, and inspected the family's phylacteries. Her father's was gone.

She stormed her way back to the Estate, not bothering to cloak herself in shadow. She ignored the stares and the whispers of the people around town. They'd rarely seen her so of course they'd react. When she made it home she went to Sasha's room, but before she could talk there was a noise from down the hall.

The girls moved with speed, as disturbances in the Estate were uncommon. They made it to Galina's room just in time to see Manford standing over the matriarch.

“Stay back,” he said. With a click of his tongue they were frozen in space. “You must not break this spell.”

With all her power Akenesa couldn't move against that click. It was like her mind and body were in shackles, like a weight was dumped on her soul. Her arms were pushed back and her knees buckled. She couldn't even speak despite her anger and her breath caught in her chest.

“What have you done?” growled Sasha, giving it her all to move from the spot.

“Now the matriarch sleeps,” said Manford with a grin. Akenesa wanted to destroy him. “Now stay here for an hour and tell no one what you've seen.”

He left and Sasha dropped to her knees in tears. They were being torn apart by the man, piece by piece. Akenesa crawled to Galina's side and looked at her gentle face.

“We'll get him, Sasha,” she said. “We have to.”

The rest of the moon went by in a blur. Akenesa could hardly recall it and yet what she did remember was so vivid. The man who set off the explosion was from the Coral Kingdom, supposedly, and now the girls were off to war. Liara had tagged along, clinging tightly to Akenesa's arm, despite her protests. War was no place for the innocent.

The death of four members of House Talwaen had been a huge upset for the people, and so the war had been at the behest of the people. They called for the Grand Crystal to be found and for the deaths to be avenged. Akenesa put it to Sasha that this was further manipulation by Manford, but the mad girl didn't care. A vampire filled with rage was hard to reason with and near impossible to stop.

Akenesa thought of Galina. She had been struck with a dreadful curse, one dooming her to sleep for eternity. She had no idea how to remove it as she didn't know the words used by Manford to enact the curse. It left her frustrated behind her stony mask.

Akenesa watched the battle before her playing out. A fleet of airships met by another. She sat at the bow of the *High Moon*, one of her family's vessels, and lethargy had taken over. She had no energy to stand and help the fight and just watched ship after ship fall from the sky.

Liara sat beside her drawing in a notebook. She had decided to bring crayons to war. Looking over Liara's work, Akenesa saw what her sister could have been. The splendid lines and perfectly aligned colouring. There was a sharp mind buried in there that just couldn't get out. It depressed her to see Liara so stunted. She had the vocabulary and the skill to be the greatest of all Nerikans, but she was broken.

Akenesa had tried many times to convince Liara to try experimental treatments to repair the scar, but was refused each and every time. It was a painful process, in Akenesa's own experience, so she understood her sister's fear. Her own scar

had one of its sharp tips removed, it was now rounded, and Akenesa could frown on occasion, but it was a slow and painful process, so she had stopped. It had been fifty years since she had figured it out and had been working on an easier method.

Then the *High Moon* lost its starboard sail to a shot from a cannon. Akenesa sighed and finally stood as the skymen around her started to panic. She looked over the rail at the broken wingmast and spoke to the universe.

“*Sayai. Gazou.*” *Heal. Fly.* Her aether surged and the universe listened. The wingmast grew as if alive and a new sail unfurled, connecting in all the right place, ropes pulling back into place.

Akenesa was one of the most powerful mages on all of Terra. She was in the Grand Circle and only one man other than certain Gods stood above her in terms of raw strength, though she didn’t regard such unturned potential to be true strength. Neri was her native language and it was a derivative of Skrae, the language of the Gods and of magic. That man had needed to learn it from nothing and so didn’t understand the nuances she did. She knew if they ever fought she would win.

She looked at the battle again and raised her hand into the air, fingers stretched wide, palm up, elbow locked. She spoke to the universe and it answered her.

“Tear my enemies asunder, their ships and their men alike!” She brought down her arm and pointed forward, her internal night flowing forth through the air in flurries and flows. Her black light made the world darker as it pierced airship after airship, the sounds of explosions and screams carrying on the wind. She sat back down and took her journal from a small table next to her chair and began noting the effects of the spell.

“You should have done that earlier,” came Manford’s voice from another airship directly into her mind. She tried to ignore him, but it never worked. “The sooner that the Coral Kingdom is wiped from the map, the better.”

“Why?” she dared to send to his mind. A single word

but one she was rarely allowed an answer for.

“You know why,” he answered.

She did know, but it was an unpleasant thought. The war wasn't about vengeance or resources as the propaganda would have people believe. It was pre-emptive. They were being manipulated by Manford and other worshippers of the Empty Diamond and she could do nothing about it. Azael was looking to prevent the rise of heroes like those in the Coral Kingdom.

She had been so close to being set free. She longed to fight on the right side for once. She needed to be released from Manford's chains so that she could rally her people against Azael. But it wasn't going to happen. The chains were too tight, and most of Nerik vilified her as an abomination. She hadn't spoken to Alek about him because of the stress of loss and upcoming war.

She looked to Liara, who smiled up at her and pushed a drawing into her lap. It was an accurate drawing of the Coral airships. She had to keep trying.

The army had landed in the north of the kingdom and then marched south. The airships had returned to Nerik to ferry over more soldiers and soon they would have a force of over seventy thousand.

Not that numbers were what decided wars. This was a world of heroes and great mages. The forty thousand already marching towards the capital would be killed by the knights and the wizards of Cora, but unlike the kingdom's soldiers they were immortal. Most were liches, and so destruction of their bodies would return their souls to their phylacteries, back in Nerik, deep within the Vault of the Endless. Nerik's army was infinite, but that was also not what would be the deciding factor.

Nerik had its own heroes and great mages. Sasha the Devourer, Anton the Black, Renatus the Invincible. They'd split the army in three and spread throughout the country. Nothing would survive.

Akenesa had been left in the north with Liara and no army. She didn't need it and her goal was simple. She was to cripple Cora's call for aid. As such, she planned to travel to a city named Valra and destroy it.

She set out, pulling her sister away from playing with the local wolves, who ended up following them for a time regardless.

Akenesa and Liara had approached Valra from the east, then circled around the south and stood on a hill to its west, taking the time to measure it with their eyes. The city was as large as Nerik, with a central tower. Akenesa then noted the how many airships were travelling north as she set up the rune that would destroy the city. She'd need to track them down later.

That was when a voice hit her mind like a hammer, but then became quiet and worried.

"Akenesa!? Be careful out there, please."

"Alek?" she asked. He was unskilled with this type of magic. It was clear by how muddled his voice was in her mind.

"Someone attacked the Vault of the Endless last night. They stole more than thirty phylacteries, including yours and Liara's. Something is happening."

"Give me the names. I'll warn the others."

This was serious and so she spent the next hour in contact with each of the victims. Had the phylacteries been destroyed then their souls would have returned to them. They would have noticed that. No, a theft was something else. It was possible to blackmail a lich this way, and it was one of the reason the Vault had been built in the first place.

She cursed becoming a lich. She hadn't needed to and it was all for an experiment. Not only that, but Liara had copied her like the sweet little puppy she is. At least Sasha was still unfettered.

She thought of Manford. Was this all part of his plan? Did he plan to recruit others to his cause? Many of them had been Vault Lords, those in charge of defending the Vault, many of them now out on the battlefields of the Coral Kingdom.

She finished burning the rune into the ground and looked down on Valra. She had to do her job. Her strategies were being implemented across the country and her hands had already been stained with blood, but she hesitated. This was more than just how to deal with enemy armies. There were

innocents down there and she knew she was playing into Azael's hands.

She enacted the spell and within moments the city was gone. It was nothing more than a crater in the ground slowly filling with the sea on its northern side. Some airships turned to see what was happening and others zipped off into the afternoon sky.

And then in the far north she saw what she had been truly waiting for. A massive drake made of bone and lightning broke through the clouds and was heading directly towards her. It was only a matter of time before Argus appeared.

He was a mage in the Grand Circle, just like her, but she was confident she could defeat him. He was a known ally of the Coral Kingdom, so it was expected for him to fly in on his famous undead drake.

Akenesa's spell had a trick that allowed her to hold a second charge. She was rather proud of discovering repeating runes, and this was likely its most destructive use so far. She levelled her arm and aimed at the drake. She discharged the spell, feeling its intense aether leaving her, and within seconds the drake shattered in the sky.

"It won't be long before he gets here," said someone from her left. She turned to see a man dressed in grey with long matted hair and dirty, scratched skin. He wore the Empty Diamond and when he looked at her she saw his pupils shaking violently within his still irises. "He's a revenant, you know."

"Who are you?" she asked, taking a step so that Liara was behind her and protected.

"Little Manford asked me to help you," said the man with a smile. His teeth were broken and jagged. His Neri was also flawless, but his eyes betrayed a foreign heritage. The way he stood made him look weak but she could sense the depth of his soul. He contained a great darkness.

"I didn't feel your approach," she said. She didn't want to provoke this man. There was a malevolence that unsettled

her and she couldn't place it. "How did you get here?"

"I folded the string and looped around," he said with a smirk, as if that was meant to impress her.

"I don't need your help," she said.

"Oho?" he said, taking a step back. When he moved his soul shifted and she could sense it. This man was a Visage. A devourer of souls. As his own soul moved the hundreds bound to him moved too, like a school of fish following the current.

"You need to leave," she said. "I'll have no help from one who worships the Empty Diamond."

"Then why not attack me?" he asked. "If you know of my master then why not destroy me?"

"You know why," she said, mirroring Manford's words. The man laughed and in a swirl of darkness disappeared.

"Who was that?" asked Liara, looking up from her books. "He smelled."

"If you ever see that man again, run to either me or Sasha. We'll protect you."



It was another forty minutes before Argus made it to shore, soaked to the bone and looking displeased. Not that it was difficult to accomplish, as the man was little more than a skeleton in a robe with a crown on the right half of his head.

As he walked up the hill, his soggy boots sinking into the grass, he looked at the crater that was once Valra. There was a disappointment in his aether. She couldn't regret it now and she would live with her actions, so she stood firm and waited.

"So this is how we finally meet, Lady Akenesa Talwaen of Nerik. Not under pleasant circumstances." There were pin points of deep blue light within the darkness of his skull and his jaw didn't move as he spoke. But it wasn't telepathy. He was creating the sound as if he spoke naturally. "I've read your books on runecraft and corruption. They were fascinating and

helped me in my own experiments.”

“I must thank you for my early education,” she said to the skeleton. He didn’t seem to care that his deep purple robes were thick with water. “Your books on elemental attunement and the basic structure of souls led me into a scholarly life.”

“Our careers have been mutually beneficial, it seems,” he said. There was a smile in his voice but that skeletal grin on his non-existent face was unsettling. “Though I believe I started first, am I right?”

“You are, indeed,” said Akenesa. “You’re at least a hundred years my elder and the Great Maelstrom already existed by the time I was born.”

“Yes, the Great Maelstrom, one of my more depressing creations.” He gently adjusted the metal of his half-crown and touched the symbol of creation on his skull’s forehead.

“I had wished to one day travel there and examine it myself, but I hear you prevent people from going there. Is that true?”

“It is, but I could make an exception for you,” he said, tilting his head and looking at Liara. “You do seem like the kind of person who wouldn’t try to destroy what I created.”

“You’re dead!” shouted Liara far too happily.

“Almost and not quite,” said Argus with a laugh. “Have you heard of a revenant before?”

“Oh, just like Vala?” asked Liara. She started to walk to Argus but Akenesa held out her hand to stop her.

“So it’s true about the scars on your family’s souls?” he asked.

“That depends what you’ve heard.”

“You are emotionally stunted, a being of pure logic. And then your twin sister is overly emotional, with no logic at all?”

“Close, but not quite,” said Akenesa. “I feel but cannot show it. Liara has a keen mind, perhaps she could have rivalled us both, but her curse is immaturity. She never grew up and won’t ever do so, despite her age.”

“How does that happen? I hear only rumours.”

“My grandmother,” said Akenesa. “Our matriarch. Her soul took on the burden of divinity. She is now the Goddess of Night after Low Lady Lunada gave up her power. It is just unfortunate that Skraeðan souls are incompatible with us lesser creatures. The process broke her and drove her beyond the horizon of madness. Then she created her children from a snipping of her soul, passing down the scar. When those two children bred naturally, the scar still passed down. It will likely propagate through our line forever, each of us taking on our own unique curse.”

“Is it true that your cousin eats people?”

“Yes, but that’s because she’s a vampire, not because of her own scar.” Akenesa shrugged. “Liara, our conversation is over now. Take your books down the hill, please.”

“Alrighty!” said Liara, gathering up her things and running down the hill behind Akenesa.

And then it began. Argus made the first move, sending lightning from his fingertips and taking to the air. Akenesa raised a hand and a shield of darkness formed, tightly locked hexagonal panes of black glass. She was a defensive fighter and would wait for him to expend more energy before making her move.

He did as predicted. Attack after attack raining down on her, carefully and delicately blocked with her unbending shields. She shot the occasional bolt of black flame at him, just to make sure he was still paying attention. Her attacks were precise and her defence impenetrable, and the frustration was showing in his soul. The once careful tide was a raging ocean of aether.

Akenesa called on her soul and pulled a spear from her chest, crafted from her own corruption and aether. She had never given her soulblade a name, unlike most others she knew. She just didn’t see the need. As a bolt of lightning flew down at her she caught it in the tip of the spear and redirected it into the crater that was once Valra.

“Shall we proceed beyond the basics?” she asked and

watched as Argus's rage built. A wide circle of light appeared around her and soon she was in air, standing on a pillar of rock pulled from the planet.

Argus flew down at her, pulling a blade of lightning from his soul and bringing it down hard. Akenesa blocked, covering her left arm in her shield and deflecting the attack with a backhanded swipe. She made to stab him with her spear but the intent was different. The blade vanished in a puff of smoke and struck from behind Argus, catching the edge of his robe as he foresaw the attack.

The spear stopped an inch from her own heart and she pulled it back through twisted space so that it was whole again. She stood straight and ready to take on the revenant before her who was clearly thinking quickly about how to beat her. He wasn't a fighter. He was an alchemist and a breeder of monsters. She couldn't let him plan.

"Keep up!" she called as she leapt forward, pushed by a torrent of darkness. She knocked him through the air with a hefty shove and followed him, readying her spear. He could fly at will, so knew this wouldn't win her the fight, but she had to distract him. Overstimulate his mind. Have him make as many decisions as she could as quickly as possible.

He flew away from her and she let out a thunderous burst of aether, spreading her corvid wings and following. She wasn't the best when it came to flight. She was no air mage like Argus. She was a Vanavolk, a crow, and had to flap furiously to kept aloft, but that didn't stop her. Her jet black wings were massive and a warning of things to come.

She kept him moving by always advancing. He was faster in the air than she was but her wings and shields easily broke his lightning attacks. They were too high for him to effectively use earth magic and so the stray spikes that flew up were ignored more than dodged.

Her aggressively defensive fighting style kept Argus where she wanted him, slowly draining his aether while she did very little. Her shields and spear were summoned and

stuck around at a fixed cost, and her wings were free. Her aether was rising as her emotions moved her soul but Argus was struggling. He wasn't staying calm. He had expected her to fight more directly with the amount of power she held. The pair could break the universe if they wished, but they were keeping it simple and it frustrated him.

And then came what she expected. A slight surge of power in his soul as he steeled himself. He raised his arm and black clouds filled the sky as he chanted the words in his mind. The universe heard his intent and made it manifest. He swung his hand down and pointed at her. There was a crack and a boom and the most powerful lightning bolt yet flew from the clouds directly at her.

"*Jarak*," she called and her shields expanded. She held the universe firm as she spoke the word *shield* and she was launched directly into the ground. Her shields broke but she stepped out unharmed. She then conjured a flame by speaking "*akeel*," burn, and lit the sky on fire.

Argus looked up, fear blatant in his soul, and watched as his clouds dispersed. The blue sky shone down, and in the distance Cora's airship army was amassing. Akenesa spotted the green banners of Maraki too, Cora's ally from the west.

Argus then looked down, but it wasn't at Akenesa. She followed his sight and realised the horror to come. She flew at her sister, using a huge aether burst to send her through the air, tearing up the landscape as if a bomb had hit it. She tackled her sister to the ground as the lightning struck, flowing through her wings and dancing around her shields. Everything hurt but she stood, her cold face unable to show the purest anger she had ever felt.

Before she could berate him for the depths he had sunk to it happened. Liara launched herself into the air in a streak of darkness. A child of mind and heart, but her power was not to be scoffed at. Liara was the reason that Akenesa had gained so much knowledge about corruption. The girl had a unique ability in that she could control it. She could be as corrupt or as

pure as she wanted, flipping between the two in an instant.

That was what had earned her the title of Willing Beast and why she had a sect of her own in the Church of Night. She could soothe the souls of the congregation or turn them into her demonic pets, and when she corrupted herself she gained an insight into the universe that no one could match.

Liara brought Argus to the ground, grappling him out of the air, spinning and crashing into the dirt. She howled and ran behind Akenesa like a scared puppy, but her power was radiating throughout the area, darkness deforming the air and creating horrific shadows.

“I protect her because I love her,” said Akenesa, gently touching Liara’s head by her waist as the girl hugged her hips. “People think her to be feeble because of her scar and they underestimate her, but I’ve always seen her potential. I’ve never been worried about leaving her alone or with strangers because I know she’ll protect herself. I feel the need to hold her and protect her because she is my twin, but she doesn’t need me to fight for her. All she needs is a moment to change into something more deadly.”

“I will admit to underestimating her,” said Argus as he stood up. His robe was torn to reveal the ribcage underneath and his bones were popping back into place. “I thought to use her to get at you. I see that was a mistake.”

“Calm now, Liara,” said Akenesa, petting her sister’s head. “Go get your books and take them a little farther away. I’ll be with you shortly.”

The girl nodded and slunk away, growling at Argus as she went. Akenesa recalled her spear and shields and stood ready to continue the fight. Argus sparked up his lightning blade and stared at her.

“You think you can’t lose, don’t you?” asked Argus.

“Of course I can’t,” said Akenesa. “I may be a scholar but I’m not like you. Do you know of the Ether War? Do you know how I’ve fought? How I became known as a strategist? How you are being manipulated exactly as I see fit?”

“What do you mean?” asked Argus, standing a little straighter at the honesty of her words.

“You can’t leave here because if you do then I’ll move west into Maraki and stop their reinforcements, yet as we speak my people are taking down the three major cities of the Coral Kingdom. Your heroes will fall while you stand here doing nothing. I can hold you here for as long as it takes.”

“Don’t be so confident,” said Argus. “I have my own pieces in play. Surely you would have heard of my heist by now.”

The malevolence in his voice made Akenesa remember Alek’s warning about the stolen phylacteries. If he stole them then he thought he could end the war with blackmail.

“We’ll fight to get them back,” she said eventually.

“You will try,” said Argus.

“Who stole them for you?” asked Akenesa. That was something she couldn’t figure out. Someone with his power would stand out in Nerik. It had to be someone weaker but with knowledge beyond the ordinary.

“I have an apprentice these days,” said Argus. “She’s a very skilled mage. A Seer too.”

Seers could go where they pleased, much to Akenesa’s dismay. Being able to see the world around them seconds in advance would allow someone to walk in and out of the Vault without issues.

“So you expect us to leave so we can have them back?”

“Not at all,” said Argus. There was a strange surge in his aura. It was a signal, but what did it mean? She would only figure it out when she started getting telepathic messages.

They were screaming as their physical forms were broken and they were being dragged to their phylacteries. She could feel their souls travel north and then disappear.

“Sasha,” she thought, sending her words to her cousin. “Get in the city and drop the tower right now. Something big is happening and we could lose this war.”

“Understood,” came her cousin’s voice in her mind.

It was all she could do. What had happened to them that the Vault Lord and other warriors of Nerik would be defeated so easily?

“A spell of my own creation,” said Argus. He held up a sheet of paper that appeared from nowhere. On it was written a complex rune but Akenesa could read it. An anti-lich rune designed to break down their physical forms and send their consciousnesses back to their soul jars. The paper burned and tendrils of light shot out, one piercing Liara’s chest in the distance and another striking Akenesa.

“Liara!” she called, reaching out to her sister, but her body broke and everything went dark.

It was a box. Just a simple box but there was power keeping it closed, so no matter how hard she pushed she couldn't open it. She was trapped in her phylactery, a white porcelain doll with veils as arms and a skirt. Inside it burned with a soft blue soulfire and she seethed.

She could see outside, and she could even feel Liara trapped in another box not far away, but she felt powerless. She was stuck in some storage room in Argus's frozen castle in the far north and she hated it.

"Do you hear me Liara?" she called to her sister. She didn't know, but she could feel Liara's panic and fear. "Please stay calm. We will escape this."

Some time passed and Akenesa felt Argus's presence in his castle. He was conducting some vile experiment in another wing. She didn't know what had happened to Sasha and the army. Had they won the war?

Her only consolation for the horrible situation was that she could sense Manford's soul, trapped in another box. He had been defeated and imprisoned just like her. He couldn't spread his filth any longer.

She didn't know how much time had passed. She could sense the aura of a young woman. Argus's apprentice. She was a princess of Maraki. The daughter of the king. Her blood was used in sealing the boxes and it was the only key to open them.

Around her neck was a medallion in the shape of a heart, and inside Akenesa could sense Sasha's soul. She had been trapped too, though in a different way.

She had been screaming for days, shaving edges off her scar so she could express her rage and sorrow.

It must have been years. Not much changed in Argus's castle. He came and went, and eventually his apprentice had shown up one day pregnant, announcing her retirement from his

service. Akenesa hadn't seen her since.

Her sight was slowly improving. She had mapped and memorised Argus's castle and the snowy mountains to the south and east. There was a vast snowfield to the north and west. Soon enough she would be able to see Nerik again.

The sky cracked and time shattered. The Grand Gate opened and Akenesa could only watch as the universe's greatest mages and warriors gathered to fight the encroaching horror that was Azael. She cried out. If she were free should could help. She wanted to fight too. She wanted her freedom.

Liara had gone to sleep, and so had most of the others.

She had read every book in Argus's castle countless times. She saw another war, this time brought to Nerik. Sasha's daughter fought proud and strong. Anđa had been five years old when they had left Nerik. When had she become a woman? When had she joined the Synod?

Why did Alek look so tired?

Fear.

The Sixteen Dragons raged across Terra's surface, breaking it apart and ruining all in their path. Argus's castle was hit and the boxes were thrown across the Aether Sea in chunks of the world.

The pieces were gathered and a new world was built.

Some ancient ruin from a world before perched on top of a mountain somewhere far from civilisation. In the far distance Nerik was trapped in the Ethereal Realm again.

Anđa was building a house. Angels were settling into the new world, freed from their service. Alek occupied a castle of his own and had the box containing Liara, protecting it. Vala walked around Nerik endlessly, as if looking for the Isle of Dusk, which was far away, occupied by a crazed angel.

Rage.

Anđa met a Host of the Heavenly Soul like herself. Such pure love was something Akenesa hadn't known. She began to look into this Host's family.

She caught a whiff of familiar blood. A family had survived all this time. She needed to keep track of them. It was her only hope. The blood of Argus's apprentice was alive.

Sorrow.

Anđa had a child. Narianel. A beautiful name, but a chaotic soul. She was a machine of rage and defiance and her mouth flowed with the words of reality.

A schism in the blood of the apprentice. A setback but not fatal. Akenesa would be free eventually.

Another birth. Isaac. Such a beautiful soul.

The box began to move. The delvers of history, the Archivists, had found her. The box was moved from the ruins of Argus's castle onto an airship and to the same city that Anđa built a family. She was brought underground into an aetherially sealed chamber where the Archivists kept all their discoveries.

She waited.

The box opened and Akenesa leapt at the chance. Black mist filled the room and when it cleared she stood in a body of flesh once more. She picked up the porcelain doll that was her phylactery and when the mist cleared she saw that she was surrounded by men and women holding weapons.

“Do any of you happen to speak Skrae?” she spoke, feeling the most gentle of smirks cross her face. She hadn’t filled in her scar all that much, but it was enough.

There was fear in the eyes of those around her. These people were young. Mortal. They hadn’t seen half a century much less a millennium. She had seen two, though half her time had been in that box.

Then one man stepped forward. He was old. Far older than those around him knew. His soul showed all the signs of a life beyond that of the ordinary. He was wrinkled and scarred but generally in good shape, with defined muscles in all the right places to show his active lifestyle.

“My name is Thomas Acker,” he said in Skrae. He had trouble pronouncing words but she could tell he was faking it. She saw through the act. This man knew exactly what he was doing. “This is the Guild of Archivists in the city of Seremont. Are you able to speak in Vinrini?”

“I will be able to soon,” she said. She looked at the others in the room. A bald man who wore no shirt, his body covered in runic tattoos. No, he wouldn’t do. A blonde girl who seemed to have as bad an attitude as Sasha. Definitely not. And there he was. A boy with the blood of the apprentice. She had watched him most of his life, following his family and trying to influence them towards her. It hadn’t worked, but it had gone her way regardless.

She walked over to the boy. He must have been in his late teens. Shaggy black hair grown to below his ears, deep brown eyes, pale skin, and the most interesting set of aether based technologies welded to his body. Such things weren’t

done in Nerik. They had the magic to regrow limbs, but here in this new world they lacked that power. Or, at least, this method was cheaper. His right arm had been severed at the shoulder and had since been replaced with a mechanical arm, tied to his soul with magic so that it could move.

“Give to me your knowledge,” she said, invoking the words and commanding both the boy and the universe. He coughed and a thick black mist rose from his throat. She put her lips to his and gently sucked in the tendrils of darkness, feeling his thoughts and feelings and memories spreading through her mind.

She took a step back and the boy’s face was red. He mistook her actions for a kiss, but she didn’t mind. He could use the thought at night for all she cared. She had what she wanted. She looked at the man named Thomas Acker.

“I now speak your language,” she said in fluent Vinrini. “Information is easily passed.”

“What was that?” asked the girl. The boy’s memories told Akenesa the girl was called Iris Sauveterre, the boy was Walden Morris, and the bald rune mage was Traugott Amsel. She hadn’t sought their names, only the language, and yet he had given so much more and so freely. An open mind, which she thought would be his downfall one day.

A flicker of aether rose in Thomas Acker and she saw it for just a flash before he hid it again. She knew what power he held now.

“I must thank you for freeing me with young Walden’s blood, Mister Thomas.” She walked back to the box and closed the lid, looking over the runes all over its surface. If she had seen these before being locked away she could have counteracted them and gotten herself out. When she looked back to Thomas she saw the look on his face. She had correctly named his title. He was indeed a Mister.

“How did you get locked in there?” asked Walden. His palm was wrapped in a bandage and he was putting pressure on it. She went to his and held his hand, channelling her aether

to heal the wound instantly. Healing wasn't something she had needed to do much, so she wasn't all that good at it, but it was enough to leave the boy in wonder.

"I got into a fight with a man named Corwin Argus," she said. "I should have defeated him, but he had a rather cunning plan. I should have seen such an attack coming, but I was arrogant and underestimated him."

Then she paused. A powerful aether passed through the gates to the city. An angel, a Vanavolk, a creature of the purest rage. Akenesa wanted to run to her, to the little cousin she had never met, but she knew she shouldn't. Akenesa had been watching Narianel her whole life and knew to let her act and calm down. She would give it a few days. Let her get her head in order, get her house cleaned, get her goals straight.

"Are you alright?" asked Mister Thomas. "You just turned to face a wall."

Akenesa blinked. The man was right. Her face was an inch from the wall and she had been staring at the girl from across the city. She would need to get used to masking the way she watched again. Subtlety had left her during her long imprisonment.

"Who else have you freed?" she asked, turning back to the room and leaning against the wall at her back.

"Just one other," said Mister Thomas. "A man named Manford." She internally cringed. "He's waiting in the other room for us to finish here."

She sought out his signature and found it twenty feet away through a wall. The man was alive and out of his own box, and now he would be a plague upon her again.

"Let's go see him then," she said. "Get it over with," she added in a mutter in Neri. The rune mage Traugott caught what she said and gave her a curious look, but she ignored it.

They walked out into what she would know as the Archive. They had been in a side-office used for individual study or work, and emerging into the main hall made Akenesa wonder if it was the largest room she had ever seen. It was a

multi-storey library with rows of bookshelves and arranged displays of ancient magical and technological relics. Hanging from the ceiling was the preserved body of a creature Akenesa had only read of, a Leviathan Spawn. It was a sort of whale crossed with a sea serpent. It apparently paled in comparison to its mother.

She was on the lowest level of the library and she saw dozens of Archivists going about their work. Some were taking apart machines, others were translating books and scrolls, and there was even one looking at instructions for an ancient dance and trying to perform it. The Archivists were a strange and eclectic lot, and what little she had seen of them while she was in the box made her like them. If she had been born on Avani, these would be her people.

She followed Mister Thomas into the next room and came face to face with Manford. He was tall and thin with a shaved head, though a small amount of white stubble was just visible. He had been granted immortality in his seventies, so his face was wrinkled and he generally looked decrepit. If she told someone he was dangerous, would they believe her?

“Ah, there you are,” he said with a wicked smile. She wanted to punch him but knew she couldn’t. Perhaps it was the right time to visit Narianel after all, and maybe tempt her into destroying him. She noted that he had lashed his own phylactery to his hip, likely intending to go hide it soon. “We need to be going.”

“I need to get to Liara,” said Akenesa without thinking. It had been lingering in the back of her mind since she got out of the box. She needed to go save her sister.

“She can wait. Let’s go.” He clicked her tongue and she flinched, but it was odd. She didn’t feel it. Normally the world darkened and she felt a pressure. There was a compulsion and she couldn’t disobey. His psychological trick forced her into his service whenever he clicked his tongue, but she stood there awestruck at her own free mind.

Manford walked past her and she moved as quickly as

she could. She pulled the black spear from her soul and shattered his phylactery in a single smooth motion. And that was all it took. His soul returned to him. He was no longer a lich. His human mortality had returned to him.

He attempted to flee. She couldn't let him go. He ran into the main hall of the Archive and she chased him. Her actions shocked those around her, but also herself. It was pure instinct with no logic. Fighting in this place could destroy so much these people had worked for but her inner wolf wanted only to tear out the man's throat and crush his soul into dust.

He turned into black fog and leapt from table to table, climbed up a bookcase and made it to the second tier. She followed as quickly as she could, launching off the first table and spread her wings. Flying indoors would normally be impossible, but the sheer size of the room let her go wild. At the second tier she tried tackling him but he moved, her spear narrowly missing a tapestry that hung from the side of a bookshelf.

He ran for the stairs up and she jumped back out into the middle of the room, then flew up to the top tier. She didn't have enough room to become her inner Vanavolk so she let her wings vanish and ran after him, flooding the area with a thick black ooze than poured from the pores on her hands and arms. It whipped up and around the shelves and tried to grab Manford but he was surprisingly nimble for an old man. He was using every drop of aether in his soul to escape her.

He made it to the stairs and hid his aether. She lost track of him as she pulled back in her power and rushed up into the basement of the guildhouse. She focussed for a few seconds and knew that it was fruitless. Azael had hidden his loyal follower from her. But this was a small victory.

Akenesa stood in the office that Manford had been released in. His own box was similar to her own, though the runes were notably less powerful. Argus hadn't underestimated her the way she had for him.

“Are you ready to tell us what that was about?” asked Mister Thomas in Skrae. “Why did you attack him?”

“He has been acting for Azael,” said Akenesa. Finally being able to speak the truth about the man felt good. “He used a tongue click to control me, to silence me. An implanted trigger from my childhood. He had been my tutor. I hate that man and look forward to killing him. I will no longer be used by the Empty Diamond.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Mister Thomas.

“Absolutely,” she said, looking him directly in the eyes. He nodded to Traugott Amsel who ushered away the younger Archivists and some others who had gathered.

“You speak so openly of the secret war,” he said when the room was clear. “Is it common in Nerik to do so?”

“The Synod has no secrets,” said Akenesa. “The whole nation knows of Azael and why we fight him. How could we not teach our children when he is the cause of the Temporal Corruption that forced our people to abandon our original world and move to Terra? That is a world I’ll never know as it was destroyed a hundred years before I was born.”

“Things are different on Avani,” said Mister Thomas. “We’re not sure who to trust, so we refrain from talking about the Empty Diamond. We simply teach that it’s a blasphemy. There are those that know the truth, and those that don’t.”

“I dislike that,” said Akenesa in full honesty. “Keeping the truth from the masses only sets them up for a cruel and unwanted surprise. I was made absent for the Ruination.” She kicked the box. “But my people were ready and fought. You would not be here if not for those in the know.”

They looked at each other for a moment before Mister Thomas shrugged and looked away. None could beat Akenesa when it came to stare downs. She was unable to express her discomfort.

“What did you say before about your sister?” He was hesitant to ask. She didn’t know why one such as him, who had earned that title, would ever be nervous.

“I’m planning to collect her from the Castle of Masks,” she said. “I’ll be needing some of the boy’s blood. Walden Morris. He descends from the apprentice of Argus and so he is able to open the boxes. Though, you already know that, don’t you?” She looked back down at the box.

“We may be able to help each other, then,” said Mister Thomas. “I have been planning an assault on that ruin for a long time. We lost some Archivists to the creatures that live there and so we’ve been planning for some revenge.”

She couldn’t tell if he was a fool or manipulating her into doing exactly what she planned to do, but she would accept their help. Over the years she had watched Alek hiding in that castle, protecting the box where Liara slept. He had become distraught and was taken by the call of the Void. She would help him end his life. She would let him keep his honour. She could feel him waiting for her to end the pain in his soul.

“Prepare your assault,” she said. “I’ll join you. Though I will insist that any Nerikan property within be returned to the nation. The castle itself is from another world, but there is one of my own living there.”

“One of your own? Is this person a vampire? We lost our people to familiars.”

Familiars were those that had been corrupted by a vampire but had yet to regain their senses and become full and true vampires. Alek had taken so few familiars when he had lived in Nerik, but she had seen him turn over two dozen on Avani. She had also seen other vampires staying with him, all servants to the House.

“He is, yes,” she said. “You can destroy the familiars. They have suffered enough. But no Nerikan people will die.” Except him. “I will talk to him and see to it that his servants stand down.”

“And how will we tell apart a familiar from a Nerikan?” asked Mister Thomas.

“Is it really that hard?” she asked. She pointed to her

eye. All Nerikan people had tilted eyes, the outside tip higher than the inside. It set her people apart.

“Ah, you’re right,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve met a few of your people before.

“Anđa and Narianel,” she said.

“Not the names I know them by, but yes,” said Mister Thomas with a smile. “Back when I first met Anđa she was still trying to fit in with the Vinish people. She was using the name Finley Blackwood. She dropped that a few years later, though she still gave her daughter the alternate Vinish name Beatrix Blackwood. Two strange women, though in entirely different ways.”

“How would you describe them?”

“Anđa has always been aloof, as if she has a plan that she’s not sharing. Beatrix is... troubled. I see it in her eyes. She fought too young. I’m actually not sure what her grandfather was thinking, taking her to war at that age.”

“She’s a Vanavolk,” said Akenesa. “She was born for the hunt. Her parents and grandfather knew that. You think it a tragedy that she lost her innocence in that canyon, but it was an awakening. She would have needed to experience it at some point, and the sooner she got over the fear the better. With her unique scar she was suited to the task.”

“Unique scar?” asked Mister Thomas.

“Each Vanavolk has a scar on their soul.” She tapped the middle of her chest. “The scar changes the way we see the world and the way we express ourselves. Narianel’s scar gives her a burning anger. She is in a constant state of rage that bubbles beneath the surface. She needs the outlet.”

“That makes sense, thinking about how she fights. She was amazing in that war, despite her age. What about your scar, then?”

“I cannot express emotion,” she said. “I feel them as much as a normal person, but I cannot smile nor frown, I cannot gesture and my eyes and voice never change. I’ve managed to somewhat cure my own scar. It was painful but I

tried anyway. One day I hope to cure us all, especially Galina.”

“And who is Galina?”

“Our matriarch. The original Vanavolk. She merged her soul with the Skraeðan Lunada, and so she became the Goddess of the Night and the Moon. That merging is the origin of the hereditary scar. Her curse is madness.”

“What of Anða? And your sister?”

“Anða is eternally happy. She can’t feel sorrow. Liara is cursed with immaturity. She is an adult that never grew up. She isn’t capable of complex thought or emotion, which pains me to see because I can tell that without her scar she would have been brilliant.”

“Anða’s scar doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Do you really believe that?” asked Akenesa, managing to tilt her head just a little to sell her disbelief. “Do you know what it would be like to enjoy absolutely everything you do? To be able to hurt others to have fun? To enjoy taking lives? What if your child came to you upset and you could only feel joy? There is a reason she avoids conflict when she can. There is a reason she devoted herself to healing.”



Akenesa spent the rest of the day talking to various Archivists. She talked about Nerik and her culture, the religions of the Synod, the history of the nation. The Archivists were more than happy to get a primary source for this sort of information and giving it out early would make trade relations easier later. She was already planning the revival of Nerik, but she had to prioritise Liara.

“Would you please send me Adela Ogden when she gets in?” Akenesa asked the receptionist before heading back down into the Archive. She had spent the night walking the streets as a shadow. She had missed it. She had even visited Narianel’s house, lurking in the darkness and watching the girl. She hadn’t been noticed as Narianel was too busy cleaning. Her senses had become numb since she locked away her power.

Akenesa was still resisting the urge to reveal herself to the girl. She needed to free herself from her sorrows before Akenesa added new problems on top. The girl was struggling, but Akenesa knew she would be alright. She was hoping the cleaning would clear the girl’s head, unbind her aether.

