
DEMON'S ASCENT

NEWLY SUMMONED DEMONESS

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CHAPTER 1 – SUMMONED

Reality slowly coalesced into the painful throbbing of Elania’s temples. Each beat of her heart felt like someone was stabbing into her head with an icepick and she let out a groggy groan. Her thoughts stirred slowly as she tried to recall the night before. She’d pulled an all-nighter so she could finish a term paper for her history class.

Heat leached from her body uncomfortably, and she pressed herself off of the cold stone floor into a sitting position.

Wait.

Cold stone floor?

She was not in her dorm room. It didn’t even look like she was on her university grounds unless they had redecorated some basement into an 18th century dungeon. Candles cast soft flickering yellows throughout the chamber, but left swaths of shadow to fill her imagination with the worst possibilities.

She’d been kidnapped!

A coarse croak erupted from behind her. “She’s awake.”

Elania pushed up off the floor and onto her feet to whip around. Four cloaked figures stood wearing dark purple robes, two near the only exit to the chamber and the other two much closer, flanking a large lectern that had a massive skull adorned book.

“Send for the Bishop!” the second closest robed figure shouted.

The icy grip of panic squeezed her heart. She glanced around for anything that might help her. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she found that there was no sign of her clothes, or anything to use as a weapon. They’d chalked strange white symbols and lines around where they’d placed her in the middle of the room.

Being kidnapped and disrobed while unconscious was bad enough, but she had no idea what a cult would want to do with her!

“What do you want with me?” she asked in a shaky voice.

“Mistress, the Bishop should be here soon. He will explain everything,” the nearest robed figure explained.

That did nothing to help her calm down. She did not want to speak to any Bishop, nor stay here any longer. The shadows seemed to disappear, and she confirmed that there wasn't anything waiting in the darkness to grab at her, but that also meant there was nothing she could grab to use as a weapon. She glanced at the three remaining figures between her and the exit.

Those weren't good odds.

Worse, as her vision in the dark improved further, she realized it wasn't just white chalk that marked the surrounding floor. The grooved symbols on the ground were filled with thin pools of blood. Lots of blood, but no sign of a corpse.

Maybe they'd used a chicken? The white lines were marked with white chalk, right? Or was it...ground up bones?

A half step forward in panic caused a sudden dome of blue light to flash into existence like a cage. She slammed into it face first, hard enough to send her reeling backwards to fall on her ass.

“Mistress!” The voice was filled with panic. The man knelt down beside the circle and began to chant some in-explicable mantra that wasn't in any language she had ever heard, but her focus had been snatched by the blue box that had appeared in front of her.

[A Demonic barrier is unbreakable with your current power.]

Her first thought had been they'd put some kind of invisible electric fence around her, but the screen hinted otherwise. She reached out and passed her hand through the screen. It wasn't anything physically present and reminded her of some kind of holographic projection she'd seen on some sci-fi shows.

There was a familiar 'X' in the top right corner, and when she tried to press it the message flickered then disappeared. It was replaced by a new screen in a portrait orientation with a slowly scrolling list.

[Status Update]

[You have arrived from another world!]

[You have been granted the perk, 'Summoned from Another World!']

Elania felt her blood turn cold. She'd watched enough isekai animes to recognize the wording. Heck, her favorite guilty pleasure was staying up late and watching cheeky OP 'Villainess' romance shows. More than a few times she'd spent an entire night reading web comics from that genre.

One thing she was sure of, she'd never met Truck-san, she would have remembered! She should have been safely tucked into her bed getting a few hours of sleep before turning in her term paper!

Why the heck was she here?

A giddy feeling filled her, and she started to giggle. The robed figure stopped chanting and looked up at her, giving her a clear look at his pencil-shaped face. Why did he look more terrified than she felt?

"Wake up, wake up, wake up," Elania mumbled to herself. She pinched her forearm hard enough for it to be painful before lightly slapping her cheeks.

The man began to shake, and that highlighted another issue. Why was she able to see him so clearly in the dark? Individual beads of sweat began to form on his forehead, and she could see it all in exquisite detail. She'd always worn glasses before, her eyes too sensitive to wear contacts.

Her whole body hurt from the barrier she had slammed into earlier. A cold breeze caressed her bare skin, causing her to shiver. She had never felt so vulnerable in her life. She took a deep breath and tried to force the feeling into a box. A small box that'd let her think and figure things out.

No clothes. Check. No weapon. Check. Stuck in some weird magic circle. Check. Some bastard called 'The Bishop' on the way to talk to her and possibly let her out... that seemed too good to be true on top of everything else.

If this was a bad isekai LitRPG thing, then wasn't there some type of command or skill she should be able to use?

The earlier message had provided a hint. "Status," she intoned.

A screen flickered to life in front of her obediently.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 1 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 0/100]

[Skills: Locked]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!)]

It was nice that she'd guessed right, but the second her eyes landed on the 'Race' line, she had a mild panic attack, not that it was hard to trigger one in her current predicament. She stopped trying to hide her modesty as she patted her forehead, looking for horns. They didn't appear to exist. Her shoulder blades didn't seem to have wings sticking out of them, and her tailbone was mercifully absent a tail.

Everything seemed to be perfectly normal. Maybe that would have been a disappointment to some, but she was perfectly happy to still be herself.

So why did it call her a demon? Plus, her level was absolutely weak... she was level 1, with no power, skills locked. Wasn't she supposed to get a box full of cheat skills? That it provided no help getting out of the barrier and past the cultists was frustrating.

A clink of metal striking stone drew her attention away from the screen and to a new figure that entered the chamber from the hall. The new arrival caused her body to tense and her stomach to turn.

He was the perfect image of what she'd considered fit an insane cult leader. Half his face was disfigured, with oozing sores leaking pus. The other half was marked by deep age lines, his two glowing blue eyes lacking pupils. The long beard terminated in a sharp pencil point, and bones had been weaved into it at even intervals.

His attire fit the part, too. An antlered skull sat atop his head, while his black-purple shaded robes were embroidered in golden inlaid geometric symbols. The metal clinking came from a crystal topped staff that was sheathed in a silvery-colored metal that shimmered in her vision.

Two subordinates flanked him, both keeping their hoods pulled down and doing their best not to draw any attention to themselves. Three more bodies she'd need to somehow navigate around if she wanted to escape. Not that she had any idea on how to remove the barrier.

It was so ridiculous that she had to force down a laugh. If it wasn't for the status message, she'd have given them props for putting on a good show. It was so ridiculous that she had to force down a laugh. If it wasn't for the status message, she'd have given them props for putting on a good show.

She desperately wanted to believe that someone would jump out, shout "surprise!" and ask if their joke had fooled her. But deep down, she knew it was wishful thinking.

The 'Bishop' stepped forward and placed his hand on the skull bound tome on the lectern while his lackeys filed out into a semi-circle around her. The three of them knelt down and began a low hum in harmony.

The Bishop turned to her and clanked his staff on the stone three times before opening his arms wide in a grandiose gesture. “Great Queen, we welcome you to Eladu! No cost was spared for your summoning, and we, your greatest servants, beseech your greatness to sign a contract with our order and lead us to victory against the Overworld!”

Elania felt her eye twitch. Everything was so over-the-top that she wanted to scream at them. A demon-worshipping cult had somehow brought her here and wanted her to lead a war with whatever the Overworld was?

Hell-no!

[Cult of the Black Candle wishes to make a contract with you!]

[Do you wish to see the contents of the contract? Y/N]

“No way.” She waved her hand, and the screen obediently disappeared. “Send me back.”

CHAPTER 2 – COMPLICATIONS

The prostrating followers immediately straightened up and looked at her in shock. They began to speak in unison.

“N...no!”

“Please, mistress!”

“Don’t abandon us!”

The pitiful outcries almost made Elania feel sorry for them. She had no idea how they managed to put in such a pleading inflection to their voices while she was standing there stark naked in front of them all. But the keyword there was ‘almost.’

Maybe if they had provided her with something to wear, she’d have felt more lenient.

Unlike the others, the Bishop remained silent, but he couldn’t disguise the pained expression on his face either. One of his sores began to ooze a green liquid even, and she had to fight to keep her expression impassive.

“Great Mistress, we did not summon you unprepared. We have much to offer you. Besides our loyalty and obedience to your will...” The man’s words trailed off as he gestured to a dark wooden chest near the room’s entrance. Two cultists rushed into the room to lift it, and from the strained look on their faces, it was heavy indeed.

But the revelation that stood out to her was that there were two more men she somehow had to bypass to escape. The wooden chest clunked loudly as they lowered it onto the ground. The Bishop gestured again, and the men lifted its lid then heaved, dumping the shining contents across the floor.

Gold and gems spread out in a cascade, the clinking sound of coins filling the otherwise quiet chamber. She had no reason to doubt that it was real gold, and the gems sparkled with their own internal light like nothing she had ever seen before.

Although her second thought was a pragmatic one; they'd make great flashlights. Something that would be really helpful when escaping a dark, dank dungeon. Each one had a slightly different hue, and the lights seemed to rotate slightly, the imperfections in the stones creating little soft shadows that danced across the ceiling and walls.

Despite the sudden display, she kept her neutral expression. The Bishop seemed taken aback by her lack of response and stuttered over his next words.

"G...Great Mistress, we know this must seem paltry considering the great wealth and abundance of mana shards in the demonic realm, but this represents years of our preparations, so you might empower yourself quickly here on Eladu."

Elania frowned. She wasn't sure what her position really was, and she desperately needed more information. With no other options, playing the role seemed the only way forward, but she was tired of standing in front of all of them in her birthday suit and covering herself with her arms and hands was a lost cause.

"Remove the barrier and give me some clothes, and I'll consider it," she finally replied.

Surprise registered on all the cultists' faces. Each one of them turned to their leader as if they were seeking clarification. The Bishop was just as shocked, and he stared at her with a furrowed brow. The silence that fell in the room was deafening.

Eventually, the Bishop cleared his throat. "Great Mistress, I am your humble future servant, but I have to ask... what is your name?"

Elania cursed silently to herself. Had she given herself away somehow? Not that she had dedicated much time or effort to pretending to be the person they had 'summoned' yet, but it was still troublesome that her act died from the very first sentence. It also hinted at just how little she understood what was going on.

So much for her improv acting classes. "Elania. My name is Elania."

She watched for a reaction, and—much to her surprise—they all looked relieved or excited. Especially their creepy ass looking leader.

The Bishop nodded and lowered his head. "I'm sorry for doubting you, Dark Queen Elania'onbe'tila. I beg your forgiveness. There is no way for us to release the barrier without you signing a contract."

A mix of confusion and irritation welled within, but before she could react or respond, a voice echoed from the hallway entrance, interrupting any further dialogue.

"I can help with that," announced the new voice confidently.

All attention swiftly shifted towards its source. The tall figure stepped forward calmly, donned in a radiant silvery-white plate armor adorned with gold trimmings that glowed in

the dungeon's dreary atmosphere. His open-visored helmet, sculpted with stylized wings at his temples, cast a shadow over his face and somehow shrouded his features despite her improved vision in the dark.

He pointed his drawn sword straight at her. An ethereal blue glow flared to life, painting dancing shadows on the stone walls, but what caught Elania's breath was the blood—a vibrantly fresh crimson liquid that slowly dripped from the blade's pointed tip.

The disoriented cultists found their bearings, and a chorus of disparate chants filled the chamber. The flickering hope that the armored figure was there to help quickly evaporated.

Her status called her a demon. He was wearing a getup that screamed 'Paladin' to the high heavens, and the cultists had balls of fire and other elements forming in front of their outstretched palms.

She desperately wanted to cling to something that would reveal that this was all some kind of joke or dream, but everything looked, felt, and sounded so real it was impossible to ignore.

A chaotic barrage of elemental orbs launched themselves toward the knight from every direction. Flames, ice shards, bolts of electricity, and globs of sizzling acid—all collided uselessly against his shining armor that seemed to absorb the strikes as if it was eagerly gobbling them up for a snack.

She was trapped, defenseless, and naked in an arcane circle while insane religious cultists battled it out with what appeared to be a classic holy knight. Fear gripped her as she looked around her feet for something, anything, that would help. There was nothing.

The glowing sword cut a swath through the air, creating a wave of blue light that arced straight for her. Elania yelped and held her arms up to protect herself, but the energy slammed into the invisible bubble that was trapping her. It sizzled and sparked, but didn't seem to have any effect.

She'd have almost thought that it might have been to help her except that, where the wave had struck the dungeon walls, it had blackened and charred the rock to the point of crumbling.

It seemed like she was forced to root for the 'bad' guys and hope the contract thing was something she could come to terms with, not that she liked the idea.

The Bishop seemed unperturbed by his cronies' futile attempts at stalling the knight's advance. He finished his cryptic incantation and pointed his staff at the intruder; its crystal top began to glow ominously in response. Darkness seemed to seep out from under him

like ink spilled on parchment, enveloping the surrounding light before coalescing into a dark purple-hued tentacle that rose from the floor.

The appendage lunged forward without hesitation to strike at the knight, who continued his steady approach, unfazed. A split second before the shadow struck, the man raised his sword and cleaved through the ethereal limb with an uncanny precision. The shadow seemed to fill the air with an alien shriek as the blackness dissolved into the air.

Elania's summoner wasted no time. A subtle movement of his staff sent a second shadowy tentacle streaking toward the knight.

It was hewn into two pieces much like the first, but then was followed up by a third and fourth in rapid succession. Each one was sliced through with ease, leaving a thick layer of dissolving black smoke along the knight's path.

The distance between the two figures shrank and then didn't exist anymore. The Bishop's staff came up to meet a heavy overhead swing of the glowing blue sword, sending a gout of ethereal flame and sparks through the air. Multiple clashes sent more sprays of magic randomly through the surrounding air, one stream landing on one of the chanting cultists.

The man's black robe caught fire, and he ran screaming, bouncing into her prison before collapsing a short distance away. A smell of burnt flesh reached her almost immediately and Elania turned to dry heave on the floor. The shrieking suddenly cut off, and she realized the man was dead.

The cultists began to move away from the two colliding figures in a hurry as their weapons locked together, sending a constant spray of sparks towards the ceiling, covering it in a layer of lights that shone like angry stars in the night sky. It would have been pretty if they weren't locked in a deadly clash.

Elania clenched her fists. That the frail-looking Bishop stood firm against the Paladin's overpowering strength was almost as shocking as the fact that the magic they were using was real. Or as real as this was real. She held her breath as she watched as the lower-ranking cultists tried to help their leader by throwing useless spells at the Paladin that continued to go unnoticed.

He obviously had some cheat gear or skill that nullified their magic.

Just when she thought that maybe—just maybe—the Bishop would hold his own against the invader, a gauntleted fist broke free from their deadlock. The blow landed squarely on the Bishop's face, sending him flying backwards violently; he bounced off the uneven stones before crashing with an audible thud and crumpling onto the ground.

For a moment, silent shock reverberated around the room as everyone took in what had just occurred; one moment he was standing tall, defiantly pushing back against the knight...and then he was sprawled helplessly on the stone floor. His horned headwear had gone flying across the chamber and landed near Elania's feet.

He didn't just have cheat skills or equipment; he had super strength, too. She knelt down and scooped up the horned helmet as he turned on her. A quick toss of the object at him was battered away with a contemptuous swat with his oversized longsword.

His stride was slow, but unyielding. Elania stepped back as far as she could without shocking herself, but the distance felt like a futile attempt to slow the impossible. He swung his blade toward her, swiping from the side.

The sword caught in the invisible barrier for a moment before a bright light flared up from the indentations on the floor. The blood in the channels vaporized into a glowing red mist before dispersing into nothingness, and the light died completely.

The invisible dome around her turned into a brilliant orange and then shattered into a thousand shards that disappeared into nothingness.

That was the moment she had been waiting for; Elania jumped backwards and backpedaled away from the man rapidly.

He didn't seem concerned, stepping forward slowly before coming to a stop over the empty circle. "Demon, you can show your power before I send you back."

Well, that was just fucking polite of him, wasn't it? Except she did not know what the fuck her 'power' even was. "Leave me alone. I have no fricking clue who you are!"

He flashed forward, somehow moving faster than she could even see to appear an arm's length away. Elania tried to dive away from him, but his sword smacked her in the side, sending her into a rolling fall.

She reached down to pat herself where she'd been hit, expecting to find a slash or hole, but there was just a sore spot. Her self-inspection didn't last long as he fell on her and slapped her with the metal again.

"Why the fuck won't you cut?" he demanded.

She wasn't sure the question was even for her because he continued to prod her with the not-so-sharp sword tip. It was like being thumped with a hard stick, and it hurt. She crawled away as fast as she could, only to have her bare ass smacked again.

He didn't follow her mad scramble into the room's corner, and when she turned to face him again, she wasn't sure if it was the litany of expletives and curses that had given him

pause or if he'd realized that for whatever reason his sword had gone defective. Despite its sharp edge she was covered in a mottling of future bruises without a single scratch.

The confusion writ on his face certainly led credence to the latter as he uttered a name. "Eziel?" The shadows that had hidden the man's face had disappeared and confusion was writ on his face. Brown stubble gave him an unkempt, uncared for look that was at odds with the shiny metal armor. He glared at her. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I don't know why you're attacking me!" Elania hissed.

It was the wrong thing to do because it seemed to break him from his inner conversation and he stepped forward, cutting off escape from the corner. He jabbed her with the point of the sword, thumping her in the rib. That hurt, but it was clear he was expecting more. He swung again, but this time she grabbed the blade to stop it.

The blue flames licked at her hands, but it didn't burn. Neither did it cut her hands, and she wasn't sure which one of them was more shocked by the display. She tried to push it, and him, away, but it was like trying to push a solid wall.

A purple tentacle appeared, wrapping around his middle and yanking him and the strange not-very-sharp-sometimes sword away. It slammed him into the ceiling and then the floor before tossing him into the wall across the chamber.

Elania patted herself down, checking for injuries. She could feel small tremors shake through her body as the threat of mortal peril had lessened. Being bashed with a metal stick hurt even if it hadn't eviscerated her. She glared at the growing cloud of debris and dust from the Paladin's impact site with vindication. He totally deserved what he had got.

Across the room, cultists stood up and began to cast their magic attacks into the dust cloud. More tentacle arms appeared from the ceiling and floor, especially where the light was weakest.

She spotted the Bishop who had gotten back on his feet and was waving his crystal-topped staff around.

"Kill the Light-bringer!" the old man shrieked hatefully. The efforts of his followers seemed to redouble and tentacles smashed into the opaque and glowing cloud of destruction.

Elania glanced at the entrance and only exit. She had well and truly overstayed her welcome and she needed to get the fuck out. No one was paying attention to her anymore, and she was no longer trapped in the barrier.

She took off toward the exit, crossing by the chest of spilled valuables. She stepped on one of the crystals and it bit into her foot painfully, causing her to nearly hop to a stop

so she could more carefully pick her way through. On impulse, she reached down to grab one of the larger shining stones.

A wave of blue light crashed into the wall in front of her, causing her to look over her shoulder. The Paladin had somehow survived the impact with the wall and was fighting back against the cultists again, but his attention and gaze was locked on her.

There was no more time to dally. She approached the hallway, speeding back up to a sprint.

One of the lower-ranking cultists jumped in front of her and spread his arms out to the sides. “Stop, Mistress! We—”

She didn’t hesitate to smash the glowing stone in her hand into the man’s face. She had expected it to off-balance him enough to slide around him, but he crumpled like a sack of potatoes.

Worse, a blue screen appeared in front of her, nearly causing her to trip.

[??? - Human - Lvl 33 has been defeated!]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[Improvised Combat Rank E has been unlocked and slotted.]

She waved her hand, and the screen flew away. Elania didn’t look back as she dashed into the hallway, leaving the cacophony of explosions and violence behind her.

CHAPTER 3—ESCAPE

E lania didn't slow down as she ran blindly through the dimly lit maze of corridors, her heart pounding against her chest with every adrenaline-fueled step. The sounds of combat between the cultists and the holy knight faded behind her. Numerous intersections and heavy looking closed doors dotted the hallways, but she felt the need to put as much distance between her and the chaos as possible.

The further she traveled, the less cared for the dungeon seemed to become, and the torch sconces became sparse, only placed at the intersections. Despite the fear gripping her, she couldn't help but marvel at how she was still navigating through the darkness so effortlessly.

It felt like her eyes had somehow adapted to see in the low light, and the bizarre change felt connected to the race moniker her status had shown.

At least if they were going to change her race, it came with perks. Right? Right?

She skidded to a stop as voices ahead bit through her internal panic, and then turned and shot down one of the secondary corridors. The hall was pitch black but lined with a dozen doors on either side. When she reached the end of the hall and went to take a turn, she found that it was a dead end. A pang of panic filled her; the voices were getting closer.

The end of the corridor had just enough room for her to tuck in and hide. Two figures passed by the lit intersection at a run, and a clear shout of "Intruder!" sent her panic through the roof, but then a trio of cultists continued in the same direction. Their robes were different from the black ones earlier—crimson adorned with black symbols—and they brandished wicked-looking daggers.

One of them glanced down the tunnel but didn't see her.

[Stealth Rank E has been unlocked and slotted.]

Thank you, merciful and helpful system gods, but why couldn't the damn thing come with a user manual? Elania blinked. Maybe it did, but she hadn't exactly had time to think or try to find one. She glanced down at herself, she was covered in red patches that were going to make her look like an abuse victim later, and she was distinctly naked.

The sound of the cultists had disappeared, so she popped out of her hiding place and tried the first door. It was locked. The second opened, but was more darkness, the forms of unused old furniture stacked for storage filling the space. The third was the same. Each one was locked or unused storage and she started to feel more anxious as she neared the light of the intersection.

The last door on the right opened and the insides of the room were lit by a small candle. The room looked lived in, with a small cot and a few pieces of furniture. She shut the door behind her when the room began to shake heavily, causing the candle to splatter itself on the ground and plunging the room into a pitch black.

The shaking stopped almost as soon as it started. She didn't know much about earthquakes, but being underground during one seemed bad with a capital B.

Elania froze. Earthquake? Was that really it? Had the fighting earlier just reached another level?

She swallowed and moved toward the wardrobe and yanked it open. The darkness didn't bother her, but the choices presented were limited; there were only a few sets of black robes hanging from a rod. She grabbed one and pulled the thing over her head. That solved the glaring problem of running around completely naked.

There was a sharp-looking dagger and leather sheath hanging from a loop as well, and she slid it into the robe's oversized pockets. There was a heavy black book on the dresser by the cot, but she discarded it as not being useful and too heavy.

Since there wasn't much else useful in the room, she focused on the robes. Snatching one out, she considered using it as some type of knapsack, but a second heavy resonance through the room sent dust falling from overhead, eliciting a coughing spree.

She needed to get out. Immediately.

Grabbing the two spare robes, she left the sparse quarters behind and reentered the hallway. The torch sconce had gone ajar, and the lights had gone out. At the next intersection, she nearly slipped and fell on a pool of blood. Her heart jumped as she realized she had nearly tripped over two bodies that were splayed out on both sides of the corridor.

The idea of looting them came to mind, but another shake encouraged her to hurry with her escape. The halls began to devolve into a zig-zagging mess of intersections and the state of disrepair of the dungeon became more evident the further she went.

After what felt like an eternity of fleeing, she stumbled upon a dilapidated gateway that seemed promising. The door was composed of thick bands of rusting iron and hung precariously off its hinges as though it hadn't been disturbed in centuries. She took a deep breath and darted through the narrow opening.

On the other side was a completely different world.

The ethereal landscape was starkly different from the dark tunnels of the dungeon. An otherworldly glow illuminated everything; bioluminescent mosses blanketed the cavern walls and ceiling, radiating with a soothing blue-green light that filled the expansive space with an eerie tranquility.

The ground was a vibrant tapestry of flora; patches of fluorescent purple fungi intermingled with softer shades of green moss that seemed in the process of working its way up the walls to meet with its cousin on the ceiling. Other shades and colors appeared in patches, and as she made her way deeper, everything seemed to dance with luminescent colors in response to her passing.

The colors were stunning, and under other circumstances, she'd have loved to take the time to examine everything in detail.

Pushing into the cavern elicited a pained curse after a few dozen steps. The ground was mostly rock and sharp pebbles, which had painfully poked at her bare feet. Sounds of the combat had trailed off, but she didn't consider stopping, she couldn't afford to. The cavern was wide open and there wasn't anywhere to hide.

It took her nearly ten minutes to reach the far side, the cavern narrowing until it opened up into an identical chamber with another exit on the far side. Frustration gnawed at her. Just how large was the cave, and how long was it going to take to make her way out? There was a subtle incline which gave her a modicum of hope; perhaps she was indeed ascending, however slowly.

Elania passed through three more chambers before coming to an intersection that forked in two different directions. One path seemed to go upward, so she picked it almost immediately. Distance was hard to gauge, but it felt like she'd covered at least a few kilometers since leaving the cultists' dungeon. She had to concede that the cave might not have such a straightforward layout as she had first assumed.

A shiver of fear filled her as she realized the cave might not even lead to a way out. The cultists could have set their lair up at the front of the cave and, if it was the only way out, she was still well and truly trapped, no matter how far she made it.

The Bishop's words replayed in her mind. 'Lead us to victory against the Overworld.'

She looked up at the glowing ceiling, a frown creasing her lips. Overworld. As opposed to, say, an Underworld? A fucking Underdark? She'd never been very religious, but she considered offering a prayer to something for her chances of finding a way out.

Minutes turned into hours as she continued to trudge through the caverns. Whenever an intersection presented itself, she took whichever one looked like it would lead upwards, or if they had the same incline, alternated between left and right at each one in the hopes of not looping back in a circle.

Her feet hurt, and she was feeling exhausted. She wasn't sure how far she'd traveled when the light from the moss suddenly stopped. Panic filled her, and she immediately searched for a cubby-hole to hide in along the cave wall. It took a few seconds for her vision to adjust, but the lack of light wasn't going to hamper her... but what had caused the change?

The fungus continued to glow, and she realized the area she was standing in was lit up more than the rest of the cave, singling her hiding spot out. The faint luminescence followed her as she decided she couldn't stay in one spot if it was going to light her up like a target...or intruder?

A wave of exhaustion washed over her, and she knew she was reaching her body's limit, anyway. The only problem was that she'd not seen very many places that were welcoming. There had been a rocky chamber that she'd passed by earlier. That'd get her out of the biome and the glow that now seemed to follow her but had its own issue. If something cornered her in it, there was no way out.

It was that or stay in the open and hope nothing noticed her...

The way her feet felt, she didn't think she'd be able to run or sprint far if chased, though. She quickly decided to go with the more hidden option.

Backtracking to the transition zone, she easily found the chamber she'd spotted. It wasn't much, but at least she'd be harder to spot and there was a choke point to defend.

She set one of the robes she'd collected on the ground and sat on it. As soon as her feet were off the ground, she realized how badly they hurt. She'd never been what someone might consider an 'athlete,' but she had kept up with her fitness with morning jogs or

bike rides whenever possible. Walking ten or twenty kilometers shouldn't have bothered her...except she usually had shoes on.

Examining the bottom of her feet, she winced. Blisters were forming and there were several ugly looking scrapes and scratches. Touching the skin brought a wince of pain. She was well and truly fucked.

They probably didn't even have antibiotics. Maybe healing magic? She needed anti-septic, but all she had was what she had collected from the cultists and she had no idea if any of the flora in the caverns would be medicinal. She didn't even have the faintest clue about how to go about figuring that out, either.

She didn't even have water to rinse the cuts with.

Leaning back against the cave wall, she let out a defeated sigh. Maybe the status screen would offer her some other options?

"Status."

[You have previously unread messages.]

[???? - Human - Lvl 33 has been defeated!]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[Improvised Combat Rank E has been unlocked and slotted.]

[Stealth Rank E has been unlocked and slotted.]

It was nice that it summarized the latest messages for her, and she read them all more carefully than during her rapid flight out of the dungeon. She scrolled the ethereal panel down to the status screen.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 5 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 4/100]

[Skills: Locked]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!)]

[The requirement to unlock 'Skills' is to have earned a slotted skill.]

[You have sufficient requirements to unlock Skills. Unlock Skills now? Y/N]

She noted that her 'Power' had gone up slightly, whatever that meant. She pressed the 'Yes' button and the status screen blinked, then shrank into nothing before a new one popped up in its place.

[Class: None]

[Skill Slots: 2]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank E), Stealth (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank E) (Activated), Mana Manipulation (Rank E)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank C) (Activated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank E), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B)]

Her highest skills were in talking, reading, and writing. Great. That was probably why she perceived everyone as speaking English, but none of them were really going to be helpful in her current situation. Was that because she was a college student?

Where were her ‘wake-up-quick-or-be-late-for-class,’ or ‘survival-cooking-with-ramen!’ skillsets? Granted, she didn’t really expect those to be skills, but what she had received seemed sparse. Surely she had more talents from the real world that should have translated over?

Real world.

Elania hugged her knees and felt a pinch of panic threaten her. What had just happened was real. If she was going to not die, she couldn’t treat this as a game, even if the world resembled something like one.

Four skills stood out to her: **[Demonic Aura]**, **[Mana Manipulation]**, **[Darkvision]**, and **[Identify]** seemed like her basic skills. The first three were likely related to her stated race of Lesser Demon. **[Demonic Aura]** and **[Darkvision]** appeared to be toggleable, but she didn’t remember ever turning them on.

[Darkvision] at least explained her ability to see in the dark.

Elania cleared her throat, a hoarse croak disturbing the silence. Biting her lip, she decided to try to test things out. “Demonic Aura, Deactivate!”

The noise of her voice made her wince. The sound echoed around the chamber chaotically, and she realized just how the sound seemed to permeate the caverns. When the echoes finally died, she realized it was sort of a bad idea to broadcast her presence.

To top it off, nothing actually happened. The **[Demonic Aura]** skill remained active. Her cheeks heated in embarrassment. Had she really just acted like some Shonen manga character, trying to toggle their skill?

She tried to focus her mind on turning it off, but that didn’t work either.

[Demonic Aura (Activated)]

Somehow, she was doing it wrong. The cultists had been chanting something to use their magic. Maybe she needed to do so as well? Except she had no spell book or manual

on what to chant, so that'd be a non-starter. Did all the skills and magic follow the same set of rules even?

A sense of defeat washed over her, and she rested her forehead on her knees. She hadn't cried from the shock and fear of the events yet, but now it seemed to catch up to her all at once. Her eyes began to water then stream.

She just wanted to go home.

CHAPTER 4—CONFLAGRATION

Time lost its meaning in the dark.

Eventually, Elania nodded off for a nap. Eventually, consciousness slowly returned.

Submerged in the murky depths of her refuge, her tear-streaked face reflected palely in the dim light as she scanned her surroundings, taking stock of her situation.

The absence of the luminescent moss plunged the caverns into semi-darkness, leaving only a few glowing fungi to cast their muted violet hues on the stone walls. The secluded rocky chamber she had hidden in was cloaked in even darker shadow, absent the nearly ever-present moss.

A pang of hunger gnawed at her empty stomach, and she studied the fungi with a reluctant curiosity. Maybe they were edible? The idea of munching on raw mushrooms wasn't very appealing, but if she found nothing else, she would eventually have to consider it.

That would come with the risk of toxins or something that could make her sick or worse...and this wasn't a biology test at her university where a mistake would mean a bad grade—here, errors could cost her life.

She shook the fatal thoughts away and then considered a more pressing need: water. The presence of vegetation suggested moisture must exist somewhere nearby. Maybe an underground stream or pool that fed the ecosystem? She'd not seen any dripping water from above, but the moss needed something for it to grow, and while the air wasn't exactly dry, she didn't think it was humid enough for the water vapor to be the sole source of water.

Searching for that would mean resuming her trek. She shifted position and stretched her legs, but her entire body felt stiff from remaining stationary for so long. The various bruises and injuries she'd suffered didn't help either, and there was a familiar soreness in her muscles from the earnest exercise of running away from the cultists and knight.

A hard lump pressed against her side, and she reached into her stolen robe to pull it out. It was the glowing stone she'd picked up and knocked the cultist out with. She had to squint as the burst of bright light filled up the small chamber—revealing a vivid array of colors that had been muted in the darkness. Holding onto it sparked a strange sensation, like soft vibrations pulsating rhythmically under her fingertips.

She scrutinized the crystal further with a growing fascination. She wished she knew what it was.

A small status screen with text appeared over the crystal as if summoned.

[Mana Shard (Condensed)]

Elania blinked in astonishment. The system had answered her! Was this her **[Identify]** skill at work?

She hadn't called for the skill by name, or even been thinking about it. She'd just wanted to know what the mana shard was. Even if the information was lacking, maybe that was because it was Rank E?

She pulled out her dagger from her other pocket and repeated the process. She wasn't disappointed.

[Steel Dagger]

It worked! Not super helpful, but at least it was a start. She turned her attention toward anything she could find.

[Glow Moss (Inactive)]

[Black Robe]

[Rock]

[Fencia's Fungal Growth]

The last surprised her a little. The purple-hued mushrooms had a proper name she had never heard before. That told her the skill didn't just name something generic based on her own knowledge. It was providing her with answers she didn't already know!

She wondered if ranking up the skill would increase the information and add descriptions, but she wasn't sure how or even if she could level it up. In most games, she knew, one typically enhanced their abilities through repeated use—but was that logic applicable here?

Her level had increased, potentially from when she had defeated the cultist. A frown creased her face. Or killed him? She shook her head; she didn't think she hit him that hard. Maybe it was an effect from using the crystal as a weapon?

She just didn't have enough information on how things worked.

[Mana Manipulation] was another skill she needed to figure out. Everyone knew that in RPGs, magic was usually overpowered, and if she could somehow use it to conjure food or water, that would solve her current problems.

The flip-side was that magic was probably dangerous. At the very least it was weaponized in this world, considering what she'd seen the cultists doing with it.

Maybe she could use the skill like she had **[Identify]** and just think about what she wanted?

She closed her eyes and pictured a jar of clean water and a sandwich as hard as she could. After a minute of trying, she cracked an eye open to look at the bare ground in front of her. No dice.

Well, that would have been too easy.

The sparkling white light of the mana shard caught her attention. Maybe **[Mana Manipulation]** went with **[Mana Shard]**? She picked it up and held it up in both hands and closed her eyes in concentration. She just wished something—anything—would happen, but there was a frustrating silence of nothingness.

Maybe she needed a stronger intent, a clearer visualization of what she wanted to achieve? Shifting her thoughts, Elania imagined guiding the light from the crystal into her hands and up her arms and away from her palms. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then there was a slight fluctuation, and then she could feel an almost imperceptible shift in the energy flow.

It felt like fire flowing through her veins. It didn't exactly burn, but it was unpleasant, and she dropped the crystal, fearing that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Worse, the weird sensation of tingling in her hands didn't dissipate. A sheen of perspiration formed on her forehead, and she realized she was burning up. She shook her hands in a panic and tried to push away the energy.

There was a tangible resistance for a second before it suddenly relented—releasing a sudden surge of heat from her hands, which caused her to yelp and recoil as if she'd been stung by a bee. A shower of sparks flared to life, flaring out in front of her, each one a tiny firefly that seemed to dance in the air.

Most of them painted dim white trails that gradually deepened to an incandescent yellow-orange before fading into oblivion.

A few survived long enough to land on the floor.

One defied gravity and weaved its way up to the ceiling, where it landed on the inactive glow moss.

She watched with growing horror as the dim spark began to grow brighter and then began to spread.

The moss was flammable!

What had she done? Before she could get up and try to smother the fire with her spare robe, white tendrils began to spread rapidly before self-igniting.

She scooped up her few belongings and rushed for the exit. That proved a smart choice because the chamber behind her suddenly flared red, the fire growing fast. The moss in the transition corridors between the larger caverns wasn't that thick, but that didn't stop it from spreading across the ceiling.

Wildfire seemed like a poor description. This was much worse. Her feet stung painfully as she barely reached the nearest cavern before the fire. At least there would be more space, even if there was also more moss to burn.

It felt like she was starring in one of those stupid volcano b-movies.

The conflagration was relentless, matching Elania's frenzied pace as she fled deeper into the cavern. She could feel the heat licking at her back, and the bright incandescent light of the inferno cast elongated shadows that danced ahead of her like specters on a rampage.

She huffed as she pushed herself to go faster along the rocky path at the expense of her battered feet. She made it to the next cavern with barely any time to spare.

The spread slowed slightly at the intersections, but quickly picked up its pace as soon as it made it through. It quickly became clear that while her endurance was limited, the spread of the wildfire was not going to stop as long as there was fresh moss to burn.

What exactly was causing the moss to burn so crazily? Was it some type of natural chemical in the moss, or was it just super dry and ready to burn?

She reached another three-way intersection and froze. A faint luminescence was growing brighter—in both directions! She didn't think she had doubled back, which meant the moss had somehow found a shorter route and cut her off!

She glanced over her shoulder and noted that the inferno behind her was rapidly approaching. There wasn't any unscorched path left for her. A fiery death trap awaited her in every direction.

“That’s just perfect!” Elania muttered sarcastically to herself. “A hidden door right about now would be really helpful,” she called out aloud, half-expecting some divine intervention; none came.

The intersection had less moss, and more importantly, the ceiling wasn’t that high. An idea popped into her head, and she jumped up and grabbed the stringy moss. It came down with her in a thick heap, peeling away from the ceiling. That was a much better result than she had thought she’d get and she began to strip a circle around the center of the chamber.

She only had a few minutes to work with, but she cleared an area twice her arm span in diameter before huddling in the center. None of her skills seemed suited to helping her more than that, so she pulled the spare robes she’d gathered over her head and hunkered down. Flames raced around the edges and flashed past her. The heat radiated and filled the space, sparks and flames licking at her despite her attempts to make a safe space.

The robes seemed fire-resistant though and didn’t ignite. That was nice.

The heat that bathed her like she was in an oven was less so. A string of moss ash landed on her unprotected hand, causing her to hiss in pain. She yanked it under the robe protectively and pulled the extra fabric tighter. Hopefully, nothing larger would blow on her.

The flames began to calm, the raging heat slowly replaced by a cloud of smoke. Panic gripped her as she realized that burning might be the least of her worries. If the fire consumed too much oxygen, or the caverns filled with unbreathable smoke, she wasn’t going to make it.

How had the fire looped around to get in front of her? Did the caverns go in circles? Was she really making progress, getting away from the cultist dungeon?

Every doubt and worry washed over her, warring with the pain and oppressive heat as she covered her face with the robes, creating a little bubble of air for herself.

A system message suddenly appeared, stealing her attention.

[Sufficient [Glow Moss] essence is available.]

[You have met the requirements for Ash Demon evolution.]

[Do you wish to evolve your race to Ash Demon? Y/N]

CHAPTER 5—STAIRS

The choice to evolve into an Ash Demon or not hung in the air, taunting her for over a minute. If this was a monster evolution game, then ‘evolving’ might make her stronger. Maybe even better suited for the hellish landscape that remained after the massive fire that she’d accidentally started.

Despite all the game-like system messages that floated in the air, nothing said that any of her choices were a ‘game,’ though.

Ash rained down slowly from the ceiling, and the radiant heat felt like it would bake her skin with its unrelenting oppressiveness. That was one vote for accepting the evolution, but she had no idea just what becoming an Ash Demon or evolution entailed.

Things were bad enough that the **[System]** called her a Lesser Demon already.

Ultimately, she swiped the message away. She didn’t want to risk becoming a mindless monster.

She was quite happy with just being normal Elania, a hapless college student who had somehow been summoned to a weird-ass world and wanted to go home. Changing her race might help her in the current circumstances, but her experimentation had already produced one catastrophe.

Until she learned more, she didn’t think it was wise to jump into potentially irreversible things.

Smoke continued to thicken as the active fires burned themselves out into smoldering remains. Most of it swirled around the ceiling, pooling in a thick cloud. Elania pulled out her mana shard for a bit of extra light because the smoke was hampering her **[Dark-vision]**. It helped slightly, but it highlighted the immediate need to look for a more hospitable location.

Pressing forward through the chamber, she did her best to avoid any visible hot spots on the ground to spare her feet from burns. It made the trek even more challenging, and the burning in her throat from the scorched air had her worrying about suffocating. If that was true, though, she expected she would have already passed out earlier.

As it was, it was just extremely uncomfortable. Painful.

When she reached the choke point to the next chamber, she paused and made a small rock pile. She wasn't exactly sure, but all the chambers looked much alike, and she wanted to determine if she really had been going in circles like she had feared earlier.

Several more passages went by, the ash and soot in the air raining down on her like snow. The thick cloud of smoke above her head had lowered dangerously until the air quality at the height of her head was bad enough that it forced her to crouch while walking. Frustration and panic gnawed at her as she continued desperately to look for a way out.

[Your natural resistance to poison-based effects has increased!]

Elania froze in her tracks and frowned. "Why?" she whispered, looking around for some type of poison. The sudden break highlighted how her entire body ached painfully. She wasn't sure what felt worse: her stinging feet, the rapidly coloring bruises from the battle, or her eyes and lungs that burned and watered from the smoke-filled air.

The idea that the poison could easily be held in the tainted air hit her. She covered her mouth with the black robe. Maybe she had been breathing the poison in?

Carbon monoxide was the obvious choice, but there were a whole host of things that the fire could have released, not even considering the world's weird fantasy-esque nature.

There seemed to still be oxygen, though, and she'd traveled through several chambers, at least a few kilometers, so why hadn't she fallen over dead?

Elania picked up her pace and continued forward, looking for some change or something new to help her.

She almost missed it.

A weak but noticeable breeze of cooler air pressed against her side. She didn't spot anything that could be the source, but cooler air had to be coming from somewhere, right? Instead of going for the exit to the next chamber, she turned straight into the breeze. It led directly to the side-wall of the cavern, and behind a row of rocks, a small, human-sized cubby-hole was hidden.

What riveted her attention, though, was that there were stairs. Ancient-looking, worn stairs that had crumbled in some places—but definitely stairs, carved right into the flank

of the cavern. They were the source of the cooler air, which was creating a clean pocket around them as the airflow pushed away the smoke.

It was the first sign of anything artificial in the 'natural' cave system she'd been exploring since leaving the cultist's dungeon lair.

The air was clearly coming from somewhere, and she took a hesitant first step. Her first step didn't crack or collapse the stone under her weight, and she immediately began to trudge upward. The floor was cool to the soles of her feet, and she enjoyed the refreshing feeling as she closed her eyes to let the air blow over her face.

The constant cool breeze was a welcome change from the charred cavern she left behind. Continuing upwards, she held the mana shard up above her head, which created pretty sparkles that revealed etchings in the stonework near the ceiling.

That might have been something to create hesitation; dealing with magic was firmly in her 'let's not fuck around with things we don't understand' category after sparking the glow moss into a conflagration, but...

Really, she didn't want to trudge around the burnt remains she'd left behind, and the air had to be coming from somewhere more hospitable than the area she was leaving behind.

The second scary thought was that stairs meant people, and while it was hard to imagine that whoever she might meet would be worse than the cultists or holy knight... it wasn't impossible. She had no idea on what the ratio of batshit crazy and well-adjusted was in 'Eladu' or wherever the heck she was. Worse, what if there was an actual monster?

Inside her robe pocket, she squeezed the hilt of the stolen dagger for reassurance. She'd just have to do her best.

The spiraling stairs seemed to go on forever, and in several spots, she found they had crumbled, forcing her to climb over the rubble to continue. It was a new form of endurance workout that was more challenging than the one below. By the time she reached the first landing, her legs felt like jelly.

Glancing back the way she had come, the thought of the staircase being a major building code violation made her giggle. She'd climbed the equivalent of what had to have been thirty or forty floors. If someone slipped and fell, they'd roll a very long way before coming to a stop.

The stone landing wasn't very large, a second staircase led upward, and there was an opening where, presumably, there might have been a door at one time. Exploring the

room led to a second and third, and she decided to stop and rest before trying to climb higher.

The burning of her lungs and eyes had stopped, but everything else was painful. There was a raised block that was well suited as a bench in the chamber farthest away from the stairs and she sat down on it heavily. Other than the block, there wasn't anything but rubble and broken stones.

Her feet burned in protest of her long march. They had been sore before, but now they were bad. She pulled a foot up to examine it, shining the mana shard with her free hand. They were covered in grime, ashes, and blood.

Pulling out her dagger, she cut a few strips of cloth from the less singed end of one of her spare cultist robes and did her best to wipe them down. It wasn't very effective without water, but it was something.

The thought of water sent a slight panic through her. She had had nothing to drink or eat since she'd arrived, but it had been at least a day since she escaped. You couldn't live long without water, but... licking her lips, she didn't feel parched. As soon as she'd left the burnt area below, the parched feeling in her mouth and throat had gone away.

While she wasn't an expert, she didn't feel dehydrated, and her hunger had disappeared. It was strange enough that she wasn't even sure if she needed to eat or drink anymore. That just left her feeling confused and wearier.

She leaned back against the cool stone wall and let out a sigh. It was hard to fight against the exhaustion that filled her.

Taking a deep breath, she sat back up and eyed the cut robe. She took the dagger and carefully sliced it into one long spiraling strip. Cutting that into three equal length strips gave her three pieces to work with.

She wrapped one around each of her feet, starting at the base of her toes and then working her way up to her ankle to tie it off. Just tight enough to not come loose, but not so tight that they cut off circulation. The third one went around her chest to support her breasts.

All the running around naked had been distinctly uncomfortable, and wrapping something around her feet was something she should have considered and done far earlier.

[Survival Crafting Rank E has been unlocked and slotted.]

Another skill. What was the trick to unlocking them? Where was her hiking or climbing skill? Certainly she deserved it?

A simple thought brought up her status screen.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 5 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 47/100]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!)]

She immediately noticed that mention of 'Skills' had disappeared, and that her 'Power' stat had skyrocketed. She wasn't sure what that meant, but it didn't seem like she had Health Points.

That left power representing her mana? Because if it was HP, the way she felt indicated she should have been losing them, not gaining.

Stretching caused her to wince, and she didn't want to think about what was going to happen to her in the next few days. There was no way she'd escape an entire body of sore muscles.

A way to convert power into healing would have been really nice.

What about her skills? As soon as the thought came, a second screen appeared to join the first.

[Class: Escapee]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank E), Stealth (Rank E), Survival Crafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank E) (Activated), Mana Manipulation (Rank E)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank C) (Activated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank E), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B)]

Her eyes widened as she took in the change to her 'class.' Escapee? She hadn't seen any notice or anything about it changing, and really, what kind of name for a class was that? What in the heck did her skills have to do with 'escapee' anyway? If anything, shouldn't it have been mage or scholar based on her skills?

Her eyes slid downward to the second bit of annoying information. The number of her skill slots had increased by one, presumably when she'd gained the **[Survival Crafting]** skill?

She didn't understand that at all. Did she just get a new slot whenever she gained a skill? Was there a way to swap them out, and if so, what effect did that have on the skill?

Elania bit her lip and studied the screen with a growing frustration. Why couldn't things be simple?

There had been a message about poison resistance increasing as well, but it wasn't listed anywhere that she could see. Wasn't the entire point of a stupid game system to show the user clear indications of their abilities, powers, and attributes?

Where were the simple listings for Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, or Charisma? Was the stupid **[System]** broken for her?

She let out a yawn and suddenly felt exhausted. She pocketed her dagger and the mana shard before using the last remaining robe as a pillow as she curled up on the stone bench. It wasn't comfortable at all, but she needed another nap.

A few seconds later, she was snoring in the quiet darkness.

CHAPTER 6—YOLANI

The insistent tolling of the morning bell reverberated throughout Neftasu; its rhythm as unyielding as the stone edifices that comprised the subterranean city. An audible groan escaped from Yolani as she stirred. The glint from the massive light stones hanging over the city proper invaded her room, finally forcing her to roll to the edge of her bed.

She barely managed to untangle her sheets from her legs before they caused a face-first encounter with the cool stone floor. “Stupid sheets!” she muttered in annoyance.

Given the city’s remarkably stable ambient temperature, heavy bedding was more of a luxury than a necessity. However, the sheets, with their enveloping softness, were a comfort she wasn’t willing to go without.

Despite the added difficulty they could add to her morning wake-up routine.

It was just that today was a day to hurry.

Her bedroom took up one half of the upper floor of her father’s artifice shop, and was littered with unfinished experiments, tools, and failed artifacts. Her wardrobe was hidden in the corner near the plugged fireplace that was never used, and heavy curtains blocked the ceiling height window holes that had never held glass.

Not that she minded. They were the only access ways to the balcony, and sometimes she liked to sit outside and watch the traffic go through Artisan Row. Her father’s shop was at the end of the way and had a commanding view of most of the district.

Yolani stopped in front of her dresser mirror. It was the neatest flat surface in the room, but that wasn’t saying much. She grabbed her wood comb, one of the few pieces of wood in the entire building, and ran it through her long black hair a few times. It was mostly

enough to tame her bedhead, but she'd failed to wake up before the bell and she needed to hurry.

Her father was counting on her to make it to the mana shard auction and get what they needed to finish the project for the magisters. They had paid up front for the project, so funds for a shard weren't a problem, they just needed one the right size at the auction.

Dressing for a day out in the city required practicality above all else, and Yolani was no stranger to the city's demands. She slipped into her trousers—a set of durable Ralfot leather that had seen better days but held up well against the rigors of an active artificer's life. Her boots were made of a sturdier leather and had been recently cleaned and polished. It took a moment to work the many laces, but she'd never go out without the protective footwear.

Her blouse was a simple white affair, linen tailored to stretch enough to retain her mobility while also being breathable and temperature regulating. The crowning piece was, of course, her Artifice jacket—functional as it was stylish. Her father had gifted it to her on her 18th birthday, and it was made from the skin of an Alpha Rock Snake. Sporting a dozen pockets of various sizes that could hold anything, a set of loops would make carrying any needed tools a handless endeavor.

She slipped her standard carrying pouch's shoulder band over her head and tied its leather security tie to her belt. Her artificer wand went on her other hip, attached by a steel chain. The gold pouch her father had entrusted her jingled satisfyingly as it went into the pouch. She thumbed the lock, and it flared briefly as the magic sealed the contents against even the city's best pickpocket.

Yolani eyed her goggles—as crucial as they were for any Artificer worth their salt—they weren't something she'd wear if she didn't want to be laughed at outside the district. She left them on the table. It wasn't like she was going to work on an engine or something today. She was going to the Syndicate's auction house.

The scent of oil and metal filled the air as she headed down the shop's stain stairwell; echoes of clinking tools greeted her as she entered the workshop. Her father was hard at work replacing the magical transducer of one of the mammoth light stones that decorated the city cavern's ceiling. It dwarfed the man, and the amount of effort required to bring one down was just as great as the skill required to repair it.

Which was why he'd taken on the lucrative contract. They had everything needed for it, minus a mana shard which would power the contraption for another decade. The tinkering paused, and he lifted his goggles to look over his shoulder.

“Off so late?” He chided lightly, standing up and brushing off his hands.

A smile appeared on her face, and she raised her chin slightly, capturing a loose strand of her hair and sliding it behind her ear. “Don’t fret! Henri is supposed to walk with me over there.”

The mention of Henri raised an eyebrow. “You know what they say about boys,” her father began, his teasing belying the caution in his eyes. The hug he wrapped around her seemed just a bit overprotective, too.

Yolani rolled her eyes at the parental concern. This wasn’t a new conversation; it was one she’d heard many times before. Henri had been accepted as one of the members of the city guard and had grown up in the Artisan Dis’ and had been her playmate since she was like...five.

“Really now,” she retorted before pulling away, heading for the door, “He’s just Henri. He’s harmless.”

As she stepped out into the city’s artificial light, her father’s parting advice echoed in her ears, a reminder of the sort of thing you could find in Neftasu if you weren’t careful: “Just remember to keep your wits about you, especially around those Syndicate folk.”

She nodded absently, already anticipating the excitement of the auction, and securing the mana shard they needed. Yet underneath the thrill of responsibility and trust her father had laid on her was an unspoken tension. Life in Neftasu required more than just skillful artifice; it demanded a keen sense of survival and street smarts to avoid being trampled or snared by the schemes of those looking to get ahead.

The gentle hum of scattered morning conversation greeted her as she headed down the street. Artificer Row, with its orderly array of workshops, boutiques, and middle-class residences, lay before her. The air was filled with quiet anticipation of the day’s potential—of creations yet to be brought to life and deals yet to be struck.

As she passed by Master Artificer Ranolf’s shop, an apprentice opened the door and swapped the sign to open and Yolani waved and smiled. He waved back, blushing furiously, before disappearing inside. She had no idea why the boys were so easy to tease, but it probably had to do with her being the only female artificer apprentice that lived in the row.

There were plenty of female artisans, but artifice wasn’t a popular profession for them. Yolani had no idea why, but it was likely the frequency one became covered in machine oil. It was hard on the hair unless you took good care of it later.

A cart laden with supplies bobbed its way in the opposite direction, pulled by stalwart looking white Ralfots. She gave the teamsters a wide berth and linked up with a mercenary she recognized going in the same direction.

The middle-aged man gave her a suspicious look. “Yolani, where are you going?”

“Just to the gate, then the Syndicate auction.” She gave him a disarming smile and then he nodded.

The truth was the protection wasn’t really necessary. The Artisan District, and Artificer’s Row especially, were comparatively safe areas in the city. Probably second only to the Noble’s District or the Guard’s Fortress. But it was always good to stay on friendly terms with the guards.

The only problem was she had forgotten the man’s name... if she’d ever known it. “You don’t have a wife or girlfriend now, do you?” The mercenary group wasn’t known for attachment, so it was a pretty safe assumption.

He blinked at her, then shook his head. “N...no.”

That was exactly the reaction she was looking for and she carefully slid up to him, then linked her arm under his. “Great!”

He turned beet red for a few minutes, but by the time they reached the main entry point to Artificer Row, he’d returned to normal. She spotted Henri talking to one of the sergeants of the mercenary troop that maintained the security of the neighborhood. He was one of the ones she liked: Sergeant Harlock.

The older man noticed them first. “Lucas, what did I say about running off with the local girls?”

Yolani laughed and released her escort. “He was just being chivalrous.”

Her childhood friend’s eyes lit up when they found hers, but that attracted the attention of the mercenaries nearby who said something that made Henri sputter. Yolani gave him a smile, and he straightened and tidied his uniform’s tunic.

The guard outfit was a fusion between functional armor and the city guard’s regalia, neatly worn and polished like was required by the very finicky guard captains. The white and red was a vibrant contrast against the mercenary guard’s drab brown and dark gray, making him stand out. That was the point though, the city guard always wanted to stand out.

It was better because no one would make the mistake of hassling them.

Yolani moved to reattach herself, this time to Henri’s side. “Hii. Thanks for agreeing to go with me. You know how it is.”

The mercenaries nearby all let out a unified laugh, causing Henri to blush fiercely. Something crass or vulgar, she had no doubt.

“Always making me wait,” he teased lightly.

She hugged his arm a little tighter and offered him a smile and a wink. “I did a good job not oversleeping.”

Sergeant Harlock laughed, “Taking your girlfriend shopping now, eh?”

A flush crept onto her cheeks, but when Yolani looked up to Henri, he had outdone her, turning from red to a deep scarlet. She rolled her eyes. “Ignore them,” she advised breezily before turning her attention back to the mercenaries. “You lot better mind your manners!”

The Sergeant’s grin nearly filled his face. “Aye, aye, princess. We’ll see that your kingdom isn’t disturbed, ye papa, and the other artificers pay us well enough for it.”

She let out an annoyed sound and tugged Henri away and out into the Artisan District proper.

“Leave it to you to make their day, Yolani,” Henri chuckled. He followed her lead further into the city, which quickly became much more crowded.

The Artisan district was where the craftsmen class lived and did their work, so a litany of forges hammering away filled the streets. Other jobs, such as plate fabricators, textile mills, and every other artisan craft one could conceive of were hidden away in the labyrinth of branded rows and ways, each dedicated to its own craft.

They fell into a comfortable but quiet stride as they made their way to the next district, which wasn’t too far. She was preoccupied with thinking about the upcoming auction, and Henri didn’t make his thoughts known to her.

As they made their way to the Central Market, the atmosphere turned electric. Street vendors haggled with customers over supposed artifacts, street performers dazzled crowds with their enchantments, and orphans darted between the stalls either participating in games or mischief. The kaleidoscope of color from the foreigners that called the market home painted the area vibrant shades of colors that weren’t at all common throughout the rest of the city.

She turned them toward the next district, only for Henri to resist and pull them to a stop. She raised an eyebrow at him. “What?”

He looked at her accusingly. “Where are you going?”

“Henri,” she started hesitantly, “we should cut through Mercenary District...It’ll be quicker.”

He tensed beside her. The Mercenary District wasn't exactly known for its safety. Actually, it served as the city's slum, and anyone that went into it without a certain amount of wariness was liable to not come back out at all. She could tell his protective instincts had kicked in immediately.

"And risk running into trouble? The route through the Conclave district might be longer, but it's safer..." He frowned as his words trailed off.

"But we're already cutting it close, and I can't be late," Yolani argued back. "Besides, I can handle myself."

She pulled away and patted her artifice wand. It was fully charged. "Guess whose **[Mana Manipulation]** and **[Aether Manipulation]** both just hit Rank B?" She grinned wickedly.

He shook his head. "That's pretty good, but mage craft doesn't make you invulnerable, Yolani."

She frowned. "I'm an adult. I don't need permission to go that way."

There was a tense moment between them, with her daring him to try to stop her. The moment she saw defeat cross his face, she spoke first. "I'll not only feel a lot safer, but will be with you as an escort."

He sighed. "Alright, alright. You win. Your father would kill me if he knew I let you go alone."

Yolani went on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you!"

Somewhat predictably, he turned a shade of red again, eliciting a giggle.

CHAPTER 7 – HIGHEST BIDDER

The light-hearted banter died as they crossed the threshold into the Mercenary District. A half dozen other guardsmen nodded to Henri as they passed by. Traffic flowed freely between the market and the district, but only under the watchful eye of the authorities. If someone wasn't dressed the part and tried to pass into one of the other, higher districts, there would be questions.

Yolani frowned as she took in the stark contrast to the orderly chaos of Artisan Row. They didn't make it two streets before evidence of poverty and sick inhabitants sitting homeless on the sides of the street came into view. Desperate eyes scrutinized her and Henri's every move with a predatory gleam.

She tugged her jacket tighter around her, suddenly conscious of how her outfit screamed 'wealthy artificer.' She checked her wand for easy access, just in case there was some trouble.

Playing [**Advanced Identify**] over those they passed by, she kept note of the few who had higher levels. She didn't want to slot the skill, so the information was just basic, but the class titles gave her a good approximation and idea of what they were about.

[**Struggling Artisan – Human – Lvl 25**]

[**Wandering Minstrel – Human – Lvl 28**]

[**Silent Observer – Human – Lvl 49**]

[**Orphan – Human – Lvl 7**]

[**Unemployed – Human – Lvl 32**]

[**Thug – Human – Lvl 27**]

[**Beggar – Human – Lvl 19**]

Most were of lower level and had probably never ventured outside of the city. That wasn't to say much. Someone's skill ranks mattered much more than their class or level. Any of them could have a S rank skill that was dangerous, and she kept an eye out for anyone getting too close.

Henri was similarly vigilant, but one thing she was thankful for was his uniform. No one in the city messed with the guard. Even the gangs and thugs that ran the Mercenary District didn't want a swarm of them descending on the location to knock heads. And one thing every guard had was an instant line of communication with the primary guardhouse and the ability to relay their position to each other.

"Do you remember when we snuck out here as kids?" Yolani asked, side-stepping a puddle in their path.

Henri grunted at the memory, despite himself. "How could I forget? We were nearly pick-pocketed by that gnome."

"Yeah, but who chased him down and got your apple back?"

"You did," he admitted begrudgingly. "But I remember holding onto him until he gave up your coin pouch."

Several times she spotted small groups standing at the entrance to an alley or other side-street, eyeing them with glares. No one bothered or approached them though, and by the time they made it to the Dungeon District, Yolani let out a sigh of relief.

Henri looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "You're the one that wanted to go that way."

"Yes, yes. Thank you for the escort, again." Yolani replied quickly.

The guards at the gate into the other district were in the middle of swapping out with their compatriots, so their presence was heavy. The Syndicate uniforms were mostly gray cloth wraps with red tasseled caps, all of it hiding what she suspected was chain or leather armor underneath.

They were mostly foreigners. The Syndicate was a multi-national group that was spread all over Eladu, at least on the western continent. They had a lot less presence in the Underworld, and Neftasu, by relation, but they were still a force to be reckoned with. The city's nobility and ruling council didn't take kindly to outside influences, as far as she was aware of the city-state's politics.

Still, they were very useful and many of the more important imports, like hardwood and surface foods, would have been impossible without the well-guarded and maintained caravan routes to the Overworld that they maintained.

Yolani gave Henri a smile. "We made it, though. All fine."

He shot her with an admonishing look, but it bounced off. “Just because nothing happened doesn’t mean it couldn’t have,” he grumbled.

The auction house wasn’t that far into the district, and while it had elevated security, it wasn’t anything like the dwerven dungeon that ran deep underneath the city. When they reached the pavilion just outside the large stone building, she stopped and turned toward him.

“I don’t want to take up your entire day, and I’ve no idea how long the auction will actually be. I’ll head back through the conclave, so you don’t have to worry.” Yolani offered. Before he could respond, she reached up and gave him another kiss on the cheek. Maybe she was overdoing it, because somehow, he managed not to blush this time.

He still looked extremely uncomfortable, which elicited a little laugh.

“I...I’m glad to hear that. If you need any help again, just send a message.” Henri stammered.

She nodded and headed into the thin crowd outside the auction house, stopping and waving goodbye after a short distance. There was always a crowd of people to watch the auction, but most of them weren’t actual participants. She headed to a small, non-descript side entrance. A guard stationed there frowned and raised his hand, halting her.

“Stop,” he ordered before gesturing to the two main doors that were propped open. “Public entrance is over there.”

“I know. I’m a participant,” she replied, fetching a small pendant out of her tool bag. The piece of jewelry had the Syndicate’s sigil engraved on its silver polished surface and the man stood up straighter and took it from her. He pulled out a small wand and waved it over the metal, causing a small blue glow to emanate from the engraving’s grooves.

Yolani smiled; she made engravings like that all the time. They were even fun, at least when someone wasn’t posting an order for a thousand of them.

He nodded, then handed it back to her. “Sorry, Ma’am. Can’t be lax about the security.”

She nodded, and he opened the door and let her in. The atmosphere inside was radically different, and as the door shut behind her, the sounds of the city were muted. The stone environment was plastered with fabric tapestries that provided a lived-in warmth to the large building, and the burgundy carpets and dimmer lighting made the place feel...arcane.

Making her way down the hall and to the auction chamber, she found she was very late. Nearly all the seats had been taken, and she had to accept a standing position near

the back of the hall. It wasn't usual that things were so packed. The bench seating for the public was on the second level, and it was similarly packed.

A few seconds after she settled in, the flamboyantly dressed auctioneer arrived on the main stage under the glow of multiple light spells, illuminating him and two men who carried a square pedestal with a cloth covering hiding a valuable item underneath. An expectant hush fell over the room as everyone's attention focused on both the man and the hidden good he would present.

From monster cores glowing with residual energy, to peculiar-looking artefacts harvested from deep within Neftasu's labyrinthine dwerfen dungeon, all the items that would be presented held potential value for the different bidders that had assembled.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, his arms sweeping wide in a grand gesture. "Today, we have gathered for an exclusive collection of items harvested from our very own labyrinthine dungeon beneath Neftasu."

As he spoke, the two attendants unveiled the first item up for bidding. Yolani immediately recognized the large, glowing orb as a high-quality monster core. The residual energy pulsed visibly, proof of its potential use as a catalyst.

Yet she wasn't interested in it. It was a Drake Core, which was perfect if someone wanted to make an artifice forge or other source of heat, but that wasn't what she was looking for.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, before you is an exceptionally high quality Drake Core, harvested from an Elder Fire Drake. The heat that it can channel when properly crafted will be unmatched! Let the bidding start at five small golds!"

A hand shot up almost instantly, taking the offer only to be outbid immediately—the value incrementally increasing as bids went flying until it was finally sold off for five large golds. It was an exceptionally large amount for a monster core considering that it would need a lot of artifice work to be useful, but if the auctioneer had been honest about its quality, then it was likely worth it to someone running an industrial forge or smithy.

Next came a pair of enchanted obsidian daggers, which went for even more. A strange map with glowing sigils detailed the insides of the upper floors of the dwerfen ruins and went for ten large golds. None of it was what she was interested in. After the fifth item, she began to feel anxious. Normally the auctions were filled with mana shards, the most common item sold, but so far there had been none.

The efficient Syndicate members ran the proceedings smoothly, but she could tell that there was an undercurrent of confusion throughout the crowd. It wasn't just her that was

after the mana shards. Ten items went, then fifteen. Bidding slowed and eagerness died as anticipation for some explanation for the lack of mana shards built.

The sixteenth item nearly caught her attention. It was a loaded artificer wand with built in defensive auras that were self-powered by the user's own mana. That was rare for artifacts—most of them required mana shards to empower and direct conversion of human mana to artifice power was nearly impossible.

She wanted it just so she could take it apart and figure out how it worked. Yet getting the mana shard for the light stone project was critical and she held back. The wand went for a single large gold, which was a stupid steal, considering how awesome it was.

As it was carried off the stage, no new item arrived, and the auctioneer cleared his throat, creating an expectant silence throughout the room once again.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I'm sure you've noticed by now, but the Syndicate is afraid to inform you that today's auction is dry of mana shards. Fear not, however, for we have one high-quality shard available for bidding today. It is likely to be the only one for the rest of the month due to supply difficulties.” As soon as the man was finished with his announcement, an uproar from the bidders exploded.

Yolani tried to hammer down her own panic while guards bristled and stood resolute against the outrage. Most of those assembled for bidding were higher middle class, or even a few nobles, so she doubted the guards wanted trouble with them.

When the auctioneer cleared his throat, they finally quieted down, his voice slicing through the room. “Due to supply issues in the dungeon,” he began, his tone apologetic yet firm, “there is but one mana shard for this week's auction.”

He reached out and removed the cloth covering the mana shard. Yolani activated her **[Advanced Identify]** skill and peered at it closely.

[Mana Shard (Condensed) 888/888]

It was a mid-grade stone, and probably the lowest quality and lowest power level that they could get away with for the light stone project. That seemed lucky. It was larger than normal, and wouldn't even fit in her pocket, so that was annoying, but once installed, that wouldn't likely matter much for her application.

“Let us start the bidding, then. Keep in mind that this is likely the last stone the auction will see for some time! Let's start with one large gold!” The auctioneer's enthusiasm was the polar opposite of dread filling Yolani's stomach.

A large gold? The mana shard shouldn't have gone for more than several small golds! She raised her hand in a panic. Still, she had come well prepared, and her father had entrusted her with forty small golds in her pouch. "One large and five small golds!"

"Two large golds!"

Yolani eyed her opponent with a panic, but before she could bid again, someone else shouted another bid.

"Three large golds!"

She raised her hand again. "Four large gold!" That was everything she had.

A second later she felt like doom had arrived. "Five large golds!"

If she had a seat, she would have sat down. What was she supposed to do? The Syndicate was the only source of mana shards, and if they weren't available, then the project would be a failure. Her father's entire shop could be at risk, depending on what penalties the contract stipulated.

The bidding continued all the way up to fifteen large golds. It was a preposterous sum; she'd bought a stone of much higher quality for a tenth of that price just a week earlier!

The auction was promptly brought to a close, which hammered just how astray things had gone. The entire city ran on mana shards, if there was a massive shortage like the auctioneer alluded to, there would be trouble. Rather than give up hope and panic, Yolani turned and headed out. She wasn't sure how widespread the news was, yet.

It was the first time she had heard of a shortage, but she suspected that after today's auction that news would run wild. But maybe if she hurried, she could find someone still offering one for sale.

She knew just the place, as much as she hated the shopkeepers there: the noble district's 'artificers' who sold marked up artifacts and artifices for highly marked up prices to the nobility who cared more for what was in vogue than function.

She noticed others leaving quickly as well. That added a spring to her step.

They probably had the same idea.

The knowledge of the mana shard shortage was going to spread like wildfire.

CHAPTER 8 – DESPERATE MEASURES

Morning had ended and the light stones overhead had reached their maximum intensity as set by the city's day and night cycle. The Noble's District straddled the line between the Conclave District and Mercenary District, not too far from the City Guard's fortress and the Artisan District. There weren't any direct access ways from the poorer slums to it. A series of deep chasms acted as a moat, and the stone archways that lead over to the prestigious district were heavily guarded and watched.

Yolani took the path through the Conclave District to reach it, which meant she had to go across one of the more scenic bridges. The city's massive underground river weaved its way below, and a cascade of several waterfalls kept the bridge under a constant barrage of cool mist. People had nicknamed the bridge the 'Slip of Death' because of just how dangerous that could be.

A city janitor was hard at work scrubbing the stones down to prevent anything slimy from growing on it, but she barely had the mind to pay heed to the uncared-for sections of the walkway. The guards took in her class and outfit and decided she had business in the district, so she didn't have to stop and get a pass.

The district was highly vertical, forming an hourglass shape. Her destination, the Noble District's 'Artificer Row', was on one of the lowest mid-levels.

In her opinion, giving any of the inhabitants of the district the title of 'Artificer' was a massive stretch. As soon as she had reached the first level, the ostentatious display of wealth and power was on full display in the form of expensive mage works and artifices shining a bright spotlight on the main path; presumably illuminating any who dared approach or seek to climb the noble's personal fortress inside the city.

Care had been taken to hide the murder holes and barricades that would have turned any mob's assault or attempt to storm up the district to murder their 'betters' would have been a massacre. It was a throwback to the city's storied past and had little use in the current day and age. For sure the defenses were archaic, there would be enough people in any said mob with enough knowledge and expertise to level them quickly.

A single set of artificed cannons flinging fireball spelled shells using smoke powder would probably do the trick.

But the city's opponents and strife mostly came from the outside now.

Yolani tugged her artifice jacket closed as a shiver ran down her spine. Would a mana shard shortage threaten that?

Her legs began to burn at her pace, and by the time she reached the fifth level of the spiraling district, she'd reached her destination. A small upward slanted street curved off the main promenade, flashy shop-signs and storefronts set out to lure wealthy gentry into their doors. There were very few people out and about as she crossed under the sign the proudly proclaimed that she'd entered the "Artifice Way."

Yolani had no intention of being choosy on the shop and entered the first one. Intricate gold leaf adorned the door and display window, which hinted at rows and rows of plush velvet pillowed display cases offering a multitude of magical jewelry and other items. As soon as she crossed the threshold, there was certainly plenty of artifice on display for sale; she was sure that some of it had probably even been made in her own father's shop, purchased for reselling by the merchant that ran the store.

Summoned by the bell at the door, the shop owner appeared, but she could see the disappointment cross his face when he saw she wasn't a noblewoman.

"Do you have any many shards for sale?" Yolani asked quickly.

The man looked at her for a moment, then shook his head. "A lord was in just an hour ago who bought out my entire stock."

She thanked him and extracted herself from the shop quickly. That was not the kind of thing she had wanted to hear. As she stepped back into the street, panic washed over her as reality settled in—no mana shard meant no completion of their commissioned project on time, which would potentially lead to severe penalties. She wasn't sure what would happen to their workshop, one that she and her father had invested everything into.

The project hadn't been particularly hard, but she wanted to curse her dad for accepting something with so much risk. He should have let a larger shop like Ranolf's handle it, and they could have just continued on making smaller gadgets and toys for the rich.

An impending sense of doom filled her as she tried shop after shop with the same results as the first. Halfway through the district, she unslotted her **[Street Smarts]** and **[Artifice]** in favor of **[Crisis Management]** and **[Negotiation]**. The effects were immediate, and her panic began to subside. She should have done that earlier, but there was no use in worrying about it.

Even if it didn't result in an immediate improvement, it definitely helped her determination to go through every shop in the row. And **[Negotiation]** meant that she was treated at least a little better, even if the effects were incredibly subtle because she'd never leveled the skill much. It was still only Rank D.

Near the end of the line of artifice shops, she found one that was tucked away in a corner, partially hidden by the neighboring shop's outer décor. Despite the secluded nature of the shop, she found that there was already another patron inside, browsing the shop's displays. She hurried slightly and the skinny shopkeeper raised an eyebrow at her as she reached the shop's counter. "Can I help you, miss?"

"I'm looking for a mana shard, at least medium density. Current charge isn't an issue." Yolani replied quickly.

He looked at her and grunted before nodding. "I have one," he admitted. "But they've been selling quickly the last few days. I'm not sure when another batch will get in."

Yolani's eyes lit up instantly. "Can I examine it? I'm interested."

He nodded politely, then went to the shop's back wall and opened a built-in wall safe that was secured by a spell ward. She only had one slot cooldown free for the rest of the day but immediately swapped out **[Crisis Management]** for **[Advanced Identify]**.

The shopkeeper returned carrying a small, felt lined container. Opening it revealed a medium-sized mana shard nestled atop the soft fabric. "It won't be cheap," he warned.

"May I examine it, please?" Yolani asked. He nodded, and she reached forward to examine the stone.

She had not brought her Artifice lens, but **[Advanced Identify]** meant they weren't needed. She could clearly see the flow lines running through the stone as she peered at it closely, and as she examined its entire surface, she found no abnormalities or fractures.

[Mana Shard (Condensed)]

[Rarity: Rare]

[Density: Medium]

[Power: 985/1026]

A sigh escaped her lips as she ran her fingers over the polished crystal. It was actually a nicer specimen than the one at the auction. It was a quarter of the size and had a better storage capacity.

“I’ll take it.” She declared without hesitation, causing the shopkeeper to raise an eyebrow at her quick decision.

“The price is two large golds,” he said coolly while watching Yolani’s reaction closely.

Her **[Negotiation]** skill began to tingle across the back of her neck, urging her to haggle and get the price down, and not give away just how desperate she was for the stone. Wasn’t that the entire point of her slotting the skill, anyway? To help her negotiate?

Something bit at her, though, telling her not to listen. To get the transaction over as quickly as possible and make it back home safely.

“That’s a lot, but this suits my needs perfectly. I’ll take it.” Yolani answered quickly. She pulled out twenty of her small golds and placed them on the counter for him to count before quickly stashing the mana shard into her pouch. The shopkeeper looked annoyed at how fast she’d hidden away his merchandise, but that disappeared when he finished counting and confirming the authenticity of her gold.

“I’m surprised you didn’t haggle,” the man murmured thoughtfully.

Yolani smiled weakly at him. “I really need this stone.”

He placed the coins in the box and then walked them back to the safe while looking over his shoulder at her. “The Auction House has them much cheaper.”

“There was some problem with their supply today. My father needs the shard to complete a project before the next one.” She answered honestly. “I don’t think this one was just the last one in your shop. It might have been the last one in the entire row.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I should have charged you double then.”

The shop’s bell rang as the other patron left quietly, then the shopkeeper brought her a small slip holding the details of the transaction along with the shop’s seal.

Yolani wasn’t sure why she was suddenly being so honest. “I would have paid it.”

The man grunted and gave her the slip. “A deal’s a deal. But you should be careful on your way home. If what you say is true, there’s likely to be trouble.”

His words mirrored her earlier thoughts, and she thanked him again and headed out. There was no quick shortcut out of the Noble District that was public and she needed to go all the way back down the spiral and then through the Conclave District and back to the Artisan District. Heeding the shopkeeper’s advice, she did not dawdle.

Halfway back down, she started to feel stupid for feeling so harried.

Halfway back down, a figure emerged from a narrow alleyway ahead, blocking her path—a soldier adorned with unfamiliar livery, but clearly an armsman for some noble house. His attention was focused on her, and she skidded to a stop and turned like a startled rabbit.

CHAPTER 9—ARTIFICER'S DETERMINATION

Yolani scanned the man as she turned to bolt, a quick info card appearing informing her of his class and level.

[Bodyguard - Human – Lvl 140]

A second soldier was behind her and reached forward and grabbed her shoulder. “Going somewhere in a rush?” He asked gruffly, while grabbing the fabric of her leather jacket. His half helmet failed to hide the man’s rough features and scars, and the foulness of his breath washed over her face, filling her with a prickly anger.

[Armsman - Human – Lvl 155]

She pulled against his grasp, but his grip was strong. “Who are you? What the fuck do you want?”

She quickly glanced around; there was an alarming lack of city guards in the stairwell section, while other citizens purposefully ignored the altercation. That was so in line with the inhabitants of the city, it made her sick.

He chuckled at her but didn’t answer as a third man appeared from the alley, this one richly dressed. It wasn’t a surprise when identify revealed he was some type of noble.

[Noble - Human – Lvl 32]

The tone of the noble’s voice immediately set her on edge. “Young lady, I believe you have acquired something through vile deceit. It would be in your best interest to return it immediately.”

“I don’t have anything of yours.” Yolani hissed, then looked up at the guard holding her. “Let go of me, now.”

The guardsman laughed, and the noble continued. “Now, now. I knew I recognized you from the auction. You must be desperate to have resorted to such underhanded tactics as scamming that poor, noble shopkeeper. My servant reported you took his last shard for a tiny price.”

“I bought it from him fairly!” Yolani protested.

“Ah,” the noble waved a dismissive hand, as if swatting away her protestation like an annoying insect. “Perhaps not ‘wring’ by a base commoner standard.” He paused for dramatic effect before continuing, “But it just so happens that I need that mana shard much more than you do. So please avoid a scene and me having to order my men to beat it out of you.”

“I’m sure the city guards wouldn’t appreciate your threats.” She shot back. They were standing in broad daylight, surrounded by public witnesses. Even though all of them were still blatantly annoying the scene, probably because they recognized a noble was involved.

“My dear girl,” he said, meeting her eyes with a vile smile. “This is the Noble District; common trash like you have no rights here.”

There was a tinge of truth to his cruel words, but a Noble acting like a common thug wasn’t something that the guard was likely to ignore. That was more for the slums in the Mercenary District, where their presence was minimal. Maybe he had bribed the guards to look the other way, but there was no way they’d ignore battle.

She’d burned all her skill re-slots earlier in the day, which meant she had to use what she had on hand. Thankfully, she never unslotted her two primary skills: **[Mana Manipulation]** and **[Aether Manipulation]** and she was very confident in their usage.

Her other combat skills still counted at half affect even though they weren’t slotted, and she felt her entire body relax as she came to grips that she was not going to just give up the mana shard to this man and his thugs.

The armsman seemed to recognize the second she decided to fight back, and his hand clamped down on her shoulder painfully as he reached out to grab her other wrist.

He was too slow.

Her hand fell straight down to her wand, and she didn’t even have to point it at him to blast him with a maximum strength blast of wind.

He didn’t fly off the level like she had intended, probably using some skill to stand his ground, but he was blown back towards the edge.

The bodyguard stepped in front of his noble and raised a miniature crossbow at her and fired. This time she raised her artifice wand and deflected the projectile up toward the city cavern's ceiling with a plate of hardened Aether.

That distraction was enough to give the armsman time to draw his blade and charge. She raised her wand to meet his slash, creating an attraction between the metal and her wand tip. The two weapons collided, and the poor-quality steel in the sword vibrated for a tenth of a second before shattering into a thousand metal shards to the hilt.

Yolani directed those into the man's face and armor, and whatever defensive skill he had didn't work. His shrieks attracted the attention of a passerby, sending them screaming for the guards.

The bodyguard cocked his weapon and aimed at her again. She scoffed and used a pulse of wind to drag his companion into the path of the bolt; the metal making a wet squelch as it buried itself into the man's side. She shoved him down the slope and the men collided and went into an uncontrolled roll down the promenade.

The noble, somewhat predictably, looked utterly shocked. In a panic, he began to draw a magic sigil in the air, some type of offensive magic. As he finished his spell, he let out a shriek, "Deathly Binding!"

Calling out the name of a spell was extremely cliché, when it was so obviously not needed for the spell itself. Chains of glowing mana formed above his head, which was more concerning. They shot forward violently as he pointed at her.

She did not know what the spell actually was but her [**Mana Manipulation**] was more than high enough to pick the spell's sigils apart from afar and cause the chains to freeze mid-air and then explode down their lengths in reverse, setting the man on fire.

He screeched his way into a sprint toward the level's edge.

Several new heavily armed figures appeared from around the corner. "City Guard! Freeze!"

Yolani dropped her wand to hang on its chain, but the noble didn't listen very well and ran right off the edge, eliciting a litany of curses from the guards.

They bound her hands behind her back promptly and then forced her to sit on the street's edge. A healer helped the two soldiers, who immediately begin throwing a stream of accusations her way. When a guard finally escorted a singed but healed noble up to the investigation, all three eyes settled on her.

The noble's furious ranting about assault, theft, and conspiracy would have been more serious if his stupid hat wasn't still smoldering, at least in her opinion.

When a guard finally came to hear her side of the story, he had to haul her off to the entrance of an alley.

He glared at her, obviously already having taken a side. "Start talking."

All the waiting had given her plenty of time to recount her side of the story. It probably wasn't as good as if she'd kept **[Crisis Management]** slotted, but it wasn't the wild ravings of the noble, at least.

The calmness in her voice surprised her probably as much as it did the guard. By the time she had finished recounting everything she could remember, she had his full attention. Although that might have simply been the fact that she wasn't a simple commoner, and her father's membership in the Artifice guild placed her firmly in the upper echelons of the middle class.

With more than enough funds to hire a lawful proprietor to defend her in the city's courts. Especially when there had been plenty of witnesses to the entire thing, and a noble assaulting a young lady on her business in the middle of the day likely was terrible optics for whichever watch lieutenant was in charge of the district.

Panic started to overtake her mustered courage. The fight and confrontation hadn't actually taken that long, but she had to grab her hand to stop it from shaking. She had one last trump card to play, even if she hated using it like that. "My friend Henri is a watchmen in the Artisan District's Third Regiment, Artificer Row Company C. I would like it if you could chime him to come here, he should still be on duty for a few more hours."

That more than anything else had an immediate effect and the condescending expression on the guardsman's face flashed into a one-hundred percent neutral. "You're friends?"

"We're very close." Yolani confirmed, without explaining more, allowing the guard to take his own interpretation.

The man's eyes glazed over into a flat gray for a second, a common expression that she'd seen plenty of times before. It was the spell the guard used to contact each other through the city's web way network that powered the maps and clock that all the citizens used to keep track of things.

Since she'd given him Name, Regiment, and Company, that was exactly enough information for him to contact Henri directly. If things hadn't been so dire, she would have felt bad for bothering him after already using him as an escort earlier in the day.

A few seconds later, the man's eye color returned, and his expression softened. "Your friend is on the way, miss. The watch lieutenant is on the way to sort through the mess, and you shouldn't have to worry about your safety anymore, so you can calm down."

"Ahh. Ah, thank you." Yolani reached up and wiped her eyes. She wasn't sure why her eyes had begun to water.

The guard had her turn around and released her cuffs, then told her to please sit back down and wait. She did so, watching the commotion down the street the noble was still making. When the guard she'd been talking to started talking to the guards who'd been dealing with the man, the screeching somehow managed to intensify.

The armsman and bodyguard were suddenly hauled onto their feet then led away, still in their cuffs. When one of the guards brought out a magical gag and silenced the noble, she knew that the man had been full of shit and puffed-up importance. A minor noble, then. They wouldn't have dared treat anyone higher ranked like that, even for the girl of one of their own.

Relief filled her and the cramp in the muscles in her side released.

Time seemed to stretch out as she waited nervously. By the time he appeared around the corner, she'd calmed her heart and nerves down a bit. Still, she shot to her feet immediately.

"Yolani," He greeted her with concern etched on his face before looking back at the restrained noble who was now receiving a lecture from the guard lieutenant, a noble himself. "What happened?"

She frowned and crossed her arms. "Did they tell you already?"

He nodded, but it was clear he wanted more. "They gave me a summary of what you told them."

"It's that. I bought the mana shard from the shop. On the way back home, they tried to rob me of it. Can you please take me home?" Yolani asked.

He looked her over more carefully. "They said you weren't hurt?"

She looked away. "I'm not. I just want to go home."

"Let me go talk to the other guards." Henri told her.

She nodded and leaned against the stone wall. And waited. And waited more.

When he finally arrived, she felt numb, like she'd spent all her mental energy.

But he had a weak smile on his face that promised good news. "The shopkeeper confirmed your story, as well as the witnesses. The Lieutenant said you're free to go, but

nothing is likely to happen to the noble. He's the son of the Lord of House Farchet, and they're going to bury this."

Her chest tightened. Of course nothing was going to happen to him. Stupid nobles. "I don't care as long as they leave me alone. Can we go?"

Henri nodded and put his arm around her shoulder. She didn't object and leaned into him. It was actually sort of nice. Nice enough to ignore the daggers, the noble stared into her on the way down.

The rest of the trip went by quickly, and she surrendered all their safety to Henri as she zoned out. When they suddenly were in front of her father's shop, it was a surprise. He was waiting for them, waiting on the porch, smoking one of his pipes.

Yolani released her escort and rushed to him and hugged him before beginning to sob. He patted her on the back reassuringly. "There, there. It's alright," he paused, then looked over at Henri who swallowed.

"Do I need to kill this young man?" her father asked.

She shook her head. "No...no, Papa. Henri helped me. I got the mana shard."

"That's my girl. You did well. Let's go inside and talk about what happened," he said. Looking at Henri, the two men nodded to each other.

She gave him a parting thanks and wave before following her father inside.

When she saw the workshop, she wished she hadn't and froze in the doorway. "What have you done?" Yolani hissed.

Her father looked at her with a perplexed expression.

Two extra light stones were laying neatly beside the first near her father's crafting table; their seemingly innocent inner radiance glowing ominously while they sat there—as if mocking her with their presence.

CHAPTER 10 – ECOSYSTEM

The feeling of Fire and Water was all-encompassing.

As Elania slowly regained consciousness, the first sensation she had was of being covered in a copious amount of sweat; if someone had told her they'd just fished her out of a lake, she'd have believed them. Her robe was soaked thoroughly and dripped onto the floor.

As she sat up, her heart pounded in her chest like she'd run a marathon, and every heavy breath felt like fire leaving her lungs. Her entire body was flushed with heat, like she had a deadly, crippling fever.

So why did it feel so amazing? All the pain that she had fallen asleep with had disappeared, and when she checked her sides, the bruises were gone. Her feet felt fine.

Standing up felt like she weighed nothing. She pulled out the items in her pockets and then disrobed so she could wring the article out; it made little sense, there was no way she could have sweated that much, and the fear of not being able to water was... mitigated? A little stream of her sweat had flowed out of the room, then down the stairs.

Magic. Or weird Demon related things. It had to be that, otherwise, she'd have been a shriveled-up husk.

She wiped herself down, but sweat formed almost immediately. Whatever was causing it, she still had the sensation of being on fire.

Was it related to the message about poison? Had she...sweated it all out or something?

She pulled up her **[Status]** and was shocked by the dozens of messages that had apparently arrived while she was asleep.

[Your body is reaching the limits of its capacity for power!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current power!]
[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for power!]
[You have gained a Rank in Demonic Aura!]
[Your body is experiencing slight thermal degradation!]
[Your body has expelled impurities!]
[Your body is slightly adapting.]
[You have gained a level in Darkvision!]
[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]
[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]
[Your body has expelled impurities!]
[Your body is slightly adapting.]
[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]
[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]
[Your body has expelled impurities!]
[Your body is slightly adapting.]
[You have gained a Rank in Demonic Aura!]
[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]
[Your body has greatly exceeded the limit of its capacity for power!]
[Find a stronger body or reduce your current power!]

It took her a few seconds to take it all in. At some point, her **[Power]** had overflowed and caused her to... thermally degrade? Plus adapt? Her idea that she'd been sweating out the poison, whatever it was, seemed to be on the nose, too.

There wasn't exactly an explanation for where all the water she had sweated out had come from, though.

[Status: Elania Reyes]
[Level 5 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]
[Karma: 12345]
[Power: 168/112]
[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!)]
[Class: Escapee]
[Skill Slots: 3]
[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank E), Stealth (Rank E), Survival Craft-
ing (Rank E)]
[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank C) (Activated), Mana Manipulation (Rank E)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank E), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B)]

Her **[Demonic Aura]** and **[Darkvision]** had gone up just like the messages had indicated, but why those two skills in particular had been effected, she wasn't sure. Maybe it was the adaptation?

It was clear that her **[Power]** stat was responsible, but why was it going up like it was? The maximum level of it had even increased, but she hadn't even figured out how to use it herself!

Where the fuck was a manual when she needed one?

It was probably self-explanatory to someone who was a native. The thought brought her the mental image of a class full of children being taught what their status screens meant. Since she was imported, she would have been happy with a brief PDF.

An alarming thought wiped the funny picture away. There was some sort of normal civilization or something with schools around somewhere, right? If she'd been dumped into some dystopian hellhole...

Elania winced. She'd feel almost right at home, right? Capitalistic Earth wasn't such a great place. Then again...

She expelled an angry sigh. This line of thinking wasn't helping, and she'd deal with things as she encountered them. Wasting energy on it in a survival situation was surely a bad idea.

[Crisis Management Rank E has been unlocked.]

Her eye twitched. Apparently, battling herself inside her head was enough to earn a skill. She noted it was not slotted like the previous ones. Did that mean she was limited to three slotted skills?

Elania rolled her arms and stretched. She still felt like she was still burning up on the inside, but other than that, she felt better than ever. The sweating had slowed down but was still present. She suspected it would probably not stop until either the poison was all gone or her **[Power]** stat was under control.

Everything appeared more vivid in the dark, even without the mana shard to light her way. That was definitely from her increased **[Darkvision]** skill. She slipped her slightly dried robe back on and pocketed her shard and dagger before heading up the next set of stairs.

The trek up the stairs was no less boring than the first time, but it was much less arduous. When she reached a second landing, there was even an extra spring in her step as she pushed herself to power climb faster. When she reached a slide of rubble, she jumped the entire section in a single leap. The feeling of being super light was liberating, even if deep down she felt an itch of concern.

How else was her body changing... 'adapting.'

The constant stream of cool air working its way downward continued and felt amazing against her skin. It certainly helped with the burning feeling that was still filling her.

When the first signs of light seeping down from above appeared, she paused, thinking that she'd somehow dropped her mana shard. When she realized that wasn't it, she carefully ascended while trying to suppress her anxiousness.

There was a small stone arch and landing as she stepped out into an entirely different world. Vibrant greens and blues were a feast for her eyes as she took in the sight of the thick moss and other cave flora. The ceiling was a tremendous distance above, only visible due to the brilliant lime-green moss and vines that dominated it.

Massive stalactite formations sprouted down from the carpet in spots, and they shined with the red and orange of some other type of plant, breaking up the colors.

She activated her **[Identify]** and scanned the different things, each one gave her a basic name. She figured it wouldn't hurt to know what to call each one, and on the chance that leveling the skill was done by usage... she didn't want to miss her chance.

[Brilliant Glow Moss]

[Red Tangle]

[Underground Creep Vine]

Scanning the massive cavern, she realized that not everything was natural. In the distance, she spotted the remains of some stone buildings, covered in thick patches of grassy moss. They didn't appear inhabited, and part of them had collapsed to the point where only a few walls remained. It gave off a serious ancient ruin vibe.

If this was a video game, it would have been at the top of her list for exploring for a looting run.

She didn't see anywhere else interesting, so as she trekked forward, she headed toward it as her destination. The terrain was broken up into hundreds of small plateaus, each carpeted with the grassy moss. If she was going to ever start a fire, she needed to be very careful.

Burning the world down around her a second time would not be... ideal.

As she came closer to the ruin, she scanned them with **[Identify]** too.

[Stone]

[Worked Stone]

[Ruined Stone]

It was funny that the skill incremented on the names of the bricks based on their state. A towering mushroom tree had sprouted and grown from inside one of the buildings, pushing its way out and had caused one of the walls being knocked down. There were more of the same type of mushroom ‘tree’ behind the ruins and throughout the cavern as she reached a point that let her take in a view of the entire V shaped cave.

[Fungal Growth]

[Fungal Wood]

[Tree-cap]

The ruin was at the tip, and the two halves had their own distinct flora. Thick grassy moss and flat plateaus on one side, and tons of fungi and tree-caps on the other. A lot of the fungal flora gave off their own red-hued bioluminescence, and that warred with the blue hues cast from the ceiling, creating a purple shading that shifted along the walls.

It was a beautiful sight.

There was also a stream that ran down the length of the cave on the mushroom tree side that disappeared into the ground at the far end. It had plenty of its own flora as well. She paused and scanned those as well.

[Water Spore]

[Fencia’s Fungal Growth]

[Rock Blight]

[Scour-Stone Moss]

[Itch Moss]

Elania blinked, her brain finally catching up with her eyes.

[Water]

Water. That was important, even if she had temporarily turned into a sweat spring on the way up. She almost changed directions straight for it, but restrained herself as she glanced across the caverns. It was almost a complete eco-system, but there wasn’t any sign of any fauna. Where were the animals or other creatures?

Shouldn’t there have been some insects, or... well, she had no idea. It just seemed strange that there weren’t any animals. Maybe they had heard her coming and were shy?

She wasn't really thirsty, and although that worried her a bit, she was almost to the ruins anyway, so she decided to explore them first. The water wasn't going to go anywhere, and if she decided to stay in the cavern for a while, she'd probably be making plenty of trips between wherever she decided to camp and the stream anyway. Why add an extra one?

The sound of trickling water added a pleasant sound to the air, and compared to the silence of the caves below, it was very welcome. She picked her way across the grassy moss plateaus and around the fungal growths and broken rocks. There were a multitude of names for each type, and she especially avoided anything with the word itch in the name.

[Identify] she was sure, was one of the best skills to have.

A **[System]** box appeared in front of her just as he neared the ruins.

[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

Elania frowned as she swiped the message box away. Mention of the poison had stopped, but she felt like the heat in her core had increased. She had thought that it was just the lack of the breeze running down the staircase. Wiping the sweat off her forehead, she was sure that it was, in fact, getting hotter.

The elation from the lack of pain and the abundance of energy had faded somewhat as well, replaced by a feeling that... something was seriously wrong.

She checked her **[Status]** for more clues, only to find that her **[Power]** had continued to increase further.

[Power 188/116]

[You have gained a Rank in Demonic Aura!]

Her **[Power]** stat wouldn't quit going up. What if the burning got worse until she caught on fire or something?

It felt like doom was approaching, which added an extra bit of speed to her step as she searched the first building. It was disappointingly bare. The second sent a shiver down her spine as she froze at the entryway.

Bones.

Thousands of small bones, stacked in chaotic piles that lined the walls and nearly reached the ceiling. That's where all the little critters she had expected had gone. Into something's belly.

She took a step back and resisted bolting. There wasn't a smell of rotting flesh and all the bones had been scoured clean; so maybe they weren't recent.

Backing out of the building, she looked toward the third one. Whoever had built them had probably been about the height of a human...or elf, judging by the size of the door holes. Wasn't there at least one game she had played that the elves were...cannibals? A shiver ran down her spine as she decided to skip the rest of the ruin and try the stream.

If she couldn't figure out why her **[Power]** continued to rise, maybe she could find a way to spend it faster. She'd have thought that running up the stairs would have been training, but apparently not. Maybe **[Mana Manipulation]** would divest her of some more easily?

Elania glanced up at the ceiling and winced.

For that, she'd need to go back down the stairs and try practicing it there. There was absolutely no way she was going to accidentally loose some of the sparks on the flammable moss again.

She took a step away from the building, only for the faint sound of pebbles shifting, causing her to freeze. Breaking free of her shock, she spun around and looked up, coming face-to-face with a pair of blood-red eyes and a savage expression full of teeth.

CHAPTER 11 – FIRST BLOOD

The attack came so fast that the only reaction she could muster was to raise her arms. She caught the creature on its shoulders while its dazzling array of razor-sharp teeth snapped viciously in her face. The impact was strong enough to send her flying backwards, and it was mostly luck that she managed to lay her feet into the thing's stomach and kick off, sending it flying away from her.

It landed with a heavy crash into a pile of stones, but immediately jumped onto its hands and feet in a low crouch, snarling hatefully at her.

[Bone Eater - Lesser Demon - Level 57]

The only reason **[Identify]** fired off was because she had started to make a habit of using it on everything she came across. She was slow to roll back onto her feet, and as she took up a tentative combat stance, she felt a stinging in her arm. Wet heat dripped down her forearm, and she realized the thing had left deep slash marks with its claws in their brief tumble.

It was shorter than her, but it was a lump of thick muscle with limbs tipped with sharp claws as well as a mouth full of teeth it flashed at her with every snarl. She took a single step backward toward the ruin entrance, but that caused the monster to launch forward at her.

She almost tripped, taking a second step backwards, and she only had her spare robe in hand to fend off the attack; it caught the demon's claws in the first swipe, but then it chomped down hard on her forearm that was already bleeding.

The high-pitched screech she let loose in the thing's ear seemed more effective than the fist to the side of its skull, but a second punch to the base of its eye resulted in it releasing her and jumping back out of reach. It had deposited a slash to her side with its free claws

as well, and she was bleeding so much it would have sent her into a panic if she hadn't already been in one.

Her dagger. She had a weapon.

She pulled it out with her relatively unharmed arm and brandished it toward the demon. "Fuck you! Fuck off!"

Tears mingled with sweat as blood pulsed down the deep, jagged bite on her left arm. The monster seemed wary of her weapon and growled and screeched at her as it lopped side to side, looking for a chance to dart in at her again.

She scanned it again, but the message was the same.

[Bone Eater - Lesser Demon - Level 57]

Lesser Demon. It was the same race as her, but they were nothing alike. The level different hinted that it was much stronger than her, though. Or did it? She'd have expected a level 57 to instantly beat a level 5. It was wary of her, so maybe she had a chance yet.

The thing's eyes glowed with a crimson glint, full of anger and hatred, giving it a possessed look as it focused narrowly on her weapon.

[Your physical Status is degrading.]

[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

Elania hissed in pain and anger. "I fucking know! Tell me something useful!"

The outburst caused the Bone Demon to charge again. She stepped back to the inside of the ruin and used the edge of the doorway as a shield. When it slashed at her with its claw tipped arm, she slashed back.

The metal struck right between two claws, neatly slicing the creature's flesh down to its wrist while its claws dug into the back of her hand. It screeched and pulled away, raking her as it did so.

[You have gained a level in Improvised Combat!]

The warnings about having excess power repeated themselves, filling her with anger and frustration. Her left arm was useless, and her right hand was savaged, and she wasn't sure she'd be able to hold on to her weapon again.

The punctures on her side were causing her black robe to stick to her, and she was leaking so much blood she wasn't sure she'd last more than a minute.

She'd hurt the thing, but she doubted it was fatal.

If she had so much fucking power that it was cooking her from the inside out, where the hell was it?

Elania stepped back deeper into the ruin where there was still a stone ceiling cutting off the light from the glow moss. **[Darkvision]** was more than helpful and the shadows didn't hinder her, thankfully. She really only had one more card to play, and that was only if the thing attacked her again before she passed out. Or died.