Akenesa had been given free reign of the guildhouse and the Archive, which she was sure wasn’t normal. Mister Thomas knew better than to try and stop her from doing what she wanted, though, and it was of benefit to the Archivists to keep her happy. The happier she was, the more knowledge of the old world she would share. She let them believe that, anyway, and it let her move freely.

She settled into the office where she had been freed from the box. Both boxes had been brought into there and she had torn them apart to study them. She might be able to free the Vault Lords and other warriors of Nerik without using the boy’s blood, though she’d rely on it for Liara.

The Archivists had tried to give her blankets but she told them she didn’t sleep. They gave her curious looks but when she didn’t explain further they backed away. It wasn’t the truth, of course. She slept for an hour or two each day in micro-naps but she never had a full rest. Her room back in the Talwaen Estate didn’t even have a bed, just a comfy chair.

When they brought her food, however, she gladly ate. She asked for it to be uncooked, especially the meat. She was a creature of the night, and though she looked like her human half she was still a beast. She was a wolf, and though she

wasn't a vampire like Sasha she liked her meat bloody.

"So, you are a Seer?" she asked Walden Morris. She felt the need to get to know the boy. He would be integral to her plans to revive Nerik. He would unseal Liara and the others if she couldn't figure out a way to break the boxes, and he would be the key to waking up Galina.

"I am, yes," said Walden. He was nervous. The way he avoided her eyes told her that he was still thinking about the touch of her lips. "I've only just gained access to my powers, though, so I don't know how much I'll be able to help you."

Akenesa had pulled one of the tables from the wall to the middle of the room and sat across from him. There were several books on the table full of notes about Seers from the Archive's past.

"Do you know of Vala Zoraken?" asked Akenesa. He shook his head. "She is the greatest Seer that Nerik has ever known but she lacks telepathy. She can pinpoint any moment in time but her soul doesn't bend enough to resonate with those around her. Despite being in the High Circle last time I met her, she wasn't able to master that power. Do you know why?"

"No," said Walden.

"I've had time to think, and I've come up with a theory. Souls become more solid as time goes on. This is a fact that we Nerikans have known for some time but never imagined it had consequences. But my theory is that the older a soul, the less it is able to learn. People become fixed and it takes great effort to change. It takes a trauma to soften a soul enough for it to grow again.

"I spent time in that box and it broke me. Looking at my soul now I can see changes. Manford's trick no longer works and my soul is far softer than it should have been. The thread is not bound so tight. Aether flows as if I was just a few hundred years old rather than two thousand."

"So this Vala Zoraken can't learn telepathy because her soul is too old? It won't accept new powers so readily? But if

that's the case wouldn't it just require more effort to learn rather than being outright impossible?"

She liked the boy. He was clever and understood her meaning without much effort.

"That's true," she said. "If she had taken the time since the Ruination to practice, it's possible she would be able to by now. But that is unlikely. Vala's priorities are not mine, so this is why I must turn to you."

"My soul is still young, so I should be able to learn how to use telepathy?"

"Correct," said Akenesa. "It shouldn't be too difficult. I will give you the ability to speak Neri, you will look into the past at the precise moment of the curse, and in that moment you will read Manford's mind. This will give you the words he used, and with those words I can create the cure. It's a simple plan."

There was a knock at the door and Akenesa called for the person to enter. It was Adela Ogden. Long brown hair and shining green eyes. When Adela saw Akenesa there was shock on her face.

"Hello," said Akenesa. "My name is Akenesa Talwaen. I believe you are acquainted with my cousin, Narianel. If you could excuse us, Walden."

Walden left and Adela took his seat.

"I thought I knew the name Talwaen from somewhere, but I just couldn't place it. Seeing your face, however, made it very clear."

"Do you think I look more like Anđa or Narianel?" she asked the flustered girl.

"Anđa," said Adela.

"I modelled this face after Galina," said Akenesa. "I do see the resemblance. Do you intend to return to Narianel's side?"

"If I get the chance," said Adela, looking away. There was sorrow in her eyes. "I don't understand why she would do that to me."

“You haven’t talked to her since then, so it’s likely that you just don’t see her mind,” said Akenesa. “I know that you have tried to move on, but your soul bond prevents it.”

“Soul bond?” asked Adela. “Do you believe in that sort of stuff?”

“You can fly, dear girl,” said Akenesa. “What is there to believe? Your souls resonate so strongly with each other that even at a distance you yearn for each other. Your souls are connected. So just wait. She’ll come around.”

“Why did she do it, though?” asked Adela. She was holding back tears. “I don’t understand.”

“Have you ever been afraid of yourself?” Akenesa’s question was so blunt that Adela sat and stared for a while. “Imagine thinking yourself small and insignificant only to be thrust through the universe’s barriers like a spear through a child. She knew she was strong, but she was grounded. She knew her blood contained power, but she had control over her tricks and abilities.

“But then her soul matured. She’s in her early twenties so it’s only natural. On that day she lost her grip on what little humanity she had left. She didn’t just become an angel in the truest sense of the word, she became a vortex of wings and fire and darkness. She melted and reformed with a new bond to the universe. She went from insignificant to important. From a whisper to a scream.

“Before I was sealed away I was working on a theory. I call it presence. You can use the prettiest words and speak with authority, but if you have no presence in the universe then the magic is meaningless. Narianel went from a slightly above average presence as a Vanavolk and a Host equivalent to being a nephilim and blessed by Chassuille’s gift. Not only that but her Godly blood from Mother Lunada would have awakened too as her power crossed into the Low Circle.”

“I... I think I understand,” said Adela. “I need to hear it from her though. I want her to explain it to me.”

“Don’t be mad at her,” said Akenesa. “Scream at her

and cry if you need to, but her perspective on the universe has changed. She wasn't trying to hurt you, she was trying to save you from the strange creature she had become."

"It was a dumb way to try and save me," said Adela. There was a quiet laugh. She had forgiven Narianel.

"The nephilim are fast learners," said Akenesa. "You might have noticed how quickly Narianel picks up new skills and powers. Their minds are wired to take in all possible new information. That, however, doesn't mean they make good decisions. They are still as flawed as everyone else. She's back in Seremont, you know."

"She is?" asked Adela. "Why haven't I felt her aether?"

"She hides herself from the sky," said Akenesa. "She keeps her power low so she doesn't become her true self again. I'm no Seer, but I predict that she will come to the Guild for help soon. She is planning something and I doubt the Eyes of Chassuille will help her, so she will need help getting to where she is going. The Guild has maps."

"So you're saying I should wait for her to come to me instead of chasing her?"

"Exactly," said Akenesa. "She is volatile right now but give her time. She will become that angel you saw again."



Akenesa spent some time talking to Adela before returning to teaching Walden about telepathy. It was a long day, but she was happy with her progress.

“How much of this city is underground?” asked Narianel, much to the amusement of those around her. Akenesa lurked in her usual office when the girl’s voice echoed through the Archive.

“A moment,” said Akenesa to Walden. She pushed a set of notes she had translated to Vinrini across the table and then pressed herself against reality, becoming a flat shadow on the ground. She zipped up to the top tier and followed Narianel and Mister Thomas, listening to their conversation.

The girl had a strut to her step and a stance when she stood. Despite her inner turmoil and rage she held herself in such a proud and powerful way that Akenesa could only be impressed. Only Sasha projected that much confidence but it was more than bravado. It was real strength.

As a shadow hiding in plain sight she couldn’t really get a clear look at Narianel’s face. Was she more like Sarasha or Galina? The original or the reincarnation?

Her aether was shallow but it flowed quickly. Power still had a grip on her, and as soon as she regained control she would be unstoppable. Akenesa had felt the change in her from the box. Akenesa had become a lich to test the difference in her own presence, but had she just waited she would have seen her theory proven in an incredibly clear way.

When Narianel went back upstairs she noticed that Adela was standing in the way, so she left the two to have their encounter. She headed back to the office and emerged from the shadows, startling Walden.

“My cousin is an interesting girl,” said Akenesa. “Have you read the notes?”

“I have, but all this magic stuff is difficult.” Walden held open a book with one hand and was drinking apple juice with the other. “I’ve only been at this for half a year and this is some very complicated stuff.”

“It’s not magic, it’s psychic power,” said Akenesa. “The

two are quite different.”

“And what is that difference?” asked Walden.

“Magic involves turning aether into matter and energy to effect a change in the world but psychic powers are about the flow and resonance of souls. A Seer’s sight simply checks the universe’s resonance from past actions and predicting possible futures from that resonance. A Sarkali’s aether bursts are about a sudden and directed flow of aether.”

“Sarkali?” asked Walden.

“Sarkal is a martial art that combines light strikes with powerful rushes of aether. I was the one that discovered the basics, but it was others that developed it into a full art. My cousin Narianel is a practitioner, taught by her mother and several books on the matter.”

“You talk about your cousin a lot,” said Walden.

“I’m simply looking forward to speaking with her. But you need to get back to practising. You need to learn to sense aether properly before you can start with telepathy.”

Akenesa saw it. The shift was dramatic. Narianel was down in the temple below the city and her power spiked. She fought and defeated a demon despite holding back.

And then just a little later Narianel fought a beast with incredible regenerative powers. Akenesa watched as the girl unleashed just a little of her power, gathering strength from all her heritages to restore the beast to humanity.

Akenesa sat in her office in a meditative state, her eyes closed but her third eye wide open. It was a power called world sight, and it wasn't unlike the power in the blade that Narianel sought. When in use the user's pupils turned white and the rest of their eyes swirled with darkness. It let her see the world as it was and had been her constant companion in the box. Now she sat watching Narianel in action.

She watched Narianel take the blade and return to the surface, and so Akenesa went to the reception and waited for Adela. When he saw her, Mister Thomas came and stood beside her.

"So why are you standing here?" he asked.

"Adela and the bug are on their way back."

"They don't like being referred to like that," said Mister Thomas. "His name is Vel-Marin. He's a sklaara. They come from a culture that values pride, so you should treat them with respect."

"There are too many non-human races on Avani for me to really care. On Terra it was just humans and Vanavolk. And elves and dwarves too, I suppose. Nobody liked the elves. I'm glad they vanished in the Ruination."

"The elves were said to be noble," said Mister Thomas with a chuckle. "What did they do that was so wrong?"

"It was the superior attitude. They thought they were better than everyone else. I do miss the dwarves, though. They were hard workers and great artists."

At that moment Adela and the bug walked in. She had a

tired look in her eyes. The sklaara was a tall ant-like creature with four arms and a colourful shell. She had seen a few of them around the guildhouse but hadn't talked to them.

"That was quite a trip," said Adela. "I'll do the reports now. I'll vouch for Vel. He did good."

"Glad to hear it," said Mister Thomas.

"I would like to borrow Adela for a while." Akenesa gave a nod to Mister Thomas.

"As soon as she finishes her reports," he said.

So she waited. Adela got to work right away and Vel disappeared into the guildhouse with Mister Thomas. It was a little under an hour before Adela emerged from her office and tattoo parlour and placed papers on the desk. Akenesa had spent the time going over what she wanted to say. She had never been so nervous.

"So what did you need me for?" asked Adela.

"It is time I met Narianel." Akenesa tried her best to smile but knew it looked awkward.

"I was going to visit her anyway, so let's go." Adela's own smile was far more natural.



Adela rang the bell at Narianel's door with such enthusiasm that Akenesa thought she would rip it right off the wall. There was no chance that Narianel didn't know it was Adela at the door.

Adela then moved Akenesa to stand in front of the door and stepped to the side as if presenting her at auction. When Narianel opened the door she was shocked to see her standing there, as if she had never been away.

"Akenesa?" she asked. She recognised her instantly. That made Akenesa happy to know. Andā had taught her all about the family and hadn't skipped over her. Narianel had long black hair and deep grey eyes with those distinctive crescent pupils that all Vanavolk sported. Her skin was even

whiter than the moons of Terra.

It was good to finally see Anđa's skill with the paint of Nerik. Around her eyes were black stains, shaped like sharp wings, and under her mouth was a pair of little fangs. These stains were the blood of Galina, permanent from the inherent corruption. Akenesa and all Talwaen girls had the marks around the eyes, but not those little fangs. Akenesa's unique stain was a ring around her neck, with a solid diamond at the back and an open section at the front, sharpened to point at her vocal chords.

Liara had of course copied Akenesa's mark. They were twins and it made sense, and Akenesa enjoyed the feel of Liara's love. Liara had also copied Akenesa when she became a lich, which she hadn't been so fond of. As Vanavolk they didn't need phylacteries to be immortal and it had just been one of Akenesa's experiments. It had ended in those boxes and she regretted it.

"You look like Sarasha, Narianel," she said. There had been no pause in their discussion but Akenesa's mind raced as she looked at her cousin. She gently touched Narianel's cheek. "Your skin is just as coarse as Sasha's, however. I can't be surprised."

Sasha's skin had likely once been soft, but years of battle and regeneration had made it tough. She felt like a shark whenever they touched. Akenesa had told her how to fix it, but Sasha never bothered unless her husband was available for the night.

"I've been wanting to tell you since you got back to Seremont," said Adela, jumping out from beside her. "But I was sworn to secrecy. Guild rules and all." There was no oath to keep it secret. She was making an excuse so she looked better.

"I thought you were sealed away," said Narianel. She had deliberately ignored Adela. The conflict in her was great.

"I was, but this Guild of Archivists group found the box in a ruin and just so happened to have the key to freeing me,"

said Akenesa. Would she know what that key was? That was a conversation for later.

“How long have you been out?” asked Narianel.

“Just a few days,” she said. She looked up at the violet sky of Avani. It was threatening to rain soon, though that was apparently normal for the time of year. “I hate this sky so much, but we’ll add a moon soon enough.”

That wasn’t something she would say lightly. It was part of her planned return of Galina. A proper moon in the sky in honour of God and Family.

“Where’s your doll?” asked Narianel. She meant her phylactery.

“In the Archive, for now,” said Akenesa. “I’ll move it when I return Nerik to the material world.” She was debating this, but it’s what came out her mouth. She thought about destroying and losing her lichdom, but she needed that safety net while Manford was still alive. “First I will be going to collect my sister. Do you wish to join me?”

“I wish I could,” said Narianel.

“I know of your fight, but thought I would ask anyway. I’ve been watching you for a long time. I’ve seen all your battles and saw all your victories.” And she was so proud of her little cousin.

“Not at all unnerving, but something my mother had theorised about,” said Narianel. It was said with a smile, a rare sight on the girl’s face. She invited Akenesa and Adela inside and led them to the dining room. The house was large and the architecture clearly took after the different houses of Nerik. An open to the sky courtyard of the Kewaen, the kept back garden of the Zoraken, the pillars and arches of the Talwaen. Anða loved her heritage, clearly.

Narianel served them some tea. It had a soft aroma and Adela started on it straight away. Akenesa wondered if the flavour was bought specifically for Adela. When Narianel sat down Akenesa began.

“Narianel, you walk a dangerous path. A foe like the

Morning Star would be nothing to me or Liara or Sasha, but you are still so young. You've yet to reach your peak and then continue climbing higher. This will be the toughest fight you have ever been through. Are you ready for that?"

"I am," said Narianel. Her face grew determined.

"I looked into your grandfather," said Akenesa. "He was a decent man. A bit crass, but mostly alright. Hardening his aether was a good trick, though. Just from watching him I believe I can replicate it. Did he leave you any notes?"

"I have his journals where he details it, but I've not gone over them yet. Haven't been in the mood to read them."

"Learn it quickly then," said Akenesa. She understood the tone of voice. She had also not been in the mood to study after the death of her parents. But any edge in her task would be useful. "You have time before your meeting with the Eyes, correct?"

"Just how much do you watch me?" asked Narianel. Discomfort spread across her form.

"Since your mother and Isaac left to the Aether Sea you are the only family within my sight. Aleksashdra in his castle and Vala in Nerik are not my family and so I don't keep a close watch of them. But I'll turn a blind eye for tonight. Your woman's aura here is flared in the same way Sasha's does and it's always uncomfortable to be near. Bed her already. I'm returning to the Guild. We can talk more when you get back from your mission. Hopefully I will have Liara before then and we can work on that promise you made to your mother."

She subtly pushed her cup of tea towards Adela and patted her once on the head as she left. She had said that the girl's aura flared, but it was both of them. Getting them in the same room was like standing between Sasha and Azra-el. The pair could burn a hole through a wall with their intensity.

She hit the streets and was glad to be out of there. She had used up most of her knowledge in that last push, but she knew that Narianel got her point. She was finally out of her shell and good to go.

The promise she had mentioned was going to be the important point, which is why she ended on it. A promise to kill Manford Talgarath where he stood. Anða had realised the problem and done her own investigating, and when the time came she passed down that knowledge.

Akenesa had returned to Narianel's home and brought along her phylactery. The girl turned the little doll over in her hands with a sceptical look on her face.

"Why would you store your core in here?" she asked.

"I was working on an experiment, but now it's a useful precaution."

"It's the reason you were trapped," said Narianel as she put the doll on the table as gently as she could.

"That's true," said Akenesa, "but I'm starting to think it was fate."

"Not afraid of getting struck down?" asked Narianel. It seemed to be common belief that mentioning luck or destiny would bring you quickly to an end on Avani, but Akenesa was not so superstitious. She knew the Gods behind the Game and knew they wouldn't hurt her on purpose.

"Not at all."

"You mentioned an experiment." Narianel finally sat down. She was agitated, but Akenesa couldn't blame her. She was ready for war. "What was it?"

"I was working on my presence theory. The idea that some people are more attuned to the universe. It was long rumoured that becoming a lich increased magical potency so I performed some actions, became a lich, and then performed those actions again."

"And the result?"

"A slight increase," said Akenesa, managing a shrug. "I didn't get enough information to conclude one way or another but I have better proof now."

"And that is?"

"You." Akenesa tried for a soft smile and wasn't sure that she managed it. "I saw your soul mature, and I saw you unleash your power in the temple below the city. Your soul fundamentally changed in a way that tied your words to the universe. You don't simply have more raw aether for any magic

you wish to weave, you have more authority within the universe and so it will listen more closely.”

“More reason to feel less human,” said Narianel, her voice upset, her arms crossed, her eyes averted.

“You were never human, Narianel,” said Akenesa. The girl looked at her in confusion. “You might have some level of human blood in you through your Blair and Zoraken lines, but that doesn’t make you a human. You are more of a nephilim and a Vanavolk and a twilight spirit than you will ever be a human. Your vampire line is also quite weak.

“But that isn’t a bad thing. We should all be accepting of who we are. I am half Vanavolk and half human, and I do not reject either side but I also don’t solely commit to either side. I have walked in society and ran in the wilds and both are me. Accept yourself and reclaim that power, Narianel. It is a part of you.”

“I’ll... think about.” Narianel went to make more tea for Akenesa.

“And this, dear cousin, is Walden Morris. He is a Seer and will be the key to waking Galina.”

Narianel looked Walden up and down with suspicious eyes, Akenesa noticing the girl’s eyes linger on the boy’s arm. They were meeting in the Guild’s training yard as Akenesa had invited her to vent some of her frustration.

“Train hard,” Narianel said to Walden. “I want to meet her as soon as I get back from my task.”

“You’re going somewhere?” asked Walden.

“Whether the Eyes of Chassuille help me or not I’m going to the Isle of Dusk to kill a fallen angel.” The intensity and malevolent pressure rolling off her soul would have made Akenesa shiver if not for her scar. “They meet in another five or so days. I’m waiting for them to gather so they can make the decision.”

“On that topic,” said Akenesa. “I’ll be tracking you when you go there. It won’t be my top priority, as you can understand, but I believe I can move the island back into the waters near Nerik. You just need to go there and clear out the dangers.”

“That’s the plan. Now, shall we?” asked Narianel with a grin, two sickles appearing in her hands after a burst of silver light. Akenesa nodded and they took their places in the middle of the training yard.

Archivists had gathered around the edges of the area and Akenesa heard them chanting all Narianel’s various nicknames and titles she had earned over her short life. They revered her as a Goddess of war. Fitting for one with Skraeðan blood, even if Lunada hadn’t favoured the art of combat.

“Go!” shouted Mister Thomas and Narianel charged before Akenesa could move an inch. She was already faster and stronger since fighting the regenerating beast. She had loosened her shackles but hadn’t quite freed herself yet.

Akenesa had already raised her shields by the time the

girl reached her. Her black glass hexagons locked together and absorbed the impact from Narianel's strikes. Her sickles were divine blades forged by Prochorus and so were incredibly sharp, but Akenesa had studied the blades years ago and so was prepared to counteract them. Her own shields were based on Barrier's power.

With each strike came a burst of aether, like a thunder clap that shook the windows. It still wasn't enough to break through Akenesa's shields, however, as Akenesa's words were too well practised for such chaotic attacks. Her rage lent her strength and focus but Narianel's dance of blades was exactly what Akenesa had trained to fight. The girl reminded her of the Etherians, in a way.

Deep within the girl Akenesa felt that unnatural void that she sensed in Manford and that visage she had learned was called Egil Krom. Narianel had told her of the things Egil had talked about and Akenesa could see the claim Azael had made on her soul. The girl rejected it and fought to keep on the side of right, but Akenesa couldn't deny what fuelled those attacks.

The sickle in Narianel's left hand, the one known as Havoc, changed in a flash of silver light into a black sword only a foot or so in length. Akenesa recognised it instantly and rather than block the swing she dodged backwards, using the shadows to zip herself across the ground.

"From what I've heard you weren't one to retreat," said Narianel with a smug smile.

"Long ago when most of those blades were still in Nerik, a few were taken in by our family. The absence of the owner meant they were simply powerful magical items to be sold and lent, and eventually we just had three. Crow, Thorn, and Fang.

"One year during the Long Fog Sasha lost a duel, and lost Fang. It wasn't common for her to lose a fight, but she had challenged the angel known as Michael. I saw the power of that blade many times before it passed to into the angel's hands.

It's humorous that it found its way back into the family, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten."

"My mother never mentioned this," said Narianel.

"She hadn't been born yet and we were sealed when she was very young," said Akenesa. "Sasha was unlikely to tell her about such a loss at that age."

Akenesa changed her stance to something far more useful in the situation, the shields distancing themselves from her. The black hexagons spun around her disconnected from each other creating a tornado of glass and dust. She took a wide stance and pulled her spear from her soul, holding the handle horizontally above her head with the tip pointing at Narianel.

The girl charged into the storm, bouncing and dancing with speed towards Akenesa. Narianel had the dexterity and keen senses to make the dodges look easy, but Akenesa had a surprise for her. She began to sing and the look in Narianel's eyes meant she knew what was coming.

The song was one that Akenesa knew well but that didn't matter. All that mattered was that the universe heard her and bent to her will. She sang Viktor Sala's masterpiece of the Lunatic Choir, *Wolves in Blood*, and her power grew in an instant.

The world twisted away and all that was left was the two girls in an endless black void. This was the power she should have used against Argus. White pillars shot from the depths in all directions as reality was wound around Akenesa. In the distance, far above, the white moon of Terra appeared, soon followed by its red sister to their right.

Platforms sprouted from the pillars and soulfire raged around them, flowing and spiralling like a river, and on the edge of hearing were the howls of the ash hounds and the cries of the lunar crows.

By the time Narianel had navigated the maze of pillars and platforms it was too late, Akenesa had stopped singing. She stood strong and with a howl she shattered reality.

They were back in the Archivist's training yard and Akenesa crouched down and touched Narianel's cheek. Her soul's core was perfectly intact but she was unconscious. The pressure Akenesa had exerted on her had been too much, but this was a test. How would she fare when her power had been unchained and she had become one with the universe?

"What was that?" Narianel managed to whisper as she woke and pushed herself to her knees.

"I created a pocket within space and dragged your soul through a spacial shattering. You're unharmed, which is a surprise. Most die from it, and those that survive are hurt. The universe likes you."

"Doesn't seem that way," said Narianel, holding her head. "You didn't speak any words, you just sang and it all happened."

"The words didn't need to be spoken," said Akenesa, helping Narianel to her feet. "The universe understood my intent. The song was building aether while my mind did the rest."

"I think this is too complicated for me."

"You underestimate yourself, Narianel." Akenesa held out a hand to help her to her feet.

Akenesa held Perception in her hands. It had been a long time since she had handled one of Prochorus's divine blades, even if her time in the box was ignored. She could feel the power in the blade and also its disobedience. The fallen angel that was used to make the blade didn't want to give her its power.

Narianel sat in a corner of the room with Adela. They were talking about nothing in particular and Akenesa could see peace in Narianel's eyes. She had a subtle smile and it reminded Akenesa of Sasha and Azra-el. One was mad with power and the other held a profound sadness, but when together the vampire and the angel radiated joy.

Placed neatly on several tables in Narianel's library were the divine blades she had collected. Havoc and Malice were two sickles and also Narianel's favourites. Venom and Fang were made from wood grown in the Black Forest, ancestral home of the Vanavolk. Claw she had claimed by defeating the visage Egil, though Narianel believed him to still be alive. Perception she had claimed from below the city in the Temple of Eyes. She was also apparently in talks with one of the Eyes of Chassuille for another. A spear named Gungnir.

Then there was the curious case of Almut and Wraith. Akenesa wondered if Narianel had noticed that a divine blade was being used as a handle for the broken blade of the other. She didn't seem to count it when she said she owned six and a half blades. It should be seven and a half.

Akenesa put down Perception and picked up Fang. An instant aetherial twitch ran up her arm. The demon of the blade wanted to be used. Its power was purely destructive and it craved to release it upon the universe. Abaddon was such a dangerous creature.

Then she felt it. There was another divine blade in the room, but she couldn't place it. There were too many here and it was confusing her senses.

"What's wrong?" asked Narianel. "Why are you looking

around like that?”

“I thought I felt something,” said Akenesa. The aura faded. “Maybe it was my imagination.”

It was night and Akenesa sat at the top of the bell tower attached to the Guild of Archivists. She stared at the empty sky and if she could sigh then she would have. She hated the empty sky. There were no stars and no moons and it was no wonder all the ash hounds had gone feral.

The world was blanketed in a thick darkness, though her eyes could pierce its veil. She was a Vanavolk and this was what she was built for. She dropped to the ground, a gentle flap of her wings breaking her fall. She became shadow and wound her way through the city at such speed she reached Narianel’s home within a minute.

When she emerged from the shadows she was in the courtyard, gently lit by lanterns at its edges. There was a lawn surrounded by black rose bushes, which in turn was bordered by a raised deck. There were steps at the centre of each of the four sides leading up to the deck, which had a canopy covering it. The deck had a solid fence keeping the roses from growing up onto it.

This was a place of peace. Akenesa knelt down and sniffed her namesake, the black roses of Nerik. These had been grown from seeds taken from the Talwaen Estate by Anđa when she had built the house. Narianel had been raised well and had been taking care of them, though the bushes were rugged and could survive in the wild just like a Vanavolk.

From the shadows stepped a stranger. A black Host of the Heavenly Soul.

“It’s rare to see another one of you Vanavolk,” he said. He spoke in fluent Skrae without a trace of the Neri dialect and accent, but that wasn’t a surprise. His eyes betrayed him as a foreigner to Nerik.

“It is rare to see a melanistic Host,” she replied. “May I ask which demon you crawled out of?”

“My mother was the human,” he said. “My father is the one that young Beatrix intends to kill. The Morning Star.”

“And yet you ally yourself with her? You follow the Grand Lord and make friends with his most loyal followers?”

“My life has been complicated,” he said, placing his hands on the face and leaning out into the night. “I was raised on the Isle of Dusk, taught to fight, to kill. I became a killer, an assassin, and went out into the world to gather information for my father. But I became disillusioned and when I was approached by Gregory Blair to either die by his hands or to join his fledgling organisation, I took the chance.”

“What is your name, Host?” asked Akenesa.

“Gilbert Huff. I already know yours.”

“Do you sleep?” she asked abruptly. He knew what she was asking and looked away. “Be careful of the path you walk. I fear Narianel walks it too.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” said Gilbert. “I owe Gregory that much.”

“When you speak his name your aura flares.”

“Mind your own business,” said Gilbert, dissolving into shadows and vanishing into the night. Akenesa wished she could laugh. The man was so embarrassed by his attraction. He wouldn’t fit in well in Nerik.

Akenesa had spent five days training up Walden and was glad to see him making good progress. He was a clever young man and she could see a strong future as a scholar as his path if he didn't get himself killed in some old ruin.

She had also begun teaching a large group of Archivists how to kill vampiric familiars. They weren't full vampires but they had many of their strengths and weaknesses.

"I don't quite appreciate being pulled into the planning of my uncle's death," said Narianel. They stood at the side of the training yard of the guildhouse.

"I know, but your blades and teeth will be useful for these lessons," said Akenesa.

"Aldo is in town and I wish to speak to him," said the girl, looking towards the door. "I think he's holding a meeting tomorrow but I have a lot to say first."

"This won't take long," said Akenesa. She dragged her cousin out in front of the Archivists and they cheered. They really seemed to love her, but Narianel was uncomfortable. Her aura shifted unnaturally as she planned her escape.

"So this is your plan?" asked Mister Thomas. Akenesa gave what she felt was an exaggerated nod but knew it was subtle compared to others.

"People," said Akenesa addressing the crowd. "You all appear to be fond of my dear cousin, but many of you may not be aware of her heritage. You see a Host of the Heavenly Soul, but she is a nephilim. A free angel. You may have seen her Vanavolk form, and that is where our familial ties are. But, on the topic we have been training for, she has ancestral vampiric blood."

"That explains so much!" called one of the Archivists from the crowd.

"Remember seven-seven Rain, six-seventeen!" called out another. Akenesa knew it as a date only by the inclusion of a season name. It was during the war with Cor to the east.

What had Narianel done on that date? Looking at her she seemed proud, her eyes closed and a smirk crossing her face.

“That’s enough of that,” she said, not hiding her smile at all. Akenesa asked her later and found out it was the date of a battle known as the ‘Bloodfield’ in which Narianel had killed over a thousand people on her own after being separated from her scouting party. She had returned to camp covered in blood and looking far too satisfied.

“I want you to pay attention to her lower teeth,” said Akenesa when the crowd’s chattering died down. “Even though she has the Vanavolk’s sharp teeth, her first and second lower canines are notably large. Compare them to mine. These are vampiric fangs. When fighting vampires you need to keep their mouths away from you. If their upper teeth touch you their jaw will snap up and those fangs will tear out a chunk of flesh. They are strong enough to break bones.”

“This is why we’re using iron plates on vital areas,” said Mister Thomas to the crowd. “Pure iron has natural mist properties, and while not enough to be true anti-magic the metal and the aether will keep your necks and arms safe.”

“Over the next few weeks you will also be trained with aetherblades,” said Akenesa. A man named Oggy approached the crowd holding two swords. He was apparently Adela’s father and was the Guild’s training officer. She had been working closely with him over the last few days. “You have seen how these work.”

Narianel summoned Havoc and Malice to her hands and there were nods amongst the crowd. Oggy handed out the two swords and went to fetch more weapons, dragging along a couple to help him.

“I am not an eldithan,” said Akenesa, “but I have done my best each night to craft these weapons. They should hold for the duration of the fight. Don’t compare them to my cousin’s blades, as they are not unbreakable or forged from souls.”

“What’s an eldithan?” asked a man in the crowd.

“It doesn’t have a word in your language,” she said. “Its

closest equivalent would be a blacksmith that specialises in weapons forged with magic rather than by physical means. A mix of forge master and an enchanter. *El* means blade, and *dithan* means weaver.

“The man who made my cousin’s blades was called Prochorus, and he was one of the best eldithan that Nerik had ever seen. It was part of his soul. The weapons he crafted, not just the divine blades, have survived the last two and a half thousand years without a hint of tarnish or a single dulled edge. It takes power on their own level to damage them at all and I only know of three of his hundreds of blades to suffer such damage.”

Without prompt Narianel dismissed her sickles, then released Almut from its harness. She held it up to show how the blade had snapped in battle.

“I am no Prochorus,” said Akenesa. “My blades are not that good. But they will work the same until they break. And you will be needing them in the Castle of Masks. You need to aim for the core of the soul and shatter it. How many of you can feel aether enough to see cores?”

Only a few hands went up and it was all mages rather than any of the warriors. Such was the culture of Vin. In Nerik every warrior could see souls so they could accurately aim their blade, whether destroying the soul or missing to simply send them to the afterlife. This wouldn’t do.

“Alright... Alright...” she said with an internal sigh and cry of frustration. “Those of you who can see cores, we’re going to go around the crowd and teach people where their own cores are. Those of you who can’t see cores, learn the location of your own core and keep it in mind when fighting. You all have standard placements, except for people like Walden Morris who is a Seer, and so if you know your own place then you can aim for it in other people.”

“Can I go now?” whispered Narianel as the crowd started to move.

“I was hoping you would help with this, but I can see

you are getting impatient. This is not your fight. Meet me tonight in the fields to the east of Seremont. Where your soul matured and you ascended. I have something to show you and I hope it is useful in your fight.”



Narianel had created a ball of flame that followed her around like a fluttering fairy. It was a common spell used in Vin to see in the dark, but Narianel shouldn't have needed it.

“What is it you want to show me?” she asked.

“This,” said Akenesa, and within moments she had become her true self. The Vanavolk. Part crow, part wolf. She towered over Narianel and spread her wings. “I wanted to show you what you have forgotten.” Her voice echoed on the wind and through Narianel's mind.

“I haven't forgotten,” she said.

“Then show me this side of your power,” said Akenesa. Narianel wouldn't meet her eyes. “You are afraid of yourself. I can see that. Use your journey to the Isle of Dusk. Make it matter. Defeat that fallen angel and awaken your power. Do not waste your reality by chasing a dream of the mundane.”

Akenesa turned back into her human form in a flurry of feathers and darkness so deep that the fairy light couldn't pierce it.

“I understand,” said Narianel. She wouldn't admit to her hesitance, but it was clear in her soul.

“I also have a favour to ask you,” said Akenesa. She held out her phylactery. “I want you to store this in your house instead of me leaving it with the Archivists. My plan against Manford is already in motion and I trust you more than I trust the Archivists.”

“That I can do without fear,” said Narianel. She took the little porcelain doll with care. “My mother once told me that the house's magic is attuned to Manford's soul. He won't be able to enter. Your soul is safe with me.”

Akenesa walked into Narianel's bedroom to see the girl sitting on her bed in a meditative state. Her soul was still because there was no consciousness. It was adrift somewhere else in the universe. Narianel eventually opened her eyes.

"Curious," said Akenesa.

"What is?" asked Narianel, moving to sit on the edge of her bed.

"Sending your mind elsewhere while leaving your body and soul behind. I wish I had considered it while I was sealed away, but then again, my magic was also heavily limited in that box. I could only see, not interact."

They moved to the common room and Narianel made some tea. It seemed to be a compulsion to treat her guests. It was likely something Anða had taught her.

"Why haven't you gone to collect Liara yet?" the girl eventually asked.

"She's waited a thousand years so another season or two won't change anything," said Akenesa. "Sadly I can see inside the box and she became empty long ago. She sleeps and waits. It hurts to see, but I'm humouring the Archivists. They want to mount an attack on the Castle of Masks."

"They're going to attack my uncle?" asked Narianel. "Why would they even try that?" The question was rhetorical. She knew their plan well enough. "I only met Alek once," said Narianel after a short while. "I was very young when I went to his castle. There was something about him that struck me as odd."

"His heart is heavy with sorrow," said Akenesa. "He yearns for the greatest sin, Narianel. The reason I humour the Archivists isn't that Liara can wait. I would rather save her as quickly as possible. Bring back that light in my life, but... I hesitate to destroy him."

She didn't want to admit that she loved him. She had turned him down so many times and the reason she had tried

to fix her soul was so that she could be with him. She wanted him to see her smile. But he had succumbed to the Hollowing and just like every other immortal that had experienced the same he waited for someone to kill him to retain his honour.

“He’s really that far gone?” asked Narianel. “I didn’t know. I wish I had. I would have visited him while I was in Fye this last year.”

“Anđa knew when she took you there,” said Akenesa. “She wanted you to meet him before he went through with it. He actually guards Liara’s prison carefully because he respects her. He awaits my arrival and now he knows I’m free. He won’t sin, but position himself as a villain in the story.”

She had made sure to flare her aether and send a burst towards to the Castle of Masks after she had revealed herself to Narianel. Alek needed to know she was there, that she was coming. It wouldn’t be long.

“You’re going to give him mercy?”

“That’s the plan.” She realised she hadn’t had any of her tea so she downed it. She was too distracted with the conversation and it had gone cold. “It’s not unlike your task with the Morning Star.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see when you get there,” said Akenesa. “Alek is driven to corruption by the fall of Nerik and is ready to die. The Morning Star is fuelled by loss too. Remember that. Now, I can sense Adela’s aether bouncing down the street, so I’ll leave you here. You should be gone only a few days, so I think you should be able to join us if you wish to see Alek again.”

“I would like that,” said Narianel. “Hopefully this fight doesn’t take too much out of me so I don’t delay you.”

It was getting to be late at night and Akenesa had tracked the soul signature of Narianel through a portal to a place on the other side of the planet. The Isle of Dusk was incredibly far away, outside the wall of water known as the Torrent. Akenesa had set its location into her memory and would bring it back to Nerikan waters when the time was right.

Adela sat in the corner of Akenesa's office. She had fallen asleep some hours before but had been eager to get updates on Narianel's fight. She had listened as Akenesa described the fights against Puriel, the small army, and Turul. Narianel had claimed two more divine blades, Waterling and Flameroot, and Akenesa could see the rest of Almut in the fallen angel's hands.

Akenesa was stunned at Narianel's beauty and could hardly describe it to Adela. A spiral of wings larger than Seremont with a pinpoint of brilliant red and black light at its centre. Entirely inhuman and yet enchanting. She had become her true self and embraced her divinity. Lunada's blood flowed strong, her presence was intimidating, and her aether seeped through cracks in the universe that she created by moving.

She had repaired a twilight sky and defeated Lucifer, but it had been at a cost. Akenesa saw the dying curse and the destruction it wrought upon Narianel's soul. She saw the reapers come to take Lucifer's soul, and she saw them take Narianel beyond her vision.

And then came a message directly into her mind. It was a familiar voice. The Grand Lord himself.

"She is safe."

"What does that even mean?" asked Adela. "Do you have any idea? Is she going to be alright?"

"I have an idea, but if it's true then the Grand Lord is far more intelligent than I took him for." Akenesa leaned back in her chair, tipping it back onto two legs and balancing it. "What do you know of the Game of Fate?"

"I have no idea what that is," said Adela. It was at that point that Mister Thomas walked in and the two girls looked at him.

"I need to talk with you, Lady Akenesa." His tone was so formal it amused her. Adela ducked out the room and he sat in her seat, making sure the door was closed. "What were you about to say?"

"Not much," said Akenesa. She managed a sly smile.

"How much do you know?" he asked.

"Everything. I've been groomed by the matriarch."

"You cannot tell my Archivists about it," said Mister Thomas, trying to intimidate her, but it wouldn't work.

"Secrets and lies are a cancer, Mister Thomas. They

grow and contort reality until everything breaks. Adela Ogden will be closely tied to the future of my House and so she will know the truth. But if you wish to stop me from telling her, then you can try, but you won't succeed. Even if you do stop me, do you think you could stop Narianel when she finds out? I believe she's on her way to Sonta right now. What are the chances that she *doesn't* meet Mao?"

He stared at her for a short time before standing and leaving. Adela crept back into the room and Akenesa took the time to explain the game the Gods play, who Azael was, and the role of people like Narianel.

It had been a while since Akenesa had been in an airship. This one was also filled with soldiers but they didn't wear a uniform. They were the most eclectic group she had ever seen, like a team of adventurers from a trashy play. Walden sat to her side, practising what she had taught him.

There were three airships, each holding around twenty Archivists plus supplies. They planned to set up camp in the forest near the Castle of Masks and for the attack to be on the next day.

The airships flew further north, following the Salest mountain range. On the horizon Akenesa saw the island that held Nerik and the homesickness was strong. It would still be a few days before she could go home, but it still called to her. She longed to hear the Lunatic Choir and curl into the embrace of Galina.

The airship shuddered and Akenesa stood. They were flying in a pile junk loosely bound together by people who didn't understand the technology completely. Akenesa looked back to Nerik and recalled the airship fleet. Even the Coral Kingdom, years behind as it was, had better airships than this.

They moved into the mountains, flying above a canyon known as the Northern Pass. It wasn't long before they passed into the eastern plains and the Castle of Masks was visible to the north, surrounded by a dense forest.

They landed and Akenesa watched as the Archivists got to work setting up camp. She was impressed at how quick they were, most of them having done this dozens of times. They had a separate command tent and had already divided into teams without being ordered. Even the newer Archivists like Walden and Iris knew what they were doing. They were a clever lot.

As she stepped off the airship Akenesa caught a scent on the air, one both familiar and menacing. There was no hint of aether to accompany it, but that made it all the more clear who it was. She told Mister Acker she would be going into the

forest and not to worry. She would be back as soon as she could.

“It has been a long time,” she said when she was close to the source of the scent. “Are you going to resist what I’m here to do? I wonder. You have certainly improved your spells in my absence. I’m glad you didn’t stagnate.”

“I won’t let you do it,” came a voice from various places amongst the trees. To her left, to her right, and above in the canopy. “I can’t.”

“You will have to, Ana,” said Akenesa. “You needn’t be harmed in the process. You’ve seen what’s happened to his mind. If I don’t do this then House Kewaen will suffer a great dishonour and fall apart. Its pieces will be auctioned off and some other House will rise to claim its position in the Synod.”

“That will happen even if you kill him!” Ana hissed. She was standing behind Akenesa, who slowly turned to meet her eyes. Ana’s youthful skin belied a haggard soul. Her hair had been cut recently to shoulder length but it was still a mess. Her eyes were unsteady and darting around. Her mental strife had grown worse.

“If I keep the House’s honour then it will not die. Sasha will inherit. She will become the new Lady Kewaen.”

“I see your game!” shouted Ana, pointing at Akenesa so close she was almost touching her forehead. “Lady Akensashdra is the child of Lady Galina’s first. She is primed to inherit the title of Lady Talwaen and you seek to unseat her and take it for yourself!”

“I shall be waking up Galina as soon as possible,” said Akenesa. “She will return to duty as Lady Talwaen. I seek no titles, only peace for Alek.”

“Lady Galina’s malady prevents her from duty,” said Ana. “That is why she delegated to Lady Anastasya. You will not fool me. I see through your plans.”

“If Galina cannot perform her duties then it will fall to Anđa. She would return to Nerik if given the opportunity.”

Ana squinted her eyes and stared at Akenesa.

“Failing that,” said Akenesa, “there is always Narianel. Have you met Narianel?”

“Once,” said Ana. She started to circle Akenesa. “Lord Aleksashdra introduced her to me, though it was so brief I doubt she remembers me.”

“And while Nerik is matriarchal, when he turns sixteen there is Isaac too. There has yet to be a Lord Talwaen, though we would not reject his leadership. A Vanavolk is a Vanavolk. There are plenty of options in the primary line after Sasha, so this is not a power grab. This is for Alek.”

Ana growled, then screamed, then became a shadow and vanished into the forest. Akenesa caught a wisp of her aether in her scent and began mentally reverse engineering the spells that hid Ana as she walked back to the Archivists.

“We heard a scream,” said Walden as she reached the camp. He had a magearm in his hand. It was a small device, somewhere between firearm and aether cannon. The guards in Nerik used similar devices, though they were far closer to regular rifles than weapons of destruction.

“How many shots do you have in that?” she asked. “Does it require new bullets?”

“It takes cartridges with three shots each,” he said. He tapped three small cylinders on his belt next to the weapon’s holster. “I’m carrying three extras, so I have twelve shots in total. I’m just finishing up repairs on a second magearm so I’ll have two fully loaded going into battle and I’ll be able to reload both once, or a single one twice.”

“And how goes the preparation for the fight with Alek? Have you managed to defeat him in your visions yet?”

This had been her primary plan for dealing with Alek. She planned to make him look like a hero in the eyes of the Nerikan people. She wanted him to die defending Liara from the Archivists, whose lust for knowledge led them down a wrong path. The Archivists would be quickly reformed and become a strong ally, and Alek would find the end he sought.

She hated her plan, but it was the only way that Alek

could retain his honour. She didn't want him to die, but he had lost his vital spark, he had become Hollow. He was little more than a beast now and couldn't be saved.

Walden was proving to be highly convenient to her. His blood was the key to many locks, and his Sight allowed her to manipulate events the way she saw fit. She would need to reward him for his service.

"I'm close, but I keep running out of shots," he said. "He can shapeshift and turn into shadows and there's so much magic I don't understand yet. I think I can work it out tonight so I can fight tomorrow."

"Don't exhaust yourself," said Akenesa. "You still need to be able to fight."

She sent him back to his work and went to see Mister Thomas in the command tent. There was a local area map as well as a rough outline of the castle.

"Are you here to help or judge?" asked Traugott Amsel. He was seeming more and more like Mister Acker's right hand man as the days went on. He didn't like her, though she didn't know why. The bald mage had a sceptical look on his face.

"Help," she said, picking up a feathered quill. She dipped it in ink, opened her eyes to the world, and started filling in the castle map. With her world sight she could see all the rooms and corridors. She filled in details like large tables and statues that could be useful in a fight, and she made notes on where some captives were held.

"The front door isn't well protected for a castle," said Traugott. "Other than the portcullis being down, there's nothing between the gate and the front door."

"Once inside I'll take Walden through the chapel," said Akenesa. Mister Thomas had some small statues with little name tags tied around their necks. She noticed hers had been painted black, while the others were colour coded depending on the skills they possessed. "True vampires will be stationed near Alek in the offices on the second floor. Your people are to stay away from there."

“We’re to fight familiars, correct?” asked another one of the Archivists. This was a woman named Luz Aqua that Akenesa hadn’t gotten to know yet. By the colour of her statue it looked like she was an antimagic user.

“Correct,” said Mister Acker. “We kill the familiars and warn any Nerikan person to back off.”

“Why are you taking Walden?” Traugott asked, looking at Akenesa.

“I’ve been teaching him to Prefight,” she said. “He’s quite smart, so I have confidence he’ll figure it out.”

“Prefight?” asked Luz.

“Using his powers as a Seer to plan every step of a fight so that he’s guaranteed victory,” said Mister Thomas. “You’re sure he’s good at it? He’s not been aware of his powers for that long.”

“A little over half a year,” said Traugott.

“I don’t doubt him,” said Akenesa. “I won’t be able to help him in the fight, but I’m making sure he’s ready.”

“Why can’t you help?” asked Luz.

“It won’t help the narrative,” said Mister Thomas with a keen smile. “Do they use magic to discern lies in Nerikan courts?”

“Of course,” said Akenesa. “I need to do everything I can to make sure the story is correct so that I can pass those checks, but I doubt this will go to court. This is just in case. And while we’re talking about it, this is my official order to sneak into the castle and steal away the box containing Liara, just so I can say that is our purpose here. It’s not my fault if you disobey and things go wrong.”

The small group laughed. It was hard for her to convey humour and sarcasm, but they understood.

“Also, you need to be careful of Ana Kegarath. She was sometimes called Ana the Paranoid. I hadn’t expected her to be here but I’m not surprised she is. I met her in the forest before coming here and she is planning to fight. I can smell the desperation. She will likely go after me in the chapel and I’ll

have to let Walden go to the fight alone.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Mister Thomas.

“I provoked her,” said Akenesa. “I had to. I simply told the truth, but she is irrational. She now views me as a threat.” She avoided saying that she had to lure her away from the Archivists because they were too weak to deal with her. Ana would slaughter them all except Mister Thomas.

“Alright,” said Mister Acker. “Everyone, get some rest and make sure the equipment is ready. It begins tomorrow at dawn.”

There was blood on the air as she prowled the night. Her claws and talons kicked up the soft soil and her wings pushed aside the branches. Her eyes saw through the thick blanket of Avani’s night and painted the world in monochrome.

She had already scared away a group of familiars going towards the Archivists and could still smell Ana in the area. The vampire’s scent lacked perfume, but there was just a hint of Alek and a lot of fear. And then there was a scream and the smell of burning canvas.

Akenesa rushed back to the camp, knocking over trees and tilling the soil. When she reached the camp she slid to a stop, kicking dust into the air, and with a howl she called the rain. The fire was soon out and she strode through the camp. Ana was close.

“She is *far* bigger than Blackwood,” she heard Traugott say. Had he been there during the war to see her fight that fool Marquis? She ignored the thought as she followed Ana’s trail back into the forest, soon catching up to her.

“Stay back!” she shouted, holding an Archivist by the neck. The man was bleeding from his side.

“Release the man and we can talk,” said Akenesa as she became human-shaped again.

“There is nothing else to say!” shouted Ana, fangs on full display. “You’re going to kill him! I won’t let it happen!”

“Just let him go,” said Akenesa. She stepped forward

and Ana took a step back, pulling the man along with her. “We can even fight if you wish.”

Ana narrowed her eyes and then pushed the man to the ground. He scrambled and ran away.

“Do you not see that he is Hollow?” asked Akenesa.

“It’s not true!” said Ana, tears welling up in her eyes. “He is doing well. He sees me! He speaks to me! He’s not that far gone!”

Akenesa walked to Ana and held her in a tight hug. It wasn’t something she was comfortable with, it wasn’t even something she thought she was able to do, but she knew that it was needed. Ana began to cry into her shoulder.

“Go spend the night with the man you love, Ana. He has fought the call of the Void for so long now, so comfort him now. Come tomorrow it will all be over, as I will show him my own love in the only way I can. Mercy.”

The Archivists made their way through the forest and Akenesa scouted ahead as a shadow. She made sure there were no ambushes waiting and then slipped through the portcullis of the outer wall's gate. She found her way to the mechanism and opened the portcullis, then waited atop the gate.

As the Archivists approached she heard their energetic conversations halt and the orders from the leaders begin. They sorted themselves into their teams and walked through the gate, and Akenesa jumped down next to them.

"How does that not break your legs?" asked Traugott.

"I'm only half-human," Akenesa said as Walden took his place beside her. "My bones are that of the Vanavolk. This form is simply for convenience. I'm really a thirty-foot tall denizen of the night. We split here. With me, Walden."

She led the young Seer to the left of the castle and into the chapel. She didn't recognise the architecture, but the walls were lined with clear symbology.

"Sorren of the Hunt, Torkin of Labour, Seran of Life." She looked at the names of the Gods carved into the walls and decorated in flowing lines.

"The people of this castle hunted but also worshipped High Lady Seran?" asked Walden. "That feels contradictory."

"What do you know of the masks this castle is named for?" asked Akenesa.

"Nothing."

"I feel them lining the walls." Akenesa turned to her right and looked through the castle with her world sight. "They were once alive. People and creatures. The people of this castle before the Ruination weren't just hunters. They took the souls of people and worked them into the masks. The symbol of Torkin the Eldith confirms this. The masks have charms woven into them that allows the wearer to become the person or creature trapped inside. To live their life."

"That's honestly rather disturbing," said Walden.

“It’s time for you to go,” said Akenesa. She turned to look at Ana, squatting on the pedestal at the far end of the chapel like a perched crow. “You know the way?”

“I do,” he said after following Akenesa’s eyes. She saw the fear in his eyes as he left. Ana didn’t even try to stop him. She didn’t realise their real plan. She just let Alek die without even knowing it.

“I won’t let you pass,” she said once Walden had left. “I cannot let you kill him.”

“Let’s decide it here, then,” said Akenesa. She pulled a black spear from her soul, and from her left hand up to and around her neck she created shields.

“How long will it take you to get back here when I’ve torn apart your body?” asked Ana.

“Five hundred miles with mountains in the way? I can do that in half an hour.”

Ana leapt from the pedestal and in a perfect arc she landed on top of Akenesa, who raised her shields and threw her off. Ana bounded along the ground and pews in a grace that Akenesa had come to associate with Narianel. When she jumped at Akenesa again she was met with a spear to the gut and tossed to the floor.

The wound healed quickly, and Akenesa knew that this would need to end quickly. Ana’s ability to heal would keep her on her feet for long into the day, so Akenesa began to plan her move. She made mental notes of everything in the chapel, from the pews to the pedestals to the statues lining the walls.

Ana’s claws were deflected by shields and the vampire dodged Akenesa’s swipes with the spear. Akenesa forced her away and they stood looking at each other for a moment.

“Why are you so determined to do this!?” asked Ana, tears flowing. “Why do you want him dead!?”

“I don’t,” said Akenesa. “But when I’ve taken Liara, what do you think will happen? He’s Hollow and without his purpose. It will be the end of House Kewaen.”

“He’s not Hollow!” Ana screamed with such ferocity

that Akenesa's ears rang. She charged and Akenesa countered by filling the chapel with black flames. Ana jumped high into the air to dodge the flames but was pierced by Akenesa's thrown spear and pinned to the wall.

"That's enough of that," said Akenesa. With a little nod of intent the spear split and bent, becoming cage for the vampire.

"Let me down!" Ana demanded. The spear split in a mess of fractals and tangents until it became a solid sphere with the vampire trapped inside, still skewered. It fell from the wall and landed heavily.

"I'll let you out once I have Liara back," said Akenesa, dismissing the flames and tapping the sphere. It made a dull metallic sound with each tap and Ana began screaming.

As Akenesa left the chapel and followed the halls to the throne room where Alek and Walden fought, she heard a shot and Alek's aether became erratic. Akenesa rushed and threw open the doors.

"Alek," she said. He was on the ground, clutching his chest. His soul was unravelling. Kneeling beside him she held his hand and he looked her in the eyes.

"Akenesa..." he said, his voice weak. "I'm going now. I have been waiting for this."

"I know," she said. "I trained the boy so I wouldn't have to do this myself."

"I figured as much," said Alek. "I can see you watching my core. Don't save it. I don't want the afterlife. I just want the emptiness. I don't have long left. Do me a favour and save the boy. I used a Godslayer on him."

Akenesa's eyes showed a slight bit of the shock she felt and she turned to Walden. His left arm was petrifying and the aether inside was dispersing. She created another black spear and cut off the arm with a swing, then knelt next to him and healed the wound before making sure the aether stayed intact.

When she was done she rushed back to Alek and took his hand, clasping it tight.

“I can see it,” he said. “The sadness in your eyes. I wish I had been stronger. But I hear it even now. That darkness calling to me. The ends of eternity resonate within me, but I should have been better. I wanted to make you smile.”

Akenesa had a mission. She had to defeat Azael. It was everything she had worked for. It was the reason she had studied and experimented. But in that moment she thought she could hear it too. The end. The divine nothing that many immortals succumbed to as their minds became overfilled from living so long. The Hollowing.

But she couldn't give in. She clutched Alek's hand and smiled before leaning in and kissing him as the last of his aether unwound.



The Nerikan servants gathered in the gardens as Akenesa set Alek down on the ground. She had freed Ana from the cage and she was sat at Alek's head weeping.

Akenesa nodded to one of the servants who strong-armed Ana away and Akenesa lit the funeral pyre. It hurt to watch him vanish, but she watched until the end. She gave a few words to the servants, who began to pack up all Alek's possessions, but Ana stayed behind.

“You should prepare for the journey to Nerik. You should be ready.”

“I'll stay here with him,” said Ana. Akenesa could see her energy draining in the midday light, but the vampire didn't care any more. She was close to giving up.

“You are a high ranking servant,” said Akenesa, forcing herself to put her hand on Ana's shoulder. “Sasha will awaken soon and take over the house. You will become her right hand. Go supervise the others. I trust you to take care with Alek's belongings, as well as his House duties until Sasha is ready.”

“How will I get to Nerik?” asked Ana.

“We'll go together,” said Akenesa. “The Archivists will

take us tomorrow. Be ready.”



Akenesa scraped some blood from the floor of the throne room where Walden had been lying. She walked behind the throne and put her hand on the box, wiping Walden’s dried blood on the seal. It broke and she stepped back.

The box popped open on its own and inside was Liara’s phylactery, lying still. Akenesa picked it up and placed it on the throne gently.

“Liara,” she said. “Do you hear me?”

The phylactery twitched and Liara’s soul sparked. The soulfire within the phylactery lit and it turned its doll-like head to look at her.

“Aksa...” said Liara, her voice distant.

“It’s time to get up,” said Akenesa. “You’ve been asleep for a very long time. Don’t go Hollow on me now.”

Black and green flames filled the throne room, but they didn’t burn. Liara created a new body and clothed herself as the flames danced about. When everything settled Liara fell into Akenesa’s arms and gave her sister a crushing hug.



Night was approaching and Akenesa had finished talking with Mister Thomas about airship passage and she went to see the boy. Walden had spent all afternoon in surgery, getting a new aethertech port installed where his arm used to be. When he returned to the city he would be given a new arm.

“His body is surprisingly tolerant of new components,” said Elpis. She was the boy’s mechanic for his other arm and was entirely made of aethertech. She called her kind *figuras*, and she had no more organic parts, though she wore false skin and hair, making it hard to tell she was different at a glance. The eyes stood out as mechanical, however.

“I did what I could to repair the arm,” said Akenesa. “The weapon did a lot of damage to his form, so I’m not sure how well he will be able to control an a new arm.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Elpis. Her smile was soft and warm. The kind of smile Akenesa wished she could make. “I’m very concerned about the weapon, though. Is it still in the castle?”

“No,” said Akenesa. She took the dagger out from the sleeve of her dress and placed it on Elpis’s desk. “I wouldn’t touch it if I were you. It’s called a ‘Godslayer’ for a reason. It frays the soul and turns flesh to stone. Its poison slowly spreads through the body and can be fatal quite quickly.”

“How many of these are there?” asked Elpis, looking at the dagger in disgust.

“Too many, though most were destroyed. Not without a lot of pain. My family has the power it does because of them. And Chassuille is...” Akenesa flicked the top of her left ear, but didn’t explain further. “Make sure Walden rests. I’ll need his power again soon, so tell him I’ll be coming to get him later this year. Oh, and before I go, I’ll need a vial of his blood.”

As the Archivists and Kegarathee unloaded the crates, there was a scent on the wind that Akenesa hadn't smelt in a long time. She pulled away from the work and walked to the figure standing in the distance watching, with Liara tailing her.

Akenesa's black dress and hair flowed in the wind, and this woman's stark monochrome seemed untouched by both time and space. It was Vala Zoraken, Lady of House Zoraken and a revenant whose soul pushed against the universe.

"Greetings, Lady Zoraken," said Akenesa, bowing deep and showing as much reverence as she could muster. "It is a pleasure to see you again." Liara copied the bow.

"Well, if it isn't the abomination from House Talwaen," she said with scorn. "You lead a group of Kegarathee. How did this come about?"

"I gave Lord Aleksahdra his honour." She stood tall and put her hand on Liara's shoulder to stop her attacking Lady Zoraken for the comment. "My cousin will be taking over as Lady Kewaen."

"And who do you plan to be Lady Talwaen?" asked Vala. "Surely not you."

"I'll be waking Galina," said Akenesa. "If the job is to be delegated once again, then I will be nominating Anða for the duty, or perhaps Narianel. I've always been curious, so I think it's time I ask. Why do you hate me?"

"Isn't that obvious? You deny the truth." Vala shook her head.

"I have never denied any truth," said Akenesa. "Like all true Nerikans I seek the truth of the universe."

"You hide your birth," said Vala. "You've taken a false name and taken a new face."

It was a standard Nerikan prejudice. One that had earned her the scorn of the masses outside the cult of night. She was a red soul, a woman, but was born with a male body. When she had come of age and gained enough power she had

told her family she wanted to become female and taken on a new body and name.

“The Vanavolk accept me,” said Akenesa. “I may have been born as Gregor Talwaen but I live as Akenesa Talwaen. The truth is that I was born with a defect that I have since fixed. Do we not repair other birth defects? Deaf children given sound and the blind given sight? Do they deny the truth too?”

Vala looked away and shook her head. “You live as though you were always this. Those children are thankful for the gifts we give them.”

“You don’t know me to know that,” said Akenesa. “I live as myself. I show the world the truth of my soul, even if my body is different from the one I was born in. Tell me, what do you think of Anđa and Narianel? They both accept me for who I am. They see the truth, they know my history, and they do not deny me. Do you consider their beliefs as worthless as lies, or do you trust their judgement?”

“I am old, Akenesa,” said Vala. “I’ll at least be pleasant, but I’m unlikely to change. Perhaps you can convince me in time, if that is your priority. I’ll trust in the judgement of my girls. For now.”

“We need to get into Nerik,” said Akenesa.

“I can get you in, but I’m not sure what you’ll do about the barrier keeping it trapped in the Ethereal Realm.”

“I can feel your raw power, Lady Zoraken, but I believe I might be more skilled, if you will forgive the arrogance. I can break this barrier.”

“I’m forgiving a lot today,” said Vala. “Tell me when you’re ready.”

“Before that,” said Akenesa. She was hesitant but knew that she had to make more ground than just civility. “How many Legion Breaks did I miss?”

“You don’t care about that,” said Vala. The look in her eyes was harsh.

“Not on a personal level,” said Akenesa. “I’m not a Zoraken, after all. But with my power I have a certain level of

duty to the universe. I should be there to help you, just as I should have been there for the opening of the Grand Gate. I'll make no excuses. It was my failure being tricked by Argus and getting stuck in that box for a thousand years, and I should have done better."

Vala's aura flowed a little more freely. The tension eased just a bit. Just enough.

"Tell me when you're ready."



Inside the barrier Nerik was frozen in time. The Ethereal Realm was a place of dense aether forming like a fog, and as Akenesa walked through the streets she remembered the first time Nerik had been trapped in the fog. It had been a long war with a ferocious people, but Akenesa's strategies had allowed the nation to secure a foothold and survive.

With Vala's guidance they had entered through an open area in the Kewaen ground and walked to the Central Star. Akenesa gave Liara and Ana instructions and they set to work creating a rune. Vala stood to the side and watched.

"We are ready," said Akenesa. Liara and Ana stepped off the rune and Akenesa stood on top of the fountain in the middle of the Central Star. She began to sing and felt the power build inside her.

Her song was elegant and flowing, rhythmic and filled with every drop of intent. She pushed her power down into the fountain and out into the rune. The words that wound through the rune lit up one by one in precise order and when they were all glowing Akenesa finished her song and spoke.

"*Thrav!*" *Release.* The barrier shattered like glass and the sound was heard as far away as Seremont. The fog of the Ethereal Realm was absorbed all around the city as fuel and from its thick claustrophobia the city emerged into the light of day. People began to move again, but stumbled as they woke.

Akenesa spoke to the city, her power focussed in her

throat and amplifying her words.

“People of Nerik. You have been trapped for over six hundred years. The war with Dragons has become known as the Ruination and we now exist on a patchwork world called Avani. I have written notes that I will be taking to the printers in the next few days to further inform you. There is no need to panic as we are safe.”

“You know that telling people not to panic is a bad idea, right?” asked Vala as she walked to Akenesa. The smirk on her face was insufferable, though Akenesa saw hints of Narianel in there.

“Then call the Synod,” said Akenesa, jumping down from the fountain and drying her shoes with magic. “There is no active Lady Talwaen right now, and I’m on my way to wake up the new Lady Kewaen.”



Deep within the Vault of the Endless Akenesa and Liara found the chamber where a locket was being stored. That little heart shaped locket contained Sasha’s soul. It had been won by Anđa during a war that had come to Nerik and stored safely.

The locket was around the neck of a bust of Sasha, and hanging on the wall behind it was Thorn, a divine blade of Prochorus that Sasha had claimed as her own. Wounds from the blade never healed and always hurt.

Akenesa took the locket and poured the vial of blood she had taken from Walden over it. It broke in her hand, bits of metal flying in all directions, one piece hitting her in the eye. She removed the shard of metal and healed herself as the glowing core of the locket floated in the air.

And then in a tangle of flesh and blood Sasha’s body appeared. Black shoulder-length hair, pale white shark skin, grey eyes with crescent pupils, sharp teeth with prominent vampiric fangs.

“Clothes, Sasha,” said Akenesa. She sighed internally,

having fully expected to need to say that. Her cousin created clothes and smirked.

“How long was I asleep?” Sasha asked.

“A thousand years. Follow, I’ll explain everything.”

*A pain that refuses to flow from her heart,
she hesitates and tries and it rarely shows.*

*Her aura is dense with malice and joy,
but if her control ever lost then so would all others.*

*In the end of days her chest will be tight,
because pain and sorrow are her dark crown.*

Part 2

The Bloody Smile

In which there is lust for both blood and flesh

Sasha was doing her best to control herself. It was all she could do. Her urges were horrific and it could all be blamed on the scar on her soul's core.

Anða sat on her lap, sleeping sweetly in the late evening light, everything painted in oranges and reds and yellows from the refracted light of the crystals on the roofs outside the windows. Sasha rested her chin on her daughter's head and held her gently. She loved the little girl more than anything, which is why it hurt to be away from her so much.

Sasha's curse was one of lust, both of blood and flesh. She craved sexual pleasure and violence and easily became lost when in the throes of passion, confusing the two and mixing them to terrible results. She couldn't put Anða through that, she couldn't hurt her, so she had her daughter stay on the Isle of Dusk with her father and grandparents. She often visited, but never stayed for long.

Anða was five years old and very curious, her own scar making her a being of joy. She had asked Sasha multiple times why she was a Zoraken not a Talwaen, and all Sasha could say was that she would explain when she was older.

Lady Sara Zoraken entered the room and sat on the plush chair across from Sasha.

"Am I a monster?" Sasha asked suddenly. Sara looked her over carefully before answering.

"Yes, but you're doing what is right for Anða. In my opinion, that makes you a good person. At least when you're not on the battlefield."

Sasha smiled and stroked her daughter's glowing white hair. The girl was a Host of the Heavenly Soul. Her father was an angel so there was power in her flow and light in her veins. She wanted to give her daughter the world.

"I'll take her to bed and leave," said Sasha, hooking her arm under Anða's knees and holding her shoulder tight. "Thank you for letting me stay so long."

“When you control yourself you are a pleasant person, Lady Aleksashdra. If you can behave like this more, then you will continue to be welcomed back.”

She stood and headed through the Castle of Dawn to Anđa’s room, placing her on the bed. She knelt and kissed Anđa on the forehead.

“I love you, my little angel.”



Freed from maternal responsibility, Sasha stood on the roof of the Castle of Dawn. She spread her wings and took flight into dusk’s waning light. As she crossed the Nerikan Strait she caught a scent on the air coming towards her. She called back in her wings and let herself drop to the sea below.

She was smothered in his musk, that rich scent of light and dark, of forest and sky, of sickness and immortality. She looked him in the eyes and he caught her and rose back into the sky. They were filled with joy at the sight of her and held all the weight of his history.

“Azra-el,” she said, kissing him. “You’ve returned.” She held herself close to her husband as he carried her the rest of the way to the Talwaen Estate. They landed in the gardens and she looked him up and down. “You’re less injured than the last time.”

“You almost sound disappointed,” said Azra-el. He had his usual faint smile, one lined with dry humour and stoicism. “Ah, yes, it’s because there’s less blood this time.”

Azra-el was a thin man who once had a wasting disease so painful that he offered himself to any God who would save him. The one to take him was the Grand Lord Chassuille, the God of Light and Creation. This is how he became an angel.

He had one white wing and one black, a symbol of his twilight heritage, matching his two-toned hair. His skin was white, though he wasn’t nearly as pale as Sasha or the other Vanavolk. He wore white trousers and a tunic with the name of

the Grand Lord sewn into them, though they were torn and bloodstained. Around his neck, upper arms, wrists, and ankles he had black tattoo rings.

“Who were you fighting this time?” she asked. She was on the prowl once more, her man standing before her and ready for the taking.

“Asmodeus,” said Azra-el. “He got away. He’s such a nuisance and dropped into the Phase again.” It was only then that Sasha noticed Almut floating behind him, gently spinning as if on a wheel. She didn’t let it distract her from her goal and stepped closer, touching Azra-el’s chest.

“Do you want some medical attention?” she asked. She let herself smile, though she hated her face when she did. She knew how sharp her teeth were, how obvious her vampiric fangs were, how cruel her eyes were. But Azra-el knew better than to judge her for it.

“Now that you mention it, there’s been a tension I’ve needed released since I left.” His face changed to that dirty look that Sasha loved. He held her hips and pulled her close.

Azra-el left early in the morning, though she had managed to get him one more time before he left. Sasha curled in her blankets, intoxicated by his smell and savouring it for as long as she could. It wasn't long before she was disturbed by her servants looking to wash everything.

She stood in the middle of her second chamber and her servants lit her on fire. The chamber was devoid of any furniture or anything else that could catch fire, deliberately kept for these moments. The fire burned away her skin and hair and when the servants called back their flames her body regenerated, her skin and hair returning to normal. Now she was clean.

Sasha's father was a vampire and she'd gained many of his traits. She had inherited many vampiric strengths, but also its major weaknesses. Sunlight made her lethargic and water burned more than flame. When she was young the fire baths were intolerable, the flames licking and searing her skin to clean her, but after becoming invincible she let the servants burn her to the bone. It was cleaner that way and it hurt less. All dirt and sweat and disease was banished by the flame.

When she had regenerated she dressed and dismissed her servants. She was always melancholic the day after seeing Anđa, so she planned to spend the day reading if she could. She took a nap around noon, waking up after a few hours, and read for a while before she began preparing herself for the night. She was brought food at various points, though didn't have much of an appetite.

In the evening Sasha heard a careful knock at the door. The even spacing between each knock, neither hurried nor lazy, told her it was Akenesa, so she called in her cousin.

"We need to push up the plan," said Akenesa. Sasha looked at her in the mirror as she continued to apply her paint for the night.

"Why so bold?" asked Sasha. She suppressed her smirk

because she knew Akenesa hated it.

“I think he’s the one spreading rumours of the Grand Crystal in Cora,” said Akenesa.

“You think he’s finally moving?” asked Sasha. She looked at Akenesa, who nodded to her. If his plan was really in motion then Sasha was ready to break free and end him. “Who do we get to act on him?”

“Alek. I’ve been talking to Ana today about the rumour and hinted that there’s a problem amongst our servants. I just need to figure out how to drop his name to her.”

“It’s a risky plan,” said Sasha. “But it should work. I trust Uncle Alek. He’ll get it done. He’s not directly connected to you, so if it seems you’re working against Manford then Uncle Alek won’t be suspected.”

“I’m going to see Alek tonight,” said Akenesa. Sasha heard a hesitance in her voice. She knew the pair’s history and how difficult it was for Akenesa to see him. “I’ll do my best to make it work. He thinks I’m going to interrogate his servants.”

“Make sure not to get seen,” said Sasha, pointing her brush at Akenesa. “We’ll need Alek to be a surprise if we’re going to murder him just right. What about his phylactery?”

“You’re a Vault Lord and you don’t know that?” asked Akenesa with a noticeable sigh. “You get into the Vault and steal it.”

“That would count as betraying him,” said Sasha. “We can’t do that.”

“Then we give him a reason to withdraw it.” Akenesa tapped her right cheek as she thought. Sasha was worried her cousin was spending too much time with Galina and picking up her bad habits. “We hold an inspection.”

“It *has* been over three hundred years since the last,” said Sasha. “How do we get my mother on board with it?”

“Aunt Anastasya craves order, but running the house has allowed this to slip her mind. When Alek is ready to move we simply remind her and she’ll demand a quality check.”

With a solid plan Akenesa took her leave and Sasha

turned back to the mirror and continued her preparations. She was eager to end Manford's tyranny and the thought made her hungry.



Sasha was in attendance at the night's festivities. There were people sat in circles all over the grounds, talking amongst themselves while servants brought them water. They were moongazing and praying to Galina, who stood on a balcony and watched her followers.

In the distance Sasha could see her mother and aunt walking between circles and talking to the people. They were giving blessings of the night and people praised their divinity. Sasha did the same, but she wasn't a pure Vanavolk like them so she felt awkward about it, even if she had been doing it for a thousand years.

Sasha smiled when she spotted Liara, who was sat in one of the circles and singing with the people. Her hounds prowled the grounds, letting the worshippers pet them. Sasha looked around but didn't see Akenesa anywhere, but that was normal. She usually skipped duties, but when she was around she was the favourite of the three half-Vanavolk. The crowds loved her and praised her beauty and mind.

Sasha's reputation was something she worried about. Her scar's curse wasn't widely known and she tried her best to remain calm in public. There were people who she saw and instantly her thoughts turned to mounting them, but she held back. She didn't want to shame the family. She was thankfully seen as the warrior of the family. The Drake Slayer. The aether drinker. People asked her for blessings related to conflicts and struggles, asking to overcome the daunting things in their lives.

When they were done the family began to gather in front of the house, though Liara sat with her hounds in the middle of the grounds and Sasha stood to the side. Her father

and uncle emerged from the house to join their wives and Galina began her usual speech from the balcony. A blessing for the masses. A joy in the stillness and peace of the night.

“You’re going to stand still and watch,” said Manford, emerging from behind the pillar Sasha was leaning against. He clicked his tongue and the command took hold. She lost control of her body and was forced not to move, despite how much she struggled. It was a chill and a heat at the same time. It was paralysis and a mental fog. She wanted nothing more than to kill him, but she couldn’t.

And then she saw someone approach her parents with a package. He was a man with pale skin and blonde hair. His scent was unfamiliar. He presented his gift to Anastasya and within a second there were flames and a shock wave that pressed Sasha to the pillar. The aether signatures of her parents and her aunt and uncle were gone, their bodies burnt to ash by the magic of whatever had been in that box.

The house was aflame, and the crowd cried as it fled into the night.

A month later Nerik was at war and Sasha led the charge. She tore away the armour of her opponents and plunged her talons through their chests. Her Vanavolk form was massive and graceful and filled her enemies with terror.

The Coral Kingdom was home to humans, though they were being backed by a large army of dwarves. Their armour was steel but non-magical. The humans tasted like their farms and cities, but the dwarves tasted of their grand underground tunnels and mines. Sasha thought there must have been four or five different clans of dwarves in the battle because of the different stones and metals their scents were coated in.

She picked them apart, several at a time. There was no stopping her. She was truly invincible. Anything they cut from her regrew and her blood coated the battlefield just as much as her enemy's. Her front claws and rear talons were enough to destroy metal armour, her tooth-lined beak able to pick up and throw those that got in her way, her dark wings pushing away a dozen spears with each waft.

It had barely been an hour and the army was falling back, retreating into the city of Cora. Its walls were fortified but Sasha wasn't afraid. A well placed cannonball tore a hole through her wing, sending black feathers into the air. Within moments the wing was repaired and Sasha roared. She tucked in her wings and charged the walls.

The Nerikan army hadn't even joined the battle with her. In the distance behind her in the fields and hills she could hear the songs and merriment as they cheered her on. The Coral army didn't pay them any attention. They were far more concerned with the rampage of the Vanavolk.

She bounded up a tower and tore the ballista from its top as its operators fell in panic, then she leapt into the city. She crashed through a roof and into someone's home. The roof had been built for rain and snow, not the enormous weight of a creature of the night. Sasha felt little aether in the city. It had

been evacuated.

The war would soon be over. Nerik was ready for a total victory. She had never believed the lies about an aether crystal, and hadn't needed the excuse of the assassination. It was all Manford's plan to sew discord and she needed to vent. Her cries of rage and pain were dwarfed by her lust for horror and destruction.

Then came a message from Akenesa. It echoed through her mind and she knew she had to hurry.