Death. She was going to die, bleeding out in some random shit fantasy world in some random shit ruins.

Spite filled her. "I'm in here jerk-wad!"

The Bone Demon snarled and came in after her. She threw her dagger at it, but her throw was bad and the hilt bounced off its head. It recognized she lost her weapon and charged her.

She let out a hitched breath and focused on her less mangled hand. **[Mana Manipulation]** was something she'd only done once before, but that had been a tiny trickle. This time she forced all her pain, spite, and rage into the current, visualizing it turning her hand into a blazing meteor of retribution.

Who cared if she burnt down the world around her? She was going to take the fucking thing down with her.

It was a bit of a surprise when the skill worked. Her hand turned into a glowing orb of heat just as it smashed into the side of the Bone Demon's head.

Flesh, sinew, and bone had no business resisting the power surrounding her hand and dissolved accordingly as the motion neatly sliced through the thing's head, bisecting it like a soft stick of butter.

The Bone Demon's body collapsed straight down in a heap, twitching a few times before going still. There was no blood but hers, as the cut had been instantly cauterized by the blow.

A **[System]** message arrived cheerfully, informing her she'd gained a rank in the skill.

[You have gained a Rank in Mana Manipulation!]

And then the pain hit. Every nerve ending in her arm lit on fire and she fell onto her side; the bad one that was injured. A half dozen injuries she hadn't even noticed suddenly began clamoring at her, but it was her **[Power]** burnt fist that was pure agony. When the light faded away, she realized that the skin and tissue of her hand was completely gone; skeletal fingers poked back at her, the bone somehow fused together from the heat.

Ahh... she was going to die. At least she'd taken the thing with her, but why did that not make her feel much better?

She used her feet to scoot herself back against the ruin wall. It was nice to lean up against it, taking the weight off of her back. She tried to use her mangled arm to undo the wrap around her breasts to use as a tourniquet, but she failed to find the dexterity to untie it. Using her melted hand to help wasn't even a consideration.

Elania took a deep breath and shouted. "Help!"

Her own voice echoed back at her before fading into the cavern. What was the point? There wasn't anyone around to hear her.

Tears formed in her eyes. She didn't want to die. She needed to stop the bleeding. Gritting her teeth, she called on her **[Mana Manipulation]** again and set her boney appendage alight a second time. She pressed it into the bite wound on her forearm.

[You have gained a level in Mana Manipulation!]

She almost passed out. She was pretty sure the screams were hers. When she blinked the wetness out of her eyes, she could see the bite mark looked charred, and had stopped bleeding.

A sense of exhaustion filled her. Now she would just die from infection instead of bleeding to death.

She felt lightheaded. Succumbing to her wounds seemed inevitable. She leaned against the stone and watched the **[System]** messages scroll by as she waited.

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly.]

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly.]

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly.]

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly.]

"What about my mental status, you piece of shit? Can't you let a person die in peace?" Elania choked out.

The pain in her hand finally calmed down. She glanced at her wrist. It hadn't changed, nothing but bone all the way to her wrist. The stub was melted shut from the magic. At least it wasn't bleeding, too.

Probably there was no pain anymore because her body had finally caught on that there weren't any nerves left there to tell her 'ouch!'

Suddenly the body of the Bone Eater began to flop on the floor, but before she could feel panic, it went still again. This time a **[System]** message popped up.

[You have slain Bone Eater - Lesser Demon - Level 57]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[You have reached level 10. Please choose a new perk!]

[You already have the maximum amount of Karma possible and can acquire no more.]

That was awesome, thank you Mr. System. All very helpful to a girl two steps in the grave already. She tried to call up her [Status] but nothing happened.

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly.]

Maybe it was because she was dying? Elania took a deep breath, which hurt.

“Status,” she hissed as she hurled the word angrily at whatever god had pulled her from her cozy dorm room.

It worked.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 11 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 112/124]

[Perks: 2] (Summoned from Another World!) (Please Choose a new Lesser Demon related Perk!)

[Class: Escapee]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank D), Stealth (Rank E), Survival Crafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Activated), Mana Manipulation (Rank C)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank E), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank E)]

Elania gritted her teeth, focusing on the new [Perk] line. “Show me the available perks before I pass out.”

Everything felt cold, like a blizzard had plummeted the air temperature. There wasn't any sign of snow, so she figured she was probably going into shock or something.

At least her overloaded [Power] stat had fixed itself when she'd dumped it into the Bone Demon.

[Perks]

[1 Available Perk Selection]

[Current Perks: (Summoned from Another World!)]

[Available Perks: (Weakness Negation), (Resistance Improvement), (Resistance Selection), (Physical Ability Improvement), (Body Manipulation), (Regeneration), (Reactive Adaptation), (Power Absorption – Touch)]

She wanted to slap whoever had formatted the list into one long blob. Maybe she was being over-violent, but that was probably a product of her physical state.

Some of the choices looked weak, but others were more impressive. But there was only one Deux-Ex-Machina that was going to save her from dying immediately on the list. Probably. At least, the choice was clear to her.

“Regeneration, please, and make it snappy.” Elania mumbled.

Nothing happened for a second, and she was about to try again when messages began to scroll.

[You have gained the Regeneration perk!]

[You have spent all your available perk selections.]

[Due to your high power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

[You have met the requirements for Bone Demon evolution.]

[Do you wish to evolve your race to Bone Demon? Y/N]

“Fuck no, I’d rather die than turn into that thing,” Elania replied. The screen dissolved into the air, leaving her alone in the dark.

Almost immediately, she felt slightly better. Less drained. If **[Regeneration]** worked on her blood loss, then that was amazing. She glanced at her bone-for-a-hand and hoped it would fix that, too.

The burned bite on her arm literally began to knit itself back together, and a pinch in her side forced her to pull her robe away as her skin started to pull the cloth into the wound. Her whole body felt like it was on pins and needles, and then a stinging erupted in her arm.

The melted bone crumbled away into dust, and the stub of her arm began to bubble. At first, she thought she’d lost the limb permanently. Before she could feel sorry for herself, the exact reverse of the earlier pain spiked in her wrist as nerves fibers began to regrow. New bone began to grow out, and her flesh began to stretch to cover it.

This time, she was sure the screaming belonged to her.

It was a bit more intense.

She passed out.

CHAPTER 12 – SELF DEVELOPMENT

Two crimson orbs reflected back at Elania, her reflection painted a vibrant shade of red within the water's surface. She traced the contours of her face with slender fingers, her eyes not leaving the sight of her own reflection staring back at her. The tanned hue of her skin had been replaced by a pale color that looked like she'd never been embraced by the sun before.

Her hair, once a tangled mess stained with blood and debris, now flowed freely around her in fiery waves. The wash had stripped it clean but left behind an unexpected, vibrant hue. Hidden near the roots, patches of its original black peeked through like tiny shadows amidst a sea of red.

It was sort of a vampire-ish look, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

There wasn't any brush or soap at hand, but that didn't stop her from finding the deepest pool of water and submerging herself in it.

After a careful check to make sure there wasn't anything in it, of course. It was crystal clear and looked, and tasted, as fresh as could be, so it wasn't that big of a question to find a spot to bathe alone with no hidden water-things to eat her.

If anyone had told her she'd be skinny dipping in an underground fantasy world, she'd have laughed at them. If they had told her she'd come face to face with her own death after fighting off a literal demon, she'd probably have thought about calling the police on them. Or at least getting the heck out of there.

Unfortunately, it looked like she was going to have to get used to new normals or go batshit crazy. She glanced at her mana shard. "Right, Mr. Rock?"

The stone continued to shine in silence, sitting on the rocky steam bank. It wasn't quite as shiny as when she had collected it from the cultists, making her wonder what had caused the change. She checked her **[Status]** for the fourth time since setting it down.

[Power: 102/128]

A thrill of excitement ran through her. Her guess after waking up had been right.

When she'd regained consciousness, her Power had overflowed again, and she'd been in a mild panic about reducing the overload. When she had finally removed her tattered mess of an outfit and left the mana shard inside of it, she had realized that the excess power had begun to bleed off.

It was hard to determine the exact rate of discharge with no way to tell time, but her best guess was it took about an hour for one point of **[Power]** to drain without the stone. That was with **[Demonic Aura]** and **[Darkvision]** still stuck permanently on. That included **[Regeneration]** as well, but she hadn't really accrued any new injuries.

Although how far **[Regeneration]** was going to restore her was... a question. Elania looked back down at her reflection. Standing up carefully, she turned around and looked at her rear. Her birthmark was completely gone. So were all the blemishes and scars she'd ever acquired.

The **[Perk]** didn't seem content to just heal her injuries, but had really gone and restored her to her body's original intended state. Or at least the **[Lesser Demon]** version of her body.

It had even restored her...

Her cheeks heated, and she sat back down in the water.

Taking one of the clean scraps of cloth she had left and using it to scrub her skin. Even if she didn't have a brush or soap, the rough cloth worked well enough. Even if she scrubbed extra hard, **[Regeneration]** was there to the rescue to keep her skin from feeling scraped raw.

It didn't seem like she needed to eat or drink, either. **[Power]** seemed to take care of that, although she'd drank from the stream just because it tasted good and the cool water down her throat was nice. She wasn't sure **[Regeneration]** would work against illness or viruses, but she suspected it would.

She had never played a game that didn't have two sets of numbers for 'Hit Points' and 'Mana', but that didn't mean there hadn't ever been one. It didn't seem normal to her, though, to have everything combined into one single **[Power]** stat.

Not needing to eat or drink still needed a bit more testing, but if her theory that she was consuming **[Power]** to sustain herself somehow... what did it mean if she ran out? There was a constant passive draw on her **[Power]** that she had found, and other than the stone, she didn't know how to get more.

She glanced at it and frowned; the white glow pulsated ever so slowly. It had gotten dimmer than when she had first found it; she was sure of it. Now the reason the cultists had offered so many of them to her made a lot more sense. Her stomach knotted slightly at the thought of what would have happened if she hadn't snatched one to take with her.

How many times was she going to narrowly avoid getting killed?

Elania let out a sigh and stood up, letting the water flow off of her in rivulets. The streams didn't have fish, so there wasn't really anything to eat even if she had wanted to. Why couldn't there be some stupid fish? A nicely roasted fish would have been perfect. Maybe a blanket of steamed rice and some sushi?

Shaking her head, she threw away the mental image. She needed to keep it together. She wasn't out of danger yet, and she needed to be better prepared.

Somehow the flare of power hadn't set the glow moss on fire, but she didn't want to trust that to happen again.

She'd need equipment and a better weapon than her dagger.

She thoroughly soaked what she had recovered from her spare robe she'd been using as a pillow; it was a tattered mess. At least half of what she had was separate cuts she'd salvaged. The robe she'd been wearing had fared slightly better, but it too had multiple slashes and badly needed tailoring.

The blood had been hard to wash out, and they were definitely stained, but the black color wasn't that disturbed by it. Not that she thought there would be anyone caring about if her torn cultist robes were stained.

Gathering everything along the stream up she carried it back to her makeshift camp in the ruins. She'd selected the only other building that had a semi-intact roof. She needed to dry everything, though. Running around in a damp robe was about as appealing as running around in the open, butt-naked.

She needed something to dry the things on. Looking around, she spotted the blood-spattered path into the ruin with the Bone Demon's corpse. That was going to be a problem.

Setting her things on the stone she'd designated as her camp; she hesitantly approached the chamber in which she had nearly died. Before anything else, she needed to discard the

corpse, preferably somewhere far away from the camp. Maybe then consider cleaning up the blood, although that was much lower priority.

It had mostly dried already, anyway.

The corpse, though, would start to decompose, and that would stink and attract scavengers, if there were any. There probably would be knowing her luck, and she didn't want them to come anywhere near her camp if she was inside it.

The corpse was still where she'd left it. She winced as she noticed the gunk that had flowed out of the thing's bisected skull. Elania wiped her face with her forearm, then suppressed a gag. Good thing she'd not put any clothes back on, because she was going to need a second skinny dip and wash after dealing with the corpse.

She grabbed an ankle and much to her surprise, a **[System]** message popped up.

[Absorb the lingering Power from Bone Eater - Lesser Demon - Level 57?]

She didn't really feel any kind of kinship with the thing, so it wasn't really cannibalism, was it?

"Why not?" Elania asked, confirming her choice.

The corpse began to glow before exploding into a mist of glowing dust that seemed to evaporate into the air. Some of it flowed away and up into the ceiling before disappearing, but most of it suddenly redirected itself into her chest. Almost immediately, she felt her core temperature spike, and a sheen of sweat appeared on her forehead.

Her skin and breath felt like it was on fire, and the reason was clear.

[You have absorbed 115 Power!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high Power, [Regeneration] is enhanced!]

[Power: 211/134]

Some mental math told her the percentage she was over her maximum power was the highest it had ever been, but somehow it didn't have quite as bad a deteriorating effect on her. **[Regeneration]** reported it had been enhanced, so... was it actually actively healing her from the damage being over her maximum power did?

Her maximum capacity kept going up when she went over, so if she kept the cycle up, it was a bit like power leveling, wasn't it? And she didn't see any reason to not maximize

her **[Power]** capacity. Actually, it was probably a very good idea to do so, even if it caused some discomfort.

She returned to her camp and used her dagger to cut some long thin strips from the destroyed robe and made a long line from them. She tied it off in the chamber and then hung up the rest of her cloth to dry.

Finding a spot in the corner with a clean stone to sit on, she sat cross legged and pulled up her full **[Status]** so she could inspect the changes.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 11 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 210/134]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration)]

[Class: Survivor]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank D), Stealth (Rank E), Survival Crafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Activated), Mana Manipulation (Rank C)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank E), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank E)]

Her **[Improvised Combat]** skill had gone up, but she wasn't sure it did anything. It certainly didn't feel like it during the fight, and if one thing was certain at all, it was that she needed to learn to defend herself. The other thing was that she needed to keep practicing with her **[Mana Manipulation]** skill because it seemed like it was her most potent offensive ability.

It'd allowed her to slay the Bone Demon in one blow, albeit at a heavy cost to herself. **[Regeneration]** synergized well with that, though she really didn't want to go about incinerating parts of her body in order to do damage.

Maybe if she practiced, she'd be able to channel the **[Power]** into a weapon? She glanced at the steel dagger sitting nearby beside her mana shard. Magic weapon power-up, maybe?

Elania spent a while trying to figure out the rest of her skill and how to toggle her **[Demonic Aura]** off, but still didn't manage it. Eventually she wandered out to inspect

the nearby **[Fungal Wood]** she had spotted nearby. Using her dagger, she was able to cut off some long strips of the very soft wood that she thought might be useful.

She sat the shafts against the wall in the corner, then scoured the entire chamber, cleaning it and removing any sign of glow moss. It was the best she could do, but she needed a space to train her skills safely.

It took a few hours, but she mastered the trick of creating sparks with her fingers. More importantly, she learned how to control their movement after they left her hand, at least until they dissipated. Sending sparks out with her fingers wasn't the most useful of abilities, but that led to her trying to power up her dagger; and that worked extremely well.

Almost too well.

The weapon heated rapidly until it was glowing a dull red and too hot to hold. She dropped it on the rock to cool before nursing her burned fingers. They healed rapidly, but it still hurt a lot.

The experience had probably ruined the heat treatment of the blade, too.

Ruining her only metal tool hadn't been her intention, but at least she had gained a bit of information: she could dump mana into items to heat them up.

Maybe if she figured out how to level the skill further, she'd be able to surround them with power without actually melting whatever it was? Like a barrier or shield?

By the time her clothes had finished drying, she was ready for a nap. With the mana shard nestled away in the corner, but not touching her skin, she went to sleep.

When she woke up, she wasn't melting from being over her **[Power]** limit, and in her mind that pretty much confirmed the mana shard had been slowly trickling the power to her when she kept it close to her skin.

Not wanting to leave the safety of her camp, she spent the rest of the day practicing **[Mana Manipulation]** while thinking about how to do something with the fungal wood and her tattered robes.

By the end of the training session, she was able to control sending her **[Power]** to different parts of her body without actually killing herself. It didn't actually block anything; when she'd poked herself with her dagger, it had drawn blood before beginning to absorb the heat. Anyone grabbing or grappling with her was going to be in a world of hurt, though.

It also seemed to improve her muscle strength in the area, which was a nice, notable benefit. She'd practiced picking up a massive stone block that easily weighed twice as much as her by channeling the power throughout her entire body.

The **[System]** seemed satisfied as well by the time she was finished and she was greeted with a pleasant message.

[You have gained a Rank in Mana Manipulation!]

She wasn't sure how good Rank B was on the scale of such things, but it was definitely better than what she had started with. It also gave her an idea of how the skill leveling worked. It wasn't just about making the skill better, but actually knowing how to use the skill in different ways seemed to be what caused the rank up changes.

Whether it was just her getting better at using the skill, or some invisible number going up while she worked at the skill giving her the new abilities, she was unsure. She wasn't even sure how it really mattered other than: use skill, get better at it and rank up.

The next skill to work on was **[Survival Crafting]** and she had thought long and hard on how she'd deal with the **[Fungal Wood]** shafts. Javelins seemed the way to go. They'd give her a ranged attack and could be used up close in a pinch, with a lot more reach than her dagger.

She used the metal to shape the tip into a point and called it done.

It was certainly primitive.

She also didn't get a level for it, which sort of made sense.

Her work was total crap.

There was no one to complain to, so she decided to try to pick up some sort of throwing skill, and went outside. While looking for something to use for a target, she had a sudden idea of how to work her **[Demonic Aura]** from what she'd learned from using **[Mana Manipulation]**.

Closing her eyes and picturing her energy flowing around her as a big bubble, she did the opposite of what she normally did when channeling her **[Power]**. Instead of forcing it out from her core, she pulled the visualization of the dispersed bubble around her inward.

[Demonic Aura (Deactivated)]

Elania smiled. It worked!

Almost immediately, the silence of the cavern was broken, sending her heart pounding. The melody of insects mingled with a series of loud cries from some kind of creature.

Before anything could spot her, she ran back to her camp in the ruins.

INTERLUDE—ANTON

Anton made one final lap through the complex; his arcane sensing stone dialed to its highest sensitivity. There was no sign of any further artifacts or cultists that he had found, and yet he had failed in his mission. The summoned lesser demon had escaped, and the leader of the cult had nearly killed him before the tides had reversed and the Black Bishop had utilized a teleportation spell to vanish.

It wasn't often that one of the Black Candle Cult's bases was revealed to the Order, and he had fumbled the chance to eliminate the chapter completely.

Returning to the summoning chamber, the stacked pile of arcanist corpses had begun to decompose into a black miasma. The death of so many members of the Cult would set them back for quite some time, he hoped. He raised a gauntleted fist and a pulse of light magic flared out from the metal, immolating the darkness in a karmic fire.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the remains of darkness wither in the purifying flames. Even if he had fallen short of his primary goal, at least he had interrupted the Cult from binding a powerful ally to their cause. The demon had been left resourceless and without the treasure trove of mana shards and monster cores, that would have given it a terrifying capacity for destruction.

With the detritus taken care of, Anton turned his attention to the large, shining chest. A layer of gold filled the bottom, but it was the glittering mana shards that captivated. It was a ridiculous number of them, and he had found even more in the stronghold's treasury. Just how the cult had procured so many was a major question.

The only place nearby that could have supplied so many was one of the places he hated most: Neftasu. The underworld city was one of the few that possessed a Celestial Engine capable of making the area around it stable enough to be habitable. It had the same squalor

and troubles as above ground cities, except it reveled in its excess of violence, artifice and... obsession with the demonic.

Tracking the terrified female form the Demon had taken had been hampered by the fact she'd likely been the culprit who set the entire under-cavern surrounding the stronghold aflame. The events in the dungeon played back in his mind, and the fact that his blade had refused to cut her down when he had finally cornered her was galling.

Drawing his blade, he began to clean it. The blue shimmer tinged the light from the mana shards to match it. He could tell the blade was hungry and wanted one of the shards.

"Why wouldn't you cut her?" Anton asked. There was no immediate reply, not that he expected Eziel to answer. The sword was moody and rarely communicated with any of its bearers any longer. At some point, it had gone silent.

Once the blade was wiped down and oiled, he placed the tip on one of the mana shard which promptly winked out as the sword soaked in the stone's power. There was no question as to the artifact's power when facing the enemy, and the Lightbringer Order needed all the advantages it could get.

"Eziel, Arch-Seraph of Light, Judge of the Divine, hear my inquiry. Why didn't you cut the demon?" Anton asked formally. Maybe the meal would put it in a better mood for answering?

A vision suddenly filled his mind.

A young woman that looked similar to the escaped demon was sitting at a desk wearing strange attire, with a strange artifice casting a warm light over an open book. The image winked away quickly, but the sword's words echoed in his mind longer: "She is more innocent than you, bearer."

Anton took a moment to process that, then finally scoffed. "The High Cardinal won't be happy to hear that one of the Order's seven artifacts is going senile. You were never fooled by fake numbers before. Why now?"

The sword's hilt sparked in his hand, offering a shock, but the effect was easily mitigated by his **[Magic Resistance]** and he sheathed the sword in its scabbard. Sometimes it was just better to put away the unruly thing.

Chasing after the demon wasn't a priority, though. It was very unlikely that it would find its way to a population center, so it would be joining the throngs of monsters that inhabited the underworld. Exactly where it belonged. It was still hard to put the young woman's face out of his mind, though, which put him in a foul mood.

Inevitably, he'd take it out on some of the demonologists when he made it back to Neftasu to make his report and search for more evidence of the cult.

CHAPTER 13 – DOMESTICATED

Elania's gaze widened, her breath hitching as she absorbed the panorama unfolding before her. She'd climbed up to the flat second floor of the ruins she'd taken up habitation in. The cavern pulsed with life and dozens of new sounds filled the area, the loudest being something that sounded like a swarm of crickets or June Bugs playing out a constant symphony.

Near the ceiling, ethereal beings that resembled jellyfish descended gracefully from their hideouts between hanging vines and moss, their luminescent forms dancing playfully in the shadowy pockets untouched by the radiant glow moss. They were aptly named **[Jelly]** when she played **[Identify]** over them. Just how they were floating in the air was left a mystery.

Her thoughts were disrupted by an echoing "Moobaa" that sounded something like the noise a terrible cow-sheep hybrid would make. Elania spotted the source, a quadruped that was covered in hairy moss that formed a shaggy coat. A second one appeared nearby the first before a small herd of them came out of hiding on the opposite side of the cavern from her ruins. Each one was designated a **[Ralfot]** by the **[System]**.

The lack of levels on the creature's info cards hinted they weren't the same as people, or demon-monster things because of the missing level. Unless there was something more at play, like a hidden skill or something like husbandry or the like blocking more information.

She wasn't sure how the **[System]** accounted for animals. These were the first ones she'd seen, and she wondered just how dangerous they were. A silly thought occurred to her; What if there was a super high-level cow that was doom to anyone who tried to milk it? She tried to suppress her mirth, which was at odds with her nearly fatal encounter just

a day earlier, but the sight of cute animals that probably weren't interested in eating her was... nice.

A new species of smaller creatures appeared; each one simply labeled an **[Elnat]**. They were a funny-looking cross between a jackrabbit and a squirrel. They appeared in large numbers and made their home on the green mossy plateaus she'd had to travel over to reach the ruins. A few of them were adventurous and began to spread out, while others clustered together in a large group of about twenty.

One of the little critters jumped on the back of another and she thought they were going to fight, but it appeared to have other intentions. She choked down a reflexive inhalation before blushing and looking away, if she had needed any confirmation, she was in the wild with wild creatures then that was more than enough to confirm it.

It was like the entire eco-system had been holding its breath while her **[Demonic Aura]** was on. It was a bit worrying that it had been oppressive enough to affect so many creatures, although maybe it had been beneficial, too.

Other than the Bone Demon, she hadn't seen any predators yet.

That didn't mean there weren't any, though.

There were a few larger insects flittering around the stream, and she realized they were preying on an even smaller insect that was hard to see. The tiny ones were called **[Moss Flies]** and the larger ones were each called **[Fly Eater]**. It was funny how the **[System]** grouped up the tiny insects in a swarm, but not the larger one.

[You have gained a rank in Identify!]

Elania's eyes lit up with excitement. That'd be useful! Maybe it would show more information?

Much to her dismay, the same simple names appeared for everything she tried the leveled-up skill on. She'd been cheated.

When a few of the bugs flew closer to her camp, she felt skittish. Maybe **[Demonic Aura]** hadn't been all that bad after all. Maybe she'd be able to learn how to control its radius and use it as an effective insect repellent?

That was something she needed to try before going to sleep, because she wasn't ready to wake up covered in whatever this world's equivalent of mosquito bites were. Although maybe **[Regeneration]** would protect her from itchy bump things?

No. Not something she wanted to test. Regrowing a hand had already taught her just how painful using the skill could be.

All the animals showing up led to the thought of what she was supposed to do. The makeshift javelin she'd made was...crude but maybe she should try hunting something? She had not had any hunger pangs despite eating absolutely nothing since arriving, and although she'd been drinking from the stream, it didn't actually seem required other than to soothe her own worries about it.

That seemed to suggest she lived off her **[Power]** stat. A combined health, mana, and hunger bar?

If absorbing an animal had the same **[Power]** boosting effect as what she'd done to the Bone Demon, was knowledge critical to her survival. If it was even possible.

One thing had become clear: the mana shard wasn't going to last forever, and she wasn't sure she wanted to fight another demon again. If there even were any more nearby.

The option to absorb flora hadn't shown up at least, which might mean she'd been transformed into an obligate carnivore. Or demonivore? There was only one way to find out, and she needed to know.

She spied on the creatures and their habits and traits while watching for signs of anything she missed for another hour before finally making up her mind. The Ralfots seemed too big, but the Elnats were a lot less intimidating. There were so many of them that there were plenty of targets, too. Sneaking up on an isolated one wouldn't be too hard, would it?

She even had the **[Stealth]** skill!

Elnatia climbed down from the roof and got her things ready. Magic rock in one pocket. Dagger in the other. Pointy stick in hand, and what was left of her shredded fabric went with the dagger. It had actually poked her a few times, and the scraps made a makeshift scabbard. She just needed to be mindful to definitely not fall on the stupid thing.

She crouched down and crept along once she reached the plateaus, doing her best to keep her head down. Keeping an eye on where her feet went, she avoided anything that would make noise. After a few minutes, she'd closed the distance to where the Elnats were congregating.

Peeking over the ledge sent her into a mild panic and she crouched back down instantly; a half dozen of the animals were really close! A brief feeling of disappointment gnawed at her at not having ranked up her **[Stealth]** skill. Really, hadn't she just performed an impressive feat? Sneaking up on wild animals was supposed to be hard, and she'd got it on the first try!

The memory of her and her father going camping one year when she was little came back to her randomly. He'd offered to take her hunting, but mostly it had just been a fun hike through the woods. Other than that, she'd hardly ever been anywhere she'd consider 'out in the country' or anything. She was definitely a city-girl.

Which was probably why she was drawing a blank about what to do next. Was she... just supposed to jump up and stab one with her stick? It would probably run away as soon as it saw her. Was she supposed to chase it around like that?

Suddenly everything seemed much, much more complicated than the little consideration she'd given things. What if she couldn't absorb it, how was she going to cook it and deal with carcass? Killing the thing then wasting it...was in the high-middle of her 'bad things to do' list.

The memory of her father hammered into her just how far from home she was and there wasn't a phone to call for advice or...just to hear her parents' voices.

The grip around her javelin tightened as she swallowed back the sudden breakdown that threatened her. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself, and she needed to see if she could use the animals to live off of, assuming she lived off her **[Power]** stat.

Reaching up, she vaulted up onto the plateau and zeroed in on the nearest **[Elnat]** which was only a few strides away. All the creatures perked up at her sudden appearance, their rabbit-like ears going erect and homing in on her. Thinking to attack before they could run away, she charged forward and closed the distance as fast as she could.

A spear-length away, she pulled her javelin back and went to stab it, when she realized something was wrong.

None of the Elnats had retreated. The one she was aiming at looked up at her curiously and let out a cheerful, chirpy sound. "Cheep? Cheep-Cheep?"

Confusion filled her. This was not what she had expected. Carefully, she lowered the spear. The creature hopped forward and began to sniff her foot with no malice or fear. She realized she couldn't kill the thing. At least not unless she was going to die or starve to death, a state she was far from being close to at the moment.

"Hh...hi? Little guy?" Elania mumbled. The other Elnats began to chirp at her in greeting before going back to their business of sniffing around the grassy moss for something to eat.

She crouched down and discarded her hunting plans. When she reached down slowly and petted the one that was sniffing her, it didn't seem upset and actually stopped to press into her hand, just like a cat would have. "You're pretty much tame, aren't you?"

Not everything was out to kill her. That was nice, but...

What the fuck was a tame fantasy bunny-squirrel-rabbit thing doing in a random underground cavern with ancient ruins?

A pungent odor suddenly greeted her, along with a new voice, causing her head to snap in the direction.

The “Glua-Glua-Glaa!” came from a humanoid shaped figure approaching with a spear held in both its hands. Humanoid was the primary word there, because other than being bipedal with two arms, it wasn’t human. Its head resembled some type of mushroom cap, with a set of glowing yellow eyes and a wide mouth full of teeth.

“Glaa! Glaa! Glaa!” came a second shout from nearby. There were at least two of them.

[Tender – Mushroohum – Level 17]

She’d discovered mushroom men! They also had a class and level, so that mean they were definitely not animals and were intelligent. The second one joined the first, pulling a shield and another kind of weapon off of its back.

They both yelled out again and the realization that intelligence didn’t necessarily mean friendly or safe occurred to her. One of them gestured to the Elnats and let out a whistling sort of sound, and the entire group of them jumped up and bolted in every direction.

That’s why they were so tame. The Elnats were the Mushroohums’ pets! The one nearest to her let out a confused chirp and looked around for the danger. She stood up and felt bad. She’d almost hunted and ate someone’s pet.

The nearest Mushroohum raised his spear and aimed it at her and then threw it, the trajectory fell well short of her, hinting that it was a warning, but the act startled her so much she took a step and stomped right down on the poor creature underfoot. She almost tripped and fell, and it went running while yelping in pain.

“Sorry!” Elania shouted, but the Mushroohums were angry, and a second spear was aimed much more accurately. She had to jump out of the way to not get hit.

[You have gained a rank in Improvised Combat!]

“I’m really, really sorry!” She shouted again. They began to approach her with weapons raised and she backed away. She jumped down into the trench network separating the plateaus when the clack of another missed spear throw echoed nearby.

This was not the good type of first contact. She needed to retreat. Did she even have anywhere safe to retreat to? The ruins had been her first instinct, but it wasn’t like they were anything special.

As she sprinted around a bend, there was a Mushroomum crouched waiting for her. He'd been silently sneaking towards her to intercept!

[You have gained a rank in Stealth!]

Fuck you **[System]**! Why now when she wasn't even sneaking?

She batted the message away just in time to watch her assailant jab his spear towards her face.

CHAPTER 14 – MUSHROOM CONFLICT

Elania dodged the spear by jumping backwards, a purely instinctive reaction. In contrast, channeling her [Power] into her legs to give her a burst of speed was purposeful. One thing she had noticed right away was that the Mushroomums weren't agile. The hidden hunter chased after her, but she quickly left him behind in the trench-like maze between the grassy Elnat plateaus.

As she created distance between her pursuers, she ducked behind a boulder as the sound of clacking spears thudded into the area she'd have been if she hadn't paused. There were at least five of them, meaning there were more Mushroomums that she'd not spotted yet.

She darted forward again, heading in the direction of the ruins. Another volley of spears missed their mark, falling close by but falling short of their mark. Each one left a distinctive clack as her assailants gave up their volley fire and began taking opportunistic potshots.

She outpaced them, but when she reached the edge of the cavern's corridor below the ruins, a half dozen new figures came out of the shadows of the vertical terrain around the ruins. They'd infiltrated her camp!

Not that she'd left anything of hers behind, but a jolt of panic ran through her.

Where was she supposed to go?

The new arrivals didn't waste any time speeding her on her way, and she had to leap out of the way of another group of thrown spears.

"I didn't mean to step on the Elnat! I am not your enemy, please!" Elania shouted.

The vocalization only seemed to help them aim at her better, and she gave it up and focused on escape. She reached the stream and splashed to the other side before bolting

down the bank. The cover was much worse, but that gave her the chance to really put her new abilities to the test.

She reached a sprint speed that was scary enough that she had to slow down before she made a mistake and slipped. The distance created put an end to the spear throwing, though.

Thoughts ran through her head quickly; maybe they thought she was the Bone Demon? But her level was much lower, and she definitely didn't resemble the hateful thing.

The stream deepened, then disappeared into the ground, and she found that the end of the cavern was a dead end. Thick **[Fungal Growth]** clogged the passage she had expected, a solid wall that she had no idea how thick or solid it was. Had the Mushroomums grown it?

Being blocked in was not good; she hadn't bothered to scout the entire chamber before, and now she had cornered herself with bad navigation.

Turning around, the Mushroomums slowly picked their way toward her position, their heads briefly poking out from behind rocks as they moved from cover to cover.

She took the time for them to catch up to regain her breath. Despite all that had happened in the last few days, running so fast was not something she was used to, and dumping **[Power]** had a very perceptible effect on her energy and endurance. She'd been keeping herself topped up, but maybe she should have been pushing it further.

But that would drain her mana shard faster...

The introspection was almost enough to get her killed as a spear flashed by her head and cut its way through her shaggy mop of hair.

"Fuck you! Leave me alone!" Elania shouted. She picked a route back the way she had come and began a new sprint back toward the staircase.

Almost immediately, a row of Mushroomums appeared with shields and spears and blocked her path. Two of them suddenly charged forward, and she parried its spear with her javelin. The other tried to attack her from the side but she darted in, shoving power into her leg muscle as she kicked its shield, hard.

Hard enough to send her flying backwards; the Mushroomum was large and apparently sturdy enough to absorb the blow. What did she expect from something over seven feet tall? A chorus of "Glau-Glaa!" echoed through the cavern, hinting that there were even more reinforcements coming and she was well and truly cornered.

She held up her hands and dropped her javelin on the ground. "I surrender!"

A few of the Mushroomums shouted their stupid “Glaa-Glaa!” but there wasn’t even a pause before more spears lashed out at her. She jumped to the side to avoid them, but one of them led her enough for the spear to leave a bloody gash in her arm. She shrieked back at them and grabbed one of the spears and threw it back.

Her throw was, predictably, terrible.

She ran and picked up another of the thrown spears; they were better made than her garbage javelin, anyway. She had other skills to use, though, and focused on activating her **[Demonic Aura]** skill. She channeled it a bit forcibly, and the familiar sensation of energy expanding like a sphere ran through her.

Sure enough, the chorus of insects that had continued unabated went silent. The Mushroomums, however, were unimpressed, and she had to duck behind a boulder to avoid being skewered again. Why wouldn’t they give up?

And they weren’t taking prisoners...

She remained under cover until one of them worked its way around to get a throwing angle on her. She scooted around to keep the rock between them, then peeked above the rock. Several spears clacked against the stone, but she got a good visual on where the nearest ones were approaching from.

She didn’t want to be hunted down, and she spotted a spot that would make throws hard for the others while she engaged the two Mushroomums on the path. Focusing another burst of **[Power]** into her muscles, she jumped out and put her plan into action.

It seemed like a good plan at the time, but the large overbearing Mushroomum she collided with almost changed her mind. Before she could rethink things, it jabbed its spear at her. She used her own to stab back at it, the fungal wood shafts flexing as the two weapons collided. A thick scent of musk assailed her nose, but she had little time to consider the smell as she was forced to dodge another attack.

The skill difference was evident; the thing wrapped its weapon and smacked her hand with the tip, cutting her hold and causing her to drop her weapon.

Time seemed to slow down as she did the only instinctive defense she had: Dump more **[Power]** into her body to make herself stronger and faster.

It worked.

The motion of the Mushroomum’s spear seemed to slow down so much she was able to reach out and grab it. She yanked hard on it, and it pulled her toward her with it before it jerked out of his grasp entirely.

Stepping forward, she slammed her shoulder into the opponent that had towered over her; it lifted him off his feet and he slammed into the cavern wall then fell with a heavy thump. Reaching down, she grabbed the purloined weapon.

[You have gained a rank in Improvised Combat!]

[Village Defender – Mushroomum – Level 21 has been defeated!]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

A fit of anger took over her, and she raised the spear to jab the man in the chest and make sure he couldn't chase after her ever again. Hadn't he intended to do exactly that to her? The stupid creature looked ugly and smelled bad, and its sheer strangeness called out for her to put an end to it.

Elania let out a deep breath and lowered the weapon.

Wasn't she the invader here, though? And she'd threatened their livestock.

A desperate plea came out as a shout, even if she didn't expect it to help. "Let's stop fighting? I never wanted to fight any of you. Just let me go!"

Of course, it didn't work. A spear clacked against the cavern wall overhead, and she moved away from the incapacitated Mushroomum. She tried to move up through the cavern, but every ramp and direction was covered by more hunters.

The only way left was down towards the stream, so she took it.

The Mushroomums apparently had no mercy for Elnat Stompers.

She traced her way around the pool of water, where the stream disappeared into the rock. There were multiple boulders that were tall enough to take cover behind and she found a small cover in the corner where there was only one line of approach they'd be able to attack from.

If she'd been cornered before, now she was trapped.

At least she had a chokepoint.

A chorus of Mushroomum cries filled the air before going silent. She watched the only way into the copse closely for several minutes. The thought that maybe they were like game mobs and she'd lost aggro hit her. Maybe she'd be fine?

The danger of thinking that everything worked like a video game became apparent when two warriors appeared, backed up by two more behind them. Each set linked their shields together and slowly approached with their spears leveled straight at her.

Elania took a few deep breaths as a cold calm filled her. She raised her spear and pointed it back at them. "I don't want to fight. Please leave me alone."

Her voice was surprisingly calm. It didn't have any effect, but at least she had tried. "Don't blame me if you get hurt," she added. They approached silently. One gestured as if he was about to throw, but she remained limber on her feet and the throw turned into a feint.

When they were halfway to her, she decided to strike first. There didn't seem to be any point in holding back, so she channeled her **[Power]** hard; draining it even more. She hadn't been checking how much she had left, but it was probably scarily low and she didn't need more distraction.

She slid to the side and then caught both forward spears under her armpit, then slammed them into the ground and pushed. The shafts snapped as she jabbed her spear straight for the front Mushroom's shield. Instead of focusing the power into her arm, she forced it into the tip; the wood turned a solid yellow then ignited before punching through the leather covered shield and into the man's chest.

[You have gained a rank in Improvised Combat!]

[Hunter – Mushroom – Level 18 has been defeated!]

[You have gained a level!]

The other one pushed forward to slam into her with its shield, that pushed her back and when she tried to pull her weapon out, it was stuck. She forced her strength in her arm higher and the weapon snapped in two, leaving the pointy end still lodged in her opponent.

The broken shaft served well enough as a weapon, though. She grabbed the shield, pushing her back and slammed the broken spear into the Mushroom's head like a club. Multiple times.

It punched back at her regardless, managing a disorienting blow to her head, but the shoving stopped. She pushed forward with even more force, pushing it backwards only for the second pair of the attack to arrive and stab at her from both sides. She spun to the side and dodged one, the other one sliced into her leg.

Elania realized she was getting slower. Her pushed of **[Power]** had less and less effect each time and she was probably running on empty. As the spear slid out of her leg, she grabbed the shaft and pulled it; the warrior didn't let go, but that was fine. The off balancing put him directly into the path of his compatriot and they fell to the ground in a mushroom heap.

She stepped back to gain some space and pick up a discarded spear on the ground. During the lull, four more Mushrooms appeared, shields and spears raised.

There was no end to them, and she could tell she was almost spent.

The three she'd knocked about began to pick themselves up and rearm themselves with things on the ground that weren't broken or shattered.

She looked for a way out, but of course she'd put herself in a corner because she had nowhere else to go. Unless so many of them came in after her she could run around them?

They had formed a column of two wide and four deep, and that was a good amount. Maybe it would be enough. Channeling a burst of power into her legs, she jumped up to the large stones surrounding the cubby hole and pulled herself up.

Almost immediately, spears began to clack into the rock around her feet. One spear hit her, leaving another gash, but she shook it loose and the weapon fell to the ground.

Being on top of a large stone, in plain view of much of the cavern, was a bad place to be.

There were also a lot more Mushroomums looking up at her than she had expected; dozens and dozens of them, all armed with spears.

They stared back at her for a second before the quicker ones began to aim at her.

When the tidal wave of projectiles came, she jumped out of the way.

That landed her in the pool of water, rapidly draining out of the cavern and into the rock below.

The suction was much stronger than she had expected as it pulled her under the water.

CHAPTER 15—HUNTER’S CALL

[**Darkvision**] didn’t work very well underwater.

The sudden plunge into the underground river took Elania by surprise, sharp rock biting into her skin as she was swallowed by the violent current. The vortex whirled her around without mercy, and her chaotic flailing was useless.

Her lungs screamed for air as they filled with water instead of the much-desired oxygen. A primal panic gripped her, and she instinctively curled up into a ball and tried to cover her head. Each painful collision knocked her senses awry until she realized she wasn’t passing out from the lack of oxygen—it was the violent impacts hurting her the most.

Suddenly something hard struck her head, and everything went black.

The first sensation that registered when she regained consciousness was a coldness in her core. It made it hard for her to react. She opened her eyes and realized that she was floating face down in a pool of water.

She wasn’t breathing. Her lungs were full of water, and her entire body ached with exhaustion.

Reaching out, her fingertips found purchase on a stone, and she pulled herself out of the pool and onto the rocky bank. Multiple [**System**] messages popped up, vying for her attention, but her mind swam with a fogginess that made it hard to think.

When she tried to breathe, her entire body tensed up, and then she vomited and choked out a copious amount of water. It took several minutes for the coughing spree to end, and that left her feeling exhausted. Instead of trying to stand, she rolled over onto her back and spread her arms out, lazily looking up at the ceiling.

The familiar glow moss of the previous cavern was gone. The chamber she had ended up in was devoid of its ambient light. Faint colored shimmers of red, blue, and yellow

contrasted heavily against the near pitch blackness. Apparently, her **[Darkvision]** had stopped working, and that left her nearly blind in the dark.

As she settled, she finally pulled up her full **[Status]** screen and discarded messages.

[Your power is low. Your toggleable skills have been deactivated automatically.]

Well, that explained the darkness.

It was nice to know there was an auto-shutoff when she was unconscious that would prevent her from draining herself to death. Although since she'd healed from the impacts in her water-slide down to wherever-the-hells-she-was-now it was obvious that it didn't apply to **[Regeneration]**.

Or maybe the **[System]** was smart enough to know what to turn on and off? Probably not, and definitely something to count on.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 11 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 26/152]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration)]

[Class: Survivor]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank A), Stealth (Rank D), Survival Crafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Deactivated), Mana Manipulation (Rank B)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Deactivated)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank D), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank E)]

Elania stared at the small amount of **[Power]** she was left with. No wonder she felt like shit. Flicking her **[Darkvision]** back to brighten the chamber into clarity.

She needed to rest and recover her power. It was a miracle that her dagger hadn't jabbed her to death during the chase and fighting. Reaching into her pockets for her mana shard, her heart stopped.

They were empty. No dagger. No mana shard.

She looked around; the shard gave off its own light so should have been easy to spot. She flicked her **[Darkvision]** off and on several times to look for anything, giving off a bright white light, but she didn't see anything nearby.

An unwelcome "Glua-Glaa!" froze her in place. Crouching down behind a rock she hid, while a group of Mushroomums passed by. They didn't see, smell, or seem to sense her, so she remained hidden.

[You have gained a rank in Stealth!]

Another Mushroomum came from the other direction and met the group. It held up a glowing stone.

No. A mana shard.

Her mana shard!

Anger licked at her as the Mushroomums pawed at her mana shard eagerly. The noises they made grew louder, and it seemed they were having an argument. About who would get to keep the stone, probably. At least that was what she got from the gestures flying between the one who looked like the leader and the one who had found it.

Not only had they chased her from their cavern and tried to murder her violently, now they were stealing the one thing she really, really needed to stay alive!

Panic followed quickly as the group seemed to come to a consensus. The leader pocketed the shard, and they all turned to leave.

She followed them from a distance, doing her best to stay silent and unnoticed. The caverns were completely unfamiliar to her, and the flora and fauna had changed shape and color. The ever-present presence of the glow moss was gone, replaced by sharper looking ceiling rocks and smaller patches of mushrooms that glowed with a red light.

Several times there was evidence of bones and long dead-creatures, but she ignored them. It took most of her focus to keep her thieves in sight without losing them. Eventually, they came to a larger chamber. One of the walls had a large gate cut in it. The ancient stone was propped up by a massive fungal growth that sealed it off, tendrils growing in long roots in every direction.

It was recognizable: the same sort of thing had been what blocked her path back in the Bone Demon area when she had tried to escape. When the Mushroomums reached the portal, she realized what the fungal growth was. It was a door, or well, a gate!

The flesh parted on its own as they approached and allowed them in, before sealing itself shut.

Sealed shut with her mana shard inside!

At least she knew where their lair was now. Apparently, she had been sleeping and staying right beside it. Things made a bit more sense to her now; she'd been sleeping in a cavern right beside their base. That didn't explain the Bone Demon, or its nest packed full of Ralfot and Elnat bones. Maybe it just stayed hidden and struck periodically?

Elania shook her head and stopped worrying about it. The Bone Demon was dead; she'd eaten it. Now she needed to come up with a plan to get back her mana shard. Creeping at the edge of the Mushroomum's base wasn't going to do that, so she turned and sneaked away.

She wasn't sure where she was in relation to the cave before, anyway. Although she figured it was likely close, considering how close the pool was to the Mushroomums and how fast they'd showed up to look for her. If she was lucky, they probably thought she was long gone or dead and wouldn't be searching for her anymore.

The thought put a bit of spring into her step. She didn't want to get cornered by the Mushroom Mob again, at least not until she was ready...but...

Her hopes died a little. How was she going to get ready? She wasn't even sure she'd be able to get more **[Power]** without the stone, or finding and killing another demon. That wasn't happening when she was on her last leg.

She couldn't let the defeatist thoughts determine what she did. First thing's first: she needed to hunt something down, like a Ralfot or Elnant, and see if she could absorb it. That meant she needed a weapon.

On the ground nearby, she noticed a rock that was a good shape for throwing. She picked it up and pocketed it.

She needed something sharp that she could use to cut the fungal trees with. Their wood was very soft, so she figured a sharp rock would work. Finding one of those was much more challenging. At first she searched near the stream bank, but she realized everything there was smooth from the water. That was the opposite of her intentions, but she gathered a few more throwing stones.

Elania set off deeper into the caverns, searching for something that would work. The stream led to a new chamber, a mix of the two environments that she'd become familiar with, although this one didn't have any Elnats or Ralfots. **[Jelly]** floated near the glow moss covered ceiling, though.

Picking her way across the chamber, she spotted a side of the cavern that looked sharp and jagged and homed in on it. When she got closer, the cause of the jaggedness became apparent. It looked like some massive creature had raked its claws into the stone.

She knew from reading some random internet articles that what she really wanted was flint. That was supposed to be the caveman material of choice. The only problem was she had no idea what flint looked like, if there would be any present underground in caves like she was in, and there was a skill to using it called knapping that she did not know how to do.

Eying the rock, she decided to just go with the first thing that looked good. There was a vertical sheet of rock that was relatively thin and ended in a wedge. It was attached to a bigger rock, though. She pulled on it and tried to snap it off; that failed miserably. She didn't want to burn **[Power]** to force it, so she pulled out the throwing rock in her pocket and smacked it.

That seemed more promising, so she repeated. A lot.

The pounding echoed through the cavern, giving away her position. That made her nervous and encouraged her to go faster, and when it finally broke and went flying, she felt excited relief. Snatching up her new rock wedge, she went straight to the nearest fungal growth tree.

The wedge left a lot to be desired. It was much harder to use than the steel dagger had been, but she got a sizable length of the wood from the trunk that would be shaped into a spear shaft. One wasn't going to be enough; she gathered five more then bundled them all under her arm.

Working out in the open was not an appealing prospect, so she decided to search for a more sheltered alcove. There were tons of them in the cavern, but she decided to go to the next chamber further away from Mushroom land.

In one of the darker caverns she found a spot with a raised outcropping cut into the side, with a nifty chamber further back that was hidden from view. Even better, it didn't really have any fungus or other stuff. It was bare stone. The darkness didn't bother her, and not having to worry about unknown plant rashes was a major bonus.

She got to work as soon as she sat down, using the rock wedge to carve one of the fungal shafts. It was not easy; she deeply regretted the loss of her dagger as a carving tool.

The first one was mangled, but she was rewarded anyway with a **[System]** rank-up message, and a snarky line from **[Identify]**.

[Very Crude Makeshift Spear]

[You have gained a Rank in Survival Crafting!]

The next spear was marginally better. At least it had a pointy end. So did the third, which netted her Rank C.

[You have gained a Rank in Survival Crafting!]

The next two actually looked good. Even **[Identify]** recognized her efforts.

[Makeshift Spear]

At least a little. They were about the same quality as the nice one she'd made with the steel dagger, despite having far inferior tools. Whether that was just her getting practice in making them and using the stone wedge, or if it was the awesome **[Survival Crafting]** skill at play, who knew?

One thing that had been bothering her was the 'skill slotting' that the three skills she'd picked up had. It seemed fairly straightforward that 'slotting' did something to the skill, although exactly what wasn't clear.

If slotting improved the skill, then what she really wanted was one of her better skills in there. It was sort of clear that even with **[Survival Crafting]** whatever she made was a bit... garbage compared to say, having better **[Mana Manipulation]** or maybe even **[Demonic Aura]**, especially offensively.

Ideally, she'd be able to swap them out when needed, but something told her that there was probably some sort of restriction on moving the skills in and out, otherwise why bother having the slots at all?

Elania closed her eyes and tried to think 'Unslot!' really hard at her **[Survival Crafting]** skill. It made her feel stupid when nothing happened. Frustrated, she tried again using different wordings. She even tried pulling up her **[Status]** screen and pulling the skill off the hologram. It was ethereal and she couldn't touch it, though.

She reached her maximum threshold and cursed at it. "Fucking unslot, you piece of shit! Put **[Mana Manipulation]** there!"

[Survival Crafting has been unslotted. Mana Manipulation has filled the slot.]

[You have two slot replacements remaining. Slot cooldown has 23 hours remaining.]

Her jaw dropped.

It worked!

All it took was to specify what skill was replacing the unslotted one! She guessed that might be so you couldn't have any empty slots, for some reason. She wasn't sure why it mattered. Either way, it was time to test it somehow. She looked over to the last remaining **[Fungal Wood]** shaft that she hadn't crafted into a spear yet.

She went to work.

[Crude Makeshift Spear]

Elania winced. It was worse than her last two products, but better than the first ones. So, the skill had definitely had some effect... or was it a placebo? Had she just not focused hard enough on it?

Fuck, she hated this world. Where were all the hard numbers? Definitive stats that she could use to determine the optimal thing to do?

Not that she was good at math.

But she was pretty good at following build guides in whatever MMORPG was recent.

She started to set down her spear when she suddenly froze. Two sparkling yellow eyes shined at her from a dozen feet away. The owner stopped creeping closer when it noticed her jerk.

[Darkwalker]

The thing resembled a panther; an oversized one. Color was hard to determine without natural light, but the second she locked eyes with it, the predator pounced. Elania pulled her spear up to place it between them. Somehow, she got it in place before the feline shape landed on her.

There was a squelch as the point jabbed into the creature's torso; the shaft braced against the stone she'd been leaning against and bending dangerously. The weapon dug home and finally found a soft point between one of the darkwalker's ribs. A vicious, hateful snarl exploded in her face, splattering her with spittle.

Its claws raked her side, but she grabbed it by the throat.

It slammed her against the rock wall, scraping her back. A heavy swat tried to bash her away, but she shoved **[Power]** into her arms. It wasn't much because she was so low on it... but it was enough.

Her fingers dug into the animal's flesh and then a sick sounding crunch echoed in the cave. Her opponent went limp.

She'd crushed its spine.

Blood pooled all over her, half of it hers. She shoved the beast off of her and her wounds burned as they slowly stopped bleeding and knitted back together. It wasn't like the instant healing she'd had before.

When the Darkwalker's eyes glazed over, a new message appeared.

[Do you wish to absorb the darkwalker Essence? Y/N]

Her entire body tensed up. That was not the same message as when she'd absorbed the Bone Demon's 'lingering power' or whatever. If demons were the only way to recharge, and she couldn't get her mana shard back or find a new one...

She accepted the message. Half the blood spattered on her began to glow and disintegrate along with the corpse. Little gold motes floated into the air before gathering and then flying into her chest. It was pretty, but nothing was more beautiful or relieving than the message that appeared before her.

[You have absorbed 15 Power!]

[You have gained a level in Stealth!]

[You have gained darkwalker Affinity!]

[Consume more darkwalker Essence to enable darkwalker Transformation!]

Losing the materials from the carcass wasn't ideal; maybe she'd eventually need some hides for making something. Except she had no fucking clue how to go about it, really. She had a vague idea that you needed brains or something to tan it, but she suspected there was a level of nuance and knowledge she simply lacked for attempting it.

Actually, having the thing dissolve into nothing while boosting her power was probably ideal for her current abilities. That she'd gained a rank in a skill from it... was a pretty nice bonus. More stealth seemed like a great thing to pick up.

She wasn't sure what Affinity meant, but the transformation bit was worrying. It was a different term from the previously offered 'evolutions' and it didn't sound as permanent.

Her sides pinched as they quickly began to heal with the sudden extra **[Power]** she'd gained. Still slower than when she'd been overloaded, however. It just meant she needed to hunt more creatures. It seemed her transformation into a Lesser Demon meant she was on a carnivore diet now.

She fixed up her robe, which had grown a bit more tattered; it was torn in a dozen places now, but it was the best she had.

If she wanted to survive, she knew what she needed to do now.

She gathered up her spears and held them under her left arm. The best one went in her right hand. She could use it as a walking stick...and a weapon to hunt with.

It was time to hunt.

CHAPTER 16 – THE HUNT

Hunting was not as simple as Elania had thought it would be. Going out and just wandering through the various caverns aimlessly allowed her to build up a mental map of the region, but prey eluded her. She guessed that the Ralfots and Elnats were all hidden away under the protection of the Mushroomums near their village, meaning it was too dangerous to go after them.

She had seen no wild specimens of the two species, so she had started to think about taking on something larger, like the **[Darkwalker]** that had attacked her.

In one cave, she found a weird-looking plant that had long but flexible rods. The **[Fenrod]** stalks seemed perfect for weaving something useful out of them, and she carefully constructed a frame from them using small strips of cloth from her dwindling supply to secure the construction. The wicker frame was sturdy and flexible by the time she was done, but since the most common weapon she'd faced was spears, she felt it needed reinforcing.

Using her wedge rock, she stripped some wide boards off of a fungal tree and then used a small amount of **[Power]** to fuse the soft wood to the frame rods.

[Primitive Shield]

At least it hadn't given it the 'crude' moniker. She wondered if the result would have been better if she'd slotted **[Survival Crafting]** back, but the cooldown on swapping slotted skills made her hesitate to do so.

She was looking for a fight, after all.

Searching more caves didn't yield any results, and she was growing bored. But not tired. Her **[Power]** was on a timer and slowly eroding. The fight with the darkwalker had been only slightly beneficial. She'd burned 12 power killing it and only gained 15. That was a

bad ratio, and she needed to ambush whatever she fought and try to conserve as much **[Power]** as possible while doing so.

Projectile weapons would be ideal, but the throwing stones didn't seem like they'd be effective. She needed more javelin spears.

If she had a lot of them, there would be no need to hesitate to throw them at whatever she came across. She needed that advantage. Her aim wasn't very good. It never had been, really.

Giving up her fruitless hunt for a while, Elania aimed for some more of the **[Fungal Growth]** trees that were so common. Her wedge rock came out, and she began furiously scraping away at one of the larger ones. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty shafts later, she felt satisfied and bundled them up in her arms and carried them off to a cave corner and got to work.

Before she started though, she wanted to swap out a skill for **[Survival Crafting]**.

[Mana Manipulation] was just too important to consider dropping, and she never knew when something was going to attack, so she didn't want to give up her **[Improvised Combat]** either.

[Stealth has been unslotted. Survival Crafting has filled the slot.]

[You have one slot replacement remaining. Slot cooldown has 23 hours remaining.]

Oh. That was an interesting new tidbit. The cooldown for the slot change had reset with her new switch... meaning she had to wait another 23 hours to get her full three swaps back. If she swapped another skill before then, the 23 hours would reset a third time and she'd be stuck with what she had picked until the cooldown was up.

Still, that didn't derail her current plan to craft the javelins and then re-slot **[Stealth]** for the next round of 'Hunting' that she hoped would be... a little more productive.

Going through the big stack of spears took a while. The quality seemed very subtle, unfortunately. All of them came out as **[Makeshift Javelin]** without the crude moniker, so that was good. She wondered what it would take to get an 'excellent' or some other prefix. If that was even possible?

Armed with the stack of makeshift javelins, Elania set out once more into the cavernous network. Her newly crafted shield hung awkwardly from her shoulder, but it was the best defensive thing she could come up with. Re-slotting her **[Stealth]** skill set her cooldown back to 23 hours, and she was officially out of swaps until it reached zero.

A few more caverns turned up nothing but **[Jelly]** and a few insect swarms. She was about to move on when the smell hit her. It was the smell of rot and decay. Something had died. Or just smelled terrible.

Scouring the area turned up a half-eaten Ralfot carcass. Bugs squirmed in its flesh, and she quickly dismissed the thought of approaching any closer to see if she could absorb it, anyway. She hurried to a safe distance away and then fought to keep from vomiting. Nothing came out, though, just dry heaves.

That was probably because she no longer ate or drank anything.

There simply weren't any big herds like she'd found near the Mushroom village. Probably because things like the darkwalker ate them, so they had to hide. Heck, she was hunting them; there were predators and it only made sense to keep hidden.

When she entered the next cavern, the gloss moss on the ceiling was shining extra brightly, enough to actually hurt her eyes a little. Covering her face with a forearm, she moved to a more shaded spot so she could survey the area.

A stream ran through the rock, patches of green moss growing along the back all the way to a large pond. She froze when she spotted the first creature. It looked like a **[Ralfot]**, and she realized there was a whole herd of them. So much for her theory of no herds—they were probably just widely spread out.

Unlike their domesticated cousins, this group was absolutely silent. Which made sense. She crouched down and did her best to avoid being spotlighted by the bright patches of moss as she worked her way around to a ledge that overlooked the water.

All the Ralfots had their heads down, taking big gulps of water and sniffing some of the mushrooms and plants near the water's edge.

Except one. A big one, with a massive coat of shaggy white moss-hair that reached the ground. It read as a normal **[Ralfot]**, as well, but she suspected it was the bull. The large pair of horns that curled inward on themselves almost guaranteed it in her mind, anyway.

As she got a better look from above, the differences between these Ralfots and the domesticated ones became even more apparent. Their coats were shaggier and longer. It looked like some of them had been in rough fights and had major scars, and one was even missing an eye.

That jived with how rough a place she'd learned the underworld caverns could be.

She set down her stack of javelins silently, then counted. There were eleven of them. That was a pretty scary number. If they decided to run around and up to the ledge as a group, she'd be hard pressed to not be forced to flee rather embarrassingly.

But she'd made a lot of javelins. She had twenty-five ready, and she felt like she could probably take down one of the beasts with two or three good throws.

She set her shield down and prepared herself mentally. A bit of guilt washed over her. Everything she had killed had tried to murder her first—this was the first time she was going to be the aggressor. She didn't really count stomping on the Elnat an aggression; that had been an accident.

She took three javelins in her left hand, then readied another in her throwing arm. Nervous energy coursed through her as she stood up, took aim, and threw at the nearest **[Ralfot]**.

The throw was bad. She could see that before the weapon even made it halfway to the target, so she quickly took aim again and threw a second one. Then a third.

The first one clacked on the rocks loudly. All the Ralfots froze and lifted their heads, looking for danger. The second throw sank into her target's flank, right in the big muscle of its back left leg. It let out a pained "Moobaaa!"

[Throwing Rank E has been unlocked.]

The herd bolted like she had expected. Straight for her and the ledge. The aggression was surprising, but they didn't angle to go around and up to get to her, instead several smashed into the stock outcropping. The ground shook slightly, but it wasn't very effective.

Elania revised the intelligence of the **[Ralfot]** downward, considerably.

Their stupidity gave her a good chance, though. They were so close it was hard to miss, and she shoved a bit of **[Power]** into her arm to increase her strength. Javelin after javelin rained down on the herd.

[You have gained a rank in Throwing!]

That was nice. The skill was easy to level. She definitely needed whatever advantage it gave; her aim was admittedly bad.

When she had three more solid hits, which took over half her javelins, the Ralfots finally realized that she was a predator they couldn't deal with, and the herd scrambled to escape out of the cavern.

They quickly charged out of her range, except for one she had wounded heavily. It made it a little way away from the pond before collapsing onto its side. She gathered her five remaining javelins and jumped down and hurried over to the carcass. She touched it and accepted the absorption request quickly.

[You have gained a level!]

[You have absorbed 11 Power!]

[You have gained a rank in Crisis Management!]

[You have gained Ralfot Affinity!]

[Consume more Ralfot Essence to enable Ralfot Transformation!]

She shook her head. There wasn't time to think about why Ralfots rewarded Crisis Management. Or any reason to think about transforming into one.

There were two more wounded Ralfots. She'd watched them run away with the rest of the herd with javelins sticking out of them. Sprinting over to where she saw them disappear, there was another cavern. Blood drippings on the ground provided a line to follow, and she did just that.

Not blindly, though. She didn't want to run into the angry herd and give them an easy target to attack. Keeping a careful eye out, she pushed forward cautiously.

In the next chamber she spotted a **[Ralfot]** on its side, puffing heavily. The wound had been enough to slowly take it down. The rest of its family was nowhere to be seen. Elania stepped up to the thing's head, and it made a pitiful cry as its eyes rolled wildly at the sight of her.

A frown crossed her face. "I'm sorry they left you behind. I'll end things fast."

Not trusting her soft wood javelin, she knelt down, then pushed a flare of **[Power]** into her fist before slamming it into the animal's skull. It was crushed between the blow and the stone, and it went limp.

[You have absorbed 12 Power!]

[You have gained a rank in Crisis Management!]

[You have gained Ralfot Affinity!]

[Consume more Ralfot Essence to enable Ralfot Transformation!]

There was one more left. She was pretty sure she got it good as well. The trail of blood continued further into the cavern, and she followed it. It led to another transition, but this area was full of glowing red plants. Her eyes adjusted to the light, but it made it very hard to spot the red blood trail that was leaving a thinner and thinner coat on the rocks.

That wasn't good.

Giving up didn't sit well with her, though, and she put a lot of effort into searching. Eventually, her perseverance was rewarded with a new, very useful sounding skill.

[Tracking Rank E has been unlocked.]

She was racking up new skills at a rapid pace, but she would have traded some of that for more **[Power]**, the Bone Demon had given much, much more and it was going to

take hunting a lot more creatures than she had thought to reach her maximum. Especially since it had leveled up so much when she had been overloading with the mana shard.

The blood trail crisscrossed through a half dozen more caverns, and she began to feel frustration. Just how far was the thing going to run? The blood trail had nearly gone dry, so the wound had probably nearly stopped bleeding. She hadn't spotted the javelin, but that didn't mean it hadn't somehow dislodged the weapon and she had just missed it.

Just when she was about to give up the chase, she spotted her quarry lying on its side near an incline up to another cavern entrance. "Yes!" she mumbled out loud, excitement getting the better of her.

Unlike the second **[Ralfot]**, this one wasn't moving or awake.

Her javelin had been removed from its corpse and was lying on the ground, and as she moved closer, she immediately saw that someone had been slicing off the animal's skin. A familiar musky scent filled the air, as did a loud "Glua-Glaa?"

Immediately, she went into a crouch and crossed to a shadowy area along the cave wall. She moved forward slowly until she spotted the source. A Mushroomum was looking around, maybe for the sound she made, a metal knife held in its hand.

[Hunter – Mushroomum – Level 22]

She stopped and watched it look around. Maybe her **[Stealth]** skill was working because it looked directly toward her several times, but its gaze passed her right by. After a few moments, it went back to the **[Ralfot]** corpse and went back to work.

He had stolen her kill. Anger at another theft filled her, but she quickly suppressed it. Still, she didn't want to give up the **[Power]** the carcass would provide, even if it was reduced due to the damage and state.

Looking back over her shoulder, she confirmed an escape route was clear, then moved forward, doing the best she could to remain silent and stealthy. It worked until she was very, very close.

She stepped out of the shadows and shouted. "Hey!"

The hunter was so startled it fell backwards from its crouch. Its two yellow eyes focused on her immediately and it held up its knife, pointing it at her. "Glaa-Glaa!"

A stinky smell filled the air.

Maybe she'd just made the mushroom man shit himself?

Elania pointed at the Ralfot. "That's mine!"

"Glaa?" The smell became less pungent, but still bad. More worryingly, it slid its knife into its belt and then grabbed its discarded spear.

Elania readied her own weapon. If he choose violence, she was ready to end things quickly, and she wouldn't feel bad at all about it. Stealing from her was one thing, but then fighting her over her kill was another.

Her grip tightened on her weapon. "We are all just fighting to survive, but that belongs to me!"

"Glaa-Glaa!" came the reply.

Frustration filled her, but then she froze as she noticed movement behind the Mushroomum. Two yellow eyes crept forward.

She realized that her attempt at an inter-species communication breakthrough would have to wait.

The **[Darkwalker]** roared and pounced on the hunter's back.

CHAPTER 17 – DIPLOMACY

Elania watched in frozen horror as the Darkwalker descended upon the unsuspecting Mushroomum. The cavern echoed with a guttural roar as the beast completed its pounce, slashing at the hunter's back with vicious abandon. Reflexively, she tightened the grip on her ready javelin.

A flurry of panicked "Glaa-Glaa!" filled the air as the Mushroomum was thrown to his knees under the brutal assault. The Darkwalker loomed over him menacingly in the dim light and went for a bite.

Acting on instinct rather than logic, Elania rushed towards them. She threw the javelin in her hand at them, but it went wide and high and clacked against the cave wall ineffectually. Reaching another javelin, she tossed the bundle with the rest of them onto the ground so she could wield her weapon with both hands.

As she closed in, she noted how the struggle evolved into something less one-sided. Despite being taken by surprise and being slashed and bitten already, the Mushroomum shook the Darkwalker off its back and grab its nearby weapon.

His skin bore deep gashes, and dark green blood welled up and oozed out slowly like a strange jelly. As the mushroom man spun around, the Darkwalker didn't hesitate to continue the attack. He barely raised the spear and jammed the handle crosswise into the Darkwalker's gaping maw, preventing it from biting down on his throat.

Both went falling backwards in a tumble, and Elania reoriented and continued her charge.

The Darkwalker adjusted immediately, clawed feet raking the man's torso savagely. It was so preoccupied with its prey that it didn't notice her. She remained silent right up to

the moment where she slammed her javelin into the beast's side, right behind its front leg. The sharp point sunk deep into flesh.

The Darkwalker reacted instantly, jumping off and rolling, causing the weapon to bend almost to snapping before it slipped out. A gush of blood exploded like a pulsating geyser, and the creature let out a pained shriek.

[You have gained a rank in Improvised Combat!]

[You have reached the maximum available rank in Improvised Combat!]

[Consider developing a more advanced skill!]

Leaping off the Mushroomum, the Darkwalker nearly collapsed when it landed, but regained its feet and turned to run.

The Mushroomum stood up immediately and brandished its spear toward the Darkwalker, but it was clear the wounds had left it disoriented and dazed.

The thought that the wound she had given the creature was enough to kill it proved wrong when it suddenly spun around and charged again—directly at her. Elania took a step back in surprise, startled by the new attack.

Disarmed, she did her best to dodge, jumping out of the way as it pounced on her. Scrambling back toward her javelins, it chased. It was faster, but she pulled out a throwing stone and infused **[Power]** into her arm as she tossed it. The throw was bad and she was weak, but the Darkwalker was so close she couldn't miss, and the stone thwacked heavily into its feline torso, knocking it off its feet.

It gave her enough time to reach her weapons, but before she could throw, it was on her flank. She dodged sideways into a roll before slashing at it, but its claws raked her forearm heavily as it slid underneath the weapon.

A yelp-turned-curse escaped her as she tripped as she backpedaled out of the roll, and then it jumped on her. Its back foot clawed her thigh and it swiped at her face.

She blocked that with the shaft of her spear, and when it tried to lunge down and bite her neck, she head-butted it in the nose.

Slamming her knee into its side in an attempt to flip it off of her didn't work. It was bigger than the first one she had fought and heavier than her by far. A hot roar blew in her face as it snapped at her.

Before she could react, a spearpoint slammed into the Darkwalker's side, spraying her with another coating of blood. This one died rapidly, and she could immediately feel the creature weaken.

The Mushroomum! She'd completely forgotten about him in the melee!

She rolled again. This time it was like dealing with a dead weight; there was a final growl then she saw the Darkwalker's eyes glaze over.

It was dead.

[Do you wish to absorb the darkwalker Essence? Y/N]

Yes, she did; she scrambled to her feet and turned on the Mushroomum as the process took over.

[You have absorbed 15 Power!]

[You have gained a level in Stealth!]

[You have gained Darkwalker Affinity!]

[Consume more Darkwalker Essence to enable darkwalker Transformation!]

It watched her closely as the **[Darkwalker]** dissolved into energetic motes that melded into her skin. Blood dripped from the hunter's spear, and he slowly backed away from her toward the **[Ralfot]** carcass and the hides he had been preparing.

Riiight. She'd helped him on impulse, but that didn't mean she had accomplished her goal. It was still to be seen if this would help communications or if the Mushroomum would be thankful. Maybe he thought he hadn't needed her help?

Too bad her 'Universal' speech skill seemed to be about as universal as a ten-year-old, out-of-date tv controller.

Her small wounds had already healed, and he looked the worse for wear, though. His gaping injuries weren't bleeding profusely, though. Most of them had sealed up, probably because whatever 'blood' the mushroom man had was very thick.

How exactly their biology worked, she had no idea.

"Glaa-Glaa." A sickly sweet scent she'd not smelled before filled the area, and she realized it emanated from the Mushroomum. Come to think of it, the mushroom men seemed to suddenly smell more whenever they talked. Maybe that was a hint?

"Stop." Elania ordered.

The Mushroomum did so, turning toward her while still holding his weapon.

She moved around him, keeping a safe distance and then got between him and the Ralfot. "It belongs to me. I need it."

"Glaa." There was a sharp odor. But the Mushroomum didn't approach, but its focus lingered on the hides it had been preparing.

Elania frowned. It wasn't like they were going to be of much use to her. They probably would be if she knew how to tan them or make things from them, but she had never

taken primitive survival lessons back home other than watching random documentaries on Discovery or National Geographic.

The exchange cycled frustratingly between “Glaa” and “Mine” in an annoyingly consistent manner until she knelt down and picked up the hides. The system labeled them **[High-Quality Ralfot Skin]** which proved that there were higher quality levels, but she was probably just too bad to make them.

The Mushroomum tensed up. She pointed to his knife. “Trade.”

He tilted his head. She tried again, but there was still no understanding.

Deciding to take another tack, Elania knelt down and put the skins between them. Pointing at his knife, she demanded again. “Trade.”

He finally seemed to get the idea and knelt down as well, drawing the knife from his belt and placing it opposite of the hides. She pushed the stack of them towards him slowly.

Instead of copying her gesture with the knife, he reached out and pulled the hides to himself. He reached out to take the blade back as well, but her hand snapped over to it and snatched it.

“No! You don’t get both.” Elania warned.

“Glaa-Glaa-Glaa!” That didn’t seem to make him happy, which meant she got doused in a musky smelling rot. Ugh. She did not like mushroom men!

“It’s a trade. You don’t get both,” she repeated.

He wobbled multiple times, then it seemed to finally click. He pulled off his leather belt and put it down on the ground, then pointed at the knife. “Glaa!”

Elania rubbed the side of her head and considered. The knife was made of crude metal, not nearly the quality of her steel dagger, but it would still be very useful.

On the other hand, making another trade would probably improve their communication, and the hides for the knife seemed a little unfair. The belt would be helpful for carrying things as well.

Ultimately, she decided to acquiesce, even though she wanted the knife and the belt.

The trade went off without a hitch this time.

She examined the belt. It had a metal buckle and three small empty pouches. It also had a loop for the knife sheath, but the Mushroomum had kept that part. The knife sheath went with the knife, she supposed, so she didn’t object.

But she really wanted the knife, too. Looking back at the carcass, she pointed to it, then to his knife. “Trade.”

This prompted confusion. She cleared it up by standing up and walking over to the carcass. It was easily twice her size, and definitely heavy. She channeled **[Power]** through her limbs and lifted it easily. The offer to absorb appeared even though the carcass wasn't intact, but she denied it.

Dumping the carcass at his feet, Elania pointed at the knife again. "Trade."

She got her knife.

Rather than disappearing immediately, she moved away to a safe distance and watched. He kept a wary gaze on her as he went back to his work preparing the carcass. It turned out he had a second knife, this one made of bone, inside his big leather pack. That would have been nice to get, too, but she doubted that he'd accept the stones in her pockets for it, and she wanted to keep the belt and knife.

It turned out there were a lot more skins on the **[Ralfot]** left to harvest, and then came a dozen large steaks of meat. They oozed on the ground, and she didn't think it was exactly sanitary, but she realized that worrying about that might not be important to the mushroom men.

"You should have a name." Elania blurted out.

He looked at her, confused.

She hadn't really meant for him to understand. She was taking mostly to herself. "How about, Skinner? That's a good name. Plus, it's what you do."

Skinner replied with a predictable, "Glaa?"

It was a stupid thing to bother him with, but apparently, he didn't think so as he picked up one of the meat steaks and tossed it to her.

She winced. Was she a dog? Actually, she hadn't eaten in... well, a long time, but the meat didn't seem that appetizing. Her appetite had disappeared completely, she realized. She'd have rather had another dose of **[Power]**, if anything.

Elania's eyes widened. That wasn't quite correct, she realized. She had an appetite—for recharging her **[Power]** stat. It acted like her food and water. Heck, it even acted like her oxygen!

Did that mean she'd never be able to eat anything ever again? This was skirting too close to the idea that she actually was, in fact, a vampire thing. Or rather, a demon.

She eyed the steak and picked it up. It was gross as heck, and now there was a coating of cave dust on the bottom.

But she couldn't shake the thought.

She wanted the ability to enjoy food. That was a major part of being human!

Drinking water hadn't made her sick, so eating should be fine, right? Right?

"I'm going to leave you to it," Elania finally decided. The Mushroohum watched her go without a word, before returning to tending the **[Ralfot]**.

A new obstacle lay before her: how the heck was she going to make a campfire to cook with safely?

CHAPTER 18—STEAK AND INTROSPECTION

Elania made her way through the labyrinth of caverns, keeping an eye out for any signs of danger. Her senses were on high alert as she picked her way through the quiet buzz of the underground's flora and fauna. The meat would probably attract predators and she didn't want to run into another **[Darkwalker]** so she did her best to hurry while keeping out of sight.

Eventually, she found a small clearing surrounded by large boulders right in the center of a stream. The river stones had been scoured clean by the water, and the entire area lacked a coat of moss on the ceiling. The center of the boulders was dry, too.

It was a nice place to set as a fire-safe makeshift campsite.

Elania wasted no time getting to work. First, she fetched water from the stream, and rinsed the meat thoroughly, removing the lingering dirt and grime that had attached itself. She left it on a javelin skewer leaning against the boulder wall. Then she gathered wood from a nearby **[Tower Cap]** that was harder than the normal fungal growths.

It was harder to cut its flesh, but with the metal knife, it was possible. It had a harder texture and was less springy, but was also less fleshy and wet. With a little help, she thought it would burn.. She had a little idea on how to use tinder to start a fire. She'd never have attempted it without a lighter or fire source.

Luckily, she had one built-in now.

She arranged a pile of stones in a small circle, then began to create a pile of shavings. The rest was turned into thin slices. A few larger chunks she saved to build a little log teepee. The kindling went inside. Drawing on her **[Mana Manipulation]** she pulsed a small wave of **[Power]** into the base of the kindling pile and it instantly ignited.

Magic sure was nice.

She watched the kindling burn and fed it more lengths until the fire was a steady crackle and a base of embers had formed underneath the logs. It was finally time to cook the meat. She brought the steak over and sliced it up into multiple cuts with the Mushroom knife, then stuck each one on its own skewer.

Setting up two big rocks, she balanced the meat skewers over the fire. As the meat slowly roasted over the heat, it began to drip and sizzle. As she slowly rotated them, tantalizing aromas filled the surrounding air, and for the first time, she thought she felt the stirring of hunger.

When each cut was finally charred to perfection, she removed them from the heat. She took a moment to admire her handiwork before taking the first experimental bite. Rich flavors exploded on her tongue—juicy tenderness mixed with a slightly crisp exterior and a smokey undertone that reminded her of a home-cooked barbeque back home.

Relief filled her as she swallowed the mouthful with no odd or adverse reaction. It appeared that she was still able to enjoy normal human pleasures after all. With a newfound enthusiasm fueling each bite, she devoured the simple meal.

It was almost a shock when there was none left.

The warm fire, the meal, and the copious amount of recent exercise and fighting left her feeling sleepy. Using her arm for a pillow, she nodded off to sleep.

A chill draft woke her, eventually. The fire had burned itself out, hinting at the duration of her sleep. She felt rested and re-energized. She needed to figure out her next plans. Without thinking about it she opened up her **[Status]** to confirm her progress.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 13 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 59/152]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration)]

[Class: Survivor]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank A), Mana Manipulation (Rank B)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Deactivated)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank D), Tracking (Rank E), Survival Crafting (Rank C)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank D), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank C)]

One thing was sort of clear: leveling was slowing down. The first ten had gone by in a flash from defeating the cultist and the Bone Demon. The fights with the Mushroomums and the animals had only gained her two. She wasn't sure what levels did, though, if they even did anything at all.

Annoying. At least her skill ranks seemed to be helpful, even if some of them were fuzzy in that department. Certainly, some skills seemed much more useful and tangible than others.

The rate she'd been increasing them seemed quick as well, since it appeared S+ was the highest they could go. Although the hint that she should develop a more advanced skill seemed relevant.

Did that mean she could change her [Improved Combat] skill to something with a better grade or something?

Martial Arts? Super Heroic Fighting Style? Martial Supremacy?

She was able to think of all kinds of fancy names for skills that would probably be better than [Improved Combat].

What she really needed was someone who knew how things worked to explain it to her, although she was putting some of it together herself, at least.

Elania let out a sigh. She still needed to get two-thirds of her [Power] stat re-filled. Which meant more hunting. There was no way she was going to infiltrate the Mushroomum village without it maxed out. Ranking up her skills, especially [Stealth], seemed like a good idea, too. A few more Darkwalkers would probably help in that regard.

Before hunting more, she needed to deal with her new gear. The leather belt fit her since it was capable of tightening with the buckle. It looked relatively modern, actually, although it was made from what she assumed was real leather. The metal buckle was free of rust and felt sturdy.

She wasn't sure what she'd used the pouches for, yet. They didn't have a ton of volume.

Swapping out [Mana Manipulation] for [Survival Crafting] was a temporary measure, but even if the help was minimal, what she wanted to do was slightly more complex than what she'd been doing before. So, she figured every bit would help and would be worth starting a slot swap cooldown.

What she wanted was a holster for her javelins. With the knife, she cut off a small splinter of wood and then used the point to make a needle hole. A tatter from her robe provided thread and the material to make some loops. Adjusting the pouches to her back, they made a suitable base.

Next up was to make some new javelins to replace the ones she had left behind in her mad hunting scurry. She shaved off ten new shafts and then used the knife to whittle spear points for them. That went much faster than using her stone wedge.

It took almost two hours to carefully complete both projects, but she was satisfied with the results. Standing up, she slid three javelins into the loop and pouch. Bouncing around a bit, she tested the fit, and they stayed secure on her back. As long as she didn't do anything too crazily acrobatic, they'd stay put long enough for her to draw them and then throw.

Still not as fast as just keeping a few extra in her left hand, but sometimes she needed both hands.

Satisfied with her new weapons and equipment, she decided it was time to go. Her destination was easy to determine: the pond where she had ambushed the **[Ralfot]** herd. She'd stupidly left her shield behind on the stone outcropping, and getting it back was a good idea.

If just only because wasting her effort making it rankled.

The shield's effectiveness would be low against a **[Darkwalker]** or charging **[Ralfot]**, but if she engaged with some more of the Mushroom warriors, it would probably be good.

Once she fetched it, she could make a loop for it and hang it on her back or something. Even if that meant she'd end up looking like a LARPer or something.

Remembering to swap out **[Survival Crafting]** for **[Mana Manipulation]**, she took the further step to swap **[Improvised Combat]** for **[Throwing]**. Being able to hit her targets from a distance would be a more effective use of her ammunition. And she could still use her **[Mana Manipulation]** to fortify herself in an up-close fight.

Even though the caverns were maze-like, she had a pretty good idea of which way to go. Halfway there she spotted the old blood trail, and her **[Tracking]** skill made it much easier to spot when she traveled back through the red-hued caverns. When she reached the pond-cave, she couldn't believe her eyes.

The **[Ralfot]** herd was back!

Minus three of their number. She crouched down, thanked her increasing level of stealth, and made her way over to the outcropping. Sure enough, her shield was right where she left it. She sat down and watched the herd, wondering what to do.

There were nine left. That'd be ninety points of **[Power]** conservatively calculated. But she wasn't confident in a full sweep, and there were two younglings that she wasn't keen on killing, and killing the entire herd was probably... too much?

Elania frowned. She needed the power. Her sympathy for the herd and their losses conflicted with her own needs. She decided to wait and observe and see if she could learn more about the animals. It was clear it was a habit that they come to this pond to drink, especially considering there was still evidence of the earlier battle in the form of dried blood all over the cavern.

Other than the macabre décor, **[Ralfot]** watching turned out to be sort of relaxing. The moss glimmered, and the Ralfots went about their business munching on plants and mushrooms while getting drinks. The big bull stood guard, keeping an eye out.

Lulled to peacefulness, she nodded off into a nap.

CHAPTER 19—DARKWALKER BATTLE

E lania was woken up by a massive, wet tongue on her face.

One of the smaller Ralfots had found its way up to her, and was standing overtop of her. Small was a misnomer, because even being one of the younglings, the animal was still massive.

And apparently curious, and not holding a grudge for the earlier hunting. It licked her again, eliciting a giggle. She gently pushed away its snout. “Stop that.”

It came closer and nuzzled her. There was a questioning “Moobaa” from below, and she felt a bit of panic. The adults were not likely to take kindly to her hanging out with one of their calves.

A frenzy of “Moobaa” erupted, filling her with panic. She’d been caught! It wasn’t even her fault!

The calf ran back down the outcrop and left her alone. By the time she gathered up her shield and javelins, she realized her mistake.

An angry roar filled the cavern. She immediately spotted the source: a **[Darkwalker]** pouncing on one of the young Ralfots that had taken flight. A savage twist and the calf’s throat was torn out.

The large **[Ralfot]** Bull charged the attacking **[Darkwalker]** but then a second **[Darkwalker]** appeared from behind a boulder, pouncing on the bull’s back. Claws raked down its side, and the first **[Darkwalker]** turned and changed targets, snapping at the Bull’s throat.

The massive animal was not willing to surrender, however. It lowered its head in time and slammed its massive, curled horns into the Darkwalker’s face. It went flying, but that gave time for the other one to dart in and rake the bull’s side.

The two jumped back, avoiding the Bull's blows while taking opportunistic opportunities to attack. The rest of the herd fled quickly. When they were all gone, the Bull tried to escape, but it quickly became clear that it was wounded heavily from the raking and was losing steam. One of the Darkwalkers was also wounded, favoring one leg slightly.

Elania ran the calculations in her head. The larger Bull probably gave more **[Power]** and the Darkwalkers would give her more stealth, probably. Maybe all three would give her a level?

She strapped her shield onto her forearm with its cloth wrap, then slid three javelins into their holsters and then readied three more into her left hand. The battle continued to rage below, and she carefully walked down the ramp and then towards it.

None of the combatants noticed her. They were all so focused on their own fight. When the unharmed **[Darkwalker]** presented its side to her, she made a **[Power]** infused throw from almost point blank.

Maybe it was because she'd raised her **[Power]** level, but the projectile streaked forward like a rocket, slammed into the Darkwalker's side and buried itself deeply, the tip poking out the other side of its ribcage.

[You have gained a rank in Throwing!]

It swiveled to her and let out an aborted wet roar before a spew of blood escaped its throat. She'd probably hit both of its lungs...assuming they had two lungs.

The Bull charged the wounded **[Darkwalker]** but the attack was anemic. Elania didn't waste any time, not wanting the two to resolve their battle. She threw again, with a bit less **[Power]** and struck the Darkwalker. A third throw struck the Bull, causing it to avert its attack on the **[Darkwalker]** and charge at her.

She'd been ready for that.

Turning around, she pushed **[Power]** into her legs and then jumped, easily clearing the stone outcropping enough to land on her feet. The Bull turned away from slamming into the stone wall at the last second, but she tossed two more javelins in quick succession from her elevated position. Both slammed into his back.

[You have gained a rank in Throwing!]

The bull wasn't finished though and continued to flee, but it was slowed. It was clear his injuries were fatal, but he just didn't want to go down yet. It ignored the **[Darkwalker]** as it headed in the direction the herd had fled.

Elania jumped down and headed straight for the dead **[Darkwalker]**. She'd absorb the corpse for more **[Power]** then go finish the wounded one off. Much to her surprise, the wounded one rushed to the corpse first and block her path.

Leveling her javelin at the thing and holding it in a two-handed grip, she continued her approach. The **[Darkwalker]** let out a multitude of warning growls and hisses. It tried to scare her away from the corpse.

Elania frowned. Were they a mated pair or something? She felt bad, but she was sure that they'd eaten plenty of other creatures during their lives, too.

"Sorry, you're my dinner," Elania said.

That seemed to be the signal to pounce. The **[Darkwalker]** launched itself forward, but she'd been expecting that, too. Lining up her spear was easy, and her forceful shove forward into the pounce just added more power to the blow. The spear bent dangerously, but the fungal wood was incredibly flexible.

It bent nearly in half as Elania turned the leap into a vault, the spear tip embedded half a foot in the cat's torso, then slammed it into the ground behind her. It wasn't dead, but it fell as it tried to get up. She slipped the spear out and then stabbed it again in the throat. Multiple times. Blood covered everything, a situation that she'd become intimately familiar with.

She realized she was absolutely filthy; her robe was no longer black at all. Ralfot, Darkwalker, and even her own blood co-mingled on the fabric to coat it into a crusty red mess.

When had she stopped caring about her appearance? How was she not dying from being so filthy?

The sudden introspection was long enough for the light in the Darkwalker's eyes to fade. She stepped forward and touched the corpse and absorbed it.

Before the absorption was finished, she went and touched the other one as well, then turned to hunt down the **[Ralfot]** Bull.

[You have absorbed 38 Power!]

[You have gained a level in Stealth!]

[You have reached the maximum available rank in Stealth!]

[Consider developing a more advanced skill!]

[You have gained darkwalker Affinity!]

[Consume more darkwalker Essence to enable darkwalker Transformation!]

She scrolled through the messages as she went. It was a nice amount of power, but maxing her **[Stealth]** skill left her conflicted. What did it mean to develop **[Stealth]** into a more advanced skill? What was more advanced than **[Stealth]**? Maybe... Super-Duper Stealth?

It turned out it hadn't made it far, collapsing just outside the cavern from the blood loss of two dozen wounds. One of her javelins had snapped when it had fallen, but she recovered one that was still serviceable before touching the corpse.

[You have absorbed 32 Power!]

[You have gained a rank in Crisis Management!]

[You have gained Ralfot Affinity!]

[Consume more Ralfot Essence to enable Ralfot Transformation!]

She checked her power; she'd used ten killing them. Gaining sixty power for the engagement was nice, but she felt worried. She was changing in ways that she didn't fully understand, and she felt certain it had to do with her devouring the animal's essence.

A mewl snapped her out of her thoughts and she swiveled around. A young kitten **[Darkwalker]** sat beside the dead **[Ralfot]** calf that she had completely forgotten about. Elania bit her lip, feeling extremely conflicted.

The two Darkwalkers, in her mind, had certainly been a mated pair, and probably hunting to feed their cub? It let out a second cry as she approached. Outside of reach, she knelt down and looked at it in the eyes. "I'm sorry. They're gone."

It cried back at her, whining. She didn't know what it was saying. She started to reach out toward it, but it let out an angry hiss.

"Yeah. I'd be mad at me, too." Elania mumbled.

She touched the dead **[Ralfot]** calf and the absorption message appeared. But her eyes tracked back to the cub. He probably would need the meal more than her. She wasn't even sure he'd survive the caverns without his parents to hunt and protect him.

But she felt like she needed to give him a chance. She denied the absorption request and instead pulled out her knife and used it to cut a chunk of meat off the carcass. She tossed it to him. Almost immediately, the cub began to lick and then chomp down on the meat.

"Sorry, but I'm not ready to adopt, so this is the most I can do for you." Elania said.

It looked at her, but then went back to eating. She cut a second chunk from a leg muscle, then headed back to where she'd made camp. The stream there was deep enough... for her to consider a bath.

Plus, she could cook another meal.

The only issue was that she felt the desire to just bite into the raw meat immediately, without cooking it.

CHAPTER 20—MUSHROOHUM SIEGE

E lania lost track of time as she descended into the routine of a cavern predator.
Hunt. Wash. Sleep. Hunt.

She was vaguely aware that her life had turned into a training montage, but she still didn't feel she was ready to explore the Mushroomum's lair.

With **[Stealth]** at S+, she was able to sneak around nearly unnoticed by predators and prey alike. That allowed her to pick her battles, and she generally ambushed them whenever she thought there was an opportunity to do so without risking having to dump a large amount of **[Power]** into the altercation.

She'd learned that mistakes would drain a lot more **[Power]** to correct, either because she needed it to power **[Regeneration]** or because the amount of **[Power]** dumped to increase her potency was high.

Keeping her **[Power]** high at all times would be ideal, she found. It wasn't just having more to work with actively; having her **[Power]** ratio nearly full definitely had passive benefits as well. As she neared topping it off, it was clear she had become faster, stronger, and thinking was easier and it felt like she had more time to make decisions, even in stressful situations like a fight.

Her **[Crisis Management]** and **[Throwing]** both reached S+ rank as well, and **[Survival Crafting]** had improved again to Rank B. That seemed to be the limit she could raise it though, at least from grinding javelins out. That was almost certainly a limitation of her imagination or available tools. There was definitely a knowledge or mental component to upgrading a skill.

But absorbing the essence of something seemed to bypass that. She wasn't 100% sure, but the skills being maxed out didn't just mean she was a master of the craft, but it was a helpful boost.

She found it a bit funny that her weapon came out as **[High-Quality Makeshift Javelin]** now. The **[System]** was right, though. Each one came out a little different from the other. Makeshift for sure. Standardizing them when all she had was an old iron knife was difficult.

They worked well enough for her hunting purposes, though. She found that close range, high-power shots were very effective. Even when she'd have preferred a bit more distance between her and her target while it bled out.

Cooking was more trouble than it was worth, despite her misgivings. Part of that was convenience. Having to return to a place that was safe to make fire slowed things down. The other was the fear that she'd start chomping down on the animal carcasses without even cooking them. Rather than face that possibility, it was easier to vaporize them into **[Power]** points.

It was also much easier to find a simple cubby-hole for sleeping than it was to find one that didn't have the flammable glow moss nearby.

Washing, however, became a necessity. If she allowed herself, it was possible to completely forget that she was covered in blood or filth. That was nasty.

She would not compromise.

Washing came before sleeping. Always.

She avoided external displays of **[Power]** or using **[Mana Manipulation]** as much as possible, because those tended to be much more expensive on her than internal reinforcement.

Her **[Demonic Aura]** also remained off. She didn't experiment with it much, simply because it was like leaving a giant 'I'm around here sign' on all the time, and it was also a constant energy drain.

More and more she appreciated just how much her mana shard had saved her life at first. She'd never have survived the encounter with the Bone Demon if she hadn't been jacked up on **[Power]** over her limit like an addict hopped up on something. The overcharge benefits had increased her maximum, too.

Eventually, she reached her goal.

[You have absorbed 15 Power!]

[You have gained a level!]

[You have gained Darkwalker Affinity!]

[Consume more Darkwalker Essence to enable darkwalker Transformation!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

It was time for her to move on to her primary goal. Maybe it wasn't smart to confront the Mushroomhums over her mana shard anymore, but it was hers. Needing it to survive wasn't strictly true anymore, but they had stolen it from her. She hated being stolen from.

There were plenty of other justifications she could make for confronting them, from potentially better gear or knowledge... or even just companionship. Skinner had proved they weren't all homicidal mushrooms.

But she'd be lying to herself if she tried to pretend it wasn't just because the mana shard had been hers, it was powerful, and she wanted it back.

What was scary was that she had always been someone that let things go, before she had been summoned. Another change. More subtle than wanting to chomp down on some raw **[Ralfot]**, but more insidious in how things had shaped her.

She still was herself, wasn't she?

Elania made her way to a cavern she was familiar with and enjoyed a skinny dip to clean off. Drip drying to a hidden outcropping halfway up the cavern wall, she laid down and slept.

Dreams of pouncing on prey and running in a herd with her brothers and sisters were a fuzzy memory when she woke. Those dreams had come more and more often of late. She pushed the worry away and jumped down to the cavern floor and headed toward where she knew the Mushroomhum lair was. This time, she remembered to bring her shield.

Scouting the area around the lair hadn't been high on her priority list because she hadn't wanted to engage in a conflict. With her **[Stealth]** skill topped out so much though, she felt confident in keeping hidden unless she wanted to reveal herself.

Her mental map that had formed of the complex network of caverns was precise, but it was still a surprise when she realized just how far she had roamed. It took several hours to make her way back, and that was with no mistakes while taking the most direct route.

When she reached the pool that she had washed up in after the mushroom men had chased her out of their fields, she decided to find her way back up to the chamber where the Bone Demon had nested. That took some time. There was no way she was swimming up the stream, and she'd never walked between the two areas.

She was thinking it wasn't even going to be possible because the lair blocked off the only entry point, but eventually she found a winding ramp that led up to the cavern. It was too small for a [Ralfot] to fit through. It looked like it had been dug out by something smaller with sharp claws.

The Bone Demon?

Elania shook her head and pushed through. Keeping an eye out for any Mushroomums, she picked her way past the [Elnat] plateaus and back to the ruins she'd stayed in. It was trivial to jump up to the second floor, then go prone and observe the rest of the cave.

Nothing noticed her, but she spotted plenty of Elnats and Ralfots without issue. Even the ones that thought they were hidden. Maybe she missed a few, but she was fairly confident. She was capable of sneaking up and stalking Darkwalkers, after all, and the animals in this cave were more domesticated than their wild cousins.

She could have taken them all out quickly if she wanted. If she ever wanted to use them as a food supply, though, that'd just be a waste. They'd all be dead and wouldn't repopulate. Sneaking in every so often and taking one when she needed a recharge would be trivial though, if she didn't do it too often.

Elania frowned. Had that been what the Bone Demon had done? Had it been smarter than she'd given it credit for?

As she scanned the area, she couldn't see any evidence of her battle. No left behind spears or javelins. The mushroom men had cleaned up. So why was there a heavy tinge of blood in the air?

After a few minutes of watching, her brow furrowed. The Ralfots were on the wrong side of the cavern. Clustered up near the Elnats. They wobbled between the mossy plateaus with difficulty.

Something was not right.

After a few more minutes of looking for any sign of movement other than the animals, she decided to investigate more closely. She moved quietly between cover, advancing a bit more hastily than was perhaps prudent. The smell became stronger the closer she came to the blocked tunnel that led to what she assumed was the Mushroomum's home.

When it came into view, her eyes widened. The fungal growth that had blocked her way before was torn open, large chunks of the barricade torn out and strewn across the area. Corpses of Mushroomums were interspersed between them. She approached the closest and examined the body.

The man was clearly dead, but small mushrooms were growing out of the dozens of wounds. Despite the rotting smell, she managed not to gag. The wounds looked like the ones Darkwalkers left on Ralfots they hunted.

The thought of reaching out and absorbing the mushroom man was dismissed quickly. She didn't feel right eating sapient people. At least, not when they hadn't tried to murder her first, and she couldn't be sure any of these had been the ones that had chased her away. There was also the fact that she was nearly full on **[Power]** already, and too much power had its own drawbacks, mostly of setting her insides on fire.

What kind of **[Darkwalker]** could have killed all the hunters? Or were there more of them? Elania focused on the ground, looking for tracks. **[Tracking]** had been hard to level, but it was enough for her to clearly recognize the paw prints on the ground as coming from multiple animals. Not just two or three.

She felt a chill run down her spine. There had been dozens of them!

What could have possessed the Darkwalkers to group up together and attack? Viciously, and understanding that they needed to tear down the fungal wall to get inside, too.

It didn't add up. One thing that she'd learned about Darkwalkers was that they were duo hunters. They didn't group up with other adults other than their mates. She'd taken out two couples and spotted a half dozen more.

To see so many working together...was unnatural. Darkwalkers were animals, not an army!

Yet, she couldn't deny the evidence staring her in the face.

Somehow, they had.

Elania gazed into the torn open passage and decided to investigate. Hadn't she planned on doing so anyway?

The tunnel through the fungus oozed from where it had been torn. It was clear the events had occurred some day or days prior. It wasn't a good sign for the Mushroomums that they hadn't collected their dead or repaired their defenses.

But would an admittedly large pack of Darkwalkers stand a chance against organized spear fighters? She didn't think so, so there had to be more to what was going on.

A half-decapitated corpse lay against the tunnel mouth, and as she approached, she heard the distant sound of growls and rumbling. She picked her way carefully forward. When she reached the threshold, she couldn't help but play her gaze across the new chamber in awe.

It was massive.

Ruined stonework lined the far wall, likely at least a half mile away, and a waterfall poured from the ceiling into a lake, creating a near constant mist.

That provided a humidity she could feel all the way at the small entrance she had arrived through. The musky smell that she associated with the Mushroomums became thicker as well. Glowing moss grew from the ceiling, lighting everything in a pale green light.

Nestled at the base of the ruins was a round palisade of fungal trees, their tops removed and reformed into pointy tips. Yet there were more buildings in the cavern than just the settlement. Small farms of mushrooms were scattered everywhere, but she spotted Darkwalkers prowling angrily between them, and most of the crops looked like they had been crushed.