"Sasha, the Vault of the Endless was raided while we've been away from Nerik. All the Vault Lords being out in the field was a mistake. Drop the tower as quickly as you can and prepare for retreat. Something is happening."

And there was the fear she had been missing. She was a leader amongst the Vault Lords. They had left behind a few members, but their best were in the field. She had been so lost in her rage and bloodlust that she had abandoned her duties. It came flooding back to her. The pain of four family deaths, the sleep of Galina, the manipulations of Manford.

She broke through the house and into the street. She made her way towards the city centre, killing any soldiers that tried to get in her way. They formed blockades and ambushes but couldn't stop her.

She skidded to a halt in a market square that looked like it had been abandoned in a hurry. She took on a human shape once more, her vampire form, and then called on the words that she had memorised. Her words took on shape and then scarred the air and tore a path through the stone tile roads. When it was done she had bent space in a way that she barely understood. This was a plan of Akenesa's decision.

"Stop right there, monster," said a voice that echoed from within a helmet. She turned to see a group of dwarven soldiers led by a tall golem. It was the golem that had spoken.

"So the king of the underhalls graces me with his presence," she said with a cruel smirk. "Another king I get to rip apart and devour."

There had been a battle to the east a few days prior, and she hadn't known it until afterwards, but she had killed the king of Cora. It was dissatisfying in many ways, but she didn't let that show. It was the ultimate demotivator to know that their king had been killed by accident and she saw it in their eyes. This monster before them was too much, and they knew it.

She caught the eyes of some of the dwarves. The horror there amused her, but when they looked at her body they turned away. Dwarves were notoriously prudish. The sight of her naked body was enough to turn their faces bright red.

"What sort of creature are you?" asked the golem.

"Vanavolk, vampire, half and half," she said. She strode towards the group. In a moment she could be upon them, but she liked to play with her food. She could smell a different mixture of metals and stone. There was silver in there. It would burn, but she wouldn't die. It would hurt, but the warm blood would soon be down her throat.

"What is your name?" asked the golem, pulling a huge slab of steel from his back. It was shaped like a sword but it was more of a club.

"Are you a worshipper of Chassuille?" she asked. She stopped to let the golem think he had intimidated her with the weapon, but she was in perfect pouncing distance. "Only they care about names so much."

"Fine, I'll go first. You can call me Marquis."

"I've heard of you," she said. "The free golem who can actually think. My name is Aleksashdra Talwaen."

"Ah, I've heard of you too," said Marquis. There was a certain malice to his words.

"You speak the Coral language well," said Sasha. She stretched her arms and legs, suggestively posing to embarrass the rest of the dwarves who had managed to hold out and keep looking.

"Yours is almost unintelligible," said Marquis. "It's like you speak backwards with an accent that bounced down a

mountain.”

“Oho, so you insult me,” said Sasha. “This is something I must respond to. I took great pains to learn it to insult the king, but I guess I shall have to take it out on you!”

A second later she was hurtling through the air, her pale skin replaced by dark fur and feathers. When she landed in the group she was a Vanavolk again and the dwarves were dead. Marquis rolled down the street.

Sasha didn’t consider herself to be the most intelligent person around, especially when stacked up against the likes of Akenesa’s scholarly skills or Liara’s raw talent. What she did know was limited, but she was aware that she had to keep Marquis from interfering with her spell. It would take some time to work as space overlapped with the tower back in Nerik and then unfurled, leaving the tower in Cora.

When Marquis stood she pushed him further down the street with a shoulder tackle. A knee guard came off as he bounced, making Sasha realise he was just a walking suit of armour. She had assumed there was something underneath holding everything together, but his knee leaked aether and there was darkness inside.

She took on her vampiric form again and gave a wide smile to the golem as he shook. His stance was weak. She gently played with the tip of her sharp ear and she sauntered up to the hunk of scrap metal.

“I heard you golems of Dramar were immune to magic. Should we pull you apart and learn how that works?” She kicked aside the fallen knee guard.

“Creature was the wrong word to describe you,” said Marquis. He swung the sword and cut her clean in half down the centre, only for her flesh to twist in the air and form a mound of bone and meat and hair. She then reformed into her normal shape. “What kind of horror are you? How did you become like this?”

“I swallowed a black stone and then I woke up eternal. It was quite the evening.” Manford had fed her the stone. It

seemed a plan to turn her into a weapon. It had worked and she longed to turn it against him. "That Azael worshipper needs to die," she muttered.

"Who is Azael?" asked Marquis, tilting his head.

"Trust me when I say you don't want to know. He's more of a monster than I am."

She charged down the street as she became a Vanavolk once more. With a roar she poured every drop of strength into a swipe and smashed open the golem's chestplate in a single strike. The bones in her paw and forearm shattered, but it wasn't a worry as they were soon healed.

Sasha kept pushing, not letting the golem concentrate. Akenesa had told her how long the spell should take and the reality was far slower. Sasha wasn't much for magic, so she started wondering if she hadn't said it correctly, but then there was a boom behind her.

Air was shoved out from the space that the Deathlight Tower now occupied, causing winds that Sasha had to brace herself against. She hadn't been warned about that.

"What is that?" asked Marquis, looking at the top of the tower where an eerie green glow flared into a bright light. A wave of magic washed over the entire city, sending a chill through Sasha. Her state left her immune to the spell, but the dwarves and other soldiers she had killed weren't so lucky. Even the ones she left alive were suffering now.

She looked back towards the tower, only just realising how far she had forced Marquis away. She saw the corpses of the dwarves stand, their eyes glowing green and their bodies falling apart until all that stood were skeletons. This city was now a necropolis, home only to the undead.

"What did you do?" asked Marquis.

"What I had to," said Sasha, returning to her human form. "This war is ours to win."

"Why are you even attacking us!?! Our countries did nothing to you!" The golem's voice was angry, but there was no facial movement to the helmet.

“There’s never a good reason for war,” said Sasha. “We fight for resources or survival or just because we feel like it, but in the end it never matters, so you just have to let go and learn to enjoy the carnage.”

She left the golem behind, his body too broken to keep up with her. He would have to retreat from the city if he wanted repairs, but that wasn’t her problem. When she got to the northern gate she saw someone standing outside.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” said the woman in fluent Skrae. She was shorter than Sasha and wore her hair in pigtails like a child, but she had to be in her twenties. She had light skin and hair, so it was likely she was a local. Her dress had a dozen pockets all about her hips, making Sasha curious about what she was carrying. Each pocket bulged in a slightly different way, and the woman reeked of various magical plants. “I had expected you to be more clothed, however.”

“Clothes just get in the way. Who are you?”

“I’m just an apprentice, here to shut you down. Before I do, however, what is that tower?”

“It’s turning everyone in the city into an undead fiend,” said Sasha with a grin. “Clever design by my cousin. Very cruel, but also very effective. This city is now unusable by our enemies.”

“And you weren’t effected?”

“I’m special,” said Sasha with a shrug.

“Clearly,” said the woman. Her face was straight but Sasha knew that tone. It was the same one her father and uncle adopted when teasing each other. From a pocket she pulled a silver locket in the shape of a heart. “And now, I say goodbye.”

With a muttered word the locket sprang open and Sasha’s body shattered, the magic contained by the locket pouring out into the world and distorting reality.

“A seal of my blood by which you sleep,” said the woman, and so Sasha drifted away, her mind and heart and soul trapped by an eldrine clasp.

The locket opened and everything that was Sasha poured out onto the floor. When she regained herself, Akenesa and Liara stood before her.

“Clothes, Sasha,” said Akenesa. To appease her cousin she created clothes for herself. Just a simple black dress that came down to her knees and out to her wrists. It was trimmed in white lace, and Sasha thought it to be quite fashionable. She smirked at Akenesa, who rolled her eyes.

“How long was I asleep?” Sasha asked, cracking her neck. Her body ached, but it had been destroyed and reformed a thousands times before. She would be fine, given time.

“A thousand years. Follow, I’ll explain everything.”

Akenesa began to leave the room, but Sasha didn’t follow right away, and neither did Liara, who was just excited to see her. Sasha turned to the bust behind her, before noticing Thorn hanging on the wall. She hadn’t taken it to the war as she knew she would mostly be in Vanavolk form. What good was a sword when she had no hands?

She took down the sword and formed a sheath on her back. It was a peculiar blade, long and thin at first with a pointed fish hook at the end. The hook was intended to be used for disarming, or so she had read when studying the blades at a young age. The edge was a strange white metal while the back and inside the hook were made from a black metal made from the ash of the demon Prochorus had turned into the blade.

Any wound from the blade would never heal and hurt for the rest of the victim’s life. Even a tiny cut would become a tremendous burden. It was a perfect fit for her, as anyone who survived her rampage would surely remember her. She knew that if she had ever met the demon, Bali, then she would have liked him.

She followed Akenesa’s scent out of the Vault of the Endless near the centre of the city, and then all the way to Galina’s room in the Talwaen Estate, but didn’t enter when

Liara did. There was something odd in the air. A new scent. She turned and entered a room to find a nursery. She could smell Anđa, but it was somehow different. There was a mixture of blood and aether that Sasha's couldn't quite pin down.

"Whose nursery is this?" asked Sasha as Akenesa appeared beside her.

"Narianel's," said Akenesa. "Your granddaughter. She's currently in her mid-twenties and looks a lot like Sarasha. Her skin is like yours. I met her not long ago, though she is currently not in this world."

"Not in this world? What do you mean?"

"Do you remember Lucifer? We only met him a few times back on Terra, when he would speak with Azra-el. Naria fought and killed him, but was wounded. Cursed. The Gods have her now, but she isn't dead. I believe she is being healed, and you will meet her soon enough."

"What of her scar?" asked Sasha. She stood looking into the cot, and then saw the stars and moon painted on the ceiling. "What is her personal curse?"

"Rage. She's just as brutal as you in battle, and because she is a nephilim her ability to heal is compatible to yours. A duel between you two would last for weeks."

"A nephilim? So Anđa married another Host of the Heavenly Soul? I'm surprised to hear about others existing."

"Anđa never married, though she is committed to that one man. There was a war we missed called the Ruination. After that, the universe was a mess, with only this world left as a patchwork of other worlds. This place is called Avani. After the war Chassuille allowed many angels to leave his service with grace as a reward. Many settled down and had families. Anđa is not so rare any more, and though there are only a handful, there are other nephilim too. For example, you also have a grandson called Isaac."

"Isaac," said Sasha. "That isn't a Nerikan name. What is his scar?"

"Honestly I'm not quite sure. I haven't met him. I was

trapped differently from you. I wasn't asleep, so I managed to keep an eye on the outside world. I saw Isaac born and have memorised his soul's signature, but his scar is odd. It mirrors Galina's, but on the opposite side of his core. He's incredibly pure as a result."

"Incorruptible?" asked Sasha. Was such a thing even possible? They were a family of corrupt individuals so it felt that he didn't match. He was a male Vanavolk too.

"That is my current hypothesis, yes," said Akenesa.

"Where is he?"

"Anđa has moved out to the Aether Sea and took him with her. This was before I was freed. I've yet to see her too."

"Where is Azra-el?" asked Sasha. Talk of family had her suddenly craving the touch of her man.

"Stationed on a rock in the middle of the ocean," said Akenesa. "We can take an airship to reach him in a few hours, but we have more pressing issues."

"Such as?"

"I'm going to send for a young Seer to help me break Galina's curse. Until then, you will be running both House Talwaen and Kewaen."

"What happened to Alek?" asked Sasha, her heart now tight in her chest.

"I took too long to be freed," said Akenesa, turning away. "I had to give him his honour."

"Hollow? No..."

"There are people coming!" shouted Liara as she ran down the hall outside towards the front door. She sounded as happy as usual. Sasha hadn't noticed it, but there were distant aether signatures on the grounds.



It was Sanja Talgarath, along with the servants of both Houses Talwaen and Kewaen. Akenesa had apparently called for them to gather on the grounds before she had woken up Sasha.

“It is good to see you again, My Lady,” said Sanja. She was the head of the servants for House Talwaen and had been one of Sasha’s tutors when she was young. Sasha gave her a polite nod before turning to the crowd. She had to be on her best behaviour again.

“Your jobs are safe,” Sasha said first, which eased the many eyes on her. “Akenesa tells me that I will now be running both Houses as Alek has unfortunately been defeated by outside forces. On my way down the stairs I came up with a better plan.”

She felt Akenesa’s gaze on the back of her head as the dark scholar stood back in the doorway. This move was sure to upset any of Akenesa’s plans, but it needed to be done. It was long overdue.

“During the war with the Coral Kingdom and until my Anđa was old enough to rule, Sanja acted as leader of the House, keeping everything in order. She then did so again during what has been called the Ruination. As current matron of House Talwaen, I appoint Sanja the name Talvara and make her Steward of House Talwaen until Galina is awoken. She is given status of Second Family and all the power that entails.”

“Lady Aleksashdra, I must protest!” said Sanja. There was shock on her face and disbelief in her eyes. “You know what your mother’s death letter said. Lady Akenesa is due to inherit should you take over House Kewaen and you have no heirs. I am aware you have heirs not in Nerik, so this duty should fall to Lady Akenesa.”

“The other House leaders are more interested in their archaic ideas of truth than they are in my comfort,” said Akenesa, stepping up next to Sasha. “I wasn’t told this was happening but I do not object. My sister and I are not suited to rule, and a Second Family Steward is acceptable. Houses Solash and Akwaen regularly use this method of rule when their leaders are away.”

Sanja had gained her lichdom late in life, and so her face was wrinkled and her hair greyed. But there was light in

those deep brown eyes. Sasha had been an insolent child, but as an adult she respected Sanja's care and hard work, and above all her intelligence.

"Lady Aleksashdra," said Sanja.

"No," said Sasha, holding up a hand. "For your service to the House and to the First Family, you are ascended. You are now named Sanja Talvara and shall begin your duties immediately while I lead House Kewaen."

All the other Houses of the Synod had multiple Families. Even House Zoraken had split their lineage into Akenzal and Chanzal when the leader had twins. Only House Talwaen had held out as the servants had object to the idea. They only saw those of Vanavolk blood to be worthy.

Sanja was about to object when Liara stepped forward. Sasha and Akenesa could be convinced, but Liara was another thing entirely. Her immaturity made her stubborn. Her eyes were already filled with tears. She held a knife—who knows where she got that from?—and stood in front of Sanja.

"Be our sister of the night," she said, cutting her palm and offering it to Sanja. Sasha was surprised and Akenesa very slightly tilted her head.

When imbibed by a wolf, a Vanavolk's blood turned them into an ash hound. Bigger, stronger, faster, the ash hounds were Liara's pets and companions, living in the forest behind the Estate. When given to a person, something very similar happened. She would become a Vatal, a sort of lesser Vanavolk.

"You would be of Vanavolk blood," said Sasha with a nod. She had been a dam to a Vatal, although accidental. She had been duelling with a Vault Lord named Mateo. She had pinned him down with her cut forearm his mouth and was suddenly thrown back by his transformation. He was lowborn so had no surname, but from that day went by Mateo Volkan. *Wolf man* he called himself. He was going to seek Family status after hearing of this.

The crowd around Sanja looked at her, several of them

nodding. They knew she deserved it too and was only resisting because she felt she had to. Upon seeing how serious the girls were, Sanja took a breath and kissed Liara's palm, taking in the blood.

The transformation was instant and bloody. Sanja's body exploded in a crimson mess and before the crowd stood the newest Vanavolk. Liara transformed, soon followed by Sasha and Akenesa. Sanja was smaller than the truebloods and her plumage was different, but she was unmistakably one of their kind. She smelled like them now.



Sasha sat in her grandfather's chair, behind his desk with the red window behind her, tinting the room. She wasn't alone and looked at the gathered vampires. They hadn't been so well dressed in centuries and their face paint needed work, but they hadn't been in Nerik in so long.

"Ana," said Sasha. The woman was older than Sasha but somehow gave off the impression of a scared child, but then when age was counted in millennia it didn't mean much. "My father and uncle were in charge of policing, correct?"

"Yes, that is the duty of House Kewaen," said Ana. She looked depressed. Her face drooped and her eyes were barely open, her voice deep as if she had just woken up. Akenesa had warned Sasha about Ana's mood, and she hadn't been wrong.

"The world has drastically changed. We have no trade partners and the possibility of new enemies." Sasha clasped her hands in front of her. "I want a visible police presence, especially in the docks and main streets when we start getting visitors from the nearest nation, Vin. I want us seen as strong, especially until Lady Akwaen can sort out the military."

"No time has passed for most people here," said Ana. "It shouldn't be difficult to keep the police running. How soon are we to expect travellers?"

"Akenesa is importing a Seer," said Sasha. "No doubt

the boy's organisation will come with him, possibly set up a branch in the city. Expect them soon enough, and prepare the handbooks so they know our laws and customs."

Ana looked like she had a little more energy. This was good. Sasha knew that if she motivated Ana and gave her tasks that she wouldn't have time to think. She wouldn't have time to let Alek's death bring her down. Eventually she would be in a better place to deal with it.



That night she allowed herself to succumb to her lust. Letting it loose every now and then was good for her soul and she knew she wouldn't have the chance for a while. Things were about to get serious.

She thought of her husband, so far away, but resisted calling in a servant to help her. She wouldn't touch anyone else. Not yet. Not until her Azra-el had taken her once more.

Two weeks passed according to the new Avani calender. Sasha found it odd that a week was ten days instead of seven, but she would adjust in time. The Archivists had arrived and they were actually *eager* to learn Nerik's laws and customs.

Sasha sat in a room of the Kewaen Estate with three Archivists, Ana, and Agata Akwaen. She had been forced into formal clothing by Sanja and she hated how loose they felt. She was used to her form-fitting one piece that she wore to battle, but this blouse and long skirt didn't suit her, even if they were in her family's colours and bore the symbol of the Vault Lords.

Ana stood just behind Sasha and was in a black and red longcoat, and wore a stiff cap with the symbol of House Kewaen. This was the uniform of the police and most people who wore it looked authoritative, but Ana looked like a pretender. Her messy hair, the dark circles under her eyes, the way she held herself. She looked so tired.

And then there was Agata Akwaen, in charge of foreign affairs and the military. She didn't wear a uniform, but instead a flowing blue and white dress and a prim, wide-brim hat, with a tuft of blue fur around her neck. Her face was painted in delicate stroke and despite her physical age she had a youthful bounce to her movements. She sat to Sasha's right, and leaned gracefully on Sasha's desk.

She was a dangerous woman, and Sasha respected her. It was her forces Sasha had led to war, and her approval Akenesa had received to deploy strategies and tactics. Her strongest force was the navy, but that was no surprise for an island nation like Nerik.

Of the Archivists only the one named Thomas Acker was of note. He was their leader and with the way they talked to him she could tell they cared for him. She couldn't speak their language, but the tone of voice and shift in their aether said everything. Acker himself spoke Skrae quite well, though he seemed to have trouble understanding the Nerikan dialect.

Neri was quite different to the base language in many ways, so she couldn't blame him.

They were discussing a visit from the king of Vin but Sasha was distracted. There was something about Acker that she didn't like. His scent was wrong. He claimed he wasn't a mage but he was powerful. He carried a firearm but had the muscles of a spearman.

Akenesa entered the room, trailed by Liara, and placed a stack of papers on the desk. She then gave a summary paper to Sasha and Agata.

"Good morning, Mister Thomas," she said to Acker and that was when it clicked. Sasha had only met one other Mister and the presence of this man was terrifying. They had posted so few guards in the Estate, but at least the Vault would be safe. Sasha would have to rely on Akenesa if a fight broke out.

"I can see by Lady Kewaen's face she recognises what that means," said Mister Thomas. "You are not helping me keep my secret."

"Such a thing should never have been a secret," said Agata, all the gentleness in her voice fading. She could also see the massive security issues. "Your kind are actually forbidden from entering Nerik. This is information that should have been disclosed."

"What's wrong, exactly?" asked one of the Archivists. He was bald and tattooed and spoke Skrae far better than Acker, which spoke to his skill with magic.

"Mister is the title of an Arbiter," said Sasha. "We don't allow interference here in Nerik. We are secluded from the Gods, even while we respect and worship them. Their hand has caused us to suffer, just as we have caused them pain. We have a peace treaty and an understanding. We'll have you escorted back to your airship. Ana."

Ana quickly stepped up to Mister Thomas and, with a stern look, motioned for him to stand.

"Your payment for the Seer is on your airship already," said Akenesa.

“Why didn’t you tell me this would happen?” asked Mister Thomas. He wasn’t angry, but exasperated.

“I thought you would be smart enough to tell us before you stepped foot on the island,” said Akenesa. “I *have* been openly calling you by your title since we met.”

He left, trailed by the other Archivists who were asking questions in that language of theirs.

“You should have told us,” said Agata.

“Perhaps,” said Akenesa. “I wanted to test his integrity, and it seems he failed. I was hoping for a close ally, not just another soldier in the final battle.”

“What do we do about Narianel?” asked Sasha, reading the report. It seemed the police and military forces were doing well, so she only skimmed the paper. “She is a Champion, correct?”

“She is, yes,” said Akenesa.

“This is the Zoraken girl I’ve heard about?” asked Agata. It looked to Sasha that she was just skimming the document too. “Your granddaughter?”

“Yes, Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken,” said Saha.

“The Zorakenee have always had an exception,” said Agata. “Prochorus was born a Champion, so there was no helping it. Once we met him and accepted him, we had a Champion in our midst. What is the girl’s designation?”

“She has inherited from Prochorus,” said Akenesa. “She has his power and his title.”

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem,” said Agata. “Even if she’s foreign born.”

“She was born in the Talwaen Estate,” said Sasha. “In a room across from where Galina sleeps. Vala Zoraken was there as witness.”

“Even less of a problem then,” said Agata. “Gre— ah, Akenesa. Deliver a message to Mister Thomas for me. The King of Vin will be allowed into Nerik but there will be a military presence. Mister Thomas may also appoint someone as his second if he wishes for an Archivist presence in Nerik,

but the man himself is permanently banned.”

“You corrected yourself,” said Akenesa. There was a hint of a smirk, but only in her usually monotone voice. Her face was as blank as usual. “Been talking to Vala?”

“Yes, and she has stated her stance before the Synod, but that isn’t why I’ve chosen to respect this change of yours.” Agata thought for a moment. “It’s been around two thousand years since your birth and almost as long since you changed. Maybe I’m just being sentimental, but this change of world has made me think again.

“You were seen as a truth denier, the worst kind of person in a society based on information preservation. But as far as I can remember you’ve never denied your birth, only accepted yourself for what you are and sought to change. We deal in immortality not to deny death but to accept life. How are you any different?”

“Thank you, Lady Akwaen,” said Akenesa with a slight bow. When she rose her head there was a sparkle in her eye. A tear? Sasha thought her eyes must have been playing tricks.

“All it takes to change a society is to change the minds of its leaders,” said Agata. “Jela Gaimel is all that’s left. Solash always accepted you, and so did Galina. I remember Senka disliking you, but her sons held you in high regard. I hear that Aleksashdra in particular was fond of you. With your words reaching Vala and hers reaching mine, you are close.

“That’s not to say that I haven’t respected you until now. There were times in the Ruination that I wished I could have had your expertise. We lost a few battles to the Dragons I feel you could have won. I won’t say a single strategist in a war with literally quintillions of people could have changed the result, but perhaps we could have saved a few extra lives.”

“I will graciously accept your compliments and deliver your message,” said Akenesa with another bow.

“Before you go, let me ask you something,” said Agata, leaning forward in her chair. “Why didn’t you make a power grab for House Talwaen? Your claim is legitimate. With your

cousin taking on House Kewaen and with her heirs not being present, you are next in line.”

“Some things are more important than power, Lady Akwaen,” said Akenesa, making for the door. “I have our Goddess to wake up.” She closed the doors behind her, and Sasha wondered why Liara hadn’t followed her. The girl had a talent for blending into the background, but she was sat where Mister Thomas had been and was looking out the large window behind Sasha.

“I should go too,” said Agata. “Kresimir has been trying to get my attention for a while, wondering when his merchant ships can go out and chart the nearby areas. He’s already planning routes to that city in the south-west. What was it called again? Named for a bird?”

“Port Swan, I think,” said Sasha. “He’s already been at my throat about the patrols in the markets increasing, but I’ve managed to calm him. He seems to have realised that I’m just as ruthless as the rumours claim.”

Agata laughed and bade Sasha and Liara farewell, and closed the doors behind her. Seconds later, Liara let out a flurry of words that Sasha had to take a moment to parse.

“Naria’s aura is thick with corruption and she’s going to need my power if she doesn’t want to become a beast.”

Liara was cursed with immaturity. She just hadn’t grown up mentally or emotionally. She was prone to tantrums and had trouble with basic reading and arithmetic. But she understood corruption. She was born with a strange and unique power to suppress or expand a person’s aether. She could purify someone and relieve them of their burdens, or she could instantly corrupt them and turn them into a beast. She knew what she was talking about and Sasha gave weight to her words.

“She was in Nerik a few years ago, near Galina’s room, outside this Estate, by the Central Star,” continued Liara. “I can smell her there. Aksa told me she went off to fight a fallen angel. She will return corrupt. I need to save her.”

“You’ll have your chance, I’m sure,” said Sasha. It was in moments like these that Sasha saw the woman Liara could have been if not for her curse. The woman that Akenesa had vocally dismayed for on more than one occasion.

“Her scent scares me,” said Liara, pulling up her legs onto the chair and hugging her knees. “Like a demon.”

And there it was. The timid girl returns.

“She’s be fine,” said Sasha. “I’ve heard she takes after me, so she’s definitely indestructible.”

“You’re three steps from beasthood,” said Liara, her eyes narrowing, but that cheeky smile peeking out from behind her knees.

“I would make a terrific beast,” said Sasha, standing and raising her fists. “The most powerful of them all!”

“You’d be a big dog that chews all the cushions,” said Liara, letting out a giggle.

It wasn’t hard to cheer up Liara, and in turn the girl’s soft smile made Sasha smile too.



It was long after dusk and Sasha walked through the woods behind the Talwaen Estate as a Vanavolk. Despite the lack of any light she could see just fine. Aether gave everything shape and her eyes, the eyes of all Vanavolk, could see that shape through their crescent pupils.

She hadn’t needed to transform, but being confined to those uncomfortable clothes all day and controlling her urges had been scratching at the inside of her skull. As a Vanavolk she belonged to the forest and at the same time she was free. She could feel the wind in her fur and feathers, and the scents of the forest leapt out at her.

In the distance she could feel the aether become dense, so that’s the way she headed. It was a sure sign that Akenesa was present. Sasha soon found her cousin sitting on a fallen tree by a pond. Liara was playing in the pond, chasing the fish,

her black, expensive dress completely soaked and filthy.

Sasha took on her humanlike shape again and sat next to Akenesa, shrouding herself in black and red clothes. She was going to have to get used to the red rather than having everything be trimmed in white. Not that it could even be seen in Avani's solid nights.

"Do you believe Liara?" asked Akenesa.

"I do," said Sasha. "She knows more about corruption than anyone. It's why you studied her power and put together the defining thesis on the topic, right?"

"I could feel the darkness in her," said Akenesa. "It was more than just corruption. She's a nephilim."

"Are you about to go into the stories of the dark angel? Those are just guesses." Sasha let out a laugh as Liara held up a fish. It struggled in her hands and managed to free itself, falling into the water with a splash.

"They are very plausible, considering what we know of Azael," said Akenesa. "We've met some of his followers. We've fought them. All of Nerik prepares for the day the Grand Gate opens again."

"Yes, again," said Sasha. "We missed the first time, sadly."

"I would've liked to have been able to fight too, but that irritating mage and his sealed boxes. He should have been smart enough to release us after that. We should have fought in the Ruination."

"Careful, Aksa," said Sasha with as big a grin as she could muster. "That almost sounded passionate. You'll ruin your reputation."

"Stoicism isn't a choice," said Akenesa. "I'm no Vesna."

"You think Narianel could be a follower of Azael?" Sasha had to ask the question directly.

"No." Akenesa gave her sister a gentle applause when she caught another fish. "I'm very worried about her being manipulated, though. She has inherited darkness from Galina and the twilight from Prochorus, but she felt different than she

should be. Her darkness is a flame, and the light within her burns even fiercer.”

“Her curse is rage, right?” asked Sasha. “That means that all her aether is tinted with that emotion. You could be worrying about nothing.”

“I would hope that you’re right,” said Akenesa. She let out an audible, if small, sigh. She was getting better at that. “She’s a powerful piece in this war. Azael is no doubt moving, based on the things I’ve heard. He has a boy named Egil that’s a visage, and even the King of Cor on his side.”

“Cor?” asked Sasha. “We’re near that nation, right?”

“South-east, on the other side of the mountains. The King is an old friend of yours.”

“Who?”

“Marquis,” said Akenesa. “That dwarf-made golem you told me you fought in Cora. His capital city is built around the ruins of Cora and he leads a nation of rock creatures that seem to be off-shoots of the dwarves.”

“That golem didn’t know Azael when I talked with him back then,” said Sasha. She stood up and sniffed the air. The wind had changed direction and she caught the scent of the ocean. “Why would he pick Azael’s side after learning of him?”

“My guess it’s because you stood against him,” said Akenesa. “Azael is your enemy, you are his enemy, and so Marquis sided against you. Other than that I can’t think of a reason. Narianel defeated him too.”

“But not destroy him?” asked Sasha.

“She was young and I’m not sure if the true weight of the war with Azael had hit her yet,” said Akenesa.

“You know I have to tell the Synod this, right?” asked Sasha with a sigh and a frown. “If there’s a minion of Azael sitting on a throne then we have to go to war.”

“Give me a few more days,” said Akenesa. “I almost have Galina awake. I won’t go to war until I know that the curse on her is broken.”

“Alright,” said Sasha. “As soon as she’s awake, I’ll go to

the Synod.”

Sasha was in Galina's room with Akenesa, Liara, Sanja, and the Seer named Walden. He was a foreign boy from Vin, and while his skin was pale and his hair was dark, his eyes made him stand out. He didn't even paint his face like Kresimir's people did, so even though they were dark skinned they still felt Nerikan. There were even bronze-skinned mixed-blood people born with Nerikan eyes now after so many centuries. This boy was just an oddity.

Galina lay sleeping and Sasha just wanted to be near her. She was more than just her grandmother. She was the matriarch. She was the original Vanavolk from which they all descended, she was the Goddess of the Night and the Moon, and she was the centre of the family.

Walden stood before her, his eyes letting out a soft light as he searched through his visions. Akenesa had tasked him with finding the words that cursed Galina into her long slumber. From what Sasha had heard he had found the correct time but was having trouble discerning the words. He wasn't a native Skrae or Neri speaker, and the curse wasn't cast vocally.

"Apparently Vala Zoraken has also been coaching the boy," said Sanja. "She says she had tried to break the curse on her own, but her mind was elsewhere."

"Vala's never been reliable," said Sasha.

"Don't judge her too harshly," said Sanja. "She was different before Prochorus... Hm."

"Alright, I get it," said Sasha. "No one older than me likes talking about that. I do wish I could've met him."

She had only missed meeting Prochorus by fifty years, which was nothing in an immortal life. She had heard he was a good man, if a bit of a flirt, but that wasn't a problem in Nerik. Lust and love were two different things, and his love for Vala was never in question. Sasha felt she could relate. She was devoted to Azra-el, but her lust was something to be kept under control.

Walden came out of his vision and began writing in his notebook, and then handed it to Akenesa.

“This is it,” she said, stepping up to Galina. Walden retreated to a corner of the room and drank from a waterskin. He was exhausted and Sasha thought she could hear his stomach growl. That was just being a mage. They needed the energy and skinny ones like him had it harder. Less mass to burn for fuel.

Akenesa started writing and Sasha stepped up to look over her shoulder. She was thinking through multiple poems and songs that could work, and eventually settled on using pure intent. If the curse was cast that way, then it would be the best way to put a stop to it. She wrote down words that reflected what Walden had written and would use those as the base for her thoughts and feelings.

This was the problem with curses. They needed exact wording to break, and only by knowing the original magic could they be reverse engineered. The method used to put Galina to sleep was also a problem, as simply having opposite intent did nothing. They had waited so long for the words behind that original intent.

Akenesa got to work, calling up every drop of aether within her. She was in the Grand Circle and so it was no surprise that the universe began to twist around her. The air itself bent and Sasha’s vision distorted. She had trouble even looking at Akenesa as reality was disrupted.

And then Galina opened her eyes. The world snapped back to normal and Akenesa fell to her knees. Her internal chant and power expenditure had exhausted her, but when a hand settled on her shoulder she looked re-energised.

Galina had a soft smile and when she stood Akenesa stood too. Her aura filled the room and then flowed through the Estate, eventually flooding the island before vanishing. She stood tall and stretched.

“Thank you,” she said, meeting Akenesa’s eyes. “But we cannot just stop with breaking this curse. We need to fix this

world's most pressing problem.”

“Who are we going to war with?” asked Sasha. Galina looked at her and smiled just a little wider, showing her sharp fangs.

“We’re not going to war, my girl, no,” said Galina. She pointed out the window. “This world has no moon.”



It was almost dusk but people were gathering. There were cries of joy as Galina walked amongst the crowd. The other members of the family got a similar treatment as they followed her, but there was no doubt where the focus was.

Before the curse Galina had been reclusive and many of these people remembered that. Just being near her was a rarity, and they felt blessed that the first thing she did when woken was to walk amongst them.

“Sanja,” said Galina when she stopped halfway down the path and had turned to face them. “That symbol you wear. Welcome to the clan.”

“Thank you, my Lady,” said Sanja, bowing deep.

Galina then looked at Sasha and nodded.

“I see what has happened,” said Galina. “Politics. Tell me, Akenesa, why did you not step up?”

“You were my priority,” said Akenesa. “Sanja is more than worthy of becoming the head of a Second Family.”

“I don’t disagree,” said Galina, “but I do expect more from you. Do not limit yourself. Sanja Talvara, you shall stay Lady Talwaen by delegation. Now, where is little Anđa?”

“The Aether Sea,” said Akenesa. “Her children aren’t on this world either. I imagine that Vala Zoraken will have something to say about their place in her House as one has inherited the power of the blades.”

“Then let us begin,” said Galina. “We won’t wait for them to arrive if their lives are elsewhere. But I look forward to meeting them. Now, all of you, I will need as much aether as

you can spare.”

Sasha had never bothered to rise above the seventh circle, but Liara and Sanja were both in the Low Circle. The three of them began to sing, each tapping into the song they knew so well. *The Anthem of Lunada*. The song empowered them and the crowd sang along. Aether began to flow and Sasha had to brace herself for when Akenesa joined in.

Aether flowed into Galina and she reached towards the sky. Sasha wondered what could possibly be going through her mind but then became fascinated by the sight. Galina’s left eye widened and the gap where her right eye should have been began to glow bright red beneath her long black hair.

“Let’s do this right!” she shouted, her breath puffing out red aether as if it were frost on a cold day. “Solim! Dasus! Voria! This world needs a sky, a day, a night! You left it all to that minimalist Chassuille and you feel you can relax, but no more! In my sleep I felt the world around me, felt the major changes, and this world needs more than minimum effort!

“Look at this glass orb these people call a sky! It is a pathetic excuse for creation! It’s even broken in some places and sends down darkness instead of light! Well, no more! I call on you three to help on this day!”

It was then that three people appeared before Galina and Sasha almost lost her song in surprise. Two she knew from the history books, but the third she had never heard of before.

Low Lord Solim, God of the Day and the Sun, wore a bright yellow and white robe with an open chest and bare feet. He was Skraeðan, so his ears were pointed in three places and his eyes were oddly squared. His skin was a pale yellow, as if coloured by chalk. His eyes were red, so they stood out to Sasha. He was one of the Gods worshipped in Nerik, his church headed by Kresimir Solash.

Then there was Low Lord Dasus, God of Twilight and Balance. He was another God of Nerik and was the direct creator of Prochorus Zoraken, and was the one to charge him with creating his divine blades. He only wore a pair of basic

grey trousers and a set of sturdy boots and gloves, both in black. His skin was almost white and his hair was a deep black, almost like the Talwaen family's own, but neither were pure. They had a slight grey to them. His eyes had white irises and black sclerae, and because of that he was probably a Seer.

The third one wore the symbol of Space, and Sasha realised she had never considered there would be Gods of the high elements. The advanced element Gods were all known, with Chassuille for Light, Galina for Darkness, and Dasus for Twilight, but the high elements of Space, Time, and Pure Aether seemed unaccounted for until now.

This man, Voria, was taller than Solim and Dasus by a head, and his skin was a strange swirl of greys and pastel greens, as if a child had rubbed their hands all over a loose pile of chalk. His hair was white and his eyes were green, and he had an arrogance about his stance.

All three of them bore the First Curse. They were gaunt and there was something wrong with the flow of their aether.

"I'm busy with your descendant," said Dasus, "but I suppose I can take a break to do this for you."

"We're not meant to interfere with Avani," said Voria. "This will make Ia and Mao quite mad, so let's do it." His smirk made Sasha irrationally angry, but she kept her singing up. "I've been wanting to stretch my power for a while."

Then Sasha and the entire crowd were knocked down as a shockwave of aether washed over them. It was just like with Akenesa. A Grand Circle Skraeðan that wasn't Chassuille, Mao, or Ia. It was strange to encounter another one.

"I'll admit I got lazy with Avani," said Solim. "It's time I correct that mistake." His aura grew and Dasus followed. Their souls smelled so similar to Sasha, but they were brothers so that was to be expected.

The four Gods' power merged into one roaring flame and the sky shattered. Liara and Sanja stopped singing at that, staring at the black beyond along with Sasha. Then the sky became what Sasha remembered from Terra. A sun, dusk

falling slowly instead of instantly, hints of early stars, and there, the most glorious of all, a moon. A white disc looking down on them, as beautiful as Galina herself.



Later that day Sasha walked with Akenesa and Galina as they visited the other Nerikan leaders and explained everything. It hurt to let others know how easily Manford could manipulate her and her cousins, but it needed to be a known fact. He was a worshipper of Azael and a traitor that tricked them into war for no good reason. He needed to be branded an enemy of the state.

Sasha thought of her mother and aunt, of her father and uncle. She had loved them deeply and it hurt.

“So,” said Galina, keeping her expression calm. “What are we going to do about this Marquis person?”

She was sat at the Synod’s round table and Sasha sat to her left. Kresimir Solash, Vala Zoraken, Agata Akwaen, and Jela Gaimel were all in attendance too. The full Synod of the Six was in session. Each religious leader was in charge of a different aspect of governance and it was rare for the table to be full.

The room was quite large and the table sat at the centre of rings of ascending seats. These seats were filled by interested civilians and the servants of the leaders. Behind Galina sat Sanja and Akenesa, and behind Sasha was Ana. Vala had no one with her, but that was part of a sad truth. The Isle of Dusk wasn’t in Nerikan waters, and apparently there were heavy casualties amongst its populace in the Ruination.

“We haven’t had a good war in a while,” said Agata with a smile.

“Have we ever had a good one?” asked Jela Gaimel. She gained immortality when she was still a child, and so looked like she was just eight years old. Sasha felt lucky that she at least stopped ageing when she was seventeen, so she wouldn’t be stuck in a body like that.

“All of our wars have been good,” said Agata. “Even the mess that was the Coral Kingdom. We still won that after losing all our generals to that revenant.”

“I think it would be wise to search out the other Vault Lords first,” said Kresimir Solash. He was dark skinned and shaved bald. He arrived on Nerik after its founding and made his name as a merchant before being accepted into the Synod as a representative of commerce in the nation.

“My Akenesa tells me that it is being worked on,” said Galina. “They will all be here soon enough. I believe we have enough to deal with in Marquis and his nation.”

“Are we sure he worships Azael?” asked Vala Zoraken.

“If there’s proof then I will vote in favour.”

“Akenesa?” asked Galina.

“Spring, seven years ago,” said Akenesa as she stood up. “Avani’s calender would put it on the third day of the eighth week, in the season of Rain. Year six-one-eight. The day that Narianel fought him. I was watching from the box I was sealed within. Listen to what he said to her when she defeated him. It’s clear he was working with Egil Krom, a known soldier of the Empty Diamond. I believe the war was manufactured to test her.”

“You think they’re trying to turn Narianel?” asked Vala with a frown.

“Everything Egil and Marquis said to her makes me believe so, yes,” said Akenesa. “She won’t turn. Not with the weight of the Talwaen and Zoraken families behind her. We will support her and she will stay on our side.” She sat back down.

“The Vanavolk *are* very close,” said Jela. “But Egil...”

“I agree that Narianel is not a threat,” said Agata. “But this Marquis is a problem, if what you’ve said is true. We should unseat him.”

“Could we get Vin as an ally?” asked Kresimir. “They’ve been to war with him before.”

“I doubt it,” said Agata. “I was given copies of their treaties yesterday. There’s a non-aggression pact and it’ll make Vin look bad on the continental stage if they break it. We’ll have to rely on our own forces.”

“We should end here for today,” said Vala. “I’ll spend time going over Marquis’s statements to Narianel and I’ll look deeper into Egil. Tomorrow I’ll be able to cast a vote.”

Sasha was sure they were going to war. Akenesa never lied, so she was easily believed. War needed a unanimous vote from the Synod, and it seemed that everyone but Vala and Jela were convinced. As soon as Vala said she was in favour of war, Jela would agree too.

They were back in the Synod and news of a possible war had filled the stands. The first row was sparse as it was reserved for the servants, but the rest of the seats were packed. Some people even sat on the stairs leading down to the table.

Everyone paid attention as Vala stood and took a deep breath. Sasha knew what she would say before she even started. The scent of determination and regret lingered on her soul.

“I vote for war,” Vala said with a frown. Sasha nodded and there were murmurs from the crowd. “I looked into the past and Marquis’s tale is disturbing. After he was defeated in Cora by Lady Kewaen he met with Azael during the opening of the Grand Gate and submitted to his rule. He must be destroyed for the sake of our universe’s survival.”

“This will not put us in a favourable light with future trading partners,” said Kresimir. “But it must be done.”

“Those trading partners will understand when we explain to the world who Azael is,” said Agata. “He was the one to orchestrate the Ruination, so he is tied into their history as a villain. My armies are at the ready, in any case.”

“I vote in favour,” said Galina. “Azael’s minions have manipulated the Synod to their own ends and now we have a chance to strike back. It will not bring back my girls or their husbands, but I am ready to commit.”

“I want to be on the front line,” said Sasha. Galina sighed but the other leaders nodded to that. Then all heads turned to Jela. The Eternal Child was in charge of festivals and public beauty, and seemed to care for little else. A war would interfere with her ability to sit back and enjoy life.

“I remember the Temporal Corruption,” she said. “And the opening of the Grand Gate. And even the assassinations at the Talwaen Estate, and the Ruination.” She let out a sigh and shrugged. “I have no choice but to vote in favour.”

“Then we go to war,” said Vala as she sat down. “I want

to talk about Egil too.”

“Do we have to?” asked Jela.

“We do,” said Kresimir. “I have no idea who he is, but he keeps getting talked about as if he’s known.”

“Egil Krom used to be Egil Gaigarath,” said Vala. “He was a playmate of Jela up until being lost in the Temporal Corruption. He later reappeared and took Prochorus from me. His words with me and Narianel have proven him to be a devout worshipper of Azael.”

“So where is he now?” asked Jela. Sasha could see just how upset she was talking about him. She was known to grow attached to her child servants because they would spend a long time playing games together. Jela was a lot like Liara in many ways, but she could act mature if she wanted.

“I’m not sure,” said Vala. “He was defeated by Narianel in the recent war between Vin and Cor, but he’s not dead. His core was damaged but not broken.”

“Isn’t the man a visage?” asked Galina. “How did she damage his core?”

“She takes after Lady Kewaen,” said Vala. “A fighter through and through.”

“Visages are abominations,” said Agata. “That alone has convinced me to have him hunted down. Do you think he’ll appear when we attack Cor?”

“It’s a possibility,” said Vala.

“He’s fallen so far,” said Jela.

“Many do, when broken by the Empty Diamond,” said Galina. “We should prepare for him. Does he have any magic that isn’t standard to visages?”

“Teleportation without the Phase,” said Vala. The crowd began to whisper. Even Sasha sat back in her chair and looked at Vala like she was more insane than usual.

“That’s impossible,” said Sasha. “Isn’t it?” She looked over to Akenesa in the crowd who shrugged in a very visible way.

“He disappears and reappears without leaving a trail of

aether,” said Vala. “It’s no wonder Narianel thought she had killed him for so long. I haven’t managed to find an instance of him using it for combat, but he often appears at a battle, causes trouble, and then vanishes without a trace.”

“This sounds like a gift from Azael,” said Kresimir. “The ability to break the laws of reality.”

“Can Marquis do anything like that?” asked Sasha.

“Not that I’ve seen,” said Vala. “But that doesn’t mean he has no tricks hidden away.”



They spent the rest of the day discussing strategy, which Sasha had always found boring. She would much rather just be thrown into the middle of the enemy army and allowed to run wild. Galina and Jela took their leave early, and Akenesa was allowed to sit in the Talwaen seat so she could give her input.

Sasha had expected another airship assault, but hadn’t realised that most of their fleet had been destroyed by the Dragons. There was so much catching up to do, so made sure to ask Ana later that day to fetch accounts of the Ruination and other major events before Nerik had been frozen in time.

They were to approach the northern coast by ship and then move south-east across the hilly region to the ruined city of Cora, where Marquis had built his own national capital. It would take eight days to reach the city and there was no doubt he would mount a defence. It would be possible to reactivate the Deathlight Tower, and they discussed that at length, but decided it would be unnecessary in the end.

Several weeks passed and Nerik spent its time gearing up for war as secretly as it could. Building ships, forging weapons, training soldiers.

They had been visited by three world leaders and talked to them of Azael and the need to defeat his followers. The King of Vin had taken a strong interest but the Prime Minister of Bileen thought it was nonsense. There was no working with some people, but as long as they were getting word out into the world of the threat of the Empty Diamond then they were making progress.

The Synod also took the time to calm the world leaders about the change in the sky and warned of the seasons also being gradual now. No more sharp snaps from one to the other, just as dawn and dusk were now periods not moments.

Sasha had set increased patrols of police officers and ordered the Vault to be heavily guarded. Her forces were stretched thin, but without other Vault Lords she was working alone. She wished that at least Renatus was still around, as he seemed to enjoy the quiet life guarding the Vault.

Sasha looked up at the moon and felt herself relax. It was visible early in the evening sky and she knew Sanja and Akenesa would be out with the people, giving them the blessings of Galina, all while Liara ran about playing with the children.

She shook her head and got back to work.

It was dawn and the boats were being boarded. All the supplies were already on and now it was just the soldiers. Sasha sat on the railing near the front of the ship and looked out over the sea. They were only fifty miles from the land now, which was incredibly strange to her. The mainland was so close now. They'd be there by the afternoon instead of taking three days.

She saw Akenesa talking to Liara, telling her to stay in Nerik. Sasha agreed with the decision. While Liara could handle herself well, the family didn't want to risk her in a fight against the minions of Azael. There was a chance Manford would be there, which made it even more dangerous.

Sasha even *hoped* Manford would be there. She knew Akenesa was now immune to whatever trick he used to take over their minds, and that provided an edge. Akenesa could easily disable Sasha was her magic if she was controlled and could take on Manford herself.

As the ships began moving a little over an hour later Sanja and Liara waved to them.

"This isn't going to be easy," said Akenesa, leaning on the railing and waving.

"I know," said Sasha. "You'll probably have to destroy my body if Manford gets me."

"I know," said Akenesa. She turned to face into the ship and looked at the soldiers. "I worry about them, though. How quickly I can respond directly affects how many of them you eat."

"I don't always eat people," said Sasha. She looked down into the water, knowing that if she slipped the water would burn her alive. "Sometimes I just maim them."

"I think that's probably worse," said Akenesa. Sasha leaned back and smiled at her. "Just be ready."



Agata Akwaen looked amazing in her armour. A blue and white brigandine with shining pauldrons. She carried a spear and wore a long, flowing cape. Sasha knew the spear to be tipped with eldrine, making it an incredibly powerful weapon, capable of breaking through even Marquis's protection.

She walked up to Sasha as they stood on the shore and watched the wagons roll out. They had an army of fifty thousand and needed a lot of supplies. Luckily they had plenty of food mages, those of the wood element, who could supplement what they were able to bring. There were a few thousands non-combatants with them, including those mages and the forgers to take care of the weapons and armour.

"I've been asked by Vala to tell you not to turn into your true form," said Agata. She looked aged but she stood like any other general. There was a power hiding beneath that wrinkled face.

"I guess I'll rely on Thorn, then," said Sasha. She wore the sword on her back as a symbol, but she had expected to give it to a runner to keep it safe in battle. If Vala was warning against a course of action, then it would be smart to listen to her.

"I've always wondered if it was true that you were invincible," said Agata.

"It is," said Sasha. "My soul has no core and my body regrows. I don't know how it works." She knew how she became that way. Manford had made her swallow a black rock and she fundamentally changed.

"Have you ever flown before?" asked Agata.

"I'm a Vanavolk, so I can have wings," said Sasha. "I've also been on your airships a few times. You know that, right?"

"No, I mean have you *flown* before?" Agata pointed at a catapult that was being rolled off a ship.

"Now there's an interesting tactic I hadn't considered," said Sasha.

"Akenesa came up with it," said Agata. "I think it was a joke, but it's hard to tell with her."

“Well, when we get to the city of Cor, I won’t be against it,” said Sasha.

They had encountered a few scouting groups as they crossed the countryside but hadn't found any real resistance. All the towns were apparently in the mountains that could be seen in the east, and to the far west there was another mountain range that was occupied by Vin.

They set up camp within sight of the city and could see the enemy army amassing. Sasha could feel herself getting hungry. She longed to rip and tear. She needed the blood.

Agata and her generals had gathered in the command tent to go over plans, and Akenesa had been talking for at least half an hour. Sasha knew what plan she needed to use. The one that had gotten her the title of the Devourer. She was just going to kill and eat and destroy. It's what she was good at anyway.

"A human has been sighted on the city wall!" shouted a messenger as he entered the tent, out of breath and sweating. "Bald, old, wearing the Empty Diamond."

"Probably Manford," said Sasha.

"No sign of Egil as well? Long, messy hair? Wears rags?" asked Akenesa.

"Not yet," said the messenger.

"Tell the scouts to make sure that Manford doesn't approach," said Akenesa. "We can't let him get to Sasha inside the camp." The messenger saluted and ran off.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Sasha. "Why would they let him be seen before the battle? They want us to go after him."

"I agree with that," said Akenesa. "They've tipped their hand to try and lure us into a trap. Marquis controls a large army. Bigger than ours. If he manages to pull either of us away from the fight then our power advantage is removed and their numbers advantage suddenly matters."

"If it comes to it, then I'll go after him," said Agata. "I'd rather be fighting Marquis, but tactically it makes more sense

for me to fight this mage of yours. I hate fighting mages.”

Another messenger burst into the tent and handed a letter to Agata who narrowed her eyes as she read it.

“Let them in,” she said.

A few minutes later a group of people dressed in white were let into the tent. Several men and women, not all of them entirely human. They all wore the symbols of Chassuille.

“Greetings. My name is Aldo Bello. I am aware you don’t like Champions of the Gods, so I should tell you that I am the Champion of Eyes, leader of the Eyes of Chassuille.”

He had brown hair but it was greying, and his deep brown eyes had a kindness behind them, but his build and the sword at his side showed he was experienced. None of these people wore armour, at least not visibly. His pale skin and the shape of his jaw marked him as a descendant of people from mainland Terra. His Skrae was flawless, as if it were his native tongue.

“What are worshippers of Chassuille doing out here?” asked Agata. “Don’t you see a battle will be taking place in the morning?”

“We see it very well,” said Aldo. “We wish to join you.”

“How can we trust you?” asked Sasha.

“You even talk like her,” said Aldo. “We are allies of your granddaughter, Narianel, though we mostly know her by her Vinish name, Beatrix.”

“It’s true,” said Akenesa when Sasha looked at her.

“When our scout informed us of your movements we knew what was happening, and so we came to help.” Aldo held out a piece of paper to Akenesa. “If you can draw this rune then we will be able to use it in the morning to turn the tide of this battle permanently in your favour.”

“All this does is open a temporary portal to the Aether Sea,” said Akenesa. “How will that help?”

“The Grand Lord gave us the coordinates,” said a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. Sasha thought she was beautiful. Very different from Nerikan women in an exotic

way. “When that portal opens, you’ll receive a very powerful soldier. Someone who has been recovering.”

“Narianel?” asked Akenesa.

“Yes,” said Aldo. “She spent weeks recovering, but she’s now ready to return to Avani.”

“Akenesa, can we trust them?” asked Agata.

“I believe so,” said Akenesa. “It will take me several hours to draw this. Portal runes are notoriously fussy. It’s already past noon, so I won’t finish until dusk.”

“We’ll open it after the battle begins,” said Agata. “Are you sure you can open it without Akenesa, Bello?”

“Please, just call me Aldo. And yes. It’s keyed to light aether like mine and my wife’s. We can lend two of our own to the fight, but the rest of our number will be our guard while the portal opens.”

“Which two?” asked Sasha, looking at the group.

“Gilbert Huff and Tesni Armstrong,” said Aldo. A timid looking girl with draconic features stepped forward. She had black scales, horns, and a long tail. She looked at Sasha and seemed like she wanted to say something, but stayed quiet.

“She smells like darkness,” said Akenesa.

“Serpentine,” said Tesni.

“Descended from those empowered by the Dragons,” said Aldo. “Her dark aether is like yours. Use her well.”

“And the other one?” asked Agata. Aldo pointed behind her and Sasha turned to see someone sitting at the back of the tent. There were no doors on that side so Sasha had no idea how he got there.

“A shadow walker?” asked Agata and he nodded. He was a Host of the Heavenly Soul, but instead of shining white he was a deep black, like night itself. His eyes shone and his teeth stood out, but the entirety of his flesh was pitch black. He wore the same white uniform as the rest.

“Gilbert is an ex-assassin, some of a fallen angel, and I would highly recommend you send him to take down that man on the walls,” said Aldo. “I don’t recognise him, but his soul

glows with the same energy as other Azael worshippers.”

“Glow?” asked Sasha. “I’ve never seen such a thing.”

“A power of the Champion of Eyes, I’m afraid,” said Aldo. “I can see those who worship Azael. They stand out like a beacon. There are two within this city.”

“And Narianel?” asked Sasha.

“I’m not worried about her,” said Aldo. “She has a faint trace of that aether, but it’s because she has been in contact with Azael’s soldiers. It’s residue, not a flame. It’s the same for my own people.” Sasha relaxed to hear that.

“I was the scout, in case you were wondering,” said Gilbert Huff. “Scouted your Synod building too. While you were in it. Discussing war and Azael.”

“We *definitely* need the Vault Lords back,” muttered Agata, but she didn’t seem worried. Sasha felt like she should be arresting the man, but since the Synod was open to the public it was hard to find the excuse.

“I’m going to start on the rune,” said Akenesa, leaving the tent. There was something off about her aether. It was normally so steady, but Sasha could see the smallest hint of frustration.

“Do all Vanavolk have those sharp teeth?” asked Tesni, finally asking what she had clearly wanted to ask since she was introduced.

“Don’t worry, kid,” said Sasha. “They’re only for eating all the naughty little children, so be good. Alright?” She gave the girl a wide-eyed smile and watched as she backed away.

“Your personality is so different,” said Aldo, laughing. “Such a similar face, but while she seethes you delight.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her,” said Sasha. “I think we’ll get along quite well.”

The battle began at dawn, but it wasn't a siege of the city as Sasha thought it might have become. Cor's city walls were decorative in nature owing to the arrogance of Marquis and his yes men, so the army didn't even bother with them. They just set up outside the city and waited to try and repel the Nerikan army.

Sasha was pretty happy about this, as she always ended up alone behind the walls in a siege, which meant she had to circle back and open the gates unless she just decided to go it alone like with the original raid on this city. She could see the Deathlight Tower looming over everyone, its complex and woven form stretching up to the clouds.

Sasha dismissed the thought and climbed into the bucket of the catapult, readying herself to land in the middle of the enemy army. A soldier pulled away the ladder and Sasha took a deep breath, but the moment was interrupted by Agata calling out.

"It was a joke!" she said with a laugh as she rode up on her horse. "You're not really going to do it, are you?"

"I said I wasn't against it," she said. "The armies have clashed less than half a mile away. I'll be there in seconds by doing this."

"Half a mile isn't too far to walk!" said Agata, still in fits of laughter.

Sasha nodded to the engineers and saluted to Agata as she was launched into the air. She was used to the feeling of air rushing past her and when she was at the peak of the arc she pulled Thorn from her back and spread her wings. She had to flap them a lot to get where she wanted, but soon enough she managed to aim her fall.

Sasha crashed into the ground right in the middle of a resting platoon, instantly killing the man she landed on. From a pile of blood and gore she reformed, her senses taking a moment to awaken. First scent, then sound, then sight, then

the pain. Her skin pulled across her newly reformed muscles and she stood surrounded by terrified soldiers. She didn't bother with wings.

These soldiers weren't human, but that didn't matter. She didn't take the time to examine them other than the scent of silicates and industrial fumes. They were dead in moments as Sasha tore out throats and ripped out all manner of organs she didn't quite recognise.

When she was done she found Thorn a short jog away and was then surrounded again. She was not a fast fighter. She was like a turtle. Slow and defensive. She didn't need to be, but it was natural to her. This is how she would have fought even if she could be killed. Thorn's hook was perfect for parrying and disarming, often literally, and the talons on her left hand easily tore through armour.

Any time she was hit the wound closed quickly. She didn't know why but they always aimed for the body when her legs and arms would be better targets. She wondered if common soldiers, no matter where they were born, were the biggest idiots possible. Just follow orders, don't think about the moment to moment tactics unless your commander tells you to. At least Agata seemed to train her soldiers better than that.

As Sasha cleared a fifty foot circle around her the mages moved in to face her. They had pulled away from supporting the front lines and Sasha could see who was their squad leader because of the red tassels on his shoulder plate. He shouted something in a guttural language and they began launching bolts of elemental energy at her. She avoided these in a dance, though many grazed her, burning or tearing her skin. Even though she preferred to fight in as little as possible she called on her inner darkness and formed black metal armour to ward off strikes that would slow her down.

She forced her way forward, the armour honed over centuries to turn aside magic thanks to training with Akenesa, and was soon tearing apart the magic squad. Some fled and, in

an uncharacteristic move, she let them go. The scent of pure aether flooded her mind and she was distracted. Back at camp the portal was open. She could feel the movement of the Aether Sea in the distance.

And then a brilliant aether rose into the sky. It was a very rare triple attunement. Fire and darkness and light, all mingling in one soul and pushing past the form and into the world around it. A shining red light filled the sky for a moment before retreating to a pin prick far above. And then came the wings, dozens of them, alternating black and white, several glowing silver, and all wreathed in flames. It covered the sun and left the world below in deep shadows.

Sasha gasped in awe looking up at the angel in the sky, her mind in tatters just trying to comprehend its size and how the universe contorted around it. The wings were slowly rotating around the central point which seemed to be leaking a thick black corruption and staining the air around it with the tainted aether, obscuring the red light.

The divine creature was beautiful and terrifying, and its power threatened to engulf everything around it. Sasha could only wonder why her eyes weren't burning at the sight of such a wondrous being. And then she felt it. That familiar signature. This wasn't just an angel, it was a Vanavolk and a vampire and a human all at once. This was a nephilim that was bending reality to its will just by existing.

This was Narianel, and Sasha had never expected her granddaughter to be such a world shattering experience to behold. Then Narianel screamed and the ground shook, and four thick black tendrils shot down into Cor from her centre. The city was torn apart in moments and the Deathlight Tower fell away from the battle. With the tendrils latched in place, Narianel pulled herself down to the city, causing a quake that split the ground.

The Nerikan forces began to retreat and the Coran army stood in shock at the destruction of their home. Sasha ran towards the city, eschewing the armour in favour of her

usual tight-fitting battle clothing. The mass of wings that was Narianel burst and then shrank to the size of a person and Sasha had to meet her. She needed to see the form she took in her normal life.

When Sasha reached the wall she simply blew through it with a burst of aether and continued running. In the ruins of a large mansion up ahead she thought she heard a song, and when it ended a second aether disappeared. It was already dwarfed by Narianel and barely there, but Sasha caught it as it vanished.

The entire city was destroyed. Not a single building still had a roof and there were flames in places. Sasha had seen this done to too many towns to truly care, but seeing it happen so instantly to a city was astonishing. The farms outside the city were safe and the people could rebuild. Those that survived, anyway.

Sasha reached the mansion and was soon climbing over rubble. She quickly found a young woman standing over a broken pile of armour.

“Narianel,” said Sasha. The woman looked at her with clearly Nerikan eyes. Under her bottom lip were two little black fangs painted in the blood of Galina. But the woman was made of aether, with no physical form. She had a faint white glow to her body and her deep black hair was like a crack in reality. Everything about her seemed too light, as if she wasn’t affected by gravity, and her black and white clothes floated as she moved. She turned and her footsteps made no sound.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, grandmother,” she said and Sasha rushed to her. She dove into a hug but found herself hitting the ground on the other side of the angel.

“What happened to your body?” asked Sasha, climbing to her feet. “Why are you not physical?”

“I’ll explain later,” said Narianel. Her voice was husky and she was looking around. “I heard from Aldo there was another worshipper of Azael here. Where is he?”

“Here,” came a voice from the shadows. “Kill her now,

Sasha.” A click of the tongue and the world went black.

*Only through perseverance will she grow,
and take upon the mantle that she has earned.*

*She wields fang and talon and torrential darkness,
but her quest for satisfactions will never end.*

*After the end we cannot know,
but the destroyer waits behind the static and I must know.*

Part 3
The Reality Destroyer

In which rage becomes apathy

Beatrix woke up. It wasn't sudden but it wasn't slow. She just didn't remember sleeping and it was as if she had always been there. She tried to sit up, but couldn't move. She tried to lift her arm, but it wasn't there. She tried to kick her legs, but they weren't there. She tried to grow her wings, but they refused to come to her.

Panic came over her, drowning out any lingering anger from her core's curse. She couldn't even flail and her mind was a mess. Her aether rushed inside her core but couldn't escape and she couldn't see or feel anything beyond her.

"Calm," said a voice, and so she did. She didn't mean to but the command was the most real thing she could grasp. The voice was gentle and so she allowed it to wash over her.

Then there was a crack and her aether was free to flow and soon she had an aetherial form. Head, body, arms, legs. She became complete again. Or so she thought. She couldn't pull together a physical body.

"I'm broken," she said, finally able to form a mouth on her face. Speaking didn't work properly. Her voice felt wrong.

"Yes and no," said the voice. "You once were broken, but now you are not. But also, you are missing your matter."

"My matter?" she asked. Nose and ears appeared on her head, and fingers sprouted from her hands.

"Your physical body had to be destroyed. You have no more link to the physical realm. Lucifer's dying curse was so strong that we could only move it, so we put it in your body and separated your soul. The body is gone, and now you are just your soul."

Lucifer. The battle came back to her in waves of pain and satisfaction. She had attained the peak of her power. She had been in control. And best of all she had retained her sense of perspective. She hadn't become inhuman like she'd feared. She hadn't needed to seal off her power or put Adela through all that trouble. She had become herself.

But that dying curse. Jumping in through her eyes and wrapping itself around her core. She remembered seeing the reapers, and maybe someone else, but then her memory was blank until waking.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked. She gained toes and the shape of her tongue and teeth became more defined, allowed her better control of her voice.

“Thirty-seven days,” said the voice. She finally opened her eyes and saw that she was lying in a bed. She couldn’t feel the sheets on top of her or the pillow beneath her head. The room was mostly empty and had no doors or windows, and in the corner sat a man with almost pure white skin with nearly pure black hair. He wore a grey shirt with most of the buttons undone and a pair of woollen trousers, also grey. He also had black boots and gloves.

“Who are you?” asked Beatrix, finally sitting up and stretching even though she had no muscles or joints to loosen, pushing aside the sheet with numb hands. Black hair fell from her head and flowed behind her, gently floating in the air. She noticed that she wasn’t wearing anything, but as a soul there was nothing to show. Within her spun tiny balls of silver light that were her blades, and around her core was a spiked black cross with a hole at its centre for her core and an elongated bottom spike that looked like the handle of a sword.

“My name is Dasus,” he said with a smile.

Her hands regained their feeling as she clutched the bed beneath her. She looked at the oddly rectangular eyes and the three-pointed ears like her own and she saw this man was a Skraeðan. A God was slouched in his wooden dining chair and looked half-asleep. It was all too casual.

“Low Lor—”

“No need for that,” he said. He stood up and touched the chair, causing it to vanish. “You are a guest in my home, not a worshipper in a church. Your form is slowly filling out how you remember looking. You should create clothes before it’s too late.” He chuckled at that, but Beatrix didn’t see the

humour in it.

Beatrix concentrated but couldn't create clothing at first. She had learned to do it with physical matter but now that she had none to use she was at a loss. Dasus offered some instruction on how to do it with just aether and she managed it, but without real substance it still felt like she was wearing nothing and none of it conformed to gravity. Soon her body was fully formed, but not fleshed out.

"Can you stand?" asked Dasus. She did so and was able to feel the cold ground beneath her, even through the boots she gave herself. "Follow me."

He touched the wall and it opened like an iris. It was all so smooth that it felt wholly unnatural. She stepped through and it closed behind her, leaving no sign there was ever a door. She didn't think there had even been a door in the first place. Just a wall Dasus had decided to open.

This new room gave her a terrible feeling. Millions of tiny hooks lined the wall on the right, and on her left was a rack with an uncountable number of needles, scissors, and other tools she didn't recognise.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Where you spent the last thirty-six days," said Dasus as he turned to face her. "I feel that it's just good manners to explain everything to you. How much do you remember after the reapers took your soul?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I made a deal with Nareshilna," said Dasus. "As a rule, we cannot bring our Champions into Sonta, but that's not to say that another cannot do it for us. It's a loophole that we've abused before but Mao doesn't fix."

"I'm in Sonta?" asked Narianel. That was even more of a surprise than meeting Dasus and seeing him so slovenly. She was in the home of the Gods. Somewhere beyond the walls all around her were the other Skraeðan. The other Gods. Beings of power and brilliance.

And then she remembered meeting Chassuille and how

petty he seemed. And now Dasus being so lax. She was struck with something she had rarely thought about before. These Gods were people. Not just in the sense that they were a race of sentient beings, but a *people*. Flaws and personality quirks and bad habits included.

“You are.” Dasus gave a lazy nod as if he was about to fall asleep where he stood. “The Zeroth Layer, very close to the Grand Gate, which has been bad for business.”

“Business? Isn’t your job to oversee the dusk and dawn in the mortal worlds?”

“And how exactly do I do that?” he asked with a grin. “Those titles are arbitrary. You’ll learn that quickly if you spend any time around here. So, these hooks I’ve seen you eyeing. These are my business. This is a rethreading room.”

“Rethreading?” asked Beatrix before there was a flash in her mind. A feeling of being stretched infinitely thin. “You unwound my core and hung me on these hooks to keep me from tangling... Why?”

“To fix your damage,” said Dasus. “Not only did your battle with Lucifer do a lot of damage to your core thread’s consistency, you’ve spent your entire life stressing yourself so hard that you nearly broke. Lucifer’s curse was a tipping point on an already dangerous balance.

“You sealed away your own powers, which was such an incredibly dumb move that I’m surprised anyone would ever do it. You’ve also faced a fallen angel and multiple run-ins with the forces of undoing. For someone so young you’ve done a lot already.

“You’ll have a lot of battles like those ahead. Egil will return, he always does. You will need to face Legion too. And then there is your promise to your mother to face Manford, right? You will fight the Empty Diamond again and again. So you need to take your time to rest and relax. Soak your soul in blessed water. Chassuille’s followers call it cleansing pools, I believe, so use theirs.”

Beatrix took the time to think through his words. She

knew that everything he said was true. She hadn't been good to herself, or even to those around her in many ways. She would change that.

"Follow me, again," said Dasus, walking to the other end of the room and opening the wall. She walked with him into what looked like a sitting room, with sofas around a small table. There were several books on the table and even a vase with Nerikan black roses. The wall to her left had a dark wooden door and the wall across from her had a window with grey curtains pulled across it. Some light leaked in through the curtains and her aether began to revitalise.

On one of the sofas, facing Dasus and Narianel, was another Skraeðan. His hair and skin were so black that it looked like the world simply refused to show him to her. She couldn't read his expressions at all.

"Faret," said Dasus with a smile and holding his arms wide. He sat opposite Faret. "I wasn't expecting you today. How can I help you?"

Faret was the God of Judgement and was in charge of organising the afterlife. From his posture he didn't seem very friendly, so Dasus being so relaxed with him was a bit odd.

"I felt her aether stirring," said Faret. His voice was strong and when he moved his face to look at her she noticed that he wasn't gaunt. In fact, he was rather muscular for someone with a lean build. All Gods were said to be victims of the First Curse, but he showed no signs of that, unlike Dasus and Chassuille. She wished she had paid more attention to her mother's lessons. She vaguely remembered the talk about it all when she had first learned of Azael.

"Narianel, come, sit down!" said Dasus, moving along the sofa to give her room. He patted the seat next to him and smiled at her. She sat down and was very uncomfortable with the situation. Being treated as an equal by a God.

"You owe me an apology," said Faret. She felt his glare even if she couldn't see it properly.

"Why?" she asked. A curt response only increased her

discomfort as Faret audibly sighed.

“For making me add a new pillar,” said Faret. “You were meant to destroy Lucifer, but now I need to create a whole new section for dead angels.”

“I don’t see why you needing to do your job is my problem,” said Beatrix. Dasus laughed but Faret continued to stare at her.

“I dislike the way you talk,” said Faret.

“So do most people.” Beatrix folded her arms and let herself lean back. The sofa was actually pretty comfy. “If you need to create more pillars or whatever then do it. I did what I felt was right.”

“If she wasn’t a Champion I’d say we should initiate her,” said Dasus. “I’ve heard she spoke in the same way to Chassuille. Could make the meetings less boring.”

“Why do I have to be a Champion anyway?” she asked, looking at Dasus. “If I have the power and the will to do it, why do you need to lay claim to my soul?”

“That sounds like a very good question,” said Faret, now staring down Dasus.

“Ask Galina,” said Dasus. “She’s the one with your bond now that she’s awake.”

“Wait, what?” asked Beatrix. “The matriarch is awake now? Since when?”

“Nerik has returned,” said Dasus. “Your grandmother, Galina, and everyone else. It was only a few days after your battle on the Isle of Dusk that your cousin managed to awaken the city, and it was about a week ago that she broke the curse on Galina.”

“I need to go see them now!” said Beatrix, standing so quickly that she almost fell over.

“Your form won’t last long outside Sonta,” said Faret.

“He speaks the truth,” said Dasus. “You’ll need to adjust to the new you before leaving. A few days here, longer on the Aether Sea, and then you can return to a fully physical world.”

“What do you mean?” asked Beatrix.

“You’re a soul now,” said Dasus. “You have no more body. You’ll pass straight through the floor if you don’t learn to fly first. Sonta is drenched in aether and so the objects, walls, and floors here will be solid to you for the most part. The Aether Sea is also mostly aether, so the physical objects there like the islands should be filled with enough aether for you to stand on.”

“So I have to learn to fly?” asked Beatrix.

“It’s the easier method,” said Faret. “Your other choice would be to learn to forge matter from aether and give yourself a new body. Or you could merge the Material and Ethereal Realms in your experience so you could be present on the Material while using the Ethereal as a floor.”

“You can already turn aether into kinetic energy,” said Dasus. “Heat and light too. Crafting a physical body isn’t too far from where you are, but you’ll need to adjust to where you are now. And maybe read some books on nehpilim biology.”

“Are there actually books like that?” asked Beatrix, suddenly feeling overwhelmed.

“Her particular mix is odd,” said Faret. “She’d need books on human and vampire biology too, and I don’t know if there’s a book on the Vanavolk because only two have ever died and they were cremated without being dissected.”

“Galina would know,” said Dasus. “She crafted copies of her own genetics and then modified them enough to be considered children and not clones. This is, of course, if you don’t want to just create a block of meat shaped and sized to the way you want.”

“This is too much,” said Beatrix. Holding her head in her hands. “So I have this body but I also don’t have a body and while I can sit here I can’t sit back on Avani.”

“You won’t be able to touch anyone in the Mortal Circles,” said Faret. “Low Circle and above will have souls that are dense enough to touch, and the higher numbered circles may have some resitance.”

That struck Beatrix and she looked from Faret to Dasus and then back again.

“I wasn’t going to break that to her,” said Dasus.

“I know,” said Faret. He stood up and grinned, letting Beatrix see his white teeth. He was like a much darker version of a black Host like Gilbert. “You caused me work, and so I get to upset you.”

“Adela...” muttered Beatrix, her shoulders falling.

“Come on, that was harsh,” said Dasus.

“Fine,” said Faret with an exaggerated sigh. “I’ll make it up to you, Narianel. How would you like to talk to Gregory Blair one last time?”

She looked at him and furrowed her brow. Her mind was all over the place and she couldn’t tell if he was being serious. His strange complexion made it impossible to tell.

“Is that a real offer?” she asked.

“It is,” said Faret. “I was waiting for you to ask.”

“He would refuse resurrection,” said Beatrix. “I didn’t think it would be worth asking. He was ageing and his soul was damaged so he wouldn’t want to come back, even though I would want him back. He wouldn’t want anyone to pay the cost either.”

“There are ways of speaking with the dead without a full resurrection.” Faret walked to the door. “Three minutes of talking. It’s all you’ll get. If you’re interested then come to the afterlife in five hours. It takes time to prepare.”

He left and Beatrix sat there filled with a strange anticipation. She started running through everything she wanted to say to her grandfather in her head but Dasus cut it short.

“I’ll show you around the city,” he said. “You’ll be here for a few days so you should know your way around.”



Sonta was the strangest city Beatrix could ever imagine. There

were several wide streets but no carriages. There were many Skraeðanee just walking around like normal people, but they weren't hurrying around. Many were just standing and talking to others they just happened to pass.

Dasus warned her against going down the side streets and they didn't follow normal rules and she could easily end up on another Layer, and she was only just starting to learn what that meant. If she focused she could see the other Layers and all the streets and people and buildings in completely different places.

They soon arrived at the Centre and it was as awing as she had imagined as a child. The Grand Gate stood a hundred feet tall and covered in trillions of runes that held it shut. She could feel the oppressive aether pushing against it from the other side, but somehow it felt hollow.

"Something wrong?" asked Dasus.

"I once had a dream where Azael spoke to me," said Beatrix, not taking her eyes off the Gate. "I don't think he's on the other side. I think he's here, working to undermine us all. The Dragons rose up after the Gate was closed, after all."

"Chassuille told me about that," said Dasus. "I'm not sure what to think about it. You could be right, but it could have just been a wisp of his aether that was left behind. There's no way to know, however, as his presence is entirely invisible. Even his followers are hard to spot, and it's why we have specific Champions with tuned senses."

"He is the Pure Lord," said Beatrix. "Can he really be defeated?"

"How do you know that title?" asked Dasus. "I didn't think it was taught amongst mortals."