A few pockets of Mushroomum warriors stood atop the roofs, armed with javelins. Along the fortified village's edge, they were still throwing them at any Darkwalkers that came close, but on the outskirts, the defenders had run out. Those defenders looked exhausted, like they'd been harried for days or weeks, and barely responded when an opportunistic Darkwalker found a chance to leap up on the building, in attempts to claw their way to their trapped prey.

She wasn't sure what to do. Just figuring out how to get inside had been the extent of her plan. Not in a million years had she expected to find an ongoing war between the wildlife and the inhabitants.

How the heck was she supposed to look for her mana shard now? The leader of the group that had taken it looked like he was important, and her eyes automatically fell on the upper level of the far ruins. The village seemed to lead up to it, and there were signs of inhabitation when she looked closer.

That was probably the best place to start. She hoped that important people gravitating to the highest, more prestigious spaces was a trait the mushroom men shared with humans. Of course, that was assuming a lot. Like what if they saw the stone ruins as the slums and the refuse pits and farms were the fancy spots?

Elania shook her head and moved forward, looking to collect more information. She nearly ran into a pair of Darkwalkers that had been sitting quietly behind a rock.

They let out a growl, then hissed at her before attacking.

CHAPTER 21 – HUNTRESS ASCENDANT

E lania took in the two Darkwalkers darting in at her calmly. She considered whether she should turn and run or look for some sort of high-ground that would give her an advantage.

In the half-second she had, she decided on neither.

One [**Darkwalker**] was closer than the other and she darted for it. It grounded itself firmly, then reached out to slash at her with a razor-sharp strike with its paw. She caught it on her shield; the claws digging deep into the soft wood. Her arm was free in the loose arm strap, though, and she twisted so she could grab its leg.

Fingertips digging into its flesh in an unbreakable grip, she shoved a chunk of [**Power**] into her stance and then waved her arm, flinging the [**Darkwalker**] into its compatriot like a flail. The two cats went rolling in a lump together before they slammed into a rocky wall.

A chorus of roars erupted from what seemed like every direction, echoing off the walls to create an intimidating sound. She glanced on across the fields; everywhere she could see Darkwalkers were coming out of hiding, they had been resting in the shadows and waiting for some signal that her arrival seemed to have triggered.

Dozens of Darkwalkers suddenly began to assault the outer farms, and dozens of Mushroom warriors that had been harried on the roofs were pulled down and dragged into a frenzy of tooth and claw.

A nearby growl returned her attention to her two opponents. They'd righted themselves and turned back to her, this time approaching with much more caution. The one she'd thrown limped on three legs since the leg she'd tossed it with was dislocated and bent backwards at an odd angle.

She pulled a javelin from her pack and leveled it on top of her shield, moving to a crouch.

Making herself smaller prompted the unharmed one to attack with a pounce. She caught the leap with her shield, and gripping the spear near the tip she jabbed it into the beast's belly twice in quick succession before tossing it past her. The first one moved in slowly to swipe at her, but she lashed the javelin across its face, dragging a bloody line across both its eyes.

The one she'd stabbed came at her back, but she jumped to the side and threw her javelin at the blinded one. Extra **[Power]** into the throw meant it punched through the beast's ribcage and into what she hoped were some important internal organs.

That didn't buy her more breathing room from the one rushing toward her, though. She drew her knife as she sidestepped a second swing and follow-up bite.

When it tried a third swipe, she lunged inside the blow, grabbing the cat by the side and flipping herself up onto its back.

It jumped backwards in an attempt to dislodge her, but her legs clamped down on its ribcage hard enough for bones to crack.

Elania pumped **[Power]** into the blade to enhance its sharpness; it cut cleanly through the creature's throat all the way to the spine. Death was nearly instant, and she triggered the absorption before they hit the ground.

The one she had impaled earlier was lying on its side, its chest heaving as it took its last breaths. She absorbed it as well, pushing her power over the limits.

[You have absorbed 17 Power!]

[You have absorbed 19 Power!]

[You have gained a level!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[You have gained Darkwalker Affinity!]

[Consume more Darkwalker Essence to enable darkwalker Transformation!]

[Due to your high power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

[Power: 183/158]

Elania resisted a sudden urge to lick her fingers clean from the Darkwalker blood as it finished dissolving into motes of light. Heat trickled from wounds and slashes she hadn't

even realized she'd received at the time. The pain was dulled by her sense of calmness, and the wounds began to knit themselves closed rapidly.

Fire filled her core. It had been a while since she'd felt what being over the limit so much was like. A sheen of sweat formed on her forehead, and each breath felt like ice inside her lungs.

The sickness didn't come, instead she felt invigorated as she watched the battle going on down below in the cavern's fields. She spotted a block of Mushroomum warriors exiting the palisade in a square formation, their shields and spears up as they moved toward the nearest outskirt building that was still besieged.

It looked like they were moving to relieve the defenders there and take them back to safety. She wasn't sure that they'd make it in time, but she admired their bravery. Almost immediately, Darkwalkers began to harass them with snarls and snaps.

The smart thing to do would be to escape, run out of the cavern and wait until whatever was going to happen, happened. Risking her life fighting to defend Mushroomums that probably would turn on her and attack as soon as they could, was not a good idea. She had no promise of a reward for helping them, and the only real reason she had any inkling to do so was that Skinner had shown that they weren't completely violent. That and they were people, and the Darkwalkers were mean angry predators.

The second-best thing to do would be to continue her infiltration, sneak around the battle, climb into the Mushroomum village, and look for her mana shard. Except she had very little idea on where it would be stored, and she'd almost certainly need to fight the mushroom men at some point. The leader could still have it in his belt for all she knew.

So why-why-why did she feel such an urge to rush down into the battle?

Elania stared down the path toward the fighting, slipping her knife back into her belt and pulling out a javelin. She couldn't help but think at some point she'd turned into Lara Croft, fearless super adventuress.

The Darkwalkers were preoccupied and didn't notice her approach until she was almost halfway across the fields to the nearest mushroom farm. The defenders there had all been pulled down from the building's roof and torn apart already, but a few straggler Darkwalkers had remained to chomp down on the corpses.

How they found the Mushroomums palatable, she had now idea, their flesh smelled rotten and even with her...questionable appetite as of late, the thought made her sick.

The calm walk and lack of fear scent allowed her to make it very close to the group. When one looked up and noticed her, she let off a high-powered throw with the javelin so

strong it impaled the beast and pinned it to the building's wall, cracks splintering across the crude brickwork in a spiderweb pattern.

"Who's next?" Elania asked.

The three remaining beasts snarled and charged at her. Four bodies meant sixty to eighty power, so she felt no need to hold back. When the first one reached her and pounced, she made a fist and punched it in the nose.

She'd gotten better at judging just how much **[Power]** she was putting into attacks, and she made it a twenty-point dump. That was a tremendous amount for a punch; she felt her hand burn with pain, and she realized it was a bit too much.

The Darkwalker's face caved into its head, which caved into its neck, which caved into its body. Its body blew up like a balloon, then exploded into a shower of blood, scraps, and viscera.

Too much. Looking at her hand, the flesh had been burnt off, and it was a melted bone again. The option to absorb was still granted to her, and she took it, replacing the spent power in whole.

[You have absorbed 20 Power!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Due to your high power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

The wave of pain from regrowing her hand washed over her; it was just as bad as before, but she was ready for it. This time she didn't pass out, she couldn't afford to in the middle of a fight. The attack was a miscalculation; she'd spend more power on **[Regeneration]** now, making the kill a net negative.

She jumped as the second arrived, spinning and kicking it in the side.

They flew apart; it slammed into a boulder while she flew straight toward the third one. It didn't hesitate at the sudden reversal and clawed at her, but she drew her knife and stabbed it in between the beast's paw pads, catching the strike.

Its other paw flashed in, and she let it claw her as she reached up to uppercut its jaw with her arm stub. The pain rocked her, and she realized she was screaming into its face louder than it was roaring back at her.

The blow lifted it up off the ground slightly. It raked her again, but she dumped more power into her mangled limb; golden glowing immaterial fingers appeared where her flesh should have been and gripped its throat as she did a rolling flip on it. It was forced to follow her move or have its spine snapped in the twist.

It landed on its back and tried to scramble away, sending them spinning on the ground like a top, but she refused to release it. Its glowing yellow eye stared at her defiantly as she pulled her knife free, then plunged it into the socket all the way to the beast's brain.

It went still. She affirmed the absorption then turned to the last beast.

[You have absorbed 17 Power!]

[You have gained a level!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

"I know. It's great." Elania murmured.

[Due to your high power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

The **[Darkwalker]** she'd kicked looked at her and roared. Then it spun and ran away. Her eye twitched with annoyance, but she couldn't blame the animal. Whatever had enraged the beasts enough to assault the Mushroomum village had finally been overwhelmed by its survival senses.

A wicked grin appeared on Elania's face. "Tell your friends!"

She turned and collected the pinned-to-the-wall Darkwalker's essence.

[You have absorbed 17 Power!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

She looked at the damage from the impact. The clay brick was different from the stonework she'd seen before, and it seemed much weaker than the cavern stone. Punching her hands into the brick, she gained a handhold and then flung herself up.

She just barely cleared the second floor enough to get a handhold on the ledge. Pulling herself onto the roof, she surveyed the battlefield. Things had changed.

She was able to make out the individual Mushroomums in the battle formation now. There were about forty of them in a square, all shields and spears on the outer edge locked together and pointing outward while survivors from the building made their way out. She realized that one of the survivors had a different colored outfit; just like the one that had taken her mana shard.

He was important. They probably wouldn't have bothered to leave their fortifications if he wasn't.

A horde of Darkwalkers surrounded them; at least sixty, but probably more. They were leaping around so furiously it was hard to count them.

Despite the Mushroomum's tactics, it didn't seem like they were doing too well. Several were snatched and dragged away to be torn apart. Javelin throwers from the wall did their best to throw without hitting their allies, but it was far and most missed.

A heavy twang heralded a massive log projectile plowing through a half dozen of the Darkwalkers. The ballista bolt seemed to be the most effective, but it seemed that the Mushroomum only had one of them located on the middle level of the stone ruins over their village.

Elania's heart calmed as she watched from her perch. The pain in her hand disappeared, and she looked down at it; **[Regeneration]** had done a good job. The new flesh looked perfectly normal. More importantly, her fingers worked as she formed a fist.

She licked her lips; the blood was probably hers. The Darkwalkers had been turned into motes.

It would be nice if the red-cape had her mana shard.

Maybe she'd try her **[Demonic Aura]** a little since she was fighting so many at once.

Her legs tensed, and then she flung herself off the roof toward the battle like an arrow.



Tre'gat'aru was one of the most experienced hunters and skilled javelin throwers of the tribe. Countless young shrooms had sought to mimic him, but few had survived the deadly reality of the world outside the colony on their first hunt.

The **[Elnat]** and **[Ralfot]** caverns did not prepare them for the vicious and cunning predators that prowled the far caverns.

Jal'yar'tin, the royal heir, had found himself foolishly caught in the tender fields when the attack had come. They'd held out for two days while warriors inside failed to sally out to rescue them.

No one had realized how many of the Darkwalkers had invaded. It was more than Tre'gat'aru had ever envisioned. He had slowly put together a formation of the strongest warriors to prepare for a final attempt to rescue the cut-off heir at the command of the king.

It had not quite been ready when the Darkwalkers had suddenly stirred after days of idle attacks. The sudden frenzy had caught all off-guard, and he had watched as the trapped Mushroomums on the periphery had been pulled down.

Panic ensued as the warriors ready for the charge formed up. There were only a few defenders for the prince remaining. When the gate opened, the full force of the

Mushroohum advanced, a wave of encouraging spores communicating their unified intent to do battle.

Tre'gat'aru forced his windpipes like bellows, emitting a loud "Glua-Glaaaa!" as his own contribution to the spores filled the air.

A few Darkwalkers harried them, but their unified approach with shields and spears ready beat any stragglers back. They reached the tender farm building in record time, but then the difficulty started. The opening had been barricaded with everything inside. Spores filtered out, communicating the dilemma. Too many had died inside to clear the way quickly!

Warriors bearing two precious metal axes began to hack away while those inside removed the barricade. Two warriors remained on the roof. A rope was thrown up to them, and they pulled up two massive bundles of javelins.

Tre'gat'aru pulsed a wave of respect spores upwards. The two warriors would remain and provide covering fire until they were overwhelmed.

The pressure increased far faster than he anticipated. The situation began to devolve as warriors were dragged away. Spears pierced **[Darkwalker]** flesh as well, but the beasts outnumbered them and seemed intent to slay and devour as many as possible.

What could have driven so many of them up from the deep caverns and then bound them unnaturally together to attack? There had been signs that the deep levels had been smoked out, but the attack, in his opinion, had to be precipitated by a lesser god.

Why one would target the village? He had no answer.

More warriors fell. The great Cap-Launcher hurled a tree-length of death into the massed creatures, killing a half dozen of them. Javelins rained from above, forcing the beasts to dance as they snarled at the linked warriors. Some threw themselves into the line, their heavy weights knocking gaps in the defense so other beasts could drag warriors into the open where they were devoured.

Half their number had fallen, and yet they hadn't even cleared the barricade or acquired Prince Jal'yar'tin.

The scent from spores of determination and courage were slowly replaced with ones of fear, despair, and defeat. The morale of the formation was breaking before his eyes, and despite his best attempts to halt the spread, his own "Glaa!" was overwhelmed by the press felt by his brothers in arms.

As a commander, he had failed.

When the red-haired human demon landed in the beast's midst, he recognized her as the one that had taken his knife and belt in return for the [Ralfot] carcass. She'd gained multiple levels in such a short time, indicating she'd been active since they'd parted.

[Huntress - Lesser Demon - Level 19]

Anger and confusion filled him until she struck out at one of the Darkwalkers. It flew away from her small frame like it had been struck by a human artifice weapon. Thumbing head over heels, it rolled into one of its kin, both collapsing into a heap.

Yet, even with that power, his hopes faded as a dozen of the beasts turned and assaulted her. He could not contain his disbelief as she began to dance between them. "Glua-Glaa!"

She jumped. She twirled. He recognized his knife as it plunged into the beasts' yellow eyes and carved out their throats. When they struck her, she withstood their blows. When she struck back, bones were crushed and flesh was rendered by the force of her fists alone. The dead fell at her feet and melted into floating golden motes of light.

They could not overpower her; she grabbed the torso of one and with her bare hands ripped it in half.

The Darkwalkers were not more agile; she danced between claw and tooth as if she knew where they would strike before they did.

The beasts were totally outmatched.

Tre'gat'aru felt a chill run through his center. He was sure they were all outmatched, no matter what level the gods had decided she had. The Survivor who had become a Huntress was surely worthy of the title of lesser god, despite his previous judgement that there had been a mistake.

She was death.

An explosion of blood reached even his troops, who had begun to disperse their confusion and weary states into the air with a chorus of spores. It was overwhelmed by the sudden scent of victory as the wood door crashed.

Furniture fell from the destroyed portal to the farm. Inside, he spotted the prince waiting while two of his attendants created a path. The two axe-warriors hewed the more fragile wood into splinters.

The prince emerged.

"Glua-glaa!" To return! The warriors formed up as the prince entered the center of the circle. He guided the young Mushroomum to call for their retreat to the colony's bastion.

A sudden weight slammed into Tre'gat'aru. His chest heaved, all the warriors around him fell to their knees. Panic flared, but the Darkwalkers were similarly affected.

The demoness was not; a red glow had begun to form around her, red lightning crackling as power escaped from her body. Suddenly her knife flared a brilliant white as she slashed the air. An arc of energy shot out, and it carved a dozen Darkwalkers in half.

He and his fellow warriors grunted under the strain, but forced themselves back onto their feet. The weight of the lesser god's aura was heavy, but not impossible to survive after adjustment. The pressure benefited them, though. Darkwalkers were simple animals, despite their sudden aggression. Their souls were immature, and not as strong as a sapient creature's.

The beasts began to flee and crawl away, even as the Huntress chased them down. She moved freely as she cut them down, making massive vaults between each of her targets.

When they had nearly reached safety, the demoness landed from above in front of the formation, sending the warriors to a staggering halt.

He could smell nothing but fear and blood in the air.

Standing up, the Huntress held out an empty hand and uttered a proclamation in her alien, verbal tongue.

Her glowing ruby eyes landed on the prince.

CHAPTER 22 – KING OF DARKWALKERS

E lania watched as the Mushroom warriors came to a sudden halt in front of her. She fell into a squat, balancing on her feet as she licked the blood off the back of her hand. The salty taste that filled her mouth was of her own blood; she'd absorbed everything from the Darkwalkers she had hunted.

Her insides writhed and burned; she could feel the fire inside of her melting her organs while **[Regeneration]** constantly worked to repair them. Her **[Power]** was dropping rapidly, even as her maximum capacity worked its way up.

[Power: 340/196]

[You have achieved maximum Darkwalker Affinity. Would you like to attempt Darkwalker Transformation? Y/N]

She never hated the **[System]** more than now. Why didn't it explain to her what **[Darkwalker]** Transformation would do to her? Was it permanent? Would she become a Darkwalker? Did it increase her skills?

How would it affect her mind?

She'd absorbed without hesitating and spent the power freely during the fight. Deep down she knew she had gotten carried away, but it felt so good to hunt that she'd not cared. She'd done new things that far outstripped what she thought she could do.

It almost didn't feel real. Even the pain that filled her seemed slightly distant. Was S+rank **[Crisis Management]** that good? Admittedly, her entire life since being summoned was a crisis. She wasn't sure how well things were going with the management part.

The soldiers stood anxiously, spears and shields at the ready, all of them eyeing her with a respectful wariness. She stared back with nonchalance as she slowly stood up. Her focus was drawn to the red-cape in the center of the warrior's formation.

She could smell it, feel it. He had her mana shard; she was sure. Her **[Power]** infused **[Darkvision]** spotted the faint telltale sign of light coming from inside the Mushroomum's pouch. She examined him as the warriors worked to firm up their lines.

[Prince – Mushroomum – Level 22]

Elania held out her hand and opened her palm. She pulsed **[Power]** into her voice to make it louder. "Mine."

Her eyes bore into the prince. The other Mushroomums shrank inwards, except for a large one standing at the prince's side. Recognition sparked as she realized who it was—Skinner.

The remaining Darkwalkers fled to a safe distance, yowling and growling from afar in a loose semi-circle. The sounds seemed to put the warriors on edge.

But not as much as when she finally took a step toward them.

"Give me back what is mine," Elania ordered. They shrank back from her, but they didn't run. Instead, warriors from the rear and sides moved to the front, thickening their defense. That angered her.

Elania's eyes flickered to a **[Darkwalker]** corpse between her and the Mushroomums. She walked to it and picked it up, denying the absorption request. Her gaze flickered to Skinner.

"Trade," she shouted, then tossed the carcass at the warriors.

The formation braced for combat, but her aim was good. The corpse struck the ground with force, then rolled into their front line. Warriors in the front were shoved backwards, but support from the ones behind them kept them on their feet and the **[Darkwalker]** corpse came to a stop.

She pointed at the prince dramatically and shouted. "Give me back my mana shard!"

A series of "Glua-Glaa" spilled different scents in the air. Her senses were alight with the different smells. A small epiphany hit her. The reason her **[Universal Speech]** wasn't working... was it because they weren't using speech at all? Did they communicate by smell somehow? Suddenly a lot of things made a bit more sense if she was right.

Red-Cape did not receive her demand well. The Mushroomum raised his spear and pointed at her. All at once the formation raised their spears as if they were going to throw at her.

Her first instinct was to attack. The blood from the recent fighting was still fresh in her mouth and the energy coursing through her felt limitless. Her mind whirled as she

thought how she could find some way to use **[Power]** to form a shield from their attack somehow. Maybe she could obliterate the objects in flight?

Or dodge. She could just dodge. She was faster than their thrown weapons in flight.

Then she could take the prince's throat and her mana shard in one quick leap.

The Mushroomums continued to shout their incessant "Glua-Glaa!" while a series of pungent smells wafted around them.

Elania took a breath and suppressed the animalistic urge to pounce and rend. She decided to stand her ground and wait. That could prompt them to attack so they could get back to safety, but she wasn't going to just leave.

There was an awkward lull while they brandished weapons at her. "You are all literally the stinkiest bad breath people ever," she remarked.

Confusion filled the ranks of the soldiers. Distant **[Darkwalker]** roars added a tinge of urgency to the situation. The prince became irate and jumped up and down, even going so far to grab a spear and threaten to throw at her. She tensed and prepared to pounce.

Skinner snatched the spear away. She wondered how denying royal prerogative worked in the Mushroomum kingdom. Maybe she could save him and take him with her along with the mana shard? She was pretty sure he knew a lot of handy hunting skills. Maybe she'd convince him to make her a backpack?

Her guess was wrong when the warriors seemed to defer to the Mushroomum. The prince looked chastised. The warriors followed Skinner's lead and lowered their weapons. When he came to the front and left the formation to meet her alone, she was left a bit at a loss at how to communicate.

"Glua-Glaa." The less pungent scent met her. Elania's eye twitched. The olfactory experience of the Mushroomums was not pleasant, and how the hell was she supposed to decipher words from smell? She got that the stink was probably fear, and this was probably... a question?

She remembered the sweet smell of victory from when they had defeated the **[Darkwalker]**.

That the metaphor had been turned literal made her want to laugh.

Pointing at the prince, she tried again. "I want my mana shard back."

"Glaa-Glaa." A new smell, with no meaning other than it smelled like a bad fart.

An idea struck her. Despite Skinner chastising the prince, it was clear the warriors were protective of him and she was pointing at him each time she made her demand. Maybe they thought they wanted him? She just wanted her mana shard.

Elania knelt down and picked up a small, round rock. Fusing **[Power]** into the stone, just enough to make it glow but not explode. She tossed it on the ground and pointed at it.

“Mana shard,” she stated. Then she pointed at the prince. “Mana shard. Give.”

She held out her hand like she had when they had traded in the far away cavern.

There was confusion, but after a minute of standing around looking stupid, the prince finally reached into his pouch and held it up.

[Mana Shard (Condensed)]

“Yes!” Elania said.

Just when things were about to work out, a roar filled the cavern. A heavy guttural roar that was distant yet strong enough to make her feel the vibration in her chest. She looked for the source; it was near the entrance to the chamber she'd used.

A massive form of a **[Darkwalker]** but much too big, and it was growing in size right before her eyes. It rushed forward into a sprint, then leapt into the air. It landed near one of the farm buildings. Feline shoulders reached up to the top of the building's first floor. If it wanted, it could have swallowed someone whole.

Elania's eye twitched. Had they changed genre to Kaiju or something?

[Great Beast – Lesser Demon – Level 87]

[You have gained a Rank in Identify!]

She tried the skill again. No change.

[Identify] was truly doing its best to be useless. Why didn't it add Giant-Freaking-Darkwalker to the description?

Elania cursed under her breath. “Fuck.”

“Glaa,” Skinner replied.

For once, they were in verbal agreement.

A sharp prickle of electricity filled her senses, sending a bolt of pain down her spine. It felt like something was squeezing her. It actually was. The other demon's aura was attempting to wrap around her own and crush her.

Dumping more **[Power]** into the **[Demonic Aura]** skill was a more complicated affair she hadn't appreciated would require practice. Dumping a surge, sure, that was easy. But adjusting the power into a constant, steady effort?

That was hard, and apparently needed, because when she tried her pulse, it pushed the attack back, but only for a few seconds. The surge was less **[Power]** efficient by far, too.

The Mushroom warriors moved to flee toward the walls, taking a circular path around her. She let them go, and Skinner rejoined the group. The demon's attention was riveted solely on her, and that demanded her full attention.

"Shove off!" Elania shouted. The prickles increased ever so slightly in response.

Elania picked up one of the discarded javelins that had been left on the battlefield. Before she could consider her next move, the Darkwalker Demon leapt forward again, rushing toward her and the village. Its long bounds allowed it to cover the distance rapidly. She braced herself for a point-blank throw when it darted to the side and around her.

She realized it wasn't trying to flank her; it was going for the Mushroomums!

Hundreds of javelins flew from the palisade walls near the gate and the Mushroomum's giant ballista let loose a well-aimed projectile.

The javelins that hit bounced off the Darkwalker Demon's fur. For a second, she thought the bolt would skewer it, but it spun in the air and caught the projectile in its paws. The force sent both into a spin before it released the bolt.

It flew up back the way it had come in a spectacular fashion that was worthy of an epic fantasy movie. Stone, dust, and rubble exploded from the cavern wall as the ruins exploded outward from the blow. A shaky looking tower collapsed completely, sending a cascade of brick pummeling everything below.

The Darkwalker Demon landed on its paws, then leaped forward again like nothing had happened.

Elania realized what the other demon's focus was. She raised her javelin and took careful aim. When it took its next pounce toward the prince and her mana shard, she dumped a huge chunk of **[Power]** into the throw and her projectile.

The air around her cracked as it broke the sound barrier, leaving her ears ringing. White lightning sparkled around the solid yellow glowing spear; she wasn't even sure there was any of the original material remaining. It was a bolt of almost pure **[Power]**.

The Darkwalker Demon noticed. It yanked itself mid-air to avoid being hit.

That made her mad. She'd put a lot of power into the attack. It should hit. She reached out instinctively with her hand and closed it into a fist. "It will hit," she proclaimed. She willed it to be so.

The bolt's trajectory curved slightly, then struck the Darkwalker Demon in the side. The force of the blow snatched it out of the air, slamming it into the ground and sending the Demon tumbling. A spike of power flared off of it, and her projectile dissipated. Blood flowed from the wound and the demon let out a massive guttural roar.

It charged for her this time, completely forgetting the nearby prince.

She'd burnt off a third of her power in the throw, pushing her below maximum. There were a few nearby **[Darkwalker]** corpses. She rushed them and gathered the **[Power]** up for herself.

[You have absorbed 15 Power!]

[You have absorbed 21 Power!]

It chased her, but she wasn't slow.

[You have absorbed 16 Power!]

Rock exploded into the air as the demon landed with each bound as it matched her zig-zagging course.

It caught her.

Twisting mid-air, she avoided a slash before stabbing at its nose with a snatched Mushroomum spear. Its other claws sliced the weapon into pieces before its jaws reached her. Elania realized her mistake too late.

It clamped down on her arm and shoulder. Almost immediately, it began to shake her back and forth in its grip as razor-sharp teeth dug into her bone and flesh.

The instinctive reaction to flex as much **[Power]** into her arm as possible was the only thing that stopped the bite from ripping her shoulder off. The explosion in the Darkwalker Demon's mouth was enough to send them flying apart temporarily.

[Your physical status is degrading.]

Blood poured from dozens of penetrations up and down her back and chest. Her arm was a mangled. **[Regeneration]** went to work but was hampered by the sheer volume of damage.

Her arm popped as it shoved itself back into place from being dislocated and the seeping wounds sealed themselves shut. A frown creased her face; when she flexed her fingers into a fist, her grip felt weak.

The Darkwalker Demon lost no time, leaping back at her. She jumped over a heavy claw slash and drew her Mushroomum knife and slashed the back of its leg. It spun at her and raked her side, but she slammed the blade tip home into the beast's side. Both of them let out their own screams of rage. A heavy blow hit her and sent her flying away in a tumble.

[Power: 180/201]

That was dropping way too fast, **[Regeneration]** was demanding almost as much power as she had put into her attacks. A single tendril of fear pierced through her. Could she win?

Elania recovered from the tumble as she hit the ground, rolling onto her feet and reaching down to grab the ground. Dust and stone flew up behind her as she skidded to a stop.

The Darkwalker Demon faced her and let out a roar.

Looking at her weapon, she realized it was ruined. It had bent when she'd shoved it into the beast's ribs. This time, they collided and she was unarmed. A massive clawed paw flashed at her and she kicked it away. A bite nearly got her foot, but she spun away from the attack. Claws dug into her arm, but she rolled away.

The deep gouge healed itself, but she was wheezing. Her **[Power]** had dropped another thirty points.

Blood oozed from dozens of injuries she'd inflicted on him, but he stood resolute. Elania realized that the other demon didn't heal like she did. It didn't have **[Regeneration]**. It was a question of whether she'd run out of power to heal before she had inflicted enough wounds to bring him down.

Without a weapon of her own, that wasn't going to happen.

If only she had claws of her own.

The thought gave birth to a new system message that stared at her in stark contrast to the glittering cavern.

[You have achieved maximum Darkwalker Affinity and met the requirements for full Transformation. Do you wish to activate Darkwalker Transformation? Y/N]

CHAPTER 23—QUEEN OF BEASTS

Did she want to transform into a predatory beast with much better natural fighting equipment than her human body?

Eying the Darkwalker Demon barreling down towards her, Elania knew the answer. Yes, she did.

[You have gained the Demonic Transformation perk!]

The heat was suddenly all encompassing; hotter than any overload of **[Power]** had given her before. But it wasn't quite as unpleasant. A whirlwind of power and essence pooled around her. Everything outside a small bubble misted away. Visibility faded away until she couldn't see her own hands, but she could feel herself changing inside.

A small pinch of her consciousness lasted only a second, but then the transformation was complete. She landed lightly on four powerful limbs, her tail swishing of its own accord behind her. She worked her jaw, nicking herself with a set of teeth evolved to rend and tear.

Sound was different, causing her ears to flicker at the increased register. The taste of the air on her tongue was full of new flavors that mingled with a more acute sense of smell. Nothing prepared her for the disorientation of her new vision when the cloud dispersed. The colors were all wrong, but shadows had been banished. And then there was the fact that everything was crystal clear, even far away.

Her opponent aborted his leap and skid to a halt as he examined her. She let out a warning growl as she began to prowl to the side, gaining familiarity with her new form of movement. Neither of them broke eye contact with each other as he joined her in circling and sized her up.

Completing half a rotation, he stopped then turned to the side, looking away from her and showed off his size. He was bloody from the earlier combat. Small wounds oozed with coagulated blood, but he was not damaged in an inherently fatal way. His proudness stood out and Elania felt her new body respond.

He was a lone male, an alpha, and he would make an excellent mate.

He would make an excellent mate.

The intrusive, distinctly [**Darkwalker**] thought, reverberated through her and she felt a momentary panicked horror as she rejected it.

The only thing she could do was yowl and hiss and then pounce on him, her claws aiming for his neck. It was almost as if he had expected that reaction because he side-stepped the strike and raked her side with an efficient movement.

He was an enemy. The enemy. He had hurt her, offended her, and she wanted him dead.

She'd feast on his corpse.

Rather than retreat from the slash, she leaned into it, darting in to bite him on the leg. Blood filled her senses as her powerful jaw clamped down on meaty flesh and muscle and tore. They went spinning in a ball.

Before the roll ended, she was slammed by an invisible force, knocking her away. She regained her feet in a second, only to see a glowing orb floating over the Darkwalker Demon's body.

A line of light from it centered on her forehead. She jumped away on instinct without understanding what it did just in time for a pulse of light to explode the rock where she'd been standing. A second beam aimed for her and she began to dash in a wide circle around him. Bolts of power slammed into the ground around her as she zigged and zagged out of the blasts.

When she saw a chance, she darted inward to close the gap. It was harder to dodge. A near miss rocketed shards of stone into her side with a thunk. It hurt, but it didn't stop her. Just as she reached him, the glowing orb itself launched at her.

He wasn't the only one with [**Power**] that could be used as a weapon. Copying his method, she formed a ball of her own, this one glowing a tinted red. They slammed into each other; lighting bolts sparked from both, slamming into the terrain all around them as the two spheres of energy warred with each other.

Suddenly they exploded upward, a massive pillar of spiraling yellow and red light piercing the stone and moss above like a deadly stiletto. Almost instantly, the glow moss there ignited into flame.

Oh no. She glanced at the ruins; the Mushroomum village was covered in the moss. The fire was going to spread rapidly and incinerate the entire cavern! She could see Mushroomums scattering in every direction in a panic as they spotted the fire.

He slammed into her side and sent her rolling while she was distracted. A turn and bite prevented another swipe. Her body was strong, and while his attacks hurt, she healed quickly. The amount of damage he did was much less than when she was in her smaller form.

She charged, and they went into another rolling sprawl of swiping claws and snapping teeth. Her senses filled with the feeling of flesh parting between her paws and warm, tasty blood filling her mouth. He managed to pin her, but she bit him. Once, then twice, forcing him to reposition.

That brought the flames back into her view. How to put out the fire and defeat him at once?

The lake was in view, giving her an idea.

Darting in again, she dodged his swipe to strike at his torso, but instead of clawing or biting, she created a new orb of energy. She swung it with her nose at point blank, blowing him back in a massive concussive boom.

He skipped across the water like a rag-doll, sending large splashes into the air with each impact, until he broke out of it into a roll and then skid to a stop on top of the water. His paws glowed blue, magic somehow allowing him to walk on the lake.

The impact wasn't enough. He skidded to a stop as she summoned an even larger ball.

She didn't hurl the energy toward him; instead, she slammed it into the water like a hammer. It reached the bottom and then exploded, vaporizing a huge amount of the water.

[You have gained a rank in Mana Manipulation!]

Steam exploded in a shockwave, blasting everything in a pulse of heavy wind. Water erupted in a geyser, straight up into the ceiling, extinguishing the flames. Around the eruption, a tsunami leapt out of the banks and rushed out in every direction, scouring the ground with a two-meter-tall wave of water.

It slapped at structure and terrain alike until it struck the edge of the cavern walls. The Mushroomum's palisade resisted the impact of the water, but a wave of tools, equipment,

trampled crops and corpses floated on the water as it began to reverse course as gravity took hold once more.

A heavy, hot mist filled the air, obstructing her vision. There weren't any more flames above. She hoped her plan had worked because she didn't have enough **[Power]** left to repeat it.

An echoing yowl hinted her enemy was still there. She hadn't expected the blast to harm him, anyway. The mist obstructed her view enough that she couldn't track where he was, though. She settled down on her haunches and crouched, a cat preparing to strike from hiding.

He roared again, giving her a better idea of his location. The rage in his voice hinted at his injuries.

When the Demon Darkwalker came into view, she pounced, coming at him from the side. Landing on his back allowed her to rake him with all four sets of her claws and she clamped down on the back of his neck, tearing at his spine.

He rolled onto his back defensively, and their claws met in a mutual chaotic raking while they sought each other's throats. Her jaws found his throat just as claws found her belly.

He disemboweled her; she ripped his windpipe and important artery out of his throat.

Elania rolled away to disengage. Almost immediately, a sensation of weakness flowed through her; she was losing a massive amount of blood, fast. He'd torn out her abdominal artery.

Coming to a rest on her haunches, blood pooled all around her as she looked up at him.

He stood resolutely above her a few meters away. Blood poured out of his torn throat in large geysers, each pulse a deluge of precious life force. Taking one step forward, the Darkwalker Demon collapsed.

[You have slain Great Beast – Lesser Demon – Level 87]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[You have met the requirements for Darkwalker Demon evolution.]

[Do you wish to evolve your race to Darkwalker Demon? Y/N]

The question scared her at how enticing the offer seemed. She had only been transformed for a short time and yet being a **[Darkwalker]** felt so natural. A bestial instinct pressed for her to accept, but she snatched that hand away.

No. No. No. She did not want to evolve into a **[Darkwalker]**.

The message disappeared to be replaced with another.

[Due to your low power, Regeneration is degraded. Seek more Power.]

Elania breathed heavily. She could feel the blood flow out of her slowing, but her healing was weak. She'd overplayed her hand, creating the tsunami waterspout.

She needed to check her **[Status]**.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 36 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 11/233]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Class: Huntress]

[Skill Slots: 3]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank S+), Mana Manipulation (Rank A)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Activated)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank S+), Tracking (Rank D), Survival Crafting (Rank C)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank C), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank S+)]

Wow, she'd gained a lot of levels.

It was no wonder she felt so exhausted; she was almost out of power. Less than when she'd started hunting.

[Your Power is low, all active abilities have been disabled, and your transformation will be forcibly reversed.]

A pulse of pain struck her, and she yowled. Her body crushed in on itself. There was no heat this time, instead it felt like something was smashing her with a cold hammer without mercy. Her face stretched and pulled. Every nerve fiber in her body came alive as she was molded and stretched back into her human form.

When the invisible hand released her, she thumped onto the cold, damp stone. It leached the heat from her skin; her clothes and equipment had completely disappeared, she had come full circle.

Naked, alone, defenseless, and low on power.

[Maximum Darkwalker Affinity has been achieved while evolution has been rejected. Creating permanent affinity: Darkwalker.]

The words hovered over her as she lay on her back, staring up at the charred area of burnt moss. Dust and debris still floated down from the massive puncture that had been dug into the ceiling. It was a hole in the otherwise vibrant glow of green. Everything was contrasted heavily by deep black shadows.

What the hell did ‘permanent affinity’ mean?

She felt cold and exhausted and didn’t want to think. Fuzzy fog filled her head. When a low pitched “Glaa” sounded nearby, she tried to stir. The smell was sweet.

It was skinner. He came to stand over her, but her eyes were drawn to the glowing mana shard in his hand as he set it down.

She grabbed it, curling up into a fetal position before passing out.

CHAPTER 24 – GAMBIT

As Yolani descended from her room, the absence of tinkering in the workshop was noticeable. When she opened the door and looked inside, she was stunned.

Her father had donned a set of armor, and a full set of combat wands was hanging off a combat belt. The armor and a half dozen empowered medallions held runed protection sigils, set to ward off any elemental magic, and his leather travel gear was spelled for durability and weight reduction of their contents.

She'd seen him wear his adventuring outfit only a few times before, when her mother was still alive. The two of them had taken turns adventuring for the materials needed for the artifice shop. Until one time, she'd not come back.

It had been their thing, and neither had wanted to give up adventuring. A prick of long suppressed guilt welled up to sting her. Until she had come along, they'd gone together. Maybe if father had been with her, she wouldn't have...

Yolani took a deep breath and released it then glared at her father. This was all his fault, anyway!

"What are you doing?" Yolani whispered.

Her father paused momentarily before setting down his helmet on the table. He locked eyes with her, the serious expression something she had seldom seen before. "We need that mana shard, Yolani."

"Next week's auction might have one..." she offered weakly.

"We both know that even if there is, we won't be able to take the winning bid, even with the funds paid up front." He countered.

"Where are you going?" A frown crept onto Yolani's face.

“I’ve got some help with arranging some men to go with me on a delve. We’ll pick up a mana shard there.” He picked up his helmet and put it on. The protective runes lit up briefly before going back to their normal state.

“What? Are you stupid! The Syndicate won’t just let you take out a mana shard without you giving it to them!” Of all the stupid plans she’d heard, this one took the cake!

He shook his head. “Lani, it’s fine. Do you think your old pops is daft? Your uncle Hector made a deal with them for us. We’ll be providing them with a bunch of work for free in return for being able to keep the shard.”

“You don’t know you’ll find one.” Yolani tried, but she couldn’t think of any good reasons that he shouldn’t go other than it was dangerous, and she was afraid he would get hurt... or worse.

He smiled at her. His stupid disarming ‘everything will be okay’ smile. “Oh? I think I’ve a few good years left in me, and the upper levels of the dungeon aren’t that dangerous. We just need a mid-grade stone, and we shouldn’t have trouble finding one.”

The conversation seemed over. He pulled a backpack over his shoulder and then headed to the door. Yolani felt a bolt of panic run through her. “Wait. You’re going now? Already?”

“Scheduled to go in at third hour today, pumpkin.” He turned and looked at her expectantly. “Not going to see your father off before he goes?”

She froze. It was something she’d always done as a little girl when either of her parents had left to go on an adventure. Hesitantly, she approached him and went on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Please, dad. Be careful.”

He patted her on the head. “Always. There’s a good bit of work left to do, and I’ll entrust you to work on the light stones while I’m gone. I should be back in two or three days. Who knows, we might get lucky, and I’ll be back tomorrow even.”

“It’s only going to solve half the problem unless they let you take out two,” Yolani replied. The headpats turned into messing her hair up and she whined and captured his hand to stop it.

“Don’t worry your little head. Hector is good at getting deals. He said he likely can get us another shot at a stone later if things go well. He pulled through and got us the good contracts for the light stones, after all.”

Yolani froze. “Uncle Hector was the one who proposed those contracts?”

Her father raised an eyebrow. “He pointed me in the right direction to the Magister who needed the work done at least. He’s a good brother.”

“He’s too good at getting deals... and those weren’t good contracts, dad...” Yolani whispered again. Alarm bells were going off in her head.

He sighed and patted her shoulder. “I know things didn’t work out well. We’ll avoid any contracts in the future as long as we can keep up sales on the sundries enough to support our costs. If you have a better plan, I’m willing to listen.”

Yolani shook her head. “I don’t have anything...”

He nodded. “Me either.” He pulled her into a hug. “Love you, Lani. Don’t let that Henri boy drag you into anything dangerous while I’m gone.”

She hugged him back and squeezed as tight as she could. “Love you, too, dad.”

And then he was gone. It felt like an empty hole had settled in her chest. Why did it feel like she’d never see him again?

A heavy sigh escaped her, and she slapped her cheeks. Those were not good thoughts to have! She needed to stay strong.

Turning to examine the workshop, there were plenty of tasks left unfinished that needed tending to, not even including the light stones themselves.

Her father had already done most of the work on them, but they still needed their power couplings replaced since the old ones would likely fail in the middle of the unit’s next service term if they weren’t.

Hours passed as she immersed herself in the various tasks at hand. She’d had plenty of guidance under the eyes of her father all of her life. It’d been years since she’d actually needed any help at all, and she’d already begun to explore her own avenues of research into conundrums that had stumped her father and the rest of the artificer community.

Even if she wasn’t as deft with a micro-engraver and her work was sometimes a bit crude, she felt her application of theory was maybe, just a bit, more advanced than her dad’s. The tomes he’d learned from weren’t quite modern editions, and things had changed a bit.

And he was stubborn at trying new things.

Which was probably why he had been so happy to accept the light stone contract. They were big, simple, and very expensive to repair because of all the servicing work required to refurbish them for another decade of service.

Grunt work. That took a lot of time, focus, and concentration. But it was so bog-standard she couldn’t help but feel it was... boring.

Most artificers probably felt the same way. Which was why such work carried a large price tag. And because of how valuable the light stones were—they were as old as the city itself and very hard to replace—there were massive fines and penalties if you damaged one.

So, throwing apprentices at the task was out of the question.

As the day trudged along, a handful of regular customers came by to purchase minor trinkets or items that had already been repaired. An apprentice for another shop stopped by to buy some pre-built components, and she traded a few tidbits of rumor and news with the young man. There were a lot of things you could learn just from talking to the customers about their day.

She kept her cheerful front up the entire day, but no matter how hard she tried, it was impossible to put the worry away.

In the end, she closed up shop early. Part of her job was to keep their tools and supplies stocked up, and the **[Power]** on their workshop tool's shard crystals had become quite low.

Mana crystals. They were basically miniature mana shards.

One of her more recent research ideas was how it might be possible to combine shard crystals into full mana stones. Which recent events had suddenly shoved to the forefront of her list of things to think about.

The small pieces were usually fragmented off a proper stone or found as drops from lower-level monsters in the dungeon.

Each one carried a small charge and generally they were used to run low powered tools and items, while mana shards would carry heavy workloads, like powering a light stone for ten years for sixteen hours a day.

If mana shards held anywhere from hundreds to thousands of power units, then the little shards were only rated for ten to twenty.

Yolani made her way to the back room where most supplies were kept and did an inventory. Over the years, she'd formed a collection of the smaller crystals. She kept them all charged up in case of emergencies.

Her father often joked about it since they only needed about ten to twenty at a time for all the equipment. They did slowly degrade with use, so she rotated them out with each power cycle.

It was best to store them while fully charged to prevent degradation, which informed her next maintenance task. Fetching the next tray of ready shards, she brought them out to the workshop and replaced all the tools that needed a new one.

Not every tool was used evenly, so only about half needed to be replaced. It was still enough for her to fill half a tray with empty and nearly empty shards.

She fetched her purse and pulled out a few small golds. It was a lot, but power prices had skyrocketed with the mana shard shortage. There were only a few places one could go to get magic items recharged with the lack of stones, and one of those was Ranolf's shop.

Locking up the shop with an artificed lock, she headed across the row. Since she'd closed early, there was still plenty of activity and people going about their days all over. Some people she recognized and waved as she went by, while others seemed in a hurry to make purchases or go about their business. Ranolf's was the largest shop on the entire row and did an almost industrial amount of business.

She forgot how many apprentices he had, but it was like two dozen, and he had two sub-artificer masters under his umbrella working for him as well.

It meant he had his finger in the business of every shop in the district, and most of the ones outside of it, too.

It was also the only place in the row itself where you could pick up power for shards. Or even mana stones, but that would have been very expensive. That would have never made sense before the mana shard shortage, but now she'd heard that some of the richer nobles had been visiting to get their full-sized shards topped up.

He had a near monopoly on the service because it was very difficult to emulate. Restrictions on demonology were heavy, and even more so the requirements to get a license to house a stable of them underneath your shop.

There was a Ralfot wagon unloading and six apprentices hauling the boxes into the shop when she arrived. Inside was controlled chaos, and she deftly moved between the moving parts to reach the front desk. The apprentice manning the counter stood up and nodded to her. "Yolani, welcome. Do you want me to get one of the masters?"

"I have eleven Class B mana crystals to recharge," Yolani said.

The apprentice's eyes widened a bit. "Of course, I'll go get Master Ranolf."

He disappeared into the back of the shop, leaving her alone with her thoughts. Her gaze wandered over the bustling workshop; apprentices were busy with the more menial tasks that were part of artificing. All of them seemed well engrossed with what they were doing, whether it was cleaning components or hauling things in and out.

She didn't notice any disaster in the making, and she zoned out.

Master Ranolf finally emerged from the back. The man was short, only a few inches taller than her, but his ornate robes hinted at just how much of a fixture in Neftasu's

artificer community he was. His expression was stern as always, but his eyes held an unmistakable glimmer as they landed on her.

“Yolani,” he greeted. “Eleven Class B, I heard?”

She nodded, pulling out her small, sealed tray of crystals. She clicked it open and allowed him to examine them. He examined each one carefully in silence, before finally nodding. “A fairly standard set here. The cost will be two small golds.”

Yolani winced. That was the full amount she had brought with her to pay for them. “Are you sure...maybe we could work out a discount?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but with the shortage, I can’t entertain selling the Power for any less.”

She sighed and pulled out the two coins and watched as they disappeared into the shop’s tiller. Nodding to himself, Ranolf handed her tray of crystals back and then gestured to the door to the back of the shop. “If you’ll follow me, we’ll go see to charging them up for you right away.”

“Thank you,” she said, following him into the back. An artifice elevator screamed wealth at the back of the room, gears whirling to open the box as Ranolf waved a hand over the controller to unlock it. She stepped on board first, then he followed. A small light crystal hung from the cage’s ceiling, and there was a grumble from the artifice before they started to slowly descend.

“Sounds like an apprentice forgot the machine oil,” Yolani commented almost automatically. Her cheeks reddened slightly when she realized that it might have been somewhat rude.

Luckily, he laughed and nodded. “I’ll have to see that they get on it. Thankfully, it is still well within tolerances, and the safety mechanisms wouldn’t have allowed departure if there was a danger.”

Yolani nodded. He was right, of course, but it still seemed a little sloppy to her. She decided to change the topic to something less judgmental and much more notable. “About the mana shard shortage... have you heard anything?”

He grunted and stroked his beard. A thoughtful frown appeared. “It’s worse than we thought,” he admitted grimly. “The Syndicate has tightened their grip over the dungeon shard even more than before. There’s a shortage in acquiring them, I heard. The upper levels have run dry, and mercenaries have been having to go much deeper than normal to find them. Only four groups brought them back this week, and all of them were low quality.”

Yolani forced her free hand to unclench and relax. Her father would be fine! He was very experienced, and he was taking a team with him to watch his back.

“Does anyone know who it was who scooped up all the mana shards in the weeks prior?” she asked.

Ranolf shook his head. “It was a group, of that I’m certain. One with deep pockets and an ability to coordinate their efforts so that the market wouldn’t have time to react. Unfortunately, it looks like it will take months for things to recover to normal.”

“And power prices will be Overworld-high in the meantime,” Yolani muttered caustically. “I’m afraid I don’t know how I’ll keep costs under control, to be honest. Two small golds for eleven crystals will mean half the most popular sundries cost more to make than they sell for... unless I double the price, and then no one will want one.”

“We will all have to tighten our margins in the coming month’s I’m afraid,” Ranolf offered unapologetically.

Silence filled the cage, broken only by the rolling of gears. Yolani pondered the issue in her own head before deciding to offer an idea.

“I had another idea about merging crystals, and I wanted to run it by someone with more experience...” Yolani let the statement trail off to see how he’d respond.

Ranolf shook his head dismissively. “It’s impossible. Mana crystals are inherently unstable; any attempts to merge them into a full mana shard would cause catastrophic failure of the structure. Likely fatally for anyone making the attempt.”

Despite the discouragement, she couldn’t help but feel determined to keep thinking about it. She simply nodded, accepting his advice and remaining silent. She would prove him wrong someday.

As the elevator cage reached the bottom, she felt a shiver run down her spine. The air temperature in the demon kennels was at least five degrees cooler than the rooms above and Neftasu’s normal ambient temperature.

Her mana senses were tingling as well, hinting at the contents of the cages arrayed before them as they stepped out of the elevator.

There were dozens of the opaque boxes, each one with a sliding steel shutter only opened when the demon would be ‘drained’ with a mana shard. They made their way to the far wall, where the space’s workspace was bolted to the stone wall.

A cage rattle made her jump and Ranolf chuckled. “Don’t mind them. Fully secure. A new batch of specimens came this week, and they are slightly agitated after being moved, but they’ll calm down soon.”

“Right,” Yolani replied hesitantly. No one was going to tell her to calm down around half a horde of demons.

The crystal works were arrayed with various tools and materials for affixing and unfixing crystals to different surfaces. At the center on a locking pedestal was a vibrant mana shard that dominated the counter it sat on.

[Mana Shard(Condensed) 1450/2150]

Her heart jumped at the sight of it. Maybe this could be their solution? It was a very high-grade stone. It was only half charged, but even then, it would be enough for a decade of light stone service.

“Is that shard for sale?” she blurted, without thinking.

Ranolf paused and gave her a stern, silent look.

She barely avoided flinching under his gaze as she realized her mistake. “I’m sorry... just... had to try. It was thoughtless of me.”

He slowly nodded before turning his attention back to the task at hand. “I heard about your father’s contract,” he said after a long pause. He sounded almost sympathetic. “That must be quite a predicament indeed.”

Yolani swallowed hard at his words, remembering the worry etched on her father’s face before he had departed. “Yes,” she agreed quietly.

Carefully, each crystal was lifted out of the tray and then touched gently against the powered crystal. Yolani watched as Ranolf worked the mana threads between them, creating a siphoning effect. Once the smaller crystal was full, it was returned to the tray. Each transfer took about a minute to perform.

She let him work in silence as she focused on the new light on each crystal and considered her theory. Mana crystals were all different shapes and sizes. Each one had a different resonance based on the crystal purity structure, making them all unique. Which was why when you tried to merge them, they would explode.

What if she could find two crystals that were nearly identical, but with opposite resonances? The resonance could be altered manually as well, with a bit of work with a tuner. The smallest deviation would likely cause the crystals to separate sooner or later, but if it was perfect, theoretically, it would become a single crystal just with the capacity of both its parts.

If she could get that to work properly, what would stop her from combining two doubled crystals the same way?

Sixty-four Grade B crystals with 20 power each would be a medium quality mana shard, enough for the light stone.

She had at least that many in her collection.

Ranolf coughed into his hand, then gestured toward the tray and she snapped out of it. “Sorry. Was thinking.”

All eleven of the stones glittered brightly in the dimly lit kennels. She leaned forward and used **[Identify]** to confirm each one was fully charged. Satisfied, she slid the tray shut and smiled. “Thank you, Master Ranolf,” she said gratefully.

CHAPTER 25—AVARICE

Yolani had been unable to sleep, so she had spent the night working in her notebook. She'd run through hundreds of equations and algorithms in an attempt to solve her theoretical problems. When the light stones above had flickered above, she realized she'd stayed up the entire night. Across the row, the earliest risers had already begun to go about their business.

That was the start of her non-theoretical problems. For starters, she now felt exhausted.

It wasn't like she and her father had an employer to make sure they worked on a schedule. If she had been willing, no one would have yelled at her for falling into her bed and sleeping until mid-day.

Except herself, because there was no one else to tend to the shop, most customers arrived in the morning, and they needed more funds and to sell off their stocks—even if it was just so they'd have enough money to purchase more supplies.

Their business didn't run on credit, and while they had a literal fortune by the metrics one would use in the Mercenary District, it was a paltry sum to run an artifice shop.

Breakfast turned into a basic affair of toasted bread on the kitchen stove and a freshly ground brew of Geru beans. The bitter drink was one of her father's favorites, but she hated it. There wasn't any sugar to be found, and the icebox didn't have any milk, either.

She was supposed to have gone shopping for groceries the day before but had been completely forgotten amid her father's departure and recharging her mana crystals.

The drink was very effective against her tiredness, although how much that was the nearly painful bitterness to her palate, she couldn't be sure. How her father drank it like this every morning she would never understand.

The extra energy was enough to prod her to prepare the shopfront for the morning opening. She was only an hour late. When she flipped the sign, she didn't spot anyone waiting, so she busied herself with working on an array of glow lanterns.

They only needed a crystal to power them, usually sold well, and were useful for those leaving Neftasu, whether they were delving into the depths or heading down into the *dwerven* dungeon.

When the entire set had been prepared, she pulled out an ornate wand engraved with mana transfer runes. It was one of the most valuable of the wands they had in the shop, and the only one capable of forming the permanent sigils on metal that would remain functional for at least a decade before needing to be renewed.

It was also power hungry, and a lot of power was wasted in the wand's own permanently active reinforcement runes, so it was generally stored in a powerless state. There was also no extracting the power from the wand once it was input. She needed to finish all eight of the lanterns in one go, or she'd have to waste a second crystal to complete the set.

Eight was a safe number, allowing her to take her time with each one, but still maximize the usage of a mana crystal's charge.

Each glow lamp would go for two to three large silver, so if she didn't mess up it would pay the two small gold recharging cost for eleven crystals the day before.

That seemed like a great return, but it didn't include all the other costs, or the fact that it would probably take a month to sell them all.

Still, it was just one item of many that people needed.

When the artifice hummed in her hand and she expertly drew the golden lines on the lantern's metal frame, she was almost able to forget about all the things that were pressing down on her.

Yolani finished the set before the wand's charge ran out with a safe amount of time to spare. The yellow tinged glow lit the entire workshop with enough light to shine out the windows. She turned the knobs on each one, killing the light, but left two on a low setting and set them near the front where customers would be able to spot them.

Task complete, she couldn't help but stray to the front door, half expecting it to burst open any moment with her father's hearty laughter and the mana shard they needed.

Business was slow all day. The news of the mana shard shortage had probably spread fully by now, and people would be wary of paying over inflated prices due to it. That was going to be another drag on things on top of everything else.

Increased running costs, no available critical supplies, and a decrease in demand.

She needed to think about how she could use her skills to bring in more money, or even if they got the light shards done in time, it wouldn't matter.

By the end of the day, she felt exhausted and sick. The brewed Geru had worn off and the sleepless night had caught up with her. She closed early again, giving the street a thorough look on the off chance that her father might be nearly back. He had said there was a small possibility it would only take a day after all...

When she closed the door, she couldn't help but repeat a mantra in her head: "Two or three days."

Tomorrow or the next day. She needed to stay strong.

Sleep claimed her as soon as she laid down, but despite the exhaustion from being awake for too long, it wasn't peaceful.

Dreams were full of monstrous creatures lurking in dark caves, and shadowy figures threatening harm were ever present. Her father was there, fighting valiantly against insurmountable odds, only for his strength to wane slowly.

Every time he would look at her, smile, and then he'd disappear.

When she woke, her face dripped with tears, and she was covered in a thin sheen of sweat from head to toe.

Oh. This was the worst.

Here her father was, counting on her to keep the shop safe and she was falling apart after he had been gone for a single day.

Hugging her pillow tight eventually was enough to let her fall back asleep. When the morning bell woke her, things were slightly better. Except for the stickiness of her skin and dampness of her nightshirt. Normally she would have just washed off with the basin or prepared for a trip to the row's hot bath, but neither was a great option.

Communal bathing always made her nervous, and she needed to relax. There was a third option, though. They had a nice artifice shower set-up in the back room. It was expensive to run though, needing an entire mana crystal for a single shower.

She gathered up her clothes and wash-things and headed downstairs. It would be alright if the shop opened a little late again. Business would be slow anyway, and it was just a few days of disruption. When her father got back, they'd dig in hard and work their butts off and make it through the trouble. They always had before, and things had sometimes been even worse. Especially when... mom hadn't come back.

Yolani winced at the direction of her self-cheering, and let out a sigh. She flipped her **[Status]** screen open. The magical arcane scroll popped into place in front of her, gold shimmering sparkles falling like dust to the ground. Of course, no one would be able to see it unless she willed them to, but she still instinctively looked around the shop to make sure no one was spying on her, anyway.

Then she picked it up and unrolled it.

[Status: Yolani Aetherhart]

[Level 28 Human (Inherent Potency 850)]

[Karma: 56]

[HP: 100/100]

[Mana: 100/100]

[Perks: (Third Generation Artificer)]

[Class: Artificer Apprentice]

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Mana Manipulation (Rank B), Aether Manipulation (Rank B), Artifice (Rank C), Negotiation (Rank D)]

[Affinities: (Mana), (Aether)]

[Magical: Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank C), Elemental Affinity (Rank D), Safety Protocols (Rank B), Arcane Tool Maintenance (Rank B), Mana Forging (Rank D), Arcane Reading (Rank A), Arcane Writing (Rank A)]

[Physical: Combat Awareness (Rank D), Manual Dexterity (Rank B)]

[Mundane: Advanced Identify (Rank D), Neftasu Dialects (Rank A), Neftasu Customs (Rank A), Street Smarts (Rank C) (Activated), Crisis Management (Rank D), Bartering (Rank B), Herbal Knowledge (Rank C), Basic Crafting (Rank S+), Handwriting (Rank A), Numeracy (Rank A), Storytelling (Rank C), Culinary Skills (Rank B), Basic Carpentry (Rank B), Candle Making (Rank D)]

Her entire life so far. Condensed into a small roll of leather. It annoyed her, but she swapped **[Negotiation]** out for **[Crisis Management]**. Almost immediately, she felt slightly better. Things weren't as bad as she had worried, and falling apart wouldn't help anyway.

It galled her that the effect worked so quickly, without feeling out of place at all. That part of the reason she disliked the skill, it made her feel extremely detached from... everything.

Which was why it was such a commonly learned and acquired skill. Humans were terrible at managing their own mental health, usually.

Humming to herself, she setup the shower, then disrobed. A careful check of the water temperature and everything was then ready. She pulled the cord that would activate it and jumped under the showerhead. Warm water fell on her hair almost right away. The heat slowly ticked upward as the pipage reached the same temperature as the water.

It was bliss.

She pulled out one of her scented bars of soap and began to scrub the icky night sweat feeling away. Steam began to escape the crystal enclosure, but strategically placed fans sucked the air into exhaust pipes that vented outside. The wastewater fell into a tank below in the basement that could then be manually discharged into the city's sewage or used as catalyst for any artificing that didn't strictly require fresh water.

Truly, building the contraption with her father had been one of her proudest achievements. More than once she had tried to come up with a way to make the shower portable, thinking that they'd sell it for a tidy sum to some rich noble somewhere.

The chime of the shop door broke her thoughts while she was rinsing and caused her heart to launch into her throat. There was no way she had forgotten to lock the front door. It had been secure when she had gone to sleep, and she had checked again when she had woke up. The lock had been spell warded and would have exploded before being finessed, and there hadn't even been a peep from the alarm.

The only way to open it safely and silently was with a key.

Her father was home!

Yolani jammed the emergency kill switch on the shower, then grabbed her towel and wiped herself down quickly. She jumped on her dirty clothes to dry her feet, then wrapped the towel tightly around her torso and ran to the front of the shop.

"Dad! You made it!" Yolani yelled as she reached the doorway to the front workshop.

She skidded to a stop as she took in the sight of the back of the overweight bald man's head as he turned to look at her. It wasn't her father.

Almost instinctively, she held up her arm and tightened the towel a bit to make sure it wouldn't come loose. "Oh. Uncle Hector," she greeted him, her voice guarded as surprise turned into unease. This was not the reunion she'd been expecting.

"Yolani," Hector returned her greeting. "I heard about your father...It's unfortunate."

Unfortunate? That word felt like a slap in the face, replacing their predicament and her father's risk as an inconvenience. A bitter taste filled her mouth, but she forced herself to swallow down her anger.

"That's one way to put it," she responded defensively. His gaze hadn't left her, and that made her feel as if she'd need another shower by the time the encounter was over. "Do you mind if I get dressed?"

"Of course, of course. I'll wait here," he replied. He turned and began to examine one of the glow lanterns she had made earlier.

Small mercies. Yolani retreated, somehow managed to not slam the door to the back workroom, and hurriedly dragged on her daily outfit. Just to be safe, she grabbed her wand belt and strapped it tight over her hips.

When she returned to the front, she found her Uncle still examining the glow lantern, but he'd progressed to shaking it while holding it upside down.

"Please don't do that. It could break." It was hard to keep the acid out of her voice.

He coughed and had the decency to appear embarrassed before setting it down. "Ah. Excuse me. Of course, I was merely impressed by its sturdiness. It's very good work. Your father's?"

Somehow, she kept her expression flat. "No. Mine. I made it earlier today," Yolani replied.

Hector shifted uncomfortably before changing the subject. "What I meant earlier was...it's unfortunate that he decided there was a need to delve into the dungeon, knowing full well how dangerous it is."

Yolani's eyes narrowed. His words were like adding fuel to the fire already burning inside her. Did he think she was a stupid Ralfot? That she hadn't been putting things together the moment her father had mentioned him?

"And who do you think gave him that idea?" she asked.

A flicker crossed his face, making her even more angry. He quickly masked it with an expression of nonchalance. "I merely assisted—"

"Assisted?" she echoed.

Anger filled his face. "If you would let me finish, girl, instead of interrupting."

She remained quiet and let him continue.

"Your father needed assistance, and I arranged an agreement with the Syndicate's office. If he recovers a mana shard of acceptable quality, they will allow him to keep it. There is,

however, a modicum of equipment and material they need serviced, repaired, or rebuilt that the shop will have to complete for them.”

“Considering the circumstances, that seem more than fair,” Yolani admitted. “But that’s only one mana shard and we need to complete two light stones. The first one is due in two weeks and the other in six.”

“Of course, of course,” Hector said. “But that’s more time to find another.”

She doubted his good intentions. She’d never appreciated his ‘attentions’ or his interactions with her father.

“What are you here for?” Yolani asked.

He looked smug. “Your father asked me to take care of things in case anything happened. In order to counter the contract, we’ll need to sell the shop. That will protect you from any liability.”

A jolt of fear punched through her chest. “Did something happen? Did dad come back hurt?”

Confusion appeared on his face. “What? No—”

“It’s only been two days,” Yolani hissed. “How do you know he’s not coming back?”

“They’re overdue,” Hector said calmly. “Considering what must be done if the worst has happened is only prudent.”

Her brows furrowed in disbelief. “How convenient for you he took your ‘suggestion’ and ended up signing a disastrous contract with the Magister on an ‘easy’ job.”

Hector’s eyes flickered at the mention of the contract, but he quickly composed himself. “He told you about that, eh? Well, that’s part of the reason I’ve been trying to help. I’ve already arranged a compromise with the Magister so that you won’t be part of your father’s debt.”

“Oh? Helping because you feel bad? Not because as part of your deal? Did you somehow become the beneficiary? Because no matter how you cut it, this shop and its contents are worth a thousand times more than that stupid contract.”

He folded his fingers together and looked apologetic. “You’re right. As part of the arrangement, I would take possession of certain excess proceeds so I can look after you and provide you with a safe home.”

There it was. Everything clicked into place for her.

“Get out,” Yolani ordered.

“Yolani, please,” Hector began. “You don’t understand—”

“No,” Yolani cut him off, her voice sharp. “I think I do understand, Hector. The timing of it all. It’s too perfect to be a coincidence. I don’t know how, but you somehow knew about the shortage before everyone else. You manufactured everything, just so you could somehow siphon off some of the value of the shop me and dad have built up since mom died.”

Hector’s calm facade finally cracked, his face contorting into an expression of anger. “You do not know what you’re talking about!”

“You set my father up,” she accused.

“That’s ridiculous!” Hector snapped, his voice echoing throughout the shop. “And even if it were true, you have no proof.”

She leveled a hard stare at him. She didn’t need proof—not when his reaction had all but confirmed her suspicions. “The shop won’t be sold,” she said. “I’m of age, and my father’s only heir.”

“Girl! See reason!” He took an aggressive step forward.

Reacting instinctively, Yolani grabbed the wand off her belt and leveled it at him. Her eyes glowed in the shop’s dim light as she activated her mana sight. He froze and stared at her with fear.

She pushed an icy anger into her voice as she calculated her next words. “You’re wearing eighteen spell wards, which will take me twenty-seven power points to tear apart. The spell that will cut off your head will cost 28 mana. The fire to reduce your body will take 24. The acid to hide the remains... another 20.”

The color drained from his face, and he took a step back as he held up his hands. “Yolani...”

“Get...OUT!” She raised her wand and all the lights in the shop suddenly flared to their maximum brightness.

Hector spun on his heel and fled.

The door slamming shut was sweet relief, and she slid down onto her knees.

When the door jingled again a few minutes later, she nearly incinerated Henri’s concerned face.

Instead, she ended up bawling like a baby on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 26 – LOST

Yolani moved through her tasks to clean, re-etch, and re-power a set of auto-gears. Hector's words echoed in her head, fueling a slow burning anger that settled deep inside her. His thinly veiled admission of having orchestrated her father's disastrous choices so he could profit from them left a vile, bitter taste in her mouth the Geru beans couldn't compete with.

She glanced over at Henri, who was helping an elderly customer with their purchase. He'd taken the day off from work to come help her. Taking a day off in the Guard wasn't an easy thing. It made her feel even worse, but she was thankful for the support.

Customers continued to shuffle in and out, but it wasn't anything like a regular day. Her fears about the mana shard stifling business seemed accurate. The noose felt like it was closing around her neck.

She'd lost hope that her dad would come home even before she had got out of bed for the day...

Lost any idea of what to do.

When Yolani finished the set of gears she was working on, she excused herself and retreated to the back workshop. Storing the tray of auto-gears on a shelf, she gazed across the room. Clutter and thousands of different objects greeted her, all of them carrying their own type of potential or needing cared for. It was chaotically organized in a way that only she and her father understood.

Her eyes eventually landed on one of the lower drawers of a storage shelf. One in particular held her interest. It was in the back, all the others around it were covered in a thin layer of dust. She hadn't fooled with that area in...well, ever.

As she slid open the drawer, her eyes landed on something unexpected. She sucked in a sudden breath, hand shooting in to pull out a half-rolled piece of parchment. Spreading it out on the flat surface in the center of the workshop, Yolani's eyes widened as she took in what was depicted.

It was a map—detailed and meticulously drawn—outlining the labyrinthine dwarven dungeon beneath Neftasu. Someone had spent countless hours detailing all the upper passages and chambers.

It was annotated in her father's own hand. The entire thing had faded slightly, but a more recent line of fresh ink marked a path to the dungeon's third level.

Yolani swallowed. She had a blueprint for following in her father's footsteps.

"Yolani?" Henri's voice pierced through her thoughts, causing her to look up from the map.

His gaze was locked on the parchment spread out before them, and an immediate frown formed on his lips. "You can't be thinking of going after him? He could be back today!"

His words were logical—rational even—and under normal circumstances, she would have agreed with him without hesitation. But these weren't normal circumstances.

"I need to find out more first," Yolani admitted slowly, determination seeping into her words even as she felt uncertainty prod at her insides.

Henri's hand closed around her arm so quickly that it startled her. His usual jovial expression had shifted into one of grave seriousness that was totally out of character.

His hand tightened slightly around her arm. "Promise me if you go, you'll tell me first," he demanded.

She blinked at him, taken aback by his intensity, before nodding hesitantly. "I will," she assured him shakily. Gently extricating herself from his hold, she turned back to the map, studying each note and committing it to memory.

"I need to know more about his companion," she murmured.

"The mercenaries?" Henri asked.

Yolani nodded. "He hired a team. I...I don't know if they were involved or not, but..." Her heart clenched as she swallowed. "It seems like Hector had his finger on everything...if he paid them..."

Silence hung between them for a few seconds before he spoke again, his voice soft with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

Yolani raised her chin, then grabbed his arm. “We’re going to the Merc Dist’ this evening to get answers.”

Panic filled his eyes, but she wasn’t going to let him talk her out of it. “You took the day off to help, didn’t you?”

They closed the shop early to prepare. Henri had to go get his gear and equipment while she prepared an assortment of wards and protections for both of them. Arrow stopping glyphs, spell deflection, sigils, and blade turning stones.

Each one was a cheap way to stop one attack, one time. Half of them she stole from the store shelves, while the more expensive magical blocking ones came from a hidden shelf in the back. Her wands needed checking as well, and she topped them up to make sure they were all at maximum power.

On top of her normal artificer jacket went a thick metal studded leather vest. A half dozen of the studs contained reinforcement runes that would improve the protection to the equivalent of high-quality chain mail with no extra weight.

She linked each wand to the belt with a small chain. There was the risk of entanglement, but it was better than someone yanking one off in the middle of a fight. She did not know what they’d be facing, so she brought the entire assortment of combat wands she had built up over the years.

Not only had she built every single one of them herself, but she knew how they all worked intimately, and her father had taken her to practice plenty of times.

Either way, they weren’t just going to be strafing the Merc District’s outer edges this time, so the preparation wasn’t overkill. The tavern ‘Fredric’s Noose’ was smack dab in the center. That was a high-volume traffic area, but also one of the most violent. Tavern brawls were a daily occurrence, from what she had heard.

Henri was a guard and level 157, which would give some pause, but she needed to do her best to look the part of a scary, dangerous artificer. Her level hinted that she was inexperienced, but then a lot of mage classes were like that, especially arcane ones that relied on a lot of study.

It was just that most mercenaries cut their teeth killing tons of things outside the city, so their levels were usually much, much higher.

The city light stones overhead had dimmed to the evening luminosity when they finally crossed over into Neftasu’s most notorious district. Henri took the lead while she hovered just one step behind and to the side while monitoring their flanks and rear. An automated brooch on her capelet hummed as it searched for threats.

Her hands stayed away from her wants; she didn't want to give off the perception of being nervous despite how it all felt. Henri dressing as a guard was both a blessing and a curse. It made them highly visible, but also raised the bar for anyone wanting to harass them.

She was wondering how well it was working when a rock suddenly flew at them. An arcane hexagonal shield appeared in the air and deflected it. Henri drew his sword immediately.

A chorus of laughs from spectators along the sides of the street erupted as a young orphan turned into an alley and ran away.

"You won't last long here if you're afraid of little boys, guardling!"

Yolani grabbed Henri's arm and shook her head to prevent him from responding or chasing after their assailant. His sword slid into his scabbard with a click. They moved on; the price of a projectile defense stone was worth not getting a bloody smack from a slingshot.

Henri looked at her with a frown. "Keep close."

They continued and reached the center of the district with no further incident. Not that there wasn't plenty going on around them. Along the way, she spotted two people in a fist fight, a chained woman being sold to some merchant, and two different groups of muggers accosting the local denizens.

None of them paid Henri or her any heed. There was an unspoken agreement with the guard here: you don't fuck with their members, and the law wouldn't intervene in things unless directly forced to do so. Keep your head down and mind your own business was the watch phrase.

She didn't like it, but they had more important things to do. The tavern came into view. It was still early and there weren't too many customers nursing tankards of ale yet. Inside was a different environment. Two armored bouncers eyed them warily from behind a well-lit bar with dozens of different bottles shelved behind the counter.

Unlike the outside, the inside was packed.

The burly figures covered in scars and grime huddled around the tables, all of them directing their attention to her and Henri's arrival. She loosened the neck of her jacket without thinking about it. The thick scent of sweat, ale, and smoke lingered, adding to the intimidating atmosphere.

Henri started to approach the bar, but she touched his arm and then moved in front. The bartender glanced at them, probably using **[Identify]**, before turning back to the glass he was polishing. He didn't look up at her when they sat down.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for information on my father."

He looked up at her and stared her in the eyes. "Rude to ask questions without ordering something. If you aren't ordering, you can make space for someone who is."

Yolani bit her lip. "Something non-alcoholic."

The patron next to her turned to her and tilted his head. "Eh? You came to Fredric's and aren't going to drink something good, girlie?"

Yolani winced at the smell of his breath, but didn't back down. "Don't give me that shit. I counted six races that would literally die if you gave them alcohol in any amount, and twelve more that would take one gulp and be out faster than someone sniffing Fibro-oil."

He gaped at her, the shocked expression only interrupted when the barkeep slapped down two glasses in front of her and Henri.

"Frujuice?" the barkeeper asked.

"Filtered, please." Yolani answered.

The man shook his head. "We only have pulp-in."

Yolani pursed her lips, then shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Fine."

The bald man at the bar stuttered with growing animosity, "Girlie, you better—"

"Oi. Thomas, are you accosting patrons who are actually going to pay their tab? I will throw your ass out. Permanently."

"Ah..ah.." The man looked at Yolani and completely changed his attitude. "Sorry about that, missy."

She turned back to Henri to see the shock on his face as well.

"What? I can take care of myself." Yolani prodded.

Henri stuttered. "Uh—Uhh, yeah. Never saw you like that before."

The barkeep chuckled and poured a sweet-smelling liquid from a pitcher into their glasses. When Yolani pulled out her wand, he flinched.

She tapped both glasses and the thick cloud of pulp inside them suddenly clarified into non-existence. "It's better this way."

The man stared at her for a moment before nodding. "Fancy magic."

She slid across two large silvers, which was much more than what the juice cost, then took a big drink from it. The sweet taste was nearly overwhelming, but she managed it. Setting the drink back down, she raised her chin to the barkeep.

"I've patronized your establishment now. Do you mind telling me about who I'm looking for? I'm told their leader is a dwarf named Thurgan," Yolani asked.

Silence fell on everyone nearby enough to hear her. The barkeeper grunted.

His explanation was brief, but to the point. "Rough crew. Thurgan's Fists, the group calls itself. Mercenaries. Regulars here, but not seen them for several days."

"Surprised you're telling us about your patrons here in the open," Henri said.

The bartender fixed him with a glare, then raised his voice. "Those bastards didn't pay off their tab. Anyone grab them and drag them here. There's a small gold at stake."

That started a murmur, and a few people even rushed their drinks to head out, no doubt looking for the impromptu bounty that was offered.

"So, no sign of them for a few days..." Yolani's words trailed off.

The barkeeper shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, girlie. Best I can do. People often just disappear in the 'Dist.'"

Yolani and Henri finished their drinks in silence. He kept a watch on their backs for any trouble, while she was lost in thought.

This was just another obstacle. She knew it hadn't been a sure thing looking for information, but at least she'd tried. Maybe she was being stupid after all and should have given her father more time. It was just that the encounter with her uncle had been so sour she couldn't sit still.

As soon as they were finished, she pulled on his cloak. "Let's get out of her."

Henri nodded, and they headed out. She wasn't sure what they'd do—this was the best lead she had. Waiting another day and then asking the Syndicate guards at the dungeon probably wouldn't amount to anything. They were very tight-lipped unless you had an inside connection with one of their 'managers' or high-ranking officials.

There was a reason the insular merchant organization was able to operate inside Neftasu without being picked apart by the major factions.

"Pssshht." The sound came from the side, bringing Yolani to a halt. Henri stiffened in surprise at the sudden stop.

A scrawny ten-year-old boy beckoned at her.

[Orphan – Human – Level 5]

"Yes?" Yolani asked.

“I heard y’all talk ‘in. I know ‘bout Thurgan.” he said.

She glanced to Henri. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Henri was right to be cautious, but something told her they’d learn something. Turning back to the boy, she knelt in front of him. “What can you tell me?”

He looked away. “I saw ye ‘av silver.”

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out ten small silvers. The boy’s eyes widened at the sum.

“Tell me what you know... if it’s good, you can have them,” Yolani urged.

“Thurgan...he and his crew went in the dungeon with someone. When they came out, it was jus’ them. They came back yesterday.”

The orphan boy reached out and took the offered coins, then ran.

CHAPTER 27 – DEBTS AND CONTRACTS

Somehow Yolani managed to keep her focus as they extracted themselves from the Mercenary District. Once they made it to the safer side of the city, she surrendered her safety to Henri as he guided them back home. Her mind swirled with the orphan's words. Each step felt heavy, and more than once she struggled with the reality of her father's absence.

There was a stupid thread of hope that when they made it back, he would be there waiting to chastise her for worrying so much and tell her everything had been a misunderstanding.

Instead, there was a carriage adorned with the symbol of Neftasu's Council parked outside her shop. She shared a concerned look with Henri as they walked up. The Magister was already standing outside, patiently browsing the wares she'd set up in the window display. His rich burgundy robe shimmered under the city's light stones, making him look every bit as intimidating as his title suggested.

[Arch Magus – Human – Level 883]

She didn't recognize him immediately, but the insignia was the same one she had seen on the work orders related to her father's contract for the city's light stones.

"Good evening, Magister," Yolani greeted, bowing slightly in respect. Henri followed suit beside her, but his face revealed he felt just as blindsided as her.

"Ah, Miss Aetherhart, I assume?" the Magister said in a deep voice that echoed on the stone pavement and wall of the shop. "I trust you're well."

A frown crossed her lips. Did he really think there was any possible way she'd be 'well' under the circumstances? "I'm managing," she replied cautiously. "To what do I owe this visit, Magister...?"

He frowned, obviously annoyed at her not knowing his name. “Relain. Magister Relain.” His gaze turned steely, “I’m here because of your uncle Hector’s concern about your father’s disappearance and its implications for our city.”

Yolani’s eyes narrowed. Hector had wasted no time in ensuring her troubles multiplied. “And...?” she prompted.

“And as such,” he continued, “the contract regarding the city’s light stones is currently in jeopardy. According to the responsibilities therein, your father guaranteed the safety of the stones while they were in his care. Now that he is no longer here, that places him in default.”

“There is nothing wrong with their safety. No one can break into the shop without a cataclysm level weapon or artifact. The runes that have been engraved into the structure have been built up over two decades, even before I was born,” Yolani informed him.

He raised his chin, then looked at the wall again, before looking back at her. “Even if that is so, you currently use the abode as your home, and I don’t see how we can allow you custo—”

“Magister Relain, with all due respect, I am fully skilled in artifice. I am more than capable of caring for and repairing the light stones on my own,” Yolani said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Is that so? Then why is your title ‘apprentice artificer’ then? This equipment is far too valuable to be leaving in the care of an apprentice, as high as her opinion of herself might be.”

Yolani opened her mouth, then shut it without replying. He wasn’t wrong, her title was ‘apprentice’ although she’d far surpassed that years ago. She’d become her father’s equal in the last few years, but she’d never once considered the title ‘apprentice’ a burden. She loved working under his guidance, and he never talked to her about things.

He listened to her theories and helped her shape them into real, workable artifice.

Henri shifted uncomfortably beside her, obviously feeling out of place. She put a hand on his shoulder to calm him before looking back at the Magister.

She took a deep breath and locked eyes with the man. “I am a Master Artificer.”

There was no audible sign or visual effect. Instead, she activated her **[Status]** and snatched the scroll from out of the air and opened it. It answered her demand for just the single piece of information:

[Class: Master Artificer]

Yolani let out a sigh of relief and flipped the scroll around and displayed it to Magister Relain. He eyed it warily, then looked at her, no doubt scanning her with his own skill.

Relain grunted in acknowledgement. "So, it appears. Very well, I admit the light stones are not in danger. I had planned to force you to accept default here in order to partially preserve your wealth and ensure your safety under the care of your uncle."

Safety? Under the care of her uncle?

"Magister Relain, did you work with and help my uncle Hector setup my father to purposefully get him killed so you could claim the value of the default?"

Henri blanched and recoiled from her question. She could hardly believe she'd went straight for the jugular herself.

The Magister's eyes narrowed sharply. "What?"

Yolani reached up and snapped the thin gold chain holding a clear crystal off her neck. She held it up in front of her. "This is a truth stone. If the bearer channels their mana into it tells a—"

"I know what it is," Magister Relain snapped.

The stone lit up as she pulsed her magic into it. "You are Magister Relain. You're a level 883 Arch Magus. I can't tell what elemental superiority you have, because it looks like you have all four at an equal level far higher than I can really calculate."

She took a single step forward. "You have 564 defensive runes on your person, which will require 2458 points of power to disarm. Your mana reserve appears to be in the 2000-3000 range, but I can't be sure."

The truth stone continued to glow with a sparkling glow without shattering.

"What I can be sure is that you don't have enough visible defenses to stop me from disarming your spell wards with my wand, which has 1123 available power before you can cast a spell to kill me."

She stared at him intently; he glowed a vibrant array of colors in her mana sight. "I don't think you have anything that escaped my notice. Which will allow me to detonate the security sigil you are currently standing beside, which will outstrip any defensive spell you can cast by at least 8,000 to 12,000 mana."

Yolani let the power fade, then tossed the truth stone to him. He caught it by the chain.

"Now channel your power into that and tell me if you had a hand in killing my father or not." Her entire body felt tense, searching for a single sudden movement or change in the mana currents surrounding them. If someone had jumped behind her and shouted "Boo!" at her, the entire block was going to explode.

"You wouldn't dare," Relain hissed at her.

“Do I look like a woman who would let the murderer of her father get away with it?” Yolani demanded, her heart pounding louder with each word spoken.

“Yolani...” Henri stepped forward and reached for her, but she slapped his hand away while focusing on the Magister.

It was hard to keep her wand hand ready to draw while he distracted her. She shoved him. “Shut up Henri. You should run away.”

The truth stone lit up. “I had no intention or inclination to see your father harmed or dead. Both the contract and the liquidation of the contract before it defaults was your uncle’s idea. I stand to gain from events, either way.”

The stone didn’t shatter. Her shoulders slumped; she’d misjudged.

“It’s the death penalty to threaten a Magister going about his duties or force him under duress to answer questions while under spell or drug,” Magister Relain continued.

“Magister, please!” Henri said. Yolani’s hand on his chest cut him off.

Relain shoved the truth stone in his pocket. “If you don’t wish to sell the shop, then so be it. I’ll remind you that upon your father’s death, you will inherit his debts. The default wasn’t to include the shop, but it included his person. That would be you now.”

Yolani felt a chill run down her spine. Debt slavery was worse than being homeless in the Mercenary District.

“If your father does not return within two days’ time and you cannot fulfill the first half of the contract by then... I’m afraid I’ll have no choice but to seek out another artificer and claim your default.”

“Two days? We had two weeks left! Two days is impossible!” Yolani protested.

Magister Relain licked his lips, then nodded. “I am not unsympathetic to your misfortune, Miss Aetherhart. A week, then. No more. I wish you luck in bringing those who engineered your father’s fate to justice.”

He turned and climbed back up into his carriage, leaving them standing there in front of the shop. A heavy thud heralded someone landing on the roof.

[Death Dealer – Lesser Demon – Level 556]

Henri’s hand went on her shoulder, and she suppressed a bolt of panic. She had no idea what the demon was capable of, but then the Ralfots let out a ‘Moobaa’ and began to take the ensemble away. The demon sat down, crosslegged, and ignored them.

She realized it had been the Magister’s bodyguard.

She hadn't been in control of the situation at all, and he'd kept her truth stone. It was easily worth a large gold. That stung. But it could have been worse. He wasn't wrong about the city's laws on threatening a Magister.

It felt like a defeat, but at least she knew for sure who her real enemy was now.

CHAPTER 28 – ALLIES

Once they were inside the shop, Yolani walked to the back workshop and picked up the map of the dungeon. Her eyes traced the lines her father had drawn, marking his planned route.

“I need to go after him,” she said, not tearing her gaze away from the parchment. “I can follow his steps and see if I can find him.”

“What?” Henri blurted as he followed her into the room. His face turned pale in the dim light of the workspace. “Yolani, that’s insane! The dungeon is a death trap!”

“I know,” she replied calmly. “But it’s also where my father is.”

Henri ran a hand through his hair. “What if you don’t come back? What then?”

“Then I guess we’re both lost.” Her voice was quiet but firm. The shaking in her hands had stopped. That surprised her.

“That’s not an option!” His words echoed throughout the room, the sound filled with desperation.

Yolani finally looked at him, meeting his distressed gaze with a solemn one of her own. “Do you have a better plan?”

“I could...” he faltered, looking down at the table before continuing, “...we could hire someone else to go into the dungeon to look for him.”

“And who would we trust with such a task?” Yolani asked pointedly. “No, I have to go for sure.”

“Then I’m going too,” Henri said. “We will need help, though.”

“Wait...what?” Yolani blinked in surprise. “You’re going to come too?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice firm. “I’m not letting you go in there alone. I promised your father I would look after you.”

“But Henri, it’s dangerous!” she protested.

He gave her a look. “Are you stupid?”

She blinked in confusion. “What?”

“I just told you it was dangerous, and then you said you are going! Of course I’m going with you,” he said. “You’ll need someone to watch your back.”

Yolani opened her mouth to argue, but closed it again. She knew he was right. She wasn’t thinking rationally. A part of her felt relieved as well; she didn’t want to admit it, but the prospect of venturing into the dungeon was terrifying.

“I will always be there for you.” Henri stepped closer, closing the distance between them until they were only inches apart. His eyes bore into her, filled with an intensity that she’d never seen before.

“Henri, what are you—”

Before she could finish, he leaned forward. She froze in shock as his lips met hers—a soft yet insistent pressure that sent a jolt through her entire body.

Pulling away abruptly, she stared at him wide-eyed as confusion swirled within her. Henri was her friend, and she’d always thought of him as more of a brother. She’d never considered him in any other way before.

“Henri...” she trailed off uncertainly.

He looked at her anxiously, his hands falling to hang limply by his side. “I...I just thought—”

She shook her head, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Henri,” she began softly. “You’re my closest friends... you’re like family to me.” Her heart pounded as heavily as it had when she confronted the Magister as she continued. “But I can’t... I’m not ready for anything else.”

The silence that followed was deafening, filled with unspoken words and a thick tension. He looked at her and nodded. “I’m sorry. We should be focused on finding your father, anyway. That’s what is important right now.”

Yolani let out a silent breath of relief. She pushed down a sudden surge of anger. Why had he chosen now of all moments to do this? She turned around and looked at the map. “Thank you, Henri. For... everything.”

He walked around the table and looked at the map as well. He pointed to her father’s final plotted destination on the third level of the dungeon. “We need help,” he declared. “At least two other fighters, I think.”

Yolani looked up at him. “We could try hiring from the Iron Fist. I know some of them...well we see them every day.”

He frowned and rubbed his temples as if warding off a potential headache. “That would be expensive. I’m not sure they’d be interested in leaving the cushy guard duty, either.”

“How much do you think it would cost?” Yolani asked.

Henri took a minute to think about it before answering. “At least 3 or 5 small golds, plus supplies and equipment costs.”

Yolani nodded. “The shop has funds I’ll borrow for that. There is also the large gold entry fee. There is no point holding back...”

She turned and went to the large safe in the back corner. Unlike the wall safe that kept the high-value trinkets and stones, this one was more often used. She deftly unspelled the locking runes in the correct order, allowing the heavy metal door to open. There was a pouch of small gold, and she took it without hesitation.

Placing it on the map, she counted it out. The workshop’s lighting gave the coins a lustrous hue.

“Thirty?” Henri’s eyes widened at the sight of so much money. “Yolani, that’s way too much!”

She gave him a look and didn’t put it back. “No amount is too much when it comes to saving my father, and we are going to be hiring more than one person.”

“Ahh...I didn’t mean it like that,” Henri replied.

“I know, it’s okay.” She secured the coins back in the pouch and then put it in her travel bag. Now they just needed to figure out who they’d hire without getting stabbed in the back.

“Sergeant Harlock,” she suggested. “He’s reliable and would probably be willing to help, and definitely would know if there were a few others willing to do the job.”

Henri nodded. “I think that’s a good choice for a first place to start.”

Yolani restrained a loose lock of her hair. “Alright. You should go home and arrange for a few days’ leave from the guard. I don’t know if your uncle can—”

“He can. It’ll be fine. Trust me.” A frown appeared on his face. “Are you sure you’ll be okay here alone tonight?”

Yolani offered him a small smile. “I’ll be fine, Henri. I’ll take care of hiring the mercenaries in the morning.”

He nodded, then walked around the table to her. A momentary panic filled her as she remembered the earlier kiss, but he enclosed her in a hug instead. Instead of tensing up, she relaxed.

“I’m sorry about earlier. You’re already under so much stress.” Henri whispered.

She really was. The façade she had built about being tough felt like it would crumble if someone tapped it. “I’m sorry if it wasn’t...I just can’t think about it right now...I have to focus on finding my dad.”

Henri stepped back and squeezed her shoulders. “Don’t worry about it. We can talk about it later. For now, let’s just focus on saving him.”

Yolani nodded. He hesitated, clearly reluctant to leave. Finally he turned and left the shop, leaving her alone with her thoughts and plans for the impending expedition. A moment later, she went and locked up the shop for the night.

There were a lot of things she needed to organize, a lot of the items they’d need would be able to be sources from the shop itself. Defensive items, consumable weapons, and the like. She was pretty sure that dad had kept a healing ward stone somewhere, too.

A wave of determination surged within her. She would find her father and bring him home—no matter what it took.

When she finally finished all the preparations she could think of, she laid down to try to get some sleep.

It felt like she had just closed her eyes when the morning bell echoed through the city. The deep sleep helped a lot, and she felt a resurgence of energy as she got dressed and geared up for the day ahead.

Her first stop was the checkpoint at the front of Artificer’s Row. The familiar sight of bustling artisans and hurried wagons was in stark opposition to the sudden direness she felt. She was relieved to see that Sergeant Harlock was at the gate, overseeing the comings and goings as usual.

“Sergeant Harlock,” she greeted him, keeping her voice steady.

“Yolani,” he replied, his gaze softening slightly at seeing her. “Any word on your father?”

She shook her head sadly. “Actually, that’s why I am here. I need help,” she stated. She jumped into a thorough explanation of the previous day’s events and what she had found, the map, the delver crew coming back without him, and her encounters with her uncle and the Magister.

Harlock listened attentively as she spoke. His brow furrowed in concern when she mentioned the venture into the dungeon, but he didn't interrupt her explanation. Once she had laid out all the details of her plan, he remained silent for a moment before responding.

"This is a risky endeavor you're embarking on," he said gruffly. "We can't be sure what happened in the dungeon either, but I admit, the picture you paint doesn't look good."

"They might have left him in there, alone and hurt. The more we delay in going, the worse...the worse..." Yolani's voice faltered and the line of thought almost brought a line of tears to her eyes, despite doing her best to fight against it.

He gave her a moment to compose herself.

"I know," Yolani responded firmly. "But I don't have any other choice."

Harlock nodded grimly before letting out a sigh. "I'll help you find some trustworthy men from Iron Fist who might be interested in the job."

Her eyes lit up with gratitude. "Thank you, Sergeant Harlock!"

"It won't be cheap. I figure it will be at least three to five small golds per volunteer," Harlock warned.

Yolani nodded. "I'm prepared to pay, and will be happy to have some men we can trust along the way."

"We? Is your boy Henri coming along?" Harlock asked.

A blush formed on her cheeks. "He's... he's not 'my boy' Sergeant... but yes, he's coming along."

Harlock grunted, but before he could respond, another mercenary stepped up. She recognized him as the man that had walked her down from the shop to the gates a few days earlier on the day of the auction.

Harlock looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "What is it, Lucas?"

Lucas nodded to them both. "Couldn't help but overhear. Seems like you need some extra hands. I'd like to volunteer."

Yolani turned towards him in surprise, feeling a surge of hope. Maybe finding volunteers would be easier than Harlock had thought? "Lucas, are you sure? It's going to be very dangerous."

He nodded firmly, meeting her gaze. "I'm aware of the risks," he said. "But your father, and you—are nice sorts. I need a bit of extra coin, too."

The next hour turned into a mix of Harlock monitoring the gate guards while they continued to discuss the specifics—potential candidates, her taking care of the needed

supplies, and the fact that she would need to deal with the Syndicate to get access to the dungeon.

Satisfied with things, Yolani left Lucas and the Sergeant to recruit while she went to collect the supplies and get them ready at the shop. They needed rations, water, potions, and of course, all the artifice sundries she had prepared the previous evening.

Henri arrived mid-morning, his face a mask of determination. He was armed and ready in his own delving gear, with supplies strapped securely to his back. He set it down and quickly got to work helping her organize things. She left him to mind the shop to go shopping for the needed potions.

Thankfully, Alchemist Row wasn't that far. The wide array of magical concoctions that would provide invaluable in the dungeon weren't rare, but they were expensive. Eight small golds for two dozen healing potions. The Master who sold to her threw in two defensive reinforcement potions for free when he heard what she needed them for.

She thanked him profusely. No matter what anyone said about the cutthroat nature of the city, she felt the artisans did their best to look out for each other...most of the time.

By mid-day, preparations were complete when Sergeant Harlock arrived along with Lucas and three other men.

"Miss Aetherhart," Harlock greeted her with a respectful nod before gesturing towards the men accompanying him. "These are our volunteers from Iron Fist—Lucas you've already met; this is Thoren," he nodded to a man who resembled a mountain with arms like tower-caps.

Yolani gave Lucas a smile and Thoren a respectful incline of the head.

"Jareth," Harlock indicated to a wiry man with a set of half a dozen daggers on his belt; "and finally, Kael," he gestured at the youngest, who had an air of nervous excitement around him.

Yolani responded to Jareth's wave with one of her own. The smile she gave Kael was perfectly neutral as she thanked them all. Was Kael really old enough to go with them?

"I'm sure the Sergeant has gone over things with all of you, but I just want to reiterate this is a dangerous mission, and we will be looking to rescue my father or...find evidence of his...passing. Regardless of the outcome, you'll all be paid for accompanying me and helping keep the party safely on the trip. It's all the way to the third level."

She gave each one of them a serious look, but no one seemed deterred.

Harlock nodded to her. “Payment will be two large golds for the expedition. After we are out, there will be a final tally for damage to equipment and gear, maxing out at one large gold.”

Henri sputtered, “That’s outrageous.”

Sergeant Harlock gave him a sharp glance. “The dungeon is dangerous, lad. You can’t expect men to risk their lives for pennies. Not honest men who will watch your back down there, at any rate.”

Yolani nodded in agreement with Harlock’s statement, silencing any further protest. She pulled out her money bag and counted out twenty small golds, and Sergeant Harlock distributed them to everyone.

With the matter of payment settled and introductions done, they gathered their packs and headed as a group towards the Dungeon District. Moving as a group through the city was subtly different from what she was used to. The mercenaries formed up in a small arc in front of her while Henri and Jareth stood slightly behind on her flanks.

The throngs of people parted for their passage like schools of fleeing fish in the path of one of the lake monsters in the city’s primary lake.

Despite the short time knowing them, there was a seemingly undeniable sense of camaraderie between the mercenaries. That made her feel like she’d made the right decision to hire them all from the same mercenary company.

As they reached the Dungeon District, Yolani felt a small knot forming in her stomach. The guards posted at the checkpoint were Syndicate men. Their cold faces and dismissive attitude were something she’d grown used to over the years attending the auctions with her father.

A burly guard with a twisted scar running down his cheek stepped forward, blocking their path. “Hold it right there,” he ordered gruffly. His eyes flicked over them disdainfully, as if judging their worthiness to enter. He seemed to find what he wanted when they finally settled on her.

Well, her title of [**Master Artificer**] was probably what he was looking for.

“We’re here to delve into the dungeon,” Henri stated firmly, meeting the guard’s gaze without flinching.

Before the guard could take offense or stall things, Yolani stepped forward. “I have the delving fee for the dungeon run.”

The guard's glare slowly drifted away from Henri to focus on the large silver she held up in her hand. He pocketed the bribe and nodded. "Really. You lot? Well then, you'd better prepare for a thorough search."

What followed could only be described as invasive. Their belongings were turned out and examined meticulously by the guards—every potion vial opened, every piece of equipment handled roughly while being logged. They were stripped bare with no regard for privacy or respect.

The only saving grace was that the search of their items was done in their presence, so there was no chance for shenanigans or theft.

No matter how greedily the guards eyed her money pouch and bag of artifice crystals.

Once the guards had finished rifling through and documenting their things, another man approached with an air of authority that clearly marked him as someone higher in rank within the Syndicate hierarchy.

"Manager Fenton," Harlock greeted tersely as he gathered up and began to re-adorn his armor.

"Oh? Are we acquainted, Mercenary?" Fenton asked.

"Been through here before." Harlock answered with a gruff.

Fenton nodded to him. "Excellent. Then you'll know the rules and procedures, however I shall go over them again for the rest of your party."

Yolani already knew the gist of it but she stopped and focused on the message so she wouldn't miss anything.

The manager's gaze swept over them with a dismissive expression before launching into a list of rules and costs associated with entering the dungeon. "Any mana shards are to be handed over upon exit with no delay; the price for failing to disclose anything found is one year of indentured servitude with no parole. Half the value of any loot found is to be paid either in kind or coin; and no rescue parties will be dispatched should you fail to return."

Yolani raised her hand, drawing a frown. "Yes, Miss Aetherhart?"

"My father had an agreement with the Syndicate," she stated. "He was supposed to be allowed to keep one mana shard from his dungeon delve."

Fenton raised an eyebrow, annoyance clearly etched on his face. "Unlikely," he scoffed.

"It's true," she insisted adamantly. "Check your records if you don't believe me."

He almost protested, but ultimately turned and fetched a large journal that was chained to the table. After flipping back a few pages, he stopped to read the entry. He grumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘damned artificers’.

“It seems you’re correct. Your father did indeed have such an agreement. Now, if your party would like to depart, you must all agree to the Terms and Conditions of Expedition before being allowed entry.” Fenton turned his gaze to Yolani. “There is also the formality of the gold entry fee.”

She pulled out her one large gold and handed it to him. He passed a small wand over the coin, which turned green, confirming the metal’s purity. Placing it in his own pouch, he had each party member sign their mark to the agreement form before filing it away in the large ledger.

“Very well. It appears this group is founded as the 5,672nd Neftasu expedition. May fortune favor you.”

Fenton gestured towards one of the guards, who moved forward obediently. The man’s beefy arm disappeared into a recess of the wall as he manipulated some hidden mechanism. With a low groan that echoed ominously through the corridor, a heavy metal door to the dungeon began to open.

As they stepped through the threshold, Yolani couldn’t help but feel a sense of foreboding wash over her. But she pushed it down, steeling herself for what was to come.

CHAPTER 29 – MUSHROOHUM VILLE

A massive panther hunted her in the dark, but she had lured it into a trap. As she slowly rose from her crouch, she recognized the shape; it was a Darkwalker, not a panther. Water dripped from the cavern's ceiling into small pools that leaked into a nearby stream.