"I was never taught it, but it's in my head. I know things I shouldn't. Long black hair and deep grey skin, but eyes unlike any other Skraeðan. Eyes that are more human in shape and depth. A voice that's deep and powerful, cold and demanding. His head tilted just slightly to his left, as if he's trying to look down on you. And a hole in his chest that lets you see his black

heart beating. A twinkle of red within.”

Some of the passing Skraeðan had stopped and stared as she talked, describing the figure that stalked her dreams. The reason she didn't sleep.

“I see it in the flow of corruption,” she continued. “I see it in the eternity beyond my dreams. The only place I don't is in the Great Beyond. That light beyond the nothing when the universe is broken. He can't get there on his own, which is why he's in need of allies.”

“I think that's enough of that,” said a new voice. She looked behind her to see a familiar face. Chassuille. He was also far too thin, his arms looking like sticks. Around his chest he only wore a single piece of cloth, as if he were a woman making the bare minimum effort at modesty, and he wore a pair of trousers that would fit any normal man far too tightly. He was flanked by two others that she didn't recognise.

“How did you come to that description?” asked one of them. He was taller than Chassuille, about the size of an average human male, and his eyes were completely empty. It wasn't just that he was missing the eyes themselves, but there was a deep blackness there that threatened to suck in the world around him. There were stars in that void.

“I just know it,” she said.

“We should investigate this,” said the other one. She was about as tall as Beatrix and had an air of sadness about her. She wore thick clothes that hid her shape, but Beatrix noted a silver ring on her left ring finger.

“If she is his ally we should eject her from the city,” said the first one.

“She's rude, but she's not his ally,” said Chassuille. “The alliance paid too much to get her here, so I don't want her gone just because she's been visited by phantoms.”

“We'll give her due diligence,” said the man with the missing eyes. “We'll investigate her claims, Chassuille. We can't dismiss something like this. If he's on this side of the Gate then our efforts all these years were misdirected. We need

every edge we can get.”

“That was why I tried to warn you,” said Beatrix to Chassuille, letting her anger show on her face. Being ignored like that and called a fool would irritate anyone, but it boiled her aether until it was close to overflowing.

“Just no more talk of this in public,” said Chassuille. “It upsets people.” Beatrix could see he was right so didn’t argue. The various Skraeðanee onlookers were disturbed by the things she said, reliving memories of an age long past.

Chassuille gave a curt bow and stalked away with the other two following him. Beatrix saw them enter a rather large and round building baring the word ‘council chambers’ above the doors.

“Who were those two?” asked Beatrix.

“Mao and Ia, two of the Grand Circle,” said Dasus.

Fate and fortune. Gods who didn’t wish to be praised by mortals and so delivered nothing but pain on those who invoked their names. So they were the devils people feared.

“Come, I have a gift for you before we go to see Faret.” Dasus walked away and Beatrix followed after a minute of staring at the Grand Gate. She lost him in the crowds but just followed his scent all the way to a cottage in a long street full of fancy buildings. None of the styles matched and each was decorated wildly different.

The door was open so Beatrix walked inside to find Dasus coming down from the upper floor. Everything was in black, white, or grey, making it feel like the world suddenly lost all colour.

“Prochorus was my creation. A soul of my own design. I was the one who built him, thread by thread, and on top of that design I laid the plan of the Monochrome Alliance. I was given a song written by the others. Words by Chassuille. Beat by Seran. Melody by Horal. This is the song that you no doubt hear when you close your eyes.”

“I do,” said Beatrix as Dasus pushed something into her hand. A crystal of such a deep blue that it was almost black. A

completely corrupted man's dead soul. Unlike living souls, dead souls didn't glow and there was no flow of aether. "Each blade I obtain adds to the song, makes it a little more complete."

"The song wants to be sung," said Dasus. "But that is not the only power the Alliance placed within Prochorus. Your blades are floating within your soul as specks of silver light. I had to remove them from you while I worked on you and then place them back when I was done. Actually, before I continue, I have a question, why are you storing Heart as a whole rather than as light?"

"Heart?" asked Beatrix. "I don't have Heart yet."

He waved his hand and her tunic burst open, revealing her chest and her soul's core within, glowing a deep red. He stuck his hand into her chest and grabbed the black spiked ring by the long section at the bottom and pulled it free.

"This is Heart," he said, and she could suddenly feel its presence.

"Why was that inside me?" she asked, working her magic to recreate her clothes. "I had always assumed that was just a strange marking within my form. Why can I feel it now? I don't understand."

Her mind was racing. That was there since before her Separation over a decade ago. Why was there a whole blade inside her soul?

"Heart is an odd one," said Dasus. He swung it to the side and nothing happened. "Heart chooses its master. You have direct influence over the others but this one's power is influence itself. On its own it is just a handle with a pointed crossguard. But with other blades..."

He tossed the blade to her and she caught it. She could feel it trying to draw on the power of the other blades within her and so she let it. Suddenly a thin silver light shot out from the handle and formed into the blade of a sword.

"I've read about this," said Beatrix. "The more of the other blades it can draw on, the larger this silver energy will

grow. It's a sword without a blade, much like Wraith, but the other blades are its blade."

She dismissed Heart, pulling it inside herself and felt it mingle with the others.

"Heart has been stuck within Legion," said Dasus. "It must have sensed your birth and your ability to wield it. The demon inside, Iblis, was always a strange one, even before he fell. But, that aside, the power of Prochorus is strong within you, and so I think you might have also inherited his ability to forge souls."

"And who is this?" asked Beatrix, holding up the dead soul. "You want me to test that power on this poor soul?"

"A poor soul?" asked Dasus with a grin. "You hold in your hand the Chronomage."

Beatrix physically recoiled at that news and dropped the soul. It bounced off the ground, letting off a high pitched ting each time it hit the hard floor. It rolled under a side table.

"Why would you put his soul in my hand?" she asked.

"Are you afraid?" asked Dasus, retrieving the soul. "He was just a man, even if he was a worshipper of Azael. Galina and Prochorus fought hard to kill this man. Don't you think that the fallen angels and demons inside you are so much worse? Abaddon killed twelve thousand people in his first night after falling and you and your grandfather use him all the time."

It was true, and she knew it. The Chronomage was a man who brought devastation to Nerik, killing thousands and was the reason time magic was now a taboo. When Dasus gave her the soul again she took a moment to look at it.

"Why do you have this?"

"When we were arranging for you to be brought here because of visions from Serk and Horal, I had an idea. As you might have noticed I'm good friends with Faret, and I asked him to pick this particular soul from the afterlife for me. He knows why I want it, and I think you might be able to make use of it."

“I think my mother had notes on soul forging, but I’ve never looked into doing it myself.” Beatrix turned the soul in her hand and thought it strange that it didn’t reflect any light even though Dasus kept this place well lit.

“For now, draw it into your soul,” said Dasus. “Claim it as part of yourself. It should work the same as drawing in your blades. Think of it as another blade, just unrefined.”

She tried for a few minutes but couldn’t do it. At one point she accidentally summoned Flameroot and knocked it from her hand. Then, just as she was about to give up, Dasus slapped the bottom of her hand and knocked the soul into the air. She scrambled to catch it and as it touched her palm it turned into light and became a part of her. The light was a much darker shade than her blades, but it felt right. For just a moment.

The memories and thoughts and feelings hit her all at once. She stood in Nerik in a state of destruction. Then there was a porcelain man with a glowing gem in its chest attacking her. Azael was healing her crippled leg and offering power in exchange for a task. She held out her hand to a young boy with grey hair.

And then she was back in the hall of Dasus’s home. She realised she had fallen to her knees and her form had frayed. She calmed herself and solidified her form.

“That was... intense,” she said. If she had a heart it would be thumping and if she breathed she would be puffing.

“We’ll have time to discuss what you saw later,” said Dasus. “We need to go see Faret now.”

Walking through a door near the Grand Gate took her to a different world altogether. She stepped into the afterlife and everything she had read sprung to life from the books of her youth. Endless rows of pillars that reached up and down forever.

“No wonder he was angry to create a new one,” said Beatrix. The pillars seemed eternal. Stepping out into the

darkness she found that the empty air was solid and she was able to walk with no problems. As she reached the nearest pillar she saw that it held thousands, if not millions, of dead souls, each in its own little indent.

“Follow me,” said Dasus. “He’ll be at the Theatre.”

They walked through the darkness and pillars for a long time. By the time they reached an arch she felt like they had been walking for days. Through the arch was a large circular arena with seating all around in tiers. Beyond the seats she couldn’t see the pillars any more even though they should still be towering over her.

“Welcome,” said Faret. He entered from another arch on the other side, holding a bright blue soul, but one that was undoubtedly dead. It had a familiar scent. Faret placed the soul on the sandy floor which shook and a rune appeared in neatly combed lines. “This will wake him up. From the state of his soul you will only get three or four minutes. Tell me when you’re ready.”

“Do it,” she said with an exaggerated nod.

Faret chanted and the lines in the sand began to glow, power flowing outward to the circular edge of the rune and then back to the centre. Dasus and Faret took seats while Beatrix watched the soul float into the air and begin to glow.

Beatrix found herself filled with nerves, her anger down to the lowest level it had ever been. Her eyes softened and her mouth hung slightly open as the familiar shape of a man sprang from the soul. White strips of cloth burst from the sand and wrapped around him.

Before her stood Gregory Blair. He opened his eyes and they glowed blue.

“Did you really go and resurrect me?” he asked with a grin. “That’s quite the cost to pay for someone with so few years left.”

“I didn’t resurrect you,” she said. She wanted to hug him but without a body she couldn’t.

“Oho, this is the Theatre, isn’t it?” asked Gregory. He

looked at Faret and Dasus and bowed.

“I don’t have long, so let me talk. I killed the men who killed you, and I defeated Lucifer. My power is fully unlocked and I am ready to live my life again.”

“Show me,” said Gregory. “I never got the chance when I was alive.”

She nodded and assumed her true form. Her aether flowed and she flew high into the air. Eighty-two wings burst from her, alternating black and white, wreathed in flame and silver. And then she began to glow from her core, letting her angelic shield loose and allowing it to form a halo in wheels around her centre.

Then something unexpected happened. From the base of each wing sprouted a miles-long black tendril. They all spiralled behind her but she could feel them like extra arms. Nimble, prehensile, and most of all deadly.

She pulled it all back inside and within moments she was stood before her grandfather once more.

“You have no physical body,” said Gregory, walking around her. “You’re made of visible aether now. Beautiful and awing and fantastic, but you lack physicality. I felt your power and your sheer presence, but I could see what you lack. What happened?”

“Lucifer’s final curse,” she said. “Dasus fixed my soul but had to shift the curse into my body in order to save me. My physical body is destroyed but in time I can learn to create new matter. At least according to Dasus.”

“Have you read my notes on aether hardening?” asked Gregory.

“I have, but I’ve not tried it.”

“Now is the perfect time to learn, then,” said Gregory. “I couldn’t be more proud of you, you know. You’re no longer that angry little child trying to prove yourself. You’re now a very angry *woman* who has already proved herself.”

He hugged her, pulling her tight, and she felt his aether thickening to the point that her incorporeality didn’t matter.

They held each other until he vanished. His soul began to float down but she caught it and held it a little longer before giving it to Faret when the pair of Gods joined her in the sand. There were no tears to shed, just contentment.

Beatrix was in Dasus's workshop, standing before all those tiny hooks that would haunt her nightmares if she ever slept. She held the Chronomage's soul in her hand and was listening as Dasus talked her through the needles and picks that were used in the trade. Soul forging seemed difficult, but she felt she'd get the hang of it in time.

She carefully used the proper tools to unravel the soul and gently laid it on the hooks. She had just pulled apart the very essence of this man and was now examining the thread for damage under the careful eye of a God. It was surreal.

"So let's talk about what you saw when you claimed his soul? What was the first thing?"

"The destruction of Nerik all around me," said Beatrix. "I was looking down from the old castle in the mountains of the original island. In the distance I could see the people fleeing towards a portal that smelled of divinity. I was dying, but I was actually happy about it."

"The death of the Chronomage," said Dasus. "He died in Keep Kewaen. Next?"

"I was fighting the puppet," said Beatrix. "The man of porcelain made by Galina with the glowing gem in its chest that was a sort of pretend soul. It moved with unreal speed but I was slowing time around me to keep up. I think it was using one of Prochorus's blades, but everything is a blur. I couldn't tell which one it was."

"It held both Flux and Spite," said Dasus. He showed her how to repair a section before continuing. "Flux is one of the elemental blades. It enhances time magic and allows for both acceleration and deceleration if used correctly."

"I've read that the elemental blades all have secondary properties like that," said Beatrix, carefully rethreading a section. "I have Flameroot and Waterling, but I haven't had time to practice with them."

"Spite is such a curious blade," said Dasus. "You would

think with its name it would be similar to Malice, but it lets the wielder inflict pain at a distance instead of empowering the user. Flux was used to normalise time by counter-acting the Chronomage's power, and Spite was used to stiffen his joints and muscles so the puppet could get close enough to deal the killing blow. What was next?"

"I was injured, lying on the ground at the side of a road somewhere on a plain. There was a destroyed wagon nearby. My leg was broken in several places and I saw Azael crouch next to me. He healed my leg in exchange for a task."

"Did you hear his voice?" asked Dasus.

"I did, and it was exactly how I described yesterday." She took a needle and pick and opened a gap in the thread so she could insert new thread. "He was smiling and gentle, but terrifying. He wanted me to attack Nerik with the power he would give me."

"I don't think we ever found out who the Chronomage was or why he joined Azael. We could never find his name, not even with Seers. Time mages do weird things to Seers who try and look at their timelines."

"I did wonder why my mother never said his name," said Beatrix. "I thought it was because it was taboo, not that she just didn't know his name at all."

"I'll have to report this to the council," said Dasus. "Was there any more?"

"The Chronomage reached out to a small child with grey hair." Beatrix narrowed her eyes as she worked on the soul. "I feel like the boy was familiar but I can't place him. The area I was in was strange too. The sky was black and there were pieces of land floating around. I saw structures and natural terrain, but it was all damaged."

"There's nowhere like that," said Dasus. "At least not as far as I know. We can continue this later. We need to see the council now."



Beatrix entered the council building after Dasus to find a room just like the Theatre, except that she was at the top of some stairs leading down instead of in the circular area at the bottom. The room was filled with Skraeðanee citizens sitting in the seats, all looking at the five down in the centre.

“There are two I don’t recognise,” said Beatrix as they found seats about halfway down. There must have been about six hundred people in the stands. Six hundred Gods.

“The blue skinned one is Serk, Grand Lady of Time,” said Dasus. “The green one is her brother, Voria, Grand Lord of Space.”

Serk and Voria were currently answering a question from people on the other side while Chassuille was talking to someone nearer where Beatrix sat. Ia was looking through some papers on a circular table at the centre of the room, but Mao was staring directly at Beatrix with those weird empty eyes.

When Chassuille was done talking to the person near the front, Dasus immediately raised his hand to get his attention. With a nod from Chassuille, he stood up and told the council and crowd what Beatrix had told him. All five had listened and so did most of the crowd. It seemed any mention of Azael got their attention.

“I’ll send out my Arbiters,” said Mao.

“You believe he’s here?” asked Chassuille. He was always smiling and it bothered Beatrix.

“More than ever,” said Mao. “He always escapes any attempt to look at him. When I’ve looked back on events they are always a blur when he is there. The Grand Gate opening is a mess in my mind.”

“I’m the same,” said Serk. “I’ve talked with Horal on this topic before too. He escapes visions and even his minions hold no place in our searches. His methods elude us, and it’s entirely possible that he’s keeping us distracted by falsely making it seem like he’s still behind the Gate.”

“I’ll set both the Eyes and the Hands on the hunt, then, if the council is in agreement,” said Chassuille. “We can at least track down some of his followers. We know of a few we can go after.”

“My own followers are still working on reopening the Phase,” said Voria. “I’ll tell them to stay on watch, though.”

“Do we really trust her to be free?” asked Ia, pointing at Beatrix. “She has too many links to the Empty Diamond.”

“She’s actually our greatest weapon,” said Mao.

“I’d like to hear an explanation of that,” said Ia.

“They have tried to recruit her,” said Mao, “and yet she has resisted the temptation. Even before she knew who Azael was she fought back against Egil. I wouldn’t say she has a good grasp of morality or ethics, but she at least understands the conflict. She has been given multiple opportunities to give in to her innate villainy, but here she is, giving us information we never had before.”

“Villainy?” muttered Beatrix. She listened to them all speak as if one wrong turn would have her executed.

“I hate that I have to agree with you,” said Chassuille.

“You don’t hate anything,” said Voria with a grin that Beatrix didn’t understand.

“Narianel,” said Mao. “How would you like to kill some more of Azael’s followers for the council?”

“Do you think of me as some monstrous killing fiend?” she asked, standing up and looking Mao in the non-eyes.

“Yes,” he said bluntly. “The most efficient killer we have available. When you are ready, we would have you hunt down and murder people for us because that is what you are best at.”

“You are far too honest,” said Beatrix, earning a laugh from the crowd. Even Voria and Ia chuckled. “Just point me in the right direction. I don’t want the world to end and I’ll need to keep my blades sharp for the main event.”

“I like her,” said Serk. “She’s like Chassuille before the Bell. Passionate.”

“How many blades are in Sonta?” asked Ia.

“Six,” said Chassuille. “Four in the hands of my angels, two in the hands of other Skraeðanee.”

“As an order of the council we want all Divine Blades of Prochorus brought to his heir,” said Ia. “She will need all the help she can get.”

“Who has the other two?” asked Mao. “The two not with the angels.”

“I have one,” said Dasus, holding up his hand.

“So do I,” said a Skraeðan near the front of the crowd. He was dressed all in red and Beatrix couldn’t tell who he was from this angle. “I’ll give it to her later today.”

“We’ll take our leave now,” said Dasus, standing up next to Beatrix. “When council is over, I’ll expect those blades, Chassuille.”

The Grand Lord nodded and they left.



Back in Dasus’s home she followed him upstairs where there was a large, open seating area. Many sofas and low tables were around the room as if it were set up for parties. On the back wall hung a blade and she knew it was hers instantly.

Beatrix raised her hand and the blade turned into silver light then appeared in her hand with a flash. It was a black metal sword with a chain attached to the pommel that then fastened to her wrist.

“Alliance,” she said. “The demon, Eleazar, is the reason they all fell so easily.”

“He is, yes,” said Dasus. “The power to make anyone agree with you. To make your desires desirable. Quite a strong ability. Once he was corrupted, everyone else fell with him.”

There was a knock at the door and Dasus headed down while Beatrix gave Alliance a few test swings. It was heavier than her other one-handed swords but it felt good in her hand. Dasus returned a moment later with the Skraeðan in red. He was carrying a greatsword that Beatrix didn’t think she could

even lift.

“It’s good to meet you,” said the man, holding out the massive sword with ease. His sickly frame was a lie. On his chest was the symbol for war.

“High Lord Aramis,” she said with a bow. She called Alliance into her soul and then drew the greatsword to her hand. She had no muscles to pull or bones to break, but she was dragged to the floor with the weight of the sword.

“Aren’t you made of aether?” asked Aramis. She had never thought the God of War would ever laugh at her. “Just use your magic to become stronger. That’s the way you angels work, right?”

“It is, but she’s still getting used to this form,” said Dasus. “She had a body until recently.”

“Victory,” she said, using the power of the blade on herself. She was filled with a determination to win. She would not lose. She refused to fail. She gathered her aether in her form to create aetherial muscles, strands that could hold the weight and channel pressure from point to point. She lifted the blade with both hands, one on the handle and one on the ricasso above the crossguard.

She called Victory back inside herself as her form broke and she returned to her previous state. She felt weak after the surge but was pleased she had still managed it, if only for a short time.

“You learnt that quick,” said Aramis.

“Nephilim,” said Dasus. “They always learn quick, but they always spend their power poorly. You’re going to have to work on that, Narianel, if you want to maintain it for more than a few seconds in the future.”

“Yeah,” she said, rising to her feet.

“They moved on to Free Expansion before I left,” said Aramis. “Talk of a second Gate.”

“It’s probably too late for that,” said Dasus. “But I can see why you decided to leave early. That debate normally lasts for far too long.”

Beatrix lost track of their conversation as she thought over the powers of all her blades. She knew them on a deep and instinctual level, but she was considering strategy. Both Alliance and Victory were incredibly useful in a military setting but wouldn't be as useful when fighting alone, and Heart would only be useful when she had most of the blades.

After a while Dasus led Aramis out but Beatrix kept on practising. She switched from blade to blade as she stepped through a routine she had been developing, but when she felt the familiar grips of Havoc and Malice, her sickles, she became lost in a dance. She was careful not to damage any of Dasus's furniture but the space was open and she could move quickly in a twirl of sharpness incarnate.



It was dusk and Beatrix sat on top of Dasus's workshop and was watching the sun in the sky and the movement of the shadows. She had never experienced a real day before getting to Sonta. Avani's fixed switching had always felt unnatural and this just felt right.

Down below she noticed Chassuille approaching the workshop so she jumped down. It was more than fifty feet to the street below but she landed with grace. Nothing hurt in her lack of a body, so she didn't even bother with a burst of aether to slow her descent.

"Angels aren't permitted in the city," he said as Dasus exited his workshop. "You'll need to leave the city if you want the four blades I have, but if you do you won't be able to return."

"Why?" asked Beatrix.

"This is a space for Skraeðanee," said Chassuille. "Very few outsiders are allowed in and you only got in here using a loophole in the rules."

"No, I mean, why don't you go to the Void, get the blades, and then bring them to me here?" Beatrix thought it

was the obvious solution.

“People are already annoyed at your presence,” said Chassuille. “You should be leaving soon anyway.”

“Not until she’s managed to make a blade of her own,” said Dasus. “She’s close. It won’t be long.”

“Alright, just make it quick,” said Chassuille. “The blades will be waiting for you when you go.” And with that he left.

“I don’t like him,” said Beatrix.

“He used to be a much better man,” said Dasus. “We chose him as our leader for a reason, but we also have a reason for having a council and not just him.”

“Do you know what blades he has?” asked Beatrix.

“Zephyr, Purity, Oracle, Rage,” said Dasus.

“Purity? So he had Lilith all along.” It put much of the conflict with Lucifer into context when she thought about it. “Why didn’t he allow Lucifer to use Purity if he had her?”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing for a long time,” said Dasus. “It seems like an easy way to appease him. The sword would only need borrowed while the song is sung and then could be returned to him without issue. It could have solved a lot of problems.”

“Why is he always smiling?” asked Beatrix. “He never manages either friendly or sinister, so what’s the point? It’s an obviously false smile.”

“How much do you know of the First Curse?”



That night she learned more of the story. Azael, Chassuille, the Bell, the Grand Gate. She was told everything, beyond even what her parents and the Eyes had told her. She felt bad for Chassuille, and especially for Ia. She understood why Faret wasn’t gaunt, just like twenty percent of the population of Sonta. She knew of Skraeð and the Original Creation.

And most of all she finally knew the purpose of the

game and the song. She knew why the Skraeðanee couldn't cure the First Curse themselves and why she needed to sing for them. She became more determined than ever to see her collection complete, and mentally she prepared for the fight ahead.

She had spent a day and a half working at the Chronomage's soul and could finally sit back and look at it.

"Now you just need to wind it back into a ball," said Dasus. "Get to it!"

Along the length of the soul were millions of tiny pins that told her exactly how to roll the soul back into place. It took more than an hour because of just how long the soul was. She was glad to have Dasus's help throughout the whole ordeal too, and she couldn't imagine doing this as often as Dasus apparently did. It was his hobby, or job, or something of the sort.

"Now that the soul is repaired," said Dasus when they had finished making it a crystalline sphere again, "it's time for you to turn it into a blade."

Dasus opened a wall and they entered a new room. It was hot enough that Beatrix felt it despite her internal flame, and it was because of a massive furnace. There were multiple barrels of metal rods and an anvil at the centre of the room. It didn't take long for Beatrix to notice that all the metal here was eldrine.

"There's a fortune in metal here," she said.

"Perhaps to you," said Dasus with a smile. "We literally grow this stuff on trees here."

"Trees?" asked Beatrix.

"I'll show you before you leave," said Dasus. "There's more than just the way you're thinking to get the stuff."

Eldrine was a complicated metal. Worked one way it enhanced magical power, and worked another way it became a potent anti-magic substance. It was a metal of extremes and she had only read about it. Seeing it for the first time and in such abundance was truly odd.

"Now," said Dasus, taking one of the eldrine rods from the barrels. "We want to bring out the magic of the soul we're working with. While he would also make a good anti-magic

weapon, I think it would be better to tap into his time magic, but since this is your weapon, it's your choice."

"No, I agree," said Beatrix. "Only Flux has any sort of time manipulation that would be useful in combat and I don't have it yet, and I also doubt that I'll be learning the art on my own."

"When working eldrine, the type of fire you use makes all the difference. A physical flame like this one will pull all the magic from the metal until the metal itself wants to steal magic from others. We need to turn this into a soul flame, which will feed the metal even more."

He put his hand into the fire and sacrificed a touch of his own aether. The flames went from red and orange to an unnatural bright blue that moved in strange ways, twisting in on itself again and again.

Dasus gave her the eldrine rod and instructed her on its careful heating and how to shape it with her own aether. She had expected to be hammering it on the anvil, but the chunk of iron was little more than a glorified table as she turned the heated metal with her mind. About halfway through she pushed the soul of the Chronomage into the metal and shaped it to match the newly forming blade.

It took a long time and by the end of it she was tired. She was low on aether and stressed but in her hand she held a blade. Without giving her a chance to rest Dasus got materials for building a handle and talked her through the artistic side of it rather than the practical. She called on the power of Victory inside of her to give her the mental and emotional boost to get her through the process.

The whole ordeal took several hours, but she thought it was worth it. She made an attempt and the blade smoothly turned into silver light and found its spot within her soul, as if it had always had a space ready for it.

"Well, what will you name it?" asked Dasus as they walked the streets back to his house.

"I'm not sure." She had never considered creating her

own blades and had no idea how to go about naming one.

It was a single-handed, double-edged sword with a narrow white blade and a black fuller down the flat of the blade. Its handle was simple, with a black grip and a deep blue crossguard and pommel. The very tip had three small teeth on either side, though they were hard to see from a distance.

When they reached Dasus's cottage there were a few Skraeðanee waiting outside. The woman in white wearing the symbol of Life was Seran. She had gentle eyes and Beatrix could see the family resemblance to Chassuille and Aramis, who were her older and younger brothers respectively. She was also the twin of Nareshilna, the God of Death and Unlife.

Also present were Horal and Solim, who Beatrix had met the previous day. Solim was the God of the Sun, and Horal was God of the Mind. All of them were members of the Monochrome Alliance and they had regular meetings about their various Champions and plans. Beatrix got the feeling that they never got anything done because of how long-lived they were. No need to rush when you have millions of years ahead of you. She wondered if she'd eventually succumb to that kind of thinking too. She'd rather Hollow.

While they had their meeting in a downstairs office Beatrix decided to take a walk. She needed to come up with a name. When she reached the Grand Gate she felt something odd in the air. It was aether, but it had a tinge she couldn't identify.

Then she was assailed by someone dressed head to toe in grey and black. It was no doubt a Skraeðan but the face was covered and the aether masked with that weird scent. She dodged several attacks as the man burst from the shadows, falling easily into her stance at the end of his flurry and calling on Havoc and Malice.

They exchanged swings, but neither could connect. They could both read the motions of the other and easily twist and evade. But there was something about the way the man moved that irked Beatrix. It was as if he was far more skilled

than he actually was, yet at the same time showing that higher skill. Then it clicked.

“You’re a Seer,” she said, switching her sickles for both Flameroot and Perception, extending her reach using swords without throwing herself off balance. He easily dodged them even though she had switched just before striking.

She continued to switch weapons, trying to decide on which to use randomly, but the man was completely aware of everything coming at him. She felt she had a speed advantage but it didn’t matter when the man could react before she had even moved.

And then she pulled out her new sword and tried to call on its power, hoping that its time magic would mess with the Seer’s ability to see her future actions. But it didn’t. It did something far less predictable. She found herself standing and looking at the Grand Gate again, as if the fight had never happened. Then the man jumped from the shadows and they fell into combat again, but the steps played out differently.

She could feel the irritation in the man’s aura and she remembered something her mother told her. Seers remember all time, even when it changes. The sword had moved her back just a few minutes, but those few minutes would be in the mind of all Seers within the range of its influence. She didn’t know how large the bubble was, but the blade was made of a man who had collapsed an entire world.

She focussed, willing the sword to act again, trying to limit it to just the area around her. She stood in front of the Grand Gate and the man attacked. She did it again. She stood in front of the Grand Gate and the man attacked. She did it again. She stood in front of the Grand Gate and the man walked out of the shadows and stood tall over her.

“Have we met before?” she asked with a grin. “I *really* feel like we have.”

“This was bound to happen,” said the man as he began to unwrap his head. “I just had to make you realise the power you hold now.” It was Mao, Grand Lord of Fate.

“I didn’t think it was you,” said Beatrix.

“You have an incredibly useful tool,” said Mao. “You will need to learn to control it. Even if you never end up in dire need of it, it would be better to be able to use it than let it run wild. You’ve already shown quick thinking, but Horal and other Seers in the city are likely to be annoyed by you now.”

“Do you know what I end up calling it?” she asked.

“You already know,” said Mao. He walked away, back towards the council building.



“Encore?” asked Dasus. She had returned to his home and told the gathered Gods what had happened. Horal was fine with the situation and even got a laugh at her deliberately annoying Mao. He had been confused in the moment, however, as their conversation had gone in circles.

“Yeah,” said Beatrix. “It lets me repeat things, so it’s a fitting name, I think.”

“Just be careful around Seers,” said Horal. “I felt its reach go outside the city and out into the nothing beyond the walls. You’ll have to seriously reign it in, especially since that man’s power was meant for destruction.”

“If I can learn to control Fang then I can learn to control Encore,” she said. She considered for a moment. “I think I’m ready to go to the Aether Sea.”

“Stay the night and relax,” said Dasus. “I’ll take you there tomorrow morning.”

Beatrix walked through a portal near the Grand Gate and found herself standing on a stone disc within an oppressive darkness that stretched out forever in every direction. This was the Void, the link between the Godly Realms and the Mortal Realms. From there Dasus opened a portal to the Aether Sea and she left the lands of the Gods behind.

The Aether Sea was simply amazing. A vast faintly violet fog flowed like an ocean and dotted across the landscape were islands. She could see mountains in the far distance. Some islands were like rolling hills and some were covered in forests. She could see the ruined stone rings that used to be portals to other worlds.

“Where is Avani?” she asked.

“Far to the south,” said Dasus, pointing in a direction she just had to trust was south. “We’ll have to wait for those angels with your blades before you go. While we’re here, don’t touch the orbs.”

The orbs were seven large crystalline balls they were arranged in a circle around the stone portal to the Void. They each contained an unbelievable amount of aether and looking at them she felt like she would be sucked in and lost forever.

“Are these the Origin Worlds?” she asked, to which Dasus just nodded.

Each Origin World contained a seed from which the first seven mortal races were born. Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Emri, Isvi, Sklaara, Sanai. From those seven all others evolved and spread. All but Humans and Sklaara went extinct in the Ruination, but their Origin World still existed. They could be reborn as soon as the Gods wished. Their various breeds were still active, however, so she thought it was unlikely unless all mortals died, or perhaps when Azael was finally defeated.

They waited for a while and Beatrix watched the waves in the deep aether from the edge of a cliff. The fog was thick, but she could see the ophanim down there, rolling around and

creating more aether. Tireless wheels, working to create the ultimate weapon for use against Azael.

In the blue sky was a long red crack in space that was leaking a horrific aether. When Dasus saw her looking at it, he spoke up.

“Maybe twenty years,” he said. “Maybe a bit less. He gets out and we fight.”

“Is Legion that powerful?” She thought she could see the beast beyond the tear. It terrified her, but she knew that one day she would be back on the Aether Sea and ready to fight it. She would have to. Collecting all the blades and her family’s happiness depended on it.

“Five members of the Grand Circle,” said Dasus. “Two more from the mortal races, including your cousin. We’ll need them all to be there if we want to defeat him once and for all. All we can do is trap him for now. Next time he breaks out, I’ll be counting on both you and Isaac, if he’s old enough to fight. He’ll be six years old tomorrow, so I hope there’s time to train him.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” said Beatrix. “I don’t want him to fight, but there’s really no choice. Maybe I’m not thinking of the adult he’ll become since he’s so young, but I do hope that he becomes strong. Legion and Azael are real threats and we need the help.”

“Ah, look,” said Dasus, gesturing to the horizon. There they saw a large white figure with many wings. “It won’t be long now.”



Oracle, Rage, Zephyr, and Purity. Chassuille had arrived on the Aether Sea and his angels had given her those four blades. They were unnatural creatures but she felt she understood them. The mortals would call them inhuman, but she could see the people inside those monstrous forms. The one closest to a human shape was named Baphomet, and even he had a goat

head and bat-like wings, making him stand out even amongst the angels.

She tested each of the blades in turn. Oracle was a ring with a sharp needle in its setting that gave the gift of instant sight, and ability some Seers could develop that let them look moments in the future without fully activating their powers. This was the power that Mao had used against her to avoid her attacks.

Zephyr was another bladeless sword, like Wraith and Heart. When swung is created sharp cuts through the air using the wind itself. It was also the air elemental blade, so any air mages who held it would have their power enhanced.

Rage was a circular blade that was capable of messing with the mind of anyone it cut. It didn't send them into a full berserk state as Beatrix had once thought it might, but instead made them irrationally angry and confused. It made people make bad decisions because they couldn't think properly.

Then there was Purity, the sword made from Lilith. It was the pure aether elemental blade and could suppress the corruption within a person's soul, though it couldn't actually heal said corruption. It reminded Beatrix of the power Liara was said to have, but unlike Liara it couldn't fully corrupt someone in an instant.

The four blades resonated within her soul and she could feel the song growing louder and more powerful. She had seventeen of Prochorus's blades now, and one of her own.

The angels dispersed, one of them quite literally, and Chassuille looked up at Legion's prison. He stood there for a moment before leaving.

"Whenever you need me," said Dasus, "just call me. Speak my name to the universe and I'll hear it. I'm not really supposed to go to Avani, it's a non-interference world, but I think those days might be coming to a close. We'll be more actively recruiting to fight Legion soon, and there's a general feeling that this war will be over within a young human's lifetime."

“Thank you,” said Beatrix, bowing to him. “I think I’ll be needing more eldrine by the end of this. Azael has a lot of followers and I’ll have no regrets turning them into weapons to fight their master.”

“Mao has told me he’ll be relaying any orders for you through me or Galina,” said Dasus. “I doubt you’ll want to take your tasks from Chassuille, so that leaves us.”

“I can be civil,” said Beatrix. “As long as it’s coming from Mao and not Chassuille directly.”

Dasus laughed, clapped her on the shoulder, and left. She was alone on the Aether Sea, and so set off south. She walked to the edge of the island and then grew wings to fly to the next. She found that flying was easier now, as her natural angelic power was keeping her up rather than relying on the physical state of her Vanavolk wings.

She travelled for a long time, always in awe of the land she saw. There were ruined towns and forts here and there, leftovers of the Ruination. She saw angels going in various directions, probably on jobs from Chassuille, and she even saw other people. Some were in airships and others were building bridges or new forts.

Near dusk she arrived at a town with an active portal and she knew it had to be the place. At the centre of the town was the portal and houses spread out all around, and on the edge of town she could see people building new stone rings. New worlds were being constructed here.

“There’s a familiar face,” said someone as she landed. She almost didn’t recognise him, but she smiled as her father stepped forward. Sorley Blair was in rather basic clothing, with a tool belt around his waist and a short cape over his shoulders.

“It’s good to see you again,” she said. She stopped herself from trying to hug him, knowing that she would pass straight through him. Some of the ground in the Aether Sea felt like she’d fall through it, and she knew people were even less dense with aether.

“We’ve received messages about your state,” he said.

“I’ve been practising hardening my aether these last few days but I’m not very good yet. I’m not sure how Gregory did it so easily.”

“Hundreds of years of practice,” said Sorley. “Your mother already got together her books on biology for you to read while you’re here. It’s a shame there’s no pieces of your original body left, as that would let you do it instinctually.”

“I’ll study,” said Beatrix. “I basically skipped most of secondary school so I really should learn some more things. I can take the opportunity to learn healing magic too, while I’m here.”

“How long will you be staying?”

“A few weeks, most likely.” Beatrix tested a few steps. “Until I can walk around here without feeling like I’m on a paper floor.” She looked at all the people walking around. They didn’t even seem to notice her, though some nodded when they met her eyes. “Are all the people here working on new worlds?”

“Some of us are reconstructing portals, but most of us are working on opening the Phase again,” said Sorley. “We can still teleport by dipping into it, but it’s largely cut off. Once we open it up again, which will still take us a few decades probably, the Gods will be able to make new worlds. The runes we’re using are incredibly intricate, so it’s taking a long time.”

This was the task her parents had been given a few years prior, and Beatrix thought it was a noble goal. Whole new worlds for people to live in, ones that didn’t have Dragons lurking beneath the surface. The Phase was a realm of chaos that existed below the Aether Sea and was a powerful font of magic that the Gods had been building since Creation. It had been sealed by the Dragons during the Ruination and that was one of the reasons that were so successful in their destruction.

Beatrix walked with her father through the town and found a building with familiar architecture. Nerikan in design with a few hints of Vinish culture, just like her home back in Seremont.

“Mother built this, didn’t she?” asked Beatrix with a smile. They headed inside and Beatrix was immediately taken out at the knees and slammed hard onto the floor.

“Naria!” called a loud but friendly voice. She looked at Isaac in utter shock. He could touch her as if she were still whole. She gave him a tight hug. “I’ve missed you!”