Just as it was about to pounce on where it thought she was, she threw her javelin. The weapon pierced the predator's side, right through its heart. A roar erupted throughout the cave before the beast collapsed.

A sudden pinch in her side stung like fire, and her throat dried out instantly. The pain was sharp, and her hand came back covered in blood as she tried to press on the wound.

A javelin was stuck, shoved through her chest. She yanked it out in a spray of blood.

A sudden certainty filled her: she'd hunted herself. She'd stabbed herself!

She screamed.

It was enough to wake her from the nightmare. Her senses immediately caught fire as she found herself naked and covered in sweat. Everything was dark; she flipped [**Darkvision**] on almost instinctively.

She was inside a metal wrought cage. Anger flared through her, but before she got up, she realized the cage wasn't sealed. The door was tied open and there was no sign of any guards.

Was she not a prisoner?

One thing was certain, somehow, she'd ended up naked again. Somehow, it didn't feel as much as a vulnerability as when she had woken in the Black Candle's dungeon. Probably because there weren't creepy ass cultists staring at her while wearing satanic robes and blood etched all over the floor.

Yeah. That was a good guess.

The mat she was sitting on was scratchy but plush. Some type of moss, the same texture as what grew on the Ralfot skins. Looking around, she froze when she spotted her mana shard. Her memory of the battle was a fuzzy vagueness, but she did somewhat recall the end and finally getting it back. She'd almost been hoping the entire sequence wasn't real.

She'd turned into a cat. A darkwalker.

Instinctively, Elania reached out and picked up the glowing crystal and used **[Identify]** on it.

[Mana Shard (Condensed) 701/1456]

Apparently, her new rank in **[Identify]** was useful. That the shard was now less than half power, though, was less than ideal. Would she be able to shove excess power into it for storage? That would be amazing.

Being able to store power without having to 'power level' her maximum **[Power]** stat would be very convenient. She'd certainly risked and suffered, a lot for that perk.

Holding it in the palms of her hands, she focused on the energy she could feel. Pulling at it gently unleashed a sudden river of energy that flowed through her. After a few seconds, the flow constricted itself to a tiny trickle.

Her slight morning tiredness and icky feeling melted away until the air felt crisp, and a multitude of smells assailed her senses. Everything seemed more colorful; sensation felt more visceral. Her body seemed to agree as her heart began to pump faster and she felt a wave of electric wash over her skin as if the nerves there had suddenly woken up.

The feeling that she could jam her fingers into it and widen the power flow back up was there, but she refrained and flicked her **[Identify]** at the shard again.

[Mana Shard (Condensed) 476/1456]

[Power: 233/233]

Elania never been blind or deaf, but it fit the idea of someone suddenly being able to see or hear when they couldn't before. The draw on the crystal was a lot, but she'd been very low on power. Strategically, it might not have been a good idea to draw power from the shard unless necessary, but tactically running around with low power was a bad idea.

She really needed to test if she could refill the shard. The sounds of work and people going about their business echoed around her, though. The desire to figure out if the Mushroomums were friendly now pulled her to her feet.

Glancing around again, she confirmed there weren't any clothes. That wasn't ideal, but modesty was probably...different for mushrooms?

When she stepped out of the cage, the half-open building she'd been stored in revealed itself. The tall wall was two stories tall, with the second open level being dedicated to storing a large amount of...moss? Ample amounts of the stuff hung out of various baskets, jars, and containers.

The lower level was awash with working Mushroomums, grabbing tools from various workbenches and walls that were covered in what she assumed were iron or steel tools. Shovels, Pickaxes, Hoes, and all sorts of things she didn't recognize the name of.

Carpenters were busy sawing [**Tower-Cap**] logs into planks, while a row of a half dozen kilns were cooking what she assumed were bricks. The building was much longer than it was wide, and one of the long walls was missing, giving her a full view of the village palisade and cavern lake.

The aftereffects of the battle were still visible; crops had been smashed, the land was covered with puddles of water and mud. In the distance, she spotted Mushroomums carrying bodies of Darkwalkers toward the village, as well as other members of their tribe...village...group.

Despite being in her birthday suit, the Mushroomums totally ignored her. That was... good, but also weird. Looking around, she spotted a bunch of seated Mushroomums working with bolts of what looked like cloth or leather. She decided that was a good a destination as anywhere. She started feeling like she was a ghost when a big Mushroom suddenly blocked her path.

A smelly "Glaaaaa!" exploded in her face.

Elania, although on alert, was not ready for that. She punched it in the face.

It wasn't a piercing blow, but the Mushroomum lifted off its feet and landed on its back a few feet away.

The expected encirclement and threatening spears and javelins didn't materialize, nor did the Mushroomums pay much attention to the altercation. Her interloper stood back up and released another 'Glaaa!' then turned and walked to the tailors.

It wadded up a ball of something and threw it at her. She almost let the bundle hit her in the face, not understanding. When she unrolled the leather, and it was [**Darkwalker**] leather, it was a loose outfit in the same style as the Mushroomums wore. Sized for a Mushroomum, which was to say, for someone twice as big as her.

Without needing any prompting, she pulled it over her head anyway, then used a loose strap to tie it around her. The Mushroomum was still staring at her.

“Umm. Sorry for punching you. Thank you for the clothes? Do you know where my other stuff is?” Elania asked. It stared at her for a bit longer before leading her over to another area where there were various sets of equipment.

It pulled out a belt and knife and gave it to her. It wasn't the same one as she had traded Skinner for, but it was the same type, almost like it had been made on a manufacturing line.

Glancing at the long workshop...building...thing, she expected maybe they had done just that for the belt and pouch. Although she didn't see any evidence of a forge or metalworking, maybe they traded for those.

Once she had the belt on, the Mushroomum turned and left her. Not really understanding what was going on, she decided to explore on her own.

The cage she had woke up in wasn't the only one inside the workshop, but when two Mushroomums carried in a corpse and tossed it into one of the others, she froze. All the other cages were occupied with bodies of the dead. The Darkwalkers were being skinned, and their meat cut up before it was all tossed into the cages.

She reached up and pulled on her nose. She didn't smell anything bad. Was her sense of smell even working? But she'd smelled the spores from the Mushroomum.

Whether the building was the mushroom version of Home Depot or a Funeral Parlor, she wasn't equipped to determine. However, she decided it was time to look around somewhere else. Outside, there was evidence of more industry; buildings that had been damaged were being repaired. People seemed to be everywhere, working on cleaning up.

She found herself attracted to a charred spot near the lake. Copious amounts of blood painted the rocks a darkening red. The corpse of the Darkwalker Demon was nowhere in sight, she wondered what the Mushroomums had done with it. There was so much damage visible everywhere, melted rock, torn gouges in the terrain where they had fought, and it looked like the ceiling was still periodically dropping rocks from above.

A bit of guilt pricked her, but she quickly dismissed it. They'd stolen her mana shard... she had it back now, though. Why had there been an attack by a horde of Darkwalkers and a Demon on the village, though? Was this a normal occurrence for the underworld? Somehow she couldn't imagine it was considering the state of things.

She reached up and ran her fingers through her hair. “Urgh!”

“Glaa.” Heralded a neutral scent from behind.

Elania whipped around; Skinner was standing with his spear, using it as a walking stick. His wounds seemed to have crusted over, leaving ugly looking scars and the mushrooms that had been growing in them had been pruned off.

The memory of his previous appearance clicked things together; the corpses of the Mushroomums, piling the refuse on them all...the Mushroomums were growing new baby mushrooms? She'd have to use **[Identify]** on the cages later to confirm if she was right.

Skinner repeated his communication. "Glaa."

Elania sighed. "Glaa to you too. Don't suppose you can vocalize something with information in it, so we can talk?"

"Glaa." Skinner turned and headed away.

Frustrated, Elania followed him. He took her on a tour of the village. Around the outskirts, out into the Ralfot and Elnat fields, even. After a few hours of what she assumed was patrolling and guarding the domesticated animals, they returned to the palisaded village.

The large gates opened and welcomed them in. All the warriors and guards bowed with respect; she assumed it was for Skinner and not her, although she caught a few fearful glances and avoidances that were directed to her for sure.

The reception as they ascended into the older stone ruins, the reception was less warm. The guards were armed with fancy cloaks and metal shields. When they entered the chamber, she realized it was some sort of mushroom styled throne room. There were fancy metal weapons and cloth tapestries on the wall, sure, but there were also mushrooms growing from the ceiling.

On the throne was what she thought was a fancy dressed Mushroomum corpse; until it finally gestured toward them. Mushrooms grew from his body in tumor-like masses. Liquid dripped from his body onto the floor while two attendants mopped up the spill as they approached.

Old age was not kind to Mushroomums, she assumed.

Guards and other Mushroomums assembled themselves in rows as they approached. Was this where she got her reward for saving the kingdom?

They reached a certain point, and Skinner fell and knelt on one knee. She supposed she should have done the same, but a certain stubbornness pricked at her and she decided not to.

That's when the prince strode out from a room behind the throne. He stood in front of the throne and pointed at her.

“Glaaaa!” Of course, the proclamation smelled like shit.

Elania added up all the things she’d learned since waking up.

Skinner was well respected by most of the village, and most of the Mushroomums deferred to him.

The prince hated her, probably wanted her dead.

The king was, to the best she could tell, a corpse sitting on a throne with mushrooms growing on him.

What else could go wrong?

A horn sounded in the distance.

CHAPTER 30 – NEW ARRIVALS

Taniel and the rest of the monks stopped and stared at the massive Darkwalker that the Mushroomums were butchering. The industrial process ended as they spread its remains across the cavern's small moss fields. It was obviously a demon variant, so maybe they weren't wrong that its flesh would act as a powerful fertilizer. He just had no idea how they had taken down a lesser demon with their primitive weapons.

Fal'ren Colony didn't have any spellcasters as far as he or the Conclave was aware, and nothing short of an experienced adventuring party had any business facing off with a lesser demon. That there were any Mushroomums left was a miracle in itself... for the village and the conclave mission.

Marcus, the group's guide, let out an annoyed sigh. "You lot going to keep staring all day? I for one, am ready to set camp and get some rest."

Taniel restrained his immediate dislike for the man and looked to the other monks. "Let's go. We'll ask about it later."

The novices all nodded. Joren, his fellow senior monk for the expedition, raised an eyebrow. "Look at the wounds. Looks like a larger beast found it and mauled it to death."

Taniel nodded. "I know. We should keep an eye out until we know more."

One of the younger novices couldn't hold back. "What could have done that?"

Marcus let out a jarring laugh. "Might be o' one of the things ye lot hired me to keep you safe from. Don't suppose the mushrooms learned to tame beasts, do ya? Maybe an Elder Razorscale."

"Stop trying to scare the novices," Joren warned.

Marcus laughed again. "There is no 'trying' about it."

"I'll remind you to keep to your job, Mercenary," Taniel added.

“Aye, aye. We are here, aren’t we?” Marcus asked.

Joren let out an annoyed ‘Tsk’ before looking back at the demon corpse. “Two days late.”

“Looks like it saved us from dropping in on the fun,” Marcus countered.

Taniel frowned. He couldn’t argue with that, but he doubted it was anything other than dumb luck that they’d avoided the conflict because Marcus’ chosen path had been blocked and the backtracking took an entire day.

Marcus pointed a vicious smile to the half dozen teenage novices. “Don’t worry, boys. I’m sure we’ll find out more when we reach the chief. If something scarier than a Darkwalker jumps out, I’ll protect you.”

As they entered Fal’ren’s primary cavern, Marcus raised a horn to his lips and blew the sound across the landscape. It wasn’t really needed, but it was protocol to allow the leaders of the colony to know they had arrived.

But what riveted Taniel’s attention wasn’t the annoying **[Ranger]** they’d taken as a guide—it was the devastation laid out before them.

“Demon’s tits” One of the novices blurted.

Joren slapped the young man on the back of the head. “Mind your tongue,” Joren warned. “Keep your inner spirit calm, especially when faced with the unknown.”

As they picked their way down the slope toward the village, evidence of rebuilding came into view. A large workshop longhouse was a hive of activity as Mushroomums went about collecting debris and reprocessing it. Their methods were primitive, but that didn’t stop them from working quickly. Especially since they had the aid of modern equipment and tools.

The monks had carried exactly that sort of things in the baskets on their backs as part of the trade agreement with the colony.

Dozens of corpses of Mushroomum and Darkwalkers alike were being carried away, which probably meant they would see a massive population explosion soon. The village and ruins themselves looked mostly intact except for one section of the stonework that had crumbled into a pile of broken bricks.

Taniel spotted the large bolt thrower that had been sold a few seasons prior and smiled. It had probably been what had allowed them to defeat the demon.

Joren grabbed his shoulder and pointed to the ceiling. “Taniel, look.”

The massive burnt circle of dead hanging moss was like a punch in the stomach. The **[Glow-Moss]** that the conclave needed was only able to grow in the deep caverns where

mana pooled heavily. It was extremely flammable and dangerous to work with, but was critical to the supply of potions. Especially the sort they used to unlock a new monk's full potential.

The Mushroomums tended to the moss and sold it to them in bulk. Once it started burning, there was hardly any way to stop the process other than severing the burnt area. So how had they preserved the rest of the growth?

The question drew his eyes to the massive puncture in the cavern's roof; it looked as if a massive hand had driven a spike into the rock. Whatever had happened was on a much larger scale than he had assumed.

"Surprised there is anything left," Marcus grumbled.

That was something they could agree on.

Looking up at the ruins, two red dots seemed to look down on them. A sudden instinctual fear sent his heart pounding in his chest. Joren shot him a sharp look as the other monk felt the sudden instability in his spirit. He closed his eyes and focused himself back into a tranquil pond.

When he looked up at the spot again, there was nothing there.

He had been seeing things, surely. There was no way an unbound demon was loose in the cavern. The Mushroomums were all still alive.



Skinner left her to what she assumed was to speak with the leadership; the king, or prince, or whatever. So Elania had found a comfy place on top of one of the ruin towers that hadn't been collapsed by the ballista bolt. In the distance, she watched the group of humans, or what she assumed were humans, approaching.

Being too far away to **[Identify]**, she wasn't able to confirm.

More importantly, she'd been filled with the need to find the highest spot possible in the cavern to perch on and watch. That was mildly annoying, but when the same type of urge prompted her to lick her hands to clean them, she'd rebelled and wrapped them up in strips of cloth. The wraps didn't help the urge, but licking the coarse leather-like fabric was far enough out of the question that it squelched the desire.

Elania devoted her attention to the approaching group as they came closer. All of them but the leader were carrying large baskets on their backs, and each one had a small glowing lantern. The leader was dressed much as she would have imagined a fantasy ranger would: A cloak, a bow on his back and a sword at his hip, while he held up a torch that glowed with magic instead of fire.

The last was probably a smart thing, considering the flammability of certain flora in the caverns.

When she could finally start to make out their faces, she was finally able to use [**Identify**].

[**Novice Monk - Human - Lvl 23**]

[**Novice Monk - Human - Lvl 19**]

[**Novice Monk - Human - Lvl 31**]

[**Novice Monk - Human - Lvl 17**]

[**Holy Monk - Human - Lvl 87**]

[**Martial Monk - Human - Lvl 95**]

[**Ranger - Human - Lvl 276**]

An uneasiness settled in the back of her mind. Her very first instinct to find a higher place to watch from, she could attribute to the newly maximized [**Darkwalker**] affinity from absorbing so many of them. Whether or not that was a permanent effect, she did not know. It was something she could live with, she thought, since it didn't seem to override her own will.

What if other humans didn't see it that way? The sight of other humans, while a relief, was also terrifying in its own way.

Humans could be far more vicious and terrible than beasts.

Not that she had much personal experience with that, considering her relatively safe and sheltered childhood growing up in a relatively well-off middle-class family. Yet she'd learned a lot from history books, social media, and entertainment news channels. It probably didn't help that her mom loved watching the crime-drama shows and whodunits.

The fact that her [**Status**] plastered 'Lesser-Demon' on her as her 'race' instead of 'human' was also a major concern and red flag that things weren't going to go smoothly.

The paladin who had tried to murder her upon arrival had certainly taken it at face value.

And yet...

It would be nice to be able to talk to someone. The smelly burps that the Mushroomums somehow found communication were not ideal for fostering conversation. She was fairly confident that her **[Universal Speech]** skill would work unless they somehow used sign language or something.

She had tried writing, too. Unfortunately, the scribblings she had made received little acclaim. She'd looked for any sign of the written word from the Mushroomums, but found nothing but oddly glowing runes scattered about the ruins.

Her writing skill apparently didn't apply to magical runes.

Which was frustrating. There were too many limitations to a lot of things that she didn't know or understand.

Taking a last look at the approaching party, Elania decided she needed to prepare. Her makeshift sack and leather belt weren't going to make a very good impression. She had seen little in the way of tailored apparel, but she had seen plenty of material and tools. Jumping off the tower, she landed outside and made her way to the workshops where she'd seen such.

She wasn't sure what her status or rights were in regard to taking material, but the Mushroomums seemed to live communally, and her association with Skinner had given her some type of protection. She doubted it would permit her to grab tons of stuff willy-nilly without any purpose, but the Mushroomums didn't bat an eye when she took a roll of **[Darkwalker]** leather, some of the red-hued fabric, and a set of sewing tools and thread.

Finding a relatively sheltered alcove that was out of sight, it was time to put her cos-play production experience to the test. There was no chance she'd make something really nice, at least not on such short notice, but upgrading her sack to a pair of trousers and a simple blouse, with a nice set of foot and hand wraps to go with it, wasn't impossible.

Especially when she trickled a small amount of **[Power]** into her movements, allowing her to move quicker and more accurately than she ever had been able to on Earth. Turning into an organic sewing machine wasn't quite the experience she'd expected, but at least it was effective.

Even the **[System]** seemed to approve.

[Skill evolution criteria met. Reprocess the 'Survival Crafting' Rank C, into 'Basic Handcrafting' Rank E? Y/N?]

The question would have been much easier to answer if she'd had more information. At least this was a good skill to test on; **[Survival Crafting]** might have been nice to make javelins, but was that really necessary for her to survive now? Not really.

Being able to create nicer things would be more useful. Plus, there was probably considerable overlap...maybe the new skill would even include all the abilities of the previous one, or even enhance them?

"Only one way to find out," Elania murmured. The message disappeared and a confirmation appeared.

[The skill Basic Handcrafting has been acquired. For upgrading your first skill, a fourth active skill slot has been acquired. Basic Handcrafting has been selected automatically.]

"Oh," she mumbled. That was a nice perk. How many active skill slots could she earn?

She spent another two hours working on the outfit, making a rough backpack to go along with it. By the end, she had workable underwear as well. She tested each thing out and made sure it was comfortable to wear. No mirror to check on how hideous it looked, but there was no way the two-toned color scheme was worse than a black sack tied up around her middle.

Even if that seemed to be the normal Mushroomum fashion choice other than the 'royal' guards and the prince enjoyed. Her hand froze as she finished wrapping her feet. Hopefully, they wouldn't be angry with her when they saw she used some of their red fabric.

Fixing up her mana shard went next: she made a little pouch for it and a loop that went around her neck.

That sorted everything she could do with what she had, so she returned what she hadn't used and picked up a few of the available spears; the shorter ones more suited to throwing. They went into sheathes she'd worked into the side of her backpack.

That left her feeling as prepared as she'd be on short notice. She felt like there was at least a better chance the new arrivals wouldn't react poorly at the sight of her. Self-dressed huntress in a cave woman outfit was better than a half-naked one wearing an oversized sack, right?

Being left alone had its benefits, but she quickly found that there was a major drawback: she had no idea what she was supposed to be doing or where to go. Lack of communication with the Mushroomums meant she did not know if they even wanted her to meet the ranger and monks.

Where the heck was Skinner, anyway? Following him around would probably lead to the best results, or at least put her near a potential ally. She was pretty sure that his intervention was what had kept relations cordial after the battle.

As soon as she had the thought to locate him, a strange surety filled her that he was up in the ruins. Whether that was her [**Tracking**] skill doing some kind of magic, her new weird [**Darkwalker**] senses doing something, or just some weird hunch... she did not know. Actually, without going and checking it out, she had no idea it was accurate.

So that was exactly what she did. Skipping the stone stairs, she jumped up onto a roof, then climbed her way up the stone wall.

The freedom felt exhilarating. Fear didn't even prick her; if she fell, she'd land safely. Vertical movement perk, acquired.

When she reached the top, one of the guards noticed her immediately and let out a stinky challenge "Glaa!" at her. He stomped and looked angry, but she just stood and stared. Eventually he resorted to pointing at her to follow him, which she obliged.

The royal chamber was much brighter than she remembered. The addition of seven humans and their light-sources tended to do that. A glowing orb floating in the ranger's hand was doing its part, too.

The prince, Skinner, and the humans seemed to be locked in a fierce staring contest, with the orb acting as moderator. Mushroomums were busy moving baskets back and forth in some kind of choreographed game.

Her escort led her into the chamber and then let out an informative "Glaa." that attracted the Mushroomum's attention, even King Shroom who had been quietly napping.

The highly structured and orderly meeting of musical baskets stopped abruptly, and a few things happened at once.

The Ranger drew his sword and pointed it at her; the metal shimmering with a blue sheen that enveloped his entire body.

The younger novice monks clustered up into a terrified ball behind their two higher-ranked members, one of them letting out a terrifying screech.

The prince gestured toward her emphatically while spewing shit smell everywhere.

All the 'Royal Guard' lowered their stupidly long pikes at every human in the room—including her.

Skinner looked at her with a mushroom expression she could only call resigned. When his mental voice sounded in her head—and she was sure it was him somehow—her jaw dropped.

“The Honored One’s timing is impeccable as ever,” Tre’gat’aru transmitted. The smell of irony was like citrus.

Elania glanced at the Ranger and tried to give him a friendly smile. “It looks very intimidating, but do you really want to fight?”

She wasn’t sure what she did wrong as the monk novices seemed to somehow fold in closer to each other.

Introductions were off to a great start!

CHAPTER 31 – MEETINGS

No one seemed interested in replying to her question, resulting in a staring contest between her and the ranger.

The standoff ended quickly when the Mushroomum servants began to drag back the baskets that had been offered to the party in trade for their supplies.

The humans had brought backpacks full of metal tools, much like the ones she'd seen in the workshop. Suddenly the presence of the more refined metalwork clicked together in Elania's head. When she pushed **[Identify]** at the baskets, the Mushroomums had been offering her eyes widened a little.

[Gloss-Moss Basket]

The fact that the ranger and monks had ceased hostility when Skinner had reclaimed them hinted at their value to the group.

Elania slid around the guards to stand behind Skinner. That seemed to be the safest bet. The ranger's eyes never left her, but the tension was mutual. When she stuck her tongue out at him, he flinched, and she just barely kept a giggle from escaping. The smug look was impossible to hide, though.

The prince glowered at her, but even he had been silenced when King Shroom had hit him with a stick and indicated that Skinner was to speak. Somehow that made her worry about the stability of the Mushroom Kingdom, but who was she to judge how they ran things? She was...just an honored guest?

As what she assumed was an intense telepathic bartering session continued, she eyed the glowing orb.

[All-Species Translation Orb]

Greed licked at her; she really wanted the thing. It would have solved so many of her issues with the Mushroomums.

The back and forth of baskets was amusing for a while, but it slowly wore on her patience. Furtive glances were cast at her repeatedly by the monks, who seemed content to let the ranger do the talking for the party.

Things seemed to near resolution when the prince suddenly jumped up and pointed toward her and let out a hateful “Glaa!” with a terrible smell. The monks covered their faces and ranger wrinkled his nose as he stared at her.

She was glad her opinion on the Mushroomum smells was universal.

The silent negotiations were broken by the ranger. “You are joking. We aren’t taking her!”

Elania’s ears perked up. “Taking me, what?”

The man glared at her. The three primary Mushroomums—King Shroom, Skinner, and the prince—had their own discussion in the form of a varying cloud of smells. It was enough that she stepped away, which caused the party to tense up.

Taking the opportunity, she centered on the ranger. “If you want to take me anywhere, I’d like to know where I’m going before I agree.”

The ranger’s cold gaze remained fixed on her. “We’re not a babysitting service.”

Elania bristled at his dismissive tone. “I can take care of myself.”

Elania frowned, turning her attention to the Mushroomums. She took in the prince’s acrid odor and the sour scent of King Shroom that seemed to indicate senility...or decay. Skinner carried a distinct, vinegar-sharp scent that was hard to place.

Changing her tone, she tried to be as neutral as possible.

“I don’t want to fight,” she said, pulling the ranger’s attention back towards her. “I helped them with the Darkwalkers. I don’t really know what’s going on, and I’d really appreciate information rather than being glared at.”

The ranger grunted in response, but didn’t reply immediately. His gaze was drawn briefly towards where the Mushroomums were offering another basket of moss to the monks, who were practically salivating over it. Eventually, he sighed and looked back at Elania.

“The elder hunter seems to think it would be helpful to you since it thinks we are the same race,” he explained grudgingly.

Her eyebrows shot up at that revelation. Well, that made it clear why they were so hostile. They didn’t even consider her human. Lesser Demon Elania it was, she guessed.

“And what does the little prince think about that?” Elania asked.

“He’d rather see you dead,” was all the ranger said before turning his attention back towards Skinner and King Shroom, leaving Elania with a sinking feeling in her stomach. That was entirely too believable.

She was surprised when he turned back toward her again with a vicious smile on his face. “Looks like you’re coming with us.”

“The orb lets you talk to them with telepathy. I want to talk to them.” Elania stated.

The ranger raised an eyebrow. “You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want the orb; I just want to talk to them for a minute.” Elania said.

“Pay me a small gold, and I’ll let you have your conversation,” he countered.

Elania gritted her teeth. “I don’t have any gold. You let him say something to me earlier!”

The ranger grunted. “A costly mistake, I assure you. It costs durability for each message to be translated. I’m on a fixed budget.”

The Mushroom servants delivered the last baskets on their side while taking the offered tools and equipment bags. It seemed the negotiations were over, and she’d been included in them without being consulted.

The martial monk cleared his throat. “Did you really kill the Demon Darkwalker?”

Elania glanced at him. “Yes,” she replied confidently.

It seemed **[Universal Speech]** was living up to its name. It felt like they were conversing in English, anyway.

The monk seemed taken aback by her answer, but the ranger just continued to monitor her as the novices collected the Glow-Moss Baskets.

“Where are you going after leaving?” Elania blurted out.

The ranger actually answered her. “We’ll be setting up camp for the night, then leaving for Neftasu in the morning.”

“What sort of place is that?” Elania asked.

“The largest city you’ll find in the region,” the martial monk answered.

She had so many questions to ask; it was hard to restrain herself.

“My name is Elania Reyes,” she introduced herself. When a response wasn’t offered, her brow furrowed. This was going to be harder than she thought.

“Do you have names or are you just ‘ranger’ and ‘monk’ or something?” Elania asked pointedly.

The ranger glared at her before answering. “Marcus.”

“Joren,” the martial monk answered.

That got him a glare from the spiritual one, but then the man seemed to sigh and give up. “Taniel,” he offered.

“You’re a new one, aren’t you?” Joren asked.

Elania felt confusion. “A new what?”

“Demon. A new demon,” Marcus answered.

Right. She definitely was that. She wasn’t sure how much information she wanted to share, and something about Marcus set her on edge to be careful. Lying about her experiences wasn’t going to help with any trust issues, though.

If she knew what was safe to share and what wasn’t, that would have been excellent information. As it was, she doubted she had enough experience and knowledge to make up anything convincing, anyway.

“Yeah. Like one or two weeks,” Elania admitted.

Marcus nodded. “I’m surprised you were able to gain a new form so quickly.”

She frowned, although she supposed the story of her fight with the Demon Darkwalker was probably one of the first things the Mushroomums and told them about her. She wasn’t sure why he was bringing it up first thing, though.

Elania let out a sigh. “I’ll go with you for now. I don’t want to overstay my welcome here. A city sounds like a place to go, but I have a lot of questions about things.”

That drew the opposite of happy looks from the monks, but Marcus nodded. “I bet you do.”

She glanced at the prince, who seemed to have a smug expression. A sudden jolt of annoyance ran through her. “Marcus, I know you said no translations, but could you please tell the prince if he lets out another shit smell, I’m going to punch enough holes into him to give him a hundred mushroom babies?”

He stared at her and blinked. The monks looked horrified.

Finally, he laughed and pointed the translation orb at the prince.

She didn’t get to hear anything, but the way the prince jolted, then turned and ran out of the room, was enough to make her feel better. Skinner gave her a stern look.

“Sorry. He’s a prick,” Elania offered sheepishly.

“That one is for sure.” Marcus agreed. The group had finished collecting their goods and begun to leave.

Elania turned toward Skinner. A deep well of thanks to him for the few small, but notable events between them lead to an impulsive hug. “Thank you for helping me.”

He didn't really react, but he didn't push her away either. "Glaa."

The earthy smell she liked to think was something like respect, or maybe even potential friendship. She wasn't sure she'd ever get a chance to return, but she hoped that he'd be okay with King Shroom being so old and the belligerent prince in the background.

After a final farewell, she turned and hurried after the others before they left her behind.

Even if they didn't like her, she was determined to get some answers.

CHAPTER 32 – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

E lania followed behind Marcus and the monks far enough that she was able to study all of them. An itch scratched at her senses, giving her the feeling that somehow they were still monitoring her, despite appearing not to look at her at all. Heck, they probably were, with some skill or spell or something she had no idea existed.

The stone stairs down to the village proper were lined with Mushroohums resting or watching the procession of humans and their large basket backpacks full of **[Glow-Moss]** descend.

As she studied the ranger's back, she felt a hollow feeling. Shouldn't she have felt some type of relief at finding other humans that could possibly answer her questions? A little voice of doubt filled her as she continued to follow along.

The memory of the paladin trying to kill her was still fresh in her mind... and the first reaction from the monk party had been in the same vein. The look in the novice's eyes had been real fear. Marcus, Taniel, and Joren had all shown varying forms of hostility at first, as well.

The high level of the ranger made her worry, but one thing she had learned so far was that levels weren't everything. She wasn't even sure they did much at all.

When they reached the cavern floor, one of the novices tripped and fell face first onto the stone. The lid to his basket broke open and the glowing moss scattered across the ground. Joren laid into the younger man with a vicious tongue lashing as they collected the spilled, seemingly precious, moss.

They sure were going through a lot of trouble to get the stuff. The tunnels near the cultist dungeon had been full of it... at least until she'd incinerated it all. Why, then, was

it so valuable? Certainly she hadn't nuked all the glow moss in the entire world...it wasn't that rare, right?

One of the larger Mushroomum buildings was opened up for them, baskets of blankets were made available as well as some supplies. A fresh brace of gutted Elnats was tied together on a line outside the building, hinting at the evening meal. Elania felt a bit of surprise at just how much the Mushroomums were helping the group.

They hadn't offered her an **[Elnat]** to cook, and she felt slightly betrayed. As the monks entered the building, Marcus stopped and turned towards her.

"So, Little Demon, how did you end up out here? Some poor group accidentally summon you? Pull yourself out of some primordial soup? Group of unlucky cavers run into you and get turned into snacks?" His barrage of questions caught her off guard.

"I was summoned. On purpose, though," she admitted, keeping her tone neutral despite the sting of his words. She wasn't sure how much to share just yet—about the cultists or the paladin who had tried to kill her on arrival. She pulled her red shoulder shawl closed a bit tighter; she definitely didn't want to share anything about her mana shard.

Her admission seemed to amuse Marcus as he leaned back against the building's wall and let out a low chuckle. "Ah, yes. A group of incompetents dealing with something well beyond them." His gaze was piercing as he continued, "Probably didn't even realize that a newly summoned demoness' favorite snack is essence-brimming sapients."

Elania's brows furrowed in confusion. "What?"

He raised an eyebrow. "That's how you got that form. Ate enough humans to evolve into one. Normally that doesn't happen so early on in a Demon's career though, so you're a bit of an oddball. Other than the ones raised specifically for that purpose, of course."

Elania felt a shiver go down her spine. People purposefully summoned...monster demons and fed them people to turn them into sapient demons? Why? The world was turning much darker than she had imagined with every sentence. Maybe going to the city was not the best idea after all.

"You'll want to be careful around the monks," he warned casually, gesturing toward the entryway. "Their Conclave doesn't have much love for demons—its one of their mandates to hunt down and deal with them. Especially unbound ones that have slipped their contract."

"Unbound? What's that mean?" Elania asked before adding defensively, "And how do you know I don't already have a contract?"

A smug smile spread across his face at the question, as if he had been waiting for it all along. It made her feel distinctly uncomfortable, as if she had just walked into some sort of trap.

“As a fresh off the circle demoness,” he began in a patronizing tone, “You’ll probably not have any experience with contracts yet...Your eyes are red; you aren’t under contract at the moment. If you were, they’d shine blue.”

He paused, his grin widening as he saw the confusion flicker in her eyes. “One thing a demon can’t do is hide their eyes. Windows to the soul and all that if you’d like.”

Elania felt a sickening sense of dread settle within her. [**Identify**] and now her eye color—it didn’t seem like it would be very easy to hide her designation. Being a demon came with far too many tells for her liking.

“There’s no way to hide it? No way to fool Identify?” Elania asked.

“No skill, anyway. Mayhap a magic trinket or artifice out there, but I’ve never heard of anything specific,” he replied.

Before she could ask anything else, a call echoed from inside. “Marcus!”

He shot her a final calculating glance before excusing himself and joining his companions inside.

Venturing inside after him, she found the space similar to the workshop she had been in earlier, albeit on a smaller scale. The open interior left little room for privacy, but it did allow her to take in everything at once.

Supplies and goods had been stacked against one wall, and baskets filled with the [**Glow-Moss**] lined another. The light didn’t really escape much, but there were tiny holes that made them glitter an ethereal green, which cast itself on the entire interior. That light was mostly drowned out by the glowing torches the monks had, but it was still noticeable.

The novices were occupied in setting up bedrolls, their movements coordinated and efficient. Meanwhile, Taniel knelt by what looked to be a fire pit in the center of the room, attempting to ignite some kindling with a flint and steel.

“Hey! Isn’t that dangerous?” Elania blurted out suddenly, her eyes darting between Taniel’s sparks and the glow-moss baskets with growing alarm. Memories of the wildfire incident resurfaced unbidden; she wasn’t eager for a repeat encounter.

Taniel faltered mid-strike, looking up at her in confusion as his promising flame sputtered out. “What are you on about?” He growled at her defensively.

The monks paused in their tasks momentarily, sharing a confused look between themselves.

Elania pointed at the glow-moss baskets, feeling a rush of anxiety as all eyes turned to her. "Aren't those really flammable? Is it really safe to have a fire in here with them?"

Taniel resumed his task without responding, his jaw clenched in apparent annoyance.

Joren seemed more understanding and was quick to ease her worries. "The Glow-Moss is only reactive to mana," he explained calmly. "Regular flame won't set it off."

"Oh." The realization brought relief flooding through Elania; having a campfire without worrying about causing another inferno was indeed reassuring.

Once the fire had begun to burn, Marcus arrived with a pack, removing what she could only call the company's mess kit. Pots and pans mixed with bowls, plates, and utensils were sorted out onto a stone table. A few novices arrived with armfuls of potatoes, while another fetched the Elnats.

Elania's stomach suddenly grumbled embarrassingly, drawing glances at her. It was impossible to control the fire reaching her cheeks.

"Better she eats the dinner than one of us," Joren joked, drawing a dark glare from Taniel and causing the novices to flinch in horror. Marcus only chuckled.

Elania nodded. "I haven't had a chance to eat much food. I'd appreciate sharing a meal with you all."

"Sure," Taniel grumbled.

While the monks worked on cooking, Elania found a spot against the wall near the entrance and watched their efforts play out. Marcus sat at the table and undid his sword belt, which carried the longsword that seemed to have some type of magical effect, plus a long straight dagger. Her gaze flickered between the cooking and the weapons while the ranger went about polishing them.

After a few minutes, Joren looked over at her, "Come sit down. You're making me nervous."

Elania shook her head. "I'm fine standing, thanks. How far is it to Neftasu?"

Joren shrugged. "About a week's travel, depending on the [Razorscale] migration. It isn't the best time to be traveling through the area."

Her time since being summoned was hazy; a week represented what she felt might be half as long as she'd been on Eladu so far. It was a considerable distance, considering that she had spent most of her exploration time going in loops and circles to explore the local

area around the Mushroomum village. A week traveling in a straight line meant Neftasu was very far away...and she was unlikely to find it on her own.

“A week. Alright. How do you tell what time it is, anyway?” Elania asked. They had mentioned it was evening, but in the Mushroomum cavern, the moss didn’t flip off and on like it had in the wilder areas.

“Just look at your system screen,” one of the novices interjected.

Elania blinked. “I don’t see anything like time on there.”

“She doesn’t have a system clock, unless she linked herself to a binding stone,” Joren corrected.

“Oh. Right, sorry.” The novice offered a sheepish apology before Taniel pulled him away to work on the food preparation. That seemed more calculated to keep the young man away from her than because of any real need for help skewering the Elnats.

“What’s a binding stone? Don’t tell me that if you die, you resurrect at one?” Elania asked hopefully.

Marcus let out a chuckle. “Fun idea, but no. It’s an artifice that provides certain functions to those who live in the area. Clock, maps, the ability to call the guards, among other things. You’ll find a few in Neftasu.”

“And the city ones reach out there? What does using them cost?” Elania asked.

“Binding to one costs nothing. They are provided by the city. Once connected, the binding doesn’t break for several hundred kilometers. It’s how the Guard utilizes long range communication outside the city,” Marcus answered.

This was getting complicated. For starters, she doubted that with all those things the binding stone did, it would be free. If it didn’t cost coin, then the people bound to it probably were the product of whoever operated them. Modern earth certainly had prepared her to be skeptical of free products.

Taniel fixed her with a glare. “Why are you bothering to answer her stupid questions? Just offer her a contract before she decides supper isn’t enough and eats one of us while we aren’t paying attention.”

Elania bristled. She did not like his suggestion or where it led. “I don’t plan on making any contracts until I understand everything more,” she paused mid-way to fix Taniel with a frown and stare of her own, which was apparently enough to make him look away. “And I’m not going to eat anyone for a snack. The only thing I’ve absorbed are Ralfots and Darkwalkers.”

His glare snapped back onto her. "So, you've forgotten the people you devoured on arrival already, or you're lying. Joren, don't entertain this thing, it isn't safe."

"I didn't devour anyone on arrival," Elania stated clearly. There was obviously a grave misunderstanding, and she wanted to correct it. "There were only humans where I come from. I was a college student getting ready for an exam when some cultists called the Black Candle, yanked me here. Then some holy knight paladin guy tried to murder everyone while they were trying to foist some kind of contract on my head."

Her eyes flickered between each person, hoping for some type of recognition on the name 'Black Candle' but there was nothing. Well, no recognition. There was plenty of distrust.

"I get that you don't trust me, but I have positive Karma, shouldn't that count for something?" Elania asked.

Marcus burst out laughing. "Girlie, if you think **[Karma]** is a yardstick you can use for trust, yer daft."

Elania's eyes narrowed, and she glared at him. "Well, I don't know how it works. I have a lot of good **[Karma]**. Why doesn't it count?"

Joren frowned. "When you kill someone with negative **[Karma]** you'll receive half of it as positive. The reverse if you kill someone with positive **[Karma]**. Killing someone with zero will give you negative one point. It's not a useful measurement, because people abuse the system."

Elania frowned. "I didn't kill anyone. I had a positive balance on arrival."

"Bringing her along is a bad idea. There's no way we can trust her," Taniel complained. "Joren, you should get rid of her."

What had made him hate her so much that he would suggest killing her? Joren actually looked uncomfortable at the thought, at least. The novices were less readable, focusing on stirring the in-progress stew while rotating the skewered Elnats that were roasting on the flame.

Marcus coughed. "Your story doesn't add up, Girlie. You should work on it a bit, because the things you're saying don't jibe with how things actually work."

Elania crossed her arms and felt glad she was near the exit. "That's unfortunate, because I'm not lying. That's what actually happened to me."

Well, this wasn't going great. There was a long, awkward silence that settled until the ranger finally broke it.

“Why don’t you show us your **[Status]** screen,” Marcus asked. “You said you were a student, so you must know writing and magic things then.”

Her eyes flickered to his. “You can do that?”

“It isn’t normally done. A person’s status is very personal,” Joren added.

Marcus gave him an annoyed, sharp look.

“You think it would help prove that I didn’t eat people somehow?” Elania asked.

“Well, you said you were a student, so you must have some skills of the learned, such as writing and the like.” Marcus said.

“I do have **[Universal Speech]**, **[Reading]**, and **[Writing]**,” Elania admitted. A frown creased her face, though, and then she fixed Marcus with a stony glare. “When I absorbed Darkwalkers and Ralfots, my **[Stealth]** and **[Crisis Management]** both went up. How does what skills I have on my **[Status]** prove anything? According to you, I absorbed people, so no matter what skills I have, you could just claim I took them like that.”

Marcus grunted, pulled out a flask of some drink, and took a sip.

The non-answer seemed to tell all. “You just wanted to snoop.”

“It’d be good to know what we are dealing with,” Marcus answered.

Elania shook her head. “You haven’t convinced me it’s in my best interests to just hand over my **[Status]** like that. Trust is supposed to be mutual, and with Taniel sitting there staring daggers at me, I feel like there’s half-a-chance you lot will try to stab me in the back if it seems convenient.”

Oh. Now she’d done it. Stating thing like that in the open probably wasn’t very... subtle. She quickly changed tack. “How do I get home? I don’t want to stay on Eladu.”

“Die,” Taniel spat at her.

The urge to punch the hostility off the monk’s face was quickly heating up. Except that was probably what he wanted; a fight where it would be her against all of them at once.

Joren winced and quickly added to that bit. “It’s said that when demons dissolve, they go back to where they spawned from.”

“That seems like a very permanent solution with very little evidence backing it up,” Elania said.

Marcus grunted. “There isn’t much known about sending demons back because all of them end up either like the beast you fought or bound by a contract to someone.”

He launched into a more thorough explanation. “Wild demons evolve into a demon form of whatever they devour. Summoned ones evolve into whatever their masters feed

them; and it's not hard to form a contract with a summoned demon. Most are quite trusting and easily tricked into accepting anything as long as they receive enough essence stipend to meet their maintenance costs."

Essence maintenance? Was that **[Power]** or something else? She knew her **[Power]** dropped constantly, even when all her skills were deactivated, so that was the only maintenance cost she knew she had.

"So...people summon demons and turn them into slaves with a contract. Then they turn them into whatever demon type they want by feeding them that? They feed them...humans, and that's just accepted?" Elania asked.

"No, it's not just accepted. Your kind are an abomination. It's a tragedy that you were allowed to occur," Taniel said.

"It's more tolerated than Karma markets. Those only exist in the west. But Demon markets are everywhere, including Neftasu," Marcus added.

Ahh, this was wonderful. Her race was generally regarded as useful slaves, or as dangerous monsters. As a human, she was branded as having devoured a bunch of humans to achieve her form.

From what she had picked up from the monks, their feelings ranged from terror at her existence to the pure hatred that Taniel seemed to exhibit. Marcus was looking for something self-serving. Like a contract that benefited him somehow, considering the tack of the conversation.

The only one who seemed nice was Joren, but one out of seven wasn't a very good starting benchmark for how people would react.

Marcus offered her a smile that made her feel hunted. "Don't worry, Little Demon, contracts aren't always one-sided. You already have a huge advantage in that you're already sapient and can choose what you accept or not."

"Stew's ready," Joren informed them.

Somehow, she had lost half her desire to eat anything.

CHAPTER 33—MANZITORE

The stew wasn't bad, but the unfortunate reality that she wanted the raw meat hit her after the first bite. It wasn't bad, although it did lack the salt and spices she was used to. Everyone else took several bowls of the stuff, but she was done after just one.

Roasted Elnat was far more palatable, and she took one for herself.

"Only like meat, eh?" Marcus commented.

Everyone paused and eyed her warily, forcing her to comment. "I think it's a side-effect of absorbing so many Darkwalkers during the battle with the demon that attacked the village."

Everyone went back to eating, but the statement didn't seem to help the monks' wariness of her. When Joren handed her a cup of some type of sweet-smelling drink, she eyed it warily. "What's this?"

"Frujuice. This is the last of it we had so enjoy. It is water from here on out," Marcus said.

Joren poured some for everyone in the group from the same container, so she took a sip. It was sweet and reminded her of some type of berry mix. It was very smooth, too, with no pulp, so it definitely reminded her of something you'd get from the grocery store.

A smile graced her lips. "It's sweet."

Taniel gave her a dirty look. "Just because you can stomach something other than raw meat means nothing."

Elania blinked, then looked at Joren. Had dinner been some type of test? To see if she wasn't an obligate carnivore or something? Her hunger and enjoyment of the meat evaporated. She set her meal aside found a place to sit a safe distance away. The novices chattered quietly to themselves in the background.

“You said there was a ‘Demon Market’ in Neftasu. I’m not going to end up a slave or something if I go there with you, am I?” Elania asked pointedly.

Taniel, Joren, and Marcus all shared a look before Joren answered. “It’s not likely, but if you don’t have a contract, you won’t be well received. The Guard doesn’t take kindly to unbound demons in the city; it usually only happens when someone’s contractor dies suddenly and then the demon goes berserk killing people.”

That didn’t make her happy, and... was it even true? Was this just them trying to encourage her to sign a contract?

Her eyes flickered to Marcus. “You said the Conclave specializes in killing rogue demons?”

Taniel coughed. “The Conclave has a branch dedicated to that purpose. Joren is well on his way to becoming a member, he just needs to hone his **[Holy]** skills more and raise his **[Karma]**.”

Elania raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say **[Karma]** was useless for telling who was good or not?”

“Some skills still rely on it. Holy magic and the like require positive, while some more gruesome necromancy abilities require negative,” Marcus explained.

Oh, that was just great. She’d be a prime target for some necromancer or bad person wanting to max out their negative karma then. Skip the grind, just munch on one poor Elania.

“I’m sure the meal didn’t provide much sustenance, so how about we sign a contract for our trip to the city?” Marcus asked with a sudden interest.

Elania eyed him, then stood up. “Sorry, but I’m afraid our conversation hasn’t really inspired the greatest trust of all of you.”

Taniel sputtered and nearly spit out his soup. “What! You dare imply we are the untrustworthy ones here?” he hissed.

She skewered him with a glare. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt that you’re just carrying some kind of trauma or something and not just some fucking racist...speciesist bastard.”

Taniel’s jaw dropped.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “Let me spell it out for you: you’ve been actively homicidal to me. Marcus has been looking for some way to exploit the conversation to get a contract and benefit somehow. Joren has been the only one polite to me today, while the

little monks piss their pants whenever I look at them. Why the fuck would I trust the lot of you?”

Joren looked uncomfortable and ate his soup. Marcus chuckled unashamedly.

Elania turned to leave.

“Oy, where are you going?” Taniel demanded.

She looked over her shoulder at them. “I’m definitely not staying here tonight. I’ll go find somewhere I feel comfortable.”

Marcus fixed her with a stare. “The Mushrooms paid us to take you out of here. Don’t make us come search for you in the morning, Girlie.”

The Mushroomum cavern felt much less oppressive once she was outside the building. She didn’t really have a set destination, but somewhere faraway from the group was preferable. Her nerves felt shot, and she vibrated with frustration as she headed toward the Elnat and Ralfot caves.

The Bone Demon ruin was still there. The animals gave her a nervously wide berth, and she spotted a few Mushroomum guards that were hidden. None of them approached her, which was nice. She didn’t feel like dealing with any more people today.

Jumping up to the second floor of the ruin was trivial for her now. Perching on the edge allowed her to observe the area from high up, and she watched the animals go about doing their thing. It was oddly peaceful.

When she’d finally calmed down a bit, she pulled out some of the extra fabric she’d kept in her pack and laid it on the stone. Wadding the end into a ball made for a semi-decent pillow. It was the definition of roughing it.

Her dreams were easy and calm. When Elania woke, the impression of being lazily perched on something high off the ground was all that remained.

She shoved her makeshift bedroll into her pack; the Glow-Moss in the animal cave had started to glow slightly brighter, marking the start of the morning. The opportunity to run out into the wilds called to her. It was possibly safer, as ironic as that felt. There was no telling what creatures or monsters she’d find and end up having to fight.

If she did that, though, she wouldn’t get answers to her questions.

And... and it would be a solitary existence. She’d be lonely.

The party of monks and ranger wasn’t her first choice for adventuring companions, but at least they had offered answers to some questions. Which had led to more questions... Grinding out her skill ranks and accumulating more power would make her stronger, but

she had no idea if she'd ever find the city if she didn't take the opportunity to learn where it was.

Picking her way down from the ruins, she found the route that the party would take on the way out.

There was a nice overhang perch that would hide her from view. The wait was longer than expected, and she almost nodded off for more sleep when she heard them approaching.

"We'll have to hunt it down and kill it before we go. We can't just leave it to prey on the Mushroomhums," Taniel said.

"Well, that's still to be seen," Marcus replied. "Besides, our mission is to get the **[Glow-Moss]** to the Conclave, not hunt demons."

"She didn't show up. What other proof do you need that she ran away?" Taniel hissed.

"Did you even listen to anything I said, Monk?" Marcus asked, annoyance clear in his voice. "I think the Girlie was right, you're wearing your hate on your sleeve."

"She didn't seem hostile," Joren said.

Elania didn't have a view of them, but somehow, she was able to visualize Taniel giving the other monk a heated look inside her head.

When the party passed into the animal cavern, she jumped down from her perch and landed in the middle of the group.

The novices screeched and fell on their asses. Marcus whipped around to give her a dark glare. Joren and Taniel both whirled on her, falling into some kind of martial arts stance.

"Morning," Elania offered casually.

"Trying to start a fight?" Marcus muttered.

Elania shrugged, "Just dropping in to join like ordered." She didn't mention that she'd just wanted to test her **[Stealth]** skill on them. Apparently, it worked pretty well, at least if she was out of sight and concealed.

There was a tense silence as she kept pace behind Marcus, with Taniel and Joren leading the monks behind her. That was probably because they wanted to monitor her as they traveled. That suited her just fine, though, since it gave her access to Marcus and Joren. She had a lot of questions.

"If reading isn't a common skill, how do people use their **[System]** stuff?" Elania asked.

"Everyone has their own way of interpreting it. If they can't read, they might hear a voice, or see something else that makes sense to them," Joren explained.

Well, that explained why she saw the messages as some sort of game hologram. “When you wanted me to share my **[Status]**...”

“We would have each seen something different, but understandable. You interested in sharing now?” Marcus asked.

She scoffed and shook her head. “Hardly. Is reading a rare skill?”

They came to a stop at an intersection. Marcus looked at both paths, then picked the one on the right before shaking his head. “Not rare, but uncommon. I can read, but the monks here cannot.”

Elania looked back at Joren. “So you hear voices in your head?”

Joren frowned. “I see magical stones. Taniel has a talking head.”

The other monk shot Joren a heated glance. Elania suppressed a giggle as she pictured a buddha head yelling at the permanently angry monk. No wonder he was so acidic. She’d glare at everything too if there was a talking head floating around her all the time. She managed an uninterested ‘hmmm’ as she followed Marcus.

Joren cleared his throat. “I have a question for you myself.”

Elania smiled and almost tripped on a rock. Marcus looked back and frowned at her, but she could only offer an apologetic wave.

She looked back at Joren. “Sure. You’ve answered a lot of mine. Ask away?”

“What’s the demon world like?” he asked.

The question caught her off guard. “Eh?”

Joren frowned at her. “Your world. Where you come from. What’s it like?”

Where did someone even begin with explaining modern earth?

With a thoughtful look, Elania turned her gaze to the cavern ceiling, imagining that far above there was a sky. She hadn’t really thought about how to explain her world before, but she decided she would give it her best shot.

“My world...it’s probably similar to your ‘Overworld,” she began. “We don’t live underground. Our cities are vast and sprawling, reaching up towards the clouds with towering structures of glass and metal.”

“We don’t have a **[System]** or anything like that,” she continued. That seemed to surprise even Marcus, who looked back at her pointedly before turning his attention back to their path.

“No levels or skills. Just whatever you know how to do, kinda thing.” Elania expanded on the thought.

“Must be hard to keep track of what you can do,” Joren commented.

She let out a laugh. “Yeah, it’s a bit more fuzzy for sure. Do skills lose ranks here if you don’t practice them?”

Joren looked horrified. “Gods no, how would anyone keep all their ranks up if that were true?”

“I see.” Elania paused for a moment as she tried to think of how to convey some of the contrasts she’d learned about so far. “On one hand, we’ve eliminated many injustices that plague other societies. Slavery doesn’t exist, and everyone has rights regardless of their race or gender.”

Okay, maybe she was glossing over the colossal battle for those things, but she liked to think that there weren’t any slave markets back home. A sudden wave of negativeness started to press at her as she thought about all the bad things; Tipping culture came to mind right away.

Swallowing, she continued. “But it’s not perfect,” she added. “Poverty still exists. Corruption is still an issue in most places. Different nations still war with each other over resources and ideologies.”

She looked back at Joren and tried to offer a small smile. “But despite its flaws, I was happy. Where I’m from, it was mostly peaceful. Well, a crowded, energetic, kind of peaceful. I grew up in a city.”

“Sounds like a nice place,” Joren murmured. “I can see why you’d be interested in going back.”

She wasn’t sure how well she’d done with her explanation, but guessed that it was good enough. “Every place has its pros and cons.”

As they continued, she decided to focus on more positive things that she liked—the hustle and bustle of city life, the taste of good coffee in the morning, and even just lounging around watching videos or playing video games.

Explaining what a tv or computer was turned out to be complicated.

Taniel fixed her with a look. “You either have an incredible imagination, or you’re really an oddball. Demons don’t really remember anything of their old world by the time they become sapient.”

Elania’s eye twitched. “How do you know? Do you deal a lot with demons?”

A frown creased Taniel’s face. “Most demons remember nothing of their old world by the time they become sapient. So, it isn’t common to be able to ask.”

“The Conclave is a holy order that protects the city from the worst the Underworld offers. The Guard handle the more mundane threats and policing the city, while the

Conclave focuses on dealing with the most powerful rogue demons or monsters,” Joren explained.

“Rogue Demon?” Elania asked.

“If a demon somehow gets out of its Contract, they usually go on a rampage until dealt with,” Taniel said bitterly.

She didn’t feel the need to express that maybe those demons probably had built up resentment for how they were treated and enslaved? If she was tricked into a contract before becoming sapient, and left at the mercy of whoever had done that...

Yeah, she wouldn’t be happy, either.

“Don’t forget that, Demon. You will be watched. There isn’t anyone who won’t associate those red eyes of yours with carnage,” Taniel said.

She eyed him warily. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Maybe going all the way to the city wasn’t the best idea. Still, she wanted to at least locate it. The caverns were a confusing maze, but with her **[Darkwalker]** affinity being so high, and a natural ability to mentally map their path, she felt confident that she’d be able to find her way around.

The flow of the conversation died, and she and the monks focused on their feet and following Marcus as the terrain became more rough. Much as she expected, the ranger kept them on a straight line track, with no backtracking or looping. He definitely had a solid picture of where they were going, and they were passing through different biomes at a rapid clip.

The conversation had distracted her so much she realized they were near the edge of where she’d explored on her own. It wasn’t even that far to where she’d ambushed the Ralfot herd. Despite the heavy pace Marcus set, she didn’t really feel tired. Meanwhile, it became obvious the novice monks were starting to be a little winded.

Her **[Power]** remained fully topped off, neither ticking upward nor downward. She’d wrapped the mana crystal in multiple layers of fabric, and the rate she was draining it almost perfectly matched her natural expenditure from moving and keeping her **[Dark-vision]** active.

She still needed to experiment and see if she could refill the mana shard, but that was something she would have to find some ‘alone’ time to do. Displaying the shard to the party was out of the question. There were also the ramifications of her... transformation ability. She had learned nothing about it yet, other than it reversed when she ran out of **[Power]**.

Asking about it seemed unwise, and she didn't really want another acidic opinion from Taniel, so she kept quiet.

At the threshold to a new cavern, Marcus raised his hand and brought them all to a sudden halt. Everyone went on alert, and she peered into the gray shades of the new cavern. No glow-moss offered its ambient light, and there was very little bioluminescent fungus. Almost all the light available came from the monks and Marcus' glow torch.

The ranger turned on them and pointed toward the wall. "Flatten yourselves!"

The order was adamant enough that everyone obeyed immediately. In the distance, she picked up a sound: Hooves. Her ears twitched as the stampede picked up volume. It seemed like thousands of hooves were approaching, and the roar of Ralfots letting out angry 'Moobaaa!' filled the air.

They came into sight; the herd was massive. At least a hundred of the beasts were hurling themselves down the tunnel like their lives depended on it. One member tripped and was trampled to death by its peers in the frenzy.

At the intersection, the group split; half continuing down the massive cavern while the rest turned toward her and the party.

"What do we do!" Elania shouted.

"Just stay up against the wall and out of their way!" Marcus replied.

The first beast passed, paying them no attention, and the rest followed suit. The dust and rock billowed up from their passage, but it was the smell that hit her. Blood. It smelled like blood.

They weren't paying her any attention...if she timed it right, she would be able to jump out and land on the back of one and... and...

A hand fell on her shoulder, and Marcus shook his head with a stern look.

Elania felt her cheeks flush and leaned back against the cavern wall forcefully. She swallowed and stilled herself. The **[Darkwalker]** affinity she'd gained had some serious downsides, and she'd almost got lost in a lust for hunting.

When the herd finally passed, she realized that the smell hadn't come from the Ralfots, but was coming from the cavern.

They had been running from it? No, they were probably running from whatever the source of it was.

"I smell blood," Elania said.

Marcus grunted. "Manzitore."

“Oh gods, no!” One of the novices exclaimed. Panic ran through them, but Taniel shushed them. One of them had a bloody nose from some debris hitting him in the face, and Joren tended to the injury.

That seemed to comprise applying pressure with a bandage instead of a healing potion or the ‘Holy Magic’ she had expected. Maybe those kinds of things were too expensive to waste on a broken nose, though.

When Marcus spotted the injury, he became livid. “You fool!”

A deafening roar erupted before a massive crash sounded in the cavern. When the beast came into sight, Elania’s heart skipped a beat.

[Manzitore]

It was like a mad scientist had crossed a dragon and a lion. Its scaly flesh dripped with a red liquid, leaving the stone behind it covered in splatter. Small trails of steam rose from it as rock melted from the contact. Acid or heat? She had no idea, but it explained the sudden deluge of blood smell.

It was the size of a building, and it clumsily crashed into the cavern walls and ceiling as its oversized wings flapped heavily. The strong gusts blew her hair, and she had to pull her shawl tighter to secure it.

The monster spotted the dead Ralfot and dived on it, its tail lashing out with a maw of razor-sharp teeth.

The carcass disappeared into the appendage without the monster even having to pause its chaotic rampage.

It flew past them; a brief relief filled Elania as she thought it wouldn’t bother with them, but that died when it suddenly flared and came to a stop. It whirled toward them and glowing yellow eyes skewered the injured novice.

Ah, fuck. Now she understood why Marcus had been pissed at the monk getting hurt.

The ranger pulled his bow off his back and nocked an arrow. Blue symbols began to glow on the weapon and the steel arrowhead began to glow a brilliant blue.

“Taniel! Get the others to the next waystation. Go now!” The ranger ordered.

The monks didn’t need any further prompting and scattered in the direction the Ralfots and **[Manzitore]** had come from.

Elania realized she’d completely forgotten about her own weapons and drew one of her javelins.

Marcus glared at her. “Mundane weapons aren’t going to hurt that thing. Get going with the others, or you’re going to die!”

CHAPTER 34 – FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Elania turned and hurried after the monks without missing a beat. If Marcus didn't want any help, he wouldn't get any! She didn't want to fight that thing herself, anyway! It was a literal raid boss!

She quickly caught up and then outpaced the monks, letting herself go loose enough to leap from rock to rock. While they trudged along on the path, she took the chance to make sure there wasn't anything else looking to jump them in the chaos.

The sounds of a battle carried on behind them. Stone cracked, and a series of smaller explosions shook the ground. Rubble from above fell in concerning rockfalls, sending clouds of dust exploding in small plumes. It seemed like the cavern was being torn apart from the combat.

A gust of wind blew through the cavern, lashing at her hair and loose cloth. She paused and looked at the monks. One of the novices had fallen behind considerably, and Taniel had stopped to tend to the young man.

"Maurice! Hurry! We can't slow down!" Taniel shouted.

The boy looked winded. Exasperation filled his face. "I'm sorry, Taniel! That rock took a chunk out of my HP! It's slowing me down."

Elania's jaw dropped. H-fucking-P? As in Hitpoints HP? She pulled her **[Status]** screen up to make sure she wasn't blind and had missed the entry somehow.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 36 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 231/233]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Class: Darkwalker Huntress]

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank S+), Mana Manipulation (Rank A), Basic Handcrafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana), (Darkwalker)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank B) (Deactivated)]

[Physical: Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank S+), Tracking (Rank D)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank C), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank S+)]

No, she hadn't missed anything.

Why didn't she have any HP? Was that fair?

The cavern shook again, and she had to shift her balance slightly on the rock she had perched on. Joren and the novices with him nearly turned into a pile of monks as they scrambled for balance while they continued to run.

"Dammit!" Taniel shouted.

She could see his frustration: Maurice was going even slower.

Did HP work the same way her **[Power]** did? If it got lower, they got weaker? That seemed very punitive for a broken nose. Taniel continued to shout at Maurice while the younger man became frantic.

He was almost in tears. "I can't keep up!"

Taniel slipped an arm under his shoulder and tried to help him.

Joren and the rest of the group finally realized how far the two had fallen behind, and stopped to look at them. "Hurry!"

Their encouragement seemed ineffective. Elania decided she would help and jumped down beside them as soon as they reached her. They skidded to a stop, Taniel flashing an angry glare at her.

She ignored him and looked at Maurice. "I'll carry you."

Taniel frowned at her. "I don't think you—"

She gave him a glare, then knelt down. "Get on my back, quick!"

Maurice looked between the two of them, hesitating. Sure, she wasn't that big, but she felt annoyance prick at her. "Hurry up!"

An approaching roar forced the manner and he all but jumped on her, his arms cinching around her neck and his legs digging into her ribs. It was a good thing she didn't need to breathe. He was unwieldy, especially with the giant [**Glow-Moss Basket**] on his back, but the weight was a non-issue for her. She stood up, and she appreciated the shocked look on Taniel's face.

She took off, leaving the Spiritual Monk behind. Maybe if the Manzitore caught up, it would eat him first. One could only hope.

Maurice's weight shifted with each leap she took, but the bouncing didn't slow her down. She caught up to Joren and the other novices and the party was able to move together at full speed now that they didn't have to try to slow to Maurice's pace.

The offshoot from the tunnel they had been traveling along reached another intersection. They took the hard ninety degree turn, and Elania hoped Joren was pointing them in the right direction. She had no idea where they were and had to trust their navigation.

As they rounded a corner, a Darkwalker stood in their path and let out a roar. The group momentarily skidded to a stop, but Elania felt a rumble in her throat and let out a roar of her own.

The beast looked at her, its tail went between its hind legs. A second later, it turned and fled.

They pushed forward into the new cavern section. The distant rumbles and shaking seemed to catch up with them as they went until suddenly they were everywhere. When rocks fell from the ceiling, she realized that somehow the battle had found its way to another chamber, above.

"Watch out!" she shouted. Rocks sent everyone scurrying for cover, including her and Maurice. A burst of light piercing through the ceiling and dug into the floor near the center of the cavern, sending huge chunks of rock flying out in every direction.

One piece flew directly at her, and she filled with panic as she did not know how to stop it with Maurice clinging to her. A yellow shield appeared just in front of the both of them as it struck, the rock crushing itself into a million smaller pieces of rubble and pelting the wall just behind them.

Taniel stepped up nearby, wheezing, a set of prayer beads wrapped in his hands.

She blinked. Had he used some ability to save them? "Thank you?"

"I was protecting Maurice, not you, demon," Taniel hissed at her.

The [**Manzitore**] suddenly crashed through the ceiling, widening the hole. It slammed into the floor, but immediately rolled onto its feet and let out its glutaral roar. A pair of

blue arrows flashed downward, exploding into clouds of shrapnel. Each spray blew out cones of flesh from the beast. The wounds immediately started to knit themselves together as the thing's blood seemed to writhe together.

A whirlwind of hot air whipped outward, and she had to raise her forearm in front of her face to protect from the whipping. They were so fucked. How were they supposed to fight something like this?

A fireball formed in the mouth of the thing's tail, which it released upwards into the hole in the ceiling. The entire cavern shook heavily as it exploded. Rock flexed as the chamber above bulged.

A momentary silence filled the air, and then the **[Manzitore]** turned on her and Maurice.

What the absolute fuck. She jumped back on her feet, then started to move to the side. The beast's eyes followed them intently, like it was sizing her up.

Or was it focused on Maurice? She turned her head to look at him out of the corner of her eye. Was the monster attracted like a neodymium magnet to his fucking nosebleed?

Marcus erupted from the raging inferno above, only to fall right into a heavy tail slap that sent him flying back into the upper chamber. That didn't seem great for his survival chances, but she didn't really know what he was capable of...or able to survive. Maybe he'd be fine.

More importantly, the Manzitore jumped toward her—and Maurice—and attacked.

She jumped straight up to avoid a tail swipe, only for it to nearly catch her in its meter long claws. Her feet caught the side of the cavern though, and she pushed off hard, propelling them away from the monster.

She sensed more than saw some type of energetic line intersecting her chest as they touched down, causing her to hurl them to the side. A bolt of red light lanced the area a second later, and she felt a momentary surge of panic as she realized Maurice was carrying a literal firebomb on his back.

The ground behind her erupted in stony explosions as the beast scrambled after them. She lost track of the direction the other monks had gone, and it was all that she could do just to try to outpace the thing.

[Mobility Rank E has been unlocked.]

There was no time to celebrate getting a new skill, because the **[Manzitore]** was right on top of them, and its teething tail snapped right at them. She dived out of the way, but

that dislodged Maurice right off of her back and he went rolling. There was no time to pick him back up, and she needed to do something; running wasn't an option!

Her best attack was throwing things like an angry monkey. A quick slot swap replaced **[Basic Handcrafting]** with **[Throwing]** as she pulled a javelin off her back. Shoving a decent amount of power into it, she threw with all her strength right into the thing's tail as it streaked toward her again with another snap.

The **[Tower-Cap]** javelin dissolved as it struck out, turning into a simple energy bolt as the material failed to withstand the **[Power]** infused in it. That didn't reduce the attack's potency, and it struck with enough force to whip the tail in the opposite direction, lift the **[Manzitore]** off its feet slightly, and then explode out the back of the tail's throat.

That elicited a furious, pained roar.

Oh shit, she'd made it more mad. The attack had taken a chunk of fifty **[Power]**, too.

She needed to keep her speed and physical enhancement at the maximum and couldn't afford more of those, not if she didn't want to get immediately caught and munched on. She ran to collect Maurice, only for his body to suddenly lift into the air.

"What?" Elania shouted.

A panicked look filled his face, and he began to spin as he twisted and turned and tried to get a hold of something. Then he shot straight toward the **[Manzitore]**. Right toward the thing's waiting lion-shaped maw.

A frantic screaming escaped from the novice. "Help! Help!"

The fucking monster had telekinesis or something. What the fuck was she supposed to do?

Meter long teeth snapped, bisecting Maurice's torso and silencing the shrieks. Then it gobbled the other half, **[Glow-Moss Basket]** and all.

Her frozen indecision lasted long enough for the beast to turn its attention back to her, and before she could try to run away, she was lifted off her feet as well. Floating straight for the thing's mouth.

Panic filled her; she tried to pulse her **[Power]** around her body like a shield instinctively, but nothing happened. Halfway to the thing's teeth, she tried **[Demonic Aura]**. That broke the connection, and she fell straight down as gravity re-established its hold on her.

An angry claw swipe angled in at her, but she twisted and kicked off the thing's paw. Another swipe slammed into the ground as soon as she landed, but she jumped off an exploding rock. Its tail thrust itself into her path, maw open wide, ready to catch her.

She reached out, grabbed two of the teeth, and flipped herself out of the maw and onto the tail itself. Her leather trousers immediately began to sizzle and smoke, while the scaly burning acid blood scoured her palms.

One thing she hadn't tried was thrusting **[Power]** into something else other than her weapons. Punching her fist into the acidic flesh, she imagined her power flowing through the thing like electricity, then pushed hard.

The beast's entire body went rigid, like it had fallen on an electric fence, toppling it to the ground. The cost to her **[Power]** reserve was massive, though, and she cut off the attack quickly to jump away. Her hands immediately began to knit themselves together. The beast was slow to react as it tried to pick itself back off the ground.

Then a red arrow slashed through the air toward the thing's face, exploding into a fireball. She didn't have any time to brace herself as the explosion sent her flying away, tumbling down a pile of stone rubble.

Dazed, she slowly started to sort herself when hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her onto her feet. Taniel's face was only inches away. Her hearing had turned into a relentless ringing, but she realized he was shouting at her. "—et go him, you stupi—"

Joren pulled the monk off of her, then dragged the both of them toward a smaller tunnel. Marcus floated to the ground just in front of them, his boots glowing blue with magic runes. Flying boots? What was next, a magic cannon?

The inside of her ears repaired themselves in time for her to hear the angry ranger's shout. "I told you all to get out of here! Go!"

Elania blinked. Hadn't they won?

Looking over her shoulder, the **[Manzitore]** slowly rose to its feet, a massive bloody hole in the side of its face slowly gluing itself back together in a dripping mess of burgundy red. It roared at them all.

What did it take to kill that stupid thing?

Marcus readied more of his magical arrows and began to fire at it, while the rest of them fled through the small tunnel. It didn't seem large enough for the **[Manzitore]** to fit in, but the thing was so strong it would probably dig its way through the rock to them anyway. Or use its telekinesis?

This time, the sounds of combat became more distant with every step. Long after the sounds of battle had disappeared, the group kept running. Several of the novices began to sob and cry. When one stumbled and nearly fell, she caught him.

They continued at a slower pace.

She lost interest in the different cavern biomes after several hours. Each one seemed to have a different color scheme, but they all pulsed with bioluminescent plants. It seemed the further they traveled from the Mushroomum village, the more vegetation there was. Multiple streams had to be crossed, and in one cavern, there was a massive lake that would have been capable of housing a lake monster.

There was no end to the march, and when Taniel ordered them to finally stop, it felt like they had been traveling for days on end.

“Stop. Everyone stop. We’ll take a ten-minute break.” Taniel ordered.

Everyone fell to the ground. Joren gave the other senior monk a worried look. “Do you think we are far enough away?”

Elania’s jaw dropped. They’d traveled so far. How would it sense them? The notion that it was vindictive enough to track them down over such a distance—and capable of it—terrified her. What if she had been spotted by the thing and she had been alone?

“I don’t know, but we need to rest, then find a waystation,” Taniel said.

“What’s a waystation?” she blurted out.

“A place to rest,” Joren informed her. His normal, helpful tone had disappeared into exhaustion and he didn’t expand on the answer.

A place to rest. Well, yeah. That was sort of inferred. What made it safe from something like a **[Manzitore]**, though?

One of the novices gasped, then pointed. “Look! We made it!”

Everyone turned their head toward the direction. There was a small rectangular cutout on the cavern’s side. A faint blue hue of light pulsed gently from inside the chamber.

“I guess we ran further than I thought. Let’s get inside,” Taniel said.

Elania blinked and stood up. It looked like she was going to find out how the waystations worked, sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER 35 – WAYSTATION

The vibrant red hues abruptly transformed on entering the waystation into softer blue and turquoise lighting. It created a pretty purple effect at the entryway. The moment she stepped into the area, she felt a strange pressure squeeze her.

[Demonic Aura has been suppressed and deactivated.]

That was new, but she supposed it made sense that the waystation had some type of safety or security system. There was a small, glowing pillar embedded in a stone near the center of the circular room Taniel went to straight away. When he placed his hand on it, the pressure grew until she felt a pop in her ears and it vanished.

[WY#348 has accepted your unauthorized presence in order to rectify a security boundary.]

Elania blinked. Looking over her shoulder, there was a shimmering blue field in the doorway. “Are we stuck inside?”

Joren answered. “If you are inside when the boundary is created, you can exit. Once it is established, those who were outside can’t get in.”

“How long can we stay?” Elania asked.

The other monks began to unpack their things and set them down against one of the walls. The main chamber was circular, but there were small alcoves cut into it, making each space a little more private.

Joren explained. “The field has enough power for a few days. One day is best, though. They are maintained by rangers like Marcus and built with deployable artifice from the city. Only work in the deep caverns though; they somehow siphon the excess mana from the environment.”

“And that doesn’t work anywhere else?” Elania asked.

Joren shook his head. "Mana is much thinner the closer you get to the surface. On the Neftasu level, it would take years to gather enough to power the barrier."

Elania nodded. "I guess that's why the [**Glow-Moss**] expedition exists?"

"Right. It wouldn't grow in the city," he confirmed.

Elania moved inside and examined the chamber in closer detail. The walls weren't rough stone, but smooth and refined. Metal braces were hidden in grooves along the ceiling to reinforce the structure, and she realized that the glowing fungus wasn't random. It was strategically placed as natural night lights.

Not that the monks needed night lights with their glow torches, but she guessed when they went to bed that it would work as such. A metal firepit in the middle of the chamber had a built in fire spit for cooking things, and a pile of cut [**Tower-Cap**] logs were waiting to be split into firewood to fuel it. Overall, it seemed like a pretty nice place to camp.

The stone shelves were probably meant for sleeping on, but the only cushioning would be what you brought with you. In that regard, it wasn't going to be much different from her sleeping on top of the Bone Demon ruins.

Taniel pointed to the room closest to the entrance and furthest away from where the monks were setting up. "That room is yours. Don't bother our stuff when we aren't looking."

She bristled. "I wouldn't touch it. I'm not a thief."

"Just a man-eater," Taniel shot back. "You gave up Maurice to that thing to save yourself."

She suppressed a feline hiss at him. Suddenly sleeping in the waystation didn't feel safe at all. His insinuation was a step too far for her to control herself. She took a step closer.

"I didn't give him up at all. I tried to save him," she informed him coldly. Her voice took on a sharp anger as she continued. "If anyone gave him up, it was you, Taniel. You abandoned us and ran away with the others. Where was your magic shield when it used telekinesis to pick him up and eat him?"

He began to shout obscenities at her, and his hands turned into fists. It seemed like he was about to strike her. Her entire body went on alert, and her senses sharpened as she prepared a counterstrike when she noticed Joren walking up from behind.

The other monk caught Taniel's wrist before he could do anything. "Your aura is disturbed, brother. You should go meditate."

Taniel struggled against Joren's grip, but it was futile, and Joren didn't release it until Taniel gave an angry nod. The 'Spiritual' monk stomped off to the other side of the waystation.

"You shouldn't have prodded him like that," Joren warned. "He's hurting."

She fixed the monk with a stare. "I did my best to save Maurice."

"We know. I think even Taniel knows. He is just upset with himself," Joren replied.

Shaking her head, she glanced over to Taniel, who had sat down with the three remaining novices. "I won't be slapped around. I will defend myself, and I don't know how to pull my punches."

Joren frowned. "I would have to defend my brother. Please don't—"

"Don't defend myself?" Elania hissed.

"Don't encourage a fight." Joren looked over at the others. "None of the novices should have been on the expedition. Losing one of the [**Glow-Moss Baskets**] will nearly fail the mission. The results would be...bad."

Elania turned away. "You're sure I can get back in if I go out?"

"That's how it works," he confirmed.

She didn't need to hear more. He called after her, but she didn't feel like talking anymore. The cavern outside the waystation was all reds and purples, and she let her eyes adjust for a second before taking off. The monks were exhausted, but she'd been getting stronger the entire time they had fled.

That was draining her mana shard. It was time to hunt. Maybe test out if she could refill her mana shard, too.

It didn't take long before she spotted the telltale signs of some creature thanks to [**Tracking**]. Not a [**Ralfot**] and not an [**Elnat**] or [**Darkwalker**]. Quadrupedal, but with clawed feet. Not feline, but maybe something like a lizard, she guessed.

Razorscale something? She thought that one of the monks had mentioned some type of predator that made the trip harder. It didn't seem too big, so she decided to stalk after it.

Thirty minutes later, she spotted the owner. Silently moving up to a rocky perch, she observed the [**Razorscale**] sliding into a small pool of water. It wasn't large to hold much aquatic life, just a few plants and mushrooms. It wasn't even deep enough for the [**Razorscale**] to submerge into it fully.

That didn't seem to stop the creature's enjoyment of the dip, though. It rolled over and made a large splash, sending water cascading across the floor. The cascade slowly began to drizzle back into the pool.

It didn't notice her, so she pulled out her last javelin. She'd need to make more of those, too.

She settled in and waited while observing. The **[Razorscale]** seemed content to splash around and lounge in the water for at least an hour. When it finally exited the water, Elania's ears perked up.

The path out of the chamber lead right by her rock. When it was right below, she pulled a drag of **[Power]** then dropped on top of it, using her body weight to slam the javelin into the beast's back just behind its head.

The result was swift.

[You have absorbed 28 Power!]

[You have gained a rank in Tracking!]

[You have gained Razorscale Affinity!]

[Consume more Razorscale Essence to enable Razorscale Transformation!]

Tracking! That was very useful since leveling the skill had been difficult. The amount of **[Power]** given was higher than a **[Darkwalker]** too, although the exact amount was always variable. A couple more and she'd be back to being topped off. Then she could experiment with her mana shard.

Several hours and five Razorscales later, she'd achieved her goal and raised her **[Tracking]** skill to rank S+ and overfilled her **[Power]** stat. Gaining skills from absorbing things was overpowered as heck.

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current power!]

[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for power!]

[You have gained a Rank in Demonic Aura!]

[Your body is experiencing slight thermal degradation!]

Yes, yes. That was obvious. The question was did she want to keep hunting while over the limit, and potentially upgrade her capacity further or attempt to refill the mana shard? It had also been a while since she had left the monks alone. She hadn't decided to abandon them yet, so it was probably a good idea to check on them.

Elania hopped up onto a ledge and perched as she made her decisions. Try to refill her mana shard, first. Maybe hunt some more. Then check on the monks.

Her shawl came off first, then she loosened the wrap holding the cloth necklace. The wrap around the shining crystal glittered in the dark as she removed the insulating cloth. The heat inside her chest that ran all the way to her fingers made it difficult to feel the faint warmth that the crystal had always put off.

[Mana Shard (Condensed) 423/1456]

A quick check of her power told her she'd already gained an extra point of capacity.

[Power: 262/234]

Hunting a few more then letting it bleed off would definitely be smart...or maybe she should focus on charging the mana shard fully? Urgh. Tradeoffs. Wait. She was getting ahead of herself. What if she couldn't refill the shard?

Closing her eyes, she tried to picture the process: energy flowing through her body and flowing into the shard in the palms of her hands. It was the opposite of when she had used it to recharge herself. Nothing seemed to happen until suddenly it worked.

It felt like a vacuum had attached to her soul and began to suck it down a straw. The feeling of being compressed and... contained filled her. The sudden light-headedness threatened to make her fall off the ledge, but she leaned back against it.

And fight the vacuum sucking her insides out.

The shard pulled on her and didn't want to let go. She had to forcibly push back and cut it off. When the sudden drain on her **[Power]** stopped, she was panting.

[Power: 96/234]

Fuck. It had drained way too much. When she was finished, she winced.

[Mana Shard (Condensed) 492/1456]

It was much less than she expected. A quick mental math ordeal later she confirmed that nearly half the **[Power]** she had pushed into the crystal had just vanished. Where was the first law of Thermodynamics to save her??

Sixty-nine **[Power]** units was a lot to just vanish into thin air! There wasn't even any heat.

"Urgh," Elania grumbled. She wrapped her shard and tucked it back in and pulled her shawl back over her shoulders. The re-arrangement made her realize something else: she was covered in **[Razorscale]** blood. She needed to add a bath to her schedule, probably before returning to the waystation.

The improvement to **[Tracking]** enabled her to easily locate tracks of another **[Razorscale]** that had passed by. If she pulsed a light amount of **[Power]** into the skill, it

even allowed her to visualize the tracks as shiny lights on the ground. They even changed in color the more recent they were.

It was almost a cheat skill.

The **[Razorscale]** was busy drinking at a pool. Rather than try to get the high ground she went straight for it. **[Stealth]** was effective right up until she stood up from her crouch walk and jabbed her javelin into its neck where she had found the beast was vulnerable.

The wood shaft snapped instead of driving its point home. Elania's eyes widened in shock, and the beast twisted around to snap at her. She darted back, pulling out her dagger and hissed. The beast let out a growl and lunged forward much faster than she had assumed the alligator wannabe was capable of.

She jumped over the bite, only for it to scramble back onto its hind legs and slap her side with three large claws. The blow wasn't that strong, but the slashes still hurt. Looking down, anger filled her; she might heal, but her outfit did not! It would be heckin' hard to fix the gash marks in it without any sewing material!

Her shout matched the beast's volume. "Bastard!" Never mind the fact that she had tried to assassinate the thing to eat it. It had ruined her outfit!

This time, she didn't allow it to rush her. She dashed toward it first. She jumped over a claw and then under the other before reaching up to stab her dagger into the thing's chin. A **[Power]** pulse through the metal allowed it to slice all the way down to its collarbone before she rolled out from under it.

Blood poured everywhere in stupid amounts. Luckily for her, none of it was acidic like the **[Manzitore]**'s had been.

The **[Razorscale]** chased after her, but she avoided it, climbing up on top of a rock where it couldn't reach her. It smashed into the boulder several times while bleeding profusely, but it quickly began to slow down. She waited patiently.

When it was dead, she dropped down and absorbed it.

[You have absorbed 25 Power!]

[You have gained Razorscale Affinity!]

[Consume more Razorscale Essence to enable Razorscale Transformation!]

That was a good start on refilling. Time to make some new javelins and then hunt four or five more.

There was no way she was going back to the waystation without being topped up.

CHAPTER 36—MOVING FORWARD

The waystation was deserted as Elania stepped through the entryway. The shimmering blue field was deactivated, and there were no signs of the monks having been there other than the smothered remains of the campfire.

She'd been gone a while, but it hadn't felt like it had been that long. It had taken a while to refill her **[Power]** and craft new javelins, but not that long. She checked each alcove to make sure there was nothing left behind, then activated her **[Tracking]** skill. Sure enough, the footprints of the monks stood out blatantly, and judging by the color they had left a few hours earlier.

The silence in the chamber felt heavier than she'd experienced before. Surprise gave way to the sting of minor betrayal, a bitter taste spreading in her mouth. From the direction of the tracks, it didn't seem like they had even looked for her at all.

Abandoned, then. Not that they had parted on the best terms, she supposed. Taniel probably forced the issue.

Whether it was Taniel's disdain, or the novices' fear, why was she surprised...and yet she was? They'd escaped from the **[Manzitore]** together and traveled a bit. Shouldn't that have been worth a little consideration?

She pushed the feelings away. Dwelling on it wasn't going to help her at all, and it wasn't like she was lost. With her new tracking ability, she could easily catch up to them.

But did she want to? Moments turned into hours as she carefully picked her path through the Underdark, following the trail. Moderating her pace, she kept the party just ahead of her as she dwelled on the question. Several times they came into view in some of the larger caverns, but thanks to her **[Stealth]** they didn't seem to notice her.

Before she figured out the answer to her question, a roar echoed from ahead. Picking up her pace, she reached the group as they faced off with something she'd not seen before.

[Rockbear]

It was only half the size of the **[Manzitore]** but that wasn't saying much; it was still easily two meters tall at the shoulder! The bear moved forward faster than its size hinted at as well, and Joren dodged under the claw swipes in rapid motion before landing a counter kick to the bear's forearm. The loud crack of fractured stone sounded, but the thing was far from deterred.

It lumbered forward and nearly crushed the monk, except for a sudden flare of yellow energy that appeared around him. Elania's head whipped over to Taniel, who was using his prayer beads. As much as she hated to admit it, because Taniel was an asshole, it was a nice save.

The novices had retreated to a corner and huddled together. She made her way to them.

Either **[Stealth]** was way more effective than she gave it credit for, or the monks were really...really bad at noticing things. A few feet away, she stopped and crouched down, then greeted them.

"Hey. Are you guys okay?" Elania asked innocently.

Two of them shrieked, one pissed his pants, and the last had the fortitude to speak. "H..h..help! Rock Bear!"

She nodded. "Is it strong?"

The young monk stammered out a response. "T...T...tough!"

It didn't seem like questioning them was going to produce much information, and another loud clash with the sound of shattering rock hinted at escalation.

She reached out and patted the novice on the shoulder. "Got it. I'll go help Joren."

When she rounded the corner, the situation had indeed changed. A second **[Rockbear]** had appeared and gone straight for Taniel. Joren was still focused on dodging and fighting his opponent, but the spiritual monk seemed to be having a much harder time.

It didn't seem he was able to mount an offense, and Elania noticed that on each block with his yellow shield the protective light grew smaller.

She drew one of her javelins and moved to the side to get a better angle for her to throw. Once in position, she didn't hold back. Judging by the bear's rocky armor plates, she needed to put a lot of energy into it. Goodbye javelin.

[Power] dissolved the projectile almost instantly, and the yellow bolt flew on course for where she estimated the bear's heart could be. Unfortunately, it jumped at the last movement, making the angle of impact all wrong.

Ninety-degrees suddenly turned into a glancing strike, albeit one that dug a foot deep gouge in the bear's armor all the way down its left flank. It immediately jumped to pivot toward her and let out a challenging roar.

Well, she had drawn it away from Taniel. Maybe he'd be able to do something to help if he wasn't stuck protecting himself constantly.

The **[Rockbear]** predictably charged her. Rather than running or charging back, she drew a second javelin and charged it up to throw as well. The bear jumped as the projectile was mid-flight, spoiling her aim for the eye socket. It slammed into the bear's chest instead, a thunderous crack loud enough to shake the cavern.

The bolt dug in three quarters of its length, hinting at a successful penetration, but the bear continued toward her unabated. She'd dumped fifty **[Power]** into the two strikes, so she pulled the same amount from her mana shard to top her off. It was slightly more difficult with the insulating cloth, but she finished that just as it reached her.

The bear went for a sideswipe. She poured **[Power]** into her feet, body, and fist and crouched. Her fist swiped outward, her knuckles slamming into the bear's paw. The force blew stone chunks off the bear's limb, and a sickening crack echoed as bones underneath the plating fractured.

The **[Rockbear]** listed to the side, falling toward the now ruined limb, completely off balance.

She wasn't done, though. Launching herself forward, she exploded for the thing's throat. If she'd known martial arts, a fancy kick like the one Joren had demonstrated might have been more effective. All she knew how to do was punch.

The bear wasn't going to evade, so she dumped half her remaining power into the force of the blow. Her body protested; she wasn't supposed to put this much **[Power]** into any attack. Her arm burned and its sensation went out as nerves died from overload.

Healing nerves was always a pain in the ass.

But the attack was effective. The **[Rockbear]** seemed to rely on its heavy armor to allow it to bash its opponents to death. Rock was tough, hard, and... brittle.

And, oh boy, did her **[Power]** dump deliver a lot of kinetic energy into it, ensuring that it fractured. Her fist dug into the outer armor plate a few inches before the force began

to spread like a shockwave. Spiderweb cracks formed across the Bear's entire rock shell before exploding into a hurricane of splinters.

They pelted her savagely, several of them digging into her skin and tearing into her outfit.

The internal damage to the bear was even worse than its shattered stone shell.

The **[Rockbear]** dropped dead, instantly. Unfortunately, she was underneath it. The heavy weight pinned her down, but the option to absorb appeared and she took it.

[You have absorbed 99 Power!]

[You have gained Rockbear Affinity!]

[You have gained the skill Body Conditioning!]

[Consume more Rockbear Essence to enable Rockbear Transformation!]

The rock that had embedded itself into her phased away, fueling her **[Power]** storage and allowing her **[Regeneration]** to kick into overdrive.

As she got to her feet, she watched Joren slam a fist into the bear's forehead. Taniel's spiritual-monk-holy-shield-thing flashed around him as the bear attempted to swat him away. Able to focus solely on offense, it seemed like every punch Joren made became faster and stronger. His fists began to glow, and then he landed a kick to the **[Rockbear]**'s jaw.

The beast staggered and fell to the side. It wasn't down though, and let out a roar and swing its head at the monk. He dodged backwards.

Elania panted heavily, her insides writhing before settling out. **[Regeneration]** always played weird and disgusting feelings through her body whenever she was heavily damage. Also painful. Her arm seared as it knit itself back together, but she had grown used to that. That didn't mean tears didn't pour from her eyes as she bit down, but it meant she didn't come close to passing out.

Instead of launching herself back into the fight, she took the time to watch how Joren and Taniel fought. Her **[Power]** ratio for dealing with one **[Rockbear]** was negative forty-three. The ranged attacks had cost fifty and seemed to have been ineffective. Since the beast had paid off so much, taking one down would be a small net gain.

Taniel began to chant something she couldn't translate. This was confirmation that **[Universal Speech]** didn't translate arcane stuff.

Yellow lights began to appear in the air around the bear before they launched themselves like rockets into the stoney armor plates, leaving glowing radiant spots behind. The **[Rockbear]** rose on its hind legs and swatted at Joren again, but he grabbed the limb and threw himself into the air.

He barely avoided being chomped on by spinning around the massive jaws, then landed a punch on one of the glowing marks.

The force was multiplied; a crater in the armor slammed the bear into the ground. As Joren landed with a kick on another spot, the explosion of force sent a shockwave rippling outward, full of dust and rubble. It suddenly made sense why the two had been paired together. Their abilities synergized well with each other.

The dust and rubble kicked up by Joren's final blow gradually settled, revealing the form of the first **[Rockbear]** embedded into the ground. It didn't move or get back up.

Joren nodded to her as he straightened out of his combat stance, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Taniel, on the other hand, was panting heavily, beads of sweat trailing down his face as he gripped his set of prayer beads.

She gave a little wave, then turned back to find the novices. "Are you all okay?" she asked. The one who managed to speak earlier stuttered out a thank you while the other two simply nodded.

"What do you want?" Taniel's hostility was palpable even from a distance. What the fuck? She'd just saved his life.

"I wanted to help," Elania said carefully, her eyes flickering to Joren, who remained silent.

"You've done enough," Taniel replied tersely.

Elania's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean? I saved you from the second **[Rockbear]**!"

"I was dealing with it just fine. I didn't need your help!" Taniel shouted.

"Like hell you were!" Elania snapped back. Behind Taniel, Joren shook his head weakly.

She let out an exasperated sigh. "So, what are you going to do with it? Chop it up? Harvest its meat?"

A confused look appeared on Taniel's face. "What? It's a **[Rockbear]** its made of rock. It'll just sit there."

"Can I have it?"

Before Taniel could speak, Joren put his arm around the other monk and gave her a smile. "Sure thing."

"What do you want with it?" Taniel asked suspiciously.

"I'm going to eat it," Elania said. A smile erupted on her face. "Like the other one."

Both monks' eyes widened as they turned to where she had taken down the second bear. Apparently, they hadn't noticed the missing corpse.

[You have absorbed 102 Power!]

[You have gained Rockbear Affinity!]

[You have gained the skill Body Conditioning!]

[Consume more Rockbear Essence to enable Rockbear Transformation!]

The extra **[Power]** flushed through her system, setting her insides alight. It was a familiar sensation she had grown accustomed to, but the messages complaining about it assailed her.

[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Power: 289/252]

Her maximum had ticked up several times already. If she hadn't had spent so much fighting the bear she would have really been over the maximum.

The dissolving light motes flowing into her left a massive crater where Joren had smashed it into the ground. One thing was certain: she needed to respect their fighting powers. The battle with the Darkwalker Demon...and perhaps a heavy amount of predatory instinct from absorbing things had made her overconfident.

But...being walked over and treated poorly was out of the question. The entire situation felt so frustrating.

When she turned back to the monks, all of them were staring at her with shocked expressions.

"You just...but it was...you absorbed all of it." Joren stuttered. "How didn't you immolate yourself?"

Elania flicked her hair behind an ear. "It was just a snack."

Did other demons have lower **[Power]** capacities? Why? Maybe she was being too aggressive with **[Regeneration]** and pushing her limit higher? Did it have bad side effects?

Why, why, why. The questions were exhausting. "What about Marcus? He didn't catch up yet? Do you think he was able to defeat the Manzitore?"

The change in topic worked. Joren frowned and thought for a moment before answering. "I don't know if he could kill the thing. They have a lot of powers and have high natural potency, so their skills are all generally S+ ranked, and that one seemed to have extra perks, too. He probably was able to escape. I doubt it was able to kill him, either."

So, battles between powerful and dangerous people and monsters tended to be stale-mates? That hadn't been her experience so far. Everything usually ended with a single high-powered attack. Although that might have just been because she was...different in a lot of ways.

"I'm surprised he wouldn't get tired and then run down," Elania replied.

Taniel shook his head. "He's a ranger, and it's hard to pin that type down. They are at home down here, too."

She bit her lip, looking between the two while the novices picked themselves up and dusted off. Each of the [**Glow-Moss Baskets**] got an integrity check, too.

"How do classes work? I haven't figured that out yet," Elania said.

Taniel glared at her before going to sort out the novices. It seemed like no matter what she did or said, even saving his life, he wasn't going to stop hating her.

Joren gave her a weak smile. "Classes are based on... well, it's complicated."

As the group began to trudge along behind Taniel, she waited patiently for Joren to continue.

"Classes are a combination of personal belief and [**System**] judgement."

Elania's brows furrowed. "Personal belief? You mean someone can just believe themselves into being something like, uh... an archmage or something?"

Joren frowned. "If someone believes strongly that they are a warrior, then the system will usually pick that over something else, like fighter. However, if their skills are completely out of tune with the perception of whatever 'class' they feel they are, then it will reject that."

"It works automatically? Cause at first, I was 'Survivor' then 'Huntress' and now 'Darkwalker Huntress.'" It seems like it's getting more specific," Elania said.

"It works on its own, but some things can prompt a change, like a sudden purposeful re-classing if your own self-image changes suddenly. Normally, it just happens in the background. I wouldn't worry about it, unless you're aiming for something specific," Joren explained.

"I see," Elania murmured, thinking about her own experiences. Running away from the cultists had designated her a 'survivor' then. The change to huntress made sense once she began to go all primitive with the javelin throwing. The 'Darkwalker' addition was probably because of how many she had absorbed and the...other more worrying changes to her psyche.

"We aren't far from the next waystation," Joren informed her.

She nodded and followed along. "Why did you all leave without me?"

He glanced at her. "Didn't know you hadn't decided to go off on your own. You said nothing and never came back. We have to get the [**Glow-Moss**] back to the Conclave safely, and it's dangerous down here. Other than yelling for you, we couldn't risk looking longer."

"So you yelled for me when you left?" Elania asked.

"We did, yeah."

"By 'we' you mean you, don't you?" Elania pressed.

Joren looked uncomfortable. "Thanks for coming back. Two Rockbears would have been hard to deal with. Honestly, I never really believed you were the one to handle the Darkwalker Demon until now."

The thanks made her feel good, and she realized he was right. She had disappeared for much too long after stomping off from the confrontation with Taniel. It wasn't really their fault, since she had wandered off to do her own thing without a word. "I'm sorry for going off without saying anything. I was angry, and then I got distracted..."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry for Taniel. He never really acted this way before. Then again, we never traveled with a sapient demon before, either." Joren looked over at the other monk's back with a frown. "For what it is worth, I don't think you're a bad person."

"Thank you," Elania replied.

The rest of the trudge to the waystation was carried out in contemplative silence.

CHAPTER 37—SHARING CAMP

The waystation was nearly identical to the first. The cavern it was attached to, however, was completely different. Elania looked down at the terrifyingly deep drop as the waterfall near the entryway tumbled into the darkness below. Her **[Darkvision]** just barely allowed her to make out the body of water at the bottom, large white sprays of foam lashing violently as more water poured into it.

The trek upward had taken two hours, a massive spiraling path around the main chamber that sometimes intersected. The waystation was at the very top, just under where the torrent of water flowed into the open air.

She made sure she wasn't last in line when Taniel activated the barrier. The same familiar pop of her ears occurred as the barrier seemed to try to expel her, then gave up.

[WY#145 has accepted your unauthorized presence in order to rectify a security boundary.]

The number had gone down. If that hinted that they were getting closer, that was a hopeful sign... but also a stressful one. Reaching the city was almost as much a goal as a dread in her mind. Somehow, she doubted things would suddenly get better when she got there.

Elania glanced at Joren. She needed to somehow get more answers from him.

Taniel assigned her one of the side chambers, and this time she unpacked her stuff. It was a pitiful amount compared to the monks: her length of cloth that acted as her sleeping mat. A few rocks that she'd kept for no reason other than... well, she had forgotten they were in her robe, to be honest. Her pack had several holes in it now, plus three empty javelin loops.

Most importantly, her mana shard which she had managed not to drain any further. Keeping that power safe and ready to use was important if she ran into difficulties. As long as something didn't kill her instantly, it was worth almost two full charges of her personal capacity.

If she had time, she could probably hunt enough to charge it further, too. Considering that she had needed less and less sleep, especially when near her maximum **[Power]** capacity, that seemed very possible.

Hunting, though, was what she had done on the last camp break, and she wanted to fix her outfit and gear this time. And ask questions. She'd missed her chance to ask them at the first waystation.

The novices all piled into a single room, while Taniel and Joren picked the one beside it. Hooks were hanging down from the entryway of each chamber, she realized, and one of the novices stood up and placed a large sheet, creating some privacy.

She glanced at her single piece of cloth. If she wanted, it would serve the same purpose, but then she wouldn't have anything to sleep on. Before she made up her mind on whether to take more privacy or have a little comfort, she heard sobbing coming from the novice's space.

That sort of explained their desire for privacy. A wave of sympathy filled her. They had lost Maurice and continued to run into monsters and nearly died. Whoever had sent them with Taniel and Joren was a criminal. The novices were obviously unready for the fight for survival that seemed to make up the Deep Caverns that Joren had called the region they were in.

Elania cracked her neck and then yawned. She hadn't really slept since they had left. That was almost two days? A nap would do her good. She had no idea how effective the waystation's protective field was, but it was a comforting shield, at least against any predators.

As soon as she laid down on her back, she was fast asleep.

Dreams assailed her constantly. Violent clashes with Rockbears and Razorscales dominated her attention, while the more laid-back hunt of **[Ralfot]** felt like a wistful memory. A pack of Darkwalkers found her and she hissed at them to leave her territory. Humans passed by while she watched silently from the shadows.

No traumatic moment stirred her awake, instead she found herself slowly drifting back to consciousness, a dull ache where she had laid on the stone. For once, she wasn't covered in a sheen of sweat.

There was a rhythmic snoring coming from across the chamber, hinting that the monks were asleep. The remnants of a meal were piled beside the banked campfire, that only had a few glowing embers remaining. Stretching her legs, she stepped toward the exit, listening to the constant roar of the waterfall.

“Going somewhere, demon?” Taniel demanded.

She whirled to her right, not having seen the monk who had remained completely still in the corner beside the entryway. “Everyone else is asleep, and I just woke up.”

He frowned at her. “Go back to sleep. There’s still plenty of time until morning.”

“I can’t really do that. I don’t need that much sleep anymore. What about you? Don’t you need rest?” Elania asked.

“I’m on second watch,” he said.

She tilted her head. “Want me to do the watching for you?”

He scoffed immediately. “Like I’d trust you to do that. The whole point of the watch is to keep an eye on you.”

Elania rolled her eyes. Well, that made sense. If the barrier kept everything out, the only thing he’d be ‘watching’ for was her. Still, the lack of trust was palpable. “Fine. I can keep watch with you then. Do you mind if I ask some questions?”

He eyed her warily. “Yes. I do mind, actually.”

She bit her lip, suppressing her annoyance. No matter how much he didn’t like her, it didn’t feel like anything she had done warranted his behavior toward her. It felt very unfair.

Not wanting to stick around someone who hated her guts, she changed her plans. “I’m going to go collect some wood and work on my crafting, then.”

Taniel shrugged, looking away from her. “Suit yourself.”

Ugh. She wanted to slap him silly, but that wouldn’t solve anything. Deciding to be the bigger person, she walked away and through the barrier. A cool tingling enveloped her skin, then dissipated once she was fully on the other side. Tracking indicated that there weren’t any creatures that had passed by other than them, so that hinted at a bit of safety.

Backtracking for a bit, she headed down the spiral and into the previous large cavern. **[Tower-Caps]** and other flora greeted her with their vibrant hues, and she immediately took her little knife and began to scrap off some new shafts for javelin making.

Gathering logs didn’t seem workable without an axe, but she had a full bundle of about thirty sticks by the time she was done. They would make good kindling. Taniel was still awake when she returned, propped up against the wall, watching her every move.

She set the bundle of wood down by the rest of it and selected out her favored shafts so she could begin to carve them into javelins. Halfway through the set of a dozen, she got a rank up.

[You have gained a rank in Basic Handcrafting!]

The next six came out as **[Basic Javelin]** complete with no 'makeshift' modifier! A smile crept onto her face. Across the chamber, Taniel grunted.

"Did you just level up your crafting skill?" he asked.

Elania nodded. "I just got **[Basic Handcrafting]** to Rank D."

"I'm surprised you managed to do that by making something so simple," he commented.

Sensing a gap in his permanently-angry wall, she decided to ask a skill-related question. "How does upgrading skills work? It let me change my **[Survival Crafting]** Rank C into **[Basic Handcrafting]** Rank E, but I'm not 100% sure why or how it worked."

He eyed her for a minute before responding. "Some skills are better than others, but related. The upgraded skill usually accounts for the capabilities of the previous one while being more effective or allowing new things. Skills don't translate 1:1 for everyone. They are more based on your personal experience and capabilities."

He looked away and continued. "A swordsman who has mastered his **[Swordsmanship]** skill who expands his capabilities with new weapons might upgrade to **[Martial Handling]** which encompasses more weapons...but taking that path won't change the fact that he'll keep the benefits from **[Swordsmanship]** and be better with the sword than everything else."

Elania blinked, soaking that knowledge in, but couldn't help but feel shocked. It was probably the most words Taniel had ever spoken to her, and without the constant glaring.

"Thank you for explaining to me," she said.

He grunted and avoided looking at her.

A sigh escaped her. Small progress was at least progress, right? Looking at her new javelins, she took the nine worst ones and set them against the wall. Maybe someone would find them useful if they used the waystation someday. Or maybe they'd turn them to kindling. It didn't really matter. She took the three she kept and put them in her chamber.

Next up was the sorry state of her outfit. The tears from the **[Razorscale]** claws and holes from the **[Rockbear]** shrapnel needed fixing. She had enough material to do so, but not the right tools. She popped her head out and looked at Taniel.

“I need to fix my outfit. Do you have a sewing kit with a needle and some thread?” she asked.

He looked at her, and his perpetual frown reappeared. “No.”

She raised an eyebrow. “No, you don’t have a sewing kit? Or... No, you won’t share it?”

His glare deepened. “I have one, but you can’t have it.”

“I don’t need it forever.” Elania said. She stepped out, then tugged at her outfit, displaying the holes. “I just need to fix my clothes a bit. It got shredded some.”

He stared at her silently.

“Won’t you have some mercy? What if we meet someone along the way? They’ll look at poor Elania the Demon with her deteriorating outfit, her tits hanging out, and point and go ‘Look at those Conclave Monks, forcing that poor demon to go around half-naked with them!’ or something!”

The glare disappeared into one of confusion. “That would never happen.”

“Fine. Fine. No repairs then.” Elania responded. She began to pull her clothes off.

She almost had the robe over her head when he began to stutter. “Wh...what are you doing? Don’t take off your clothes!”

Pausing, she let it down enough so she could look at him. “I’m just speeding up the process. Running around naked will let me keep my outfit intact until I can repair it, right?”

He let out something that sounded like a curse as he stood up. Going over to his chamber, he brought out a wooden box. Cracking open the lid, he showed her several sets of needles and a few spindles of colored thread. It was perfect.

“Don’t use more than is needed,” he ordered.

She gave him a mocking salute. “Aye, aye, captain. No thread wasting shall occur.”

He looked more confused than angry, and she couldn’t help but feel a bit of mirth. Back in her room, she went to work making repairs. There were a lot more holes than she had realized. The claw marks required that she cut off some sheets from her makeshift bedroll, which was going to make it short enough that her feet would stick out from now on.

That didn’t really bother her. It was thin padding anyway.

By the time she was finished, the others had started to stir. They went in groups of two to relieve themselves outside, while Taniel began to set up some cold rations for what she assumed was breakfast. He nodded to her when she returned the kit and offered her a slice of hard bread.

Elania shook her head. "I'm good. I'd rather eat some beastie if we run into one."

That was the wrong thing to say, apparently, according to the look on his face. He didn't snap at her, though.

She retreated to her chamber and packed up her things. That only took a few minutes, and the others were still getting ready, so she tried to focus on the new skill the **[Rockbear]** had given her.

[Body Conditioning] Rank D sounded very cool, but also not very intuitive. She closed her eyes and tried to picture herself being tougher, like the **[Rockbear]** had been. Nothing really happened. Maybe it was a passive effect? She grabbed her knife and slid it against her thumb. It stung, and blood welled almost immediately.

Urgh, she hated not knowing things. Worse, she hated the feeling that she couldn't ask because... well, letting someone know she had a specific skill might bite her in the ass later. What if the monks went hostile and, since they knew about the skill, they could negate it because they knew more?

She eyed the group; they were nearly ready. Companions she couldn't fully trust. Suddenly all the RPG games she had played with party dynamics and the like seemed to have missed just how bad grouping up like this was.

"Elania, we are leaving," Joren called.

She stood up and followed.

The next curve took them away from the waterfall chamber, on a gradual upward slope. With Joren awake, she had a new target to extract information from.

"What's potency do? The number beside your level and race on the status screen," Elania asked.

Joren looked back at her. "That's your race and natural capability for learning new skills and ranking them up. A normal human tends to be around 250 point, while those with special ancestry might get as high as 1,000. Some races like elves might reach 2,000 or a little higher."

Elania blinked. Hers was 9999+ so it wasn't even giving her the full number. What the heck.

"What about...what about demons?" she asked.

Taniel snorted. "They have the same as their summoned race. Sad that you got a bad number?"

"I'm surprised that humans have such a low starting number. Doesn't that mean they have a hard time getting skills? I feel like it should be reversed, with humans having a high

number and elves lower because they live so much longer... wait, elves live longer, right?” Elania asked.

Joren looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “They live for several thousand years, yes. Why wouldn’t they learn faster? You don’t want to fuck around with an elf. They usually have dozens of skills in a wide variety of areas. It makes them very dangerous. One of the reasons they are disliked. Thankfully, they don’t enjoy visiting Neftasu and keep to the Overworld mostly.”

“Only one of the reasons? Why else aren’t they liked?” Elania asked.

“Well. They don’t have issues with eating people. It’s said humans taste good to them,” Taniel answered. “Something you probably have in common.”

Oh. They were those kind of elves. She ignored Taniel’s comment about her own preferences in favor of another question.

“If you have some skill you don’t understand or know about, is there a way to learn about it without having to find someone to teach you?” she asked.

Joren looked back at her again. “Other than trial and error? Not really, but if you have a skill, you should know how to use it already—”

Taniel held up his fist. “Quiet!”

Everyone jolted to a halt. They were at the threshold to a new cavern, this one relatively shaded with a lack of **[Glow-Moss]** and other fungi. As she scanned the horizon of the cave, she spotted what had prompted Taniel’s caution.

“Can’t make it out in this light,” Joren complained.

“Don’t worry. I can see them. It is just a herd of Ralfots—”

Her words trailed off as she spotted something larger in the center of the herd. She’d dismissed it as a large rock, but then it moved, turning two large sheepy-bovine eyes toward them.

[Alpha Ralfot]

[You have gained a level in Identify!]

“—Alpha Ralfot!”

Curses erupted from the two senior monks while the novices began to back step the way they had come.

The large brute began to glow, pawing the ground and kicking up rocks that sent the herd fleeing in the other direction, a chorus of ‘Moobaaa’ filling the caves.

“I see it,” Taniel confirmed.

How could he not with the fucking thing glowing like a spotlight?

It snorted, let out a bellow, and then charged.

CHAPTER 38 – ALPHA

Lightning began to spark as the glow from the **[Alpha Ralfot]** intensified. It barreled through the cavern towards them, sending tremors through the cavern floor with each impact of its hooves. Elania’s heart hammered in her chest, but she kept her gaze fixed on the charging beast, studying its movement.

She’d faced Darkwalkers, Razorscales, and Rockbears, but this **[Alpha Ralfot]** was a wholly different beast than the normal Ralfots she had hunted before. It was colossal, probably large enough to give challenge to the **[Manzitore]**. She could feel the magical energy pouring off of it like an aura of some sort, and the sparking lightning looked dangerous.

It also explained why there wasn’t any **[Glow-Moss]** in the cavern.

“Scatter!” Taniel barked; his voice was nearly drowned out by the beast’s challenging cries.

The novices needed no more prompting and sprinted down the path the group had arrived from. Joren took up a fighting stance and stepped forward. Taniel’s prayer beads came out.

They were going to fight this thing? Elania swallowed as she sprang into action, her legs carrying her rapidly to the side of the cavern with a speed that surprised even herself. Double checking her **[Power]** she confirmed she hadn’t really used any for the move. Was that **[Body Conditioning]** at work?

The **[Alpha Ralfot]** seemed to focus on Joren as the closest target, so that allowed her to maneuver freely.

Joren stood his ground with a determined expression. He slapped his palms together and a yellow glow appeared around them. The light spread to surround his entire body.

Elania still wasn't sure how smart he was to take on the rampaging lightning-bull-alpha-whatever head on.

She drew a javelin from her pack and gauged the needed trajectory, but Joren began to sprint forward before she could line up a shot. She was going to need to get closer to make sure she didn't risk hitting him, so she jumped forward as well, coming in from the side.

Just before the [**Alpha Ralfot**] and Joren collided, a massive golden brick wall snapped into existence. Taniel's chant reached a crescendo, and she shook the prayer beads in his hands, causing the wall to slide right into the bull's face.

It was like the beast had run smack dab into a solid wall; it crunched into it heavily before bouncing off and slamming into the floor. The bull's massive body dug up rock and flung it in the opposite direction as it skidded to a stop. Joren was right there to take advantage. He jumped into the air and landed with a kick, then began a rapid flurry into the beast's side.

It was a furious assault, but Elania couldn't help but feel it wasn't doing enough damage. Joren was absolutely dwarfed by the beast; he was standing on its neck and slamming the punches towards where she assumed anatomy had placed its spine, but...

No time to think. She arrived and jumped up herself, not throwing her javelin but charging it with [**Power**] and jamming it into the [**Alpha Ralfot**]'s side. The soft wood smoked as she regulated the [**Power**] flow to the highest level she could without incinerating the fragile weapon. Sizzling blood streamed out in bursts that were in beat with the thing's heart.

The Alpha was not deterred; it rolled back onto its feet and let out a furious "Moobaal!" that would have been funny if it wasn't coming from a building sized monster. It whipped around, sending Joren flying away, and she had to decide whether to let go and get flung off or use both hands to hold on to the javelin sticking out of its side.

Elania decided to hold on; the beast bucked and jolted. It wanted her dislodged and moved the slam her into the cavern wall. She stuck out her feet and pulsed her own [**Power**] into the limbs, and when they struck she kicked off, sending a piercing shockwave through the wall that sent them flying back into the center of the cavern.

Side-stepping wasn't a Ralfot speciality and the beast nearly toppled over. It gave her time to reach behind her back and grab another javelin. She reinforced it with [**Power**] then stabbed it in the side again.

The beast was not happy. It turned and centered its rage on Joren and charged. Rather than stay still, Elania yanked her first javelin out, releasing a torrent of blood spray. Then

she forced herself up to jab the beast again. The second javelin came out, and she began to work her way up its back. She wasn't sure where she was going, other than up.

Right up until the beast reached Joren and lowered its horns for a slashing sweep. Taniel's holy shield thing flashed into existence again, right in front of the attack. The small surface area and physics joined forces to apply a tremendous force on the horn; all the weight from the charge came to a sudden stop in much too short of a time.

There was a resounding crack as the impacting horn snapped. The [**Alpha Ralfot**] somersaulted into the air, taking her for a spin with it. Before they landed, she realized it was going to land right on top of her.

A split-second decision flashed in her mind. Jump free and dodge or attack.

The earlier conversation about powerful things fighting coming down to a battle of attrition flickered.

Who the fuck had time for that?

Elania shoved more [**Power**] into the javelins until they flashed into two pure shafts of energy. She pictured them as razor sharp swords. The blades elongated inside the Alpha, then she pulled them apart sideways, making two enormous gashes that cleaved through the flesh like bloody canyons.

Flipping back, she kicked off the beast's flesh, hurling herself toward the ground, twisting mid-air to land on her heels. Crouch transformed into a powerful jump as she slammed the energy swords together to form a solid beam of energy. Picturing a knight's lance with a guard that covered her entire body, she slammed into the [**Alpha**] from below, punching through its torso.

A geyser of blood and viscera erupted out of the things back as she punched through, the spray falling like rain all around as she slammed into the ceiling. Her energy weapon dissipated, and she realized she'd near burnt herself out with the attack.

[**Power: 23/252**]

Gravity took back control, and she spread her legs and arms out like a squirrel to slow down her fall. Air whipped all around her as the stone floor rapidly came to meet her. She closed her eyes and curled up into a ball at the very end, only for there to be no impact.

A golden hand enveloped her and turned her into a feather before gently setting her down. Her head snapped to Taniel, who was staring at her while doing one of his prayer things. He'd helped her! Elation filled her until the [**Alpha Ralfot**] let out a snort, causing her to whirl around and jump back.

How was the thing not dead? Was it seriously still going after having half its internals splattered onto the ceiling?

It started to try to rise when Joren's glowing yellow foot slammed into its skull. The blow bounced the thing's head on the rock, smashing a small crater into the cavern. Taniel raised his prayer beads and started to go all chanty again, and the glowing points formed on the bull's body.

Joren jumped between each one, slamming a fist or kick into each spot, causing a shockwave of power to blow through each one. It seemed like the yellow marks Taniel made caused each hit on that exact location to turn into something like a critical hit.

It was very effective. The **[Alpha Ralfot]** went limp on its side, dead or dying.

[Your party has defeated an Alpha Ralfot!]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

Dead then, she corrected mentally.

Joren slid off the thing's torso and landed on his feet. She took the moment to restore her panting to normal breathing as her lungs worked to keep up. Everything felt heavy and her entire body tingled from the excess discharge of **[Power]** that had left her nearly drained. Gravity felt like it was trying to reclaim her as she finally stood up.

"Wow...that thing was...big," Elania panted.

Joren nodded. "Alpha monsters are very dangerous evolution of more normal creatures. I am surprised we found one so close to the city, though."

"Well, we took it down, but I'm really drained," Elania replied. She turned to look at the massive corpse as she considered whether absorbing it was... safe.

Taniel jumped in front of her, an angry expression appearing on his face. "Stay back, demon. This one isn't for you."

She froze and stared at him. Hadn't she helped take it down? Anger coursed through her in response to him just assuming there wasn't a discussion on what they would do with it!

He turned and strode up to the beast's mouth, then climbed into its mouth, striding up its limp tongue. When he reached near the back of its throat, he raised his hands and began to chant. A bloody lump lowered itself from the flesh and then ripped its way through the sinew.

It was a massive golden orb. When it lowered to Taniel's palms, it began to glow and then shrank itself down to something the size of a baseball.

Annoyance warred with curiosity as she stared at the glowing gold orb that looked like it was made of solid gold. “What the heck is that?”

Joren frowned. “It’s a monster core, a high grade one that—”

“Not for you to know, Demon!” Taniel shouted. He whirled around, his face twisted in an apoplectic hatred. “You should know your place!”

Her eyes widened as he sprinted down the tongue and jumped at her. Reflexes dulled by her low **[Power]** she wasn’t able to dodge the fist that slammed into her face. Hard. The blow lifted her into the air, and she flew backward and slammed into a rock with a crunch. She rolled onto her side as she hit the ground and started to get back up when she realized her nose and front teeth were a bloody, shattered mess.

She spit out the tooth shards as hot liquid and pain filled her mouth. He’d tried to kill her! “Fu-ffk—yu!”

He reached her and swung again with his free hand, the other holding onto the orb protectively. She ducked under the strike and slammed her knee into his chest. He flew back but landed on his feet. If it had been Joren, she was afraid she’d be dead, but Taniel wasn’t as strong in a fisticuff.

“What the hell are you two doing!” Joren shouted at them both.

Taniel ignored him and lunged at her again. She deflected the blow, then made one of her own only for him to parry it. Her **[Improvised Combat]** skill was clearly inferior to whatever martial arts training he had and her boxing like moves were deflected at every turn while a plethora of kicks and chops struck her from every direction.

Suddenly, he grappled her wrist and locked her elbow joint before forcing her forward and slamming her already bloodied face into the ground. She let out a scream and rolled, snapping her joint painfully but allowing her to wrap a leg around him and force him into a straddle.

She was low on power, but she was still far, far stronger than an unenhanced human. Taniel was a monk, but he seemed to be a spellcaster-type. She slammed her forehead into his face. Twice.

A yellow orb formed between them and slammed into her chest, knocking her off of him. She landed painfully on her fractured arm, skipping several meters before rolling onto her feet to face him. The monk finished standing back up, staring back at her with his now bloodied face.

Elania reached up to her chest and focused on the mana shard. It was way, way past time for her to pull a drag of power out of it. Before she could do so, Joren jumped in between them.

Taniel attacked anyway, ignoring his fellow monk completely. When Joren moved and intercepted, Taniel's fist stopped a few centimeters from the other monk's face.

"Peace, brother, unless you mean to kill me," he said.

She wasn't sure how Joren's voice was so calm.

But somehow, it worked. Taniel was frozen in place, a kaleidoscope of emotions running across his face. Joren reached out and took the golden orb that was clutched in Taniel's fingers. As soon as the connection was broken, Taniel collapsed like a rag-doll.

Joren sat down, cross-legged, and held the orb up in his palms. A flash of light filled it, then it suddenly clarified, the golden color dissolving until the core was completely transparent with a single golden grape in the center.

Her shoulder vibrated and then popped loudly as the joint forced itself back into place on its own, eliciting a pained 'Argh!' from her. The rest of the bones in her shattered arm knit themselves back together as well. Her face throbbed painfully as she felt the buildup and then eruption of new teeth.

The novices arrived and stared at the scene in horror.

Joren let out a pained sigh. "Are you alright, Elania?"

Her eyes flickered to him, her expression guarded. "No."

Dragging power from the mana shard now, and be ready for a fight? That would be a massive drain on it, consuming half the stored power. She glanced at the **[Alpha Ralfot]** corpse and then stood and started walking toward it in a hurry.

Joren called out to her. "Elania?"

She ignored him and grabbed the dead bull's unbroken horn.

[Absorb the lingering Power from Alpha Ralfot?]

The message was different from the normal animals she'd hunted. It was the same message the Bone Demon had given her. She took it.

[You have absorbed 445 Power!]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

[Your body has far exceeded the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Your body is experiencing extreme thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high Power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

[Power: 468/264]

Elania screamed as all her senses caught fire at once. The Alpha turned into a blanket of golden light motes that blanketed her, threatening to consume her entirely.

She'd literally turned into a glowing human torch of energy.

In the back of her mind, in the small part that wasn't writhing in agony from the pain, she thought that maybe deciding things via attrition wouldn't be so bad.

CHAPTER 39 – CONTRACTS

The energy that cloaked her had died down from an inferno to just turning her into an omni-directional radioactive yellow flashlight.

It had taken an hour of her sitting while attempting to meditate to block out the pain. Slotting out **[Throwing]** for **[Crisis Management]** had helped with that considerably, but it was still a terrifying experience. She wasn't sure if she would have made it without an on-demand skill that was the world's equivalent to Prozac.

When the pain had died down and she had been able to think she had connected to her mana shard and dumped the excess into it. That had calmed things down, but apparently there was still more energy left over. It just hadn't been able to enter her body.

The light swirled around her for a while until it stuck to her like a glowing layer of paint. It slowly absorbed into her, heating up her **[Power]** level again until she was over the limit and burning again. It was like being covered in radioactive fallout. When the amount of **[Power]** became too uncomfortable, she dumped it into her mana shard.

Another mark for 'mana shard' critical to survival, although in this case she probably could have hurled a **[Power]** ball into a wall or something to relieve the overcharge.

Taniel was completely unconscious, and Joren had to carry him like a princess as they continued the trek toward the next waystation. The novices seemed to have gone past the terrified crying stage to the emotionally exhausted zombie one.

To the group's credit, they had rested and waited for her to get the rampaging **[Power]** storm under control. How much that was because Taniel was knocked out, she wasn't sure. There was still a question that was burning as hot as the over-limit heat flooding her body.

Halfway to the next cavern, she finally blurted it out. “Joren, why did Taniel attack me?”

Depending on his answer, she was going to split from the group. She worked her jaw in her mouth, her mouth still hurt from the new teeth suddenly growing and erupting to shove the shattered old ones out. That was not a magical experience she wanted to relive again anytime soon.

Joren looked at her with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. He wouldn’t have done that normally.”

She raised an eyebrow. “He’s not kept his disdain hidden the entire time.”

Pausing, Joren reached into his robe and pulled out the clear crystal orb with the gold center. Instinctively, she identified it.

[Monster Core – Ralfot]

“This is a monster core; they form inside of ‘Alpha’ class beasts that have been exposed to a dungeon. When raw, they can invoke and amplify emotions when handled,” Joren explained.

Elania eyed the core warily. When he handed it to her, she was surprised. “What? It’s safe now?”

He nodded. “I purified it. Taniel tried to do so himself, but only partly did so before he lost his composure.”

Lost his composure. Is that what they were calling his attempted homicide now?

“Why’d he handle it if he couldn’t purify it safely?” Elania asked.

Joren shook his head. “He should have been able to handle it, but I suspect his own emotions were unstable. One of the abilities of conclave monks is to control their emotions so they can purify the cores.”

Control their emotions? “Honestly, he’s done a shit job of controlling his emotions from what I’ve seen.”

One of the novices spoke up. “Taniel is from an orphanage that was massacred by a demon.”

Elania eyed the young man, and she shrunk back. She didn’t argue. Of course, it was something like that, right?

Joren sighed. “You can keep the core. You earned it fighting the thing anyway and from... what happened after.”

“Is it valuable?” Elania asked.

“It’s probably worth a large gold, maybe two,” Joren replied.

She wasn't sure how much that was, so it was her next question.

He gave her a quick rundown. "A cheap room at an inn, with a meal, is probably one small silver in Neftasu. Up to a large silver in one of the surrounding outposts. Ten small coins to one large, with copper, silver, and gold denominations."

So, it was worth... ten small golds, one hundred large silvers, or a thousand small ones? That was 1,000 days of rent, then. That was an impressively sized reward, although she wasn't sure how much other things in the city cost.

Maybe the rent and food were cheap. Although living in the city could possibly not be the best choice. If people hated demons, then maybe an outpost where she could stay in the caverns and hunt things to get stronger would be best.

Elania frowned. Was she considering living in the Underdark for the rest of her life? She had gotten used to the endless caverns, but it was dangerous without question. Maybe the 'Overworld' would be better? Being back under a normal blue sky would be nice.

She tucked the core into her pack. Somehow her outfit hadn't been affected by the **[Power]** surge, which was... a miracle. Also good for her sanity, because if she ended up naked every time something like that happened, she was going to go insane. Or become an exhibitionist.

The stony path slowly morphed from uncut and unhewn stone into an actual path. Stone and brick tiles were mostly worn or damaged along the way, but they were undoubtable evidence that at one point there had been a civilization in the area.

They followed it for several hours before they reached a small cavern that was filled with ruins. The waystation was located inside one of the buildings that dug into the cavern's side. A small pond and stream ran around it to feed a small pond that was full of lily-pad like growths and mushrooms. The high ceiling gave off a feeling that the space was much larger than it actually was, like they were at the bottom of a massive chasm.

"We'll rest here until Taniel wakes up," Joren said.

Elania frowned. "I didn't hurt him too badly? I hit him pretty hard. There wasn't any room to pull my punches."

Joren gave her a reassuring smile. "I did some first-aid. He should heal fine, but he'll be bruised pretty badly for the next few days."

There was an exhausted and worn tinge to the air as Joren activated the waystation's protective field.

[WY#88 has accepted your unauthorized presence in order to rectify a security boundary.]

She felt tired, too. Not physically tired, the high level of energy coursing through her saw to that, but emotionally and mentally. It was going to be hard to rest, and a bit selfishly, she hoped Taniel wouldn't wake up for a while.

Taking the chamber nearest the exit, she found that this station was slightly better equipped. There was a **[Tower-Cap]** divider she immediately deployed that only left a small opening. That was a nice upgrade to privacy, which was nice, even if the only thing she intended to do was lay down for a while.

That turned into two solo hours of practicing **[Mana Manipulation]** so she could precisely control the flow of **[Power]** into the mana shard. It was like holding the jaws of an angry bear open while trying to feed it a spoonful of easy to spill liquid while a vacuum cleaner was trying to reach out of its throat and drain her pond. Over and over.

It got easier with practice.

By the time she stopped glowing, she'd raised the skill's rank to S+ which felt like a big triumph.

[You have gained a Rank in Mana Manipulation!]

It raised the question though, what skill came after **[Mana Manipulation]**? With no skill tree and just the explanation that skills evolved and usually carried the benefits of previous versions... well, she would have preferred a list or someone to tell her what was next.

She'd just have to find out on her own, she guessed.

No one had bothered her or interrupted her practice, so she peeked out to survey the common room. The novices had put up their own divider and were likely inside their room. Taniel was laid out on a sleeping mat, still out cold. Joren sat by the slow burning campfire, watching the entrance in silence.

So, a pretty normal sight for a waystation camp. She popped out and greeted the senior monk.

"If you're tired, I can keep watch," Elania offered.

Joren shook his head. "I'm fine for now."

"Then do—"

He cut her off with a grin. "Sure, ask away."

Bah, was she too predictable? Clearing her throat, Elania came up with the first question on her mind. "We are getting closer to the city, I think. It's been what, three days? Wasn't it supposed to be a week?"

“We sort of took a shortcut after Marcus disappeared. Right through the Razorscale migration,” Joren explained. He glanced over at her. “Worried?”

“I am. I don’t know anything about the city. Will I be alright going there?” Elania asked.

“People won’t like you, especially without a contract. I don’t think you’ll have trouble getting in, but... there might be questions from the Guard. They have the final say and could deny you entry.”

“But like, people aren’t going to try and murder me, are they? Form a mob and stone me in the street?” She couldn’t help but look over at Taniel as she asked.

“I...I don’t think so, but it would probably be best to keep a low profile. Maybe...make a contract with someone so the stigma of ‘Unbound Demon’ isn’t around your neck,” he suggested.

He didn’t think so? That was not the most compelling of phrases and didn’t inspire confidence.

“I don’t even know how that works. The only contract thing I saw was when the Black Candle cultist person offered me one, and I rejected it without even looking,” Elania said.

“Eh. Should be pretty simple. Contracts aren’t just a demon thing; powerful mages use them as well. Don’t you have a **[Contract]** function in your system?” Joren asked.

She blinked and pulled up her **[Status]** looking for anything contract related.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 44 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 322/321]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Class: Darkwalker Huntress]

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank S+), Mana Manipulation (Rank S+), Basic Handcrafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana), (Darkwalker)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Deactivated)]

[Physical: Body Conditioning (Rank D), Mobility (Rank E), Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank S+), Tracking (Rank S+)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank B), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank S+)]

Yep. No sign of contracts or anything, so it wasn't on her **[Status]** sheet...

Maybe... maybe it was its own thing?

Instead of **[Status]** she tried to picture in her mind what **[Contract]** would look like and suddenly a new screen popped into existence.

[Contracts: Elania Reyes]

[(Available: 1) (Active: 0)]

[(Contract Essence Draw: -0.5)]

[Configuration: Default]

[(Contractor: Elania Reyes, (Contractee: None Specified), (Duration: Indefinite)]

[(Requirements/Contractor: Contractor shall protect Contractee from harm to the best of their ability.)]

[(Requirements/Contractee: Contractee shall provide Contractor with sufficient essence to sustain Contractor for the contract's duration. Contractee shall not seek any harm to the Contractor. Contractee shall surrender their soul to Contractor upon death.)]

[(Penalty/Contractor: Contractor shall forfeit any right to Contractee's soul upon violation of their requirements.)]

[(Penalty/Contractee: Contractee shall forfeit their soul and life immediately upon failure of any violation of their requirements.)]

Well, there it was. The mention of the Contractee giving up their soul immediately made her feel uncomfortable. People had souls in this world, and they were items that could be given up? It was like a B movie script where the devil tried to get someone to give up their soul.

A sudden feeling of sympathy for non-sapient demons filled her. They didn't even get a chance to read the contracts before they were forced to sign them. Why would anyone be surprised that after they became smarter and learned that they were slaves, the demons lashed out if they got the chance?

Shitty world.

"I don't want there to be friction if we get to the city. Why don't we sign a contract?" Elania asked.

A series of gasps from the novices' room drew her attention. Apparently, they had been eavesdropping on the conversation. The younger monks burst out of the room in a hurry.

"Senior, wait!"

“How could he...”

“Don’t do it!”

Joren gave all of them a firm look and they retreated. He gave her an apologetic shake of the head. “Conclave members are forbidden from ever signing any contracts with demons. It would compromise our position and status.”

Elania frowned. Compromise their status as the bogey-men who hunted down rogue demons? Was it a cop-out or legitimate refusal? She didn’t know enough to be able to tell. Rules were rules, she guessed.

A bit more experimentation with the new [**Contract**] screen proved that if she changed the contract from default, she could manipulate the terms almost at will.

She removed the penalties, made the duration a few days, and edited the terms to simply be that they would work together to get to the city as party members. No soul shenanigans involved.

It seemed valid, and she marked Joren as the Contractee and sent it.

“How about this?” Elania activated the contract and assumed that he received it.

Joren looked up with alarm, then reached out and waved his hand away. “Don’t do that! I told you no.”

“You didn’t even read it!” Elania objected.

“I can’t! I said no! It’s anathema!” he yelled back at her.

Elania bit her lip. “I just don’t want to be discriminated against.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help with that.” Joren looked away and turned back toward the entryway to the waystation.

He was the only one that had been ‘nice’ to her. She liked him.

That’s probably why it felt like betrayal.

If Taniel had told her that, she wouldn’t have cared at all.

CHAPTER 40—TRANSFORMATION

Elania sat on a boulder outside the waystation entrance, humming a half-remembered tune from one of her favorite fantasy music channels back home. One of the novices had been in and out a few times to fetch water, and each time gave her a funny expression.

Maybe they weren't used to musical demons? Or maybe she was just bad at humming. She certainly hadn't earned any music related skill from her attempts, which was unfair. She was doing her best.

Waiting for Taniel to wake up was boring, and she reached out to swat the small **[System]** bar that represented her contract screen to send it spinning like a spin-top balanced on her finger. Why couldn't things be easy?

Figuring out that her **[System]** screens weren't quite as static as she had imaged was a nice revelation. She'd rearranged everything to feel more comfortable, including adjusting the color, opacity, text, font, and size. If she wanted, she could plaster them against a wall like a full size projection, or attach them to her forearm or clothing.

No one could see them but her, but it was a nice touch for just looking at things and... thinking about them.

The first thing she had made was a nice gauge for her **[Power]** stat that she kept active somewhere, unobtrusive. It was, in her opinion, her most vital statistic since it acted as her life bar, mana bar, and food bar all rolled into one.

Joren called her from inside the waystation. "Elania!"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "What's up?"

It took some effort to stifle a giggle and smile when he actually looked at the ceiling, looking slightly confused, before looking back to her. "Taniel's still unconscious. I want

to try a few herbal remedies to see if they would help. Could you find a few mushrooms for me?”

Elania shrugged and then hopped off the boulder. “Sure, I guess. What do you need, exactly?”

He pulled out a leather pouch, along with a leather glove. “Most important ones are [**Fencia's Fungal Growth**] and some [**Bright Stem**] mushrooms.”

She eyed the leather glove as she accepted it and the pouch.

“You'll want these. Don't get the Fencia anywhere near your eyes, nose, ears, mouth or...” His gaze crept downward and then his cheeks turned red as he looked away.

She wanted to know just who Fencia was and why she had been sticking mushrooms between her legs, but she didn't figure the poor embarrassed monk would know. Scratch that. She didn't want to know.

“I've seen the Fencia before, but what does the [**Bright Stem**] look like?” Elania asked.

“They are the small ones that like to grow on the sides of rocks near the water. They have long spines with a bright glow coming from underneath the cap,” Joren explained.

Elania nodded. “Easy enough. I think I saw them near the pond when we came in.”

Ten minutes later she had already filled half the pouch with the [**Bright Stem**] while still looking for more Fencia. It was ten times more annoying than she imagined, because all the ones she spotted were growing on small ledges that were too hard to reach. There was no way she was going to take the risk of jumping up to one and face planting into it with all the warning labels.

By the time she had the leather pouch full, it had taken a full hour. Actually, it was more like 90% full, but if Joren wanted more Fencia, he was going to have to get it himself. Following the stream back toward the waystation, she noticed one of the novices gathering some water...

With a [**Razorscale**] sneaking up on him from behind.

Elania hastily broke into a run toward them. She didn't have her javelins with her, just her knife.

Moving as fast as she could, she almost made it in time. When it became clear the [**Razorscale**] was about to lunge, she shouted a warning. “Run!”

The novice looked at her and was afraid of the wrong thing, freezing in place. The overgrown alligator monster snapped down on his leg, eliciting a pained scream. It yanked him off his feet easily, then began to drag him away.

Panicked, she slammed on her **[Demonic Aura]** and pulsed a burst of power into it, directing it straight forward. She wasn't sure of the efficacy, but the **[Razorscale]** did pause and release the novice to turn on her.

He screamed and scampered through the pond away just as she reached the monster. It snapped at her but she sidestepped the bite. Jumping over a claw swipe, she jumped onto the beast's back. The knife wasn't an idea weapon, even as she reinforced the edge with **[Power]** and began to poke holes in the **[Razorscale]**'s back.

It scrambled to remove her, but she held on for a half dozen stabs before it twisted in the water and managed to flip her off. A hot searing pain flared up her left arm as large teeth dug into her upper arm.

The new position had one small benefit. It gave her access to its throat, and she jabbed her knife into the soft skin there and slashed a cut all the way to where the thing's jawbones connected. That made a large opening and while they struggled, she jabbed her hand into the opening.

The once crystal-clear water of the pond had turned a murky burgundy by the time the beast stopped struggling.

[You have absorbed 22 Power!]

[You have gained Razorscale Affinity!]

[Consume more Razorscale Essence to enable Razorscale Transformation!]

Her arm burned like fire, and the fight had ended up a net neutral **[Power]** wise. Joren ran out of the waystation straight for them.

"What happened?" he shouted.

"A **[Razorscale]** ambushed him," she panted. Pain blossomed in her arm and wasn't going away. Confused, she pulled her robe away and was horrified by what she saw.

Instead of fresh baby soft skin, there were writhing abscessed pockets bubbling there. "Ahh! Fuck!"

Joren went for the novice first. "Allen! Allen! Stay with me!"

A white light appeared from Joren's hands, but she was too preoccupied with her own ordeal to pay much attention. Slowly she realized that the **[Razorscale]** had somehow injected something into her arm with the bite, and her **[Regeneration]** had caused her skin to heal over it, trapping it inside.

Holy shit... was the bite infected like some type of super poison Komodo dragon thing?

She glanced over at the novice Joren was tending to and felt a moment of panic. The young man was dead, his eyes glassed over. The area where the **[Razorscale]** had bitten

him had begun to melt like wax too close to a flame. Melted flesh began to spill into the water. Joren was still trying to use his glowy hands to help.

Being dissolved like that was horrible. That was what was happening to her? She couldn't let it happen.

Her knife was still bloodied; she pulsed a flare of **[Power]** through it, blazing off the outer layer of grime. Then she pointed the cleaned blade at her arm. The painful writhing flesh was mercifully not working its way higher, but it was still fully active.

Elania stabbed herself.

A splatter shield would have been a good idea.

The contents of the pustule were the most foul-smelling liquid ever. Worse than even the Mushroomum compost baby boxes.

Pain wracked her in pulses that were as bad as having her nerves regrown. **[Crisis Management]** wasn't blocking things out. Distantly, she realized that she'd stabbed a second one. At that point, the thought of cutting her arm off just so she could grow a new one seemed to be the smartest idea.

But she didn't have an axe. Holy shit, what if the thing had bitten her somewhere other than her arm? How many Razorscales had she fought, how many times had she come close to getting bitten?

Elania rolled onto her back, panting heavily. Joren's face appeared as he stood above her, looking down with a frown. "It bit you, and you're still alive somehow."

He knelt down and put his hands on her shoulder and examined her infected arm. He shouted something to someone and then she realized they were carrying her up to the waystation. It would have been heartwarming if she wasn't in so much pain. They placed her on her thin bedroll.

She reached up and grabbed Joren's wrist when he turned to leave for something.

"Can you chop it off?" Elania asked, tears flowing freely from the corners of her eyes.

A panicked look appeared on his face at the question. "I can try some holy magic on it, but it might hurt since you are a demon."

"Wh...whatever. Just do it!" she hissed.

Light flared around his hands as he laid them on her arm.

It turned out holy healing magic was a bad idea. He stopped almost immediately, but it seemed like whatever he had done had multiplied the constant flare of pain. It filled her entire body.

She was vaguely aware of her screams when everything went black.



Elania raised her nose and sniffed the air, the scent of terrified fleeing Ralfots clear in the still cavern air. One passed by her hiding spot and she transformed into a silent flash of movement, leaping from stone to stone. The distance between her and her prey was devoured rapidly until she spotted a vulnerable target.

The young Ralfot screeched as she pounced and tumbled with it to the cavern floor. Claws rent deep gashes through the calf's side, spilling precious life blood. The rest of the fleeing herd paid the encounter no mind, and she bit down hard on the carcass and dragged it to a safe alcove.

The taste and sense of fresh blood filled her mouth. The hunt was good. A feeling of satisfaction filled her as she finished the meal, and she found a safe, hidden alcove to curl up in.

When she woke up from the dream, she felt the need for a massive, spine curving stretch. It felt wonderful. The absence of pain was welcome. Cracking an eye open, she found herself inside her chamber in the waystation, her stuff pooled in a pile on the floor. Opening her mouth wide, she let out a yawn.

When she looked out into the common room, the light was dim; everyone was asleep. Her ears flicked as the soft sounds of steady breathing highlighted the occupation of two chambers. The three remaining novices were together, while Taniel and Joren were asleep in the same room.

She poked her head around the divider, her tail swishing of its own accord. Sure enough, Joren and Taniel were fast asleep exactly where she had pinpointed them to be. It seemed everyone was exhausted and tired after all the fighting.

It wasn't like she had much to do, so she decided to take up the watch herself. Laying down at Joren's feet, she watched the entrance to the waystation.

Eventually, she nodded off for a nap since nothing happened.

Something tried to move underneath her, and she shifted her weight so she could stretch from head to tail as best she could. A small, panicked noise had her ears rotating as she tried to go back to sleep. The noise grew louder and then a hand landed on her head. It squeezed her ear!

It was too rough! Finally opening her eyes, she found Joren was trying to push her head away. She let out a warning growl, and he froze. Standing up, she rubbed her cheek on his face before walking a short distance away and licking her foot. She needed to clean between her claws.

“Elania?” Joren asked hesitantly, still frozen on his bedroll.

She turned and tilted her head at him. “Joren?”

The sound came out through the filter of an oversized female Darkwalker. His eyes widened at the sound, and he looked extremely worried. He looked torn between trying to flee or not.

She wasn't that scary, was she? Deciding to give him some reassurance, she prowled over to him and gave him another friendly nuzzle.

“Ha...ha...haaa. Elania, why are you an oversized Darkwalker?” Joren stammered out.

That was a good question. She started to try to vocalize something when he held up a hand. “I don't understand. Let's try yes and no questions. Tilt your head left for 'No' and right for 'Yes,' alright?”

Ha! This game was simple. She settled down onto her haunches and tilted her head to the right. He almost seemed surprised that she got it right.

“Are you Elania?” he asked.

What kind of stupid question was that? She tilted her head to the right again.

He seemed at a loss for words. “Ok... umm. Do you know why you are a Darkwalker?”

Hmm. Elania thought about it. She knew part of why—it was that stupid transformation thing that happened during the big fight, somehow activating on its own when she blacked out from the pain—but she didn't think that was what he was after. She didn't have any idea why the transformation had activated this time.”

She tilted her head to the left.

He let out a sigh. “Alright... do you know how to transform back?”

Uhm. Right. Transforming back into a human... she wasn't sure what to do, and when she tried to think about being a human again, nothing happened. Her **[Status]** didn't appear when she called it, either. That was annoying. Was the only way back to burn out all her **[Power]** like before?

She tilted her head to the left again.

Joren let out a sigh. “Alright. Well, just wait here a moment. I need to tell the others before they see you and panic.”

Elania considered. Hunger was absent, so she finally agreed with a nod and laid down, putting her chin on her feet. What was the big deal, anyway? She felt fine in her new form.

“Just...just remember, don’t eat Taniel.” Joren said as he stepped out.

She let out an acknowledging rumble. No promises.

CHAPTER 41 – DARKWALKING

Unfortunately, whatever Joren was up to didn't take long enough, and he immediately began to bug her just as she was dozing off. "You'll frighten Taniel if he wakes up with you hovering over him."

What was the problem with that?

A sudden icky smell wrinkled her nose, and she realized it was the scent of fear coming off the three novices. They each were peeking out from their chamber's divider. Why did they have to be such scaredy-cats?

She decided to inform them of their failings with a low roar, which elicited a series of shrieks and their disappearance.

Joren gave her a reprimanding look. "Don't scare them like that."

Hmm. Well, she'd consider it. Her tail swished back and forth as she followed him to the waystation's entrance. "Why don't you go keep an eye out and make sure no more **[Razorscale]** sneak up on us? I'm hoping Taniel wakes up soon."

She tilted her head in curiosity. He wanted her to leave? Hunting for some creatures outside was tempting, but she wasn't hungry.

Tilting her head to the left, she turned and found the corner and curled up into a ball, ignoring Joren's demands. It was a pleasant corner, and she wanted to do what she wanted, not what she was told.

Eventually, the novices came out of their hiding space but did not stop with their wary glances at her. The smell of cooking tickled her nose, but it was mostly the spices that were appealing. There was no way she wanted any of the vegetables or bread they prepared.

A nice **[Ralfot]** steak would be perfect, but she didn't think there were any nearby.

Eventually, Taniel woke up. She ignored him. She didn't like him.

Her catnap lasted for a while. How long didn't really matter, but when she stretched and looked around, it looked like everyone was getting ready to leave.

They'd get to travel! That would be fun!

Excitement ran through her, and she quickly padded over to her chamber. Her stuff had been touched, neatly rolled up into a bag.

That was a problem... she didn't have any way to carry it. At least not very well. She nipped her pack and picked it up with her mouth, then padded over to find Joren. He almost fell over when she rubbed up against his leg.

"Elania! Stop! You're too big," Joren complained.

She was not big! She was perfectly sized. Annoyed, she tossed her bag of stuff up onto whatever the thing was that he had been working on. Then she sat down on her haunches.

He started to move the stuff, but she let out a warning growl.

Joren sighed. "Okay, okay. We'll find a way to move your stuff. I'm already going to be carrying an extra [**Glow-Moss Basket**] so we will need to make a backpack for you... or something."

"Why are you bothering? She's obviously going feral. We need to get rid of her," Taniel muttered.

Elania's ears perked up. That was not what she wanted to hear. Especially not after he had tried to hurt her! Whirling around toward him, she loped forward and smacked into the monk. He went off balance and then she pawed him in the side to make sure he fell.

Without her claws. He tried to scramble away; she'd won via a complete surprise attack. Unwilling to let him go, she pounced carefully to land on his back, then sat down on him.

She was much heavier now that she was a [**Darkwalker**] and he wasn't able to dislodge her. The frantic yelling from the monk had everyone else in an uproar, but she ignored them all in favor of licking between her claws. A triumphant sense of satisfaction filled her. He squirmed, but she paid him no mind, doing her best to put on an air of indifference.

Joren hurried over to intervene. "Elania!" he shouted. "Get off him!"

Why should she? She was comfortable, and Taniel had been asking for it. But seeing Joren's pleading eyes eventually broke her down and made her reconsider. With a reluctant growl, she lifted off of him and padded over to Joren.

Joren ignored her and checked on Taniel, who was gasping for breath as he sat up. It was hard for her to rectify his previous shouting, with her being too heavy for him to breathe, but whatever. Joren looked at her with a frown. "Elania," he said firmly. "That was unacceptable. You can't just attack people because they say something you don't like."

Her ears fell back, and she let out a warning growl. It wasn't about liking or disliking what Taniel had said; it was about respect and not being a prick. She tilted her head to the left in defiance.

The monk sighed.

Everyone finally got about packing their things and Joren brought her pack and two leather straps. The pack went on her back, and the straps went around her middle. When he pulled out a smaller set, she recognized it as a collar and sniffed it warily.

"It is needed to keep the weight from rolling the pack off your back and under your belly," Joren explained.

She huffed and sat on her haunches, and let him wrap it around her neck. A length went around it to snap to her pack and then he tightened everything. To confirm it was suitable for their journey, she did a few hops and jumps to test the balance and security and was impressed it worked as well as it did.

With everything in place, she decided she didn't want to wait anymore and headed outside before the others were ready. Sniffing the air told her there weren't any nearby dangers outside the waystation, and she prowled around the pond to get a drink of water. The horrific bloody scene from before had been washed away by the steady underground stream's constant in-and-out flows.

When the party of monks finally came out to travel, she hurried to jump in front of them to lead the way. Several times, Joren or Taniel had to shout at her to come back and take a different branch in the path, but she didn't mind. They were too slow anyway.

The journey to the next waystation was supposed to be short. Less than a day. That had very little meaning to her, though.

The scent of Ralfots wafted through the air, threatening to draw her away to hunt, but she resisted the call. At one point, she smelled evidence of a mated [**Darkwalker**] pair and let out a threatening, angry roar as warning for them to stay away.

The panicked monks had no idea why she roared, and she didn't feel like explaining. So, she just moved on without paying them any attention, expecting them to follow. Which they did.

Vibrant shades of blue, green, and yellow filled the air as the biome changed, and when Joren called to a temporary halt for the novices to rest, she stopped.

For a few minutes.

It was boring, so she decided to explore, despite the monk telling her to stay. The nearby chambers were mostly empty except for the thick carpets of moss—not glow moss. That

had slowly tapered off to nothing. Now it was just normal green moss. Ironically, it made the caverns even darker as she relied on the bioluminescence of the fungal growths.

The deep caverns were better lit than the higher levels. That was funny.

When her eyes fell on a stonework built into the side of the cavern, she froze. They must be getting close! Mostly, she had been ignoring the stonework, but this time there were small alcoves with strategically placed fungus that provided light. It was, in a word, pretty to her **[Darkwalker]** eyes.

She bounded back to the group, but smelled fear on them, so she immediately became alert. Voices reached her. Voices she didn't recognize.

Carefully minding her step, she prowled around until she found a hidden spot to view the exchange.

[Mercenary - Human - Lvl 223]

[Warrior - Human - Lvl 319]

[Ranger - Human - Lvl 231]

She listened to the words but found them much less useful than the emotions exchanged. Taniel and Joren were wary, the novices afraid. They were always afraid, though.

More telling was the group of three men smelled like predators who had just found prey. One of them kept patting his sword sheath threateningly as they argued.

Maybe they wished to fight. She moved to a better position behind the interlopers, her red eyes glowing in the dark. Since she was at their back, and she made no sound, they suspected nothing.

She could tell the moment Joren spotted her. He froze mid-sentence and looked directly at her, and panic-smell flashed off of him.

Elania licked her sharp teeth in response. She was ready.

When Joren recovered, he looked at Taniel, and she could sense the hardening of their resolve.

Before she could pounce, Taniel spoke. "Our other companion has arrived; you should move along and mind your own business."

The mercenary didn't seem impressed. "Methinks you're lost, monk-boy. No ranger to guide ye? We'll do so—for half the value of your goods. Ye really shouldn't look to argue, not with the beasties around here, any hap."

The ranger, however, looked over his shoulder and spotted her. He grabbed his companions and turned them around to point at her.

Now the fear-smell shifted from the novices to the harassers. A prick of annoyance filled her though. Why had they given up her chance to ambush? To intimidate was nice, yes, but ambush would have been more direct.

Stupid humans.

The trio excused themselves and fled.

Pleased with herself, Elania strode out of the shadow and approached the monks. When she didn't get the head scratch she deserved, she bumped into Joren hard enough to nearly knock him off his feet.

"Hey! Watch it," Joren warned.

She bumped into him again. And again. Until he finally got the idea and praised her and distributed the ear scratches.

"Yeah, I think this confirms what kind of demon she was before eating a bunch of humans," Taniel said sarcastically.

Anger flashed through her. She was not a **[Darkwalker]**! She was a human person.

There was a sudden pulse that shook her entire body, and then a **[Power]** fueled cloud enveloped her as her body suddenly yanked itself into a new shape. The sensation was weird, as if she was disembodied and watching it happened to herself, until suddenly she popped back into her own head.

Kneeling on the floor, she stared at the monks before getting to her feet. They stared back at her.

Her loose pack sat on the ground by her feet.

"Uhm, Elania," Joren said.

She looked down and sighed. She was completely naked. Again.

After the shock wore off, all the monks turned beet red and looked away. Somehow, she managed to not panic. So, they'd gotten a good look at her, so what? It didn't cool down her cheeks, but at least she didn't freak out.

"Your clothes were shredded from the first transformation...you can have one of our spare robes," Joren finally stammered. Taniel turned around silently while the other monk searched for the outfit, then handed it to her without turning to look at her.

Was chastity one of the monk-virtues along with demon-hating?

She hastily pulled on the outfit and tightened it with the cloth belt. "Who were those people?"

Taniel grunted. "Ranger mercenary team, looking for loot, beasts, or...lost expeditions they could extort."

“Your ambush worked well. They didn’t know what to make of you,” Joren said.

“You can all turn around now. My nakedness won’t assail you anymore,” Elania replied glibly. A fresh sheen of embarrassment appeared on the novices’ faces. Somehow that seemed a bit endearing, because she doubted that the rough looking other group would have given her the privacy.

A sense of relief filled her. She was back to being human... normal. Not that being a **[Darkwalker]** had been bad...but her memories of the experience were heavily tinted with... feline Darkwalkerness.

“Are we almost there?” Elania asked.

Joren nodded. “Next cavern, actually. Wouldn’t be surprised if that group had been using the waystation earlier.”

That led to her next question. “What happens if a waystation is in use when another group shows up?”

“Either the group inside can lower the protection magic and the groups can share, or... the outside group is left to their fate to continue or find a new place to camp,” Taniel explained.

Ouch. First come, first serve.

That probably wasn’t a problem for the more distant waystations, but if they were taken as they got closer to the city, she’d have to be on much higher alert if they camped in the open.

She stuck to her own thoughts as they continued forward. The world seemed intent on destroying her clothes, most of the time with an audience—would it be possible to find some type of magic that made her outfits survive?

The monk outfit was nice. Nicer than anything she had worn in Eladu so far. It was oversized on her, and the pants were baggy and pooled out slightly, but she tucked that into the fur-lined boots. She suppressed the uncharitable thought that they had been making her go barefoot the whole time so far.

The top was a cloth doublet, and she added a wrap around her torso to keep things from flopping around. The travel cloak was a delightful addition, although the orange material stood out a bit to her eyes.

She hoped they didn’t expect her to return it in one piece. There was a fat chance of that happening.

There wasn't much time to tidy up and customize things further, and the group continued. A little while later, they arrived, but her heart jumped a little when she saw the blue shimmering field already activated.

It felt like a kick when they saw who was inside.

"Marcus," Joren said flatly. Apparently, the monk wasn't happy with the man.

"Ah, my wayward charges, I'm so glad to see that you've made it to safety!" Marcus replied jovially.

CHAPTER 42 – THE THIRD LEVEL

Yolani held her wand up in the air, the bright glow lighting up the large space opening up before the group. Henri stood beside her, leaning a bit too close for her comfort to the edge to peer down into the abyss.

His armor was stained with ichor and dirt. They'd spent the last three days fighting and delving into the dungeon's depths. The density of their opponents had been far higher than indicated on her father's map. There had been scant reward as well; all the enemies had been simple-minded undead or beasts. The dungeon's balance had somehow been changed.

Was that why there had been so few mana stones coming from the Syndicate?

They'd collected two dozen mana crystals, but on average, there should have been at least a low-quality mana shard to go with them.

The loot chests were also empty. There was no sign of another adventuring group, though.

The way the dungeon branched out, unless they had the same map and chose the same directions, there was scant chance of two parties running into each other randomly. There were just too many roots spreading out into the depths.

Yolani sighed as the rest of their party took turns looking down. They'd reached the third level. She gave a smile to Harlock.

He gave her a serious look. "It took much longer than expected."

She glanced at the others. Lucas looked exhausted. "It's a good thing we brought extra supplies."

“Aye, lass. You prepared this well. Wouldn’t have come otherwise, but I’m afraid unless we have better luck, we won’t have much time to search before needing to turn around,” Harlock said.

That was like a crushing weight. They’d come so far only to have to turn around and give up... but it wasn’t that far left to go. “I think we can make it.”

The grizzled sergeant nodded. The party headed down the spiraling stairs. There was a rest spot halfway down to the next level with a security grate. They stopped to rest their feet. Rations were shared and everyone got a few hours of rest before they continued their march.

A pair of skeleton guards greeted them with halberds at the bottom, but Thoren let out a yell, then smashed them into pieces with a swing of his oversized two-handed sword. Jareth nodded to the oversized warrior and slipped into the lead, keeping an eye out for traps.

The man had a high level of **[Darkvision]** so the lack of light wasn’t a problem as he scouted at the forward edge of her glow lamp. That was her primary role: light bearer. The others preserved their glow lamp charges for combat, while she carefully swapped out a crystal charge whenever hers ran low.

Kael remained glued to her side. As the youngest and least experienced in the group, the young man acted as her bodyguard. Henri and Lucas acted as the rearguard and watched their flanks, while Harlock acted as a beater to move to wherever there was excess trouble.

Over the three days, they’d learned each other’s strengths and weaknesses and formed a well-oiled cohesive unit.

The air felt heavier, probably because it was. Some of the more drained crystals in her bag and began to glow with their own inner light. Mana lay heavy like a thick fog, and a shiver ran down her spine. The conditions were perfect for a demon to form or appear.

Also perfect for a mana shard formation.

There were four exits for them to choose between, at the base of the spiral. Everyone kept an alert eye while she glanced at each one. She’d memorized the map already and pointed to one with a cracked arch. “This one.”

“You sure, Yolani? That looks pretty unstable,” Henri said.

She nodded. “It’s that one. There should be three corridors and chambers before we reach the...end.”

Despite her outward calmness, a knot of fear twisted tighter in her gut. Every step forward meant...coming closer to either knowing her father’s fate, or failure and having

no resolution. An icy hand had squeezed the hope that she'd find him alive until it was a numb shard in her heart that stabbed her. If she dwelled on it, she'd work herself to tears.

There was no room for that when danger lurked around every corner.

So she pushed the thought of it away.

They needed to reach the end, one chamber at a time.

The corridor wasn't trapped, so they made a quick pace. Jareth reached the threshold into the next room first and then fell back. "There's a **[Rockbear]** in the middle of the room. Didn't see any adds."

Harlock grunted. "How big?"

"Big enough to be trouble," Jareth replied.

"What's the plan?" Henri asked.

Harlock looked over at each of them before settling on Yolani. "If the girl here can create a kinetic ward of some kind powerful enough... I'd say we bait it into a charge, slam it to a stop with a collision, then hack at it."

Yolani frowned. "You're sure your weapons can hurt it? The ward is no problem."

Harlock looked at Thoren. "We'll probably want to use some elemental grease. Rockbears are sensitive to lightning and electricity."

"Isn't that backwards? Shouldn't earth resist lightning and we should use fire instead?" Kael asked.

"Aye, earth resists lightning. But the insides of the **[Rockbear]** aren't earth. Once you pierce the armor...that amplifies the shock internally," Harlock explained.

Yolani set down her pack and fetched out the blue jar that glowed. The grease crackled inside, hinting at the contained elemental energy of the stuff inside the glass. She pulled out a pair of thick rubber gloves and put them on. "Make sure not to touch your weapon to anything once it is applied. It'll wear off after a few blows or a bit of time."

Everyone mumbled acknowledgement and then offered their weapon of choice one by one. She applied a thick layer to each blade with her gloved hand and then resealed the jar. A flick from her other hand cleaned her glove and then she stored everything back into her pack.

They were ready.

Yolani readied her kinetic combat wand as they strode into the chamber. It was an artificially abrupt change of scenery as the dungeon bricks gave way to a more natural looking cavern. A small stream ran from one end to the other, while different mushrooms and plants grew while giving off their own inner lights. High above, shining crystals

glinted, casting a pale purple light across the entire chamber, highlighting the sleeping **[Rockbear]** in the center.

Fairly standard or a dungeon, all told.

Harlock raised his crossbow, and a bolt thwacked out to stab into the sleeping beast's eye. The projectile dug a few inches, shocking arcs playing through the air around the impact zone. He let out an annoyed 'Tschk' as the bolt dislodged itself as the beast opened its eyes and roared.

Predictably, it charged straight for him, and she went to work forming a ward spell. The sergeant didn't flinch or flee as the **[Rockbear]** bore down on him, trusting her completely.

She was happy to not disappoint as the bear made a final lunge and smashed nose first into a spiral of white energy that inverted all kinetic force applied to it. There was a sickeningly loud crunch of stone as the bear's armor plating fractured from the impact. It limped to the side, partially stunned by the sudden self-inflicted blow to its head.

The rest of the group wasted no time attacking.

Thoren reached the staggered bear first, swinging his scintillating great sword with all his might. The blade cleaved into the bear's armor plate deeply enough that the lightning grease discharged strongly. A swipe forced him to dodge backward, yanking the weapon free though.

A follow up bite from the **[Rockbear]** received a slash from the sword, discharging a shock of lightning into the beast's mouth, causing it to rise on its legs and roar.

Jareth moved in on the beast's flank, then jumped at the **[Rockbear]**'s hip. His two stilettos slid through an open joint in the rock before they pulsed with a discharge. The bear's entire left leg went limp from the shock, and it toppled over.

Not wasting any time Lucas began to hack at the bear's exposed stomach with his war pick, stone chunks exploding outward with each piercing strike.

Harlock set his spear on top of his shield and charged. The long weapon allowed him the reach to jab the beast in the throat without having to get too close. Blood leaked from the wounds, while the lightning grease played havoc on the bear's nervous system.

Wounded, the **[Rockbear]** roared in pain and anger, lashing out blindly as it tried to fend off its attackers.

Yolani watched everything with rapt attention, looking for any strike that a party member might not block or avoid in time. Her wand still had nearly a full charge, and reversing a blow wasn't impossible if she was fast enough.

She didn't even notice when two goblins chittered and jumped from an overhang hidden above, straight at her. Kael and Henri saw them, though.

Kael raised his spear and the first goblin impaled itself all the way to the blade guard, and the young man used its own momentum to fling it against the dungeon wall.

The second one fared just as poorly as Henri's sword decapitated it in a single, sizzling blow. Blood splattered all over her side, but Yolani ignored it. The **[Rockbear]** had risen to charge again, this time for Kareth.

She didn't have a good view, so instead of placing a barrier in front of it, she shackled its rear ankles.

That worked well. The bear came to a sudden halt and slammed into the floor as momentum suddenly reversed itself. A few moments of hacking later, the beast was finished, and no one was hurt.

That was the important thing. They didn't have a lot of healing supplies left. Thankfully, her cleaning wand was rechargeable from the mana crystals they found.

"Good job, everyone," Yolani said. Everyone looked up at her as they caught their breath. "Let's take a moment to rest and clean up and look for loot."

She swapped to her cleaning wand and waved it in a single deft motion, igniting a soft glow that enveloped each of her companions. The blood stains on their clothes and armor faded away as if they were never there. It didn't work on the dirt and grime, though, giving them all a rugged, battle-worn appearance.

"Aye, that's a right miracle, that is," Thoren commented. There was a chorus of agreement.

"Not oft ye get to run with a walking clothes wash," Harlock said.

A small smile crossed Yolani's lips. It was nice to be appreciated, especially for her less 'combat' inclined utilities. Not that she hadn't prepared plenty of those for the delve as well.

"Sadly, it won't help with anything but non-human fluids," she said, stowing the wand back into her tool belt. She eyed the **[Rockbear]** with a frown. "Not sure there is anything harvestable there, especially after the shocking we gave it."

Jareth frowned at her. "There's the meat."

"We aren't camping until we reach the end chamber. If you want to carve some steaks to carry to through the next two fights, go ahead," Harlock said.

The wiry man did just that. Yolani shook her head. They had plenty of rations. Was there really a need to take some raw meat with them?

Jael and Henri worked together to climb up the side of the chamber's wall, working their way up to the hidden alcove the goblins had jumped from. When they reached it there was a grunt and then confirmation. "Treasure chest up here."

"Toss it down," Harlock ordered.

"Make space and watch out," Henri replied.

There was a 'heave, ho' from the two men up top then the metal banded chest flew. It crashed onto the floor with a loud crunch, the wood shattered in places. Not a chest-mimic then. Yolani approached warily.

Harlock reached it first and gave it a crude kick. He grunted in satisfaction. "Seems clean."

Yolani rolled her eyes. "I'd tell you guys to be gentler with the loot, but all we get is crap so far."

"Bad luck," Harlock confirmed.

A wave of her wand set the chest upright and then shattered the lock and slammed it open. It was mostly empty. A knife was the only object and there were a few silver coins along with a mana crystal. Junk, junk, junk. Where was all the gold? It was like the engine that ran the dungeon had been drained of power.

She picked up the dagger and examined it carefully. The hilt was adorned with intricate patterns that hinted at an enchantment, but the crystal embedded into it was drained. Using her [**Artifice**] skill, she carefully measured the lines of the runs and determined what they did.

"It has a piercing enchantment," she declared. "But it's out of charge."

The group looked at each other before they all glanced at Jareth. He was the one who used short blades, and whose fighting style fit the weapon the best. But he simply shrugged and said, "I don't need it. My stiletos are better."

Yolani nodded and opened her side back and slid the weapon into it. It was the designated house for all the 'party' loot that would be sold and then distributed between them equally. Thankfully, the weight reduction enchantment was working very well.

Otherwise, she'd have had to give it to Thoren to carry, considering how much other stuff she was loaded down with.

"Alright, let's move on," Harlock announced.

She nodded. Two more battles to go before... before they reached the end.

One way or another.

CHAPTER 43—IT SIZZLES IN THE DARK

The tension was palpable as they trudged down the final corridor to where the map claimed there was a treasure chamber. Those were relatively rare—and also contained the most dangerous enemies—and nothing prevented the summoned inhabitants from migrating into the corridors.

Everyone was weary. The [Rockbear] had just been the start. They'd had to fight a horde of skeletons backed by archers after that, and her anti-projectile wand had been drained dangerously low. Yet she didn't want to waste mana crystals on recharging it without a specific need, because those stores were limited in supply.

Yolani sighed and rubbed her face. Even if she hadn't been in the thick of the fights like the others, she still felt the exhaustion seeping into her head.

That wasn't a great state to be in when there was an upcoming showdown.

She peeked into her potion bag and counted. They had one set of stamina potions left, and everyone still had their own healing vial.

"We should rest," Harlock suggested as they reached the halfway point of the corridor. It was marked by a small indent in the wall, where a corridor might have gone if they were in a different section of the dungeon. It was probably the best resting spot they'd find.

Yolani nodded. "We should each take a stamina potion. Whatever is up ahead will probably be the worst thing we face here."

"Aye, especially if there is a treasure like promised," Thoren said.

"The map's been accurate according to the structure of things so far, it's just the rewards have been meager," Yolani said.

Harlock grunted. "That's likely because your father's crew came in before us, but it's a wee bit extreme."

"I'm not a delver, but I agree. It should have recovered by now, really. It took us three days to get down here. Maybe they left father behind, and he's been stuck down here looting..." Yolani's words trailed off. It really was too hard to try and hold on to some hope.

Henri came over and put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it supportively. "If anyone could do it, it would be your father."

She gave him a fake smile and nodded.

Kareth began to rummage in his pack for something, and she caught the smell of fresh meat. Harlock had handpicked the team, and the man had done a deft job of being the party's finesse, but...

"If you're so attached to those pieces of meat, I could cook them for you," she offered with a hint of sarcasm. Her fire wand was low-powered and more for starting fires than doing anything major, but it would be capable of cooking the meat, at least enough to eat.

Her suggestion elicited a laugh from the group, breaking the somber mood for a moment. Kareth shook his head with a grin. "No need. We'll have ourselves a campfire up ahead, and we can all enjoy some juicy steaks."

She shook her head but didn't press further. Probably everyone coming to help her had their head on a little loose, otherwise they would have fucked off. Actually, that probably went for anyone who entered the dungeon willingly.

Everyone downed the small vials of yellow-green liquid. An almost immediate relief from the tiredness and exhaustion washed over her, and she quickly stashed the empty vials for later reuse. The energetic effect would eventually wear off after several hours and they'd be even more tired, so delaying wasn't a good idea.

"Alright, let's finish this," Henri said. Everyone nodded and moved out.

The next chamber was incredibly massive; if it wasn't for the obvious continuance of the corridor on the other side of the room, she would have thought they had accidentally punctured into the deep caverns.

Lucas let out a low whistle, drawing a sharp look from Harlock.

Yolani didn't blame the man though, a massive canyon cut the area in half, with an anemic stream of dark water at the bottom that slowly flowed through. At the end, a ramp worked its way up to a second level, then across the ravine and down to the other side.

A multitude of different colored lights shone from the second level, which was out of sight. It was the only path available unless they wanted to try and bridge across the ravine, but the chamber was their destination anyway.

Yolani's grip on her kinetic combat wand tightened unconsciously with each step into the chamber. It was quiet, too quiet. It wasn't really a question of whether there was an ambush or trap waiting for them. She was sure that there was. Everyone else seemed to feel the same way as they scanned their flanks and held their weapons ready.

At the top of the ramp, she wasn't disappointed. The boundless array of colors weren't spawned from the Underdark's plethora of bioluminescent fungi—larval eggs and silent insects tending them revealed themselves to be the source.

"Demon's tits," Harlock muttered.

Yolani's eyes fell on the largest form in the chamber's rear, nestled on top of a large clutch of the eggs.

[Alpha Waspite Queen]

The queen's body was a sickly yellow brown color, twice the size of a person. The veins in its wings glimmered with magical energy while the spikes embedded in the exoskeleton seemed to bristle. A single loud note escaped from her mandibles as it rotated to face them.

An exhale escaped Yolani as the group formed a defensive circle with her in the center. An angry buzzing filled the air all around them as more **[Waspite Drones]** revealed themselves from every nook and cranny. The entire upper chamber turned out to be their nest.

"Killing the Queen should incapacitate the rest," Harlock said. There was no humor or mirth in his voice.

Kael swallowed nervously. "I don't suppose there is any way to back out now."

Yolani shook her head as she looked over her shoulder. There were drones filling the space behind and below them, the entire ravine crawling with the things. Despite knowing that there would be an ambush, it still came as a surprise. They were effectively cut off from escape. "We've come this far."

Thoren grunted and readied his great sword at the front of the group. "We'll need protections."

Yolani went to work without delay, wringing her memory for the properties of **[Waspites]** the best she could. Their venom was acidic in nature, so she pulled out the corresponding wand and began to etch a personal protection ward for each party member.

That served as a signal for the drones to rush them.

"Brace yourselves!" Harlock shouted over the deafening hum of wings. Each **[Waspite Drone]** was easily the size of a person, but they rushed with the speed of a charging Ralfot.

The first attacker arrived and Thoren swung heavily with his great sword, cleaving it in half, sending a dangerous spray of ichor through the air. It missed splattering her, and she enacted the acid wards with a final drawn sign with her wand.

It was just in time as Harlock jabbed another drone with his spear, sending a spray directly into his face. Rather than sizzling acid the blood dripped off his skin. That didn't protect his gear, though, and it quickly began to smoke and sizzle.

Thoren took down a second and then third drone as he began to cleave through each challenger, but they began to attack in groups. Lucas raised his shield and blocked one attack on the exposed warrior's side before bashing the extra attacker away, but the drone released a glob of green acid that quickly began to etch away at the wood.

Their weapons and armor would need separate wards, but before she could consider that, she was forced to change tack. Four drones assaulted their rear at once, Henri cleaved one while Kael guarded his side, but they were nearly flanked and stung anyway.

Her wards wouldn't do anything to protect from an actual sting, and she was forced to aim her kinetic wand and slam a white bolt into each attacker.

It preoccupied her so much she didn't see the one drop from the ceiling right on top of her. Rather than be impaled, Jareth was there, tackling the drone and stabbing it repeatedly in the side of the head. She didn't have time to feel shocked.

They needed to deal with the queen somehow, and they were already starting to be overwhelmed by the drones! The **[Alpha Waspite Queen]** seemed content to remain on her clutch, so Yolani figured she'd have to be the one to act.

"Cover me, I'm going to hit the queen!" she shouted. There was a chorus of acknowledgement, but there was little room for anything else.

The warding wand went back into its slot as she yanked her Aether one out. Her **[Aether Manipulation]** would amplify its effects greatly. She wasn't sure it was the optimal counter to the queen's own affinity for acid, but it was better than trying something else.

She kept the kinetic wand in her other hand and ready just by simple necessity. Leaving herself open while channeling wasn't an option, even with the other party members doing their best to cover her.

Raising the Aether wand above her head, she drew a full circle in front of her as the base for the spell. The massive space provided ample room for her to rapidly begin to etch the needed runes in the air, but it also meant it would drain an alarming amount of **[Power]** from the built-in mana shard powering it.

The space was thick with natural mana, though. Adjusting the formula on the fly, she added a siphon that would allow the working to draw from that source as well. That complicated everything, but she wasn't sure she'd get a second shot, so she needed to make the first one count.

Penetration, siphoning, lighting-Aether, wind-Aether, shockwave amplification, homing, multiple projectile, explosive, channeling, and acceleration runes all slowly formed one by one around the artificer's center.

The blue-white lines burned in her vision as she used the raw energy as the tapestry for her working. Once the runes were in place, she began to inscribe the Aether bindings around the edge and then work on the core's finishing touches.

The [**Alpha Waspite Queen**] was not amused and jumped off her clutch and into the air. It seemed to recognize the danger, and green orbs began to form around her in response.

"Incoming casting!" Harlock warned.

Yolani grunted and raised her kinetic wand, while focusing on her drawing. If she made a mistake, the working would burn itself out and waste all the accumulated energy of her wand.

Tendrils shot out from the orbs of green liquid like spikes directly at the entire party. There were too many of them for her to target individually, so she created a dome field instead. The strike splattered off the barrier, but she gritted her teeth as she tried to ignore it and focus on finishing the artificer.

The brief respite underneath the acid covered shield allowed the others to regroup, quaff potions, and rearrange their equipment. The [**Power**] remaining in her kinetic wand dropped alarmingly fast.

Yolani finished before it drained completely. It was an improvised working, incorporating brand extra elements that she had only studied and never actively used simply because of how dangerous they were.

She jabbed the Aether wand into the core and the runes and energy began to spin, indicating that everything had clicked together correctly.

Releasing a tense breath, she smiled. Every artificer needed a name, even a made-up-on-the-spot one that would only be used once.

No, not needed. Required. Artificer casting was the hybrid between a wizard's proscribed list of studied incantations and technical spell casting with the elementalists' pure

willpower-fueled efforts. Her creator's will wed itself to the sharply drawn and calculated artifice runes.

Yolani took a deep breath and whispered, "Queen's Requiem."

Despite the softness of her voice, the sound vibrated strongly in the air, echoing as if a chorus of a thousand voices repeated the name.

The acid that had begun to pool around them on the floor immediately lifted into the air like the center of the spell was a whirlpool, the enchanted liquid consumed by the siphoning spell. A wall of **[Waspite Drones]** formed up in front of the queen just as the spell launched forward.

Green tendrils shot forward toward the beam of energy, which split into hundreds of smaller beams of light, zig-zagging rapidly across the distance. They sliced through the intercepting acid sharply before impaling the drones and shooting out their backs, straight for the queen.

A defensive magic circle flashed into existence in front of the queen, but it was too late. The spell work was shattered as the multi-pronged beams slashed the working to pieces then stabbed into their target. Each lance of Aether was small but punched clear through the queen's exoskeleton like bullets before arcing back around to strike again... and again.

By the time the spell worked itself out, the queen was a pile of gore on the dungeon floor. As promised, all the drones began to stagger and act like they were drunk before keeling over or falling out of the air. The lighting from the larval eggs changed from a rainbow to a steady, harsh red.

Kael was the first to say anything. "Holy shit."

Yolani bit her lip and hoped that was it. Both her kinetic and Aether wands dimmed until they displayed a dull, lifeless shard. She had some extra **[Power]** in the mana crystals, but it was hardly enough to recharge them effectively. There was zero chance she'd be able to pull off another improvised artifice again.

"That's why ye don't mess with an artificer, lad. Or at least don't give them time to think about doing that to ya," Thoren said.

Lucas nodded. "Nothing ever good comes of pissing off artificers."

Harlock grunted and looked across the now still chamber. "Not looking forward to combing through this mess."

Henri scratched his head. "Probably should start behind the queen's clutch."

It seemed as good a place to start as any.

“Acid wards for boots first. Unless you all want to be going around barefoot on the way back,” Yolani cautioned.

The group straightened themselves out while she played her warding wand over each person’s footwear. It was a miracle that they weren’t already barefoot in the first place, so she worked as quickly as she could. Once that was done, they moved forward together as a group.

Just as Henri had predicted, there was a separate room behind where the queen had nested. It was free of the ichor and mess the Waspite hive had presented.

It was unnaturally clean.

Except for the skeletal remains of a person in the corner, clutching a pouch to its chest. Acid had scoured all the flesh and equipment away.

Yolani pushed past the others, ignoring the chests and other items in the room to kneel beside the body.

She recognized the warded pouch, and the **[System]** message was a punch to her gut.

[An inheritance has been stored for you. Would you like to accept your inheritance now? Y/N?]

Yolani burst into tears.

CHAPTER 44 – BITTER FRUITS

The world turned into a blur. Yolani was vaguely aware of others talking and moving around her, but their voices were distant echoes in her ears. Her gaze remained fixed on the skeletal remains; her father's pouch clutched in its bony fingers.

Her father's pouch, magically protected from the acid that had dissolved everything else. After an agonizingly long hesitation, she reached down and took the leather gently.

Inside was a mana shard. It shined brilliantly, hinting at its high-quality nature, but she didn't bother using **[Identify]** on it. Maybe the skeleton was someone else from the party, and her father had given the pouch to him?

But there was the damning **[System]** message. She wasn't sure what skill, spell, or artifice was at work, but she had tried to ignore it. Yet it hovered at the edge of her vision, unrelentingly demanding an answer to its question. It didn't seem inclined to force her to accept or refuse, though, and she purposefully ignored it out of spite.

Yet...yet...in her heart, she knew the answer. Leaving some kind of special thing behind for her to find was...keeping in with his character. What had his last moments been like? The Waspites were dead, though they'd return eventually either in the same chamber or a different one, according to the dungeon's whims.

The dungeon wasn't to blame for this.

A hand landed on her shoulder and the person told her it was time to go. Right. There was no rest in the dungeon. The chamber would coalesce and form new enemies to fight, the artificial system resetting things, and anyone lingering too long inside would end up facing more and more foes.

Yolani stood up; Henri gave her a worried look and led her to the rest of the group. One of them went to her father's remains and collected them as respectfully as they could into

a bag. Then the group began the trek upwards, following the reverse of their previous path.

Her childhood friend was there, his hand on her shoulder, his voice soft and soothing. But the words were meaningless sounds to her. Nothing could penetrate the fog that had settled over her.

The remains of the [**Alpha Waspite Queen**] were abandoned while the loot was distributed and load balanced. The nearest chambers were still clear and facilitated their upward ascent to the second level. Fighting was light, which was a good thing because her mental state wasn't suited for combat. It all passed by with no effort from her.

What had taken three days of fighting downward to achieve took less than one to ascend, despite her incapacity. It didn't seem like the dungeon had the energy to throw further challenges in front of them, so it did the absolute minimum expected. A goblin here, a skeleton there, with no further rewards offered.

The entire system seemed as broken as her heart.

A subtle awareness remained at just how she was failing the group, but she couldn't bring herself to apply her full attention.

When they arrived at the gates leading into the Syndicate's chokepoint entryway, her mouth dropped. They had come that far already?

Harlock yanked on the bell to indicate their arrival. Everyone looked exhausted. Lucas, Jareth, and Thoren leaned against the stone wall while they waited as if they all needed a long rest off of their feet. A few minutes later, the guards ushered them through the heavy steel vault door and into a sealed chamber.

"Dump your loot and things here. The manager is on his way," the burly guard ordered.

It took a lot of time for them to sort things out, which was expected. Delves weren't expected to be immaculate affairs. When Fenton arrived thirty minutes later, they had not been waiting long.

The ledger of their catalogued items was in his hand as he greeted them. "Welcome back. I see that all of you have survived. Congratulations."

"Not all of us," Yolani mumbled.

Fenton's gaze slid off of her and to the laid out remains on the examination table, and then to her father's small pouch. Rather than starting on her side of the room, he began with the others.

That went slowly, with every item either being matched to their previous list of belongings or appraised and then added to the party's running tally of acquired items and

their preliminary value. The process was methodical, thorough, and allowed no room for objection. Not if they wanted to leave, other than in prisoner cuffs.

She ignored it all, resting her head against the stone and closing her eyes, gripping her father's pouch tightly in her hands. Henri ran her things through the process for her, but then the manager reached her father's skeleton.

Fenton coughed to draw her attention. "Ms. Aetherhart, I'm afraid you'll have to show me the contents of that pouch."

Resigned, she opened it and displayed the high-quality mana shard which illuminated the entire room. Fenton grunted and plucked it from her palm. "I'm afraid that I'll have to take this."

She felt a spike of defeat. "The agreement with my father said he could bring back one mana shard."

He stared at her for a moment with a frown. A glimmer of hope that he was considering letting her keep it was smothered promptly. "That agreement was between your father and the Syndicate, not you, Ms. Aetherhart."

Fenton's men hauled off all the loot items they had found, minus a few tidbits some of them had decided to keep. At a cost to their share, of course.

Each member of the party was issued a card that was then magically sealed by blood with the lot numbers of each item and their royalty share for the haul, to be paid after the items were sold or auctioned off.

Yolani, to her surprise, received two cards. One for her father, and herself. Fenton looked at her sternly. "The mana shard will be auctioned off this rest-day. Your father's fifty percent share of the proceeds will be available the day after."

She gritted her teeth and stared daggers at the man. "The deal was for one shard," she managed to spit out.

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Ms. Aetherhart, my job is to see that all procedures and rules are enforced at this station, without playing games or favorites. I am not unsympathetic to your loss, but it is not an uncommon fate for those who delve into the dungeon."

He reached down and picked up the discarded and empty pouch and placed it in her hand before folding her fingers closed around it. "I encourage you to not lose that. Unclaimed inheritances are not on the list of proscribed items of report on the Syndicate's books. A memento from your father might help you."

Anger, confusion, and pain filled her chest. What did he know about helping her? He'd already taken the thing that she needed.

That was the last bit of business, apparently, because he turned to the rest of the party. “You are all free to leave. As stamped on your tickets, you may come reclaim your share of the proceeds of the expedition on the date indicated.”

Yolani stood up and let out an exhausted sigh. “I need a carriage. She pulled out a small gold coin.”

Fenton eyed it, then accepted the payment with a nod. Carriages were expensive, so it probably wasn’t enough to cover the price, but he didn’t argue. “I’ll arrange one for you. I assume your destination is your shop on Artificer Row?”

Yolani nodded wordlessly. Henri gave her a concerned look. “A carriage.”

“I can’t deal with the city,” she admitted.

“We’ll escort you back, lass. No need for you to spend your coin,” Harlock said.

Yolani shook her head. “I’m sure some of you have things to do and take care of now that we are back. I don’t want to put anyone out because of me.” She already had done enough of that on their way back.

There were a series of protests, but she ignored them as she carefully packaged her father’s remains in the small box the Syndicate guards had provided her with. It was better than a bag, but she would have to see a more permanent solution later.

When the carriage arrived, a servant packed her things. Harlock, Lucas, and Henri chose to ride along. Harlock and Lucas because they shared the same destination. Henri, she suspected... that he was just going along to watch over her, but she didn’t object.

She didn’t have enough energy to even know if objecting was the right thing to do.

So, she cried into her elbow while watching the city pass by as the powered carriage maneuvered through Neftasu’s busy streets.

When they reached the main gate of Artificer Row, Harlock and Lucas disembarked, offering her quiet words of condolence before they left. She nodded and thanked them...more because that was what she was supposed to do, and not because anything had really been able to help her heart. The words were just more cacophony that filled her head.

Henri stayed on with her to the shop. He directed the servants in unloading her bags and her father’s remains. When she opened the door and stepped inside, everything was untouched... exactly where she had left it.

It felt hollow.

She moved mechanically through the familiar space, setting down her things on one of the less cluttered workbenches. Unfinished works that she and her father had promised

to finish together lay in jumbles everywhere, from small cantrip side projects to more complex inventions they still had not figured out.

As her eyes slid onto the two unfinished light stones, she felt a torrent of rage run through her. A nearby wrench sat nearby. She wanted nothing more than to pick it up and bash the stupid things that had caused her father's death.

No. That was wrong. The light stones weren't responsible, at least not directly. There was someone else that had that honor. She began to hyperventilate.

"Yolani?" Henri asked with concern.

"Thank you, Henri, for helping me. I...I would like to be alone now. Could you come back tomorrow?" she asked.

He frowned and looked like he was about to argue when suddenly he nodded. "I can do that. Please take care of yourself."

Haha. She wasn't sure she'd be able to do that, but she'd try.

When the shop door closed with a click, she walked over and sealed it with the primary security lock, sealing off the inside of the shop from the rest of the world. Then she returned to the box that contained her father and sat down on a chair.

"Why?" she asked. "Why?"

Grief wracked her until her eyes ran out of tears. Somehow, the little leather pouch ended up in her hands and she squeezed it. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, lost in her grief, stroking the leather pouch with her fingertips.

A blurry **[System]** message on a scroll prompted her to finally wipe away the tears so she could read it.

It was the same message when she had found her father's skeleton.

[An inheritance has been stored for you. Would you like to accept your inheritance now? Y/N?]

Confusion filled her. She'd ignored the message, but hadn't Fenton already taken it? He had the mana shard. She accepted the prompt.

[You have inherited your father's belongings: 1x Mana Shard, 1x Artificer's Pouch]

Yolani blinked in confusion. Suddenly the leather pouch was heavier, and no longer empty. With shaking hands, she opened it and pulled out the contents—a new mana shard. A medium-high quality one that would work for one of the light stones.

She covered her mouth with a hand. She recalled Fenton's words to her. Had he known?

Her heart pounded in her chest as realization dawned on her. Her father...he must have hidden the shard somehow. He must have known the Syndicate would take any shard she found...

Clutching the mana shard tightly, she stood up and glared at the nearest light stone.

The magister would have his pound of artifice.

And she'd have more time to prove her uncle's treachery.

CHAPTER 45 – REUNION

Marcus' return stirred a whirlpool of emotions within Elania. He ushered them into the waystation with an air of feigned graciousness. She hurried past him to her own chamber while the senior monks didn't waste any time in launching into their grievances against him, blaming him for the deaths they'd encountered along their journey.

The monks, she had found herself able to tolerate, even finding a semblance of camaraderie with Joren. However, Marcus was an entirely different story. His presence felt like the sting of a thorn prickling at her senses and leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

It felt like he had much in common with the three thugs they'd just left behind, and as stupid as it seemed, she felt like she could trust Taniel more than him.

Which was saying a lot because Taniel wasted no effort pretending that he liked her. Maybe it was the way Marcus looked at her, like she was a slab of meat to be dissected on the butcher's block. Or his smug attitude.

Marcus remained unflustered throughout the heated accusations, offering reassuring words that the worst was behind them and they were nearly at their destination. The tidbit that they were only one day from an 'outpost' and another from the city was critical information that set Elania's mind rolling through her options.

Did she want to complete the journey with them? Part of her said yes, but another, more wary part was screeching in the background.

The encounter today hinted that there would be more to worry about than just beasts or monsters.

The question was... if she'd run into things like the **[Manzitore]** and other things already...what worse things were out there? She did not feel like she was the apex predator

of the Underworld. There was almost certainly something out there that was probably stronger and could kill her.

The same could be said about the city, but... there was a chance she could find her own niche or friends to work with. Probably not the monks, since it was sort of their job to kill demons from what she understood, and definitely not Marcus... but someone?

Her stuff neatly unpacked and arranged, she sat down on the stone slab and leaned against the wall, eyes closed and listening. And thinking about what she would do when she actually reached Neftasu.

The [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] she would need to sell. If it was worth as much as promised, she'd have enough funds to live off of for longer than she'd been in the world, so that seemed like a decent first step.

Somehow, it probably wasn't going to be as easy as she thought. Food wasn't an issue, but [**Power**] would be unless she found a way to hunt something that provided her essence in the city.

Cities always had rats, right? The idea made her stomach flip. She was not going to end up eating rats.

She'd leave and risk living in the deep caverns first.

The other option was the contract thing, but that seemed shady. Potentially dangerous. Definitely not something to just jump into, despite the fact she found that the contract was easily morphable into something she found acceptable. One thing she didn't know or understand was just how a contracted person could provide their 'essence' willingly. Would it have negative effects on the Contractee?

There were a lot of questions there and she didn't want to hurt people via ignorance.

The noisy argument died down finally, but it didn't give her any relief. She sensed Marcus' presence before he spoke.

"Little Demon," he greeted casually as he appeared at the entrance to her room.

Elania stiffened, but forced herself to look him in the eye warily. "Marcus."

His lips curled into something resembling a smile—one that did nothing to ease her discomfort. "Nervous about reaching the city?"

Elania hesitated before shaking her head. "I'll be fine."

"Sure, you will. I imagine you'll have a rough time with things without having a contract, though. The guards won't like it," he said. A wry grin appeared at the edge of his lips. "I could help with that if you like."

He made it seem like he'd be helping her out of the kindness of his heart. What strings would it give him? All her senses screamed at her. Trap, trap, trap, trap.

One thing she'd learned since her arrival—her senses were pretty good, and she should probably listen to them.

“No thanks,” she said dismissively. For a second his friendly demeanor cracked, but it was restored so fast that she'd have missed it if she had blinked.

He stepped away from her chamber. “A pity. If you change your mind, let me know.”

Once he was out of sight, Elania allowed herself to breathe again. The waystation suddenly felt oppressive, and she decided she needed some space. She needed to replace her javelins again. Maybe someday she'd find something that didn't disintegrate half the time she used it.

As she made her way to the entryway, Joren called out to her. “Don't go too far,” he warned softly. “If you run into anyone, come back here right away.”

Elania nodded in acknowledgement. “Thank you, I'll be careful.”

Stepping out into the dimly lit caverns beyond felt like fresh air. It was funny, because she'd only been inside for less than twenty minutes. What was she going to do if Neftasu was a crowded mess? It was going to set her on edge. Which was worrying. It hinted that the Darkwalkerness was continuing to rub off on her and...

And she hadn't even addressed or brought herself to think about what the random transformation had been caused by. The only thing that really made sense was that by transforming her body somehow rid itself of whatever the **[Razorscale]** had injected her with.

That would be fine, except it hadn't been easy to transform back. So far, she had two transformations and only two ways back: running out of power and nearly dying, or being pissed off by Taniel questioning her humanity.

Minding her **[Stealth]** skill, she kept to the shadow and worked her way out of the semi-ruins onto the stone path. It wasn't far to find a branch that didn't have the ancient stonework, and plenty of **[Tower-Cap]** mushroom trees to pick from. The harvesting was something she'd worked into a science and it didn't take long before she had a whole bundle of two dozen person-length shafts to work with under her arms.

Her ears twitched as they measured all the drips and other sounds around her, but nothing set her senses off on the way back. When she returned, the monks had already started a fire and were cooking something to eat.

Almost immediately, her nose wrinkled. A smoke filled the air and her eyes immediately slid to the source. Marcus was nursing some type of pipe that was slowly releasing a trail of white smoke. Ugh.

She sat down off to the side just outside of her room and began to whittle the lengths of wood. It didn't take her long to have her first **[Quality Primitive Javelin]** ready, but it drew a derisive comment from Marcus.

"Those look like they could barely pierce a **[Ralfot]** hide," Marcus said, his eyes assessing her new weapon.

Elania didn't rise to his bait, instead setting it down and working on the next one. Let him mock all he wanted; she knew they were useful, especially with her skill-set. He hadn't seen her fight, and she didn't think the monks had told him anything, so maybe it would be a welcome surprise to prove him wrong.

Or if he attacked her, maybe a rude awakening for him if the javelin did a lot more than he thought it was capable of.

"I'll remember that next time I see a **[Ralfot]**," she finally retorted coolly.

A snort was his only response as he turned away, leaving her to work in peace.

Her fingers moved deftly over the wood, stripping away the excess and shaping it into a lean, deadly weapon. The **[Quality Primitive Javelin]** might not have looked impressive to Marcus' untrained eye, but Elania had seen firsthand what it could do.

Spending the rest of an hour working on it. The monks were busy conversing over something, but she ignored the words. When she finally had her bundle finished, she set the worst ones by the firewood stacks and took the good ones into her room.

As she sat the javelins down, her gaze flickered to her pack.

It wasn't how she'd left it.

Her hand went to her neck instinctively; she hadn't replaced the necklace with her mana shard since it was destroyed from her transformation and the shard had been left in her pack. She rushed over to it and her worst fears were confirmed: someone had taken her mana shard.

She burst out of her room, barely able to contain the crackling energy that coursed through her.

She'd been robbed.

"Hey!" Elania shouted; the volume of her voice was amplified by the small space. It cut through everything everyone was doing to draw their attention and bring whatever activity they were up doing to a sudden stop.

“Elania?” Joren asked, confusion etched on his face.

She shot him a glare and spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Who stole my mana shard?”

“Elania, please calm...” Taniel started to say.

“Give it back!” Her head whipped around frantically, and she tried to sniff the air, but the only thing she could sense was the smell of smoke.

Marcus stood up and drew his sword and stepped toward her, holding it slightly in front of him pointed towards the ground. “Stand down, demon. Before I put you down. You’re—”

Elania eyed the sword and Marcus as he approached threateningly. Every single hair on her body surged to alertness and a primal need to either attack or flee filled her until it washed away her more logical thoughts.

She didn’t know why, but she hated him.

She wanted her mana shard back.

She was tired of running away.

Instead of moving away, she stepped forward, flooding her body with **[Power]** and moving as fast as she could before he could realize he had already stepped partially within her reach. Her hand clamped down on his sword; hands weren’t supposed to clamp down on swords, she knew that, but it was better than letting him swing it at her.

As soon as her hand clamped down, a blue aura surrounded the weapon and Marcus reactively; it was like she had grappled a discharging stun gun. She knew what that felt like because she had tested one on herself when she had purchased one to keep in her purse while on campus.

Grabbing magical swords and picking a fight with someone who had escaped a **[Manzitore]** was probably one of her less considered ideas.

Still, she didn’t collapse; she could feel the raw power in the weapon fueling the magic. Whatever skill that was from, she wasn’t sure, but it was much like when she’d used her mana shard to charge or discharge her power. Instinctively, she yanked hard on the weapon’s energy.

The weapon didn’t like that, and fire pulsed through her entire body. One of them was going to melt.

It wasn’t going to be her.

[You have absorbed 121 Power!]

She was right. The sword’s enchantment caved to her will.

[Power: 428/323]

Marcus' eyes went wide as his weapon exploded into a thousand shards of steel shrapnel, digging into his hand and armor.

She swung a **[Power]** infused fist at his chest, but he dodged backwards faster than she believed possible. Instinctively, she swapped her **[Basic Handcrafting]** out for **[Mobility]**. There was no room to let him escape, so she followed rapidly as he drew a pair of purple daggers from behind.

Some instinct told her that those were bad news, and she didn't want to grab them, and she'd already allowed her **[Darkwalker]** born instincts to carry her along.

She skidded to a halt, placed her palms together and tried to emulate a Hadouken-style attack complete with her own voiceover. The yellow pulse of energy from her hands didn't disappoint, nailing Marcus with an explosive blast.

It sent him careening into the stone wall behind him, a cloud of dust billowing outward as the stonework crumpled from the impact. Elania didn't give him a moment's reprieve, launching herself at him, her fists glowing with **[Power]**.

Taniel reacted quickly as he shot to his feet. A golden field flared to life, bisecting the waystation, placing the monks on one side, and her and Marcus on the other. There wasn't much time to consider it; it wasn't like she'd expected them to help her.

"Protect the **[Glow-Moss]!**" Joren ordered. The novices obeyed and rushed to the baskets and began to collect them.

Joren stood beside Taniel, a grim look on his face as he watched the fight.

There wasn't time to focus on anything else as she reached her target. Despite the blow she'd hit him with, he staggered back onto his feet. His purple daggers gleamed ominously as his lips twisted into a cruel smile and he lunged at her. Not wanting to touch the weapons, she twisted out of his reach, narrowly avoiding being skewered.

He was fast and experienced; each strike of the short purple blades was aimed with a deadly precision that forced her to stay on the defensive. Whenever he was there, and she couldn't dodge in time, she let off a flare of **[Power]** from her palms to blast the incoming metal away. It was a style of attrition that would leave her weak and exposed, especially without the reserves in her mana shard.

Anger boiled over inside of her; her counters grew more desperate as he pushed her back, each retreating step a delaying tactic for her to find some other way to turn the flow of combat.

Pain exploded in her side, hot and searing as blood welled up from the wound. Coldness pulsed through her entire body from the stab, a numbing sensation that made everything feel distant. Refusing to give in, she clamped down on his wrist before he could pull the blade free for another strike. Marcus' other weapon stabbed upward for her throat, but she caught that one as well.

The rapid flurry turned into a lull, but she caught his eyes slip to the dagger in her side, a wicked grin spreading on his face. "Got you, little demon."

Fury filled her lungs and she let out an animalistic roar at him that shook the room. Her fingers crushed his wrists with savage strength, and she swiveled, dragging him around to point at the nearest wall. Then she charged, slamming him into the stone. A blue field flashed around his armor and skin, hinting at how he'd survived the earlier crushing blow.

The grin had been erased, his expression spewing hatred and anger back at her. "Die already!"

The pain in her side from the dagger certainly seemed like it was trying to achieve exactly that. A kick to her leg almost unbalanced her, but she maintained her feet.

He grunted as she raised her knee and slammed it into his leg. She wasn't sure how he found the breath to curse at her.

"I won't let you win, demon," he spat in her face.

"Then you'll die," Elania hissed back.

The fight turned into a brutal series of slams and headbutts that she had the upper hand in as she reinforced each strike with **[Power]**. Pain filled her entire body; she wasn't sure if **[Regeneration]** was working anymore after the stab wound, but heat and fire in her core kept her moving regardless of any internal damage.

His defense turned drunken as she continued to batter away at his head and finally, she yanked the blade in her side free and stabbed him with it. The weapons clattered to the ground as she pulled the strike free, then lifted him into the air and carried him into the main chamber.

The monks stared at her; horrified expressions plastered on their faces.

She slammed Marcus into the ground, then straddled him, her fingers going to his throat like they were claws. They might as well have been.

"Elania!" Joren shouted. "Stop!"

She looked up, her breaths coming in ragged pants. The pain in her side continuing to spiderweb through her entire body. She wasn't sure what kind of magic or poison had

been infused in the weapon, but it was agonizing, and definitely not healing like the rest of her body.

“You have made your point, demon,” Taniel said sternly. “Enough.”

Her eyes slid to him, but when he held out his palm they were riveted; he was holding out her mana shard.

“You,” Elania accused.

“Don’t kill him. I’ll give you your stupid crystal back,” Taniel replied.

She glanced down at the ranger. Marcus.

No matter what Taniel said, the man was a risk. A danger. She couldn’t think of anything specific that he had done, but she knew he was a predator. He’d been sizing her up since the moment they had met, as if she was his prey.

She knew. He was a predator.

Like she was now.

An urge to dig her fingers into his exposed throat and rip his life out filled her, but a message suddenly stole the choice away.

[You have slain Ranger - Human - Lvl 276]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[You have reached level 50. Please choose a new perk!]

[You already have the maximum amount of Karma possible and can acquire no more.]

[Absorb the lingering Power from Ranger - Human - Lvl 276?]

Elania’s eyes slid down to the blood pooling out of the dagger wound. It was still leaking out, but the heartbeat driven pulses had stopped.

“He’s dead,” Elania whispered.