“It’s good to see you too,” she said. She knew she couldn’t cry in this body, but she was worried she was.

When she pulled away she looked at him properly. He was growing up fast and she could see both her father and her grandfather in him, but his eyes were Nerikan. His hair was pure white, but didn’t glow, and his eyes were shining blue. He had no traces of corruption in him at all.

“You really are pure,” she said.

“It’s not much of a curse,” said her mother as she walked into the room. A gentle but joyous aura radiated from her. “He definitely has it the best of all of us.”

“Have you heard about Galina and Nerik?” asked Beatrix.

“I have,” said Anđa. “Dasus told me. They also made a real sky, a sun, and a moon. Avani is going to be very different when you go back.”

The thought excited her. A real moon over Seremont was something she had wanted to see her entire life.

“Before you settle in,” said Sorley, “let me get changed. I want to see how far you’ve come.”

“You really want to fight me?” asked Beatrix.

“That tone is one of arrogance,” said Sorley. “We’ll see if it’s earned.”



They had moved to a nearby island and there was a crowd. She hadn’t expected people to know of her, but even in this town in the world between worlds she had a reputation. She was fine with a crowd.

Sorley was wearing his Eye uniform and on his belt was a sword Beatrix had never seen before. A brand new sword made of titanium and filled with flames.

“Don’t hold back on me.” Beatrix shifted back and forth, testing the ground. “I’m an adult now. I can take it. Let me see how you became the Firestorm.”

Sorley drew the sword and Beatrix called to her hands Venom, her father’s old blade. It was a two-handed longsword made of nightwood, with the power to emit a gooey toxin that could paralyse those who touch it.

And then everything became flame. It washed over the area in an instant and she could see her father standing at its centre, untouched and in a defensive stance. The heat was intense and overwhelming her internal flame’s ability to regulate her temperature, so she had to be quick.

Beatrix charged, finding Havoc within her and calling on its power without bringing it to her hands. She found herself moving at a speed she hadn’t thought possible, but unchained from her body she closed the gap in seconds. Her form had contorted, turning her into a streak of white light, but Sorley still caught Venom using his sword.

“Not bad,” he said, and with a push on his sword she was thrown backwards into the air. The flames in the area gathered around him and formed into six magnificent wings of fire. He launched himself right at her and she only just managed to parry his sword as he passed at blinding speed.

“Since when can you do all this?” she called, letting herself fall to the ground. She landed hard but there was no pain. No muscles to strain or bones to break.

“I’ve always held back, Beatrix,” he said. He floated down gracefully, but stopped just before touching the ground. His wings filled her with awe. “I don’t think I ever told you, but I’m the strongest of the Eyes, even including my father. Gilbert is the only one who came close to matching me. Each has their strengths and weaknesses, but I’ve stood toe to toe with Legion.” He tapped the scar running through his left eye and

down his cheek.

“I guess if you’re really not holding back then neither should I,” said Beatrix. She dismissed Venom and made a show of stretching her arms.

“Go for it,” said Sorley.

So she did. She returned to her true form, spreading her miles long wings and enveloping the sky. She became the angel of dark and light, of flame and silver, of balance and corruption. From the base of each wing grew a tendril. This time she suppressed her halo. She didn’t know who was watching and she didn’t want to hurt the crowd.

Sorley was a mile below her but she could clearly see the shock on his face. Her wings gently spiralled behind her and her tendrils writhed, ready to strike. Sorley readied his blade and flew directly at her exposed core, but he was caught by the lightning speed of a Havoc-fuelled black tentacle. He bounced against the ground but caught himself. She could see he had hardened his aether to protect himself, just like her grandfather.

Sorley tried again and again, and sometimes she got him with a swing and others he got past by cutting the tendril. He got too close to her core so she twisted her wings into a shield and his blade rebounded off her metallic feathers. Then with a forceful spiral the wings unfurled in front of her and cut through him in several places.

But he wasn’t done. His flames erupted again and to her surprise Beatrix lost several wings. He had missed her core with the attack, his concentration wavering from the injuries, but his aim perfect. The pain was unreal. Four wings, severed from her core’s control, splashed down into the sea of aether. He’d proven his strength and then fell.

Sorley hit the ground, unconscious, and Beatrix landed next to him in her human-like shape. Those wings would return to her the next time she transformed, so she wasn’t worried about them, but there was still pain in her right shoulder. Her mother rushed over and began healing Sorley,

who was awake and laughing in no time at all.

“You can control it now,” he said as Anđa worked on an extremely deep cut in his side. “I’m impressed.”

“I don’t see it as needing controlled,” said Beatrix, sitting next to him. “That is my natural state. It’s strange to have hands and need to stand on the ground now, but this shape is more convenient. The world is built for the small.”

“So cool, Naria!” said Isaac with a wide smile as he ran around them all. She didn’t remember having that much energy as a child. Maybe his lack of rage was allowing him to flow more freely than she could.

“I defeated Lucifer in his true form while I was like that,” she said. “My wings are blades in their own right.”

“I wonder how Isaac will turn out,” said Sorley. Anđa had finished healing him and was helping him stand.

“It’s a worry, but I look forward to it,” said Anđa. She pulled Isaac into a hug. “This one’s going to be powerful, just like you, Narianel.”

“I’m looking forward to it too,” said Beatrix. “Think of the sparring matches we could have. I wonder what he’ll look like. Will he be like me or something else entirely?”



It was night and Isaac had been put to bed. Beatrix was sitting on a comfortable chair by the fireside, trying her best not to fall through it. Sorley and Anđa were sat on matching chairs, and the three of them were catching up.

Her parents talked about the new world project and how they were happy to be participating in it. They also talked about how Isaac’s education was going, since they had to do it themselves. There were no schools in this part of the Aether Sea despite several families living in the town, which Beatrix had only just found out was called Harelas. It was a Skrae name, *hare* for new and *elas* for founding.

There were at least a thousand people all working on it,

and many more in the town providing other services. She hadn't realised it would be such a large endeavour, but if the Gods were too lazy to do it themselves then it made a sort of sense.

"So what are your plans from here?" asked Anđa. She was petting Creaky, her pet undead cat that Beatrix had once found terrifying. She was confident she was more powerful than Creaky now that she'd matured, but it still unnerved her.

"Mao wants me to hunt down followers of Azael. It does sound like a good idea to me, so I'll do it. The less allies he had in the final battle, the better. My immediate future is just trying to rebuild my body, however. Take on a physical form. I'll need to do a lot of studying to get the biology right."

"It will be difficult," said Anđa, "but it will be worth it in the end."

"Do you have any idea how to find the followers of Azael?" asked Sorley. "That sounds like quite the task."

"I don't," said Beatrix. "Not right now, anyway. I'm sure that Egil is still alive, and I think he'll turn up again if I just wait. I think I'm going to go after Marquis first. The things he said to me still stick in my mind. He was definitely working with Egil."

"I got a message from Vala," said Anđa. "About a week ago Nerik decided the same thing. They're going to war with Cor to get rid of Marquis."

"Then I think I'll join them," said Beatrix. "When they are ready, I will be too."

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It was Isaac's sixth birthday and Beatrix spent the day with him. She didn't have a gift for him, but he didn't seem to mind so long as she was there. He was a good kid, and Beatrix loved him. She wanted to protect him from the world, but knew his future would be a hard one, just like hers.

Beatrix spent most days with her mother, learning biology and how to use healing magic. Without a real body of her own it was difficult to do it properly, but she got the gist of it and was happy with her progress. She would be able to heal skinned knees and mild cuts, but it was more than she could do before.

“Less than two weeks,” said Sorley, entering the living room where Beatrix and Anđa were sat on the floor and surrounded by books.

“Until?” asked Beatrix.

“I’ve been in contact with Aldo. He says that the army from Nerik will be at Cor in less than two weeks. He’s got Gilbert spying on the Synod.”

“I can’t say I’m happy about that,” said Anđa. “I need to talk to him about it.”

“It’s fine,” said Sorley. “He doesn’t plan to keep it going once he’s revealed himself to the army.”

“I’m still going to talk to him,” said Anđa. Sorley just laughed and shook his head.

“I’ll be ready,” said Beatrix.

“You won’t be going through the main portal,” said Sorley. “We’re going to make a temporary portal so you can go right to the battlefield. The main portal would take you to Darizion, which won’t be too helpful.”

“I can fly pretty fast now,” said Beatrix. “I could get to Cor from Darizion in about an hour or so.”

“Do you really think terrifying the countryside is a good idea?” chuckled Sorley. “A mass of wings and fire flying overhead, passing village after village, as well as Seremont.”

“You’re probably right,” conceded Beatrix, shrugging.

Beatrix had taken the time to spar with Sorley a few times, though both of them agreed to hold back just enough that they wouldn't put a burden on Anða. He also helped her get better control over hardening her aether, and while she didn't feel confident enough to use it in combat she could at least walk on the ground and relax in a chair without worry.

Her healing didn't advance much further, but Anða told her which books in the library back in her Seremont home to read to continue practising. Much to Anða's dislike, however, Beatrix had also taken the time to teach Isaac how to hold a knife properly. She had tried to see if he could draw the blades into himself, but he didn't seem to be able to do it. It was something she wanted to revisit when he was older, when his power was more mature.

She stood in a field outside Harelas. There was a rune beneath her feet and she was calm. It was a strange feeling, but she knew it would soon be replaced by that rage that was always just below the surface. Her parents were chanting the words needed to activate the run and Isaac was looking on with interest.

When the rune began to shine she steadied her hands and nodded to Isaac with a smile, who began to wave and call his farewells. The portal opened beneath her and she fell, the world disappearing into darkness and suddenly she was tossed into the air. She landed on her feet in a matching rune, surrounded by the Eyes of Chassuille as well as Akenesa, who was tired and sat on the ground.

"The sky is weird," she said, looking up. The aether was just like the Aether Sea instead of what she remembered.

"No time for chatting," said Aldo. "There are two of Azael's followers here and I hear you've been tasked with killing them."

"Where are they?" she asked, looking at the battle. She recognised the Nerikan uniforms, though she had only seen

drawings of them. She wasn't looking forward to killing more Coran people, though.

"In the city, behind the walls," said Aldo. "How are you going to get there?"

"Directly."

Her wings burst from her as she flew into the sky and once more she became her true self. In the city she could feel Marquis, but she couldn't find the other one. She trusted Aldo but there would be a search after she dealt with the golem.

She sent out four of her tendrils at the centre of the city, knocking over the Deathlight Tower and surrounding Marquis in the process, then she pulled herself and slammed into the ground, letting out a massive wave of aether that caused an earthquake.

It was more destruction than she had intended, but when she resumed her human shape she was standing over a broken set of armour. From the helmet came a weak voice.

"This is unjust," said Marquis, his armour trying to pull back together.

"This is war," said Beatrix. "You chose the side of Azael and so you have to die. But don't worry, I'm going to turn you into a tool that will help save the world."

"What do you mean?"

She summoned Encore to her hand and crouched down next to the golem's core, looking directly at it.

"This was once a follower of Azael," she said. "This was a time mage that attacked Nerik, killing many. I turned his dead soul into a blade to be used against his master. I'm going to do the same to you."

"You're a monster," said Marquis.

"Maybe," said Beatrix. "But the world needs saving from people like your master, and it's going to be tough. We will have to do terrible things, but I'm ready to do it."

She grabbed his core directly, a shining blue gem made from a tightly wound thread, and she tightened her fist. She powered her grip with song, letting its power tighten her

fingers enough to hold him still. All movement stopped in the armour and his soul locking into that eternal slumber.

She held his core for a moment before absorbing it with her power. She fully intended to fulfil that promise. She was going to turn him into another blade.

And then his memories hit her. His defeat at her own hands, a satisfied feeling. The Ruination as the Dragon of Flame burnt the world. His defeat at the hands of a young girl with black hair, her cruel grin and his devastation. Sitting in a ruined city, a man in grey approaches.

She had been so distracted that she hadn't felt a new scent approaching until that moment. A familiar scent, yet also distant from her own. When she appeared in the ruined structure, Beatrix knew who it was. Aleksashdra Talwaen, her grandmother. She looked to be in her late teens, maintaining a natural youth and beauty. Her skin and hair and eyes were just like Beatrix's own, and those she saw in her mother.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, grandmother," Beatrix said with a smile. Sasha rushed to hug her, but Beatrix wasn't expecting it and failed to harden her aether in time. Sasha fell straight through her and hit the ground.

"What happened to your body?" asked Sasha as she stood up. "Why are you not physical?"

"I'll explain later," said Narianel. "I heard from Aldo there was another worshipper of Azael here. Where is he?"

"Here," came a voice from the shadows to Beatrix's side. "Kill her now, Sasha." The voice let out a weird click and Beatrix knew who this was. Manford Talgarath, an ex-servant of the Talwaen family and someone who could not be trusted. Sasha charged and Beatrix caught her by the face, letting out a burst of aether that blew off her head. She would survive that, if all the stories were true.

That second of worry passed as even before Sasha's body hit the ground her head was regrowing. Beatrix turned her attention to Manford. Now that she had caught his scent he wouldn't get away. He tried to flee when he met her eyes, but

she rushed him, summoning Havoc and Malice and cutting off both his legs.

“Did you hear what I said to Marquis?” she asked him as he tried to pull himself away. She stood on the back of his head to hold him still.

“The weapon is forged,” he said. “It was all worth it. Every last second. Every time I cursed or manipulated. This world is at an end and Azael will rise as the God of Gods!”

“I’m surprised you didn’t make another phylactery,” said Beatrix, pushing down on his skull, feeling him struggle. “You would have survived another day.”

“This is my end, as told by the prophet,” said Manford. “I have no fear.”

“The prophet?”

“Egil Krom, the Wholeseer.”

Beatrix narrowed her eyes at that. Egil had indeed talked as if he knew everything that was to happen, but she didn’t know he held that kind of position within Azael’s ranks. As she was about to question Manford more she was tackled by Sasha in her Vanavolk form and tossed aside.

Beatrix stood up as Sasha raised her talons, ready to swipe and strike her down, but Beatrix couldn’t be afraid, not when she knew she could go all out and not kill her. Six huge wings burst forward and tore Sasha into hundreds of tiny pieces before disappearing again.

Manford was still on the ground, watching in horror at her ease of destruction. She walked back over to him and crouched next to his head.

“I’m going to kill Azael, and I’ll make sure to use you and all the others to do it.”

She summoned Fang and stabbed him in the head, then took in his soul. Oddly, she got no memories from him. It was as if he had been emptied before she could take them.

“What’s going on?” asked Sasha, rebuilt and confused. She was sitting against a wall and holding her head.

“We won,” said Beatrix.

“How?” asked Sasha, standing and repairing her body and clothes.

“Far too easily,” said Beatrix. She was concerned about what they had said. Marquis seemed to know nothing despite his allegiance, but Manford was ready for it. “I think they have a Seer on their side, and they’re using the visions to shape their actions.”

“Are you always so serious?” asked Sasha. Beatrix saw her grin and it reminded her so much of her mother.

“I can’t help it,” said Beatrix. “Not when it comes to this war.”



At the camp Beatrix introduced herself to Agata Akwaen, and said more hellos to the Eyes and Akenesa. They caught up on events and Beatrix was almost overwhelmed by the amount of things going on with Nerik. She wanted to see it so much, but there was somewhere else she had to be first.

Beatrix had flown to over the Salest mountains during the night and stood at the western mouth of the Southern Pass, looking east. She could see the sun rising, dawn breaking, and she was mesmerised. Such an unfamiliar sight in a place she kept finding herself.

She turned west and walked for several hours to the city of Seremont. As she walked she saw how the shadows were at an angle, sitting opposite the sun instead of being directly below. It was so odd. The farmers in the fields didn't seem to notice, but they'd had time to adjust.

As she reached Seremont people began to notice her. She became conscious of how her clothes and hair were still floating as she moved, ignoring the wind and gravity. She had stopped noticing and she didn't know how to control it yet. She was glad that she was at least visible, as she couldn't imagine being stuck as a ghost.

Some people recognised her, calling her various names and titles given to her by the Guild of Archivists. She used to enjoy them a little, but she was beginning to get tired of them. They didn't really reflect who she was.

She reached the Guild not long before noon and the guard at the door was shocked to see her. He let her in with a nod, but such blatant magic wasn't often seen. Not that she could help it.

The inside was as she remembered it, but she had been here just a season and a half ago. It felt like such a long time had passed. There was a male receptionist that Beatrix had never met before, but she ignored him and walked the way she knew she had to go.

She had suppressed her aether signature while she was in the city, so she managed to walk right into Adela's office without being noticed. She made a sound as if she were clearing her throat and Adela looked up from a drawing she was doing at her desk.

“Beatrix!” shouted Adela and Beatrix did her best to harden her aether before Adela managed to hug her, but there was a weird push and an awkward shared look.

“I don’t have a body any more,” she said. “I’m learning to build a new one, or to make this aetherial form more substantive, but for now we can’t really touch.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Adela with a tearful smile. “So long as we’re together.”

“I need to go see Nerik,” said Beatrix. “I need to meet Galina, and there’s a few others things I want to do too. It might be little longer before I can stay in the city again.”

“I can wait,” said Adela with a nod. “How long will it take? When will you be back?”

“It shouldn’t take too long. A few weeks at most.”

Beatrix arrived in Nerik and pulled in her wings not long after dawn. She was amazed at her own ability to travel now. What would have been hours on an airship or weeks on foot was now a leisurely fly away. When she thought about collecting the blades from all over the world and Aether Sea, the task seemed so much more manageable now.

People had seen her approach and gathered on the docks to see who she was. She had chosen her clothes to bare the symbols of the three families she descended from and people seemed to realise she was Anđa's child from that alone. They greeted her like old friends, and some even bowed to her as they would to a priest.

Her visits to Nerik while it was in the Ethereal Realm didn't do it justice. Everything was so colourful and the people intricately decorated themselves. Even those whose clothes indicated they were simple workers or peasants had at least some form of veil across their shoulders or paint on their face.

Several of the dock merchants tried to buy some aether from her but it wasn't long before Kresimir Solash showed up. He was a dark skinned man who moved to Nerik not long after its founding and made a name for himself as a merchant, buying himself a phylactery in the Vault of the Endless. He had since become a high priest of Solim and joined the Synod as chief economic advisor. And the way he looked at Beatrix was startlingly predatory.

"I've been hearing about you," he said with a smile. "I've never met a nephilim before." He then talked at length about how her aether and dust could be worth more than the other merchants were letting on. She was lucky that Vala appeared to save her.

"That's quite enough," she said with a soft smile as if this wasn't the first time she had needed to talk to Kresimir about trying to buy parts of living people. They talked for a moment before the man withdrew back into the crowds.

“Thank you,” said Beatrix, exasperated. “I’ve never met a man so insistent on holding my attention.”

“I imagine they mostly just run away,” said Vala and before Beatrix could respond to that unexpected snark she continued. “Galina will be going to sleep soon, so you won’t be able to talk to her. Spend the day with me.”

And so she did. Vala gave Beatrix a real tour of Nerik. They visited the various Estates and the Synod building, and Beatrix was shown the Vault of the Endless. It was a shaft that went deep below the Synod with over a million side rooms holding the phylacteries of the populace. Vala talked about how the Ruination had been a disaster for the city and that someone had sneaked in and destroyed a lot of phylacteries, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands when the city was finally attacked.

On the far side of the Talwaen Estate, at the coast through the forest, there was the Black Pier. This was on the south-west of the island and had originally been for small ships to travel between the Nerikan main island and the Isle of Dusk.

“It’s a shame that the island is on the other side of the world now,” said Vala.

“It doesn’t need to be,” said Akenesa, appearing from the shadows. At Beatrix’s surprise she simply continued with “As a shadow I can move great distances. The water was the real issue. But I digress. I believe I can return the Isle of Dusk to Nerik. You left a lot of lingering aether there, Narianel, and I’ve memorised the location. With the right runes I can bring it back to our waters, but there was something missing there.”

“The Temple of Blades,” said Beatrix.

“It broke off in the Ruination,” said Vala, “when the island was taken by the Gods to construct Avani. It landed on Ashenteliar and killed him.”

“So my mother told me.” Beatrix tried to recall all the stories about the Ruination. “It’s in the Mefari Desert, quite far to the south. Even with how fast I can fly, it’ll take me days to

get there.”

“That’s not how my visions predict your actions,” said Vala. “You really want to go there now?”

“No, I don’t,” said Beatrix. “There’s been something on my mind for a while now. I want to free Michael. Seeing all those other angels and how my power had matured, I realised that I might have the power to free him.”

“What’s your plan?” asked Akenesa. Her lack of facial expressions and monotone voice made it hard to tell if she was actually interested or not.

“I’m an angel of fire, and I have Flameroot to enhance that,” said Beatrix. “If I can tunnel a hole through the aether maelstrom in the Divide of Creation, I may be able to open it long enough for him and the other angels in there to escape.”

“There are two problems with that plan,” said Akenesa. “The first is that you’re in the Low Circle, so you won’t be able to generate enough aether to get through the Divide. Azra-el had tried multiple times, from what I’ve seen. The second problem is that the Divide is a mess that you won’t be able to direct your flames through it.”

“I can see through it,” said Beatrix.

“How?” asked Vala. “I’ve tried myself, but I can’t see past the swirls.”

“I can see the world in more than three physical dimensions,” said Beatrix. “I haven’t been able to articulate it until my talks with Dasus. I can see through the vortex of the Divide and I can see every part of angels. I can even see my wings right now.”

It was a simple truth, but one that was so hard to talk about. People couldn’t see what she could see. Her wings were folded in the gaps between layers, extending from her back even when she looked like a human. They passed through everything as if they didn’t exist, but she could feel it. She could manifest them at any moment, and even the tendrils were ready for her to take action.

“I can see the path to Michael, and I have every reason

to believe other angels have the same ability, so when a tunnel is opened they'll be able to escape. Getting enough aether to fuel my flames won't be a problem either."

"And why is that?" asked Vala.

"There are two members of the Grand Circle standing on this dock with me," said Beatrix. "Just share your aether with me."

The two women shared a look with each other before looking back at Beatrix. She could feel the tension between them, but they knew it was a good plan.

"We can do that without issue," said Akenesa. Vala nodded her ascent.

"Besides, before I leave Nerik I have something I want to do," said Beatrix. She summoned her blades around her, letting their silver light fill the air and their song resonate in the air. It was only then that she realised what those chains were back on the Isle of Dusk that allowed her to hold the blades in the air. They were the beginnings of the tendrils, a power that had only just begun to awaken at the time. She now held each blade with a tentacle that was invisible to the others.

"I can hear the beginnings of the song," said Vala. "It is far from complete."

"It won't reach the universe, but I can reach the city. I'll stand in the Central Star and sing what I have, taking the corruption of all the people here. I'll give these people a better life and gain their power in exchange. It will go a long way towards freeing Michael. I'll do it at dusk, after talking to Galina."



While everyone was eating dinner, Beatrix waited for Galina outside her room. She had just met Liara who was running through the hall with several large wolves. She had stopped to stare at Beatrix with wide eyes before giving an innocent smile and running off again. Liara reminded her of Isaac, which was

just a show of her curse.

The aether behind the door stirred and Beatrix waited to be called inside. She made sure to gently raise her aether so that she was more noticeable and when she was called in she became nervous. Her hand shook on the door handle and just stepping inside was difficult.

Galina was beautiful and sat on a stool in front of her dressing table. She wore a long black nightgown and her hair flowed to the floor. Her lips were gentle and slightly parted, allowing Beatrix to see her fangs. Her eyes, however, were entirely sinister. Grey irises and crescent shaped pupils, just like Beatrix and the other Vanavolk, but there was something behind them. An insanity so intense that Beatrix had only heard of in her mother's stories.

Galina tilted her head just enough for Beatrix to see the gap where her right eye had once been, now mostly hidden beneath her hair. She once had a slight tic of tapping her cheekbone, but as her corruption and insanity increased she tapped harder and harder until she had done irreparable damage. The other eye was far more terrifying than Egil could ever wish to be, and yet Beatrix was drawn in by her motherly scent.

“Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken,” said Galina. “It’s a name that’s been on my mind a lot recently. My girls have been saying it, and yet the first it came to me was twenty-four years ago in a dream, whispered by an angelic voice. Such a wonderful name. Tell me of your curse.”

“Rage,” said Beatrix. “No lungs for heavy breath, no skin to sweat, no blood to boil, but I feel it as a rush. A pain in my heart that forces me forward, drives me to act, makes me want to sink my fangs into the nearest flesh and tear it off, letting the blood run down my throat. It comes with a roar and a flood of magic, fuelling me in my steps, and making the swings of my blades easy.”

“What a wonderful curse,” said Galina, her eyes finally showing a hint of the person beneath her own curse. Pure and

unfiltered chaos within her mind. The original curse, its origin in her ascension to Godhood. When Lunada gave Galina her power as a dying blessing, the Vanavolk broke.

“Have you heard of Isaac?” asked Beatrix.

“Yes, but tell me everything.”

“My younger brother. He lives on the Aether Sea with my parents. His curse is an unusual one. His soul cannot be corrupted. He just turned six years old.”

“I felt you six years ago,” said Galina. “A mass of power and anger. A storm swooped in over me and stole my blood.”

“I needed it for his family markings,” said Beatrix. “My mother asked me to come and collect it. Just being here was a wonderful experience.”

“Come,” said Galina. “I wish to touch you.”

Beatrix walked to the matriarch and knelt before her. Galina was able to touch her, an ability granted by Lunada’s power within her. She was the God and family they spoke of. Her skin was silky and cold, and seemed to sap away her aether. She was suddenly tired and just wanted to curl up on Galina’s lap.

“I see history in the thread of your soul,” said Galina. “You have had a rough life, but that isn’t unexpected of a Vanavolk. We seem to attract trouble. What are your plans for the future.”

“Heal the corruption in the city, free the angel Michael from his prison, travel to the Temple of Blades and return the Isle of Dusk to Nerikan waters. That is my immediate future, but I have greater plans.”

“I feel those creatures within you,” said Galina. “You do not have to carry that burden.”

“But I want to,” said Beatrix. “This isn’t something that has been forced upon me. This is my choice. These blades are mine. They don’t belong to Prochorus any more and I’ll find them, defeat Legion, and heal everyone. I’ll remove these curses on our souls and you’ll think clearly again.”

Galina gently petted her head, stroking her hair and

nodding. When Beatrix looked her in the eyes, the madness had returned and the matriarch was practically comatose on her stool. Her eyes flicked around, taking in Beatrix and even looking at her wings and tendrils. Galina was said to slip into this state every now and then and it could take her hours to return to normal.

Beatrix stood and gently kissed the matriarch before leaving. It was time to help her, at least a little.



A large crowd had gathered as dusk arrived. Deep shadows were stretching across the Central Star from the west and Beatrix stood on the fountain, looking at the sky. The moon was already visible, and it gave her the strength to do what she had to do next.

“Lira is ready,” said Akenesa. “Just tell us when.”

“You’ll know when,” said Beatrix. She was surrounded by family and chatting crowds, but that didn’t stop the fear from spreading through her soul. As she summoned the blades around the people cried out in joy. They knew that she didn’t have the full collection and that she couldn’t break curses yet, but their corruption would be cleansed and their health improved.

She burst into song and her aether flooded the city. Each note she sang was instinctual, fundamental, and it was all that mattered in the moment. And then a thick cloud of darkness rose into the air, pouring from the souls of several hundred thousand people from all over the island.

The tainted mass came for her, entering her soul through any means it could. The pain and sorrow and fears of everyone was overwhelming. From the petty to the profound, she could see everything that troubled them, and one thing rose above all else. Azael. They knew about him, they knew he was coming, and they spent their lives trying not to think about him.

And then the more powerful souls hit her too. She saw the minds of Vala and Sanja and Kresimir and Jela. The stresses of running a city. And then there was Galina. Her own particular corruption was confusing and threatened to break her mind. Beatrix nearly toppled from the strain, but she kept up the song. She couldn't stop.

She then got the corruption from the outer edges of the island, from the docks and lower districts. It was all the same. Pain and anguish over their everyday lives and the deeper fear of Azael's approach.

When the song ended she jumped down from the fountain and felt something strange. She was no more corrupt than before and didn't need Liara to push it all down. She was holding all this taint and it didn't even register on her core as a fraction of a percent. She could still feel it all there, and while her own corruption was choking the light of her core, the rest seemed to be in its own pocket of her soul. She could hold so much more.

"I'm glad," said Vala, approaching the fountain. "You have *all* of Prochorus's in-built powers, even the storage."

"It's so strange," said Liara. "Two lots of corruption." She put her hand into Beatrix's chest and grabbed her soul. It would have been horrifying if it wasn't Liara, who was so gentle that it was hard to be afraid of her. At her touch, the corruption in Beatrix's core was suppressed to a minimum, but the second mass was untouched.

Beatrix was suddenly much more relaxed and she began to remember a time when she was young and could call herself happy. When Liara removed her hand, however, she felt it all flood back into place. The rage deepened and the sorrow darkened. She knew this was what she called normal these days, but it somehow felt so much worse.

"Why does it rebound?" asked Liara, leaning so close to Beatrix's chest she almost dipped inside. Akenesa gently pulled her back.

"I hate to invoke the word," said Vala, "but I think it's

because some people are fated to become beasts.”

“I’m sure Mao will forgive you,” said Beatrix. “Do you really think I’m doomed?” It was an insulting thought, and something Vala shared with Mao.

“The Lunar Beast is coming, Narianel,” said Vala. “But I think you can control it.”

“You wrote something like that in your journals,” said Beatrix. “What have you seen?” Even though she wanted to keep the conversation private there were still people trying to get close to them. The police force were holding them back, but that didn’t stop the shouting.

“Death and curses,” said Vala. “How you deal with the future is up to you, but all roads converge on a single point.”

Vala gave a shallow bow and walked into the crowd, leaving Beatrix lost for words.

“This is why people dislike Seers,” said Akenesa. “They all do it. They seem to think it makes them important and deep rather than just irritating.”

“I should probably meet some controlled beasts,” said Beatrix. “See how they cope.”

“There are vampires all over the island you could talk to,” said Akenesa. “The only other beast on the island is the Clockwork Beast, however, and she can’t talk.”

“I’ve read about her,” said Beatrix. “My mother’s notes said... Well, that the beast used to let my mother ride on her back when she was a child. I don’t even know her name.”

“Are you waiting for Sasha?” asked Liara, breaking her concentration. “She’ll take a while to get back.”

“I’ll wait until she’s here,” said Beatrix. “She’ll want to take part in freeing Michael. Azra-el guards the Divide.”

The army returned to the city to find it a different mood. The people were happier and working harder than ever. With the influx on new corruption, Beatrix was on the docks waiting, ready to sing again.

This time she got both Agata and Sasha in her song, as well as a few dregs from within the city that had built up over the last week. Sasha's corruption was odd, as it was far more dense than a normal soul could contain.

An hour before noon Beatrix arranged a meeting to properly discuss her plan to free Michael. Akenesa, Liara, Vala, and Sasha were present, though so were many servants who were filtering in and out of the room with sweet foods and tea.

"I don't get it, but I guess it will work if Akenesa and Lady Zoraken say it will," said Sasha.

"We were all expecting you to be more excited," said Akenesa. "We're going to the Divide of Creation."

"What was that again?" asked Sasha, leaning back in her chair and eating a cupcake with frosting of some sort.

"It's where Azra-el is," said Liara. She had a cupcake too. Several of them. She had licked off the frosting.

"Then why are we still here?" asked Sasha, perking up at the mention of her husband. Beatrix had yet to see such passion in her eyes. She knew of her grandmothers curse of lust, but this was the first time her control had broken. She was licking her bottom lip with eyes and a fury to the flow of her aether.

"Sasha, repress," said Akenesa. Sasha took a long and deep breath in through her nose and when she breathed out again she was back in control.

"Take an airship there tomorrow," said Beatrix. "I'm going back to Seremont first and I'll meet you there."

"Why are you going back to Seremont?" asked Akenesa with enough of a tone that Beatrix caught it.

"I might be able to leverage some more aether," said

Beatrix. “As much as all of you can lend me, I want to ensure a success. I’ll get the Guild of Archivists to lend me their power in exchange for them getting to witness history in the making. They’ll go for it.”



Later that day Beatrix arrived in Seremont, opting to take one of the trading airships that had begun moving between the two cities on a regular basis. Nerik’s main export was magic and so the rest of the world was eager for the knowledge.

Before they reached the dock Beatrix vaulted over the railing of the airship and glided down, occasionally flapping her pair of black wings. She still wasn’t entirely used to the way angelic flight worked, fuelled entirely by magic and almost pulling her through the air on strings rather than by physical propulsion.

She landed on the wall of the Fort of Kings, waved to the Bull Knight, and then jumped to the street below. She had planned to land by the Guild of Archivists, but she couldn’t tell apart the building in the mess of towers and spires from the air. She did manage to spot her own home, which she knew would need more maintenance since she hadn’t been there for over a season.

The walk through the city was just like before. So many staring eyes. She was a local hero and a living god, so it was to be expected, but she would still rather she was left alone. To fade into the shadows.

The guard let her in without issue. It was the same man as before. It was lucky that Thomas Acker was in the main hall as she entered, a phrase of thought she was no longer afraid to think. Ia was not to be feared. If anything she was to be pitied.

“I heard you were escorted from Nerik,” said Beatrix.

“A misunderstanding of my intentions, I assure you,” said Thomas with an obviously false smile.

“You’re an Arbiter of Mao.” Beatrix tilted her head in

disbelief. “Your job is to manipulate the people around you.”

Thomas looked around and motioned for her to follow him to his office. They went up some stairs and into his office, a rather sparse room with only a desk, chair, and no windows.

“I feel like there was a window in here before,” said Beatrix. “Wasn’t there?”

“Probably,” said Thomas. “It comes and goes as I need it. Sometimes I need privacy, sometimes I don’t. You cannot tell people of my position.”

“I can do whatever I want,” said Beatrix. “Your God has tasked me personally with hunting down worshippers of Azael. The Skraeðanee council is the highest authority, isn’t it? I think that holds more weight than your now open secret.”

“Did you just come here to assert dominance?” asked Thomas, sitting at his desk and looking far more angry than she had ever seen him.

“No, I came to make you an offer. I’m going to need as much aether as I can get, so I want you to bring your most powerful mages to the Divide of Creation tomorrow. Your kinsmen get to witness a historic event and I get the energy I need to burn away the Divide and free Michael.”

He considered for a moment and his face went through a range of emotion. He ended on resolution.

“Fine. I’ll gather the people I have. Do you really think you can do it?”

“I think I’m one of the few who could. The rest are the non-interventionist Skraeðanee or fallen from grace. There are probably some unwilling to help Chassuille too, in fear of losing their little competition. But this is about family rather than that. His flames are my flames, and so I see it as my duty to free him. I’ve already killed Lucifer, so this won’t be hard.”

“I can’t tell if that’s confidence or arrogance. In any other story you’d be the villain.”

“Mao basically said the same thing,” said Beatrix. A pulse of rage shot through her but she managed to repress it. “I really don’t like it.”

“You deny the truth, I see,” said Thomas, standing and leaning over his desk to meet her eyes. She hardened the aether in her hand and slapped him.

“I speak nothing but the truth. I am Nerikan and we do not lie. Reality is the most important thing and everything I do is to reinforce and perpetuate it. I may do things in a way you don’t like, but that doesn’t mean I’m a villain in some cheap sideshow of a street play. I’ll show you whose side I’m on right now if you need me to.”

She spread her aether and began to sing, her blades appearing in the cramped room and almost cutting through the walls and desk. He held his chest as the corruption inside him was drawn from his soul, just as it was for everyone in the city. She called it into herself with the end of the song and felt the emotions and thoughts of the city.

She slammed her hands on the desk, not dismissing her blades. She looked him in the eyes with a furious and all-encompassing determination.

“Never doubt me.”



Beatrix spent some time looking over her house, making sure it was doing alright, and when Adela arrived after work she was in the garden, attending the roses. Knowing that she had relieved Adela of some of the weight she had caused these last few years was comforting, but she still worried about how easy it was for Adela to forgive her.

Beatrix met the Archivists at the airship dock as they were loading up. There were more than a hundred of them going, and apparently more had volunteered after feeling the effects of her song spreading across the city. She saw them loading writing and drawing supplies, as well as a lot of food to keep their mages supplied.

They sorted themselves into three airships and Beatrix chose to board one of the two without Thomas. She sat with Adela at the front of the airship, and it wasn't long before they were in the air. The Archivists were a rowdy lot and she could feel the excitement in their auras, but they didn't try to talk to her. They were too busy in their books or social games to bother her, and she thought they were used to having strange people like her amongst them.

Within a few hours they were out over the sea, west past Port Swan and heading directly for the Divide. She had once considered airships to be incredibly fast, but now she knew she could surpass them. She thought more about how to fly with her angelic powers, how she was supposed to control her speed and motion. Adela talked about using air magic to fly, and many of the principles were the same so she took the advice to heart.

To the north they could see the Torrent, the wall of water that cut the three continents off from the rest of the world. Somewhere beyond that was the Isle of Dusk and so many other lands she had never heard of. Galina had written notes on the composition of the world after she brought a sun and moon to Avani, and these were being passed around Nerik, so Beatrix knew that Avani was far larger than most worlds before it.

She thought she could sense her blades out there too. Not all of them, but enough. Some were moving, others in the depths of the world, stolen and hidden, or sitting as trophies in some collector's room. She would have to get them soon

enough.

In the distance she could see the Divide. A tall swirling mass of aether that stood like a flat but moving painting. A blemish on the world. She could already feel Azra-el and she was sure he could feel her presence too. His eyes lingered on her soul with a satisfaction only a grandfather could have. It was the same as her final embrace of Gregory.