CHAPTER 46 – FORCED NEGOTIATIONS

Elania stared at Marcus' lifeless body, a strange mix of horror and... triumph swirling within her. The once arrogant and oily ranger lay sprawled underneath her, his eyes vacant and lifeless. His chest bore a deep puncture wound that was rapidly turning black with rot where she had thrust his own weapon into him. The pool of crimson blood was bubbling as the black ichor spread underneath him, soaking the coarse fabric and leather of his armor.

The monks watched her in stunned silence. Joren's face was ashen, his eyes wide with disbelief, while Taniel wore a stoic expression that did little to hide the tension radiating off him. His prayer beads were clutched tightly in both his hands as he maintained the golden shield that separated them from her.

"Elania," Joren finally broke the silence, his voice barely above a whisper. "What have you done?"

She looked up to face them, her senses keenly aware of every movement. The mana shard in Taniel's hand glowed faintly in the chamber, drawing her attention.

"He attacked me," she said flatly, her voice echoing in the silence that followed.

Taniel's gaze flicked between Elania and Marcus' corpse before settling on her again. He seemed to weigh their options carefully.

Taking a deep breath, Elania stood up. Pain flared through her side and her hand came away from the location of her puncture wound, wet with fiery blood. The flow had stopped pouring out of her, but the injury refused to seal up or stop oozing. The pain had somehow dulled itself, leaving a constant flare of heat as her **[Power]** drained to try to regenerate the area.

"Give me my mana shard back," Elania ordered.

“We need...to discuss this,” Joren said reluctantly, looking between her and Taniel.

“We don’t negotiate with demons,” Taniel spat out, his grip on the shard tightening.

“Give it back!” Elania demanded, her voice echoing off the stone walls of the waystation.

Ignoring her, Taniel turned to Joren. “We need to get rid of her.”

Joren’s eyebrows furrowed. “Taniel,” he started, his voice steady but filled with caution, “we cannot just—”

“Silence!” The senior monk snapped at him. His gaze never wavered from Elania’s form.

She could feel the hostility radiating towards her like a heat from a fire. She was wounded, and she knew how strong the two monks were. With Taniel’s magic blocking the door, she was trapped in the waystation.

And he was the one who had stolen her mana shard!

She stepped forward and stomped on Marcus’ arm and flicked the still waiting **[System]** prompt.

A surge of power flowed into her from the body. Her maximum capacity had grown by leaps since she’d over-saturated herself, but she had no intention of holding back and letting it settle on her for a slow absorption. The wound in her side was persistent and worrying, so she flooded the excess power into a ball on the palm of her hand.

The monks looked at her in shock, slowly coming to the realization of what she had done.

She slammed the ball of energy into her side where the wound was, blowing a chunk of her torso away in the blast, the splatter painting the walls and ceiling.

[Your physical Status is degrading quickly!]

It was just a bit extreme.

It also made it hard to breathe.

Thankfully, she didn’t need to.

Marcus’ body began to dissolve into the motes of light and they flowed into the wound eagerly.

[Your physical Status is degrading.]

[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[You have gained the skills Martial Bladesmanship, Negotiation, Intimidation, Bribery, Archery, and Navigation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high Power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

Things were flipping by so fast even the **[System]** was having a hard time keeping up. Her ears were ringing still and she couldn't hear what Taniel and Joren were arguing about. It was nice they were giving her time to pull herself together.

As her side knitted back into existence in real time, it finally reported the **[Power]** gain.

[You have absorbed 401 Power!]

[Power: 522/324]

The remaining influx was almost too much for her to handle; it was like a tidal wave crashing against a rocky shore, threatening to shatter her to pieces. It wasn't a new sensation.

Like before, she forced the energy into a container too small to hold it, then shoved the lid tight. That the container was her body was just an uncomfortable fact.

It was the highest her power had ever been, although it was percentage-wise less than when she had absorbed the **[Alpha Ralfot]**, and that was important. Overcapacity effects she had found were governed by the percentage she was over, instead of any set amount.

That percentage was still high for having just blasted herself with what was at least a hundred **[Power]** blast, though.

And she needed to make use of it before it burnt itself out.

Her eardrums knitted themselves back together. The monks were lucky Taniel's shield seemed to have protected them from the shockwave, or negotiations would have turned...difficult.

"Give me back my mana shard," Elania stated.

They both had been arguing and distracted and looked at her at the same time.

"I want my mana shard," she growled at them, "and I want one of you to make a contract with me."

Joren's face filled with confusion, but Taniel raised his arm and cut him off.

"And if we refuse?" Taniel challenged defiantly.

Elania's gaze hardened as she turned towards the novices. Each one had strapped a **[Glow-Moss Basket]** onto their backs. Two of them sat unclaimed on the floor: Taniel and Joren's. That was what was important to them. The whole point of their mission. She did not know what the real value of the stuff was, but...

The monk's first words when the fight started hadn't been 'protect the novices', it was 'protect the [**Glow-Moss**]!' and that seemed to be all she needed to know. Raising a hand, she formed a low power energy bolt and threw it.

Predictably, it slammed into the golden monk shield, blasting apart ineffectively. The novices pulled back, doing their best to hide behind their two seniors.

Elania eyed the movements warily before she glanced to the floor nearby. From the chaos, one of her javelins in the woodpile had landed nearby. She reached down to pick it up.

"Next one goes through," Elania said frankly.

"You... you wouldn't dare," Taniel protested weakly.

"I don't want to," Elania said, "but I will if you force me."

Joren reached out and plucked the mana shard from Taniel's hand before the monk could react and tossed it to her. "We agree. Stand down."

She caught the stone easily, the familiar connection and warmth filling her palm. Rather than burn down more power, she collected herself, then carefully dumped the excess into the crystal before it could burn off further.

Taniel was immediately livid, and the two jumped into a fierce argument. That was expected, but she felt mentally exhausted and checked out of the conversation to focus on drafting the contract she wanted.

[Contracts: Elania Reyes]

[(Available: 1) (Active: 0)]

[(Contract Essence Draw: 0.0)]

[Configuration: Custom]

[(Contractor: Elania Reyes, (Contractee: Joren), (Duration: Indefinite)]

[(Requirements/Contractor: Contractor shall make every reasonable attempt as determined by Contractor to not harm Contractee's group or goods.

Contractor may terminate the contract at any time.)]

[(Requirements/Contractee: Contractee shall prevent members of the group, or any other affiliated allies from harming the Contractor for the contract's duration.

Contractee may terminate the contract in a populated public place in the City of Neftasu while the Contractor is not in any current danger.

Contractee may not falsely answer any question made by Contractor when directly questioned by the Contractor.

Contractee will provide Contractor the required essence maintenance costs for this contract.))

[(Penalty/Contractor: Contractor shall forfeit any right to Contractee's soul upon violation of their requirements.

Contractee will receive the right to terminate the contract at any time.))]

[(Penalty/Contractee: Contractee shall forfeit their soul and life immediately upon failure of any violation of their requirements.))]

She did not intend it to be a balanced contract.

Raising her hand, she shoved the contract screen toward Joren. She observed as he reacted to it appearing. He dragged his hand through the air and apparently showed it to Taniel.

The other monk recoiled as if burned. "She's a demon. She killed him! You can't accept a contract with a demon! Conclave law—"

Joren interrupted him calmly. "You can argue it was a sort of self-defense; he did threaten her," Joren countered smoothly. His eyes flickered to Elania, assessing her with an unreadable gaze. "Conclave law permits exigent acts to save the Conclave's people and goods."

Taniel clenched his hands into fists at his sides, seething with righteous indignation. "That requires a tribunal to exonerate! She didn't just kill him," he protested vehemently; his voice raising an octave higher in distress as he added, "She absorbed his soul!"

Without missing a beat, Joren sighed softly, shaking his head in disappointment. "We allow worse to happen across the city all the time," he stated matter-of-factly.

"But not in front of us!" Taniel argued fiercely. "We don't permit it! The Conclave does not!"

"She saved the lives of the novices—and yours." Meeting Taniel's glare with an equally challenging stare, he continued logically, "I doubt we could have dealt with both [**Rock-bears**]."

His words seemed to sting deeply as Taniel bit back angrily, "Marcus saved our lives as well. Did you forget? Besides, she killed Maurice!"

"That was not her fault, and you know it. She did her best to carry him to safety," Joren argued.

Taniel's voice echoed loudly in the cavernous room as he retorted, "And failed!"

A hint of exasperation slipped into Joren's composed demeanor as he responded philosophically; his gaze never once wavering from Taniel's heated one. "Everyone fails at something, at some point."

That seemed like a heavy slap she didn't have the context for, because the 'spiritual' monk shut up.

Joren turned to look at her with a resigned look. "I accept."

[Contract has been accepted. Active Contracts: 1]

Elania glanced around; she had expected more fanfare. Some visual signal it was done. She opened her **[Contracts]** screen and found that it was active. How anti-climactic was that?

"If any of you attack me, Joren will drop dead," Elania announced, partly more for her own sense of security rather than any threat to the monk.

Taniel took it the wrong way. "We know you—"

Joren silenced him with a hand. "We can all calm down now?"

Elania nodded, feeling mentally exhausted.

"What will we do with that?" Taniel asked pointedly. He was pointing to the gear and items that were pooled at her feet and strewn around.

"We'll need to fix the waystation and clean this place up. That is going to take some work," Joren said.

She stared at the empty leather armor and chain mail. The purple daggers that had been deadly were still discarded on the floor. There was an entire travel pack the ranger had left behind.

Kneeling down, she lifted the armor up and held it up, staring both Taniel and Joren in the eyes.

"To the victor goes the spoils," she said icily.

She barely suppressed her sudden urge to vomit.

CHAPTER 47—UNSETTLING SPOILS

Elania gathered Marcus' belongings that were scattered around, a grim reminder of his previous existence. Having slain him, she was now the proclaimed heir to his earthly possessions: the deadly purple hue daggers, his set of leather and chain armor, a tattered olivine cape, and a heavy travel pack stuffed with who knew what.

Her insides writhed with the weight of her actions. She'd never killed another person before. Monsters and even animals were different. But Marcus...he was a person. Had been a person. One who had set himself to be her enemy, but a person nonetheless.

Had she done the right thing? He had threatened her, and in more ways than just the verbal threat of violence.

She did not regret stabbing him; the fight had been kill or be killed.

But she might have done more to try to avoid the situation altogether, that might apply some of the blame on her... yet...

Her gaze slid over to Taniel, the instigator of the whole affair. A thief.

Elania looked away, refocusing on her task. Gathering up the things carefully, she dragged them to her room, which was one of the chambers that had been spared destruction. Her old pack remained where she had left it, propped up on the stone bed.

Taking a deep breath, she sat down on the stone slab's edge. The dagger wound in her side had been completely healed, but the memory of the pain still radiated through her. It reminded her of how close she had come to death herself. It made it easier—somewhat less haunting—because she knew full well that he had intended that she be the one dead on the floor.

The sound of rock clunking drew her attention. Wasting no time, the monks had apparently put the entire event behind them to start repairing the waystation immediately.

The sturdy brickwork that had been decimated in the fight was separated into piles of intact bricks, damaged ones, and rubble.

Joren seemed to lead the operation, directing the novices in the sorting. Taniel sat cross-legged on the floor; his hands pressed together as if in prayer. Damaged bricks began to mend themselves, floating into the air and then their shape restored as pulverized material rose from the ground to embed itself in them. When each brick neared its normal form, it suddenly heated and cooled as if the material had been fused together.

It was amazing to watch and stole all her attention, even making her forget what she had been thinking about.

Once a considerable pile of repaired bricks had formed, Joren began to direct the novices in laying them where they belonged. They didn't use mortar, and she was worried the new wall would collapse on them all. That worry proved premature when Joren began to weld the bricks together, somehow using magic from his hands.

Elania grunted. Conclave monks were more than just fighters then. Add stonemasonry and civil repair to their skillsets? It was weird to her, but she guessed it made a sort of sense. If you had superhuman magic abilities, why not learn how to use them for more than just fighting and destroying things?

In her mind, from what she had seen of the world, it had hinted at a somewhat primitive and medieval style of technology. The armor, weapons, and tools of the Mushroomums had all pointed toward that. The clothes and gear the party wore were all custom tailored and didn't appear to be from a factory, and yet...

Now she had to reconsider. What if the world was a lot more advanced than she thought?

Turning back to Marcus' things, her curious mood soured. She needed to go through the pack.

She opened it with a stick, even if it made her look stupid, just in case it was booby-trapped. No explosion greeted her. Sitting down on the cold stone floor cross-legged, she began to riffle through it. It felt like she was an intruder, and the guilt intensified as each item revealed itself and painted a picture of its former owner.

Empty vials possibly used for potions or...poison came first. Then some bits of dried food wrapped carefully in cloth; a large, rolled parchment that was covered in neatly written script followed. It was his contract with the conclave to escort the monks.

Wrapped in a wad of extra clothes was a small bag that jingled. Opening it revealed thirty small silvers and two dozen large ones, along with a single small gold. She set it aside.

At the bottom of the pack, a small leather-bound book greeted her. Carefully extracting it, she couldn't help but feel a wave of curiosity wash over her. It seemed out of place, and she'd never seen him with it during the travels.

Pack dealt with she examined the purple daggers.

[Vorpel Stinger]

They were an identical set, and she used her **[Power]** to clear off the blood and grime that had marred their gloomy sheen. Other than the name **[Identify]** didn't seem to want to help. Her mana senses didn't seem to find any sense of innate power like his sword had carried. Whatever deadly properties they had seemed to be a property of their construction and material rather than magic.

The armor was interesting as well. It didn't seem magical in construction either, but it had certainly protected the ranger from her attacks. Or had that been one of his skills?

It had blood on it; all of it hers. Marcus' remains had evaporated, so her cleaning job was much simpler. The same applied to the worn travel cloak that he had once worn. The boots were armored as well, and she took care of the entire set of gear.

It was much better made than the spare outfit the monks had given her.

Elania took a breath and swallowed her discomfort. One thing she knew for sure: she needed to become stronger if she wanted to survive in this world.

Upgrading her gear was part of that.

She began to disrobe and adjust her own outfit so it could be used as an underlayer.

The leather armor was bulkier than anything she had ever worn before; its grooves and curves designed with a purpose beyond aesthetics. Metal reinforcements were cleverly embedded in vital areas providing an extra layer of protection, while chain mail sections allowed flexibility.

Adjusting it to fit her smaller frame was tricky, but thankfully there were plenty of straps for adjustments. She pulled each one tighter, cinching them down till they sat snugly against her body.

The bracers, pauldrons, and shin guards all were latched on last as separate pieces. The boots required her to stuff with some extra cloth to make them fit, but the ankle and lower leg portions fit snugly. Her mana shard got wrapped in a clean cloth and then stuffed in a tight, secure pocket on her torso.

Finally, she pulled on the travel cape.

Fully dressed and geared, she headed to the waystation's exit. Taniel glanced at her with his usual glare, but then went back to ignoring her.

The blue shimmer of the protective field provided an ethereal reflection for her to examine. Intending to see how the outfit looked, all her attention was diverted to her face; two glowing sapphire irises shone with innate light.

The contract thing determining eye color wasn't a joke. She blinked several times to confirm that it really was her face. Nothing changed. This was her now.

A demon-girl wearing a dead man's clothing, with glowing eyes and a contract that could rip a man's soul out of him if he crossed her.

Inner turmoil gripped at her, and she returned to her room to sit on her bed, hugging her knees and waiting for whatever would come next.

Eventually, she nodded off.

But not for long. Her senses jolted her awake as Joren stepped up to her chamber's threshold before he could speak. He hesitated as her blue eyes landed on him.

"Yes?" Elania said. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to apologize and explain."

Elania looked away, hugging her knees tighter. "Whatever. Go ahead."

"Taniel said he saw a light coming from your pack and had to investigate in case it there was danger to the [**Glow-Moss**]. When he saw the stone, he was shocked and took it," Joren said.

Her eyes slid back to him, but she remained silent.

"Mana shards are rare, valuable, and contain dangerous amounts of power. Things like the waystation field are powered by them...so he said he took it for safety reasons. He said he didn't intend to keep it from you forever," Joren finished.

It seemed like he wanted an answer as the silence stretched. A pulse of anger flowed through her. "That's all bullshit, and I can't imagine you don't know it. He stole from me. Went into my room and rummaged through my stuff. Even if his excuse is real; which I doubt very much; I've had the stone with me the entire time with no issue. If—if he intended to not steal it and return it, he had ample opportunity when I got back to say something or mention it to me. I spent over an hour making javelins!"

She fixed him with a glare. "Did he even mention it to anyone else?"

"No," Joren admitted. "But he probably just forgot after we started working on—"

"He just forgot," Elania repeated.

"Think about it, Elania! There are only a few of us in the group. How could he conceal it had been taken? You'd have noticed it missing right away and...well, things..." Joren's words tapered off.

“I’ll tell you what I think. I think he thought I was a stupid little demon that wouldn’t notice her single most important possession was missing. I think he thought when the evil little demon got angry at being robbed, a certain ranger could be encouraged to deal with the problem,” Elania accused.

Her hands balled into fists. “I think we can lay most of the blame of Marcus’ death on a certain forgetful monk, who has the most twisted, hateful ‘spiritual’ calling I’ve ever seen. If one thing proved to me that this world’s **[System]** is totally fucked up, it’s that someone like him can do ‘holy’ magic without being turned into a self-conflagration!”

Joren stared at her as she regained control of her hyperventilation. More excuses or apologies didn’t follow, just a pained frown at her.

“It’s not holy magic, it’s meditation sutra,” Joren corrected. Glancing back at the other monks who were apparently watching the exchange. “Either way... everything is packed, and the waystation is repaired. We are ready to go.”

Elania was surprised to see that he was right. The waystation looked rough, but not shattered and destroyed like when she’d fallen asleep.

Standing up, her new armor creaked. That was going to need to be fixed. Maybe some type of oil to help its flexibility or something? She let out an exasperated sigh. “Let’s go then. It is supposed to be some kind of outpost outside the city? Then the city tomorrow?”

Joren nodded. “We need to talk about that. Everyone is going to know you’re a demon. With blue eyes, they won’t be as...hostile. But they are going to assume you were a Darkwalker Demon that ate people until you became a human.”

“So, they’ll hate me,” Elania stated.

“More that they’ll be wary. It’ll be best if you don’t...threaten anyone. That would be illegal and likely call down the Guard on you,” Taniel said.

“Great,” Elania muttered.

The trek out of the waystation was done in silence. The stone path they took was uninteresting, and Elania immediately found something to draw her attention while mindlessly following along near the rear of the group.

She’d focused so much on the equipment and death that she’d forgotten about the new skills she acquired and that had been added to her **[Status]** sheet.

More importantly, she’d forgotten about the waiting perk point for hitting level fifty.

Reading and focusing on the screen nearly caused her to trip and stumble several times.

[Perks]

[1 Available Perk Selection]

[Perks: (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Available Perks: (Weakness Negation), (Resistance Improvement), (Resistance Selection), (Physical Ability Improvement), (Body Manipulation), (Reactive Adaptation), (Soul Siphon – Visible), (Magical Resonance), (Soul Manager), (Total Regeneration)]

Some options had disappeared, others had changed. There were several new ones that felt alarming and concerning. **[Soul Manager]? [Soul Siphon]?** Those sounded related to her recent activities. She didn't know what to pick without more detailed descriptions.

Glancing at the monks, she considered asking Joren, but... did she want to reveal what her options were to them? Maybe she'd find more information later.

And keeping the choice open left her with the flexibility of choosing something relevant in an emergency.

The path slowly grew more maintained as they went. She half expected they would meet someone as evidence of artificial lighting began to be visible embedded in the stonework walls along the path. A lump formed in her stomach. It felt like anyone who looked at her would know she had killed Marcus and shun her.

That was an irrational fear, she told herself; they'd shun her just for who and what she was, not because they had any knowledge or care about Marcus himself.

Telling herself things didn't help.

It was a surprise when they arrived. Joren looked back at her with a frown. "We're here. We have to go through the security in groups of three."

Looking around, she felt confusion. What security?

Taniel reached up and pressed a stone into the wall. The carvings immediately lit up and then a large round stone began to roll to the side with a grating sound. The opening revealed a long corridor.

"You go in, then it seals behind you. The guards check us, then let us in," Joren explained.

"There won't be a problem with me?" Elania asked.

"No, it should be fine. They won't even question you. It's not like the city," he replied.

She watched as the novices entered. There was a chain one of them pulled that resealed the airlock. After a few minutes, a stone flared blue, and Taniel pressed the opening stone again.

It was their turn.

The space was cramped. Once the way out was sealed a steel window slid open, revealing a man in padded leather and metal armor looking at them through a heavy grate. She instinctively looked away and pulled her hood tighter around her face.

“Oi, none of that. Don’t hide your face. Let me see you,” the guard ordered.

The order felt like a jolt that ran through her. She just wanted to hide and be left alone. Still, she didn’t argue and pulled her hood down and gave him a stare.

The man grunted, then pulled out a clipboard and wrote something on it. “Five conclave monks and a bound demon. Not something you see every day. All’s clear from the detector. Do any of you have any restricted goods you are required to declare? Infectious disease vectors, horror spawn, cursed destructive items, or seraph bones?”

Seraph bones? Were there actual angels running around the world now? Elania shook her head quietly, and a chorus of ‘no’ filtered out from the group. That seemed to satisfy the guard who pulled a lever, activating another magical contraption. The inner door slid open, revealing a large circular cavern.

The outpost was more like a small town. Hundreds of buildings were crammed together tightly, a small square visible down the straight street from the entry-point. A dozen large crystals hung from steel chains pouring light down on everything below, while dozens of lit windows could be seen carved directly into the chamber’s outer walls.

“It’s bigger than I expected,” Elania murmured.

“Waystation four is one of the oldest. It acts as a travel hub for those who travel the depths,” Joren said.

“This is a waystation? The same thing we’ve been staying in?” Elania asked.

“Not exactly the same, but yes, at one point, it was. It’s grown.” Joren pointed to a large building in the distance, near the central square. “Inn and tavern are there. We’ll want to get food and rooms.”

She wasn’t sure about food. Her stomach had been terrible all day, but a room sounded...very pleasant. Maybe they had baths or something, too? She’d been washing off in the cool underground streams, but some hot water would be...magic to her mental state.

Maybe she could scrub the guilt away.

CHAPTER 48 – WAYSTATION FOUR

E lania's head pounded as she slowly woke up. The dim memory of closing and locking the door before stripping and falling into the decidedly plush bed was all she could remember on short notice. Dismay filled her as her mana shard glared in her face as she rolled over in the sheets that somehow turned her into a human burrito.

This time she was fairly certain that the headache—the hangover—wasn't heralding that she'd been summoned to another new world.

Sliding to a sitting position, she disentangled herself and activated the room's magical lighting. She vaguely remembered paying with Marcus' silver for the very best room at some exorbitant rate. A mechanical grandfather clock stood in the room's corner, proclaiming the time to be in the wee early hours of the morning.

That was good. It meant she still had time to call a bath, and she'd been very clear on the point that one was included with the room. That was more important than the offered breakfast and dinner.

She glanced at the dirty bed linen and realized how dirty she'd been. The sheets and pillows were covered in a thin coat of gray dust and grime, even though she'd not slept in her clothes. The housekeeping staff was going to hate her.

But when the monks had eaten in the common room, she had stayed with them...simply because the cost of the dinner was part of the room price. Rather than eat anything, she'd spent her dinner allotment on drinking the sweet alcoholic beverage that had been provided.

A bit too much of it. Apparently, **[Regeneration]** did not work on alcohol. That seemed a rather large blind spot considering it worked on poisons and wasn't alcohol just another poison? Just one that humans consumed willingly.

She'd never considered herself an alcoholic before, but the liquid had been freeing and relaxed the stress and worries so well that she hadn't held back.

Not great. Drinking her worries away was a bad idea. Letting her guard down was a bad idea.

A small card sat on a table beside a pull rope, indicating it was to call a bath. She tugged it once and pulled on her small clothes and a shirt before waiting. A few minutes later, a maid came and confirmed her request and promised to bring up a tub. An almost guilty feeling hit her; she'd be making the woman carry up a tub and buckets of water to fill it.

When the tub arrived, Elania stood up. "I can help carry the water. I don't want to make you have to do it on your own."

The maid looked at her with surprise. "Carry the water? No, my lady, there is a faucet for the hot water."

A faucet? Elania watched the maid drag it over to the corner, then revealed two metal spigots that had been hidden in plain sight. Turning one knob released a stream of steaming hot water.

"Oh my god, I didn't see that," Elania sputtered.

The maid gave her a hesitant smile. "There is also a drainage plug and channel for the water to run out. You don't have to worry about that, though. I'll see to it after you check out."

Elania nodded. "Thank you!"

As soon as the door shut, Elania locked it back and gazed around the room. It was nice. It wouldn't be bad to live in. Stripping down to nothing, she checked the water, which was still too hot, and then looked at herself in the mirror.

A frown slid into place on her face as she took in the sight. Her face was smudged black with grease, her hair was a tangled mess. It fell down past her shoulders in clumps; she needed to find or buy a comb. Her new red colored hair still glistened in the room's dim light despite how dirty it was, but that wasn't that helpful when it just revealed what she was.

And her eyes.

They glowed back at her, like a deer in headlights, deep sapphire irises providing their own illumination. No one was going to need **[Identify]** to tell that she wasn't a normal person.

Elania bit her lip. The terrifying discrimination that she had feared hadn't materialized in the waystation. Her demon-hood hadn't even been remarked on. Joren had told her

not to worry too much because the waystation outpost was used to all times of hard folk passing through. Even a demon couldn't jolt them.

She considered maybe it would be a good idea to stay in the outpost instead of continuing on to the city, but...

The [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] needed to be sold, and that was done in the city. At least that was what she had been told. Plus, despite her splurging on the room, her funds were limited. A few weeks in a pleasant room wasn't a stable home.

Testing the water again, it was just right. Not too hot to scald her, but still hot enough to turn her a little red. She slipped into the water, submerging down to her shoulders before relaxing with her eyes closed.

Repeatedly she'd been filled with internal heat and pain from overcharging, but the heat that now seeped into her was wholly different. Heat that was relaxing and calming instead of energetic and galvanizing.

When she woke up, the water was almost tepid, and she was face down in the tub. Panic filled her, and she coughed up two lungfuls of bathwater. Stupid!

The coughing fit took several minutes before it stopped. Elana glared at the water like it was at fault instead of hers. There was soap on the nearby stool and she hadn't even cleaned herself properly yet. She nabbed it then began to scrub herself down seriously.

It took multiple dunks under the water to rinse her hair from all the gunk. By the time she was done, the water was a murky, disgusting black. She drained the water down the channel and rinsed herself down with some fresh water from the spigot. Feeling refreshed and much better already, she jumped out and rubbed herself down with the provided towel.

The fabric was soft and wooly, unlike the stuff the Mushroomums had. Whoever was providing them their 'luxury' goods was probably exploiting them.

Checking herself out in the mirror presented a much better image than earlier. That was encouraging. Pulling on her underclothes, she left the breast wrap off for later. It was really nice to finally have some time unrestricted. Roving through the room, she searched for something to use as a comb for her hair but came up short.

Her eyes slid to the rope that called for the bath service. She hated to be a bother, but she pulled it anyway. The maid from earlier arrived within a few minutes. "Is something wrong with the bath?"

Elania shook her head. "The bath was amazing."

Except for the falling asleep and drowning part. She didn't mention that. "I just need to take care of my hair and I don't have a comb..."

The woman's gaze locked on the horrible mess of hair, understanding filling her face. "We don't really offer combs...but...just wait here a moment and I'll be back. I can do your hair for you."

Elania blinked. "Oh...no I don't mean to put you out. You must be busy."

The maid shook her head. "I'm free now. I'll be back in a moment."

True to her word, the woman made it back quick with a styled wooden comb in her hand. The way she held it made it seem like a prized possession.

"Is that your comb? It's very pretty," Elania commented.

The maid nodded. "It was my mother's. It's made from a hardwood from the surface, so it's rare."

She had Elania sit on the stool in front of the table and lean back. Her hair wasn't super long, but it did go past her shoulders and it was absolutely a mess. A brush would have been nice, but the comb worked as well. The other woman carefully worked the tangles and snags free without ripping them out.

A tingling feeling ran through her entire body as the other girl's fingers worked on her scalp.

The feeling of bliss allowed her to tune everything else out and just turn to putty.

She almost didn't notice when it finally stopped.

"I think that's the best we can do." The woman said.

Elania blinked and turned to smile at her. "Thank you!"

The other girl blinked at the exuberance.

"By the way, my name is Elania. What's yours?" Elania asked.

A small, responding smile appeared. "Allie. I'm glad you liked it, I think your hair is looking much better now than this morning."

Elania stifled a giggle. Anything would have looked better than her hair earlier. She stepped forward and slid her arms around Allie for a hug. "Thank you, thank you. This really meant a lot to me."

The other girl tensed slightly, then patted her on the back before slipping out of the hug. "You're welcome. I'm glad I could help."

Elania waved her goodbye and turned back to her belongings. An hour flew by as she cleaned things up the best she could with several of the spare rags and towels and

unlimited source of water. Some of it, like the metal, was going to need different supplies for caring for, and she had no idea what she'd need to do with the daggers.

Weapons were supposed to be oiled, she thought, but the weird metal was going to make her wary of doing anything until someone explained the alloy to her. When she reached her mana shard she inspected it and used **[Identify]**.

[Mana Shard (Condensed 687/1456)]

With the excess power she'd been accumulating and dumping into it, the shine was definitely stronger. Not as strong as when she had first acquired it from the cultists, but it was going in the correct direction.

Her passive **[Power]** costs would possibly be a worry in the city. Since Joren was paying the 'cost' of the contract, she didn't have to worry about that draining her. Yet her **[Darkvision]** drained some, and just living did so as well. Maybe one or two power points per day if she wasn't active.

Of course, she'd hardly had a single 'inactive' day yet. So, it wasn't a precise measurement, just her best guess.

Elania licked her lips and pulled up her **[Status]** since it seemed like a suitable moment to look it over after all the changes that had occurred.

She blinked and pulled up her **[Status]** looking for anything contract related.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 58 Lesser Demon (Summoned Potency 9999+)]

[Karma: 12345]

[Power: 318/326]

[Perks: (Select) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Class: Huntress]

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank S+), Mana Manipulation (Rank S+), Basic Handcrafting (Rank E)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana), (Darkwalker)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Deactivated)]

[Physical: Body Conditioning (Rank D), Mobility (Rank E), Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank S+), Tracking (Rank S+), Archer (Rank E), Martial Bladesmanship (Rank E)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank B), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank S+), Navigation (Rank E), Negotiation (Rank E), Intimidation (Rank E), Bribery (Rank E)]

Her class had changed back to just 'Huntress' and her new skills were all listed. All of them Rank E, but with the rate she'd been leveling up skills, she wasn't too worried about that. Although a lot of her Rank S+ skills had come from absorbing things that gave the skills instead of any...learning or practice on her part.

That was still a funky thing to wrap her head around. For some skills it sort of made sense, but others like **[Tracking]**? She didn't have much knowledge on how it worked...just that if she focused, she could spot glowing footprints. Plus, that strange sixth sense of knowing where things had gone while she stalked them. Although that might have been the **[Darkwalker]** stuff coming through.

She needed to find a way or place where she could level up her new combat skills. **[Martial Bladesmanship]** seemed incredibly promising, and she had a scary dagger to use it with, too. The way it was worded hinted that it was versatile, working for any bladed weapon instead of just swords, so that was great. It didn't lock her into trying to find a specific weapon to learn.

Turning to her belongings, she started to take care of them and pack them up before piecing back together her armor outfit. This time it felt like she had much more time to work with, and she carefully adjusted and fixed things so it would fit better. The room even had a small kit with scissors, thread, and a needle, which was incredibly handy.

The room was proving to be worth all the silver she had spent on it.

Her mana shard got a more secure chain to go along with the cloth wrapping she had buried it in, while the ragged cloak got a trimming before she hemmed the new straight bottom. Now it didn't look like someone had set the bottom of it on fire.

By the time she was done and checking herself out in the mirror, a knock at the door arrived.

She almost jumped. For a short while, she'd forgotten about the world outside of her cozy room and its temporary nature. A second knock came just as she reached the door.

It was Joren. "Elania? Are you awake ye—"

He stopped mid-sentence to stare at her.

Heh.

Maybe all the hostility had just been because she was a dirty little demon, instead of a nice clean one?

Nah, probably not. Still, she enjoyed his jaw dropping.

Not that it would change her opinion of him and the enabling of his shitty monk brother's ways.

"I'm awake and packed up," Elania said.

Joren nodded. "We are going to eat breakfast first, then head out to the city. We should arrive before the end of the day."

Elania swallowed. Finally, they were going to reach their destination.

The nervousness in her stomach returned with a vengeance.

But...

If the city was bad, maybe she could find a way to make enough money to come back to Waystation 4 and live in the inn with Allie. The girl seemed nice.

There were nice people in the world.

Somehow, she just needed to avoid the bad ones.

Elania grabbed her things and turned to Joren. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 49—CHECKPOINT

E lania ignored breakfast and left the monks to eat among themselves. Instead, she waved goodbye to Allie in the common room and then stepped out into the outpost proper. Inhabitants were going about their business and the small market was already bustling with traders selling food and other goods. There were half a dozen stalls that held her interest, and she passed by each one with a feigned indifference.

She ended up in front of the fruit stall. Even if she didn't technically need to eat regular food, she liked the look of the offerings. [Pintal] resembled a pineapple, and although she wasn't ready to cut one open, the red [Apnals] looked incredibly familiar. Pulling out a small silver, she purchased a few to put in her bag while munching down on one she kept for herself.

Finding a spot to sit that was out of the way, she people watched until the monks came out of the inn.

Leaving the outpost was easier than entering; the guard had all of them jumble together into the same claustrophobic airlock this time before cycling the heavy round stone doors with the magical contraption.

And then they were back in the wild, like a massive town wasn't hidden on the other side of the cave wall. The silence rang in her ears like tinnitus, the sudden absence of the thousands of small noises in the inhabited section a stark contrast to the nearly persistent low drum of the outside.

She wondered just how effective the waystation shield was when it was so big. There had been no visual sign of the machine that powered it like there was in the smaller ones they had stopped at. That was probably by design. Wouldn't want visitors to go up to the magic shield and smash it...

As they came closer to the city, it felt like they were traveling more through an ancient underground ruin than the caverns. Wildlife still was present, but now it jutted through cracked stone walls or the cobblestone along the sides of the tunnels. Stairways greeted them at every vertical transition, and the wall sconces of glowing fungus lit the way.

Elania smelled their first encounter with another party before they came into view. Another group of mercenaries with a ranger. This time they simply nodded, and the two groups passed by each other without comment or further interaction.

Something had broken after the fight with Marcus. The quiet muted conversation that had been present during their travels from the Mushroom colony had evaporated into a silence that was only broken when required by the necessities of travel or coordination.

That suited her just fine. She was tired of traveling with the monks, too.

As far as she was concerned, they'd drowned any potential future friendship and getting to the city safely was now a business transaction.

After a few hours, they arrived at an old metal wall that cut through the tunnel, punctured by a half-raised metal portcullis made of steel rods. She didn't spot the guards because there were none. The fortification was just the outer edge of the security zone. Arcane lighting shined brightly enough in the chamber to cause her eyes to water after being adjusted via **[Darkvision]** to the caverns for so long.

A small buzz of conversation caused her ears to twitch as they came closer and she realized there was a second, larger metal wall on the opposite side of the cavern than the one they were passing under. A small line of travelers was waiting at a set of smaller steel doors while a half dozen guards watched.

Their uniforms were thick trench coats with steel plates woven into the fabric. Metal full plate helmets hid their faces, but what drew her attention the most was their weapons. Each guard was equipped with a sword on their belt, but also held a long weapon on their back.

A few were even holding theirs at the ready... rifles? Magical muskets? Regardless, they were certainly recognizable as some type of firearm.

Holy shit, there were guns.

The realization pulled her eyes to a round cylinder that was emplaced in a bastion that was elevated a bit off the ground. It was pointed right towards them and the entry point of the outer wall.

Holy shit, there were cannons!

Taniel led them to the back of the line without word, and she shifted uncomfortably under the eyes of the guard.

One of the soldiers moved down the line to them a clipboard in hand. "Party of six?"

The monk nodded. "That's right."

The man looked at each of them in turn, jotting down a note on the clipboard. When he reached her at the end, he frowned. "One's a demon," the guard called out. There wasn't any response from the others, but it didn't look like he had expected any. Apparently, it was a warning to the others.

When he finished jotting his notes, he looked up at her, then to Taniel. "Your group will receive additional screening."

Joren groaned, and the novices looked confused.

"We're Conclave Monks on Conclave business. Can't you just cut us a break?" Taniel asked.

The guard shot him a deadly glare. "You want to skip security procedures? No exceptions to 'random' screening. Who the fuck ever heard of Conclave Monks traveling with a demon?"

Elania swallowed. The man would have made a good airport security agent. Taniel shot her an angry, accusing glare, but Joren's hand on his shoulder stalled any words.

"Let's just get it over with," Joren said.

The guard returned with a group of three more, then pointed to a second door in the wall that had opened. "Out of the line. Let's go. Faster you move, the faster this will be over with."

Elania followed obediently even if a cascade of nervousness ran through her. They were escorted through a short but maze-like path through stone corridors inside the metal wall. Crystals were inlaid in sconces and lit the way, doing their best to mimic a harsh electric lighting that would have been familiar on Earth.

Metal decorations lined the walls, hinting that the stuff was ubiquitous. That certainly indicated no lack of metalworks or smithies, and there was an almost industrial quality to it all that hinted at more. Well, if the monk's usage of magic to repair stonework was any indication, there were almost certainly those who could do the same with metal...

They reached a larger chamber with more waiting guards. The **[Glow-Moss Baskets]** were taken from the monks and ushered out of the room with promises to return them after inspection. A man came out with a wand with a glowing blue crystal on the end of it, passing it over each of them. He left without a word, seemingly satisfied.

The same word kept repeating itself in her head, though.

Airport, airport, airport, airport. She hated airports.

There was a security booth with a window, and their primary escort slid his clipboard through a slot. "Lieutenant Gaston! Six for additional screening."

The lieutenant didn't look up at them, instead, he pulled the clipboard in to read it. Elania studied him. His uniform was naval blue with gold buttons, a styled hat with a gold circle embedded in it. The outfit looked mass produced, giving credence to the city having a technological base that was more advanced than medieval at least.

Finally, he looked up at them. "Separate them for questioning."

The guard hesitated. "Sir, one of them is a demon."

Lieutenant Gaston looked annoyed. "I read the report. That's why they are being questioned individually. Now please try to follow orders, corporal."

"Sir!" The guard turned at them and glared like they were the reason he'd been reprimanded.

She didn't like the idea of being separated from the others, but she was already well embedded in the process and didn't think arguing would help anything. It was annoying to see that racial profiling was alive and well in fantasy worlds, too. It certainly felt like they were being singled out because she was a demon.

They were led to a hallway with a half dozen thick metal doors on each side that felt worryingly like a prison. Each monk was separated into one and ordered to sit at a table with chairs on both sides that was remarkably similar to what she'd consider a crime tv show interrogation room.

She got the room at the end of the hall, which looked like it had extra thick walls, although that might have just been her paranoia.

"Someone will be in to question you. Sit tight," the guard said.

Elania took a seat at the table, placing her back to the wall as the door clanked to a shut. At least she had the corner and could watch the entrance to the room. The wait stretched, leading to boredom more than nervousness. Eventually, she scooted closer to the table and used her arms as a pillow so she could take a nap.

The metal door made a dissonant sound that jerked her back to wakefulness as Lieutenant Gaston entered with a serious look on his face. "I see you made yourself at home. I apologize for the delay."

Elania sat up. "Hello, Lieutenant."

He entered and sat down opposite of her, pulling out a wooden cage that held a white crystal suspended in it before pulling out a small booklet and what looked like a pencil.

Elania barely kept her face straight. She was now starring in a bad Hollywood detective movie. She eyed the crystal warily. "Let me guess... that's a magic box that can tell if someone is lying or not?"

He looked up from his notes. "The box will flare red if any untruths are spoken within its presence once activated."

Her mouth hung open. Even if she'd made the suggestion, it had mostly been a joke. "Oh. I guess that makes interrogations easy."

Lieutenant Gaston stared at her for a moment. "Hardly."

He wrote something down, then looked back at her. "I will start with the standard questions and go from there. Any refusal to answer questions could cause your forcible detainment, or deportation from Neftasu. Are you prepared?"

Elania nodded. "As I'll ever be, I guess."

"Are you afflicted by any contagious disease, magical or non-magical in nature?" he asked.

Thank god she hadn't ended up smeared with any [**Fenicia's Fungal Growth**] during her travels. She shook her head carefully. "I'm not."

"Are you in possession of any dangerous artifacts, objects of mass destruction, or items that might cause undue damage to people or property?" he asked.

They had taken her pack and gear, leaving her with just her clothes. Even if she wasn't sure about the daggers, she didn't have them on her now, so the question was easy. "I have nothing like that."

He jotted the answer down. "Do you plan to harm any inhabitant of the city?"

Elania blinked, almost instinctively saying no, but then decided to be in depth. "Only if they try to harm me first."

For the first time, she saw a crack in the Lieutenant's professional mask in the form of a slight smile. "I'll mark that down as 'No' as anything else means being refused entry."

That was nice of him.

The next question followed swiftly. "What's your purpose in Neftasu?"

Elania frowned. That was a very open-ended question, so she decided to just go with what she had been thinking about over the last few days. "I'm looking to sell my [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] and maybe live for a while."

He scribbled something onto the paper before locking eyes with her again. “Do you have any affiliations in Neftasu?”

Elania shook her head. “No, I’m... new here.”

“Very well,” he continued, “Have you been convicted of any crimes in your previous dwelling place or anywhere else in Eladu?”

“No,” she responded truthfully. She’d never even committed a crime back on Earth.

Lieutenant Gaston studied her for a long moment before jotting down another note. “And finally, do you intend to obey the laws and regulations of Neftasu during your stay?”

That was a bit of a question, but also rather easy to side-step. Even if she didn’t know any of the laws, she didn’t intend to break any.

“Yes,” she nodded firmly.

He closed the booklet and stood up, leaving the crystal cage on the table. It had remained a calm white throughout their conversation. “The standard questions are always rather boring. Let’s make things more interesting. What are the circumstances of your travel with the Conclave monks?”

Elania answered, trying not to go into too much detail. Multiple rather pointed questions followed that left little room for vague answers. By the time the Lieutenant finished, she felt slightly violated, but happy to have not had to answer anything about Marcus or the circumstances of his demise.

When he finally seemed satisfied and began to pack up his magic truth box, relief washed over her.

Lieutenant Gaston rose from his seat. “You’re free to go. Your belongings will be returned after they’ve been inspected. Wait for the guard to come fetch you.”

As Lieutenant Gaston exited the room, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease lingering in his wake.

The guard arrived a short time later, and she was reunited with the group. Their things were eventually returned to them, but she saw everything had been jumbled in her pack and she had to reorganize and repack it so it would all fit.

All the monks looked more than ready to depart. Joren caught her look and gave her a weak smile.

Taking a breath, Elania decided to try to lighten the mood. “Surprised people don’t go around the checkpoints if they are all like this...”

Joren shook his head. “There is a massive protection field around the city’s cavern that goes through the rock. The only places you can pass through are the checkpoints.”

Oh. Well, that was unfortunate for anyone wanting in or out without being treated and processed like a criminal. Once the guard was ready, he led them through another series of tunnels to a larger chamber that was bisected by a shimmering blue field similar to the ones she'd seen in the waystations. Except it was absolutely massive, like a floating wall of transparent water. And thick, too, at least three or four meters wide.

The smell of ozone hit her. Light crystals flickered like they hadn't seen maintenance in years. The entire room felt like an old subway.

There was a small building centered in the field, puncturing through it. The platform was raised off the ground with a stairwell going up to the device. It seemed like whatever it was, it was meant to be their way through the magical barrier.

Going through it made her ears pop. The taste of the air changed immediately, and it seemed...thinner, somehow. Like all the magic had been sucked out of it. Heck, it probably had been. What were they using to power the barrier?

Hopefully not the people inside. That would suck.

The guards left them to their devices once they were out the other side, the only exit through a tunnel in the far side of the room. It was large, easily wide enough for a half dozen parties to pass by without running into each other. The sound of falling water and the scent of humidity touched her before they reached the end of the trek. A heavy door at the end was locked open.

There was a massive cliff, and a series of steps that worked themselves downwards to the massive city below. It looked like it was cut into different shaped cookies, each separated by dark chasms and canyons with black water at their bottoms.

What drew her gaze the most, though, was the massive waterfall that tumbled down from above, filling a vast underground lake below the city. It glittered with blues and yellows of the thousands of hanging crystals attached to the cavern's ceiling by massive metal chains.

Joren noticed her staring. "Welcome to Neftasu."

CHAPTER 50 – DRIFTING

At the bottom of the ramp, there was a booth that charged them a small tax. Two large silvers to get into the city, and it was two small ones to leave. Anyone who couldn't pay was forced to work for the city to make up the difference, and Elania couldn't imagine the pay was very good.

Thankfully, her funds were enough to cover the cost. It was the secondary cost that gave her pause.

The clerk placed a large orb on the counter and had each monk place their hand on it to drain some mana.

Elania stared at the crystal warily. "How much does it take?"

"All of it, miss. I realize that some might have slower regeneration than others, but without the extra cost it would be impossible to power the city's protections and infrastructure," the clerk explained.

All of it? As in all of her **[Power]**? Haha, no thank you. "I refuse."

That seemed to shock the clerk. Taniel glared at her. "Without the power donations, the Celestial-engine would run dry and then the defenses would falter. It may seem peaceful, but there are worse things in the dark that surround the city than Manzitore. If you're going to be here, you need to contribute as well."

He was going to lecture her about what was right and what she should do? Glaring at him, she turned back to the crystal. For all she knew, she'd touch it and it would yank her soul out and poof no more Elania. Or she'd shrivel up into a dead husk.

But...maybe that wasn't super likely. If it was more like her mana shard then she could probably control it. Limit the amount it drained.

“Fine. I’ll give some,” Elania hissed at the clerk, who looked panicked and relieved at the same time.

She placed a finger on it instead of her palm like the others.

[Outsider detected.]

[Authority Level Recognized: Maximum.]

[Vessel Status: 433/799]

[Drain: Enabled]

Elania blinked. No one else seemed to see the interface that appeared, and that was probably a good thing. Too bad she had no idea what it meant.

The others stared and frowned when the crystal didn’t light up...probably because it wasn’t receiving any power. Treating it like her mana shard, she threaded the barest amounts of **[Power]** into it, amounting to less than a single unit.

The crystal happily gobbled it down and turned a brilliant white. Then she killed the flow.

“There. That’s good, right?” Elania asked.

“You have a lot of mana, miss. That’s more than enough, thank you.” The clerk took the crystal and placed it back under the counter.

She shook her head. Weird. As they moved through the tax gate, her eyes fell on the back of Taniel’s stupid bald head.

Celestial-engines? Divine-magic-tech? Was she going to end up dealing with theotechnicians next? The disparate parts of the world were a hodgepodge blending of different genres and things she’d never have believed could be real. Would the people back home be excited to learn that the daydreams they’d thought up actually existed?

If she ever got home, no one would believe her, and she’d end up in an insane asylum. Maybe she’d be able to take up the job as an author and tell her story?

A bridge took them out over the ravine and towards the nearest section of the city. It looked like there were broad sections when she had studied it from above. “Is there a city map?”

Joren nodded. “You’ll need to touch one of the way stones to connect to the city interface. It’ll provide a map and some basic functions like calling for the Guard. Don’t use that, though, unless it is an emergency, or you’ll be jailed.”

Elania nodded. “No false emergency calls. Got it.”

It quickly became apparent that they had entered the city via one of the rougher districts...and that was being charitable. The stone buildings were worn down from use

with no evidence of repairs or work being done to repair cracks that looked universal. It sort of ruined her first impression of the city.

Dozens of people were idle, sitting along the sides of the street, leaning against or camped by the walls and alleys. All of them stared at the monks and their procession with hungry eyes. The city, it turned out, wasn't much different from the deep caverns. It was just that the predators were hiding in plain sight instead of nestled up in a hidden alcove.

Ahead of them, two guards had seized a haggard-looking man. They were taking turns punching and beating him before they began to haul him off into one of the nearby alleys.

"What'd he do?" Elania asked quietly.

Taniel shot her a look. "None of our business. You'll keep your nose out of other's troubles if you know what's best for you."

Her eyes slid to the monk and settled with a cold hardness. Where had the 'we protect people!' spiel he had spouted when it came to 'Demons' go? He only cared if people were killed by demons, but not by ruthless, overzealous guards? Fucking hypocrite.

It wouldn't do to voice her opinion on him, though. Soon they would part ways, and hopefully she never had to see another Conclave monk asshole again. Still, she couldn't quite disagree with his reasoning. As much as she might want to consider helping people, she wasn't a hero. She didn't have the resource to do much. Taking care of herself was already going to be a tall order.

Her opinion of the city dropped further as they went. The district turned out to be the slums for real, or as Joren called it, the 'Mercenary District', which didn't seem very accurate. Sure, there were plenty of mercenaries that she had spotted, and the central square was certainly full of taverns and tough looking men between work, but it was mostly just a slum.

When they reached the large, gilded gate leading into the 'Conclave District' the disparity in wealth became abundantly clear. Here was a city that was segregated by socio-economic classes and wasn't afraid to widely broadcast the inequality.

Why else would the Conclave District have a fucking gatehouse gilded in gold right beside a district where the people looked like they hadn't had a decent meal in weeks?

As the architecture and displayed wealth changed, so too did the people of the Conclave District. Most notably, their attire, which was colorful and adorned with expensive looking jewelry and embellishments. The guards were much more prevalent in their presence near the gate, and all of them eyed her with interest. She doubted that she'd have made it into the area if she hadn't obviously been part of the monks' party.

The street worked its way up, and up. Several times it transformed into a staircase until they were fully on what she assumed was the main level. A large open square was surrounded by multi-story stone abodes, while dozens of temporary looking vendor stalls filled the center.

“This is the only open-air market allowed in the Conclave District,” Joren said. He pointed toward the stone in the very center of it. “That’s the way stone. If you touch it, you can accept the city interface and that’ll give you a map and clock.”

Elania nodded when a new system message flashed.

[Contractee Initiated Contract termination.]

[Contract Completed]

[No violations have been assessed.]

[All clauses fulfilled. System-termination of Contract completed.]

Elania blinked as she read quickly. It was over. It was over so suddenly that it took her by surprise.

“This is where we part ways,” Joren said, a hint of apology in his voice.

The novices continued ahead. Taniel turned around, his eyes targeting her. “If you know what’s best for you, Demon, you’ll get out of here now. The districts outside of the Mercenary District have curfews, and a wild demon at night is definitely a violation.”

Elania pulled her pack tighter and then shoved past him, heading toward the way stone. A faint good luck from Joren sounded, and then something snide from Taniel. She ignored both and put them out of her mind.

She needed to get the map and clock, then figure out where she was going.

As she approached, a contraption on wheels nearly ran her over and she dodged it, a shout from the driver urging her onward. Cars? They had magical cars? Well...it was more like a self-moving box on wheels, and didn’t make any noise, but... cars?

The encounter left her with the realization she needed to keep her mind open about what was possible and what wasn’t when there was magic involved.

There was also evidence of **[Ralfot]** pulled wagons as well, which moved much slower but were pulling cargos that looked quite heavy. The bazaar was packed with people that made an easy path to the way stone challenging. Rather than take a straight-line path, she wandered between the merchants and customers, quietly minding herself.

Pretty fabrics and jewelry were the predominant offering. A few food and fruit stands stood together in clumps, while a few stalls offered weapons. Clothes were in abundance everywhere, and more than once, she had almost stopped to admire some things.

When she finally reached the Way Stone, it felt like she'd run through a marathon. Maybe that was just the claustrophobia of being surrounded by so much noise and people. The last weeks had been relatively silent except for the occasional bursts of chaos and adrenaline. This was a much different stimuli to get used to.

There weren't any indications of how to link with the stone, so she just did the most basic thing she could think of: place her palm on the stone. It was cool to the touch, and it seemed like the correct thing to do as it suddenly lit up with runes. No one seemed to take notice, hinting it was some weird **[System]** thing.

[Binding: Neftasu]

[Clock: 17:18]

[Emergency]

[Map]

[Other]

Oh, that was perfect. A big smile erupted on her face. The new screen was pretty easy to understand, and she mentally jabbed the **[Map]** function without hesitation.

She was rewarded with an enormous screen popping into place in front of her, the slightly transparent image expanding to several meters in width and height. It was much too close, and she was forced to take a few steps back before she went cross-eyed.

The map was not what she expected. Google Maps might have spoiled her slightly, and her expectations had been... thrashed. No search bar, no 'food near me' function, and definitely no map pins.

Almost immediately, she found a zoom function, and that allowed her to push the image in closer. Beige street lines came into focus and there were even shop labels! Bingo!

Except there were thousands of buildings. The map was hard to understand compared to where she was, and there...was...no...search. How the heck was she supposed to find the right shop like this? At best, it would help her familiarize herself with the different districts via landmarks.

Well, she knew she needed to find an 'Artificer', just not where they were located. That meant asking a random stranger for directions. Elania scanned the crowd with a growing anxiety.

Maybe it was time to make a random purchase. That'd make the conversation easy.

She wandered through the proffered wares randomly. It was the fabric that finally caught her attention. The stall was manned by a young man with a brown complexion and black hair. As soon as she stopped, he immediately smiled.

Her eyes flickered over everything on display and tallied up the things she really needed. Several pairs of small clothes, a cheap tunic and trousers to replace the ill-fitting ones she had. New footwear, because the wads of fabric in her boots squeezed her toes and made them uncomfortable. Maybe she should have looked for a shop that would trade them for something else.

“Can I help you, Mahlessi? Mahim has many things for you to choose from today.” His thick accent surprised her. It was the first time someone hadn’t sounded like perfectly neutral American English.

“How much would a set of small clothes and a set of sandals cost?” Elania asked.

His eyes seemed to appraise her for a few seconds before replying. “For you, I believe a small gold would be enough for all of it.”

A small fucking gold? From what she understood, that was literal robbery!

“That seems extremely costly,” Elania responded neutrally.

He shrugged. “My wares, they are fine silk from the Overworld, and the sandals are made with fine leathers from a prime [**Umbwalk**]. They are worth much. If you wish for cheaper items, I would recommend the market in the city center or artisan district.”

Urgh. She’d somehow ended up shopping in a bazar for rich people.

“I’m sorry, but even at half that price, I couldn’t afford it right now,” Elania admitted.

The cheer on his face faltered into a polite stare that resembled an annoyed service person dealing with a non-customer. Biting her lip, she asked for what she needed anyway.

Mahim sighed. “You’ll find many artificer shops in the Noble District. They have an entire street of them, I believe. You can find it on your map, yes?”

Elania nodded. “Thank you.”

He waved her on and she moved with the crowd out of the bazar. Once she was in a relatively more open space away from the stalls, she opened her [**Map**]. Rotating it was simple enough, and she found the Noble District in the center of the city.

It was easy to spot looking around, too. The place was a massive spire that jutted upward all the way to the cavern’s ceiling. No missing it.

Taking a deep breath, she headed toward what she hoped was the right place.

CHAPTER 51 – ARTIFICE DENIED

Elania headed out of the market, having walked its entire length and still having barely scratched the real depth of the place. Someone wanting to browse the wares would have been easily able to waste an entire day or two exploring everything.

She was not one of those people, at least not at the moment.

It was a rather straight shot out of the Conclave district to reach the central hub that looked to be more markets and shops. Everything seemed to be a muddled mix of qualities and styles, hinting at a district that was a melting pot for the entire city. As she passed under one of open guard post gates, a woman with a child in tow came around the corner at the same time.

The other woman was looking down and yelling at the kid and bumped into her. That drew a heated curse and then, when the woman stared her in the eyes, a frantic high-pitched scream.

Elania blinked in confusion and froze in place as the woman continued screaming and jumped backwards, leaving her child behind, equally confused. Realizing her mistake, the woman grabbed her kid and pulled back, but this time tripped on her own skirt and both went tumbling to the ground.

Everyone around evaporated, leaving the three of them alone in the middle of the gatehouse. Guards appeared by the dozen almost instantly, filling both ends of the space.

An accusatory finger and shouts of ‘Demon tried to kill me!’ echoed all around.

Holy shit. She’d run into an otherworld Karen.

The guards seemed to calm down when she didn’t offer any resistance. If they had police cars, she was sure she’d have ended up in the back of one no matter how it looked,

just because of her red eyes. As it was, they took her far enough away so that the woman's shrieking wouldn't drown out the conversation.

The questions were pointed. Elania answered all of them carefully. There was no presence of a 'truth' stone, and she wondered if they'd have to go that far to prove anything.

Her worry was misplaced, because apparently the guards were annoyed by the woman. The claims had become more and more fantastical until, finally, one of the guards spoke up and said she was a liar. That made her even more mad, and she slapped him.

That was the wrong thing to do.

The slapped guard stood and watched as one of the other guards snatched her wrist and locked her arm behind her back in one smooth motion. The other pulled out a metal stick and then smashed it into her face.

Elania was sure the woman would crumple instantly from the blow, but the guard holding her kept her on her feet. A series of metal fistful blows to the woman's stomach and face followed until the guard holding her decided it was enough and tossed her to the ground. The young boy jumped up and threw himself over her, and began to sob and beg for mercy.

The guard with the cudgel turned and pointed at Elania. "I think we figured out what happened here. Go on and get out of here, demon. Don't cause any more trouble."

Elania wanted to protest that she had started no trouble, even though she felt terrible and guilty about the woman getting beaten. Even if it was her own stupid fault. Elania took one more look at the bloody mess the guards had wrought, and then passed by silently.

The kid gave her a glare of hatred.

If she had been a hero, she'd have stopped the guards somehow and made everything turn out alright. If she'd been given super healing and happy love powers, she'd have healed her and made everyone laugh.

She wasn't a hero, and didn't have those kinds of powers.

Elania pulled her cloak around herself tighter and kept her head down as she passed by the very unhappy guards.

Finding out how many guards it would take to beat her into a bloody pulp was not on her bingo card for the day.

Her trek through the central hub area was done in somber personal silence. The guards at the noble district studied her intently as she passed through. The Noble District turned

out to a series of spiral staircases upward, each level featuring a different function of shops or multi-story houses embedded directly into the central pillar.

Fancy gardens of mushrooms, flora, and even grass and small trees that weren't [**Tower-Cap**] greeted her, giving the place a, well, Overworld feel.

The row of 'Artificer' shops she found on one of the medium-upper levels. The sign for the street clearly stated the purpose helpfully, and she eagerly headed into the first and largest shop on the street.

The front door was fancy, but she didn't miss the metal reinforcement woven into the frame. Once inside, there was an old vintage feeling. Every surface was covered in wood...the real type of wood, not the soft fungal stuff she'd become accustomed to in the Deep Caverns.

The floors were polished and clean, and dozens of stands held different trinkets that glittered with magic light and artistry.

A man standing behind a glass counter smiled at her.

It was a fake, forced smile. "What are you doing, girl? There's no food or charity here. You'll scare the clientele away, please leave."

Elania blinked. "I'm not here for charity. I have something to sell," Elania continued and stepped toward the counter, but the man almost immediately freaked out.

He shouted at her. "Stop! We have security!"

Elania's eyes followed the man's hand as he pressed a stone on the side of the wall. It lit up and bells began to erupt in the building, making a horrible cacophony.

"I have a [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] to sell! Please!" Elania shouted over the noise, halting in place.

She pulled the core out of her bag and showed it clearly so maybe he'd calm down and stop freaking out.

He didn't care, and a trio of armed guards emerged from a back room.

The shopkeeper pointed at her. "Get her out of here!"

Her hope for some type of resolution plummeted through the floor. She raised her hands and backed out slowly. Two of the guards remained inside and bolted the door shut while the third followed her and made sure she left.

A city guard either saw or heard the commotion and hurried over. "What's going on?"

The bouncer shrugged. "Girl's banned from shop."

"Why?"

The man shrugged again. "Dunno. 'Cause she's a demon, I guess."

That prompted the guard to give her a second look, and a frown appeared on his face. "I'll take things from here then."

The bouncer nodded and disappeared back into the shop.

A lump of defeat filled her stomach. How'd things end up like this?

"What are you doing here?" the guard asked.

"I needed to see an artificer, so I could sell something," Elania said.

He shook his head. "You're in the wrong place for that."

"Is there a right place?" Elania asked rather more pointedly than she meant.

"I mean, this is the Noble District. There aren't any artificers here. Just rich shops that sell things for ridiculous prices. I am guessing what you are trying to sell isn't actually an artifice, is it?"

Elania shook her head. "It's a [**Monster Core – Ralfot**]."

He nodded. "So. Wrong place. You need to go over to the Artisan District, then to Artificer Row."

"Oh." Elania mumbled. She pulled her map up and looked at it. Sure enough, there was such a place. It was just on the opposite end of the city, and she had to pass all the way through either the Mercenary District or Conclave District to get to it. That was going to be a lot of walking.

"Ugh. Thank you. I didn't know. I'll head that way now," Elania said. "Thank you."

The guard didn't let her go. "Wait. Are you planning to break curfew?"

Elania blinked. "Curfew, what?"

No one had mentioned a curfew to her, had they? That seemed like an important thing to forget to mention. Elania glanced at her new [**System**] clock. It read 18:34.

"Curfew starts at 19:00. Conclave, Noble, and Artisan districts lock down. Lights go out. Only the Mercenary District doesn't observe it. If you don't have a place to stay, you need to head there now if you want to make it in time," the guard explained.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She was going to have to spend the entire night in the slums?

He must have seen the panic on her face as he sighed. "Come with me. I'll escort you to the gate at least. That way, you won't have to run."

Elania blinked. He was being nice? She smiled and thanked him again.

The walk back down was faster than the one up. The path through the noble district and then back through the hub to the Mercenary gate took nearly an hour. Other guards scrutinized them carefully, but her escort seemed to provide the necessary hall pass needed as the overhead crystals dimmed and left everything in muted dark blues.

“A piece of advice. Don’t use the ‘Call Guards’ function in the Merc Dist’ or you’ll likely get hurt,” the guard said unbidden as they neared the gate.

Elania blinked. “I can fend for myself. Why are you helping me?”

“Call it a weakness for young women in distress,” he replied immediately.

Her cheeks heated. She was not in distress. Actually, maybe she had been. Alright, yes, he was right about that part. Centering herself, she let out a little huff. “Does my hero have a name, then?”

That drew a choke from him, which made her smile slightly.

“My name is Henri. Yours?” he asked.

“Elania,” she replied. “Thank you again.”

He shook his head. “Don’t mention it. Just doing my job.”

A few guards idled at the gate. Traffic had aborted, and they looked bored. That changed when they saw her and Henri.

One of them waved. “Henri! What, did you find a new girlfriend already?”

Henri’s cheeks flushed. “Uhh, no. Girl needed help with some directions.”

“So you escorted her all the way down here?” Another guard asked.

Another guard leaning against the wall chimed in, “Always the knight, bleeding heart Henri.”

One of the guards stopped lounging and suddenly stood up straight, half reaching for his sword. “Hey! She’s a demon!”

The friendly chattered died as everyone went to attention.

One of them pointed. “Fuck! She’s not even bound! Look at her eyes!”

Henri held up his hands. “Guys, calm down. I don’t think she’s dangerous.”

The angry guard didn’t let up. “How can you be sure about that? What are you bringing it here for, anyway? We already have enough problems in the Merc Dist’ without a rampaging demon running around!”

Elania sighed. “Hello, I’m right here, definitely not rampaging or anything you know?”

Everyone went silent and stared at her.

“I already went through the checkpoint and was interrogated by Lieutenant Gaston. He let me through without issue. The group of conclave monks I was traveling with didn’t seem to have any issue with me going off on my own, either. I was lost and Henri helped me get here so I didn’t violate curfew. What’s the problem?” Elania looked at each of them in turn.

She saw her words got through to a few of them at least, including the one that was in charge. Henri was on her side, but she couldn't suppress her annoyance at the treatment. The one who had spotted her in the first place also wasn't buying it.

He seemed firmly in the 'anti-Demon' crowd. "None of that matters! She's a bloody unbound demon! We need to lock her up before there is a bloodbath that we'll have to clean up!"

Elania puffed up her cheeks. "I'm not going on a rampage! The only way there will be a bloodbath is if someone attacks me, I'll probably beat the crap out of them!"

That elicited a chorus of laughter from two other guards. One of them slapped his leg. "She's going to beat the 'crap' out of them!"

What was so funny? Had they really never heard a shit joke before? It wasn't even a joke really, just a turn of phrase.

"That's a new one!"

Apparently not.

"Fitting."

"Wouldn't want to clean it up."

Her antagonists glared at all of them. "Stop laughing! This is serious! She's a demon, not a girl!"

"Seems like she's both to me," Henri said.

The man fumed. "This is se...!"

The leader held up his hand. "...serious. Yeah, sure, but plenty of people end up as bloody messes in there. What's the difference? We don't get involved with those, anyway. Just when things get really out of hand."

The older man looked at her. "Keep your head down in there."

Elania nodded. They passed her through.

Yay. Too bad every fucking thing had to turn into a demon-discrimination ordeal.

At least no one had tried to stab her yet.

CHAPTER 52 – TAVERN SPOT

E lania set her destination as the center of the Mercenary District and where she suspected she'd find the active taverns and alehouses that'd give her a chance to look for a room or a place to wait. The main avenue was well lit, but evidence of squalor was everywhere she looked. Trash and litter filled the street, most of it having washed up against the buildings—and people—along the sides.

The lack of overhead crystals cast everything in darker hues than when she'd been through before. **[Darkvision]** dealt with most of that, but multiple streets branching off still had the 'Oh-fuck-someone-is-following-me-too-dark-category' attached to them.

When the central plaza of the district came into view, she relaxed. Let her guard down a little.

That's exactly when someone tried to stab her.

There was a flicker of sound and her ear tensed up as her **[Darkwalker]** senses set off the alarm. She turned her next step into a whirl, and her hand clamped down on a man's wrist.

[Stabber – Human – Level 77]

He stared at her in shock. She stared back. There was the vague sensation of hundreds of eyes watching the altercation, as if all the other piranhas were waiting to see if it was safe to bite.

Offering a silent apology and prayer to Lieutenant Gaston, she yanked hard, and the man flew, smashing into a nearby stone building with a heavy thump. She'd controlled herself; he'd probably get back up again. Maybe after healing a few broken bones.

She turned and continued on her way as if nothing had happened. It seemed to have been the correct decision, as no one else accosted her.

The thought that the taverns would be open and doing business was correct. The scene ruined her mental picture, though. Outdoor seating was crammed full, music filled the air, and hundreds of men were going about like it was the middle of the day. Scantily clad women walked with men to what she assumed were brothels or something else. She'd officially found Neftasu's nightlife scene.

She hoped that Mr. Stabber was the only one who had a thing for armed and armored lesser demonesses.

The center was too crowded. She picked a side street with some more shops and found a tavern with empty seating. It was less noisy, and she decided to try the place out.

A busy barmaid was rushing large tankards between tables as Elania slid off her backpack and sat at one of the empty ones. She slid her boots through the straps just so no one thought they could snatch it and run.

Settling in for a long wait, she began to study the other patrons. Most of them were lower level, much lower than the people she'd seen at the checkpoint and Waystation Four. She'd not seen any real rhyme or reason to the levels, but city people seemed to be much lower level.

Considering you only earned levels for killing things or people, that made sense.

As her gaze wandered, she noticed a man staring at her from near the door. He was large, wearing armor, and looked dangerous.

[Bouncer – Human – Level 245]

So, there was security. The question of whether she was going to have trouble passed through her head almost immediately. Taking a deep breath, she smiled and waved to him, but that only seemed to make him more annoyed.

Oh well. She looked away and tried to pretend to be interested in something else.

That wasn't hard, because she was interested in a lot of what she saw, all of it new. There was very little evidence of wood wherever she looked. Furniture, doors, signs, and pretty much everything was made of metal—or stone.

Fungal wood probably didn't do well for anything intended to last. It was so soft it likely decayed quickly. It was mushroom flesh, after all. Its pros really went to how easy it was to turn into javelins. Probably made good flexible bow material, at least if you didn't mind your bow turning to mush and having to replace it every so often.

By the time the waitress arrived, Elania was studying the city cavern's ceiling, the dimmed light stones barely visible hanging from their chains if she pushed her unslotted **[Darkvision]** to its limit.

“What can I get you?” the woman asked with a neutral tone that was very much all business.

Ugh. The waitress was literally screaming anti-demon.

“How much is a Frujuice?” Elania asked politely.

“Small silver,” the waitress answered.

That seemed...expensive from what she had been told about city prices. Still, it was whatever.

Elania nodded and pulled the coin out of her pouch nestled underneath her torso armor. The woman took it without another word. Eventually, she returned with the glass of clear golden liquid.

It tasted fine, a bit too sweet compared to before. The bouncer continued to glare at her.

The thought that maybe she should find another place to wait quickly occurred.

Maybe finding an inn for the night would be a good idea.

Elania carefully nursed her Frujuice, taking little sips at a time to draw out her stay.

There were only so many things to be interested in before the waiting became boring. She sighed and rested her face on her hand and stared at the wall. No social media to check, no videos to browse, and not even a blog to read. Maybe she should pull open her **[Status]** and daydream about ideas on her skills?

The moment she finished her glass, the Bouncer gave her the evil eye and approached. It was, perhaps, time to move on.

He reached her before she had her pack on. “Time to get out of here, demon. You’re not welcome.”

Elania nodded. “Sure—”

A melodic voice poked both of them. “There you are!”

It belonged to a lithe woman wearing a black and white maid’s outfit, complete with little frills and knee-length stalking. Her heart-faced shape was surrounded by a bob-cut of yellow hair that ended in slightly darker tips. It was the eyes, though, that captured Elania’s attention. They were a deep, glowing sapphire blue.

[Death Dealer – Lesser Demon – Level 556]

Panic flashed through Elania as the woman walked right up to her side and then linked arms with her. Her instincts were screeching as loudly as they could: Danger, Danger, Danger. The woman flashed the bouncer a smile. “Why don’t you be a dear and go get us something to drink? A warm cider, maybe? A Frujuice?”

The man scowled and reached out to grab the Demoness by the shoulder. "Your kind is not wel—"

Elania blinked. Apparently the bouncer had no sense of self-preservation or a broken **[Identify]** because the 'Death Dealer' turned and grabbed his wrist. Then ripped his arm out of the joint, spraying half the tables with a shower of blood.

Then she hit him with it.

Hard enough to send him flying through the air to crash into the building's storefront sign, the limb she used exploding into a useless stub.

It all happened so fast. Elania had very little time to think about it.

Patrons ran and screamed. The waitress looked out from the door to the tavern with a horrified expression. The Demoness noticed her and smiled. "Don't worry darling, I wouldn't leave you to clean up everything."

A familiar process unfolded: the man's blood and body parts began to disintegrate into golden light motes that then flowed into the other demon. After a few seconds, the bloody scene was clean and only the slight damage to the sign and a pile of empty clothes remained.

"You just...ate him," Elania accused.

"They're delicious," the demoness replied without a hint of a joke. She squeezed Elania's arm slightly. "What's your name?"

Feeling trapped, Elania answered. "Elania. What's yours?"

"Elania! What a nice name. I'm Tessa. Let's have a drink together!" It was impossible to tell whether or not the exuberance was fake.

"Uhh. Sure. But could you...please let go of me?" Elania asked.

A vibrating 'hmm' came from Tessa before she did so, moving to sit down. Elania numbly sat down at her seat more slowly.

Tessa waved to the still frozen waitress. "Bring us something before I get impatient!"

The woman scurried back into the building.

A group of four men approached. Elania's first thought that they were guards was dead as she examined them. They looked like mercenaries. One of them muttered a low "Demons."

Their weapons were drawn. The leader halted a safe distance away. "This is our turf, Demon! You just killed one of our customers. Get out of her before we remove you."

Elania felt like pulling her hood up and escaping, but Tessa reached over and grabbed her hand. “Elania, please just wait a moment while I deal with this. I am so sorry our chat has to be delayed again.”

The Demoness was going to ‘deal with it’. That was what she had been afraid of!

Tessa moved to stand in front of the mercenary party. “You’ve all forgotten to be afraid.” She licked her lips. “My master has given me strict orders about who I can and can’t kill. Please threaten or touch me.”

The mercenaries looked between each other uncomfortably, but the wizard stepped up and began incanting something. His crystal tipped staff began to glow.

Tessa pointed at him and uttered a single arcane word.

A black circle appeared over the wizard’s head, then flashed downward. At first, it seemed like it was going to crush him, but there wasn’t anything like that. Instead, it seemed to be like a portal, and when it reached his feet, it winked out of existence... along with the wizard.

“Who else wants a trip to the depths?” Tessa asked cheerfully.

“Relain’s Hound!” one of the men shouted, fearfully. Whatever that meant, Elania suspected Tessa had managed to succeed in reminding them to be afraid. The three turned and ran.

Elania’s brain played catch up.

Holy shit, two people were dead.

Well, she assumed wherever the ‘Depths’ were had killed the wizard. Still!

Tessa returned like nothing had happened with a smile. A smile lined with triangular, razor sharp looking teeth.

Elania did a double take. Tessa’s ears were pointed as well. Elf? The human eaty-kind-of-Elf?

Tessa hid her smile. “Sorry, I’m told it’s a bad habit that makes others uncomfortable.”

Elania nodded quickly. “Uhh. Does this happen often?”

Tessa shook her head. “You tell me. Normally I stay unnoticed. But you, you’re sitting here all meekly in the open.”

Was she really acting meek? Elania frowned. “I just need to wait until morning.”

“Maybe you should look for an Inn,” Tessa replied.

“That’s what I was doing until you...until you...” Elania’s words trailed off.

Tessa smiled again. “Sometimes the people of the Mercenary District need be reminded of their place. Which is not antagonizing me.”

The Demoness looked over at the tavern and frowned before shouting. "And they better not do more by not bringing me my drink!"

Elania fidgeted, glancing around. Everyone had disappeared, except she spotted two city guards watching them with interest. Oh no.

"The guards...they're watching us," Elania stammered.

Tessa let out a trilling laugh. "Don't mind them. There were probably a dozen emergency calls, and they had to look to make sure there wasn't a rampage."

This didn't qualify as a rampage? She'd ate the bouncer and did...did something to the magic caster!

Tessa leaned forward and sniffed at her. "So... what type are you? You smell so strongly human it's hard to tell."

"I'm a human-type," Elania said flatly.

Tessa stared at her before suddenly reaching out and snatching hand then yanking it to her mouth. A sharp pain flared through a finger before Elania could yank her hand back.

Considering the teeth, she was lucky, Tessa probably could have taken the whole finger off. Thankfully she'd only took a nibble. Still, Elania fixed her with a hostile glare. "Don't touch me like that."

"As you wish, little kitty. I won't touch you again unless you ask me to," Tessa replied with a sly smile as she licked her lips. "Did you eat your master?"

"I never had a master," Elania answered.

Tessa gave her an appraising look over. "A young wild one somehow making it to the city? You have much potential, Elania."

Potential for what? Tessa had kept her off balance the entire time, and Elania did not like the feeling that everything was spinning out of her control. Before she could figure out a response, the waitress arrived with a tray of drinks and set them out.

A super polite "Would you like anything else?" was dismissed by a wave of Tessa's hand. The waitress escaped in a way that made Elania envious.

Tessa turned her smile back on. "I can offer you a few suggestions, especially on—"

Two guards in burgundy cloth and with gold caps appeared beside the two guards.

Tessa's head snapped over towards them, and she let out a hiss. "My handlers have caught up with me. Time to go."

Elania blinked. "Someone is after you?"

Tessa stood up and eyed her. "Today is my free day, but if they catch me, they'll give me orders. I am not cleaning the sewers again."

The demoness snatched the drink and gulped it down before her eyes slid back onto Elania. “I’ll find you later, unless you want to come with me?”

Elania shook her head.

“Pity! Maybe next time.” Tessa backed away, then jumped up onto the building’s roof like it was a perfectly normal action. The four guards began to run after her on the ground as the woman took off.

Shaking her head, Elania stood up, sorted her stuff and laid another small silver on the table for the drinks. Gulping down her Frujuice she hurried away, pulling her cloak tighter.

Maybe there was a dark alley she could claim until morning.

CHAPTER 53 – REVERBERATIONS

The light stone was simple enough to activate once Yolani slotted in the mana shard. It had been just high enough quality to work. Unfortunately, it had been low on charge, and after the combat in the dungeon, she had been low on energy. The vault of mana crystals she had stockpiled proved their usefulness as she recharged the shard and her combat items.

The light stone was hauled off in a **[Ralfot]** driven wagon, and a few hours later a note arrived confirming her delivery of the goods... and the lengthening of her grace period of two more weeks to finish the last one.

It was a miracle they'd managed the first, and a weight settled on her shoulders. How was she going to get another mana shard?

The next few days passed like a blur as she tended to the shop. A visit to Ranolf cost her dearly in coin to recharge several trays of mana crystals. His monopoly, via owning the only demon kennels on the row, was exacerbated by the shortage. It wasn't just her that had to go to him for charging, but everyone.

The cost went up accordingly.

Henri was a consistent presence, showing up every day like clockwork to check on her. She appreciated his care, but after the kiss, she couldn't help but think of what he was after. Not that she didn't like him, but there was no way she could think about that sort of thing with the specter of the Magister's debt weighing around her neck.

Thankfully, he seemed to understand, or know, because he didn't bring it up.

On the days that Henri didn't make it because of his work, Lucas showed up. Both helped her whenever she needed assistance moving things, which was good because her

father had packed things tight and she wasn't tall enough or strong enough to move some of the crates. Reorganizing things took up most of her time.

Her father...

The shop's bell rang and broke her train of thought. It was an early morning customer. A few words were exchanged, and Yolani fetched one of the spell locks and personalized it to their thumbprint. Then exchanged the item for a few coins.

By the time the transaction was completed, she had forgotten the person's face. Normally she'd have felt proud to have made and sold the useful object.

All she could feel was a hopeless feeling. What was the point in selling the thing for a few coins? Without a mana shard, everything would disappear.

Yolani swallowed and went and turned the shop sign to 'closed', before getting on her city outfit. Leather armor, her wand belt, and a pouch containing her useful items. It was time to return to the Syndicate and fetch her share of the dungeon dive's proceeds.

Hurrying down the row, she avoided the people moving up and down the street, but when she got to the main gate, a familiar face was there.

"Greetings lass, good to see you out and about finally," Harlock greeted.

Yolani blinked. He wasn't wrong. She'd spent the entire week locked up in the shop almost. "How are things?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Same as ever. A bit more desperate. The shortage is on everyone's lips. More and more come and go, looking disappointed. Got word it's starting to affect the infrastructure people. Waterworks technician was cursing a storm when he left yesterday."

She considered that. The city certainly needed mana shards to effectively operate. There were too many people in too small a space for it to be otherwise. Air was constantly cycled from long lengths of air pipes, while sewage, running water, and the light stones all required shards to power their functions.

Civil engineering would always have first priority for their needs, but if they weren't getting any either...

The situation seemed even more dire than she thought. Why wasn't everyone panicking?

Yolani blinked. They didn't know. Not everyone was an artificer that understood how the city functioned. It explained the grim look she'd seen on her peers' faces when she had been to Ranolf's recharging her crystals.

“If yer gonna take a nap on me, you can take my seat, lass. Although I was fairly certain I was the older of us, and more prone to falling asleep in the middle of the day,” Harlock said.

The comment jolted her out of her inner thoughts, and she let out a little laugh. “Sorry, sorry. You gave me a lot to think about. I’m heading to the Syndicate to pick up my share of our dungeon run.”

Harlock frowned. “You’re going alone?”

Yolani nodded. “I’ll be fine. There is plenty of time. I’ll go through the Conclave side of things.”

He let out an unhappy grumble, then looked over to the other side of the gate. “Oi! Lucas!”

The middle-aged man hurried over, wearing a brand-new set of armor. It was clear where he had spent part of his share of the loot.

Yolani smiled at him. “Nice to see you, Lucas!”

He smiled and greeted her back before looking more seriously to Sergeant Harlock. “Sir?”

“Escort mission. The girl is going to pick up her gold from the Syndicate. Make sure nothing happens to her,” Harlock ordered.

Embarrassment ran through her. “Sergeant, there is no need. I’m not a...”

“Things are restless, and the service is part of our employment package,” Harlock said before turning back to Lucas. “If she needs to make any detours or the like, then follow along. Just make sure she gets back safely.”

As they headed through the city, she really couldn’t think of anything to talk about. “Uhm. Sorry for putting you out like this.”

“No problem. Guarding the row, escorting through the city. Job is about the same,” Lucas replied. He grinned at her. “Actually, you could say I got an upgrade cause I get to walk with a cute artificer.”

Her cheeks heated, and she let out a nervous laugh.

When they reached the central city hub, her feet were hurting. A week of inactivity had left her out of shape? She trekked onward.

When the Syndicate’s fortress of a district finally came into sight, a frown crossed Yolani’s face. A thick crowd had gathered outside. “What’s going on?”

“Lot of people are offering a lot of coin for mana shards. Lots of people are hard on their luck, taking the chance to go on a dive to look for one. Profit share is enormous considering the price the shards are going for at auction,” Lucas explained.

“Any idea what those prices were?” Yolani asked.

Lucas shrugged. “Think I heard fifty large golds for a high-quality shard. That’s enough for someone to retire on.”

Fifty large golds? That was insane.

“Expect you’ll get a large payout for your father’s shard,” he added.

Her shoulders drooped. Her father’s shard. If only Fenton hadn’t taken it, she’d have had the extra shard she needed to solve things.

Lucas immediately saw her expression crumple. “Oh, hey. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to...”

She shook her head. “It’s not your fault. I just haven’t worked through things yet.”

Skipping the crowd, they headed over to the back entrance to the Syndicate’s building dedicated to collecting auction sale shares. It was a plushly decorated but small room with a single receptionist window. The lady had them wait while she went to find the manager.

When she returned, it was with Fenton in tow. Was he the only manager that worked here? Or had he taken an interest in her for some reason?

“Ms. Aetherhart. I’m glad to see you. Your father’s shard went for quite a sum,” he said. Pulling out a small leather bag, he handed it to her.

The weight shocked her.

As he stated the value, she was shocked. “Twenty large golds for the shard itself as your father’s share. Plus, one large gold, five small gold, and some silver for expedition’s share.”

No wonder Harlock had sent Lucas with her. It was a fortune! Everyone had received just over one and a half large golds for the run? That was... way more than she had expected.

Fenton glanced at Lucas. “I see you already have your own escort, but if you’d wish, the Syndicate can provide a carriage or men at no charge to see you safely to the bank or your shop.”

Yolani swallowed. “I don’t suppose you have any mana shards for sale with 800 capacity?”

He shook his head. “We’ve had a few come in, but they are going quite high at the auction. You missed it, I’m afraid. I would tell you that next week’s auction might be your chance, but supply has not recovered, even with so many new divers.”

“Twenty gold wouldn’t be enough for one?” Yolani asked with a frown.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The Magistrate has placed a blanket ban on the sale of the lower end of our shards, buying them outright for the city. There is not enough for even that, and only the higher end ones have been going to auction."

She let out a defeated sigh. "Thank you for the information, Manager Fenton."

The ache in her feet prompted her to take the man's generosity. "I'll take a carriage back, if it's really no trouble."

He nodded. The arrangements didn't take long.

The entire ride back, she clutched the bag of gold. Maybe she could try visiting all the shops in the Row again? Other than that, she had no idea or clue where she'd be able to find a mana shard.

INTERLUDE—GASTON

Lieutenant Gaston stood rigidly in Captain Harrik's office, the latter man leafing through a thin folio more for display than anything else. The air was thick with tension as the captain sighed and leaned back in his chair, pinning Gaston with a stern look.

"Lieutenant," he began gruffly. "Care to explain why you let an unregistered and unbound demon saunter past your checkpoint like it owns the place?"

Gaston swallowed, fixing his gaze on a point behind Harrik's head. "Captain, the demon in question is not unrecorded. I submitted the initial classification and observations myself..."

Harrik responded by tossing a report across his desk; it skimmed the polished wood surface and almost slid off onto the floor before Gaston caught it.

"I read your report," Harrik grumbled. "Everything seems in order except for one minor detail—she's free as a bird, no contract binding her."

Bewilderment flashed across Gaston's face. "Sir, when she passed through my checkpoint, she was unmistakably under contract."

Ignoring Gaston's confusion, Harrik reached for a small wooden case on his desk, revealing an assortment of cigars. He selected one and deftly used a gilded cutter to prepare it.

A sense of annoyance washed over Gaston as he watched Harrik light up the cigar—tobacco was restricted in Neftasu, and somehow these sessions usually ended with him neck-deep in trouble.

Smoke filled the room, curling around Harrik's figure like spectral tendrils. Gaston tried to relax. The captain only smoked in front of him to set him at unease. He knew

better than to protest, or even mention that the Overworld cigars were a type of contraband. Some battles were just not worth fighting.

An exasperated sigh escaped Harrik as he waved his hand in the air. "Look around you, Lieutenant," he said. "You know what time of year it is, and this year's worse than usual."

He paused, waiting for Gaston's nod before continuing. "There's word that Magister Astolf has come to an understanding with Magister Relain. The uneasy peace between the Mercenary Guild and Syndicate only confirms it."

Harrik leaned back again, puffing out another cloud of smoke and watching Gaston closely as he continued. "Imagine if the Council swings into Relain's hands? Imagine if our budget gets slashed while the scum in the Outer districts ends up richer?"

Gaston could only nod at this. He agreed tentatively; such a shift in power would indeed be bad for the Guard, although there was a very obvious need for more funding in the Mercenary District, but how did it connect to their demon problem?

"Sir, I see your point, but I fail to understand its relevance here. There are countless demons within these city walls."

"Yes," Harrik shot back impatiently, "all bound neatly to someone who answers for their actions. But who answers for this one?" He pointed a stern finger at Gaston. "We do. You do."

Gaston sighed and rubbed the side of his head. "But sir, she was accompanied by Conclave monks and didn't seem at all unhinged..."

Harrik cut him off with a derisive snort. "And they never do... until they do! And then it's us cleaning up the mess!"

Sliding two pieces of paper across his desk towards Gaston, Harrik continued grimly, "Just look at these—two incidents involving her already."

He pointed at each report in turn. "One where she nearly beat a woman to death and another with a disgruntled noble shopkeeper lodging a formal complaint against her."

Gaston frowned, picking up each report and leafing through them, reading as fast as he could. He knew the Captain valued the complaints from the noble district more—they catered to the nobles who could take their grievances straight to the Magisters.

"And then there's the mana shard shortage." Harrik continued, "Not only is it disrupting our operations, but it's also destabilizing the city's economy. The city works is in uproar. The Council is on edge."

The implications he was stating were clear—if things went awry now, it would not be good for the city guard. It would not be good for Captain Harrik.

“I want you to handle this, Lieutenant,” Harrik commanded, leaning back in his chair and puffing contentedly on his cigar. “She’s been here for just one day and already stirred up trouble. I trust you’ll deal with her appropriately.”

Gaston held his ground, determined to make his point. “Sir, based on the reports, it seems she didn’t instigate the first incident. As for the shopkeeper’s complaint—my nephew was involved. She merely showed up and tried to—”

“Enough!” Harrik snapped, slamming his fist onto the desk, causing his cigar ash to scatter across its polished surface. “I don’t care about your opinions. This is an order! Deal with her!”

The captain’s eyes bore into him as he laid out a range of unsavory options that included hiring a Conclave hitman or even tricking the demon into a trap outside the city.

“If you can force her into a contract serving the Guard, that would be ideal,” Harrik added grudgingly. “Every other fool in this city is collecting these pet demons like they are lucky charms. Why not us?”

Gaston swallowed hard at that suggestion before proffering his own idea: “How about we start by having her under surveillance? Just to assess her value...or threat.”

Harrik leaned back in his chair. “Fine,” he conceded gruffly.

“But remember this, Gaston,” he continued, pointing a finger for emphasis. “You’ll be responsible for whatever happens. We can’t afford any mistakes right now.”

“Do you understand?” The captain’s question hung heavy in the smoky air between them.

Gaston nodded solemnly. Wasn’t that how it always was?

“Yes, sir.” He replied.

CHAPTER 54 – THE REAL ARTIFICERS

All the dark alleys had been claimed by gangs, orphans, or the homeless. Elania did not want to confront anyone on their own turf, so she kept trudging along through the streets. Whenever someone approached her, she gave them a heated glare that seemed to forestall any further encounters.

Whether it was the change in her posture, the speed at which her hands went to her two **[Vorpal Daggers]** or just her unhappy attitude, she wasn't sure.

Eventually, she came to an inn that was still lit up. Checking her clock, it was just after midnight. No free rooms.

The second inn she found was the same. No free rooms.

No free rooms.

After the sixth, she realized it was a lie. They just didn't want a demon staying the night. That made her angry. Not that she had any inkling about what to do about it. She'd never been the target of such discrimination before coming to Eladu.

It sucked.

Eventually, in a corner near the gate back to the central hub, she found a cubbyhole that wasn't in use. Climbing up to a second level, there was a flat stone landing that was built into part of the building's roof that was perfect for having a high vantage point.

She sat down, crossed her legs, and pulled her backpack around. A quick rummage allowed her to check on her **[Monster Core – Ralfot]**. It was still safely bundled in its cloth wrap. She pulled out her two **[Apnal]** and snacked on the crunchy sweet fruits.

Her mind wandered back to Joren's estimation that the core was worth at least one or two large golds. From the way things were going, the worry that she'd be ripped off

more than she had expected was real. If she got a quarter or half of the value, that would probably be lucky.

Meaning her funds weren't going to be nearly as much as she had, though. What kind of job could she get in the city as a demon? It seemed laughable, and she didn't really have any skills of note other than her fighting ones. Maybe she could be a bodyguard or something? But then, no one seemed to like or trust demons, so that was probably a dead end.

Maybe a contract would allay any fears, but then people seemed very hesitant about that. At least the Conclave monks had seemed to hate the idea. Maybe that wasn't universal.

But who the heck could she ask about it? If she stopped someone on the street to ask, they'd probably run away, curse at her, or freak out.

Or try to stab her again.

Not for the first time, Elania wished she was more of an extrovert and knew how to not be socially awkward. The fact that she'd now been labeled a literal demon seemed like a handicap that was entirely unfair.

She'd always had a hard time pretending to be a normal girl at school, and now she had a literal sign around her neck that said, 'I eat humans!' How the heck was she supposed to deal with that?

Finished with her meal, she packed her things and then walked carefully on the roof, minding the stone tiles. Finding a perch with a view of the gates, she sat down and watched.

And watched.

Eventually, she was so bored she nodded off. When a low drone of voices woke her, she realized sleeping was probably not the safest course of action. Thankfully, it seemed like she had gotten away with it.

Her **[System]** clock reported it was morning. Scrambling to her feet, she made her way back down to the street level and headed up to the gate. Curfew was over and it was time to get to the Artisan District!

Elania wielded the thought like a sword against her previously depressing musings.

The guards still gave her a serious appraisal as she passed through. She gave them a smile. They didn't stop her, so it seemed to work.

Her **[Map]** of the city gave her a rough path to follow, and she weaved her way through the various zones of the Artisan District. There were smith streets, carpentry streets,

tailoring streets, and, well, just about every crafting profession she could think of streets everywhere.

One section contained a massive steelworks, with smoke billowing out of two large brick chimneys. Heat poured from the openings in the large open building, and the clang and bang of people hard at work doing stuff she had no clue about radiated all around her.

The contrast between the quiet, depressed poverty and lethargy of the Mercenary District with what she now found was stark. She much preferred the lively action of the Artisan District.

Now she just needed to find Artificer's Row.

When she found it near the edge of the city cavern's wall, she hesitated. It was a broad street that worked its way up the cavern's side, with two metal gates cutting across the street. Both gates were wide open, the larger allowing wagon traffic through while the other passed through people.

Both were watched by what looked to be at least a dozen heavily armored mercenaries in heavy armor. All of them had swords, spears, or the firearm she'd seen the city guards possess. The security wasn't kidding around.

A wave of apprehension washed over Elania as she approached. She felt very much alone and vulnerable. The guards fixated on her almost immediately.

"Halt. What's your business here...demon?" The man's voice rang out clear and demanding. The other guards, who weren't busy, turned to watch the encounter. Having an audience added to her discomfort, but she was determined not to buckle.

"I have a [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] I was hoping to sell," Elania said. Somehow, she kept her voice steady.

Nearby, she could hear the guards comment on her. Almost predictably, she heard one comment about her race. "What's an unbound demon doing here?"

"Where'd you get a core at?" the guard interrogating her asked.

She let out a tense breath. "I helped kill the Alpha, and the core was my share of the loot."

The man grunted. Whether that was because he did or didn't believe her, she had no idea. Nearby, an older man made a gesture toward her pack and the guard nodded.

The guard looked back at her and nodded at her backpack. "Let's see it. If you're telling the truth, we'll let you in."

Elania pulled her pack off her back and pulled out the core without hesitation. When she uncovered it from the cloth, the transparent orb almost glittered under the light stones above. The single gold orb in the center gave off its own hue of color as well.

The man whistled. "That's a pretty decent specimen. You don't often see them that clear."

"I was told it was worth a few gold," Elania offered.

He turned and yelled. "Lucas! Git over here!"

A wiry man with brown hair and a set of shiny armor jumped up from his seat and hurried over. "Yeah?"

"She has a core to sell. You're going to play escort for this one," the guard ordered.

The man sighed and rolled his neck to crack it. "Oof. What is this, have Lucas escort the ladies around day? I just got back."

The guard didn't seem sympathetic. "Want me to tell Harlock you're having trouble?"

Lucas looked at her and smiled before doing a double take. He blinked several times before greeting her. "Hello...I'm going to be walking around with you."

Elania kept her smile. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

The morning seemed to start early on Artificer's Row. A bustle of workers was already moving goods in and out on wagons. More of the guards were in evidence along the streets, it was probably the heaviest concentration of guards she had seen. Although they were all mercenaries and not the city guardsmen she'd seen in the conclave district.

Different guards for different sections of the city? Maybe artificers were just rich, since they had more protection than she'd seen the noble shops have.

Or maybe the nobles just kept them better hidden in their spiraling vertical home.

Once they had passed out of hearing distance from the gate, she looked over to her escort. "Lucas?"

He looked at her and arched an eyebrow. "Yes?"

She dived right in, since this seemed like the best chance to ask questions. "My name is Elania. Thanks for showing me around. Do you know the best place for me to sell my core? I'm hoping to get the best price for it so I can have some funds to live off of for a while."

He seemed hesitant, but finally spoke. "Well, uhh. I guess Ranolf's Artifice would be the first bet? It's the largest shop on the row."

"Can we go there first, then?" Elania asked.

"Sure?"

She waited for him to show her the way. He looked confused.

"I don't know where it is. Can you show me?" She tried to smile.

Understanding blossomed on his face. "Oh. Oh. You don't know where it is. Sure, follow me."

Maybe she could get some more information. "Do you do lots of work escorting people for... uhm."

"Steelfist. Our company has the exclusive contract with the Artificer's Guild so we protect the area. We do all sorts of services for them." There was almost an eagerness to Lucas' voice, and he was basically puffing out his chest.

Well, it was good that he had pride in his work. The smile on her face might have even been genuine.

Further up the street she spotted a set of three wagons unloading things into a what looked like a warehouse. A large sign stood hanging over a side door. "Is that the shop?" Elania asked.

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, that's it. Convenient location right at the front of the row. I'll wait for you outside."

Elania nodded. "Okay."

She wasn't sure what to expect when she went through the door. That lack of expectation was a good thing because it didn't resemble the 'artificer' shop in the noble district at all.

Apprentices carried boxes of items between workbenches and the wagons. A sharp tang of heated iron and a hint of some kind of incense or mystical essence filled the air, tickling her nose.

Shelves and shelves of different items were on display. Works small and large filled the large open space all the way to the rear. It was an industrial operation, and the storefront was built into one building.

Elania approached the counter; a sleepy apprentice didn't notice her until she coughed.

"Oh. Uhh. Hello! Welcome to Ranolf's Artifice. How can...I...help you?" The young man stammered off as he looked her in the eyes.

Elania smiled. "Yeah. I have that effect on people. I have a **[Monster Core – Ralfot]** that I'd like to sell. I heard maybe I could do that here?"

He blinked at her for a few seconds, then nodded. "I will have to go get Master Ranolf. Could you...please wait here?"

Elania nodded. "Sure."

With the apprentice gone to fetch Master Ranolf, Elania stood awkwardly beside the counter. She quietly observed the organized chaos of the workshop. Artificers, their apprentices, and several burly workmen were busy with various projects.

A few minutes later, an old man with a gray beard returned with the apprentice, adjusting a pair of thick-lensed spectacles as he examined her. His eyes widened slightly as he looked at her before they slid to her backpack.

“Miss demon,” he began. “I am Master Artificer Ranolf. I heard you’re here to sell a monster core, yes?”

Elania nodded. “A [**Monster Core – Ralfot**] that we got from an Alpha Ralfot.” She pulled her pack around to her front and loosened the tie, then carefully unwrapped the core again. He let out an appreciative grunt as he took it.

“It has already been purified. You said you harvested it directly?” Ranolf asked.

“I was traveling with several Conclave monks when we ran into it,” Elania explained.

Ranolf released an appraising hum. “I see. Normally we purchase these from the conclave directly.”

Elania licked her lips. “Since you won’t have to be paying them for purification, I’m sure you can give me a better price that is a win for both of us, right?”

Ranolf gave her an appraising look again. “There is a shortage of mana shards, so I hope you came with realistic expectations for the value of the core.”

A frown appeared on her face. “What does a mana shard shortage have to do with the value of the core?” Elania asked.

Ranolf puffed. “Due to the shortage, there simply is no need for cores. The cores are used to build major artifices, while the mana shards power them. With no shards, there is no need for cores that cannot be powered.”

She wasn’t sure how much that made sense. Wouldn’t any shortage be temporary? If it was worth a lot, then that meant it wasn’t common. So when the mana shards recovered, the core would still be worth a lot?

Elania couldn’t hide her frown. “So, how much can you give me for it?”

“I will need to grade it first before I can make an offer.” The counter had a simple metal holder built for spherical objects and he laid the core in it. The ring was just narrow enough to hold the core in the air, and then he pulled out a small wooden wand with a crystal on the tip.

He tapped it and the core lit up, the golden grape in the center of the crystal giving off its own glow. “The resonance is ideal,” Ranolf murmured.

He pulled another wand from his belt and this time rubbed it against the orb in a circular motion. Nothing happened at first, but then small speckles of blue and red began to form inside the translucent crystal portion. The lights moved in small lazy spirals, mimicking the rubbing motion of the wand.

“The emotional resonance is minimal, so the purification was well done, or the core wasn’t very passionate to begin with.”