"I'll meet you there," said Beatrix, standing and giving a fond smile to Adela. As she did she finally noticed a few Nerikan airships following far behind. They would take at least an hour longer than the Guild to arrive.

She dropped off the airship and in a controlled fall she was getting far too used to. The sky was hers now. The crow held more sway than the wolf inside her. She became the spiral of wings again and used Adela's tips to pull herself ahead of the fleet and down to the island within minutes.

She landed on her feet as she became humanoid again and was hugged by Azra-el.

"You've grown," he said with a friendly smile. "In more ways than one. Thank you for killing Lucifer, not destroying him. I couldn't bear the thought."

"In the end I felt it," she said. "He was conflicted, not evil. I don't hate him, though I can say I'm not happy with losing my body."

"Those airships," said Azra-el. "Why are you bringing so many people here?"

"I'm here to free Michael." She looked over to the Divide. It stood almost right up at the Torrent, and she could remember feeling the spray of the ocean as it shot into the sky. She was close enough to feel it just a little, but falling as a gentle rain rather than the upward stream.

"Do you have a plan?"

"I do." She explained everything she was going to do and her grandfather quickly volunteered his own aether too.

"The world is changing quickly," said Azra-el. "Give me a moment." He walked to the Divide and began chanting. She

could feel the words channelling his thoughts directly into the Divide. He was alerting Michael and the other angels in there to dismiss their halos or they'll hurt those who were arriving to save them.

It had been a long time since she had gotten to talk to him directly, so she took the chance to talk about everything she could. They discussed Vala and Dasus, their experiences as angels, and the nature of Azael. It was the first time that she had heard her grandfather complain about his own name being so similar to such a monster, separated only by a letter and the expression of vowels. She found it rather funny, but their names meant entirely different things, so people never judged him for it. She let him swing around Almut, but he insisted on giving it back when she offered to let him hold it while she collected the others.

The Archivists arrived first and set up their stations, preparing to draw the sights and document the words. The only ones to approach were Thomas and Adela, who Beatrix introduced to Azra-el. He took much more interest in Adela, talking about finally meeting her, causing her to blush and giggle.

Everything changed when the Nerikan airships got to the island. The Archivists grew quite, left in awe as several historical figures disembarked. But the tension was broken as Sasha sprinted across the rocky ground and leapt straight at Azra-el, knocking him to the ground. He wrapped his wings around them both to get some privacy, and reactions in the crowd were mixed.

When everything was settled, Beatrix approached the Divide, but she was distracted. She could feel something just on the other side of the wall. The water didn't stop her from stepping up to it, passing by the side of the Divide. As she got closer she could feel its intensity increase. There was a power that was just beyond reach.

"What's wrong?" asked Akenesa, trotting up next to her with Liara in tow.

“Do you feel that?” she asked. She put her hand close enough to the water that she almost touched it.

“I don’t,” said Liara with a happy tune.

“The world is changing,” said Beatrix, repeating her grandfather’s words. In a move that shocked the onlookers, she jumped into the Torrent, expecting to be torn apart by the water. But she was safe. The water turned around her, unable to touch her. She floated through the air on wings only visible to angels and she landed about thirty feet away on the other half of the island, behind the wall. There she found what she was sensing.

A half-sword stuck in stone, a beam of light shooting down into the water from a gemstone in its handle.

“I didn’t feel you when I was young,” she said to the sword. “I was too immature, my nose not yet ready to follow your tracks.”

She grabbed the sword and cancelled its power, the light disappearing and the wall simply stopping in a collapsing wave. The people on the other side were silent and staring, and she pulled the blade into her soul before floating back over to them.

“Torrent, the twenty-second blade,” she said to those that approached.

“Hmm, a few years earlier than I predicted,” said Vala. “Your power is growing fast.”

“I can already feel them in the distance. In far off lands I’ve never been to, held by people I’ve never met.”

“You sound like you’re ready to go get them,” said Adela. It was a timid voice and Beatrix could feel the fear.

“I have to go to the Temple of Blades,” said Beatrix, “but after that I’ll settle down for a while. I need to regain my body before I make that journey.”

“Good,” said Adela. Her smile filled Beatrix’s core with warmth.

“Now, let’s get this done,” said Beatrix. She walked before the Divide and faced it, staring into the aether and

counting the angels. The Archivists were still silent, but there was a notable joy to their souls. They were as ready as she was and she knew she wasn't going to let them down.

Vala, Akenesa, Azra-el, and Archivist mages took up position behind her in a semi-circle and began to build up their pools of aether. The Nerikans began singing, but the Archivists had their own methods for building aether, mostly by letting themselves fall into their emotions.

Beatrix summoned the blades, holding them on her invisible tendrils. She took Flameroot in both hands and then pointed it at the Divide. She could see the way that space had collapsed in on itself, unfolding it in her mind to positioning Flameroot so its power was directed towards Michael.

She began her own song and the blades resonated with her voice as if singing in concert. Instead of sending that aether outwards to take the corruption of others, she directed it inwards, letting the blades enhance her. When her song ended she felt the others push their aether into her and she let it flow through her flames.

The fire shot from Flameroot's tip and straight into the Divide, following the path she laid out for it. Michael reacted and linked himself with the other angels using his own flame, then strengthening the bond when he got ahold of Beatrix's fire. The entire Divide became a blaze but she could feel it trying to collapse back into its state of chaos. Michael pulled on her aether as the other angels clutched onto his thousand wings. She slid forward but dug her heels into the ground.

"Anchor me!" she cried out to the others, trying to keep her concentration on her flaming fishing line. Vala and Akenesa grabbed her shoulders and she felt them grab onto the universe itself with a few words. Space bent as Beatrix pulled on Michael and he pulled back. It wasn't going to be enough, so Beatrix did something reckless.

"Elium!"

The cursed word's power followed a different path. Its destruction fell into the spiralling path of the Divide, cutting

back the aether trying to fall in on her flame. Some said the word was uncontrollable, but Beatrix knew differently. She had used Fang and uttered the word enough that it was becoming her own. It followed her will, destroying the aether in the Divide without harming the angels. It bent to her intent and she took it as her own.

The group fell backwards as Michael was dislodged like a pulled tooth, bringing with him a hundred different angels that clung to him. His thousand wings silently rotated in the air, the erelim had been freed.

The Archivists recorded events furiously and Azra-el flew up to meet his brother in arms, but Beatrix just lay there looking at her great grandfather. She wished she could have done this before Gregory had died, so he could see his father again, and regrets filled her to her core. But she pushed it down and she was sure that he was resting peacefully.

It was a while before Beatrix sat up. Adela had sat down next to her but they just looked up at Michael and the other angels. There was some fear in Adela, but Beatrix held only awe for the beings above. Those grand people of white and silver and gold, of porcelain and feathers and eldrine. There were a little over a hundred of them but there were millions of wings and eyes and faces. They were beautiful. They were divine.

When she finally sat up she looked at the Divide. It had almost entirely collapsed back into itself, the vestiges of flame and destruction being smothered by its overwhelming might. To repair the Divide completely she'd have to punch through to the other side, and she had maybe managed two percent of the distance. This wasn't a feat she was capable of right now, but she was sure that Akenesa could craft the right poetry to get the job done, given enough time and care.

"You did well," said Vala.

"This was a group effort," said Beatrix, standing and facing her. "I might have had the strength, but I didn't have the aether. Thank you."

“You do yourself a disservice being so humble,” said Vala. “I thought you were confident in your power now?”

“I am, but I can also see my limits. Without you and Akenesa to hold me back I would’ve been sucked inside too.”

“Why are you still down here?” asked Sasha, striding up to the group. “Go meet him!”

“You’re right, I should, but I don’t feel worthy. My mother was always very honest in her stories about all of you. She told me both the good and the bad. Meeting you all has confirmed many things but I was expecting everything you are and proved yourselves to be.

“But no one ever said anything bad about him. He’s an angel of Chassuille. An erelim of wings and flame. A perfect being. Perhaps his only flaw was stopping to listen to Lucifer instead of striking him down. He got trapped when Gregory was my age, and by all accounts he was an involved and loving father. Dutiful, loyal, beautiful, royal. My expectations are too high and I’ll only be disappointed. Maybe I can just admire him from afar.”

“You’re so dumb,” said Adela with a giggle. Sasha also laughed at just how serious she had spoken.

“Michael has his flaws,” said Vala. “Prideful, boastful, ignorant of the pains of mortality. The years in his prison hasn’t changed him. This was a bump in his life that won’t be noticed in the grand scheme. What’s nearly six hundred years to a being that’s over twelve thousand?”

“Even my imprisonment changed me,” said Akenesa, finally speaking up instead of giving those above her intense stares. “I spent half my life in a box and I’ve come out as a different person. Fundamentally the same, but I can feel a shift in my own mental state. I moved towards the darkness of the taint. I almost gave up. But look at him, there’s almost no corruption on his core.”

“May I speak with you?” asked Thomas Acker as he strolled over.

“No,” said Beatrix. “I’ve been convinced of something I

must do.”

She burst into the sky as her wings unfolded and it was only approaching him that made her realise just how much he dwarfed her. She was miles wide with her wings spread but he filled the sky. He was immense, but he didn't cast a shadow. He was light and flame itself, his white wings a soft sky all his own. Maybe she didn't own the sky as she had thought.

“I see it in you,” a voice rang through her mind. Deep but wonderful, vibrating in her heart. “I see the power I gave to you by blood. I welcome you, daughter of flame. Azra-el my brother has told me your name, but I would hear you speak it. Invoke it.”

She had never invoked her own name before. She had no idea what it would do. What sort of magic had her mother written into her soul?

“*Narianel Akenzal nga Ath Zoraken!*” she called and so the universe responded.

Narianel. Eternal Beauty.

Akenzal. Black Forest

Nga Ath. From the Family.

Zoraken. Dawnseer.



Beatrix stood in an unfamiliar place surrounded by dead trees and snow. Her internal flame wasn't melting it and not even a wisp of steam rose.

“Eternal beauty,” said a harsh voice. “What a joke. You walk around with such a sour face that no one would find you attractive. Besides, it's being written incorrectly.”

She turned around to see a man standing waist-deep in a pond. The water was red and she could smell the blood in it. The man had long black hair and pale skin, and was entirely human. His ears were both clipped in two places, making him look like he had the three-pointed ears of a Skraeðan.

“Azael,” she said and he nodded.

“This is what I was before,” said Azael. “Just another man. One who sought power.”

“I’ve already heard this story from Egil,” she said.

“Yes, I allowed him to bring you into the fold.”



Beatrix was surrounded by broken black trees. Past them she could see the ruins of a town so she must have been in some sort of public garden. Azael stood next to her, blood pouring from his eyes and nose.

“This was my first conquest,” he said. “Here I claimed the fire and the lightning. It was just a step towards my goal.”

“Why should I believe any of this?” asked Beatrix. “I’ve heard what you did, apparently, but this is an illusion.”

“It’s no show of light,” said Azael. “It’s a memory of my past. It is a truth that you Nerikans value.”



Beatrix was in a room with several wooden chairs and a long table. Six people sat and ate. They looked poor but were relatively clean. Azael sat down at the head of the table. He wore all black and had a diamond painted on his forehead. The others at the table all wore the Empty Diamond in one way or another.

“This is my family,” he said.

“I’ve heard otherwise,” said Beatrix.

“I lost each and every one of them along the way. All except her.” He pointed to the one wearing the mask. Any skin showing was incredibly pale and she had flowing black hair. “I have a feeling you’ll recognise her face if we stick around.”

“You got these people killed,” said Beatrix. “In your selfish quest for power, right? Is that what happened?”

“Are you any different?”

“I don’t seek to become a god or a ruler. I have all the

power I need and I plan to use it for the good of others.”



Beatrix stood in a world surrounded by nothing. Bits of land floated by, broken and at odd angles. Nothing about this place made sense. Then there was a bright light in the distance and it began to consume everything. It started so far away but it was growing with an insane speed. It would only take minutes to reach her.

“Do you see the light?” asked Azael, standing next to her. “Do you see the dawn of my new world?”

“I see only senseless destruction,” said Beatrix. “I only see hostility and madness.”

“Then stop looking at your own hands and look at the big picture. You know my plan. Egil delivered my message loud and clear. The sooner you get on board, the easier this will be.”

“So what would you have me do?” She gestured to the oncoming light of the Great Beyond. “You want this end?”

“This isn’t the ending,” said Azael. “This is just the beginning. You’ll see. Just do what you think is right and it will all come together. Collect the blades, sing the song, and destroy everything with me. It’s time to go from a confined God to a real one, and you will be the blade by my side.”



Beatrix had fallen and landed as just her core, but jumped awake and her form soon filled out. She frantically looked around, expecting to see Azael again but she was back at the Divide.

“Are you alright? What’s wrong?” Adela tried to grab her shoulders but her hands passed straight through.

“I saw him.” Beatrix kept looking around, her aether flowing as if she were in the midst of a battle. “I saw Azael.”

“That isn’t possible,” said Vala. “He’s behind the Grand

Gate, still trying to break through.”

“No he isn’t,” said Beatrix. She then realised she was holding Fang. When had she summoned it? Was Abaddon sensing her desire to kill, to struggle, to fight? “He’s out here and I feel him. He’s here somewhere.”

A man stepped up to her, looking like a young version of Gregory, but in his eyes were stars. He gently put a hand on her shoulder.

“Be calm,” he said, and by the voice Beatrix knew this was Michael. “If he is here, then we fight him together. It is what I was created for. It is what we were all made for.” He gestured to Fang.

“All of us have chosen this fight,” said Azra-el. “This is the least safe place for him to be right now. Just as we’ve found new strength. We pushed him back into the Grand Gate and we can do it again.”

They didn’t understand. They were naïve. They didn’t feel him, lurking in the air, waiting to strike.

“This isn’t right,” said Beatrix, finally getting Fang to disappear from her hand. She strode away from the group and walked right up to the Divide. She turned to face them.

“This is what he is!” she shouted. “Do you not feel him all around you? Do you not see what his power can do?”

“Lucifer did that,” said Azra-el. “It was a stable portal before then.”

“How did he manage that when he couldn’t even beat me? Look at the level of power we had to bring to be able to just put a scratch in it deep enough to get Michael out! Two members of the Grand Circle and multiple members of the Low and High Circles. Lucifer was in the Low Circle himself after he fell, and there was no way he could have done this.”

“She’s making too much sense,” said Akenesa.

“The Ruination began about two hundred years after Azael was sealed behind the Grand Gate,” said Beatrix. “Look at how much damage they did. The Dragons are in the High Circle, right? That’s what I was told. So how did they get to be

so effective at destroying worlds. How did they reduce it all to the Aether Sea and the Origin Worlds, which were left entirely intact?"

"Are you saying he planned Avani?" asked Vala.

"I'm saying he's planned *everything*," said Beatrix. "We can't beat him like this. We need our own plan."

"The council has a plan," said Michael.

"Their plan is to sit around and let everyone else do everything for them, because despite their power they're too lazy to do anything themselves." Several people were shocked at her words, but she continued. "We have to find a way to fight Azael. He is far beyond everyone else. He is the Pure Lord. I thought it was a title but it's a circle of magic above Grand, isn't it? How are we supposed to fight that? But we have to. I hear it in his voice. He's coming."

She had flown off, leaving everyone back on the island. Those that could fly fast enough to follow her hadn't and she thought they were just giving her space. She had flown directly south, passing over ocean and lands she had never visited before finally stopping when she rounded the Sato Strait that split the Semblan Continent from the Everlands.

At night she had settled down on a small island in the Strait and watched the moon and stars, trying to relax. She had crossed the whole continent in just around six hours and was too mentally exhausted to continue.

Akenesa had tried using telepathy to contact her several times, but she had ignored her. She didn't want to talk any more. She had looked into the eyes of the beast and come out ready to fight. She was terrified.

When dawn came she let the light of the sun recharge her before she took off again, heading farther to the south. She was on her way to the Temple of Blades. It felt like the right place to go. It was a place she could be to fight back. She had to see it.

All that flying and she hadn't even changed into her true form. She had maintained her small humanoid form so she could avoid being spotted. When she looked down she was over a jungle and she could see the desert, which took another hour to reach.

The desert was far bigger than she had expected, but there was a beacon she could follow. Another blade. More than one, actually. Her mother had told her that she had put a few in storage there a long time ago, and she was glad they hadn't been stolen.

She looked down again and saw a long string of wagons following the ridges. And then she saw the bandits riding towards them. She rolled her eyes and prepared to land as despite her fears she couldn't see that and just ignore it.

She hit the ground hard, sending sand into the air. She

looked to the wagons and then at the bandits, who had turned their horses directly towards her instead. She didn't really want to fight and she couldn't be bothered with anything long so all she did was manifest a single wing in their direction. It carved a mile-long ravine in the sand and turned them into a fine red mist. She called back her wing and sighed.

"That was something marvellous!" said a familiar voice and Beatrix saw it was Amrit Sharma.

"It feels like an age since I last saw you," said Beatrix.

"You are very different," said the trader. "I don't think you always glowed. Or could do... That." He looked at the new canyon.

"No, that's new," said Beatrix.

"Why are you this far south?" asked Amrit.

"Going to the turtle."

"It's a tortoise," said Agni, appearing from the group of mercenaries that were gathering around Amrit as if they could do anything to protect him from her.

"It doesn't matter," said Beatrix, nodding to him. He looked a lot more tough than he used to. He'd grown up more than anything. "Either way, it has a chunk of an old world on its back that I need to visit."

"The place is a ruin," said Amrit. "What could you hope to find there?"

"It's more than a hope," said Beatrix. "It's a certainty. I'm on my way to collect a weapon made by my ancestor."

"Like the sword in the Temple of Eyes?" asked Agni. His voice had a nostalgia to it even though that adventure hadn't been that long ago.

"Just like that," said Beatrix.

"Can I come with you?" he asked, eyes wide and teeth showing from the smile.

"Sorry, you'd just slow me down this time. Maybe next time." She bowed to them and then grew a pair of wings and shot into the air, leaving them behind.

Ashenteliar was a massive desert tortoise from Terra. It was a unique creature, more than ten miles long and its skin was said to have intricate patterns. All that was left was a shell and a skeleton. The Gods dropped their old world fragments into Avani rather carelessly and ended up killing it. It started a rather short-lived rebellion.

Looking down on the city she saw multiple styles of architecture, but easily picked out the Temple of Blades. It was a large building with with a lot of chimneys and was in the same style as the Isle of Dusk. Landing at its front doors let her see the symbols used by the Zoraken family, so she knew she had the right place.

The inside was strange. It was a single long hallway leading to a hexagonal central room and nothing else despite how large the building was. She could see hundreds of tiny holes all over the ceiling of the central room and then used Perception to follow them. There were pipes that lead to runes and she could see they were to help her get her song out to the Aether Sea and beyond.

In the room there were eighty-two altars with slots for each of her blades. This was the room Prochorus was afraid to enter. He failed in his task, but she couldn't blame him. It was a daunting mission, but she was willing to do it.

She summoned her blades and they found their place, each sliding in easily. The altars were made with the blades present, using them to get the shape perfect. It felt strange to be without them so suddenly, but it felt natural for them to stay there too. But she decided against it, calling them all back to her. She could fight without them, but she wanted them.

And then she noticed she had taken three extra blades. They had been sitting in their altars but were now inside her. Quake, a black hammer with a spike on its other side that was the earth elemental blade. Flight, a rapier that allowed its wielder to fly like an angel. Elemental, a sword that could be used with one of the elemental blades to change a person's attunement.

Flight was entirely useless to her as she had that power within her, though she thought she could probably lend it to someone until she needed it for the song. Elemental, however, intrigued her. She crossed it with Akwaen and felt her internal flame disappear.

The internal flame was rightfully called a fire font, and each element offered its own kind of font. The water font was a way to speed up healing, and the earth font would allow a person to survive without food. Neither appealed to her, but she now wanted the other elemental blades to test what they offered. She switched back to fire and felt her flame reignite.

She felt the weight of Quake in her hands and it felt good. Hammers were never her style of weapon, but punching holes in armour was a skill she respected. She thought better of swinging it around inside the temple and was about to leave when she noticed someone approaching down the hall.

He was shaking as if his entire body prickled in pain. He smiled as he approached, his long grey hair tangled and his pupils shaking in his irises. His teeth were broken and he licked his lips as he spread his arms wide. His clothes were ragged and dirty, but she could tell they were originally grey. He had on that diamond shaped shawl that he wore the last time they met.

“How long has it been?” asked Egil.

“For a while I thought I had killed you,” said Beatrix.

“Was that the last time we met? Then there’s still some road ahead.” He sat down against the altar for Flameroot and started to laugh. Beatrix saw that his core had healed, the deep cut she had given him filled in, but it was amateur. The threads were still frayed and misaligned.

“How did you survive?” she asked, ready to summon her blades the moment he moved.

“Same way I always do.” He tapped his chest. “I was whisked away on the tides of reality.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“It would if you understood.”

“Why am I letting you talk?” she asked, holding her head back in frustration.

“Because I’m always right and never lie,” he said. She stared at him and he nodded confidently, but then he clutched at his chest and curled over, shaking more violently.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked. She didn’t move any closer, just in case this was a ploy.

“I’ve done terrible things, but they were worth it.” His soul was completely clouded with corruption. There wasn’t even a hint of blue in there, just solid black. “Everything I’ve done was to forge the blade, and I have no regrets. This will end the suffering.”

She summoned Fang to her hands and the silver light it appeared in lit up Egil’s face, showing the depths of the madness in his eyes. It was different from Galina. More manic and less lost. He was driven by it and he thought he was in the right. His shroud of souls was filled with thousands of the unfortunate dead that he had eaten.

When he noticed Fang he laughed harder, coughing and dribbling black blood.

“You hold it as if it hadn’t wronged you,” he said.

“Fang has always been reliable.”

“Ah, then I see where we are,” said Egil, nodding to himself, his gaze distant.

“What are you talking about?”

“That blade,” he said, pointing to Fang, “is going to change your mind.”

“Is this you being a prophet now?” She didn’t believe he was a Seer. She couldn’t see it in him, and his core was in his chest, not his head. Even though her blood was diluted, Beatrix had Seer blood in her and even her core was higher than his, even if it was still in her chest.

“I’ve seen all, I know all.” Egil held out his arms again. “I was with you at the end, and I’ll be there when you take up your true mantle as the Blade of the Infinite. *Nar. Iana. El.*”

“Those aren’t the runes used to spell my name,” said

Beatrix more angrily than anticipated. She was holding herself back well, but it slipped there. *Iana* meant 'belonging to' and *el* meant 'blade' so he was trying to mispronounce her name into making that title that irritated her. 'Infinity belonging to the blade' or 'Blade of the Infinite' and she hated it.

"Aren't they?" asked Egil. "Maybe you should ask your mother how she named you. How she almost died when the Grand Gate opened and was given the option. Name her child as directed or be destroyed."

Beatrix didn't want it to be true, but it probably was. The Battle of the Grand Gate was a slaughter and she could believe her mother accepted such a strange offer just to survive the brutality.

"Your cousin is trying to bring you to her," said Egil. "I can feel the space around us trying to fold. But that won't work while I'm here."

"Why not?"

"Because of my power." Egil tapped his chest again.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"The source of my power is within me."

"Are you being deliberately dense?" She was getting too annoyed to hold her tongue any longer. "Did you just come here to talk riddles?"

"I came here to offer you a job." He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out. She hesitated for a moment and then took it, reading a list of names.

"Who are these?" she asked. She didn't recognise any of them.

"The people I want you to kill," he answered, chuckling to himself. "Followers of Azael who do not hold to the path. Slay them for us."

"What's really in it for you?" she asked. She knew this list would be useful, especially since each entry had a physical description. "Why would you help me weaken your position? Won't think lead to Azael's failure?"

"Not at all," said Egil, standing on unsteady legs. "This

will make our remaining ranks stronger. Those I've not told you about are going to play a key part in the final plan. Also, I have a prize for you if you decide to do as you're told."

"A prize? I'm not some child."

"Then I'll keep this, shall I?" Egil pulled a thin chain around his neck out of his top to reveal a triangle of bone tied to it. She recognised it instantly. "I can see it in your eyes, Narianel. I see you want this."

She recalled the day of the storm in Seremont when she had been training with her family. Collecting bits of cloths when he appeared. He snapped her collarbone in a show of unreal strength. It was a piece of her original body and it was free from Lucifer's curse. With it she could skip the training and studying and have a physical body again, using it as a seed to grow whatever she needed.

"One fight," he said. "It won't be one of the ones on the list. I have a specific job for you. The list is just extra."

"What's to stop me just taking it?" she asked, moving Fang to make sure he remembered she was holding it.

"You can try," he said. "But you can't become an angel in here. You'll break the building and it'll need to be rebuilt. And besides, I'm a better fighter than you."

"I've beaten you before!" she shouted, her words echoing in a strange way. The sound was working its way through the pipes.

"Have you?" he asked. "I'm still standing here."

She charged him but he ducked under her swing. He was quicker than she remembered, bouncing along on the tips of his toes. It reminded her of...

"You're using my movements!" she shouted as she moved in, matching him step for step but failing to strike. For longer reach she switched Fang for Perception and she called Oracle to battle for the first time. It was a ring that she summoned to her left hand on the middle finger, its spike sticking out, ready for her to punch. Its power flowed into her and started to see her options, but then it suddenly failed.

“That won’t work on me,” said Egil as he ducked yet another strike. He tapped his chest again.

She had to hold back whenever he got close to an altar and he moved around them on purpose, toying with her. She was getting more irritated by the moment so she chose to end this quickly, calling on Havoc, Malice, and Gungnir. Speed, strength, and accuracy. They empowered her, for their power enhanced. Perception caught him in the shoulder, but he was still able to dodge most of the damage.

“You’ll have to try harder than that!” he said with a childlike laugh, as if they were playing a game of tag. He stood in the centre of the room and black aether flowed out from him. When it disappeared his wound was healed and there was a malevolent aura about him. She didn’t know what he had done, so she continued her attack more carefully.

She switched Perception for Venom, deciding that the two handed sword’s reach was worth losing her off-hand, and she tried to shower the area in the blade’s paralytic ooze. Egil tossed the bit of bone into the air, evaded the globs that came close to him, caught the bone, and took a bow.

Nothing seemed to work on him so she dismissed all her blades and their active powers and focussed on one. She called Encore to her hand, intending to rewind until Egil was sat on the floor. It wouldn’t be an honourable kill, but he deserved very little.

The world shook and strained and Egil laughed while shaking his head.

“That won’t work either,” he said. “We’ve both gone back a few minutes, but here we are, together.”

“How did you avoid that? You’re no Seer.”

“No, but I’ve seen things.” Egil tucked the bit of bone into his pocket and turned to the exit. “I’ll see you again soon, my dearest blade. I’ll have some information about the job for this prize. They’re within the wall of water, but you must have removed that by now, correct? Or is that later? It’s hard to remember. When you kill them you’ll get this piece I saved

from Lucifer.”

And with that he vanished before her eyes. There was no magic, no light, no movement. It was in the blink of an eye and there was no trace he had ever been standing there.

“Just like last time,” she said, remembering her hand around his core. Squeezing, some of it turning to ash. She had thought at the time she had destroyed him, but later realised she hadn’t, and this meeting was inevitable. She had no idea it would turn out like this, and she felt the need to talk to her family about it.

And then everything shuddered and she remembered that Egil said Akenesa was trying to bring her and the temple to Nerik. That was convenient timing. She felt the temple rise into the air and a sensation that ran down her back. Aether spread out below her and she knew she had been moved to the Aether Sea. It was probably the most efficient way to do things, but it still felt more complicated than it should have been.

Then the sensation passed through her again, a prickly cold running upward this time as the temple descended. The temple landed with a thud and a shake, but it was intact. She composed herself and thought through everything she wanted to say before heading outside.

She was back on the Isle of Dusk. She was on the northern side of the island near the bath house she had slept in before fighting Lucifer. She could finally see the light refracting through the crystals all over the roofs of the town. To the west was the Castle of Dawn and it stood majestically. She already knew the way to the dock, so she headed down the hill, following the streets and seeing signs of her previous struggle.

At the harbour she found the portal to the island from the Circle Sea, wondering how that would effect trade with nations on its southern side like Bileen and Itore Luca. She could see a ship already approaching from the main island and could feel the people on board. Vala, Akenesa, Sasha, Liara, and Adela. She didn’t really want to face them but she knew she had to.

When they arrived Adela ran right to her and asked a thousand questions before she could speak and she did her best to calm her. Vala walked straight past them and went into the town, heading towards the castle.

“Vala has been looking into your past,” said Liara.

“She’s spent the last day or so looking at your aether when you invoked your name,” Akenesa clarified. “She says there was an unfamiliar presence within you at the time. She spoke with Azra-el and others present at the Battle of the Grand Gate and they confirmed it was Azael.”

“I spoke with him in a vision,” said Beatrix. “I think I held it together fine until I was back in the real world, but it was honestly terrifying. He seemed so gentle but I could sense the destruction within him. And I’ve just spoken to Egil too.”

“Who’s Egil again?” asked Sasha.

“One of Azael’s followers,” said Akenesa. “He seems to appear when a war draws near, I’ve read. I met him once and he offered to help me fight Argus, but I turned him down before he disappeared.”

“He has a piece of my original body,” said Beatrix. She touched her broken collarbone. Even in her aetherial body that scar had manifested. “He says if I do a job for him he’ll give it back to me, which will allow me to remake a physical form.”

“What was the job?” asked Akenesa.

“You can’t be serious,” said Sasha. “If he’s a follower of Azael then we shouldn’t be working with him. I hope you tried to kill him.”

“I did, but he’s pretty evasive,” said Beatrix. “I think he’s picked up on my fighting style, so I might need to learn a new way to fight just for him. But he wanted me to kill some people for him.” She gave the paper to Akenesa. “Says they’re worshippers of Azael but they’re not doing their jobs properly or something. Seems like an excuse to me.”

“I don’t know any of these names,” said Akenesa. “By their descriptions they’re not Nerikan, so I don’t have an issue with this.”

“So you’re going to go off fighting again?” asked Adela.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Beatrix fought for a moment. “He said he’d see me about a job, someone who’s not on the list, so I should at least do that, right? We have this list of extras, though. We should use Seers to look into these people, find out who they are and if they’ve done anything to deserve it, maybe?”

“Seems like the logical choice,” said Akenesa.

“You’re going to do it anyway,” said Vala, rejoining the group. She was holding a piece of one of the crystals that had been broken. Beatrix didn’t think that it was her fault, but wasn’t ruling it out. “There’s no point discussing it. Since they all follow Azael they’re probably hidden from Seers. You’ll just have to find them yourself.”

Vala held out her hand to Akenesa and was given the list. Her eyes glowed as she used the information to try and search for them, but just shook her head when she was done. She gave Beatrix the list.

“He said he’ll bring me more information about a job,” she said as she gave the list to Adela for safekeeping. She had no pockets, after all. “I don’t know when that will be, but he said it would be soon.”

“I still think it’s a bad idea,” said Sasha.

“Me too, but I think it’s still what has to be done. We either kill them as soon as possible or we deal with them when Azael finally makes his move. One at a time or all at once.”



Later that day she spoke to the Synod and explained what was happening. Her vision of Azael, her talk with Egil, her plans for the future. There were mixed responses but they mostly agreed that it was still the right thing to do. Their war was with Azael, and so anything that weakened his hold on the world was worth doing.

Beatrix had spent the last two weeks with Adela in Seremont, talking about everything and nothing, rekindling their love and strengthening their partnership. It was difficult without being able to touch her, but it was the best they had at the moment. Chill had arrived and a cold wind had begun to snake its way through the city.

She sat on the roof of her house after taking the time to make sure everything was fine and looked over the list again. She had memorised it already, but she couldn't help but look at it over and over. There was something wrong with it, and the wait for Egil was getting tense.

She had never expected her life would turn out like this, but ever since she had met him everything had become weird. She had gone to war instead of just hunting. She had seen lost parts of the world and found ancient blades.

He was constantly in the back of her mind like a living ghost. He lurked there and despite it all, she couldn't really hate him as much as she should. He had gutted her, broken her collar, and was the minion of a destructive monster. But she felt bad for him. He was broken and battered and she had this thought in the back of her mind that she could save him from Azael.

She jumped down into the garden and pushed it from her mind. There was no redeeming him. She would have to destroy him, and she planned to do it as soon as she got that bone back. Her mind was made up. This war was only just beginning.

Afterword

In this extract I believe I have managed to avoid being censored, especially after reaching out to the higher ups of the organisation. Hopefully I won't have to shorten sections and black out certain words after writing this.

Narianel Akenzal is on course for the role I have discovered she played in the end of the world. She has shown sympathies towards Azael and his followers even if she is afraid of them. Her natural destructive tendencies are also on display.

Saying that, she has also diverged dramatically from the other books. What moved Dasus to give her the soul of the Chronomage and why is she making blades of her own? This is a brand new event in this Cycle and I find it incredibly interesting. It must be a major source of the Reality Corruption and I'll have to follow these new events as they unfold.

When looking through Akenesa's book it was far messier than I expected it to be. Her emotions run wild but she's unable to act on them because of the way the magic flows in her soul. Her attempts to heal the scar are quite alarming too, especially when I read about the state of Egil's soul from Narianel's account. If it went wrong then she could seriously damage herself. It's hard not to be invested in her health when I'm reading her account of her life, and perhaps I should take a step back here.

Sasha, on the other hand, has a surprisingly organised book that was very easy to translate. That said, I avoided most of her thoughts and feelings during her part, as I felt incredibly uncomfortable reading them. I'm already cutting

out most of Narianel's relationship with Adela due to it being not fitting into the narrative I'm trying to build, but Sasha's lust was disturbing. She had thoughts and reactions that would scare even the most liberal minded pervert in the world.

We're approaching the end of the 17th, and I'm beginning to worry about the 18th. Due to what I wrote in the previous extract the study already has an increased military presence. Guards patrol the rooms and there's a group of soldiers constantly watching me and my fellow Technicians. I'm already looking forward to this all being over.

Suggested Actions

Wait and see. There's been no real change since the last extract and all Transfers have gone as normal, with no changes to previous Cycles.

Appendix I

Names

Basic Skrae and Neri

Here I have compiled a list of names that are significant to the contents of these extracts and have listed their meaning. Names in Skrae and Neri are constructed from normal words within the language, though many feature corruptions to force words together. Additionally, some female names include an extra "ah" sound at the end to make them more feminine.

Any names I have previously translated into a more common form (such as Prochorus and Michael) I have instead listed by their true transliteration here. There will be notes at the end on a few concepts that are regularly used by these people but are strange when compared to the real world.

--- Narianel's Family ---

Name	Meaning
Narianel	Eternal Beauty / Blade of the Infinite
Anōa	Angel
Aleksashdra	Champion Protector
Azra-el	Hope Blade
Akenesa	Black Rose
Liara	Joy Burst
Vera	Strength
Anastasya	Honour
Demyan	Slasher
Galina	Feral
Sarasha	Balanced Wild (Nature)
Sanja	Care
Senka	Thirst
Vinsent	Aggressor
Sama-el	Determined Blade
Sara	Balance
Vesna	Knowledge
Prokorus	Music and Song
Vala	Serenity
Mika-el	Inferno Blade

--- Nerikan People ---

Agata	Warrior
Jela	Fortitude
Kresimir	(Not a Neri name, means Slick Tongue)
Ana	Lily
Egil	Awestruck

--- Nerikan Surnames ---

Zoraken	Dawnseer
Akenzal	Black Forest
Chanzal	White Forest
Talwaen	Moon Child
Talvara	Moon Blessed
Kewaen	Blood Child
Akwaen	Water Child
Solash	Brightness
-garath	Servant
Krom	Free (used for previous servants)

--- Skraeðan Gods ---

Chasyool	Light Creation
Nareshilna	Eternal Spirit
Seran	Shine Soul
Aramis	Soldier
Lunada	Midnight
Dasus	Twilight
Solim	Noon
Horal	Mind
Vereen	Gentle Touch
Faret	Judge
Mao	Fate
Aia	Luck
Serk	Time
Voria	Space
Merik	Journey
Kaldrum	Planet
Arsenum	Clockwork
Zenan	Love

--- The Empty Diamond ---

Azael	Origin
Aoran	Continuance
Elium	Nothing

Now to go over some common concepts in Nerikan and Skraeðan culture.

The first is Ser and Nar. These are usually translated as Shine and Shade, respectively, but they represent much more. Shine can mean mortal or limited, but it is the natural state of most souls within Skraeð. Those with Shine Souls live normal lives, die, and then go to the afterlife. Shade souls on the other hand are (mostly) infinite and undying. Narianel's name contains this symbol and meaning. These souls are usually paired with bodies that are fuelled by magic itself or simply lack physical bodies at all, instead having bodies made of magic.

Next is the way the Nerikan people use the word Ara. It means burst or explosion, and when paired with their other words in magic incantations creates spectacular results. Nerikan people, however, use it to mean "a lot" or something along those lines. To me it feels like it reduces the meaning, but they don't seem to care so who am I to judge?

Appendix 2

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 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 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 103 (81) Zasad / Victory (Victory)
Netzach, Male Fallen Erel
Causes courage and determination

Divine Blades of Narianel

Blade 105 (83) Nanana / Encore (Encore) Garret Endarias, Male Human Causes time to rewind

I'm still curious as to why this category exists at all, as in other cycles Narianel created no blades of her own. Things will change from here, I'm sure. I managed to find the Chronomage's name, though I don't believe Narianel ever learns it, at least as far as I've read now.

As a note, the first number for each blade is its number in the Skrae and Neri counting system, and in brackets I've put the decimal number. I've been asked by several colleagues about this, but I barely understand the Skrae counting system myself and there's no easy way to directly translating it without just looking at a pre-made list. I might go into this in future extracts.