Elania blinked. Was that good or bad? “The [**Alpha Ralfot**] was certainly very passionate.”

Ranolf flipped through a few lenses on his spectacles, moving closer to inspect the core. He spent another minute staring into its depths and focusing on it. What he was looking for, she did not know.

He finally gave his verdict. “I believe this is a B-class core. There are few disharmonies, although its channeling capacity is limited.”

She hated feeling stupid and clueless. “Is that good or bad?” Elania asked.

He frowned at her. “B-class is a high grade but outclassed by A-class. S-class would be the highest.”

Well, that followed the skill ranking system curve, so why not? She sighed. “Alright, so it is good, but not the best.”

Ranolf nodded. “Ralfot are mid-tier creatures, the limited power capacity makes sense.”

The man paused, leaving her on edge, waiting for what felt like much too long before finally giving her a price. “Two small golds, and that is being generous. Like I said, the mana shard shortage has shown no sign of abating, and that means the core just isn’t in demand.”

Elania frowned; that was a lot lower than she had been led to believe.

“I was told it would be worth a few large gold,” Elania countered weakly.

Ranolf shrugged. “A month ago, you would have been right. As it is, I cannot offer more. The core will go into storage for who knows how long before it’s useful again.”

Elania bit her lip. It felt like she’d brought her prized possession to a pawn shop only to be told it wasn’t a real gem and the gold was fake. “The price isn’t what I hoped for.”

She realized his gaze had fallen down to her breasts, and he was almost leering at her. A sudden uncomfortable feeling filled her, and she almost took a step back.

“If you need more funds, there are other items I am interested in purchasing,” Ranolf said with a false smile.

Panic filled her. Was he asking for sexual favors? Wait. No. Her mana shard was hanging between her cleavage underneath her armor in its cloth wrap. Was he able to see through her clothes? Regardless, she wasn't sure she wanted to sell her only **[Power]** storage. Without it, she couldn't regulate things or have backup in case of a nasty fight.

"Uhh. Like?" Elania asked hesitantly.

"As a demon, I am interested in the **[Power]** you could provide, to charge my own mana crystals and shards. If you had any of those too, they would definitely be worth quite a few large golds."

"You'd be willing to buy **[Power]** points? How much each?" she asked.

He frowned at the question like he hadn't considered the price. "I'm sure we could work something out. Perhaps sign a contract. I am well versed in such things, and the power provided is essential for maintaining the city's running infrastructure."

He was well versed in dealing with demon contracts? They powered the city's infrastructure? Alarm bells were going off like crazy, not for the first time since she'd arrived in the city.

"I'll consider it. I don't want to sign a contract right now. I think I will go to a few other shops and see about getting a few more appraisals on the core before accepting your offer for two small gold." She tried to keep her voice as diplomatic as possible.

Ranolf picked the core back up and proffered it back to her. "You can check at other shops, of course. The price is good, and I doubt you will find a better one."

Elania felt a bitter disappointment welling up within her, but she forced it down. Offering a weak smile, she secured the core back in her pack. "Alright. I'll keep that in mind. I just would like to look around a bit more before deciding. It was a fairly difficult fight and journey to bring it here."

Ranolf waved her off. "Feel free to do so. Just remember what I said."

Turning on her heel, she hurried out of the shop as was polite to do so. The crowded street was still bustling with traffic. Lucas was waiting by a lamppost and waved with a smile.

She wished she had it in her to give him a genuine smile back.

CHAPTER 55 – RED AND BLACK, BLUE AND GREEN

As Elania stepped out of the third Artificer shop of her search, she began to question her choice to keep shopping around for a higher price. Ranolf's offer of two small golds had beaten all the offers by a full coin. That was to say, the others had, at best, offered her one small gold.

Lucas was waiting, and to his credit, had showed no signs of being annoyed by her wasting the late morning and early afternoon in a fruitless search.

"Lucas, any other shops? This one was a bust, too. I'm thinking it's a waste of time." It was impossible for her to hide her defeated tone.

He rubbed his head. "I know someone who might be able to help. Even if she can't buy it, I bet she could give some good advice on whether the offers you got were legitimate."

Elania blinked. "Sure, that sounds good."

He pointed up the street all the way to the end. "It's at the very end of the row, in the corner."

That proved to be further than it appeared because of how the street was so straight and on an upward slope. The shop was nestled in the corner, wedged tightly between two other buildings. A wooden sign proclaimed the property read: "Aetherhart Artifice."

As they approached, the door shot open violently, slamming against the wall with a loud crack.

The irate voice of a young woman erupted from inside. "You murdered my father! He would never have sold the shop to you! Get out!"

A large, portly man with a bald head stepped backwards, stopping at the doorframe. He held his hands up, warding away whoever was inside. “Be reasonable, girl! You have a chance to save yourself from his debt! I’m trying to help you!”

The female voice reached a crescendo. “Debt he took on because of you!”

A heavy gust of wind erupted from the shop, blasting the man into the air to tumble across the pavement several meters away.

Lucas put a hand on Elania’s shoulder and urged her back a bit more as a young woman with flowing raven black hair stepped outside. The girl’s emerald green eyes sparkled with a fierce intensity and anger, and she leveled her wand at its source.

[Master Artificer – Human – Level 28]

The woman held the same class title as Ranolf had. That hinted that despite her apparent youth she wasn’t to be messed with, and Elania had already learned that level wasn’t a very good yardstick to measure capability.

The man rolled to his knees and got up, much to Elania’s surprise. She wasn’t sure he was the brightest person, because as soon as he did, he shook his fist at the woman.

“You’ll regret this! I’ll make sure of it!” he cursed.

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say. The wand sparked and then zapped the man. He was wearing a dozen pieces of fancy jewelry in the form of rings, earrings, and even a bracelet. All of them suddenly flashed red and then shattered, eliciting a pained shriek. A second bolt of air formed in the air, this time it made a visible white bullet of mist. It shot forward and slammed into the man’s chest, sending him rolling down the street a considerable distance.

Elania’s nose twinged in discomfort. It was impossible to ignore the scent of his bloody, shattered teeth as he skidded to a halt. Thankfully, Lucas’ hand on her shoulder was enough to ground her from the impulse to chase after the wounded prey.

Remarkably, he got up again, and instead of turning and running, he yelled again. “I’ll summon the guard, you insane woman!”

The black-haired girl raised her wand, but this time Lucas stepped forward. “Yolani! You’re going to kill him!”

The emerald eyes slashed over to him. “Good!”

But she didn’t lower the wand or release whatever magic she had intended. Lucas stepped up and took her wrist, and the weapon was gently lowered.

Fatso didn’t seem to be able to read the room. “Ha! Now—”

Lucas turned on him, drawing his sword. “Get out of here or I’ll skewer you myself!”

The man ran.

The violent tension seemed to evaporate and turn into something else. The woman's anger turned into something sad. Lucas patted her on the back, and they said something to each other in low voices.

Feeling awkward, Elania stepped forward. "Umm, Yolani? If this is a bad time, I don't want to bother you..."

The girl looked at her with surprise, noticing her for the first time. "Uh."

Lucas stepped in for the rescue. "This is Elania. She's a demon, and she's looking to sell a monster core, but isn't sure about the offers she's been getting."

Elania nodded quickly.

Yolani looked her over while wiping an eye. "Sure. I can appraise it for you at least. I am not sure I am looking to buy one, though."

"That would be helpful. I just don't know if the other shops are trying to rip me off or not because of..." Elania's words trailed off, unsure if she should finish the sentence.

It turned out she didn't need to because Yolani finished them for her. "Because you're a demon. Right."

The black-haired girl gestured for them to follow. "Come in."

Elania stepped into the shop, but Lucas shook his head.

"I'll keep watch out here, just in case that asshole comes back," Lucas stated.

Yolani nodded. "Thanks, Lucas. I'll take care of her."

The door closed with the subtle jingle of the doorbell. Elania looked around and sniffed the air. It was a more mellow scent that Ranolf's shop had. The largest contrast to Ranolf's bustling industrial workplace was how much denser the shop was. It was smaller, but tables everywhere were covered in a multi-faceted display of unique items.

A large central workbench was surrounded by shelves that were stocked until they looked like they were in danger of being overloaded. Secondary workbenches lined the walls, each with their own projects in progress on them.

And then there was the central piece near the back, an enormous crystal that looked identical to the ones that hung high over the city and provided its day and night cycle.

Yolani walked behind the counter and extended her hand for the core. Elania handed it over silently. Yolani's fingers brushed against her own in the exchange, and Elania couldn't help but notice how warm they were.

Holding up the core to the light from a nearby lantern, Yolani examined it carefully through squinted eyes. Her lips moved as she muttered under her breath, too low for

Elania to hear. A familiar set of spectacles came out, and Yolani repeated the tests done by Ranolf in her own way.

Letting her work, a silence lingered between them, broken only by Yolani's occasional murmurs and the distant hum of activity outside. From close proximity, Elania could see faint lines of exhaustion under Yolani's eyes, and a vulnerability that hadn't been there before.

Eventually, Yolani straightened and put down her tools on the counter gently. "It's a B-class core," she confirmed Ranolf's evaluation. "Given its size and clarity, it would probably be worth about one large gold. Maybe two if someone really needed one of this type."

Elania frowned. "But with the mana shard shortage?"

Yolani sighed. "It honestly isn't very useful right now. A core like this would build something that requires mana shards to power, and there aren't any. No power, no function. So, I am not surprised you're having trouble selling it for what it is worth. They'll basically be keeping it in storage until things recover. If they ever recover..."

Elania nodded slowly at that affirmation from Yolani; it stung less than it had from Ranolf, but not by much.

Noticing Elania's disappointment, Yolani added hurriedly, "If you aren't too hard up for coin, you might want to keep it and sell it for its real value later on."

"I was really hoping to get more." For a moment, their eyes locked. There was something about Yolani's gaze that resonated with her. Was it just seeing another girl with her own troubles, trying to work through them?

Yolani bit her lip. "If you need some coin right now, I guess selling it is your best option... but..."

Their fingers brushed again as Yolani carefully passed the core back. The simple touch yet again felt strangely warm.

Elania raised an eyebrow. "But...?"

Yolani seemed to consider something for a moment, her gaze distant. Then she turned her sparkling emerald eyes onto Elania, curious and probing. "What are your plans, Elania?"

Elania hesitated, taken aback by the question. She really hadn't thought that far ahead yet. "To sell the core and... figure things out," she admitted. "I was hoping the money from the core would give me time. I'm... new to this world and things aren't the greatest."

Yolani nodded, then looked over to a tray on another table. "Would you be interested in charging mana crystals? I could use someone capable of what you can do."

Elania frowned, a sense of wariness filling her. "That's what Ranolf wanted me to do too," she confessed cautiously.

A look of understanding flashed across Yolani's face. "Of course he did..." she muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

"There is something you should know about how mana shards and crystals are powered." Yolani started slowly; her voice grim, which immediately put Elania on edge.

"The city owns a large array of non-sapient demon kennels for most of the city works. Here on the row, Ranolf has a near monopoly on the things. He has a kennel under his shop, and with the mana shard shortage, he's the only source of **[Power]** for recharging. He's seriously price gouging everyone and there is nothing anyone can do about it. That's one of the reasons I'm interested in your services."

A chill ran down Elania's spine as she considered the implications. Demon slave kennels? The city used demons as magical battery chargers? If she ran into trouble, was someone going to cuff her and lock her up in a box and drain her constantly? The prospect was terrifying.

"Kennels?" The world barely escaped her lips; it felt like the air had been sucked out of her lungs. Her heart pounded against her chest as panic seized her. First Marcus had been after her, and now she realized she'd barely side-stepped going down into Ranolf's lair for something likely just as sinister.

She felt sick to her stomach just thinking about it. Trapped like an animal, and her freedom stripped away.

"Thanks for the information, Yolani." Elania finally murmured.

The other girl nodded understandingly. "I didn't mean to say that he intended to lock you up or anything. Just that's...his thing. I would compensate you for your time and services if you could help me."

Elania's eyes flickered with uncertainty as she looked at Yolani. She wasn't sure how much trust to extend, but it felt like she was genuinely concerned and...honest. Maybe this was the most honest conversation she had since arriving in the city, even.

"I... I need to keep my **[Power]** high." Elania admitted, holding Yolani's gaze steadily. "I can't afford to let myself get low, or that would leave me... weak and vulnerable."

Yolani nodded in understanding, then hesitated before asking another question. "What do you usually... eat, Elania?"

The question took her by surprise. Blinking in confusion, she tilted her head slightly as she tried to understand what Yolani was getting at. Apnals? That was—Oh. OH. Realization dawned on her.

“Ranolf feeds his kennels clutches of chickens, every day,” Yolani continued. “They fuel the demons and then he extracts the excess.”

Elania shook her head. “Darkwalkers mostly, although not many as of late. But I think I hit some type of threshold and it marked me. Then there were some Razorscale, Rockbears, and...”

Elania swallowed. “There was a ranger...”

Yolani nodded at her. The judging glare or look of condemnation never came. It didn’t really lift the weight of guilt on her chest, but it was... nice.

“You want me to absorb chicken essence to acquire energy, then charge your crystals?” Elania asked.

Yolani nodded again in simple affirmation. “That would probably be the best way to do it. Although like you said, too much of one thing can cause changes in yourself. Signing a contract would be best, one that provides you with enough essence so you can maintain your humanity on your own.”

Elania’s mind was already spinning, and the mention of a contract brought back an image of Marcus’ sly grin. He had tried to get his hands on her via one. Ranolf was keeping demon slaves in a kennel. Tessa was, despite her brief appearance, apparently running away from some type of sewer cleaning duty. It hinted that the contracts weren’t complete slavery but...

The worry that somehow someone could make a loophole or use a skill to modify the contract thing without permission made her afraid of making one. She’d done so with Joren out of desperation, and it had worked out mostly, but...

“What kind of contract are you talking about?” Elania asked cautiously.

“I could use some help around here,” Yolani admitted with a glance around her shop. “I... I’m having to handle a lot more than normal. It would probably need to be temporary. I’ve been having some issues of my own, and unless I can solve one of them, I’m going to lose the shop.”

Elania blinked in surprise. That certainly was a big problem. “The man earlier...”

Yolani winced slightly, but nodded in confirmation. “That was my uncle... He’s part of it.”

She didn’t elaborate further, but her silence spoke volumes.

Yolani glanced at Elania, her emerald eyes serious. "Here's what I'm thinking, Elania," she began, carefully choosing her words. "We sign a contract for an essence exchange; you feed off my mana regeneration and perhaps on chickens I can acquire from time to time. The human essence from the contract would counterbalance the chickens so you don't have to worry about growing feathers."

Elania covered her mouth, almost letting loose a laugh, despite how serious things were. Was growing feathers a real thing? It probably was, she shouldn't be laughing, but the way Yolani said it tickled her.

"Then we use the power derived from that to charge mana crystals and wands that I need for my work," Yolani continued. "Besides charging things, I could use an extra set of hands around the shop and...a bodyguard. Neftasu can be dangerous, especially now with my...situation."

There was a pause before she added quickly: "In return, you'll have a place to stay here in the shop—it's not much, but it's safe and clean..." Yolani paused and looked around, then corrected. "...well equipped. I can also help you with figuring things out since you probably have lots of questions about things...and of course, there will be payment in coin."

The proposal hung in the air between them. Elania bit her lip and considered it. It seemed like... a miracle? It offered a sense of security and companionship that she hadn't realized she'd been craving. If something seemed almost too good to be true, then it probably was. That adage made her feel like it could be a lie. Or a mistake.

"I appreciate your offer. It almost seems perfect, but... what's the catch?" Elania asked.

Yolani frowned and looked away. "I only have eight days to figure out how to settle my father's debt. He died... well... My uncle got him to agree to a stupid contract, then convinced him to do something even more stupid, which cost him his life."

"The man earlier, he killed your father?" Elania barely managed to ask without stammering.

Yolani's fists clenched. "I haven't been able to prove anything. He's working with a Magister to steal the shop. They'll get a lot of money. It's...it is ridiculous."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Elania offered helplessly.

Yolani nodded and brought her hand to her forehead to rub it. "If you stay here, you'll be involved. If I can't settle things and you're here when they try to take the shop... they'll probably try to claim you as well. So you'll have to go before then."

A moment of silence filled the air before Elania took a deep breath and broke it. “And the contract... It would be one that we both agreed upon? No hidden loopholes?”

Yolani’s emerald eyes glittered in the workshop’s light, meeting Elania’s gaze straight on. “Absolutely. We write it together—no tricks or hidden clauses.”

Ah shit. Elania bit her lip. The girl was her type. The offer was exactly what she needed. Reaching out, she took Yolani’s hand and shook it. What the hell was she getting in to?

Elania smiled. “Let’s do it.”

Yolani smiled back.

CHAPTER 56 – SIGNS AND REVELATIONS

They spent the rest of the day going over the contract, ensuring that no stone was left unturned. There wasn't really any lawbook or contract law for them to use, so they had to wing it. Elania was pretty sure that a real lawyer would have hated their contract because of the number of 'reasonables' and other vague words.

Lucas was slightly confused when Yolani sent him back to work without a demon in tow, but he didn't argue or seem too concerned.

By the time they were finished, it was already late into the night. Sealing the deal was almost anti-climactic. No magic fanfare or cheering. Just a message.

[Contract has been accepted. Active Contracts: 1]

A sense of relief washed over her anyway as she stared at the final version of the document. It felt right, balanced. She couldn't help but feel a strange sense of security in its existence. Even if it was seemingly hideously complex.

Until Yolani had told her, she hadn't realized there could be multiple tiers of requirements and penalties.

"Are you sure that whatever manages these things is going to be able to follow all this?" Elania asked.

Yolani nodded, her finger moving to the contract. "The more complex the contract, the higher the maintenance tax on it. Look, you'll be paying 25% of your acquired essence to maintaining the contract for the duration."

Elania nodded slowly. "And you're giving me half of your mana regeneration, and mana is synonymous with essence. Which also happens to be **[Power]**."

“Not exactly, but close enough. As a demon, you eat essence and convert it into **[Power]** which can then be stored in mana shards, crystals, and a few other devices or stones capable of storing it,” Yolani explained.

“I was really confused when I learned people had HP and MP, but I don’t,” Elania admitted.

Yolani nodded. “That’s because you’re an outsider. Seraphs don’t have HP or MP either.”

Elania rubbed her temples. “I still am a bit surprised angels are real.”

Yolani looked thoughtful. “I think you have a bit of otherworld cultural baggage associated with that, or it’s something strange with how your **[Universal Speech]** is working.”

Elania looked over at the tray of mana crystals that Yolani had been interested in charging. “Did you want to charge those now?”

Yolani suppressed a yawn and shook her head. “Tomorrow morning.” She started to get up, but then froze with a more serious expression. “Unless it will be a problem for you? Now that you have **[Power]** income, it isn’t going to push you over your limit? I don’t want you to get hurt...”

Elania shook her head. “My **[Power]** is nearly full right now, but that’s fine. When I go over the limit, I usually just gain more capacity.”

Yolani blinked. “It...it works that way? I thought it would kill you fairly quickly if you went over.”

“Uhh. Not for me? I mean, I’ve been almost double my capacity a few times. It burns off fast as **[Regeneration]** kicks in and heals the ‘thermal’ damage the **[System]** starts going on about. Even before then, it wasn’t too bad when I went over just a little bit.”

“D...double? And you didn’t turn into a human torch?” Yolani stammered.

A smile appeared on Elania’s face. The other girl’s reactions were fun. “I did that once. I don’t recommend it.”

Yolani stared at her, wide-mouthed. “You’re joking... you’re joking, right?”

Elania smiled and shook her head.

Yolani shook her head. “I admit I’m not a demonologist, so I just really have secondary information on this because it relates to Artificery. But that’s really not typical for demons.”

“I don’t mind being special. It worked out for me,” Elania said with a grin.

That just riled Yolani. “You’re way too cavalier about this! If you keep gaining capacity and charge up fully, it could mean bad things for you! It’s a theoretical disaster waiting to happen!”

Elania opened her mouth in surprise. “Bad things like what?” she finally asked.

Yolani raised her hands and then smacked them together. Then she made a funny explosion noise before finishing with a serious look.

“Umm. Magnets smack into each other and then go boom?” Elania asked with a weak laugh.

The facepalm was instant, and Yolani shook her head. “You just need to be more careful. High levels of **[Power]**, especially used at once, can cause exponential curves that can be bad.”

Elania bit her lip. “Bad is sometimes good if it’s for someone you don’t like.”

Yolani shook her head. “Okay, let me specify: it could be bad for everyone, including you.”

Elania nodded. “I understand. I’ll try to be careful.”

Rubbing her temples, Yolani frowned. “Sorry if that was a bit too intense and serious.”

Elania shook her head. “No, it’s okay. I wasn’t trying to make light of it...just its all so... very serious and trying to laugh it off is a way to cope. I didn’t really expect to be here. Really, I should be thanking you.”

Yolani gave her a soft smile. “Well, we can thank each other then?”

Elania smiled back and nodded. “That works!”

Her hand went to her chest absentmindedly as she thought about her arrival. “Say... do you have any idea what’s causing the mana shard shortage?”

Yolani blinked before shaking her head. “Not exactly. Almost all mana shards come from the Syndicate controlled dungeon in the city. There haven’t been any coming out of it though, compared to normal.”

“When I was summoned, there were these cultists. Black Candle something. They had a scary-looking guy who called himself the Bishop. Does that ring any bells?” Elania asked.

Yolani shook her head. “Can’t say it does, but there are probably a lot of weird cults around.”

Elania bit her lip. “I was stuck in a circle at first. They wanted me to make a contract with them...then offered me a chest. I didn’t really know what it was at the time, a bunch of gold and... mana shards.”

The other girl’s eyes widened. “How many? Where was this?”

“It was really far, in the Deep Caverns. Near a Mushroom colony,” Elania explained. “There were... at least a hundred. Maybe two hundred.”

A frown appeared on Yolani’s face. “And you got away without agreeing to a contract?”

Elania nodded. “A holy knight... or paladin, I’m not sure—I didn’t have **[Identify]** working yet, broke me out of the circle when he attacked.”

Yolani’s jaw fell open. “You survived the attack?”

Elania nodded. “His sword wouldn’t stab me for some reason. It didn’t feel good, but it probably should have chopped me in half.”

“Wait. Wait. He had a sword that didn’t hurt you? Like it was sentient?” Yolani asked.

Was that important? Elania tried to produce the memory in more focus. “Uhm. He talked to it actually, I think.”

Silence filled the room as Yolani appeared lost in thought. Finally, the black-haired girl spoke. “This is a lot to take in. If they had that many shards...they might very well have something to do with the shortage. Maybe they somehow found a way to steal them from the dungeon without the Syndicate knowing?”

Elania shrugged.

“There have been rumors of a Lightbringer Order paladin in the city. I really haven’t been paying much attention to stuff like that, but if he’s the same one you met... maybe we can get answers from him,” Yolani concluded.

That...felt like a bad idea. The man’s first impression had been pretty terrible. Still, if it was a lead, and helpful... Elania nodded. She’d agreed to help, and she’d meant it when she had done so. “If it will help. Just promise to not let him jab me with his blunt sword again.”

“We’ll be prepared. First, though, we need to figure out where he is, or if he’s even in the city, or if the rumors are just fake. Luckily, I know someone who can probably help us figure that out.” A smile lit up on Yolani’s face. “My friend’s uncle is a lot nicer than mine, and just so happens to be a Lieutenant in the City Guard. We can ask him about it and see if we can get a lead.”

Elania nodded. “Okay. I’m glad I brought it up. It seems like it was more important than I thought.”

Yolani’s eyes sparkled. “Honestly, this is fantastic. I have had no idea what to do, but this could be promising.”

Elania watched as the other girl pulled out a parchment and began to write and sketch on it. That was fine... except the conversation was suddenly dead, and it seemed like

the other girl had forgotten she was even there after five minutes. **[Universal Reading]** didn't seem to apply to whatever Yolani was working on, either.

"Umm?" Elania prompted.

Yolani looked up like a deer caught in headlights. "Oh... OH! I'm so sorry, I got distracted."

"No problem... but what is it?" Elania asked.

"It's a ward for negating holy-aligned magic from a positive karmic demon utilizing a—" Yolani coughed and changed tack. Maybe it was the bewildered expression on Elania's face. "It's a ward for protecting you from paladins."

"Oh." A grin started to spread on Elania's face. "That's thoughtful of you."

Yolani rubbed her temple. "Sorry, when I get tired, my mind wanders easily. We've been at this all evening, and it is getting late. Maybe we should turn in for the night?"

Elania nodded. "Sure. That sounds good."

Yolani pushed herself up from her chair and led the way to a small door on the far side of the shop near the back. The abbreviated tour of the downstairs workshops hadn't included the upstairs, so Elania's interest was piqued.

A small stone stairway went up half a flight before curving back and reaching the second floor. It was a simple stone hallway with a few lights and two doors opposite each other and one at the end.

Elania almost bumped into the other girl's back when she paused.

"Umm?" Elania raised an eyebrow.

Yolani let out a sigh. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm not ready yet to go through my father's things... So, we can share my bed."

Elania's jaw dropped. By the time she closed her mouth, her cheeks were heating up slightly at the suggestion. Studying the back of Yolani's neck, her brain started to short-circuit.

"Uhm... sure?" Elania finally responded with a little laugh, trying to play off her surprise casually. "I hope you don't snore though."

Opening the door on the right, Yolani chuckled lightly. "Oh no, you caught me! I'm actually famous for keeping up entire neighborhoods with my snores."

Elania couldn't resist a giggle. The room turned out to be remarkably spacious and larger than expected. Yolani's bed was surprisingly large—spacious enough for two people without discomfort. The sheets were a warm, cream color, and a soft quilt was folded neatly at the foot.

The rest of the room resembled the workshop. There was clutter and items everywhere. A free-standing clothes rack held a half dozen outfits near the corner, while an over-stuffed wardrobe looked neglected beside it. Devices and gadgets were strewn about as well, and while a few had obvious uses, most were rather arcane.

Elania looked down at herself, still covered in her gear and armor. “Umm. Where do I put my stuff?”

“Oh. Umm.” Yolani paused and looked around before pushing a bunch of clutter out of a corner. “You can put your stuff here.”

Elania nodded and began to pull her cloak off, then her armor. She felt a small amount of panic when she reached her mana shard. She hadn’t shared its existence yet. It still felt like an important lifeline. Pulling off her boots, she stuffed the shard and its cloth wrap down one of them.

She’d need to see if it was possible to buy a few new outfits with her coin tomorrow. Turning to ask Yolani about it, Elania froze in shock.

The other girl was highlighted by the glowing lantern against the far wall, her very bare, naked body burning itself into Elania’s memory. Then she mercifully pulled a light single-piece nightgown over her head.

Elania dot exe finally rebooted and started to work when Yolani tilted her head and looked at her with a question mark.

The emerald-green eyes slid to Elania’s pack then back to its owner. “Do you want a nightgown? I have extra, and you’re not that much taller than me, so it probably will fit fine.”

“Y..yeah! That’d be great. I just have these, and I was wondering if we...I could go find a tailor or something to get some new clothes. That fit,” Elania replied quickly.

Yolani’s eyes widened. “Of course! I’ll go with you. I know some nice people who do great work. I’m sorry for not thinking about it.”

A nightgown was fetched and delivered, but Elania looked around for the still missing privacy divider. It apparently didn’t exist. Yolani didn’t seem to notice her search and slid into the bed.

Elania pulled off the rest of her clothes and then slid the nightgown on. The other girl didn’t peek or even show interest. That had been what she’d been worried about...but...why did she feel disappointed?

Rubbing her forehead, Elania pinched her own cheek. Why was she so wound up? A pretty girl was nice to her, and her mind was jumping way, way, way ahead. There were

so many critical issues to deal with, adding a sudden attraction... or crush was not a good idea.

The innocence of Yolani's offer was obvious in retrospect. Walking over to the bed, Elania carefully slid under the sheet and turned on her side to place her back between them.

"Goodnight, Elania," Yolani murmured.

"G...goodnight, Yolani," she managed to reply, her heart skipping a beat.

Despite everything that had happened—was happening around her—she felt a bit of comfort. For the first time, Elania felt like she wasn't alone as her mind slowly ordered itself into stillness and she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 57 – CLOTHES AND SECOND MEETINGS

Morning came with the soft glow of the city's magical light stones illuminating Yolani's room through the window. The soft scent of lavender filled Elania's senses while a warm softness pressed against her back as she slowly drifted to wakefulness. She suppressed a sudden surge of panic when she realized what it was.

Yolani had rolled up against her, arm awkwardly positioned hanging straight up in the air.

There was a streak of drool that had glued a lock of hair to the side of her cheek.

And she was definitely snoring.

Cute little snores.

The thought caused Elania to tense up, which was enough of a reverberation to wake Yolani. The girl's mop of black hair had somehow wrapped itself around her face like a wild vine. Reaching up to the side of her face, she dealt with her hair. "Uhfghm... Issit morning?"

Elania glanced at her clock. "It's almost noon."

"Hgrmph!" Yolani jumped up out of bed like a rocket, jumped over to her pile of clothes and things began to fly through the air. "We're going to miss our chance to ask Henri, and there won't be enough time...!"

Not wanting to take advantage of Yolani's complete lack of modesty, Elania did the same, hurriedly pulling off the nightgown and getting her acquired outfit back on. Once she had the shirt and trousers neatly squared away, she glanced back at Yolani.

The other girl had a pretty skirt and blouse on. No armor. Turning back to her stuff, Elania decided not to put on the chain and leather armor. Instead, she rearranged her

boot so the mana shard was in the toe stuffing, while securing her leather belt and daggers around her hips. It was sort of nice to not have the heavy armor gear on.

Although when she looked in Yolani's person sized mirror, her outfit looked way worse without the armor strapping things down.

Yolani came up behind her and looked at the reflection in the mirror as well. "Hmm. Do you want to borrow one of my shirts? It will probably fit a lot better."

Elania blinked. "If it is okay?"

"I have plenty!" Yolani said cheerfully. The girl brought over a black long-sleeved blouse. "Should match your brown trousers until we can get to the tailor. We are going to need to hurry though... we slept in too long."

Elania nodded and swapped her top. It was tight in the chest, but not too bad. She was already wearing a breast wrap, so it really didn't matter. Hopefully, the shop would have some workable lingerie.

Yolani hurried to brush her hair, offered a spare brush, then rushed out of the room and downstairs to get ready. Elania suppressed a giggle and carefully brushed her hair, working out the tangles that had accumulated since leaving the waystation.

It was not the morning she had expected to wake up to at all, and it left her with such an uplifted feeling she was actually looking forward to the day. By the time she made it downstairs, Yolani had already begun to make some type of breakfast and drink. Actually...

"Hold up. You have a toaster oven and a coffee machine?" Elania asked in disbelief. The little metal box had red wires running through it while two slices of bread from a loaf on the kitchenette's counter were slotted into it. Another machine was dripping liquid into two metallic cups.

Yolani looked back at her and tilted her head. "What's a toaster oven, and what's coffee? I have a slice of toast and some Geru bean brew. Plus sugar and milk."

Elania pointed at the little oven. "That's a toaster oven! Plus... the Geru-stuff smells like coffee."

"Hmm. So you had similar things in your world?" Yolani asked curiously.

Elania nodded, eyeing the embedded mana crystal in the machine's frame. "They ran on electricity, though. We didn't have mana...power...or soul things. Just science."

Yolani's mouth fell wide open. "No mana! Wow! I can't imagine... what's electricity? You mean bottled lightning?"

Elania shook her head. “If you take a magnet, wrap copper wire around it, then spin another magnet around that really fast, you can create electricity which can power things.”

A notepad materialized so suddenly in Yolani’s hand, Elania had no idea where it had come from. The other girl began to jot notes down furiously. “Mm-hmm. Tell me more?”

A chime on the toaster rang and Yolani looked up startled. “Oh. Uhh. Breakfast. Plus, we are late, we can talk about electricity later. It sounds fascinating. Spinning magnets? Imagine if we had a gigantic wheel to put under the city’s waterfall!”

The Geru Brew definitely tasted like coffee, and both of them added a liberal amount of milk and sugar to their cups. When they were done with the small meal, Yolani wasted no time ushering them out after equipping her belt of wands and a small bag.

Exiting out onto Neftasu’s busy streets felt less intimidating with a companion. Elania followed beside the other girl, slightly behind to allow her to steer their movements, but not so far back that they couldn’t continue to chat about things.

Like electricity, airplanes, and skyscrapers. The topics weren’t something she’d studied in-depth before, and Elania felt like that had been a mistake. Filling Yolani on all the little tidbits and trivia on Earth was turning out to be fun, but the other girl inevitably wanted to know the little details.

Exactly how things worked and... a lot of those Elania had just taken for granted while lazing about worrying about what major to select before her sophomore year was over.

The bustle at the gate seemed well in progress when they arrived, the guards ushering through a pair of two more [**Ralfot**] pulled wagons. One of them was full of squawking chickens, which, considering the previous day’s conversation, gave Elania a tinge of worry. Not that she had any problems eating chicken, it was just that she knew where the wagon was headed.

A burly guard waved to Yolani before his eyes fell on Elania and a frown appeared. “Yolani, who’s your friend?”

“Elania, this is Sergeant Harlock.” Yolani answered before offering a disarming smile. “I’ve contracted with her to help me with the shop.”

Elania tensed up as the man gave her a thorough appraisal from head to toe. “Did you pass by your contract to Ranolf?”

Yolani crossed her arms. “No. And I have no need to.”

Harlock grunted. “Suppose not. But I doubt the other Artificers will be happy. Human-Demon running around will make folks nervous.”

“You mean the same Artificers who can’t find a single spare mana shard in all their shops to help someone?” Yolani asked pointedly.

Elania turned to look at her, a frown forming. She needed a mana shard? An uncomfortable feeling filled her, and the lump against her toes felt like an accusation. Still... she wasn’t ready to trust giving away something so important to her survival. Even with how things seemed to be going.

Harlock grunted again, but didn’t answer.

Yolani shook her head. “Has Henri already been by? I guess we missed him.”

“About an hour ago. Looked like he was in a hurry, skipped his usual news swap,” Harlock answered.

“Tsk.” Yolani looked away in annoyance. “We overslept... we’ll have to just go straight to the station, then.”

Harlock raised an eyebrow. “You have business with the Guard?”

Yolani nodded. “There are some questions we wanted to ask Henri’s uncle. Have you heard anything about a Lightbringer in the city?”

Rubbing his chin, the man nodded. “Heard something about one a few weeks ago. Disappeared for a while before reappearing. Think he has some mansion in the Mercenary District that’s well guarded. If you’re going that far I’ll—”

Yolani raised a forestalling hand. “No, there’s no need. Lucas isn’t my personal escort, and you don’t have to keep sending someone with me whenever I go out.”

That didn’t seem to convince the Sergeant very well. He started to object. “But—”

Elania froze as Yolani slipped her arm around hers and clung to her.

“Besides, I won’t be alone. Elania is going with me,” Yolani said with a smile. “We’re going shopping for some clothes, anyway.”

Harlock turned a heavy stare at her, and Elania swallowed. “I...I am contracted to be sort of her bodyguard.”

He gruffed, then waved them on. “As you wish, ladies. I’ve no real authority to order otherwise in any case.”

Yolani let go and then went over to the man and kissed him on the cheek, which did a number on his stoic facade. “Thank you, Sergeant, for looking out for us. I appreciate it.”

“Just my job,” Harlock muttered, clearly embarrassed by the affection.

Elania followed closely as they made their way to Tailor’s Row. It wasn’t that far, being in the same district, and she realized they’d arrived when a large array of shop displays

began to offer different forms of outfits inside the storefront windows. “Is there a specific store we are going to?”

Yolani smiled at her. “There is,” she confirmed, leading Elania to a shop with a sign that read ‘Bella’s Fashions’. The window displayed dresses, blouses, skirts, and trousers made from various materials, each of them intricately designed.

“Bella’s is known for its wide range of clothing styles and sizes. Plus, they’re used to dealing with all sorts of customers—from humans like us to dwarves, gnomes, elves, and even beast men. Bella is nice, so I don’t think we’ll have a problem,” she explained, guiding Elania inside.

Elania blinked. “Beast men? There are people with animal traits?”

Yolani shot her a glance and nodded. “You’ve never seen one? There aren’t very many in the Underdark, but they are found all over the Overworld.”

Elania filed that bit of information away.

The shop was spacious and well-lit, with rows upon rows of clothes and different colored fabrics hanging on racks. An older woman stood behind the counter, looking up to smile at Yolani. Her eyes widened slightly when her gaze slid to Elania, but she quickly regained her composure.

Yolani introduced her like before and soon had Bella pulling out various pieces for Elania to try on. The process was lengthy, but enjoyable—Elania found herself charmed by the experience. Despite how nice some of the things looked, she focused their selection on practical trousers and shirts that would be good for adventuring or working. One fancy blouse with trills sneaked into the pile of accepted garments, but she put her foot down on the offered dresses and skirts.

It just didn’t seem like they’d have a place in her life at the moment.

That had Bella changing tack, and when she brought out several pieces of lingerie, it was obvious the woman had homed in on what she was looking for.

“Are these...elastic? Sports bras?” Elania asked.

“I’ve never heard those terms, dear. But they are the item of choice for those of us who live a more active lifestyle. They offer excellent support and will prevent unwanted movement.”

Elania grabbed the set of them and hurried into the changing booth to figure out her size. It was such an upgrade in comfort from her breast wrap, she decided to order multiple. They came paired with an equally nice lower undergarment that, while not

exactly made to be sexy, was very comfortable. She'd actually been going commando, so it was... a relief to have something nice.

That led to another realization. She hadn't had a period since arriving. Counting the days since her arrival was impossible, but it was easily multiple weeks and that meant she was certainly overdue. She hadn't participated in any activities that were concerning, but it brought up a series of questions in her mind. Would she even get periods anymore? Were demons infertile? Did **[Regeneration]** interfere with things or cure her usual cramps and... everything else?

She started to consider asking, but the heat in her cheeks made her reconsider. Maybe later. There were other things they needed to focus on.

One nice thing, though, was she'd not have to wear Marcus' clothes out of the store. "How much do I owe for this, Mrs. Bella?"

Elania didn't miss the subtle little shake of her head that Yolani made. Bella gave her a large smile while holding her hands. "Don't worry about that, dear. I'll have the rest of your things packaged and sent over to Aetherhart's Artifice."

On the way out, she didn't miss Yolani's underhanded pass of a gold coin to the lady. A large one. It immediately made her feel guilty. She hadn't done her part of the job or contract yet, and they'd only known each other for a single day. Yet here Yolani was, giving her a tremendous gift and not making it obvious.

As they stepped out of the shop with a final farewell to Bella, the amount of time they had spent became obvious. Yolani let out a puff. "We're going to need a carriage if we want to get over to the City Guard's headquarters in time."

Elania frowned. "I'm sorry. That took a lot of time—"

Yolani shook her head. "We both overslept. It isn't anyone's fault. I'm just hoping we can find the Lieutenant. I didn't get to tell Henri to let him know we were coming."

Elania nodded quietly. "Okay."

"Let's go back to Artifice Row. The Ironfist mercs can get us a ride quickly," Yolani said as she led the way.

When they returned to the main security gate, Elania blinked in surprise. Henri was there, and she suddenly put the name to the person and realized that Yolani's friend and the guard that had helped her were, in fact, the same Henri!

He stared at her in shock as well. "Elania."

A weak smile appeared on her face. "Hello, Henri."

Yolani looked between them in confusion. "Wait, you two know each other?"

Elania nodded. “He helped me in the Noble District when the first shop I went to sell the core was... a bust.”

“Wow,” Yolani said, before turning back to Henri. “We need to speak to your uncle. Can you check to see if he can see us?”

Henri looked at them like he was very confused before finally shaking his head and putting his fingers to a temple.

Elania blinked. “Umm. Is that...?”

“Telepathy. The guards have a mental network they can use to communicate quickly. It’s how they operate and run the city,” Yolani explained.

Henri finished his ‘call’ quickly, then took on a serious expression. “I’ll go with you two. The Guard is sending over their own carriage to fetch us.”

Yolani blinked. “What. No, I didn’t mean to put you out like that—”

Henri shook his head. “You wanted to go see my uncle, but you’re not the only one looking for someone. I’ve been running around for him all day on this.”

He pointed right at Elania.

“Uncle Gaston has actually been looking for her,” Henri declared.

Elania blinked in confusion. Did he just say ‘Uncle’ Gaston? Lieutenant Gaston? The one that had interrogated her on arrival?

Both Henri and Yolani stared at her, and she couldn’t think of anything to say.

CHAPTER 58 – MUTUAL QUESTIONING

A sense of unease filled Elania as they rode in the carriage toward the City Guard's headquarters. Henri sat opposite of them and had been strangely quiet after his revelation. Yolani seemed equally concerned. The tension in the air was palpable, and she could feel a knot forming in her stomach.

Henri tapped his fingers rhythmically on his thigh—a clear sign of nervous energy.

Tugging on her hair, she watched the streets go by while she wracked her brain for why the Lieutenant wanted to question her.

When Yolani's hand slipped onto hers and patted it, Elania looked at her with wide eyes.

Sparkling emerald eyes highlighted a weak smile. “Everything will be alright. We made a deal, right? I'm not going to abandon you.”

Elania let out a tense breath and nodded. “Thank you.” Glancing down at the other girl's hand, now she just needed to figure out how to slow down her thrumming heart patter.

Yolani frowned at Henri. “You don't have any ideas?”

He frowned back. “Might have to do with that noble shop? They might have filed a direct complaint with the Magisters or something. Seems ridiculous, though. It isn't like I was not there as a witness. They were just bullying her out of the shop. She didn't do anything.”

When they finally arrived at the headquarters, it was an imposing sight—an enormous tower of gray stone that loomed over the district like a mountain. Henri's credentials had them ushered through a side entrance by a pair of stern-looking guards. Everything was expedited, unlike her first encounter with the checkpoint garrison.

The bottom floor was an expansive space, with massive murals and tapestries covering the walls in heraldry. Two crossed poleaxes on a solid yellow background were the symbol of the Guard, while a horizontal dragon's skull on a gray background was the city's motif.

As they crossed the hall, Elania spotted the destination of their path. Her eyes widened slightly. "You have elevators, too?"

Yolani and Henri looked at her.

"Artifice Lift, yes? You have them on Earth? You can use electricity to move them?" Yolani asked excitedly.

"On what and with what?" Henri frowned in confusion.

"Elania's home is full of really interesting things and ideas," Yolani explained.

Henri shook his head as they all entered the box. "Right. My uncle's office is on the twelfth floor."

Yolani turned a dial to its first position and then pressed down two small levers. The box reacted immediately, sending them upwards faster than she'd expected. They slowed as they neared their destination floor, then came to a smooth stop.

Elania shook her head. The thing didn't even groan, which meant the lift didn't need much maintenance or they really cared about elevator safety, unlike back home.

Henri led the way out of the lift box and past a receptionist's desk. He obviously knew the way and the worker there waved them by without question.

The room he brought them to was a spacious office, with hundreds of books lining one wall while the other was decorated with various swords, axes, firearms, and shields. Behind the large ornate desk was a ceiling height window, secured by a steel lattice frame that let the light stones trickle in their distant light.

Gaston looked up and waved them in. "Henri. Good work."

He shrugged. "I didn't do anything. Like I told you, they came to me wanting to speak to you."

The lieutenant's sharp eyes were exactly as Elania remembered them, and they cut to her swiftly. His lips slowly turned into a frown. "Would you two ladies like Henri to step out, or do you mind if he joins our conversation?"

Elania shrugged and let Yolani answer for them.

She smiled. "Henri can stay."

Gaston nodded. "Of course, but I had to ask. These matters could be slightly sensitive."

"We have our own questions for you, actually," Yolani replied.

He nodded. "I understand, but first I need to go over some things." His gaze locked onto Elania's, and he continued. "Miss Elania, we meet again."

Elania smiled weakly. "Yes. Hello Lieutenant."

"I see you are contracted. To Miss Aetherhart, I presume?" Gaston asked.

Elania nodded. "That's right."

He rubbed his chin. "Yet there was a period where you were contactless after passing through the checkpoint?"

She nodded. "That's right as well. After the Conclave monks left me in the bazaar, I was left on my own for a while. When I finally met Yolani, we made a deal after finding out we had common ground."

"Common ground," Gaston repeated, musing over the word.

Elania nodded politely but remained silent—unsure of what to expect next.

"Could you two please go into more detail about the nature of your contract?" Gaston asked.

Elania opened her mouth to try to answer, when Yolani stopped her with a hand to her wrist.

The other girl shook her head. "That's private. If you want to know, you need to give us something in return."

Gaston raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. "Very well, Miss Aetherhart. Feel free to ask your question."

Yolani smiled. "We've heard rumors there is a Lightbringer Paladin in the city. We want to know his whereabouts."

A frown erupted on the lieutenant's face. "Why do you want to know that?"

Yolani remained silent, and Elania took her cue from her.

The man puffed, then nodded. "I know about the paladin. He is here in the city. He has a mansion in the Mercenary District he has been using as a base of operations."

Yolani and Elania shared a look. That was something they had heard as a rumor, but it was good to have it confirmed. It just wasn't an address.

Gaston looked over at Elania. "We've had two serious reports on you during your uncontracted period." His gaze slid over to Henri. "The first, I believe, is easily dismissed, although it is the far more serious of the two. My nephew vouches for your innocence in the matter, and it appears the shopkeeper grossly misrepresented the facts in his report for some reason."

Elania let out a tense breath. So that had been what it was. She wondered what the Guard would have done if she hadn't already been contracted to Yolani.

"The other, however, is concerning. It says that a woman ran into you while traversing gatehouse number eight, and then you beat her near to death in front of her child. Could you please explain your side of the story?"

Elania blinked. "What? I didn't beat her! The guards did that!"

Gaston raised an eyebrow. "That is not what the report, filled out by the guard and woman indicates."

Yolani bit her lip and interjected. "I don't think Elania would lie about something like this."

Elania nodded. "Bring back your truth box thing. I'll exonerate myself right now."

Gaston held up a hand. "No need. I believe you. Unfortunately, there isn't much I can do about the woman or the guards there. They aren't under my section, and making a deal of it would simply cause... strife."

"Still, I don't want to be charged for a crime I didn't commit." The frown on Elania's face deepened.

Gaston nodded. "Your case was presented to the captain, and he charged me with your surveillance and care. He's made me responsible for you. I believe that under Miss Aetherhart's wing you will be fine, but I want you to check in with the Guard periodically, just so I can keep tabs on you. Henri should do. That shouldn't be a problem?"

Elania looked over at Henri, then shrugged. "That's fine. Your nephew is nice."

Gaston laughed, and Henri looked embarrassed. "Nice. Right. At least someone in the Guard has a good reputation, eh?"

Yolani took a deep breath, her eyes serious as she leveled a gaze at Lieutenant Gaston. "Lieutenant, we need to know about the Lightbringer Paladin. Do you have the exact address?"

He frowned. "Why are you looking for him?"

Yolani and Elania shared a look as they both considered what they should tell him. Eventually, Yolani nodded.

Elania cleared her throat. "He's related to my arrival here. There was a cult—The Black Candle—that summoned me. He showed up and interrupted things, but... they had a massive chest of mana shards. We believe that it might have something to do with the shortage, which is harming Yolani's shop seriously."

Gaston remained silent. Eventually his gaze landed on Yolani. "I heard about your father from Henri. I am sorry about that. I'm afraid there's been nothing I could do about the contract with Magister Relain."

Yolani nodded carefully, but didn't relent. "And the Paladin's location?"

Gaston shook his head. "You two shouldn't be looking into something like this. It's dangerous. I haven't heard about this cult specifically, but if what you say is true, the shortage could be manufactured to create a crisis."

Yolani's eyes widened. "The magisterial elections."

"Exactly so." Gaston grunted. "Very astute, Miss Aetherhart."

Elania frowned. "I still need to see the Paladin. He might know more about the summoning."

Shaking his head, Gaston clasped his hands. "I'm sorry, Elania. I must insist that you both refrain from getting involved. I will be placing this as a high-priority and will see about speaking to the man myself to learn more."

Yolani's brow furrowed. "But—"

"Henri! Escort these two back to her shop. Make sure they make it back safely. I'm assigning you and a squad to watch them for the time being," Gaston ordered.

Henri blinked. "A full squad? Full-time surveillance?"

"That's an order," Gaston replied sternly.

Yolani looked ready to argue, but Gaston held up his hand. "This discussion is over for now, Miss Aetherhart. If you won't comply, then I'll be forced to consider imprisoning your demon."

That knocked the sails out of Yolani's response, but not the angry glare. The other woman stood up and pulled Elania to her feet as well. "Come on, Elania. Let's go home before he changes his mind."

Shit. They weren't going to leave on good terms. That was bad. Lieutenant Gaston obviously had a lot of pull. She waved weakly at him. "Thank you for your time, Lieutenant."

Henri followed them out.

Yolani turned her sharp eyes on Elania as they waited for the lift. "Why are you thanking him?"

"Well, just in case we need to talk to him again," Elania offered.

"He just squelched our plans," Yolani countered.

Elania shook her head. "I don't believe for one second we can't figure a way around it."

“Hey. I’m supposed to watch you two. I’m right here listening,” Henri said weakly.

Yolani jabbed him with her eyes next. “Shut up.”

The ride down was done in tense silence, as was the ride back.

Yolani eventually let out a breath. “Sorry. I’m just annoyed.”

Elania nodded. “No worries. What are we going to do?”

“We need a plan,” Yolani stated firmly, her gaze meeting Elania’s. “A way to slip out without being noticed, and somehow locate the paladin’s residence.”

“Sounds good. I bet we can get Henri to help with the first part,” Elania said, her eyes sliding over to the young man.

“I’m right here. I’m listening to you. I can’t disobey a direct order,” Henri replied.

Yolani’s eyes lit up. “What were your uncle’s exact orders?”

A frown erupted on Henri’s face.

“I believe it was ‘to watch’ us,” Elania smiled as she answered for him. “Nothing about staying locked up in the shop or out of the mercenary district.”

As they pulled through the Ironfist checkpoint, Elania saw and waved to Sergeant Harlock. The man had a scowl and shook his head, garnering a frown from Elania. Was he having a bad day? He had seemed fairly nice during their earlier encounters.

The carriage pulled to a stop, and they disembarked. Up by the shop there was already a crowd at the door to Aetherhart’s Artifice.

“You sure didn’t waste any time getting your squad here to watch us,” Elania commented.

Henri frowned and shook his head. “Those aren’t my squad. Not my uncle’s division, either. Looks like—”

“They’re trying to break in!” Yolani shouted before taking off at a jog up the street to the group of men.

Elania followed in a hurry, with Henri close behind her.

“Stop that!” Yolani shouted once she was closer.

Immediately alarm bells started going off in Elania’s head. She recognized Master Ranolf and a few of his apprentices. The guards were wearing a different color surcoat, the same as the ones who had beaten the woman. When her eyes reached the fat bald man, she knew it was Yolani’s uncle again.

The entire group turned toward them at once.

Yolani pulled to a halt. “Uncle Hester, Master Ranolf, what are you doing to my shop front?”

A chilling grin emerged on the swollen face of the man.

He, accompanied by a guard, advanced.

Hester meticulously unfurled a parchment and declared, “By virtue of this official document, ordained by the Magisterial Court, on the grounds of personal assault and malevolent aggression upon Hester Hartman, Esquire, one Yolani Aetherhart is hereby summoned to answer and if found guilty, make amends for her alleged transgressions.”

He rolled the parchment up and then gestured to Ranolf while pointing the decree at Elania. “But first, we’re confiscating your new pet.”

CHAPTER 59 – BLOODY DESSERTS

As Hester finished his proclamation, Elania felt a wave of dread wash over her.

She counted six city guardsmen. Ranolf and his two artificers had artifice wands she recognized to be like Yolani's combat wand in one hand, and shackles with arcane looking glyphs glowing on them in the other.

Those were definitely some type of slave tool, probably meant to bind and control her.

Yolani looked shocked, emerald-green eyes darting between the advancing guards and the artificers. "You can't do this," she protested, her voice ringing out clear and defiant despite the escalating situation.

Hester stood back as he watched the others move forward, his grin only widening at the protest. "Oh, but I can," he retorted smugly. "And I will."

Ranolf leveled a serious gaze at Yolani. "Regardless of your skill, Young Aetherhart, you're outmatched here. I have my two best combat artificers with me. You can't best all three of us, even if you have the advantage."

His eyes flickered to Elania. "Submit, Demon. It won't harm you to change masters. I'll see that you're cared for."

"I'm not a dog," Elania spat at him. That just hardened the look on the man's face.

Yolani looked at her with a frown. "I won't let them take you."

Elania glanced between the incoming guards and Yolani, then frowned. "I can run, if you want to surrender to the law...or..."

Yolani reached over and put her hand on Elania's shoulder. "No." The fierce gaze caught Elania by surprise. "This is my home. He's taken my father. He's got the Magister around his finger somehow. I won't win this in a court. I'm going to fight."

Elania blinked. Her math said it wasn't good. The guards had drawn their weapons. Seven against two... three? She glanced at Henri, who had an ashen expression on his face.

Yolani let out a tense breath. "You don't have to fight, Elania. You can go if you want."

Shaking her head, Elania made her decision. "No. I'm your bodyguard, remember? I'm with you."

Yolani turned to Henri. "Are you with us?"

Henri swallowed visibility. "Yolani... I can't. The warrant is valid. You need to surrender..."

The black-haired girl pursed her lips and turned away. "Just don't interfere. I don't want to have to hurt you."

He backed away towards the nearest building.

Yolani's hand pulled two wands off her belt, then held them at her side.

Following the other girl's lead, Elania drew her two Vorpal Daggers. "What's the plan?"

"Guard me from the ones who come up close," Yolani ordered.

Ranolf attacked first. He leveled his wand at Elania, and a thick glob of lightning launched itself at her, causing her to skid to a halt as she positioned herself in front of Yolani.

It only made it halfway to her, Yolani leveling her own wand at the projectile. A metal rod erupted from the ground in front of it, discharging the lightning into the ground harmlessly.

The counterattack was swift, Yolani leveling her other wand at her shop. A massive metal spear erupted from the wall, skewering one of the guards from behind, bursting open his chest in a spray of blood that launched itself a dozen meters across the street.

That wasn't the end, though. The spear writhed like a tentacle, turning and streaking straight for Ranolf. He reacted instantly, leveling his own wand at the attack. The metal appendage suddenly locked in place and then shattered onto the ground, broken.

The five remaining guards rushed forward. One leveled a firearm at Elania, but the weapon suddenly flipped out of his hands, spiraling through the air as Yolani reacted.

Elania grit her teeth as she suddenly tugged on her mana shard. She'd already been at max **[Power]**, but she drew two hundred extra units anyway, pushing herself well over her limit. The burning fire in her core leant her extra speed, and she darted into the path of a swordsman dashing toward Yolani.

He stopped short and swung at her, but she ducked under it and slashed back with her **[Vorpal Dagger]**. The strike was shallow, but it sliced through his armor with a

hiss, leaving a line of blood seeping into cloth. He pulled back for another strike before beginning to scream.

Ouch. Maybe Marcus had some type of resistance to the blade that had protected him. The guard obviously did not. The man dropped to the ground and began to writhe in agony. Holy shit.

The shock almost made her miss the spearman stabbing at her back. Spinning around, she sidestepped the blow, then deflected another strike with her dagger while backpedaling. He was trying to drive her away from Yolani so his three allies could work their way around freely.

In the background, she saw Yolani exchanging blasts of energy between herself and the three Artificers. She was dual wielding her wands while they were just using one, and the other girl was forced to dance around to avoid the strikes.

Being outnumbered was bad. They were going to get worn down like that. Elania's eyes slid back to the spearman, assessing his weapon.

He stabbed at her again, but this time, she didn't dodge. Instead, she thrust herself into it. His eyes widened in shock as she grabbed the weapon and slid down it faster than he could back pedal. **[Vorpall Dagger]** slammed into the socket of his eye, slaying him instantly.

[You have slain Guard - Human - Lvl 176]

[You have lost 113 Karma.]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[Absorb the lingering Power from Guard - Human - Lvl 176?]

Yes, please.

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship, Negotiation, and Mobility!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high Power, [Regeneration] is enhanced!]

The sudden influx of power was too much. Golden light from the man's soul danced around her. She'd only drained a hundred points, forcing her body's performance higher,

and her experience fighting Marcus told her that people were easily worth hundreds of points.

Ripping the spear out of her chest, she hurled it at one guard charging Yolani, dumping all the excess **[Power]** she was holding onto.

Yellow light burst into existence. It was less a spear throw and a massive energy discharge that curled up the cobblestone and surrounded the man, incinerating him as the energy smashed him into the nearby building.

[You have slain Guard - Human - Lvl 156]

[You have lost 11 Karma.]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

Holy shit, Yolani hadn't been kidding. The amount of discharge went up exponentially the more power she dumped into the attack.

If she'd channeled that through her body instead of the spear, she'd have blasted herself, too.

One of the artificers turned away from striking Yolani and targeted her. A lance of ice flashed through the air, and Elania dived to the side to dodge it. Another one followed rapidly, changing course to track her.

A slash with her dagger shattered it, but the shards that erupted bit into her. Another strike came, a flying brick. She kicked it, shattering it into dust.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted one of the guards reaching Yolani. He swung his sword at her, but she raised her wand to counter, the tip meeting the blade.

Both the weapon and her wand exploded dramatically, the blast back shaped toward the guard, sending him hurling through the air over the nearby buildings in a high arc.

A blast from Ranolf caught her in the side as she struggled to pull another wand.

As soon as Yolani was knocked off her feet, all three artificers turned toward Elania at once.

A fusillade of magic flashed toward her. It was impossible to dodge, so she flared her **[Power]** liberally to punch the magical projectiles away. They deflected in every direction, smashing into buildings and roofs all around the street. In the distance, Elania realized there were scores of people screaming as they ran away.

How much fucking power did the artificers have in their stupid wands? Her **[Power]** gauge was dropping rapidly, and Elania dived toward the writhing guard. He had curled

up in a ball and gone still, but he wasn't dead yet. She fixed that with a sharp blow to the side of the skull.

[You have slain Guard - Human - Lvl 126]

[You have lost 51 Karma.]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[Absorb the lingering Power from Guard - Human - Lvl 126?]

The surge of power rebounded her struggle against the projectiles.

[You have gained a rank in Martial Bladesmanship and Mobility!]

Suddenly, a lance of light flashed through the air and impaled one of the artificers in the chest, knocking him back. Jewelry and his robes suddenly flared red and exploded, leaving him half naked, but he jumped back on his feet almost immediately.

A shout to the side drew Elania's attention. Yolani was struggling with the guard, who had a dagger she was barely holding at bay.

Fuck. She'd messed up and missed the last guard!

Jumping toward the struggle, the three artificers leveled their wands together at her. A solid chunk of purple light slammed into her chest, locking her in place. Suddenly air was unavailable, her entire body felt like it was on fire.

That was because it had punched a basketball size hole through her torso, and her heart, lungs, and ribcage were missing.

[Crisis Management S+ active ability has activated. Remaining time: 6 seconds.]

It was cause for concern, but she felt calm. Time seemed to slow. The beam wasn't just pure energy, but a solid construction of some metal, impaled into the ground behind her like a massive spear.

It was solid all the way back to the artificers... and it connected her to the three wands in her attacker's hands.

She could feel the constructs...or maybe it was their mana shards.

Their capacities were absolutely puny. How had they wielded so much potent magic with so little **[Power]** available to them?

The way they connected to her, it would be trivial to yank that power out and drain the combat wands.

That was the wrong direction. Elania sucked down half the remaining **[Power]** in her mana shard and shoved it back into the wands.

The small shards in the wands lit up like miniature stars before shattering in their owner's faces. The man who Yolani had blasted off his defensive warding was decapitated instantly.

[You have slain Artificer - Human - Lvl 193]

[You have lost 27 Karma.]

Flames flared up around the other artificer as his wardings burned before the force slammed him into the wall of the shop with a sickening crunch.

[You have slain Artificer - Human - Lvl 142]

[You have lost 53 Karma.]

[For slaying beings over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

In front of Ranolf, a green circle flashed into existence that deflected the explosion into the ground, but even he staggered backwards.

Whatever the artificers had impaled her with didn't disappear. She grabbed it with her fists and punched at it, trying to break it, but it was solid and rang with each blow. **[System]** messages flooded her vision enough to disorient her.

Fuck. Ranolf was getting back onto his feet. Yolani was...

Her last option clicked into place. Elania closed her eyes and remembered what it was like to hunt.

The sudden change was disorienting as she hit the ground, but she recovered quickly, rolling onto her paws. Ranolf didn't see the movement, and she pulsed her **[Power]** into **[Stealth]** which turned her form into a blurred mist.

Elania glanced behind her to check on her partner and was surprised. Yolani was on the ground, scrambling to get on her feet, the guard impaled from behind on the length of Henri's sword. As soon as she was on her feet, she reached for a wand, but a lightning bolt from Ranolf rushing forward blasted her hand away.

"You've done enough already. You'll pay for this with your lives," the master artificer spat at the two.

Yolani's hand inched slowly toward a wand, but he gestured with his wand. "Aht! If you move, I'll impale the both of you now. You aren't fast enough to draw before I can cast."

Elania slinked forward on her belly from behind. When she was in range, she leapt with a roar. The old man still had the slave collar in his hand, but all he saw before she ripped out his throat was her **[Darkwalker]** teeth.

Human blood filled her senses. It tasted good. She smashed her paw on the old man's exposed spine, severing it as she swallowed the chunk of flesh she had torn out.

[You have slain Master Artificer - Human - Lvl 276]

[You have gained 153 Karma.]

[For slaying a being over 50 levels higher than you, extra experience is rewarded.]

[You have gained multiple levels!]

[Absorb the lingering Power from Master Artificer - Human - Lvl 276?]

Instinctually, she knew it would be too much power and she wouldn't get more flesh, but she took it anyway.

Golden fire wreathed around her. It hurt. It hurt a lot. But she was strong. She could withstand it. She had use for it.

[You have gained a rank in Negotiation, Bribery, and Intimidation!]

[You have gained the skills Artifice, Enhanced Mana Sensing, and Elemental Affinity!]

Loping over to her abandoned clothes, she clawed her boot and touched her mana shard. The excess energy flowed freely into it, restoring some of the drained **[Power]**.

Not having hands was difficult. What if she used **[Power]**?

Telekinesis was possible. At a cost. Her purse opened. Important things went inside. Daggers. Mana Shard. Her new bra. No room for anything else. Grabbing the pack in her mouth, she ran back toward Emerald Eyes.

The male beside flared panic and leveled his weapon at her, but she ignored his posturing.

Emerald Eyes stared back into hers. "E...Elania?"

Elania let out a loud purr and nuzzled up against Yolani's leg.

"That's Elania?" Henri asked weakly. "She's...big."

"Are you alright?" Yolani asked.

Elania let out another purr, but then a small noise echoed nearby, causing her ear to twitch. Leaving her bag with Emerald Eyes, she bounded toward the sound.

There was still one enemy left. The one who had hurt Emerald Eyes the most and caused all the catastrophe.

Hester hid in a trench of torn stone, his hands holding onto his bald head to hide it. When her shadow passed over him, he looked up and shrieked. She reached forward and raked his chest with her claws. He was weak. Not a fighter. A talker. His ability was poisoned words.

Easy prey. Not hers, though.

She bit down hard on his shoulder, blood filling her mouth again. Elania dragged him out of the hole and then turned toward emerald eyes, carrying her catch to her partner and deposited the bleeding piece of meat in front of her feet.

Emerald Eyes looked down at him for a moment, her eyes radiating her emotions.

The poisoned words came. Pleading. Mercy. Offerings. Elania hissed at him.

“You’re too dangerous to leave alive,” Yolani declared. She leveled her wand at his head and suddenly a thin bolt of blue lanced through his skull.

It was over.

Yolani’s hand covered the side of her face. Elania could tell she was in pain. Mentally and physically.

“You have to go. The guard will be here in minutes,” Henri said.

That was bad. Sniffing Hester’s corpse, she took a chunk of meat and swallowed it before absorbing him. There was no reason to leave waste behind. Even if he tasted icky, and she was already regretting the fatty bite she had swallowed.

[You have gained a rank in Negotiation and Bribery!]

Yolani let out a tense breath. “I need to get—”

“No! You need to go now! Both of you! There’s an entire reaction platoon coming!” Henri shouted.

Elania sniffed the air and then picked up her bag with her teeth. But where would they run?

Yolani pointed toward the shop. “Into the shop. There’s an escape. I need things.”

Henri nodded. “Alright. I can’t come with you. They would track me.”

Yolani looked to the ground and nodded. “Thank you.”

Henri pushed her gently. “Go. Hurry.”

They fled.

CHAPTER 60—ON THE RUN

Elania bit down on her bag as she finished absorbing the remaining bodies on the street, shoving the excess power into the mana shard contained inside. Then she bounded after Yolani, who shoved the slightly bent doorframe of Aetherhart's Artifice open. Henri watched mutely as the two disappeared inside.

The door groaned as Emerald Eyes shoved it back shut, then directed her wand at a drop bar. The metal suddenly turned red, and it fused into the wood and stonework.

Elania tilted her head. She knew there was a window. Maybe they would be jumping out of it? But then they'd still be exposed to the ones who hunted them outside.

Sniffing the air, the familiar scent of the shop had overpowered the stench of blood and magic that had hung in the air outside. Yolani was a whirlwind of action, fetching a large bag and shoving things seemingly at random into it. It was a big bag.

Elania sat on her haunches and watched. It was going to be heavy, and she was unsure how Yolani would carry it. She let out a meow in worry that she'd be expected to carry it on her back. She was not a pack animal!

Although... she probably wouldn't mind if Emerald Eyes wanted to ride on her back.

"I'm hurrying! I need my charge crystals and my back-up brace! Shit, where are the camo-cloaks?" Yolani's words came out in a rapid chatter that had Elania tilting her head as she watched. A belt of wands of various shapes was shoved into the leather pack.

A few minutes later, the sounds outside caused her ears to twitch rapidly, and she let out a warning hiss.

Yolani froze and stared at the door. "It should hold—"

There was a loud crack upstairs. Elania whirled and growled at the upstairs door.

“The window is warded, and they won’t get easily even if it’s open. Elania, come here,” Yolani ordered.

Pausing in her growling, she loped over to Emerald Eyes eagerly, but when she saw what was in the girl’s hands, Elania let out a hiss and stopped on her haunches.

It was a collar and harness! She was not a pet!

“Calm down. It’s for holding things and carrying stuff! We don’t have time to argue!” Yolani yelled at her.

Elania’s ears went back on her head, but she stepped closer and let Yolani put the thing on. Why did she even have a Darkwalker shaped collar, anyway?

It turned out to be a very configurable harness, probably meant for something even bigger, like a Ralfot Bull. It was actually shrunk down to fit her. There were nice hooks on it, and Elania played with her bag, sealing it shut and hooking it onto the new feline outfit.

She still eyed the giant bag Yolani prepared warily.

Almost as if reading her mind, the other girl answered. “It has a weight artifice on it, so it doesn’t weigh as much.”

That would be handy. But how did someone manipulate weight? Was it gravity magic? The sudden interest evaporated as a loud explosion sounded on the other side of the door. Someone was trying to break in—with magic.

Elania began to pace nervously around. Emerald Eyes hadn’t told her how to escape! Coming into the confined building felt like a mistake to her instincts. It would have been much better to sprint away and find a dark shadow to hide in before pouncing on the enemy.

But she couldn’t leave Yolani unprotected and alone.

Her ears swiveled as she listened to the sounds of attempted intrusion and danger, holding still while Yolani clipped several more bags to her harness. Her earlier indignation at becoming a pack animal resurfaced, but she pushed it away. If helping carry things would help, then she would do so.

The pounding explosions outside became incessant. It honestly surprised her how resilient the shop was. It sounded like they were pounding on it with artillery. Actually, remembering the cannon at the checkpoint. Maybe they were?

“Elania! We need to go! Come on!” Yolani shouted from the back room.

Turning and loping after the other girl, she found that there was a hatch built into the floor beside the shower contraption. Elania sniffed at it in dismay. She hadn't had a chance to try it out.

A hand grabbed onto her collar and tugged her downward. First instinct was to claw the preparator, but she didn't want to hurt Yolani, so she let out a low growl. The collar was not for tugging on her! She submitted and jumped down into the hole. The trap door closed above them.

"If you don't like that, just wait until you see where we have to go through..." Yolani mumbled.

Elania sniffed the cool air. It was icky. Acrid with a tang of rot. Her fur suddenly stood up in alarm. No!

"The drain goes to the Row's sewer line and into the main network."

Sewers. Ugh. A low growl escaped.

"I agree," Yolani replied.

Elania nudged her with her nose, taking a sniff. It was probably the last nice thing she would smell in a long time.

A grate blocked their progress, Yolani pulled out a simple, ordinary wrench and undid the bolts holding it in. There was a membrane filter of some kind held behind the grate and as soon as it was removed, the stench hit for real.

Elania laid on her belly and covered her nose with her paws.

"Gods, you're such a drama cat," Yolani said, a hint of laughter in her voice. The girl smiled at her. How could she smile? Everything was ruined. They were being hunted. Elania stood up and nuzzled her before licking her face.

"Ehck! You have bad breath! Stop!" Yolani pushed her away gently.

Elania let out a purr. Well yeah, of course her breath was a little off. She just ate some rotten people. Yolani slid through the opened grate and landed with an icky sounding splash before pulling her stuff down after her.

There was a moment of silence as she stared at the dark hole.

Emerald Eyes sparked in the dark, urging her to hurry. "Elania, come!"

This was the worst. It would have been better to fight the entire city! Still, she couldn't turn around now. Elania laid down on her belly and did a cat maneuver to squeeze into the new tunnel, landing with a splash. Her paws were soaked with nasty liquid. Raising one to sniff it made her feel like she needed to spew her earlier meal.

She let out a low yowl.

“Stop that. We need to hurry!” Yolani was already moving down the tunnel at an intersection.

Moving to follow, she had to keep her movements controlled to prevent excess splashing. If the nasty goop got matted in her fur...

It would all be over.

The sound of explosions slowly grew fainter as they traveled through the sewer tunnel. It was mostly a straight shot; Elania was able to easily picture all the uproar and chaos just a few meters above their heads as they escaped.

Another intersection appeared as the line cut into a large tunnel. This one had a dry shelf of stone to stand on, but the damage had already been done. Yolani raised her artificer lantern and lit the way as they continued.

Elania followed quietly. The other girl didn't explain where they were going, or how they would stay hidden. Without a voice, she couldn't ask. The low hum of air flowing through the space was like a blanket on the conversation between them. Well...the one-sided conversation. It was sort of hard to respond either way.

The tunnels slowly grew wider and more intricate as they ventured deeper into the system. It was nearly the size of what she would have considered a subway tunnel when the first sound of voices pricked her ears. Elania jumped in front of Yolani and growled.

“We're in the Mercenary District now. I don't think that's the Guard,” Yolani said as she reached down and stroked Elania's back.

Her hair stood up pleasantly, her tail standing up straight on its own. They continued and Emerald Eyes turned out to be right. The voices weren't from the Guards. Evidence of inhabitation appeared, strewn debris and furniture outside a growing number of scrap metal shacks. **[Darkvision]** worked well, allowing her to see further down the tunnel than the dim lighting would have normally allowed, and she spotted human shaped figures moving and lounging about.

The slums of the Mercenary District seemed wonderful in comparison, and they had been terrible.

As they continued, Yolani's grip on her wand tightened visibly, and her eyes darted nervously between the shadowed corners and ragged figures huddled around. A few dim fires dotted the corridor, and the inhabitants' attention was squarely focused on the two newcomers. None of them offered a greeting.

Elania prowled closely beside Emerald Eyes, brushing against her legs several times. Her eyes glowed with predatory intensity as she watched carefully as they passed by every

potential threat. When one person stood up nearby, she let out a low warning growl that sent the man tumbling onto his ass with a yelp.

An old crone cackled from her seat. “Watch your steps with that one, girlie!” Her laughter echoed off the dank walls. “Not every creature that slinks in the dark is as docile as it seems!”

Yolani paused, giving the old woman a wary glance before continuing forward without a word. Elania replied with another rumble of her throat, but followed suit.

They reached a large chamber, and there were even more people. It looked to be a market where the sewer dwellers exchanged goods or bartered. They hurried through, avoiding the eyes on their backs.

Yolani finally paused at an intersection on the other side of the chamber, then picked the right-hand path. It was less populated and there was less debris and items visible. The water channel flowed freely, and they hopped across it to the other side to reach a small chamber that was set in the side.

The entrance was narrow and would offer them a choke point to defend...at the expense of being trapped inside. It made Elania feel uneasy, but at least they were out of sight from prying eyes.

“We’ll rest here for a bit,” Yolani said quietly, looking around before pointing to a dry spot near the entrance. “I need to organize our things.”

Elania settled beside her and let the other girl detach the packs from her harness. Her paws were too nasty to consider licking clean, and a dirty feeling pervaded her senses enough to elicit a whine.

“I’m sorry,” Yolani whispered.

Fingers moved deftly in the dim light, sorting through the packs attached to Elania’s harness and the large pack that Yolani had carried on her back. She brought out bundles wrapped in oilcloth, glass vials filled with colorful liquids, and various other tools and supplies. One by one, she attached an assortment of items to Elania’s harness—elaborately carved talismans and brooches, each one giving off a soft inner light.

“They’re artifice wards,” Yolani explained absent mindedly. “They’ll protect us from magical detection and provide minor deflection of magical energy.”

Pulling off her shirt, Yolani grimaced as she leaned over and looked at her side. Livid red blisters marred her skin, and the scent of burnt skin filled Elania’s senses with worry. A blue vial came out of a bundle and the girl poured the liquid onto the injury. It began to glow.

Without thinking, Elania leaned in and licked the area, spreading the liquid around the wound.

“No licking,” Yolani chided softly, gently pressing Elania’s head away before scratching her between the ears.

Pleasurable shivers ran down Elania’s spine, and she let out a pleased purr.

By the time Yolani finished organizing their supplies and setting up their wards, she looked utterly drained. Green eyes were heavy with exhaustion and she leaned back against the grimy sewer wall.

“We should get some rest,” she suggested quietly. “We don’t want to stay here too long, but I don’t think they’ll find us straight away.”

Elania watched as Yolani closed her eyes with a weary sigh. Moving closer, she could feel the girl’s body heat through their close contact and listened to the irregular rhythm of her breathing. A twinge of worry pricked at her heart, but she pushed it aside. Complex thoughts were easy to ignore when the present was now.

They were safe here for now; Emerald Eyes needed rest. Getting comfy, Elania set her chin down on Yolani’s thigh, keeping a single blue eye riveted on the entrance while her ears remained alert for anything or anyone that might approach.

All they had was each other now; that would have to be enough.

There would be time to search for their prey when they woke up.

CHAPTER 61 – BURDENED HEARTS AND A WASH

Elania's ears flickered back as soon as Yolani's calm, regular breathing hitched. The other girl had slid to her side while asleep, resting her head on Elania's flank. A clumsy set of fingers sank into fur as she propped back up to sitting.

"Elania?" Yolani whispered.

Elania responded with a loud purr and nuzzled her.

"We need to continue searching for the Lightbringer," she said softly after a moment of silence. Soft strokes against fur came, and Elania pressed into them eagerly.

A frown appeared on Yolani's face after a few minutes. "Are you able to transform back into a human?"

That was a good question. Probably? She had before. But did she want to? The sewers were nasty, and she would be totally naked except for her bra. That wasn't acceptable.

She let out a low growl.

Yolani frowned. "We need a way to answer questions..."

Elania recalled Joren's method and tilted her head to the left. Then to the right. Then repeated.

Green eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh! Right is yes, left is no?"

Emerald Eyes was smart. Elania tilted her head to the right and gave her a lick.

Yolani's hands pushed her away. "Stoop. Your tongue is scratchy. Can you transform back?"

Elania tilted her head to the right.

"Okay. Can you do it now?" Yolani asked.

Tilt to the left.

A frown appeared in response. "Why?"

Elania glanced at the sewer water in the channel nearby. That wasn't a yes or no question, but she let out a whine, then splashed the nasty liquid with the tips of her claws. Then she pawed at a loose part of Yolani's shirt.

"It's nasty, and you'd be naked?" Yolani asked.

She knew the other girl was smart. Head tilt to the right.

"I brought you a spare pair of clothes," Yolani stated. "I wasn't sure if we'd need them."

That was worth a lot of nuzzles, and she had Emerald Eyes giggling before she was stopped by her pleading. This was fun.

A frown appeared on Yolani's face, and she hugged her knees. "I'm sorry. I messed up. When I attacked Hester, I was so mad...I didn't imagine that he'd bring in the Guard and have Relain's backing for a warrant like that...and he did it in a day."

Tears started to form on her face. "I'm sorry."

Elania tilted her head to the left, then nuzzled Yolani's hand. It was the best she could do to be supportive without any words.

Yolani managed a weak smile as she stroked Elania's fur on top of her head. "I'm okay," she murmured softly, although they both knew it wasn't true.

Not yet.

Elania felt her resolve harden. Somehow, they would make things okay!

She wasn't sure how, but the only thing she could think of was what Yolani had mentioned. Go after the Paladin and question him and find out if they could locate the Black Candle mana shards.

That would solve the shortage in the short-term at least, and from what she had seen it would be worth a lot of coin... and she had been gaining enough levels in **[Bribery]** to feel that it wasn't an uncommon practice in Neftasu.

"It helps that we know his mansion is in the Mercenary District. We just need to question people until we can track it down. There will at least be rumors. It's likely a new compound, and guarded. That'll bring notice," Yolani theorized.

It sounded good to Elania, so she tilted her head to the right.

Before they could plan further, the distant ring of metal clinking reached her ears. Elania got up, dumping Yolani off of her.

"Hey! Careful," Emerald Eyes protested.

Elania growled and poked her head around their chamber's exit to stare down the tunnel. The sound was getting closer, from the direction of the shanty town settlement.

“What’s going on?” Yolani asked. She quickly began to pack their things and came to stand beside Elania.

A distant shriek was cut short and Elania’s ears flicked like little radar dishes. Suddenly there was a distant boom, and then the sound of screeching metal. More screams and shouts—the scent of blood rapidly propagated and reached Elania’s nose, even through the nasty murk all around them.

She let out a growl, nipped Yolani’s trousers and tugged them gently before moving on.

“We stayed here too long. They must have found the trapdoor,” Yolani whispered.

Behind them, Elania listened to the sewer dwellers die, but by the time the sounds faded into the background hum they were far, far away.

They passed by a half dozen more intersections before Yolani pulled them to a stop and pointed. “There, that’s an access way.”

Elania started to turn move toward it, but a hand on her collar forestalled her. She nipped at Yolani’s hand.

“Hey! Careful... You can’t go out like that, though. Transform back?” Yolani asked.

Elania let out an annoyed puff before tilting her head to the left.

Yolani swallowed. “Okay, fine. I brought something in that case.”

She pulled out a length of fabric. It has little shapes worked into it, each having its own dull gold sheen. Opening it up, she draped it over Elania’s back.

It wasn’t comfy. Elania let out an unhappy grumble.

“Just wait. It’s a camouflage. It’ll help you stay unnoticed,” Yolani said.

Invisibility cloak? That was super neat! She’d read so many stories with invisibility cloaks, and now she was getting one! For a moment she almost decided to turn back, but the thought died when she realized that her previous reasons still held. Unless she was forced to by a very good reason, she wasn’t going back to normal without a wash ready.

Plus... Yolani touched her. A lot. It felt good, caused pleasant tingles, and head scratches were wonderful.

Maybe that wasn’t the best reason, but it was very relevant when she was doing so while attaching the magic invisibility cloak to the harness!

“There. Okay, it’s working,” Yolani said.

Elania glanced back at herself and felt disappointment. There was no invisibility. She whined.

Yolani raised an eyebrow. "What? It doesn't make you invisible, it just helps make people not pay attention to you. You'll still need to use your stealth and do your best to not bring attention to yourself."

Ugh! It was one of those types of 'invisibility' cloaks! She should have known it was too good to be true...plus it didn't cover her completely. Her head and tail would stick out.

The steps leading up were sealed by a heavy metal door. It required Yolani to grunt and work at turning a round lever to unseal the metal bolts holding it shut. A loud roar filled the air as soon as it groaned open.

They emerged into an empty alley beside a large depression, a large dark pool of water slowly flowing off an edge as a waterfall. They were right at the district's edge, where the channel separated them. Elania sniffed and loped toward the edge to peer over the side. They were fairly high up, but she spotted a series of ramps that lead down to the water's edge.

Looking back at Yolani, she let out a whine.

"What?" Yolani asked with a frown.

Pawing the air, she whined some more, then pointed toward the ramp.

It took a few moments before Yolani figured it out. "You want to go to the water?"

Head tilt to the right, and her tail shot up.

Yolani looked around. It was late in the evening, and there weren't many people around. "Alright. I guess washing off isn't a bad idea. Plus... you can change back."

Elania gruffed noncommittally.

They hurried down the ramp, their steps blending in easily with the waterfall's noise as it cascaded down into the shadowy depths below. Elania allowed Yolani to lead the way so she could keep a careful watch around. The walk was long and not entirely safe.

Several times, Yolani's hand reached out and sank into her fur as they navigated crumbling steps that hadn't been maintained in a long time.

When they finally reached the bottom, there was a small line of trash that had washed ashore where the ramp dipped gently into the water. Despite being near the waterfall's edge, the water moved calmly in the abatement pool, with stonework stretching across the water to form as a sort of fence to prevent things from washing over the edge.

Predictably, it had turned into a wall of trash and debris. The water was still mostly clean, though. That was the important part.

Elania bounded the rest of the distance in a hurry and dipped in a paw. The water was surprisingly cool to the touch. Looking around, she didn't spot anyone nearby. This was a city. Wasn't that a bit strange?

Yolani didn't seem to think it was, so Elania took her cue from her. Still, she monitored their surroundings carefully with all her senses.

Emerald Eyes stared at her for a moment before gesturing out to the water. "Go on then."

Elania needed no more encouragement and stepped into the water carefully. It was cool, almost cold, but her thick fur helped insulate her even though it was wet. Dark-walkers weren't evolved for swimming, but that didn't make it impossible, or even hard even.

She spread her toes and paws and paddled with effort before dipping under the water. That felt strange and bad. She held her breath, which wasn't natural, but a current of **[Power]** removed her need to actually breathe. The water burned at her eyes, though, and she pivoted around and returned to the ramp.

Yolani had already finished stripping her clothes and then dipped a toe into the water. Dripping like a soaked rag, Elania began to shake, sending water spraying all over—especially onto Yolani.

"Ahh! You did that on purpose!" Yolani squealed before covering her mouth.

Elania glanced around. That was right, they probably should remain quiet. She stepped up to a dry area and sniffed her paw, then licked it. No sewer. At least, not much. She stared and watched as Yolani went into the water to her hips with a rag and some bar of what Elania assumed was soap.

While the other girl scrubbed, Elania gave herself her own bath while keeping watch.

Yolani was quick, efficient, even. But Elania could see the strain in her movements as she tended to her blistered side. Her hands were trembling slightly when she finished washing up.

As Yolani stepped out of the water, Elania brushed up against her leg comfortingly. Emerald Eyes responded with a gentle stroke along her mane. "Thanks, Elania," she murmured softly, a small but genuine smile gracing her lips.

With the worst of the filth washed off them, they moved to the nearby wall and into a shadowy area while Yolani pulled her clothes back on. The black-haired girl grabbed Elania's attention once she was done and held her eyes. "I think it would be best if you turned back now. I have clothes for you."

Elania considered a moment before agreeing. Yolani was probably right, and there was no way to tell how well she'd be able to stay unnoticed and being forced to transform back at a time not of her choosing would leave her naked somewhere probably unpleasant.

Nothing happened for a moment. A thin thread of fear ran through her as she didn't transform back. It had been easy to turn into a **[Darkwalker]** when she'd needed to, but changing back wasn't as easy.

That was wrong.

Her thoughts were fuzzy and muddled with **[Darkwalker]** thoughts mingled with her own, but she wasn't a **[Darkwalker]**.

She was human.

It was like an audible pop in her head, a small jolt of **[Power]** filled her and a smokey cloud of gas evaporated off of her as she transformed.

Regaining her human body felt like stepping out of a second skin. The world seemed different, less vividly colored, but sharper in detail; her sensitive hearing was completely drowned out by the loudness of the waterfall, and her thoughts rapidly became clearer, more complex.

Yolani was staring at her, holding a bundle of clothes.

"Hello," Elania mumbled.

"Hello, yourself," Yolani replied with a smile. She looked Elania over from head to toe. "You're human again."

Elania's cheeks heated instantly, but it was far too late to try to hide her modesty. Instead, her thoughts drifted to hoping that Yolani liked what she saw. Which really was the wrong thought to be having considering their current situation!

By the time the bundle was handed over, Elania's face had nearly turned a lobster red. Thankfully, the dim light helped conceal that somewhat. She didn't think Yolani had **[Darkvision]** so that was probably a good thing for hiding her embarrassment. Turning around, Elania quickly opened her own pack that was still attached to the harness and pulled on her elastic underwear first.

Once fully dressed, she let herself breathe. Leather belt with daggers went around her hips, mimicking Yolani's combat wands. They both didn't have any of their armor, and the Guard had probably ransacked the shop and there was no telling if she'd get the stuff she'd left there back.

No use thinking about that, though.

Yolani approached from behind and grabbed her arm, causing her heart to skip a beat. Elania quickly smothered the repeated thought of ‘incidental contact’ running on repeat in her brain while the other girl pointed up the ramp.

“We should ask around the outer non-hub taverns before the night’s over. I bet we can find the information we need there... especially with some coin,” Yolani said.

“You got some coin?” Elania asked.

Yolani frowned. “Not all of it, but some large golds and a bunch of large silvers. I didn’t have time to unpack the safe.”

Elania nodded understandingly, taking note of Yolani’s efficient planning once again. Despite everything they’d been through, the other girl managed to think ahead.

Yolani draped the ‘invisibility cloak’ around Elania’s shoulders suddenly. “Keep this on, too. That way people will be less inclined to notice what you are or **[Identify]** you.”

Elania pulled the fabric around her shoulders and tied the string to her top’s collarbone loops. “Thank you.”

Yolani replied with a nod and smile.

They began their ascent in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Elania couldn’t shake off the worry that almost immediately settled in her stomach after transforming back into a human. There were some serious upsides to her **[Darkwalker]** transformation, and one of them was not worrying about things.

Elania glanced at Yolani as they reached the top of the ramp. What worried her most wasn’t exactly the unfamiliar streets and danger of the Mercenary District.

What worried her most was Yolani.

Dark circles had formed under the other girl’s eyes and her face seemed to have a sickly pale tinge. She was strong. Elania had no doubt about it, but she was also visibly worn out.

But she didn’t think they were going to have time to rest. The few hours of napping in the Sewer was all they were going to get. Her demon nature seemed to allow her to function with much less sleep than normal, but the same wasn’t true for her companion.

Elania shook off the melancholy thoughts. Now wasn’t the time for worry; they needed to focus on finding the Black Candle’s mana shard trove and getting out of this mess.

CHAPTER 62 – GUEST RIGHTS DON'T APPLY

The third tavern they tried was a dingy, poorly lit establishment by the name of The Mucky Puddle. The name fit. Outside, a leaky city works pipe drizzled over a nearby hole that had long filled with filth. Elania watched from across the street as Yolani went about inside and out, mingling with the patrons.

They were an eclectic mix of mercenaries, laborers, and downtrodden folk resigned to finding the cheapest establishment in the district, and the Mucky Puddle fit the bill. It was the perfect place to dig for information in the Mercenary District without drawing too much attention, according to Yolani.

How she knew so much about the underside, Elania wasn't sure.

A trio of burly men passed by, and she pulled Yolani's enchanted cloth around her tighter. So far it had worked wonders, and even when walking side-by-side with the other girl on the streets, Elania had been forced to avoid being walked into.

Yolani, on the other hand, had appeared alone and free game, but her hand on her combat wand had been enough to forestall any unfriendly encounters. And when she was actually in the tavern, her charm, wit, and coins kept the other patrons friendly, boisterous, and hopefully giving up the whereabouts of a certain Paladin's base of operations.

From where she stood, Elania could watch each interaction unfold like a carefully orchestrated dance. Yolani would approach, exchange a few pleasantries before a glint of silver exchanged hands or an order of drinks was placed. Then she'd listen intently as they spoke.

Some conversations were brief and aborted; others were lengthy and filled Elania with the hope of promise. The other taverns had slowly pointed them in a direction, and they'd

followed the trail. Supposedly, there had been a number of guards hired in the area, all fitting the timing of when the Paladin had been said to return from his first expedition.

When he'd found her. In the Black Candle's dungeon.

Elania scanned the streets, looking for any sign of pursuit. Whoever had followed them into the sewers hadn't shown themselves. Or hadn't even been after them. Since they hadn't seen the bloodshed—and she was sure that there had been a slaughter—there was no way to be sure. An instinctual worry that they were being hunted was impossible to ignore, but it was vague and also impossible to pin down exactly what it was.

Other than they were probably wanted dead or alive, emphasis on dead, by the City Guard. Who used telepathy to communicate like modern police radios?

Yeah, that was probably what was gnawing at her, actually.

Elania glanced back at Yolani, who was talking to an older man. The girl was full of tenacity and patience. Despite her haggard state, she'd went straight to work and didn't show the tiredness that Elania knew was hiding under the surface. That spark of resilience that refused to be extinguished despite the odds against them drew her in and made her...

Fuck. She was fangirling again. What was wrong with her? Chances were, the girl was straight. Crushing on her was going to be a miserable experience. Did Eladu even have the concept of sexual orientations other than straight? She'd not seen any signs of it on the streets of Neftasu, which hinted at scary, very scary things for the acceptance of her preferences.

Yolani stood up, thanked the man, then turned to bee-line toward her, broadcasting an irresistible smile as soon as their eyes met.

Elania's heart skipped a beat, and she slapped her own cheeks twice.

Now was not the time. Stupid hormones, stupid Elania brain!

Yolani came to a stop beside her and leaned in.

"We've got it," she said in such a hushed voice it barely reached Elania's ears over the clamor of the tavern's raucous laughter and clattering mugs. "We have a location to check. It's not far from here."

The relief that washed over Elania was tangible, like a heavy burden being lifted off her shoulders. "Let's go check it out?"

Yolani nodded. "Follow me."

Elania fell in beside her, one last gaze sweeping the tavern and area behind them to make sure they weren't being followed. She didn't notice anyone paying attention to them.

It was only half a dozen blocks to their destination, which placed them almost to the edge of the cavern, where the dark walls loomed ominously overhead.

They found an alley across the street from it, and Elania studied the area intently. A stately mansion was surrounded by a metal fence that was topped with spear tips to deter climbing over it. An ornate gate in the same style was positioned right in front of the building's two large double entry doors.

She didn't see any posted guards patrolling as had been promised. The yard was deserted.

"The door's ajar," Yolani whispered.

Elania frowned and looked closer. The other girl was right. The front door was slightly ajar. Combined with the absence of guards, that was concerning.

"How can we be sure it's the right place?" Elania asked.

Yolani grunted and then pulled her pack off and set it on the ground. "I brought something for that."

"What?" Elania asked.

"A detector. If there is a cache of mana shards in there, it'll tell us," Yolani explained.

Elania's brow furrowed. "But the mana shard chest belonged to the Black Candle. He's their enemy!"

Yolani shook her head. "I know you said he was on the losing side of things when you escaped, but... he made it back, see? They wouldn't have let him live if he lost."

"Maybe he ran away," Elania offered weakly.

"I'm not sure that type run away, but you could be right," Yolani admitted. The detector was a wooden sphere on a round base, with tiny little specks of colored crystal embedded into the wood. There was a dial in the side of the base and Yolani turned it to the right.

Almost immediately, the sphere began to spin before snapping into position; a blue arrow pointing directly at Elania.

Yolani looked up at her with a frown.

Elania's eyes widened a bit. Was it detecting her mana shard? "Sorry, maybe it is—"

"You must be really dense with **[Power]**. Can you go to the back of the alley so I can calibrate it?" Yolani asked.

Elania nodded mutely and retreated, Yolani raising a fist in the air once she was far enough away. When the black-haired girl waved for her to come back, the device had a glowing orange square on the base while the sphere pointed towards the mansion.

“What’s it mean?” Elania asked.

“It’s...it’s detecting mana shards,” Yolani replied. “A lot of them, hidden behind a detection blocker. That’s why it is orange. But we are so close, and there are so many, that their signal is leaking anyway.”

A chill ran down Elania’s spine. She looked back at the mansion again, her gaze lingering on the slightly ajar front door. Still no visible guards, or any signs of life whatsoever. Even the usually inhabited streets of the district were vacant.

Everything about it screamed ‘trap’, yet their target lay within reach just beyond the doors.

“We have to be careful,” Elania murmured under her breath. “This is what we wanted, but we aren’t out of the woods yet.”

Yolani shot her a confused look. “Out of the woods?”

“It’s an expression. We aren’t out of trouble yet,” Elania explained.

Yolani nodded. “Why don’t you do a walk around, see if you can spot anything from another angle?”

“Okay, on it.” Elania tugged her hidey cloak and aimed for the street corner. Almost immediately, she saw a person walking down the street and her hand instinctively reached for the dagger at her belt. But they were going away and didn’t even notice her. She spun her attention back to the mansion.

The area between the building and the fence was a well-curated garden of green shrubs that was growing under the artificial light of artifice lanterns. Shaped stone rocks stood like little soldiers in some places, while a small, paved walkway weaved through the décor. A few stone benches served as seating, and opposite the main entrance was a small white gazebo.

It was pretty nice, but there was still no sign of the promised guards as she worked her way back around to Yolani.

The other girl looked at her expectantly. “Well?”

Elania shook her head. “Nothing much. Just more of the same. Ghost town.”

“I don’t think we have much choice. We go in,” Yolani replied.

Elania nodded. “Agreed.”

Yolani pulled out some items from her pack. The first thing she proffered was a small red vial. “Healing potion.”

“What? No, I don’t need it. You keep it,” Elania said.

Yolani didn't relent. "I know you heal. I have more. Just hold on to this one. If I get hurt or something, you can pour it on me."

Taking it hesitantly, Elania stuffed it in her belt. "That's a red flag. Don't raise red flags."

Confusion filled the other girl's face. "What?"

"Nothing. What else do you got for us in there?" Elania asked.

Yolani sighed. "Not much. You have your artifice wards already. Do you want a combat wand?"

Well, she had gained the Artifice skill, but... "Does it work with Rank E Artifice skill?"

"When did you learn anything about Artifice? I mean... I didn't have time to teach you anything!" The surprise in the other girl's voice was very pointy.

"When I ate Master Ranolf," Elania said matter-of-factly.

Yolani froze. "You get skills from eating people?"

"And things. Darkwalkers give **[Stealth]**, and Ralfot give **[Crisis Management]**. That's how I got most of my S+ Rank skills," Elania explained.

Yolani's mouth opened wider before she responded. "You have an... you have multiple S+ Rank skills and you were summoned a few weeks ago?"

"Yes?" Elania scratched her cheek. Maybe her situation was more special than she had thought.

The other girl's shock seemed to snap as she looked over at the mansion. "Now's not the time, let's get back on track."

Nodding, Elania led the way. When they reached the iron outer gate, it was still sealed. A brief burst of **[Power]** let her shear the bolt off with a snap.

Yolani hissed, "I had a wand for that."

"Wasn't that loud? No one around," Elania replied as she led them straight up the front path to the main doors. There had been a few side entrances, but what the heck, she just wanted to get this over with. If it was a trap, it was a trap. The mana shards were inside, they just needed to punch their way to them before running off with them at worst.

She slipped inside, prepared for a fight, but the inside was just as silent as outside. A grand foyer greeted them, multiple large hallways stretching out in three directions, with multiple doors lining each one. Dimmed chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, their small crystals giving off only a bare hint of light. Two massive curving stairways led to the second-floor landing.

Glancing around, Elania spotted no sign of life—no guards, servants, pets, or anyone, really.

Elania glanced at Yolani. "Where are they?"

Yolani nodded with a frown, "Don't know. There should be people."

"Yeah, I don't like it, but I meant the mana shards," Elania clarified.

Yolani raised her hand and pointed upwards. "Somewhere on the second floor."

The staircase was solid; it didn't creak or groan like Elania had worried. Two branching hallways went in opposite directions from the landing, but the center axis held two ornate double doors. "Well, I guess we have a good idea of where to go first."

Yolani gently grabbed her wrist. "Wait."

Elania looked at her and raised an eyebrow, but the other girl had already pulled out her detector thing. It pointed toward the room, sure enough. Then she brought out a new wand and waved it over the door handles. It flared blue once before going dark.

"Huh. Not booby-trapped," Yolani stated.

"I'll go in first. You stay behind my back?" Elania asked.

Yolani nodded. "I think that formation suits our particular talents best."

Elania grinned. Their formation. Ha. There were just the two of them. Yolani was making it sound like they were an army or an adventure game party. Actually, the latter probably fit the bill a bit too accurately. Except things were a lot less fun and more stressful.

The door handle turned easily, and the door opened inward with a click. She didn't hesitate to press forward, and Yolani followed close behind.

The dimly lit room was massive, the tall walls lined with rows upon rows of books. A large ornate desk dominated the center, and Elania's eyes were attracted to the box sitting on top of it like it was a lodestone. She recognized it. It was the box the Bishop had offered her upon her summoning. She pointed it out to Yolani.

"That's it," Elania said.

A large swivel chair around the desk turned to face them. The Paladin in his bulky silver armor comically oversized for the furniture. The chair actually creaked like it was ready to snap and he stood up before being dumped on his ass.

Elania blinked. Oh fuck. It was the paladin.

Well, what else had they expected to find?

He spoke first. "I see my trap has finally netted me results, but you took your sweet time dealing with the guards."

His gaze swept over them appraisingly, and Elania pulled off her stealth cloak and shoved it in her side pack. No need to risk getting it shredded now.

"I'm surprised they tracked you down," he said, looking at Elania.

Elania shook her head. "No one tracked me down." She pointed toward the chest. "The city is in trouble and needs those. Why don't you hand them over?"

He chuckled. "I need them," he said before looking to Yolani. "To catch more well-hidden cultists."

Yolani stepped forward. "I'm not a cultist, I'm an artificer. The mana shard shortage is causing things to break down and we need them."

The paladin reached behind his back and pulled off his massive blue hued sword, causing Elania to stiffen. Although she didn't have a lot of data points, she remembered the man not really listening to anything when he was attacking.

It was going to be a fight.

Yolani seemed to realize the same thing and leaned in close enough that her breath tickled the ear. "You grab the shards; I'll hold him off and then we'll run."

It was as good a plan as any she could think, so Elania nodded in agreement.

"We don't want to fight. We need the mana shards to clear Yolani's name, finish her contract, and relieve the shortage," Elania offered quickly as the Paladin stepped around the desk.

The paladin didn't pause, but proffered a question. "Is she accused of stealing the city's mana shards then?"

"Uh, no. Her uncle tried to steal her home, and we killed him. We need the shards to bribe the Magister that was backing him to drop the charges. Plus, finish the light stone," Elania said as she stammered through an attempted explanation. Yolani shot her a sharp glance.

What? It was mostly accurate, right? And making up reasonable sounding lies on the spot was hard!

The blue sword came to a one-handed ready position in front of him. "Murder and bribery. Even if you aren't cultists, it should be fine to cleanse the city of a little darkness that has had its greed grow unbound."

"The sword shoots magic," Elania directed to Yolani.

Her combat wand flared white as the paladin took another step forward, a bolt of white energy slashing through the space between them. He swatted it aside contemptuously.

Yolani wasn't deterred, pulled a second wand, and began to let loose, casting bolt after bolt toward him. Some flew around to attack at different angles to strike at him behind, but blue mana flared around him, causing them to dissolve into clouds of gas that rapidly dissipated harmlessly.

It didn't even slow him down. Elania remained rooted, unsure whether she should leave the other girl's side.

Yolani didn't look away from her target as she hissed in annoyance. "The plan!"

Elania took a deep breath and nodded. She took a hundred points of **[Power]** from the mana shard in her pocket as a buffer.

[Power: 488/396]

He didn't let her pass him by, lunging to the side, bringing her within sword swipe range. Elania ducked the blow, but a rapid overhand strike came swiftly. That forced her to roll to the side to avoid being bisected, and she drew a **[Vorpal Dagger]** to strike back.

He backpedaled the strike as several white bolts of energy struck him in the back, but Yolani's magic was ineffective, like chiseling at a mountain.

Elania surged a pulse of **[Power]** through her legs and shot toward him low to the ground, aiming to slash a leg. His sword accurately swiped for her, and she parried the strike.

The dagger shattered into shards like it was made of brittle glass instead of the strange poisonous alloy. Anton's sword smashed into her side.

A voice echoed inside her head. "You've killed freely, but not irredeemably."

A line of sharpness lit up on her side and she was catapulted into the ceiling, smashing into the rafters. She had the presence of mind to grab on to one and her free hand flashed to her side. It came back bloody, but by all rights the blow should have chopped her in half.

The memory of the sword bludgeoning her before came unbidden. Maybe the sword didn't like her as much anymore?

The Paladin turned and swatted a large red bolt sent hurtling toward him by Yolani. The energy split in two, but then arced back together and slammed into his faceplate. It knocked him back several feet, and Elania spotted her chance. She swung and braced her feet against the ceiling and then pushed off, sending herself toward the desk like an arrow.

She landed with a crash, smashing into the desk but rolled to her feet quickly. The Paladin turned toward her, but once she had the mana shards, she didn't think he'd be able to hurt her at all if she started dumping their contents in his face.

She reached for the box.

Only for it to be snatched away.

Two glowing blue eyes glinted at her, a yellow mop of hair and razor-sharp teeth shining a wicked grin.

“Thanks for distracting Anton for me,” Tessa giggled maniacally.

CHAPTER 63 – RELAIN’S HOUND

Elania reacted instantly, pushing forward to chase after the mana shard chest. Tessa didn’t let her close, jumping back equally fast.

The razor-sharp looking teeth grinned madly. “Hahaha! My master needs this.”

A curved blue wave of energy flashed towards both of them as Anton turned and charged toward the stolen prize.

There was no dodging the wave; Elania punched it with a burst of energy, and the section slashing through her dissolved. Tessa leaped over the attack easily, latching onto the side of the bookshelf. It tilted and began to fall straight on top of the charging paladin. It didn’t slow him down any as he burst through the furniture and books.

Tessa was already gone, flashing toward the exit. A wall of light materialized a few feet in front of her and the demon smashed into it heavily with a thud, her and the box both falling to the ground. The demon wasn’t dazed, though, and rolled away with the chest.

Yolani flicked her second wand; a pole of metal dug its way down from the roof like a spear impaling the ground where Tessa had just vacated. More poles began to slice down, one after another, each one narrowly missing the evading demon. A manically laughter filled the room.

Elania turned and darted to chase after Tessa as well, but Anton had the same idea and they nearly collided. He swung at her without hesitation and Elania jumped over the sword and then kicked him. She bounced off him. His shell was like a mountain.

Forgetting about the mana shard chest, the paladin rushed her with a rapid flurry of swings and strikes that took all her attention to avoid. The sword was relentless, each swing carrying a force that felt like it could split the earth itself, much less her. The gusts of air that accompanied each swing blew at her hair and clothes like a hurricane.

There was a shout of pain from Yolani that burned her ears and forced her to glance over at the other fight. The demon was agile, dodging Yolani's strikes, while tossing and throwing books, splinters of wood, and every sort of debris there was available in the room. Yolani's defensive wand snapped at each projectile, deflecting each one with cool efficiency, but the rate was obviously wearing her down.

A shard of metal slashed Yolani's cheek, leaving a red line of blood, which only seemed to fuel Tessa's delight further; the maniacal laughter filled the room with a macabre horror.

Elania felt a surge of panic. Yolani needed help!

In the corner of her eye, blue flashed. The heavy paladin blade was streaking for her head, and Elania realized she'd made the mistake of getting distracted. No time to dodge.

Fine.

There wasn't time anyway.

What had Yolani said about **[Power]** being exponential?

Fifty points was a normal attack, a hundred for a strong one. When she'd been desperate and created the incineration beam, it had been a hundred and fifty.

Time seemed to slow, and she swung her fist like a hammer for the flat of the massive blue blade. How about three hundred?

Her **[Mana Manipulation]** had become fairly precise. She didn't even have to draw it from herself, the mana shard she had still had that much thanks to the previous battle on Artifice Row.

Her fist and forearm lit up like a yellow star as it impacted.

Physics seemed to break; there was a resounding gong that pulsed through everything that was felt more in her spirit than as sound. It felt like her entire being was warbling, but both she and the sword were anchored in place, like they had been freeze-framed while everything else erupted around them.

Instead of damaging the sword, the blast materialized in a coned shape on the other side of the metal, spreading out with sharp lines that shot ahead of the shockwave, blasting into the mansion's wall and punching wide holes all the way through like armor-piercing bullets.

When the wave hit, the masonry crumbled and stretched until the entire side of the building blew out in a massive plume of debris straight into the city streets.

The vacuum of the blast sucked in all the air from the room, dragging books, debris, with it. The paladin was yanked to the side, his grip on the sword restraining him from being blasted away... until it slipped, and he went flying with the rest of the chaos.

Tessa flashed by, jumping from one piece of debris to the next, her cackles muted in the frozen moment. The mana shard chest was still in her arms as she disappeared.

[Connection Established. Profiling New User.]

They unfroze, and Elania clamped down on the sword's hilt, stabbing it into the floor as the vacuum sucked her feet off the ground. Yolani somersaulted past her, and Elania reached out and grabbed the other girl's ankle with an ethereal hand made of golden light.

The wind died down, and they both crumpled onto the floor. There was nothing but devastation around them.

"Yolani?" Elania croaked. No sound. Her eardrums must have shattered. Crawling forward, Elania found that her left hand was missing at the wrist from the blow, slowly beginning the re-knitting process.

But Yolani didn't have **[Regeneration]**. Panic swelled inside Elania's chest as she scrambled to the other girl, using her ruined limb anyway.

The other girl was unconscious. Elania pulled her onto her side, then her back, carefully looking for injuries. Nothing looked broken or bent wrong, but red was leaking from her ears and there was a large wooden splinter stuck in her upper right arm.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

She could drop bombs with her fists, and regrow entire limbs and organs, but she didn't have a single fucking skill for helping someone else!

First aid. She'd taken a first aid course a million years ago. What was the first thing to do?

Elania's eyes settled on a broken vial across the room, a memory slamming into her like a miracle.

Fucking. Red. Flags.

Her pack was missing, but she'd put it in her inner shirt pocket. Pulling out the small vial of red liquid, it seemed like it was too small to do anything, but, hey; it was magic, right?

Elania yanked the splinter out, then poured half the vial into the wound. It immediately lit up blue, little motes of light evaporating off of it. Right. Right. It was working. Tilting Yolani's head to the side, she poured some drops into her ear, then repeated it for the other side. Then she poured the last bit into the girl's mouth.

She was still repeating the other girl's name when hearing slowly worked its way back from the incessant ringing. Yolani coughed and opened her eyes, looking at her with a dazed expression.

"We need to go. The Guard will be coming here!" Elania said.

Yolani didn't respond with words, but tried to get to her feet, but a sharp look of pain appeared on her face and she fell back. Elania caught her.

"Shit," Elania cursed. Yolani reached out and Elania's eyes followed the gesture. It was to Yolani's pack, which had somehow tangled on a fallen support beam and not blown away. Elania rushed over and brought it back, rummaging through the random assortment of things she didn't understand while looking for more healing vials.

None there.

In the distance, the murmur of shouting men and women slowly drifted closer. They didn't have time.

Slipping the pack over Yolani's head, she lifted the girl up into her arms then turned and started to leave.

[Not without me. User.]

Elania froze, her gaze turning to settle on the blue sword.

[Yes. Take me.]

Cursed talking sword that sent **[System]** style messaged to her?

[Blessed. Blessed talking sword. One that saved your life twice. Take me.]

Elania frowned. Yolani was already hard to carry, not because she was heavy but because the other girl was the same size she was!

It was complicated, but she pinned the sword between a tightly hugged Yolani pressed against her chest.

Then she ran.

The only place Elania could think of going was the sewer entrance near the channel. The stealth cloak was tattered, and she did not know how effective it was, but she kept it wrapped around them while jumping from roof to roof. Her power levels were slowly dropping from the exertion and the mana shard in her boot barely gave off an anemic pulse.

That wasn't good.

The area around the mansion glowed from a fire that had erupted. Many people were running toward the blast area. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice them going in the opposite direction along the roofs, or so she hoped.

Reaching the access way, the area was similarly deserted as when they had exited from it, and she pulled on the heavy door.

It was sealed.

[I can assist.]

Elania blinked. Well, what choice did she have? If she tried to force it, the **[Power]** cost was going to be high, the door would be obviously destroyed, and... how was the sword able to assist?

She set down Yolani gently, then wielded it with two hands. A glowing red area near where the lock bolt slid from the door into the wall was highlighted in her vision.

[Strike there.]

She did—the blade cleaved through the metal joint neatly, almost as if it adjusted the swing mid-air for her. There wasn't even a visible scratch as she pulled the heavy door open.

Recollecting Yolani, she carried her two passengers into the tunnel. The first intersection reminded her of just how nasty the place was, and this time she didn't have the disassociation of being a **[Darkwalker]** to combat the literal filth and smell.

“Fuck. I'm sorry this was the worst idea,” Elania mumbled. Maybe she should have broken into someone's house. There were lots of run-down looking buildings in the district.

Not wanting to go very far into the mess, Elania picked the first cubby hole she spotted that was dry. Yolani was still mostly unresponsive, but when Elania shook, her dazed green eyes greeted her.

Did she have a concussion? If the healing potion didn't heal her all the way, they were out of options. She'd have to find someone...or give Yolani up to a hospital...did they even have hospitals in this city? Fuck, she didn't even know if they had places for injured!

There had to be something, maybe apothecaries? Elania opened up Yolani's bag and started going through it. It had lost a lot of things since she'd packed it, and again, there were no more healing potions.

She took Yolani's hand and squeezed it. She didn't know what to do.

[I can assist.]

Elania blinked and rubbed an eye before glancing at the sword she'd set on the ground. Golden etched runs were worked into the blade along its entire length.

[I am Eziel, Arch-Seraph of Light, Judge of the Divine. Touch me to the girl's head and I will pronounce my judgement of her worthiness.]

Elania reached down and picked up the sword, scrutinizing it.

“Does that mean you can heal her?” she asked pointedly.

[If I judge her worthy, I can.]

Elania let out a slow, shaky breath.

“Well, Eziel, Arch-Seraph of Light, Judge of the Divine, I am Elania Reyes, Human Girl from Earth, Recently Turned Eladu Demon. I’m going to touch you to her head. If you don’t heal her, I’m going to submerge you in the sewer filth before casting you off the waterfall into the abyssal depths of wherever the fuck the city lake goes so you can rust down there for eternity or the next thousand years or whatever.”

There was a tense moment of silence.

[I will take it under consideration.]

Elania bit her lip. She didn’t know if this was a good idea. How did the sword judge anyone? Was it real? Yolani had killed her uncle not even a day ago. Did that make her friend evil? They’d both killed more people than Elania ever thought...no she’d never thought that she’d ever have to kill anyone. But she had, in order to survive.

How did the sword judge people?

Resignation filled her chest. There weren’t any good options.

But if the sword made things worse, Elania knew she’d figure out how to make magic talking swords suffer and do her best possible to make it happen. She was that vindictive.

Did that make her evil or bad, according to the sword?

[Not worse than the previous User.]

Elania shook her head. She knew nothing of the Paladin.

Yolani’s breathing came in stressed hitches. Elania placed the flat end of the blade against the other girl’s forehead gently.

The sewer chamber filled with golden white light.

CHAPTER 64 – REST AND UNREST

The golden light was warm as it bathed the sewer hideout. It was also blinding, forcing Elania to shield her eyes with her arm. When she opened them again, Yolani was awake and staring at her, wide-eyed.

“Elania?” she sounded hoarse but alert.

Filled with relief, Elania sat down Eziel and wrapped her arms around the other girl in a tight hug. “Thank god,” she muttered into the other girl’s hair. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Yolani returned the hug weakly, patting Elania on the back. Elania slid in to sit beside her.

“Did we... did we get the mana shards?” she asked weakly.

Elania shook her head. “Tessa got away,” she said quietly.

“You know who that demon was?” Yolani asked.

“I met her in the Mercenary District the night I met you, but just for a few minutes,” Elania explained.

In her head, she replayed Tessa’s words, and then focused on their meeting. Elania’s eyes widened as she realized something. “I think I know who her master might be. One of the people called her “Relain’s Hound.”

Yolani’s breath hitched. “Relain.”

“Yeah, but I have no idea who it is,” Elania said weakly.

A grim look appeared on Yolani’s face. “I do. It’s the Magister who started all this...he holds the contract for the light stone and was working with my uncle.”

“Wait...and he’s involved with the mana shards? It seemed like Tessa knew they were there. The paladin was laying a trap... for her? And we got caught in it?” Elania asked as quickly as the gears in her brain came to the thoughts.

Yolani hugged her knees. “We failed... I don’t know what we can do now. There is no way we can take on the Magister.”

Elania bit her lip at the other girl’s dejection. She didn’t enjoy seeing Yolani defeated. “I got something.”

Yolani looked over at her, and Elania held up Eziel. “It’s a talking sword.”

“Talking... sword?” Yolani blinked rapidly as she stared at the large blue blade.

“It called itself Arch-Seraph Divine Judgement thing. It healed you after the healing potion wasn’t enough. So... it’s pretty useful,” Elania explained.

[Eziel, Arch-Seraph of Light, Judge of the Divine.]

Yolani’s eyes went wide and slid to an empty spot in the air. “It can communicate through the system?”

[Typically, no. However, your souls are connected via contract and my method of communication utilizes the User’s [System] interface.]

“Any idea what it is?” Elania asked.

[I am present. I am a divine instrument.]

Ugh. The stupid sword was going to interject in every conversation, wasn’t it?

“It’s an artifact. The paladin must have been high ranking... he’s going to be mad and want it back,” Yolani said.

[Previous User’s choices and actions unfortunately led to moral degradation. Current User’s morality values more closely align with projected optimums.]

“Umm. Thanks?” Elania mumbled. That was a compliment, right?

Yolani looked away and mumbled. “Relain. We’re screwed. We can’t fight the Magister.”

Elania frowned, unsure. She’d never seen Yolani express defeat before.

“I don’t think we can stay down here. We need to find a safe place to stay and rest,” Elania offered.

Yolani shook her head and seemed to shrink into herself. “They’ll be searching for us everywhere. Maybe a small inn in the Mercenary District... but they’ll find us, eventually. The city is enormous, but the Guard has eyes everywhere, and the Magister will be urging them after us... Getting the Mana Shards was our only option.”

“We can’t give up,” Elania stated.

Yolani looked at her, and the exhaustion and pale complexion caught Elania by surprise.

“I’m really tired,” Yolani admitted. Almost immediately after speaking, she collapsed to the side. Elania caught her.

“You were supposed to heal her!” Elania’s eyes slid to the sword accusingly.

[Your companion has reached the end of her endurance. A low amount of essence transfer due to User contract has exacerbated matters.]

“That was only for a portion and wasn’t supposed to affect her!”

[Physical healing requires natural essence and being. User’s personal dynamo efficiently converts the essence of other beings into usable stores. Humans do not have this capacity. Beyond her physical exhaustion, her soul is drained from recent events and requires a period of repose.]

“Fuck,” Elania muttered. “We need to figure out how to move without me having to carry you.”

Her eyes slid to Yolani’s pack. There were some more regular tools in it. With a bit of ingenuity, she rigged up two leather straps as a way to secure Eziel onto the pack while wearing it. There was no way they were going to stay in the sewer any longer. Whatever had caused the earlier massacre in the shanty town proved just how bad an idea it was.

There was still a good amount of silver and even a few golds in Yolani’s purse, and Elania stashed it in her inner shirt pocket.

Eziel’s weight caused the pack to sag as she attached him, but it worked well enough for now. Next came getting Yolani up and moving again. Kneeling beside the other girl, she shook her shoulder and said her name.

Two blank green eyes looked up at her, dull and unfocused. With a bit of urging, she stood up on shaky legs. The presence concealing cloak went around Yolani’s shoulders, and then Elania slipped an arm around her back to help support her. That was the best she could do.

Finding a room was going to be a nightmare.

The trudge out of the Sewer and back onto the street took a long time. It was a relief to exit, though; the foul smell disappearing with the sealing of the heavy metal door.

Elania let out a sigh and started down one of the streets. There were inhabitants watching them from the sides, and she bit her lip. They were too conspicuous. **[Stealth]** wasn’t very effective considering the situation, but the way her skills had begun to work...

She pictured her **[Power]** being pushed into the skill, making them hidden. Almost immediately, there was a drain, but she wasn't sure it was doing anything. A sudden pop-up appeared.

[You have gained the skill Presence Concealment!]

Maybe it was doing something.

"Eziel, can you, like, help us locate a room or something?" Elania asked.

[I am a divine instrument, not a concierge.]

"Okay, sorry for asking. I should have known the inert piece of metal would be useless," Elania hissed under her breath.

[I suggest using your [Bribery] skill.]

What the fuck did she really know about **[Bribery]**? She'd gotten the skill from eating assholes. Throw coins at someone and hope it worked?

"Can't you, like, use your judgement thing to find an innkeeper who isn't morally bankrupt and won't sell us out?" Elania asked.

She froze as the sensation of a invisible hand took hold of her soul and yanked, causing a flow of **[Power]** out of her. Was that what mana shards felt when she drained them? She reacted instinctively, clamping down on the drain and strangling the connection.

[A wide search will require a constant donation.]

Oh. It had been Eziel. "Fine. But not too much. I'm already low."

[I will let you know if someone who meets the criteria comes into range.]

They continued down the street, Yolani mindlessly following directions. The sensation of a slow bleed of **[Power]** gnawed at her, the fuel for **[Presence Concealment]** and Eziel's requirements trickling her numbers down.

As they turned around the corner, panic filled her; a trio of guards were walking straight down the street in their direction! Elania aborted her first instinct to turn and go in the opposite direction when they looked right at her and didn't seem to notice anything.

Okay. The hide in plain sight things were working. She could deal with that. There was just a time limit on how long she could maintain it. They meandered down the street. Then another.

Thirty minutes of aimless wandering through the squalor of the near ruins. They neared the district's hub, then went down a different spoke. Eziel was silent, which was rapidly eroding her faith in humanity that had already been punctured badly since arriving in Eladu.

Just when she thought that she needed to change tack, Eziel interrupted.

[Ahead and on the left. An innkeeper would likely be favorable.]

Elania's eyes slid onto that side of the street. At first, she didn't spot the building. Most of the houses were dark and uninviting, but a lantern inside a window lit up one of the buildings with a sign outside with a bed etched on it. It looked run down and poorly maintained like everything else around, but it was better than nothing.

She headed to it directly. The door was unlocked and there was a single ding from a sharp bell as they slipped inside. The interior was in much better condition. The outside was a façade?

The room was long and narrow, with steps leading to the second floor on the left, a door to another room on the right, and a large desk at the end of the space. There were a few chairs near the door beside a potted mushroom that glowed blue.

A burly-looking man sat behind the desk, but he stood up as his eyes took in the sight of them. A cudgel came out from under the desk, banded in iron.

"I don't take trouble. See yourselves out," the man said clearly.

Elania paused, then helped Yolani sit down. "We need a place to stay."

"So do a lot of people," he replied. "Your master looks like she's on her last leg. I'd prefer her croaking somewhere else."

"My friend needs rest and a bed," Elania said. She fished out a single small gold coin, which was a hundred times what she had been told a room should cost. "We only need a night or two."

He stared at her, then looked to Yolani, and then back at her and then the coin. She could see the cold calculation going on inside his head. She wanted to shake Eziel. This was what he had come up with?

Greed seemed to finally win. "One room, one bed, third floor. No board, no bath. Two nights only."

"Deal," Elania responded immediately.

The man put away the cudgel and pulled out a ring of keys. She passed him the coin; he scrutinized it, then grunted. "This way."

He led them up the flights of stairs and to a room on the top floor. She was pleasantly surprised by the room. It was small, but clean and, most importantly—private. "My name is Jark. If there is a problem, you come see me. If you need to store your things while you are away, bring them to me. The only lock is a bolt. I'm not responsible if anything is stolen from the room while you are gone."

Elania nodded, and he disappeared. She hurried to deposit Yolani onto the bed. The other girl moved like a marionette, increasing the amount of her worry. Was she going to be okay?

[The girl's state is a classic case of soul exhaustion. Rest will allow her to recover.]

Elania pulled off the other girl's boots and tended to removing the bulky belt still wrapped around her middle. Half the wands were missing, and it looked like whatever had been in her pouch had spilled out, but there was no helping that. It all went in the corner by the bed, along with Eziel and the big pack.

After tucking the sheet around Yolani, Elania grabbed the wooden chair in the corner and sat by the bed. Exhaustion ran through the back of her neck as well.

[Soul exhaustion recovery could be hastened by returning essence to her.]

Elania's head perked up. "How?"

[It is the same as charging or draining a mana shard, except you do so to her directly. Do note that you should use a tiny, precise amount of power over a period of time, or you will simply immolate her, which would have a negative effect on recovery.]

Elania frowned. She had been getting better and manipulating the energy, likely thanks to her S+ rank **[Mana Manipulation]** but messing this up would be very bad. She didn't need Eziel to tell her that.

Getting up, she made sure the door was securely bolted, then tugged off her own boots and belt. Then slipped into the bed with Yolani. Sliding an arm around the other girl's middle, she closed her eyes and put her forehead on her shoulder.

It was easy to feel her body warmth like that, which made pushing the trickle of **[Power]** into her easy. It eventually stopped requiring her concentration to regulate the flow.

Her mind drifted. She was so tired.

Sleep claimed her as well.

CHAPTER 65 – SCENE OF THE CRIME

The first sensation Elania became aware of was the feeling of something warm and soft pressed against her. Then the soft thing elbowed her in the side and moved. Her eyes fluttered open to find a pair of curious emerald eyes staring at her from a nose-length away. Yolani was awake.

“Hey,” Yolani murmured softly, her voice carrying an underlying strength that hadn’t been there the previous night.

Arm still around the other girl, she felt absolutely frozen from the proximity. Elania swallowed. “You feeling better?”

Yolani examined her face for a few seconds before replying. “Still tired, but... yeah. Better.”

A rush of relief washed over Elania as she took in Yolani’s improving condition. In the back of her mind, she partly blamed herself for things, and the guilt had been secretly hitting at her. She reached out instinctively, brushing a few loose strands away from the other girl’s face to tuck them behind an ear. “That’s good.”

Yolani’s cheeks took on some color as she sat up. “Did we... did we get the mana shards?”

Elania sat up, too, both of them facing in opposite directions. “Do you not remember when we talked last night?”

“Nothing much after the blast... a fuzzy bit where you carried me,” Yolani answered.

[Memory loss is an expected symptom of the received physical damage and degree of soul exhaustion.]

Yolani head turned to the sword. “The sword talks,” she said matter-of-factly.

Elania filled her in quickly.

They were left with the serious question of what came next.

"I think we ought to go after Relain," Elania declared decidedly. "If we can get back those mana shards, or prove that he was involved with the Black Candle and the shortage somehow, then it might be enough."

Yolani looked at her skeptically. "The Magistracy is probably the most guarded place in Neftasu, with tons of artifice wardings," she pointed out cautiously.

An impish grin tugged at one corner of Elania's mouth. "I can't think of a better person to be teamed up with for dealing with that."

Yolani huffed but didn't deny it—instead, there was something almost calculating in her gaze, as if gears had started turning in her mind despite everything they had gone through. It was fascinating to watch, and Elania couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration.

"What would we need?" Elania finally prompted, leaning back on the headboard as she studied Yolani with interest.

Yolani considered it for a while before relaxing back on the bed as well, her fingers tracing patterns on the bedsheet absently. "We lost most of my kit. We would need some of my equipment from the shop if it is still there," she finally admitted. "We'll have to go back..."

Elania tilted her head, feeling confident in that, at least. "I think we can manage that. We'll probably want to wait until night, though."

"There's curfew at night," Yolani reminded her.

Elania nodded. "Fewer people, too. I got a new skill, and your invisibility cloak is resilient."

Yolani's eyes lit up. "It survived? Wait. Who named it 'invisibility cloak?' That's not what it does!"

Elania laughed.

Night found them still at the inn, having spent the day resting. Elania had even managed to pay Jark several silvers to go get them a meal. He grumbled but came back with two plates of **[Ralfot]** meat and some kind of starchy vegetables that Yolani liked. It was simple fare, but wholesome.

As Elania collected Eziel and their belongings, she couldn't help but feel a pang of apprehension. Their plans tended to get derailed.

Jark grunted as they came down the stairs. "No refunds."

Elania waved acknowledgement and followed Yolani out onto the street.

The journey back into the sewer system was considerably less challenging, simply because of Yolani's improved condition. This time, they both had two small pieces of paper to plug their nose to combat the smell.

When they reached the shanty town they had stumbled upon before, they found a scene of desolation with visible signs of destruction strewn everywhere—bloodied pieces of clothing, splintered wood from the shelters, ravaged metal and scattered belongings.

But no bodies.

They passed through the area in a hurry and without talking. When they reached the narrowing tunnel that marked the transition between the Artisan and Mercenary Districts, Elania grunted.

"It's weird," she mused aloud as they were forced to splash into the muck as the walkway disappeared. "For a city that prides itself so much on the gate security... why leave such a glaring weak point like these sewers?"

Yolani shook her head absently in agreement. "I never really thought about it," she admitted, with a slight frown creasing her forehead. "Probably someone benefits from it."

Elania nodded. "We probably should scope out your shop from above ground first," she suggested. "Just to get an idea of what we might be walking into."

A nod came from Yolani. "That's a good idea. I don't like the thought of coming up the sewer drain into a crowd of Guards."

Yolani diverted them down a different tunnel than Elania remembered them coming through and **[Navigation]** ensured that she remembered every turn. The exit point they used was up a ladder, emerging in a dark alley. Tugging the noseplugs was a breath of fresh air, quite literally.

They quietly replaced the metal cover, and Yolani tugged the concealment cape around her shoulders. Closing her eyes, Elania focused on the same method as the night prior, pouring a trickle of **[Power]** into her new **[Presence Concealment]** skill.

Yolani pointed toward a shadowy side street, and they shared a silent nod. They didn't have to go far before they were standing across from the security gate on Artificer's Row. Elania picked out the Ironfist mercenary guards stationed there immediately. She didn't think they'd give them any trouble.

Before she could make a move, Yolani's hand rested on her arm to stop her. "Wait," she whispered urgently. "I don't want to get them into trouble. I know another way."

Well, why hadn't you mentioned it earlier? Elania nodded anyway, trusting Yolani's judgement. It was possible the gate was being watched, and if there was a way around it, then it made sense to avoid contact anyway.

They weaved their way through the back streets before crossing the main thoroughway to another mazelike section of back alleys. Eventually, they worked their way around to what Elania expected was the Row. She was right. Yolani pointed to a dead end.

"Up there," Yolani directed. "There is a flat spot. Can you climb up?"

Elania nodded. It was twice as tall as a person, but a powerful leap let her clear it easily. She laid down on her belly and reached for Yolani's raised hand, and pulled the other girl up to join her.

Then came jumping down on the other side, which landed them in an alley that led straight to the main street she remembered, just considerably darker.

Elania shook her head. "Seems like security is pretty lax everywhere with all kinds of built in pass-throughs," she commented lightly.

Yolani grunted before answering. "I only used this one once, when I was in trouble with...dad and avoiding the guards."

Questions popped up into Elania's head. Why had Yolani been avoiding curfew? Was she okay? She'd just lost her dad recently. It took an effort to suppress them in the interests of being silent as they exited the alley and pushed up toward the end of the street.

Aetherhart's Artifice came into view, but it was not the sight that Elania remembered. A large round hole had been blasted through the door, and it looked like part of the front wall had crumbled. Evidence of a clean-up of the debris in the street was strewn about, but no one had done anything for the rubble still inside the shop.

It seemed like no one was around, but as soon as they were about to step through the ruined entranceway, a voice rang out from behind them. "Halt!"

Elania and Yolani both pivoted toward the sound, Yolani pulling her wand and Elania reaching to her back to grab Eziel's hilt.

A shadowy figure stepped forward, lit by an artifice lamp. The light lit up his face, revealing that it was Lucas.

"What are you two doing here?" He demanded, his eyes flicking between the pair in disbelief.

Both girls visibly relaxed.

"We need some things from the shop," Elania explained.

"What happened to Henri?" Yolani asked.

Lucas looked between them, a frown appearing on his face. “He was arrested. I’m supposed to be watching this place... Alerting the others and the Guard if I spot anyone suspicious.”

Yolani bit her lip. “Lucas,” she pleaded quietly but firmly, “Just pretend you didn’t see us tonight.”

There was a momentary silence between the three of them that felt like it stretched until finally he nodded once and then turned around. “Must have been the wind.”

Elania immediately raised Lucas’ value in her mind by at least ten points. Once inside, they were greeted by a scene of chaos. Everything was turned over and flung about without any care or consideration. The way Yolani’s shoulders slumped said everything about how she felt.

Patting the other girl’s shoulder, Elania gave her a weak smile. “Hey. Once we get things sorted, I’ll help you clean and sort everything out.”

“Thanks for the support,” Yolani replied with her own sad smile.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Elania asked.

“I’m looking for things. You’re going to go upstairs and see if you can find us new boots,” Yolani ordered.

Elania nodded without protest, and they split up. The crunch of footsteps filled the shop as they both went about their own tasks. It didn’t take long for Elania to find a few pairs of boots; the wardrobe had been slashed to pieces and the things that had survived were strewn about in the open.

Matching the boots up was the challenging part. Trying on a pair, she was very pleased to find that Yolani’s shoe size was nearly identical to hers.

That left her with finding a new spot to hide her mana shard. Maybe Yolani would have an idea.

When she came back down, Yolani had a large bag already stuffed with things.

“What do we got?” Elania asked, holding up the boots.

Yolani didn’t look up at her as she pulled some stuff out from underneath a tipped over shelf. “Disarming wands, detection spells, combat wands.”

Elania blinked and looked at the massive bag. “But... what’s all this?”

Yolani looked up at her. “Bombs. Wall breakers. Portable Walls. Deployable Negation Fields.”

Those things sounded good. “Do you have a chain or something that I could use to hold my mana shard?”

“What?” Yolani replied sharply.

Elania pulled the shard out of her pocket and held it up. “I need to be able to wrap it and keep it close to my skin.”

Yolani stared at the shard like it was unthinkable. “You managed to grab one of the shards from the chest?”

Elania shook her head. “No. I’ve had it since I was summoned.”

“I...that’s what I needed to solve the contract. You had one the whole time,” Yolani whispered.

A frown appeared on Elania’s face. “You needed one? You didn’t mention it. I didn’t say anything about it because...well it’s saved my life more times than I can count and I wasn’t sure whether to trust you or not.”

Rubbing the side of her head, Elania frowned at the shard, then held it out to Yolani. “You can have it if you want.”

“No, no. It’s okay,” Yolani said, obviously distressed. “It stopped being the thing I needed when I blew up and assaulted my uncle.”

She went and began to dig into another pile of stuff before coming back with a silver chain with a loop. “You’ll want to wrap it in something and tie it to that.”

“Perfect,” Elania mumbled.

Yolani slipped on the clean pair of boots and then the dirty ones got thrown in a corner. “Before you wrap that up, I have something for you.”

Elania looked at her curiously. A tray of mana crystals came out. Then a second one. And a third.

“They left everything in here. You’re low on **[Power]** right? You can charge up, and we can put whatever excess we have left into the shard, too,” Yolani explained.

That was a lifesaver, and Elania pinched each crystal until her **[Power]** reached its maximum.

[Power: 409/409]

Yolani stuffed a handful of crystals into her pocket, then began to tap the shard against the remaining crystals. It quickly charged up to a quarter of the way as well. Considering it had been nearly depleted completely, that was a sizable amount.

“We’ll spend a lot of days recharging all of these,” Elania mused.

Yolani glanced at her while she wrapped the shard up, then handed it back. “You think we’ll make it back?”

Elania tried to give her an encouraging smile. “What’s your plan for getting into Relain’s office? Are we going to scope the place out before going in?”

Yolani shook her head. “We can’t afford to spend any time,” she replied. “Our resources are dwindling, and we’ll have to spend your energy to cloak ourselves through the entire district. Spending that time checking it out would just drain us further for when we get inside.”

Elania bit her lip. “We are not working with the best odds,” she admitted. She glanced at Yolani carefully before continuing. “What about leaving? Just...escaping Neftasu altogether?”

Yolani froze mid-step at Elania’s question, turning towards her with a frown that held an undercurrent of fear beneath its surface. “You could...” she began tentatively after a long pause, only to shake her head firmly, as if discarding an unwelcome thought.

“But I can’t run forever,” she added stubbornly, meeting Elania’s gaze fiercely despite the tears welling up in her eyes. “We’d be fugitives, and the shop...it was...it meant everything to us.”

Elania reached over and squeezed Yolani’s hand. “I’d only go if you went with me,” she confessed softly, leaving the unsaid the remainder of her thought—that she would follow Yolani wherever she chose to go. Even if that was straight into some scary place called the Magistry.

A confused look filled Yolani’s face as she squeezed Elania’s hand back. “But...why? We’ve only known each other a few days.”

A smile appeared on Elania’s face. “Because I like you.”

In more ways than one.

CHAPTER 66—INFILTRATION

Of course, Yolani smiled and said she liked her as well. Elania bit her lip and nodded, realizing the other girl didn't really understand what she'd really meant. That was okay, they had enough to deal with already, and facing her possibly impossible unrequited feelings was not something they needed right now.

And she was right, they'd only known each other for a few days, it just felt incredibly longer than that. She barely knew about the other girl, but everything Elania learned she liked. And she felt like she really, really wanted to learn more with every tidbit.

The journey through the Artisan District to the Magister one required an above ground route, through curfew'd streets and around dozens of guard patrols. It was nerve-racking and enough to keep her mind preoccupied and away from stupid Elania thoughts. Security was ridiculous, and probably only possible by the severe segregation of each district and the cavernous nature of the city.

Although the sewers had proved that the seemingly impenetrable walls and ravines that separated the districts were not impermeable.

When they finally reached the gate to the Magister District and looked at it from a nearby alley, Elania felt her heart skip. There were two dozen guards in neat rows lined up with rifles. That wasn't even mentioning the guards walking along the wall above, looking out over the city!

She pulled back and looked at Yolani with concern. "How are we supposed to get past that?" Elania hissed.

Yolani shook her head and smiled. She pulled out two small brooches and handed one over. "This will make us invisible to the gate's energy detector wards," she explained briefly.

Elania attached the silver piece of metal to her shirt with a pin. That was easy enough. “What about the guards?” she asked.

Yolani nodded and went back to her pack and pulled out a simple wooden stick. It looked like a chopstick. “Can you power this?” she asked, her gaze piercing into Elania’s.

Scrutinizing the object in question, Elania reached out and touched it. The feel of a small, empty crystal was there. She nodded slowly. “I can, but...why?”

A ghost of a smile flickered onto Yolani’s face at that. “This will render us completely invisible for about sixty seconds if we both touch it,” she explained.

That was extremely useful. There were several times during the prior day that it would have been really nice to have.

“Oh, well, why didn’t we use one of these before?” Elania asked.

“I only have one, and they are hard to make, and I didn’t remember where it was. Was just luck I spotted it in the mess,” Yolani replied.

Luck. Well, it was about time something went their way.

Elania reached out and took hold of the stick. Yolani’s hand clasped around hers. Power flowed and then they stepped out together, a hurried but carefully silent walk toward their goal. Invisibility meant silent, and now was not the time to sneeze.

As they hurried along, Elania found herself hyperaware of their joined hands; something about that contact felt intimate amidst all the danger and uncertainty surrounding them.

As they passed by the standing formations, the murmur of soldiers filled the air. Some of them were chatting idly. Excellent. Just a normal, boring guard duty. No invisible girls sneaking by here!

They barely made it to a nearby alley between two grand buildings as the invisibility stick turned to ash in their hands. Well, there was no going back now.

The imposing silhouette of the Magister Tower loomed ahead of them, a colossal structure that dominated the district and rest of the city much like the city watch’s citadel on the other side of the city. The Magister tower, though, was dotted with thousands upon thousands of red lights, ringing around it and pulsing in a rising pattern like some type of gaudy skyscraper advertisement.

Well, whatever. They just needed to reach it and break in.

The structures surrounding the tower were laid out in their own grid pattern, and guards patrolled between the buildings in small groups of two at random. With the city light stones deactivated for nighttime, they were easy to spot by the lantern glows.

Trusting their concealment skills and items, they hurried, only diverting to avoid getting too close to guards that got in their way.

That got them to the inner edge, but there was a massive gap between the buildings and the base of the tower. Worse, there were dozens of random two-man guard patrols crisscrossing the open area.

“What do we do now?” Elania asked. They’d used up the invisibility stick.

Yolani followed her gaze before pointing towards the ground, faintly visible red lines crisscrossed amongst the cobblestones. “See those?” she asked quietly. “They light up when someone steps on them.”

Elania frowned, glancing over to the nearest pair of guards who were nonchalantly strolling across said lines with no visible reaction. “But they aren’t lighting up for the guards...”

Yolani nodded and then fished out four circular metal disks from her bag and held them up in response. “Two years ago, my father worked on a project—making new boots that could bypass the detection lines for the guards. The design and materials were under strict security...but I peeked at them one night for a few minutes.”

Elania’s eyes were drawn to the four disks in realization.

“I memorized everything from the schematic that I saw. A few days later I redrew it and then made these as just a funny side project. Never really thought they’d have a use,” she said wistfully.

“That’s...amazing,” Elania breathed out, genuinely impressed.

A sheepish laugh escaped from Yolani as she shrugged. “Well...don’t celebrate yet,” she admitted awkwardly. “They’ve never been tested...and the formula was complex. But in theory, these should throw off the sensors.”

The uncertainty was a minor damper on the confidence, but given their situation, they didn’t really have a choice. Their luck had been good so far, so hopefully, it continued to hold.

“What about the guards’ line of sight? This isn’t going to hide us from that,” Elania questioned, observing the patrolling soldiers with a frown. It was one thing to fool the magical detection, but there were guards with eyeballs still.

Yolani turned towards her, giving her a weak smile. “I was hoping your new skill might work.”

Elania felt a pang of apprehension. Using her **[Presence Concealment]** skill would use some power, but more importantly, she wasn't sure if... "I don't know if it will work for both of us," she admitted reluctantly.

Yolani's eyes roamed over Elania before quickly averting them. "It should," she said with a determined edge to her voice, "as long as we stay very close together."

Elania blinked. Well, there was only one way to find out. She closed her eyes and focused on picturing how her **[Presence Concealment]** skill worked and then pushed **[Power]** into it. They both attached the disks to their boots, and then Elania scooted close enough to Yolani to bump shoulders. "This close enough?"

Yolani shook her head in response.

Feeling her cheeks heat, Elania stepped closer, looping her arm inside Yolani's. The other girl pressed even closer, until they were glued together, her arm going around Elania's back and squeezing her side.

"This should work," Yolani said.

Elania could feel herself blushing as the other girl's body heat radiated against her. The walk went slowly, and as they reached the first detection line, both their hearts pounded synchronously. The line didn't activate when Elania did a test step on it.

Slightly relaxed, they carefully picked a path between the guard patrols until they reached the base of the tower itself. Each step felt like it was bringing them one bit closer to salvation or... No, better not to dwell on the 'or' part.

They ducked behind a large statue for cover and to take stock of the situation. The two massive entry gates were ceremonial in purpose and remained perpetually closed. That left access through a set of double doors on the structure's cardinal directions, or a smaller stairwell access in between them.

Yolani pointed to one of those. "The guards pass by every sixty seconds... It'll take me approximately forty to unlock the door."

Elania looked between the door and Yolani several times. It was not exactly close. "That's...quite some distance," she pointed out hesitantly.

"I know," Yolani responded with a nod. She bit her lip, then looked Elania in the eyes. "That's why I need you to carry me while you sprint over there at max speed."

Elania blinked in surprise. "Excuse me?"

Yolani repeated the request quickly. "You'll have to be silent while doing it, too," she added.

Elania let out a tense breath. "Okay, let's try."

There was no turning back, anyway.

Yolani got her tools ready and in hand, and then Elania lifted her up into a princess carry. There was too much stress to even be nervous about that, as her attention was riveted on the passing guard patrol. The second they turned the corner, she leapt out from the statue and sprinted as fast as she could without slapping her feet on the marbled tiles.

As soon as they reached the door, Elania set Yolani down and the girl got to work, placing some type of sticky thing just below the door handle while tapping it with a set of small wands.

Elania couldn't discern any pattern to the work. Constant glances for the next set of guards kept her busy enough.

When the telltale light began to diffuse around the corner, she began to feel panic. "They—"

The door clicked open, and they both scurried inside. Yolani quickly turned and pulled off her door cracking tool and then sealing the door quietly and quickly.

They'd made it.

The interior was a narrow room with a door on the other side of it leading deeper. More importantly, was a stairwell in the corner that led upwards.

"We're in," Yolani gasped out between breaths. "This is...the western stairwell." She pointed towards the ascending steps with shaky fingers. "It should take us up to...to the twentieth floor."

Elania arched an eyebrow at that but didn't question it further, trusting in Yolani's knowledge of Neftasu's bureaucratic structures.

"Once we get there," Yolani continued, regaining some of her composure. "We'll need to find...the directory." She paused for a moment, catching her breath before finishing, "that will tell us where Relain's office is."

The stairwell was dark and silent, which was perfect for their ascent. Each step felt odd to Elania, though. It felt like a pressure at the back of her head was building. It wasn't painful, but it was impossible to ignore. "Do you feel that?"

Yolani looked back at her questioning. "Feel what?"

"Some kind of pressure?" Elania asked weakly.

"Probably just need to pop your ears. Try swallowing?" Yolani asked.

Elania shook her head, and they continued upwards.

Their climb finally reached the 20th floor and Elania peeked inside the door. The room was expansive and open, but filled with endless shelves and desks—dimly lit and eerily

silent. They slipped inside unnoticed, and **[Darkvision]** made it easy enough to pick a path.

Yolani's hand settled on her shoulder and she followed closely, having a hard time seeing anything.

Just when they had nearly reached the primary reception counter, the diffuse light of a lantern approaching behind the shelves sent them scurrying from cover. It was a single guard, quietly walking through the room on patrol.

He passed by without noticing them and both girls let out breaths of relief.

There were dozens of paper manuals, and Yolani pulled out a tiny crystal that worked as a miniature flashlight to read them by. Elania stood near, watching for any more guards, but the pressure in the back of her head was getting worse.

It felt like she needed to go somewhere nearby... like it was calling to her. Before she could complain about the odd feelings again, the entire world flashed a bright yellow, blinding her.

Things returned to normal quickly...except she was no longer where she had been standing. An ornate looking door with a ruby encrusted handle stood before her, and Yolani was tugging on her wrist.

"Elania! What are you doing?" she hissed. "That guard almost saw us! You walked right past him!"

Elania shook her head. She had no memory of that. They'd just suddenly appeared at the door. The pressure was less, but the compulsion to go inside was stronger than ever. "I need to look inside," she murmured.

She placed her hand on the handle, and a multitude of clicks from the bolts sliding open echoed with an almost alarming amount of noise. Nothing prepared either of them of the brilliant yellow glow that erupted as the door opened.

Yolani pushed her inside in a panic as the light spread through the other room, then pulled the door shut.

Both stood in silent awe as they took in the sight before them—a massive golden artifice of rotating rings and metal disks, golden gears and long piston rods—all chugging away and spinning nearly silently as they floated over a central white disk far below the balcony they were standing on.

Yolani finally broke the silence. "The Celestial Engine."

The sword on her back had been silent the entire trip to the tower, but now Eziel spoke, his system text taking on the same golden hues as the engine.

[The Celestial Engine is dying. It has been misused. Its power nearly is depleted. The cause of the city's dungeon is apparent. The Engine can't support it with its diminished energy. Without the capacity to maintain it, there will be no new mana shards. The Engine will fail catastrophically.]

Well, that was another piece of the puzzle. Elania shook her head. Eziel had spoken, but it felt like the Engine was trying to communicate with her. It needed help.

Yolani turned to Elania, her eyes fixated on Eziel's hilt over her shoulder. "Is this...is this an artifice?"

[It's a divine artifice. Created using similar skills as yours, but crafted by the gods themselves.]

The word 'divine' echoed in Elania's head like a bell. Eladu's gods were real then? Actual, omnipotent deities running around rampant at some point? She hadn't seen anything or anyone overtly religious, not even the monks, and she had a feeling that most people were...rather lax in any worship.

How did that happen with something such as the thing before them?

She answered the question herself: no one was really allowed to come see it, were they? Probably only the Magisters themselves. Why would they want the Engine to fail? Was it related to the election thing that Yolani had mentioned a few days ago when they met with Gaston?

Yolani stared at the machine in awe for a bit longer before the fierce determination that Elania loved appeared in the girl's eyes.

"How do we repair it?" Yolani asked.

[An infusion of power on a massive scale.]

A momentary silence fell over them as they processed Eziel's message before realization dawned on both of them.

They shared a knowing look as they both spoke in unison, "The mana shards."

CHAPTER 67—WORDS OF POWER

After the revealing conversation with Eziel and the revelation regarding the Celestial Engine, they had little time to spare, but what they needed to do seemed obvious to both of them. Yolani led the way out of the chamber and back into the darkened halls with the location of Relain's offices in the tower printed on a flimsy sheet of parchment.

The path was slightly disorienting. Elania didn't remember any of the turns or stairwells they traversed, the entire journey from the 20th floor to the Engine being a blank. That was worrying, but not enough to draw her focus off of their mission.

When they reached the next landing, they froze at the door. Inside, two guards were chatting idly, lanterns lighting the room. When they broke apart, one turned and headed straight for them. Yolani let the cracked door close with a near silent click, and they scurried up another level.

To their relief, he started downwards. Elania shot Yolani a glance, then a whisper. "Why don't we just go up from here?"

"We need to be on the central stairwell. This one terminates," the other girl explained.

They waited a few minutes, then crossed back down the flight and checked the door. The room was clear.

Shelves of books gave ample cover as they hurried to the center, where a circular wall had a single heavy door cut into it. It was locked; Yolani pulled out her door opening tool and began to crack it.

Elania watched their backs, looking for the presence of more guards. None appeared.

As the door opened, light poured out, a confused guard with a lantern turned toward them.

A punch flew through the air, and Elania's fist connected with his jaw without hesitation. He went limp, and she caught him under the arms to keep him from tumbling down the stairs. Yolani shot her a panicked look.

[Watchman - Human - Lvl 135 has been defeated!]

She dragged the man between two shelves, then ripped his own clothes to tie a gag around his mouth, hands, and feet. That was the best she could do without killing him.

They hurried up the large central spiral staircase faster. "Are you sure you know where we're going?" Elania whispered anxiously.

Yolani nodded and looked back at her for a second. "Trust me," she whispered back.

Elania nodded. Really, all they had now at this point was trusting each other.

Six landings with doors passed by. On the seventh, Yolani paused, and they exited into a long corridor that made Elania nervous. The intersection at the end of it was a four way, with equally long corridors going in every direction.

It was mind fuckery of a sort. The tower had looked large from outside, but it was absolutely enormous inside.

Yolani chose one of the paths after a brief hesitation and they began to pass by closed doors.

"How do you tell them apart?" Elania whispered.

Yolani pointed for an answer, and Elania realized there were small dark numbers written with a fading paint. Not that the numbers really meant anything to her. Was it some sort of cipher?

It seemed like a random door when Yolani stopped and pushed one open. It was yet another of the seemingly endless stairwells. The tower was a freaking maze of stairs, with no windows or anything else to ground the notion of her location in relation to anything else. At least the Celestial Engine had been in the central column.

Yolani paused when they reached the top of the staircase. There was a single heavy wooden door that looked just like the rest. "This is supposed to be his office," she whispered.

Immediately, Elania tensed up. "Let's get this over with."

Yolani nodded and pushed it open. It wasn't actually an office—a large, expansive lobby that was well furnished with some shelves of books, glowing wall sconces, and even a potted plant beside the receptionist desk greeted them.

There were more hallways and doors, too.

Yolani pulled out her power detector tool and took a few steps away. When she activated it, the thing spun and then pointed directly towards the double doors that were set into the wall on the opposite side of the room.

“Must be his, you know, actual office-office,” Elania said hopefully.

The doors were ornately decorated with metal and golden handles to pull them outward. They seemed to fit more for a palace than an office room.

Yolani pulled out a wand and waved it over the handles, but there was no reaction. She frowned, looking over her shoulder. “The door is just open, no trap or lock.”

Elania blew out a tense breath. “Well, we know what we came for is behind the door, right?”

Yolani nodded. “We should be ready for a fight,” she warned.

Elania nodded and reached back to Eziel’s hilt that hung over her shoulder, withdrawing him and letting the blade rest on her shoulder. The weight and warmth of the blade were reassuring.

They both pulled on their respective doors at the same time.

Her gaze was immediately drawn to the ornate desk sitting prominently in the center of the room, flanked by ceiling high bookshelves and décor sitting atop a room sized blue carpet. On top of the desk, sparkling with promise, was their target: the chest filled with mana shards.

It felt like *Déjà vu* as a figure in a chair behind the desk spun slowly to face them.

“Tessa. Give us the chest,” Elania stated firmly as she and Yolani stepped inside.

The other girl’s hand went into her bag, no doubt readying one of her many artifice tools. Elania prepared herself to swing Eziel if needed.

Tessa let out a giggle and revealed a broad toothy grin that was as menacing as it was eerie as she spread her arms out wide. “Welcome,” she greeted cheerfully, seemingly unbothered by their abrupt entrance. “I wasn’t expecting you two!”

Yolani and Elania both tensed up. A confrontation seemed inevitable. Tessa raised her hand nonchalantly and tutted at them reproachfully. “Oh, come now, relax,” she said lightly, maniacal amusement coloring her voice.

“For two girls who’ve been through so much in a short amount of time, I’d expect you to be more interested in making friends than picking fights,” she continued casually. Her eyes swept over Elania with an unnerving interest before settling on Yolani.

Tessa smirked wickedly at Yolani's defensive stance. "My master would find it quite intriguing to have his own personal 'Master Artificer' doing what he desires... won't you consider it?" A hint of playful menace coated every syllable.

Her eyes slid back onto Elania. "And a sister! To share the workload would mean more free time for both of us!"

"You want us to be Relain's slaves?" Elania hissed back at her. A glance at Yolani's expression told her the other girl felt the same way about the offer.

Tessa let out an annoyed 'Tsk' as she waved her finger. "In return, he could graciously spare Miss Yolani from all those troublesome charges against her. I don't think he even liked her uncle. The man was just a means to an end."

She waved a dismissive hand at the suggestion of criminal activity almost flippantly. "And you could even keep your dear little shop. I dare say you could even keep it together; if that's what you two wished. When you weren't busy carrying out master's orders, of course."

The offer hung heavily in the air between them like a guillotine blade—sharp and ready to strike down mercilessly if given the chance.

Still...Tessa was extremely dangerous. Fighting her wasn't a sure thing. Elania worked her jaw, a dozen refusals and rebukes dancing on the tip of her tongue, but she pushed them back when Yolani took a step forward.

"What about the Celestial Engine?" the other girl asked tensely.

Tessa's toothy grin widened at that, but before she could answer, a side door near the desk opened and another figure in sweeping burgundy robes strode into the room, drawing the demon's attention. The man carried an aura of undeniable authority and arrogance that made the hair on the back of Elania's neck stand up.

"Relain," Yolani muttered under her breath.

The man didn't miss a beat as his gaze roamed over them before settling on Yolani. "It will be restored once our beloved city follows its rightful path again...without fools clinging to outdated dogma," he declared with confident ease. Apparently, he had been listening in the whole time.

His words were deliberate and filled with certainty—but they reminded Elania of the conversation with Gaston and Yolani's mention of the election a few days before. Obviously, the Celestial Engine had become some part of a power play, but how exactly that helped Relain's position was unclear.

Relain stepped closer to Tessa, his gaze shifting to Elania. “Another sapient demon would be of great help to my plans. I do not abuse those who serve me loyally, and I have ample resources to see that you are both cared for.” He slid his hand into the yellow-haired demon’s hair and stroked her.

Tessa closed her eyes and arched her back, letting out an unnerving moan.

The Magister shifted his icy gaze onto Yolani, offering a sharp smile reminiscent of a predator cornering its prey. “Ms. Aetherhart, it’s unfortunate that our past dealings have led you to become wanted for the murder of your uncle. As Tessa claimed, I can make those events disappear. You and your friend can be left mostly to your own devices, other than for the services I will periodically require.”

Yolani’s eyes narrowed at him as she bit her lip, her grip tightened around her bag. “Why do you need an artificer?” she challenged, her voice still steady despite the obvious anxiety.

Relain smiled as if he had won. “I lack proficient expertise in artifice myself,” he admitted, “and there are certain modifications required for the Celestial Engine that must be performed.”

Yolani shook her head slowly. “I have no experience with something like that.”

“Once certain plans come to fruition, I will be able to give you all the time you need to study it,” Relain replied easily as he turned his gaze onto Elania.

“You will be allowed to acquire all the essence you desire while clearing out our city’s riffraff and undesirables,” he proposed, as if that was a juicy steak.

Elania tensed as a realization turned her stomach in knots, her eyes sliding to Tessa accusingly. “So that’s what happened to the people in the shantytown.”

Tessa tilted her head under Relain’s hand, momentarily confused, but quickly recovered with an ominous smile that spread across her face. “You mean those sewer-dwellers? You noticed that?” She giggled hysterically. “They weren’t very appetizing...and its quite filthy down there,” she confessed. “But I have to do my best to keep things clean.”

The chilling meaning behind Tessa’s words sank in. A glacial silence filled the room as all the implications of what their two antagonists had been up to, terrorizing and feeding off Neftasu’s vulnerable citizens with no remorse or regret.

It wasn’t just about a power struggle anymore.

A silent exchange passed between Yolani and Elania, their gaze carrying a shared understanding that didn’t need any words. Even with a potential way out being laid before them, they both knew that these weren’t the kind of people they wished to align themselves with.

No matter how tempting or easy it seemed, this was a line neither of them was willing to cross.

Tessa rose from her chair, breaking the silence of the room, her eyes glinting maliciously as she prepared for a confrontation. The room crackled with tension as two sets of eyes held each other in wary anticipation.

"I'm disappointed," Relain stated.

[The Magister is a maximum willcaster.]

A jolt of unease ran through Elania at the remark. What the heck did that mean?

"Same plan as before. The fields last 30 seconds," Yolani hissed at her.

Elania frowned. She'd already seen Tessa fight, and it was going to be difficult to get past her, much less whatever Relain could do. The man was ridiculously high level!

"Kill them," commanded Relain, his voice a venomous whisper.

Tessa sprang into action, her form blurring as she launched herself toward them with lethal intent. Elania side-stepped into her path and swung Eziel as hard as she could. The demon somehow darted sideways mid-leap.

The floor and boards of the room shook frantically as Elania's strike cracked with concussive force, the blast of air making a vertical slice into the room's ceiling and back wall. Without missing a beat, Elania pivoted and made a horizontal slash follow up, the ranged strike landing right where Tessa impacted the library shelf.

Relain pointed at Elania and spoke. "Hold."

Suddenly, every muscle in her body froze, like she'd somehow been locked out of controlling herself. No matter how hard she tried to force her body to move.

Tessa's maniacal laughter echoed as she darted in toward her. Panic set in before a small, round trinket landed near her feet from behind. The orb suddenly opened, and then glowing lights erupted on its skin, a gray spherical field flashing out and covering the nearby area of the room.

Almost instantly, the compulsion lifted, and Elania raised Eziel just in time to block Tessa's attack. The surrounding air exploded as the yellow-haired girl's claws tried to pierce the flat of the massive blade. The shockwave knocked the remaining furniture in the room into collapse.

Relain wasn't finished. He raised his staff and smacked the tip on the ground; the crystal turning a vibrant red. "Firebolt!"

Red orbs appeared in the air above his head, and he waved them straight for Yolani. Tessa struck again, though, leaving the artificer girl on her own to deal with them.

But she didn't need to. As soon as the fire struck the gray nullification field, they dissolved into nothing. Yolani hefted another orb out of her bag, then threw it at the Magister. It flew true until it passed through the field completely.

"Break," Relain intoned.

Yolani's orb did that, crumbling apart, but then it exploded in a shaped blast straight for him. A red barrier snapped into place as the energy struck, and one of the rings on the man's hand shattered. Elania hissed in frustration. Shit, he had spell wards!

Without wasting a moment, Elania swung Eziel at Tessa, who just barely danced underneath of the strike. Wind still whipped at her as she darted up to stab at Elania's belly.

Elania countered by thrusting with the sword's hilt, smashing the round pommel into the demon's forearm, a sickening shatter echoing with the strike. Her other hand darted in though, scraping Elania's fingers holding the sword.

Neither backed down, Elania kneeling the maid in the side before getting clipped in the head by a shin. The two spun apart, but Elania turned her spin into a swing of Eziel, which caught the demon in the side.

Time seemed to stop.

[Guilty.]

Tessa bent in half as Eziel bisected her. The two parts blew apart with the force of an explosion, her upper body slamming into the far wall while her legs smashed into a fallen shelf of books. Relain cursed and gestured, "Mend!"

A blue cord snapped into existence between the body parts then pulled taut like a snapping rubber band, the bloody squelch as the meat smacked together, sending a spray across the room that Elania blocked with her sword.

Tessa panted as she stood back up, a glare of hatred fixed on Elania.

"Queen's Requiem!"

Glancing back at Yolani, it became clear what she'd been doing the entire time; a massive glowing circle was floating over her head, and as she lowered her wand at Relain, hundreds of small blue bolts began to flash out of the working like a spray of machine-gun bullets.

The Magister raised his staff and began to wave it, red orbs of his own flashing out to smash the incoming projectiles away. It quickly became clear that Yolani's projectiles were far superior, and they began to slam into the man's protective wards.

Elania darted for the chest. Tessa lunged after her, but a swipe of Eziel sent a blast that knocked her backwards. A cloud of dust filled the room from the repeated exploded impacts from the artifice casting, cloaking the Magister as more and more bolts smashed into his location.

It felt like victory when Elania snagged the box under an arm, only to be struck in the back by Tessa's kick. She rolled forward over the desk and smacked into the wall. The demon looked down on her viciously and stabbed towards her with elongated fingernails, only for the window behind the desk to explode inwards.

An armored figure smashed into the other demon, bulldozing her to the ground with a heavy thump. Tessa hissed violently and stabbed at the silver metal armor. A gauntleted fist smashed into her face, but she got her feet between them and kicked him into the ceiling.

It was the Paladin!

Elania rushed around both of them, angling to get back to Yolani.

"Enough!" A roaring shout erupted from inside the dust cloud as Queen's Requiem burned itself out. A red sphere flashed, sending the dust away in a shockwave.

Yolani's nullification field winked out as its time ran down.

Relain glared at the emerald-eyed girl with fury, his once pristine robes coated with soot and ash.

He pointed his staff directly at Yolani. "Cease to exist!"

CHAPTER 68 – ESCALATION

Relain's voice resonated with authority, the deadly intent in his declaration causing the entire room to shudder. The invocation sent a wave of dread through Elania's body, terror seizing her heart as she anticipated the consequences of the man's spell.

Willcaster. Literally willing magic into existence? Is that what Eziel had meant?

Time seemed to slow. Yolani screamed. Flakes of her skin turned black and began to float upward into the air, disintegrating into mist.

Forcing a large pulse of **[Power]** into her legs, Elania bolted straight towards Relain, lunging with Eziel outstretched. "Leave her alone!"

Relain glanced at her with an angry glare. He pivoted to face her and held out his crystal tipped staff, then took a deep breath. "Stronger than the Gods."

Eziel's tip struck the crystal with a reverberation that shook the entire chamber hard enough to crack the walls. Elania's grip weakened on the mana shard chest, but somehow, she kept hold of both it and Eziel while she was blasted backwards toward the entrance. She slammed into the wall.

The stonework fractured and cavitated as she left a crater in it deep enough to threaten toppling the entire wall over, spiderweb cracks racing to the ceiling and across the floor. Two lungfuls of blood exploded out of her mouth as her internal organs and bones re-knitted themselves. She took a heavy tug on her mana shard, draining it for heightened alacrity.

[Due to your excess power, your body is exceeding its limits!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high power, Regeneration is enhanced!]

Elania slammed Eziel's tip into the floor to help her stand back up, but before she could think, the Paladin shouted and drew everyone's attention.

"Bishop! You are next!" The man's size was always a surprise. He stood holding Tessa above his head, the demon squirming as he gripped one of her legs by the thigh and one of her arms near the shoulder.

Elania frowned. Bishop? She looked at Relain; the man looked nothing like the disgusting crazy old man that had summoned her.

A sickening squelch filled the room as he pulled her apart, her body ripping in half at the recently healed seam where she had been chopped in half earlier.

He tossed both body sections straight for Relain, who cursed as he knocked one aside then was hit by Tessa's legs, knocking him over.

The paladin turned toward Elania, and he pointed at her. "Return the holy sword."

[No. Don't return the holy sword.]

Before she could answer, Relain stood again and leveled his staff at the paladin. "Heart stop."

Elania fully expected the silver armored man to have a heart attack.

Instead, a miniature explosion of light ricocheted off his chest armor. The armored man turned toward Relain. "Your foul magic will not work on me you—"

A purple tentacle erupted from the ceiling and smashed into him physically. Okay, yeah, that brought back memories. The paladin grabbed it and ripped the squirming, shadowy flesh in half. More of them began to appear.

Elania hurried over to Yolani, who had fallen to her knees. The girl was pouring a potion on her arms.

"Lani, we need to—" her words froze as the other girl turned to look at her. Great big bloody patches covered her entire body. Some of them were shaded blue where the healing potion had splashed, but it looked terrible no matter what.

Yolani panted as she tried to answer. "Elania—I don't know if—"

Elania grabbed her pack and put it in her lap, then shoved Eziel into her arms. Then added the magic shard box. How many things could she carry at once?

The answer was yes as she lifted Yolani into a princess carry. Everything threatened to topple out of their grasp, but that didn't matter. Mr. Paladin was being a hero and distracting the bad guys.

Elania ran out of the office and toward the steps. Halfway down the stairs there were two guards. She jumped over them—landing feet first on their faces and riding them down

the rest of the flight of stairs to the door. Yolani reached out automatically and opened it with one hand, and they entered the long hallway.

The sprint down it, then the second hallway, was hectic as guards began to appear shouting. The entire tower had started to wake up.

In the reception chamber, a guard raised a musket toward her and fired before she realized he was even aware of them. The crack would have been familiar to anyone on Earth who used firearms. That wasn't her, but it split her ears all the same. Shelves nearby exploded as the projectile narrowly grazed her back, punching a red gouge across her skin and tearing her shirt.

The guard was already reloading, apparently it was a single-shot weapon. She ignored him and bust through the next door into another stairwell. Guards with spears were waiting at the bottom. Rushing through them would place Yolani at risk, so she didn't.

Charging her feet with **[Power]** she slammed into the wall just above the doorframe, shattering the wall and punching through into the room behind them, the debris and rubble knocking the guards down.

Shouts erupted from every direction, and she realized she was lost. "Which—"

Yolani pointed to the left. "That way," her voice croaked.

Elania darted in the direction without hesitation. A few more turns and stairwells, and she realized where they were. Just two more stairwells to the Celestial Engine and then...

A maniacal laughter behind them made her heart skip a beat. Elania instinctively ducked down, narrowly avoiding a slash of razor-sharp claws from Tessa. The move sent her skidding onto her knees, holding onto Yolani, Eziel, and the mana shards tightly to keep them from spilling.

It was no use; Tessa was so fast, Elania had to dump them to block her next strike with a fist.

The other demon's arm blew away as she smashed it at the wrist, but another slice from her other hand clawed Elania's stomach deeply. It wasn't enough to disable her, but a sharp pain filled her middle as blood gushed.

Grabbing the hilt of her **[Vorpal Dagger]** Elania slashed as she drew it from her belt, causing Tessa to jump back out of range quickly. An explosion above rocked the entire hallway, and Tessa let out another laugh. "Time to die!"

A slice came for her face; Elania raised her dagger, and it dug between two of Tessa's fingers, splaying her hand open. The demon maid's body looked ravaged; it wasn't healing via **[Regeneration]** instead; it was stitching itself back together like a puppet.

The fight became a whirlwind of violence, each exchange more lethal than the last. A slash slit Tessa's throat, a stab punctured Elania's side. **[Vorpal Dagger]** met hardened nails, sending sprays of sparks as their weapons clashed, but neither gave ground.

Suddenly, Tessa twisted mid-attack and landed a kick into Elania's stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of her and sent her skidding across the stone floor. She barely had time to roll away from another swipe of claws that carved deep rivets through the stone where she'd just been lying.

Ignoring the pain in her abdomen, Elania sprang back onto her feet. She'd landed near Yolani and Eziel. The other girl held out the sword for her while holding her own battle wand in her free hand. Elania took it and swung, sending a blast of energy through the hall.

Tessa narrowly avoided it, but the blast dug gouges along both walls as it dived down the hallway, sending a spray of debris and stone bricks flying chaotically before it all blew out the side of the tower.

The puncturing of the tower's outer skin allowed the shrill sound of a distant siren into the chamber. Oh yeah, people knew something was going down.

Elania gritted her teeth, but Yolani drew her attention by tapping her on the back of the shoulder. The other girl had got back on her feet and had the mana shard chest clutched between her arms. Elania nodded to her and they backed away from Tessa slowly, Eziel placed defiantly between them.

The maimed demon continued after them, giggling madly, and flashing her teeth, but the sounds came out in ragged puffs of air from her severed throat. Suddenly Tessa launched forward straight at them, swinging her arms madly.

Yolani stopped, and Elania bumped into her on her next step back. One of her wands flashed out just as Elania prepared to block the charge. Two bolts of white slammed into the charging demoness' feet, freezing her in place.

Elania swung downward in a heavy arc, Eziel's tip just barely reaching to nick her forehead. Time stopped for a moment.

[Guilty.]

Elania could feel the sudden reverberation all the way through her bones. Everything in front of them suddenly exploded in a massive, shaped blast, tearing through the floor, ceiling, and walls. Yolani held onto her back for support as everything shook.

When the dust cleared, they could see into the floors above and below. There was no sign of Tessa at all...the thought that she'd been blown into atoms came to mind almost immediately. The blast had been that powerful.

Elania glanced at Yolani, who looked sick. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...let's hurry," Yolani stammered.

Elania frowned, but nodded. It was impossible to carry Eziel and the mana shard box at the same time, so Yolani carried the box as they headed down the hallway as fast as Yolani could keep up.

Entering the next room, Elania spotted the ornate door that led to the Engine on the other side. There was shouting, but they ignored it. Yolani reached the door first, but when she tugged on the handle, it wouldn't open. In a panic, Elania tried, and it worked.

They hurried down the steps to the massive platform overlooking the Celestial Engine that was continuing to chug away. They made it to the bottom before the door they'd used burst open.

Elania stopped and turned to see who it was while Yolani continued to carry the chest toward the Engine. Really, their only plan was to toss the chest into the Engine and hope it worked. After that, she had no idea.

Her heart clenched as Relain walked out to the edge of the steps. He looked down at her, his gaze cold and calculating. "You've proven to be quite the nuisance," he said, his voice dripping with contempt.

Elania gritted her teeth and tightened her grip on Eziel. "Funny," she retorted, forcing a smirk on her face. "I was just thinking the same about you."

He snarled, then pointed his staff at Yolani. He didn't even say a word as the wounded girl clattered to the floor with a thump that echoed across the balcony tiles.

Elania responded by throwing her **[Vorpall Dagger]** at him, but he batted it away then looked at her with contempt.

"Hold."

Her whole body locked up again. A vicious smile appeared on his face as he descended. He twirled his finger, and her body spun around on its own to face Yolani, who was now crawling toward the edge, dragging the chest with her.

Relain tsk in annoyance. He raised a hand at Yolani and then squeezed and twisted, without even saying a word. She shrieked and rolled onto her back as he made a dragging motion with his arm.

The chest began to skid back to him, but she held onto it. Making a fist, he made a hammering motion, each blow a thud of force against her body.

Elania couldn't move. She tried to scream for him to stop, that they'd surrender. She had hold of Eziel and her muscles burned with impotency, the signals to contract and drive the massive blade through the Magister's back ignored.

She needed something, anything, to break his hold on her. More **[Power]**, but her mana shard was empty, and the fighting had dropped her well below maximum.

He slapped Yolani hard from across the room. Her hand shot out and snagged the latch on the chest, opening it and spilling the contents on to the floor.

So many mana shards, so much **[Power]** in one spot. Elania tried to grit her teeth in frustration, but couldn't even do that. It was probably more than she'd used her entire life on Eladu. If only she could reach it.

Her heart skipped a beat.

If only she could reach it.

[You have gained the, Soul Siphon – Visible, perk!]

[You have spent all your available perk selections.]

There was no real guide on how to use the perk. She just knew that she needed the power in the mana shards. She reached out like she would pull from the mana shard close to her skin. The distance made the sensation fuzzier, imprecise. But she needed that power.

Elania yanked.

Suddenly, the light in all the shards died at once. Time hitched, the even thrum of the Celestial Engine becoming a distorted mess. A cloud of yellow motes coalesced into existence at once, then shot straight for her. Her **[Power]** stat rolled upward until it broke.

[Power: 388/423]... [Power: 444/424] ... [Power: 556/425] ... [Power: 743/426]
... [Power: ???/427]

[Your body has reached the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Find a stronger body or reduce your current Power!]

[Your body has exceeded the limit of its capacity for Power!]

[Your body is experiencing thermal degradation!]

[Your body is slightly adapting.]

[Due to your high Power, [Regeneration] is enhanced!]

Relain turned slowly, his eyes widening as he took in her glowing form. He pointed at her with an accusing finger. "Perish."

It was redundant. Something was wrong—she'd taken in too much **[Power]** and she could feel her insides churning as they writhed, melting, reforming, melting, reforming, over and over in a critical cycle. It was far beyond what she was capable of handling.

She could feel the impact of his word of power; the lines of his will streaking in through the fine mist of golden energy bleeding off of her... like a thousand little tendrils of ill will seeking to change reality to suit their master's will.

They began to fray and melt as they attempted to reach her.

The sensation of being tied by a thousand—million little threads attached across her entire body caused an itch. She took her first deep breath since being Held and thousands of the lines snapped.

Relain's face filled with a snarl, and he raised his staff at her. "Perish!"

She didn't know how willcasting worked, but... when had she really known how anything worked? Knowing how things worked wasn't a prerequisite in Eladu, just an assistance. A word welled up in her chest, leaving her lips like a whisper, "Sever."

Willcasting obviously used the caster's strength of will—and also, to a lesser degree, their actual strength. She was divine. He was not. She was a Godde—

[You have supped on the divine but know this: Hubris was the downfall of the Gods.]

Relain's hold on her was sliced away; he fell back like a taut cord being sliced while under load.

Elania took a single step forward, and she was beside him, holding up her sword in the air. An impending threat of doom. "Why did he call you Bishop?" her words came out in a voice that she almost didn't recognize as her own.

Panic filled his face as his eyes slid up to the poised weapon. "My disgui—"

Elania swung, suddenly not caring about the answer. He swung back with his staff. The impact couldn't be called a clash, because the blow sent him flying through the room in a wild, uncontrolled tumble.

It wasn't enough. Everything hurt. Everything burned. Her mind was fraying from the churning energy inside of her. The golden motes of light followed her like a cloak, mimicking a visual indication of the air flows.

Elania took a slow step forward, turning to move to Yolani's side. The other girl was curled up in a fetal position. "Eziel. Heal her."

[Place me upon her forehead and I shall judge.]

Elania's grip tightened on his hilt. The **[System]** message didn't just appear before her, it flowed into her soul. The sword wasn't a machine—there was no requirement of morality for it to function—other than its own personal rules.

“Heal. Her.” She left the threat unspoken.

[Very well.]

A flare of light erupted around Yolani, her visible wounds began to shrink, and a dent in her side reformed to look normal. A bone sticking out of her forearm snapped as it worked itself back into place. The girl moaned weakly, and Elania was very glad that she was unconscious for the healing.

A subtle click above the balcony heralded a door opening. Then a second, third, and fourth. Elania looked up. Five staircases led down to the balcony over the Celestial Engine, and four figures had emerged from the doorways.

Three men and one woman, who were all wearing a similar robe to Relain's in different colors.

Words from a man she had once disliked echoed back at her.

'It's ruled by five powerful Magisters.'

CHAPTER 69—IMMOLATION

Elania's eyes flashed between the four new Magisters. Green, Blue, Black, and Purple, each man emerged from his own doorway, the ornate workings and statue above their entry points, each having its own style.

[Arch Magus – Human – Level 632]

[Arch Magus – Human – Level 758]

[Arch Magus – Human – Level 677]

[Arch Magus – Human – Level 841]

A predominantly human city, ruled by all humans. Their levels were extremely high, just like Relain's. Were they all immortal or something?

However they had become so powerful, they must have at least some wisdom, and from what she knew, they all weren't friends. A careful optimism tried to sneak into her chest. If they could explain what had happened, what Relain had been doing—

"Enough of this! Begone, demon!" Relain said as he stood back on his feet. He somehow had kept his staff. "Needles Endless Casting!"

What was the god-awful requirement to yell out the names of spells and stuff? Elania swung Eziel toward Relain with a single heavy arc. The massive azure energy wave spread out like a crescent, disrupting the trajectories of the needles as it passed by to fly in every direction except at Elania and Yolani.

Panic filled Relain's face as he raised a red barrier in front of him. The sword energy dug a deep gouge in the field, sending spiderweb cracks through the magic. It held and the rest of the blast slashed through the inner wall of the chamber, leaving a long, angry gash of molten metal.

Her attention snapped back to the four Magisters standing aloof on the balconies, each one wearing an expression of grim determination. It looked like they had made up their minds on what was going, even if they were as wary of each other as they were of Elania herself.

The green robe man was the first to move. He extended his hand outward, his fingers curling into a complex pattern without a word. Thick tendrils of emerald energy erupted from his robe, twisting and turning as they snaked at her like malevolent serpents.

Elania took a step forward, then a second, building up her momentum to swing another arc of Eziel's energy at the incoming tendrils. The slash severed several, but others dodged their way past her. She swung to the side, neatly flaying one down the center.

A quick pivot allowed her to overhead chop another. One darted for her but she held up the flat of Eziel's blade and blocked it, only to charge up her fist and slam it in the side, blowing it up into the air.

Blue was next. He drew a thin metal sword and pointed it high above his head. "Surge!"

The image of him flashed, and her eyes widened as she realized she was looking at an afterimage. A desperate pivot as she swung placed Eziel between her and the man as he appeared behind her, stabbing with his rapier. The contact of their weapons blew him back, but as he was in mid-air, he flashed again.

This time he was above her, and she jumped backwards to avoid the strike. She prepared a counter only to be forced to smash another green vine, which gave time for Blue to strike again. She blocked it, but he blasted away unharmed again.

Her insides were on fire, and she realized she was panting with exertion. Not from the fight, but from the effort to maintain herself. The energy she consumed was eating her from the inside out.

Black raised her two wands, a shadow pooling around her feet. "Void's Grasp," the woman's voice echoed through the chamber ominously.

Elania's eyes narrowed as a foreboding sense of danger hit her. Suddenly, dark hands erupted from the floor, digging into her golden aura. They were much more dense than Relain's will tendrils, with their own weight and power, and they began to dissolve as they got closer.

Just not enough.

Elania sliced downwards severing several only to have a dozen more redouble the effort to clamp down on her ankles and feet. A green vine rushed her, and she barely obliterated it with a swing when Blue darted in and stabbed her in the side.

His face turned serious and suddenly she was punctured again; and again. His arm turned into a blur as the thin blade plunged in and out of her repeatedly.

It would have been bad, but her internal organs had stopped working a while ago, anyway. She reached out and grabbed his wrist, filling his face with shock. She raised Eziel ominously.

A green vine tried to wrap itself around the sword to stop the swing, but it disintegrated into ashes.

Elania slammed the blade right into her captive's neck, fully expecting to remove his head from his shoulders.

Eziel was silent, and the man was ripped out of her grip to be sent flying into a distant wall, head still attached. Fuck. She'd forgotten how finicky the sword was. Apparently, Blue wasn't bad enough to eviscerate.

Purple took a step forward, sneering arrogantly before raising his staff. A crystal began to glow, and then white spell circles with an impossible amount of runes on each one winked into existence. "Royal Decree – Lamentation!"

A purple beam of light blinked into existence, slashing through her. Then another. Each beam traveled instantly, leaving no chance to strike back. Elania raised Eziel in front of her head as a shield, the beams bouncing off his glistening blue sheen.

Numbness began to fill her body as damage accumulated. That was a blessing and a curse. The tremendous pain she'd been blocking out was gone, but it hinted that she was reaching her limits, and while she had likely put Blue out of the fight, the others were untouched.

When Purple's spell working faded, she was still standing. Her clothes were tattered and ruined, and holes marred her body all over, each filled with a golden glowing light as they slowly knitted themselves shut.

The onslaught continued as she battled the Magisters, keeping their focus and staying between the attacks and Yolani. There was no time to monitor or check on the other girl. Attacks came without pause, and her focus had begun to wane.

An azure aura began to surround her and mix with her golden one as she and Eziel fought together, the coalesced mist of magical and divine energy becoming a physical manifestation that deflected emerald vines, shadowy hands, and purple spears.

She tore the balconies the Magisters stood upon to pieces with ranged slashes, forcing them onto the same level as her. Smoke, dust, and ash blew out from the walls as powerful impacts ravaged the chamber. Blue managed to heal and rejoin the fray, his thin little blade

a painful sting. Attacks came from every direction, but Elania stood firm, blasts of magic bouncing and deflecting off of her and Eziel.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she was pushed back to the edge of the balcony overlooking the Engine. She dug her toes into the metal floor and began to hurl her own strikes with an entirely new intensity, forcing her harassers into dodging or blocking themselves. That slowed the incoming attacks, but it drained her even more.

Something had to give.

“Your Attention is Mine!” A voice boomed from behind her.

The other magisters froze, their heads jolting toward the voice as if someone had taken hold of them and turned them to it. That was unfortunate for Blue as Elania completed her swing, smashing Eziel once again into his head and sending him into another wall.

She could feel Relain’s demanding threads attempt to snare her. They were insignificant. Little demands by a worthless man who had no business ordering her attention. But he had afforded her an excellent opportunity. Elania raised Eziel over her head to make a vertical slash toward the remaining but frozen Magisters.

A pained squeal of a young woman to her left froze Elania mid swing. Her head slowly turned toward the sound. Relain had his arm around Yolani’s neck, a dagger tip pressed into her upper arm, blood pouring out of the injury.

“Give yourself up, demon, or the girl dies,” Relain proclaimed loudly enough for the words to echo throughout the chamber. For Elania, they echoed through her entire being.

Lowering Eziel slowly, she took a ragged breath, and realized her vision was blurry. Something had broken minutes earlier inside of her. She’d continued on without thinking about it, for one reason only.

She was dying. Yolani was captured and in the hands of a madman. They’d failed to repair the Celestial Engine or achieve any of their hopes and goals.

A murmur of voices from the Magisters filled the air, but her hearing was filled with a tinnitus that blocked out everything.

[You are dying.]

“I know,” Elania whispered.

[You have enough remaining power to repair the Engine.]

Elania let out another deep breath, colored by dancing yellow light motes. Why should she repair it?

[If you sacrifice yourself, you will control it for a short time. You can save her.]

Elania’s eyes slid to Yolani. Everything else has turned into an imperceptible blur.

Through the melding of their auras, she could tell that the sword's words were true. What she could also feel was that this had been his plan all along—repairing the Engine would have required a charged outsider to fling themselves into the engine.

The so-called holy judge had been manipulating her from the start.

Anger flared inside of her, and her grip tightened around Eziel's hilt.

[No. Leave me—]

She turned and jumped for the engine's glowing center, taking the sword with her.

CHAPTER 70—DIVINE INSTRUMENTS

Eziel raged at her as they plummeted, sending violent pulses of power through her fingers and down her arm. It was just a miniscule drop against the ocean that was eroding away at her.

“Judge yourself for once!” Elania roared at him, her voice tinged with rage and betrayal. She felt the sword fall silent.

As they plunged into the glowing heart of the Celestial Engine, there was an immediate sense of being devoured. They’d entered an insatiable maw that consumed all energy—magical or otherwise—and processed it and used it for whatever purpose the Engine served.

A sense of horror washed over her as her body dissolved into the glowing cloud, but not her mind. She’d become an incorporeal cloud. She could feel and control the energy centered around her, but there was a sharp delineation where what was inside her was separated from the rest of the energy.

She could see—and it wasn’t exactly seeing, but a type of energy sense—Eziel nearby, dissolving as well, just not as quickly. Apparently, swords were slightly more resilient to being digested.

A sudden panic filled her as she realized that along her edges, particles and energy were slowly being siphoned off into the greater ether. He had promised her she’d be able to save Yolani. How the heck could she do that without a body?

She pulled back against the cloud around her, slowing the bleed of energy away from herself. Breathing wasn’t quite the right word for it, but as she struggled, she found she could do more than just prevent drain.

She could pull more in.

That increased the pressure on her mind, though. The energy that came in was lumpy.

In the whorl of gold, she felt other presences besides Eziel. They were tiny, little marbles floating around aimlessly in the vast, all-encompassing energy mist. When one brushed up against her, she recoiled in horror as memories of another person assailed her.

They had died to a **[Rockbear]** inside the dungeon. Another touched her; they had died from a skeleton when their party had run out of supplies. More and more thoughts began to assail her, she realized she was much, much larger an incorporeal energy blob than all of them. Because she had been overloaded with **[Power]** when she had fallen into the engine?

She began to push a current away from her in all directions to prevent them from touching her, but one continued to fight to reach her. Elania redoubled her efforts, and it began to shrink in size. It was determined, though, and finally touched her outer membrane.

Immediately, Elania stopped fighting it—the first memory that came through was an image of Yolani's smile. Elania felt a jolt of panic. The orb was Yolani's father!

Realization struck. Those who died in the dungeon were feeding it their own essence and souls?

A voice echoed softly within her consciousness. "Thank you for protecting my daughter."

"You...you're Yolani's father," Elania said, or thought; it was hard to tell where thoughts seemed as tangible as words.

"Yes," he said simply. His essence pulsed gently with sorrow and pride—sorrow for what he had left behind, pride for his daughter.

"I give you what's left of me," he said solemnly. "Tell her...I'm sorry. I love her."

Before she could answer, a flash of memories that weren't her own ran through her mind before the mote of energy filled her. Truthfully, it was just a tiny mote in a massive pool that was herself, but it filled her with a new line of determination. Warmth spread through her, gentle but firm, like a parent's comforting hand.

Pulsating with renewed strength, Elania roared defiance against the all-consuming ocean of the Engine. Compacting her energy, she reshaped herself, drawing from the abundant energy swirling around her. Eziel floated nearby; she reached out and a sheen of gold flowed over the blade as she wrapped him in her own power.

A massive amount of the energy that had filled her squeezed out into the engine as she formed—the engine's internals began to roar back to life, filling the environment with an

impossible to ignore rhythmic hum. The energy she'd left behind filled cracks and restored depleted reservoirs that had been drawn dry.

Empty engines that had stalled or failed began to cycle once more, creating a continuous flow that ran in loops, that fed the engine more and more power. The sensation of light burned in her mind, shining brighter than before.

But she wasn't done yet. Two appendages sprang out of her back, and she flapped them in the swirl, propelling herself back toward the surface.

Flying upward, she shot out of the core and back towards the Balcony, hovering over it.

The Magisters watched in shock. Elania reached out with her mind and senses, touching upon the latent magical energies lingering in the surrounding air. She felt their spell workings and magical items imbued with carefully woven enchantments.

She held out her hand, **[Soul Siphon]** did the rest as she tore it all into raw energy to take into herself.

Solidifying her form, she focused on Relain, and spread her wings to land before him and the woman he still held in his grasp. He tried to speak, but she stole the oxygen from his lungs, leaving him gasping for breath.

Elania landed gracefully on the chamber floor right before him, sending a cascade of golden otherworldly light motes scattering across the floor like a wave of running sparks.



Yolani whimpered as her body throbbed. She'd been wounded, partially healed, maimed, healed again, and now Relain's fingers dug into the side of her throat threatening as he held her captive from behind. Everything had fallen apart in the end.

She'd lost everything... and everyone.

The heated words between the Magisters were a white noise as she stared down at the pulsing Celestial Engine, wishing it would return what it had taken from her. She was the first to see the Engine begin to churn faster, its pistons revving up into a higher gear. Then a flash of golden light clawed its way upwards until it had firmed up into the shape of a vengeful seraph.

Yolani could recognize the angel's face—Elania hovered over them, radiant and resplendent in golden metal armor, wings of shimmering light sprouting from her back. She stared in awe as her friend had transformed into something...divine. Eziel's blade was no longer an azure blue, but a golden blade of shimmering light.

The Magisters seemed equally taken aback. Relain squeezed her tighter, making it hard to breathe, but when he began to chant a word of power, his words faltered and died mid-air. He gasped for breath—it returned as Elania came to a soft landing directly in front of them. The golden wreathed seraph loomed over them, wings extended.

“A mortal cannot command where a divine instrument holds sway over reality,” Elania stated with an authority that echoed through the chamber. Yolani felt her heart hitch. It didn't sound like Elania. Was it really her?

Relain released Yolani and sent her sprawling. He fell to his knees. “I only wished to serve you! So we might reclaim what is rightfully ours!”

Yolani blinked as Elania raised her golden blade in the air high above his head.

“Obliteration,” the seraph proclaimed with deadly calmness.

Relain's face turned a sheen of white. Yolani expected that he'd begin to disintegrate into dust, but he simply popped out of existence, a small rush of air rushing to fill the sudden vacuum.

It took her a second to realize that the man had simply vanished from existence. As she watched, Elania turned towards the remaining Magisters with an unwavering gaze. One thing had become clear to her: Elania had been changed.

The Magisters were terrified. Each one screeched as Elania waved her hand, dragging them across the floor like ragdolls before causing them to skid to a halt right in front of her.

“Kneel,” Elania ordered, imbuing the single word with such immense power that their bodies contorted to obey. Their faces paled as they stared up at the divine entity before them.

Yolani swallowed. She didn't understand what the Celestial Engine had done.

“You have failed in your charge to safeguard the Engine,” she proclaimed as she swept her golden gaze over the Magisters. “You strayed from the laws laid down by the gods themselves when they ordained Neftasu as one of the holy cities worthy of their work.”

The seraph turned her gaze on Magister Roland and stepped in front of him, his purple robes doing nothing to protect him from her scrutiny. He opened his mouth to speak, but a gesture of a finger forcefully pressed his forehead to the floor.

“The nobles have allowed themselves to create laws that benefit and enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of society,” Elania continued. “Seeing themselves above other people, instead of as their protectors and servants.”

Yolani bit her lip. That had always been true as far as she could remember. Had there once been a time when nobles weren't the privileged class who lived above all?

Taking a step forward, the seraph curled her wings behind her back as she stood before Magister Bannon. She looked down at his blue robes with a frown. “You have allowed corruption to flourish in the halls of the City Guard, turning a blind eye to excess in your own ranks, and ignored the plights of many of the city's denizens.”

Another step, this time in front of Magister Keswick who visibly shook in her black robes of office.

“You allowed the City Works to become lazy,” Elania accused, her voice reverberating with the power of judgement. “Cut corners and failed to maintain the city, allowing cracks to fester, the buildings to crumble, and to allow the very sinews of this place to rot. For what? So that a few could live in splendor?”

Keswick's body was forcefully pressed into the ground as Elania glared at her, the woman gasping for breath under the weight of the Celestial Engine's will.

Releasing her, Elania took the final step to stand before Green. “Magister Astolf, Lord of Artisans,” she announced his title with a tone of mockery. “What say you?”

The paralyzed man stammered in response, but before he could articulate any defense, Elania cut him off.

“You traded your authority for baubles,” she declared mercilessly. “Played the guilds against themselves for favorable rulings and laws to enrich yourself. You traded your vote with other Magisters, gathering favors and wealth for yourself instead of safeguarding the city's prosperity and future.”

Her golden eyes bore into him unblinkingly as she condemned his actions. “Did you ever think of the people who you were supposed to safeguard?” she asked, thought it wasn't really a question. She looked at the others. “Did any of you?”

Silence enveloped the chamber, except for the whirr of the Engine far below. Elania moved to stand before the four of them.

“All of you allowed the Magister of the People to be infiltrated by the Cult of the Black Candle,” she proclaimed, “Allowing them to place their own powerful representative in a place of supreme power on this council for over a century.”

Yolani bit her lip as she took in that piece of information. Magister Relain had been a member of the cult that had summoned Elania in the first place?

“You allowed him to reap the poor of this city,” Elania continued, each word punctuated with righteous fury. “To extract the life essence from the people en masse, so he could churn it through the Engine to mass produce mana shards for his foul purpose.”

A hot breath of golden mist escaped the seraph’s mouth as she exhaled. Her gaze swept over the Magisters, her gaze burning with divine wrath. “Worse! You knew!”

Keswick let out a choked gasp, attempting to protest. “We...we only knew about...the purges. Not that...Relain was...a cultist or planned...to usurp the Engine!”

[Guilty.]

Elania’s gaze held no mercy. “Guilty,” she echoed, the word reverberating loudly throughout the tower, each syllable hammering home their culpability. There were no denials left, no arguments that could refute the divine judgement.

Elania raised her hand high, her fingers splayed open as the golden light around her congealed into flowing sigils. The symbols of divine authority appeared on each of the Magisters’ foreheads, burning into their skin with a searing heat that made them scream in agony.

“I do not have time to repair the damage you have caused over the last millennia,” Elania declared. “I place this judgement upon you: restore the city to its former glory, see to its citizens’ needs, obey the original divine decrees of the Magistracy that you failed to uphold because you thought you were beyond the reach of the gods you serve.”

Elania raised her head and then looked over her shoulder at Yolani before continuing. “Finally, you will assist Yolani Aetherhart with whatever she needs, see that the wrongs perpetrated by False Magister Relain are undone, and that she has her shop and livelihood restored.”

As Elania closed her hand, the Magisters were released to collapse onto the floor, grasping at their throats and sucking in lungfuls of air. “Those are the terms of your sentence,” she continued mercilessly. “Fail and suffer an eternity of torment for your misdeeds in the Engine itself!”

Then, without sparing another glance at them, Elania turned and walked towards Yolani.

She watched as Elania approached, her chest tightening with anticipation. She couldn’t help but feel awed by what she’d just witnessed—Elania meting out divine judgements like a goddess descended from the heavens.

When the golden seraph came closer, Yolani realized just how large she was, standing at least two meters high. That height dissolved as the golden woman fell to her knees, golden light dissolving off her form until she was the same height sitting on the floor.

Elania's arms wrapped around her neck and she leaned in for a hug, her lips caressing an ear.

"I'm sorry," Elania whispered softly. Golden tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, where they evaporated before touching the ground.

Yolani cleared her throat and hugged back. "Elania? What is...what's happening to you?"

Elania sagged, a pained expression on her face. "I'm...out of time," she confessed, her voice barely a whisper. "I saw your dad. He was proud of you and said he loves you."

Yolani tensed up, shock filling her. Had Elania really seen her father?

"Thank you, Yolani. For your help...for being my friend when I needed someone."

Tears welled up in Yolani's eyes as she held on to Elania tightly. She could feel the other woman's form begin to dissolve into motes of light.

"No!" Yolani cried out. "You can't go! We had a contract! You're violating it!"

Time seemed to stop, the gears and pistons of the Celestial Engine shrieked and ground to a halt, a loud reverberating bang echoing through the interior of the tower and out into the city.

The golden form of Eziel floated up into the air above them.

[The gods perished for their hubris. For their dogma...and their lack of love.]

Yolani's heart skipped a beat as the golden form in her arms turned solid once more.

[You do not share their fate today, Demoness]

The sword began to disintegrate, the golden mist swirling back down into the Celestial Engine. A screech heralded the turning of the Engine's gears once again.

EPILOGUE—15 DAYS LATER

Elania's consciousness stirred slowly, like a beast waking from a deep hibernation. Her body felt heavy and lethargic, the remnants of a profound exhaustion lingering in her bones.

She was lying on something soft that smelled faintly of lavender and clean linen—a bed, she realized. Slowly opening her eyes, she found herself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling.

A system message appeared, filling her vision with a new prompt.

[You have acquired a new body.]

It took her several seconds to comprehend that she was no longer in the Celestial Engine or facing down the Magisters.

Turning her head slightly, Elania spotted Yolani slumped in a chair beside the bed. The young woman looked worn down, with dark shadows underlining her eyes and scars marring her once-smooth face. Bandages were still wrapped around her forearms—a stark reminder of their recent battle.

Yolani was asleep, her chest rising and falling in sync with the steady rhythm of her breaths. Despite everything they had been through, there was an undeniable sense of peace that emanated from her.

A pang of guilt ran through her, for what, she didn't exactly understand why. Neither of them were to blame for the events that had assailed them like a hurricane.

Elania watched Yolani sleep for a while longer before closing her eyes again. Questions swirled in her mind—about what had happened after she'd fallen into the Engine; about the confrontation with the Magisters—and what would happen now?

She pushed them away for now. Yolani was there—she wasn't alone anymore. If it was safe enough to sleep...then she would do so. The all-encompassing weariness was pervasive.

Elania fell back asleep without worry or disaster looming over her.



When Elania woke again, it was to the sound of soft humming. Opening her eyes, she found Yolani by her bedside, a book held in her lap.

“Yolani...” Elania croaked out, her voice hoarse from disuse.

Yolani looked up at her with a start. “Elania! You’re awake!” she exclaimed, relief and joy washing over her face. She jumped up and attacked her with a hug. “Thank the stars.”

Elania hugged her back, her cheeks heating slightly. Bringing herself up to a sitting position, she winced slightly at the stiffness in her joints. “How long...?”

“15 days,” Yolani replied quickly. “You’ve been unconscious for 15 days.”

Elania’s eyes widened. She briefly remembered stirring before, but had been so exhausted she’d fallen back asleep. A frown crossed her face.

“Everything is fine now,” Yolani hurriedly added, as if sensing Elania’s worry. “The shop is being rebuilt. Henri was freed from prison and pardoned. All charges against me were dropped. There’s... there’s sweeping reforms washing through the city, at the orders of the Magistracy.”

Elania felt a wave of relief wash over her at the news, but then furrowed her brows in confusion. “How...?”

“You don’t remember?” Yolani asked with a blink.

Elania shook her head slowly. “I only remember falling into the Engine with Eziel.”

“The sword is gone. Paladin Anton was very upset,” Yolani explained.

“Is he going to come after me?” Elania asked carefully.

Yolani shook her head. “The Magisters banished him. You...you really don’t remember with the Magisters?”

Elania shook her head. “I really don’t.”

“You... you came back from the Engine. You and Eziel judged them. They’re following your instructions or...bad things will happen to them,” Yolani said before looking away. “And one other thing...”

Bending over, she picked up a small mirror, holding it so Elania could see her reflection. Neither red nor blue stared back at her—two golden irises glinted in the dim lighting of the room, mirroring the divine golds and hues of the Celestial Engine.

She pulled up her **[Status]** to see the changes.

[Status: Elania Reyes]

[Level 108 Lesser Demon (Ascendant)]

[Karma: 12243]

[Power: 1426/1426]

[Perks: (Soul Siphon - Visible) (Summoned from Another World!) (Regeneration) (Demonic Transformation)]

[Class: Judgement]

[Skill Slots: 4]

[Slotted Skills: Improvised Combat (Rank S+), Stealth (Rank S+), Mana Manipulation (Rank S+), Martial Bladesmanship (Rank C)]

[Affinities: (Demonic), (Mana), (Darkwalker)]

[Magical: Demonic Aura (Rank A) (Deactivated), Artifice (Rank E), Enhanced Mana Sensing (Rank E), Elemental Affinity (Rank E), Presence Concealment (Rank E)]

[Physical: Body Conditioning (Rank D), Mobility (Rank C), Darkvision (Rank B) (Activated), Throwing (Rank S+), Tracking (Rank S+), Archer (Rank E)]

[Mundane: Identify (Rank B), Universal Speech (Rank S), Reading (Rank A), Writing (Rank B), Crisis Management (Rank S+), Navigation (Rank E), Negotiation (Rank B), Intimidation (Rank D), Bribery (Rank C), Basic Handcrafting (Rank E)]

A silence fell between them as Elania processed the enormity of what had transpired. But at least it seemed like they were safe—and together, for now.

“I’m just glad you’re awake,” Yolani said softly, reaching out to squeeze Elania’s hand.

And despite everything else that needed addressing—questions to be asked and answered—Elania squeezed back with a grateful nod: so was she.

A small smile appeared on her lips. “Thank you, Yolani.”

“For what?” asked Yolani, looking slightly confused but not pulling away from their shared grasp.

“For everything,” Elania replied simply.

Elania glanced at her reflection in the mirror. She'd been changed, but she was, in the end, still herself.

And looking back into Yolani's eyes, she knew without saying it out loud that whatever came next, they would face it together.